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OCTOBER 1986

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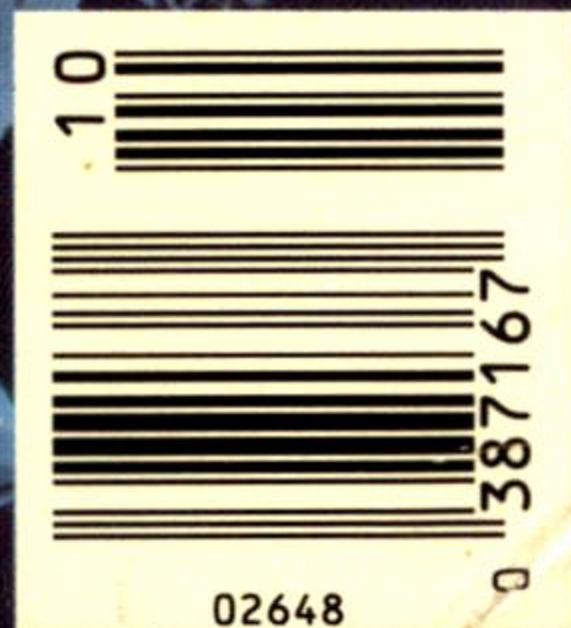
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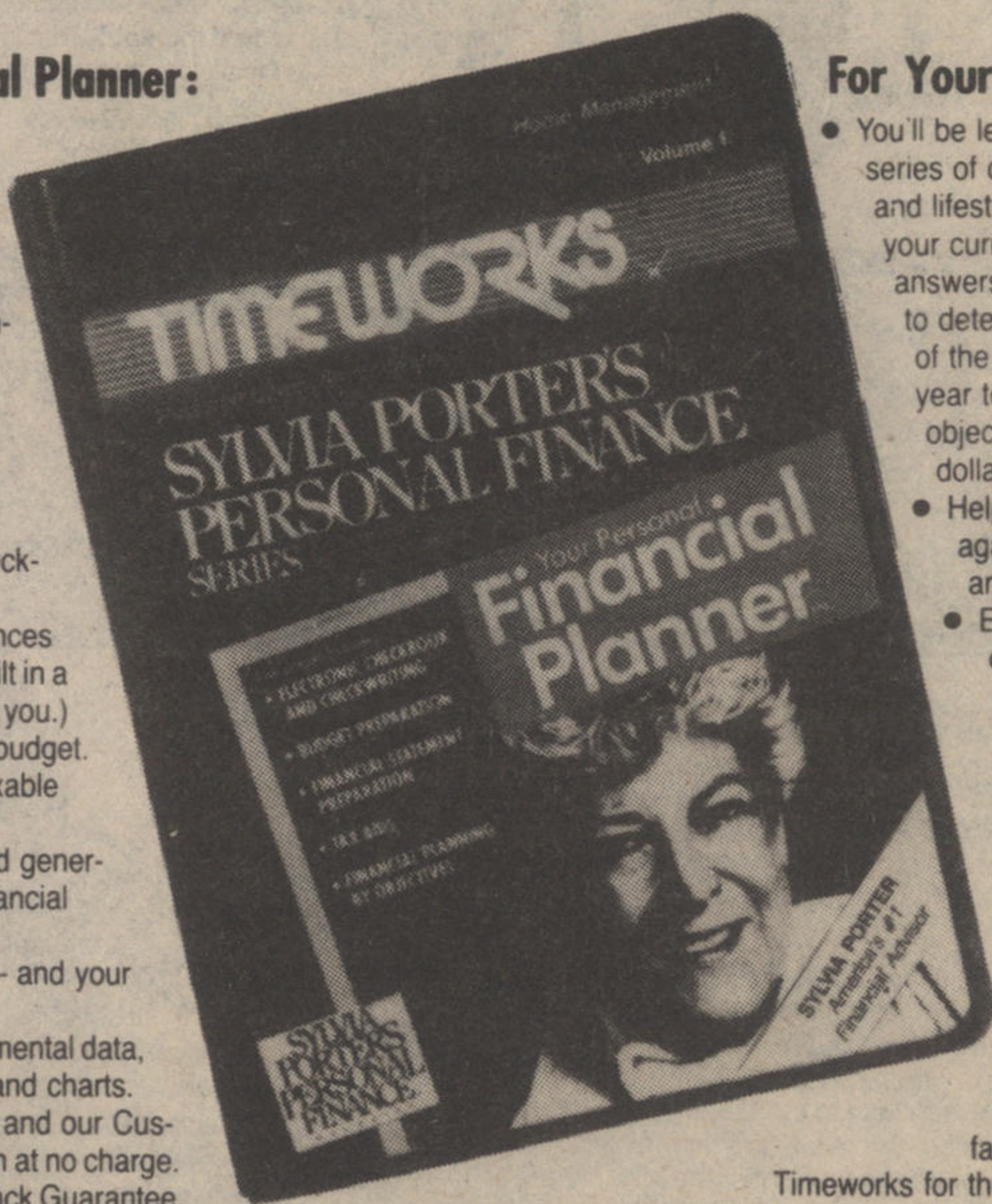
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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

Vol. 10 No. 10 (whole no. 109)
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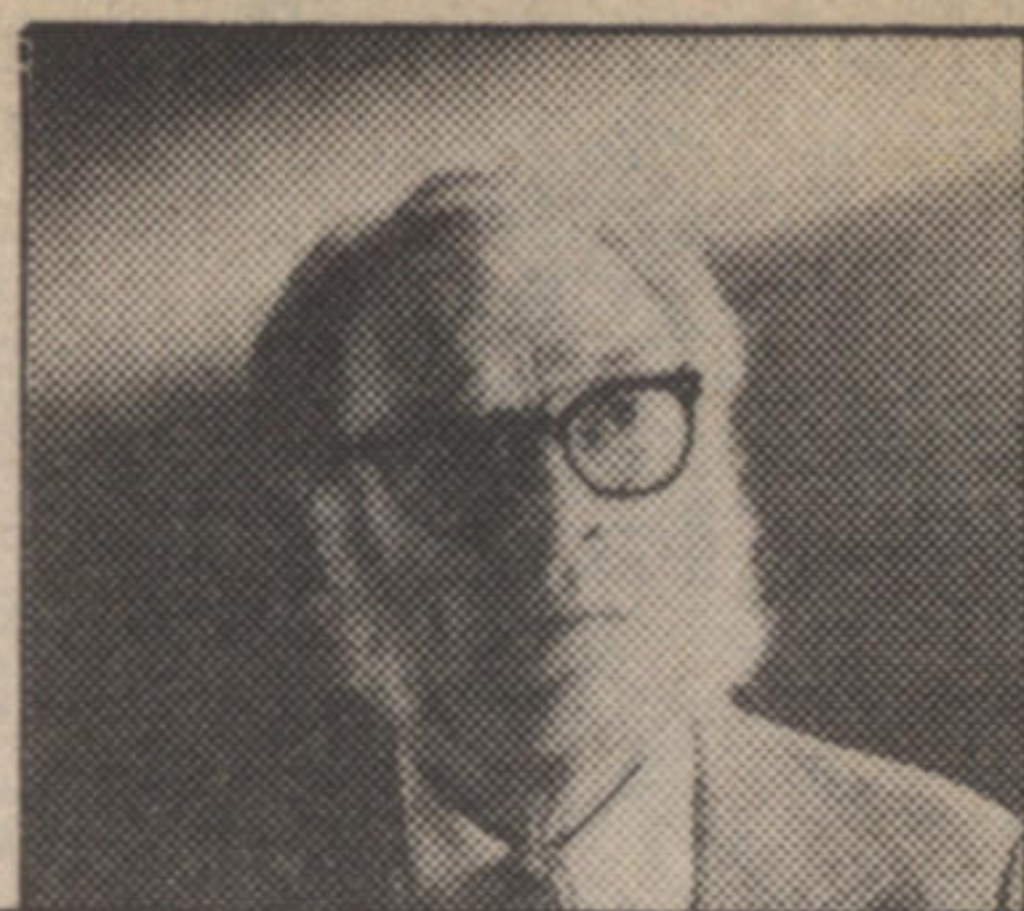
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EDITORIAL



by Isaac Asimov

THE KISS OF DEATH?

I have received a letter from David Markey of East Islip, NY, which gave me considerable reason to think. He commented on my editorial, "Outsiders, Insiders," which appeared in the February 1986 issue of *Asimov's*, writing:

"Although I agree wholeheartedly with your basic thrust, one thing bothers me. You used Michael Crichton's novel 'The Andromeda Strain' as an example of a science fiction novel sold in the mainstream by an 'outsider' to 'the brotherhood of science fiction.' Which is true, except that when it was first published (if memory serves) the book jacket did not carry the words 'science fiction' on it. Furthermore, most books sold in the mainstream that are in fact SF do not carry those words anywhere in their text."

He goes on to cite books by Allen Drury and Kurt Vonnegut as further examples.

—Well, Mr. Markey, you are right. Carl Sagan's current novel *Contact*, which is a runaway best seller, is also not touted as science

fiction. The publishers, in fact, are vehement about its not being science fiction, although it clearly is.

There are a number of well-thought-of and highly-successful science fiction writers who are quite open about their desire not to be known as science fiction writers. I will name no names, but the point they make is that the phrase "science fiction" promptly puts them in a "ghetto." Reviewers will not take them seriously; what reviews they get are a paragraph long; bookstores, if they bother buying them at all, put them in odd corners behind the box in which the cat sleeps, and so on.

Other writers, who aspire to literary excellence, or who are under the impression they have already caught the virus thereof, are very haughty about the rest of us. They consider us far beneath them, are ashamed that they had to mingle with us in order to get started, and after a while refuse to remember that they ever did.

What is this, then? Is the phrase "science fiction" a kiss of death?

As I explained in my editorial "The Name of Our Field" in the May-June, 1978 issue of *Asimov's*, Hugo Gernsback invented the term "science fiction" in June, 1929. The phrase was not to be found in the names of the magazines of the field, however, for quite a time. The word "science" by itself was already being used. In June 1929, Hugo Gernsback had put out the first issue of *Science Wonder Stories*. A year later, however, the first word was dropped and it became simply *Wonder Stories*. In January 1930, Clayton Publications put out *Astounding Stories of Superscience* but with the second issue it became simply *Astounding Stories*.

It was not until March, 1938, that the first issue of a magazine bearing the phrase "science fiction" in its title appeared. That was when John W. Campbell, Jr. changed *Astounding Stories* to *Astounding Science Fiction*. In fact, I was told once that it had been his intention to call the magazine simply *Science Fiction* but he found that Columbia Publications had already registered that title so that he couldn't use it. And in March 1939, Columbia did put out a magazine called *Science Fiction*.

For ten years that was it. Then, in October, 1949, Mercury Press launched *The Magazine of Fantasy* which, with its second issue, became *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. And in October 1950, Galaxy Publishing put out the first issue of *Galaxy Science Fiction*.

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After that, many magazines began to use "Science Fiction" in the title. Almost all of them were short-lived, but then most of the magazines that didn't use "Science Fiction" were also short-lived.

In February 1960, however, the name of *Galaxy Science Fiction* was changed to *Galaxy Magazine*. That puzzled me and I inquired. It was then, for the first time, that I heard that the phrase "science fiction" was a kiss of death. *Galaxy* claimed its sales were automatically limited as long as that deadly phrase was on the cover.

Well, *Galaxy*, with or without the phrase, no longer exists. There are, now, just three science fiction magazines that can be viewed as successful and prestigious. One is *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact* (which used to be *Astounding Science Fiction*). Another is *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. And still another is (of course) *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. You will notice, I hope, that all three have that kiss-of-death phrase in the title.

Of course, it might be argued that those three magazines occupy no more than the same small corner of the publishing world that similar magazines occupied in the 1930s, and that is true. Circulations are still 100,000 and less. Nevertheless, omitting "science fiction" does *not* increase circulation. Rather, the omission seems to lead to the death of the magazine, so that "science fiction" would seem to be the kiss of life.

Yes, but what about science fiction writers? Aren't they stuck in a ghetto? Don't their novels tend to suffer because of that nasty phrase "science fiction" attached to it? Even if they write something else altogether—a classy mainstream novel, for instance—doesn't the stigma of "science fiction writer" cling to them? Aren't they better off if they simply leave the blasted field, and pretend they were never in it? Shouldn't they go about saying, "Science fiction? Never heard of it. I write speculative fiction."

Well, I can only speak for myself. I never thought "science fiction" was the kiss of death, and I've never found it to be so.

I have written non-fiction books by the score, and have done so in every field I could manage, and no one has ever hesitated to publish me because I bore the "science fiction" stigma. Nor have the reviews dismissed me as a "science fiction writer."

I have put out fat books with titles like *Asimov's New Guide to Science* and *Asimov's Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*. I have been responsible for a two-volume *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*, a two-volume *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, an *Isaac Asimov's Treasury of Humor* and they all do well, and are accepted on their own merits. I am not in a literary ghetto, and I've never been in one.

Nor is it because I have shrewdly denied my science fiction origins. I admit that my peak science fic-

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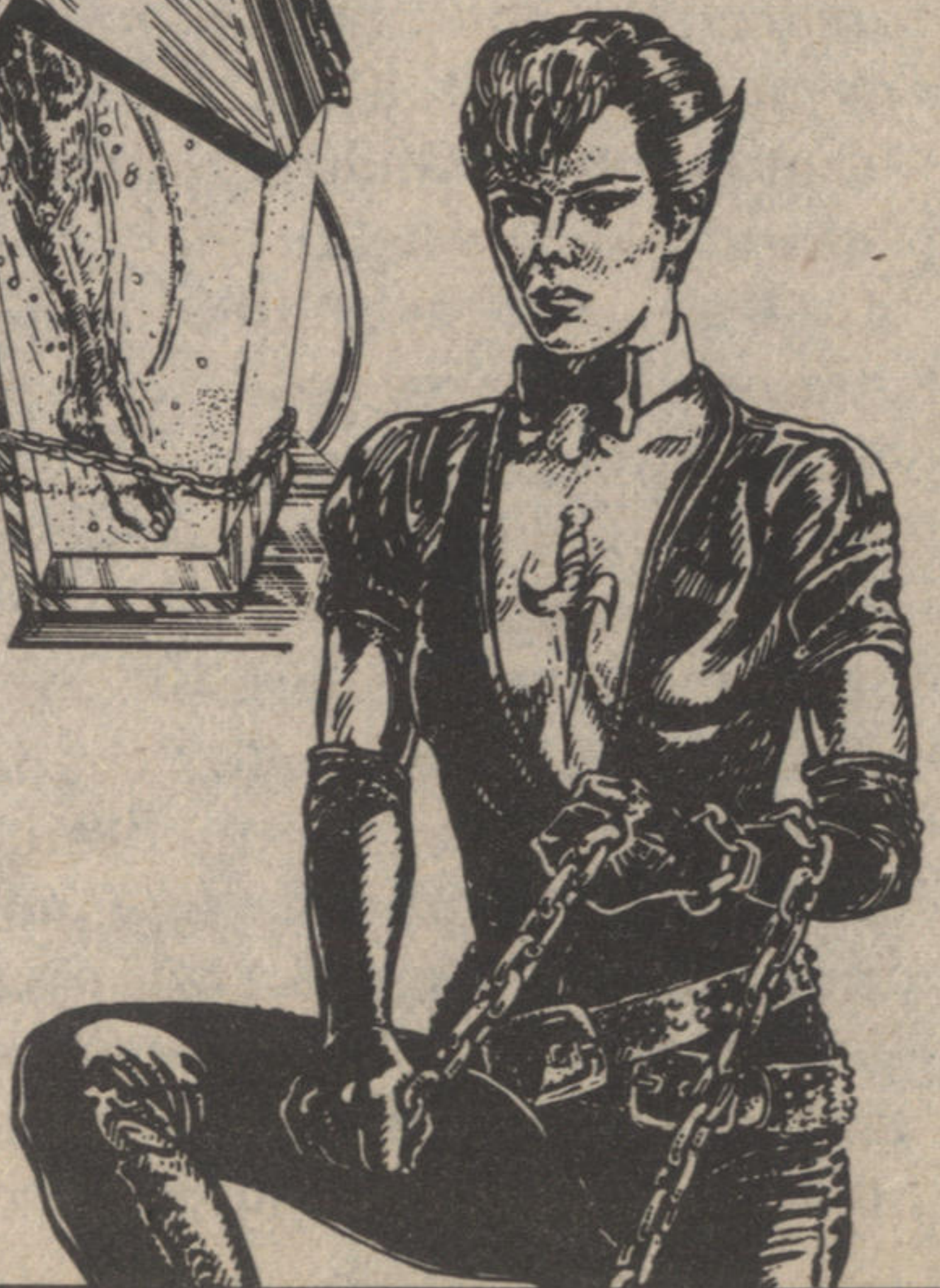
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tion production was in the 1950s and that in the 1960s and 1970s I went in heavily for non-fiction. However, I did not deny my science fiction; I didn't even abandon it. I wrote many science fiction stories in that period, when I had supposedly deserted the field, including a novel "The Gods Themselves" and a novelette "The Bicentennial Man" both of which were awarded a Hugo and a Nebula.

What's more, if, at any time in that interval, someone were to ask me what I wrote, I had my answer ready. It was, "I write everything, but I am best-known for my science fiction." The statement had the merit of truth, and I have always had an unaccountable feeling that I ought to tell the truth.

I was careful to maintain my connection with the science fiction fraternity. In November 1958, I accepted an invitation to write a monthly science column for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (at about a tenth of the word-rate I commanded for similar pieces outside the field). I have continued to do so ever since and I have now appeared in 335 issues without having missed one. Yes, I love doing them, but, in addition, I have done it with the intention of keeping myself before the eyes of the science fiction reader.

Then, too, when I was invited by Joel Davis to participate in a new science fiction magazine with my name on it, I had a number of reservations, but none of them involved any fear that the juxtapo-

sition of "Isaac Asimov" and "science fiction" would hurt me. When my reservations were taken care of, the magazine appeared and still exists (obviously) and it has never hurt me.

In the 1980s, I returned to science fiction in a major way and have now published three new novels with a fourth in press (each novel twice as long as my novels of the 1950s).

Nor is there any pretense that the new novels are not science fiction, but are something more "respectable" (if that's the word). I admit that *Robots and Empire*, my most recent novel, does not have the phrase "science fiction" on the cover, but the very word "robots" gives it away. So does my own name on the cover, since I have always carefully and meticulously identified myself with science fiction.

And if you open the book and read the front flap-matter, here's how it starts: "Isaac Asimov's *Robots and Empire* heralds a major new landmark in the great Asimovian galaxy of science fiction." There are the fatal words and it was the publisher who wrote them, not I. Doubleday isn't afraid of the "kiss of death," either; and since the book has done well, I feel "science fiction" is *not* a kiss of death.

Might I do even better without "science fiction"? I doubt it, but if I did, it would mean denying my beginnings, and I'd be ashamed to do that just in order to make more money. ●

LETTERS

Dear Isaac:

For the last couple of years, since word processors have been coming into general use, I have noted an absolutely "astounding" degradation in the spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax in the only three remaining decent SF magazines to be obtained today.

We have worked far too long, you as an author and editor, and I as a technologist and reader, to elevate this form of literature to a recognized literate form and to let it go down the drain because of editorial screw-ups.

I am not without sin, the Western Union operator just caught me in a boo-boo and corrected it but I ain't gettin' paid; you are.

Luv,

John E. Speinke
3501 Conger Rd
Huntsville, Al 35805

Are you sure this has anything to do with word processors? Maybe it's because of television taping devices which have also come into general use in the last couple of years. Or maybe it's because of the decline in computer games. Just because a and b happen together doesn't mean that a causes b, or that b causes a.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IASfm*:

Some of your readers who receive *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in braille may be unaware of the existence of Si-Fi-Cee. Si-Fi-Cee is both the name of a Science Fiction fan club of and for blind people and its bi-monthly cassette fanzine. In this cassette fanzine, members of the club can hear regular interviews with authors of science fiction and other SF celebrities and get listings of which science fiction titles have been recorded or put into braille and by what organizations, and short stories read (when possible) by their authors.

Membership is five dollars a year. Further information about Si-Fi-Cee may be obtained by contacting: in braille or on cassette: Miss Mary Lou Lacefield, Si-Fi-Cee Content Editor, 413 Atwood Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40217 or in print or on cassette: Mr. William P. Hedl, Si-Fi-Cee Treasurer, 4716 Olde Bailey Way, Columbus, Ohio 43213. To date, we have produced 16 issues of Si-Fi-Cee.

Sincerely,

Mary Lou Lacefield
Louisville, KY

Thank you for sending the letter and we're happy to publish it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

Re: "Green Mars" Vol. 9 #9 *IASfm*. One minor point—did J. K. Potter read the story before doing his/her artwork? Did anyone read the story and compare it to the artwork? Rhetorical question—obviously not. page 121: "The pack is almost perfectly cylindrical, a big green tube . . . to just over his head . . ." nothing like those used on Earth, are they? I mention this instance but it is far from unique. Altogether too often there are glaring discrepancies between story and illustrations (not only in your magazine).

My major point—I may be wrong about this as about halfway through I began to wonder what the point was and started skimming. The point of the story seems to be rejection/acceptance of Progress. Progress being defined as terraforming of Mars. I have no quibble with this point. I do object to this point being almost lost in a very long mountain climbing story that, with only minor changes, could have been set on Earth. Even things that could have been used to differentiate it were not. E.g., what effects would lower gravity have on mountain climbing techniques, what attributes of this peculiar backpack could be utilized to advantage?

I feel that the terraforming of another planet, or even parts of this one, is an important subject to be addressed and this plot is one way of doing it. However, in my opinion, it would have been better as a shorter story.

Peter Bernier
Cape Breton, NS
Canada

P.S. Must every story have a male/female love subplot?

This is an example of what makes science fiction so hard to write. Little things pile up. A difference in gravity alters the technique in mountain-climbing. Weaker gravity also causes air to thin with height more slowly. Weaker gravity also produces less friction of boot against mountain, easier to slip. By the time you've got it figured out, you may forget the plot.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IASfm*:

Just a note to tell you how much I enjoyed reading Timothy Robert Sullivan's story, "Special Education," in the January 1986 *IASfm*. I've read it several times now, and I think its best feature is its economy—no blather, not a word wasted, characters drawn with the much sought after "few deft strokes."

[*"She refused the chair, preferring to stand and light a cigarette," then, "She blinked as smoke curled up from the butt clenched between her teeth," and, finally, "Her eyes were tearing with the smoke now." Lovely externalization of the character's internal progression—she knows that something is seriously wrong, would prefer to ignore it, but is forced to face the facts. The cigarette goes from being a self-conscious prop, an expression of her irritation at being confronted with something she doesn't want to know, to being completely ignored as she forgets herself when the truth finally hits home.*]

Whoops. Sorry. I do go on . . .

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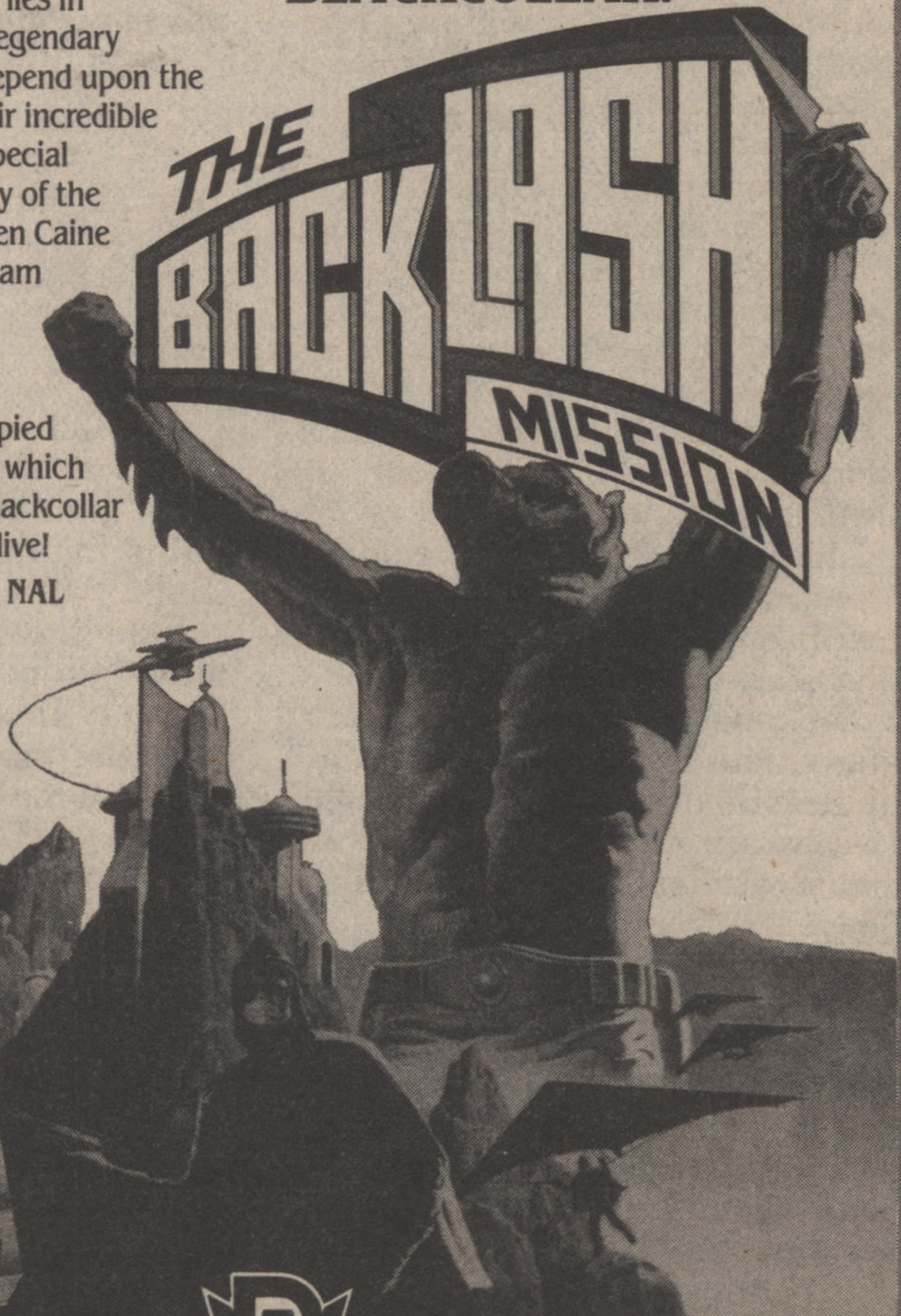
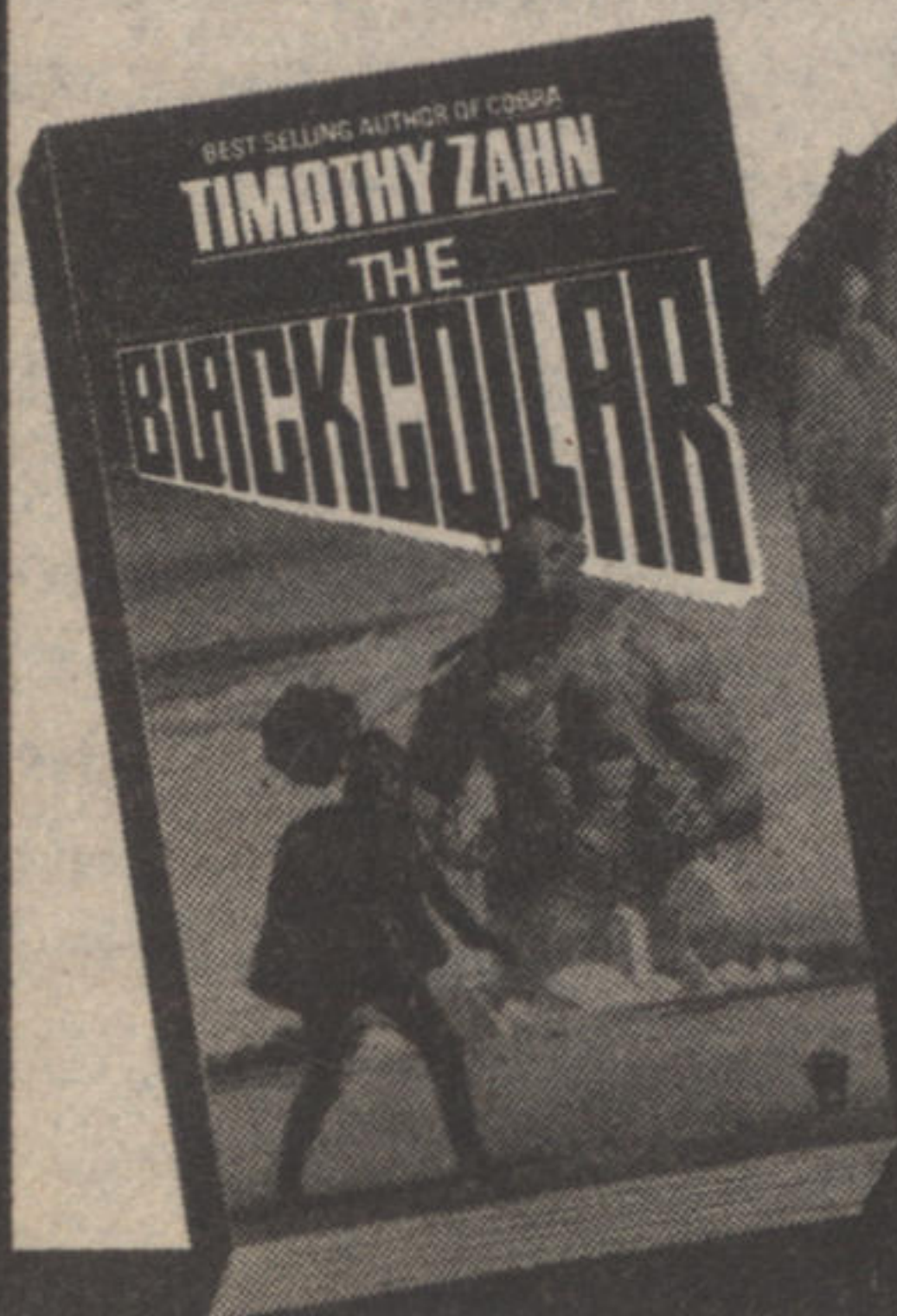
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when I like a story I tend to take it to bits to see what I liked about it. But you know the story's worth and needn't hear it from me. Aside from being a joy to read in and of itself, it gives me hope that Mr. Dozois will pull *IAsfm* out of the fantasy mush-puddle in which Ms. McCarthy left it. Thanks for publishing it. I hope to see more of Mr. Sullivan's work in future.

All the Best,

Nancy T. Atherton
Hallandale, FL

Whenever a writer is analyzed this closely, I wonder, "Did he have to figure it out carefully? If so, how long did it take him to write it?" It makes me nervous. I always write at top speed.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

I have just returned to reading magazine fiction after a long absence. I wanted to let you know that stories such as "Field Trial" by Molly Gloss make me glad that I have. This is what I'm looking for in science fiction, an interesting idea (varying forms of psi powers) mixed with characters I can feel for.

The debate about whether characterization or ideas makes science fiction what it is seems pointless to me. What is so wonderful about science fiction is that it provides good writers the opportunity to meld the two together in a way that no other field of literature can match. It's a shame that this opportunity is so often ignored.

David Brin has been telling me

for some time that your magazine is making the most of what science fiction has to offer. I see now that maybe he's right. I will be reading with interest.

Yours for better science fiction,

Perry Willis
7887 Katy Freeway #385
Houston, TX 77024

Of course, David Brin is right. Look at his story "The Postman" we published. I'm positive Brin would agree with me when I say that that was terrific.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors,

My patience has run out!! I've seen nothing in any published letters commenting on this, so I went back to the March '85 issue of *IAsfm* and re-read the story to be sure. Yep, it's there—so I've got a bit of a nit to pick about Connie Willis' very interesting "Curse of Kings." If I hadn't thought the transmutation of flesh and bones to wax to be such an interesting concept, this flaw in the story structure probably wouldn't have bothered me. But if you'll check, I believe you'll find a "first pass" on a word processor somehow failed to be erased/replaced when a final printout was called out. First, read the passages from the third paragraph, page 144, through the start of the last paragraph on page 147; then go into the body of the story to about page 162 and read from the start of the major paragraph sub-division through at least the next six pages.

The composition on pages 144–147 appear to me to be a prelim-

inary, somewhat abbreviated, draft of the material that has been more fully "fleshed out" and placed at the more logical point in the story structure—shortly after Lacau has quarantined Jack in the cage inside the dome.

To complete my commentary, I would like to indicate that there is something of interest for me in every issue of your magazine, and usually in every story as well. In that same March issue with the Willis story, you published "The Land of Osiris," a translation from the German. I thought it to be a fine story as well, and would welcome other translated stories in the future.

Keep Up the Good Work,
Regards,

Lee Hogue
Las Cruces, NM

In some stories, the author will shift the point of view into the past because enough of the story has been told for the reader to be able to look at an event in the past with new eyes. It's called a "flashback." They're hard to handle. I once wrote a story with a flashback within a flashback and the editor called me bad names. Anyway, I think you stumbled over a flashback without realizing it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I have been reading with fascination the serialization of William Gibson's *Count Zero*. In the February issue of *IASfm*, which includes part two, I happened to notice a small technical error that may interest you.

At the top of page 149 the Finn is telling Bobby about the Wig and he makes the statement that, "Silicon doesn't wear out; microchips were effectively immortal." This caught my attention because I remembered reading an article in the January '85 issue of *Scientific American* called "The Reliability of Computer Memory" which more or less deals with this very subject.

Taken one at a time, according to consensus and the article's author Robert J. McEliece, a silicon chip in isolation will last without error for about a million years. Any sizeable memory is composed of far more than one chip, however. A one megabyte memory has a projected lifetime, according to the article, of about 43 days.

This extremely short life is due to alpha particle emission from certain radioactive impurities, especially uranium and thorium, present in the chips' plastic housings. The little zingers—helium nuclei—shoot through the crystal silicon lattice of a chip and displace charges every which way. This unfortunate phenomenon interferes with normal functioning and renders the portion of the chip affected prone to certain types of error. Thus we have "error programming," or subprograms in the memory which have no use except to monitor and compensate for this type of problem.

After a while too many particles pass through the chips and the memory simply becomes unusable. An "error correction code" used in the error programming prohibits this for something like fifty years, instead of fifty days. Needless to

say, I am no expert on the subject and Mr. McEliece does a far better job explaining the matter in his article. Persons interested in pursuing this should look there or, better yet, into his book *The Theory of Information and Coding* which I haven't seen but mention from the magazine's bibliography in case anyone's interested. I had no idea this sort of thing occurred myself until I read the article.

While I'm at it I would like to applaud *IAsfm* for its high standards not only in science fiction, but in fiction period. Far more often than not the stories are fresh, immediate, and effective. I have read your magazine for about a year and

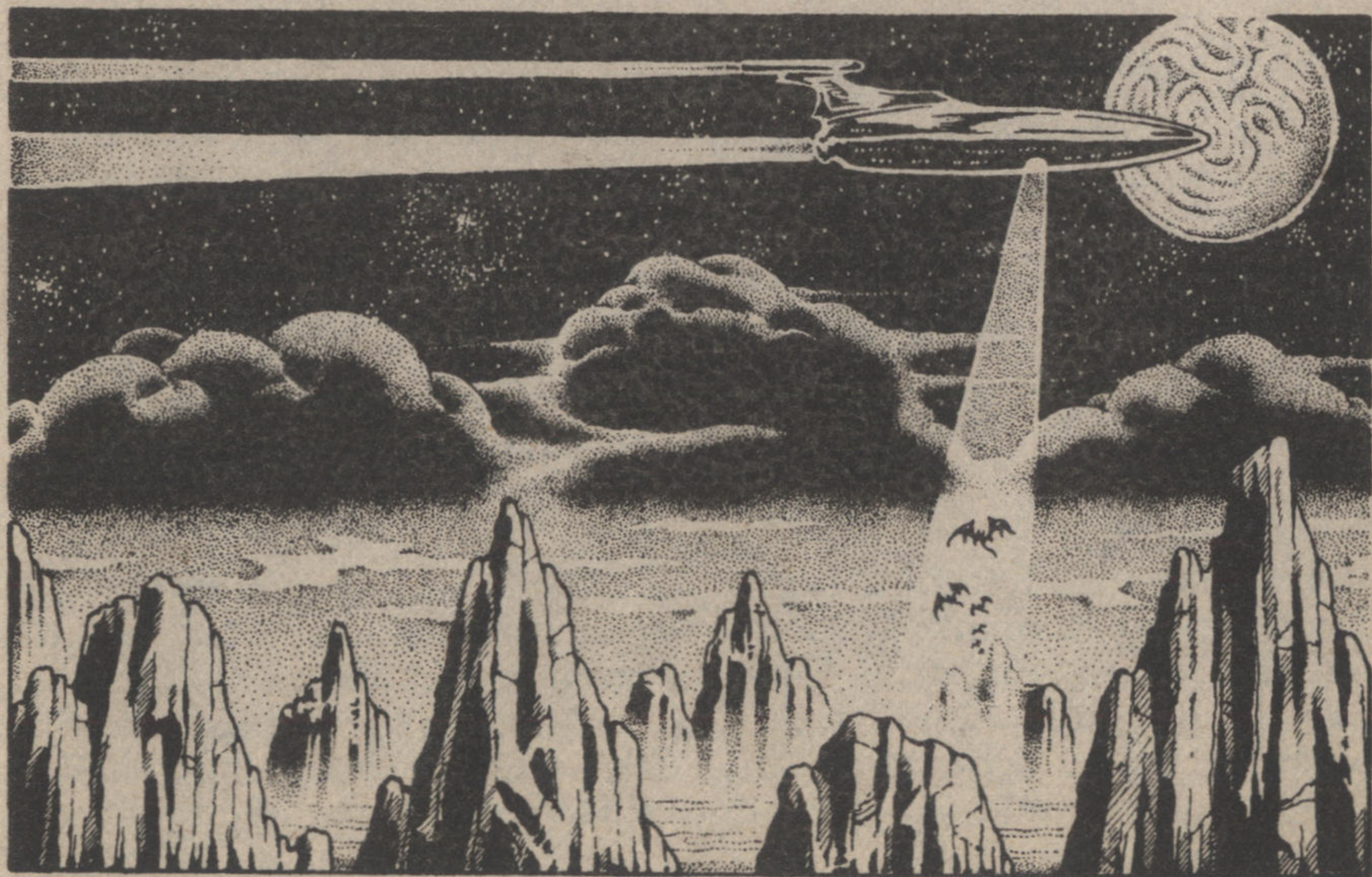
have come to expect quality fiction. Great job, guys.

I recently finished *Robots and Empire*, Dr. Asimov. I found the book insidiously thought-provoking because of the unusual characters of the robots. I believe you characterized that idea rather well.

L. Breaux
San Diego, CA

Perhaps even if you removed all radioactive materials from microchips, cosmic ray bombardment, which you can do nothing about, would set limits. And perhaps this means that my robots are more mortal, mentally speaking, than I had ever thought. I may be able to make use of that some day. . . .

—Isaac Asimov

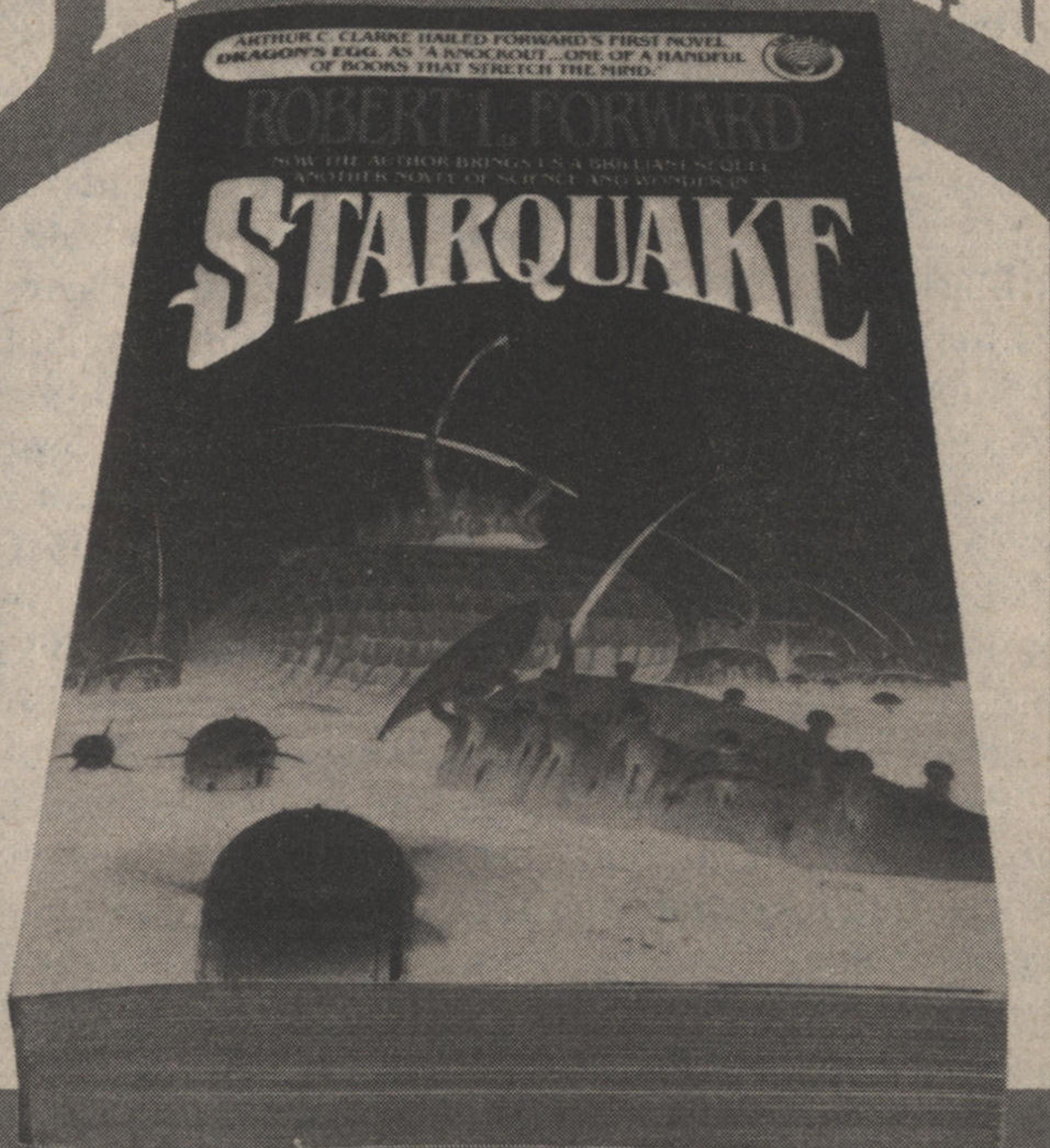


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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Did you ever want to be someone else?

No? Well, truth to tell, neither have I. I've been pretty content being me. Admittedly I wouldn't mind fine tuning my personality somewhat, and I could certainly improve my lifestyle if I borrowed a few things here and there from some more fortunate souls. (A Swiss bank account, a 1958 mint condition Corvette, and so on.)

Alter Ego (Activision, Inc.), on the other hand, is a computer game that lets you be someone else. Or, if you choose, you can re-create yourself all over again. It's described as a "Fantasy Role-Playing Game About Life" and, in my initial encounter with it, I wrote it off as some pop-psychology twaddle. But then—

Ah, I get ahead of myself. First, let me give some particulars on this intriguing bit of software.

You start by creating a character, using a personality profile supplied by the computer or selecting your own. You then take this alter ego to one of the seven life stages: Birth, Infancy, Childhood, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Mature Adulthood, and Old Age. Once at

a stage, you maneuver through symbols representing experiences. These can be social, intellectual, emotional, physical, familial, and vocational life experiences. Each symbol presents an interactive experience. You make decisions as your alter ego, while a status screen records your development. There are also special boxes to go to when you're ready to settle down to married life, raise a family, or get a job.

The status screen tells the "tale" of your alter ego, rating everything from your confidence to your trustworthiness. There are also ratings in such areas as intellectual, physical, and social development.

Okay, so I load *Alter Ego* into my IBM-PC and, as recommended, I started plowing my way through the infant years. In terms of experiences, it left a lot to be desired. I mean, why do I care how my alter ego handles a wet diaper? And after I decide, the program, designed by Peter J. Favaro, Ph.D., makes non-judgmental comments on the possible reasons for my behavior. Phooey!

Off went *Alter Ego*. But then, a week or two later, I decided to give the program another try. So I went

to the young adulthood period and began scurrying through the experiences. And now I started to have fun. A friend asks me to deliver a package to some older woman. When I arrive, she answers the door in a sheer negligee. Would I like to step in for a few minutes? Why, certainly. How about a drink? I quickly type in "Yes." And just as we move into the rumpus room among the lion and antelope heads hung on the wall, her husband, a big game hunter, arrives. He puts a gun to my head. And, well, I shouldn't cheat your alter ego of this rewarding "life experience."

There are, of course, a number of more significant experiences. From helping a depressed friend, to trying to form a stable relationship with the opposite sex, *Alter Ego* touches about all the possible bases. There are even little promotional statements suggesting psychotherapy as a real-life way to deal with certain of the issues raised.

I was enjoying *Alter Ego* in a rather detached way when a disturbing thing happened. I was at a physical life experience and a doctor's check-up revealed that I was diabetic. No problem, the program informed me, as long as I maintain my insulin treatments.

But then it tells me that due to my low Thoughtfulness score I might not be able to resist the starches and sugars that could prove dangerous to me.

How true, I moaned. I can't even hide my weakness from a computer program. I quickly hurried over to the status screen, and a full scale check revealed my Thoughtfulness at 14 percent, way below any other score. I was impulsive, self-centered, and I had been found out.

Wait! I thought. That's not me. Yes, that's my alter ego. I was just trying to get into the part of another character. Of course, my real persona is really very, very different.

Sure.

Alter Ego surprised me. It actually made me stop and think about my decisions, comparing them to my real-life values. And the program (so damned understanding and professional) seemed to really be getting the measure of a personality.

I've barely scratched the surface of the game's possibilities. I had yet to land a full-time job and marriage seemed a remote possibility. And now I began to wonder what it might be like to have another go at adolescence with the benefit of hindsight. And since middle age is my next stop on the karma trail, I really wanted to see how my alter ego would fare. (One thing's for sure: I don't want any more bad check-ups. No sir.)

Alter Ego is a remarkable mirror of a person's personalities or fantasies. Available in male and female versions, it may just be the most intriguing and personal "game" that you've ever played. ●

MARTIN GARDNER

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON



According to the Old Testament (I Kings 4:31) Solomon "was wiser than all men." We all know the story (I Kings 3) about how he settled a bitter dispute between two harlots, each claiming to be the mother of a newborn baby. Solomon solemnly proposed cutting the child in half with a sword and giving a half to each claimant. One harlot agreed, but Solomon gave the child to the other woman when she offered to give up the baby if Solomon would only spare its life.

Both I Kings 10 and II Chronicles 9 tell how the fire-worshiping Queen of Sheba (or "Queen of the South" as Jesus called her in Matthew 12:42) made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to test Solomon's wisdom with "hard questions." The Old Testament gives no details about the questions, but there are many colorful legends about them in the Talmud, in other ancient Hebrew documents, in the Koran and its early commentaries, and in Islamic folklore.

One legend says that Balkis (as she is called in the Koran) introduced a group of boys and girls, all dressed alike. Solomon was asked to separate the sexes without speaking to or touching any of the children. Solomon ordered the boys and girls to wash their hands in basins of water. The girls turned up their long sleeves, the boys did not. One is reminded of how Huckleberry Finn's female disguise was penetrated when a piece of lead was tossed into his lap. Instinctively, he closed his knees to catch the weight rather than move his legs wider apart.

Another legend tells how the queen presented Solomon with two bouquets of flowers, one real, one artificial, and asked him to tell which was which without touching or smelling the blossoms. Can you guess how Solomon solved this problem? The answer is on page 83.



solo for koto and hologram

I dream of pachinko
Which all the new men play
In the blood-bright arcades
Of Tokyo, before the cameras.

I sit on a mat
In the starlight
By the poolside
With my hands on the koto,
And they ask me to play music,
Not for themselves but for
Their insomniac lovers.

This particular dream
Has chosen me
Apart from every other.
It comes with
Something on its mind:
A role in the new theater.

A glimpse of hemoglobin
Establishes obscenities
In a red blood cell.
Auteurs draw the plectra
From navel to papilla—
Every drop that falls,
A note plucked.

Then I'm hitting the box
With crusted nails,
Open hands hammering out
The code of my dishonor.
A million lidless steel eyes
Come rolling, all deaf to the glamor.

—Marc Laidlaw







THE GIRL WHO FELL INTO THE SKY

by Kate Wilhelm

art: Nicholas Jainschigg

This well-known and highly respected author's last tale in *Asfm*, "The Gorgon Field" (August 1985), was a Nebula award finalist. That story evoked a powerfully haunting feeling for the land. "The Girl Who Fell into the Sky" takes place in another part of the country—on the Great Plains of the Midwest—but that same magnificent sense of awe is also integral to its telling. Ms. Wilhelm's most recent science fiction novel, *Huysman's Pets*, was published by Bluejay Books last January, and they will be bringing forth a mystery novel, *The Hamlet Trap*, next February.

His father was a MacLaren, his mother a MacDaniel, and for forty years John had been the one thrust between them when they fought. Today they stood glaring at each other, through him, around him, his mother with her flashing green eyes and red hair that she now dyed (exactly the same color it always had been), his father with his massive face set in a scowl, thick white eyebrows drawn close together over his long nose.

"I'll take an axe to the wheels first!" she said in a low, mean voice.

"Since when do I let you tell me what I can or can't do?"

"Knock it off, both of you!" John MacLaren yelled. "For God's sake! It's a hundred and five! You'll both have heart attacks!"

"No one asked you to butt in, either," his father snapped, not shifting his glare from his wife.

She tilted her head higher and turned, marched from the room. "I asked him," she called back. "Johnny, you want a gin and tonic?"

"Please," he said quietly. "Dad, what the hell is it all about?"

The room was green and white, cool, with many growing plants, everything neat and well cared for. The entire house was like this, furnished in good pieces, each one an investment: Hepplewhite chests, Duncan Phyfe chairs, pieces over two hundred years old that had come from Scotland, or France, or England. David MacLaren was the collector; Mary accepted it, even encouraged it sometimes, but she would not walk across the street to add to the assortment that had accumulated over the forty-five years they had been married.

Now that the argument had been stopped by Mary's departure, David MacLaren smiled at his son, waved toward a wicker arrangement near a window and led the way to it. He seated himself with a soft grunt, then waited until John was seated opposite him.

"Made the mistake of telling her I plan to take a spin over to the Castleman house tomorrow, pick up that player piano and bring it home. You know, I told you about it, first one to cross the Mississippi, still in fine shape, I bet. Probably hasn't been opened in nearly thirty years, more than thirty years. It's a beauty. Cherry wood. Keys mahogany-colored and ivory, not black and white."

The words rang false to John's ears. "You mean over in Greeley County?"

"Yep."

"Dad, that's a three hundred mile drive, and it's going to be hotter tomorrow than today. It's going up to one ten before the afternoon's over."

He looked past his father, out the window at the lawn, kept green by nearly constant watering this summer. No breeze stirred; heat shimmies rose from the white concrete of the sidewalk; the leaves of the red Japanese maple drooped. And he knew where all this would lead, knew why

his mother had called him at the office only half an hour ago. Of course, his father could not drive three hundred miles in this weather, could not have anything to do with moving a piano. He took a deep breath.

His mother returned with a tray, three tall sweating glasses, twists of lemon, sugar frosted rims. Her face was smooth, imperturbable as she looked at him; there was a glint of understanding in her eyes, a spark of determination that he knew quite well. She really would take the axe to the wheels if she had to. She was seventy-three, his father seventy-four.

He drank deeply. "You know you can't do that, Dad," he said then. "It'll keep. It's kept this long."

His father shook his head. "It's kept because Louis Castleman kept it. That nephew, Ross Cleveland, he'll drive in there hot as hell, take a look around, piss-poor land, isolated house, nothing there for him, and he'll head up to Goodland first thing, make a deal with Jennings and head for home again. And Jennings will put that piano in his café and let customers spill beer in it, lay cigarettes down on it."

"Dad, have you even been over there for the past twenty-five years? How do you know it's there? And what difference can it possibly make? You don't need it. You don't have room for it. A player piano! What for?"

"It's there," his father muttered. "I saw it listed on the inventory. Just a matter of getting the nephew to let me take stuff out, accept my offer. Be worth his while, of course, but he might want a separate appraisal or something. The land's not worth a damn, but he might want to realize a little from the possessions." He looked at Mary, his eyebrows touching, and said, "And I want it because it's mine. Oh, I'll pay for it, but I intend to go over there first thing in the morning and collect the thing and bring it home as soon as Ross Cleveland shows up to inspect his inheritance."

John looked helplessly from his father to his mother. Neither of them would give an inch to the other, but they would let him propose a third alternative, the one his mother was waiting for, the one she had called him for. And his father would protest, curse a bit, maybe storm out briefly before agreeing to let John go collect the piano. For a moment he was tempted to finish his drink and leave, let them fight it out. A surge of envy came and went; he envied them their passion, their uncompromising fights, their uncompromising love. They played hard, fought hard, loved hard, and they had kept all their passion when characteristics were being handed out at his conception. He had her hair and eyes, his father's long thin nose and robust build. They had kept all the passion for themselves.

When he left his parents' house an hour later, the temperature had climbed to one hundred ten, and he was committed to driving three

hundred plus miles to load an old piano into his father's truck and bring it home.

He and his father were partners in the law firm his father had started decades ago. He had called his secretary to warn her that he would be gone a few days possibly, that MacLaren Senior would handle anything that came up. There was no point now in going back to the office since it was four, a blistering afternoon, and he was driving his father's ten-year-old truck without air conditioning. He turned toward his house instead of downtown Wichita.

His house overlooked Three Oaks Golf Club; no one was on the greens that hot afternoon. The sprinklers worked day and night, it seemed, and still the grass had brown patches here and there. The groundskeepers kept moving the sprinklers in a futile attempt to cope with the heat wave and drought. John entered the house through the garage door and turned up the air conditioning on his way to the front door mail drop. No letter from Gina. He dumped the mail on the hall table and went to the kitchen to make himself a drink, and again a surge of envy swept him. His parents fought like alley brats and would kill anyone who tried to come between them. He and Gina never fought, never quarreled, never spoke sharply to each other, and she was spending the hot summer with her family in St. Louis. She did not write, did not call, and when he called, she was out somewhere. He spoke on those occasions with his son Tommy, or his daughter Amanda, but not with his wife who was always very, very busy.

Lorna Shields stood behind the heavy glass door of the Howard Johnson restaurant where she had just finished a strawberry soda and a glass of iced tea and two glasses of water. Beyond the door the heat rose crookedly from the pavement; the glare of light was painful. Ever rising heat; cruel light; and no sweat. It's not Ohio, kid, she told herself with some satisfaction. Not at all like Ohio. Oh, it got hot back there, too, but a thick, sticky, sweat-making heat, not like this inferno that sucked her dry as soon as she walked out into it. Her lips felt parched; her skin prickled; her hair had so much static electricity that when she had tried to comb it on entering the rest room earlier, it had sprung out like the hair of the bride of Frankenstein. She had laughed and another woman in the small space had eyed her warily.

Lorna was tall and lanky, boyish-looking with her short dark hair that curled back home in Ohio, but was quite straight here in Kansas. Her eyes were such a dark blue that many people thought they were black, and she tanned so deeply so easily that it always seemed that the first day of spring when the sun came out and stayed more than an hour, she

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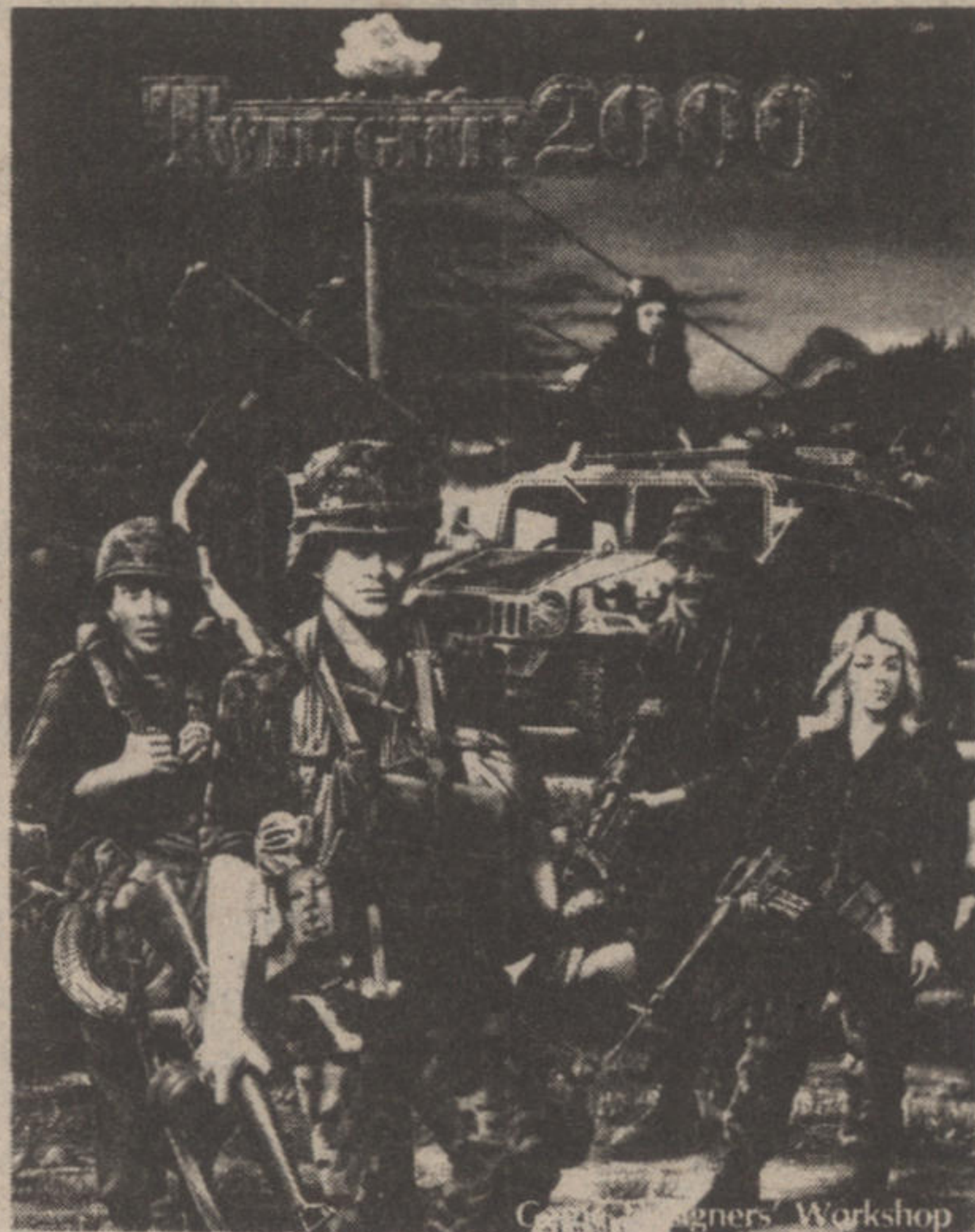
Your equipment was brand new in 1995; now it's wearing out. Gasoline is rare, so your vehicles run on alcohol you distill yourself. And 5th Division's cavalry—when there was a 5th Division—rode horses. There's not much government left, just warlords, marauders, and free cities. Even the major powers are collapsing; whole divisions are refusing orders and heading home.

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got the kind of suntan that other people spent thousands of dollars on hot beaches trying to acquire. She was twenty-five.

If she kept driving, she was thinking, she could get there around ten and Elly and Ross wouldn't show up for at least a day, maybe two. Elly had said Friday night or Saturday. The thought of having a house to herself for a day or two, not having to ask questions, listen to answers, smile and be polite was overwhelmingly tempting. Back in February her instructor-advisor on her committee had taken her aside and encouraged her to apply for a grant to continue her master's project after graduation; he had even helped her with the forms, and had written an almost embarrassing letter of recommendation. To her astonishment, she was awarded the grant, to take effect in June, to run for nine months. All expenses and living money, even enough to buy her little, three-year old Datsun. For the first time in her life she felt very rich. And with the grant the work she had been doing changed, became meaningful where it had been the result of nearly idle daydreaming, a last minute desperate attempt to find something for her project that would win approval from her committee. She was doing an oral history of religion, its importance, its rituals, its impact on people who were now over sixty-five or seventy. Not their present religion, but the religion of their youth.

Suddenly, yesterday, she had frozen, could not think what to say to the old woman waiting kindly for her to begin, could hardly remember why she was in the convalescent home in Kansas City in the first place. Last night in her motel room, she had looked about with loathing. Even the air-conditioned air smelled exactly the same in each motel she stayed in, as if they bought it in the same place that furnished the bedspreads and the pictures on the walls, and the dim lights. She had planned to stop interviewing periodically and rent an apartment, start the transcriptions that would take much longer than getting the information. The time had come for just that, she had realized, and put away her tape recorder, consulted her map, and headed for Greeley County, Kansas.

Really, the only question was, should she stop now, or continue? She could get a motel here in Topeka, but on down the road? They might all be filled later, and it was too early to stop now. Only four. She shook her head, smiling faintly at herself. She had no intention of sitting in a motel room for the next twelve or fourteen hours. She pushed the thick door open and went out into the hot air. More stuff to drink, bread, sandwich makings, fruit . . . She got into her small Datsun and started looking for a supermarket. And breakfast things, she told herself. She always woke up ravenous. Half an hour later she was on the interstate again, heading for the rendezvous with her sister and her sister's husband at the house he had inherited from an uncle he had never met. She hiked her cotton skirt up to her thighs as she drove; the wind rushed through the little

car screeching maniacally, and all around her the world turned into a corn field as far as she could see. She loved it.

What she had not reckoned with, she realized later, was the lowering sun. The sky remained cloudless, clear, pale, sun-bleached to invisibility ahead, a great white nothingness with an intolerable glare at its heart. And she had been right about the motels filling up. By seven when she would have admitted her mistake, there was nothing to be found. Doggedly she drove on into the glare, looking forward to each oasis of gas station, restaurant, sometimes a motel, all huddled together as if pressured by the corn that would have reclaimed even those spots. Finally the sun fell out of the sky, vanished without a hint of sunset. It was there, then it was not there and the sky came back, violet turning into a deep purple faster than she would have thought possible. At Goodland she made her last stop. It was ten thirty; nothing was open except a gas station. She got more water, filled her gas tank and consulted the notes she had made when she talked to her sister two weeks ago, recalled the instructions: "As soon as you get on the road heading south, watch the odometer; it's exactly fourteen point six miles to the turn-off. Then it's exactly four miles to the house. Mr. MacLaren said the key will be taped to the underside of the kitchen window around the back of the house. He said you can't miss it. So, if you get there first, go on inside and make yourself at home. The electricity will be on; there's well water, everything you need, even beds and bedding. See you soon, honey."

The gas-station attendant had said it was cooling off good, wasn't it, and she had thought he was making a joke, but now, heading south finally, she took a deep breath and another. It was cooling off a bit. The countryside was totally dark; no light showed anywhere, only her headlights on the strip of state road ever rushing toward her. After the traffic of the interstate, the roar of passing trucks, the uncountable trucks pulling trailers, the vans and station wagons and motorcycles, she felt suddenly as if she were completely alone. She felt tension seeping out through her pores and had not known until now that she had become tense in the long day of interstate driving.

Without the explicit directions she never would have found the turn-off. Even knowing it was there, at fourteen point six miles, she would not have found it without coming to a complete stop, backing up a hundred feet and approaching again, straining to see another road. The road she finally found was dirt.

Gingerly she turned onto it and suddenly the land changed, became hilly. She had grown so used to the corn-covered tabletop land that she hit the brake hard when the dirt road began to go downhill. She eased off the brake and slowly rolled forward. The road was narrow, white under her lights, hard-packed, not really difficult. It seemed that the last

four miles were the longest miles of all. Then she saw the house and drew in a sigh of relief. The road ended at the house.

Finding the key was easier than finding her flashlight in the mess she had made of her belongings in the car. When she opened the back door, hot air rushed out. She entered, searched for lamps, switches. The electricity was on. She lighted rooms as she entered them to open windows, open the front door, open everything that could be opened. The house was not very big, two bedrooms, a spacious living room, another room off it that might have been a bedroom once but seemed a storeroom for dead furniture now, and a very large kitchen with dinette space and all electric appliances. No wood out here, she thought, nodding. Everything was neat and clean. Her sister had said that the lawyer had hired people to come in and see to things. Lorna plugged in the water heater and refrigerator and put water in the ice trays and then sat down at the kitchen table too tired to pay any more attention to her surroundings.

She roused herself enough to bring her cooler inside, make herself a sandwich, then go back out to find her sleeping bag. All she could think of now was a shower and sleep.

She dreamed of distant music and voices raised in song, laughter, more song. She found herself singing along, in her dream:

*In Scarlet town, where I was born,
There was a fair maid dwellin'
Made ev'ry youth cry "well-a-way;"
Her name was Barb'ra Allen.
All in the merry month of May,
When green buds there were swellin',
Young Jemmy Grove on his death-bed lay,
For love of Barb'ra Allen.*

Suddenly she came wide awake and sat up. She was shivering. At last the night was cooling off. She strained to hear something, anything. Far away a lone coyote yipped. As she drifted into sleep again, the refrain played itself through her head over and over: "Henceforth take warning by the fall of cruel Barb'ra Allen."

It was after nine when she woke up again. She blinked at the ceiling, sky-blue, not a motel-room color. There was a silence so deep it was eerie, other-worldly. She thought of all the things the silence excluded: maids with cleaning carts, automobiles revving up, trucks shifting gears, showers running. . . . She hugged herself and ran to the outside kitchen door where she came to an abrupt stop and caught her breath sharply, then walked very slowly out onto the porch barefoot, in her flimsy short gown. The world had turned blue and gold while she slept.

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Everywhere golden grass stretched out under a sky so blue it looked like an inverted lake. There were hills, all grass-covered, the grass gold, brown, ocher. She felt no breeze, yet the golden grass responded to something that was like a shadow passing over it, shading it, moving on, restoring the shining gold. As she stood motionless, her gaze taking in the landscape, she began slowly to make out other details: the grass ended at outcroppings of rock that were also golden, or tan, ocher. There were rocky ridges outlining hills in the distance, and now she saw that the grass was not the lush carpet she had thought it to be at first. It was sparse, in places yielding to the rocky ground, in a few places high and thick, but there were few of those stands. And she could see paths winding through the grass. Leading where? She hurried back inside, eager to dress, have something quick to eat, and get back out to follow a trail or two before the sun got much higher, before the heat returned.

The drive across the state was as hot and tedious as John MacLaren had known it would be. His father had had the truck serviced, even had a new battery in it, but the monster was thirteen years old and cranky. Although his father claimed it was his hunting and fishing truck, actually he had bought it for hauling pieces of furniture from barn sales, estate sales, garage sales. And he had been willing to travel a thousand miles to attend such sales. Not for the past five or six years, John thought then, not since a heart attack had slowed him down a little, and he was glad again that he was the one in the truck, and not his father. The fact that the truck had been tuned up, the battery replaced, the tires checked meant that his father had fully intended to take this trip himself. He returned to the question that had bothered him all night: Why? What was so damned important about one more piano, one more antique?

There was something, he knew. Castleman's death two weeks ago had stirred a darkness in his father that usually was so deeply buried that few people suspected its presence. John had sensed it now and then, and had seen it only yesterday. He could almost envy his father that, he thought bleakly. His own life had no secrets, no past best left unexplored. He had married the girl most suitable for him according to her family and his. An exemplary citizen, an exemplary husband and father with no darkness in him, no crazy hermit pal to beckon and stir the darkness that didn't exist anyway.

He knew the two old men had known each other for fifty years or more, and had assumed that they never saw each other only because Castleman had been a recluse, three hundred miles away, and not entirely sane.

When John was fifteen, his father had taken him along when he visited Castleman to draw up his will. Even then Castleman had been a crank, raving incoherencies. John had stayed outside while they talked, argued,

yelled at each other in the end, and he was certain that his father had not been back since that day; he himself had never been back. He had not even seen the piano then. After the legal work was completed, he and his father had walked in the ruins of the commune that had been built and then abandoned on the property.

His head was starting to ache from the heat and the glare of the sun. He had left early enough, he had thought, to avoid having the lowering sun in his face, but there it was, almost like a physical presence pushing against the visor, burning his chest, his arms. He made his turn north before it slipped below the visor, but it was almost worse having it on the side of his face.

He missed the dirt road. When he finally was certain he had missed it, and maneuvered the truck in a U-turn, headed back very slowly, he remembered his father's curses from the distant past, when he too had missed it. "Made it hard to find on purpose," he had muttered. John crept along, found the turn and followed the dirt road to the house. It was going on six.

He felt disoriented then because it looked exactly the same as twenty-five years before. The poplars shading the house looked unchanged, neither taller nor older; the house itself was just like the memory of it: tan with green trim, well-maintained. The surrounding hills were covered with drought-stricken grass, as they had been then. Maybe the grass came up brown and never changed, he thought, almost wildly. He saw the Datsun in the driveway, back by the rear of the house, and felt disappointment. He had hoped to have one evening alone before negotiating for the stupid piano, had planned on entering the house, inspecting it, snooping around for papers, letters, anything to shed some light on the mystery in which his father had had some unfathomable part.

Resignedly he left the truck, ran his hand through his hair, gritty with road dirt, and went up to the front porch. He did not knock. There were voices clearly audible on the porch. An old woman was talking.

". . . didn't dare laugh or even smile, nothing. I did like the singing though. Mamie Eglin could sing like someone on radio or television today. Pretty! Ma's favorite was 'The Old Rugged Cross.' Makes me soup up every time I hear it even now."

They were not in the living room. He could see the empty room through the screen door. The kitchen, he decided, and backed away from the front door. He walked around the house slowly, not in a hurry to break up the conversation. No breeze blew, yet the grass moved slightly, stirred by pressure perhaps, the lifting and falling of the blanket of heat that pushed hard against the land. He stood at the corner of the house and let his gaze follow the shadows of the invisible something that played over the responsive grass.

He no longer listened to the words of the old woman; her voice was a droning in the background of his thoughts. How had Castleman stood it? So alone, so far from anyone else, just him and the grass and heat in summer, blizzards in the winter. Why had he stayed? What had he done with his time day after day after day, year after year? A hawk rode an air current into his field of vision and he watched it out of sight. It did not fly away, it merged with the sky, vanished.

Suddenly he was jolted by the sound of a truck rumbling by, close enough, it seemed, to hit him. He jerked away from the house at the same time a clear, young voice said:

“Shit!”

The other voice continued without pause, apparently not bothered by the noise. “. . . preached to scare us, meant to scare us. And did scare us near to death. And Aunt Lodie, she scared us to death. Not my aunt, but everyone called her that. She told us girls stories that scared us to death. About being turned into a mule and being rode all night, things like that. Such terrible things. We was scared all the time. Most of us didn’t pay much mind to the sermons unless he hollered and then we sat up and listened until one of the boys would wiggle his fingers at us, or one of the girls would have a coughing fit and then all of us would have to cough and Brother Dale would thunder that the devil was there with us and please, God Almighty, give us strength to put him out of our hearts, and we’d be scared again.”

John looked in the window then and at first glance thought the person he saw was an Indian youth. Short, windblown dark hair, dark skin. A girl? Who? He moved to the door and looked in. No one was with her and he realized she was listening to a tape recording, transcribing the words into a portable computer.

“. . . wouldn’t have missed it for nothing. You see, there wasn’t nothing else to do. It took all day just to get to church and back home and make dinner for a crowd, and clean it up again, and by then it was time to go to bed. But it might of been the only time for weeks on end that we’d even see another soul.”

Another truck roared by; the girl scowled and tapped her fingers on the table top, waiting. John knocked on the door.

What intrigued him the most was that although she obviously had been startled by him, she just as obviously was not afraid. She looked up with widening eyes, then squinting, with her head tilted slightly as if trying to get him in focus. He spoke; she responded, and he stepped inside.

“John MacLaren—”

“Oh, the lawyer?”

“One of them. Mrs. Cleveland?”

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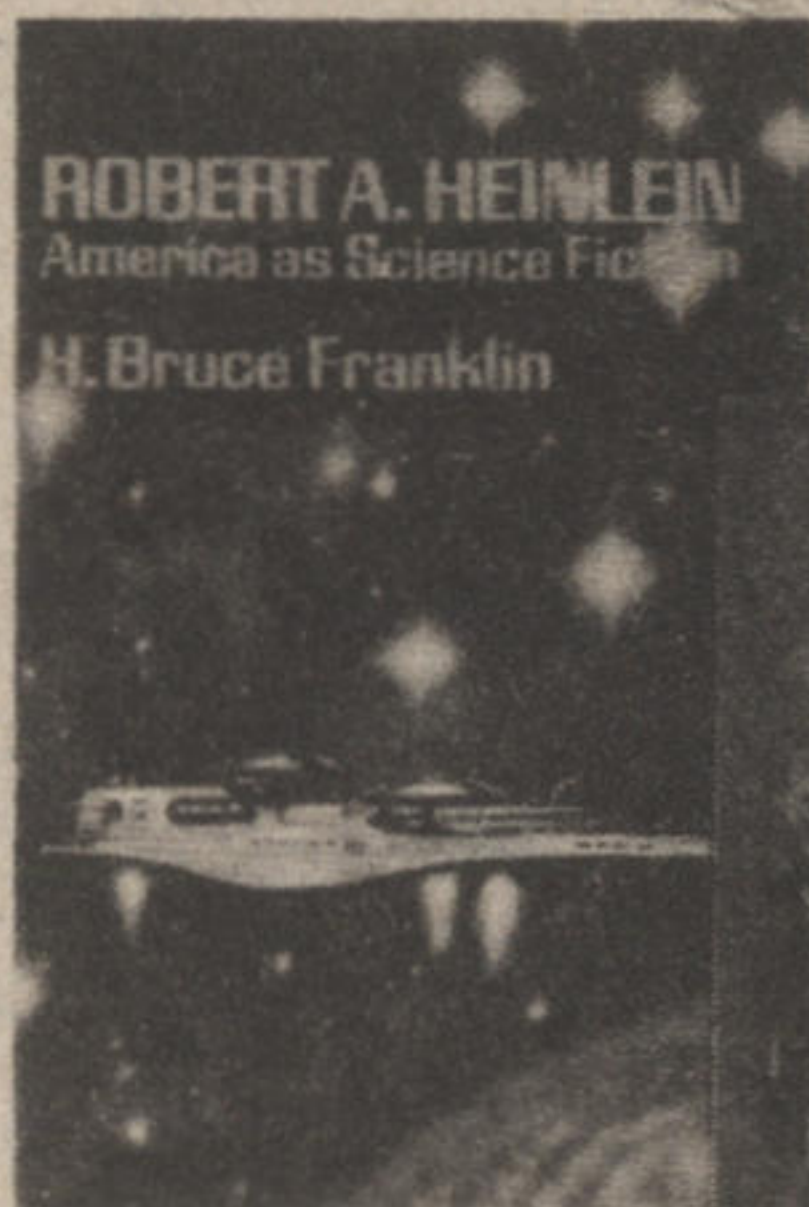
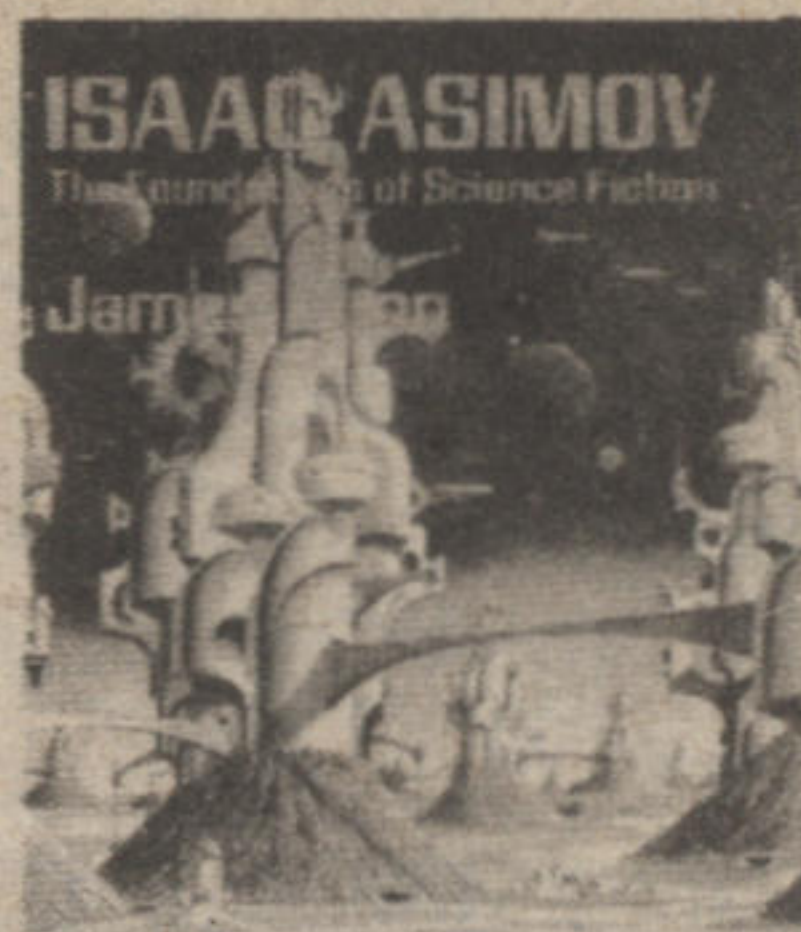
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"No. She's my sister. I'm waiting for them to show up."

"Oh."

"I'm Lorna Shields."

"Ah," he said, nodding, as if that explained a lot.

She looked around guiltily. Probably he had come to make sure everything was neat and clean for the new owner, and she had managed to create a mess everywhere. The table was covered with her tapes and papers. Her cooler was on the floor, dirty dishes in the sink. Actually she had decided that Elly and Ross would not arrive until Saturday evening, and by then she would have straightened it all up again. She glanced back at John MacLaren and forgot the rush of guilt.

"I wasn't expecting company or anything."

"I suppose not. I wasn't expecting to find anyone here."

She wanted him to go away, John realized uncomfortably. She looked very young, wearing shorts, a tank top, barefooted, too young to be out here alone at night. Her skin was deeply tanned all over, as far as he could tell, but her high cheekbones, her nose, the tops of her shoulders all glowed redder than the rest of her. She must not understand about the prairie sun, he thought, must not know how dangerous it could be. He looked past her toward the refrigerator.

"May I have a drink of water?"

Now her whole face glowed with embarrassment. "Sorry," she said. "Sure. Water's about it. Or coffee, or apple juice."

"I've got some cold beer in the truck. Would you like one?"

She nodded and he turned and left the kitchen. As soon as he was off the back porch, she raced through the room, into the living room where she picked up a stack of papers from the sofa and looked around for a place to deposit them. There was no good place. She went into the smaller of the two bedrooms and dumped the papers on her sleeping bag on the floor, folded the bag over to hide them, and returned to the kitchen.

She had started to read the stuff that afternoon and then put it off until night, but one of the names she had found in the early papers was MacLaren. Surely not this MacLaren, but she did not want him leafing through the material, and she did not want him to think she had been snooping.

He brought in the beer and they sat at the kitchen table drinking it. She told him briefly about her project, amused that he had thought the conversation was in real time.

"That's the problem with taping," she said. "You have to listen to it in real time, and transcribe it in real time before you can do a thing about editing. It's going to be a bitch to get on paper."

He realized how closely she was watching him when he finished his beer and she stood up, her own can still virtually untouched. Reluctantly

he rose also. He offered her another beer and she refused, politely and firmly. When he asked if he could look around she shook her head.

"You'd better wait for Ross, don't you think? I mean, I don't have the authority to give permission or anything."

Still he hesitated, and then, surprising himself, he asked her to have dinner with him.

Her eyes widened as they had done before in startlement. She shook her head.

"I really do have work to get to. I guess Ross and Elly will be here tomorrow by this time. Why don't you drop in then?"

He could find no other excuse to stay. He went to the truck, turned it, and started back up the dirt road, and he began to chuckle. He was acting like a damn schoolboy, a lovesick, love-stricken junior-high-school boy. At the highway, he stopped and stared at the landscape and thought what fine cheekbones she had, what lovely eyes. He thought briefly of Gina and could not visualize her; it was as if she were in another universe. The face before his mind's eye had high sunburned cheekbones and wide, dark-blue eyes, straight dark hair swept back carelessly. The eyes looked at him directly without a hint of flirtation.

As soon as the truck made the first turn and vanished from sight, Lorna had hurried to change her clothes. Jeans, sneakers, a long-sleeved shirt that she did not put on, but carried to the kitchen. She already had checked her camera, and found her flashlight. She looked around, remembered the papers, and went back to the bedroom, collected them and took them out to her car where she locked them up in the trunk. She did not expect Mr. MacLaren to return, but then she had not expected anyone in the first place. She took the house key with her when she started her walk.

It was still too hot for this, too hot for jeans, but the heat did not have the intensity that had driven her inside earlier that day. She had learned that unless she stayed on the well-beaten trails, the grass cut her legs; in some places it was high enough to cut into her arms. That morning her walk had taken her to a ridge overlooking a valley perfectly enclosed on all sides, and in the valley she had seen ruins. There had not been a trail down to the valley as far as she could tell, and she had known even then that was wrong. If people had gone down there to build anything, there was a way to get down now. She had started over at the house, first searching for a map, then studying her road map, and finally examining the road that stopped so abruptly out in front of the house. And she had seen that the road at one time had continued, that it had been bulldozed and the grass had invaded, but it was discernible to anyone really looking for it. By then the sun had been too high to continue. But now the shadows were lengthening and, although the air was


inferno-hot, it was impossible for it to become any hotter. The temperature could only go down from now until dark. She had a canteen of water clipped to her belt, her camera slung from her neck, a notebook and pencil in her pocket, and the shirt. Presently she tied the arms together and draped it over her shoulders; she did not need it yet.

She learned the feel of walking on the ruined road, how it differed from walking on the grass that never had been disturbed. The grass was sparser on the old road, rocks more numerous, sometimes making a trail of their own. After some minutes of walking steadily she turned to look at the house and could see only the tips of the poplars. For the first time she hesitated. She supposed it was possible to get lost in the grass, to wander aimlessly until thirst and then dehydration claimed one. She laughed softly. All she had to do was head east, she knew, and within minutes she would come across the highway. She continued.

There was no warning, no indication that the land dipped, formed the valley. One moment it appeared fairly level with hills in the distance, and then she was on a ridge again overlooking the round valley below. This time, she could see where the road had gone down the side of the sloping hill, where the bulldozer had knocked the land over onto it, tried to eradicate it. She nodded and started to pick her way down through the boulders and the grass that grew around them, between them, hid them from view. The boulders and the ground and the grass were all the same color, all gold in the lowering sunlight. She paused often; too hot for strenuous activity, she told herself, and wished she could sweat, could help cool herself that way. The sweat evaporated as fast as it formed. People always had told her that this dry heat was manageable, not bad at all, that it was the humidity that hurt. She took a sip of water and let it trickle down her throat, then another, and continued downward. She could not even take pictures from here, not facing into the sun as she was.

Then she was in the valley and it seemed even hotter than it had been up above. Nothing stirred. The ruins were of houses; foundations of stone and brick, fireplaces remained, nothing else. No wood. In some places the land had collapsed in areas fifteen feet wide, twenty feet. Sod houses, she realized, and tried to find an entrance to one. Only stones, boulders indicated where they had been; the earth had reclaimed its own.

The valley was much larger than she had thought; she would not be able to explore it all before dark, but already a pattern was emerging. Here there had been a big building, bigger than the houses, and directly opposite it, all the way across the valley floor there had been another large building. The houses lined a path between the two. She squinted, could almost see how it had been laid out. She shook her head; there was only grass and stones and bricks, nothing else. She turned and saw a



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stone fireplace standing over a cave of shade that was longer than the fireplace was tall. Wearily she sank to the ground in the shade to rest. She drank again, then leaned her head back against the bricks and closed her eyes. She had not known how exhausting the heat could be. After she rested a minute or two, she would go back to the house, she decided, and in the morning she would set her clock for five and come down here at dawn, before the heat was so bad.

And then she began to hear the grass. First a soft sighing, a whisper on one side then the other, a long-drawn-out exhalation, a rustling. Singing? No words, just a hum, so low it was felt even more than heard.

"Lorna! Lorna!"

She opened her eyes to a deep violet twilight without shadows. Around her the unmoving grass had turned to silver. The voice came again:

"Lorna!"

Then she saw him, the lawyer, clambering down the slope. She could not for the moment remember his name. She stood up and started to walk toward him. MacLaren. John MacLaren.

"What the devil are you doing down here? You know it's going to be dark within ten minutes? Come on, let's get out of here."

He was afraid, she thought in wonder. His face looked pinched and his voice was rough with fear. She glanced behind herself at the silver grass, stiff and still, and could not understand his fear. He grasped her hand and began the climb back up, pulling her along with him. When she stumbled, he simply pulled more strongly.

"Wait," she gasped, unable to breathe.

"We're almost there," he said brusquely. "Come on."

Then he was hauling her up over the last boulder that started the ridge and finally he let her rest. She dropped to her knees and drew in long shuddering breaths. Her heart was pounding; her chest hurt and she could not get enough air.

"Take a sip," he said.

She felt the canteen against her mouth and took a drink, coughed, drank again and gradually began to breathe normally.

"Okay now?"

"Yes. Thanks, I think." She began to get to her feet, his hand firm on her arm, helping her, and she realized that it was fast getting dark. But the sun had been out, there had been shadows. She looked at him then, her own eyes widening with fear, and his gaze was troubled.

"Let's move while we can still see," he said.

His voice was normal again, no longer harsh and brusque, but his hand on her arm was tight.

They walked silently for several minutes. The violet deepened; the horizon in the east vanished. Wall of night, she thought. In the west the

sky was the color of bad picture postcards from the Florida Keys or someplace like that. An uncanny blue, the blue of peacock feathers. She looked up at the sky overhead where stars were appearing out of the void like magic: not there, there. When she looked at the horizon again, it had deepened to midnight blue, and she marveled at the speed of nightfall here. Then a constellation of lights appeared in a tight cluster, a galaxy straight ahead. It could have been a ship far out to sea; or it could have been a warning buoy signaling danger, rocks, shoals. John MacLaren grunted his satisfaction and eased up on the fast pace he had set for them.

"What were you doing out there at dark?" he asked.

She bit back her retort that she had not intended being there at dark and said, "I fell asleep. Why did you come back? Why did you go to the valley?"

He was walking ahead of her now, a shadow against the shadowed sky, merging with the grass from his waist down; grass man, shadow man, floating above the grass that was as dark as a magician's cape, and she thought that was right. There was so little to work with here, grass, sky, stones, the tricks of the land had to be accomplished with few props; the illusions demanded magic. The illusion of a cool cave of shadows by the fireplace in the valley, the illusion of voices humming, sighing. The illusion of sky beneath her.

She stopped and caught her breath and let it out slowly, started to walk again. He had gone on, unaware that she had paused. She had forgotten her questions, forgotten that he had not answered, might never answer, when his voice floated back to her.

"I was worried about you," he said, sounding very far away. "Funny things happen out on the prairie to people not used to it. Visual distortions happen, make you think something's near enough to reach in a couple of minutes, when actually it might be a hundred miles away. It's so quiet people provide noises, and sometimes are frightened by the noises their own heads create."

"How did you know where I was?"

"I followed your trail," he said and the brusqueness was again in his voice. He did not say the grass told him because that sounded too crazy. The Judge—his grandfather—had taught him to read the grass the way a sea captain could read the open sea, follow another ship across the ocean without ever sighting it by following its wake. A subtle change in water color, a flattening of waves, a smoothing out peculiar to that one passage. And so it was with the grass. Her trail had been arrow sharp. He also did not tell her the other crazy things he had felt, thought, had known out on the prairie: how, when the sky vanished, as it had done this evening, it took all space, all distance with it. Then he could reach

into the firmament and touch the stars, the moon; he could reach across space from horizon to horizon. He did not tell how the grass could play with sound so that a whisper uttered miles away could be the warm breath from lips not quite touching your ear; or how the grass could banish sound so that the one you touched could not be heard without effort.

Ahead, the house formed around the lights; the trees arranged themselves in tree shapes. She was almost sorry. The magic was gone.

"Have you eaten yet?" she asked as they drew near the house.

"No. Have you?"

"No. It was too hot."

"I bought a very big steak and some lettuce. Share it with me?"

"You're on," she said cheerfully. "All I have is peanut butter and sardines."

He laughed and she joined in and they entered the house. He apologized for letting himself in earlier when he realized she was gone. He had a key, of course, and had put the steak in the refrigerator. She nodded. Of course.

She waited until they had finished eating and were having coffee before she asked about the valley. "What was it? What happened?"

He frowned and looked past her, considering.

"You don't have to tell me," she said quickly. "Not if it bothers you."

He brought his gaze back to her, puzzled. "Why would it bother me?"

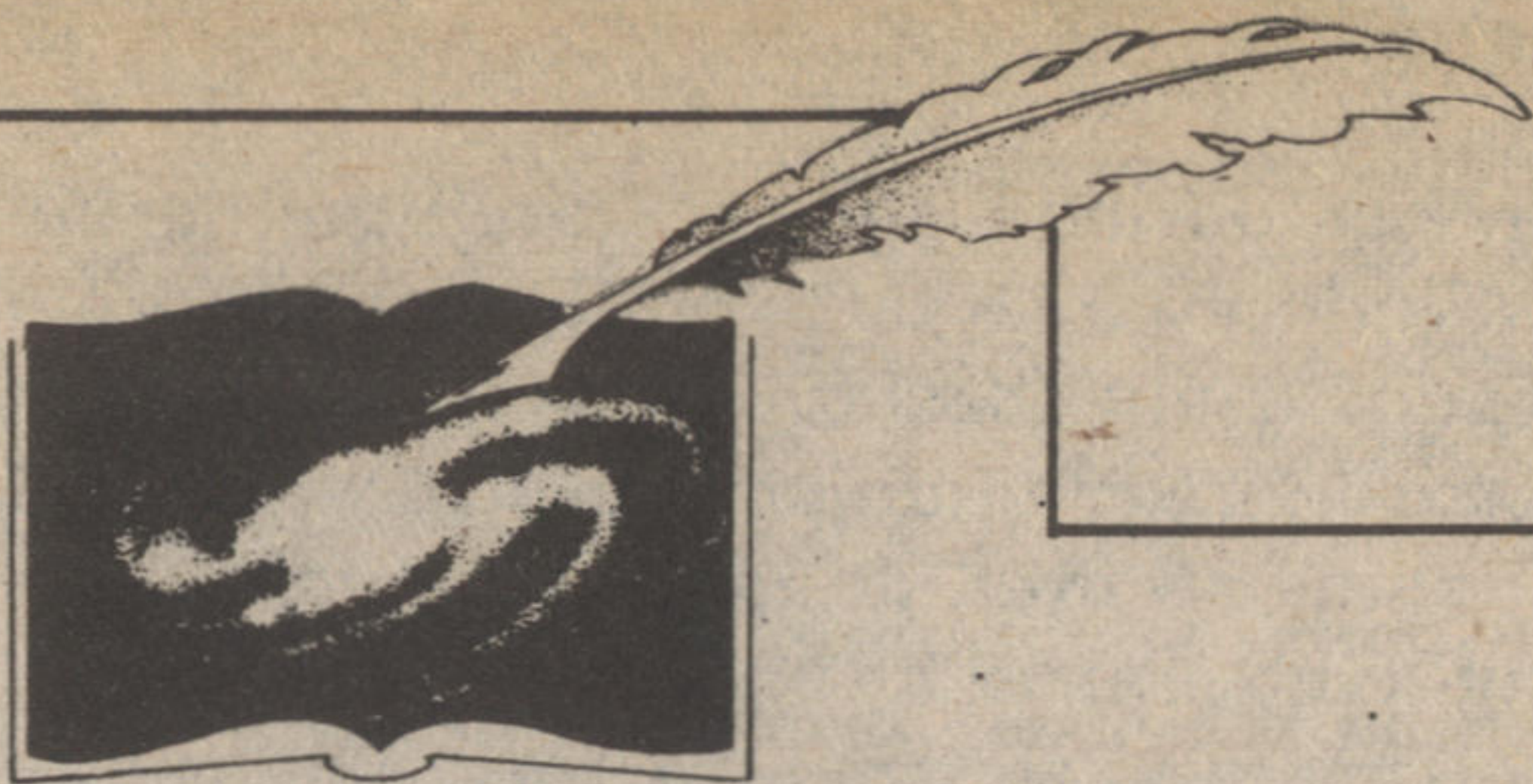
She shrugged and did not say she had seen the name MacLaren on the papers she had hidden away.

"I'm just not sure where to start," he said then.

"Start at the beginning, go to the end, and stop."

He grinned and nodded. "Right. My grandfather was the beginning. Everyone called him the Judge. Before him this was all Indian country. How he got hold of this land no one knows for sure. He used to tell half a dozen different stories about it. Maybe he won it at cards. That was one of his stories anyway. So he came out here from New Orleans back in eighteen ninety-seven, owner of twenty-five hundred acres of scrub prairie, and he saw right off that he was not going to make it on the land. He never had farmed or run a ranch or anything like it. He became a preacher at first, traveled all over the state, over into Colorado, back. Then he went into politics, settled down in Wichita and started to raise a family. Somewhere in there he was appointed a circuit judge. And he still had this land that he was paying taxes on."

His voice was almost dreamy as he told the story; his gaze was distant, perhaps even amused, as if he was proud of his grandfather. Lorna poured more coffee for both of them and wished vaguely that she had turned on her tape recorder.



About L. RON HUBBARD'S Writers of the Future Contest

by *Algis Budrys*

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of \$500, \$750 and \$1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of \$4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of \$5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

Don't Delay! Send Your Entry To:

Writers of the Future Contest
2210 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 343
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Or, you can find the rules—and examples of winning stories, plus informative essays by some of the judges—in either of the Writers of the Future anthologies. They're original paperbacks and cost \$3.95 each.

Good luck.

—*Algis Budrys*

"Anyway, during his many travels meting out justice, the Judge met Josiah Wald. No one talks much about this particular period, you understand. I doubt that anyone even knows what went on. Josiah was being tried for something or other; my grandfather was the judge, and when it was all over, Josiah had bought himself twenty-five hundred acres of scrub prairie, and he did not go to jail.

"The time was the mid-twenties," he said, bringing his gaze back, seeing her again. He liked the way she listened, as attentive as a school-girl with a test coming along any minute. And he wished that thought had not intruded because he wanted to think of her as a woman past the age of consent. He sighed and looked out the window again and went on with his story.

"It was the boom swing of the cycle, a dress rehearsal for the sixties, wild, amoral; the devil walked the earth gathering in his own. And Josiah was a prophet, a showman, a tent revivalist who suddenly was a land-owner with a following. So he started a commune down in the valley. A religious community." Her eyes widened the way they did when she was surprised. He shrugged and spread his hands as if to say, don't blame me. "So far this is all pretty much on public record. Nothing else really is recorded until nineteen forty-one when there was a fire in the valley and Louis Castleman became the owner of the land. Somehow they had survived the dust bowl conditions and the depression, but it seems the fire ended it all. The commune simply vanished after that. Six people died in the fire; Josiah was not listed as one of them. He vanished, one of the mysteries of the prairie. Castleman salvaged what he could, built this house, and tried to destroy the road down to the valley. Finis."

"Wow!" she said softly. Then she got up and started to clear the table.

"What? No questions?"

"Hundreds. But I'm not sure what they are yet. Where are you going to sleep?"

"Dad keeps camping gear in the truck at all times. I'll sleep out under the stars."

She nodded and did not protest, and he thought it was a victory of some sort that she seemed to assume he had a right to stay around. He liked the way she accepted things without fussing. He felt certain she would have had the same acceptance if he had said in the bedroom, or the living room. Just not her room, he added, also certain of that.

She began to wash the few dishes. "Why did you tell me all that?"

"I'm not sure. Probably because you went down there. Maybe because I don't think you should go back."

"Do you believe in ghosts, evil spirits? Any spirits at all?"

"No."

"Are you religious?"

He hesitated this time. Then he said slowly, "My wife takes our kids to Sunday School and church, and I go along much of the time. We have church weddings and funerals in my family. I support our church financially."

She turned to give him a long searching look and he added, "No. I'm not religious. Are you?"

She shook her head, still gazing at him, almost absently. "Why are you here? Elly told me the legalities were all settled. They just want to look around and make decisions about what to do with things."

He stood up and walked to the door. "I'm on an errand for my father. To buy the old player piano, if your brother-in-law will sell it."

She turned back to the dishes. "Is there music for it?"

"I guess so. I don't know." He had his hand on the screen door, yet did not push it open, did not want to go out, go to sleep. "You're asking the wrong questions," he said.

"Are you and your wife together?"

Now he pushed the door open. "Good night," he said and walked out into the warm dark air.

She dreamed. She was on a stage wearing a filmy blue dress, fastened only with one pearl clasp at the waist. She had nothing on under it. She sang to an audience of men and women who stared silently with vacant expressions.

*"I will never more deceive you, or of happiness bereave you,
But I'll die a maid to grieve you. Oh! you naughty, naughty men;
You may talk of love, and, sighing, say for us you're nearly dying;
All the while you know you're trying to deceive, you naughty men;
You may talk of love, and, sighing, say for us you're nearly dying;
All the while you know you're trying to deceive, you naughty, naughty men."*

She sang almost demurely, with innocent flirtatiousness, not moving. Then the music changed, the piano started over, but this time it was different and when she went on to the next verses, she moved obscenely, lewdly, and the audience stirred, seemed to come awake, out of trance.

*"And when married how you treat us, and of each fond hope defeat us,
And there's some will even beat us, oh! you naughty, naughty men;
You take us from our mothers, from our sisters and our brothers, oh!
you naughty, cruel, wicked men."*

Two men were with her, fondling her, and she sang, smiling at one,

then the other, accessible to their hands. She twisted away as one of them started to force her down, but it was a game she was playing with them for the audience, all hooting and whistling, clapping to the mad music. One of the men on stage with her had his belt in his hand; men and women were coupling on tables, on the floor, and she knew he was going to beat her, beat her, beat her . . . She tried to run away; the other man caught her and held her and the belt whistled through the air and she woke up, drenched.

She was tangled in her sleeping bag, fighting to be free of it; the music was still there, still in her head. She jammed her hands against her ears. Silence returned.

She crawled free of the sleeping bag and got to her feet, made her way to the kitchen for a drink of water, an aspirin, coffee, anything. No more sleep, she thought almost wildly. No more dreams, not that night.

"What in hell have you been doing?" John MacLaren demanded, motionless in the center of the kitchen.

"What did you do? Why—" She stopped, clutching the door frame. "You heard it?"

Shock, he thought distantly. She was shiny with sweat; when he took her arm to move her to a chair, she felt clammy. He went to the room she was using and found a short terry robe, went by the bathroom and picked up a towel and returned to her. She had not moved. He wiped her face and arms and got the robe on her, and then made coffee. By the time it was ready, she looked better, bewildered and frightened.

"What happened?" she asked in a low voice. "I was dreaming. What did you hear? Was I making noise?"

"I heard music," he said bluntly. "I thought you were playing the piano and singing." He poured coffee and she held her cup with both hands. "Were you?"

She shook her head.

"I want to look at that damn piano." When he stood up, she did too, and he did not try to dissuade her. Together they went through the living room. She pointed silently at the door to the adjoining room.

He felt baffled by her. Crazy? She did not look or act like any of the crazies he had known, yet . . . He knew he had heard her playing the piano and singing and that was crazy in the middle of the night. He felt curiously betrayed, even angry, the way he was angered when he caught a client lying to him. He opened the door and felt the wall for the light switch.

There was another television, an ancient model, one of the earliest. There was a rocking chair with the rocker aslant. There were boxes; an open one was stuffed full of clothes, apparently. A kitchen chair, painted blue, a chest of drawers with one drawer gone, charred-looking. And



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behind it was the piano against the far wall. Things had been moved so that it was possible to get to it, but he no longer believed she had played it that night. She would have had to be in here in the dark, he realized; he would have seen this light from outside when the music woke him up. Silently they stared at the piano.

The keyboard cover was down, dusty, the way everything out here was during the drought. He worked his way to the piano and touched it, opened the compartment where the music rolls went in. Empty. He pulled the piano bench out and tried to open it. Locked. That was where the music rolls would be, he thought, locked away. Finally he recrossed the room, looked back, then turned off the light and closed the door.

"I think there's a bottle of booze in the truck. Right back."

"I put some papers in my car," she said quickly. "I'll get them. Castleman's papers," she added.

He thought she simply did not want to remain alone in the house for even a minute, and waited for her to slip on sandals and get her car keys. He found a bottle of bourbon in the truck; she retrieved a stack of papers from her car, and they returned to the kitchen.

He made them both drinks and they started to sort through the papers. There was very little of any use, he thought after several minutes. A few newspaper clippings, a few letters, receipts.

"Mr. MacLaren," Lorna said a bit later, "is your father's name David?"

"Yes. Why?"

"He already owns the piano. Look."

She held out a slip of paper, a bill of sale. It was signed by Louis Castleman, who had sold the piano to David MacLaren for one dollar. Twenty-five years ago, the summer John had come to this house with his father, the day they had gone down into the valley to look at the ruins.

But that was not where she had seen the name before, Lorna knew. "MacLaren" had been on a full sheet of paper. There were not many left to examine; she picked up the next one in her pile.

"Lorna, please call me John," he said. "In this part of the world only the senior male member of the family is Mister."

She looked up at him in the direct way she had. "Are you having a midlife crisis?"

He snatched his glass and stood up, went to the sink where he had left the bottle and poured himself another drink. Only then did he look at her. "Isn't that a bit impertinent?" he asked coldly.

"Sure it is." She finished scanning a sheet of paper, put it down, picked up another one. "I found it," she said in satisfaction and leaned back to read.

He looked out the window where he could see the eastern horizon,

lightening in streaks. In an hour it would be sunrise, and he suspected that neither of them would sleep any more that night. He began to make more coffee.

When he glanced at her again, she was sitting very still, staring at the wall.

"Coffee, *Miss Shields*?" His voice was quite impersonal, he thought. He looked more closely. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She started, and pushed her chair away from the table, not looking at him. "You'd better read it," she said, and left the kitchen. Before he reached the table, he heard water running in the bathroom.

The paper was a letter written on Judge MacLaren's stationery, addressed to Louis Castleman. It was written in the kind of legalese that attorneys sometimes used to obfuscate an issue, language designed to bury the meaning in so many layers of verbal garbage that only a very persistent, or trained, reader, could possibly grasp the contents. John MacLaren read it twice, then sat down and read it a third time.

His grandfather, the Judge, had been blackmailed by Louis Castleman, had yielded to his demands. He stated that he was satisfied that the unfortunate deaths had been the result of a disastrous fire, which was clearly an act of God. He had brought the weight of his good office to bear on the official investigation and the matter was now closed.

The last paragraph said: "David left this morning to be sworn in in the armed forces. I have no forwarding address for him; therefore I am returning your letter to him. I believe this concludes all our business."

He let the sheet of paper fall to the table and went out on the porch. In a few minutes Lorna joined him.

"I brought you coffee," she said. "Black, the way you had it last time. It does finally cool off a little, doesn't it?"

"Thanks. A little. When the weather changes, it'll be on the storm front. Black clouds gather like a phalanx and march across the land. I used to stay down in Tribune with the Judge quite a bit. We watched a tornado once and he said it was the devil pissing on earth." He sipped the coffee. "He died when I was seven."

"Did he teach you to love the prairie?"

"You can't teach that, just learn it."

"One of the women I interviewed back in West Virginia said people there had the mountains in their eyes. I didn't know what she meant. I think I do now. You have the prairie in your eyes."

They were silent for several minutes. John spoke first. "Think you could sleep an hour or so?"

"No!"

"I don't mean inside. Out in the grass in your sleeping bag. I won't

sleep. I'll stand guard. An hour's about all the time you'll have before the sun will be up, the heat back."

"I'll collapse later, I guess, but right now I don't feel at all sleepy. You could go find someone to help with the piano and just take it, couldn't you? Since your father really owns it."

"Afraid not. As executor he had someone come out and make an inventory and send a copy to your brother-in-law. The piano's listed. And the question really is why is the bill of sale here. Why did Castleman keep it? Let's sit down."

They had been standing at the porch rail; now they went to the steps and sat on the top one, his back to one of the railing uprights, hers to the opposite. The sky was definitely getting brighter. No stars were visible any longer. It was as if the sky were simply retreating farther and farther away.

"I'm not going to make a pass," John said. "Might have yesterday, but not now, now that I know you."

She nodded. There had been a moment yesterday when she thought he would make a pass, and she had realized that he didn't know how to start and had felt safe. Keeping her eyes on the brightening sky, she said, "I'd like to tell you the dream I had."

She related the dream matter-of-factly, distancing herself from it as if she were retelling a story she had read a long time ago. When she was done, she said, "I never heard that song before, and now I know it. It's flirty and innocent at the same time, not like music now. No innuendoes, nothing like that, just a little teasing, but what I dreamed was grotesquely obscene. I think the song's among the music rolls. That and the other one I dreamed."

"God," he muttered. "This is crazy. Do you walk in your sleep, have you ever? Could you have played the piano in your sleep?"

She gave him one of her long level looks and shook her head.

"Okay. I heard that song and assumed it was you. It sounded like your voice, but it was dark. Let's go have a look at that goddamn piano."

"I'll go shower and get dressed. It'll be light by then, I think."

Dusk was yielding to daylight although the sun had not yet appeared. No clouds reflected the sunrise.

The clear, sharp light was all about them when they returned to the storage room. John moved junk to make a path and together they pushed the piano through it into the living room. He opened the cover—mahogany and ivory keys, just as his father had said. The piano was out of tune, and when he stooped to examine the bellows behind the foot pump, he found them brittle and useless. Obviously the piano had not been played for decades.

He went back for the bench and brought it out, then forced the lock

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with his pocket knife. The music was so brittle that when he tried to open a roll, a piece of paper broke off in his hand and he looked at it dumbly, paper with many holes punched in it, nothing more than that. He dropped the roll down among several dozen others and closed the lid. He was angry, his anger directed at himself this time. He had expected to solve a little mystery and instead had simply revealed a larger one. It would have been neat to prove that she might have been up playing the piano in her sleep—he had abandoned the idea that she had done it consciously—and instead he had proven that no one could have played the thing. When he turned his glare to her, she was frowning almost absently in his direction, not at him.

"Let's eat," he said, trying to submerge his frustration. His voice came out brusque and harsh.

"Peanut butter and sardines and fruit," she said, trying to achieve the same light-hearted teasing tone that she had come by so naturally the day before. It sounded false this morning.

They settled for the peanut butter and fruit and more coffee.

"You should pack up your stuff and go up to Goodland, get a motel room and get some sleep," he said. "I'll be here when your sister and her husband come. I'll tell them."

"Tell them what? That's the problem, isn't it? There's nothing to tell anyone. And I can't let Elly and Ross just walk in on . . . on—I have to be here."

She packed up her computer and tapes and tape recorder and straightened the room she had slept in, and there was nothing else to do. The papers they had examined were still on the kitchen table.

"If I were you," she said slowly, "I'd sort through that stuff and take out things that really don't concern Ross. If I were you."

He nodded. She moved to the door and looked out.

"I'm going to take a walk before it gets any hotter."

"You're not going back down there?"

She shuddered. "Never! Don't worry about me. I'll stay on the trails."

He watched until she was out of sight, heading directly away from the ruins, on a well-defined trail that first rose, then dipped; her shiny dark hair was like a sail vanishing over the edge of the sea. The grass, shadowed without wind, disguised the point of origin of a faint "Chuketa, chuketa," the hoarse call of a quail. Above, where the sky should have been, there was only the vastness of empty space stretching away forever.

When he went back to the table and the papers, the house seemed preternaturally quiet. What had Louis Castleman done out here every day for over forty years? How had he paid his bills, bought food, paid taxes? He began to read the papers again, this time sorting them as he went, searching for clues.

Lorna walked aimlessly, needing to be away from the house, away from the piano, the papers that hinted at terrible things. She heard the sounds in the grass all around her without identifying them. Birds, quail probably, but she was not sure. Snakes? If there were birds, mice and voles, then there would be snakes and hawks and coyotes, she told herself, and tried to follow the food chain higher, but lost track. How had he managed to keep so many trails clear of grass, she wondered. The trails were not very wide, but they were easy to follow, well trodden down, so clear that it seemed he must have spent most of his time just maintaining them. Why?

She had been going downward for some time until now she was at the bottom of a ravine, a snow run-off possibly. The trail went through, out the other end, up a steep hill, over its crest. She stopped at a boulder large enough to cast shade and rested. And now the thoughts that she had denied surged back. The nightmare, the singing the first night, her lethargy down in the ruins. There was a pattern, she thought, and just by admitting it was there, she was jeopardizing everything she had ever thought she knew. That was what frightened people: Not that strange things happen, everyone admitted that readily, joked about it, used strange happenings as anecdotal material at cocktail parties. And then they all denied any meaning, any pattern and went on to other things. Because, she went on, if you admit the pattern, a meaning, you are saying the world isn't what you thought it was, what you were taught from earliest infancy. All the stories had to be treated alike, with the same value, and that was no value at all, except as amusements.

She thought of the many elderly people she had interviewed already for her oral history of religious experiences. How easily they had accepted the various superstitions, the Aunt Lodies being turned into mules, the magical cures and powers they talked about. One woman had said, "Well, we went to any church being held. Didn't make no difference. They's all about the same."

And another: "Oh, we was scared to death all the time."

Fear of the inexplicable was channeled into religious fear that merely doubled its effect. And when religion became rational, the fear of the inexplicable had to be denied; there was nothing left to incorporate it. The inexplicable became small talk at cocktail parties. One event was caused by indigestion, one by misinterpreting the signals, one by a psychological problem. That was the only way to handle the inexplicable.

Her instructor had been surprised, then elated with the ease with which she managed to get people to talk about their experiences. It was because, he told her finally, she had no strong system of belief that she used to challenge whatever she heard. She did not threaten anyone with contradictory dogma.

"I'm an uncritical listener," she had admitted cheerfully. "I believe that they believe and that's enough for me."

"And all women are twits," he had said.

She had stiffened with instant anger, and then realized what he had done.

"You see, until you feel threatened personally, you don't pose a threat to anyone else. The people you're interviewing sense that and confide in you."

She had listened to so many stories with uncritical interest, had felt no terror and had discounted the terror of others. That was a long time ago, she had thought, when people were still superstitious. And she had known those people had brought the fears upon themselves by admitting to the supernatural, to magic, to witchcraft. Where would one draw the line, she had asked herself. If you believe one such story, why not the next and the next?

Her world was defined by air travel and moon walks and computers, by wonder drugs and heart transplants, by instant communication. Life was defined by the first brain waves of a fetus in the womb and the flattening of the EEG line that marked brain death. The fears were of things that people did to people, fear of disability, of incurable disease, of accidents, war. Fear of tornadoes and hurricanes and blizzards. There was no place in her world for the terrors of the inexplicable, no place for the terror of sensing a pattern that would mean the end of the world she knew. Admitting that such a pattern might exist created a void, and the void filled itself with terror.

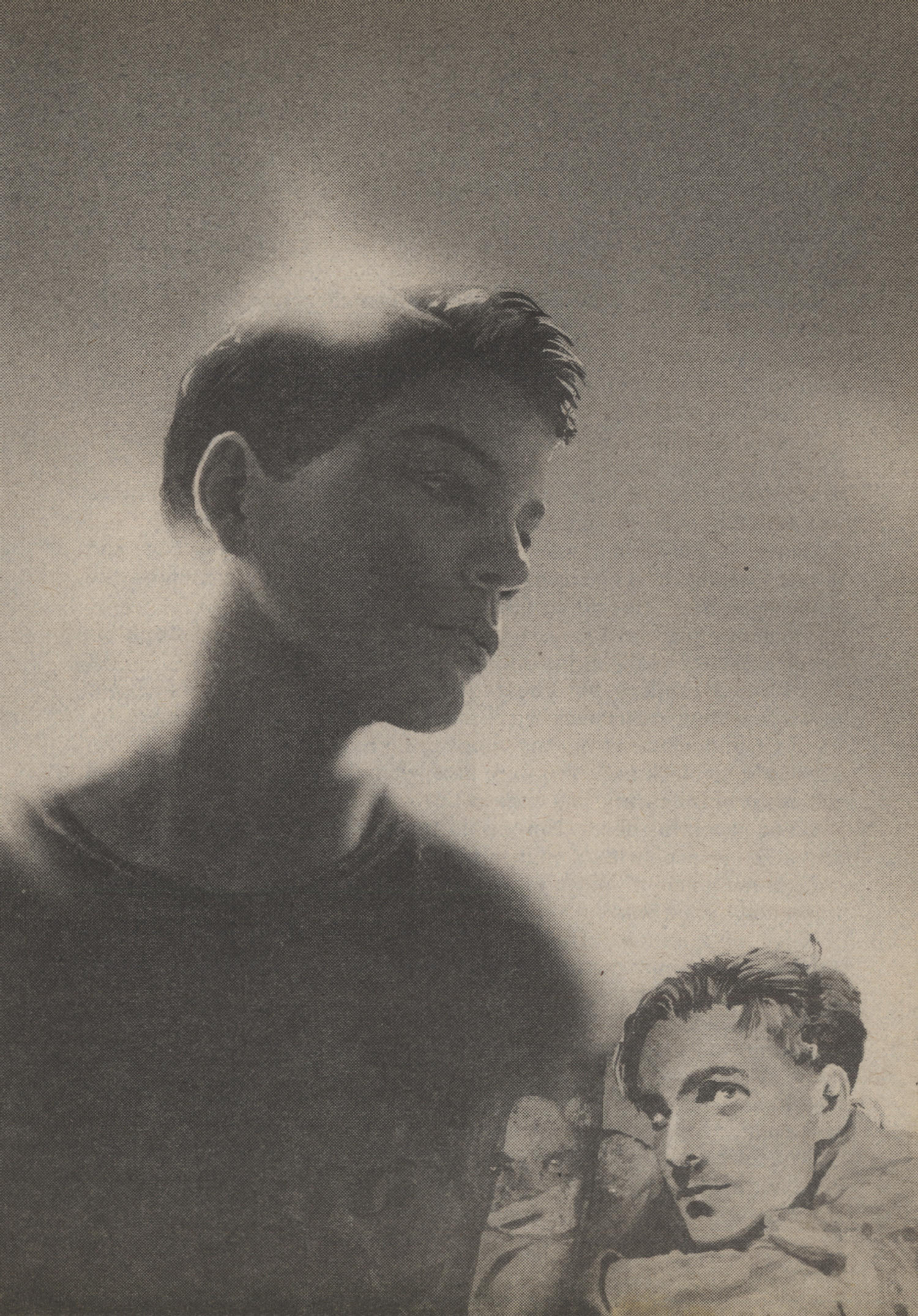
"We was scared to death all the time."

She got up then and looked at the ravine, up the far side, back the way she had come. She had been out longer than she had intended; the sun was high and hot already. Out here with the white-hot sky, the golden grasses withering from a lack of water, the quiet air, it was impossible to believe in the ghost piano playing by itself in the middle of the night. And she wouldn't believe it, she told herself.

John had put the papers for Ross Cleveland in the living room, and the others in his pocket, the ones he never intended to show anyone. Twice he had gone to look at the prairie to see if Lorna was in sight, not actually worried about her, just wishing she would come back. When he heard the automobile out front, he assumed it was Ross and Elly at last, and was stunned when he went to the front door to see his father approaching.

"The Buick's air conditioned and the office is closed," David MacLaren growled as he entered the house.

He stopped, gazing at the piano still in the living room. He looked old



and frail, John realized. Even when his father had suffered a warning heart attack—that was what they all called it—he had not looked frail. And now he did.

“What are you doing here?”

“Restless. Wanted to see to this myself after all. Got up at five and here I am. Not bad time actually. Anything cold to drink?”

“Water.”

“Water’s fine,” the father said mildly. He had not yet moved, had not shifted his gaze from the piano.

John took his arm and steered him to the kitchen, saw him to a chair, glad now that Lorna had not returned. He put ice in a glass and filled it with water, thinking furiously. His father could clam up tighter than anyone he knew, and if he took that tack, nothing would budge him. He put the glass on the table and sat down.

“Before the others show up,” he said, “there are things I have to know. They’ll have questions—”

His father was looking with great interest at Lorna’s purse on the counter. “Seems to me someone has already showed up,” he said.

“Lorna Shields,” John said, and then plunged in, knowing if he had decided wrong, he never would learn anything. “She’s convinced the piano’s haunted.” He told his father about Lorna.

“Romantic schoolgirl nonsense,” David MacLaren said, and drank his water without looking at his son.

“I’d like to think so, but I heard the music too, and neither of us ever heard that song in our lives before last night.” He drew in a long breath. “And I found a letter from the Judge to Louis Castleman, virtually acknowledging blackmail. You were here when the commune burned. You told me it burned while you were in the army.”

David shook his head. “Never said that. I said when I came home it was all gone, done with. And it was.”

“Tell me about it. What went on here? Why is that damn piano so important? What was your connection with Josiah Wald?”

“Give me a minute.” He drained the glass and John took it, refilled it while he was making up his mind. When he went to the table again, his father said, “Sit down, son.”

He drank, and wiped his mouth with his hand. “Even with air conditioning that’s one hell of a dry drive this kind of weather. You know, John, there are things you just never get around to telling your kids. There must be a thing or two you haven’t brought up with yours.” He was facing the open door, his gaze on the prairie beyond. “Well, there are things I never got around to talking about. I was eighteen when the crash came and the Judge was wiped out, and he never got around to mentioning it to me. Father to son, father to son, the same pattern again

and again. Anyway it was time for me to go to college, the way my brothers had done, and the Judge was broke. Then Josiah Wald appeared. And Josiah had money and was on the run. Next thing he owned the land here, and I was off for Lawrence, no questions asked. I was too ignorant to know what to ask, I guess. And Josiah started building down in the valley, got his people coming in, was off and running, and I never knew a thing about him, or what was going on here. The Judge managed to get me a summer job at City Hall in Kansas City, and I was in school the rest of the year, and just not home much at all until I got out of school. And that summer I learned what Josiah Wald meant."

His father's voice had become almost a monotone and grew flatter as he continued. "I was bone ignorant when I graduated from college. Bone dumb. I never had had a girl. The first girl I kissed thought she'd get pregnant from open mouth kissing and wouldn't do it. That's how ignorant we all were those days. And Josiah Wald had a little Sodom and Gomorrah and Eden all wrapped up in one package in the valley. You have to remember there was the dust bowl and ruination and people jumping off buildings, only here there wasn't anything high enough to matter and they just picked up and left. There was Prohibition and the devil was on the earth everywhere you looked. Josiah prospered. You wanted a hideout, you had it. You wanted dope, no problem. Girls, they were there. Anything you wanted, if you had the price, it was there. And he mixed in religion. His message was that no one can choose good who hasn't experienced evil. And he provided the evil. The devil was loose on earth, all right."

He drew in a long breath and looked at John. "If I ever had found you in a place like that I would have killed whoever took you there. Anyway, the Judge found out I was sneaking off there when I could and he sent me packing to Kansas City again, to work part time, starve, whatever. And he tried to run Josiah Wald out. Didn't work, though. By then Josiah had other, even more influential backers. Along about then I met Louis Castleman, and we came over together one week, and he stayed. He played the piano in the hotel. There was one building they called the hotel, and one they called the church. The hotel was a gambling casino, whorehouse, God knows what all. It was all a perversion. They turned everything into mockery and blasphemy. What Josiah was especially good at was corrupting the innocent. He got me and he got Louis even worse. What saved me was my state of finances. Down around zero most of the time, and I couldn't play the piano worth a damn. I thought he was being good to me but I know now that he let me in just to taunt the Judge. He never let me stay, only long enough to spend every cent I'd scraped together, then he'd kick me out. So I wasn't around the year that Louis was hired on. Then Louis wrote me that he was in love with a girl

there and that he was going to kidnap her, to save her, and would I help him. A man doesn't get many chances in this life to wear the shining armor and ride the white horse," he said reflectively, and took a deep breath.

"You saw the valley, one road down there and that was it. No one ever went in there without an invitation and no one ever left without permission. I went in on the north side, sliding on my belly in the grass most of the way. And no one saw me. Louis sneaked me into his room and we plotted for three days and made one plan after another until we finally had it down pat. The girl was a singer, pretty as an angel, and thoroughly corrupt. She hadn't been, Louis said, when someone brought her there. She had been frightened and innocent, a virgin. I don't know how much he made up, how much he actually knew, but he was in love with her and that was the truth."

He stood up and went to the sink for more water, not bothering with ice this time. Then he stood with his back to the room.

"The act was supposed to be funny," he said. "The stage was a copy of an Old West saloon with a piano player and a girl singer, nothing else. He plays and she sings and then he leaves the piano and falls on his knees in front of her, and the piano keeps on playing by itself. The audience loved it usually. She kicks him away and he crawls back to the piano and takes up where it left off. They had music from back in eighteen sixty-five or so, a comic song from a Broadway musical, one of the first to strip the girls, I guess. Anyway, she sang it pretty nearly stripped. They had an electric motor rigged up to work the bellows. And that gave him the idea. After the act, the piano was out of sight, but he was supposed to keep on playing for the next hour or so. He planned to turn on the motor, grab the girl and tie her up and hand her over to me. I was to carry her to the high grass on the north slope and hide with her there and wait for him. He'd continue to play his usual numbers until he was through and by then she would have been missed, of course, but he'd be in the clear, and later he planned to join me and drag or carry her up over the top and save her."

John felt frozen in that brilliant, hot kitchen as he listened to his father. His mouth was so dry he could not have spoken.

"We were all a little crazy." His father went on as if he had rehearsed all of it over and over, waiting for a chance to perform, keeping his voice dispassionate as if long ago he had severed any connection between himself and the events. "The girl was the craziest of all. Louis told her he wanted to save her and she told Josiah, because she loved him and she thought he'd be nicer to her then, and that night the show was changed without anyone mentioning it. I was outside, keeping out of sight at the start. She sang and he played all right, but then the new

action began. Two men joined her and at first it looked like a mock rape, but it didn't stay like that. I ran in when she screamed and others were screaming by then and some running out wanting no part of what was happening up there, and some liking it just fine. They beat the living hell out of her on stage while two goons held Louis just off stage and the piano never stopped playing. The girl died."

He said it so simply, so emotionlessly that it took a second or two for John to realize what he had said, what it meant.

"Oh my God."

His father turned, his face a dark blur against the glare of light. He came back to the table and sat down and his voice was brisk now.

"Louis went crazy. Everyone was crazy, leaving the valley as fast as they could get their cars started, get up the hill. Louis carried her out and got in someone's car and drove off with her. I got myself out of there the same way I had gone in, up the north side and walked the twenty-two miles to the Judge's house before daylight. The next day there were rumors but nothing concrete, and that night the fire broke out and more people died and Josiah vanished. Well, that was too much to cover up. We all knew the war was coming fast and the day after the valley burned the Judge gave me an ultimatum. I could join the army that day and get the hell out or I'd be indicted along with half a dozen others as accomplices to murder. No one ever was indicted for murder. The girl's death was laid to the fire along with the others'. No one disputed Louis's claim to the land. He took what he wanted and bulldozed the road and lived in this godforsaken place until he died."

"The piano?" John said after a moment. "What is that all about?"

"I never was sure. The day I brought you here with me, he said he wanted it in his will, that he wanted me to have it, and I said chances were about even that I'd go first and then what? I told you he was crazy. He went wild then and sold it to me for a dollar and kept the bill of sale. If I went first he'd tear it up, and if he went first, it was legally mine."

"He killed Josiah Wald," John said slowly.

"Yes. He buried the girl and went back to the valley and started the fire. When Josiah came running he pulled a gun on him and took him out. I never knew that until the day I came back with you." He looked at his son shrewdly and said, "You heard something that day and denied it. I always wondered how much you heard, what it meant to you."

"I thought it was the raving of a madman. It scared me. All that talk about the girl on the prairie." He glanced at his watch and abruptly stood up. Lorna! He had forgotten her and she had left more than two hours ago.

Lorna sat in the high grass and tried to think what to do. Long ago

she had made herself a hat of sorts, woven grass held on by strips torn from her shirt. What else could she do? What did animals do when the sun got so high and hot? Burrow into the ground and wait for shadows, wait for cooler air? Wait for water next month or the next? She pressed her forehead against her knees. No tears, not now. She could not afford to waste the water that went into tears. Presently she pulled herself up and started to walk again. It seemed incredible that she could be lost when the trails were so clear and easy to follow, when she knew that if she went east she would reach the highway. She had gone east over and over, but she had not reached the highway. Once she had seen half a dozen red-winged blackbirds, wounded-looking, bloodied with the bright red on their shoulders, and she had started to run after them. They would be heading for the cornfields, east, the highway. Then, panic-stricken, the birds lost from view, she had jolted to a stop, surrounded by high grass, no sign of a trail anywhere. She had forced herself not to move, to think first. What had John MacLaren said? You can read the grass if you really look at it. She made herself study it all around and only then began to pick her way back to the trail. It had taken a long time to find it again, and if the grass had been less brittle, if she had not crashed through it so roughly, she might never have found the trail again. Now she left it only to rest in the grass from time to time.

Why were there so many trails? Louis Castleman must have been mad. Some of the trails wandered as aimlessly as a leaf miner on foliage, twisting and turning, going nowhere, crossing themselves. Landmarks meant nothing. They changed or vanished or receded continually. And there was only the grass left. The next rise, she thought, the next high place where she could look out over the countryside, there she would find a flat rock and make a map or something . . . then she heard voices.

"For God's sake, just shoot me and be done with it!" A hoarse male voice slurred the words.

Lorna dropped to her knees in the grass, crouched as low as she could.

"Haven't decided yet," a second voice said. It was almost as hoarse and raspy as the first.

"God! Just cut me loose. We'll both end up dead out here."

"Shut up!"

Then she could see them, two men, one with his hands bound behind his back, the other holding a rope attached to him, leading him as if he were a horse. The bound man stumbled and fell; the other one continued to walk, dragging him through the grass until he regained his feet, sobbing and cursing. Suddenly he rushed the man leading him, and that man veered off, let him dash by, and jerked the rope. The bound man crashed to the ground, then scrambled to get up again as the other walked in the new direction.

Lorna held her breath until they were out of sight. Cautiously she raised her head and listened, and more cautiously she crept after them, following the beaten grass. When she saw them again, they were in a shallow gully, the bound man tied to a boulder, the other one vanishing over the crest of the opposite ridge.

"Don't leave me here! Louis, don't leave me here!"

She must have made a noise. He swung his head around and saw her.

"Get down! Don't let him see you! He's crazy, a madman."

His voice was a harsh whisper that seemed to be in her head, not across the gully. Desperately he looked up the ridge, then back to her, and he caught and held her gaze with his own. His eyes were the incredible blue of high mountain lakes, and even now, unshaven and filthy, he was beautiful, she thought, and found herself moving toward him.

"Get down! Duck behind the boulders and come to me that way!"

She took a hesitant step.

"Listen. I've got money. Lots of it, more than you dreamed of. I'll give it to you, all of it. Please help me! Untie me!"

She moved another step, another.

"He intends to drag me through the grass in the heat until we both drop dead. Do you know what it's going to be like dying of thirst under that sun, tied to a dead man, or a raving maniac? Help me!"

"He won't die," she whispered, so softly her words failed to reach her own ears. "He'll live and walk this trail every day for the rest of his life."

A shriek of insane laughter came from the ridge. "You hear that, Josiah? I told you we'd get a sign. If she wants to help you, I won't stop her. Otherwise, we keep walking, Josiah, you and me."

She looked up the ridge where he was a black shadow against the brilliance of the void. Then she was falling, falling into the sky.

John MacLaren walked steadily up a hill to scan the surrounding prairie. Strange, he thought, how he had put out of mind the day he had come here with his father, twenty-five years ago. He had decided Louis Castleman was a nut, and with the arrogance of youth, he had dismissed him entirely.

That day he had been under the poplar trees, bored, hot, and the voices had carried out clearly, the way they sometimes did on the prairie. Castleman had raved and his father had yelled from time to time.

"Wanted to shoot him and I had the gun, but I just couldn't do it. Couldn't bring myself to do it. He was the devil and you know it and he deserved shooting and I couldn't."

"Why didn't you just turn him over to the sheriff, you damn fool?"

"Couldn't do that either. We made a deal, the Judge and me. And that devil would have brought in everyone, you, the Judge, my girl, everyone,

made filth of everything he talked about, everything he touched. He would have done that, the devil. So we walked and I tried to pray and forgot the words and she came. God knew she was innocent, the devil couldn't take away that innocence no matter what he did to her. God knew and sent her to me as a sign and she told me the price I'd have to pay and that was all right. A fair enough price to get the devil off the face of the earth. And then God took her back up to His heaven."

He had heard talk like that all his life, John thought, and had always dismissed it without considering what personal tragedies might lie behind it, what real terrors it concealed. He reached the crest of the hill and looked out over the prairie at the crazy, meandering trails that went nowhere in particular and briefly tried to find a pattern to them. There was none. Then he saw Lorna moving through the grass. She was not on a trail, but was walking directly toward the house as if she knew exactly where it was.

He watched her for several minutes. She had asked, mockingly he thought, if he was having a midlife crisis. Yes, he thought at her as she moved easily through the grass. He liked the loose jointedness of her walk, the way she held her head. It pleased him that she had had enough sense to make herself a sunhat out of grass. She would do, he thought nodding as the phrase came to him, revived from the Judge's pronouncement made more years ago than this girl had lived.

He waved then and she waved back. He joined her at the foot of the hill.

"Are you okay? I got worried, after all."

"I'm okay. I got lost for a while, then I . . . I reached a high place that let me see the house." She realized she could not tell him. She did not know him well enough; she did not understand enough to tell anyone, and she could not turn what had happened into small talk. Suddenly the silence between them became awkward and they walked to the house without speaking again.

He watched her drink thirstily, watched his father's careful neutrality turn into acceptance, and he knew the girl he had first met here, the girl he had yearned for like a schoolboy, was gone, lost on the prairie perhaps. He was very much afraid that he was in love with the woman who had replaced her.

After her thirst had been satisfied, David MacLaren said he wanted to take the piano out to the middle of the dirt road and burn it. No one objected. There was a dolly and straps in the truck; the truck could be backed up to the porch and he didn't give a damn how they dumped the thing into it. An hour later they stood and watched as the first flames caught and flared straight up. They had brought out buckets of water and a broom and a rake, even blankets that had been soaked and were

already drying out. They knew that if the prairie caught fire it would all burn. No one had mentioned it and they watched the fire silently. The back of the piano popped off and stacks of money fell out, caught fire and burned. No one made a motion to salvage any of it.

The devil's money, John thought, watching it curl up, blaze, turn to ash. He wanted to take nothing with him, nothing that belonged here.

She had not earned it, Lorna thought as she watched it burn. Had there been a choice? Could she have intervened? Not having an answer had put shadows in her eyes although she was not yet aware of them.

When the fire was little more than smoldering ashes, John dug a pit in the road. It was too hard-packed to go very deep, but it was enough to rake the ashes into, to let him pour water over them, and finally to cover them with the pale, sun-bleached dirt.

"Will you come to visit us?" David MacLaren asked Lorna, holding her hand. "I'd like my wife to meet you."

"Yes," she said. "Thank you."

He would take it easy, he assured John. The Buick was comfortable and he was not in a hurry now. He wanted thinking time, a lot of thinking time.

Lorna and John sat on the top step of the front porch where the poplars cast deep shade. They would keep an eye on the hot spot in the road, they had told his father.

"Hungry?" he asked, thinking of her peanut butter and sardines. She looked surprised, then nodded, and he went in and brought out everything edible he could find. The silence was companionable now, not awkward.

"I'd like to have your address," he said after they had eaten.

"Yes. It's not fixed at the moment, though."

"Mine is."

She turned to give him one of her long searching looks and then nodded. She was glad that he realized they could meet now in an ageless relationship, wherever it might lead eventually. She was glad that they could move with the unhurried rhythms of the prairie itself, take the time they both needed before decisions had to be made. She was most glad that none of them had demanded answers, that they had by silent consent agreed that first they had to find the right questions, and that might take a lifetime. She leaned her head against the newel post and listened to the rustlings of the grass and did not know that he heard the sounds as a singing that his heart could not contain. ●

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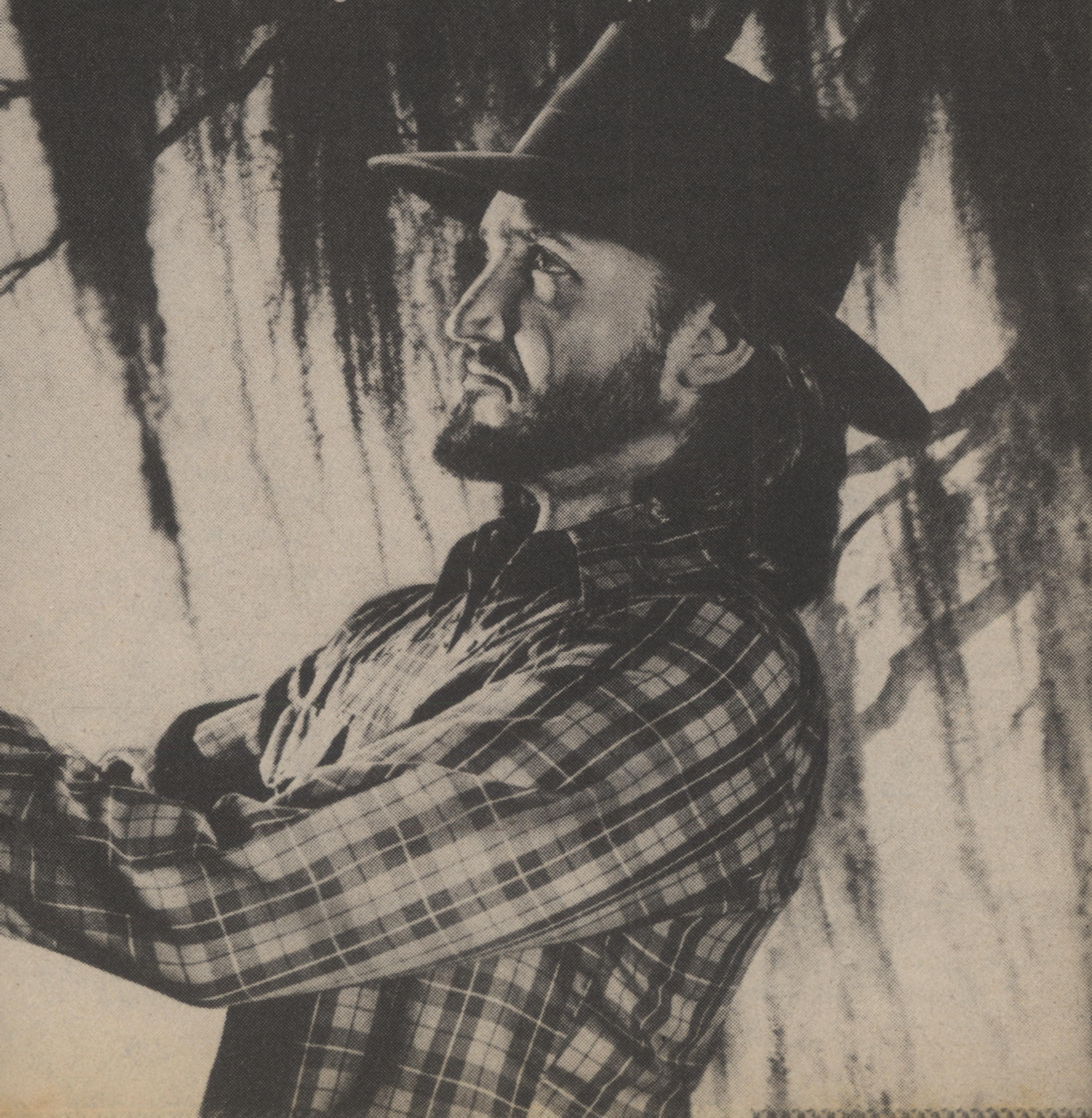
by Neal Barrett, Jr.

art: J.K. Potter

TRADING POST

The author has sold stories to virtually all the major science fiction magazines including *Omni*, *F&SF*, *Galaxy*, *If*, and *Amazing*. His work has also been anthologized several times, and he has published ten science-fiction novels.

"Trading Post" marks his first appearance in *Asfm*.



With the glasses, lying on the flat gravel roof across the street, he could follow ant dramatics on the worn brick facing of the center. The place looked thoroughly abandoned. Dry summer grass followed cracks along the broad parking lot, sprouting in small explosions. Wild azalea had taken hold in rusted cars. He slipped the binoculars into his pack and out of the heat. The South Texas sun bleached the sky of any color and there was no shade at all on the roof. He thought about beer in sweaty bottles. He'd tried making beer but it was flat, both in chemistry and emotion. Fruit jars lacked the ambiance of TV taverns.

What the Snakes had done was set up their operation in an old shopping mall on the far edge of Beaumont, close to the Port Arthur road. There was a K-Mart and a Safeway and a discount appliance store, and a dozen smaller shops all connected by an inside mall. Josh was sure they weren't using the whole place. The real operation would be hidden in some inaccessible corner, past a wall that had crumbled on its own or gotten help. You could walk through rubble all day and satisfy yourself there was nothing to see. Proper measures would be taken.

A noise from the street brought him about and he bellied across the roof and parted a tangle of dead vines. A one-wheeler took the corner fast, raising white dust and heading south. The motor was strangely flat in humid air. The Snake sat high on his perch, awkward as Orville Wright. The sun glanced off copper scales. His whip-tail snapped in the breeze. A moment later, the convoy followed. Nine boxy shapes painted the familiar vomit yellow. They made no sound and rode meters above the road.

There was nothing else to see. He backed off and dropped through a hole in the roof. The store was dark and cool. He laid on his pack and slept amid the ghosts of plumbing supplies. He dreamed that a dog came in and saw him. When it was dark he slipped out and walked back to the Neches River. The black gelding was hobbled in a thick grove of willows near the water. The mount jerked away when he approached; he held its nose and spoke to it quietly. A few miles north he turned west and followed Black Creek into the Thicket. A big magnolia grew near the creek, as broad as three men. He stepped down and allowed himself a smoke.

That was how they worked it, then; the convoy turning right past the mall had shown him the answer. The Snakes had a small repair base out past the Eastex Freeway. He had no idea what they repaired. The fact that it was there had gotten him thinking about how his buddy Howard Johnson ran his scam. Traffic came off the base and past the mall. All Howard had to do was bring his goods out the mall's back door, circle around and edge in a convoy going south. The Snakes had a setup over east of Sabine Pass, a fair-sized town and a landing pad for the big

space freighters that took everything in and out of the Gulf Coast. Howard would grease some palms and his stuff would go out clean with everything else. Someone would pick up the goods at the other end. Fucking larceny among the lizards. So much for advanced civilizations.

He mounted up again and took a long pull from the bottle he kept in his pack. The moon was nearly full. He could see flat water, a dense stand of thick-boled cypress. The mosquitoes found him out and he kicked the gelding into a trot.

He was up and out back splashing his face with cold water out of the bucket before the sun came over the trees, regretting the fact that he'd ridden in late and finished off the whiskey on the way. One of the men was chopping wood and the sound rang sharply over the clearing. The smell of breakfast led him into the cabin.

"Dry off before you sit," Ellie told him. She didn't turn from the stove. He wiped his dark beard on a cloth and filled his plate with fried fish and biscuits and sorghum. The hands had already eaten. He'd seen their plates stacked on a stump.

"You had to go and see," Ellie said. "That's what this is all about."

"Don't start on me now."

Ellie faced him, a big wooden spoon in her hand. She was a long-limbed girl with a country-strong jaw and yellow hair. "What good did it do. Will you just tell me that?"

"I know old Howard's a crook."

"Big surprise."

"Ellie. I wanted to see how he does it."

Ellie turned back to the stove.

"He's got a slick operation which is how he better do it. They ever catch him at it, they'll make him into eighty dollar shoes and a belt."

"And what'll they do to you?"

"Commerce is a risk."

"The way you do it it is."

He got up and pushed back his chair and walked up behind her and touched her waist. She stiffened slightly under his hands.

"You didn't bathe this morning. You smell like whiskey and horses."

"You smell pretty good. Like flour and a woman in heat."

"That last part's wishing." She squirmed out of his grasp. Josh saw her flush and knew evening would find her content. He drank down his coffee and walked out into the yard. The land below the cabin sloped down to a narrow inlet, the water there still and dark as slate. The wind had picked up right at dawn and the fog had burned off early. Moss bearded tall oak trees at the edge of the water. The world came to an

end twenty yards into the swamp, choked off in dense vegetation. When the sun broke through, the feeble light was pale as butter.

Sol and Jim and the two new hands were waiting in the shade of the live oak that spread its branches over the cabin and the barn, the smokehouse and the hands' quarters back past the corral. The red flag was down; Ellie had taken breakfast out to the men and disarmed the traps. Still, they waited past the last white line. They seldom came closer unless they were asked.

Josh didn't much care for the new hands but Sol said they were all right. They came from up past Votaw and Sol was vaguely related to them both. Which said nothing at all, as everyone in the Thicket was somebody's cousin. The two would bear watching. They both had the tallow-colored skin and spare frames of back country men who were never more than a day this side of hungry. They knew who Josh was and what he had, and they wouldn't stop thinking about that.

Sol and Jim stood as Josh appeared. The new men followed their lead, one deliberately slower than the other.

"We got a lot to do," Josh said without greeting. "I want those horses fit and clean. Jim, you see the trading stock gets some extra feed." He turned to the new hands. "You all get started on those stumps past the barn. I want that patch flat as a table."

One of the men looked down at his feet. The other faced Josh for an instant and scratched at his chin. He didn't want to chop out stumps. It was backbreaking work in the heat of summer.

Sol stayed on when the others left. "Anything special you want me to do today, Josh?"

It was part of their morning rite. Josh would give him paper and a pinch of tobacco in acknowledgment of his status as top hand. Sol would roll a smoke and carefully put it away. Josh had never seen him light up. Sol took his pleasure in private, or did a little trading of his own.

"That storm last week took some cedar shakes off the barn," Josh said. "You can see it from right here. In the unlikely event it ever rains again we'll have a ton of sour feed to fork out."

Sol looked down at his hands. It was something he should have noticed and he knew it. "I'll get right to that, Josh. I sure will."

"I found a bee tree yesterday evening coming back. Two miles down past that stand of palmetto. You might take a look at that."

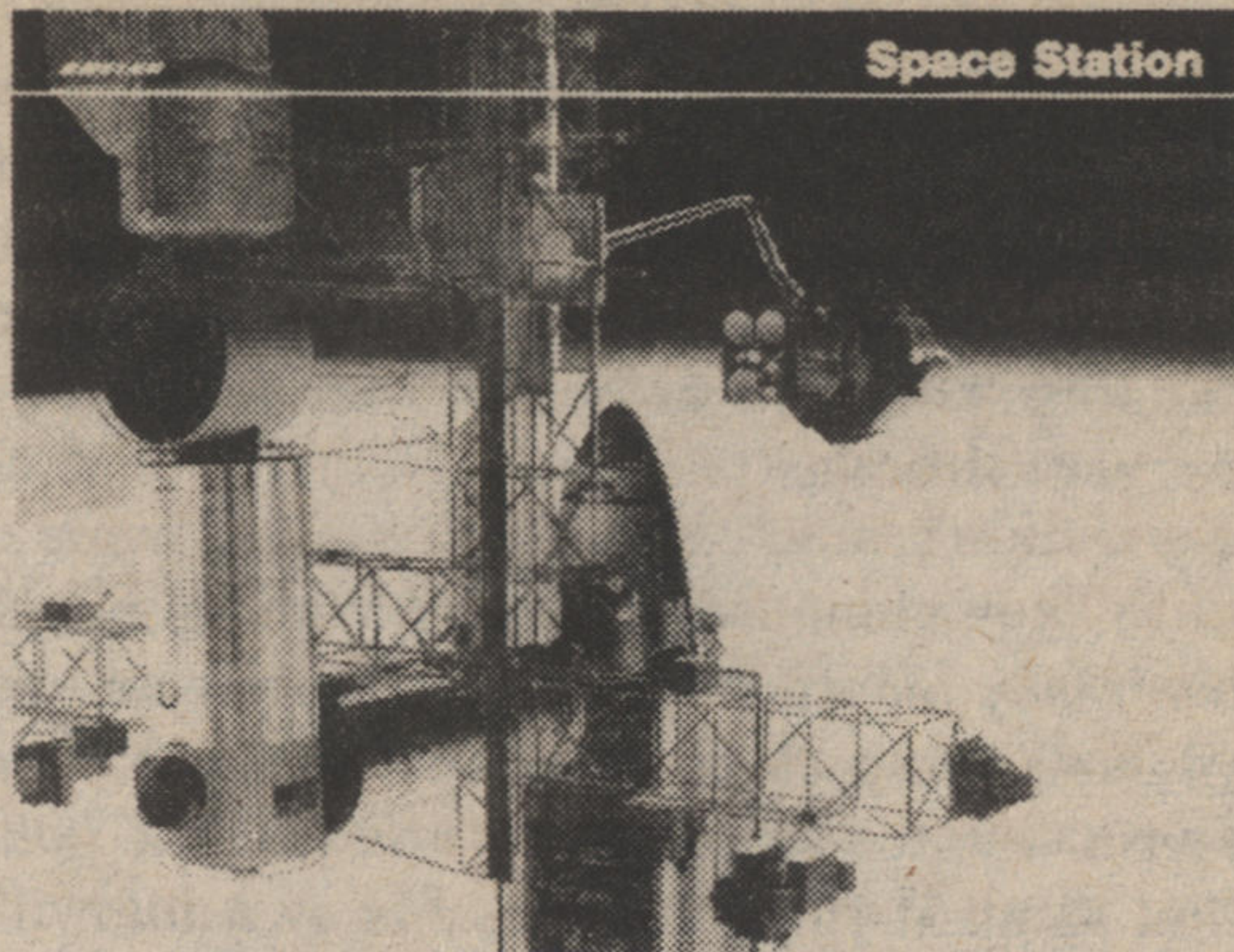
"Right after I get to that roof," said Sol. "You have any luck out in the bush? See anything at all?" He pretended the question had suddenly struck him, but it wasn't a thing he did well at all.

"A little sign, maybe," Josh told him. "There's wild porkers out there. One day I'll get 'em."

"You take me out I'll find them. I got a good nose for game."

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"I might do that," said Josh. Sol knew it was a lie. He hadn't gone out three days looking for pigs that didn't exist.

Josh stood and Sol sprang up like his shadow. He showed Josh an open cheerful grin. A dog eager to fetch. "All right, get to it," Josh told him. Sol trotted off and Josh rolled a smoke. You couldn't help like Sol and it was better to have a snoop on the property who was easy than one who wasn't. It had to be Sol that told everything he knew to Martin Bregger. Jim was too dumb. Nobody could act that ignorant unless he was.

Josh sighed and walked back to the house. The sun was up strong, the air already too thick to breathe. On one side he had Martin Bregger, who ran everything clear up to the Red River and over east to Louisiana. Martin was too smart to try and kill the golden goose, but he wouldn't mind at all if the goose was his own man instead of Josh. And on the other end he had the Snakes, Howard Johnson and whoever else was in it. He wasn't sure which he trusted the least. If either one got foolish he was standing in the middle. He tossed down the smoke and stubbed it out. Maybe he was getting too old for this business. Except the only other business was going hungry, and he was sure as hell too old for that.

It seemed like a night for a treat; no good reason except Beaumont had left him feeling edgy. That, and Ellie's disapproval. When he finished up his rounds and locked up he ran the patch of red cloth above the roof. The flag told the hands and whoever might decide to wander in that he'd armed the traps again and it wouldn't be smart to poke around. No one had since the boys from Liberty County had decided to come in and try for the horses. Martin Bregger said it wouldn't happen again and had come down himself to look at the bodies. Josh knew Bregger had likely sent them himself to see what the traps could do.

He went to the cellar and got the Herradura Añejo tequila, ninety-two proof and still in the bottle, that and two good joints, and then climbed to the bedroom upstairs. Ellie was moving about fluffing pillows. She slept in the raw year round, as he did himself, there being little need for bedclothes in the Thicket. The lamp was out but there was a candle. He liked the way the light kissed her skin. She turned and saw the bottle and the joints and gave him a curious smile.

"What's the occasion, something special?"

"Make one up if you want."

She got a single glass from beside the bed and watched him pour, then waited while he lit up the joints, closing her eyes and drawing smoke into her lungs.

"God, it isn't going to take much of that."

"It's all right, is it?"

"Better than all right."

Josh tasted the tequila on his tongue. Quick picture of a fountain, red-tiled roof and bright color.

"I'm sorry my leaving upset you."

"I don't ever like you going. Specially if it's got to do with a town. That wasn't something you really had to do."

"Maybe not."

"I don't like staying here, Josh. Making a little circle around the house."

"Isn't any other way I know to do it."

"I still don't have to like it." She flipped ash on the floor, using her whole arm in the motion. He gave her the glass again and she held it in both hands, bringing it to her mouth like a child. Her eyes came up and she caught him checking her out.

"You didn't need to get out the goodies. I can be had."

"Isn't what it was for."

"Well, then. Let's pretend it was." She touched his chest and smiled. "I'll fight you off a little."

"Not if you finish that toke."

"Then I guess I finish the toke. I can get you whenever I want."

"That's true."

"While you were gone Sol acted real funny."

"Funny how?"

"Walking around the yard all the time, stopping to get a rock out of his shoe. That kind of thing."

Josh grinned. "He's trying to map out the traps. I've caught him at it before."

"You think it's funny?"

"Ellie, you know how to find the traps? Step on 'em. That's not a practical solution." There were two trap perimeters around the cabin. When he was gone, Ellie armed the outside perimeter day and night, and shut off the inside perimeter during the day. It left her a little room to walk around, and was better than being shut up in the house.

"You're not going again soon, are you?" she asked.

"No, you know I'm not."

"Good. Just don't." She pinched out the candle and came in close against his shoulder. The loving was good and they surprised each other with their needs. When Ellie was asleep he looked up at the ceiling and thought about Sol. He was getting a little cocky. He never did anything he wasn't told to do so Martin was egging him on. Pushing him into something or maybe nothing at all. The whole idea was to keep Josh from getting any sleep and sometimes it worked better than others.

* * *

He spent his days mostly in the cellar, getting his goods in order for Howard Johnson's next visit, the squares on his homemade calendar diminishing much faster than he liked. The cellar was as large as the cabin space above, lined with concrete blocks Josh had hauled in from Batson by team and wagon three summers before. It was caulked, painted and generally proof against the wet ground pressing on every side, and had the virtue of being twenty degrees cooler in the summer. Ellie was from northern Minnesota and had no tolerance for hot and humid weather. More than once he'd been tempted to bring her down, when her skin flushed red and she could hardly get a breath. He hated to see her suffer but it was a rule he couldn't break. He'd made it clear to Martin that no one but himself had ever been in the cellar or knew how to get in or what was there. It was the only way he had of protecting Ellie. After the boys from Liberty County had taken the short course in fragmentation mines and other surprises, Josh had broken his rule about no one in the cabin. He had brought Martin in and shown him the heavy steel door to the cellar, which was really the front half of a safe, and let him read the sign he'd painted just above the combination:

WARNING!

NO ONE CAN OPEN THIS BUT ME. EVEN IF YOU HAD THE COMBINATION THE DOOR IS RIGGED TO BLOW THE WHOLE FUCKING CABIN UNLESS THE DOOR IS FIRST DISARMED IN SEVERAL PLACES.

SINCERELY YOURS,
JOSHUA T. RAINES

Martin had seemed impressed. He had stopped looking crazed for several moments. Of course the flaw in all this was if Martin somehow got past the traps outside and got to Ellie he could make Josh open up the door. If things ever went that far it was over anyway and wouldn't matter. The best guarantee against trouble was that Martin was a businessman first and a looney-tune second. That, and the fact that he was scared to death of the Snakes. Josh knew this for certain. It was easier just to let him keep dealing with Howard Johnson than try to cut him out and learn what he traded to the Snakes. Sol's little capers simply reflected Martin's feeling that Josh ought to worry a little more. It was a sound corporate tactic. One that told him Martin was probably only marginally unhinged.

The flyer dipped low over the swamp, scaring up bright-colored birds from the trees. The craft was a dull mustard yellow, shaped like half a melon, its power source vaguely asthmatic, a man sucking air through his teeth. It settled on runners in the clearing where Josh had white-washed a circle. A blister set asymmetrically forward was tinted against the sun. It slid back to reveal the four Snakes. Pilot. Two armed guards.

Howard Johnson stepped out and came quickly toward Josh, walking in the springy deliberate manner that made Snakes appear to move in slow-motion—even when they ran as fast as deer, which Josh had watched them do from a distance.

Josh differed from Martin in that he feared them for what they were, and not for the way they looked. Reasonably they were no more alien than upright chameleons. Seven-foot lizards that talked. Rust-sienna skin, salmon underbelly. Whip tail and apparently no use for any clothing. Howard Johnson wore a weapon, slung from a decorative webbing about his throat. To Josh, it looked like a lubricating tool, but would likely prove effective.

The Snake came to a stop. Forty-weight eyes found Josh. "Have a nice day," said Howard.

"Right, Coke is it," said Josh. "Hang on, I'll get the stuff." He left the Snake standing in the yard and went in and got his goods, packed on a dolly and covered with a tarp. Ellie didn't come out of the kitchen. Howard Johnson made her nervous. Josh wheeled the dolly across the yard and into the barn, waited until Howard was inside and shut the door. Sol and Jim and the new hands were off in the woods. They had left before sunup with no urging. In the hot, heavy air of the barn, Howard smelled musty and slightly sweet. Dead leaves and pollen. Josh pulled back the tarp and set his wares on a weathered plank table. Light from the slanted window was slightly muted.

"Some real good items this time," he told Howard. "You're lucky. First-rate stuff isn't all that easy to find. Rats get to the canvas. They take to that pigment like candy." As he talked he fooled with the paintings, turning one a little to the light, brushing at the frame of another.

"I like the people dancing," said Howard.

"Well sure," said Josh, "that's a Degas."

"Degas is good, I think."

"Degas is good." He knew Howard really didn't care about names. While he talked about dancers his eyes were flicking over the other paintings. It irritated the hell out of Josh that the Snake had a fine critical eye. Bluebonnets and moon-eyed children wouldn't cut it. Howard knew better. Josh had only tried it on him once.

"Just five, Josh?" Howard shook his head sadly in human imitation. "This is all?"

Not unexpected, but a direction Josh had hoped they might avoid. "We're talking masterpieces, Howard. These are first-rate goods."

"I know that, Josh."

"Then what are we saying here?"

"Last time there were nine."

"It can't be the same every time," Josh said patiently. "You know that. It depends on what I find."

"Five is not enough, Josh." His voice was slightly nasal, the words faintly musical and extended, as if he might have learned English from a Chinese waiter.

Josh studied the paintings while he thought about what to do next. He couldn't tell Howard he had only found two the last trip, that the others were from his hold-back stash. Besides the Degas he had the Miro and the Klee and the Andrew Wyeth, and a Lennart Anderson that looked as good as Gauguin. Back in the cellar he had the Freilicher landscape and the Cézanne and what he thought was maybe a Titian. And that was it. He wanted to tell Howard Johnson that it hadn't been his idea to flatten Houston. That devastation hindered the earnest collector. He was fast running out of museums, concentrating now on well-to-do residential rubble. This last avenue hit or miss, wealth not always reflecting taste.

He showed Howard the other stuff he had, the Kazak carpet and the three good Téotihuacán heads and a Minoan beaker jug, a salesman winding up his pitch and saving a little kicker for the last. Howard had a weakness for good glass, and he brought out the Baccarat crystal and held it up to the light, flipping the rim so Howard could hear it ring. A tulip-shaped glass, clear as air and whisper-thin.

"Oh yes very nice," said Howard. He took the piece carefully from Josh. Their hands didn't touch. He held the crystal by its base, fingers long and spatulate at the tips. Needles of light flecked his skin, for a moment a disco lizard.

"I would like more of these. In other shapes as well."

"So would I," Josh said carefully. Howard had an ear for human inflection. "I found this item in a shop that handled fine crystal and china. Spode and Waterford, Steuben, everything the best. Two floors of it. I never saw so much broken glass in my life. This was the only piece intact."

"You should find other shops such as that."

"That's a real good idea. As a matter of fact I'm working on another site now. There might be something, I can't promise."

The other site was pure fiction and maybe Howard knew it. If there was a Mason jar left in Houston Josh couldn't find it. In the cellar he had a single, exquisite Lalique, a crystal piece with a frosted satin finish that would knock the Snake on his tail. Howard would expect something big next time and he'd have to bring it out.

The Snakes came in from the flyer and loaded everything up, packing the items carefully under Howard's watchful eye. Josh handed Howard

the envelope with his samples for next time, then loaded up the goods Howard had brought him and wheeled the dolly into the house.

Howard was waiting in the yard.

"Bring Ellie outside," he told Josh.

"Ellie? What for?"

It shook Josh badly and Howard caught his concern. "I'm not going to hurt her, Josh. I am going to take her up in the flyer. I will bring her back safely. She can look at the countryside and see the Gulf from great heights."

"Howard, I don't think Ellie'd like to do that."

"Bring her out, Josh."

He was overcome by a terrible fear, a helpless rage. There was nothing he could do and there was no use asking the Snake what he wanted. He turned and went inside. Ellie looked up from the kitchen table and read his face. She stood quickly and Josh held her shoulders and sat her down and told her.

"Oh Jesus . . ." She looked like a bird caught in a trap.

"You'll be all right," he said. "If he was going to do something he'd just do it. That's his way. I can't stop him, Ellie."

She pulled away and stood and walked out of the cabin, past Howard without looking. Howard nodded to Josh and followed Ellie. Josh watched the flyer lift from the clearing and bank out of sight above the trees. He went inside and found the Remington 12-gauge which he wasn't supposed to have and leaned it by the door. Howard was trying to tell him something. He didn't much care what it was. If he didn't bring Ellie back safe he'd try to kill him. Pointless. But the only gesture he could imagine.

It was a full two hours before he heard the flyer again. It settled in afternoon shadow and Howard got out and then Ellie. Josh ran out to meet her. Her face looked pale and unfinished. She'd thrown up and stained the front of her dress.

"Ellie . . ."

"Just leave me the fuck alone, all right?" She pushed him off and walked shakily to the cabin.

"She became ill," said Howard.

"Yeah, I can see that. You want to tell me what this is all about?"

"Let's walk," said Howard. He left the front of the house and started past the barn to the corral. The horses shied and trotted away at his approach, bunching up at the far side of the pen, afraid of the unfamiliar smell. There were six pack animals and nine riding horses. Howard drew his weapon and began firing methodically into the pens. Josh stared in dismay, certain this was something he only imagined. A big sorrel mare went down heavily and thrashed in the dust. The other animals went crazy with fear. They shrieked and kicked out at each other and ran

blindly into the fence. Howard killed five of the riding horses. He left the pack animals alone, a point not wasted on Josh. Finally, he put the weapon away. Josh couldn't take his eyes from the corral.

"It was not a good idea to approach my place of business," said Howard. "I am greatly concerned about this, Josh."

Josh made no attempt to deny it, or ask Howard how he'd found him out. That's what it was all about, then. Ellie and the horses. Things could be taken from him. Returned or not returned.

"All right, you made your point," said Josh. "Here's one you maybe didn't consider. People see you and me having trouble, that isn't good for business. It gives them ideas."

"You'd better take care of that."

"You got any suggestions?"

Howard nodded toward the corral. "Fresh meat is scarce. Give some to Martin Bregger." He had never mentioned Bregger before. He was letting Josh know something else.

"I will be back in one month," Howard announced. "One instead of four. Have more goods ready."

"Now Christ, that doesn't make sense!" Josh was tired of holding back his anger. "I can't make a run that fast and you know it. What are you trying to do?"

"If the canvases are difficult to find you may substitute crystal for some of the paintings. One good piece will equal three paintings."

"It doesn't work like that. The glass is just as scarce."

"Try harder, Josh."

"All right, I don't know. I'll do what I can."

"I know you will. Goodbye, Josh."

He waited until the flyer disappeared and then turned and stomped back into the cabin and armed the traps, not even bothering to raise the flag. Maybe Sol would come back and blow off his ass. Ellie was upstairs. She had changed clothes and washed herself off. The bedroom smelled sour.

"You all right?" He knew it was a useless thing to say.

"I got sick and threw up and passed out. I've never been so scared in my life. I'm fine, Josh."

"I'm sorry, Ellie."

"He shoot all the horses?"

"Just the ones I don't need for business."

"Beaumont. Your goddamn adventure."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me."

"If you want I can get you something to eat. Some soup or I'll fry up those potatoes."

"No thanks. You want you can bring me the rest of the Herradura."

"I wish this hadn't of happened."

"So do I." She looked at him for the first time and he saw less anger there than despair. "I'll be okay. Just leave me alone for awhile."

Sol and Jim and the new hands came in before dark. The new men took one look at the corral and ran off into the woods. Josh got Sol and Jim butchering before the flies could do more damage. Sol knew better than to ask any questions. Martin would know something had happened here before morning.

Josh took his goods off the dolly and into the cellar, lit a lamp and locked himself in. The way the operation worked, Josh would give Howard a few grams of what he wanted and Howard would work it up. The goods came back in square plastic containers. Some standard Snake measure that came out to roughly four and a half gallons. The Snakes were clearly hotshot chemists; anything Josh had in mind they could make it. Howard never seemed concerned with the sample packets. All he told Josh was the process was risky and expensive; Josh had to take his word for that.

The Snakes leveled the cities with sonic disaster, some weapon that shattered buildings and fine crystal. The best casualty figures Josh had heard were eighty percent. Maybe more, and the same for other countries. The Snakes went away and let pestilence take its course. Disease and famine took another hefty percent. Survivors looted shopping centers and homes and grocery stores. Cattle and pigs quickly vanished. Cats and dogs. Nine years later, the Snakes came again, quashing feeble resistance and settling in to stay. They left people alone and went about doing whatever they did. Howard Johnson caught Josh looting a 7-11 ruin and made him a deal. Supply determined trade. Most items were spoiled or lost forever. Canned goods, Hershey bars and Sprite. Josh concentrated his efforts on items that had lasted. Salt. Sugar. Tea. Coffee. Tobacco. Isolated pockets of whiskey and wine. Seeds that would still come up. Occasional caches of gasoline. Marijuana, and selected recreational and medicinal drugs. Some of the food items had gone stale but nobody cared. Josh gave samples to Howard Johnson and Howard brought the goods back in bulk. There was never very much. Maybe seven hundred pounds each trip.

So Josh traded art to Howard Johnson, which Howard smuggled out to distant worlds. Howard made formerly staple items which Josh traded off to Martin Bregger. Martin stayed in power through control of rare goods. He gave Josh vegetables and fruit, flour and clothing and nails, axe handles and protection from Martin Bregger. Howard Johnson got paid in some measure; Josh had never even thought about that. All he

needed to know was that Howard would never let him out of the business. If he couldn't get out, he had to make certain he stayed in. An indispensable link in the chain of commerce and trade. Why was Howard suddenly making that difficult to do? It could be the Beaumont thing or something else. Maybe lizards thought like Martin Bregger. Keep Josh from getting any sleep. It had a perverse sense of logic, the ring of truth.

Martin appeared in the yard with the morning fog. Four men, a wagon and a team were in the clearing. One man held Martin's reins while he stood under the trees and waited for Josh. Josh had the goods ready and waiting, stacked on wooden pallets a few yards past his inside perimeter of traps. The goods had been transferred from the Snakes' plastic containers to canvas sacks, Josh having skimmed off portions for personal use.

Josh appeared in the door and Martin nodded. "Morning, friend. It's going to be a scorcher."

"Martin . . ."

Bregger was tall and stringy, a man with possum eyes. His height seemed wrong, as if something might have stretched him out of shape. One leg was shorter than the other, causing him to stand like a tree grown up in the wind. This didn't bother Martin; other men found themselves leaning off balance to catch his eye.

"Josh, my boys blow up if they get those goods?"

"Not now they won't, Martin."

Martin smiled in appreciation. He nodded and his crew brought over the wagon and loaded up. As soon as the pallets were empty, they filled them with the goods they'd brought along. Sweet corn and tomatoes, sacks of onions, strips of metal strapping and bolts of cloth. The men worked quickly. They didn't like walking in Josh's yard. Once they were clear, Josh ducked inside and armed the perimeter again, making a big show of raising the flag. Martin was still standing in his spot.

"Understand you had some trouble," he said to Josh.

"Nothing I can't handle."

"That's good to know."

"I got you some fresh meat. Be a good idea to start it smoking or eat it fast."

"Sure kind of you. Hate to see you shoot prime horses just for me." Josh waited for Bregger to get to it. "Your trouble with the Snakes goin' to interfere with business?"

"I can handle the Snakes just fine."

A wide possum grin. "I know you can, Josh."

He decided there was no use putting it off. "I'll need a couple of escorts, Martin. Sunup four days from now. I'm going back to Houston."

Martin smiled. "Did put the screws to you, didn't he?"

"The business that doesn't grow stands still."

"Uh-huh." Martin picked at a tooth. "I'll have the boys here. Pleasant trip to you." He turned back to the wagon, listing to the right. A man handed over the reins and he mounted up. Sol and Jim brought meat out of the barn and slung it off their shoulders into the wagon. Blood had soaked the sacking and left stains along their arms. Sol pretended he didn't know Martin or the others.

Ellie seemed better. There was still a distance between them. Maybe that would change with time. She walked through her days like a woman coming back from a sickness, brushing against life out of habit. Josh would find her standing in the kitchen in a pool of morning light, clutching a spoon or teacup to her breast. He sensed she was drawing some strength from the familiar.

She was reconciled to the trip; that, or too much within herself to show concern. "I'll be all right," she told him. "Don't worry about me."

"I do worry, Ellie."

"Worry about yourself. And come back safe." She rested her hands on his shoulders. The action seemed an effort. When she kissed him, her lips were dry as paper.

Sol and Jim had the packhorses ready. Josh had decided on three. He'd likely find goods to warrant one, but no use advertising that. Martin Bregger's two men were waiting under the big stand of cypress by the road. The older of the two reached up and flicked at moss with his knife. Josh had worked with the pair before. Sol brought over the black gelding and told Josh he'd hold down the fort. Sol's open, boyish grin irritated Josh more than usual.

By early mid-morning they had passed the marshy lake with its forest of skeletal trees. Yellow iris dotted the shore. The way south snaked through willows and sharp-leaved holly. Farther, the willows gave way to a steep hammock of pine and welcome shade. A sound like applause startled Josh and he turned to see hundreds of white herons overhead. Birds reassured him. Wildlife was apparently holding its own, the hunger less intense across the land. Creatures mating and reproducing, faster than people could eat them. He kept a running tally of survivors. Grey squirrels. Swamp rabbits. No more deer or wild turkey, but now and then a possum or a coon. Coons were as sly as people. He told himself the Thicket was no place to take a poll. Wildlife had always gathered here and what he saw didn't reflect true conditions.

He didn't talk to Martin's riders. There was nothing he had to say. They were there to protect him, make sure he and the horses got to

Houston and back safe. Raiders were always about; protecting Josh was essential to Martin's business. The men carried pistols but never showed them. It wasn't smart to let another see you owned something of such great value.

Josh picked up the pace and led them through a tricky piece of swamp. Gnats followed the men and the horses. The trip was settling down in his head. Going back this soon wouldn't hurt. He was running out of goods; Howard had simply nudged him into action, a little sooner than he liked. The Beaumont business or something else entirely—it didn't matter. Motives here were futile. A lizard mind was razorblade jelly.

Just after noon he called a halt and stepped out of the saddle. He ate biscuits and honey and sat down under a tree and listened to the lazy sound of cicadas. The riders ate and kept to themselves. Branches crowded in overhead; the air itself was lemony yellow. Cinnamon fern grew thickly under the trees. Josh saw a canebrake rattler slip through the grass. There were still plenty of snakes—the other kind. Snapping turtles and frogs, and 'gators back in the worst parts of the swamp. He wondered how Snakes viewed the reptile population. Probably the same way people thought of apes.

A hundred years before, black bear had roamed the Thicket. Bears couldn't run as fast as hogs. They tracked the razorbacks and caught them when they bedded down for the night. Bit the back of the neck and started eating. Wild hogs feared nothing in the world except bears. Josh remembered the taste of bacon. Pleasures now extinct seemed all the sweeter.

He was coming to his feet when the unmistakable sound reached his ears. He looked at Martin's riders. They led the animals quickly back in the trees, held the reins and squatted on their heels. Josh crawled up through the brush. He'd come due south through the Thicket, intending to skirt 90 and cross over past the Liberty County line. The Snakes kept 90 open for their convenience. Now there was traffic on the road. Four landcars and three flyers overhead. The striped cursive symbol was one everyone knew. Lizard law and order. They'd have to hole up or go back. Travel was out of the question.

The direction of the traffic worried Josh. East, into Beaumont or past it, and past it wasn't likely. He could tell himself it had nothing to do with Howard Johnson but making himself believe it was something else. Avoidance seemed a temperate solution. Reptile fuzz was the worst kind of trouble you could find.

He walked back and squatted by the riders. "I'll catch up with you later," he told them. "Don't expect me till noon maybe tomorrow. Take the horses back up Jackson Creek and wait for me there."

The older of the two looked at Josh. "We're supposed to stay with you."

"You're supposed to stay with me if I go to Houston. We can't go to Houston right now."

The man wore a straw hat frayed at the edges. "Where is it you're going?"

"That's not your business. You don't want to go."

The man thought about that, putting together the Snakes' appearance and Josh's sudden change of plans. Coming up with indeterminate answers. Each possibility worse than the last.

"We'll be at the creek," he said finally.

"Don't get attached to those horses," Josh told him. "They don't belong to you."

The shopping center was no longer deserted. A flyer sat untended near the rows of rusted cars. The three squat sedans reminded Josh of boll weevils. Three at the Safeway, one farther down at the K-Mart entrance. Winking yellow lights illumined Snakes on official errands. There was no more room for question. Howard Johnson was busted. Which meant, essentially, that Josh was busted too. They'd want to know connections and Howard would tell them. There was no way to guess whether they had him—Josh had to assume they didn't, that he still had time to get Ellie out of the cabin and into the Thicket. He backed away from the broken fence. The gelding was in an alley, two blocks away and to his right. He stood and started back across the street. Light stabbed out of the dark, nearly catching him in the open. He leaped for the cover of tall weeds. The one-wheelers drew tight circles on the road, came to a stop in a line. Josh guessed four, maybe five. They made Snake-talk and purred their engines. They weren't looking for him but they clearly didn't intend to go away. Someone had told them to keep everyone clear of the center.

Josh considered. There was no way to get across the street. Ahead, a warehouse wall blocked the way. He would have to follow the ditch to the back of the mall. Go all the way around and hope for no Snakes on the other side. It would take a good hour. He needed to be heading for the Thicket.

A building had collapsed leaving a mountain of broken brick. Debris lapped the rear of the center. Box-like carriers nosed the concrete dock where K-Mart shoppers had loaded their goods. The carriers floated just above the ground. Bright cones of light illumined the dock, the reef-like strands of rubble. Josh viewed the scene without pleasure. He could easily break his neck if he climbed the rubble. The area near the docks was bright as day. Josh watched the procedure. Workers wheeled dollies out of the mall, loaded them into carriers, turned and went back for

more. More what? Josh wondered. The Snake cops were hauling off a hell of a lot of goods. What else was Howard into besides art?

One way out. If he kept to the shadow below the dock, worked his way under the carriers past the rubble to the other end of the center. He watched the routine once more. There were maybe four minutes when all the Snakes were gone. Loading up inside or going back with empty dollies. Check it out again. He saw he was losing his nerve, waiting for intercession. He took a deep breath and bolted from cover.

The Snakes loaded a dolly directly above. The carrier dipped slightly under the weight. When they left, he made for the next carrier in line. A barrier of rubble intervened. For a moment he was level with the floor of the dock itself. He hesitated, checked quickly for Snakes. Poked his head inside the carrier for a look. The space was packed with long rectangular containers. Pressure-sealed in plastic, accordion ridges along the sides. They reminded Josh of crackers. Individual packs for locked-in flavor. The packs were different sizes. Two feet square on up. It was a bad idea but he knew he was going to do it. Pulling himself up, he slipped inside and moved to the far back wall. With his knife, he cut through the translucent plastic. Stretching the ridges apart, he got a glimpse of a very nice Utrillo. He'd traded it to Howard in March. Behind the Utrillo was another. Not really another, the same one. And after that another, the same painting. Josh tried another, slightly larger container. Grant Wood. All identical down to a wavy scratch on the frame.

He didn't picture for a moment a roomful of busy Snake forgers. The little bastards had a duplicating device. Something that could stamp out paintings like cookies. Josh ran a gallery operation; Howard had dime-store distribution. The egg-shaped containers to his left would be Pre-Columbian jars. Aztec culture by the gross. So much for hard-working chemists, miserly portions of pot. Howard could turn it out by the ton.

He heard them coming and knew he couldn't make it to the front. Crouching behind Utrillo, he waited until they wheeled the new load inside. They had to jockey things around to make room. For a moment, the containers hid him from view. He moved up as the load moved back. The dolly was flush against the carrier, stacked high with containers. No way to drop back to the ground. He went to his knees and crawled through the stacks, waited, then darted into the mall.

The mall was a mess. Storefronts gutted and crowded with rubble. Dark except for lights set up farther down. He ducked inside a store. Hickory Farms, the shelves stripped for more than twenty years. He guessed the big lights were where Howard had stored his goods. The lizard cops were looking it over. Part of the roof had collapsed. A cavern hung with rusted steel vines. It allowed Josh to move through stores without going back to the mall. Discount shoes, Doubleday. A shop for

skiers and divers. Loaded dollies passed in the mall. The stench hit him at Penney's. Something was recently dead; it would be deader tomorrow in the heat.

He could hear Snake voices and see the lights in the mall. He was right next door or close to it, much too bright and he moved to the back of the store. Clothing, he decided, from the jungle of empty racks. Light cast a narrow dusty beam on the floor. It came from a fist-sized puncture in the wall. The hole sprouted old electric wiring. The smell here was bad. He held his breath and went to his knees, turning his head to see in the hole. He backed off fast, throwing up in one violent constriction after another. His body was helpless to stop. Cries of alarm reached his ears and he knew the Snakes had heard him. He tried to crawl away. The Snake poked him with something hard. Josh turned and saw a muzzle that resembled a garden hose. Two more Snakes arrived quickly. Josh wiped his face with his shirt. The Snakes gave way to another; he wore ornamental webbing around his throat. He turned a flash on Josh, then bent to study him closer. Standing, he gave quick instructions to the others and walked away.

The Snakes pulled him roughly to his feet, took his knife and his belongings and hustled him out of the store into the mall. Outside, they opened the rear door of a landcar, tossed him in and shut him up in the dark.

Josh tried not to think, a process that only served to sharpen mental pictures. The store was full of Ellies. Hundreds of dead Ellies under a white hot light. The Snakes were dragging them by the legs and tossing them in mustard-colored dumpsters. The Ellies wore blue cotton dresses and jogging shoes . . .

"Jesus!" The image was too sharp, too bright. His stomach lurched again. There was nothing left to give. He took off his shirt and tossed it away. His hands were shaking and wouldn't stop. The landcar started up smoothly. He felt it turn left, leave the lot and go north. The Ellies wouldn't go away. Dead Ellies in the store. One back at the cabin, but *which one?* He saw her in light. Sunlight finding her in the kitchen. A candle by the bed. If he looked at her *now*, touched her again, would she be the same? *Ellie, Ellie . . .* His throat tightened just short of closing. He shut his eyes and tried to push the image aside. He wasn't sure he wanted the answer. Maybe that wasn't a problem. The way things were going it probably wasn't a question he'd ever get to ask.

The ride seemed to last half an hour. When the landcar stopped, the Snakes came back and let him out. Dark pines shadowed the rutted dirt road. Josh smelled stagnant water. A flash shined in his eyes and the Snakes motioned him forward. One brought up the rear. He watched the other spring along in an awkward, peculiarly graceful manner. Finally,

he stopped and motioned Josh to a halt. A square boxy light sat on the ground. It illuminated two more Snakes. They were digging a shallow grave.

Josh felt a quick little motion under his heart. Breaking glass. He'd guessed where they were going, but a guess is a speculation. A hole is to the point.

When the grave was complete, the guards and the digger left. Josh heard steps, turned and saw the official-looking Snake from the mall.

"You are the one named Josh," he said abruptly. "You worked with Howard Johnson. You gathered artifacts and traded them for goods. Howard Johnson produced the goods."

"Yes. I did." Josh saw no reason to deny it.

"The female. She came from your place? She left at some time with Howard Johnson?"

"Yes."

"And Howard Johnson brought her back."

"Yes."

"You'd like to know if she is real, or if Howard left a copy."

"The thought occurred."

"'Real' is a personal observation."

"Is that supposed to be an answer?"

"An answer is not a solution. That was a very foolish decision on Howard's part. Smuggling is one thing. Duplicating a being is something else. This is why I put him out of business."

"A humanitarian gesture."

"A contradiction in terms."

"Look. What was Howard going to *do* with them?"

"Do with what?"

"With the Ellies."

"Trust me. You don't want to know." The Snake drew his weapon. "This is your burial spot. No one will see you again."

Josh felt himself unravel. The Snake pointed the weapon in the hole and fired twice.

Josh looked at him.

"Take a shovel and fill it up."

Josh did. The Snake held the light. Josh was wet all over when he finished. The Snake tossed him his knife and his belongings.

"Baskin Robbins. Is that a name?"

"I guess it is."

"Then you will call me Baskin Robbins. Don't go back and get your horse. Walk home. Tomorrow afternoon, I will officially discover your cabin and destroy it from a flyer. Don't take anything with you. Sol will

guide you and the female to a place where someone will meet you and pick you up.”

“Sol will?”

“Sol worked for the Bregger person. But mostly he worked for Howard Johnson. Now he works for me. Basically, we start all over from scratch. I have to burn those goods we took from the mall. I still have Howard’s originals. I think. Doesn’t matter. You can’t work in Houston anymore. I want you out of the district. We’ll set you up somewhere else. Maybe San Francisco. Denver.”

“You’re going to keep the operation like it is?”

“Yes, of course. Why not?”

Josh sat down on his grave and made a smoke. “All right,” he said, “let’s talk business. There are some things you got to know about art . . .” ●

MARTIN GARDNER

(from page 18)

SOLUTION TO THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Solomon opened a window allowing bees to enter the palace room. The bees settled on the genuine blossoms.

The least known of all the legends about Sheba’s visit, which I relate here with impeachable authority, concerns the whimsical way the Queen reacted when Solomon asked her to marry him. Her servants brought in two bowls. One contained ten gold talents, the other ten silver talents.

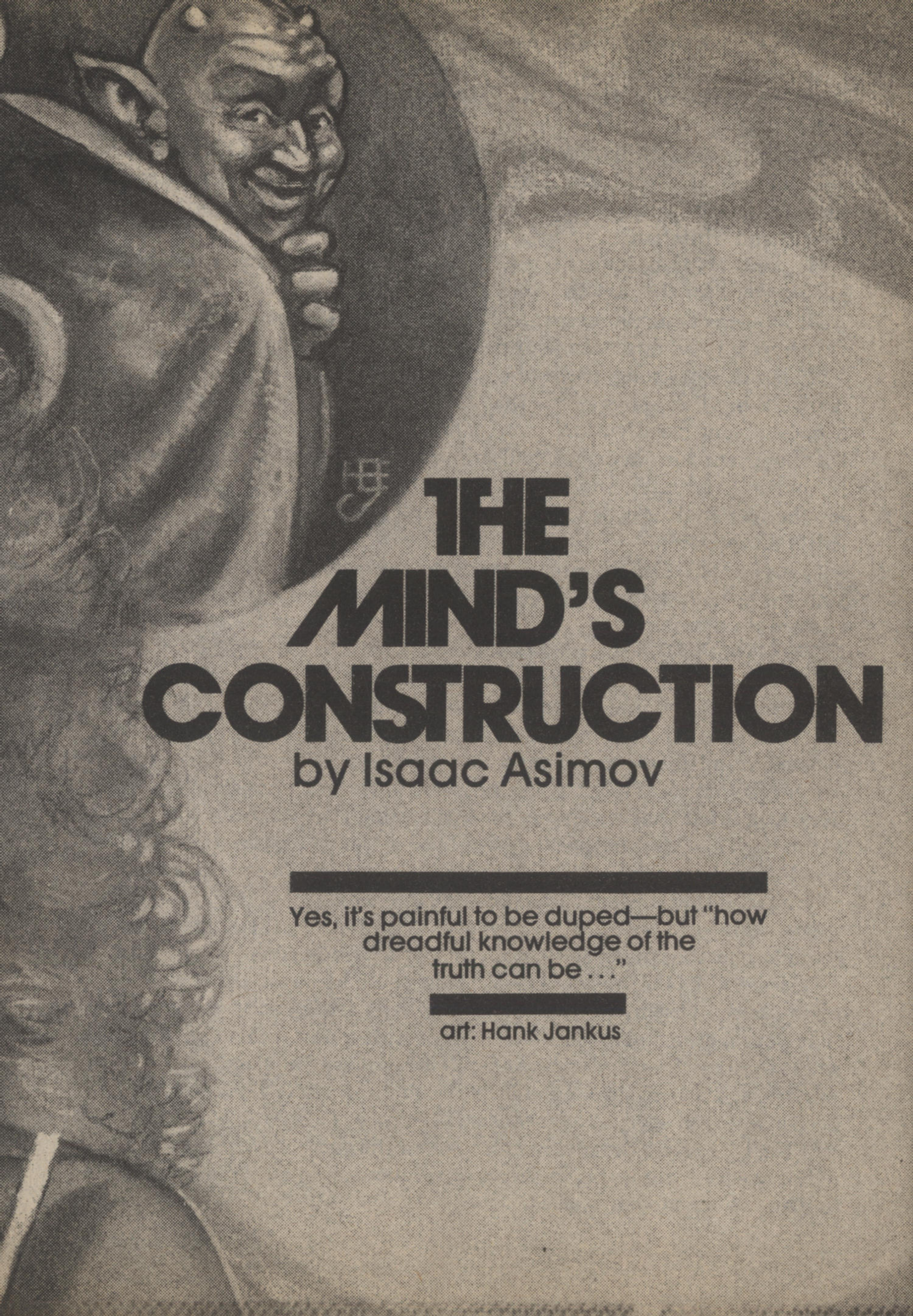
“After you are securely blindfolded,” said Sheba, “I will move the bowls about the table at random. You will then select one of the bowls, and from it you will take a single talent. If it is gold, I will accept your proposal of marriage. If it is silver, I’ll have to think about it.”

Solomon meditated for several minutes, then said with a smile: “Oh Mighty Queen, may I be permitted to rearrange the coins in any manner I desire?”

Sheba pondered the question. With gold and silver divided evenly between the two bowls, Solomon’s chance of drawing a gold coin obviously was $1/2$. Suppose he mixed them so each bowl held five gold talents and five silver ones. The probability of selecting a gold coin would still be $1/2$. Try as she would, the queen could see no objection to granting Solomon’s request.

How did Solomon redistribute the 20 coins so that the probability of his taking a gold coin rose to almost $3/4$? The surprising answer is on page 110, but first see if you can match Solomon’s insight.





THE MIND'S CONSTRUCTION

by Isaac Asimov

Yes, it's painful to be duped—but "how
dreadful knowledge of the
truth can be ..."

art: Hank Jankus

I was moved to philosophic utterance that morning. Shaking my head in mournful reminiscence, I said, "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face. He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust."

It was a rather chilly Sunday morning and George and I were seated at a table in the local Bagel Nosh. George, I remember, was finishing his second large sesame bagel, this one liberally interspersed with cream cheese and whitefish.

He said, "Is that something from a story of the type you habitually put together for the less-discriminating editors?"

"It happens to be Shakespeare," I said, "It's from *Macbeth*."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten your penchant for petty plagiarism."

"It is not petty plagiarism to express yourself in an appropriate quotation. What I was saying was that I had a friend whom I had considered a man of consideration and taste. I had bought him dinners. I had, on occasion, lent him money. I had praised his appearance and character fulsomely. And mind you, I did this entirely without any consideration for the fact that he was a book reviewer by profession—if you want to call it a profession."

George said, "And despite all these disinterested actions of yours, the time came when your friend reviewed one of your books and he proceeded to slam it unmercifully."

"Oh?" I said, "Did you read the review?"

"Not at all. I just asked myself what kind of review a book of yours could possibly get, and the correct answer came to me in a flash."

"I didn't mind his saying it was a bad book, mind you, George—at least I didn't mind it any more than any other writer would mind such a brainless statement—but when he went on to use phrases like 'senile dementia' I felt that was going too far. Saying that the book was meant for eight-year-olds, but that they would be better off playing tiddly-winks was hitting below the belt." I sighed and repeated, "There's no art—"

"You said that already," said George, at once.

"He seemed so pleasant, so friendly, so grateful for little favors. How could I know that underneath it all he was a vicious, libelous hellhound."

George said, "But he was a critic. How could he be anything else? You train for the post by maligning your mother. It is really unbelievable that you should have been fooled in so ridiculous a fashion. You are worse than my friend, Vandevanter Robinson, ever was, and he, I'll have you know, was once spoken of as a possible candidate for a Nobel Prize for Naïvete. His story is a curious one—"

"Please," I said, "the review came out in the current *New York Review of Books*—five columns of bitter spleen, venom and gall. I am in no mood to listen to one of your stories."

I thought you would be [said George] and you are perfectly right. It will take your mind off your own inconsequential troubles.

My friend, Vandevanter Robinson, was a young man whom anyone would have judged to be of great promise. He was handsome, cultured, intelligent and creative. He had been to the best schools, and he was in love with a delightful young creature, Minerva Shlump.

Minerva was one of my god-daughters and was devoted to me, as was only right. A person of my moral fiber, of course, is quite averse to allowing young ladies of outstanding proportions to hug me and attempt to climb into my lap, but there was something so endearing about Minerva, so innocently childlike, and, most of all, so resilient to the touch, that I allowed it in her case.

Naturally, I never allowed it in the presence of Vandevanter, who was quite unreasonable in his jealousy.

He explained this failing of his once in accents that touched my heart. "George," he said, "from childhood it was my ambition to fall in love with a young woman of superlative virtue, of untouched purity, of—if I may use the expression—a porcelain-like gleam of innocence. In Minerva Shlump, if I may be allowed to breathe that divine name, I had found just such a woman. It is the one case in which I know I cannot be deceived. Were I ever to find out my trust was abused, I would scarcely know how to continue to live. I would become an embittered old man with no consolation but such paltry items as my mansion, my servants, my club, and my inherited wealth."

Poor fellow. He was not deceived in young Minerva—as I well knew, for when she wriggled delightedly on my lap, I could easily tell her utter lack of any trace of vice—but it was the only person, or thing, or concept, in which he was not deceived. The poor young man simply had no judgment. He was—though it may seem unkind to say so—as stupid as you are. He lacked the art to find the mind's— Yes, I know you said that already. Yes, yes, you said it twice.

What made it particularly hard for him, of course, was that Vandevanter was a rookie detective on the New York police force.

It had always been his life's ambition (in addition to finding the perfect damozel) to be a detective; to be one of the keen-eyed, hawk-nosed gentlemen who are the terrors of evil-doers everywhere. With that end in mind, he majored in criminology at both Groton and Harvard, and read assiduously those important research reports committed to paper by authorities such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. All that, together with the unremitting use of family influence, and the fact that an uncle of his was Borough President of Queens at the time, led to his appointment to the force.

Sadly, and quite unexpectedly, he was not a success at this. Unsurpassed at the ability to weave an inexorable chain of logic while sitting in his armchair, making use of evidence gathered by others, he found himself utterly incapable of gathering the evidence himself.

His problem was that he had this incredible urge to believe whatever someone told him. Any alibi, however sieve-like, baffled him. Any well-known perjurer had but to offer him his word of honor and Vandevanter found himself incapable of doubting him.

This became so notorious that criminals from the lowliest purse-snatcher to the highest politician and industrialist refused to be questioned by anyone else.

"Bring us Vandevanter," they would cry out.

"I will spill my guts to him," the purse-snatcher would say.

"I will apprise him of the facts, as carefully arranged in the proper order by none other than myself," the politician would say.

"I will explain that the hundred million dollar government check just happened to be lying about in the petty-cash drawer and I needed a tip for the shoeshine boy," said the industrialist.

The result was that whatever he touched got away. He had an Exonerative Thumb—an expression invented for the occasion by a literary friend of mine. (Of course, you don't remember inventing it. I'm not referring to you. Would I be so mad as to think of you as "literary"?)

As the months passed, the caseload in the courts grew less; and innumerable grieving burglars, muggers, and assorted felons were restored to their friends and relations without a stain on their reputations.

Naturally, it did not take long for New York's Finest to understand the situation and to penetrate the cause. Vandevanter had been on the job not more than two and a half years, when it dawned on him that the camaraderie he had been accustomed to was fading, and that his superiors were wont to greet him with a puzzled frown. There was virtually no talk of promotion, even though Vandevanter would mention his Borough President uncle at what seemed like appropriate moments.

He came to me as young men in trouble are wont to do, seeking refuge in the wisdom of a man of the world. (I don't know what you mean, old man, by asking me if I knew of anyone I could recommend. Please don't distract me with non sequiturs.)

"Uncle George," he said, "I believe I am in a spot of difficulty." (He always addressed me as Uncle George, impressed as he was by the dignity and splendid nobility lent me by my well-kept white locks—so different in nature from your own dubiously unkempt mutton chops.)

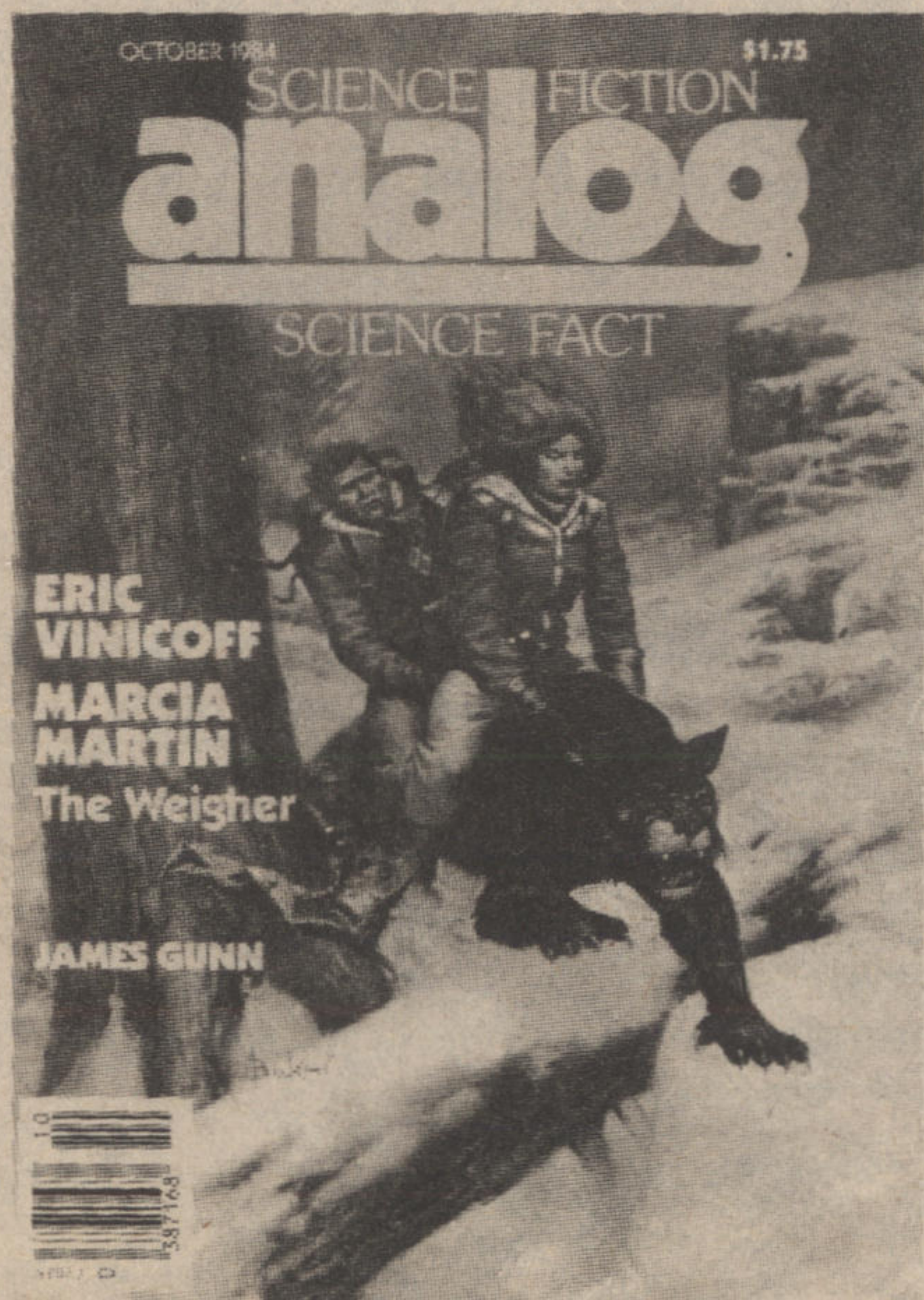
"Uncle George," he said, "there seems to be an unaccountable reluctance to promote me. I remain a rookie detective, zero-class. My office is right in the middle of the corridor and my key to the lavatory doesn't

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work. I don't mind this in itself, you understand, but my dear Minerva in her unspoiled artlessness has suggested that this may mean I am a failure and her little heart almost breaks at the thought. 'I don't want to marry a failure,' she says, her little lips pouting. 'People will laugh at me.' "

"Is there any reason why you should be having this trouble, Vandevanter, my boy?" I asked.

"None at all. It's a complete mystery to me. I admit I haven't solved any cases, but I don't think *that's* the problem. No one can be expected to solve them all, you know."

"Do any of the other detectives solve at least a few?" I asked.

"Yes, they do, now and then, but their manner of doing so shocks me to the core. They have an unlovely sense of disbelief, a most deplorable skepticism, a distasteful way of staring at some accused person in a supercilious manner and saying, 'Oh, yeah!' or 'Says you!' It just humiliates them. It just isn't the American way."

"Is it possible the accused might be telling lies and that they *should* be treated with skepticism?"

Vandevanter puzzled over that for a moment. "Why, I believe that might be so. What a horrible thought!"

"Well," I said, "let me think about this."

That evening I called up Azazel, the two-centimeter extraterrestrial who, on an occasion or two, has been of use to me with his advanced technology. I don't know if I've ever mentioned him to you, but— Oh, I have, have I?

Well, he appeared on the little ivory circle on my desk about which I burn the special incense that activates the Space-gate, when the proper geometrical forms are constructed by—the details, however, are secret.

When he appeared, he was wearing a long, flowing garment; or at least it seemed long and flowing in comparison to the two centimeters that measured him from the base of his tail to the tips of his horns. He had one of his arms raised high and he was speaking in his shrill way while his tail twitched from side to side.

Clearly, he was in the midst of something or other. He is a creature who is somehow preoccupied with unimportant detail. I never seem to get him when he is quietly at rest or in dignified repose. He is always engaged in some petty concern of no moment and is furious at having me interrupt him.

On this occasion, however, he became aware of me and at once lowered his arm and smiled. At least, I think he smiled for it is hard to see the details of his face, and once, when I used a hand-lens to help me make them out, he seemed unaccountably offended.

He said, "It's just as well, I welcome the change. I have the speech well in hand and I'm certain of success."

"Success at what, O Great One, though success in anything you do is certain." (He seems to have a fondness for this sort of orotundity. He resembles you oddly in this respect.)

"I am running for political office," he said, with satisfaction. "I expect to be elected grod-catcher."

"May I ask, humbly, that you relieve my ignorance by informing me of what a grod might be?"

"Why, a grod is a small domestic animal much esteemed as a pet by my people. Some of these animals lack a license and a grod-catcher is expected to gather them up. They are small creatures of fiendish cunning and resolute defiance and it takes someone of might and intelligence to succeed at the task. There are people who sneer and say, 'Azazel couldn't be elected grod-catcher,' but I intend to show them I can—now what can I do for you?"

I explained the situation and Azazel seemed surprised. "Do you mean to say that on your miserable world it is not possible for people to tell when other people make statements that do not coincide with objective truth."

"We have a device called a 'lie-detector,'" I said. "It measures blood pressure, electrical conductivity of the skin and so on. It can detect lies, although it also detects nervousness and tension and calls them lies as well."

"Naturally, but there are subtle glandular functions that exist in any species intelligent enough to misrepresent truth, or is this something you wouldn't know?"

I avoided answering that question. "Is there any way to make it possible for Zero-Class Detective Robinson to detect that glandular function?"

"Without one of your crude machines? Using the functioning of his own mind?"

"Yes."

"You must realize you are asking me to deal with one of the minds of your species. Large, but infinitely crude."

"I realize that."

"Well, I shall try. You will have to take me to him or bring him to me and, in either case, allow me to study him."

"Certainly."

And it was done.

Vandevanter came to me perhaps a week later, a look of concern on his patrician face.

"Uncle George," he said. "A most unusual thing has happened. I was

questioning a young man involved in the robbery of a liquor store. He was telling me in the most affecting detail that he just happened to be passing the store, deep in thought over his poor mother who was suffering from a headache which had struck her after she had consumed half a bottle of gin. He stepped into the store to ask if it was, after all, wise to consume gin too soon after having disposed of a similar quantity of rum, when the owner, for no reason he could tell, pressed a gun into his hands and then began shoving the contents of the cash register at the young man who, confused and astonished, accepted it, just as a policeman walked in. He said he thought it was intended as compensation for the pain his dear mother had experienced. —He was telling me all this when it came over me in the oddest way that he was—uh—fibbing.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. It is the most amazing thing I ever experienced.” Vandevanter’s voice fell to a whisper. “Not only did I know, somehow, that the young man had the gun with him when he entered, but that his mother did not have a headache. Can you imagine someone fibbing about his *mother*?”

Close investigation proved Vandevanter’s instinct to be correct in every particular. The young man *had* been telling an untruth about his mother.

From that moment on, Vandevanter’s ability sharpened steadily.

Within a month, he had become a keen, hard-eyed, remorseless machine for the detection of falsehood.

The Department watched in gasping amazement as accused after accused failed in the attempt to hoodwink Vandevanter. No tale of having been deeply immersed in prayer at the time the poor-box was rifled could stand up against his shrewd questioning. Lawyers who had been investing orphans’ funds in the renovation of their offices—entirely through oversight—were quickly discomfited. Accountants who had accidentally subtracted a telephone number from the item labeled “Tax due” were trapped in their own words. Drug-dealers who had merely picked up a five-kilo packet of heroin in the local cafeteria, thinking it was sugar-substitute, were instantly tied in logical knots.

Vandevanter the Victorious they called him, and the Commissioner himself, to the applause of the assembled body of police, awarded Vandevanter a key that fit the lavatory door, to say nothing of moving his office to one side of the corridor.

I was congratulating myself that all was well and that Vandevanter, his success assured, was now ready to marry the lovely Minerva Shlump, when Minerva herself appeared at the doorway of my apartment.

“Oh, Uncle George,” she whispered faintly, her lithe body swaying. She was clearly on the point of fainting. I lifted her and held her close to me for five or six minutes while I considered exactly into which chair I might lower her.

"What is it, my dear?" I asked, after I had slowly disencumbered myself of her, and smoothed her clothing lest it be disarranged.

"Oh, Uncle George," she said, and tears overflowed her lovely lower lids. "It's Vandevanter."

"Surely he has not shocked you with unwonted and improper advances."

"Oh, no, Uncle George. He is far too refined a person to do that before marriage, although of course I have carefully explained to him that I understand the hormonal influences that sometimes overpower young men and that I was certainly fully prepared to forgive him in case of an untoward event. Yet, despite my assurances, he remains in control."

"What is it, then, Minerva?"

"Oh, Uncle George, he has broken our engagement."

"That is unbelievable. No two people are better suited. Why?"

"He says I'm a teller of—of—inexactitudes."

My reluctant lips formed the word: Liar?

She nodded. "That vile word did not cross his lips, but that is what he meant. It was only this morning that he looked upon me with his dear glance of melting adoration and said, 'Loved one, have you always been true to me?' And, as I always do, I said, sentimentally, 'As true as the sunbeam to the sun, as the rose-petal to the rose.' And then his eyes grew narrow and hateful and he said, 'Aha, your words are not in accord with verity. You have told a taradiddle.' It was as though I had been struck with a heavy blow. I said, 'Vandevanter, my own, what are you saying?' He answered, 'What you heard. I have been mistaken in you, and we must part forever.' And he left. Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do? Where will I find another success?"

I said, thoughtfully, "Vandevanter is usually right about such things—in recent weeks, at any rate. Have you been untrue to him?"

A faint flush mantled Minerva's cheeks. "Not really."

"How unreally?"

"Well, some years ago, when I was but a slip of a girl, aged seventeen, I kissed a young man. I held him tightly, I admit, but that was only in order to keep him from escaping, and not out of any personal affection."

"I see."

"It was not a very pleasurable experience. Not *very*. After I met Vandevanter, I was astonished to find how much more gratifying his kiss was than the one I had earlier experienced with the other young man. Naturally, I was intent on re-experiencing that gratification. Through all my relationship with Vandevanter, I have periodically—entirely in a mood of scientific inquiry—kissed other young men in order to assure myself that not one, not *one*, can match my own Vandevanter. In doing so, I assure you, Uncle George, I granted them every advantage in style

and form of kissing, to say nothing of grip and squeeze, and *never* did they match Vandevanter in any way. And yet he says I am untrue."

"How ridiculous," I said. "My child, you have been wronged." I kissed her four or five times and said, "There, that does not gratify you as Vandevanter's kisses do, does it?"

"Let's see," she said, and kissed me four or five more times with great skill and ardor. "Of course not," she said.

"I shall go see him." I said.

That very night, I presented himself at his apartment. He was sitting moodily in his living room, loading and unloading his revolver.

"You are," I said, "doubtless considering suicide."

"Never," he said with a hacking laugh. "What reason have I to commit suicide? The loss of a trifling jade? Of a story-teller? She is well done with, say I."

"You say wrong. Minerva has always been true to you. Her hands, her lips, and her body have never made contact with the hands, the lips, and the body of any man but yourself."

"I know that is not so," said Vandevanter.

"I tell you it *is* so," I said. "I have spoken with the weeping maiden at length and she has revealed to me the innermost secrets of her life. Once she blew a kiss at a young man. She was five years old at the time; he, six; and she has agonized over that moment of amorous madness ever since. Never has such a scene of ribaldry been repeated and it is only that moment that you detected in her."

"Are you telling the truth, Uncle George?"

"Consider me with your unfailing and penetrating glance, and I will repeat what I have just said and then you tell *me* if I am telling the truth."

I repeated the tale, and he said, wondering, "You *are* telling the exact and literal truth, Uncle George. Do you suppose that Minerva will ever forgive me?"

"Of course," I said. "Humble yourself to her and continue your keen pursuit of the dregs of the underworld through every liquor store, corporate boardroom, and City Hall corridor, but never, never turn your keen eyes on the woman you love. Perfect love is perfect trust and you must trust her perfectly."

"I will, I will," he cried out.

And he has done so ever since. He is now the best-known detective on the Force and has been promoted to the rank of Half-Class Detective with an office in the basement right next to the laundry machine. He is married to Minerva and they live together in ideal peace.

She spends her life testing the superior gratification of Vandevanter's

kisses over and over in an ecstasy of happiness. There are times when she will willingly spend the entire night with some likely man who seems suitable for investigation, but always the result is the same. Vandevanter is the best. She is now the mother of two sons, one of whom bears a slight resemblance to Vandevanter.

And so much for your claim, old man, that my labors and those of Azazel always lead to disaster.

"As it happens, though," I said, "if I accept your story, you were lying when you told Vandevanter that Minerva had never touched another man."

"I did it to save an innocent young maiden."

"But how is it that Vandevanter did not detect the lie?"

"I presume," said George, wiping the cream cheese from his lips, "that it was my air of unassailable dignity."

"I have another theory," I said. "I think that neither you, nor your blood pressure, nor the electrical conductivity of your skin, nor your subtle hormonal reactions, can any longer tell the difference between what is true and what is not; and neither can anyone else who must depend on the data derived from studying you."

"Ridiculous," said George. ●

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CHALLENGER AS VIEWED FROM THE WESTERBROOK BAR

by Lucius Shepard

I was in this bar, not a fancy place, but the kind of joint where they ask if you want a glass with your beer, even the dim lighting was a form of shabbiness, and the barmaid—a tired blonde with her beachfront spilling from a low-cut blouse—turned on the TV to the shuttle launch just as Challenger lifted off, borne aloft on glory and fire and cheers from the crowd.

This old guy, he must have been in his sixties, Charlie his name, his face

seamed and mottled from too many fifty-cent shots, his expression displaying that good-humored bitterness that derives from an acceptance of failure's many virtues,

he says, "That goddamn Reagan and his goddamn rockets! What do I fuckin' need rockets for? I need bread on my table, goddamn it! That son of a bitch

don't give a shit about the workin' man!"

Most everyone agreed, and the Puerto Rican guy from the deli next door

who'd dropped in for a quick one before going to work, said Charlie was smarter than he looked, and that got a laugh.

The shuttle turned over, looking almost delicate, a white lady mated to a rust-colored giant and guarded by two castles,

headed into a depth so richly blue it seemed a color to which God might aspire.

And the neutral voice of launch control reading his telemetry, measuring the flight.

I went back to my beer, inured to such miracles, and wondered if I could afford another.

Then Charlie says, "Hey! Hey! The son of a bitch blew up!"

We all glanced at the TV, saw the fireball, the twin spirals of white smoke

that—they told us later—were the solid fuel boosters tumbling down.

"Bullshit," says one of the regulars. "That was just the . . . y'know, the what'cha call the second stage or somethin' goin' off."

"Second stage, my ass!" says Charlie. "That sucker just went to hell!"

Well, he was right,
and it wasn't long before the TV told us so,
told us to death with anchorman woe and studied political grief
and intimate televised reactions and a zillion instant replays.

"Goddamn!" said Charlie. "Whaddaya think about that?"

It was a national tragedy, the TV said,
but what it was in the Westerbrook Bar was a solution to the
problem of the afternoon,

a reason to be there, a justification for our wastedness,
and to everybody that came in, Charlie or the barmaid or
someone would say,

"Hey, y'hear 'bout the shuttle? Son of a bitch blew up."

"Yeah?" they'd say. "What shuttle?"

Instant replay number fifty three million and six would be pointed
out,

and they'd say, "Holy shit! Lookit that!"

Or "Christ, I wonder if they felt anything."

Stuff like that.

And some of the more knowledgeable would venture,

"Ain't it a bitch 'bout the schoolteacher?"

Later that afternoon, it was dark outside, I tried to think about
what they must have been thinking.

How it was to be one second thunder and vibration

and the next, flame and absolute painlessness.

The seven becoming a magical number, becoming seven
forever.

But it was impossible to consider the event in poetic terms.

All the poetry, all the small heartbreaks

and true poignancy had been snuffed out by the media
sanctification,

by the overkill of political reverence.

"Your reaction to the tragedy aboard the space shuttle?"

asks a Mini-Cam reporter of a flustered New Jersey housewife,
plump and drab as a pigeon in her worn winter coat.

"Well," she says, patting her hair, composing her features into an
expression of national sadness.

"I think it was just awful . . . a real tragedy."

The topic died in the Westerbrook Bar,

and the barmaid consulted the *TV Guide* and discovered that a
Mae West film was showing on Channel Nine.

"Mae West still alive?" she asked Charlie, and Charlie said, "Shit,
no!"

And some wise guy at the far end of the bar said,

"That's right, man.

Charlie kissed her right 'fore it happened."

"Yer ass!" said Charlie. "What you think . . . I'm out there dancin'
'round in California and shit?"

As if California were no place for a non-quiche-eater like himself. He acted pissed but was secretly pleased. And the wise guy said, "Hey, Charlie! I'm just tryin' to give you a rep!"

By the time Reagan came on, we were all drunk. Really drunk! I could barely sit on my stool. Maybe that was why his speech went over so well, why all the crap about dedication and Sir Francis Drake (who according to history was something less than a noble seeker) sounded so meaningful and straight from the heart. Or maybe we have become so bored with disaster, so removed from our actual responses, that we require these presidential iambics, this noble tailoring of dolor, in order to recognize a moment of true feeling. "Gotta admit," said Charlie. "The man's okay . . . I mean, if he'd just get himself a coupla guys to tell him what's happenin' in the street, he might get the job done." "Didja ever see 'Cattle Queen of Montana'?" I asked. "What the hell's that?" he said, miffed, not wanting to show his ignorance. "That was his finest goddamn hour," I told him. "I swear to God, you oughta see it." "It's a movie, huh? Pretty good?" "Oh, yeah! Terrific! Y'can see his greatness aborning." Charlie looked puzzled, then pretended he understood and laughed.

Instant replay five hundred and seventy-nine billion and thirty-four.

"Jeez," says Charlie, the soul of compassion, swaying, too drunk to go to the john and pee. "Poor bastards."

" . . . terrible," says a solemn anchorman. "But America will remain in space.

And that's where America belongs."

And of course, albeit absurdly phrased, he was right, not because as Charlie then said, changing his original tack,

"We gotta beat them damn Russkies!"

But rather because though all systems fail, all drives continue, outward endlessly, obeying that purest of signals, the compulsions of the human heart.

Instant replay ten trillion and two, almost eleven o'clock at night. Slow motion, living color.

The first fog of burning gasses fans out from the solid fuel booster. A point of livid fire blooms beneath the shuttle, explodes into marbled smoke and flame.

The seven enter a heretofore undiscovered universe of black suns
with golden hair,
where the voices of angels are visible as shadowy fans and
orchids,
where birds fly to heaven and back, bearing bits of the Primum
Mobile in their beaks,
and there they enlist in mystic conscious cause with all the other
fiery heroes,
voyaging outward on a mission too unfathomable to be
entrusted to the living.
Or so it is to be hoped.

"Y'know who I feel bad for?" Charlie says. "I feel bad for all them
little kids that was watchin'."
And the dark figures ringing the bar murmur in a litany of
agreement.

The barmaid turned down the volume, and we watched yet
another instant replay in silence.

Frustrated, somebody pounded on the poker machine.
The first flames showed, and with a trace of wistfulness in his
voice, as if he

were longing for such a furious extinction, Charlie said, "There
she goes."

On the street a siren squealed like a dog in pain, and shortly
after that

an old woman staggered in and started complaining about her
husband,

and a young guy was reminiscing about a bar that had burned
up a couple of years back,

the Blue Owl,

and new shadows without sources looked to be forming on the
floor

(it appeared to me they were seven in number,)

and Charlie switched from beers-and-shots to a double shot of
rye

straight up, and swilled it down.

Then, still watching the fireball dwindling into the deep blue
forever,

still wistful, but also with an undertone of pride,

as if the moment had put him in touch with his own secret
importance and splendor,

with the fade-to-blue of his own trifling glory,

he spoke again,

and though he offered no new insights,

this time he seemed the voice of a previously unutterable
wisdom.

"There she goes," said Charlie, almost sweetly. "There she goes."

CABRACAN

by Lewis Shiner

art: Richard Crist

Lewis Shiner's short story, "The War at Home" (*Asfm*, May 1985), has been reprinted in Gardner Dozois's *Third Annual Year's Best Science Fiction* (Bluejay) and it will also appear in Jack Dann and Jeanne Van Buren Dann's Vietnam collection, *In the Fields of Fire* (Tor Books). Mr. Shiner is currently at work on a new novel, *Deserted Cities of the Heart*, which is set in the same milieu as "Cabracan."



When Eddie got to the godhouse he still had to wait outside for the old man to notice him. Chan Ma'ax sat and mashed yellow pine gum into *pom* for the incense pots and pretended he hadn't seen. Eddie was sweating and his nerves were bad, but the old man demanded patience.

In their time the Mayans had worked out the cycles of the planets and built stone temples so graceful they made Eddie's eyes burn. And all that survived was a dozen wood poles and a thatched roof, and a wrinkled old man sitting crosslegged on a mat.

A tractor coughed in the distance, then crashed screaming into the underbrush. Behind the godhouse the logging road split the dense green of the jungle, its orange ruts filmed over with standing water. To either side the pale ovals of mahogany stumps stared back like frightened eyes.

The air was thick and smelled of cookfires and diesel. It congealed on Eddie's face and neck; if he tried to rub his hands together they would stick, just from the humidity.

"*Oken*," the old man said at last. "Come in, Eddie."

Eddie hiked up his tunic and sat on a low mahogany stool. After a couple of minutes the old man said, "Ma'ax Garcia spent two days in the forest, looking for *copal* to burn in the godpots. Nothing." He spread his hands, palm down, then turned them over and pretended to search them for *copal*. He spoke in Maya, but slowly, so Eddie could follow. Eddie smiled and nodded to show he understood.

The Ma'ax Garcia he was talking about was Eddie's age, mid-thirties. He was Chan Ma'ax's oldest son by his second wife. He loved the old man and wore himself out trying to help him.

"They took all the mahogany," Chan Ma'ax said. "So now we can't even make new canoes. I guess now we have to take that one and start using it on the lake." He pointed to the ceremonial canoe full of sugar cane pulp, white bark, and water. It had been fermenting under a covering of palm leaves since the day before. "So what then? No more *balché*? Then it will truly be the end of the world. My sons will all turn into *evangelistas*, no?"

He laughed, showing brown stubs of teeth. His name meant "little monkey" after his clan, and over the years he'd started to look like one: flat nose, hunched back, matted hair. The first time Eddie had been introduced to him as the *t'o'ohil*, the "great one," he'd assumed it was just another joke.

In his more lucid moments Eddie saw himself as a victim of a fashionable malaise, the leading edge of a fin-de-millennium craziness that would peak in another fifteen years. The rest of the time it seemed like some kind of short circuit in his talent that had made him walk out on a career that was just getting started. But it had gotten to the point where everything sounded stale, where he'd go blank on stage and play

obvious shit with no energy or heart. And then late at night he'd hear things in his head that were more feeling than music, things he could never find on the neck of a guitar.

He'd bummed around Europe, but the massive, colorless buildings all seemed to crawl on top of him. He'd tried to work up the nerve for Asia or North Africa but when the time came he'd gotten on a plane for Mexico City. And it was there, pissing away the last of his money, that he'd read a book about the Lacondones and gotten on a bus the next day.

He came the last leg in an oil company pickup. The oilmen were lining up right behind the loggers to take their turn in the gang rape of the Mexican rain forest, and Eddie saw he'd made it just in time.

That had been three years ago. He hadn't expected the Lacondones to make him a better guitarist. All he knew was acid and yoga and macrobiotics hadn't done it for him and he was running out of things to try.

And the Lacondones had opened up to let him in and then quietly closed up behind him. They helped him build a hut and gave him black beans and *balché* and their sour hand-rolled cigars and otherwise left him alone. He felt like somebody's retarded brother that they'd agreed to put up with.

In three years he'd lived a couple months with Nuk, one of Chan Ma'ax's daughters, who'd gotten more and more distant every day; he'd had a week or so with an *evangelista* girl from the Christian side of the lake who was having a crisis of faith and had put deep scratches in his back; and in the last year or so he'd had a kind of clinical sex with the English doctor who passed through every couple of months, who'd lived her whole life in Mexico and never listened to rock and roll.

And beyond the sudden widening of the doctor's eyes when she came, the quick "oh" of her indrawn breath, he'd had no effect on any of them.

"Listen," Eddie said to Chan Ma'ax in halting Maya. "Something's up. Not just the *balché*. Something's going on."

The smile died on the old man's face and his eyes went distant and glassy.

Shit, Eddie thought. He's not going to talk about it.

They were like the Japanese. They had a mental curtain they dropped over themselves that cut them off from somebody who offended them. Eddie knew it was no use to go on but couldn't help himself. "Those bags over there are full of clay. That's why you're keeping them wet. They're for new god pots, aren't they? You're going to break the old pots, aren't you? What's happening?"

Chan Ma'ax looked down at the pine sap. Eddie wasn't there anymore.

He'd been through this before. Once, pretty badly smashed on *aguardiente* he'd brought back from San Cristobal, a kid named Chan Zapata had said something about Chan Ma'ax and the *Haawo'*, the Raccoon

Clan. Eddie had read about them in Mexico City. They were supposed to be the last ones with a working knowledge of the Mayan calendar and ceremonies, could even, some said, talk to the gods.

As soon as the word was out Chan Zapata had shut up, too embarrassed even to change the subject. After that Eddie had gone to Chan Ma'ax and then to the rest of the village, but even a mention of the *Haawo'* turned him invisible on the spot.

Finally young Ma'ax Garcia had taken him aside and said, "It's bad luck to talk about . . . you know. The thing you were asking about. Okay? It's bad luck even to say the name. I'll probably get bit by a *nauyaca* for even talking to you about it, but I like you. I don't want you to get in trouble."

Eddie could take a hint.

He stood up and said, "Okay, Max. I'm sorry. *No estoy aqui por pendejo*. I'll shut up."

He was walking away when Chan Ma'ax said, "Eddie?"

"Yeah?"

"You will be back for the *balché* later, no?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"*Groovy*," Chan Ma'ax said. It was his favorite English word. It meant Eddie's wrist had been slapped and it was over and now they were friends again. In Maya he said, "Bring your guitar. You can sing for us."

For a second Eddie wanted to tell the old man who he was, that he wasn't just some clown who happened to know a lot of songs on the guitar. But the old man wouldn't care. It had no bearing on whether or not Eddie was a *hach winik*, a real person.

He walked out into the center of the clearing and let the heat wash over him. He shut his eyes and concentrated on the pores of his skin and felt his sweat break all at once, on the backs of his knees and between his shoulders. It made him feel cleaner, less poisonous.

When he opened his eyes the mountains were in front of him, pristine, sharp-edged, nearly the same color as the pale sky behind them. A few thin clouds floated over them, motionless.

Fuck it, he thought. Time to move on.

Everything snapped into focus. He tasted the dust in the air, smelled the jungle broiling in the sunlight, heard the high pitched drone of the cicadas like dueling synthesizers and, over them, the faint voices of women on the far side of the clearing.

Nepal, maybe. Why not? He thought about ragged, ice-covered mountains, impossibly green terraces set into the sides of valleys, whitewashed monasteries growing out of cliffs. For a second he saw them superimposed on the drab browns and tans of the village.

It would be complicated. He didn't know the politics anymore, didn't

know if he could even get into Nepal. He would have to spend a while in the real world, long enough to get his bearings and put some money together.

He went on to his hut feeling lightheaded, precarious. The hut was the same general shape as the godhouse, longer than it was wide, rounded on the ends and thatched with sweet palm leaves. Unlike the godhouse it had walls of a sort, vertical strips of yellow bamboo, braided with string and baling wire.

He opened the door and a woman's voice from inside said, "*Tal in wilech.*" I have come to see you.

"Nuk?"

"Yes," she said, switching to Spanish. "I need to talk to you."

He made her out in the dimness. She was barrel chested and thick waisted, not even as tall as Eddie's shoulders, but she was a beauty by local standards. His eyes found the red of the tattered plastic anthurium she always wore in her hair.

Eddie shut the door and sat in the hammock. He smelled the dry, spicy odor of her skin and thought about the nights they'd spent together. "*Como no?*" he said.

"It's about my father."

"I just saw him. He's getting ready to drink *balché*."

"Yes," she said. "They will drink *balché* and in the morning they will go on a pilgrimage to Na Chan."

"Pilgrimage," Eddie said, stunned. Na Chan was where Chan Ma'ax's gods lived. It was one of maybe hundreds of Classical Maya ceremonial centers still covered by jungle, never excavated, never even seriously looted because no one had enough time or money for it. Chan Ma'ax would never talk about what went on there. It was *hach winik* stuff, for real people only.

"He must not go. He's old, almost eighty. The government has told him to stay away from there. If he goes I don't think he'll come back. You have to talk to him."

"I don't know why you're asking me," Eddie said. He didn't want it to sound bitter, but it came out that way just the same.

"He trusts you. He thinks you are a good man. He listens to you."

"He'd listen better to Ma'ax Garcia."

"Ma'ax Garcia is too much a part of the old ways. He doesn't care about the danger."

The old ways. Nuk was awed by cars and planes and portable stereos. She still talked about the TV she'd seen in San Cristobal five years ago. That's what I am to her, Eddie thought. Just one more new thing.

"If he talks to me," Eddie said. "I'll do what I can. I'll tell him I think it's dangerous. Okay?"

"Thank you, Eddie." She leaned over him, kissed him quickly and ran out the door. Her lips were soft and he felt the kiss a long time after she was gone.

Finally he got up and stood in front of his shaving mirror. He didn't like the way he looked. It made him nervous, impatient. He got out his straight razor and cut his shoulder length hair to within an inch or so of his skull. He had to do the back by feel. When he was finished he washed himself with cool water from the clay jug in the corner and the last of his hard pink shaving soap.

There was a bamboo shelf in one corner and he reached to the back of it and took down his shoulder bag. The zipper was stiff from disuse. He got out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and put them on. The jeans were loose, but he punched a new hole in the belt.

The longest journey begins with a single step, he thought. Already he felt different, cut off from the heartbeat of the village, his genitals armored in heavy denim.

He rolled the mirror and razor up in the blue and orange strings of the hammock and put them in the bag. There wasn't anything else to pack.

He left the bag sitting in the dust of the floor and picked up his guitar. It was a gut string acoustic he'd bought for twenty dollars in the *mercado* in Mexico City. The action was brutal and the octaves were about a quarter tone off, but he'd been trying to wean himself from material objects and it had seemed like a good idea at the time. He carried it back to the godhouse where Chan Ma'ax was waiting.

Everybody else was back from the *milpa*, the corn field on the far side of the lake. Maybe fifteen men sat or squatted in a loose hierarchy on the floor of the godhouse. Eddie nodded to them and sat next to Ma'ax Garcia. Nobody said anything about his clothes. Ma'ax Garcia handed him a bowl of the deep brown *balché* and Eddie took it in both hands. It tasted a little like weak stout, a little like strong *pulque*. Eddie drank it off and Ma'ax Garcia passed it forward to be filled again. When the bowl came back Eddie set it at his feet and wrapped both hands around the neck of his guitar.

Chan Zapata served the *balché* from a big clay pot at the front of the godhouse. He was only in his twenties but they all knew he would take Chan Ma'ax's place when the time came. He had clean features and penetrating eyes and he worked hard for Chan Ma'ax when he wasn't on a binge in San Cristobal. He made souvenir bows and arrows that he traded for *aguardiente* and whores, and every time he came home his wife had moved out. She would stay gone a week or so and then he'd convince her he'd never do it again.

He would be going to Na Chan if anyone did.

The others sat in twos and threes, drinking, complaining about the Christian converts on the north end of the lake who'd sold off the mahogany and kept all the money for themselves. One old man asked Chan Zapata if he'd saved up enough "arrows" for a trip to San Cristobal and everybody laughed.

If I painted myself purple, Eddie thought, would anybody say anything?

Chan Zapata took the pot back out to the canoe to refill it. The full pot had to weigh close to a hundred pounds and he staggered back with his knees bent and his arms all the way around it. His face was agonized. If he dropped it the gods would never forgive him. Just past the edge of the roof Eddie could see towering black clouds blowing in from the Gulf, erasing Chan Zapata's shadow and turning the jungle behind him into a wall of foggy green.

The rain started just as suddenly, falling in handfuls that cratered the dust outside and filled the air with the rusty smell of ozone. The sky cracked into a web of white lines and the thunder came after it fast and loud enough to make one of the old men jump.

"It's only lightning," Chan Ma'ax said. His monkey face wrinkled with silent laughter. "Nuxi' is afraid Cabracan is waking up." The others laughed and Chan Ma'ax said to Eddie, "Cabracan is what they call in Spanish the *temblór*."

"*Earthquake*," Eddie said in English. The old man's smile terrified him. There had been another quake in Vera Cruz just last week, the third in Central America in the last nine months, each one worse than the one before.

"*Urt quack*," Chan Ma'ax said. "*Urtquack*." He finished his *balché* and tucked his legs up under him. "You know the story of Hunahpu and Xbalanque and Cabracan?"

"No," Eddie said. The godhouse went quiet.

"Heart of Heaven sends Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the twins, to kill Cabracan. Cabracan, you know, he has been saying, 'I am greater than the sun. I shake the earth and sky and everyone bows down before me.' Heart of Heaven, of course, he can't just let this go.

"Cabracan is walking across the land, shaking the mountains flat, and the work is making him hungry. He sees Hunahpu and Xbalanque and says, 'Who are you?'

"'Nobody,' says Hunahpu. 'We are only hunters.'

"'What do you have to eat, then?' says Cabracan.

"Now Hunahpu and Xbalanque have the idea that they must bind Cabracan to the earth. They shoot *quetzal* birds from the branches with their blowguns and the giant thinks it is really wonderful because they only use air instead of darts. They cook the birds and they smear some

of them with white lime from the lime pits and cook them until they are golden brown and dripping with juices.

"The giant eats the birds that have the lime on them and then he starts walking toward the west again, smashing the mountains. But the lime is making him heavy and it is harder and harder for him to lift his arms or his feet.

"He begins to stumble and fall. Soon he can't get up again and he falls asleep under the mountains. Hunahpu and Xbalanque dance on the ground that covers him, but they are so noisy that they anger Heart of Heaven. Heart of Heaven wanted to see a good contest and is disappointed that the twins beat Cabracan by trickery.

"So every year, while Cabracan sleeps, Heart of Heaven lets him get stronger. You can hear him sometimes turning in his sleep, making the mountains shake the way he used to. Making the *urt quack*."

Chan Ma'ax refilled his bowl, drank it all, smacked his lips. No one moved. They knew when there was more coming, like the audience at a symphony that knew when not to clap.

Finally Chan Ma'ax said, "If you go east, toward the old cities of Chichen Itza or Tulum you can see the land where Cabracan knocked the mountains down. Cabracan is very restless now and soon he will wake up and shake these mountains to pieces."

He looked at Eddie. "Wearing the clothes of a *hach winik* will not save you." Eddie thought there was approval in the old man's voice and it caught him off guard. "Hunahpu and Xbalanque will not save you. They are a part of the old ways. After Cabracan wakes up there will be only new ways."

The *balché* made another round. The old man had always told sports stories before, Hunahpu and Xbalanque playing soccer with the king of the underworld. Nothing like this.

And then Eddie remembered the book. According to the Maya calendar a five-thousand-year cycle was just now ending. It was supposed to wind up with some kind of disaster that would wipe everything out. The book figured it to be earthquakes.

Jesus Christ, Eddie thought. He's talking about the end of the world.

"Play something, Eddie," Chan Ma'ax said.

"Yes, for God's sake," Nuxi' said. "Something cheerful."

Eddie picked up the guitar. What they liked best were the *rancheras*, the traditional crap like "Cielito Lindo" that they could sing along with, but they liked old rock and roll too. He tried "Twist and Shout" and then "La Bamba" to the same chords but the lyrics depressed him savagely. He stopped singing and just hammered the chords, hard enough to split his cuticles and to pull the strings out of tune.

They had all been singing along, slapping their hands in the dust to

keep time, but now they stopped and stared at him. The chords disintegrated into two and three string grips, and then out of it somehow came a melody line, taking Eddie by surprise.

His fingers ground into the neck, slurring and smearing the notes, the cheap strings rasping skin from his fingertips, the music pouring out of him uncontrolled. He didn't have any idea how long it went on. Finally his hands slowed on their own and the notes trailed off into silence.

He got up. He was breathing hard, like he'd been running. He walked out into the rain and let the cool water run down his face.

After a few seconds he felt the pressure of the *balché* in his bladder. He walked a little further into the jungle and loosed a strong, clear stream into the undergrowth. He was already high, not fuzzily drunk but tight and focused as a laser. It took a long time to piss.

When he turned back he saw Chan Ma'ax with the front of his robe tucked under his chin, using a neighboring bush. He took a breath and let it go. "Listen, Max," he said. "It's over. It's time for me to move on."

"Okay," Chan Ma'ax said, smiling.

A vague guilt nagged at him, like he'd left the water running somewhere. He wondered if he was being an idiot. Too late, he told himself. He took another step toward the godhouse.

"Eddie," the old man said. Eddie stopped. The old man looked over his shoulder and grinned like he was brain damaged. "I have a goodbye song to sing for you." He straightened out his tunic and faced Eddie and started to sing. The words were meaningless warbling noises but they approximated the lyrics and melody to "Whatcha Gonna Do," the only hit Eddie ever had, peaking just under the top forty in 1974.

Eddie's teeth started to chatter. This isn't happening, he thought.

"I have that little radio, you know," Chan Ma'ax said. "I listen to it all the time. I hear crazy things on there sometimes." He waited a few seconds and then he said, "I don't have answers, Eddie. All I have are the old ways, and the old ways are finished. You understand?"

Eddie nodded. He didn't seem to be able to talk.

"We go on a pilgrimage to Na Chan tomorrow. The last time. To say goodbye. You understand?"

Eddie nodded again.

"You want to come?"

"Yes," Eddie said, shaken, scared, suddenly aware of the rain running down his back, soaking his jeans. "Yes, I want to come."

"Groovy," Chan Ma'ax said and walked away.

And then, so gently that afterwards he couldn't be sure it had really happened, he felt the ground tilt and settle under him, like a boat taking a wave. Enough to turn the fear to terror, for just a second. To turn the solid earth to eggshells, to betray everything he'd ever taken for granted.

He wanted to fall down and cling to the rain-soaked grass, but it wasn't the kind of thing a *hach winik* would do. He stood and watched the rain drops cluster on a stalk of bamboo. The last time, he thought. To say goodbye.

Each drop shone with a fierce and crystalline light. For the moment it was enough. ●

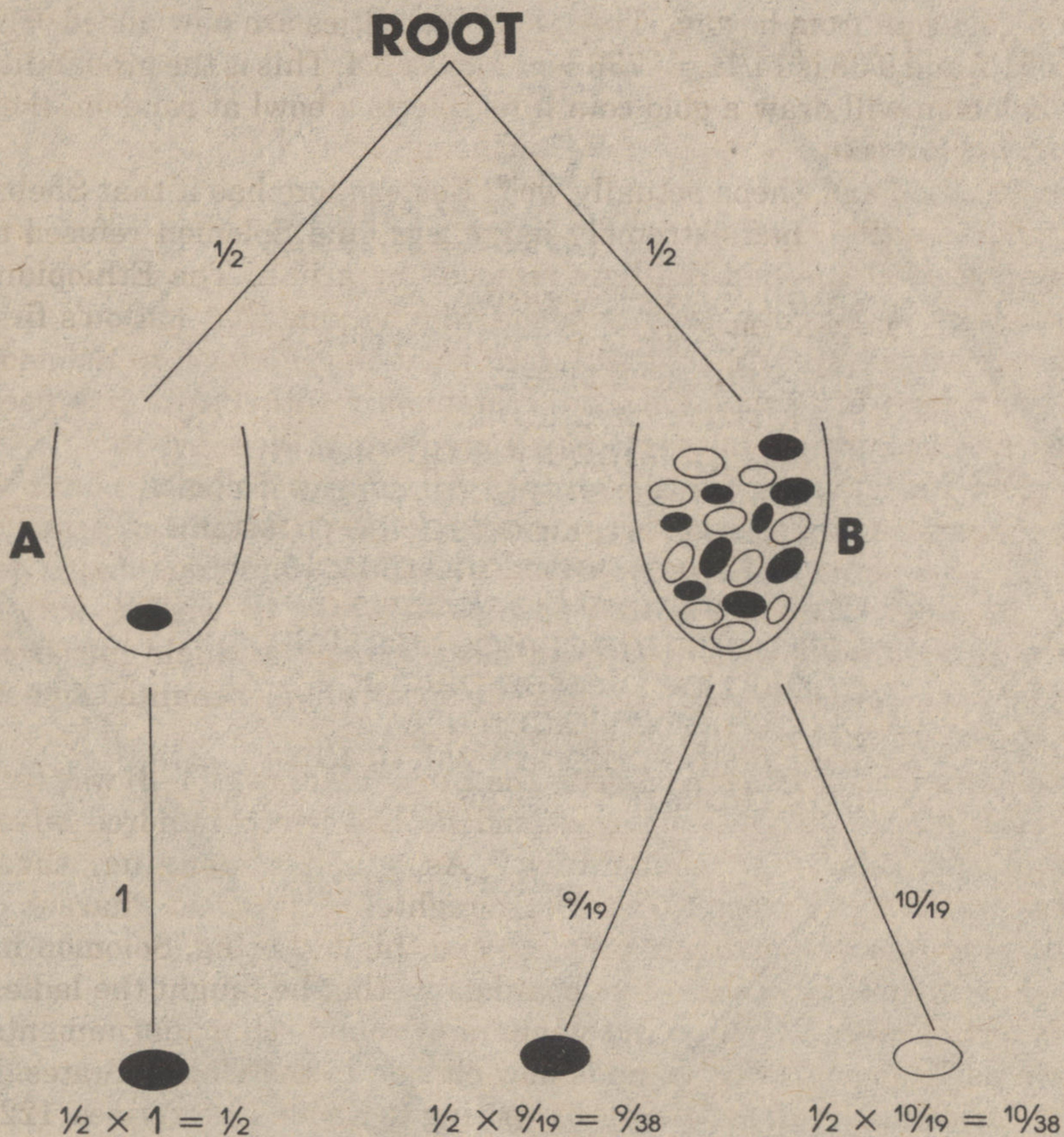


THE ICE PEREGRINE

Shedding its icy down,
applied like a crystalline cloak
on featureless sleep,
the last falcon uncoils
its first flight about the arboretum.
The millennia ship burns on but it's here
that speed is unhooded, the absolute
bone zero of nerve and muscle.
Only its internal clock can slow it
until again the cryogenics flick on,
adding the blessed plumage
of another white century.
Tonight the colonists will dream
of updrafts not of stars.

—Robert Frazier

SECOND SOLUTION TO THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON



TREE GRAPH FOR SOLOMON'S PROBLEM

Solomon put one gold coin in bowl A, and the other 19 in bowl B.

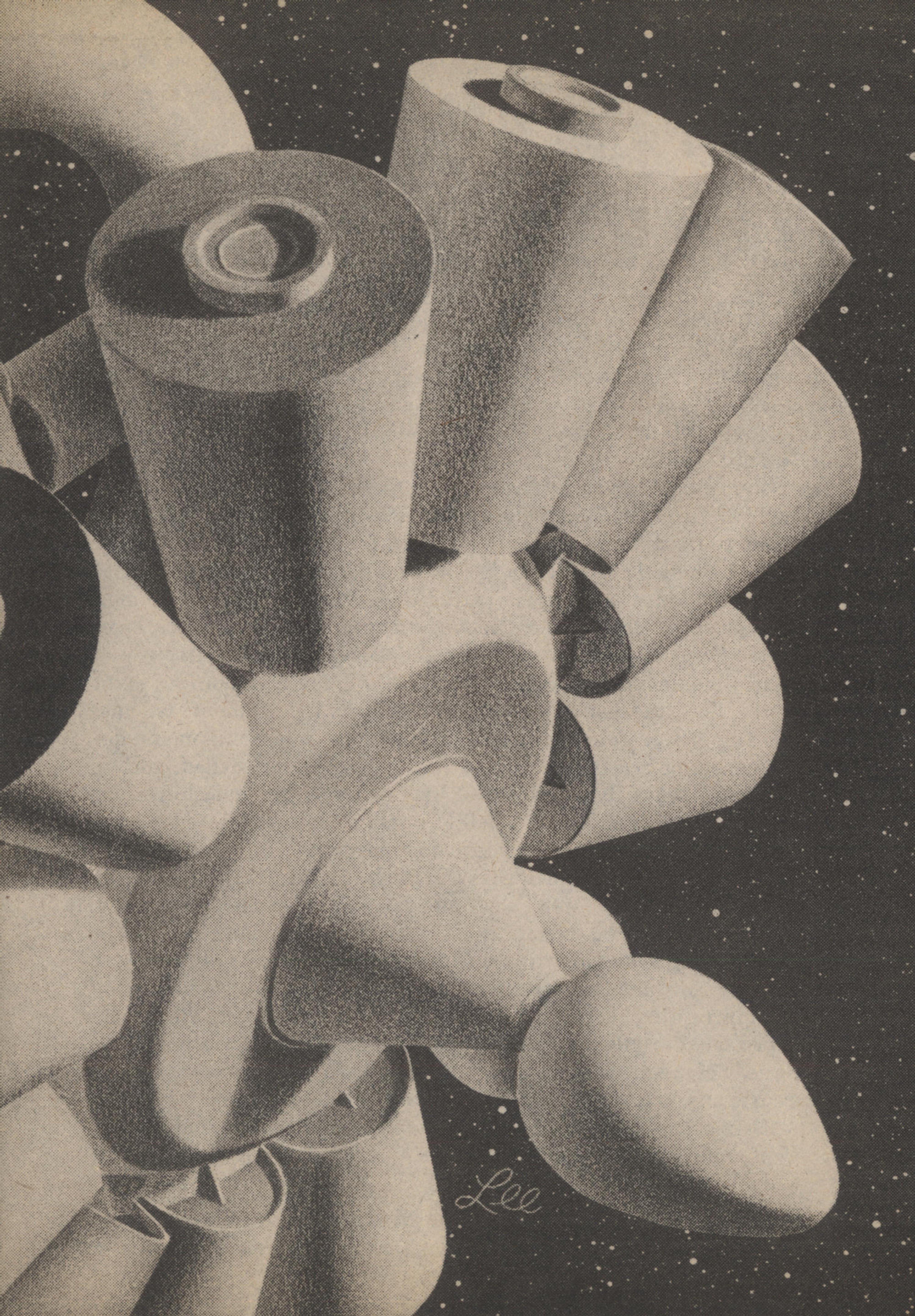
The illustration shows how a simple inverted-tree graph gives the probability that Solomon will choose a gold coin. The probability of selecting either bowl is $1/2$. If bowl A is chosen, the probability of taking a gold coin from it is 1, or certain. We multiply this by $1/2$ to get a probability of $1/2$ that Solomon will take the single gold coin in bowl A. In general, on such a graph, the probability of the event at each end-point of the upside-down tree is obtained by multiplying the probabilities that mark the branches that lead from the end-point to the tree's "root" at the top.

If bowl B is chosen, the probability of taking a gold coin from it is $9/19$. We multiply this by $1/2$ to get a probability of $9/38$ that Solomon will take a gold coin from bowl B. The two probabilities are now added. The sum of $1/2$ and $9/38$ is $14/19 = .736 +$ or almost $3/4$. This is the probability that Solomon will draw a gold coin if he selects a bowl at random, then takes from it a coin.

Did Solomon and Sheba actually wed? Eastern lore has it that Sheba, although beautiful, had extremely hairy legs, and Solomon refused to marry her until she had the hair removed by a jinn. The Ethiopians believe that Sheba bore Solomon a son who became that nation's first king. All later kings of Ethiopia traced their lineage back to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Old Testament's 45th Psalm has been interpreted by some commentators as a prophecy of those events.

Moslem fundamentalists believe that Allah gave Solomon power to control the jinn, the Koran's counterparts of Old Testament demons. Through this power Solomon was said to acquire numerous magic devices. A carpet of green silk carried him wherever he wished, with a flock of birds always flying overhead like a canopy to shield him from the sun. Both Jewish and Islamic folklore speak of an enchanted signet-ring that would whisper the answer to any question.

Solomon's greatest weakness, says the Bible (I Kings 11:1–3) was that he "loved many strange women . . . and he had seven hundred wives . . . and three hundred concubines." As you can imagine, these ladies—including Solomon's first wife, daughter of the great Pharaoh of Egypt—were constantly quarreling. To end this bickering, Solomon invented an intriguing checker-like board game that he taught the ladies. Costly prizes were given to the winners of round-robin tournaments. Known as "Solomon," this game is now on sale in the United States. If you're curious, you can get details by writing to Kadon Enterprises, 1227 Lorene Drive, Pasadena, MD 21122. The company makes and sells a variety of handsome mathematical games and puzzles.



Lee

SPICE POGROM

by Connie Willis

art: Terry Lee



Though Connie Willis is primarily known for her thoughtful and sometimes tragic tales, one of her most popular stories to grace the pages of this magazine was the screwball comedy, "Blued Moon" (January 1984). "Spice Pogrom" is a marvelous tale in the same tradition. The author also has a new novel, *Lincoln's Dreams*, which will be published by Bantam books in May.

"You've got to talk to him," Chris said. "I've told him there isn't enough space, but he keeps bringing things home anyway."

"Things?" Stewart said absently. He had his head half-turned as if he were listening to someone out of the holographic image.

"Things. A six-foot high Buddha, two dozen baseball caps, and a Persian rug!" Chris shouted at him. "Things I didn't even know they had on Sony. Today he brought home a piano! How did they even get a piano up here with the weight restrictions?"

"What?" Stewart said. The person who had been talking to him moved into the holo-image, focusing as he entered, put a piece of paper in front of Stewart, and then stood there, obviously waiting for some kind of response. "Listen, Chris, darling, can I put you on hold? Or would you rather call me back?"

It had taken her almost an hour to get him in the first place. "I'll hold," she said, and watched the screen grimly as it went back to a two-dimensional wall image on the phone's screen and froze with Stewart still smiling placatingly at her. Chris sighed and leaned back against the piano. There was hardly room to stand in the narrow hall, but she knew that if she wasn't right in view when Stewart came back on the line, he'd use it as an excuse to hang up. He'd been avoiding her for the last two days.

Stewart's image jerked into a non-smiling one and grew to a full holo-image again. With the piano in here, there wasn't really enough room for the phone. Stewart's desk blurred and dissolved on the keyboard, but Chris wanted Stewart to see how crowded the piano made the hall. "Chris, I really don't have time to worry about a few souvenirs," he said. "We've got real communications difficulties over here with the aliens. The Japanese translation team's been negotiating with them for a space program for over a week, but the Eahrohhs apparently don't understand what it is we want."

"I'm having communications difficulties over here, too," Chris said. "I tell Mr. Ohghhi . . ." she stopped and looked at the alien's name she had written on her hand so she could pronounce it, "Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh that there isn't room in my apartment and that he's got to stop buying things, and he seems to understand what I'm saying, but he goes right on buying. I've only got a two-room apartment, Stewart."

"You could move your couch out of the living room," he said.

"Then where would I sleep? On top of the piano? You said you'd try to find him someplace else to stay."

"I'm giving the matter top priority, darling, but you don't know how impossible it is to find any kind of space at all, let alone space with the kinds of specifications Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh requires." A blonde young woman moved into the image and put a computer printout down

in front of Stewart. Chris braced herself against being put on hold again. "We were already full over here at NASA, and today Houston sent a dozen linguistic specialists up on the shuttle, and I don't know where we're going to put them." He shook his head. "With all these reporters and tourists coming up, there isn't a spare room on Sony."

"Can't you send some of these people back down to earth?" Chris said. "I've got two little girls living on my stairs who're here because they think Spielberg's bound to make a movie about the aliens so they came up here to try to get a part in it, which is ridiculous. I'm not even sure Spielberg's still alive, but if he is, he's got to be at least eighty. Isn't there some way to send people like that home?"

"You know Sony's got an automatic thirty-day travel permission wait. It's been in effect since Sony was first built so that immigrants couldn't change their minds before they got over shuttle-lag. NASA's trying to get the Japanese to limit the earth-to-Sony traffic, but so far they've refused because they like all the business it's bringing up."

"Can't NASA put on its own limits? They own the shuttle."

"We don't want to jeopardize relations with the Japanese. We've got too many of our own people who need to come up to see the aliens."

"And they're all using my bathroom," Chris said. "How long will it take you to find another apartment for him?"

"Chris, darling, I don't think you understand the overcrowding problem we've got over here. . . . Hold on a second, will you?" he said, and flattened and froze.

"We've got an overcrowding problem over here, too, Stewart," Chris said. Someone rang the bell. "Come in," Chris shouted, and then was sorry.

Molly came in. "My mother thaid to tell you to get off the phone," she said, lisping the word "said."

"I'm really six," Molly had told her without a trace of a lisp the day she and her mother moved onto the landing outside Chris's apartment, "but six is box office poison, because your teeth are going to fall out pretty soon, so my screen age is four and a half." She was certainly dressed to look four and a half today, in a short yellow smock with ducks embroidered on it and a giant yellow bow in her shingled brown bob.

"My mother thayth to tell you we're eckthpecting a call from my agent," she said, with her dimpled hands on her hips.

"Your mother does not have phone privileges in this apartment. Your agent can call you on the pay phone in the hall."

"It'th a holo-call," Molly said and strolled over to the piano. "He thaid he'd call at thicktteen-thirty. Did you know thum new people moved in on the thtairs today?"

"A slut and an old guy," Bets said, coming into the hall. She was

wearing a pink dress with a sash, pink ribbon bows, and black patent leather shoes. "My mother says to tell you to ask you how we're supposed to get the lead in Spielberg's movie if we can't talk to our agent?"

"How could new people move in?" Chris said. Molly's mother had sublet half of the landing to Bets (who was also six according to Molly, even though she swore she was five) and her mother last week, and Chris had thought at the time that the only good thing about it was that nobody else could move in because Mr. Nagisha's cousins were renting the hall outside Chris's apartment and Mr. Nagisha himself was living in the downstairs hall.

"Mr. Nagisha rented them the thtairth," Molly said, plunking the piano keys, "for twenty thousand yen apiethe."

"The slut says she's in show business," Bets said archly, patting her golden curls, "but I think she's a hooker."

"The old guy came up to see the aliens," Molly said, banging out *Chopsticks*. "He thayth he'th alwayth wanted to meet one. My mother thayth he'th thenile."

"Chris," Stewart said, his face expanding out from the screen. Molly stopped banging on the piano. Bets tossed her yellow curls. They both turned and flashed Stewart a dimpled smile.

"They were just leaving," Chris said hastily, and pushed them out of the hall.

"What adorable little girls!" Stewart said. "Do they live in your apartment building?"

"They live on the stairs, Stewart. At last count, so do four other people, not counting Mr. Nagisha's cousins, who are living in the hall outside my apartment. They use my bathroom and make earthside calls on my phone and I don't have room for them or for Mr. Ogyfen . . . whatever his name is."

"Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh," Stewart said disapprovingly. "You're going to have to learn how to pronounce his name properly. You don't want to make him angry. I've told you before how important it is we don't do anything that might offend the Eahrohhs."

"He can't stay here, Stewart."

He looked aghast. Chris thought about putting him on hold that way. It was better than his frozen smile. "You can't mean that, Chris. The negotiations are at an incredibly delicate stage. We can't risk having anything upset them. It's a matter of national security. Besides, NASA intends to make generous compensation to people whose apartments have been requisitioned."

"You work for NASA. Why can't he stay with you?"

"Chris, darling, we've been through all this before. You know Mother's xenophobic. Just the thought of the Eahrohhs being on Sony has given

her terrible migraines. And you know Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh has to have ceilings at least twelve feet high for his vertical claustrophobia, and you were the only other person I knew who had ceilings that high. The Japanese didn't design Sony for Americans. It's hard enough to find buildings with even normal American ceilings, let alone twelve-foot ones. And with the Eahrohhs's privacy fetish, we can't ask them to double up with people."

"I know, Stewart," Chris said, "but . . ."

"The only twelve-foot ceilings on Sony are in the apartment buildings Misawa designed. Like your building."

And your mother's, Chris thought.

"It'll only be for a few more days. We're currently negotiating with the Japanese to transfer the Eahrohhs down to Houston. When that happens you'll have your apartment all to yourself again." He pressed some buttons on his desk. "Darling, I've got a call coming in. Can't we . . ."

The door to her apartment slid open and someone said, "Hey, this is great!"

She looked back at Stewart. He had flattened out again, this time with a decidedly impatient look on his face.

"My room in here," Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh said, and squeezed past Chris carrying two shopping bags, a bouquet of cherry blossoms, and what looked like a tent. The pockets of his long orange coat looked lumpy, too, but Chris hadn't figured out yet which of the bulges and lumps were part of Mr. Ohghhifoennahigrheeh's peculiar shape and which weren't.

He looked a little like a sack of potatoes with short, wide legs and arms. His legs and arms were lumpy, too, and so was his head, except for the top, which was round and bald and surrounded by a fringe of fine pinkish-orange hair that extended down the sides of his face in wispy sideburns. "Except for he's an alien, he'd never make it in the movies," Bets had said the first time she'd seen him.

"Mr. Ohghhifoeh . . ." she stopped and looked down at her hand to get the name right. "Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh, I have to talk to you. You've got to stop buying things. There simply isn't any more room for . . ."

Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh smiled at her, his wide mouth curving upward toward the two pinkish-orange lumps that were his cheeks. He put down the two shopping bags and the thing that looked like a tent and handed Chris the bouquet of cherry blossoms. "Hana," he said. "Buy you."

Chris had no idea what hana meant. "Thank you for the cherry blossoms, but . . ."

He shook his head vigorously, the wisps of cotton-candy hair flying out in all directions. "Hutchins buy hana."

"Hutchins?" Chris said, wishing she had the Japanese translation team here.

"Pete Hutchins," a tall young man said. He was wearing jeans and a satin bomber jacket and was trying to maneuver a duffel bag and a bicycle into the narrow hall. He held out a hand for her to shake. "He means I bought you the cherry blossoms. Hana means cherry blossoms in Japanese. You must be Chris. Okee's told me all about you."

"I'm very busy right now," Stewart said. "Can't this wait till tomorrow?"

"Hutchins stay here," Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh said. He slid open his door and ducked inside with the shopping bags and the tent before Chris could even get a glimpse of what was inside.

"Just a minute, Stewart," Chris said, and pushed the hold button. "Mr. Hutchins, what is it you want with Mr. Ohghhifoehnn . . ." she had to stop and read from her hand, "Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh?"

He twisted around to get a look at her hand. "Had to write it on there, huh?" he said. "I can't pronounce it either, so I just call him Okeefenokee. And you can call me Pete."

She closed her hand. "I don't know what Mr. . . . he told you, but he doesn't speak English very well, and . . ."

"I really appreciate Okee doing this. I just came up on the shuttle today, and I'm shot. So if you could just show me to my room . . ."

"Excuse me. Is this where the john is?" a woman with an elaborate topknot of brass-colored hair said. She was holding a skimpy hapi coat closed with one hand and carrying a makeup case. "The little kids said it was in here. I'm Charmaine. I just moved in. Top half of the stairs, but I don't mind. The seventy percent gravity's great for me in my job. And I've never seen so many cute guys in my life. Do you live here?" she said to Hutchins.

"Yes," Hutchins said.

"No," Chris said. "There's been some misunderstanding."

"About the john?" Charmaine said nervously. "Mr. Nagisha told me I had bathroom privileges."

"No, I mean, you can use the bathroom, Charmaine. There isn't anybody in there." She turned back to Hutchins. "Mr. Hutchins, I don't know what Mr. Ohghhifoehnn . . ." she resisted the temptation to look at her hand, ". . . ackafee told you, but he sometimes has trouble understanding . . ."

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said, and slithered past Hutchins, making no effort at all to stay away from him. "I gotta go do my face for my show. I'm a specialty dancer down at Luigi's. You oughta come see me." She wagged her fingers at him as she slid the bathroom door shut.

"Aren't you off the phone yet?" Molly said from the doorway. She had

her dimpled arms folded across her yellow-ducked middle and was tapping a black-patented foot. "My mother thayth to tell you that my agent hath very important newth. He'th thyure Thpielberg ith on Thony and . . ."

While she was talking, Bets was sidling past Molly and behind Hutchins, holding something behind her pink-sashed back. Chris reached around Hutchins and made a grab for it. She got hold of the curling iron by the cord and took it away from Bets.

"Electrical appliances are not allowed in the bathroom," Chris said. She wrapped the cord around the curling iron and put it on top of the piano. "I told you last time I was going to take it away from you if it happened again. You're supposed to use the outlets in Mr. Nagisha's apartment."

"We can't use the ones in Mr. Nagisha's apartment. He blew a fuse, and our agent's calling us at eighteen o'clock!"

"Not on my phone he isn't," Chris said. "The phone! I forgot all about Stewart." She punched the reinstate button, wondering if he'd already hung up. Hutchins and the little girls backed up as the holo-image spread, but they were still in the way. Hutchins seemed to be standing in the middle of Stewart's desk. Molly and Bets's face were covered with blurry brown. Chris hit the flat image button, and Stewart retreated to the screen. "I'm sorry, Stewart," she said.

He was writing busily. "Can this wait till tomorrow, Chris?" he said without looking up. "We'll have lunch and you can tell me all about it. The Garden of Meditation. In the ginza. Thirteen-thirty."

Hutchins was watching the screen. "All right, Stewart, but . . ." Chris said.

"Till then just go along with whatever Oghifoehnnahigree says. The negotiations are at a very delicate stage. Anything could break them off. Let him do anything he wants. I love you, darling. See you tomorrow," he said, still without looking up, and blanked the screen before Chris had a chance to say anything.

Hutchins was looking at her curiously. "Who is that guy?" he said.

"He's my fiancé," Chris said. Molly had climbed up on the piano bench and was kneeling on the keyboard, trying to reach the curling iron. Chris grabbed it away from her and put it behind her back.

"You better give my curling iron back!" Bets said. "I'm going to tell my mother you stole it."

"Out," she said. She escorted both of them out of her apartment, slid the door shut, and went into the living room. She lifted up the pile of folded blankets on the end of the couch and stuck the curling iron under it.

"You're really engaged to that guy on the phone?" Hutchins said, leaning against the door, his hands in his jeans pockets.

"Yes," she said, straightening back up. "Why?"

"Because 'let him do anything he wants,' covers a lot of territory. What if Okee decided he wanted to carry you off with him to Eahrohhsani or wherever it is they came from, and make you his bride?"

"Mr. Oghifoehnn . . . he is a very nice man. Alien. Eahroh. And he would not . . ."

"Earrose. They drop an e and add some h's to make it plural."

"Earrose. Mr. Hutchins, I don't care what Mr. . . . he told you. You can't stay here. There isn't any space. The landlord has people living on the stairs."

"Hutchins stay here," Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh said. He peeked around Hutchins and then disappeared back into the hall.

Chris went after him.

"Tall," he said, smiling and nodding. "High ceilings. Stay here."

"But there isn't any space, Mr. Ohghhifoehnnah . . . where will he sleep?"

"My room." He took hold of the handlebars of the bike and started pulling it toward his door. Chris backed up against the piano to get out of the way of the handlebars. "I keep in here. Lots of space."

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said brightly. She had put on her makeup, but not where Chris had expected it. She had the hapi coat draped over her arm.

"Where exactly do you work?" Chris said.

"Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria and Sutorippu. That means strip show. I'm in the Fan Tan Fannie number," she said. She turned around.

"I can see that," Chris said.

"Cute idea, huh?" she said. "I just love my fans."

"So do I," Hutchins said.

Charmaine started edging out of the hall, this time trying hard not to touch Hutchins for fear of smearing her makeup. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh went on tugging at the bicycle. Chris tried to turn around to get out from the piano so Charmaine could get past and found herself nose to nose with Hutchins. She backed into the piano. The keys made a crash of noise as her open hands hit them.

"Listen," Hutchins said, taking a step toward her, and towering over her. He really was tall. "In all seriousness, there's obviously been a mixup. I met Okee on the bullet and he said he'd sublet half of his room to me, and I said okay. I'd just gotten in on the shuttle and I guess I wasn't thinking clearly. I felt like hell."

He rubbed his hand across his forehead. He did look tired. Chris remembered what she had felt like when she came up on the shuttle.



Lee

Everyone had kept telling her how lucky she was not to be nauseated but she hadn't felt lucky. She'd felt bone-tired, so weary she had burst into tears at the thought of getting through customs, even in the zero gravity of Sony's axis.

"As a matter of fact, I still feel like hell," he said.

"It's shuttle-lag," Chris said. "Aspirin helps. And vitamin A." She didn't say he should be glad he wasn't the kind to get nauseated. "And you should get some sleep."

"Sleep," he said, leaning against the piano. "You wouldn't know of any good hotels, would you?"

She shook her head. "There's only one hotel on Sony, and it's full of Eahrohhs. So's everything else. There are over four hundred of them, you know."

"Four hundred," he said, looking at Ohghifoehnnahigrheeh, who had gotten the handlebars and the front wheel turned around so the bike wouldn't budge. Hutchins helped him straighten it out. "Where are they putting them all?"

"All over. The officials, the headmen or chiefs or whatever you call them, and all the translators, are staying at NASA. They're negotiating a treaty. They're going to give us a space program."

"Are they?" Hutchins said with an odd note in his voice. "What about the rest of them?"

"They put them anyplace there was room. Vacant apartments, extra rooms. It wasn't so bad when it was just the aliens, but now that all these sightseers have come up . . ."

"They're living on the stairs," Hutchins said. "What about that? Do you think your landlord would rent me a step or two?"

She bit her lip. "No. He lets as many extra people sleep on the stairs at night as the fire regulations will permit—he sells them 'overnight leases'—but he'd already sold out by nine this morning."

Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh had gotten the handlebars of the bike wedged in the screen of his bedroom door and was struggling with it. "Want Hutchins stay," he said.

If she threw Hutchins out and then Mr. Ohghhi . . . he got angry or refused to cooperate, Stewart would be furious. He had told her explicitly to do whatever he wanted, and what he wanted was for Mr. Hutchins to stay. While she was on the phone, she had decided to insist that Stewart come home with her after lunch and talk to him about all these things he was buying. She could ask Stewart what to do then, and he could find Mr. Hutchins an apartment.

"All right," she said. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh got the handlebars unstuck and disappeared into his room with the bicycle.

"All right, what?" Hutchins said.

"You can stay here tonight and look for a room tomorrow."

"I love you," he said.

"Mr. Nagisha said you're violating your lease by taking my curling iron away from me," Bets said.

"It's in the living room. On the couch. But if I catch you with it in the bathroom one more time, I'm flushing it down the o-benjo," Chris said. Bets flounced off, stamping her feet so the ruffles on her petticoat showed.

"I'm only letting you stay because Mr. Ohghhi . . . he wants you to, and I don't want to upset him. Negotiations are at a very delicate stage. Tomorrow when I have lunch with my fiancé I'll ask him about it, but I'm sure he'll want you to find another place to stay."

"Do you have any vitamin A?" Hutchins said.

"In the bathroom." Chris pointed at the door. It was shut. "Bets, you come out of there. You are not allowed to have electrical appliances in there."

Bets slid the door open. "I was brushing my teeth," she said indignantly, holding up a pink toothbrush shaped like a bunny.

"I'll bet." She got Hutchins aspirin and vitamin A packets and herded Bets out of her apartment. "I'll get you a bathroom schedule and the apartment rules," she said.

Mr. Nagisha's cousins were squatting around a hibachi in the middle of the landing, cooking something vile-smelling. Chris stepped over them and started down the steps. She wondered how Mr. Nagisha would take the news that Mr. Ohghhi . . . her alien had sublet half of his room to Mr. Hutchins. Probably not very well, unless he could think of a way to make money off the deal. Mr. Nagisha had welcomed him with open arms since NASA had agreed to pay the equivalent of a six months' lease. Even at that, he had insisted on rent based on changing property values, which were soaring with the sudden influx of people. He was going to make a killing.

Molly was sitting on the steps above the landing reading *Variety*. "Have you seen Mr. Nagisha?" Chris said.

"My mother's talking to him about how you took the curling iron away from Betth. She thayth . . ."

"Are they in the apartment? I need a copy of the bathroom schedule." She pushed down past their trunks and almost stepped on the old man who had just moved in. He had a baseball cap that read, "Blue Harvest," pulled down over his eyes and was snoring loudly. She took hold of the bannister to make the last jump over Mr. Nagisha's file drawers and lap terminal and knocked on his apartment door.

Mr. Nagisha had rented his own apartment out to as many people as it would hold and taken up residence on the bottom steps, but he wasn't in the apartment, even though half of Sony's population appeared to be.

He'd better not say anything to me about my alien subletting half of his room, Chris thought. She went back out to Mr. Nagisha's terminal, entered Mr. Hutchins' name under Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh and asked for a revised schedule.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said, putting down one high-heeled shoe next to the printer. "I gotta leave for work. My shift doesn't start till nineteen, but I gotta walk on account of my makeup gets smeared on the bullet."

"I can imagine," Chris said. She tore off the printout and stood up. Charmaine was wearing a pink smock that stood out stiffly from her body and made her look much younger than she had in the hall. She had her hair done in an elaborate topknot. "You'd better take an umbrella. It might rain."

"I thought on the L-5's it was only supposed to rain at night after everybody'd gone to bed."

"It is, but the sprinklers are set to come on when a given area gets overheated, and with all these people, they've been coming on at funny times. Mr. Ohghhi . . ." she said, and glanced guiltily at her hand as if Hutchins were watching her, "foehnnahigrheeh and I got caught in the ginza yesterday." He hadn't been the least bit dismayed. He had gone into the nearest department store and bought five dozen oiled-paper umbrellas. "Why don't you ask Mr. . . . my alien to loan you an umbrella? He's got more than enough."

"Gee, thanks," Charmaine said, and started up the stairs.

"He doesn't speak English very well. Just say *umbrella* and act it out." She went through the motions of opening an umbrella and holding it above her head. "Better yet, ask Mr. Hutchins to ask him. He doesn't seem to have any trouble communicating with him."

"I bet he wouldn't have trouble communicating with anybody," Charmaine said, and clattered on up the stairs in her spike heels.

Chris printed out copies of the bathroom schedules and the apartment rules, tore them off, and started back up the stairs.

"He loaned me a red one to go with my fans," Charmaine said, twirling it as she came down the stairs. "I love it. I might use it in my single. Can I ask you something about this guy Hutchins? Is he your boyfriend?"

"No," Chris said. "I'm engaged."

"I knew it," Charmaine said. "The cute ones are always already taken. Even when the ratio of guys to women is as good as it is right now on Sony. Especially the tall cute ones."

"I'm not engaged to Mr. Hutchins. I don't even know him. NASA requisitioned half of my apartment for Mr. Ohghhi . . . my alien, and he sublet half of it to Mr. Hutchins."

"Oh," she said, opening and closing the umbrella. "The little kids told me he was moving in with you, so I figured he was your boyfriend."

"He is not my boyfriend. He is not my anything."

"So you wouldn't be mad if I put the moves on him, then? I mean, I'm here to try to find a husband, but I wouldn't want to steal your boyfriend or anything." She snapped the umbrella open and put it over her shoulder. "Is he a lawyer?"

"I don't know," Chris said, and frowned. Come to think of it, he hadn't said a word about what he did for a living or why he was on Sony.

"I hope not. They always try to make marriage into a real estate deal or something." She sighed. "My old boyfriend down on earth was a lawyer, and gee, you woulda thought I was a condo or something. Well, I gotta go. See you at the show." She flounced out, twirling the umbrella.

Chris started back up the stairs, maneuvering between rolled-up bedding and a stack of dishes from the deli next door. The old man was sitting up, watching Charmaine's exit with a dazed expression. Mr. Nagisha's cousins were watching, too, and eating fried fish. Molly and Bets were leaning over the landing railing, their chins resting on their arms.

"I told you thye was a thlut," Molly said. "Did you thee those fanth on her ath?"

"At least she's really in show business," Chris said. "Unlike some people I could name."

She went back into the apartment. Hutchins was in the hall, leaning against the door of her room with the aspirin packet still in his hand as if he were too tired to take it.

"Mr. Hutchins," she said. "I'm afraid this isn't going to work. I know Mr. Ohghhi . . . he told you you could stay, but . . ."

"But you've been talking to Hedda and Louella, and they've been busily spreading the news that you have a live-in lover. Are you sure they're not forty-year-old circus midgets?"

"No," Chris said, feeling sorry for him all over again. He had leaned his head against the wall as if it hurt, and even though he was smiling at her, it looked like it took an effort.

"Am I supposed to ache all over?"

"Yes. Did you take the vitamin A?"

"Yes."

"Good." She handed him the printouts. "These are the bathroom schedules. Everyone gets an initial two minutes in the morning using this schedule, which begins at five o'clock. At six-fifteen, the second rotation begins, which allows you an additional five minutes. If you miss your turn, you automatically go to the end of the schedule. There's soap, and water for brushing your teeth in the bathroom. You get your shower water from the tank in the basement. You're allowed sixteen ounces."

"No electrical appliances in the bathroom," he said wearily.

"The apartment rules are on the other sheet. You'll feel better as soon

as the aspirin starts working. I'll make you a cup of tea and you can lie down." She started past him into the living room, but he put his arm up with surprising speed.

"It's a great idea, but it won't work," he said.

"Why not? Did Mr. Ohghhi . . . my alien buy another piano while I was downstairs?"

"Worse," he said. "He wants us all to go out on the town. 'I want to drink sake and see a *sutorippu*,' was the way he put it." He handed Chris a card that said, "Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria and Sutorippu. Topless. Bottomless. Continuous shows."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Are you sure you're not the one who wants to see the *sutorippu*?" she said. "Mr. Ohghhifoehnn . . ." she stopped and read from her hand, determined not to let him intimidate her, ". . . ahigrheeh doesn't know enough English to say a sentence that long."

"How do you know?" he said. "You're so busy worrying about how to pronounce his name that you don't even listen to him."

"Well, you definitely shouldn't go," she said to change the subject. "This Luigi's place is down in Shitamachi, on the equator. You're shuttle-lagged enough as it is. The last thing you need is full gravity."

"I'm doing okay. Your vitamin A must be working. And anyway, we don't have any choice in the matter. Your boyfriend said we had to do whatever Okee wanted, and what he wants is to watch a strip show."

Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh slid open the door to his room. He had combed down his wispy hair and put a pink tie on over his long orange coat. "Topless," he said happily. "Bottomless. Continuous shows."

They took the bullet. It was jammed. Chris spent the trip wedged between a large bearded man and a middle-aged woman who looked like she was the kind who *did* get nauseated on the shuttle. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh had bought a large paper kite on the platform when Chris wasn't looking, and he and Hutchins were holding it above their heads so it wouldn't get crushed.

The bullet got progressively more crowded as they got closer to the ginza and Shitamachi. In the crush to get off at their stop, Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh's kite got torn and Chris lost her shoe. Hutchins dived into the tangle of legs as the doors were closing and rescued it.

"Thank you, Mr. Hutchins," Chris said, leaning against a pillar to put it back on.

"Now you're mispronouncing my name," he said, with a grin that looked like he was feeling better. "It's Pete."

Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria was about the size of Chris's hall, if you took out the piano, only with such low ceilings that Hutchins had to duck. It

was nearly as crowded as the bullet had been. There was no sign of a stage that Chris could see, and the tables were too small to dance on.

The waiter led them through the mob to a tiny table, pulled it out from the wall so Chris could sit down, and then shoved it back in place, pinning her firmly between Hutchins and Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh. The waiter handed them menus that were bigger than the table and then stood there, holding a hand terminal and a stylus and looking impatient.

"In the tempura pizza, is it just the tomato sauce that's deep-fried in batter?" Hutchins asked. "Or do you dip in the whole pizza?"

"Have eat?" Chris asked Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh, pointing to the pictures on the menu. "Fish? Rice?" Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh smiled blankly at her and nodded. "Eat?" She picked up a pair of chopsticks and pantomimed eating. "Have eat?"

"What are you going to have, Okee?" Hutchins interrupted. "The sashimi lasagna looks good. I don't know about the linguini with eel sauce."

"Why do you talk to him like that?" Chris whispered. "You know Mr. Ohghhi . . ." she consulted her hand, "foehnnahigrheeh only speaks a few words of English."

Hutchins took hold of her hand and looked at the palm. "Why do you have his name written on your hand?" he whispered back.

She tried to pull her hand away. "Stewart says the Eahrohhs are very sensitive about how their names are pronounced."

"Is Stewart the guy on the phone, the one you're engaged to?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you to talk to Okee like he's deaf and feebleminded, too? 'Have eat? Fish? Rice?'"

"Mr. Ohghhi . . ." She tried to look at her hand, but Hutchins folded it firmly shut. "Okee speaks better English than Charmaine. He's only talking that ridiculous pidgin to you because you've got him intimidated with all this correct pronunciation stuff. He's afraid if he talks to you, he'll mispronounce something, so he doesn't say anything. If you'd quit worrying about how to pronounce his name, and just talk to him . . ."

"Your order, signor?" the waiter said.

"Go ahead," Hutchins said. "Ask him what he'd like to have for dinner." His hand was still firmly closed over hers. The waiter tapped the stylus on his hand terminal.

"Mr. Ohghhi . . ." she said.

"Okeefenokee," Hutchins said. "Like the swamp."

"Mr. Okeefenokee," she said timidly, "what would you like to have for dinner?"

Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh's smile straightened out into an expression Chris hadn't seen before. His cheek knobs seemed to grow more orange, and two lines formed above his nose. "I'll have the sushi and

spaghetti," he said. "And do you have any sake? *Majori*? Good. I'd like a bottle. And three cups."

Chris stared at him.

"And you, signorina?" the waiter said.

"She'll have the sushi and spaghetti," Hutchins said.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said, brushing past the waiter. She was wearing another hapi coat, made of a glittery fabric you could see through. "They told me you guys were here," she said, "And I would've come right over only on the way down here some guy pinched me. I had to do one of my fans all over again."

"We'll all have the sushi and spaghetti," Hutchins said, "and bring another sake cup."

"Oh, gee, no, not for me," she said, bending over the table to talk to Hutchins. "I'm on at nineteen o'clock. Right after Omiko and Her Orbiting Colonies." She leaned over farther.

"Great," Hutchins said.

"Would you like to sit down?" Chris said.

"I can't. On account of my fans." She looked around the room. "This is a great place to work. Three guys have proposed to me already."

"Charmaine came up here to find a husband," Chris told Hutchins.

"Yeah," Charmaine said. She leaned over Hutchins. "I wanted to go someplace romantic, someplace where guys wouldn't treat me like I was a piece of real estate. I guess you think that's kind of a crazy reason, huh? But I've met some people whose reasons are even crazier. Did you know that sweet old guy who lives above me on the steps came up because he'd always wanted to meet an alien? And this weird guy I met tonight told me he came up because he figures these arrows guys are going to kill us all, and he wants to get it over with. No offense, Mr. Fenokee," she said, turning to lean over Okee. His face twisted up in an unfathomable expression.

"Why did you come up to Sony, Mr. Hutchins?" Chris said hastily.

"Not to get married. So you thought Sony was a romantic place to come?" he said, watching Charmaine lean over the table.

"Gee, yeah," she said, leaning over even farther. "I mean, the stars and the moon are right outside and everything. It's bound to have a romantic effect on a guy. It might even have a romantic effect on my old boyfriend, but I doubt it. I mean, he acted like he was a prospective buyer and I was a two-bedroom split-level. He kept calling our wedding a closing and instead of going on a honeymoon, he wanted to 'establish occupancy.' Can you believe that?" She sighed an impressive sigh. "But I don't know if Sony's going to be any better. Omiko says the marriage contracts up here are really real estate deals, with property clauses and everything,

and that people get married all the time just to get their hands on a place to live."

"Does your fiancé have his own apartment?" Hutchins asked.

"He lives with his mother," Chris said stiffly. "Stewart says the lack of space on Sony makes property very valuable, and the marriage laws are bound to reflect that, but it doesn't mean . . ."

"Gee, your fiancé sounds just like my old boyfriend," Charmaine said, leaning over about as far as she could go. "I mean, there's gotta be a romantic guy around somewhere."

The waiter came back with the bottle of sake and four porcelain cups the size of soup bowls.

"'Scuse me, I gotta go get ready for my number." She wriggled away between the tables.

"Now there's a woman whose property value is in the high forties," Hutchins said, pouring out the sake.

"My wife has large cups, too," Okee said.

Hutchins poured sake on the table. Chris bit her lip.

"They are not painted and made of . . ." Okee stopped and searched for a word. His face was screwed up into that odd expression again. He looked like a newborn baby about to cry.

"Porcelain?" Chris said calmly, picking up the empty sake cup and handing it to Okee. "These cups are made of a kind of glazed clay called porcelain."

"Porcelain," he said, the two lines above his nose deepening. "My wife would like these cups."

Chris passed the empty cup to Hutchins so he could fill it. Now he was the one with the odd expression, and she didn't seem to be any better at interpreting his than Okee's.

"Cups," he said thoughtfully, and poured some more sake on the table.

"I didn't know you were married, Mr. Okeefenokee," Chris said, mopping up sake with her napkin.

"Yes," he said, and his face screwed up again. He drank down his bowl full of sake in one swallowless gulp and set it in front of Hutchins. "My wife and I drink . . ." he said an unpronounceable word with enough s's in it to defeat Molly's lisp, "out of cups like these. It is better than sake."

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said. She had put on her headdress, which consisted of giant red-lacquered chopsticks stuck at various angles into her brass-colored topknot. If she bent over Hutchins like she'd been doing before, she would do herself an injury. "Can I borrow Mr. Fenokee for a minute? The girls in the show all want to meet him."

Okee took another incredibly large swallow of sake and followed her through the crowd.

"Don't you think we should go with him?" Chris said, watching the bobbing red headdress work its way through the crowd.

"He'll be all right. How did you know he was talking about the sake cups and not Charmaine's, um, selling points?"

She reached for her cup of sake. "Just because they were the first thing that sprang to your mind . . ."

He put his hand over hers. "I'm serious. How did you know for sure he was talking about the sake cups?"

"Because he asked me at breakfast what the coffee cups were called, and I told him they were cups, so I knew he knew the word, and he doesn't seem to be able to absorb more than one meaning of a word."

His grip tightened on her hand. "Give me an example," he said urgently.

"All right. Yesterday at breakfast we had rolls, and he asked me what they were called. When I told him he took two of them and went out and gave them to Molly and Bets. 'Here roll,' he said, and Bets said, 'We asked if you could get us a role. In the alien movie. Not this kind of roll,' and threw it at him."

"A regular Shirley Temple. Did you try to explain what a role in a movie was?"

"Yes, I told him there were two words that sounded like roll and that Bets meant an acting job in a movie, but I could tell he didn't understand. He started nodding and smiling the way he always does when I tell him he's got to stop buying things."

"Because there isn't any more room in your apartment," he said, and caught up her hand in both of his. "That's why . . ."

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said sharply. She had brought Mr. Okeefenokee back. Chris hastily withdrew her hand from Hutchins's.

"You'll never guess who just showed up," Charmaine said. "My old boyfriend. He said he came up to Sony to find me."

"That sounds pretty romantic," Chris said.

"Yeah, I know." She sighed. "I told him I'd go out with him after I get off work, but if he says one word about escrow or closings . . . I gotta go. Thanks, Mr. Fenokee."

Okee had several lipstick prints on the top of his bald head, and his face had smoothed out into that new expression, his mouth straight across, his cheeks bright orange.

"After we see the *sutorippu*," he said, "I would like you to get married."

The waiter appeared suddenly and slammed down three orders of sushi and spaghetti in compartmentalized bento-bako boxes. "Will there be anything else, signor?" he asked Hutchins. "The first show is about to start."

Hutchins didn't answer him. He was still looking worried. Chris won-

dered if his aspirin was starting to wear off. She hoped not. Between the shuttle-lag and the sake, he would really crash. Okee motioned the waiter over and said something he couldn't hear.

"Please move over next to the gentleman, signora," the waiter said, and waved her over toward Hutchins, motioning her to turn the chair around so it was facing the wall. She moved the chair so hers and Hutchins's were side by side.

"Chris," Hutchins said, leaning toward her and yawning, "there's something I've got to tell you about this subletting situation . . ."

There was a sudden blast of music, and the wall in front of Chris rolled up and revealed Omiko and her Orbiting Colonies. Chris was glad she'd moved her chair. She would have fallen over into the orchestra pit. Mr. Okeefenokee was watching the activities on stage, which involved clear plastic stars and tassels, with the broad smile and wobbling nod that usually meant that he was going to buy something.

"If he buys Omiko and her orbiting colonies I'm evicting him," she shouted at Hutchins over the deafening music. He didn't answer. A heavy weight came down on her shoulder. He's probably smiling and nodding at those LaGrangian points, too and doesn't even realize he's got his hand on my shoulder, she thought. "What about the subletting situation?" she said suspiciously and turned to glare at him.

He was sound asleep, his mouth a little open and his face looking somehow more tired in sleep. "Well," Chris thought, feeling oddly pleased.

The music ground up to a finale, and Omiko put enough spin on her colonies to induce full gravity. Hutchins began to snore. "My wife does that," Mr. Okeefenokee said, watching the stage, and let out a wail like an air raid siren.

Hutchins slept all the way home on the bullet. Chris spent the trip explaining to Mr. Okeefenokee why he couldn't buy anything else. He smiled and nodded, trying to juggle the two dozen bento-bako boxes and Fan Tan Fannie's fan against the uneven motion of the bullet. Chris held the box containing the porcelain sake cups.

"There just isn't any more room in my apartment," Chris said. "Tomorrow I'm going to go see my fiancé and ask him if he can store some of the things in his apartment, but . . ."

"Tomorrow you and Hutchins get married. Have closing. Honeymoon." He pronounced honeymoon "hahnahmoon."

"People who get married don't really have closings. They have weddings. And they don't just get married. They have to be in love, they have to know each other."

"No?" Okee said.

"No. I mean, they have to be friends, to talk to each other."

"You and Hutchins talk. You are friends."

Chris glanced at Hutchins, who had his arm slung through one of the hanging straps to keep himself more or less upright, wishing he would wake up and explain things to Mr. Okeefenokee. "You can't just be friends. You have to spend time alone together so you can talk without other people listening, and so you can . . ."

"Neck," Hutchins said, yawning. He eased his arm out of the strap.

"Neck?" Okee said, with the smile starting again that meant he didn't understand. He put his hand on his neck.

"Mr. Hutchins means kissing," Chris said, glaring at Hutchins. He was looking at Okee, though, with that thoughtful expression on his face again. "This is our stop."

It was raining when they came out of the station. People were asleep on the sidewalks, huddled under umbrellas and makeshift tents. There were half a dozen asleep under the overhang of Chris's building. Inside, Mr. Nagisha lay curled up by the front door with his arm around his lap terminal and disk files.

"Shh," she said, and tiptoed to the stairs.

Hutchins tiptoed after her, stopping to take off his shoes. Mr. Okeefenokee followed, juggling his bento-bako boxes. Fan Tan Fannie's fan dragged across Mr. Nagisha's nose. He sneezed but didn't wake up.

Chris started up the stairs. The old man was stretched out like a corpse on the third step up, his hands crossed on his breast and the baseball cap over his face. His running shoes were on the step above him, and his feet in their pink socks stuck through the bannisters.

There were at least five extra people sleeping on the landing, each clutching an overnight lease contract. Mr. Nagisha must be making a killing. Molly and Bets's mothers were asleep sitting up against the bannister, still holding an open copy of *Variety* between them.

Molly was asleep against the door of Chris's apartment, wrapped in a sleeping bag with blue kittens on it. Chris couldn't get the door open without cracking Molly on the head. Hutchins took hold of a corner of the sleeping bag and pulled her out of the way, yawning. "Here's Dorothy, but where's Lillian?" he said, and yawned again.

"Shh," Chris said and unlocked the door.

Hutchins and Mr. Okeefenokee both seemed to snap awake at the whirr of her key being read. Okee hoisted up his dragging fan and managed to make it through the door before she did, and Hutchins straightened to his full height and cleared his throat. Chris looked at him warily and opened the door to her room.

The blankets she had left stacked on the end of the couch were draped unevenly over it, the tail of one of the quilts trailing on the floor. In the

middle of them, sound asleep, lay Bets, her golden curls spread out endearingly against the pillow and her thumb in her mouth. She was hugging a teddy bear and a frayed pink blanket. Chris glanced at Hutchins, wondering if this was what all the throat-clearing had been about, but he was bending over Bets, shaking his head. "I was wrong about the kid's acting ability. She's doing an amazing imitation of an innocent child asleep."

"Bets," Chris said sternly. "Wake up. What are you doing in here?"

Bets sighed, a sweet, babyish sigh, and turned over.

"I know you're awake, Bets," Chris said. She knelt down and snatched the teddy bear away from her. "Tell me what you're doing in here or I'll call your agent and tell him both your front teeth fell out."

"You better not," Bets said. She sat up, her cheeks pink and her eyes bright with sleep. "You better give me back my teddy bear."

Chris stuck the teddy bear behind her back. "Not until you tell me what you're doing in here."

"The door was open and I came in here just for a minute and your bed looked so soft I guess I just fell asleep." She shrugged daintily.

"She ate my porridge all up, too," Hutchins said. "Where's your phone, Chris?"

Bets stood up in the middle of the couch. Her pink nightgown had a ruffle around the bottom that almost covered her bare toes. "My mother says we're first on the list and you can't just sublet your room to some boyfriend of yours. She says . . ."

"I did not sublet my room to anybody. Mr. Okeefenokee sublet his room to Mr. Hutchins."

"Oh, yeah?" Bets said. "Then what's that doing in here?" She pointed up at the ceiling.

"What is that?" Chris said, looking up at the hammock-like arrangement of straps and white padding hanging from the ceiling. There was an aluminum ladder hooked onto the wall above the couch.

"It's an astronaut's sleep restraint," Hutchins said. "Okee bought it at the NASA Surplus Store. It was used on the space station, but don't worry. It's been reinforced for seventy per cent gravity. It won't fall down."

"It won't fall down because you're taking it down. I agreed to let you stay in Mr. Okeefenokee's room, not in here."

"I know, but Okee has trouble understanding more than one meaning of a word. That's what I was trying to tell you at Luigi's. You told him there wasn't any more room in your apartment, so he thinks 'room' means 'available storage space.'" He pointed at the ceiling. "He apparently decided this space was available."

Chris didn't wait for him to finish. She marched down the hall and

pounded on the door of Mr. Okeefenokee's room. "Mr. Okeefenokee!" she shouted. "I have to talk to you."

"Shh," Hutchins said. "You'll wake up that DeMille crowd scene outside."

"I don't care if I wake the orbiting dead. You're not sleeping in my room."

"You'd better give me back my teddy bear," Bets said.

Okee pushed open his shojii screen an inch and a half and peeked out.

"Mr. Okeefenokee, there's been a misunderstanding. Mr. Hutchins can't sleep in my room. I said you could sublet *your* room." She could see the smile coming.

"Remember 'role'?" Hutchins said. "Remember 'cups'? Remember 'neck'? I spent fifteen minutes trying to explain the difference to him this afternoon."

"And then you suggested that we go out for dinner so we wouldn't get back here until it was too late for me to do anything about it," she said furiously. "You probably timed it so it was raining, too."

"Look, I'm too tired to argue with you and in about five minutes I'm going to be too lagged to even make it up that ladder and into bed. So if we could please talk about it in the morning . . ."

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm calling Stewart."

"What for? He told you to do whatever Okee wants. Okee wants me to stay."

"Stewart was not talking about a man sleeping in my room."

"I'm not sleeping in your room. I'm sleeping in Okee's room, which happens to be above your room." He shuffled off down the hall. "I'm going to bed. G'night." Bets padded barefoot after him. They disappeared into the living room.

Chris punched in Stewart's number and let it ring. After the first ring, she hit the time key on the screen. It flashed twenty-three o'clock. Stewart's mother went to bed at twenty-one-thirty. Chris hit the hang up button.

Okee was still peeking at her through the tiny space in the sliding door. "All right," she said, "he can stay tonight, but tomorrow . . ."

"Tomorrow you and Hutchins get married," he said, and slid the screen shut with a bang.

Hutchins was already in the sleep restraint, one arm dangling limply over the side. Bets and Molly were in Molly's sleeping bag, which they had dragged over next to the couch. Their eyes were squeezed shut and their hands were tucked up under their cheeks.

"I said Mr. Hutchins could stay," Chris said. "I didn't say anything about you two. Out."

Molly sat up and rubbed her eyes with her chubby little fists. "We

have to thtay to thyaperone you," she said, "tho people won't think you're a thlut."

Chris was suddenly too tired to argue with them. It's the sake, she thought irrationally, he tried to get me drunk so I'd let him stay. He had the whole thing planned.

She undressed in the bathroom and put on her nightshift, even though there wasn't enough room in there to raise her arms over her head. Molly and Bets had kicked their covers off. She put Bets's pink blanket over them, turned off the lights, and got into bed.

She could hear Hutchins breathing above her in the darkness, a heavy, even breathing that meant he was already asleep. Poor guy, she thought in spite of herself. When she had emigrated to Sony, she'd barely made it through customs and into the Hilton before collapsing. There was no way she could have made it through a dinner and a *sutorippu*. Half a *sutorippu*, she thought, feeling pleased all over again at the way he'd fallen asleep during Omiko's act.

Bets turned over and murmured something that sounded like "I'm going to be a star!" A sound like the shuttle taking off roared from Mr. Okeefenokee's room. It went on for a full minute, subsided, and then started up again.

"What in the hell's that?" Hutchins said. She could hear the sleep restraint creak as if he had sat up.

"It's Mr. Okeefenokee," Chris whispered.

"What's he doing?"

"Snoring, I think. He does it every night."

"You're kidding," he said, and she could hear his head flop back against the pillow. "No wonder you wanted to get rid of him."

"I didn't want to get rid of him. I like him. It's just that it's such a little apartment, and he keeps bringing things home with him, like the piano, and I'm running out of room for . . . where's the piano? It wasn't in the hall."

"I helped him shove it into his room this afternoon," Hutchins said. "It sounds like he's got a spaceship in there, too. You don't suppose he bought one at NASA Surplus when I wasn't looking?"

"He might have," Chris said ruefully. "I didn't see him buy the bentobako boxes tonight. Or Fan Tan Fannie's fan."

They both listened to the whooshing roar for awhile.

"How long does this go on?" Hutchins said finally, in between takeoffs.

"Sometimes he stops," Chris said, thinking how she would have felt if she'd had to put up with this and shuttle lag, too.

"And sometimes he doesn't. But either way you have to put up with it because your prospective buyer told you to let him do anything he wants. Has he ever heard him snore?"

Chris didn't answer. She was thinking that the next time Stewart tried to put her on hold she should play a tape of Okeefenokee's snoring.

"I'll bet he has," Hutchins said, answering his own question, "and that's why he pushed him off on you. Why is he staying here anyway? How come he isn't with the rest of the Eahrohhs or keeping your boyfriend and his mother awake tonight?"

"He had to have a place with high ceilings," she said, and hoped he wouldn't ask how high Stewart's mother's ceilings were. "He has vertical claustrophobia."

"Which explains why Okee couldn't stand to ride the bullet tonight or sit in Luigi's. Did your prospective buyer tell you that? Face it, he found out about the snoring."

"How'th a perthon thuppothed to get any thleep around here?" Molly shouted in Chris's ear.

Chris snapped on the light. "You're the one who wanted to sleep in here," she said. Molly was standing over her, clutching her rag doll and Bets's blanket. Bets was rolling up the sleeping bag. "You're doing thith on purpothe to get rid of uth," Molly said darkly, and stomped out in her footed pajamas after Bets.

"She wants to be alone with him so they can—you know!" Bets said loudly and slammed the door. Chris turned out the light.

"It's an ill wind . . ." Hutchins said. "I wonder why Okee needs high ceilings. Or if that's what he really needs?"

"What do you mean?" Chris said.

"Remember the incident of the rolls? Maybe he needed sealings. S-E-A-L-I-N-G-S, whatever they are. The Japanese word for ceiling is *tenjo*, but *tenjo* also means palace. Maybe he really asked for a palace. Have you been in his room since he moved in?"

"No. He comes out when he wants to talk to me, and when he leaves he locks the door. The first day when we went shopping in the ginza I was going to go in and help him put things away, but . . ."

"He wouldn't let you. I know. I offered to go get my bicycle and leave it outside. I wonder what he's doing in there besides making lift-off noises," he said thoughtfully. "Do you have a key to his room?"

"No. I gave him mine. And besides . . ."

"I know, your prospective buyer told you to let him do anything he wants to." He was speaking into a sudden silence from the other room. He stopped talking. "You don't suppose we woke him up, do you?" he whispered. The whisper made him seem somehow closer.

Chris didn't answer. There was another long minute of silence, and another sound started up, high-pitched and rising.

"What's that?" Hutchins said.

"It's what he did at Luigi's. When the stripper came on."

"No more *sutorippu* for him. And no more sake."

The sound rose to the same keening note it had in the nightclub and then dropped and rose again. Whether it was because of the high ceilings, though, or because there was a wall between them, it didn't sound like an air raid siren this time. It sounded like an impossibly high trumpet, sweet and somehow sad.

"I think Omiko and her Orbiting Colonies reminded him of his wife," Chris said.

"Ummm," Hutchins said sleepily. "I missed her. That was when I was sleeping on you."

"I know," Chris said.

"Hutchins?" she said the next time Okee's solo faded, and was answered by a faint snore that was nothing like Mr. Okeefenokee's. "Good night," she said, feeling pleased all over again.

"I don't believe you," Chris heard Bets say from the hall. "Why would he do that?"

"You don't have to believe me," Hutchins said. He was in the hall, too. That meant he had climbed down the ladder past her and it hadn't even woken her up. She wondered what time it was. "All I said is that if I were Spielberg, I wouldn't want two million little girls following me around, begging me for a part in my movie. I'd come up to Sony in disguise so I could get close to the aliens and decide which little girl I wanted in the movie. Sort of a close encounter of the Hollywood kind."

Chris got up and pulled on a robe.

"He could be anybody," Hutchins went on, and Chris wondered what he was talking about. "Me or Okee or one of Mr. Nagisha's cousins, but whoever he is, he could be watching you right now. He could be giving you a screen test this very minute."

"Mr. Nagithya'th couthinth aren't watching uth. They got thrown out," Molly said.

Chris came into the hall. Hutchins was standing against the wall where the piano had been, holding two towels and two shower bottles. Molly and Bets were sitting on the floor in fuzzy robes and bunny slippers looking at a movie magazine. A young man with blond hair whom Chris had never seen before came out of the the bathroom, trailing his shower bottle hose, and grinned at Chris as he went out the door.

"Who was that?" Chris said.

"Charmaine's old boyfriend. The lawyer. He moved in this morning," Hutchins said.

"Mr. Okeefenokee didn't sublet another half of my apartment, did he?"

"No, he's living on the landing. But, listen, speaking of moving in, I want you to know I really appreciate your letting me stay here last night.

I was so lagged I'd probably be dead this morning if you hadn't. And I wanted to tell you why I . . ."

"Mr. Nagisha's cousins got evicted," Bets said, studying a picture in the movie magazine. "We told Mr. Nagisha they were cooking on the stairs in violation of their lease."

"You girls won't even be extras at this rate," Hutchins said.

"I don't believe you," Molly said. "Thpielberg wouldn't dreth up like an alien."

"I didn't say he'd dress up like an alien. Maybe he's dressed up like Charmaine. And if he is, I'll bet he doesn't appreciate being called a thlut."

"I thtill don't believe you," Molly said. "You're jutht doing thith tho we'll act nither."

"Fine. Don't believe me. It's your funeral."

"But Mr. Nagisha's cousins weren't supposed to use the bathroom till after nine," Chris said. "What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty," Hutchins said. He handed her a towel and a shower bottle. "What time's this lunch with your prospective buyer?"

"I'm meeting Stewart at thirteen-thirty," Chris said stiffly. "Nine-thirty! Then what are you doing in line? You were supposed to be," she squinted at the schedule on the wall, "seven forty-five."

"I traded places with Charmaine. She had a date with her old boyfriend, remember?"

"We mithed our turn, too," Molly said. "And it'th all your fault. If you hadn't kept uth awake with all that thnoring and talking . . ."

"Speaking of thnoring," Hutchins said, "Okee said to give this to you." He handed her a flat metal disk on a short chain. "You wear it around your neck." He opened the odd-looking clasp and moved around behind her. Chris caught a glimpse of metal under his shirt collar.

"When did he buy this?"

"This morning. He got up early and went out to get rolls and coffee for breakfast."

"He went out by himself? What else did he buy? A set of encyclopedias?"

Hutchins fastened the chain. The disk came right to the hollow between her collar bones and seemed almost to stick there. Chris tried to pull it out to see what was on the back, but the chain was too short. "What is this thing?" she said.

"There's an earplug thingee that goes with it," he said and dropped it into the palm of her outstretched hand.

"My mother says we should have stuck cotton in our ears and stayed right where we were last night," Bets said. "She says-possession is nine-tenths of the law."

"Did you put her up to this?" Chris said to Hutchins.

"Not me. It's not a bad argument, though. Go ahead. Put it on."

Chris looked warily at the smaller round disk and put it in her ear. "Mr. Okeefenokee didn't go out again, did he?"

(No,) Hutchins said. His lips didn't move. (He's in the bathroom. And after breakfast . . . Oh, that reminds me.) He dug his hand in his pocket and came up with a handful of crumpled yen. (I had to get money out of your purse to give Okee for the rolls and coffee. This is your change.) He handed it to her.

Chris looked at the little girls, but they had their heads together over the movie magazine again.

(After breakfast he's going back to bed,) Hutchins said, still without opening his mouth. (He says our talking kept him awake last night.)

She jammed the yen in her pocket, still watching his mouth and wondering if the thing around her neck was some sort of ventriloquist's device. "What is this thing?"

(Okee called it something that sounded like the Everglades,) Hutchins said. (It picks up subvocalizations and amplifies them so any other person similarly equipped can hear them. Go ahead, say something. Under your breath. Your lips don't have to move. In fact, all I do is think the words.)

(He said our talking kept him awake?) Chris said cautiously under her breath, her hand on the disk.

(Yep. He said tonight we were supposed to use these, which means he wants me to stay here tonight. And besides, if I spend the whole day moving out, I can't keep an eye on Okee. He'll probably end up buying a steam calliope).

(You've done a great job of watching him so far,) she thought. (When did he buy these subvocalizers?)

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully, and he could tell by the way the little girls looked up from their movie magazine that he had spoken aloud. It hadn't sounded markedly different from when he used the subvocalizer, only a little farther away.

Molly and Bets were watching Hutchins suspiciously. "Well, I don't know either," Chris said, as if they had been carrying on a rational conversation, "but I'd say his time in the bathroom is definitely up." She tapped on the bathroom door. "Mr. Okeefenokee, your time is up."

He opened the bathroom door and came out, his wispy hair wet and practically invisible. His body looked even lumpier than usual under his Japanese yukata.

Hutchins ducked in. "You could have traded platheth with uth," Molly shouted after him. "We have a holo-interview thith afternoon."

"You are wearing your thuwevrherrnghladdis," Mr. Okeefenokee said, nodding and smiling. It did sound like the Everglades.

"Yes, thank you. It's lovely." She put her hand up to the disk.

"Have you and Hutchins talked alone?"

"Yes." She looked at Molly and Bets, but they were immersed in their movie magazine again.

Bets was pointing at a picture. "It does look a little bit like him," she whispered to Molly. "See how lumpy he is."

"But what about his batheball cap? Thpielberg alwayth wearth a batheball cap."

"Good," Mr. Okeefenokee said. His mouth straightened out and his cheeks turned bright orange. "Now you can get married. Have closing. Hahnahmoon."

Both little girls looked up. "No! I mean, talking alone isn't enough." She wished Okee were wearing one of the subvocalizers so they could discuss this privately, but he didn't seem to be.

(People have to know each other a long time before they get married,) she thought at Okee, but he only smiled at her.

"People have to know each other a long time before they get married," she said aloud. "They have to . . ." she hesitated, trying to think of a word that he might understand.

"Thyeeth talking about theckth," Molly said wisely. "And if you athk me, they've already . . ."

"Nobody asked you," Chris said. "Why don't you two go find somebody else you can get evicted?" She shoved them out the door.

"Theckth?" Mr. Okeefenokee said.

Chris tried to think what she could tell him. She couldn't just say people had to love each other. Love was far too nebulous a term, and he'd already heard Charmaine say she loved Sony and her job and the fans painted on her ath. "Last night you were thinking about your wife, weren't you?" she said, watching for any sign of understanding. To her surprise, he stopped nodding. "And it made you sad?"

"Yes," he said solemnly. "Sad."

"And you wished you could talk to her and see her and be close to her." She put her arms out and brought them back again toward her and hugged herself. "Close."

"Closing," he said.

"No, not closing. Close."

"Hahnahmoon?"

"No," she said. "See, when two people love each other, they want to be as near each other as they can, and they . . ."

"Wife," he said, "sad," and screwed his face up.

"Oh, Mr. Okeefenokee, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," she said, but she was too late. He let out a wail like a fire engine.

"What did you do to him?" Hutchins said, coming out of the bathroom.

"He misses his wife," Chris said.

"She probably told him about sex," Bets said. She and Molly came back in.

"What did thye do to you?" Molly said, patting Okee awkwardly on the back.

"You can have our turn in the bathroom if you want," Bets said, her forefinger stuck in one of her dimples. "We don't really need a shower." She held out her shower bottle to him.

Okee stopped wailing and looked at the little girls, an expression on his face that Chris had never seen before. She had no idea how to interpret it, but at least he had stopped keening.

"Here. You can have my rubber duckie. Hith name ith Tham," Molly said with a sickeningly sweet smile.

Okee continued to look at them for a long moment, and then took the yellow duck and the shower bottle and went back into the bathroom.

(How did you do that?) Chris said wonderingly.

(I told them that if I were Spielberg, I'd disguise myself as an alien and do secret screen tests.) It was disconcerting to be watching him grin while he was talking to her. (I thought it might improve their general deportment.)

Chris looked at Molly and Bets, who were whispering about something, curls and hairbows bobbing. "Okay, but we'll have to hurry," Bets said, and they ran out of the hall and down the steps. "He'll be out of the bathroom in a few minutes."

"You don't suppose they'll try to kidnap him and hold him for ransom?" Chris said.

"I hope not," Hutchins said. (What we talked about last night . . . have you noticed Okee having trouble understanding any other words?) He had gone back to using the subvocalizer even though there was nobody else left in the hall.

(He can't seem to tell the difference between closing and close,) she thought (and he has trouble pronouncing some words, like "honeymoon." He still thinks we're getting married, but that's Charmaine's fault. With all her real estate talk, I think he's gotten the idea marriage is something you can go out and buy.) She tried to think. (He doesn't understand when I tell him he should stop buying things.)

(Has he ever talked to you about the space program thing the Eahrohhs are supposed to be negotiating?)

(No. Stewart said the Japanese linguists had figured out that there was a small core group of officials and a couple of translators and that everybody else was a passenger. Stewart said Okee's one of the passengers. *Noru hito*.)

(*Noru hito*, huh? Did you know that some Japanese words have as many as ten different meanings? *Noru hito* also means . . .)

There was a racket on the steps, and Molly and Bets burst in wearing leotards covered with red, white, and blue sequins, and sequined military hats. Bets was carrying a Sony chip recorder. "Ith he out of the bathroom yet?" Molly said breathlessly.

"No," Hutchins said.

"Good," Molly said. "We'll have time to practith." She adjusted the chin strap on her hat. Bets stuck a music program into the Sony recorder and pushed down the play key. They both positioned themselves in front of the bathroom door, clanking as they walked.

"Those are tap shoes," Chris said.

"I know," Hutchins said. "Baby June and Gypsy strike again."

"Ready and . . ." Bets said. "Hop, shuffle, step. Hop, shuffle, step."

She was late to lunch. Okee had refused to come out of the bathroom until Molly and Bets stopped tap-dancing, and then they demanded their turn in the bathroom. While they were in there, they used the curling iron and blew a fuse. It was almost noon before Chris could have her shower.

By the time she was dressed, Hutchins and Okee had both disappeared. She went out into the hall. Charmaine's lawyer had set up an ancient Apple and two disk drives on a chair. He had the case off the Apple and was digging around inside and swearing to himself. The old man with the baseball cap was playing solitaire on the top three steps. Molly and Bets were on the landing in pink tutus and ballet slippers, hanging onto the railing as if it were a barre and practicing the ballet positions. The chip recorder was blaring, "The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy."

"Do you know where Mr. Okeefenokee is?" Chris shouted, and then realized it was a stupid question. If they knew, they would be subjecting him to the Sugarplum Fairy.

"Don't interrupt uth," Molly said. "We're trying to practith."

"He's in with Mr. Nagisha," Charmaine said. She was sitting on the second step from the bottom, watching Mr. Nagisha's TV and painting fans on her fingernails. She was dressed in a red strapless dress and spike-heeled shoes. "He asked him to explain leases, but I think he's really hiding from the cast of Swan Lake."

"Is Hutchins in there with him?" Chris said, coming down the stairs toward her.

"No. About half an hour ago he said he had something he had to do and left.

Chris looked at her watch. "Oh, dear, I'm supposed to meet Stewart for lunch, and I don't dare leave Mr. Okeefenokee alone."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Charmaine said, blowing on her fingernails. "I don't have anything better to do."

"I thought you had a date."

"Had is right," she said, jabbing the fingernail polish stylus in the direction of the landing. "He didn't come up here to find me. He came up because he figured with all this overcrowding there'd be lots of real estate contracts to draw up. And marriage contracts. Only he can't seem to tell the difference." She jammed the cap on the stylus. "He wanted to know if I'd be interested in a lease option. That's where you get to move in before you close the deal. *If* there's a closing. Go on. Don't be late for your lunch."

"All right," Chris said, wondering what had made Hutchins run off like that. "Let Mr. Okeefenokee do anything he wants, but whatever you do, don't let him go shopping."

The bullet was jammed with people carrying flight bags and looking exhausted. Getting off at the ginza, she almost lost her shoe again. This time, since Hutchins wasn't there, she curled her toes and jammed them against the end of the shoe, and it stayed on, but just barely, and she got such a cramp in her foot that she could hardly walk.

The ginza was jammed with bicycles and people carrying huge, bulky suitcases, who had a tendency to stop suddenly in the middle of the footwalk to stare at the cities far above. It took nearly fifteen minutes to get the half-block from the bullet to the Garden of Meditation.

Stewart was standing outside, tapping his foot and looking at his watch. "Where have you been?" he said. "I've been waiting half an hour."

"I couldn't get into my bathroom," she said. "Molly and Bets . . ."

"Those two cunning moppets I saw on the phone yesterday?" Stewart said, taking her arm and steering her into the restaurant's anteroom. "I don't think I've ever seen two such adorable little girls."

"They're circus midgets," Chris said, but Stewart didn't hear her.

He was waving wildly at a waitress. "For heavens' sake, take your shoes off, so if they do have a table we can sit right down. I don't have much time. If you'd been on time we could have gotten right in, but now we'll probably have to wait." He pulled his shoes off and started through the crowd to find the waitress.

Chris took her shoes off and gave them to the pretty Japanese attendant. She flexed her cramping toes. I should get tap shoes with straps, like those "two charming moppets," she thought.

(Lose your shoe in the bullet again?) Hutchins said at her ear, and she whirled around, but there was no one behind her but the attendant and a wizened old woman who couldn't seem to find her shoes.

"No," Chris said. The attendant was looking at her oddly, which meant she had spoken aloud again. She clamped her mouth shut and said silently, (Where are you?)

(At Luigi's. Sorry to run off this morning, but Charmaine told me about

a job waiting tables, and I thought I'd better check it out. I can't keep taking breakfast money out of your purse forever. Is Okee with you?)

(No, I got Charmaine to watch him, but you're not going to be staying long enough to worry about breakfast. I'm going to have Stewart find you and Mr. Okeefenokee another apartment this afternoon and . . .)

Stewart came back, elbowing his way past the wrinkled crone, who was still rummaging through the shoes. "They gave our table to somebody else fifteen minutes ago," he said accusingly, "and they won't have anything else for an hour and a half. We'll have to eat at the sushi counter." He led her through the crowd to the wooden counter and scanned it for seats. "Have you ever seen such a mob?"

"Yes," Chris said. "In line for my bathroom. Stewart, since I talked to you yesterday, Mr. Okeefenokee . . ."

"There aren't two seats together," he said, pointing at the only empty stools, which were separated by an exhausted-looking man with a camera and a shuttle bag, "which is what happens when you aren't on time for your reservations." He motioned her toward one of the stools, sat down on the other, and handed her a menu. A waitress appeared immediately. Stewart snatched the menu out of Chris's hands. "I'll have the jiffy lunch. What is it?"

"Eel. It comes with fries."

"I'll have that, and she'll have the sushi salad."

"I want you to come home with me this afternoon," Chris said across the exhausted-looking man, who had propped his arms on the sushi counter. "You've got to talk to Mr. Okeefenokee. Yesterday he—"

"Okeefenokee?" Stewart said, with the same horrified look he'd had on the phone the day before. "I have asked you repeatedly to learn the correct pronunciation of his name. You obviously don't realize how delicate our relationship with the Eahrohhs is right now or you wouldn't . . ."

"I'm sorry, Stewart, but Mr. Ohghhi . . ." She automatically opened her hand to look at what wasn't written there anymore.

(Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh,) Hutchins said.

"Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh," Chris said. "Yesterday he brought home—"

(How delicate is the relationship with the Eahrohhs right now?) Hutchins said.

"Well?" Stewart said. "Don't just stop in the middle of a sentence like that. What did he bring home?"

(Ask him,) Hutchins said insistently. (Ask him what he means by a delicate relationship.)

(How do you know what's he's saying?) Chris said. (I thought these subvocalizers only picked up what the person said under his breath.)

(It does. You're subvocalizing what Stewart's saying. Okee says that happens when the person's upset.)

(I am not upset,) Chris thought. (And would you please stop eavesdropping on this conversation?)

(No. Ask him how the negotiations are going. This is important, Chris. Please.)

"I took the time for this lunch because you told me you had to talk to me," Stewart said, "and now all you do is sit there staring into space."

"I'm sorry, Stewart," Chris said.

(Please,) Hutchins said.

"How are the negotiations going, Stewart?" she said. The exhausted-looking man was lying in his sushi.

"We've had a breakdown in communications. Nothing for you to worry about, though. In fact, it may work to your benefit. The Japanese have decided that because the negotiations are taking longer than we expected, they'll match the compensation NASA's been paying. Which is only fair since this mess is their fault. If they'd allowed NASA to build the size shuttle base they wanted, this overcrowding problem would never have happened."

(What kind of breakdown in communications?) Hutchins said.

"What kind of breakdown in communications?"

"It seems the Eahrohhsian the Japanese team thought was their head man isn't in charge, after all, or he used to be and isn't anymore or something. Their concept of roles is apparently different from ours."

"Yes," Chris said, thinking of Molly asking Mr. Okeefenokee to get her a role in Spielberg's movie.

"This mixup could jeopardize the whole space program, and the American linguistics team is furious. They want to transfer the Eahrossians down to Houston immediately where they can use translation computers to . . ."

(Immediately?) Hutchins said, but Chris had already said it out loud.

"If they can get the Japanese to agree to it. I think they will as soon as they've had time to save face. Two or three more days at the most, and Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh will be out of your life forever."

And so will Hutchins, Chris thought.

The waitress came back with Stewart's eel and a check which she stuck under the fingers of the sleeping man. "We're out of sushi salad," the waitress said. "We got tacos and Hungarian goulash. Do you want one of them?"

"Two or three more days, and you'll have your apartment back and we can think seriously about going condo. But in the meantime, you've got to make sure you don't do anything to upset Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh. The smallest thing, and our chances of negotiating a space program could blow up in our faces."

(Let him do anything he wants,) Hutchins said. (I don't care what it is. Rape and pillage. Anything.)

"Oh, shut up!" Chris said.

"Look, don't take it out on me," the waitress said. "It's not my fault we're out of the sushi salad." She flounced off.

"I realize having to share your apartment with an alien has been a strain," Stewart said stiffly, "but you didn't have to yell at the waitress."

"I didn't," she said, thinking furiously at Hutchins, (This is all your fault. Go away and don't say one more word to me.)

"Who were you yelling at then?" Stewart said. "Me?"

"No," Chris said, "Mr. Oghhifoehnn . . ." She stopped and waited, listening. Hutchins didn't say anything. Good, she thought, I'm glad he's gone. The waitress reappeared and lifted the sleeping man's head up so she could take the sushi board out from under him. She pointedly did not look at Chris. "Yesterday the alien brought home . . ."

"Can I have the check, please?" Stewart said, "and wrap this up so I can take it with me." He slapped down a credit card and slid off the stool. Three people dived for it. "I've got to be back at the office by fourteen-thirty."

Chris struggled through the crowd after him. By the time she made it to the anteroom, he had found his shoes in the jumble by the door and was pulling them on. "Let him bring home anything he wants," he said, bending down to tie his shoelaces. "And whatever he wants to do, let him do it. I don't care what it is. It's only for a couple of days."

Chris waited for Hutchins to say, even rape and pillage? but he didn't. He'd gone away, and in a couple of days he really would have gone away because Mr. Okeefenokee would have been transferred down to Houston, and he wouldn't be able to use the excuse anymore that Mr. Okeefenokee wanted him to stay, and she'd never see him again.

"Now," Stewart said, straightening up. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Chris looked around the suddenly quiet anteroom. There was no one in it except the attendant, who was patiently lining up pairs of shoes by the door. The old woman who'd been in there before must have found her shoes.

"Well?" Stewart said.

"I wanted to talk to you about all the things Mr. Ohghhi . . . the alien's been buying, but yesterday after I talked to you I had a long talk with him, and he promised not to buy anything else. That's what I wanted to tell you."

He looked worried. "Are you sure you should have done that? You don't want to do anything that might . . ."

"Upset negotiations?" Chris said. The waitress brought Stewart his

credit card and a cardboard container with a metal handle. Two teenaged girls wearing "Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind" T-shirts came in and began looking for their shoes. "I'm sure I did the right thing. Don't worry. It won't upset your negotiations. I'll go along with anything he wants."

"Good," he said, putting his credit card away. "Oh, and listen, when this is all over I want you to come over and look at the apartment next to Mother's. With the compensation we could buy it and sublet yours."

He and the teenaged girls left together, and Chris started looking for her shoes. They weren't there. "Very busy. Much shoes," the attendant said in a passable imitation of the way Mr. Okeefenokee used to talk. "Not steal. Wrong take."

Chris thought of Hutchins diving bravely into the bullet to rescue her shoe. You could get my shoes back for me, she thought at him. Where are you?

There wasn't any answer. "Wrong take. You mine," the attendant said, and removed her getas, which were no more than a size four.

"Not fit. Wear size eight," Chris said in a passable imitation of the way she had talked to Mr. Okeefenokee before she met Hutchins, and wished again that he were here.

The attendant finally found her a pair of disposable tabis. The thick, toed socks were better than nothing, she thought, and smiled and thanked the attendant, but before she had gone twenty steps she had come to the conclusion that they weren't. She stepped up in a doorway and tried to massage her crushed instep. It was only half a block to the bullet platform, but she would never make it. And even if she did, she'd be crippled for life by the crowd on the bullet.

She leaned out as far as she could from the doorway and peered down the crowded ginza, trying to spot a shoe vendor. There was everything else: a man selling mylar balloons with a picture of the Eahrohhs's ship on them, a Sony outlet selling chip recorders, a flower vendor with a backpack full of cherry blossoms shouting "Hana! Cheap!"

Mr. Okeefenokee would love it here, she thought, and remembering that she had told Charmaine she'd be back by sixteen o'clock gave her the courage to step back down onto the footwalk, where the balloon man stepped squarely on her foot.

She retreated back up into the doorway to peer the other way. I wonder how far Mitsukoshi's Department Store is, she wondered. They'd have shoes.

(It's ten blocks,) Hutchins said in her ear. (We'll have to take the bullet.)

She knew he was miles away and using the subvocalizer again, but the feeling that he was right behind her was irresistible. She turned

around. He was standing there, holding a pair of red spike heels by the straps. "You're lucky Charmaine wears a size eight," he said, and handed them to her. "I know these aren't great, but they're not size fours either. And when we get back to Mitsukoshi's, Okee says he'll buy you a new pair."

"Mitsukoshi's?" she said, balancing herself against the doorway to take the tabis off. "You left Okee alone at Mitsukoshi's?"

"I had to come get you. Your exact words, as I recall, were, 'Where the hell is Hutchins? I don't have any shoes.' Do you realize you subvocalize when you're upset?"

"Yes," she said ruefully, and wondered what else he'd heard her think. She stepped into the shoes, which were at least six inches high, and bent down to velcro the red straps.

"Don't worry about Okee," Hutchins said. "He's not alone. I left him with Charmaine. At the makeup counter. She was trying out blusher colors on the top of his head."

"What were you doing at Mitsukoshi's? I thought you had a job interview."

"I did," he said, and helped her out of the doorway. She stepped warily onto the footwalk. It seemed a long way down. "I went in at noon, and Luigi was pretty busy, so he told me to come back this afternoon. You didn't subvocalize what Stewart said when you told him he had to find Okee and me an apartment, which means you're not upset, which must mean he said he would. Which means—"

"I'm starving to death," Chris said. "I didn't get any lunch."

Hutchins bought her a tempura dog on a stick, and she focused her attention on eating it and keeping her balance for the half-block to the bullet platform.

"Is Stewart coming over this afternoon to move Okee and me to another apartment or to throw me out?" Hutchins said after they had pushed their way through to the edge of the platform.

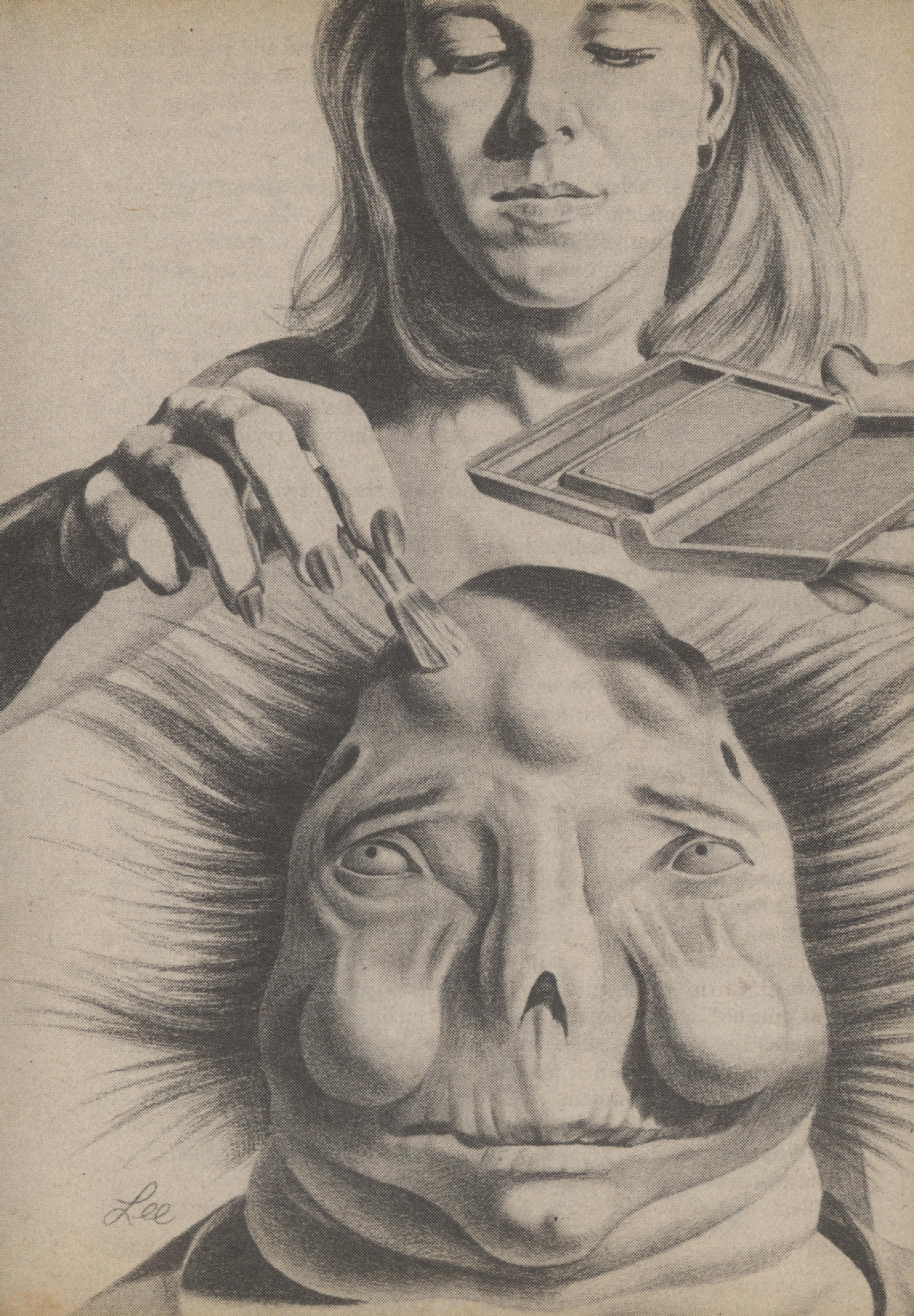
"Here comes the bullet," Chris said, looking at her feet so the spindly heels wouldn't catch in the narrow space between the platform and the magnetic rail. The bullet slid to a stop, and the people behind pushed forward. Chris stumbled and looked down at her feet.

"Come on!" Hutchins yelled, and yanked her up onto the bullet by both arms as the doors closed. They slid shut with a whoosh, and she found herself pinned between a lady with a shopping bag and Hutchins. He was still gripping her arms.

"You didn't answer my question," he said. "What did Stewart say?"

"Why do you have to ask?" she said, still looking at her feet. "You listened in on the whole conversation."

"Not that part," he said. "Charmaine asked what I thought of this



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makeup she was trying on, and the next thing I knew you were hollering for your shoes." He let go of her and put his arms around her.

"Hey," the woman with the shopping bag said, "quit shoving." She hoisted her shopping bag up into her arms, a movement which had the effect of squashing Chris and Hutchins closer together.

"Look," Hutchins said, "I should have told you this morning and now it's probably too late, but it's important that Okee and I stay where we are. I'm not talking about the hammock. I tried to get one of Mr. Nagisha's overnight leases, but he's booked up through next week, so I asked Charmaine if I could bunk on one of her steps. She said she's got a friend moving in with her, but I'll see if her lawyer friend will let me sleep on the landing. The important thing is that Okee stay in his room and do whatever it is he's planning on doing. When did Stewart say he was moving Okee out?"

"He didn't," she said.

"Good," he said, sounding relieved. "Maybe he won't have found anything by tonight and—"

"I didn't tell Stewart."

"What?"

She looked up. Charmaine's shoes put her on a level with him, and when she looked up, it was straight into his eyes. "I didn't tell him Okee sublet the apartment to you."

"Why not?"

"The negotiations are at a very delicate stage," she said, trying not to look at him. She didn't dare duck her head because they were so close that his lips might brush her forehead, and if she turned her head, he would be whispering in her ear, just as he had been with the subvocalizer. "It's only for a couple of days and . . ."

And I was afraid I'd never see you again, she thought, and then tried to stifle the thought so Hutchins wouldn't hear her. She would have taken the subvocalizer off if she could, but her arms were pinned against his chest, and she was afraid to move them for fear it would bring her closer to him. "Why is it so important that you and Mr. Okeefenokee stay?" she said.

He was looking at her with that thoughtful expression he had had the night before. She could hear his heart beating in her pinioned arms. "Because he asked for a room with high ceilings. Do you know what else the word for 'high' means in Japanese? It means losing your temper, howling, roaring, growing older, and excelling. Take your pick. I don't know what he wants with that room, and neither does that team of Japanese linguists, but it has something to do with the negotiations that are so delicate right now, and with the space program they're negotiating for. If it's a space program. The word for 'space' means harmony, leisure,

room, or eye. The Eahrohhs could be offering us a new kind of glasses or some time off or a way to beat the house on Vegas II." He stopped and looked across at her. "Chris . . ." he said.

He's going to hear what I'm thinking, she thought, and took a frightened step back.

"Quit shoving," the lady with the shopping bag said.

"You heard her," Hutchins said, grinning. He pulled her back against him. "Quit shoving."

"I'm letting you stay," she said, keeping her head averted, "but it's only because of Mr. Okeefenokee. You said you'd asked Charmaine if you could bunk with her. I think maybe that would be a good idea."

(I don't want to sleep with Charmaine,) Hutchins said in her ear. (I want to sleep with you.)

She was so surprised she lifted her head, but he wasn't looking at her. He was watching the station-markers through the bullet doors.

Did you know you subvocalize when you're upset? she thought, feeling oddly pleased.

"What?" Hutchins said.

"Get out of the way," the lady with the shopping bag said. "This is my stop."

"I said, this is the stop for Mitsukoshi's," Chris said.

Charmaine was still at the makeup counter. "What do you think of this?" she said, holding up a bright pink lipstick. "It's called Passion Pink. I'm working up a new single called 'Cherry Blossom Time.'"

"Where's Mr. Okeefenokee?" Chris said.

"Up in Furniture," she said, trying out the pink lipstick on a space above the bodice of her strapless dress. "He said he wanted to buy a bed."

"I'd better go get him," Hutchins said.

"I'll come with you," Chris said.

"Can I have my shoes back first?" Charmaine said. She reached into a shopping bag and pulled out a box. "Mr. Fenokee bought you a new pair."

"I'll catch up with you," Chris said, and leaned against the makeup counter to take off the red heels. "Thanks for loaning them to me," she said, handing them back to Charmaine by the straps.

"I didn't have any choice in the matter," she said, pushing out her chest and looking at it in the mirror. "Hutchins practically knocked me over getting them off. I thought you said you didn't like him."

"I didn't," Chris said. "I mean, I don't. I mean, I'm engaged to Stewart and . . ." She hastily opened the shoe box. "Oh, good," she said brightly. "They're flats. I don't know how you wear such high heels."

"I was trying on green eye makeup, you know, for my fans, and I asked

Hutchins what he thought of Jade Royal." She pulled the bodice of her dress down further and drew a wide line of rose-colored lipstick on the exposed area. "And he said it was fine, but I could tell he wasn't really listening because he had this kind of far-away look on his face, and I mean, gee, most guys want to help me put the makeup on, and then all of a sudden he says, 'What size shoes do you wear? Give me your shoes. Chris needs them,' and takes off."

She pulled the bodice down still farther and tried a bright coral lipstick. Chris wondered how far down the greens had gotten. "And I turned to Mr. Fenokee and said, 'How does he know Chris needs my shoes?' and you know what he said?"

Chris ducked her head so Charmaine couldn't see her face and put on her new shoes. "Maybe I'd better go see where Mr. Okeefenokee is," she said. "He's probably buying a dining room set."

"He said you and Hutchins are getting married today and asked me what kinds of things people needed for a honeymoon," Charmaine said. "Only he pronounced it hahnahmoon."

"What did you tell him?"

"Gee, you know, just the basics. Champagne and a black lace nightie and a bed. And diamonds. I figured diamonds are a girl's best friend."

"A bed?" Chris said. "Oh, no, I told him there wasn't any space in my apartment. I've got to go stop him."

She left as abruptly as Hutchins apparently had and took the escalator up to Furniture. Halfway up, she met Hutchins and Mr. Okeefenokee on their way down. "Did he buy anything?" she shouted after them.

(No,) Hutchins said in her ear. (I caught him just in time. He was looking at a washer and dryer. Meet us at the foot of the escalator.)

Chris ran the rest of the way up to Furniture, wondering if she should check with the clerk to see whether Mr. Okeefenokee had bought a bed that Hutchins didn't know about.

(I'm going to have you take Okee home, if that's all right,) Hutchins said, sounding as if he were on the step above her. (I'm already late to my interview. It's already sixteen o'clock. Why don't you and Okee just stay here and shop and then meet me at Luigi's for dinner? That way you won't have to go home.)

(I don't think that's a good idea,) Chris said. (Mr. Okeefenokee could buy the whole store by supertime.)

There wasn't any answer, and when Chris arrived at the bottom of the escalator, Hutchins was already gone. Mr. Okeefenokee was at the lingerie counter being handed a large white box. He stuffed it in a bulging shopping bag.

Chris took him back over to the makeup counter. "I'm taking Mr.

Okeefenokee home before he buys anything else," Chris told Charmaine. "He has no business being in a place like this."

"Gee, I know," Charmaine said, wiping lipstick off her bosom. "I told Hutchins you'd said he wasn't supposed to go shopping, but he said you wouldn't care if he bought a few souvenirs."

"He said what?" Chris said.

"I need twenty of the Prom Night Pink and fifteen of the Tokyo Rose," Charmaine said to the salesgirl. "Gee, you wouldn't believe how much makeup a person goes through. We ran into him up on the axis this morning, and—"

"What were you doing up on the axis?"

"Mr. Fenokee wanted to go see some of the other arrows guys, I guess he was homesick or something, and you said to let him do anything he wanted as long as it wasn't shopping, and so I took him up there and we ran into Hutchins."

"What was *he* doing on the axis?"

"I don't know. He was coming out of the NASA building. So anyway he suggested we all go shopping and . . ."

"When was this?"

"Gee, I don't know. Around twelve." She turned back to the salesgirl. "I hope this pink is right. You know how lipstick always looks a different color when you try it on your hand than on your lips? Well, I have the same problem with my fans."

"Charmaine," Chris said carefully, "do you happen to know of any job openings at Luigi's?"

"Gee, no. That old guy who lives on the stairs asked me that this morning, and I had to tell him Luigi isn't even taking applications, he's had so many people come in."

"Can you bring Okee home?" Chris said rapidly. "I've got to . . ." She couldn't even think of what excuse to give her. "I have to go," she repeated lamely. I have to follow Hutchins and see why he's been lying to me, she thought, and was infinitely glad Charmaine wasn't wearing a subvocalizer.

"Sure," Charmaine said, and asked to see the eyeliners.

Chris had no idea where Hutchins was going except that it wasn't Luigi's and that he would probably have to take the bullet to get there. If he had to wait for the bullet, she might have a chance of catching up with him and following him. She took off her subvocalizer and put her hand up to her ear, trying to hear any stray thought he might have about where he was going.

Maybe she should use the subvocalizer and just ask him, she thought. She could make up some excuse about needing to go with him to Luigi's. And he would make up an excuse about why she couldn't, the way he

had made up the interview with Luigi. Anyway, it was too risky. She might pause, the way she had with Charmaine, unable to think of an excuse, and the truth would come tumbling out because she was upset. She might say, "I need to go with you because that's not where you're going and what were you doing up at the axis this morning and why did you lie to me?" She stuck the subvocalizer in her pocket.

He was still on the bullet platform, though just barely. He was getting on the bullet, and she saw with a sinking feeling that it wasn't the one for Shitamachi. She got on at the farthest door down from him, glad she was wearing flats. She huddled down behind a young woman with a headdress like the one Charmaine wore and watched him through the red and black-lacquered chopsticks until he got off.

He looked worried and almost as tired as he had the night before, and she would have felt sorry for him all over again, but his shirt collar was open and she could see that he wasn't wearing his subvocalizer either.

The young woman got off when he did, and Chris followed her onto the platform and then ducked behind a pillar. She didn't need to see him to know where he was going. This was her stop. Maybe he's still shuttle-lagged, she thought, and he didn't get enough sleep last night with Okee snoring and Molly and Bets and everything, and he's come home to take a nap. But if that were true, why had he taken his subvocalizer off? And why had he lied about the job interview?

She gave him a ten-minute head start and then followed him into her apartment building. She opened the door quietly, afraid that Molly and Bets might have waylaid him with the Sugarplum Fairy, but he was nowhere to be seen, and the little girls were sitting halfway up the stairs talking to a redheaded man with a chip recorder.

They had changed out of their tutus and into navy sailor dresses and white patent leather shoes. "I've been in show biz since I was two," Bets was saying in her clear childish voice. "I'm four and a half now."

The old man in the baseball cap had fallen asleep playing solitaire. The cards were still on the step above him and the young woman with the chopsticks in her hair was leaning over, picking them up. When she leaned over, she looked a lot like Charmaine.

"Hi," she said. She put the cards in a neat stack and laid them next to the old man. "I'm Omiko. I just moved in with Charmaine, and I was wondering if I could use your bathroom."

Chris glanced warily up at her door. "We blew a fuse," she said. "Mr. Hutchins is fixing it, but it'll probably be an hour. Why don't you ask Mr. Nagisha if you can use his bathroom?"

"Would you pleathe be quiet!" Molly said from the landing. "We're being interviewed."

Chris went on up the stairs past Molly and Bets. "I danthed in the road

thyow of *Annie II*," Molly said to the redheaded man and then dropped to a stage whisper as Chris went past. "That'th her!"

"The woman who rents the apartment?" he said.

"Yes," Bets said, and whispered something Chris couldn't hear.

In the hall, Charmaine's lawyer was standing by his printer, watching it chug out copies of something. "Tell Okee I'll have these ready for him by tonight."

"All right," Chris said, not really listening to him. She inserted her key in the door, thinking, please let him be taking a nap. But he wasn't in the hammock or the hall, and the door to the bathroom was open. So was the door to Mr. Okeefenokee's room. A key was still in the lock. She pulled it out, put it in her pocket, and went in.

Mr. Okeefenokee had bought a bed. Though he must not have bought it today, Chris thought, because there wouldn't have been time to deliver it, let alone get it in here and pile all those things on it.

The bento-bako boxes were stacked on the foot of the bed next to a tangle of paper umbrellas and a set of encyclopedias. The rest of the bed was piled to the ceiling with boxes that appeared to be microwave ovens.

She came around the end of the bed into a narrow aisle formed by stacks of boxes that went clear to the ceiling. One of the boxes read, "One gross dental floss." Hutchins's bicycle was propped against the boxes. Next to it was a baby buggy with a Christmas tree in it. She couldn't see the piano anywhere, but there were four accordions sitting in the middle of the aisle.

Against the back wall was a trampoline propped on its side with six pairs of roller skates and a windsock hanging from it. Hutchins was kneeling in front of the trampoline, digging in a box full of styrofoam packing. He lifted out a lava lamp and looked at it.

"How did you get in here?" Chris said.

He laid the lava lamp back in the box and stood up. "Okee gave me his key," he said. "I thought you were going shopping."

"I thought you had a job interview at Luigi's," Chris said steadily.

"I did, but I called Luigi and told him I'd be a little late. Okee wanted me to check on whether he'd bought a Japanese-English dictionary or not. He couldn't remember. It's no wonder with all the junk he's got in here. At least we know what he wanted the high ceilings for. You don't see a dictionary anywhere, do you?"

"There aren't any job openings at Luigi's," Chris said. "Charmaine told me he's not even taking applications." He stopped pretending to look for the dictionary. "She also told me she saw you on the axis this morning."

"Chris," he said.

She backed away from him into the Christmas tree. The balls rattled. "You're a spy, aren't you?"

He looked genuinely astonished. "A spy? Of course I'm not a spy."

"Then what are you doing in here? And why did you lie to me about the job interview?"

"All right," he said. "I didn't have a job interview. I went up to NASA to get my subvocalizer checked. I wanted to know what made it tick."

"Because you're a spy," Chris said, still backing. "I'm calling Stewart."

"No!" he said, and then in a calmer and even more unsettling tone. "No. You aren't calling anybody. As soon as NASA works out a deal with the Japanese, they're taking Okee down to Houston. I've got maybe two days to figure out what he means by 'space program' before the NASA people start demanding that he deliver a space program he doesn't know anything about. I don't have time to mess with your idiot fiancé."

"He's not an idiot," Chris said, feeling behind her back for something she could hit him with. Her hand closed on a golf club.

"Oh, isn't he? He's engaged to you, for God's sake, and he doesn't even exercise his option. He puts you on hold and goes off and leaves you barefoot in the ginza and lets strange men sleep in your room. If I were engaged to you, I'd . . . I'm not a spy. I'm a linguist."

Chris's grip tightened on the golf club. "I don't believe you," she said. "Stewart said the American linguistics team was at NASA, talking to the Eahrohhs' leaders."

"Okee's the leader."

She let go of the golf club, and the whole bag of clubs went over and spilled out. "But Stewart said he was just a passenger."

"The Eahrohhs told the Japanese linguistics team that Okee was *noru hito*. That means passenger. It also means proclaiming one. That means he's the one who's supposed to deliver the space program, only I don't think he's got one. Do you remember what you said to Okee when I moved in? You said, 'There isn't any space.'"

"Oh, no," Chris said. "And he only understands one meaning of a word."

"The first one he hears. But those idiots over at NASA think that if an alien who has known our language less than two weeks says space program, he has to mean astronauts, rockets, and zero-gravity bathrooms. It never even crosses their minds that space also means a vacuum, that program also means a series of musical numbers. Okee could be giving us radio, for God's sake."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do what I've been doing for the last two days—try to figure out what the hell he means by space program. He can't pronounce honeymoon right. What if he can't pronounce space program either? What if he's offering us a spice program and NASA's going to find itself with eighty tons of cinnamon? What if it's a spaze program, whatever the hell that is? Or a space pogrom? We've got to find out before he goes

down to Houston. That's why I was in here. I thought maybe he was keeping some machine in here or secret plans or something, but all he's got is a swing set and a gross of Girl Scout flashlights. I don't know. Maybe he's a smuggler."

"What about the subvocalizers?" Chris said. "You said you tried to find out what made them work."

"Nothing," Hutchins said. He pulled his out of his pocket and looked at it. "It's two pieces of metal with five millimeters of air between them, not even vacuum, just air." He put the subvocalizer back on. "All they could tell me over at NASA was that it does what it's supposed to."

"It does what it's supposed to," Chris said. She thought about him taking it off so he could come over here without being followed, about talking to her at lunch with it. "Your giving me the subvocalizer, that was all a setup, wasn't it, so you could make sure I didn't tell Stewart about you?"

"I couldn't risk you moving me out. I needed to be where I could talk to Okee."

"Did you really come up on the shuttle yesterday, or was that part of the act too?"

"It wasn't an act. I was supposed to come up with the rest of the team, but I'd heard how much trouble the Japanese team was having communicating with the Eahrohhs. I figured it was because everybody was trying so hard to get the names pronounced right and learn the language that it made the Eahrohhs nervous. So I thought if I could come up here incognito—"

"Like Spielberg," Chris said bitterly.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine's cheery voice floated up from downstairs.

"They're home!" Hutchins said. "We can't let him find us in here!" He dashed back into the aisle of boxes. Chris scrambled to pick up the bento-bako boxes and stack them on the bed again. Hutchins jammed the golf clubs back in the bag and came to help her.

"I gotta be at work at nineteen o'clock, Mr. Fenokee," Charmaine said, sounding so close she could have been using a subvocalizer. "We better get all this stuff put away."

Chris and Hutchins dived out the door and slid the shojii screen shut. "Where's the key?" he said.

Chris pulled it out of her pocket and fumbled to lock the door. The lock seemed to take forever to read the key. She pulled it out.

"Can you get the door, please, Molly?" Charmaine said, there was a long pause, and the door of the apartment slid open. Chris put her hands behind her back.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said. She was carrying an unsteady stack of boxes and a shopping bag. Hutchins took half of the boxes for her. "Gee,

thanks. Would you believe that rotten kid wouldn't even open the door for me? She said after tonight she was going to be a star and wouldn't have to do anything anybody told her." She bent over in her red strapless dress to put the rest of the boxes down.

"Where's Mr. Okeefenokee?" Chris said.

"He stopped to talk to my ex-boyfriend," she said. "Look, I gotta be at work in half an hour and I don't even have my cherry blossoms on yet, so could you guys help put this stuff away?"

"Sure," Hutchins said. Charmaine grabbed a small sack out of the shopping bag and disappeared into the bathroom.

"Chris," Hutchins said. Chris pretended not to hear him. She put the key in her pocket and started for her room.

"Did you take our chip recorder?" Bets said indignantly from the door. She was wearing an aproned blue dress. Her yellow curls peeked out from under a turned-up Dutch cap. "It had 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips' on it." She stamped her wooden shoe. "You better give it back."

"I don't have it," Chris said, and amazingly, Bets turned around and stomped out. Chris heard her say loudly, "She says she doesn't have it, but I'll bet she took it. She's always doing mean things like that to us."

"Chris, listen," Hutchins said, putting out his hand to keep her from passing. "I should have told you the truth to begin with."

"Yes," she said. "You should have."

"The first thing I heard you say to Stewart was that you didn't have any room for the piano." He looked thoughtfully at Mr. Okeefenokee's door. "I didn't see the piano in there, did you?"

"No," Chris said. "So you figured if I didn't have room for a piano, I certainly wouldn't have room for you, and you were going to have to romance the landlady into giving you a place to sleep. So you fell asleep on my shoulder and brought me Charmaine's shoes and fed me a tempura dog."

"Now you and Hutchins get married," Mr. Okeefenokee said, carrying two shopping bags full of boxes and Mitsukoshi's sacks. His wispy orange-pink hair was flying out in all directions. "Go on hahnahmoon."

"Mr. Okeefenokee, I thought I explained . . ." Chris said.

"We're thyure you took it," Molly said, with her hands on the hips of her Dutch dress. "If you don't give it back, we're going to tell our interviewer all the thingth you did."

"Fine. Mr. Okeefenokee," she said again, but he had already disappeared through his door.

"I hope we didn't miss any bento-bako boxes," Hutchins whispered to her. The door slid open and Mr. Okeefenokee emerged, picked up the packages Charmaine had left on the floor and disappeared into the room again.

"You'll be thorry you were mean to uth," Molly said. She slid the apartment door shut with a crash, and Chris and Hutchins were abruptly alone.

"Thanks for not spilling the beans to Okee," Hutchins said.

"What would you have done if I'd tried? Bought me another tempura dog? Fallen asleep on my shoulder again? You're no better than Charmaine's prospective buyer, you know that? Talk about your real estate deals."

"What do you think of my cherry blossoms?" Charmaine said, emerging from the bathroom with the red dress over her arm. "Do you think that pink's too dark?" She peered over her shoulder. "It always looks different on your—"

"It looks fine," Chris said.

"Omiko said to tell you guys to come to the show tonight and she'll see that Mr. Fenokee catches her orbiting colonies tassels," she said, and clattered out. Chris watched her red high heels.

(Chris, listen, I wasn't romancing you for a place to sleep,) Hutchins said in her ear. (I was—)

She turned around furiously, yanked the receiver off her ear, and handed it to him. "It doesn't matter," she said, fishing her subvocalizer out of her pocket and putting it in his outstretched hand. "You can stay. I won't tell Mr. Okeefenokee who you are. Just leave me alone." She pulled the door of her apartment open. "I'll go ask Charmaine if I can bunk with her tonight."

"You don't have to do that," Hutchins said, looking down at the subvocalizer in his hand. "I'll sleep in the bathroom," but she went on out anyway, slamming shut the sliding door with almost as much force as Molly.

Charmaine had already left. She tried to catch her, brushing past Molly and Bets, who stopped in the middle of singing, "Tiptoe through the Tulips" to glare at her from the landing, and practically stepping on the old man in the baseball cap who was amazingly sleeping through it, but by the time she got to the door, Charmaine had already disappeared into the crowd.

She came back up the stairs. Molly and Bets stopped for her again, folding their arms and tapping their wooden shoes impatiently, and then started up again as soon as she was off the landing, singing their own accompaniment in piping, slightly-flat voices. Hutchins was at the end of the hall, talking earnestly to Charmaine's lawyer and frowning.

Chris slid her door open. "Why did you refuse to sublet your apartment to Molly and Bets?" the redheaded man said. He stuck a chip-cam in her face. She tried to brush past him. "So you admit you refused to share

your apartment with two innocent tykes and then blatantly rented half of it to—”

She got the door shut with some difficulty since his foot was wedged in it, went in the living room and shut and locked that door, too, and then leaned against it, feeling as tired as if she had just come up on the shuttle.

Chris spent the evening huddled on the couch under a blanket.

“I brought you some supper,” Hutchins called though the door about nineteen o’clock. “No tempura dogs. I’ll leave it outside the door.”

Chris opened the door. “I’ve changed my mind,” she said, not looking at him. “I’m sleeping in here. You can sleep with Charmaine,” and then was afraid he would say, “I don’t want to sleep with Charmaine. I want to sleep with you,” but he only said, “I’ll sleep in the hall,” and handed her a pastrami sandwich and a packet of milk.

He knocked again at twenty-thirty and called out, “Molly and Bets’s interview is on. Mr. Nagisha’s got his TV set up on the landing. The little girls told me to tell you because, and I quote, ‘Thith ith what thye getth for thtealing our recorder.’ I thought maybe you might want to come see what revenge they’ve cooked up.”

“No, thank you.”

“Okay,” he said, and knocked again immediately.

“Go away,” Chris said.

“You and Hutchins get married tonight,” Mr. Okeefenokee said. “I must talk to you about closing.”

She opened the door. Mr. Okeefenokee came in, wearing his solemn expression. “Why are you not wearing your thuwevrherrnghladdis?”

Chris put her hand up to her throat. “It hurt to wear it,” she said. “Charmaine said to ask you if you’d like to go see the show at Luigi’s tonight.”

“I can not go. You and Hutchins get married tonight.”

“We can’t get married, Mr. Okeefenokee,” Chris said. “I’m engaged to Stewart, and even if I weren’t, Hutchins doesn’t want to marry me. He just wanted a place to stay.”

“You like my wife,” he said, continuing to look at her solemnly, the lines above his nose deepening.

“I thought Omiko reminded you of your wife.”

“Omiko sake cups like wife,” he said, reverting to pidgin. His cheek knobs were bright orange. “But you like her most.”

“You miss your wife, don’t you?” Chris said, and then remembered that he wouldn’t understand that meaning of “miss.” “It makes you sad that she is far away.”

“Far away,” he said, nodding and smiling vigorously.

"Far away," she said, walking to the end of the hall. "Far away." She came back and stood in front of him. "Close."

"Closing," he said, and his face smoothed out into his expression of understanding. "Hahnahmoon. I bought bed. Put on subvocalizer. You and Hutchins get married after interview." He went bustling out, his wispy hair trailing behind him, like sunset clouds.

"I don't think so," Chris thought sadly, sliding the door shut. I'm engaged to Stewart and Hutchins just wanted a place to stay. Mr. Okeefenokee hadn't understood her when she'd said that. "I bought bed," he'd said, and he hadn't understood "close" either. Or "far away."

She had a sudden terrible vision of Stewart trying to explain what a space program was. "Space program," she could hear him saying, "go far way," and Mr. Okeefenokee would nod and smile vigorously.

I'd better tell Hutchins about "far away," she thought. She went out in the hall to look for him. He wasn't on the stairs, but everybody else was, including Mr. Nagisha's evicted cousins. They were watching Molly and Bets's holographic images in front of the TV. Molly and Bets, still in costume, were dancing alongside their three-dimensional images, and both Mollies were bawling, "Tiptoe through the Tulipth."

Chris went back inside and went to bed, locking her apartment door but leaving the door of her room slightly open so she could hear Hutchins when he came back. If he comes back, she thought sadly. After awhile she heard someone come in, and got up, but it was only Mr. Okeefenokee. He disappeared into his room and began to snore almost before he had the shojii screen shut.

"Chris, wake up," Hutchins said in her ear, and at first she thought he was using the subvocalizer.

"I took it off," she said sleepily and opened her eyes. He was squatting beside the couch, his hand on her shoulder. He had on jeans and no shirt. "What time is it?" she said, reaching for the light, "and what are you doing in here?"

"Twenty-one o'clock," he whispered. "Don't turn on the light. You'll wake Butch and Sundance." He pointed at the floor, where Molly and Bets were curled up in the pink blanket. "Where's the key to Okee's room? I can't get him to open his door."

"How did *they* get in here?" she said, rummaging through her clothes at the end of the couch.

"I don't know. Probably Molly had another key."

She found the key and handed it to him. "Another key?"

"This is Molly's key, too. I threatened to tell her redheaded interviewer that she was really eleven if she didn't give it to me." He stepped over Molly and Bets.

Chris hunted for her robe for nearly a full minute before she realized she was hearing the sound of Mr. Okeefenokee's snoring. "He's asleep," she said, but Hutchins was already out in the hall. She went after him. "He's asleep."

"Remember how he said we woke him up with our talking? Well, I've been shouting through the door at him for the last fifteen minutes. I've done everything short of kicking in his shoji screen." He fitted the key in the door and waited for it to be read. "Something's wrong." He slid the screen open. "Okee? Are you in here?"

The snoring continued. Chris followed him inside and slid the door shut behind her. Hutchins was staring at the bed. Mr. Okeefenokee had cleared off the bento-bako boxes and the microwave ovens and made up the bed with red-and-green patterned sheets. There was a stack of boxes on the foot of the bed with a piece of paper and a deck of playing cards on top of it. Molly's chip recorder was lying on the pillow.

"Charmaine must have picked out the sheets," Chris said. "There are fans on them."

Hutchins picked up the recorder and hit a button. The snoring stopped. "He's gone," Hutchins said.

"Gone where? And how did he get out? I thought you were sleeping in the hall."

"I didn't come in until after he was asleep." He stopped and corrected himself. "Until I thought he was asleep. I was down in Mr. Nagisha's apartment trying to get Charmaine's boyfriend to tell me what Okee'd been talking to him about, while Okee and everybody else were watching Sacco and Vanzetti tiptoe through the tulips on TV. Charmaine's lawyer kept pleading client confidentiality until the interview was over, and when I came back up here I could hear Okee snoring." He tapped the recorder on his hand. "He must have hidden in the hall till I came in and then sneaked out."

Chris picked up the piece of paper and looked at it. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he'd found out I'd been lying to him. We probably missed one of the bento-bako boxes or Molly and Bets told him I'd been in here or something. Damn it, coming up here incognito was a truly inspired idea! If I knew where Spielberg was, I'd tell him to come out of hiding before he hurts somebody! Okee's probably halfway back to Eahrohhsani by now!"

"He didn't go home," Chris said. She handed him the list. "He's probably down at Luigi's trying to catch one of Omiko's tassels." She pointed to the middle of the paper. "This is number three: Time alone. Talk."

He read the list aloud. "Be friends, talk, time alone, neck, bed, close, honeymoon. What is this?"

"It's his list. 'You and Hutchins get married.' I told him people have to have a chance to be alone to talk before they got married." She picked up the deck of cards and looked at it.

"And I said, 'Neck.' "

"Which is number four." There weren't any black cards in the deck. She fanned them out to look at them. There weren't any hearts either. "You notice those aren't checked off yet. He's trying to give us some time alone."

Hutchins reached for one of the boxes. He took the lid off and held up a black lace nightgown. "It looks like he thought of everything."

"Yeah," she said, spreading out the cards so he could see them. "Char-maine told him diamonds are a girl's best friend."

"So he got you diamonds," he said. He tossed the list down on the bed. "God only knows what he thinks a closing is. Or a hahnahmoon."

"Or a space program. We'd better go look for him. Maybe if I asked him about his space program, he'd explain it to me."

"In a minute," he said. He put the nightgown back in the box. "Okee wanted us to talk alone. Your prospective buyer said to do anything Okee wanted."

She was suddenly very aware of her skimpy nightshift and Hutchins's bare chest. "You leave Stewart out of this."

"I'd be glad to. The hell with what Stewart says. The hell with what Okee wants. I want to talk to you alone."

Chris backed away from him, knocking over the bento-bako boxes again. "I don't want to talk to you," she said unsteadily.

"Fine. Don't say anything. I'll do the talking. I didn't 'romance' you, as you call it, because I needed a place to stay. And I didn't pretend to be shuttle-lagged. I was shuttle-lagged, damn it, and all I could think of was keeping close to Okee." He came around the bed, ignoring the scattered bento-bako boxes. "It took about one good look at you to make me realize I should tell you the truth, but every time I tried, we were interrupted by some damned vaudeville act."

Chris kept backing down the narrow aisle between boxes, which was even narrower now that the microwaves were stacked on one side. "And that's why you kept interrupting my lunch with Stewart?" she said and crashed into the Christmas tree. Two ornaments hit the floor and bounced. "Because you were trying to tell the truth?"

"I was trying to keep you from marrying somebody who only wants your apartment," he shouted. "He doesn't care about you! He pawns some alien off on you without even knowing if he's friendly. What if it is a space pogrom and Okee'd decided to start with you? What if he'd decided to take you home to Eahrohhsani or marry you off to someone else?"

"He did," Chris said.

"And Stewart doesn't know about it, right? No, of course not. Because he's too busy telling you to do whatever Okee wants. So, fine, let's get married!"

There was nowhere left to back. Another ornament hit the floor and rolled, and tinsel shimmered onto Chris's hair and shoulders. "Married?" she squeaked.

"Sure. Why not?" he shouted. "Okee's got everything we need right here: champagne, diamonds, Stewart's permission." He waved his arm at the room. "I'll bet if we dug through this mess, Okee's even got a justice of the peace in here someplace."

Hutchins was very close, and since they were both barefoot, he loomed over her. "I thought you didn't want to get married," Chris said unsteadily.

He looked at her for a long, silent minute. Then he reached forward and plucked a piece of tinsel out of her hair. "I changed my mind," he said.

The shoji screen slid open. "I know they're in here," Molly said. "I heard them thouting."

"Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh!" Stewart called. "Chris! Where are you?" He appeared at the end of the hall. "Where's Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh?" he said hurriedly, giving Hutchins and Chris the barest of glances. "We need him up at NASA immediately."

"He's not here, Stewart," Chris said.

"Obviouthly," Molly said, her arms folded across her chest.

"Well, where is he, Chris?" Stewart said impatiently.

"I don't know," Chris said, shaking tinsel out of her hair.

"What do you mean, you don't know? This is an emergency. The linguistics team just discovered that Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh's the leader of the Eahrohhs. If they find out up at NASA that he's missing—"

"He's not missing," Hutchins said, stepping forward. "Pete Hutchins, Navy Intelligence Linguistics Unit."

"This is just a little misunderstanding," Stewart said, looking daggers at Chris. "My fiancée doesn't really mean he's missing."

"I know," Hutchins said. "I've had Okee under observation for the last two days."

"That'th not all he'th had under obthervation," Molly said, looking at Chris's bare feet.

"Right now he's at Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria watching the *sutorippu*," Hutchins went on imperturbably. Stewart took out a pad and pencil and began scribbling. "It's down in Shitamachi. On Osaka Street."

"Osaka Street," Stewart said. "I'll call NASA and have him picked up immediately." He started out to the hall.

"Picked up?" Chris said, following him.

"He'th not really there at all," Molly said. "They jutht want you to leave tho they can have theckth."

"Theckth?" Stewart said.

"Too much noise," Mr. Okeefenokee said. He appeared at the end of the aisle, his orange-pink hair mashed down on one side as if he'd been lying on it. "Can't sleep."

"Mr. Okeefenokee, what are you doing here?" Chris said.

"Thee?" Molly said. "I told you he wathn't at Luigi'th."

Mr. Okeefenokee bent over and picked up one of the ornaments and hung it back on the tree. "Too much noise. Fighting. Sleep in back." He gestured in the direction of the back wall, where the trampoline and the roller skates were.

Chris said, "But what about the recorder you—"

"Left a message on saying you were going to Luigi's?" Hutchins interrupted smoothly. "Did you leave it because you didn't want to be disturbed?"

"Message," Mr. Okeefenokee said, smiling and nodding.

"You need to accompany me up to NASA immediately," Stewart said. "You are needed for the negotiations on the space program."

"Space program," he said, his head bobbing even more vigorously. "Closing."

"Hutchins, you'd better come with us to help translate," Stewart said. "I'll call NASA and let them know we're on our way." He went out into the hall to the phone.

Molly picked up the cards on the bed and looked at them. "Doeth that old man know you thtole hith cardth?" she asked Okee. Mr. Okeefenokee beamed at her.

Hutchins pulled Chris back into the aisle. "Where's your subvocalizer?" he said softly.

"I gave it to you. Don't you have it?"

"I gave it to Okee. I asked him to try to talk you into wearing it again."

Chris frowned. "He asked me why I wasn't wearing it and told me to put it on, but he didn't give it back to me."

"Great," Hutchins said. "Now he doesn't understand the word 'give' either, so how can he give us a space program?" He gripped her arms. "Look, I can't let Okee go up to NASA by himself. I've got to go with him."

"I know," Chris said.

"If you had your subvocalizer you could listen in on what's happening, but . . . I'll call you as soon as I can, okay?" He looked at her. "Maybe it's just as well you don't have it on. I might subvocalize what I'm thinking."

"I knew you thtole my recorder," Molly said. She brandished it at Chris. "Wait till I tell Bets about thith." She stomped out.

"What did you say to upset that poor, dear child?" Stewart said. "I got through to NASA. I told them we were on our way. Perhaps you should get dressed, Mr. Hutchins."

"Yeah," Hutchins said. He went out into the hall. Mr. Okeefenokee followed him.

"I think I should go with you, Stewart," Chris said. "Mr. Okeefenokee doesn't understand English very well, and I couldn't . . ."

"I hardly think you'd have anything to contribute to the space program negotiations when you haven't even bothered to learn to pronounce his name correctly," Stewart said.

"How do you know it's a space program?"

"What?"

"I said, how do you know *Mr. Okeefenokee*," she said, saying his name with emphasis, "is talking about the same kind of space program you are? What if he's talking about something else?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, walking around the bed to look at the microwave boxes. "What else could he possibly be talking about?"

A spice program, Chris thought. A space program. Radio. "Aren't you going to ask me what I was doing here in my nightgown with Pete Hutchins?"

Stewart bent over to look at the accordions. "What's all this stuff doing in here?"

"You told me to do whatever Mr. Okeefenokee wanted. He wanted to buy things."

"I meant anything within reason," he said, picking up one of the bento-bako boxes. "How in heaven's name did he expect to get all this home with him?"

"How *did* he expect to get all this home?" Hutchins said, frowning. He had put on his shirt and a tweed jacket.

"It wath right there!" Molly said, pointing at the bed. "In plain thight."

"She stole it just like she stole our curling iron," Bets said. "That's what I told the interviewer." She struck a pose. "I said, 'She steals things and she won't let us use her phone or her bathroom and . . .'"

"Out," Chris said. She took hold of the pink ribbons on Bets's nightgown and used them to propel her out the door.

"You're just trying to get rid of us so you can be alone with Hutchins, but we fixed you! We—" Chris slid the door shut.

"What was all that about?" Stewart said. "You didn't actually steal that darling tot's recorder, did you?"

"Molly's practicing her lines for a screen test," Hutchins said. "A re-

make of *The Bad Seed*. Okee, are you ready to go up to NASA?" Okee nodded and smiled. Hutchins herded him downstairs.

"I really think I should go with you, Stewart," Chris said.

He started down the stairs. "It's not necessary," he said, stepping over the old man, who was laying out a hand of solitaire. "You stay here and help the kiddies rehearse for their screen test. Besides, you're not even dressed," he said, and then turned and looked back up at her in surprise.

"Call me," Chris said, and looked over his head at Hutchins standing by the door. "Please."

"I doubt if we'll be able to," Stewart said crisply from the foot of the stairs. "I should imagine we'll be in negotiations all night."

They went out. Chris hesitated a moment, and then started to run back up the stairs to get dressed so she could go with them.

"Wait," Mr. Nagisha said from the door of his apartment. "I have something to give you." She came back down the stairs, stepping carefully over the laid-out cards, and he handed her a folded paper.

"What is it?" Chris said.

"An eviction notice. You are in violation of your lease."

"I am not," she said, unfolding the paper. "How am I in violation?"

"Subletting without landlord's permission to a person not a relative and withholding of rent."

"What? You mean Mr. Okeefenokee? I didn't sublet my apartment to him. NASA requisitioned it, and Stewart paid you. I saw him. Nobody withheld any rent, and if you're talking about Mr. Hutchins, Mr. Okeefenokee was the one who asked him to stay with him. If you think he should be paying rent, too, you'll have to talk to NASA."

"I have evidence. You must be out by seven o'clock tomorrow morning. I have rented your apartment to other tenants."

"What kind of evidence?"

He flourished a chip at her, and for a minute Chris thought it was the missing recording of "Tiptoe through the Tulips," but Mr. Nagisha walked past the old man, stepping squarely on the cards, and up to the landing where he stuck the chip into the TV.

The title, "Orphans of the Stairs," appeared in front of the screen followed by a shot of the apartment building. A voiceover, which sounded suspiciously like the redheaded interviewer, said, "Inside this building is one of the apartments NASA has requisitioned so the aliens will have a place to live. But what about all those people on Sony who *don't* have a place to live? Today I met two of them." The interviewer appeared on the landing with Molly and Bets in their navy sailor dresses. They curtsied as he introduced them, all their dimples showing.

Mr. Nagisha fast-forwarded and then stopped. The interviewer said, "Let's see these budding performers in action," and Molly and Bets

clomped out in their wooden shoes. Mr. Nagisha fast-forwarded it before they could get started on "Tiptoe through the Tulips." He stopped it.

"Spielberg, are you out there?" the interviewer said. "All these two talented tots ask is a chance to break into show biz."

He hit the fast-forward button, and when he stopped the chip again, Molly was saying, "Thyee and the alien have thith whole apartment, but thyee won't let uth use the bathroom or the phone or anything, even if we're eckthpecting an important call from our agent."

"And then last night she kicked us out of her room," Bets said, stepping neatly in front of Molly. "We just wanted to sleep on the floor." She began a pretty pout and then seemed to realize that if she stopped talking Molly would jump in, and added hastily, "I think she wanted us out of there so she could be alone with him."

"Who?" the interviewer said, his ears perking up. "The alien?"

"Of courth not," Molly said, putting her arm up so it was in front of Bets's face. "Mr. Nageethya doethn't know it, but thyee rented her apartment to thith other guy."

"His name's Hutchins," Bets said, wrestling Molly's arm down to where she could see over it. "We saw him give her the rent. It was a whole bunch of yen. She's not supposed to rent to anybody without telling Mr. Nagisha."

"He wasn't paying me rent," Chris said. "He took some money out of my purse to pay for breakfast. He was giving me my change."

The scene in front of the TV cut suddenly to Chris trying to shut the door on the interviewer's foot. "The occupant of the apartment, Ms. Christine Arthur, was unavailable for comment," the interviewer said.

"I did not rent my room to Mr. Hutchins," Chris said. "Mr. Okeefenokee asked him to stay. He doesn't understand English very well, and he thought 'room' meant any available space, and . . ."

"Evidence," Mr. Nagisha said.

"Look, I'm sure we can clear this whole thing up if you'll just let me call Stewart."

The interviewer said, peering over Molly and Bets's simpering faces, "When this reporter checked with NASA they had no record of having requisitioned Ms. Arthur's apartment, which raises further questions about the alleged alien and Ms. Arthur's refusal to sublet to . . ." Mr. Nagisha popped the chip out of the TV and stepped over the old man in the baseball cap. "Seven o'clock," he said, and went into his apartment and shut the door.

"Molly and Bets are mad at me because they think I stole their chip recorder," Chris shouted at the door. "They told me they'd get even."

The door stayed shut. The old man in the baseball cap looked up blankly and then went back to laying out his cards. He'll never get anywhere

without the diamonds, Chris thought irrelevantly, and tore back upstairs, clutching the eviction notice, and tried to call Stewart.

The blonde woman who was always laying papers on Stewart's desk for him to sign told her that he couldn't come to the phone. "Have him call me as soon as you can," Chris told her. "This is an emergency!"

She got dressed and tried again. This time the call wouldn't go through. She stared at the screen for awhile and then grabbed the eviction notice and her purse and ran downstairs. At the bottom of the steps she collided with Charmaine's lawyer. He was swinging a tassel idly in one hand and whistling.

"Hey!" he said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Mr. Nagisha's having me evicted because of Hutchins. I've got to go find him."

"And leave your apartment? If you leave, you're liable to find your furniture out on the stairs when you get back." He looked at the eviction notice. "You go back upstairs and sit tight. I'll go try to talk Mr. Nagisha out of this. If it doesn't work, I'll go find Hutchins for you. Go on. Mr. Nagisha's probably already changing the locks."

Chris tore back upstairs, hopelessly scattering the old man's cards. "I'm sorry," she said breathlessly. "You wouldn't have won anyway. Your diamonds are in Mr. Okeefenokee's room."

The locks hadn't been changed, but the door was standing open. Molly and Bets were in the living room, arranging their dolls on the couch.

"I get the bedroom," Molly said. "You can thleep in the hammock."

"I get the bedroom," Bets said.

"Out," Chris said. Both of the little girls turned to look at her in surprise.

"Didn't Mr. Nagisha talk to you?" Bets said. "This isn't your apartment anymore. It's ours."

"Either you get out or I'm knocking those pearly little front teeth of yours down your throats and then we'll see how many parts you get."

"You wouldn't dare," Bets said, but she grabbed one of her dolls by the arm and clutched two others to her stomach. Molly scooped up the rest of them, and they trooped out. "We're moving in at theven o'clock and you'd better be out of here by then," Molly said.

Chris locked the door and shoved a chair against it. She tried Stewart again, and then the operator, but she still couldn't get through. Charmaine's lawyer came up to tell her he hadn't gotten anywhere with Mr. Nagisha. He didn't sound particularly worried, but he said he was going up to NASA to look for Hutchins and Okee. "You don't have to barricade yourself in," he said, pointing at the chair. "Just don't leave. And keep trying to get in touch with Hutchins from this end."

"I will," she promised, trying to think where Mr. Okeefenokee might

have put her subvocalizer. As soon as Charmaine's lawyer was gone, she went into Mr. Okeefenokee's room to look for it. She looked through the bento-bako boxes and under the bed and in the baby buggy, and then started in on the endless stacks of boxes. I wonder how he planned on getting all this home, she thought, sticking her hand inside the roller skates.

The phone rang. It was Hutchins. "I've only got a minute," he said rapidly. "Have you found the subvocalizer yet? Okee doesn't have it. They did a metals search on him when we came in. I asked him where he put it, and he said, and I quote, 'You put on. Closing. Hahnahmoon.' Do you realize what that means? There isn't any space program. He hasn't understood a word we've been saying."

"Pete, you've got to come back right away," she said to the suddenly blank screen. "I'm being evicted." She prodded the reinstate button until an operator came on-screen. "I was just cut off," she said and gave her Stewart's number. This time the phone rang. And went on ringing. Chris let it ring twenty-eight times and then went back into the bedroom and sat down on the bed.

She picked up the list Mr. Okeefenokee had written. He had checked off "time alone" and "closing" and crossed off "neck." The only thing left on the list was "hanamoon," which he had spelled the way he pronounced it.

"Honeymoon," Chris said out loud. "I wonder what he thinks that means." She picked up the old man's diamonds and took them out to him, but he was asleep again, stretched out across the stairs, his baseball cap in his hands. Chris sat down on the step above him and shuffled the diamonds into his deck. The phone rang.

It was Stewart. "I'm being evicted," Chris said before they could be cut off.

"Evicted?" he said, looking horrified. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. Mr. Nagisha claims I withheld rent from him."

"That's ridiculous," Stewart said. "I paid him myself when Ohghhi-foehnnahigrheeh moved in."

"He's not talking about Mr. Okeefenokee. He's talking about Hutchins. You've got to tell him to come back here so he can explain to Mr. Nagisha that he wasn't paying me rent, he was just giving me back my change from breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Stewart said. "How long has Hutchins been over there?"

"Two days. He's got to come explain that Mr. Okeefenokee was the one who asked him to stay. And you've got to bring over the requisition forms that show my apartment was requisitioned by NASA."

"I'll be right over," he said hurriedly.

"Bring Hutchins with you. And Mr. Okeefenokee."

"I can't do that," he said.

"I know they're in negotiations, but they've got to talk to Mr. Nagisha. What if I have Mr. Nagisha come up here and they can talk to him on the phone?"

"That won't work either."

"Why not?"

"They're on their way down to Houston. They left on the shuttle half an hour ago."

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said, and came into the living room, wearing her pink smock and carrying the red paper umbrella Mr. Okeefenokee had given her. She switched on the light. "I didn't knock 'cause I thought you might be asleep. Did you know Molly's got a key to your apartment?"

Chris nodded numbly. "Hutchins is gone."

"Yeah, I know," she said. She sat down on the couch beside Chris. "How long have you been sitting here in the dark?"

"I don't know. What time is it?"

"Three o'clock."

"They're probably in Houston by now. I hope Hutchins didn't get shuttle lag."

"You look pretty lagged yourself. Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"I can't. I'm being evicted."

"Yeah, I know that, too. My lawyer stopped by Luigi's to tell me what had happened. The way I figure it your prospective buyer figured he better get rid of Hutchins before he made you a better offer." She put her arm around Chris. "Don't worry about your apartment. My lawyer says he's got a plan to fight the eviction. He wouldn't tell me what it was, but he said not to worry, he wouldn't let those brats get your apartment, and I believe him. He knows practically everything there is to know when it comes to real estate deals."

There was a knock on the door. Charmaine went to answer it and came back in with her lawyer and Stewart.

"Well, you've gotten yourself in a nice mess, Chris," Stewart said. "Mr. Nagisha showed us the chip. How could you jeopardize your apartment by letting some stranger move in?"

"You told me to do whatever Mr. Okeefenokee wanted. He wanted Hutchins to move in. Did you show him the NASA requisition form?"

"There isn't one," Charmaine's lawyer said, looking happier than Stewart. "And we don't have a prayer of taking this to court when he's got two cute kids to testify for him. I guess we'll have to go with my plan after all."

"What do you mean there isn't one?" Chris said.

"I was afraid there'd be a great deal of red tape," Stewart said, "getting you cleared and so on . . ."

"NASA requisitioned dozens of people's apartments. None of them had any trouble getting cleared. You told NASA he was staying with you, didn't you? So you'd get the compensation?"

"It doesn't really matter which apartment was requisitioned, since we're getting married."

"It matters to me," Chris said. "I'm being evicted."

"No, you're not," Charmaine's lawyer said cheerfully. "We've come up with a plan. All you have to do is marry Hutchins. Then he doesn't have to pay rent because he's a relative."

"I can't," Chris said. "He's in Houston."

"He doesn't have to be here," Stewart said. "We can do a beam-up call, take the vows over the phone, transmit the papers and have them signed on both ends. I've cleared it with NASA."

"I don't understand," Chris said bewilderedly. "How will getting married now help? We weren't married when he stayed here."

"Sony law allows occupancy before closing," Charmaine's lawyer said, looking positively jovial. "What do you say?"

"It's the only way we can save your apartment," Stewart said. "You're not really getting married. There's an automatic buyer-backout clause if the deal isn't closed in twenty-four hours, which of course it won't be. You'll have your apartment back, and with the requisition money I get from NASA we'll be able to buy that apartment next door to Mother's and turn this into a rental."

"What if Mr. Nagisha finds out and tries to stop it?"

"He won't," Charmaine's lawyer said. "Omiko sent him down to Luigi's for the *sutorippu*, and I paid Molly and Bets off."

"I want to talk to Hutchins."

"You can talk to him during the wedding," Stewart said, looking relieved. "I'll call NASA."

"Omiko's out getting a Shinto priest," Charmaine's lawyer beamed. "I'll go get the marriage contracts drawn up. We'll have you married in nothing flat." They both hurried out.

"Gee, this is so exciting," Charmaine said. "I've got a veil from the wedding number you can borrow. I'd loan you the wedding dress to go with it, only it's not a dress exactly."

Charmaine's lawyer came back in with the marriage contracts and one of Mr. Nagisha's evicted cousins. "He's a notary," her lawyer said, and Mr. Nagisha's cousin pulled a seal out of his pocket.

"It'll serve him right," he said. "All we were doing was stir-frying a little blowfish."

"You can sign these now and then we'll transmit them over the phone."

It's a simple death-do-you-part deed, no lease option, no appraisal. Just a minute. I've got to get another witness."

He came back in with the old man in the baseball cap. Chris signed the copies and then watched carefully as the old man countersigned them, but his signature was completely illegible. Charmaine finished witnessing the contracts and scurried out to get the veil.

Omiko came in with the Shinto priest. Molly and Bets were right behind her, wearing frilly lavender dresses and large lavender bows in their hair. Molly was carrying a basket of cherry blossom petals.

"We're going to be in your wedding," Bets said. "Molly's the flower girl and I get to be your maid of honor."

"Isn't that sweet?" Stewart said, patting Molly on the head. Chris saw with satisfaction that he was mashing her lavender hair bows. "Someday we'll have two sweet little girls just like these two."

"Over my dead body," Chris said.

"Here's your bouquet," Charmaine said. She had changed back into her strapless red dress. She shoved a bouquet of white silk flowers and ribbons into Chris's hands. "It's really a pastie," she said, putting the veil on Chris's head, "so I stuck it on one of Mr. Okeefenokee's flashlights."

"The call's coming through," Charmaine's lawyer said from the hall.

"I want to talk to Hutchins first," Chris said.

"I really don't see why that's necessary," Stewart said. "He's already agreed to marry you."

"I'm not going through with this unless I have a chance to talk to him."

"It's almost four o'clock. We've got to do this in the next half hour."

"Fine," Chris said, taking off her veil. "Tell Molly and Bets they can have the apartment. I'll move in with Charmaine and Omiko."

"And lose the apartment!" Stewart said, looking aghast. "I mean, go ahead and talk to him if you have to, but make it quick. If we don't finish this up within the next fifteen minutes, we'll have to wait for satellite relay."

Charmaine's lawyer said, "It'll be a minute or so," and went into the living room and shut the door. Chris locked it and then went over to the screen. It brightened and Hutchins's image appeared in front of the screen. He was wearing the clothes he'd left the apartment in, and he looked tired and drawn.

"Are you all right?" Chris said.

"Yeah," he said, frowning. "They started interrogating Okee as soon as we got here, but they're not getting anywhere. He's clammed up completely." He rubbed his hand across his forehead tiredly.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Chris said. "Marry me, I mean. It's nothing but a real estate deal."

"It'll make Stewart happy."

"Yeah," Chris said ruefully. "And Mr. Okeefenokee. He kept saying we were going to get married tonight and here we are."

"Yeah," Hutchins said thoughtfully. "How come they were able to put this wedding together so fast? I thought Sony marriage contracts were really complicated."

"I don't know. Her lawyer was the one who came up with the idea."

"Charmaine's lawyer, huh? Maybe Okee's smarter than we thought."

"We really can't wait any longer," Stewart said, opening the door. "We've got to start the ceremony."

He came over to the screen and pressed the transmit button. Hutchins's image disappeared, and Charmaine's lawyer held each page of the contract up to the screen by the corners for a full thirty seconds. Stewart pushed another button, and a flat screen image of Hutchins appeared. He and two men in uniform signed and then held up the copies of the pages the same way.

"Gee, this is so exciting," Charmaine said. She put the veil over Chris's head again and then dashed into the bathroom to get a box of Kleenex, which she passed out to Omiko, the old man in the baseball cap, and Mr. Nagisha's cousin.

"I heard she had to get married," Bets said to the old man in a stage whisper.

Molly said, "Would you please get out of the way?" and began throwing cherry blossom petals on everyone.

Charmaine's lawyer said, "Okay," and Hutchins's holographic image appeared in front of the screen. He was still holding the copies of the contract.

"Join hands," the Shinto priest said. Hutchins transferred the contracts to his left hand and held out his right. Chris put her hand carefully where the image of his hand was. He closed his hand around her fingers, but she couldn't feel anything.

The priest made a speech in Japanese and then said, "Christine Arthur, do you understand the terms of the contract?"

"I do," Chris said.

"Peter Hutchins, do you under—"

"I do," he said.

"This contract has been duly signed and witnessed. I declare it legally binding."

"Good," Hutchins said. "Now do I get to kiss the bride?" He bent over her.

Stewart hit the hang-up button, and Hutchins's image disappeared. "Good. I'm glad that's over," he said happily. He turned to Charmaine's lawyer. "Now we can take these down to Mr. Nagisha."

"In a minute," the lawyer said. He turned to Charmaine. "I'll be back in a few minutes, and then I want to talk to you." She followed him and Stewart out onto the landing.

Chris was still watching the screen. "Ahem," the old man in the baseball cap said, and Chris turned around, but he was talking to Bets. "I've been watching you for several days. I'm directing a new movie and I'd like to cast you in it."

"You don't want her," Molly said. "Thyee dyeth her hair."

"I do not," Bets said, putting a defensive hand up to her curls. "My blonde hair is natural, which is more than I can say for your lisp."

"My lisp is not phony!" Molly shouted, and grabbed a handful of yellow curls.

"I want both of you," he said, separating them. "You're perfect for the parts. I've got the contracts in my office downtown."

"I want my name first on the credits," Bets said.

"I want star billing above the title," Molly said.

He herded them out. They nearly collided with Charmaine.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said. "What was that all about?"

"That was Spielberg," Chris said. "He just offered Molly and Bets the lead in his new movie."

"Who? The old guy on the stairs? You're kidding. You'd think he'd know better after living here a whole week." She looked at Chris. "Are you all right?"

"No," Chris said.

"I've got an idea. Why don't we all go down to Luigi's for the early show? Kind of a wedding breakfast."

"Chris has got to stay here until the buyer-beware clause expires," Stewart said.

"What do you think she's gonna do?" Charmaine said. "Jump off Sony and parachute down to earth?"

"Chris has come dangerously close to losing her apartment once today. I don't want anything to interfere with that annulment clause. The safest thing is for her to spend the next twenty-four hours in her apartment."

"Okay, we'll bring the wedding breakfast here. I'll call Luigi and have him deliver some tempura ham and eggs and have Omiko bring the girls over and . . ."

"Can I speak to you?" Charmaine's lawyer said, taking hold of her hand and practically yanking her out of the living room.

"I'm not going to let you jeopardize your apartment a second time," Stewart said. He went over to the couch. "I think the best thing for us to do is to get married immediately. I've asked the lawyer to draw up the marriage contracts. Where did this Hutchins sleep? In Ohghhifoehn-nahigrheeh's room?"

"No," Chris said. "He slept in here. Mr. Okeefenokee didn't understand the concept of 'room.' He thought it meant any space that happened to be available. Hutchins slept up there."

Stewart looked up at the sleep restraint. "In that? Where did you sleep?"

"On the couch."

"I can't believe you let him sleep up there with you not five feet away from him."

"Neither can I," Chris said. She got her nightshift and robe from the end of the couch. "You can sleep in Mr. Okeefenokee's room."

"No!" Charmaine said from the doorway. Her lawyer was with her. They were holding hands. "I mean, 'scuse me, but gee, Mr. Okeefenokee bought all that stuff for you and it's a shame to let it go to waste."

"What stuff?" Stewart said.

"If you want to be able to testify that Chris didn't leave her apartment for the whole twenty-four hours," Charmaine's lawyer said, "you should be the one to sleep out here. Chris can sleep in the bedroom. That way she can't leave without your knowing it."

"I thought you said this plan was foolproof," Stewart said anxiously.

"It is," Charmaine's lawyer said, grinning.

"Good night," Chris said, and went into Mr. Okeefenokee's room, still carrying the bridal bouquet, and shut the door.

Charmaine immediately slid the shoji screen open a few inches. "'Scuse me," she said. "Can I come in? I got something to show you." She sidled through the door, shut it behind her, and flashed her hand at Chris. "It's a diamond. We're engaged."

Chris laid the bouquet on the nightstand and started moving boxes off the bed. "I thought you said you weren't going to marry him because he thought marriage was a real estate deal."

"That was before—" She stopped. "Well, I mean, I think it was pretty romantic the way he got you and Hutchins together."

"We're not exactly together," she said. "Hutchins is in Houston and I'm locked in my room."

"Yeah, but Mr. Fenokee's going to . . ." She stopped again.

Chris looked up.

"Mr. Fenokee's going to what?"

Charmaine fiddled with her ring. "Well, gee, I mean, he's got that space program, right? Maybe he can talk the NASA people into sending Hutchins back up here. Or maybe you could go down there."

"I don't think so," Chris said sadly. "Stewart'll see to that. Anyway, Sony's got a thirty-day travel permission law, and the marriage expires in," she looked at her watch, "about twenty-three hours."

"Gee, that's right. I better go. I promised Omiko I'd be there for the

wedding number. Gee, I almost forgot my pastie." She picked it up, untaped it from its makeshift handle, and laid the flashlight back on the nightstand. She pointed at the boxes on the bed. "Why don't you wear that black lace nightie instead of that shift thing?" She flounced out. Chris shut the door and locked it.

She put on her nightshift and her robe and moved the stack of boxes off the bed. "I've just had a great idea, Chris," Stewart called through the door. "I was lying there looking at the hammock, and it suddenly occurred to me that Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh was right. That is available space. Since we're going to rent this place anyway, we won't need those high ceilings. We can turn this into two apartments. I'm going to go downstairs right now and talk to Mr. Nagisha about it."

She could hear him slide the door to the apartment shut, lock it, and start down the stairs. I hope he trips over the old man in the baseball cap and falls the whole flight, she thought, and then remembered that the old man had gone off with Molly and Bets.

She turned off the light and got into bed. There was something hard under her pillow. It's probably one of Omiko's tassels, she thought, and turned the light back on. It was her subvocalizer.

"Oh," she said, and held it to her heart.

"Mr. Nagisha thinks it's a great idea," Stewart said through the door. "He's going to do it to all the apartments in the building. Good night, darling."

She sat up against the headboard, put the subvocalizer on, and fastened the receiver in her ear. It probably doesn't work except at short distances, she thought. She turned off the light.

It was completely dark in the room. There was a narrow line of light under the shoji screen, but it only seemed to intensify the darkness.

(Pete,) she whispered without making any noise, (are you there?)

(I'm here,) he said, so close he could have been sitting beside her. (Where are you?)

(In Mr. Okeefenokee's room. My subvocalizer was under his pillow.)

(Where's Stewart?)

(In the living room on the couch. He wants to make sure I don't do anything to jeopardize the annulment clause.)

(Is everything okay?) Hutchins said. (You're not going to be evicted?)

(No.)

(Well, that's good. At least you don't have to sleep out on the stairs with Leopold and Loeb.)

(Molly and Bets aren't here. They got a part in Spielberg's movie.)

He didn't answer for a while. (There isn't any justice, is there?) he said finally.

(No,) Chris said. (I wish you were here.)

(So do I. Chris, look, they've got us locked up tight here until the negotiations are over. I tried to talk Okee into telling NASA I had to come back up to Sony to get the space program, but he said, "No. Be alone on hahnahmoon." Well, we're sure as hell alone.)

(Is he still refusing to talk?)

(No, he's been talking a blue streak ever since we got on the shuttle. And I have a sinking feeling I know why the Eahrohhs came. I don't think it was to negotiate a space program or anything else. I think they just like space travel. Okee had that lump of a nose of his pressed to the port the whole way down, and he told the NASA linguistics team the exciting story of our takeoff and landing twice. He also regaled them with a description of how Omiko orbits her colonies and danced "Tiptoe through the Tulips" for them. Spielberg blew his big chance. Okee's a lot better than Molly and Bets. He told the linguistics team about you, too. He said you reminded him of his wife.)

(I know,) she said, and wished she had a Kleenex.

(He said I reminded him of himself. No, what he actually said was that I was like him. He then said the reason he'd wanted us to get married was because he knew we liked each other, which shoots our "one word, one meaning" theory all to hell.)

(But if that's true, maybe he understands the word "space," too, and there really is a space program.)

(Maybe.) There was silence for a minute. (He told the linguistics team he'd have a demonstration of the space program for them in twenty-four hours. They asked him what he needed for this demonstration, and he said a room with high ceilings. So they stuck us in an old shuttle hangar with a guard and a couple of army cots, and he went right to sleep on one of the cots.)

She could hear something besides what he was saying, a low whooshing noise that rose to a dull roar and then subsided. (I can hear Mr. Okeefenokee snoring,) she said, and wiped her eyes on the hem of the sheet.

(Chris, listen, if there isn't a space program, Okee's not going to be the only one who's in trouble. I didn't exactly have official clearance to go undercover, and they're going to want somebody they can blame this on. I don't know when I'll be able to get back up there to get you.)

(I know,) she said, sniffing. Charmaine had left her box of Kleenex on the nightstand. She reached for the flashlight. Her hand groped in emptiness where the nightstand was supposed to be. "Hutchins!" she said out loud. "The nightstand's missing." She squinted into the darkness. She could faintly make out the walls of her room. "Mr. Okeefenokee's boxes are gone, too."

(No, they're not,) Hutchins said, and she could hear the rumble of

Okee's snoring under his words. (They're here. Did the nightstand have a box of Kleenex on it?)

"Are you all right, darling?" Stewart said through the door. "I heard you call out."

"I'm fine," Chris said. "I was dreaming. Good night."

"Why don't you come out and sleep on the—" Stewart said. His words cut off so abruptly she was afraid he had opened the door, but when she turned her head that direction, she couldn't see any light, not even the line of light that had been under her door:

(Are you still there, Chris?) Hutchins said.

(Yes,) she said, careful not to speak out loud since Stewart might be trying to unlock the door. I hope Molly took all her keys with her, she thought, and wondered if she should get out of bed and go wedge a chair against the door or something, but she was afraid she wouldn't be able to find her way back to the bed. If the bed were still there. (Pete, what's going on?)

(I don't know,) he said. (This shuttle hangar is now full of Okee's stuff. The microwaves, the trampoline, even the Christmas tree in the baby buggy.)

Chris squinted into the darkness, waiting for her eyes to adjust, but after a long minute she still couldn't see anything.

(He didn't understand when you tried to tell him there wasn't any space in your apartment,) he said slowly, (and he didn't understand the words "far away" and "close." And how come? Not because he couldn't understand the words, but because the concept didn't make any sense. Chris, I think he's got a space program, after all.)

It was suddenly not as black in the room. She looked anxiously toward the shoji screen, afraid that Stewart had gotten it open, but the light wasn't coming from that direction. It seemed to be coming from the back wall where the trampoline had been, only she couldn't make out the wall.

(It's not the kind of space program NASA thought they were getting, but so what? I think they'll be happy with this,) he said, sounding excited. (I couldn't figure out how he was going to get all this stuff home in that little ship of theirs, and the answer is, he wasn't. He was going to send it Federal Express. I'll bet he already took the piano home, and that's why we couldn't find it.)

The line of light was under the side walls where the stacks of boxes had been. They were much farther away than they should have been.

(Pete!) Chris said, getting onto her knees on the bed as if she were on a life raft.

(If Okee can send souvenirs home to Eahrohhsani, we've got interstellar trade. Not to mention what this means to Sony. So what if we can only transport freight?)

Now a thin line of pinkish-orange light was under the wall where the shoji screen should be. It wasn't there. (Pete,) she said, (I don't think it's limited to transporting freight.)

(I wonder what the high ceilings have to do with this. We can build space colonies on earth and then put them in orbit with—)

His voice cut off. (Just a minute,) Hutchins said after a pause. (The lights went out. I can't see.)

(There's a flashlight on the nightstand,) Chris said.

(I can't find the nightstand. It was right here.) His voice sounded suddenly different, further away, and she couldn't hear Mr. Okeefenokee's snoring under it. (Chris, I think it's disappeared. It's black as pitch in here. Is the nightstand there?)

(I don't know. Just a minute.) She got up on her knees, waved her hand over where the nightstand was supposed to be, and cracked her knuckles against the corner of it.

"Ouch," she said, nursing her hand. (Yes, it's back.)

"Damn!" Hutchins said. "No, it's not. It's here. I just ran into it."

"But . . ." Chris said, and then stopped and peered into the darkness. She crawled to the foot of the bed so that the orange-pink light was behind the nightstand and she could make out shapes. "Pete," she said, "take off your subvocalizer." She unfastened the receiver from her ear and closed her hand over it.

"In a minute," he said. "Okee had a box of flashlights right next to the Christmas tree." His voice sounded suddenly softer, as if he had turned away.

She unclasped the subvocalizer with her free hand and took it off. "Take off your subvocalizer and say something." She put it under her pillow and leaned across the bed, feeling carefully for the nightstand.

"Now I can't find the damned boxes," he said. "Damn it, I hit my toe again."

Chris turned on the flashlight. Hutchins had on jeans and no shirt, and he was standing beside the bed, holding his bare foot in one hand. "How did you get here?" he said blankly.

"That's what I should be asking you. This is my room." She shone the flashlight around at the walls. The line of pinkish-orange light was getting wider, as if a curtain were slowly going up. "Sort of." She smiled at him. "Stewart wanted me to stay in my room, but I don't think this is what he had in mind."

Hutchins put his foot down and looked blankly behind him at the wall. "Where's Okee?"

"I don't know. I have a feeling he could be just about anywhere he wants. But I would imagine he's in the shuttle hangar with all his boxes and the Christmas tree and the trampoline. And half of NASA when

they realize we're gone. You don't suppose they'll think he disintegrated us or something?"

He limped over to the bed and sat down beside her. "He said he'd have a space program for them in twenty-four hours. They won't string him up before then, and I have a feeling that at the end of twenty-four hours we'll be able to tell them where we've been ourselves."

"Which is where?" she said.

He looked around at the walls. The band of light was nearly a foot wide now. It looked more pink than orange. Chris switched off the flashlight and put it on the nightstand.

"Damned if I know," he said. "That old faker! He understood every word we said. He knew exactly what kind of space program NASA wanted. And all that stuff about honeymoons and closings and not understanding what kind of roll Bets wanted. 'Time alone. Talk. Neck.' I could just . . ." he said, smashing his fist against his open hand. He stopped and looked at Chris. "I could kiss him on the top of his lipstick-smearred head," he said. "I thought I was never going to see you again. I figured by the time I made it back up to Sony you'd have married your prospective buyer."

"I couldn't marry Stewart," Chris said, taking hold of his hand. "I'm already married."

"'Put on subvocalizer. You and Hutchins get married. Hahnahmoon,'" Hutchins said, shaking his head. "I'll bet he set up this whole thing with Charmaine's lawyer, the marriage, the honeymoon, everything."

He stood up and went over to the wall where the shoji screen had been. When he put out his hand to touch it, the band seemed to spread suddenly in all directions, suffusing the room in pink light.

"The honeymoon!" Chris said, getting up on her knees. "I think I know where we are. And you're wrong. He doesn't understand *every* word we say."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I'll bet you anything those trees are cherry trees, and that we're on a hana moon." The forest of blossoming trees stretched around them in all directions. She could almost smell the cherry blossoms. "It's beautiful here," she said.

"It is," he said, but he wasn't looking at the trees. "And I have the feeling nobody's going to come in to evict us or use the bathroom or do a tap dance routine." He walked over to the bed. "Spielberg didn't really give Molly and Bets a part in his movie, did he?"

Chris sat back on her heels. "You were right about Spielberg coming up to Sony incognito. You know the old man who lives above Charmaine?"

He pulled her up onto her knees. "In the baseball cap and sneakers? He's not Spielberg," he said. "He's just some chip-cam director who thinks

he can bring back slasher movies. He wanted to hire Okee to star in a low-budget remake of *Alien*. When I told him I didn't think Okee was available, he asked me if I thought people would believe in a pair of four-year-olds who were vicious murderers." He put his arms around her. "I said I hoped it was one of those movies where the murderers get what they deserve in the end. I like movies like that, where everybody gets what they deserve."

"So do I," Chris said. Hutchins was even closer than he had been on the bullet. Chris could definitely smell the cherry blossoms. "What's going to happen to Molly and Bets?"

"I don't know," he said, and leaned down to kiss her. "The old guy got this spooky smile on his face and mumbled something about tap shoes." ●

JULY 16, 1945, 5:29:45 AM, MOUNTAIN WAR TIME

Out beyond Paleozoic sands, the corduroyed gypsum dunes of a white as sun-so-bright and ivory as bleached skulls, even beyond the tortured yet youthful badlands with their pillows of Carrizozo Malpais lava, of hardened black pudding, coiled rocks, and between the Sacramento and San Andres ranges, thus between the fringes of the dark Inferno and the blinding glare of The Wasteland, lay what the Mescalero Apaches might have called "The Burning Canyons," for their ancient legends speak of such a year in this sunken, man-forsaken basin. Lacking poetry, we called it White Sands Missile Range.

There Oscura Peak jabbed its ragged stony finger up into the first primary washes of dawn, the dissipating thunderheads thick with rain. The Trinity machine, prototype atomic bomb, nested in electronic wires atop the tower site like an egg, the deposit of a great pterosaur who mistakenly used the skeletal steel for another rock pinnacle in the desert.

Ungainly, half-anorexic, Oppenheimer
paced the bunker like an expectant father
on the threshold of a hospital waiting room.
The Manhattan Project military man,
Groves, used to delays, napped like
a bodhisattva with hands on fattened belly.
Technicians smoked, chewed hang nails, and
argued plutonium ratios and brands of detonators.

At that final and precise moment,
irreversible still-point in time,
a heavy envelope of TNT gripped
the core like a rattler coiled into a fist—
the wizard light of neutrons bloomed,
balled over the desolation of New Mexico.
The Army copy boys penned an account to Truman
at the Potsdam conference, as Groves reports:
"a lighting effect within a radius of 20 miles
equal to several suns at midday."
Oppenheimer instead mouthed John Donne, the Bhagavad-Gita.
Most packed up, went home
unaware of the golem they had birthed.

That was Trinity
And Trinity Site.
For a few brief moments,
before General Groves retired into oblivion
or Oppenheimer was demoralized, crushed,
immortalized as a scapegoat to McCarthyism,
and for weeks before Hiroshima and Nagasaki,
a year before Bikini Atoll and many years
before Kamchatka, the desert fissioned
with something immense, almost beautiful.
It was a pure rending of the atom,
unsoiled by history's connotations,
unspoiled by the myopia of its makers.
We had touched the soul of a once distant,
always glacial universe.

As Oppenheimer recounts:
"A few people laughed,
a few people
cried.
Most people were silent."

—Robert Frazier

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

CLARKE'S NEW NOVA NOVEL

The Songs of Distant Earth

By Arthur C. Clarke

Del Rey, \$17.95

So the world ends in 3620. Not with the nuclear war that's so popular these days, but because the sun goes nova. It's not a very big nova, but effective enough. Mankind has known that this is to happen for about 1500 years, and in 2500 A.D. goes into high gear with interstellar seedships, since it is absolutely certain that manned travel between the stars is impossible.

At least one of the seedships succeeds, and humanity establishes an idyllic foothold on an aquatic planet it calls Thalassa ("of the sea," if my non-existent Greek serves). The stable population lives on the only land area (three large volcanic islands—three hundred kilometers end to end), manages a modicum of technology with the contents of the seedship, establishes and loses contact with Earth, and more or less dreams away seven centuries.

Meanwhile, back at the Solar System, at the eleventh hour and fifty-ninth minute, manned interstellar flight is found to be possible

in a major scientific breakthrough. A huge ship, with a million plus frozen passengers, departs just in time; in time, in fact, to see the Earth destroyed. The range of the ship is more or less infinite, but they plan to stop at Thalassa since they need water (which Thalassa has plenty of) to make into ice for a shield against deep space minutiae.

So the peace of the pastoral (aquatorial?) Lassans is suddenly broken by a ship—not from one of the other colonies, which they have half expected to happen, but actually from Earth itself.

Arthur Clarke's *The Songs of Distant Earth* chronicles the few months the 160 or so waking crewmen of the starship *Magellan* spend on Thalassa, and the interaction with the not-so-dumb colonists. Nothing really major happens. There is an attempted mutiny. There are some emotional entanglements. There is a small volcanic eruption and a tidal wave. Possible potential intelligent life is discovered in the Thalassan ocean. Then the *Magellan* leaves to found its own colony elsewhere.

This novel has a quality that I haven't found in Clarke's last few; I felt as I did on reading his earliest

work way back when. Perhaps it's its very simplicity. Possibly it's the wonderful, Edenesque Thalassa that makes it so appealing—Clarke has always been at his best when dealing with the sea. Maybe it's that it's based on a thirty-year-old short story (of the same title), and some of the warmth of the younger author has carried to the longer version. But there are still the wonder-full little surprises which are always Clarke's icing on his high-tech cake, and the masterful integration of the advanced scientific ideas into readable fiction.

Whatever, it's hugely enjoyable. And it would make a sensational movie (Clarke has done a screenplay version). Let's hope . . .

THE LAST OF THE CAVIAR

Godbody

By Theodore Sturgeon

Donald I. Fine, Inc., \$14.95

Theodore Sturgeon was, of course, one of those writers who took part in the remaking of science fiction and fantasy in the 1940s, making that period the most hectically brilliant (oh, the ideas and concepts that were being tossed about then) in the history of the related genres. He was perhaps the most individual of a highly individual lot, with an extraordinarily personal writing style—so artificial as to seem absolutely natural—and differing from the rest in centering his work totally around human beings. *His* recurring idea was the effect on not-so-ordinary people of various

fantastic events and concepts with which he involved them.

And yet I always connect Sturgeon with the tumultuous 1960s, and the youth revolution that was shaking all our lives then (my ouija-board word processor just wrote *loves* instead of *lives*—those, too). This is not only because he enthusiastically went along with it, and despite being a generation older than most of the youthful movers and shakers, was the hippest of the hip. It is because I have the feeling that he was one of the many reasons for the revolution. He himself helped shape the cause he so wholeheartedly took up. Sixties youth was the first generation to be widely read in SF; the field helped mold the temperament of hippiedom. Sturgeon was certainly one of the most popular writers of the decade before. If you read his stories from the 1940s and 1950s, you see the seeds right there, the humanistic, liberal, loving attitudes toward sex, tolerance, and nature (human and otherwise).

Now it is the 1980s, and Sturgeon's last novel, *Godbody*, has been published posthumously. It is a very brief one, and reflects everything said of his work above. It tells of the effect on a rural community of the appearance in its midst of a loving, sexual, miracle-working person who is simply called Godbody. As in all of Sturgeon's fiction, the people, good and bad, are the story, and what happens to them is immensely satisfying. There's a lot of love and a lot of sex, and all

the characters are happiest when they get together and take their clothes off.

One might say—very hesitantly and with many reservations—that this is Sturgeon's *Stranger In A Strange Land* (in a very different key, needless to say). It is shorter, simpler, and much warmer than that revered work, and, for my money, better.

VICTORIA AND ALCHEMY

Homunculus

By James P. Blaylock

Ace, \$2.95 (paper)

Arguing about whether a certain story is fantasy or science fiction has always been a major avocation for the querulous genre reader, but lately it has achieved the level of an Olympic sport. (This is, I concede, partially because there have been so many hybrids in the past decade.) So here's a philosophic factor to throw into the ring. Are stories based on outmoded (but in their time, valid) systems of science, such as alchemy, one or t'other?

The disputations can chew on that while reading James P. Blaylock's *Homunculus*. Others who couldn't care less about anything except a quirky, fast-moving read can just enjoy themselves, though there are a few problems along the way.

Homunculus takes place in Victorian London, and it has such a plethora of people that there's not that much room for a plot. There are seven or eight heroes, for in-

stance, all members of the Trismegistus Club, a loosely organized confederation mainly concerned with thwarting the evil intentions of the villains, who are fewer in number, but equally whacko.

Among others, the Trismegistus club membership includes: Langdon St. Ives, who has built a spaceship (complete with disposable rocket stage) in his back yard in suburban Harrowgate; Bill Kraken, a sometime hot pea seller (that's Victorian fast food) and dipsomaniac who reads deeply in science and philosophy and retains such gems of knowledge as that the equator is a belt which keeps the Earth from flying to pieces; William Keeble, the toymaker, who constructs artfully carved wooden boxes and oddities to go in them, such as an oxygenator for St. Ives' ship; Theophilus Godall of the Bohemian Cigar Divan in Soho; and nautical Captain Powers, who doesn't use the tobacco pipe built into his wooden leg (by Keeble, of course) because it attracts attention.

There are also a good many objects: four Keeble boxes, which variously contain, in addition to the oxygenator, a priceless emerald, a mechanical crocodile, and an extraterrestrial homunculus; a dirigible manned by a living skeleton which has been circling the Earth for a number of years; the extraterrestrial's spaceship, used as decor in a brothel; and a sort of chorus line/army of zombies, living dead reanimated by one of the villains.

The action (as opposed to the

plot), of which there's a lot, consists of all the heroes, villains, and objects chasing and being chased and bashing each other all over the mid-Victorian landscape. One is reminded vaguely of G. K. Chesterton's delightful *The Man Who Was Thursday* and even more of Tim Powers' *Anubis Gates*, mostly because of the time and place of the setting, and the complicated ingredients, but also because Blaylock refers to Powers' obscure poet, Ashbless, not to mention a quote from Powers on the cover.

Despite a certain lack of focus and an uncertainty at times as to who's on first (or anywhere, for that matter), *Homunculus* is pretty consistently amusing, and Blaylock can turn a phrase when he wants to. (*Re* an uppity butler: " 'Yes?' he said, drawing the word out into a sort of monologue.")

EARLY POWERS

Forsake the Sky

By Tim Powers

Tor, \$2.95 (paper)

And speaking of Tim Powers, here's a not-quite-new novel by himself. It's a rewritten version of the first novel of his to be published, *The Skies Discrowned*, which came out ten years ago and which didn't cause too much of a stir at the time. In an afterword, Powers says he has tightened and trimmed it, so it's essentially a different work from the earlier one. It also has a different title—*Forsake the Sky*.

Powers gives it a rather casual

SF background—it takes place on the planet Octavio, one of many planets in a dying Federation once united by the spaceships of the all-powerful Transport Authority. Many of these planets, like Octavio, are now more or less on their own, but the TA is trying to recapture them.

The hero is Francisco de Goya Rovzar (known as Frank), who as you might guess from his name is a painter, and the son of a painter. His father is unfortunately painting the portrait of Octavio's Duke when Transport invades, with the connivance of the Duke's son. Both painter and subject are killed in the takeover, and apprentice Frank, on hand, is sentenced to the mines of another planetary system.

From here, there's a distinctly medieval adventure story feel, as Frank escapes, goes underground in the capital city, ties in with the city's underworld (literally and figuratively—there's a sizable criminal population living in a city-beneath-the-city), rises to become the king of the subterraneans with pluck and luck, and avenges his father's death and puts a new Duke on the throne. There's almost no sense of any kind of future or otherworldly technology. It could be any pre-twentieth century culture, with a lot of swordplay (Frank is a whizzo swordsman), and wine-drinking.

But Powers' easy way with a story makes what could be fairly mundane stuff freshly diverting. His characters are likable and be-

lievable, the dialogue breezy and readable. And again we run into some of Powers' favorite themes: the underground community will recall subterranean London in *The Anubis Gates* (with macabre decoration such as the crazy beggar lady who uses a dead dog as a marionette), and, of course, the works of the omnipresent poet Ashbless inevitably crop up a couple of times.

JOB LOT MAGIC KINGDOM

Magic Kingdom For Sale—Sold!

By Terry Brooks

Del Rey, \$16.95

Terry Brooks has abandoned Shannara's locale (only temporarily) for another magic kingdom, and this one is for sale. It's called Landover (which I kept reading as Landrover for reasons I don't understand since I'm not automatically inclined), and it comes equipped with all the usual standard equipment.

There's a castle, of course. There's a dragon—just one, but a biggie; he's a proper countryside wastelayer (laywaster?) with the magic of the "old world" to boot. (What old world? Every magic kingdom has an "old world" which was much wiser and more skilled in magic than it is.) There are wood nymphs and trolls and gnomes, and over the hills is the fairy world, an "ephemeral place of non-being" through which go passages that lead from one world (ours, for instance) to another.

There's a witch who lives in a

wood, a ghostly knight who appears and disappears at opportune moments, and, of course, there's *got* to be a wizard who isn't quite up on his magic and makes all sorts of mistakes when trying to use it.

All of this is offered for sale in the "Wishbook" Christmas catalogue of a posh New York department store bearing a suspicious resemblance to Bloomingdale's. *Magic Kingdom For Sale—Sold!* chronicles the adventures of rich young lawyer Ben Holiday who goes and splurges a million bucks or so on it. Why? He's in an existential dilemma—recently widowed, dissatisfied with law as it's practiced now (there's a neat diatribe against the current practice of law; it might be noted that Mr. Brooks is a practicing lawyer), and all in all, at loose ends. He doesn't believe for a minute he's going to *get* a magic kingdom.

He does, and is automatically High Lord. And of course, there are catches (even despite a money-back-after-ten-days guarantee). Ben takes his duties seriously, and finds Landover in a terrible state of disrepair; aided by the inept wizard, two kobolds, and a talking dog named Abernathy, he has to get all the various factions of the place to co-operate so he can start collecting taxes and get things back in some sort of working order. But the Lords of the Greensward won't unless he does in the dragon, and the River Master won't unless the trolls stop polluting the waters with their mining, and the Witch won't be-

cause she's Not a Nice Person, and . . . you get the picture.

It's a funny idea for a book, and I wish the book were a little funnier. The humor should come from our determined hero running head on into all these clichés, but much of it falls a little flat. The wizard's ineptitude, for instance, doesn't ever approach the level of De Camp and Pratt's great original, the Incomplete Enchanter, who misplaces a magical decimal point and comes up with a thousand small dragons instead of one big one. And Mr. Brooks is sometimes a sloppy writer—the talking dog Abernathy (who is supposedly literate) calls the gnomes cannibals because they eat dogs. Come now, Mr. Brooks—check the definition of cannibal.

TIME GARDEN

Tom's Midnight Garden

By Philippa Pearce
Dell Yearling, \$4.95

For the fans of the gentle fantasy, a minor classic of the genre has been published in paperback for what I believe to be the first time. *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce tells of a boy staying with relatives in a large old house in a dreary suburb. Bored to tears, he sneaks out of the back door of the house (which he has been told leads only to a back yard with rubbish bins) at night and finds a splendid garden.

Through subsequent visits, he discovers that the garden is that of the house of nearly a century ago. The only one of the residents who

can see him (with one odd exception) is a lonely little girl—to her he is an imaginary playfellow. Over the course of a few weeks he watches her mature, and there are several fine touches where they manage to communicate over the years outside of the garden. And there is a very satisfying ending which is about as far from the it-was-but-a-dream clinker as you can get.

BACK ON THE CORLAY ROAD

The Road To Corlay

By Richard Cowper
Pocket Books, \$2.95 (paper)

Richard Cowper's *The Road To Corlay* is something of an unknown minor classic, and it's about time it came back into print. It's set at the beginning of the fourth millennium A.D.

A thousand years before, the world was flooded by melting ice caps triggered by air pollution. Britain is now an archipelago of tiny islands—Somerset is Somersea—and the people are farmers, strongly influenced by the Church.

In the first part, "Piper At the Gates of Dawn" (an unfortunate titular borrowing from the most moving chapter of *The Wind In the Willows*), the leading character is thirteen-year-old Tom, a talented piper whose music has strange powers. He has acquired his ability from a "wizard" who had cared for and educated him. From him, Tom has inherited his pipe, which may be a remnant of the technological past.

A new religion is founded, by and about Tom. The second section, *The Road To Corlay*, which takes place eighteen years after the first, has to do with what becomes of the new religion. At first tacitly condoned by the established Church, it has recently been declared heresy and gone underground. The story is mainly concerned with the attempt to get Tom's pipes and a valuable document of the new religion to Corlay, on the island of Brittany where they will be safe from the Church.

There's a kind of subplot which meshes the near future (*our* near future), when the inundating rains are just starting, with these events. A research scientist, experimenting with out-of-body drugs, somehow views them through the eyes of one of the leading participants.

As is so often the case, there have been a lot of novels like *The Road To Corlay* since it was first published (1978), but it has the flavor of an original.

And I'm glad to see that it's been republished with its original cover, which was a beauty. Some of the more forgetful readers complain when an old book is published with a new cover— apparently pictures stick in their minds more than a title or an author, and a plot is suspected to force them to buy the book for a second time. But when the old cover was a stinker, as most of them were (are), thank God for small favors. In this case, however, the publisher had the sense to keep a good one.

SHOPTALK

Michael Moorcock's *Gloriana* has never appeared in the U.S. in a mass market (regular sized) paperback, a most peculiar circumstance since it's probably his best novel. Well, it's finally happened. A wild and phantasmagoric (and lengthy) tale of an alternate Elizabeth I and her court, it's a combination of Moorcock's usual pell mell adventure and the grotesquely brilliant imaginings of Mervyn Peake (it's dedicated to Peake). It's a hum-dinger (Questar, \$3.50, paper).

If, like me, you've read H.G. Wells because you thought you should, and been taken with not only his ideas, but his often witty writing (who can forget the giant chicken at the tea party in *The Food of the Gods?*), you might like to know about three rare *non-SF* novels of his that have just been republished. This was the satirical, socially significant fiction that was supposed to be forever famous, rather than those wild scientific romances of his. They are *Marriage*, *The Passionate Friends*, and *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (The Hogarth Press, \$7.95 each, paper).

Dorsai followers will want *The Dorsai Companion* by (who else) Gordon Dickson, consisting of short pieces called "illuminations of the Childe Cycle" (Ace, \$5.95, paper).

There's a new volume in the Starmont Reader's Guides, those invaluable little reference works. This one is by Mark Siegel on Alice Sheldon. Who? *James Tiptree, Jr.*

is the better known moniker (always wanted to use that word). (Starmont House, PO Box 851, Mercer Island, WA 98040, \$7.95, paper.).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Third Annual Collection* edited by Gardner Dozois (Bluejay, \$19.95

hard-cover, \$10.95 paper); *Mythical Beasties* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh (Signet, \$3.50 paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Jack McDevitt returns next issue with our November cover story, "Voice in the Dark," a fascinating examination of what might happen when we finally *do* receive that message from an advanced alien civilization that scientists have been searching the skies for in vain for so many years now. There would be jubilation, of course, at the news that We Are Not Alone. But what if, when we finally decode the message, we don't like what it has to say... or the terrible price we may have to pay for receiving it... This is speculation at it's thought-provoking and disturbing best; don't miss it. Multiple Nebula- and Hugo-winner Frederik Pohl is also on hand in November, and in "Iriadeska's Martians" he too examines the effects that contact with aliens might have on human civilization, but from a totally different—and very funny—perspective.

Also in November: Lucius Shepard returns with a hard-hitting but oddly evocative look at the interplay between faith and survival in the midst of war, in "Fire Zone Emerald"; Gregory Frost takes us to the vividly colored Ireland of myth and legend for the wry but grisly tale of "The Hound of Mac Datho"; Susan Palwick treats us to a moving and bittersweet character study in "Elephant"; new writer Scott Stolnack deals with much more than merely "A Trace of Madness" in his fast-paced and razzle-dazzle yarn of the same name; and Joe Haldeman, wearing his poet's hat this time, takes a slyly-amusing look in verse at some "Machines of Loving Grace." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for the November issue on September 23, or subscribe, and miss none of our upcoming issues.

COMING SOON: new stories by Robert Silverberg, Isaac Asimov, Lucius Shepard, Harlan Ellison, Pat Murphy, Orson Scott Card, Ian Watson, Kim Stanley Robinson, Nancy Kress, Walter Jon Williams, Rudy Rucker, Harry Turtledove, Tim Sullivan, Gwyneth Jones, John M. Ford, Cherry Wilder, and many others.

SF

CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Fall is the busy season for cons overseas, and in North America away from the coasts. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's good to phone cons. For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me behind an iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, with a musical keyboard

AUGUST, 1986

23-24—**Japanese National SF Con.** For info, write: **201 Chanpier AWAZA, 1-6-8 Enokojima, Nishi, Osaka 550, Japan.** Or phone: (703) 823-3117 (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Osaka, Japan (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Japanese SF figures.

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation.** Marriott Marquis Hotel, Atlanta GA. (404) 521-0000. Ray ("Something Wicked . . .") Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. WorldCon 1986. Join at the door.

SEPTEMBER, 1986

4-7—**CopperCon.** Safari Resort Hotel, Phoenix AZ (602) 968-5673/968-7790. Laid-back "relax-a-con."

5-7—**Boreal.** Municipal Culture Center, Longueil QE. Annual French-speaking Canadian convention.

13-15—**CamCon, 17 Laing Rd., Colchester, Essex UK.** Cambridge, UK. John Christopher. 6th UniCon.

19-21—**Oxonmoot, % Curtis, 35 Martindale Close, Leicester LE2 7HH, UK.** Oxford, UK. P. Tolkien.

19-21—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Artist Michael Goodwin, D. Ing, astronomer R. Quigley.

19-21—**EarthCon, Box 5641, Cleveland OH 44101.** Gordon R. Dickson, C.J. Cherryh, R.M. Meluch.

26-28—**DeepSouthCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40258.** David Hartwell, S. Sucharitkul, artist Alex Schomburg, fan Ann Layman Chancellor. 24th annual Southern con. Masquerade, Hearts championship.

26-28—**ConTact, % Trimble, Box 36789, Los Angeles CA 90036.** Pasadena CA. Anthropology/SF.

29—**XIICon, % "Beachfield," Calmuir Rd., Lenzie, Glasgow UK G66 3JJ.** Another British con.

OCTOBER, 1986

3-5—**ConTradiction, 1356 Niagara Ave., Niagara Falls NY 14305.** George R.R. Martin, Nancy Kress.

3-5—**JAFCon, Box 510232, Salt Lake City UT 84151.** (801) 322-4437. Zelazny, Claremont, Busby.

10-12—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153.** (703) 389-9400. Alan Dean Foster, Hal Clement, Richard (Elfquest) Pini, Kelly Freas, Allen Wold, Star Trek actors. At Salem High School. James Bond films.

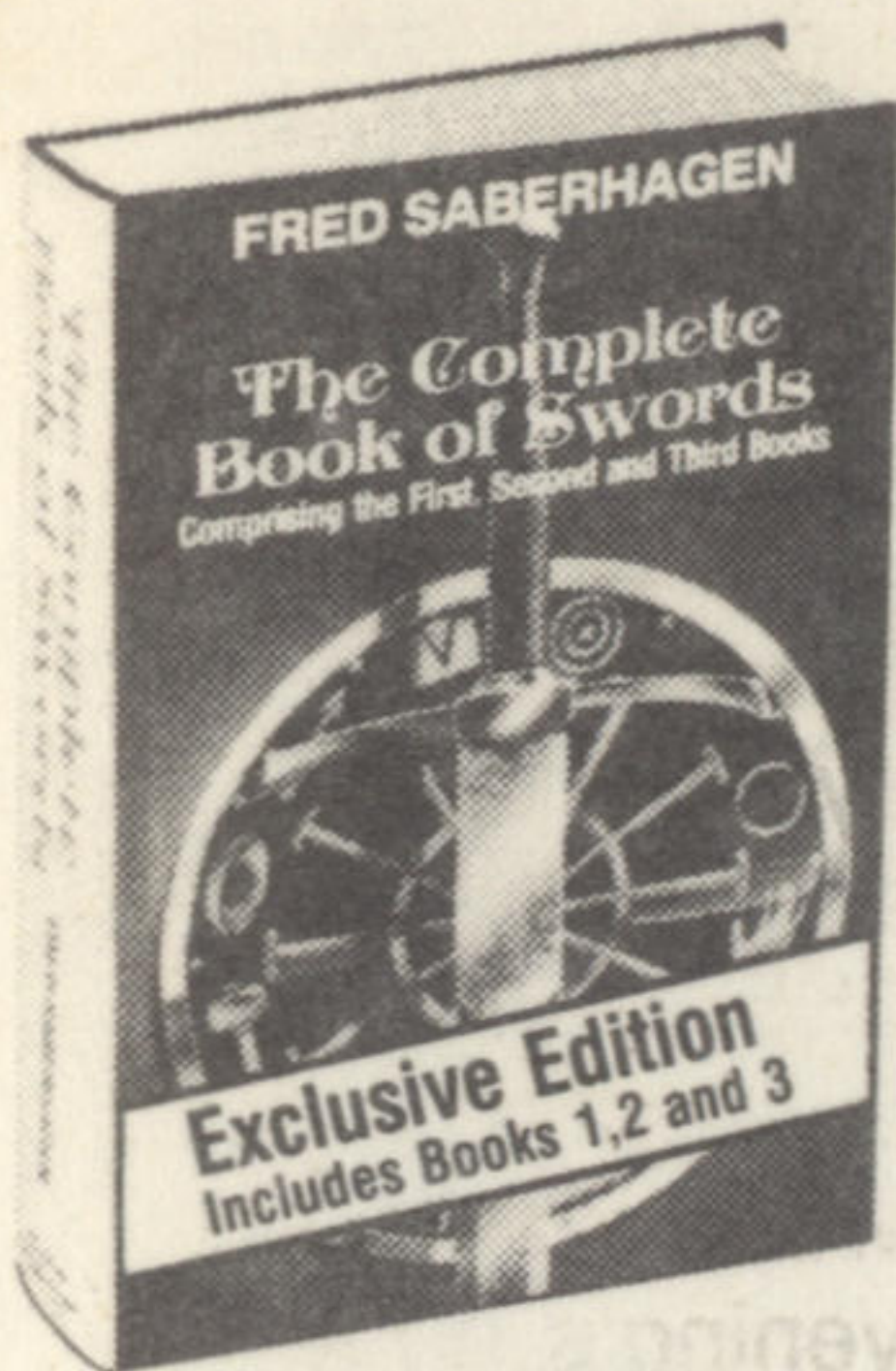
10-12—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** William Gibson, Lewis Shiner, Debbie Notkin.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, England. WorldCon '87.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. NASFiC 1987, held since WorldCon's abroad.



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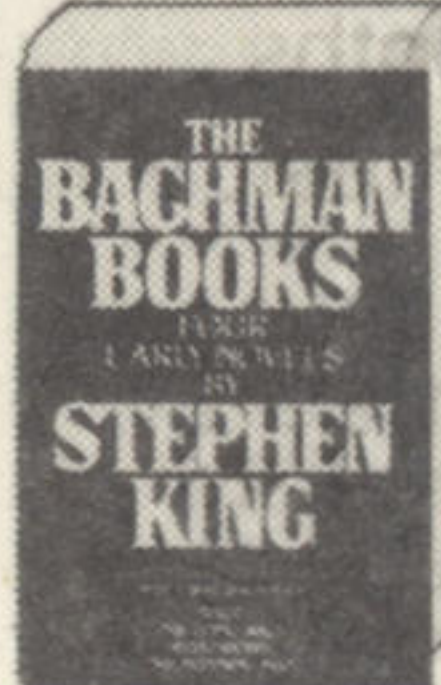
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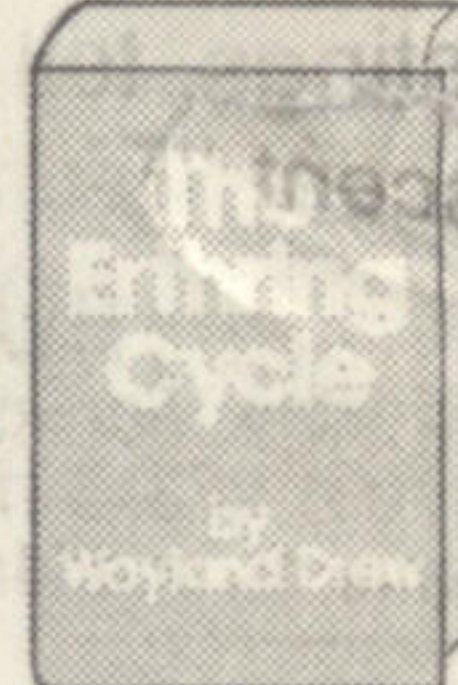
2204 Pub. ed. \$19.95



2212 Ender's Game; Speaker for the Dead. Comb. pub. ed. \$29.90



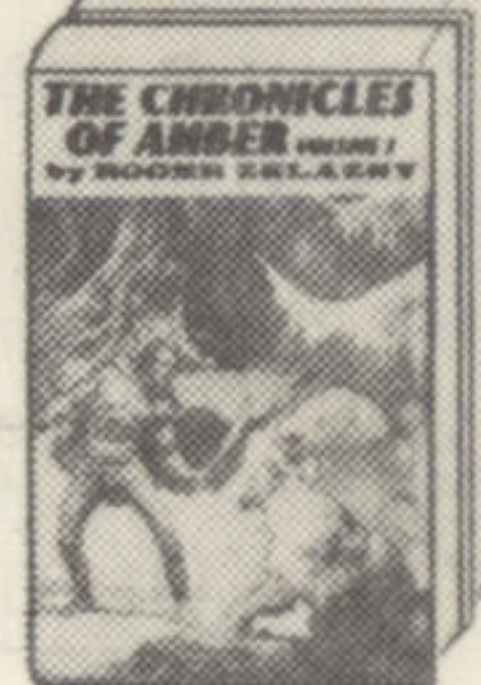
2428 The Black Company; Shadows Linger; The White Rose. Spec. ed.



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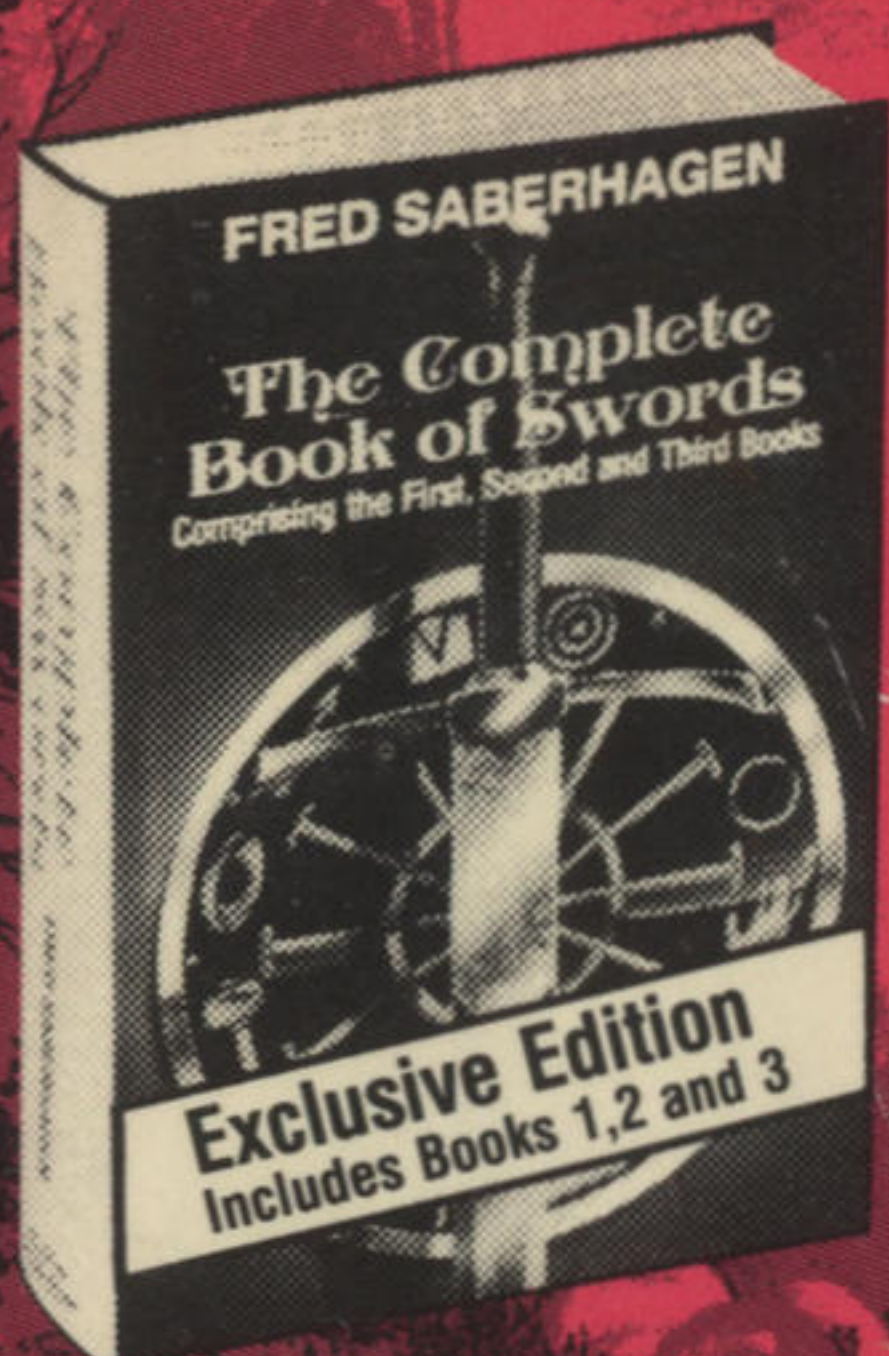
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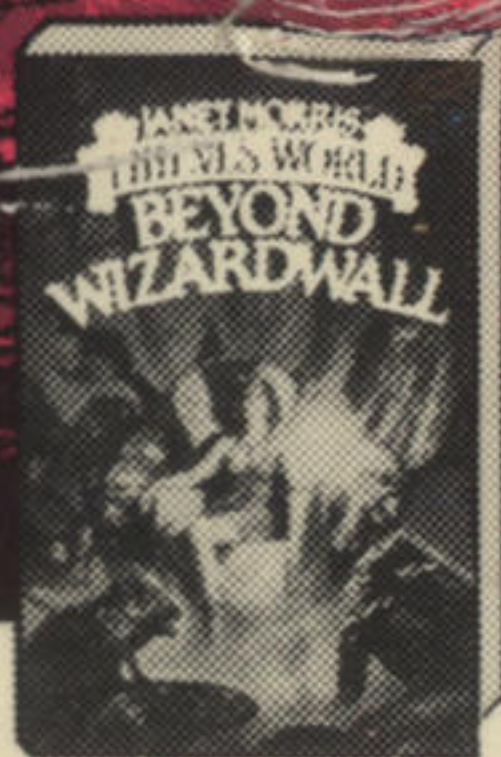


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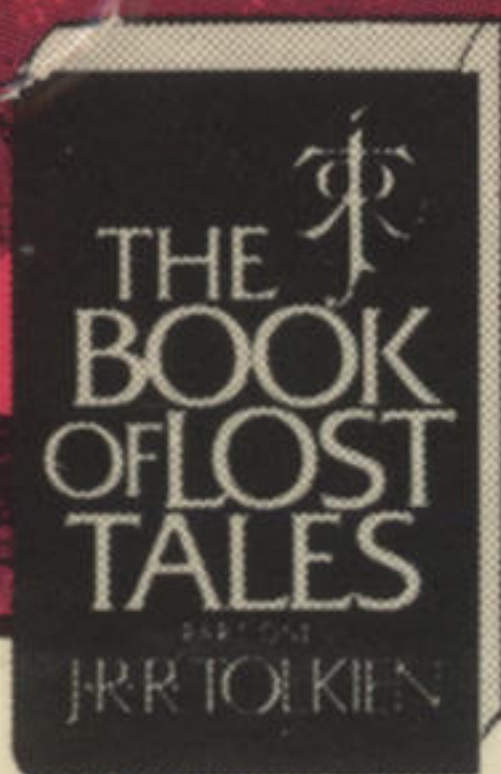
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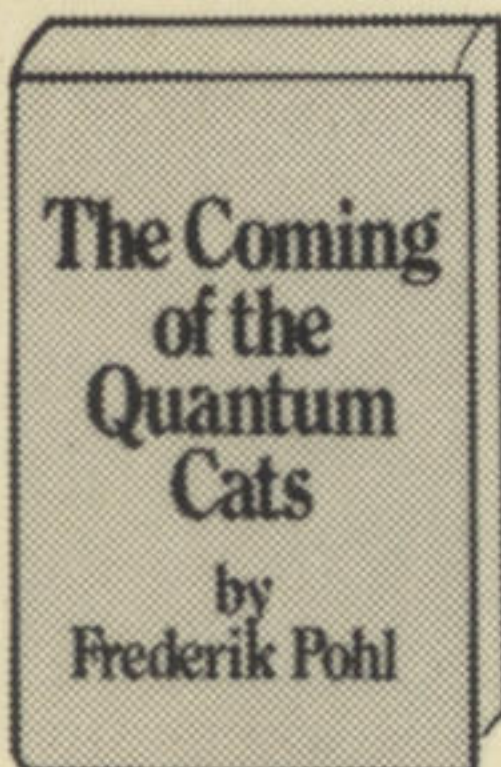
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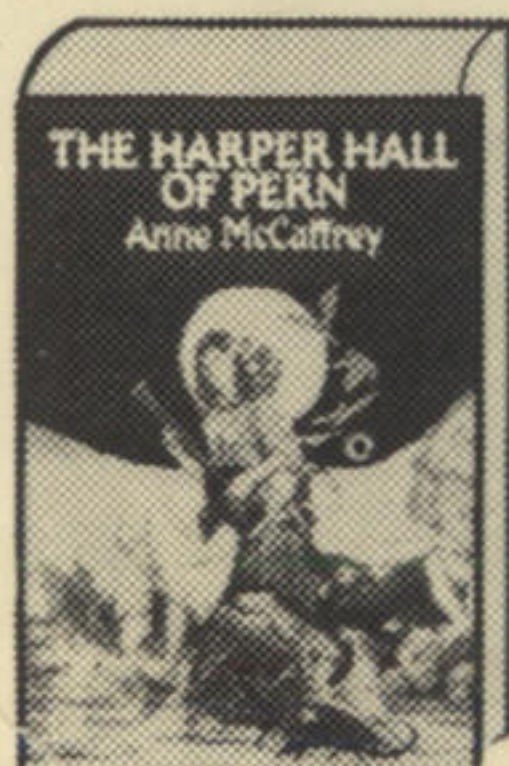
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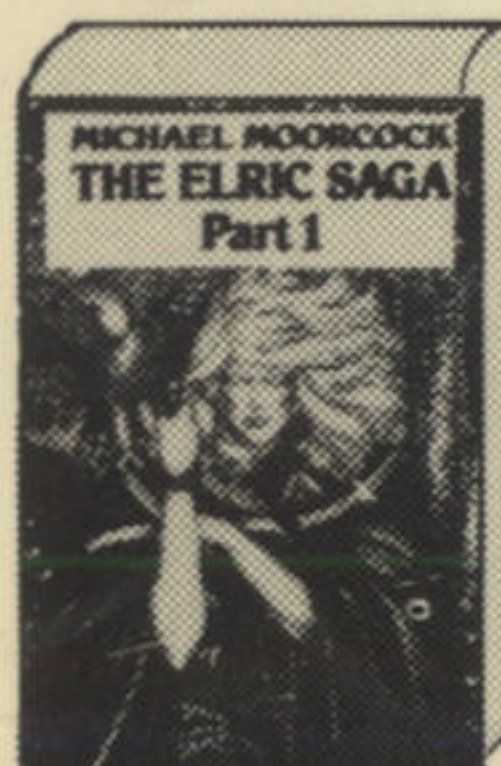
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