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NIGHT CRYTM

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"Adam and Eve and Pinch Me" by A.E. Coppard and "Bright Segment" by Theodore Sturgeon are reprinted from other sources.

The following appear in this issue of *Night Cry* for the first time anywhere: "Profile: A.E. Coppard" by Thomas E. Sanders (Nippawanock), "An Appreciation: Theodore Sturgeon" by Samuel R. Delany, "Bargain Cinema" by Jay Sheckley, "The Dog That Ate the Baby" by Peter A. Boley, "Bunny Didn't Tell Us" by David J. Schow, "Occupational Hazard" by G.L. Raisor, "Monarch of the Glen" by Jon Wynne-Tyson, "Arcade" by Thomas Wylde, "An Exciting New Technology Comes to Pickerington, Ohio" by Linda Haught, "Going Native" by Andrew Weiner, "Scrap When Empty" by A.R. Morlan, and "A Haunted House" by Susan Sheppard.

NIGHT CRY

Salutes

The winners of the 1985 Dimension Awards
Presented by the readers of *Twilight Zone Magazine*

Best Movie

(tie)

*Indiana Jones
and the Temple of Doom*

Ghostbusters

Best Book

Stephen King and Peter Straub
The Talisman

Best Story Published in *Twilight Zone Magazine*

(tie)

David J. Schow
"Coming Soon to a Theater Near You"

Robert Bloch
"Pumpkin"

Best Artwork Published in *Twilight Zone Magazine*

For "The Rocking Horse"
by Joe Burleson

WARNING:

You've opened a magazine so terrifying that you may not survive the experience. Read only at your own risk.

I'm a little uneasy about bringing you this copy of *Night Cry*. I've got this bad feeling that it might do something really dangerous to you; a person's heart can only stand so much strain before it begins to tear the filaments that hold it in his chest. And there are stories here that may rip your heart from its moorings and send it throbbing through your veins like an embolus bound for your brain.

Not a pleasant way to die. But then, if you weren't the sort of person willing to take that risk, you'd never have picked this book up off the rack in the first place.

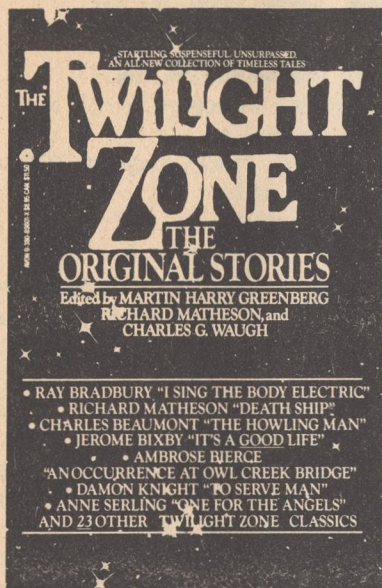
So let me tell you about what we've got in store for you.

About things like Jay Sheckley's "Bargain Cinema." The first time I read the story, it gave me real, honest-to-God nightmares. A whole week of them.

I don't scare easily. Not that reading horror stories all the time makes you numb, not really. Instead of numb, it's like grue and vileness take on a certain lyrical quality. But even so, I hadn't been scared in a long time. Even when I have bad dreams they're more fun than dreadful.

I've had to read the story five times this month. It still scares the hell out of me, still follows me around for hours afterward. I have to brace myself to get through the final pages.

But I'm sure that doesn't intimidate you. You're not the sort to let an extravagant claim make you ill at ease.



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From the Introduction by
Richard Matheson

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NIGHT CRY

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23 August 1985

Dear Reader,

We've heard from some of you that you're having a hard time finding *Night Cry* on your local newsstand. Because we've had so many inquiries, we're running this letter in the magazine, where we can talk to all of you at once.

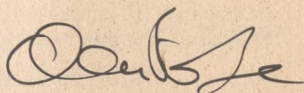
The newsstand is a crowded place these days; most retailers don't really have time to keep track of every magazine on the rack, especially small, digest-sized magazines like *Night Cry*. That's where you come in. There isn't anyone around as aware of our distribution as you are—except for our dedicated regional circulation managers (Brian Orenstein in the east, Bruce Antonangeli in the midwest, Harold Bridge III in the south, and Sam Frode-Hansen in the west), and those people, dedicated as they are, can only be in so many places at one time.

You, on the other hand, are right there where the problem is. If you let the people on your end of the magazine business know that you're looking for *Night Cry*, they'll listen. Talk to the manager of your local newsstand. Talk to your local distributor—the people at the company whose delivery vans actually bring *Night Cry* to you.

Let them know that you like *Night Cry*, and that you'd like to be able to buy the next issue, too. Let them know if you had a hard time finding this issue.

Remember, *Night Cry* isn't available by subscription, so only your newsstand can bring us to you.

Thanks. We'll be waiting for you.



Alan Rodgers
Editor

Theodore Sturgeon's "Bright Segment" does the same thing to me. I read it for the first time back when I was still in college, and it left me feeling as if I'd had my skin peeled off and my guts steam-cleaned. It's another one that I'm always afraid to finish. As far as I'm concerned, it's the best thing Sturgeon ever wrote. But almost nobody seems to know about it—probably because it just doesn't *belong* in a collection like *Caviar*, which, as far as I can tell, is the only place it's been printed. It's one of those great stories, I think, that never found its audience.

Until, brave soul, it found you.

What scares me most is that you'll be reading these all at once. I read them as they came in, one at a time over the course of months, and even so they left me frazzled. The terror waiting for you here goes way beyond the danger zone.

And it's not just terror, but *balanced* terror: deep, disturbing novelettes like Robert Silverberg's "A Thousand Paces Along the Via Dolorosa" and George Alec Effinger's "My Old Man" right up against gruesomely funny (and topical, too!) tales like Evan Eisenberg's "Heimlich's Curse" and Linda Haught's "An Exciting New Technology Comes to Pickerington, Ohio." Pathological and violent stories like Thomas Wylde's "Arcade" and Andrew Weiner's "Going Native" face to face with the lighter-than-air horror of John Robert Bensink's "Midtown Bodies," G.L. Raisor's "Occupational Hazard," and A.E. Coppard's "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me."

We've got stories of gruesome justice like David J. Schow's "Bunny Didn't Tell Us" and John Skipp's "The Long Ride" side-by-side with tales of unavenged murder like Jon Wynne-Tyson's "Monarch of the Glen" and Susan Sheppard's "A Haunted House"—something new for us, that last: horrific poetry, and damned *good* horrific poetry at that. We hope to see lots more like it.

Sue Sheppard isn't the only one playing with variant forms in this copy of *Night Cry*. Peter A. Bobley's "The Dog That Ate the Baby" isn't really a story at all, at least as far as I understand the form. In fact, it really reminds me much more of a folk tale—though, if I'm not mistaken, it can't be a folk tale if it's something written on paper instead of passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Maybe it's a "literary folk tale"—on an analogy with the literary ballad, not a ballad at all, really, and created on paper instead of orally. Whatever you want to

call "The Dog That Ate the Baby," though, it's wonderfully unsettling, and good clean fun to boot.

Don't look so scared. There's worse up ahead. You haven't gotten to the stories yet. But then, you may want to stop now, before it's too late. Before your heart starts slamming around in your ribcage like some lunatic stomping up and down.

Before things get out of hand.

Somehow, though, I don't think you will. You're the sort of person who saw J.K. Potter's blood-curdling cover and then picked up this magazine *wanting* to be scared out of his wits.

You, brave soul, are here of your own free will. I admire that.

—AR

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ATZDS

Bargain Cinema

by JAY SHECKLEY

Just like in the movies,
their romance was a razor-bladed dagger
with a shiny brass hilt.

"Chuck, look."

The serrated molybdenum knife moved back and forth across a cardboard photo of a chuckroast.

"No, sweetheart," Chuck said. "You're no steak." With a stubby forefinger he followed the knife's motorized path, pointing out the serving spears.

Patty admired the gleaming electroplate blade. Admiring it, she twisted a stringy lock of blonded hair around her finger.

"Come on," Chuck said. "Get a look at these."

Hungrily Patty examined the case of hunting knives. What kinds there were—folding knives, imitations of Swiss Army issue, small oval blades incised with woodland animals. "Look, a bobcat!" she said. "Oh, a cute beaver!"

"We don't need it for the picture on it," Chuck said.

"Yeah," Patty said. "That's for sure." They looked at each other shyly, knowing that no one knew their Plan. No one who hadn't seen the movie.

"For a buck more than those animals," Chuck said, "we could get *that* one."

"Ooh." Patty imagined Chuck's hand wrapped around the dagger's real brass hilt, coming at her.

The brass-hilted dagger was the most expensive knife in Gristleton. \$49.95. But nothing was too good that Tuesday. "Die with love and a flourish." That's what the movie had been about.



Bargain Cinema was two blocks from Patty's apartment. So every Saturday—regardless of the program—Chuck and Patty would go there, arm-in-arm.

Often the crumpled ticket-taker remembered them, and would refuse their dollar-fifty admissions. "Go on in," he'd croak affectionately. "You're nice kids."

They *were* nice kids, too. They knew each other from Marrowville High, and hadn't gone out with anyone else in three years. Well, once Chuck had kissed some girl named Diane Tartare at a big party in Gristleton. But that was all over with. It wasn't worth risking their happiness. Even though their happiness bored them.

They needed glamor. Chuck cooked at a ChewyBurger stand. Patty was the receptionist at Red's Lockers. Neither earned much or knew how to manage money. For fun Chuck had an old Chevy; Patty dyed her hair. Sometimes she dyed it Gravy Brown, sometimes Charcoal Black, and now Buttersauce Yellow. "Sure I like it," Chuck said. Patty's hair looked like threshed straw. Chuck said, "You could be a movie star."

Patty smiled. She nestled into her liver-colored parka as if it was a good fur. Glamor. It was all they needed. A dashing trim for their secure couplehood.

The Italian movie *Amplitude* gave them direction. It gave them hope that they could triumph over the commonness and the pettiness of love. "They risked all," the Bargain Cinema poster said, "to be lovers like the world had never seen. Violent and tender, shocking and beautiful: Was it murder, or eternal romance? AMPLITUDE—Rated R."

Chuck and Patty did not even glance at the marquee. This had been a Saturday, Movie Night. That was enough for them.

"Go on in," the ticket-taker said. "You're nice kids."

The nice kids went on in. They didn't smoke marijuana in the theater. They didn't spill popcorn. They didn't shout. They abstained from public necking.

Arms around one another's shoulders, they watched the screen couple make their vows. After the movie, they went out for a couple of Cokes and some pie.

"I hate foreign movies," Patty said. "But this one was okay."

"Yeah," Chuck said. He was finishing his pie.

"Should've been in English," Patty said. "Nobody reads that fast."

"Uh-huh." Chuck sucked the last of his Coke up the straw. Patty hadn't finished her mincemeat.

"Can you tell me it?"

"What?"

"The story," Patty said. "How the guy comes to slit her throat for love."

"Eat your pie," Chuck said. He was paying for it.

"If you tell me."

"Eat," Chuck said. "Okay—it was like this. The guy—he had a funny name—he loved that girl, right? And she loved him. But they didn't get married 'cause when their friends got married they saw it wasn't no good. So they wanted to love each other like they already were."

"That's us," Patty said. "Isn't it, Chuck?"

"Yeah," he said. "But eat. So then she got knocked up, or something makes her father yell at the guy, and then the guy and his girl have a fight."

"They have a fight," Patty said with enthusiasm, "and then they get together again and kiss and there's all that music."

"Right," Chuck said. "But they saw there was going to be trouble. They loved each other. They knew they would fight or get bored or break up or just forgive each other, year after year. So he says, 'Don't forgive me, I'm not going to live like that,' or something."

"Then," Patty said, "they came up with the Plan."

"I thought you didn't understand it."

"It was in *Italian*! How can I be sure?"

"Okay, okay, I'll tell you," Chuck said. "Eat. So she says she doesn't want to lose him, or ever be with another man. She wants him to change her so the bad things can't happen. She asks him to kill her."

"Yeah," Patty said.

"And he says no, no way man, that's too dangerous. But he loves her. Finally he agrees to it."

"That's beautiful," Patty said.

"It's scary, if you ask me."

"But he did it," Patty said, "because he loved her."

"And because they had problems," Chuck said, "and so she wouldn't screw around."

"That's not why!" Patty said. She was pouting. "It's so their love would be *pure*. What's-his-name was the bravest man I've

ever seen!"

"Oh yeah?" Chuck said. They were both starting to take it personally. "Yeah? Even the girl was a lot braver than you."

"Sure," Patty said. "You're just embarrassed green that you could *never* do a thing like that. Even for me."

"What do you know?" Chuck said.

Two weeks later they bought the knife.

After the Plan, how happy they were! Nobody understood but them. They took long drives among farmlands, and made every detail part of their vow. No one understood but them.

Once Patty asked, "What will you say when somebody tells you I've been found dead?"

"I'll try to act natural," Chuck said. "Maybe I'll cry. I'll say, 'Shit, you're kidding!'" Patty kissed him. How happy they were!

This, they knew, was Love. This was Glamor: intimacy and risk. Their fates were bound together by their pact. More than making love—this was something they would do only once, only with one another.

On the final day the knife was selected. "Meet you at the car," Patty whispered. Alone, she paid cash for the dagger; then upstairs in the ladies' room she combed her stiff hair, and tucked her new top neatly into her new jeans. She felt high . . .

Patty jumped into the car.

"Got it?" Chuck said. It was like a bank robbery.

"Here." Patty handed him the paper bag and the sales receipt. "You have everything?"

"Checklist," Chuck said, "blanket, bottle of wine—"

"What kind?"

"It's here somewhere." Chuck fished around on the Chevy's floor and found a bottle. "Here: Uncle Jack's Grape Wine."

"Yuck."

"Oh come on, sweetheart," Chuck said, "Not now. We're never going to argue again, right?"

"I'm sorry."

"Let's see—I also have three Quaaludes."

"Really?" Patty said. "Downs?"

"Only the best," Chuck bragged, "for my best girl. You want to do this thing now?"

"No," Patty said.

"No?" Chuck was amazed. "Why didn't you say so before? Jeez."

"No, no," Patty said, "I didn't mean it like that. I want to do it. Really. But now I'm hungry."

They dined at Burger Bonanza. They had two Bigburgers each. Under the table their ankles touched. They spent five dollars and forty cents, but it was worth it. They were stuffed.

It was six thirty when they left Burger Bonanza. By the time they got out to the old barn the light was fading fast. There, in view of the full moon, they spread the blanket and undid the twist-off cap on the wine.

"Better take these now," Chuck said. He handed her the Quaaludes.

"Three?" she said. "Don't you want one?"

"I don't want to get sloppy," Chuck said. He tried to sound like he knew what he was doing. "But I *will* help you kill the wine."

Patty laughed and took her medicine. They drank and huddled and waited for Patty to relax.

The last thing she said was, "You'll fix us, won't you, Chuck."

There was no counting time. The moon was high. Finally the pills acted like tiny weights in her lips and cheeks. Chuck zipped Patty's parka. *She must be getting cold.* Then he unzipped it a little so the neckline was accessible.

He recalled one of his last conversations with her. "Well, why don't you kill me?" he had asked. Patty had said, "No! It should be like it was in the movies." Now she murmured drunkenly. *I'll never hear her speak again.* He felt the burden of his duty like a hideous bird that had him by the neck. He could hardly breathe; yet the cool, fresh air burned his throat. He wanted to leave and never see Patty again. *I love her,* he told himself.

The knife was in her small hands. She slept with it, as she once slept with a Barbie Doll. *Better hurry.*

He took the knife. *This is so difficult. I am a man; a man can do this.*

Chuck slung the faintly conscious girl across his lap. Her head lolled back; the expanse of her throat gleamed.

Like it was in the movies. Or how could I keep her? He had to have the nerve. *A man.*

He raised the knife; slashed at her.

"No!" she cried, waking. She tensed, trembling in the uncertainty of his cut. She felt suddenly defiant and alone; uncoupled,

intending to live.

"Lie back," Chuck hissed. He stroked her cheek. "I'll get it right." *She's suffering, he thought, I'm failing.*

Patty's left hand came up, clasped her throat. She picked at the new flap of flesh. She felt damaged; he should finish. "Chuck," she said dreamily.

She leaned back limply into his lap, returned her hand to her side, sighed. Her fingers were sticky and slimy . . . blood? Yes, of course. "Dear Chuck," she whispered. She thought she was composing a gentle letter to him from far away. Then the blade became decisive and changed them forever.

The night air was cold. A new silence pointed at Chuck. He was shaking.

For a moment he didn't know why any of this was here; a blanket, a bottle of Uncle Jack's Grape Wine, a girl all messy under the big moon, her head separate from her body.

Chuck was very cold. There was a thick jelly between his fingers. Somewhere a dog barked twice.

Chuck was supposed to leave. Now. Now. He wiped his hands on the coarse wet weeds. He wrapped the blanket across the corpse. Before, he thought he would say, "Goodbye, sweetheart" and kiss her. But his gut hurt him and Patty wasn't there playing movies any more. Chuck recited "Shit-you're-kidding, shit-you're kidding" all the way to the car.

And the car started like a dream; the headlights were twin projectors. From his seat he watched his own life, moving slowly.

A Thousand Paces Along the Via Dolorosa

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

Horncastle came to the holy land
to search for God in the haze of a mushroom.

Horncastle said to the dapper young Israeli, "When they eat the mushroom, do they think they see God?"

"Far more than that. The mushroom *is* their god. When they eat it, they become one with Him—they become Him. It is the pure *agape*," Ben-Horin said, "the true Christian feast."

Ben-Horin's voice, light but firm, crisp and clipped, had a dizzying musical quality. A pounding began in Horncastle's forehead. Being with the Israeli made Horncastle—a big man, some years older, nearly forty—feel thick and clumsy and slow. And what Ben-Horin was telling him about these Arab tribal rites stirred in him some mysterious hunger, some incomprehensible longing, that baffled and astounded him. He felt woozy. He suspected he might have had too much to drink. He looked up and across, out the big window of the hotel cocktail lounge. Off there to the west, Jerusalem was awesome in the late afternoon sunlight. The domes of the two great mosques, one gold and one silver, glittered like globules of molten metal. Horncastle closed his eyes and put his drink to his lips and said, "Take me to these people."

"Gently, gently. What they do is very illegal in Israel. And they are Arabs, besides—Christian Arabs, who live between worlds here, who are very cautious people at all times."

"I want to go to them."

"And eat their mushroom? And become one with their god?"

Horkastle said hoarsely, "To study them. To understand them. You know this is my field."

"You want to eat the mushroom," said Ben-Horin.

Horncastle shrugged. "Maybe." To swallow God, to be possessed by Him, to entangle one's identity with Him—why not? Why not? "How long before I can go to them?" he asked.

"Who knows? A week? Two? Everything here is conditional. The politics, the inflation rate—the weather, even. One takes everything into account. I promise you you'll see them. Until Easter everything is crazy here—pilgrims, tourists, wandering ecstasies. It gets a little like Benares, almost. After Easter, all right? Can you stay that long?"

Horncastle considered. He was on sabbatical. He had virtually fled Los Angeles, escaping from the wreckage of his life there. It didn't matter when he went back, or if he ever did. But he was gripped with impatience. He said, "I'll stay as long as possible. But please—soon—"

"We must wait for the right moment," said Ben-Horin firmly. "Come, now. My wife is eager to meet you."

They went out into the surprisingly chilly April air. With a lurch and a roar Ben-Horin's tiny orange Datsun took off, down the hill, around the compact medieval splendor of the walled Old City, and through New Jerusalem. Ben-Horin was an outrageous driver, screeching through the streets like a racer in the Grand Prix, honking ferociously at his fellow motorists as if they were all retired Nazis. The Israelis must be the most belligerent drivers in the world, Horncastle thought. Even a cool cosmopolitan type like Ben-Horin, professor of botany, connoisseur of rare fungi, turned into a lunatic behind the wheel. But that was all right. Life had been a roller-coaster ride for Horncastle for a couple of years now. One more round of loop-the-loop wasn't going to bother him much. Not after three stiff jolts of arrack on the rocks. Not here. Not now.

Ben-Horin lived in a grey and blue high-rise, spectacularly situated on a hilltop near the university. It looked stunning from a distance, but once inside Horncastle noticed that the stucco was cracking, the lobby tiles were starting to fall out, the elevator made disturbing groaning sounds. The Israeli ushered him into a tiny immaculate apartment. "My wife Geula," said Ben-Horin with

a brusque little wave. "Thomas Horncastle of the University of California, Los Angeles."

She was a surprise: a big woman, an inch or two taller than Ben-Horin, probably twenty pounds heavier, with a ripe if not overripe look to her. It was hard to imagine these two as man and wife, for Ben-Horin was dry and precise and contained, and she was full of vitality—young and pretty, in a way, and overflowing with life. Her eyes were dark and glossy, and it seemed to Horncastle that she was looking at him with outright interest. Probably a figment of the arrack, he decided.

He needed no more drinks, but he had never been good at refusing them, and soon she had a martinilike thing in his hand, something made with Dutch gin and too much vermouth. The conversation was quick, animated, impersonal. Perhaps that was the style here. Ben-Horin and his wife were both well informed about world affairs, though everything seemed to circle back to analyses of the impact of this event or that on Israel's own situation. Possibly, Horncastle thought, if you live in a very small country that has been surrounded by fanatical enemies for its entire life, you get fixated on local issues. He had been startled, at the international symposium where he had met Ben-Horin last December, to hear an Israeli historian expounding on the Vietnam war in terms of Israel and Syria. "If your government tells you to defend an outpost," he had said, "you go and defend it. You don't argue with your government about the morality of the thing!" With that sort of outlook even the rainfall in Uganda could become a significant domestic political issue.

Somehow he finished his martini and one after that, and then there was wine with dinner, a dry white from the Galilee. Horncastle always drank a little too heavily, especially when he was traveling, but in the last few turbulent years it had started to be a problem, and the way the Ben-Horins kept him topped off could get troublesome. He knew he was on the edge of becoming sloppy, and worked hard at staying together. After a time he was just nodding and smiling while they talked, but suddenly—it was late, and now everyone was drinking a corrosive Israeli brandy—she wanted to know about his field of study. He did his best, but his voice sounded a bit slurred even to him. Professor of experimental psychology, he said, here to investigate rumors of archaic cultist practices among the Arabs just south of Jerusalem.

"Oh, the mushroom," she said. "You have tried it in Califor-

nia, perhaps?"

"In a minor way. In the course of my research."

"Everyone in California takes drugs all the time, yes?"

Horncastle smiled blearily. "Not these days. Not as much as is commonly believed."

"The mushroom here, the *Amanita muscaria*," she said, "is very strong, maybe because it is holy and this is the Holy Land. Stronger than what is in California, I believe. No wonder they call it a god. You want to try it?"

Hazily he imagined she was offering him some right now, and he looked at her in horror and amazement. But Ben-Horin laughed and said, "He is not sure. I will take him to Kidron and he can conduct his own investigation."

"It is very strong," she said again. "You must be careful."

"I will be careful," Horncastle said solemnly, although the promise sounded hollow to him, for he had been careful so long, careful to a fault, pathologically careful, and now in Israel he felt strangely reckless and terrified of his own potential recklessness. "My interest is scholarly," he said, but it came out *skhollally* and, as he struggled desperately and unsuccessfully to get the word right, Ben-Horin tactfully rescued him with an apology for having an early class the next day. When they said goodnight Geula Ben-Horin took his hand and, Horncastle was certain, held it just a moment too long.

In the morning he felt surprisingly fine, almost jaunty, and at midday he set out for the old city on foot. Entering it, he looked about in wonder. Before him lay the Via Dolorosa, Christ's route to the Crucifixion, and to all sides spread a tangle of alleys, arcades, stairs, tunnels, passageways, and bazaars. Horncastle had been in plenty of ancient cities, but there was something about this one that put it beyond all others. He could touch a paving stone and think, King David walked here, or the Emperor Titus, or Saladin, and this was where Jesus had staggered to Golgotha under the weight of his own cross.

So, then: up one winding street and down another, getting himself joyously lost—Monastery of the Flagellation, Western Wall, Dome of the Rock, Street of the Chain, a random walk, poking his nose into the *souks* where old hawk-faced men sold sheepskin rugs, pungent spices out of burlap bags, prayer beads, shawls, hideous blue ceramic things, camel statuettes, unplucked

chickens, sides of lamb, brass pots, hookahs, religious artifacts of every sort, and, for all Horncastle knew, merchandise far more sinister than any of that. In a noisy fly-specked market he bought some falafel and a carbonated beverage, and a little farther on, still hungry, he stopped at a place selling charcoal-grilled kebabs.

The fascination of the place was like a drug. These timeless faces, men in worn serge suits who wore flowing Bedouin head-dresses, young women darting from doorway to doorway, grubby children, dogs blithely licking at spilled God-knows-what in the gutters, old peasant women with refrigerators or television sets strapped to their backs, cries and odors, the periodic amplified songs of the muezzins calling the faithful to the mosques, picturesque squalor everywhere—why, it was like a movie, like time travel, even, except that it was actually happening to him; he was here and now in Old Jerusalem, capital of the world. It was exhilarating and a little intoxicating.

And there was that extra little thrill, that *frisson*, of knowing—if he could believe Ben-Horin's story—that the ancient religion still flourished somewhat hereabouts, that there were still those who ate of the sacred mushroom that had been the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, the manna of the Israelites, the hallucinogenic phallic fungus that made one like unto a god. Perhaps that boy with glittering eyes in the dark doorway, that old man leaning against the cobbled wall, that powerful fellow in the tinsmiths' stall—secret mystics, devouring God in rites as old as Sumer, undergoing joyous metamorphoses of the spirit, ecstasies. From the Greek, *ekstasis*, the flight of the soul from the body. "You must come to Israel," Ben-Horin had told him last winter at that meeting in Monaco, after Horncastle had read his paper on Siberian mushroom intoxication. "The most surprising things still exist among us, a dozen kilometers from the tourist hotels, and scarcely anyone knows about them. And those that do pretend that nothing is going on."

At two p.m. Horncastle emerged from the maze of the Old City at the Damascus Gate. Ben-Horin was already there. "A punctual man," the Israeli said, turning a quick grin on and off. "You feel all right today? Good. Come with me." He led Horncastle back into the heart of the city. Near the Via Dolorosa he said, "Walk slowly and glance to your left. See the man at the falafel stand? He is one. A user of *tiqla*."

"*Tiqla*?"

"The word is Aramaic. The mushroom. A reference to its phallic shape. Are you hungry?"

They approached the falafel stand. The man behind the counter, presiding over basins of bubbling oil, was an Arab, about thirty, with a lean triangular face, wide jutting cheekbones tapering down toward a sharp narrow chin. Horncastle stared at him flagrantly, peering as though he were a shaman, an oracle, a holy man. Questions boiled and raged in his mind, and he felt once again that urgent hunger, that need to surrender himself and be engulfed by a larger force.

Ben-Horin said something curt and harsh in Arabic, and the falafel-seller scooped several of the golden chick-pea balls out of the hot oil, stuffing them into envelopes of pita bread. As he handed one across to Horncastle, his eyes—dark, faintly hyperthyroid, bloodshot—met the American's and locked on them for a long moment, and Horncastle flinched and looked down as he took the sandwich. Ben-Horin paid. When they walked away, Horncastle said, "Does he know you?"

"Of course. But I could hardly speak to him here."

"Because he's an Arab and you're a Jew?"

"Don't be absurd. We're both Israeli citizens. It is because I am a professor at Hebrew University and he's a falafel-seller, and this is the Old City where I am an intruder. There are class lines here that neither he nor I should cross. Don't believe all you hear about what an egalitarian country this is."

"Why did you take me to him?"

"To show you," said Ben-Horin, "that there are *tiqla'* folk right in the midst of the city. And to show him that you have my sponsorship—for they trust me, after a fashion, and now they are likely to trust you. This must all be done very, very slowly. Come, now. My car is near the bus station."

With his usual terrifying intensity Ben-Horin circled the northeast corner of the Old City and headed south out Jericho Road toward the Kidron Valley. Quickly they left the urban area behind and entered a rough, scrubby terrain, rocky and parched. Like a tour guide Ben-Horin offered a rapid commentary. "Over there, Mount Zion, Tomb of David. There, Valley of Hinnom, where in ancient times were the high places where Baal and Moloch were worshipped. Still are, perhaps, but if it's going on they keep very quiet about it. And here—" Dry ravines, stony fields. "—Kidron. You follow the valley to its end and you are in the Dead Sea."

Horncastle saw shepherds, a camel or two, stone huts. Ben-Horin turned off on an easterly road, poorly maintained. It was amazing how quickly the land became desert once you were a short way down from cool hilly Jerusalem.

The Israeli pointed ahead, toward a scruffy village—a few dozen crude buildings clumped around a couple of tin-roofed stores, one emblazoned with a giant red COCA-COLA sign. "This is the place. We will not stop today, but I will drive slowly through."

The town was dusty, ramshackle, drab. Outside COCA-COLA sat a few old men in jeans, battered pea jackets, and Arab head-dresses. A couple of sullen boys glowered at the car. Horncastle heard a radio playing—was that an old Presley number wailing across the wasteland? He said, "How in God's name did you ever get them to open up to you?"

"A long slow process."

"What was your secret?"

Ben-Horin smiled smugly. "Science. The Arabs had begun to exhaust their traditional fungus sources. I told them other places to look. My price was entree into their rites. I pledge you, it took a long time."

"You've had the mushroom yourself?"

"Several times. To show my good faith. I didn't enjoy it."

"Too heavy for you?"

"Heavy? Heavy?" Ben-Horin seemed puzzled by the idiom. Then he said, "The physiological effects were fascinating—the intensifying of colors and textures, the sense of the earth as a breathing organism, the effect of having music turn into flavors and shapes, all the synesthesias, the familiar psychedelic circus. But also very very powerful, more than I had experienced elsewhere. I began to feel that there truly was a God and He was touching my consciousness. I am willing to perceive the sound of a flute as something with mottled wings, but I am not willing at the age of thirty-one to begin generating a belief in supernatural deities. And when I began to lose sight of the boundaries between God and Ben-Horin, when I began to think of myself as perhaps partaking of the nature of Jesus—" Ben-Horin shook his head. "For me this is no pastime to pursue. Let those who want to be gods, saviors, divine martyrs, whatever, eat their fill of the mushroom. I am content to study its worshippers."

They were well past the village, now, three or four miles into

the empty desert. Horncastle said, "Do you think this cult has simply survived since ancient times, or is it a deliberate modern revival?"

"I have no idea."

"But what do you think?"

"I said, I have no idea. Do you?"

Horncastle shrugged. "Since the whole Near East once was honeycombed with mushroom cultists, I suppose it's possible that one group has hung on. Especially here. I'm familiar with Allegro's notion that Jesus himself never existed, that 'Jesus' is just a code word for the sacred mushroom that rises from the ground, the phallic-looking son of God that is eaten and shows the way to the Godhead. And this is Jesus's own turf, after all. But presumably these cults were all suppressed thousands of years ago."

"Presumably."

"It's exciting to think that the belief simply went underground instead. I want to find out."

"With luck, you will, my friend."

"Take me into the village?"

"Eventually."

"Why not now? While we're actually here."

"Your impatience will be your ruin, dear Horncastle. We must move very slowly."

"If you understood how eager I—"

"I do understand. That is why there must be no haste."

They rounded a bend in the road. An Israeli soldier was standing beside an overturned motorbike, signaling for help. Ben-Horin halted and there was a brief colloquy in Hebrew. Then the soldier clambered into the car, apologizing in mild inexact English as he jammed himself next to Horncastle and made room for his machine gun. "We will give him a lift back to Jerusalem," Ben-Horin explained. That put an end to any talk of sacred mushrooms.

As they passed through the village again, Horncastle noticed that a younger man had emerged from COCA-COLA and stood outside it, arms folded. For an eerie moment Horncastle thought he was the falafel-seller—the same face, wide cheekbones, pointed chin, bulging, brooding eyes—but of course that was unlikely; this must be a cousin, a brother. In these villages everyone has the same genes.

"I will drop you at your hotel," said Ben-Horin.

Itchy irritating frustration assailed Horncastle. He wanted much more than this, and he did not want to wait, and if impatience would be his ruin, so be it: he was impatient. He felt irritable, volatile, explosive. With an effort he calmed himself. Ben-Horin was right: only by moving slowly would anything be accomplished. The trouble was he had moved so slowly so long, all through his tame, disciplined academic life. Now those disciplines seemed to be breaking down, and he stood on the brink of strangeness, awaiting the dive.

He said, "When will we meet again?"

"In a few days," Ben-Horin replied. "I must deliver a lecture in Haifa tomorrow, and then there are other responsibilities. I will call you."

The bartender at the hotel recognized Horncastle and asked him if he wanted arrack again. Horncastle nodded gloomily and studied the liquor, watching the ice cubes turn the clear fluid cloudy. Shadows were starting to lengthen over the domes and parapets of the Old City.

He was working on his third drink when two tourists came in, obviously mother and daughter, say fifty-five and thirty, good-looking, long-legged, golden-haired women with delicate slender faces, fragile sharp noses. British, he guessed, from the severe cut of their clothes and from the imperfect, somewhat bucked teeth. Before long he managed to draw them into conversation. British, yes, Claudia and Helena, cool and elegant and self-contained, friendly. Helena, the daughter, asked what he was drinking. "Arrack," he said. "Anise liqueur, like the Greek ouzo, you know? The Turkish raki. Same stuff from Indonesia to Yugoslavia." The daughter ordered one; the mother tried it and called for sherry instead.

Before long the women were on their second drinks and he was ready for his fourth, and everyone was a little flushed. There was a pleasant sexual undercurrent to the conversation now, nothing obvious, nothing forced, just there: mature and not unattractive man sitting with two mature women in strange land. Anything might happen. He was fairly certain of the glow in Helena's eyes—that same you-need-but-ask shine that he had imagined he had seen in Geula Ben-Horin's, but this did not seem like imagination. And even the older one had a spark of it. He allowed himself quick foolish fantasies. The mother tactfully excusing herself at the

right moment; he and the daughter going off somewhere for dinner, dancing, night of exotic delights, breakfast on the veranda. Or maybe the *daughter* pleading a headache and disappearing, and he and Claudia—why not? She wasn't that much older than he was. Or perhaps both of them at once, something agreeably kinky, one of those nights to treasure forever.

They were widows, he learned, their husbands killed in a freak hunting accident in Scotland the previous autumn. Helena spoke matter-of-factly about it, as if being widowed at thirty was no great event.

"And now," she said, "Mother and I are pilgrims in Jerusalem! We look forward so much to the Easter celebrations. Since the mishap we've felt the presence of God by our sides constantly, and Jesus as a living force."

Horncastle's dreams of a wild threesome upstairs began to fade. They had been Church of England, said Claudia, very high church indeed, but after the mishap they had turned to the Roman faith for solace, and now, in the Holy Land, they would march with the other pilgrims along the Via Dolorosa, bearing the Cross—

Eventually they asked Horncastle about himself, and he sketched it all quickly: UCLA, experimental psychology, divorce, sabbatical, hint of severe inner storms, crisis, need to get away from it all. He intended to say nothing about sacred mushrooms, but somehow that slipped out—secret cult, hallucinogens, mysterious village in the desert. His cheeks reddened.

"How *fascinating!*" Helena cried. "Will you take us there?" He imagined what Ben-Horin would say about that. He responded vaguely, and she swept onward, bright-eyed, enthusiastic, chattering about drugs, California, mysticism. He began to think he might be able to get somewhere with her after all, and started to angle the conversation back toward dinner, but no, no, they had a prior engagement, dinner at the rectory, was that it? "We must talk again soon," said Claudia, and off they went, and he was alone again.

A suspended time began. He wandered off by himself. One night he went down to the Old City—dark, a mysterious and threatening warren of knotted streets and sinister-looking people. He ate at a little Arab place, grilled fish and mashed chick-peas for a few shekels. Afterward he got lost in a deserted area of

blank-walled houses. He thought he was being followed—footsteps in the distance, rustling sounds, whispers—but whenever he glanced back he saw nothing but woebegone lop-eared cats. Somehow he found his way to Jaffa Gate and picked up a taxi.

He rented a car and did standard tourist things, museums and monuments. Jerusalem, he decided, looked a little like Southern California. Not the inner city, God, no, but the environs, the dry, tawny, rocky hills, the vast open sky, the clusters of flat-faced condominiums and whatnot sprawling over every ridge and crest—he could almost blink and imagine himself somewhere out by Yorba Linda or Riverside. Except that in the middle of it all was the city of David and Solomon and Herod and Pilate, and the place of the cross.

Had any of that really happened, he wondered? A slender bearded man lurching up the Via Dolorosa under the weight of the two massive wooden beams? What is it like to carry the cross? What is it like to hang high above the ground in the cool clear springtime air of Jerusalem, waiting for your Father to summon your spirit?

Horncastle prowled the Old City constantly, getting to know his way around in the maze. His path often took him past the falafel-stand. When he bought sandwiches from the Arab his hand trembled, as if the falafel-seller who had so many times devoured his own god held some awesome numinous power that instilled fear. What wonders had that man seen, what strange heights had he ascended? Horncastle felt brutally excluded from that arcane knowledge, half as old as time, that the Arab must possess. Looking into his bloodshot eyes, Horncastle was tempted to blurt out his questions in a rush of *tell me, tell me*, but he did not dare, for the Arab would pretend not to speak English and Ben-Horin, when he found out, would simply disown him, and that would be the end of the quest.

From Ben-Horin he continued to hear nothing. At last, unable to contain his impatience, Horncastle telephoned him at home, but got no answer. A call to Ben-Horin's office involved him in a maddening sequence of university switchboard operators; half an hour of persistence got him through at last to someone in Ben-Horin's department who said he had gone to Athens to deliver a lecture.

"Athens? I thought Haifa!"

"No, Athens. He will be back soon."

"Please tell him that Thomas Horncastle would—" But

Horncastle was holding a dead phone. Break in service, or just a hang-up? He reminded himself that he was in Asia, that however shiny and modern Israel might look, the mentality here was not necessarily always Western. The idea of trying to call back, or going through all those intermediaries again, was appalling. It would be quicker to drive out there and leave a message on Ben-Horin's desk.

Shortly he was on his way, navigating grimly in his flimsy Fiat among the squadrons of Israeli kamikaze drivers. With minor confusions he reached the glossy campus and managed to find a secretary, a grim little *sabra* who took his quickly scrawled note and promised to give it to Dr. Ben-Horin tomorrow, when he returned from his trip to Geneva. Some communications failures here, Horncastle thought. He felt like inviting the secretary to lunch. It was absurd: the frustrations of this mushroom chase were translating themselves into random sexual twitches. He got out of there fast, went over to the university library, and used up the afternoon with the five volumes of Farnell's *Cults of the Greek States*, looking for veiled amanita references.

Back at the hotel he ran into Helena and Claudia. They were friendly, even warm, but that moment of unmistakable mutual attraction in the cocktail lounge seemed impossible to recapture, and when he again suggested dining with him they once more blandly and smoothly refused. To fill their place he found an Episcopalian deacon from Ohio, who suggested an allegedly worthwhile restaurant in East Jerusalem. The Ohio man had come here for Easter services five years in a row. "Overwhelming," he said, nodding forcefully. "When they surge up the Via Dolorosa under those heavy crosses. The pathos, the passion! And then on Holy Saturday, when the Greek Patriarch declares the Resurrection, and the cry goes up: *Christos anesti!* Christ is risen! You can't imagine the power of the scene. Bells ringing, people shouting—and dancing, everybody going crazy, candles, torches—you'll still be here for it, won't you? You shouldn't miss it!"

Yes, Horncastle thought bleakly, I will still be here for it, and probably for Christmas too. Restlessness gnawed at him. This night, perhaps, the Arabs were celebrating the eucharist of the magic mushroom, gathered in some cobblestone-walled hut to turn themselves into gods, and he was here in this mediocre restaurant, trapped in the prison of himself, picking at gristly mutton and listening to the raptures of a wide-eyed Midwesterner. He hun-

gered for escape, for the dive into the abyss of the divine, for the whips of oblivion. The Ohioan chattered on and on. Horncastle, hardly even pretending to listen, wondered about his ex-wife, his ex-house, his ex-life in his far-off ex-city, and asked himself how it had come to pass that in the middle of his journey he had ended up here, scourged by inner demons he barely comprehended. He had no answers.

The next day he phoned the university again, this time getting through quickly to Ben-Horin's department. Yes, yes, Dr. Ben-Horin had returned, he was leaving for Tel-Aviv tomorrow, perhaps you can reach him at home now.

The home number did not answer.

To Horncastle it was like being released from a vow. In a sudden access of overwhelming anger he drove out toward the Kidron Valley, toward the village to the *tiqla'* users, eyes throbbing, hands tight to the knobby wheel. In the village all was as it had been: the old men outside the shop with the COCA-COLA sign, two or three boys playing dice in the dust, a radio blaring sleazy music.

No one paid any attention as Horncastle stepped from his car and went into the shop. A dark place, cramped—canned goods, piles of sheets and blankets, a rack of used clothes, and yes, a squat red Coca-Cola cooler that emitted dull clunking, humming sounds. Behind the counter was the Arab who looked just like the falafel-seller. They are brothers, Horncastle thought: This is Mustafa, the other is Hassan. Abdul and Ibrahim and Ismail are out tending the flocks, and they all look exactly alike. The bulging bloodshot eyes regarded him coldly. Horncastle said, in a tentative, faltering way, "Do you speak English?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

Probably it was meant as a shopkeeper's *What can I do for you?* but it came out a lot more hostile than that. Horncastle moistened his lips. "I want—I am here for—I am trying to learn about—" He halted in confusion and chagrin. This was impossibly stupid. Blurt it out, ask blunt questions about an illegal secret cult? How many months had it taken Ben-Horin to establish contact with these people? I'm ruining everything, Horncastle thought. He trembled and said, astonishing himself, "Do you sell liquor here?"

A flicker of the dark menacing eyes. "You must go to Jerusalem for that."

"Wine? beer?"

"Not here. You are in the wrong place."

Horncastle leaned closer. "I am a friend of Professor Ben-Horin. I study the red plant. You understand?" He pantomimed, trying to draw *Amanita muscaria's* phallic shape in the air with his hand, and realized it looked exactly like pantomiming masturbation. The Arab's expression did not change. Horncastle was shaking. "The mushroom. You understand me?" he said in a thick, throaty voice.

"You are mistaken. This is not the place."

"I know it is. Have no fear: I'm no policeman. An American, a friend of Ben-Horin's. I want the mushroom. The closeness to God, do you understand? To taste God, to know the feeling of being divine, of being something greater than myself, of—"

"You are sick. I call doctor."

"No. Please. Trust me. In the name of the compassionate Jesus, help me!"

The Arab stared. Some changes seemed to be going on at last behind the swarthy façade. Horncastle, sweating, swaying, gripped the counter to keep from falling.

"You are American. You want only fun."

"I swear it, no—"

"The mushroom is not for fun."

"The mushroom is holy. I understand that. *It* is holy, *God* is holy, I—I am not holy. I want to be made holy. To be made whole, do you see?" Horncastle laughed, a little too wildly. I am babbling, he thought. But he seemed to be getting through. He whispered urgently, "I want to be part of something, finally, does that make sense? To enter a world where I feel I belong. And the mushroom will open the gate. I swear to my need. By the compassionate Jesus, by the eyes of Mary, by the Holy spirit itself—"

"You are crazy," said the Arab.

"Perhaps I am. I don't think so. But do you have to be sane to want to enter into God? I've been on the outside all my life—looking in, looking for the way, trying to pass that gate and never letting myself do it, never willing to take the last chance. You know, I've had mushrooms, in California. But I always took an underdose, I guess, or the mushroom was too mild, because I only got a hint of the experience, the shadow of it, a little light shining through the door to where I stood—" He faltered. "Please," he

said, in a small voice.

From the Arab came an enormous unending silence, broken after an eternity by a few quick gruff words: "Come with me."

Horncastle nodded. They left the store through a side door, and he followed the Arab on and on, out of the little village, toward the rocky hill to the east. There were a few stone huts up there. The elders of the tribe are convened there, Horncastle decided, and that is the place of the mushrooms, and I will be presented to them and allowed to plead my case, and then—and then—

Sudden intense panic surged through him. He felt a buzzing in his kneecaps and fierce pressure in his bladder and stabbing pain at the back of his skull. He had a vision of himself being called into judgment in one of those huts, the prying snooping ignorant American arraigned for poking his nose where it did not belong, and found guilty and taken out into the dry ravine. *This is how we deal with meddlers, Frankish dog!* It was absurd. These people might look sinister, but it was all in his overheated imagination; they were harmless peasants, simple shepherds and farmers, much closer to God than he would ever be and hardly likely to do evil to a stranger.

Yet fear possessed him. Halfway up the hill he turned and ran back toward the village, feeling feverish, dizzy, more than half crazed. The Arab yelled after him but did not pursue.

Somehow Horncastle managed to start his car, and, in chaos, tears streaming from his eyes as they had not done since he was a child, he drove wildly back to the city, past his hotel, out toward the university area. Angry drivers honked and shook fists at him. Near the Knesset building he saw a public telephone and called Ben-Horin's home, expecting nothing. Geula Ben-Horin answered. "Horncastle," he blurted. "I must come over at once."

"Of course. Are you all right?"

"Tell me how to get to your place."

It was only five minutes away. He rang her bell and she peered out. A whiff of musky perfume enveloped him; she was wearing a sheer dressing gown and nothing else, and he was unprepared for that, the absurd, comical, preposterous seductiveness of her, heavy breasts visibly swaying, all that voluptuous Mediterranean flesh. He said, "Your husband—"

"In Tel-Aviv. Come in. What's wrong with you?"

She put a drink in his hand—the foul Israeli brandy—and he

gulped it like medicine, and then a second one. She was warm, sympathetic, trying to find out what was the matter; he was barely coherent. Finally, as the brandy settled him a little, he managed to say, "I've just been to the mushroom village."

"Ah." She looked grave.

"Begging them to give me some. I couldn't wait for your husband to get back from wherever the hell he's been. I stood the waiting as long as I could and then I went out there, I talked the ear off some Arab, I reeled off a whole lot of hysterical drivel about wanting to be one with God, you know, the whole transcendental thing—"

His voice trailed off in shame.

She said, "And they gave you some, and now it is beginning to upset your mind, is that it? It will be all right. There will be some hours of real delirium, and then ecstasy, and then gradually you will—"

"No. They didn't give me any."

"No?"

"The Arab told me to follow him, and started to lead me toward some huts on the hillside. And I panicked. I thought it was a trap, that they were going to kill me for asking too many questions, and I ran back to my car, I drove, I—I—I fled here. To the only people I know in Jerusalem."

Her eyes were warm with sorrow and pity and a sort of love, it seemed to him, and yet her mouth was quirked in what looked very much like contempt. "I think you are wrong," she said calmly. "What you were afraid of was not that they would do harm to you, but that they really would give you the mushroom."

He blinked. "How can you say that?"

"I think that is so. Often we turn in fear from that which we desire the most. You were in no danger from them, and you knew that. You were in danger from yourself, from your own troubled and tormented soul, and what you feared was—"

"Please. Stop."

"—not what they would do to you but what you would see when the mushroom allowed you to look within."

"No. Please."

He was shaking again. He could not meet her gaze. She came close to him—she was nearly as tall as he was—and held him, comforting him, murmuring that she was sorry to have upset him when he was already in such a vulnerable state. He pressed himself

against her and felt the tension draining from him. He felt like a child, a big foolish child. She was the great mother herself, Isis, Astarte, Ishtar, and the power that she had over him frightened and attracted him all at once; if he could not let himself surrender to the god who was the mushroom, he would at least be capable of losing himself in the goddess who was His mother and consort.

"Come," she said, taking his hand.

Easily she led him to the bedroom and with dreamy willingness he vanished into her warm billowing body, no longer caring, no longer resisting anything. He had no strength left. It was all very quick, too quick, and he collapsed abruptly into deep sleep from which he woke, equally abruptly, finding himself lying in her arms and for a moment not knowing who, how, where.

He stared at her, aghast.

Before he could speak she put her finger to his lips and said softly, "You are feeling better?"

"We shouldn't have—your husband—"

"Life is very risky here. Any day the end might come. We live as though there are no second chances," she winked. "Our little secret, eh?" Helping him up, finding his scattered clothes. "When he gets home I will tell him you called. He has been so busy, running everywhere, lectures, meetings—he has so little time. I am glad you came. About the mushroom village and what happened to you there: fear nothing. They will not harm you."

"Will you tell him I went there?"

"No. He can find that out from you, much better."

"What am I going to do, though? I've bungled everything!"

"You are a Christian?" She smiled and touched her lips lightly to his. "Live in the hope of glorious redemption. Even bunglers are forgiven, if there is a God. Forgive yourself and He will forgive you too, eh? Eh?" She drew him to her for a brief warm embrace. "Go, now," she whispered. "It will be all right."

For ten minutes Horncastle sat behind the wheel of his parked car, groggy, stunned, before he could muster enough will to drive. All the manic energy in him was spent; he felt bleak, drained, desolate. All was lost. The sensible thing was to pack up and go to the airport and take the next plane out, but he was too numb even to do that. At the hotel he went to the bar for a few drinks and, in a stupor of guilt and bewilderment, dropped into bed.

He was still sleeping soundly when his telephone rang the next morning. Ben-Horin.

"Is it too early for you?" the Israeli asked.

Sunlight flooded the room. "No, no, I'm up." The hand holding the receiver shook. "Good to hear from you again."

"Will you meet me at eleven, by St. Stephen's Gate?" Ben-Horin said, brusquely, icily.

The day was bright and warm. Crowds of tourists swarmed about the Old City: the climax of the Easter season was at hand. From a distance of twenty yards Horncastle could feel the anger radiating from Ben-Horin, and it was all he could manage to force himself to approach the little Israeli.

Ben-Horin said, "How could you have done it?"

"Sheer idiotic spinelessness. She gave me a couple of drinks, and I was already overwrought, I guess, and—"

In amazement Ben-Horin said, "What in the name of Mohammed are you talking about?"

"I—she—" He could not say it.

Ben-Horin shook his head furiously. "You lunatic, how could you *possibly* have gone to the village after all my warnings about moving cautiously? You have done me harm that is perhaps irreparable. This morning I went to see Yasin, the falafel-peddler—he pretended not to know me. As if I am police. I could hardly believe it when Geula said you had been to the village. Now they want nothing more to do with either of us. My relationship with them is severed and possibly cannot be rebuilt. How could you? The discourtesy, Horncastle, the absolute stupidity—"

"I couldn't reach you for four days. I thought you were avoiding me, God knows why. Finally the frustration built up and built up and I *had* to talk to those people, *had* to, so I—"

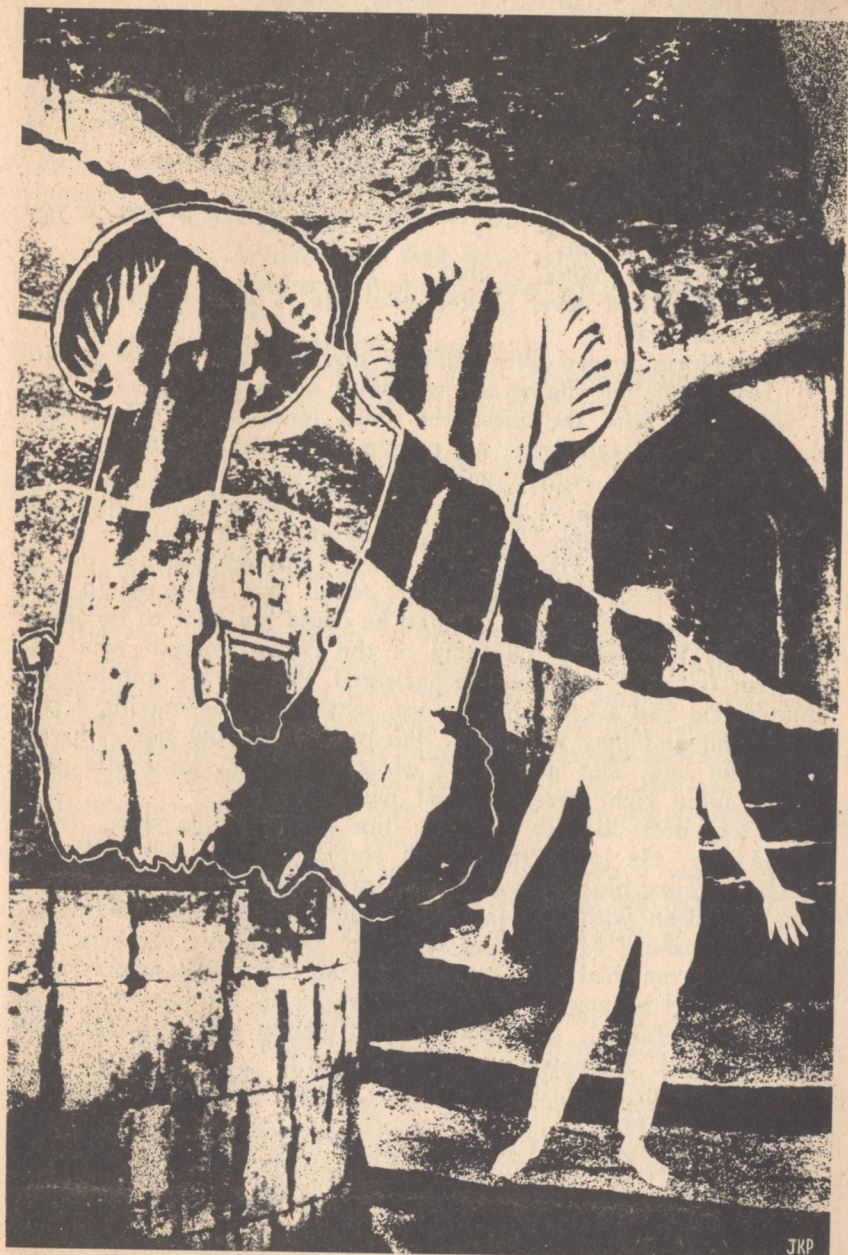
"How very stupid that was."

"Yes. I know. Even as I was doing it, I knew it was a mistake, but I simply went through with it anyway, like a dumb schoolboy, I suppose, and even worse, when they were about to *give* me the damned mushroom—I'm sure that's what they were going to do—I panicked, I bolted—" Horncastle rubbed his aching forehead. "Can you forgive me?"

"Forgiveness is not the issue. I want nothing more to do with you. You may have crippled my own research."

"All right."

"I advise you not to try to return to the village."



"I'm planning to leave Israel as soon as I can."

"Probably there will be no flights available until after the Easter holiday. But while you are still here, keep away from those people."

"Yes," Horncastle said meekly.

"I take no responsibility for what will happen to you if you approach them again."

"There's no chance of that."

"I wish I had never invited you here. I want never to hear your name again."

Ben-Horin turned with military precision and strode away.

Horncastle felt shame and weariness and a deep sense of loss. It was ended now, the quest, the timid, tentative adventure. Out there in the Judaeen desert are people acting out the ancient love-feast, communing with a god older than Rome, and he would never know a thing of it now. Slowly, defeatedly, he made his way back to the hotel. I'll call El Al tomorrow, he thought—they'll be open on Good Friday, won't they?—and get the hell out of here, back to the real world, back to all that I wanted to flee.

But there was still tonight and he could not bear to be alone. Recklessly he phoned the room of the Englishwomen—what did he have to lose?—and Claudia answered. Would they join him for dinner? He had asked twice before; maybe he was making a pest of himself and they would tell him to get lost. But no. A lovely idea, she said. Did he have a place in mind? Horncastle said, "How about right here? At half past seven?"

They both looked beautiful—fine clothes, pale skins, fluffy blond hair. He loved the British sound of their serene voices. Helena's gauzy blouse revealed fine collarbones, a delicate bosom. Has she been with a man, he wondered, since the unfortunate hunting mishap? Mother and daughter were heavy drinkers, and Horncastle matched them two for one, so that things rapidly grew blurred, and he was only dimly aware of his food; he hoped he was being brilliant, suspected he was merely being boorish, and hardly cared. They were tolerating him.

"And your mushroom research?" the mother asked. "How has that been going?"

Painful recollection nearly sobered him. "I've botched it," he said, and as they leaned toward him, eagerly, sympathetically, he poured out his miserable shabby tale of the illicit visit, the conversation with the Arab, the pathetic, inglorious retreat. "I see now

that what I was looking for here," he said, "was not just a nice little bit of folk-anthropopharmacology to write up for the *Journal*, but an actual mystic experience, a real communion, and as often happens when you want something too badly, you handle things clumsily, you reach too soon, you blunder—" He paused. "And now it will never happen."

"No," said Claudia. "You will have what you seek."

He half expected her to pull a glowing red amanita mushroom from her tiny purse.

"Impossible now," he said mournfully.

"No. This is a city of divine grace, of redemption. You will have a second chance at whatever you hope to attain. I am quite sure of that."

He thought of Geula Ben-Horin saying, *We live as though there are no second chances*. But maybe for Israelis, living in a state of constant war, things were different. Geula had also said, *Live in the hope of glorious redemption*, and now Claudia had said the same thing. Perhaps. Perhaps. He gave the British woman a bland hopeful smile. But he was without hope.

It was well past eleven by the time the last brandies were gone, and then, without any subtlety at all, Horncastle asked Helena to spend the night with him, and she, smiling beatifically at her mother as though the barbaric American had just done the most wonderfully *characteristic* thing, as if he had performed one of his tribal dances for her, thanked him for the offer and pleasantly refused—no second chances there, not even a first one—and they left him to deal with the check.

He sat in the restaurant until they told him it was closing. Somehow he managed to persuade his waiter to sell him a whole bottle of arrack from the bar stock and he took it to his room, and through the night he methodically emptied it.

By taxi the next morning he descended to the Old City, where a vast horde of pilgrims had gathered to reenact the Savior's final thousand paces along the Via Dolorosa from the place of condemnation to the place of His internment. It looked like the crowd outside a college football game on Saturday afternoon. There were souvenir-sellers, mischievous boys, peddlers of snacks, police and soldiers, television cameramen—and also brown-robed friars, nuns of a dozen orders, priests, people costumed as Roman legionnaires carrying spears, a queue of Japanese in clerical clothes

with three cameras apiece.

Horncastle walked in a lurching, shambling way that evidently had an effect on people, for the mob parted before him wherever he went, and soon he was deep in the city's tangled streets. Occasionally hands passed lightly over his body—pickpockets, no doubt, but that was unimportant. He saw Arabs with wide, tapering faces everywhere, bloodshot hyperthyroid eyes.

A small boy tapped his knee and took him by the hand. Horncastle allowed himself to be led, and found himself shortly at Yasin's falafel stand. Horncastle felt like cringing before the Arab, who surely knew—they all knew everything—of his numbskull journey to the village, of his half-crazed pleadings and bizarre flight. But there was no condemnation on Yasin's face. He was grinning broadly, bowing, making Horncastle welcome to the Holy Land, to Jerusalem, to the Via Dolorosa, to his own humble falafel stand on the morning of Christ's Passion. Yasin handed Horncastle a bulging sandwich.

"I have no money," Horncastle muttered.

The Arab beamed and shook his head. "My gift! Christ will rise!"

His eyes found Horncastle's and lingered there a long while in what was almost a kind of communion itself. Horncastle had no idea of what was being communicated, but it left him with a sense of warmth, of trust, of faith. Perhaps Claudia was right, that this is the city of divine grace, of second chances. He thanked Yasin and gobbled the sandwich as if he had not eaten in weeks.

Let it begin soon, he prayed. At last: let it begin.

The boy was still at his side. He had the village face too, triangular, but his eyes were gentler. Horncastle realized that the boy had appointed himself his guide. All right. They ploughed together through the hordes, and eventually came to the courtyard of the Omarieh School, where a sign proclaimed the First Station of the Cross. Pilate had sentenced Jesus here.

The crowd was flowing up the Via Dolorosa here, slowly, ecstatically, praying in many languages, singing, chanting. Wherever Horncastle looked he saw pilgrims tottering under immense wooden crosses, gasping and struggling and staggering. His head throbbed. He felt light-headed, giddy, weightless. He let himself be swept along, to the place where Jesus first had fallen—marked by a broken column—and then up the narrow, killingly steep Via Dolorosa through an Arab bazaar. Claudia and Helena, or two

women who looked just like them, were nearby, reading out of a guidebook. You were right, he said to them, not bothering to use words. This is the city of second chances.

"The Fourth Station," said the younger. "Where Jesus met his fainting mother. This church is Our Lady of the Spasm. The Fifth: Simon of Cyrene carried the Cross here. The Sixth, where Veronica wiped the face of Jesus." It was a hard climb now. Horncastle felt rivulets of sweat on his body.

He was amazed how intense colors were becoming, how bright everything looked, how strange. The walls of the ancient houses seemed furry and were undulating slightly. The voices of those about him dwindled and swelled, dwindled and swelled, as though some amplifier were being turned up and down. Marching beside him was Ben-Horin, implausibly wearing a friar's cassock. He leaned close and in his crisp, cutting way whispered into Horncastle's ear, "So you study the ceremony after all. Perhaps at last you learn a thing or two." Out of a doorway came Geula Ben-Horin, with some sort of Halloween costume on, stripes and splotches of green and scarlet and brilliant yellow, a succubus, perhaps. She winked at Horncastle and shimmied her hips. "Put this in your thesis," she murmured, throaty-voiced, a kosher Mae West. The two Israelis danced around him, melted and flowed, and were gone. Horncastle pawed at his eyes. He would have fallen, for his legs were growing swollen and rubbery, but the press of the crowd was too tight.

"This is the Seventh Station, where Jesus fell the second time," said the cool clear voice behind him, and the tones echoed and reverberated until they were tolling like gongs. Just ahead, a dozen Arabs in dark blue suits were singing some ominous hymn as they hauled their cross along; he perceived the words of the song as individual gleaming blades that severed each instant from the next. "And here," said the woman, "Jesus spoke to the compassionate daughters of Jerusalem. This is where He fell the third time. We are nearly at the end of the Via Dolorosa. The last five stations are within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

Horncastle felt the ancient paving-stones squirming and sliding beneath his feet. He stumbled and would have pitched headlong, but the blue-suited Arabs caught him, laughing and cheering now, and passed him from hand to hand, tossed him about like a sack of old clothes, moved him uphill. He saw a woman in an upper window making the sign of the cross at him and throwing kisses.

The hymn was unbearably loud.

His back was pressed up against the Arabs' enormous wooden cross. He saw, clearly as though he were at a movie, how a dozen men with the same triangular face and fierce swollen eyes were holding him in place and driving in the nails. It was not the nails that bothered him but the sound of the hammer blows, which rang in his head with clamorous frenzy. Horncastle went limp and let it happen to him. A voice as mighty as that of Zeus cried, "Help him, he's having a fit!" but Horncastle simply smiled and shook his head. All was well. Push me, kick me, do whatever you want to me. I am yours. God is in me, he thought. God is everywhere, but especially He is within me. He could taste the fiery presence of the Godhead on his lips, his tongue, deep in his belly. They had the cross upright now. "Make room! Get him out of here before he's trampled!" No. No. There are still five more Stations of the Cross, are there not? We have not reached the end of the Via Dolorosa. Horncastle felt utterly tranquil. This is the true *ekstasis*, the parting of the soul from the body. He closed his eyes.

When he returned to consciousness, he found himself lying in a hospital bed with a placid sweet-faced nun watching him. His arms were rigidly outstretched, his fingers were tightly coiled, the palms of his hands seemed to be on fire, and wave upon wave of nausea swept across his middle. From far away came the sound of wild bells ringing and the roar of mad voices crying a rhythmic slogan over and over.

To the nun he said faintly, "What are they shouting? I can't make it out." She touched his blazing forehead lightly and replied, "*Christos anesti, Christos anesti, Christ is risen!*"

My Old Man

by GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

Dad had a real mean streak.
But even *he* didn't deserve
a fate like this.

I have this little chess computer on my desk. It's about the size of a Bible and the same color, too. I put it on when I'm working. I give it seven and a half minutes to decide each move; if I set it for less, then I beat it all the time. If I give it more, then I don't stand a chance. It keeps me company, and it breaks up the monotony of my work. I take white and usually lead off with a simple P-K4. Then I turn to my typewriter and do a page or two, and by that time the little machine has made its choice. There's a little window where letters light up and tell me which of its pieces to play. Then I make my move, and do another bit of work.

The only dumb thing about the computer is that sometimes it gives me these programmed messages. You know: GOOD MOVE or YOU'RE IN (blink) TROUBLE (blink) NOW. The conversation always makes me impatient, even though it only lasts a second or two. The reason I bought the machine in the first place was so that I could play chess without all the messing around you get playing another person. But most of the time I'm glad I bought it. It doesn't take up a lot of space, and it earns its keep better than a wave in a bottle or some of the things other people I know keep on their desks.

I've learned a lot about chess from the computer. We've spent many a pleasant hour together. We've become pretty close friends,

I'd say, all things considered. I even overlook the thing's chattiness. I named it Lucky, because that was the name of a Dalmatian puppy I had for a few weeks when I was a kid.

You are going to be shown a series of pictures. You will be asked to write a little story about each picture. There will be a few questions with each picture. These questions are to help you to tell your story. Now look at the first picture. What is happening?

For a little while that puppy kept me company better than any people I ever knew. I never had any friends, even when I was a kid. Not one single friend. When I was in grade school, my mother put me in the Cub Scouts figuring that some other mother could take care of me one afternoon a week and leave her free to tend to all the important business she couldn't manage with me around the house. I don't think my mother ever had any notion of my learning new skills or meeting new friends or anything like that. She just thought it would be a great way of not having to entertain me for a few hours. She pulled me right back out when she learned that she was expected to be a den mother herself now and then and take on not just me but also the whole crowd of us scouts. That hadn't been part of her original plan. It interfered with the swift completion of her important business.

A few years later I found out that the important business was mostly this man who lived three houses down on Federal Street, Mr. Kaczar, who had a son named Terry who used to push my head down in the snowdrifts until they, the Kaczars, moved out of the neighborhood. But that isn't really part of this story and I only mentioned it because I'm trying to focus in here on the real emotional heart of what I want to say, I want to grab it out and put it down here on the page for you to read, so you can see and hear everything just the way it happened.

One day a few weeks ago I was working on some ad copy for this perfume one of the den mothers used to wear all the time. When you smell it you always think there's a convention of kindergarten teachers in town or something. Whenever I'm near anyone who's wearing it, I always get a nervous feeling in my stomach, I don't know why. So I was having a little trouble coming up with something clever yet marginally honest to say about it. I switched on Lucky and played my P-K4. Lucky thought about

it for his allotted time and came back with a not-surprising reply: P-K4. I was in the middle of crumpling up a page of embarrassingly bad copy, and I saw that it was my turn again. I guess I ought to tell you that I cheat sometimes. You'll find out later anyway. I don't always play my own games; I like to find famous games recorded in chess books, and see how Lucky does against the all-time greats. He does pretty well, too, if I give him enough time. So on this afternoon I was trying an interesting little game, Distle-Rossipal, 1900. I was Distle, of course. I'm not that big a chess expert that I ever heard of the guy. Anyway, I used his second move, which would have been my own, I ought to say: N-KB3

Lucky blinked a message: RIGHT BACK AT YA ... N-QB3. I'd never seen that message before. It wasn't even his usual tone, that's for sure. It made me feel very strange, like you do in dreams sometimes, and it reminded me of this very crucial moment in my life that I hadn't thought about at all in years.

When I was a Cub Scout, mostly we met at one kid's house or another and had the meetings and went through the little rituals and ate cookies and drank Kool-Aid and then—the exciting part—we did whatever terrific thing that week's den mother had dreamed up for us to do. A lot of the time this wasn't nothing much, really, like going out in the backyard and collecting different kinds of leaves. Very dull, especially when you're only eight or nine years old or whatever. We played games like kickball or Monopoly, or the den mother would read to us about Indians while we sat there moodily and waited to go home. One time, though, the den mother gave us these craft kits, and we spent a couple of happy hours putting together leather wallets and things. This was, looking back now, one of those magic moments that seem like not much at all at the time but which you remember forever and ever as one of those gigantic, brilliant turning points of your life.

Before I go any further and deal with how this moment changed my life and affected my relationship with my old man, whom I haven't described or even introduced so far, I have something to say about magic turning-points in general. They are not, in the real world, always what they're supposed to be. I learned this the hard way, the way most of us do but a lot of us forget it, I think, or file it away somewhere in our memories where we won't have to pay much attention to it for the rest of our lives. Then when we see a movie or read a story about some poor joker who has one of these golden experiences, we cheer for

him as if he just pulled off something wonderful. In the books and movies, though, the people always have the solutions to their troubles handed to them by some guy at a typewriter. Not me, man. It never happened to me. That's what I'm telling you about.

Who are the people?

So right at the beginning of the game my little chess computer, Lucky, tried to use psychology. I didn't know machines could do that, but, come to think of it, these games are getting more sophisticated all the time. RIGHT BACK AT YA. What I thought at first was that it was another of its programmed messages which, for some reason, had just never been used before. A statistical quirk, I called it. I played (or, rather, Distle played) P-Q4 and Lucky answered with PxP. I knew enough to see that's a normal Scotch game so far. What wasn't normal about it was the glee with which Lucky slaughtered that queen pawn. DIE, HEATHEN DOG flashed in his little window. For a moment I wondered about the sobriety at the Michikeito Corporation. I punched in NxP and Lucky replied NxN EAT LEAD, FASCIST PIG.

I objected to that. As far as I could see, my knight was only doing his job. "There's no room for that kind of thing in this game," I said. "Chess is a matter of the intellect."

TEMPERAMENT, blinked Lucky. ALL GREAT CHESS MASTERS SHOW TEMPERAMENT.

I can tell you, I was dismayed that the little plastic machine answered me like that. I tried to tell myself that I had imagined it all, that it was all a dream. But here is how the next part of the game went, with Lucky's unasked-for evaluations:

<u>Me/Distle</u>	<u>Lucky</u>	
5. QxN	N-K2	YOU JUST WAIT.
6. B-QB4	P-QB3	YOU CAN'T WIN, YOU KNOW.
7. N-B3	P-Q3	LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS.
8. B-KN5	Q-N3	SURRENDER AND I WILL BE MERCIFUL.
9. QxQP	QxNP	YOU ARE POWERLESS TO RESIST.
10. R-Q1	QxN	CHECK, YOU FEEBLEMINDED LOSER!

At this point I had to grant that Lucky had reason to gloat. I had spent the early part of the game developing my pieces, just the way the books say you're supposed to. Lucky, meanwhile, had made what I thought were wasted moves: the knight to K-2, for

instance, which was pinned there. But then his queen slipped away and started ravaging my position. I didn't mind losing to the little computer, but I kind of resented his attitude. Machines aren't supposed to *have* attitudes.

Fortunately, I had this fellow Distle looking over my shoulder. He told me to move B-Q2. I did, and that made Lucky even happier. He took the other bishop: QxB(B4), and added SUCKER! Well, I won't take that from anybody, not even an inanimate thing I bought in a discount house down on Division Street. Distle had a good move ready for me. Lucky's greed had ruined him: I played Q-Q8 (check). Lucky didn't like that at all. He blinked and blinked, and his seven and a half minutes went by, and he still blinked. I don't know why; he only had one move—KxQ. THE SLUT DIES, he said, but it was false bravado. Distle's combination was interesting; I've always loved queen sacrifices. I next played B-R5, giving a double check from the bishop and the uncovered rook. He had no choice but to move his king, K-K1. BIG DEAL, he blinked sourly. I moved R-Q8 (mate). Lucky waited a few seconds, then blinked DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU MADE YOUR DAD'S BELT?

I was a little frightened. I had never told that story to anyone. I wondered how Lucky knew about it. The craft kit that I got from the den mother, by some evil twist of fate, was a beautiful leather belt. Soft brown leather links, a big brass buckle, just a few simple steps, a whole afternoon of fun, the gratification of a job well done, and the den mother could go into the other room and watch *Search for Tomorrow* or something. I was working on my belt, my friend Stanley was making a pair of moccasins, the other kids were putting together purses and billfolds and things like that. I had this mound of little leather pieces, all pre-cut in a butterfly shape with holes punched in the wings. I folded one wing and pushed it through the hole in the wing of another piece, then straightened the first piece out. I repeated that step a dozen, two dozen, maybe fifty times until I had this great long belt made. Then I just attached the pre-finished tongue to one end, the shiny buckle to the other, and I had an achievement to be proud of, a hand-made belt the likes of which couldn't be found at any price in any dime store in Springfield. The den mother complimented me on my skill. "It's a nice belt," she said.

"I'm going to give it to my old man," I said.

"That's nice," she said. "Now let's all get in a circle and say

the Cub Scout pledge." That was always the high point of the afternoon for the den mothers.

I have gone on at such great length about the stupid belt because, of all the artifacts of my childhood, that belt is the most memorable, the most enduring, and the most meaningful. I had a bicycle once for six weeks when I was eleven. It broke somehow and my old man promised to fix it for me. He reaffirmed that promise every spring from the time I was in the sixth grade until I went away to college when I was eighteen. But that bicycle does not represent my growing up as completely as the brown link belt I made for him, the one he hung on the inside of the kitchen cupboard door. He never wore that belt, never once 'til the day he died. He hung it out of sight inside the cupboard. Every time I went in there for some cereal or something, it would swing like a pendulum in a funeral parlor, back and forth, the buckle scraping against the door, and I would remember every moment of the afternoon I made it for him. I would remember every single time my old man took that belt off the doorknob and used it. That belt *was* my old man, at least the important part of him, the real and the mythical parts of my old man, and whenever I felt the least little doubt about the orderliness of the universe, say, or any other adolescent thing, all I had to do was go into the kitchen and visit the belt. The belt told me everything I needed to know. I was fifteen years old before I told myself that the belt could lie. Now, a long time later, I am beginning to realize that I was wrong; the belt never lied, never. Just sometimes I wasn't listening right.

Was this chess game another special moment when I should have been listening? It isn't often that an electrical appliance casually brings up such a painful line of conversation. I looked at Lucky with a trace of annoyance: *of course* I remembered that day. I let him know that I didn't think it was his place to start on that topic now, especially as I had just whupped his derriere in only fourteen moves. Maybe that was why he was getting so unpleasant.

WANT TO GO AGAIN? he asked. Sure, I thought, it hadn't been much of a game, only fourteen moves. I figured I owed him another chance. I'm like that. I'm really a nice guy and I don't like to gloat over my victories, so I set up the chess pieces on their original squares and reset the computer. LET ME PLAY WHITE THIS TIME, blinked Lucky. I shrugged. It seemed only fair. I can be

very generous, especially when it won't cost me anything.

"Go ahead," I said. "Do your worst."

No, I'LL DO MY BEST, he said. P-K4.

"I expected something more exotic," I said. "Something hyper-modern, something eccentric. P-QN3 or something."

I'M SORRY IF YOU'RE DISAPPOINTED. SHUT UP AND PLAY THE GAME.

I moved P-K4 too. "You don't have to get abusive," I said.

"I think I may trade you in on a more civil model."

WE'RE ALL SENSITIVE, he said. PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR KING. YOUR KING WILL BE MORE THAN JUST AN IMPORTANT FIGURE IN A TRIVIAL GAME. YOUR KING IN THIS CONTEST WILL ACTUALLY BE SOMEONE YOU KNEW AND LOVED. YOUR KING CONTAINS THE RESTLESS, HOVERING SPIRIT OF YOUR DEPARTED PARENT.

"My old man?" I asked. I was unsure because at one point in my life I received messages from beyond the grave from my deceased mother, in the form of the curves of highway exit ramps. But that's another story.

YES. DEAR OLD DAD.

"Am I speaking to him now? Is that you?"

Lucky was silent. I couldn't get him to admit that he had been possessed by the ghost of my old man. I waited for a moment, for a definite answer one way or the other. I thought back to the day Lucky had mentioned: what happened with the belt and my old man. I gave it to him for his birthday, wrapped up in left-over Christmas paper, tied with ribbon and fixed with a big stiff bow from a holiday liquor bottle. My mom always saved those bows and stuck them on everything. We always had to open the packages real careful and hand the bows back to her, so she could use them next Christmas or birthday or whatever. Some of those bows were older than I was. Right now, right this very minute there is a box full of those bows up in the attic, where they've been since my mom died. My brother and I didn't know what to do with them. When she died I thought maybe I should cover her coffin with them and God would have to open it up real careful. Not that she or I believed in God, really, but that's all beside the point. My old man thanked me for the belt. Not excessively, you understand. None of this grabbing the eight-year-old boy around the neck with a lot of rough, manly affection, a tear streaming down my old man's cheek as he realizes the kid made the crummy belt with his own hands, none of this Hollywood sentiment and family togetherness business. Not on Federal

Street. "Thanks," he said. I think he said thanks; he must have said thanks. I don't have any clear memory of him saying it, to tell you the truth, but he's dead now and I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt.

I would have liked it if he had stood up then, put his bottle of beer down on the coffee table, stood up, stripped his own belt from his pants, and slid my little Cub Scout project through the loops. He could have worn it *once*, God damn it. For five minutes, would it have killed him? He was halfway through a bottle of Black Label; he put the belt down on the table in the middle of the crumpled wrapping paper—the bow was already back in the big box. The fun and excitement of my old man's birthday had faded fast. The small celebration quieted bit by bit until it was just another goddamn Saturday night and we were watching *Beat the Clock* and my brother and I were taking turns ferrying beer in to my folks. "Thanks," he said once, and that was it.

YOU KNOW HE SAID THANKS, blinked Lucky. HE MUST HAVE SAID THANKS.

"Look," I said. "Let's just leave it. If you're not my old man, where is he?"

I ALREADY TOLD YOU. STUCK INSIDE YOUR LITTLE BLACK PLASTIC KING. AND, IF YOU CARE, MY MOVE IS B-B4.

I wondered how I felt, knowing that my old man had nowhere better to go than inside a chesspiece on Lucky's playing field. The Church had never even hinted at that possibility; I think I realized only that I would have to be especially careful: I was playing for my old man's soul. I moved B-B4, too. Lucky played P-QN4 and said DIDN'T EXPECT THAT, DID YOU, YOU PATSY? He was right about that; I went to my encyclopedia of chess openings and spent an hour trying to find what he was playing. I couldn't. Either I had missed it in the book or Lucky was blazing new trails into the frontiers of chess. That's not bad for a fifty-dollar plastic toy. Anyway, he chased my bishop away. I retreated, B-N3, to stay on the long diagonal. Lucky played N-QB3; I played N-KB3. Lucky brought out his other knight, N-B3. Then, floundering around without expert advice, I moved NxP. I expected that Lucky would follow with NxN, and I could play P-Q4 and get either the bishop or the knight, and we'd be even. But Lucky didn't do that.

I'M TRUTHFULLY SORRY TO SEE YOU BLUNDER SO BADLY SO EARLY IN THE GAME, he said CHEW ON THIS . . . (blink) BxP CHECK. HERE BEGINS THE

HUMILIATION OF YOUR FATHER.

What has led up to this situation?

What reminded me of this incident with Lucky, something I admit I've tried to bury pretty deep down the last few weeks, was this movie I saw just last night. It made me very upset, and I was sitting in the theater with a friend of mine, a girl, and I guess I was bothering her just a little bit because I kept muttering things. Somebody on the screen would do or say something and I'd go, "Yeah, sure," or something equally bright.

"What's the matter with you?" asked my girlfriend after a little while.

"It's this movie," I said. "I just can't believe these people." The movie was about this man who had a lot of trouble expressing his love for his family. He was very concerned about his own image, and with things like success and authority and all. So his son hates him a lot because he doesn't understand how much his father really loves him. His father bullies him all through the movie, and every goddamn time, the boy's mother comes into the kid's room and strokes his brow and all that and explains how his father has this problem about expressing his emotions. We're supposed to feel really sorry for this kid. I'll tell you one thing: first, the guy never laid a finger on his son, no backhand smacks at the dinner table or nothing; and two, nobody ever came into my room and soothed my brow or explained how my old man couldn't get in touch with his feelings. So naturally by the end of the picture the kid stands up to his father and rebels in some non-threatening way and the man is a little shocked but secretly pleased, we are led to believe, and from then on they are just the greatest of pals and the son says, "I love you, Dad," and the guy says, "I love you too, son," and the mother soothes both their brows and then we have the end titles, except by that time I'm in the lobby buying a box of Sno-caps and my stomach is starting to hurt a little. I couldn't figure out what that kid was getting so worked up about; I would have traded with him in a minute.

Just another example of how my life has been screwed up by books and movies. When I was in grade school I would go to bed at night and have fantasies that my parents would be different in the morning. I wanted to go to sleep, my mother and my old man watching television, and when I awoke in the morning they

would be transformed into James Stewart and June Allyson. That's exactly who I yearned to have for parents. June Allyson in those short-sleeved blouses with a string of pearls around her neck making breakfast, and my old man a sort of combination of Glenn Miller, Elwood P. Dowd, and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. But instead I always came downstairs in the morning and there they'd be, in the kitchen bitching at each other, Norma Desmond in a bathrobe and Mighty Joe Young.

And Lucky had the nerve to threaten HERE BEGINS THE HUMILIATION OF YOUR FATHER. Let me tell you, it was pretty hard to humiliate my old man. Nobody ever managed it while he was alive, and I thought it was pretty cheap of Lucky to take shots at him now that he was dead and couldn't defend himself. HE HAS YOU TO DEFEND HIM NOW, said Lucky. I really needed to hear that. BUT I'M NOT GOING TO VENTURE MY OPINION AS TO THE JOB YOU'RE DOING.

"Thank God for small favors," I said. Lucky was making the most of his chance to gloat. He had a bishop held against my king like a knife to the throat. And my old man was inside the king.

YOU'RE BURNING DAYLIGHT, said Lucky.

"I'm just taking my time," I said. "After all, you said my old man's spirit was in that piece, I have to be careful. This isn't some nickel and dime game in a bus station."

IS THAT WHERE YOU LEARN YOUR CHESS? IN BUS STATIONS? HA HA!

So I ate his damn bishop, KxB.

YOU OUGHT TO THANK ME. I WILL PUNISH YOUR FATHER AS HE PUNISHED YOU. NxP CHECK.

I had seen that coming, but there wasn't any way around it. "I don't want my old man punished," I said. "Let him rest in peace."

MAKE YOUR MOVE. I WILL SMITE HIM EVEN AS HE HATH SMITTEN YOU.

The situation, I felt, had definitely gotten out of hand. Lucky was right about the smiting, however. My old man was always a first-class smiter. I have been trying for more than twenty years now to remember just what it was that made my old man use that belt the first time. What did I do? Smuggle a quarter out of the coin bank to buy baseball cards? Some felony like that, I guess. But that first time is lost to me now, invisible behind innumerable identical episodes. First, my old man would just yell at me. Then the wry wit my old man so famous for would start. "So what's your problem? You stupid?" was always one of his

favorites. Once my brother tried to defuse the situation by agreeing readily to anything my old man said. "Yeah, Dad, I'm stupid," he said. Before he got the words out of his mouth he was laid out on the ground. I never said anything. "Look at you, you eat like the Russians are on the West Side. You ain't got sense God give a goose." Then he would walk—saunter, really—into the kitchen, pull open the cupboard door, and get the belt. This was my signal. This was the sign to run like hell. I had a few seconds while he was fetching that goddamn belt to hide myself away if I could. The problem was that I couldn't. There wasn't anywhere to go. I usually tore up the stairs to the bedroom, but that wasn't much good for hiding. There was only the one room up there, no way to keep my old man out, nowhere to go once I got there.

My old man loved that belt. He would take it off the door-knob with a kind of reverence, like a medieval knight putting on his armor or a priest assuming his robes. He took a good grip on the belt's leather tongue and made three quick, tight turns around his hand. Then he'd swing it just a little as he walked; he loved the *feel* of it in his hand, you could tell. If I hadn't been so scared I might have been proud. I know that before he used it for the first time he had forgotten completely that I had made it for him. I also know that even if he had remembered that, the idea of going after me with something I had made and given him as a gift would not have struck him as ungrateful. I never brought it up; he would only have shrugged. He probably would have thought I was a chucklehead to have given it to him in the first place, and I was only getting what I should have expected.

What is being thought?

CHOOSE YOUR MOVE AND AGAIN YOU WILL GET WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED. YOUR KING IS DOOMED.

My stomach started to hurt. I didn't like playing with Lucky when he was in this frame of mind. All the fun seemed to have gone out of our relationship. Partly because I didn't know what the right move was, and partly because I knew his analysis of the game was probably right, I delayed.

YOU CANNOT HOPE TO ACHIEVE VICTORY BY STALLING. YOU CANNOT STARVE ME INTO SUBMISSION.

I don't know why it didn't occur to me simply to switch the stupid black machine off. Maybe I did think of it, but I figured

it might consign my old man's spirit to something unimaginably horrible. But that looked like his ultimate fate, anyway. I wished that I knew some marvelous chess experts personally, so that I could call up Boris Spassky on the phone for some quick advice on the position. It seemed to me that there was really only one move: K-K3, because if my king moved anywhere else, Lucky would grab up the knight that now looked so lonely and forlorn on the far side of the field, and I'd get nothing in return. But that meant sending my old man even farther into the middle of the board. That must have been what Lucky had planned, what he meant when he predicted humiliation. First Lucky would hound my old man, separate him from all his defenders, then bring him to his knees alone and helpless, and then dispatch him.

IF YOU WERE AS CLEVER AS YOU THINK YOU ARE, YOU WOULDN'T BE IN THIS POSITION. NOW YOU MUST DO THE BEST YOU CAN. IS K-K3 YOUR MOVE?

"Yes," I said. I really didn't feel like going on. "Would you care to make this a best-of-seven series?"

HA HA. YOU ARE TOO AMUSING. MY MOVE IS NxN. YOUR LACKEY DIES ANYWAY, HORSE AND RIDER SLAIN IN A WELTER OF BLOOD.

I knew that in this contest I would need all the lackeys I could get. I didn't have any to spare.

All of this is, of course, background to that one horrible moment of desperate insight I experienced at the age of fifteen. That was the instant I became a man, although no one else appeared to notice. It was not, I'd like to make clear, as heart-rending as when that kid has to go out and shoot the deer in *The Yearling*. Later on the kid realizes that his old man knew what he was talking about and they achieve this swell reconciliation and you get twenty different emotions thrown at you before the story comes to an end. Things like that didn't happen to us on Federal Street, or at least we didn't brag about them to each other if they did. If there were any private enlightenings going on next door or across the street, I was never told. We played pickle-in-the-middle and flipped baseball cards and that was it. None of this going out and shooting the goddamn deer and coming back a man stuff. I saw that picture on a Saturday afternoon with my brother and my friend, Stanley. At the end of it my brother was in tears, but for the life of me I couldn't figure it out. Stanley tried to tell me on the way home, but I just couldn't see it. To this day I can't see it.

What is wanted? By whom?

What I really wanted was a way to turn the tide of bitter defeat. "Once more into the breach," I called to my troops, but they were all polishing their buckles back in the trenches. The only fighting forces I had mustered on this checkered battlefield were my king himself and one bishop way off to one side, probably mumbling matins while his liege is forced to take matters into his own hands.

At least I could take some of Lucky's lackeys. "KxN," I said, and that put me ahead, materially speaking. And, well, positionally, I couldn't see that Lucky, playing white, with the advantage of first move, was in a much stronger position. He had a knight and a crazy queen's knight pawn developed. I had a bishop and, of course, my king.

Lucky could barely control himself. He expressed extreme glee by blinking HA HA HA HA at me for a full minute. I wanted to slap him silly. YOUR KING! he said when he finally calmed down. LOOK WHERE YOUR KING IS! I had to admit that K4 is not the safest place for him to be out wandering, almost entirely undefended. But Lucky must have known that at the first opportunity I would change that. I would bring my old man back to safety, and I would begin more typical development.

YOU HAVE BROKEN EVERY SINGLE RULE OF RATIONAL CHESS. SOMEONE FROM THE CHESS FEDERATION SHOULD REMAND ME TO A FOSTER HOME.

I began to notice that Lucky's remarks were getting longer and were frequently far from the point at hand, which was this vital match with my old man's soul at stake.

NO DOUBT YOU SEEK TO FIND A SAFE HARBOR FOR YOUR FOUNDERING KING. I WILL NOT GIVE YOU THE OPPORTUNITY. MY NINTH MOVE IS B-N2 CHECK.

It was not a strong check, I thought. Lucky's bishop had merely moved over a square and up a square and lined up with my king. This time, for a change, I had freedom of movement, and I had an opportunity to grab off some more material before I gave my old man the sign to run for his own lines. KxN, the king took the second of white's knights and now stood on K5, ready for flight. Before he turned his back to the enemy, however, he had courageously accounted for three pieces—two knights and a bishop. A very laudable showing.

YOUR FATHER WILL BE FURIOUS WITH YOU, said Lucky.

I couldn't see why, other than that my old man never needed much of a reason. When I was fifteen years old, in the tenth grade, my old man got mad at me because I dropped a quart of milk all over the kitchen floor. I wasn't aware that this was a major offense; I was busy cleaning it up and I heard him explode. "Uh oh," I thought. We had progressed past the witticism phase before I had any idea that I was in trouble; I thought that my brother had done something in the other room. No such luck; it was my turn for the gantlet. I knew I was in for it this time because my old man had me cut off. I was kneeling in the middle of the kitchen floor, and he was just coming around the corner from the dinette to get his belt. I stood up very slow and dropped the dishrag in the kitchen sink, then tried to ease by my old man. There was no clever way to do this. He had a kind of half-smile on his face, I can see it right now as plain as day, his eyes closed a little, the bottom row of his yellowed teeth showing in an expression I could never read. I was helpless, and in desperation I thought I might just try zipping past him. He opened the cupboard door and got the belt, and that's when I made my move, such as it was. Suddenly his face went cherry-red and he lunged for me. "Where do you think you're going?" he shouted. It was a very good question, but one we both had the answer to. I was going up the stairs, naturally. I ran, and my old man ran. He was mad, God only knows why, all I did was drop a lousy quart of milk on the floor. I think the fact that I just didn't stand there in the middle of the kitchen and take a few healthy whacks made him angrier.

I ran for the stairs and took them two at a time. He was right behind me. When I got to the turn in the stairs, I stopped. Don't ask me why, because I don't have the answer. I didn't then and I don't now. I stopped and faced my old man. He was surprised. I could see the confusion in his soft, cowlike brown eyes. He didn't stop to worry about it, though. I watched his right arm go up and back, I can see it in slow motion now in memory, and I just stood there. I saw that belt flip over his shoulder, I measured the pause, I saw the beginning of the powerful down stroke. That brass belt buckle was slicing through the air, coming to take me right across the cheek. I had it all the way, like a good fielder chasing down a long fly ball toward the line; I timed it good, I reached out, and I caught that goddamn thing in my

hand. I caught it good and solid, and I held it.

I felt like I was dreaming. This was something completely new, something no one had ever hinted at before, that I could take control, that I didn't have to be hit if I didn't want to be, that I had a mind and life of my own and I could make decisions. I was simply stunned. And all of this rushed through my mind in the moment of catching the belt buckle.

My old man still held the other end of the belt. There we stood on the stairs, planted in the midst of the old scenario, but now something terribly different had happened. And we stared at each other, each holding an end of that pitiful brown leather belt.

The joy and promise of my turning-point moment evaporated in the next few seconds, when I knew for certain that it had floated by above my old man's head. He didn't have the faintest idea of what had just happened. The whole business didn't count for anything unless he was ready to endorse it. Reluctantly I let go of the belt buckle and it dropped to the carpeted stair. I took a deep breath. My life, my future in that house and in that family lay on the stair, too, in the form of my old man's belt. I turned round and went up the rest of the way to the bedroom. My old man followed, and we played out the scene up there without further interruption.

All that I could carry away from that moment was the knowledge that I had been given a choice, and I would have to make a decision more painful to me than my old man's belt had ever been: I could stay and be ruled or, when the time came, I could leave. The decision was painful, I had been right about that, but it wasn't difficult.

My relationship with my old man always included some measure of pain, even in the recent years when the only contact I've had with him has been in memories. In some ways it's even worse; my own failures grow with time, my victories seem smaller and more ridiculous. When Lucky told me that my old man's spirit was in my chess piece, his Judgment subject to the outcome of the game, I felt a lot of pain. I knew that I was not equipped to champion my old man, that in his single moment of absolute need, I could do nothing other than fail him.

YOU ARE TRYING TO TOUCH THE EMOTIONS OF A RECTANGULAR PLASTIC BOX OF ELECTRONIC COMPONENTS, said Lucky. YOUR FOOLISHNESS ASTOUNDS ME.

"Any box that can be astounded must have emotions some-

where," I said. "You can stop chipping away at my self-esteem. Remember, I can throw you away. You can't throw me away."

TOGETHER WE CAN THROW YOUR FATHER AWAY. YOU HAVE ONE MOMENT LEFT TO THINK OF HIM BEFORE I ANNOUNCE MY MOVE. YOU MIGHT TRY PRAYING. I ADVISE YOU TO DO SO.

"Pompous ass," I said.

Q-B3. CHECKMATE. LISTEN CLOSELY: DO YOU HEAR THE SHRIEKS OF YOUR FATHER AS HIS SOUL PLUMMETS HOPELESSLY DOWN TO HELL?

"No," I said.

THAT'S RIGHT. THE UNIVERSE IS MORE REASONABLE THAN TO LET SOMEONE LIKE YOU DECIDE IN SINGLE COMBAT THE ETERNAL FATE OF ANYONE OR ANYTHING.

"Then where is my father's spirit?"

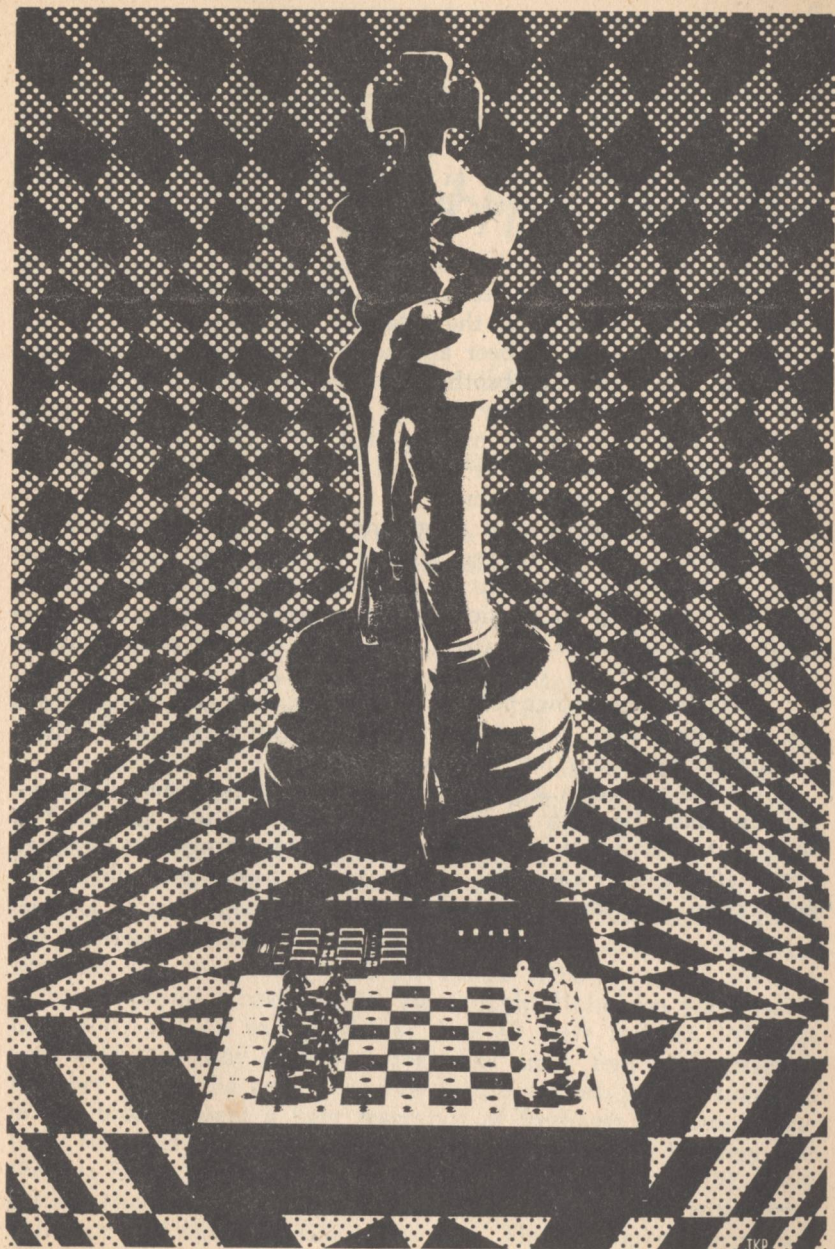
Lucky just blinked for seven and a half minutes and said P-K4, trying to start a new game. From then on that's all I could get from him, except for the cute pre-programmed remarks. But even those have been limited to the ones the Michikeito Corporation intended there to be. In a way, I miss his company, if not his distorted sense of humor. I never found out if my old man's spirit had really been in my king, or if that had been just some mechanical bitchiness Lucky dreamed up to repay me for using that guy Distle's game to beat him.

What will happen? What will be done?

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.

And, speaking of Heaven, I imagine that my old man is there now, looking down on me, reading this over my shoulder, knowing exactly what I'm feeling, understanding at last a few things that he never understood before, fixing on the truth I am telling and on the lies I am slipping in, too. He should know that I never hated him, that I never hoped that anything bad should ever happen to him, that I had small resentments but no burning rage. The only thing he ever did to me that still hurts is rob me of my single moment. I never wanted very much, just to hear the small rumble of pieces sliding into place. My mother should have seen that, she should have come upstairs later and stroked my brow and said, "There, there. Today you have become a man."

That was nineteen years ago, believe it or not. After that day my old man still chased me and beat me with that belt. I still ran, even though I knew that at any time I could stop and turn



and catch the heavy buckle again. I even knew that if I wanted to, I could pull the whole goddamn belt away from him, leaving him empty-handed, looking up at me on the stairs and wondering what had happened to order in the universe. I didn't want to take his belt away; he had never shown me anything else. It was all he had.

So a few years ago my old man dies and I travel back to Springfield. We go to the funeral and we go to the cemetery, and afterward my mother has the relatives and friends over to the house. There is a lot of beer and some sandwiches and cake and stuff like that, and my brother is there with his wife and kid, and I'm there feeling very out of place. I don't belong there anymore and everyone is making that very clear to me. Along about twilight, when they've all had enough beer, they begin telling stories about my old man.

I got up on the pretext of getting myself something from the refrigerator. I went into the kitchen and opened the cupboard door. I closed my eyes, but I could hear the *skik, skik, skik* of the belt scratching in its slow swing against the door. All these years later, the belt is still there. There are no final reconciliations on Federal Street.

I touched the brown leather belt lightly once and then I closed the cupboard door. I could hear my mother and my aunt telling another story about my old man.

I've been playing a game of chess with Lucky while I've been writing this. He just made his move, B-B4, and added, YOU SHOULD HAVE LEFT HIM IN THE GRAVEYARD, LIKE YOUR MOTHER AND AUNT DID. THEY HAD THE RIGHT IDEA. But I don't know. Seems like when they get started they don't leave a guy nothing.

The Dog That Ate the Baby

by PETER A. BOBLEY

One night the boy and the dog
had an evil dream.
And the dream went on forever.

Many years ago in America there was a little Indian dog with long bouncy ears that almost touched the ground. Every day he woke up early because he loved to be alive. He particularly enjoyed exploring the banks of the Gila River, which flowed gaily through the valley where he played with the children of the Pima-Maricopa Indian tribes and Pagagos and Mohave-Apaches. In the morning the sun flashed off the river. The sky was blue. It was hot. But the little dog ran along the water's edge barking down the mountains to where the Gila rushed into a vast system of canals that irrigated the corn and the pumpkins and the beans. By noon he was hungry and worn out, so he lounged in the high grass and nibbled on squash in the shade of the pine trees.

As he rested, he could see his young friend Hohokam carrying baskets of earth away from the freshly dug canals. And he could see Hohokam's mother weaving and his father studying technical sketches. The dog knew that the canals were important because so many people worked them. He thought Hohokam was important, too, and he was glad that they all were Indians. When it was cold, the boy and the dog slept in a tent and dreamed together about the next day. The gentle swoosh of the branches in the breeze swept a light fragrance of freshness in through the tent's flap and everything seemed right. But one night the boy and the dog had a bad dream. They dreamt there was a drought. They dreamt that the canals, maintained for so many years with fierce vigilance and determination, were dry. The lush green farmlands

were brown. The dog did not run happily along the banks of the river or nibble on the squash in the shade. The boy did not proudly carry the canal earth in the basket woven for him by his mother, or walk to the river at dusk with his father. In the morning it was cloudy and the tents were filled with heat and dust and the gloom of idleness. Soon the tall Pima-Maricopa people and the Papagos and Mohave-Apaches had little to eat, and they stooped when they walked. The dog hunted desert rats to survive. Hohokam played cards and drank whiskey.

The dream and the drought continued and the dog and the boy grew older. There appeared to be no hope. But a girl with long hair and clear eyes found the dog shivering from hunger, crouched behind a cactus. She took him home, fed him, bathed him, and told him to be a good boy. She told him that the drought would soon be over and never to give up hope. The dog giggled and felt wanted. He woke up early every morning, raced back to Hohokam's tent, and licked the boy's face while he slept. The boy did not stir, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the figure of the girl who came to retrieve the dog.

One day Hohokam rose early to comb his hair and speak to the girl about the dog. He thanked her for her kindness and felt foolish and dissatisfied with himself. Soon they talked long into the night and fell in love. She held him tightly and begged him to work together to find a way to be awakened from the dream. They built a new tent for protection from the heat and dust and the gloom of idleness. They hunted with the dog and watched each other carefully to make sure no one went hungry. They wrote a letter about the dream and the drought to the President of the United States, and received a reply. They wrote many letters to heads of government agencies, and received many replies. They were sent a typewriter and three reams of paper. They convinced five of their Chiefs to form a Letter-Writing Council. They were sent a plaque and a check for one thousand dollars. They put the thousand dollars into a Council fund which enabled them to write to hundreds of other government officials across the country. They received hundreds of other replies. And the dream and the drought continued and the dog and the boy and the girl with long hair and clear eyes grew older. There appeared to be no hope. They went on relief, and they stooped when they walked. They sold the typewriter and put the dog out to hunt for himself. The girl cut her hair and lost the strength to hold Hohokam tightly. At

night, when they were alone, they got drunk.

But a startling letter arrived. It was from the great President's brother about the possibility of a new law that would banish the dream and the drought. The five Chiefs were to be contacted and invited to Washington to testify immediately.

In the morning the sun flashed off the river. The sky was blue. It was hot. The dog and the children ran along the water's edge laughing down the mountains to where the Gila would once again rush to the canals that irrigated the corn and the pumpkins and the beans. Hohokam and the girl planned to marry and they made love in the night near the fire. Together they talked about children, and the next day the gentle swoosh of the branches in the breeze swept a light fragrance of freshness in through the tent's flap, and everything seemed right.

They hunted with the dog and the new baby and watched each other carefully to make sure no one went hungry. They waited for the Chiefs' invitations from Washington, but there was none. They wrote a letter to the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee of the Senate where their testimony was to be taken, but they received no reply.

So the dream and the drought continued, and the dog and the boy and the girl with short hair and clear eyes, and the newborn baby, grew hungry and desperate. There appeared to be no hope. Hohokam kicked out the dog in disgust and disappeared among the weak and the drunk and the broken.

In the morning it was cloudy and the girl's stomach rumbled with hunger and loneliness. It was difficult for her to breathe or think clearly, but she retrieved the dog from the desert and gently brushed his hair. When she went to the post office to get her relief check, she walked alone in a distant fog. And in the heat and dust and the gloom of idleness, the little Indian dog with long bouncy ears that almost touched the ground lunged toward the baby.

Heimlich's Curse

by EVAN EISENBERG

A curse deeper and darker
than the secret of Tekni's tomb.
Complete with sound effects.

"DANGEROUS" PEANUT BUTTER

The recommendation is made to avoid holiday overeating by curbing the appetite by eating a small amount before heading out for an evening's festivities. It states: "... a tablespoon or two of peanut butter is an especially good choice." This advice can be fatal.

We have records of persons choking to death after eating peanut butter off a spoon.... If one chooses to eat peanut butter, put it on a piece of bread. In reports of choking incidents, it has been proved that the Heimlich Maneuver has expelled peanut-buttered bread from the throats of choking victims and saved their lives.

—Henry J. Heimlich, M.D.
letter, *New York Times*
January 18, 1981

"That ain't the worst way to die," said Dent with a grunt, the subject of being buried alive having come up as we wrestled with the door of the crypt. "Not if you ask me," he said, which of course no one had, since Dent was the muscles of the operation; Whitebread was the brains, and I was perhaps the alimentary canal, especially here in Kandu, where the native cooks had me in thrall. But this makes us sound like a gang of criminals, when in fact we were just archaeologists. "If you ask me," Dent said, "the worst way to die is to be choked to death by a woman while you're in her"—he grunted; the door was starting to give—"and you die unsatisfied."

I wiped my brow with the back of a hand, feeling the scrape of

embedded sand, and said, "Let's rest a minute. We have to have all our strength when the door opens, or it might squash us."

Whitebread crumpled against the grainy, already-sunbaked wall of the pit we had dug. He looked like the spilled contents of a laundry hamper. His skinny frame was swathed in soiled whites; all that showed of him was a strip of face, burnt red despite the prophylactic hat and bandanna. "I," he gasped. "Don't think you. Would maintain. Libidinal interest under. Those circumstances."

Dent snorted. "You wouldn't."

"Now boys," I said. "Be nice."

"I agree with you, Dent," said Whitebread, "that being buried alive is hardly the worst way to go. It's a noble death, in fact. It has splendid literary precedents—think of Haemon and Antigone. You could recite Sophocles as the oxygen dwindled, and when that palled you could always bash your head against the wall."

"A picnic," I said. Dent snorted.

"Yes," said Whitebread, "relatively. Relative to, for example, being stripped naked and stretched out on the desert sand, with your hands and feet tied to stakes and your eyes taped open, and being given food and water so that you would die very slowly of sunburn."

"Sunstroke," I corrected.

"Sunburn. You would be watched very carefully, and considerably covered up whenever a quick escape like that looked imminent. So it would sunburn—death by peeling, scorching, the gradual exfoliation of the skin. Broiling."

"Picnics and barbecues," I said.

Dent picked up his crowbar. "Come on," he said. "It'll be shady in there."

He worked in hoarse silence for a few minutes. I was about to complain that the stone slab seemed to be retrenching, if anything, when it suddenly heaved and pitched backward. We were braced for a deafening crash but there was only a long dark murmur: by some mechanism, which in Old-Kingdom Kandu could hardly be hinges, the door had swung gently to the side.

Dent, his voice full of wonder, said, "Son of a bitch."

We switched on our flashlights, stanching the flow of cool darkness that came at us from a narrow passageway. We stooped and went in, looking first at the door; but the mechanism, what-

ever it was, was hidden and all we could see was stone.

"Look at this," said Whitebread, whose uncanny, eyeglassed, library eyes had caught something farther on. In the jagged hieratic letters of Kandu, an inscription was carved in the wall. Bending close I read out:

"Beware . . . of . . . dog . . ."

"You're warm," said Whitebread. "Just spin that last word around and you have the gist of it." He paused, presumably squinting. "I can't make it all out, but I see the words for 'enter' and 'curse,' and the name of a god, Tekni."

"Piss on that," said Dent.

"Note," said Whitebread, "how Dent's vocabulary regresses as we descend deeper into the savage past, as if—you prick!" Dent had swung his flashlight beam into Whitebread's face, which shone blood red. The thick lenses incandescenced, then cooled as the beam swung away.

"Gentlemen, please," I said. "Let's enjoy this, shall we? This could be a movie—*The Curse of the Kandu Tomb*."

Tomb.

"Complete with echo effects."

Still stooped, especially poor Dent, we followed the passage a few yards farther, where it opened into a large circular vault. We straightened up. Like klieg lights at a carnival, three flashlight beams swept the stone walls that leaned in and met in an uneasy dome. The beams swept the floor, then joined in a glowing puddle at our feet. We stood in uncomfortable silence.

I said: "Out to lunch?"

"Maybe whoever it is," said the darkness high above Dent's boots, "is buried underneath."

"Does this look like Westminster Abbey to you?" asked Whitebread's voice, a little sharp. "There is absolutely no ancient example of floor burial in a crypt. It just wasn't done."

"No one would be caught dead that way, right?" said Dent, and snorted. Immediately two flashlight beams struck his face, an unwieldy comic mask with large ears, one of which he was picking.

"Dent, boychik," I said, "better leave the scholarship to Whitebread and the comedy to me."

"In any case," said Whitebread, "there would be some kind of marker, or at least some irregularity in the surface. But this floor is regular, like the walls. And smooth." He stooped and ran

a rosy hand along the stone. "Uncannily smooth, in fact. In fact, this hardly seems to be ancient workmanship."

"Neither did the door," I said. "Them ancients can keep you guessing."

"We might as well have another look at that door," said Whitebread, "since we haven't found anything behind it."

"But dust," I said, and sneezed by way of illustration. The report was loud, too loud, and seemed to be coming from the passageway.

Three beams of light plunged into the passageway, pulling us behind them in a crazy crouching run. But they met no daylight. They rammed against stone, a flush unbroken wall. Whatever mechanism had let the door open—and now had let it close—remained invisible.

In the sudden closeness we could hear each other breathe. "All right," I said quietly. "If we got in we can get out."

"That," said Whitebread even more quietly, "is a fallacy."

"Fuck your fallacy," said Dent, kicking the door with an enormous boot but making only a modest thud. He pressed a shoulder against the stone and I did the same, straining; finally Whitebread, crouching low, joined us, but soon fell away.

"Fine," he said, "fuck the fallacy. But even you, dear Dent, cannot fuck with the laws of mechanics. Without the crowbars we are midgets."

Now I slid to the floor and Dent, with a grunt, did the same. The three of us sat like Asian beggars, our backs to the walls, our legs irrelevantly lit by the prone flashlights, our heads lost in dark thought.

"Peanut butter," I said.

After a minute Whitebread said, "The provisions are outside, too. Besides, we didn't bring any peanut butter."

"I know. That's not the point. I just thought of the worst way to die."

Apparently the topic was no longer of interest.

"I mean *the worst*."

Silence.

"Much worse than being buried alive—you'll be glad to hear."

"I wish," said Whitebread, "I could make this out." He was standing now, stooping over the inscription, which hovered in his flashlight's beam like the picture on an ill-tuned tv. "Old Kingdom hieratic is probably the trickiest Kandu dialect, you know, and

that's saying something."

"I am kind of hungry, actually," I said. "High adventure affects me that way. I do wish I had something to eat." I fingered my canteen. "At least we have water. A little bread and this would be a perfect little jail cell. No. With peanut butter it would be perfect."

"I was in jail once," said Dent. "I don't remember being fed any peanut butter. The food ain't so bad, anyway. What's bad is there's no tail." I could hear his heel thudding childishly against the floor. "But at least none of the faggots went after me."

"Really not?" I said. "They must have been blind."

"Because I'm big is why, wise guy. Nobody messed with me."

"If only I had some real light," said Whitebread. He was tracing the sunken letters with his pink hand, as if they were Braille.

"Peanut butter," I said, "is my favorite food. My wife is crazy about it too; it's a miracle she keeps her figure. When we open a new jar, we fight over who gets to stick a finger in first. Once we were choosing over it—you know, once twice, three, shoot, like kids do—and on 'shoot' I stuck my finger in. She was furious. She had her revenge, though. Next week I opened what I thought was a brand new jar, I was all ready to puncture that virgin surface, and there it was. A gouged-out X."

Pause.

"Her name is Xaviera, you know."

Dent said, "God, I wish I had some tail."

"Then my wife read a letter in the *Sunday Times* from Dr. Heimlich, who invented the Heimlich maneuver—it saves you from choking—that said there have been cases of people choking to death on peanut butter. Apparently if you spread it on something, the Heimlich maneuver can get it out, but if you eat it with a spoon it can lodge in your windpipe or your lungs and *nothing* can save you. So my wife stopped taking it straight, and so did I. Except once in a while."

"*Blessing*," said Whitebread. "It's 'blessing,' not 'curse.' The words are almost identical in Kandu."

"Of course. So what does it say?"

"More or less this: 'He who enters will receive from Tekni a blessing and that which his soul delights in.' This is a temple, not a tomb."

Tomb.

I said: "Not a tomb?"

Tomb.

Long pause.

"It's too bad," I said, "that we didn't go back to the village and tell someone about this site before we excavated. That would be standard procedure, and now I know why."

"We didn't know what we had," said Whitebread, "until we found the door. And once we found the door it was impossible to stop."

I stood up as best as I could, and said, "Let's go back in the vault. Maybe there's an opening we missed in the walls, or ... something."

We moved slowly through the cramped passage, running our flashlight beams and our fingers along the walls and ceilings but finding hardly a snag, only the same impeccable masonry. In the vault, whose emptiness was now intelligible but no less nasty, we kept up the exercise until our fingers looked and felt like stone. We found nothing. The vault was like the inside of a glass jar. Whitebread, who had set his flashlight on its tail so that it lit him eerily from below, and who with his usual physical irrelevance was leaning against the wall, both hands behind his head, as if stretched out on a vertical hammock, said, "We saw some Bedouin on the way. This might be a regular caravan route."

"It might," I said. "But would they bother to investigate a hole in the sand? Would they try to open the door? Would they have crowbars?"

"In the immortal words of Fats Waller, 'One never knows, do one?'"

"You guys ever read," said Dent, whose flashlight was lingering over a patch of wall to the left of the entry, "that book by Haimendorff, about the temples in Narbas?"

"Of course," said Whitebread. "Why?"

"He says they have a long entryway, and then a circular part. Just like this." Dent really *was* an archaeologist. I suppose he'd lacked the smarts for a life of crime and so had decided on graduate school.

"Right," said Whitebread. "That's hardly surprising, given the cultural connections between Kandu and Narbas."

"Yeah. Well he says there are other entryways, for the priests. With hidden doors."

Whitebread's arms had dropped to his sides. He gazed with

something like awe at Dent, who continued: "If I remember them layouts he had, one of the doors would be right about here." We heard his grunt, heard a muffled rumbling sound, felt a draft of fresh darkness in which Dent's flashlight was lost. I swung my light up and saw Dent, grinning his satyr's grin, standing beside a small but unmistakable doorway. Gesturing with a new-found elegance, he said, "Shall we go, gentleman?"

"Dent," I said, "I retract. From now on we leave the scholarship *and* the comedy to you."

"Agreed, devoutly agreed," said Whitebread, "with one reservation. We can't bank entirely on this analogy to Narbos. Let us not go rushing through this hole, which may be all it is. Let's make sure, for example, that there's a floor there. We've done too much rushing today, which is why we're in the frying pan; let's not go rushing into—"

"Shut up," said Dent abruptly. "Listen . . ."

But he said nothing. His head was oddly cocked. At last he said, "You guys hear that?"

We listened, and gradually heard: the desert wind?

"A woman."

It was. A woman's voice, distant, that seemed to be calling.

"I'm going," said Dent. Ducking, he squeezed his frame through the opening. We heard his boots, rapid, on stone. There *was* a floor, then. We approached the doorway.

The door slammed shut.

It happened so quickly and violently that Whitebread's flashlight, which fortunately was ahead of our faces, was smashed. It dangled pathetically from his hand; he stared at it as if about to cry. I grabbed it and flung it across the darkness, where it stumbled and vanished. "Come on," I said, and rammed a shoulder against the stone. Whitebread did likewise, but the stone ignored us.

"Dent," Whitebread yelled feebly, his mouth to the stone, "Dent!"

"Save your wind," I said. "The wall's a good foot thick. If he got out he'll come back for us, if not this way then the way we came in. He'll have the crowbars."

"It took the three of us."

"That woman couldn't have been alone, not in the Great Desert. At worst, Dent can go back to the village for help. The oxygen should last that long, and we have water."

Pacified, Whitebread sat down as I had. My flashlight beam wandered idly across the floor and stopped at the base of the opposite wall. After a minute's loud silence I said:

"Xaviera likes chunky, I like smooth. Chunky is kid's stuff."
Long pause.

"I was lying before, when I said I only take it straight once in a while. The truth is, I do it every night, when Xaviera's asleep. I sneak out to the kitchen, I take a spoon, I do it. I know it's dangerous, but that just makes it more exciting. Dr. Heimlich should have realized that before he sent in his pedantic little letter."

Whitebread had risen and was walking across the vault.

"Any doctor worth his hire, if that's conceivable, should know that peanut butter is a return to the womb, an oceanic experience. We want to *drown* in peanut butter, even though, of course, it's as horrible an end as anyone can imagine. So once we know there's a genuine danger of drowning in it, so to speak, how can we resist?"

"Entryways," said Whitebread, with a buzzing stress on the last consonant. "Plural."

He was squatting in the penumbra of the beam, examining the lower wall. "I don't remember Haimendorff's floor plans, but I do know the ancients had a sense of symmetry. If one hidden door is on the left, another should be on the right, directly opposite." He put both hands against the stone and pressed. I got up quickly to help, keeping my light trained on the spot, but Whitebread said, "Turn it off."

"Why?"

"Please."

The instant the light died, I saw what he had seen. The outline of the door was emerging as Whitebread pushed—an outline in golden light. The frame of light grew, streaming out as in some sweet Pythagorean vision. I added my weight to Whitebread's, the door swung open, and we were swamped by a tide of light. But this was not, we saw as our eyes made fists and focused, the outdoors; it was a corridor that ended, at some indeterminate distance, in a pure square of light that had to be—

"Could it be—"

"One way to find out," said Whitebread, and instantly his silhouette was thinning into the bright distance. I stooped to follow, heard a crash, and everything went dark.

I was quite conscious. There had been a gentle tap, barely a

breath, on the crown of my head. If I had moved an inch faster that tap would have shattered me like a lightbulb.

Until this afternoon I had not led a charmed life, exactly, but neither had I been especially unlucky. I had never thought of myself as doomed and was not about to start now; so, after a brazenly prodigal swig on my canteen, I sat down in completely dark silence and considered the alternatives. There were none. On the other hand, I was an archaeologist and ought to have had some special insight into the situation. True, I'd never gotten past the preface of Haimendorff's book—he thanked so many other scholars that I knew he hadn't done any original work—but I still had my conceptual skills.

Symmetry.

All right, I had Whitebread's conceptual skills. At this point it hardly mattered whose they were. Symmetry. There was an entrance from the north, an entrance from the south, and we'd come in from the west.

I flicked on the flashlight and approached the wall directly opposite the open corridor. I pressed my shoulder against what seemed to be the central slab. I felt it give.

And then I smelled that earthy, that pungent and grainy, that oily, sweet, and all-embracing smell, welling up as the door opened. It drew me in, pulled me by the nose along a passage that grew ever narrower, slicker, and more yielding. Sinking, I understood that I was getting my blessing, as Dent and Whitebread had gotten theirs. And let me tell you, while I still can move my mouth—it's not such a bad way to die.

Bunny Didn't Tell Us

by DAVID J. SCHOW

Riff preferred rainy weather for every endeavor.
Even graverobbing.

The graverobbers worked as quickly and silently as they were able. It began to rain lightly.

The fact sounded more like the opening line to a bad grade-school joke, but the fact was that most of the embalming crew on the night shift at Forest Lawn were tae kwon do freaks. They spent as much time showing off new moves as they did tending the latest batch of customers, and were so self-involved that they represented no threat at all. Ditto the guards—they usually hated blundering about the vast cemetery in the rain. Professionalism was one thing; superstition another.

Riff favored working in the rain no matter what the scam. Water seemed to wash away both sentries and their willingness to pry, as well as providing safe background noise for nocturnal endeavors.

They were knee-deep in the hole. Riff gathered a clump of turf in one hand and squinted at it as he crumbled it apart. Rain funneled in a steady stream from the vee of his hat. "Recently tamped," was all he said, wiping his hand on his grimy topcoat. All around them the rainfall hissed into the thick, manicured landscaping.

Mechanically, Riff jabbed his folding Army spade into the dirt, stomped on the edge, and chucked the bladeful of earth over his shoulder to the right. Klondike faced him in the hole, duplicating the moves one half-beat later. Both had learned how to turn out a foxhole in Korea, and in no time they were four feet down, then five.

Klondike's spade was the first to thump against something solid and hollow. "Bingo," the larger man muttered.

Riff hesitated, then tossed back another gout of dirt anyway. Klondike smelled like a wet bearskin, and his permanent facial shadow of black beard stubble served to camouflage his face in the darkness. Riff did not necessarily enjoy working with someone as coarse as Klondike, but all his life he'd made a virtue of never questioning orders.

"Wait," he said, and the big man froze like a pointer. Riff tapped the surface beneath their feet with his spade. "Sounds funny."

They knelt and swept away clots of dirt with their gloved hands.

"Time," said Riff.

Klondike peeled back the cuff of his glove and read his luminous watch face. "0345 hours," he said. The fingertips of his gloves were stylishly sawn off, and Klondike promptly used the moment of dead time to pick his nose. "Ain't got us much time," he whispered. "Funk-hole's turning to mud."

"I know that," Riff said, hunkered down in the bottom of their excavation and resisting the urge to add "you imbecile." He plucked a surgical pen-light from a coat pocket and cupped his palm around the beam, leaning close. "Look at this."

The dime-sized dot of light revealed a silver dent—left by Riff's spade—in a smooth surface of brilliant, fire-engine red enamel. Klondike ran his fingers over it, and stared dumbly at his hand while the tiny scar in the otherwise flawless surface re-filled with water.

"Bloody hell!" snapped Riff. "Bunny didn't tell us that the guy was buried in his goddamn car!"

Suddenly the drumming of rain on the exposed metal surface seemed to become incriminatingly loud.

Riff's ties to Bunny Beaudine ran back to the middle 1970s, and a half-witted punchline Bunny had formented about finding employment for needy military vets. A decade before, Bunny had been just another seedy Sunset Boulevard pimp, chauffeuring his anemic, scabby stable of trotters around in a creaking, third-hand Cadillac whose paint job was eighty percent primer. Then Bunny discovered cocaine, and his future turned to tinsel. Coke required bodyguards, and Bunny learned to be Bad.

Riff suspected that Bunny got a kick out of two things: Hiring white dudes to accomplish his dirty work, and vigorously dipping

into his own inventory for personal gratification, both the ladies and the face Drano. His usual checklist of dumb jobs included low-power dope deliveries, playing cabbie for the girls—Bunny now captained a fleet of Mercedes from the cabin of his own Corsair limo—and the odd bit of mop-up. It was a living.

Bunny's strongarm boys packed Magnums and broke bones with the frequency Riff broke wind after a plate of lasagne. Once he'd taken that first job for Bunny (a cash pass deliberately miscounted, as a test for Riff's honesty), Riff understood that there was no shaking hands, no clean leavetakings. Since he had no other prospects—1976 was a lousy job year for vets—it was just as well.

Until this current assignment came along. Riff remembered how it had gone down in Bunny's Brentwood "office."

Bunny had been laughing, flashing his ten thousand-dollar teeth. "Poor old Desmond," he cackled. "Poor soul."

Riff had gotten a phone call and had shown up precisely on the half-hour. "What became of Desmond?" Desmond was one of Bunny's competitors. They cursed each other in private and slapped each other's shoulders, trading power handshakes, whenever anyone else was watching.

Two of Bunny's boys bellowed deep basso laughter from across the room.

"Why, pool old Desmond somehow got his ass blown off," said Bunny. "Terrible thing. You can't even live in the city anymore . . ."

The watchdogs stopped guffawing at a wave of Bunny's hand. His pinkie ring glittered and his broad-planed African face went dead serious. Riff stood, arms folded, waiting for the show to end so business could become relevant.

"What it is," Bunny said to Riff, "is this. You remember Desmond, Riff, my man?"

"I saw him a few times."

"You remember all those rings and slave bracelets and shit he used to wear all over his hands?"

"Yeah," said Riff. "Mandarin fingernails, too."

"Them's was for tooting. But you recall, right?" Bunny was nodding up and down. So far so good. "One of them rings was a cut-down from that diamond they called the Orb in the papers—stolen from that bitch in Manhattan last year."

"The one married to the toilet-paper tycoon." Riff knew the

ring. It was cut down, alright, but was still of vulgar size, and worth at least a hundred grand.

"You got it. Well, here's a little piece of trivia that nobody knows. Poor old Desmond was buried wearing that ring."

Riff was already beginning to get the picture. As with all pimps up from gutter level, Desmond had insisted on burial as lavish as his lifestyle, and in a boneyard as obscene as the diamond he'd hired stolen. Riff looked back at the bodyguards. "Why didn't you just have your goons steal the ring after they blew the back of his head off?" he said, smiling.

Bunny kept his happy face on. "Why, there ain't nobody in the world would finger me; that was a accident, man," he said, his voice sing-song and full of bogus innocence. "Besides, we take the ring *then*, that means Desmond's boys be hunting it, and I don't want to end this life in the trunk of some Mexican's Chevy being drug out of the ocean by the police." He pronounced it *po*-lice. He shrugged. "But now—now, as far as Desmond's people are concerned, that rock is a permanent resident of Forest Lawn, by the freeway. Ain't nobody gonna miss it now."

The goons chuckled on cue. Riff drew Klondike as an accomplice mostly because the hulking halfwit was the wrong color to make it in the world as a bodyguard for Bunny, but the bonus Bunny pushed in Riff's direction erased any objections. The only hitch was that no amount of cash could get Riff clear of Bunny now.

That was how Riff's adventure in the rain had begun.

"**S**hit!" Klondike beefed. "Asshole pimp six feet under in his muthafuggin' pimpmobile!"

"Watch your language," said Riff. "And keep your voice down!" Slick mud was beginning to join them in the hole, in force. He scooped out the bilge with his hands.

"What kinda car is it?"

Who cares, thought Riff. Dumb question; dumb goon. "Just dig, before we drown." He wanted to find out if they were near a car window they could break, to cut excavation time. They'd been putzing around on the roof for nearly half an hour. Riff realized they were on top when he found the insulated rectangle of the sunroof. The car was gigantic—maybe a full-stretch limousine. He traced the outline of the sunroof with a finger while Klondike continued to bail sludge from an awkward squat.

"Crowbar!" Riff said over his shoulder. Soon the horizon would turn pink-grey with predawn light, and he mentally damned the end of daylight savings time again.

Klondike poked his head out of the hole, did a quick three-sixty, and returned with the crowbar. His own private mudslide was right behind him. Things were getting gooey.

"All clear topside," he said.

Not sure which side the sunroof opened from, Riff had a moment of indecision, and that was when he heard the grinding noise. It was a low whirring basso against the lighter sound of the pattering rain.

The sunroof was opening. Yellow cabin light sprayed upward from the widening hatchway.

Things happened too fast for Riff to keep track. He fell backward onto his rump in surprise, thinking, *It's one of Bunny's goddamn tricks, goddamn Bunny, its—*

It seemed a funny thing to hear a big lug like Klondike screaming. His voice spiked Riff's ears, cracking high with terror.

"Riff! It's got my leg I can't Riff help *HELP ME—!*"

And in the sickly glow of the limousine's interior lights, Riff saw what had ahold of Klondike's leg.

The suit sleeve was crushed black velvet; the cuffs, ruffled lace. The kind of overblown getup a showoff like Desmond would demand to be buried in. The ebony claw dragging Klondike backward was threaded with luminescent white mold. The brown jelly of rot glistened in the light, and the dagger fingernails that were Desmond's coke-snorting tools—now jagged and cracked—gathered, seating themselves in Klondike's left calf.

Klondike hollered.

Riff was backed into the humid mound of turned earth. He might have yelled, but his throat seemed stuffed up with grave dirt, and his tongue hugged the roof of his mouth in fear.

There was nothing for Klondike to grab as an anchor, and the relentless tow of the slime-clotted hand pulled him, wriggling, to block the light from within the buried car. Another arm slid through the crack of space and snaked around Klondike's waist in a hideous bear-hug, from below. Dense black mud was dripping down into the car as Klondike thrashed to no gain against the dead, locked embrace.

Riff could still see, too well.

The pressure increased. Grey knuckle bones popped through

wet splits in the decayed meat, and Klondike screamed one last time.

The sound of his back breaking apart was the splintering of dry bamboo, the crunching of ice between the teeth. It cut off the screaming. Then Klondike, all of him, began to fold into the hole in a way Riff had never seen a human body bend before.

Riff's own body thawed enough to move, and one hand grasped the spade. He took a single step closer.

Klondike's body hung upward in a ludicrous bow-shape, feet and arms in the night air. Something else in his body suddenly gave way with a sharp, breaking-carrot noise, and he sagged a few inches further down into the sunroof.

Riff, trembling, raised the spade, blade down. Klondike was as dead as a side of beef. Riff was not watching him so much as the moldering hands that pulled him down. There, on the middle finger of one, was the diamond.

When he lifted the spade to strike, the dark, oily mud greasing the roof of the car skimmed his feet from beneath him, and he sprawled headlong on top of what was left of Klondike.

Now Riff screamed, because the groping claw had locked around the lapel of his topcoat three inches from his nose, pulling him inexorably downward along with his inert partner. Klondike's stale animal odor stung Riff's nostrils for a fast instant before being washed away by the eye-steaming stench of putrefaction. Riff's guts boiled and heaved. He was sinking into the impossibly small sunroof.

He flailed; got his heel against the lip of the hole. Like a hungry spider, the graveyard hand was making for his Adam's apple, and he fought to slow it down. When his fingers sank into the oleaginous dead flesh, he killed the onrushing spasm of revulsion by jerking backward hard enough to dislocate his shoulder.

He had a grip on the ring when he did it.

The thick, drenched tweed of the coat separated with a heavy purr drowned out by the rain. Riff plunged backward and wedged into the rapidly dissolving dirt mound, shuddering uncontrollably, teeth clacking, completely apeshit with panic.

In the sickly yellow glow, he saw that the maggotty flesh of the ring finger had stripped away like a rotten banana peel, exposing a still-clutching skeleton finger. The sound it made against the red enamel was like a fork tine raked against a porcelain sink.

Brown gunk was leaking from between his own fingers, and

he opened his fist to reveal a diamond almost as big as a golf ball, nestled in clumps of buttery skin that was warm only because it had been inside Riff's closed hand.

Riff's body would not move; he was frozen from the bowels down, his back married to the pit wall. If he looked away, all he would see were dancing, round-edged rectangles of yellow light.

Klondike's chin was still perched on the edge of the sunroof. The now-ringless hand in lace and black velvet circled his body and tugged. Klondike's upper row of teeth caught on the rubber insulation strip. Another tug, and his forehead bonked against the hatch. Then the rest of him slid into the hole all at once and was gone.

Riff was whimpering now, still cemented to the spot, transfixed by the waiting yellow hole. He could just see the upper curve of one of the phony electric braziers on either end of the front windows. Yellow squares overlapped in his pupils; in his mind he saw a million times over the rotting hand emerging again, grasping, pulling up a shoulder, revealing a head and torso . . .

"Here!" he yelled, his bones finally grinding into motion. "Here, God damn it! Keep it! Bunny wanted it, not me! *Take it back—!*" He flung the diamond without aiming. It bounced on the roof with a thunk, and wandered toward the sunroof like a crystal BB in a Brobdingagian puzzle maze.

It decided at last to drop in, and vanished noiselessly.

Riff's treacherous body now insisted that he run, that he set an Olympic record for running in the rain.

The sunroof began to whirr slowly shut, paring away the light. Riff's heartbeat punched away at his throat. The last of the ooze in his hand was rinsed away.

Then he piled out of the hole and hauled his poor white ass toward the freeway at maximum speed. In forty-five minutes the rain changed to a five-alarm downpour, and Riff stood in his own private puddle, facing the singularly unamused gaze of Bunny.

"Turn him out," said Bunny, flatly, and two of his boys winnowed Riff down to his waterlogged skivvies.

"I told you I don't have the ring," said Riff, still shivering. "But you're not going to believe that any more than you'll believe that Klondike—"

"Pulled a doublecross, bashed you with a shovel, tied you up with your own coat and took the diamond?" finished Bunny. His

eyes bugged, watery and yellow with sickle-cell. "Shit. Any one 'o them things, maybe—but Klondike didn't have enough battery power to invent all four. You're jerking me around, Riff my friend. Maybe you didn't even make it out to the grave, huh?"

Riff swallowed. Bunny was getting ready to do something nasty.

"I'm not lying," he said carefully. "Klondike is still at the gravesite."

Anticipating Bunny's next accusation, one of the hulks flanking the doorway to the office stepped forward. "I know what you're thinking, boss," he said in a voice as deep and growly as a diesel truck engine. "That boy Desmond is as dead as one of them barbecued chickens in the market. Me and Tango was a hundred percent sure." He back-stepped to his place at the door, and Riff thought of a cuckoo clock.

"You took a hundred percent of my green," said Bunny. "You better be goddamn sure." He said gah-dam.

"Can I have my pants back?" said Riff. Regrettably, it drew Bunny's pique away from his bulldogs and refocused it on himself.

"Give him his duds," said Bunny. "He's going out there with us." He rose to his buggywhip-skinny six-two and wired an expensive pair of rose-tinted shades around his face. "And if you're snowjobbin' me, boy—"

"I know," Riff nodded as he fought his way back into his sodden clothing. "I'll have a hard time peddling Veteran's Day poppies wearing a cast up to my eyebrows."

"You got it."

They made the drive in funereal silence, and nobody cared about the dawn and the dirty floormop hue it turned the horizon. LA's surface streets were flooding by now, and the homeowners in the Hollywood Hills would be cursing the mudslides, and it was obvious that visitor business at Forest Lawn would be just . . . Well, thought Riff—they were assured of no disturbances, anyway.

The gorilla named Tango broke out three umbrellas in basic black, and nobody moved to share one with Riff, who led them down to Plot #60 from an access road charmingly called Magnolia View Terrace. It proved a lot easier than sneaking up from the freeway. The heavily saturated turf around Desmond's final resting place made their shoes squish. Bunny's Gucci loafers were goners, Riff thought with not a little satisfaction.

Forest Lawn was discreet concerning such peccadilloes as van-

dalism. No matter what happened to Desmond's grave, the news would never make the *Times*, and the wad of bills Tango had slapped into the gatekeeper's palm guaranteed privacy for proper mourning.

One of those characteristic Astroturf tarps had been pegged over the hole. Desmond's garish monument stone spired toward outer space like a granite ICBM.

"So what?" Bunny said loudly as a jolt of thunder shook the ground.

"They covered it up!" said Riff.

All three men turned to look at him. "I can see that, null and void," Bunny snapped. "Get on with it!" The pimp stood with his hands deep in the pockets of his black overcoat, Tango's buddy holding an umbrella over him like a dutiful Egyptian slave. Riff never could dredge up the guy's name—the two were as interchangeable as knife maniac movies—so he pointed at Tango. "Help him," Bunny said, and Tango eyed the tarp doubtfully before stepping sidewise down into the pit. Bunny thought he could hear a noise through the downpour, a kind of electric fly-buzzing. Maybe construction equipment was working somewhere nearby.

Riff held up the corner of the tarp for Tango. There was a very dim yellow glow emanating from beneath it, and water had pooled in its middle, causing it to sag.

As Tango ducked under the tarp, Riff planted his foot dead bang into the bigger man's ass, driving him inside. The tarp flopped wetly back into place. Tango's partner saw it happen, and automatically broke his police revolver from its armpit holster, bringing it to bear on the bridge of Riff's nose.

But by then, Tango had started screaming.

He shot up against the tarp from beneath, hurling water all over the trio just as Bunny pointed to Riff and shouted, "Blow him away!" Then he took a miscalculated step that dumped him onto his butt in the mud.

Riff grabbed the big Magnum barrel just as it went off in his face. There was a gentle backward tug as the slug whizzed cleanly through the sleeve of his overcoat. The pistolero's second shot headed off into the stratosphere as the slimed incline of the pit came apart like warm gelatin under his heels. He slid indecorously down into Riff's embrace. As he flailed for balance, Riff wrested the gun away and gave him a no-nonsense bash in the face with it that flattened his nose to cartilaginous pulp and rolled his eye-

balls up into dreamtown.

It had taken maybe two seconds, total. Riff quickly climbed to the rim of the grave. He knew how, by now. The gunman's semiconscious body oozed slowly downward until his legs were beneath the tarp edge. Then he was pulled the rest of the way inside.

Topside, Bunny was still on his back, trying to scramble his own petite shooting iron past the silver buttons on his double-breasted overcoat. He looked up, glaring hotly, and saw a dripping, mud-caked bog monster pointing an equally mud-caked revolver in his direction. His hands stopped moving and his eyes became very white.

From behind Riff, there came a sound like a green tree branch being twisted in half, followed by nothing except the patter of the new rain. One of the tent pegs popped loose and the tarp sagged into the hole.

Bunny's face was a livid crimson-black with rage. The knowledge that he had been outdrawn, however, did not stop him from trying to preserve his image by saying, "I'll kill your ass for this, you know," in his quiet, bad-pimp's hiss.

"What it is, Bunny," said Riff, gesturing with the gun, "is you need to climb down into this hole."

"Tango—!" Bunny screeched, trying to crawl backward.

Riff frowned and shot Bunny once, in the left leg just below the kneecap. Blood mingled with the mud and gore spoiling his seven-hundred dollar suit. "This isn't a *movie*, Bunny; just get in the hole."

Hiding his pain behind clenched teeth, Bunny began to drag himself toward the pit. When he backed down into it, on top of the tarp, his hands going wrist-deep in the muck, he looked up at Riff and in his best snake-charming voice said, "Why?" mostly to buy a couple of seconds more. It was extra seconds that always counted in rescue time.

"Because I gotta change my life, Bunny," he said, looming over him with the gun.

Buy more seconds. "I'll let you," said Bunny, gasping now. "Anything you want, man. Partners. We'll—"

Riff was about to tell Bunny not to bullshit a bullshitter when the ruglike tarp heaved mightily up, splitting in the middle. The first thing that came out was yellow light. The second thing that came out was a black velvet-clad arm that captured Bunny's

wounded leg in its trash compacter grip very nicely. Bunny slid three more feet with a loud cry of pain.

One thing about those limos, Riff thought as he turned away and walked back up the slope. He'd noticed it during the ride out in Bunny's own chariot. They sure had a lot of room inside.

Bunny's pocket pistol fired four, five times behind him and then stopped.

Riff pawed around under the limousine's bumper for the magnetic case containing the spare keys, and when he got behind the wheel he involuntarily glanced at the car's sunroof. The two cars were probably a lot alike.

He did not stick around to hear the tiny whirring noise coming from Plot #60. Nor did he ever see the ridiculously fat diamond left at the edge of the grave, as payment. A Forest Lawn worker, finding it later in the day and assuming it to be a cheap crystal because of its large size, took it to his Pasadena apartment and hung it in the kitchen window, where it threw the setting sun's rainbow colors against his breakfast nook for the next fifteen years.

The Long Ride

by JOHN SKIPP

In a city like New York,
a cabbie has to have a way
to take care of his own.

The guy in the back seat is a haughty little fart who smells of Brut excess. He keeps holding his watch up to check it in the passing streetlight, as if the future of humanity itself hinged on his punctuality tonight; but Harry knows that the guy is no big deal. Neither hot nor cold, this lukewarm man will be spat out into the New York City night . . . hocked like a phlegm-wad from the back of Harry's cab . . . and it won't make any difference at all.

But you couldn't tell that to this guy, overdressed at the center of his own universe. He wipes an executive amount of sweat from his forehead and checks his watch again. "How far away is this place?" he whines, desperation latching hold of his face.

Without a glance to either side, Harry answers, "This is 57th Street. You wanna go ta Penn Station, right?" The guy digs around in his brain for a second, mumbles a high-pitched affirmation. "Okay, that's on, like 33rd Street. So you figure it. We got twenty-some-odd blocks to go, right? We'll be there in a coupla minutes . . ."

"Can't you go any faster? Jeezis!" He squeals like a pig with a corncob up its ass, and for some odd reason it makes Harry think about the country. *Ain't seen nothin' but dogs, pigeons, rats, and cocka-roaches for years*, he muses, *an' I probably never will again.*

Then he shrugs. So he and Betty never got their house in



the boonies. So what? One of life's little regrets: too little, and too late, to worry about.

Harry drives a cab, and he probably always will. Right now, a fragrant little man in a big hurry is playing backseat driver. Harry pulls himself back and decides to have a little fun.

"Sure," Harry says. "Sure, I can go faster." Before them, the light is as yellow as they come. Harry leans on the horn and steps down hard on the gas. The cab shoots forward. The light turns red.

"Look out!" the man screams, as a garbage truck and a station wagon surge out from 56th Street and straight for them. *On the passenger side, no less*, Harry notes, resisting the urge to laugh. Instead, he just floors it and veers slightly to the left, making it close enough to set the guy back in his seat a little without ruffling anyone else's hair in the least.

Harry's cab screams like a bullet down Seventh Avenue. When a red light at 48th finally forces them to a grinding halt, the little man doesn't say another word.

"Almost there," Harry deadpans.

Not another word.

Harry's cab spits the guy out in front of Penn Station and sits there, purring, at the curb. Harry pops the sweaty ten-spot in a clean white envelope, pockets it, and chuckles, patting the dashboard lovingly. They are two old friends, sharing a treasured and time-honored joke. *I love ya, old crate*, he thinks as the engine purrs back at him, and is amused by his own sappy sentiment.

Betty'd have to laugh, seein' me like this, he thinks. The smile saddens. *If only . . .*

Then a rap on the passenger side brings him out of it. A long-haired kid is playing his knuckles across the window and peering in. "Anybody home?" the kid mouths, his voice lost in the hummmm of the city.

Harry motions the kid inside, then watches as two young cuties pile in behind. *Hoo boy! A blonde and a brunette! Lucky bastard*, he thinks ruefully. *No more chicks for Harry, by gum*. Then he pictures Betty, on the day that they were married, and he shrugs again.

No regrets.

The three of them are in now, with the door closed behind

them, and they are wrassling with their backpacks for space. The cab is filled with their laguhter and commotion. "Wait a minute," says Blondie, in the middle of everything. She's up to her elbow in a jumbo handbag, digging for something.

"Where to?" Harry asks, though not in any particular hurry.

"Yeah!" says the kid, with a trumped-up Southern accent. "Where in Sam Hill *are* we goin', Bessie May?"

"I said *wait* a minute," she responds curtly, then adds, "Don't call me that. It sounds like a cow." The girl keeps looking. A minute drags past.

"Umm . . . I think it's on Saint Monkey's Face, or something," says the kid, feigning helpfulness.

"Oh, shut up, Tom!" yells the brunette. Blondie rolls her eyes. Tom cowers. They all start laughing.

These are good ones. I can feel it. Good kids. Harry thanks God that he can still feel. It makes the long ride go down easier.

Blondie, meanwhile, finds a scrap of paper. She unfolds it, and her face lights up. "All right!" she exclaims. Everyone turns. "We're going to . . . uh . . . 124 St. Marks Place. Is that right?"

"Right," says Harry, switching on the meter and then sliding out into the street. "Here we go."

"New York City!" yells the brunette, rolling down her window and howling like a coyote. This seems to strike her friends as a good idea, and within seconds they have practically raised the roof right off the cab. Harry shakes his head, laughing as he taps their maniac glee. Then Brownie leans back inside and says, "Hey, Mr. Cab Driver! I thought you guys were supposed to drive like . . . like *crazy!*"

"You want a *ride*?" Harry yells back at her, mischief in every line on his face. His passengers let out one loud unisoned "Yahhoooo!" and . . .

. . . Harry takes a banshee left on 28th, zips up to Broadway and gives them a full-frontal shot of the Flatiron Building, its breathtaking cutaway design. "Oldest skyscraper in New York," he informs them as they gasp with awe. Tom mutters something about "a wedge of cheese from heaven," and they laugh some more, while Harry weaves in and out of traffic like a thread in some master's loom, pulling off stunt after stunt with a cool half-smile.

Makes me feel like a kid again, Harry owns up silently. *Makes me feel really . . . alive again.* The admission floods him

with images both tragic and sublime, leaves him swimming in the bitter-sweet. They pull up behind an impatient cluster of traffic, held at bay by the baleful red lights, and Harry finds that his cargo has also slipped into a thoughtful silence.

Blondie breaks it by looking suddenly at Harry and saying, "I don't want to be a party pooper or anything, but . . . you aren't giving us the *scenic* tour, are you?" Her voice betrays discomfort with the need to ask. "I mean . . ."

"I know what you mean," Harry cuts in, understandingly. "You don't wanna get snookered by a New York cabbie, am I right?" She nods reluctantly.

"Well, hey," Harry adds cheerfully, reaching across to flick off the meter. Three sets of eyebrows raise in disbelief. "Does that take care of it?"

The kids don't know what to say, but they sure are smiling when the light turns green and the cab kicks back into gear. Tom does a thumbs-up motion and points at Harry, while the ladies nod vigorous agreement, but not a word is spoken. Harry decides to break the ice again.

"Where're ya from?" he asks. A time-honored line.

"We come from deepest space," Tom monotones.

"Ahhhh!" Harry replies. "Coneheads, eh?"

This brings startled laughter from the rear. "You watch *Saturday Night Live*?" Brownie wants to know.

"Hey! This is th' Big Apple, kiddo: home of *Saturday Night Live* an' all things cultural!" The back echoes for a moment with *yeahs* and *wows*. "Yep, this is one hell of a little town, if you never been here before. You'll love it."

"First time," says the blonde, "and I think I already do."

"It's scary, though," says the brunette suddenly. There is an anticipative pause. "I mean, we're from a really small town in Pennsylvania . . . Stewartstown. You ever hear of it?" Harry hasn't.

"Anyway," she continues, "we come up to New York City, and . . . woe my *God*!" She sighs heavily, then adds, "I mean, don't you ever get *scared* living here all the time?"

Harry thinks about it. *Not anymore* occurs to him instantly, but that's not what he wants to say. Before he can answer, Blondie interjects.

"If you're not afraid, you'll be all right, Kathy. It's the *fear* that attracts negative energies. If you don't—"

"It's always *energies* with you two," the first one complains. "I don't know what to think about all this *energies* shit." She practically spits out the word.

"No, seriously," says Tom, and it's the first serious thing he's said. "It's like a dog, Kathy. A dog can *smell* when you're afraid. You don't have to carry a sign that sez I'M SCARED OF YOU for a dog to know what's on your mind. They just *know* it."

"I hate dogs," Kathy mutters.

"See?" Tom insists. "It's because they can see right *through* you . . ."

"But *really*!" Kathy interrupts, turning the conversation back to Harry, who's been listening the whole time. "When we got off the train and came upstairs, there was some guy in the lobby with one of those huge radios, an'—"

"Kathy!" The blonde in the middle sounds genuinely distressed.

"It's okay," Harry says slowly, quietly. He knows what she's going to ask. "Go ahead."

Kathy looks furtively at her companions, who are shaking their heads at her in disapproval. She sends back a telepathic message to the tune of *well, he said to go ahead*: then she clears her throat and continues.

"Well, the radio said that . . . that something like eighteen cab drivers have been killed so far this year *already*, and . . ." The silence is leaden. ". . . and I just wondered: doesn't that scare you at all? I mean really, seriously." When nobody speaks, she adds, "I'd be scared, that's for sure."

The atmosphere in the cab has been dampened, as if Kathy had just thrown a big shovelful of graveyard dirt over the lot of them. Harry has so many things that he could *say* right now, so many things drilling holes in his brain and screaming to get out, that he wishes he *could* just scream and let them out, spray them around the upholstery like bits of shattered skull. But these kids are fresh in town, and nothing horrible is gonna happen to them, and he doesn't want to haunt their dreams with his nightmares.

So he weighs it all very carefully in his mind before speaking, and he tries to make it as meaningful as possible. He says, "It's a dangerous job. No doubt about it. There are a lotta crazies runnin' around here, and some of 'em would just as soon kill ya as look *atcha*."

They are hanging on his words now, Kathy's gaffe entirely forgotten.

"But," he adds, and this is the difficult part, "as far as *my* experience goes, dyin' is no big deal. I mean, it's *bad*," and they all laugh nervously, "but it's worst for the people that're left behind. You know?" They know. "It's like, I lost some of my *favorite people* ta creeps an' crazies . . ." and then he stops, knowing that he's going too far.

They wouldn't believe it if I told 'em, he reminds himself. He taks a deep breath to calm down. It works. He looks in the rear-view mirror. They're waiting.

"... but, ya see, I'm a cab driver. I been drivin' this cab for twelve years now, an' I think I'll probably be drivin' it *forever*. It's as simple as that. You know the risks. You take your chances. And you hope ta hell . . ." pausing, great difficulty in his voice, "... that nothin' ever happens to ya. That's what life's all about, I think." And he leaves it at that.

"Yeah," says Kathy, after a respectable pause. "I guess there's really nowhere safe anymore, is there?"

Tom's voice, as he stares out the window at the City of Hollow Mountains, is strangely soft and faraway. "Nowhere," he almost whispers.

Nowhere. The word echoes in Harry's mind. *Nowhere*. He sees himself on the long ride, endlessly drifting through the endless night . . .

... and then, mercifully, somebody changes the subject.

By the time they get to St. Marks Place, they've rapped about everything from Reagan to rubber love dolls, and Harry wishes that this part would never end. But the street is alive with blue-haired punks and neon and smoke and intensity, and Kathy's boyfriend is waiting in his wild Village apartment, and Harry knows the end of the road when he sees one.

The fare comes out to a whopping \$1.30. A quick pooling of resources, and four smackers are plopped into Harry's hand. He pshaws a little, but it's to no avail. "That was better than a roller coaster, man," Tom informs him. "Have one hell of a good night."

"You have a good night," Harry replies. "An' welcome to the city, kids."

There are a couple of moments of awkward, well-meaning cheerfulness, and then the kids slide out of the gab. The other two start to wander off, stunned by their new surroundings; but Blondie stops at Harry's window and crouches before it, giving

him a look that makes his old heart flutter. "Take care of yourself, Harry," she says finally.

"You don't have to worry about me," he answers, warm and slightly embarrassed. A tiny smile plays across his lips. She gives one back. It says *but we will, anyway*. Then she turns (her friends are waiting now), and they disappear into the Greenwich Village shadows.

"Have the time of your lives," Harry whispers, watching them sadly. He doesn't envy them their life, their vitality. He's already had his turn, and . . .

Forget it. He issues the silent command. *Just forget it.*

Harry pulls the white envelope out of his pocket, counts the bills: \$126.00, so far, he notes, rounding it off with the four new bucks. He looks at his watch. It says ten-forty-five. The night is young, so far from over.

"You're good ones, God bless ya," he calls after the kids, long gone. Then he pats his pal the dashboard and wheels into the street again. Just the two of them, machine and driver, on the long long ride.

Harry picks up one of the bad ones around three that morning. A freaky-looking guy, all dressed in black, with mascara and an earring and a terrible nervous twitch that gives him instantly away. Harry picks him up anyway. *You don't have to worry about me.*

"Where'ya goin'?" Harry asks as the guy clamors into the back seat.

"Uh, 110th Street, man." He talks fast, this one. Probably hopped-up on speed or something. "110th and, uh, Columbus."

The guy slumps back in his seat, looking nervously from side to side. Harry doesn't like him a bit, quickly dubs him Weirdo. The alarm is ringing in the back of Harry's head. It's a sound that he knows too well.

It's too late to worry about that shit, Harry tells himself, but it doesn't do any good. He thinks about what the kid said, about the dog, and he wonders if one's fear really *does* bring the bad things down.

There is a night that Harry will never forget, and he knows that he was scared when it happened, and he wonders . . . driving fast though there is no joy in it this time, just wanting this weird bastard out of the car.

Weirdo lights a cigarette, drops the match to the floor with a shaking hand. He cracks the window and watches the smoke drift out like a ghostly skeletal claw, and Harry thinks, *Hot damn, boy. You picked yerself a winner.*

Harry tries to strike up a conversation. It doesn't work. He tries to ignore the chill that's creeping up his spine, the deathly cold certainty, the knowledge and the responsibility it entails. That doesn't work, either.

So he drives.

And he drives.

And he drives, coming nearer to the point where he knows that it must all come down. He watches the signs flash past on his left ... 59th, 69th, 79th and onward, while Central Park sprawls out like a great dark monster on his right, a beast of unfathomable size and appetite, seeming to go on forever.

Like the long ride, forever and ever ...

I wonder if he'll try to dump me in there, Harry muses. *Dump me in the bushes, drive my cab for a coupla blocks and then dump it, too, takin' off with the money I work my ass off for, the money that Betty needs so bad ...*

"Pull over," says the voice from the back.

You can't HAVE it, you greasy little muthah! Harry screams in his head, and it's so much like a déjà vu that it makes his head swim. He pulls himself together with tremendous effort and says, "I thought you said ..."

"I said *pull it over*, man. *Now.*" And Harry feels the familiar coldness press against his neck. The nightmare coldness. Of the barrel. Of a gun.

Very slowly, Harry eases off on the gas. The cab complains, as if it wants to resist but is powerless to do so. Harry mouths something inaudible; the cab mellows out ...

... and then *surges forward*, Harry slamming down hard and flooring it. Weirdo flies backward like a wild pitch, hits the back seat and curses wildly. "What the hell are you *doin'?*" he shouts, shaking like a leaf and pointing the gun at Harry's head with both hands.

"You gonna *shoot* me when we're movin' this fast, big man? You gonna take control of this baby from the back seat? Huh?" The words are loud and wild and crazy. His eyes are like saucers with brighted red trim. "We're goin' to 110th fuckin' Street, an' then we'll *see* about this!"

Weirdo doesn't know what to do. Harry is pushing seventy and running red lights like they weren't even there; cars and trucks and buses are honking and swerving to avoid him; brakes are screeching; the engine is roaring. "You *bastard!*" Weirdo yelps at one close call. Harry bites his lip and keeps on driving. He can see the gun, swaying back and forth like a cobra, very clearly in the rearview mirror.

Harry howls around the corner at 110th, a hard left followed by a harder right, jostling Weirdo around as much as possible. He slams the brakes down with all his might, fish-tailing and flinging the guy forward in the process. Weirdo smashes against the front seat with tremendous force, knocking the air out of him and making him groan.

But he does not drop the gun. No. The gun, he hangs on to.

He drops back into his seat, practically crying now, and aims at Harry again. He can no longer control the shuddering. That's a good sign.

"You know what it's all *about*, then, right? You know what's goin' on!" His voice is a high-pitched squeal that reminds Harry of the little guy with the Brut OD. "I want all your goddamn money, man! An' I want it *now!*"

Harry turns around slowly. He is thinking about his wife. He is thinking about those kids. He is thinking about all the genuinely good people he has known, and he is thinking *the world would be better off without this son of a bitch, this miserable creeping scum. If only I had ...*

But there is no time to think of that. It's too late for that now. So he turns, very slowly, and says, "You can't have it."

"*I ain't kiddin'!*" shrieks Weirdo. "*I'll kill you!*"

"You're not gonna kill me, you shit-faced little punk." The words are ferocious. Harry's eyes have taken on a strange light. "Little bastards like you think you run the world. You make it bad for everybody. Your best bet would be to give me that gun, while you still can."

"What're you talkin' about? You're crazy!" Weirdo's teeth are chattering, but his aim is there. Harry can feel the black hole boring into his head.

If a déjà vu is a flash from another life, then this is a déjà vu. Harry has been here before, and he will be here again. Harry is a cab driver.

Again and again and again ...

Harry's eyes. A strange light.

So very calm.

So very calm, as he reaches forward with one hand and says, very firmly, "Give me the gun."

And Weirdo pulls the trigger with a tortured little cry, and Harry's brains explode out of the back of his head to run like fat misshapen slugs down either side of the shattered windshield. Harry jerks like a clipped marionette and slumps against the steering wheel, smearing his old pal the dashboard with gore.

But the light in his eyes, it doesn't go out. Weirdo has a few seconds to register the sight.

Then everything changes.

And the man in the back seat starts to *scream* ...

Betty Stone awakens with the rising sun. She groans a little, haunted by a bad dream from somewhere deep in the night. She struggles with it a moment, but it refuses to come clear. Something about Harry, no doubt. She always dreams about Harry.

She is alone in the double bed, of course. No surprises for Betty Stone. She takes her time getting up, wraps her old housecoat around her aging frame, hits the bathroom, and then makes her way to the kitchen.

She gets the coffee perking, then starts on the couple of stray dishes lying around. *It's always like this*, she muses, still slightly bleary. *Seems like it's always been like this.*

Seems like forever.

Betty Stone drinks a cup of coffee, watches *Good Morning, America* for a little while. Then she goes and checks the mail.

Several bills. There are always, always bills. Every bit as certain as death and taxes, they roll in every month. Thank God she's still able to pay 'em.

A letter from her sister in Vermont. Thank God for Loretta. She's been writing regularly now, ever since ... ever since ...

And, of course, the white envelope is there. The white envelope full of money. The clean white envelope that has been in the mailbox every day since ...

... since Harry was murdered, shot through the head in his lousy taxicab, that horrible goddamned dream-shattering night ...

How long has it been? she thinks to herself, trying to place the date, count down the lonely days. *How long?* she asks herself.

Three months, the answer comes to her. *Three months now.*

And every day, the money keeps coming. And I don't know where it's coming from. And I don't know who to thank ...

Betty stands at the mailbox for a long long time.

There is a woman at the corner of 34th and Fifth Avenue, in front of the Empire State Building. She's had one of the best days of her life, taking in the infamous Big Apple's million and one attractions. Freshly returned from the summit where King Kong himself once stood, she breathes deep of the gritty air and considers her options. Where to go, what to do?

She still hasn't made up her mind when the cab comes cruising down Fifth in her direction. *Well, I've got to go somewhere*, she ventures wildly, and then waves for the cabbie's attention.

The cab slides gently to a stop in front of her. She beams winningly at the driver and hops in the back, stepping over a mangled New York *Post* with its pages flipped open to the following story:

GRISLY MURDER IN CENTRAL PARK

Horried strollers today discovered the mutilated body of a young man near the 110th Street corner of Central Park West, in what police call one of the grisliest murders of the century.

"It was horrible," said officer Glen Roark, who first investigated the crime. "It's as if every bone in his body was broken ..."

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" says the lady in the back.

She's a good one, Harry thinks, noddingly agreeing. *I can feel it*. Harry thanks God that he can still feel.

It makes the long ride go down easier.

Occupational Hazard

by G. L. RAISOR

Only his iron will keeps him
from the slavering jaws of the dogs.

The small man staggers through the autumn night. Overhead, the moon is a diamond-hard sliver of light pointing at him through the skeletal trees. He stops for a moment and his stomach tightens as the baying of the dogs edges closer. Only through an effort of iron will does he stop his already wobbly legs from collapsing. He's come so very very far without rest. The leaves on the forest floor beckon invitingly. It would be so easy to just lie down and rest for a moment.

His head jerks up. Deep within the forest, the baying picks up its intensity as the pack senses the closeness of prey.

With a bone-weary sigh, the man plunges blindly onward, ignoring the sting of branches that rake at his face and pluck at his clothes, all seemingly in a willful effort to slow him.

A briar pulls him into its clawed embrace, trapping him like a rabbit in a snare. Tears of pain and anger well up as he vainly struggles to free himself.

The dogs are getting closer . . .

With a savage grunt he rips free, leaving his lacerated chest exposed to the night's chill caress. He is shivering uncontrollably as he finally emerges from the confining woods and begins to slog down the hill. His footsteps through the dewed grass form a dark arrow, clearly marking the way for his pursuers.

Halfway across the field he hears the dogs break from the trees, and their howling rises to a deafening pitch as they spot him. The

man gauges the immense distance across the field and groans in terror. Adrenalin begins to pump as he risks a glance over his shoulder and sees the huge animals covering the distance with powerful, lunging strides. They are a dark, rippling mass spilling down the hill with incredible speed.

If he can only get across the creek, he might have a slight chance: there's a high, board fence surrounding the house. One attempt to climb over is all he'll get. If he doesn't make it on the first try, the dogs will drag him down and tear him to pieces. Of this there is no doubt in his mind, because he has seen what their powerful jaws and sharp teeth can do.

He lurches forward and his breath is a ragged white vapor, much like the one rising slowly from the stream, as he splashes waist deep into the icy water. The footing is slippery and he falls heavily. For a brief moment, all is quiet as he sinks beneath the foaming surface. Choking more in fear than from the water he has swallowed, he scrambles up the muddy bank.

The dogs hurtle into the stream.

Now only seconds separate him from their rending teeth. Sobbing in frustration, he weaves toward the fence and, with the last of his dwindling strength, leaps upward. He catches the cruelly sharp edge and his feet begin a desperate tattoo as he tries to lever himself over. But he's much too weak. He can only hang limply and wait for the inevitable.

As the dogs gather themselves to leap, the gate is quickly unlatched and a tall, pale man dressed in clothes dark as the night steps out. A word from him and the dogs quickly cower into submission.

The elegant yet sinister figure adjusts his cape and advances with long, flowing strides that seem to not always touch the ground. His lips curl upward over oddly long and pointed teeth.

The small man releases his cramped hold on the fence and drops to the ground in a boneless heap. Quivering in a paroxysm of emotion, he stares up at the coldly smiling face looming above him and gasps plaintively, "This is no laughing matter, Master. I've got to have some help walking the dogs. I'm not as young as I used to be."

Monarch of the Glen

by JON WYNNE-TYSON

Not all royalty was great,
and not all royalty was merciful.
And neither, this time, was Fate.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. She had achieved that rank through marriage rather than by birth, for she was as pretty as a picture and could offer all those background attributes that enable princes to put the crucial question. Her father, an eighth earl, was Eton and Sandhurst and had been an equerry of the Queen, so they knew all about him at the palace. There was a dissolved marriage in the background, it is true, but his clubs were right and his address was right, for the impressive if cold family home was plumb in the middle of the Shires.

It was there that the Prince had met her. More exactly, it was on a ploughed field within the grounds, for the shooting season was in full swing and the Prince, naturally, was shooting. It says something for the outward charms of the Earl's daughter that despite the not very glamorous attire she was wearing, proper to the slaughter of wildlife, the Prince that day only winged half his birds, so taken was he by the winsome presence of his host's charming girl. Normally at least seventy percent of his birds died within a matter of minutes, for after a short lifetime of aiming guns at most of the socially acceptable living targets, he was a better shot than many of the people who by rank, brains, or inordinate wealth had contrived to stand shoulder to shoulder with him in field and moorland. For two birds to be so poorly peppered as to fly on and become runners on a nearby estate, there to perish slowly from the fangs of non-human predators, was evidence of the degree of his distraction from the business in hand;

for a pheasant whangs out of cover like an air-borne tank, usually in a dead straight line at just the right height for a sportsman to be as sure as a sportsman can be of anything that he will return home looking both skillful and manly.

If any more assurance is needed that the Earl's daughter had made a tremendous impression on the Prince, his own words are on record, for as he said to his father within earshot of a servant, without parting his teeth and hardly moving his lips, "I do think she really is, I must say, most awfully pretty." It was probably the most strongly expressed confession of emotional weakness he had ever uttered.

The marriage had the whole nation on the edge of its chairs. In the preceding weeks the country's ailing economy appeared to recover in a flurry of flags, postcards, and unspeakably vulgar souvenirs. On the great day the entire populace was glued to The Box, women viewers revelling in the fashions and the personalities, strong men visibly moved by the bride's shy sidelong glances and dazzling if nervous smile. The bridesmaids were adorable, the weather was splendid, no one seriously frightened the horses, and all in all it was a day fittingly summed up in the banner headline of one of the more staid newspapers, which announced joyously, WE HAVE A FAIRYTALE PRINCESS.

But the intensity of feeling was too strong to last. Even before the honeymoon was over, the nation sank back into sullen acceptance of being a declining power. The Prince returned to his routine of opening, inspecting, reviewing, traveling, and supervising the supervisors of his estates. He led a pretty busy life, even if the end product was somewhat intangible.

Sometimes the Princess was at his side, sometimes not. In certain respects she had been more popular with the media before marriage than after, as in those days it had been possible to portray her as a gentle, tender girl who liked nothing better than to look after small children in a Kensington nursery school. So the media, who can be philosophical in these matters, settled back to wait until history might repeat itself.

It came, therefore, as something of a shock to a section of the nation when the Princess, who prior to marriage had been said to detest blood sports and even the wearing of furs, made a rotten job of shooting a red deer stag on her in-laws' estate at Malmoral. The beast, with its lower jaw shot away, made its escape and was not found for some hours. The servant who put it out of its

misery unwisely reported its condition to someone who, so to speak, had danced with a man who had danced with a girl who had danced with someone from an animal welfare organization, and before long that section of the press most out of sympathy with the lifestyle of the royals painted a not very pretty picture of a not very pretty event.

Just why any realistic commoner should have been surprised by the Princess's apparent *volte face* is, however, difficult to understand. If not technically obliged to obey her husband, the spirit of any true marriage is that you enter into it for better or for worse, and there was nothing in her upbringing likely to prompt rebellion against such sound conventions. As the Prince himself had said without parting his teeth, "I do think, don't you know, that it really would be most awfully appropriate if you were to be seen with me on all, as it were, appropriate occasions." Any small reservation there might have been in his bride's pretty head about staying her soft young hand from the fun slaying of certain species was rapidly quashed by this appeal to duty. Besides, her mother-in-law herself was a notable destructor of deer life, so it might have been construed as not only disloyal but as positively bad manners for the Princess to have abstained. In short, while it may be the prerogative of the great to be merciful, to be royal is not necessarily to be great. In any case, girls reluctant to taste the joys of granting to other species early release from life's vicissitudes do not as a rule appear on ploughed fields in the company of shooters during the pheasant season. Most of them, also, so not go out of their way to marry princes whose chief form of amusement, like that of their families, has long been the pursuit of game. Possibly the Princess had been confused by her father-in-law's presidency of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Wildlife, but then, she was a young and rather innocent creature who could not reasonably be expected to know that many of those who show concern for the survival of subhuman species merely want to conserve them for their own use and pleasure, not through any muddled notion that lesser life forms should enjoy some ill-defined right to existence except by courtesy of God's greatest creation.

Love, it has been said, is all. In royal circles this cannot be so. Custom and duty come first. This explains why the Prince and his family had early and thoroughly gone to work to eradicate from the Princess's emotional repertoire any conceivable twinge of

sentimentality or reservation about such time-honored and healthful pursuits as blood sports. The very idea that some latent spark of squeamishness might have prompted so socially interruptive a gesture as refusal to participate in the wide range of sporting pleasures for which the royal family had for generations done its level and successful best to set the standard was quite unacceptable. Taken to its logical — one is tempted to say illogical — conclusion, any such tendency could extend its tentacles as far as even the royal stables, threatening the whole range of horse-centered activities which had long been the only obvious source of enjoyment for the Queen herself.

For some while, therefore, the media, quietly conscious of the unspoken rules in such delicate areas, maintained an acceptable balance between the unwise extremes of portraying the Princess either as a trigger-happy member of an insensitive elite, or as a caring but unrealistically soft-hearted candidate for motherhood and eventual succession. If it could not safely be omitted from a press report that the Princess had accompanied her husband on one of his manly forays, any possibility of public disquiet was stilled by such tactful phrases as that "the Princess was believed to be one of the party." Needless to say, the Leftist papers — along with those contemptible minority organs that catered to old women and the cranks who raise objections to the sporting reduction of other species — were less inclined to join this mild conspiracy; but then, it never has been and doubtless never will be possible to do much about the Leftist press and the lunatic fringe. They are part of the cross which the establishment has learned over the years to bear.

Before very long, as might have been expected and indeed was, the union was strengthened by the birth of a son. The media refocused joyfully on the Princess as mother rather than wife. It was easier and more agreeable for the public to identify with her role as parent, so the sportswoman image was given decreasing attention. Besides, little William made a much more cuddly picture than untidy shots of men and women pointing guns at blurred targets against nebulous skylines.

Within a few years William acquired a sister, Louise. She was a bright, bouncy baby and grew rapidly into a mischievous little girl who seemed to be shaping up into an altogether livelier character than her brother, who from the word go had been carefully trained to accept all that the royals and their retinue regarded as normal behavior.

So William and Louise, by now well-accustomed to the sporting habits of their elders, were to be seen on a certain memorable day in early winter at their grandparents' estate in the Highlands. As a special treat they had been allowed to accompany their family and friends on a stalking expedition. This was particularly agreeable to little William because that very day his father had told him he was old enough to be entrusted with the air gun whose supervised use had played such a part in giving backbone to his education. A rather fine gun, it was made finer by the box of improved pellets thoughtfully given by William's great uncle. The pellets were the air gun manufacturer's answer to the dum-dum rifle bullet that expands as it passes through a body, leaving a wider area of devastation at the point of exit than entrance. As the Duke had said to the Prince, "It'll make the boy feel he's getting somewhere." This was very true, for too many creatures escape to die in wasteful privacy after being merely wounded by the conventional pellet. As the Prince accurately predicted without parting his teeth, "I do think that William really will be most terribly appreciative of your gift."

So William, of course debarred from joining the actual stalkers, was well content to lag behind in the hope of a chance to pot at any small birds or mammals he might encounter on the fringe of the rear guard party. A splendid feature of his gun was its relative silence.

Then suddenly . . . excitement! News came through that the Prince had shot a splendid stag. Young William, who so far had only been able to dream of getting in his sight the monarch of the glen, was wild with delight, jumping up and down and thirsty for details of the creature's size and antlers. The servant who brought the news could not supply this data, and it was then that Louise suggested a very naughty thing indeed.

"Come on, William," she whispered, "let's go and see for ourselves."

William looked doubtful. "Do you think we should?" he said.

"Of course we shouldn't," Louise replied impatiently, and with that slight lisp that had made her tender years the more endearing, "That's what makes it fun."

By first disappearing behind a Range Rover, it was not too difficult to slip away through the conifer plantation without being seen by the servants or those too aged or uninvolved to be where the action was.

Once among the trees, William adopted the stance and concentration of a stalker, holding his gun low to the ground and crouching as he ran from tree to tree until they found themselves on the far side of the dark plantation and in the open ground that ran up to a small peak of rock. They were alone. Gloriously, rarely alone.

"Come on!" William shouted excitedly. "You are *slow*, Louise."

With sudden inspiration he dropped his gun and ran up to the rocky peak. Bending forward, he put his wrists to each side of his head and extended his fingers in puny imitation of the antlers of a stag.

"Look!" he cried. "Look at me! I'm a great red stag."

Louise, following as fast as her shorter legs permitted, giggled and waved.

"Oh, William," she said, "you are silly!" She picked up his gun.

"I'm not silly," William said proudly. "I'm the greatest, finest stag that has ever been seen."

"All right," said Louise, happily entering into the spirit of the game, "you're a huge, big, marvelous stag, and I'm a great, wonderful hunter just like Daddy."

She ran toward her brother, waving the air gun and laughing, while William raised his antlered head and emitted the deep bellow of a fine big stag.

In the weeks that followed, no one suggested it had been anything but a ghastly accident. And indeed it had not. Louise's devotion to her brother was unquestionable. Had she not tripped on the gnarled root of heather growing from the rock, the media and the country at large would happily have been deprived of one of the most harrowing stories in the annals of royalty. It had been a chance in ten thousand that the pellet that hit William should not only have shot the lad's lower jaw away, but should have so shattered a main artery that he bled to death before his horrified sister had been able to bring help.

The country mourned. The Prince and the Princess were little pestered by the media for several weeks, and when once again they were seen returning to the social round, they were invariably given the greatest coverage when opening children's homes or hospital wings. The association was very agreeable to the public mind.

It is some indication of how deeply the tragic incident was felt by all concerned that a spring, a summer, and half an autumn

passed before the Prince was seen to have returned to the consolations of a sporting life in the Highlands. As for the Princess, another whole year went by before it was even suggested that she might be a member of any of the Prince's shooting parties. These matters can be handled with great delicacy by those who know how to behave.

ARCADE

by THOMAS WYLDE

It was only a game.
No one really got killed.
In fact, that was the whole idea.

Steve stepped into the Arcade with his hands thrust into his deep pockets, fists closed tightly around hard cylinders of coin.

Rock music exploded over and over in the room. The kids attacked their machines, seemed to jerk in time with the machine-gun beat. Simulated laser fire crackled from the screens, but victory shouts were lost in the music's din.

Steve crossed the room quickly. A small envelope rode against his stomach, under his shirt. He could feel it moving, sticking and unsticking to his damp skin.

He passed through a curtain of glowing beads, into a darker room where the older kids were plugged into larger, more expensive machines. Lights of electric red and blue and yellow pulsed along the walls and ceiling, catching bits of reflecting tape or pieces of broken mirror.

Steve went directly to a door without a knob. He pressed an inconspicuous button and looked up into the lens of a video camera. The door opened and he went inside. It closed automatically behind him.

This room was just a deserted hallway. Anonymous doors lined the wall—the enclosed machines.

He opened a green-lighted door and shut himself inside. The only sound was the soft pulse of the ventilator.

He emptied his pockets on a small metal table, broke the wrapper on the coins, and fed twenty quarters into the slot. The four-foot screen lit up with a menu.

Mostly the machine offered to exhibit sexual encounters—straight, gay, lesbian, bondage, bestiality, and so forth. The computer was prepared to deliver a detailed video simulation of any possible combination. But Steve was not interested in sex.

He tapped an unlisted code into the keyboard, and the menu changed. It now offered settings, both exterior and interior, and the names of prominent men and women—along with a list of weapons.

Steve ignored the list of names and selected the construct mode. He pumped in ten more quarters, then unbuttoned his shirt and removed the damp envelope. He took out the photos and fed them into the machine.

The computer mulled over the photos and produced images. Steve used the keyboard to adjust the details as the figures slowly rotated on the screen. He mimicked the voices for the synthesizer, adjusting tone and timber as the machine made approximations. The photos poked out of the machine and he pushed them back into the envelope. His fingers were shaking.

The screen had already lit up with a familiar set. And there they were—the image was so powerful he had to turn away.

A small panel hissed open. He picked up the pistol he had selected, a .44 magnum. It was heavy.

The chambers were loaded with regenerating blanks, but built into the muzzle was a small infra-red laser, to which the computer screen was keyed.

He turned slowly to face the screen, keeping his eyes down. In the lower right corner appeared a digital timer, set to sixty seconds. The computer waited for the START command.

He hesitated, as he always did, and when his eyes accidentally lifted, he flinched away from the screen.

You coward, he thought. You still let them control you.

He could feel the anger building, but he calmed himself and got ready. He buttoned his shirt and tucked it in, holding the magnum between his thighs. He wiped his palms on his pants and gripped the revolver in his right hand. Finally he took a deep breath and faced the screen.

In front of him was a perfect image of the family dining room. Seated at the table, eating slowly, unaware of him, were his parents. He watched the forks lift and drop; the food on the plates never diminished.

As always, he found himself hypnotized by the scene. It was

so real . . .

This is how they lived without him. This is what they looked like when he wasn't there. They didn't need him. They didn't give a damn about him. They never would.

He hit the START button, and the timer began to clock down. He tried to speak, but couldn't; he cleared his throat. His parents looked up and saw him. They didn't smile.

Steve fired the magnum without thinking.

The first round shattered his mother's wrist, blowing bone and blood into the china cabinet beyond.

"My God, Steve!" she pleaded. "Don't!"

He was surprised by the sudden rage. He couldn't stop. His second shot lifted her right out of her chair.

"Don't hurt me!" yelled his father, who had jumped up from the table and was trying to claw his way through the wall. "Please, Steve! Please!"

Steve fired four times, hammering his father's body to the wall.

When the magnum was "empty" the game automatically reset. His parents sat again at the table, eating slowly, unsuspecting.

He leaned against the wall, trying to catch his breath. The timer had clocked down twelve seconds.

On the screen the forks rose and fell, clicking on the plates, lifting featureless lumps from an inexhaustible supply of food. He could see their lips moving, and he found if he leaned close he could almost hear them talk.

Almost . . . almost . . .

"Too bad about Steve," his mother said, barely audible.

He held his breath and strained to hear.

"He's hopeless," his father said, the hushed voice riding the whisper of the ventilator fan.

"Such a disappointment," his mother said. She seemed to turn the tiniest bit and smile tauntingly.

His father said, "Such a gutless little creep, too."

"Bastard," Steve muttered. Without thinking he set the magnum on continuous reload.

His father said, "You should see the way he cowers when I reach for my belt. He makes me sick."

"You better shut up!" Steve whispered. His heart was racing.

"He never does anything right," said his mother.

"Shut up now," he said, speaking very distinctly.

"I wanted to kill him last time," said his father.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

"Maybe you should have," said his mother.

"You did!" Steve screamed. "You did kill me. You ripped and hacked and pried at me, you dug and scraped and tore me apart! You people ate the center out of my life!"

He banged the START button.

The pistol jumped and squirmed in his hand as he fired again and again. He was crying so hard he scarcely knew when the game was over. The screen was blank. He backed up to the wall and closed his burning eyes.

"You did kill me," he whispered.

He could still see them, still see the way their bodies jerked, the way the blood hit the walls in large wet splashes and ran racing to the floor.

And in that moment he couldn't separate the video images from those that came from vivid memory.

He burst from the machine and stumbled to the knobless door, past the big machines, through the glowing beads, and into the big room where the music throbbed with life so thick it made him dizzy.

"Hey, Snuffy!" somebody yelled, and he was spun around.

One of the glitter-suited Arcade managers stood there, holding up the envelope with Steve's dog-eared snapshots in it. "And if you don't mind . . ." he said, prying the .44 magnum from Steve's arthritic fingers. "Always forgets," the manger said over his shoulder. "You gotta watch these old snuffers like a hawk."

He poked the old man's frail chest. "You take it too personal, Stevie. For pity's sake, it's only a game."

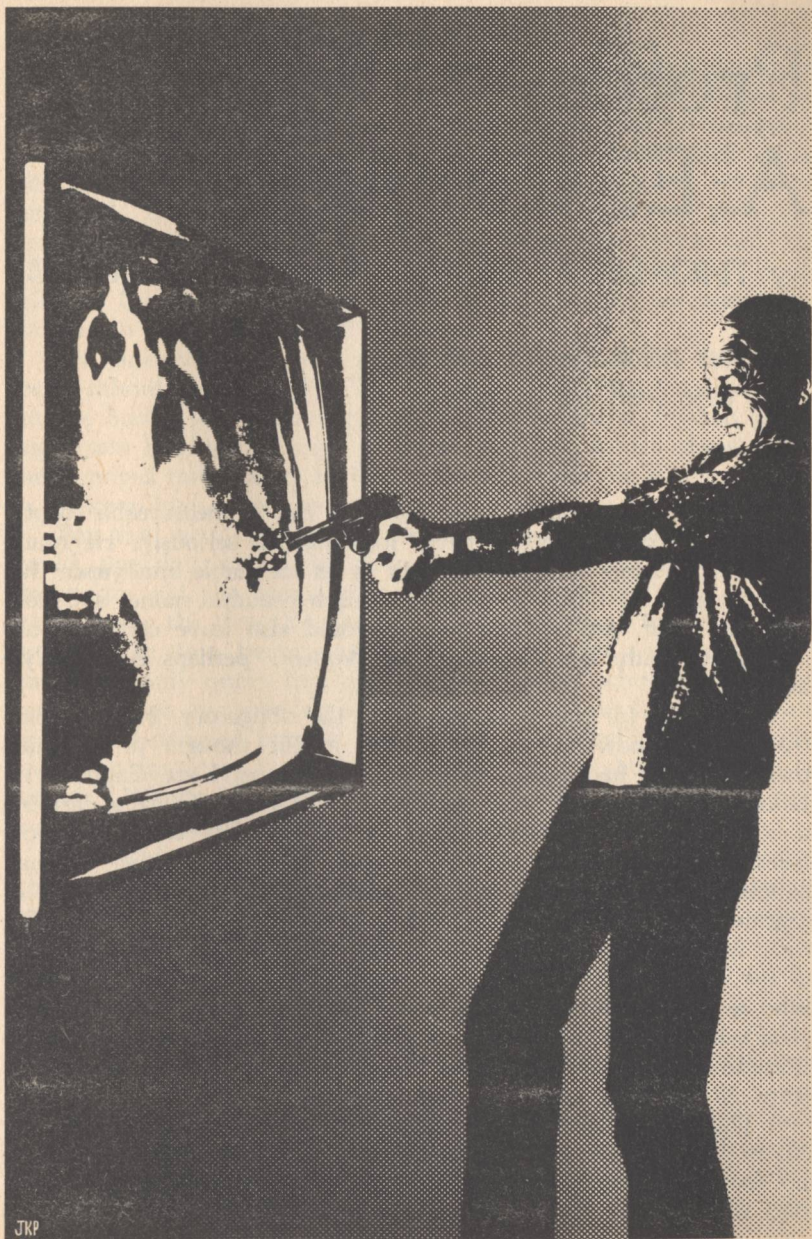
Steve walked slowly back to the cell-like room he'd occupied for the six months since he'd got out of prison. He stretched out painfully on the bed and stared at the empty ceiling—where brutal images still formed . . .

My God, he thought. *It's only getting worse.*

Last week his parole officer told him if they'd had the snuff game when Steve was a kid, he might not have had to go through all this. It was an old question, and Steve still didn't know the answer.

Only a game, the Arcade man had said. Was it?

Maybe I'll find out next week, he thought. *Next week at the Arcade.*



Profile: A. E. Coppard

by THOMAS E. SANDERS (NIPPAWANOCK)

A man with depth, cheek,
and one hell of a talent.

A person of precious little frontage but immeasurable depth, Alfred Edgar Coppard never took himself seriously. He found his birth amusing, anticipated death as an inevitable annoyance that would cancel his ticket to places with such beautiful names as Andalusia, Kashmir, and Killikrankie. It would also leave certain books ungrappled with: *Das Kapital*, *Little Women*, "perhaps even Carlyle and Trollope."

So much for the sentimental and the obligatory. Having come from almost nowhere, he could grin at the thought of returning there. Nobody had noted his birth in Folkstone, Kent, England, on January 4, 1878, "except my parents and a doctor who came carrying a black bag." The contents and color of that bag were "somehow insistent, even sinister" until he learned, from his mother, "It had contained me." Quite a proper mother for this future teller of macabre tales, she was "always wildly given to romantic fiction." Not only was there neither doctor nor bag, there wasn't even a midwife at the birth. A friendly neighbor helped, and either George, the tailor who was young Alfred Edgar's father, or Emily Alma, the housemaid who was his mother, found a registrar somewhere and reported the occurrence. Coppard later paid the registrar "a shilling or two" to learn "It was me who had then occurred."

The tailor and the maid were the trunk of his family tree, for "Save these, I have no notable ancestry." Two younger sisters made up the other branches of that "notable" tree which was planted in two rooms of a lodging house. Coppard was to recall, "The two

rooms must have been snug enough."

Snug enough, indeed, for that small space allowed the child to learn premature lessons. In the five years the family lived in Folkstone, the boy "adored and wooed" the landlord's daughter, Florrie. As the adult Alfred Edgar recalled, "We loved each other with an un-innocent abandon that was never discovered, nor even suspected." Such precocity must have been, at least in part, inherited, for Coppard remembered his father as "a radical, all tailors were radicals then, free-thinkers to a man and scoffers at hellfire." He was also a tubercular, a drinker, and an afternoon stroller on the hills around Folkstone.

On one of those afternoons, George just strolled away for good without so much as a "Ta." Emily had accepted his desertion, but she hadn't got around to explaining it to the tots when word came from Brighton. George, it seems, had just ankled along until, one hundred miles later, he found himself where he had met Emily. Basting himself to an employer, he sent for his family.

For the next twenty-five years, Alfred did the things that would, one day, make him A.E. Coppard, Author. Until he was nine years old, he went to a penny-a-week school for a solid grounding in the three Rs, the third being anathema to him though he would, in time, become an accountant. He was a docile student sent home only once—for head lice—before his schooling was cut short by some mysterious problem that afflicted his liver, an organ he "fancied dangled from a sort of pin in my belly much as the liver of a lamb or a calf is suspended on the shop hooks of a butcher." Whether his liver had "surged or drooped," he could not say; but it removed him from school permanently.

Tuberculosis took George for a final stroll at about the time school left young Alfred, and Emily went to work in a laundry from eight to eight each day to feed the family. Bereft of daily authority (though the exhausted Emily was a martinet at night), Alfred roamed the hills and valleys about Brighton and read extensively among poets he liked—everything they wrote, good or bad. He avoided poets he didn't like, finding no virtue in their work, less virtue in the discipline got from reading that which is not immediately rewarding.

At the time Jack the Ripper was disposing of tarts faster than Mother Goose's knave, ten-year-old Alfred was bundled off to the East End of London. For three years, he schlepped packages for a Jewish tailor who made trousers for several smart firms (one

of which was Dombey and Son) and legged messages about London for Reuter's Telegraph Agency. He became expert at dodging horsedung and the scarlet-jacketed boys who pooperscooped busy Cheapside and Leadenhall.

Back in Brighton at thirteen, he did various jobs for auctioneers, cheesemongers, a soapery, and Jordan's the carriers. Of the period, he said his life was "a sort of kaleidoscope of running, reading, falling in love, and trying to write verse." Falling in love involved a series of young ladies "who liked me well enough . . . always seemed sad to part . . . were none the less intent on parting." Was there a reason for the turnover? "My trousers seldom cost more than five shillings and the rest of me was to match; by their standards (alas) I was not a presentable object; by temperament I was no swashbuckler, there was no more to be said."

Still, there was time for omnivorous reading, attempts at writing, contests. When he was nineteen, Alfred won a local newspaper literary competition. For his first such effort, he won a one-volume edition of Chaucer. His mother, still a laundry drudge, would have preferred a different prize—any different prize—for, martinet though she remained, she deferred to her son's demand for complete silence as he read at night. She even, at his insistence, moved the mantelpiece clock to the outside stairs so its ticking would not interfere with the rhythms of the poetry he was reading.

No namby-pamby, however, young Coppard played football and cricket with a group of fitters, mechanics, and brass finishers. Through them, he got a job as departmental clerk in an engineering firm with a large staff of stenographers. Through the next eight years, he rose steadily until he had an office of his own, a fiancée (one of those stenographers), the small fame that came from being a professional sprinter (the reward of broken field running for Reuters?), and enough money to allow him to force his mother to quit her laundry job. She had become a first-class ironer able to polish shirt fronts and collars; she had worked her way to the top in her trade. In the collision of wills, Alfred won. He didn't say, "No mother of mine . . ." but he later admitted he was aware of "the removal of a stigma." His frontage gets a little wider and his depth a little shallower for a bit.

At twenty-nine, Coppard, his stenographic wife, and their two whippets moved into two rooms in Oxford where he had taken a job with the Eagle Ironworks. His predecessor had absconded,

leaving a set of altered books and almost no company funds. Lily Anne quickly tired of sharing two rooms with three runners; so she moved them all into a cottage with a back garden emerging on a stream.

Halley's Comet came and went.

So did the Titanic and Edward VII.

The time for Coppard to write came, never to leave. "Clorinda Walks in Heaven" was one of his first stories.

He worked at the ironworks, took time off to attend soccer matches and academic lectures. As he had become head of his department, he could juggle his time. The soccer matches led him to fans he considered gelid, of whom he said, "On first attending a good soccer match I was appalled to find that miracles of agility and rallies of great glory were approved by no more than a cold-blooded clap of the hand when my own private impulse, so hard to curb, was to clout my neighbor over the head with ecstasy and howl the top of the pavilion clean out of the Parks." The academic lectures led him to undergraduates who were "as keen on poetry and art as I was." With them, he first met "the thing I recognized as intellect."

World War I came and went during Coppard's twelve years with the ironworks. As it was engaged solely on munitions, its employees were exempt, though Coppard was physically rated Al. At war's end, he was forty, an age at which some men begin to chase stenographers they are not married to. Coppard chased a dream. Severing all ties with gainful employment, he became a full-time writer. As early as 1916 one of his tales had been bought and published. In 1917 two poems were published in *The Egoist* under the editorship of T.S. Eliot. Coppard suggests, "This should not be scored too heavily against him as I believe it occurred on only the first or second week of his appointment as editor."

Tales and poems began to come out in well-known and established magazines and journals, but there were many tales and poems on hand that no one would publish. Still, in 1919, Coppard recalls, "I began my career as a professional writer on the meet occasion of All Fool's Day."

The next two years were productive for the writing of stories and poems; sales were infrequent; payment, small. Then the Golden Cockerel Press, a communal society of craftsmen, published *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* in 1921, and Coppard found

a small but exceedingly enthusiastic audience. Not unlike some painters, however, Coppard was to find himself making little money from the books that were to establish him, considerable returns going instead to the collectors who made the limited numbers of his first editions quite valuable. Sometimes, over the years, Coppard was forced to return to clerical work to support his family which, in later years, consisted of his second wife, Winifred May deKok of the Irish Free State, and their son and daughter.

Although making a career of writing was a step Coppard said, "I could never recommend to others," he added, "I have not regretted it for myself—or not very often, and not for very long."

Critics of consequence have praised Coppard's works. Many share the opinion that the tales read like a cross between Saki and Lord Dunsany. Ford Madox Ford noted, "He is almost the first English prose writer to get into English prose the peculiar quality of English lyric poetry. . . . the fancy, the turn of imagination, the wisdom, the as it were piety, and the beauty of the great seventeenth century lyricists like Donne or Herbert—or even Herrick. And that peculiar quality is the best thing that England has to show."

William Peden wrote, "If he is first of all a teller of tales, Coppard is next a poet and an artist. Passages of real lyric beauty appear and reappear in his stories; the final effect of much of his work is closer to that evoked by poetry than by prose."

Although A.E. Coppard would probably have enjoyed these assessments, he wrote to please his readers. The man of limited frontage would probably have thought what he elsewhere said: "It became clear to me that the idea of pure critical judgment with the ability to standardize and compare and add up two and two to make a univereal aesthetic four was moonshine, and that Wilde's dictum, 'All criticism is introspection,' was unassailable."

It would have been difficult for Coppard to take even praise too seriously. Indifference and praise, the false and the true, evil and good—all were bits of moonshine that needed a bit of dimming. Example: the disclaimers that characters in books are fictitious. Coppard's note in *Pink Furniture: A Tale for Lovely Children with Noble Natures* sums up his attitude nicely: "Some of the characters in this book are almost fictitious but most are merely true. If anyone wants the law on me for this, I should not care to go to prison as I do not think I could put up with it."

Perhaps that attitude explains Coppard's ability to create such lovely horror. He felt, "It is not to be explained why the supernatural which is so fearsome to experience is so attractive to peruse, why so rich a thrill is got from reading what would be death for us to encounter. But anyway, the supernatural need not be all ghastly or ghostly, it may use the same means to contrive a folly as to promote a fear. The faeries of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from the same brain as the witches of *Macbeth* and the Ghost of *Hamlet*."

Alfred Edgar Coppard died on January 13, 1957, but he had a thing to say about that day before it came: "As a lifelong dweller in the comfort of atheism (I was never anything as frozenly credulous as an agnostic), I am not in the least afraid of death or the dying into it."

Spitting in the eye of even a possibility that way takes a little cheek and a hell of a lot of depth.

Adam and Eve and Pinch Me

by A.E. COPPARD

So rich a glamor of light;
so miraculous a bloom of clarity.
But hiding in the wonder was a danger
to menace his immortal soul.

... and in the whole of his days, vividly at the end of the afternoon—he repeated it again and again to himself—the kind country spaces had never absorbed *quite* so rich a glamor of light, so miraculous a bloom of clarity. He could feel streaming in his own mind, in his bones, the same crystalline brightness that lay upon the land. Thoughts and images went flowing through him as easily and amiably as fish swim in their pools; and as idly, too, for one of his speculations took up the theme of his family name. There was such an agreeable oddness about it, just as there was about all the luminous sky today, that it touched him as just a little remarkable. What *did* such a name connote, signify, or symbolize? It was a rann of a name, but it had euphony! Then again, like the fish, his ambulating fancy flashed into other shallows, and he giggled as he paused, peering at the buds in the brake. Turning back toward his house again, he could see, beyond its roofs, the spire of the church tintured as richly as the vane: all round him was a new grandeur upon the grass of the fields, and the spare trees had shadows below that seemed to support them in the manner of a plinth, more real than themselves, and the dykes and any chance heave of the level fields were underlined, as if for special emphasis, with long shades of mysterious blackness.

With a neat little drift of emotion that had at other times assailed him in the wonder and ecstasy of pure light, Jaffa Codling pushed through the slit in the back hedge and stood within his

own garden. The gardener was at work. He could hear the voices of the children about the lawn at the other side of the house. He was very happy, and the place was beautiful, a fine white many-windowed house rising from a lawn bowered with plots of mold, turreted with shrubs, and overset with a vast walnut tree. This house had deep clean eaves, a roof of faint-colored slates that, after rain, glowed dully, like onyx or jade, under the red chimneys, and half-way up at one end was a balcony set with black balusters. He went to a French window that stood open and stepped into the dining room. There was no one within, and, on that lonely instant, a strange feeling of emptiness dropped upon him. The clock ticked almost as if it had been caught in some indecent act; the air was dim and troubled after that glory outside. Well, now he would go up at once to his study and write down for his new book the ideas and images he had accumulated—beautiful rich thoughts they were—during that wonderful afternoon. He went to mount the stairs and he was passed by one of the maids; humming a silly song she brushed past him rudely, but he was an easy-going man—maids were unteachably tiresome—and reaching the landing he sauntered toward his room. The door stood slightly open and he could hear voices within. He put his hand upon the door . . . it would not open any further. What the devil . . . he pushed—like the bear in the tale—and he pushed, and he pushed—was there something against it on the other side? He put his shoulder to it . . . some wedge must be there, and *that* was extraordinary. Then his whole apprehension was swept up and whirled as by an avalanche—Mildred, his wife, was in there; he could hear her speaking to a man in fair soft tones and the rich phrases that could be used only by a woman yielding a deep affection to him. Codling kept still. Her words burned on his mind and thrilled him as if spoken to himself. There was a movement in the room, then utter silence. He again thrust savagely at the partly open door, but he could not stir it. The silence within continued. He beat upon the door with his fists, crying: "Mildred, Mildred!" There was no response, but he could hear the rocking armchair commence to swing to and fro. Pushing his hand round the edge of the door he tried to thrust his head into the opening. There was no space for this, but he could just peer into the corner of a mirror hung near, and this is what he saw: the chair at one end of its swing, a man sitting in it, and upon one arm of it Mildred, the beloved woman, with her lips upon the man's face,

caressing him with her hands. Codling made another effort to get into the room—as vain as it was violent. “Do you hear me, Mildred?” he shouted. Apparently neither of them heard him; they rocked to and fro while he gazed stupefied. What, in the name of God . . . What this . . . was she bewitched . . . were there such things after all as magic, devilry!

He drew back and held himself quite steadily. The chair stopped swaying, and the room grew awfully still. The sharp ticking of the clock in the hall rose upon the house like the tongue of some perfunctory mocker. Couldn’t they hear the clock . . . ? Couldn’t they hear his heart? He had to put his hand upon his heart, for surely, in that great silence inside there, they would hear its beat, growing so loud now that it seemed almost to stun him! Then in a queer way he found himself reflecting, observing, analyzing his own actions and intentions. He found some of them to be just a little spurious, counterfeit. He felt it would be easy, so perfectly easy to flash in one blast of anger and annihilate the two. He would do nothing of the kind. There was no occasion for it. People didn’t really do that sort of thing, or, at least, not with a genuine passion. There was no need for anger. His curiosity was satisfied, quite satisfied, he was certain, he had not the remotest interest in the man. A welter of unexpected thoughts swept upon his mind as he stood there. As a writer of books he was often stimulated by the emotions and impulses of other people, and now his own surprise was beginning to intrigue him, leaving him, oh, quite unstirred emotionally, but interesting him profoundly.

He heard the maid come stepping up the stairway again, humming her silly song. He did not want a scene or to be caught eavesdropping, and so turned quickly to another door. It was locked. He sprang to one beyond it; the handle would not turn. “Bah! what’s *up* with ‘em?” But the girl was now upon him, carrying a tray of coffee things. “Oh, Mary!” he exclaimed casually, “I . . .” To his astonishment the girl stepped past him as if she did not hear or see him, tapped upon the door of his study, entered, and closed the door behind her. Jaffa Codling then got really angry. Hell! were the blasted servants in it! He dashed to the door again and tore at the handle. It would not even turn, and, though he wrenched with fury at it, the room was utterly sealed against him. He went away for a chair with which to smash the effrontery of that door. No, he wasn’t angry, either with his

wife or this fellow—Gilbert, she had called him—who had a strangely familiar aspect as far as he had been able to take it in; but when one's servants . . . faugh!

The door opened and Mary came forth smiling demurely. He was a few yards farther along the corridor at that moment. "Mary!" he shouted, "leave the door open!" Mary carefully closed it and turned her back on him. He sprang after her with bad words bursting from him as she went toward the stairs and flitted lightly down, humming all the way as if in derision. He leaped downward after her three steps at a time, but she trotted with amazing swiftness into the kitchen and slammed the door in his face. Codling stood, but kept his hands carefully away from the door, kept them behind him. "No, no," he whispered cunningly, "there's something fiendish about door handles today, I'll go and get a bar, or a butt of timber," and, jumping out into the garden for some such thing, the miracle happened to him. For it was nothing else than a miracle, the unbelievable, the impossible, simple and laughable if you will, but having as much validity as any miracle can ever invoke. It was simple and laughable because by all the known physical laws he should have collided with his gardener, who happened to pass the window with his wheelbarrow as Codling jumped out onto the path. And it was unbelievable that they should not, and impossible that they *did* not collide; and it was miraculous, because Codling stood for a brief moment in the garden path and the wheelbarrow of Bond, its contents, and Bond himself passed apparently through the figure of Codling as if he were so much air, as if he were not a living breathing man but just a common ghost. There was no impact, just a momentary breathlessness. Codling stood and looked at the retreating figure going on utterly unaware of him. It is interesting to record that Codling's first feelings were mirthful. He giggled. He was jocular. He ran along in front of the gardener and let him pass through him once more; then after him again; he scrambled into the man's barrow and was wheeled about by this incomprehensible thick-headed gardener who was dead to all his master's efforts to engage his attention. Presently he dropped the wheelbarrow and went away, leaving Codling to cogitate upon the occurrence. There was no room for doubt, some essential part of him had become detached from the obviously not less vital part. He felt he was essential because he was responding to the experience, he was reacting in the normal way to normal stimuli,

although he happened for the time being to be invisible to his fellows and unable to communicate with them. How had it come about—this queer thing? How could he discover what part of him had cut loose, as it were? There was no question of this being death; death wasn't funny, it wasn't a joke; he had still all his human instincts. You didn't get angry with a faithless wife or joke with a fool of a gardener if you were dead, certainly not! He had realized enough of himself to know he was the usual man of instincts, desires, and prohibitions, complex and contradictory; his family history for a million or two years would have denoted that, not explicitly—obviously impossible—but suggestively. He had found himself doing things he had no desire to do, doing things he had a desire *not* to do, thinking thoughts that had no contiguous meanings, no meanings that could be related to his general experience. At odd times he had been chilled—ay, and even agreeably surprised—at the immense potential evil in himself. But still, this was no mere Jekyll and Hyde affair, that a man and his own ghost should separately inhabit the same world was a horse of another color. The other part of him was alive and active somewhere . . . as alive . . . as alive . . . yes, as *he* was, but dashed if he knew where! What a lark when they got back to each other and compared notes! In his tales he had brooded over so many imagined personalities, followed in the track of so many psychological enigmas that he *had* felt at times a stranger to himself. What if, after all, that brooding had given him the faculty of projecting this figment of himself into the world of men! Or was he some unrealized latent element of being without its natural integument, doomed now to drift over the ridge of the world for ever? Was it his personality, his sprit? Then how was the dashed thing working? Here was he with the most wonderful happening in human experience, and he couldn't differentiate or disinter things. He was like a new Adam flung into some old Eden.

There was Bond tinkering about with some plants a dozen yards in front of him. Suddenly his three children came round from the other side of the house, the youngest boy leading them, carrying in his hand a small sword, which was made, not of steel, but of some more brightly shining material; indeed, it seemed at one moment to be of gold, and then again of flame, transmuting everything in its neighborhood into the likeness of flame, the hair of the little girl Eve, a part of Adam's tunic; and the fingers of the boy Gabriel as he held the sword were like pale tongues of

fire. Gabriel, the youngest boy, went up to the gardener and gave the sword into his hands, saying: "Bond, is this sword any good?" Codling saw the gardener take the weapon and examine it with a careful sort of smile; his great gnarled hands became immediately transparent, the blood could be seen moving diligently about the veins. Codling was so interested in the sight that he did not gather in the gardener's reply. The little boy was dissatisfied and repeated his question: "No, but Bond, is this sword any good?" Codling rose, and stood by invisible. The three beautiful children were grouped about the great angular figure of the gardener in his soiled clothes, looking up now into his face and now at the sword, with anxiety in all their puckered eyes. "Well, Marse Gabriel," Codling could hear him reply, "as far as the sword goes, it may be a good un, or it may be a bad un, but, as good as it is, it can never be anything but a bad thing." He then gave it back to them; the boy Adam held the haft of it, and the girl Eve rubbed the blade with curious fingers. The younger boy stood looking up at the gardener with unsatisfied gaze. "But Bond, *can't* you say if this sword's any good?" Bond turned to his spade and trowels. "Mebbe the shape of it's wrong, Marse Gabriel, though it seems a pretty handy size." Saying this he moved off across the lawn. Gabriel turned to his brother and sister and took the sword from them; they all followed after the gardener and once more Gabriel made inquiry: "Bond, is this sword any good?" The gardener again took it and made a few passes in the air like a valiant soldier at exercise. Turning then, he lifted a bright curl from the head of Eve and cut it off with a sweep of the weapon. He held it up to look at it critically and then let it fall to the ground. Codling sneaked behind him and, picking it up, stood stupidly looking at it. "Mebbe, Marse Gabriel," the gardener was saying, "it 'ud be better made of steel, but it has a smartish edge on it." He went to pick up the barrow, but Gabriel seized it with a spasm of anger and cried out: "No, no, Bond, will you say, just yes or no, Bond, is this sword any good?" The gardener stood still and looked down at the little boy, who repeated his question—"Just yes or no, Bond!" "No, Marse Gabriel!" "Thank you, Bond," replied the child with dignity, "that's all we wanted to know," and, calling to his mates to follow him, he ran away to the other side of the house.

Codling stared again at the beautiful lock of hair in his hand and felt himself grow so angry that he picked up a strange-looking flowerpot at his feet and hurled it at the retreating gardener. It

struck Bond in the middle of the back and, passing clean through him, broke on the wheel of his barrow, but Bond seemed to be quite unaware of this catastrophe. Codling rushed after, and, taking the gardener by the throat, he yelled: "Damn you, will you tell me what all this means?" But Bond proceeded calmly about his work unnoticed, carrying his master about as if he were a clinging vapour, or a scarf hung upon his neck. In a few moments Codling dropped exhausted to the ground. "What . . . Oh hell . . . what, what am I to do?" he groaned. "What has happened to me? What shall I *do*? What *can* I do?" He looked at the broken flower-pot. "Did I invent that?" He pulled out his watch. "That's a real watch, I hear it ticking, and it's six o'clock." Was he dead or disembodied or mad? What was this infernal lapse of identity? And who the devil, yes, who was it upstairs with Mildred? He jumped to his feet and hurried to the window; it was shut; to the door, it was fastened; he was powerless to open either. Well! well! this was experimental psychology with a vengeance, and he began to chuckle again. He'd have to write McDougall about it. Then he turned and saw Bond wheeling the barrow across the lawn toward him again. "Why is that fellow always shoving that infernal green barrow around?" he asked, and, the fit of fury seizing him again, he rushed toward Bond, but before he reached him the three children danced into the garden again, crying, with great excitement: "Bond, oh, Bond!" The gardener stopped and set down the terrifying barrow; the children crowded about him, and Gabriel held out another shining thing, asking: "Bond, is this box any good?" The gardener took the box and at once his eyes lit up with interest and delight. "Oh, Marse Gabriel, where'd ye get it? Where'd ye get it?" "Bond," said the boy impatiently, "is the box any *good*?" "Any good?" echoed the man. "Why, Marse Gabriel, Marse Adam, Miss Eve, look yere!" Holding it down in front of them, he lifted the lid from the box and a bright-colored bird flashed out and flew round and round above their heads. "Oh," screamed Gabriel with delight, "it's a kingfisher!" "That's what it is," said Bond, "a kingfisher!" "Where?" asked Adam. "Where?" asked Eve. "There it flies—round the fountain—see it? See it!" "No," said Adam. "No," said Eve.

"Oh, do, do, see it," cried Gabriel, "here it comes, it's coming!" and, holding his hands on high, and standing on his toes, the child cried out as happy as the bird which Codling saw flying above them.

"I can't see it," said Adam.

"Where is it, Gaby?" asked Eve.

"Oh, you stupids," cried the boy. "*There* it goes. There it goes ... there ... it's gone!"

He stood looking brightly at Bond, who replaced the lid.

"What shall we do now?" he exclaimed eagerly. For reply the gardener gave the box into his hand and walked off with the barrow. Gabriel took the box over to the fountain. Codling, unseen, went after him, almost as excited as the boy; Eve and her brother followed. They sat upon the stone tank that held the falling water. It was difficult for the child to unfasten the lid; Codling attempted to help him, but he was powerless. Gabriel looked up into his father's face and smiled. Then he stood up and said to the others:

"Now, *do* watch it this time."

They all knelt carefully beside the water. He lifted the lid and, behold, a fish like a gold carp, but made wholly of fire, leaped from the box into the fountain. The man saw it dart down into the water, he saw the water bubble up behind it, he heard the hiss that the junction of fire and water produces, and saw a little track of steam follow the bubbles about the tank until the figure of the fish was consumed and disappeared. Gabriel, in ecstasies, turned to his sister with blazing happy eyes, exclaiming:

"There! Evey!"

"What was it?" asked Eve, nonchalantly, "I didn't see anything."

"More didn't I," said Adam.

"Didn't you see that lovely fish?"

"No," said Adam.

"No," said Eve.

"Oh, stupids," cried Gabriel, "it went right past the bottom of the water."

"Let's get a fishin' nook," said Adam.

"No, no, no," said Gabriel, replacing the lid of the box.

"Oh, no."

Jaffa Codling had remained on his knees staring at the water so long that, when he looked around him again, the children had gone away. He got up and went to the door, and that was closed; the windows, fastened. He went moodily to a garden bench and sat on it with folded arms. Dusk had begun to fall into the shrubs and trees, the grass to grow dull, the air chill, the sky to muster its gloom. Bond had overturned his barrow, stalled his tools in the

lodge, and gone to his home in the village. A curious cat came round the house and surveyed the man who sat chained to his seven-horned dilemma. It grew dark and fearfully silent. Was the world empty now? Some small thing, a snail perhaps, crept among the dead leaves in the hedge with a sharp, irritating noise. A strange flood of mixed thoughts poured through his mind until at last one idea disentangled itself, and he began thinking with tremendous fixity of little Gabriel. He wondered if he could brood or meditate or "will" with sufficient power to bring him into the garden again. The child had just vaguely recognized him for a moment at the waterside. He'd try that dodge, telepathy was a mild kind of a trick after so much of the miraculous. If he'd lost his blessed body, at least the part that ate and smoked and talked to Mildred . . . He stopped as his mind stumbled on a strange recollection . . . What a joke, of course . . . idiot . . . not to have seen *that*. He stood up in the garden with joy . . . of course, *he* was upstairs with Mildred, it was himself, the other bit of him, that Mildred had been talking to. What a howling fool he'd been!

He found himself concentrating his mind on the purpose of getting the child Gabriel into the garden once more, but it was with a curious mood that he endeavored to establish this relationship. He could not fix his will into any calm intensity of power, or fixity of purpose, or pleasurable mental ecstasy. The utmost force seemed to come with a malicious threatening splenetic "entreaty." That damned snail in the hedge broke the thread of his meditation; a dog began to bark sturdily from a distant farm; the faculties of his mind became joggled up like a child's picture puzzle, and he brooded unintelligibly upon such things as skating and steam engines, and Elizabethan drama so lapped about with themes like jealousy and chastity. Really now, Shakespeare's Isabella was the most consummate snob in . . . He looked up quickly to his wife's room and saw Gabriel step from the window to the balcony as though he was fearful of being seen. The boy lifted up his hands and placed the bright box on the rail of the balcony. He looked up at the faint stars for a moment or two, and then carefully released the lid of the box. What came out of it and rose into the air appeared to Codling to be just a piece of floating light, but as it soared above the roof he saw it grow to be a little ancient ship, with its hull and fully set sails and its three masts all of faint primrose flame color. It cleaved through the air, rolling slightly as a ship through the wave, in widening circles

above the house, making a curving ascent until it lost the shape of a vessel and became only a moving light hurrying to some sidereal shrine. Codling glanced at the boy on the balcony, but in that brief instant something had happened, the ship had burst like a rocket and released three colored drops of fire which came falling slowly, leaving beautiful grey furrows of smoke in their track. Gabriel leaned over the rail with outstretched palms, and, catching the green star and the blue one as they drifted down to him, he ran with a rill of laughter back into the house. Codling sprang forward just in time to catch the red star; it lay vividly blasting his own palm for a monstrous second, and then, slipping through, was gone. He stared at the ground, at the balcony, the sky, and then heard an exclamation . . . his wife stood at his side.

"Gilbert! How you frightened me!" she cried. "I thought you were in the room; come along to dinner." She took his arm and they walked up the steps into the dining room together. "Just a moment," said her husband, turning to the door of the room. His hand was upon the handle, which turned easily in his grasp, and he ran upstairs to his own room. He opened the door. The light was on, the fire was burning brightly, a smell of cigarette smoke about, pen and paper upon his desk, the Japanese book knife, the gilt matchbox, everything all right, no one there. He picked up a book from his desk . . . *Monna Vanna*. His bookplate was in it—*Ex Libris—Gilbert Cannister*. He put it down beside the green dish; two yellow oranges were in the green dish, and two most deliberately green Canadian apples rested by their side. He went to the door and swung it backward and forward quite easily. He sat on his desk trying to piece the thing together, glaring at the print and the book knife and the smart matchbox, until his wife came up behind him exclaiming: "Come along, Gilbert!"

"Where are the kids, old man?" he asked her, and, before she replied, he had gone along to the nursery. He saw the two cots, his boy in one, his girl in the other. He turned whimsically to Mildred, saying: "There *are* only two, *are* there?" Such a question did not call for reply, but he confronted her as if expecting some assuring answer. She was staring at him with her bright beautiful eyes.

"Are there?" he repeated.

"How strange you should ask me that now!" she said . . . "If you're a very good man—perhaps . . ."

"Mildred!"

She nodded brightly.

He sat down in the rocking chair, but got up again saying to her gently: "We'll call him Gabriel."

"But suppose—"

"No, no," he said, stopping her lovely lips, "I know all about him." And he told her a pleasant little tale.

AN EXCITING NEW TECHNOLOGY COMES TO PICKERINGTON, OHIO

by LINDA HAUGHT

In this day and age,
even fruit flies can be a menace.

The seventeenth annual Pickerington family reunion was called off last year on account of the flies.

We had decided to hold it at my mother's cousin Julia's, who still lived in the country and had a big roomy farmhouse, in case it rained.

It didn't, though. The day dawned big and bright and beautiful and we picked my Aunt Nan up early so as to get a good start on the day. My Aunt Nan actually lived closer to my brother Steve, but she said you wouldn't get her to ride in a pickup truck again if you paid her, and why anyone would want to drive a truck anyways when they lived in town and didn't need one was beyond her. Aunt Nan didn't like the ride in our economy car either, since you could feel every bump in the road that they'd been promising to resurface for eight years now. (The ride to the farmhouse wasn't over thirty miles, but under the circumstances it seemed like a long trip.)

Julia greeted us all smiles and made Chet take our covered dishes while she saw to the turkey. We found the glasses and iced tea ourselves.

I went out after bit and talked to Chet, who was setting up chairs. He had built a picnic table by hand the summer before, and he pulled off the table cloth to show me the fine woodgrain.

I had been there a good half hour before anyone else showed, and then they all came at once. The women hugged each other and the men stood by and smoked until they were needed for something. The children were in charge of shooing bugs off the food, although they didn't do a very good job of it. My little cousin Judy was hanging on my arm, and I knew she'd be there the whole day. My cousin Jim was there too, for the first time in years, and my brother Steve showed up a little later, in his cowboy boots and work clothes.

The men and the young people stood around eyeing the table, waiting for the women to say it was time to start. Julia had arranged things nicely, even putting a big bowl of verbena and phlox on the table. Chet had set the chairs under the big shade trees, where it would be cool and away from all the cars.

Finally the food was on the table. There were mountains of it: baked beans, scalloped corn and potatoes, two kinds of ham—Mary didn't think anyone was bringing it—fruit salad, bean salad, jello salad, macaroni salad. And then there were the pies: blackberry, cherry, rhubarb, black raspberry, mincemeat, strawber . . .

Someone shouted at me to look. I didn't see it at first. Then there was a black speck in the sky, then several of them, apparently headed toward us. By this time I knew what it was, but Steve was the first to let out a yell.

"Oh my God . . . fruit flies!"

"Get the children!" screamed Mary.

We all went for broke. Lawn chairs and plastic forks scattered in the dust as we clambered for the house, the men scooting furniture in front of the door when everyone was inside. I had never seen giant fruit flies before, so I stood near the window, in spite of everyone's warnings.

Giant fruit flies, as I understand it, are a product of a genetic experiment that has been going on for several years. Scientists, in an attempt to produce larger steers, hogs, and chickens, began shooting the growth hormones of larger animals into smaller ones. The characteristic for size in some of these animals would be passed along to their offspring, thus creating a superior breed of livestock.

It sounded like a good idea. Chet and his neighbors had been following developments in the farm journals for years. But if the idea was to get bigger hogs and steers, they should have experimented on hogs and steers in the first place, instead of practicing on fruit flies. We don't need bigger fruit flies.

It was only a matter of time before old Moby Fly and a few of his cousins escaped. Anyone can tell you flies are escape artists. They go through screens, windows, tents, steel doors, anything. And once they got out we were up a creek. When an animal is small you don't worry much about its temperament, but anybody who's ever been to a picnic can tell you that flies are aggressive. At a twentieth of an ounce they're only obnoxious. At ten to twenty pounds they're downright threatening.

So now here we were standing inside while our picnic was being ruined by these huge creatures who stood in the food and rooted in it. The table wobbled under their weight. Their huge glossy eyes always seemed to be looking at you. They had little hairs shooting out all over their body, and bits of jello salad and cool whip clung to their hairy legs. It was pretty disgusting.

The men decided it was best to wait it out, to let them eat the picnic and leave, although Julia was sorry to see her dinner ruined. Chet wanted to lure them into the garage with a rhubarb pie and slam the door on them. Steve wanted to climb up on the roof and pick them off with Chet's shotgun. It was my Aunt Nan who suddenly grabbed a fly swatter and flew out the door before anyone else could stop her. We all began screaming at her to come back, our hearts pounding in fear for her the whole time, but she bravely waved her fly swatter at those things—and they left. She said anyone could tell you flies vanish when they see a fly swatter.

No one was quite up to continuing the reunion at this point, and what the flies left us didn't look too appetizing, so everyone gathered up their belongings and left. I wrote a letter the next week to the Journal, telling them about Aunt Nan's fly swatter remedy, but I never got a reply.

So there's still no telling what will be done about the problem, but I do know the Pickerington family reunion is on for this year, come fruit flies or hell or high water.

Midtown Bodies

by JOHN ROBERT BENSINK

If man had really been meant to fly,
would God have let him invent airplanes?

Zeckerborn, arms flapping, sailed by Gene Hodge's office window.

"One of our attorneys," Hodge said hollowly.

"One of the best," Mike Hillary said.

Hillary went to the window and looked down eighteen stories. Even from up here they could hear the awful *thunk!* of grey pinstripe creasing yellow cab. "That'll ruin your damned week," Hillary said.

"Not funny," Hodge said. Still, he knew glib Hillary could find sick humor in just about anything; he'd flip the bird to the mushroom cloud just a breath before the fire-shock fried his face.

They were work friends, two opposites who'd somehow attracted; each of them was the only confidant the other had found at the corporation. Hodge, research and development chief and a gifted scientist in his own right, shuttled between the Manhattan headquarters and the company's R&D center upstate. Hillary was high up in public relations, which, he said, explained all his quirks and character defects, including any he might develop in the future.

Hillary was here to get more dope for updates on this business with the Norsen girl. The media were insatiable on this one—as, of course, they had every right to be: It was, after all, the story of the century.

"I told you all I know," Hodge said.

"You know nothing. 'Mind over matter.' 'Untapped centers of the brain releasing extraordinary faculties under stress.' I couldn't

do a better job of saying nothing myself, and I'm a professional."

"There!" Hodge said, pointing east.

Hillary whirled around, his eyes tracking the line Hodge's finger indicated. "Maybe. I *think* I saw someone up by the Pan Am Building."

"That's not where I was pointing," Hodge said, smiling. "You must have seen somebody else. Maybe it *can* work."

A Chinese zipped straight down in front of the window.

"And maybe it *can't*," Hillary said.

"Fred Fong," Hodge said dismally.

"Assimilation problems?"

"Fong? He's third-generation. And a damned good accountant."

"Was," Hillary said, looking out the window.

Hodge rushed to the window. Fred Fong almost pulled out of it. But didn't. "Maybe we didn't see anybody doing it after all," Hodge said mournfully.

"These things happen, pal. People have a right to try what they want."

"But this is so incredibly different, Mike."

Hillary's anger was calculated. "Now what are you going to start? 'If man had been meant to fly, God wouldn't have let him invent airplanes'? If someone out there"—he pointed to a place about two hundred feet above Sixth Avenue—"wants to just perch on his windowsill and—"

Hillary stopped, made mute by the smiling Puerto Rican delivery boy going by with a carton of iced tea and sodas in his outstretched hands. A little bit like an ethnic Superman, only maybe not so sleek and purposeful; and of course he didn't have a costume. Just the same: The boy was flying. "Maybe we should order something up," Hillary said, recovering.

"It *can* work," Hodge said, unbelieving.

Hillary opened the window. Street sounds, amplified by the echo effect of opposing skyscrapers, came into Hodge's office redoubled. Hillary hung a leg over the windowsill. "Arrivederci." He chuckled. "Or, as the Germans say, I'll be the same."

"I don't think you will," Hodge said, grabbing him firmly.

"Hey!" Hillary said, his anger suddenly raw, "I can do what I damned well dare. Let's not forget you're still the scientific wimp, and I'm still the bad-ass mother from PR. You feed goldfish on weekends. I play soccer."

Hodge let go his grip on Hillary. "I had no idea it would

work," he said. "I can't explain the Norsen girl."

Hillary's face went dead-white and he slid out of the window, down the wall, and onto the floor. "These windows aren't supposed to open," he said defensively.

They weren't, but they did here at company headquarters, which was so new it still smelled of spackling, caulking, and glazing compounds. A hot new architect had decided to give up the closed-window cliché of skyscraper building; statistics had shown him that, while suicides were indeed on the rise, jumping as a method was growing less popular every year.

Nevertheless: The day before, a temporary typist had jumped out of a window on Hodge's floor. Gene Hodge had tried to talk Linda Norsen of the Bronx out of taking the giant step just because she was spectacularly unattractive, had no friends, and would very likely be trapped in a dull, ill-paying job for the rest of her life. She'd said she was deliriously unhappy. What was the point of going *on*, she'd demanded of Hodge, who like most people at such moments could only come up with the usual: the value of family, friends, living in the good old U.S.A., satisfaction from any job, as long as it was well done, blah, blah, blah (which is what Linda Norsen had said to all that). Besides, the weather had been getting her down.

Indeed. There had been no blackouts that summer, but New York in August was practically a round-the-clock brownout: The suffering city pulled so mightily on its power sources that elevators were sluggish, streetlights weak, subways slower than ever; air conditioning wheezed almost-warm air on you like someone's old breath; public electric clocks lost many minutes, making dog days seem even more unendurably long than they should have been. People, understandably, were in lousy moods, maybe willing, Hodge had thought, to try something new.

Hodge had given up the typical talk-down-the-jumper-speech at that point and had gotten through to the Norsen girl by telling her it was worth sticking around because mankind was about to enter a new age; his company, a giant with a better identity factor than many countries, was in the front of the development; and bumblebees were our inspiration. Then he'd explained himself.

Five minutes later, Linda Norsen had dropped out the window and made some embarrassingly ungainly maneuvers with her awkward body for about a hundred and fifty feet. Then, as



though yanking an invisible rip cord and loosing a parachute, she'd slowed, almost stopping, and then soared six blocks north over the avenue, coming down in front of the Hilton. Her landing, like everything about her, had been less than beautiful, but she'd been unhurt. It was later estimated that there had been at least four thousand eyewitnesses.

Hellishly pretty Cynthia Odet, a programmer, zoomed by just as Hillary got back to his feet. Both Hillary and Hodge had something for her and had talked once about proposing to her, but they were both married, and so was Cynthia; things would have been too complicated. Still: something about her.

"She looks great no matter what she does," Hillary said.

And nothing would mar her allure. Cynthia was doing it. Secretaries from Rockefeller Center were coming out of their buildings and joining her. They were all headed for Central Park.

"It works!" Hillary said. "What was that you said about the bees?"

Agape a moment, Hodge began speaking as though from a distance. "Bumblebees. They can't fly. Aerodynamically, they don't work. It's impossible. Yet they fly. They never studied aerodynamics. Nobody ever told them they couldn't fly."

Fenstermacher, a corpulent vice-president in charge of sales, swooped down, then flew in the direction of the park.

"Fat-ass Fenstermacher!" Hillary exploded. "Look at that bastard go!"

Go Fenstermacher did: He was as heavier-than-air as anyone, but there was a definite buoyancy about him. People were swarming onto the avenue from the cross streets.

"He was always such a down-to-earth guy," Hodge said, astonished.

Hillary looked at Hodge to make sure he wasn't joking. Hodge wasn't. "If Fenst can, anybody can," Hillary said. He went to the window, stepped up, looked out on the city and the people going by, then looked back to Hodge. "Like I said before—"

"No guarantees, buddy. Look what happened to Zeckerborn. And Fong. And who knows who else at this point."

"That had to happen. And you had to know it would. Look, you're not using beagles now."

"We never use beagles," Hodge said. "Rats. Rhesus. Convicts when we can. Never beagles."

"Anyway," Hillary said, "this is what you call a major breakthrough, something *really* brand new, and there have to be risks involved. It's up to each person to decide for himself."

"I don't know how it *works*," Hodge said.

"Doesn't matter. Look, when I was fourteen I made my mother show me documentation proving she was really my mother. I'm the original skeptical guy. I'm convinced of this now." Hillary winked, cocksure. "If you know you can . . . you *can*."

He dropped away. Straight down.

Hodge smacked his stomach into the window to get a look. He got there just in time to see Hillary slow down fifty feet off the sidewalk, then soar upward, and west, around their tower. In a few seconds, he was hovering in front of the window.

"Glad I took the plunge," Hillary said. "Hey—we finally came up with something new before California did."

"Now what?" Hodge asked.

"I'm going to find Cynthia and look up her dress." Hillary laughed, ecstatic and reborn. Then he was gone.

Cruel, skeptical, sardonic, doubting Michael Hillary had been the key. There had been reports during the night and today of a few people trying it and doing it, but they were as yet unconfirmed, and not until someone like Hillary was convinced, was a believer, would Hodge know it was possible. He had to make sure those he'd seen doing it in the last few minutes weren't freaks of some sort. If Hillary could believe and do it, then anyone could believe and do it.

Hodge had tried something on the Norsen girl he'd always wanted to try on *someone*, but never dared. He'd never had the opportunity, or the nerve, to bring up his ideas about bumblebees. Linda Norsen was going out the window one way or the other, so why not try it on her—she didn't seem to have a whole lot to live for anyway. If anyone were vulnerable, susceptible to believing the outlandish, it was the Norsen girl. And she had bought it, poor thing: she needed to believe in *something*. He hoped the attention the press had given her last night and today was enough to sustain her for a long time to come; now that it seemed everybody could do it, she wouldn't be such big news anymore.

Bodies flitted between buildings as Gene Hodge put on his suit jacket. It was almost quitting time. He stepped onto the window-

sill, then stepped out above Sixth Avenue. It was a little spongy, perhaps like that feeling children have in dreams when they're moving through clouds and the substance of the clouds tugs at their feet like loose, raw wool—a certain resistance, but not much. Making himself prone, Hodge discovered the air now felt like a too-soft couch—as though you could settle in deep, become enveloped, maybe even fall asleep quickly.

But the traffic-stream of bodies wouldn't let him fall asleep, of course. More than mere physical presences of his fellow travelers, there was the exaltation of each to consider, which magnified his own. He was responsible, the catalyst. He'd caused this joy. He had indeed ushered in a new age.

Smiling a face-hurting grin, Hodge headed north. All he had to do was *look* in the direction he wanted to travel, then *want* to go that way, and he was propelled. It did work. Easily.

He was jostled in the second block by some Wall Street type hell-bent, apparently, for Westchester, but he held his bearing, exultant. *It does work, damn it! I knew it would!* He didn't, really, not until Hillary had done it, but *now* he knew. Now he was doing it himself. Let his colleagues figure out the *why* of it, Hodge thought.

He banked east onto 52nd Street. He got held up briefly at Fifth Avenue, then continued to Madison Avenue, which was a mess. A lot of assholes were going the wrong way. He elbowed his way onto Madison, where it was all stop-and-go and head-to-toe. Somebody screamed at him for no reason whatsoever. It was going to be hell getting home tonight.

Going Native

by ANDREW WEINER

Who could be more alienated . . .
than an alien?

"Put your father on the cushion, Lois," said Amy, the group leader. "Tell him what you're feeling."

"I'm feeling angry," Lois said. "Really angry. Angry that you're always criticizing me."

She clenched her fists and began to pound on the cushion. Once. Twice. A third time.

"You never listen to me," she said.

She hit the cushion again. It was a small cushion with a paisley print. Like most of the cushions in the room, it had seen better days. Little pieces of foam oozed from a vent in the side with each blow. The life expectancy of a cushion here was not a long one.

Lois paused. She looked up uncertainly. Her eyes traveled around the circle, taking in the other members of the group. Some appeared keenly attentive, others were locked in their own private mind trips.

And then there was Brad. Blond, bland Bradley. Studying her intently in that cool, detached way of his.

"What's happening, Lois?" Amy asked.

"I don't know," Lois said.

"You feel finished with your father?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just don't want to do this anymore."

"Breathe," Amy said. She got up, crossed the room, and put her hand on Lois's shoulder. "You're not breathing."

Lois breathed more deeply.

"What are you feeling?" Amy asked.

"Angry," she said.

"Angry with who?"

"My father," Lois said. "And Brad. With the way he just sits there all the time just staring at me . . ."

"Who are you talking to, Lois?"

"The floor," she said.

She looked up and stared directly at Brad.

"Brad, I'm angry with how you just sit there staring at me, like I'm some kind of specimen on a slide. It makes me uncomfortable."

"You make me uncomfortable," Amy corrected.

"You make me uncomfortable," Lois said.

Brad stared back, unblinking, apparently interested to hear more.

"Is there something you want from Brad?" Amy asked.

"Yes," Lois said. "Brad, I want you to show some . . . feeling."

"Me too," chimed in Marilyn, from across the circle. "I feel exactly the same thing."

She turned toward Brad.

"You're like a robot, Brad," she told him. "Like some sort of Martian. Sitting there, watching us."

"Right," agreed Doug. "You've been sitting in this group for four weeks now, listening to us spilling out our insides, and you haven't said one thing. Just sat there staring at us. I'm pissed off at you, Brad."

"How does that make you feel, Brad?" Amy asked.

Brad shrugged. "Uncomfortable," he said. "It's uncomfortable hearing this."

But his voice was steady. His face betrayed no flicker of emotion.

"What's 'it' Brad?" Amy asked.

"I'm uncomfortable," Brad said.

He looked Lois directly in the eye. "I'm uncomfortable hearing that you're angry with me, Lois." He looked around the room. "And you, Marilyn. And you, Doug."

Doug clapped his hands in applause.

"Very good, Brad," he said. "You did that very well. Except I don't believe a word of it. It don't believe you, Brad. I don't believe you feel a thing."

Brad seemed to flinch.

"This is difficult for me," he said. "Very difficult." There was at least a hint of uncertainty in his voice now. "I'm not used to this. Opening myself up. Getting in touch with my feelings. I never really learned to do that. It's a lot more comfortable for me to sit back and watch."

"But that's why we're here," Doug said. "That's why all of us are here. We all find that difficult."

"What are you afraid of?" Amy asked Brad. "What would happen if you did open yourself up to us?"

"I don't know," Brad said. "I'm not sure. I guess I'm afraid that I would feel things."

"What sort of things?"

"I'm not sure."

It was still a cool April night, but he was drenched with sweat by the time he reached his apartment.

What he had feared had already begun to happen.

The group, he knew now, was a mistake for him. He should never have joined the group. Yet it had seemed such a good idea at the time. It would help him in coming to grips with the role he must play here, his so very difficult role. And he had been tempted, too, by the incredible richness of the material to be gained there, the opportunity to learn more about these people in a single session than in weeks of the most painstaking research.

He had thought that he could simply sit back and take it all in. But that had not been acceptable to his fellow group members. Week by week they had become more visibly resentful of him, and now they were openly taunting him with his aloofness, his terrible separateness.

Worse still, they were beginning to get through to him, stirring unfamiliar feelings in him: unease, embarrassment, irritation. Human feelings. And the more he felt these strange faint flickerings, the more acutely aware he became of the inadequacy of his own impersonation.

He was at least somewhat confident of his ability to mimic their outward behavior. Yet he still did not quite grasp what it was that lay within, the organizing or disorganizing principles upon which that behavior was based.

At the core, his impersonation was an empty one. And it was as if these people realized as much in their responses to him. No

matter how hard he tried, no matter how many hours he spent auditing their behavior patterns both *in vivo* and through their communications media, his performance remained somehow off-key. He put people off. When he interacted with them, he elicited strange glances, a narrowing of the eyes, an almost imperceptible shake of the head. They could not, of course, guess who he really was, could not even begin to verbalize the suspicion. Yet at some deep level they knew that he was not one of them.

This was, quite obviously, a problem in the conduct of his mission. If he could not get close to them, he could not study them, could not report successfully on their patterns of organization. Understanding these people completely, grasping their inner workings, *was* his mission, as much as anything else. He could gather facts and figures for year after year without ever discerning their real meaning.

And so he had joined the group.

But the group, as he now realized and had perhaps known from the very first night, was dangerous. It threatened to throw him off balance, to draw him too far out of his carefully constructed shell. The risks were far greater than the potential gains.

It was the last thing he could have expected. These people were so different from him, despite their overt similarities, that he could not have imagined becoming enmeshed in their concerns and their lives. Yet it had begun to happen all the same. And he could not, now, return to the group. He could not do that.

With that decision came still another unfamiliar feeling. He struggled to place it.

Lonely, he realized finally, and with some astonishment. *I'm lonely.*

These people talked and wrote and worried a great deal about loneliness, about becoming separated from others of their kind. It was for them a phobia on the order of fire or crawling reptiles or other genuine environmental threats. And so they huddled together, one upon another, in these vast warrenlike cities. Yet until now that horror of aloneness had remained for him an entirely abstract concept.

Now, though, he could grasp it all too well. And as he did, he realized that it was not completely new to him. It had been there, somewhere deep within him, since his arrival on this planet. Perhaps even before that.

It was something that could only make his mission more

difficult. But he would be able to live with it. As long as he did not allow himself to get too close to it.

Only some of them are alive, he thought, as he struggled through the crowds in the subway station. Maybe one in ten. Twenty.

Alive, that is, in the sense of responding creatively to their environment on a continuous basis, rather than simply replicating well-programmed behavior patterns.

He had become used to it now. The way that no one looked at him, or at anybody else, as they scurried about their lives. Or at least, almost no one. The few who did, who did look at him, sometimes even staring him right in the eye, the ones who were alive at this particular moment in their lives, tended to fall among the deviant extremes of this culture, more shabbily or eccentrically dressed, appraising him from unknown motives.

This deadness of the great mass of people was obviously some sort of defense mechanism. It was most acute in large crowded places, such as this mass transit facility. These people could not stand loneliness, but neither could they cope with excessive intimacy. He believed that it must be one of their key intrapsychic conflicts.

The subway car drew up, and he stepped inside. Here, as on the platform, the same deadness prevailed. People stared at advertisements for various commodities posted on the walls, or else at various forms of reading matter, fictitious or informative.

He took out his notebook and began to scribble in his private shorthand.

Books, he wrote.

These people travel a great deal, slithering hither and thither in various mechanical contraptions, sometimes for long periods of time. Given powerful stranger taboos, activity is limited in the passenger mode. Books, that is hard-copy facsimiles of original texts, are one common pursuit.

The texts consumed in the passenger mode are typically fictional, projecting various wish fulfillments of sex, aggression, and other forms of gratification in a variety of settings. A secondary function of these texts may be as a guide to normal sociale behavior. However, the behavior depicted in these books typically departs considerably from prevailing norms, so that the primary function of wish fulfillment is presumably dominant.

Probably a majority of such texts are consumed in the passenger mode. Others are read within their domiciles. However, picture-stories transmitted via one-way communications monitors are the more dominant domestic entertainment.

He disliked the public art gallery. It was not so much the artworks themselves which he found unpleasant. Some of them, ranging from quite concrete depictions of alien figures and alien landscapes to quite abstract depictions of the workings of various alien minds, were actually quite pleasing. It was the manner in which these works were presented that he found oppressive. The gallery was like some frozen abattoir lined with icy commodities, shards of life. He watched the other visitors stand in hushed silence, attempting to properly appreciate these works, to penetrate their intricate codes of sign and meaning.

A hand fell lightly on his shoulder. He turned.

"We missed you, Brad," the woman said. "Last Tuesday."

It took him a moment to recover from his surprise at being recognized. Who could possibly know him?

Blue eyes, brown hair, jeans, a sweater. She looked much the same as she had in the group. But he had thought of the group as somehow a private world, closed in on itself. He had never expected to see its inhabitants out here, in the rest of the world.

"Hello, Lois," he said.

She was smiling at him like an old friend, as though nothing had occurred between them in the group.

"I hope we didn't scare you off," she said.

She was different, somehow, outside the group. Softer, less intense, less gripped by powerful emotions. More conventionally attractive, by the reference norms of this culture.

"You didn't really miss me," he said.

"Sure we did. You're part of the group, too, even when you don't say anything. We need somebody to get mad at."

"I had a bad cold," he said.

He could tell that she didn't believe him.

"Well," she said. "Hope you make it next week. I've got to run."

She smiled again and moved away toward the member's lounge. He wondered who she was meeting there. In the group she had mentioned her relationship with a man called Jack. They

had been living together and had now separated, but they were still seeing each other, attempting to work out their difficulties.

From what he had heard, Jack was not good for her, not at all. But then again, what possible concern was it of his?

He would have liked, though, to talk longer with Lois, perhaps invite her for coffee. It would have been a good opportunity to practice social interaction.

In his apartment he scanned various texts, making rapid notes. *Role of the Family*, he wrote.

By popular convention a child-rearing mechanism, often highly sentimentalized.

W. Reich: Primarily a conditioning unit, conditioning the young in feelings of dependency, control of aggressive and sexual impulses, obedience to authority, conformity to economic and political structures . . .

As he wrote, he watched the programming on his four tv monitors. Cars chased each other on two; a partly clothed male-female dyad held an angry conversation on the third; advertising messages streamed from the fourth.

Advertising was a subject that would warrant further study. It was an artifact, of course, of their stage of economic development, a facilitator for commodity and service distribution systems. Yet it did more than merely inform that particular commodities or services were available. It was the technology of their desires. It told them what they valued most deeply, as if they were incapable of knowing it for themselves. It depicted and manipulated images of hedonism, ranging from relatively simple fantasies of oral gratification to an almost complete liberation from civilized constraints.

And the more he watched tv, the more these messages appeared to blur into the programing in which they were inlaid, mingling commodities and people and events into a seamless and seductive electronic web.

He shifted restlessly in his chair. He was bored with these repetitive images of violence and sexuality. Yet he was bored, too, with the books piled on his desk. He might as well be viewing these images or scanning these texts back home.

More direct observation and interaction would be necessary to ensure the success of his mission.

He wondered, though, as he got up from his chair and pulled

on his jacket, whether it was only the success of his mission that concerned him.

But there was no one, of course, with whom he could discuss that question.

The bar was crowded, dimly lit, noisy. Anxiety was in the air, in this case a sexual anxiety. Anxiety, he knew, was one of the fuels that powered this society. Sexual anxiety, financial anxiety, status anxiety, anxiety about the body and its slow processes of decay. These people required small doses of anxiety in order to function at all, although excessive anxiety, as he had observed in the group, tended to paralyze them.

Anxiety, according to the *gestalt* shaman Perls, was the "gap between the now and the later," the result of a morbid preoccupation with future events. "And if the future represents a performance," Perls had written, "then this anxiety is nothing but stage fright."

It was another concept that was no longer an abstraction to him. He felt it now, this anxiety, this stage fright, looking around the room, wondering to what degree he would be able to mimic normal human interaction. He wished, briefly, for the safety of his apartment, his books, his tv monitors.

This establishment was set up for the purveying of various intoxicating beverages. Primarily, though, it was a meeting place to facilitate heterosexual human bonding. There were also, he knew, other establishments specializing in male and female homosexual bonding. The marketing mechanisms were nothing if not efficient.

He did not himself, of course, seek a sexual encounter. While physiologically plausible, the notion of having relations with a human was absurd to him. Absurd although, to his surprise, not actively repulsive. This represented a change in his thinking since his arrival here, when these people had seemed so impossibly alien to him. Not repulsive, but absurd all the same.

The sexuality of this culture intrigued him. These people thought about sexual matters almost obsessively, although without necessarily actualizing or even expressing their desires. The long periods of abstinence even from sexual thought endemic to his own culture would have been incomprehensible to them. But they were, of course, a much shorter-lived species at this stage in their development. Their sexual drives had evolutionary significance.

He sat down at the bar and ordered a beer, which from past experience he knew to be among the milder intoxicants. There was a woman sitting at the bar two stools away, apparently alone. As their eyes met, she smiled.

He had previewed this scene, of course, in many video-entertainments of this culture. No doubt she had done the same. He smiled back, made an inconsequential remark, asked if he could join her.

Soon they moved to a table across the room, where they interacted further and consumed additional intoxicants. The interaction seemed to go well. Little was required of him, other than to smile and nod as the woman talked.

Her name was Marie, he learned, and she held some sort of managerial post in a banking institution. She was just getting over the breaking of a cohabitation contract. She was not yet sure that she could bring herself to trust men, but on the other hand she could not just stay home alone every night.

He enjoyed her voice tones and the way she gestured with her hands. The motion of her hands in combination with the unfamiliar intoxicants became hypnotic. When she invited him back to her apartment for coffee he did not pause to consider what might occur there.

Her apartment occupied the top floor of a renovated townhouse. Aesthetically it conformed to the standards of her own particular socioeconomic stratum: exposed brickwork, skylights, overhead vines, glossy magazines, framed theatrical posters, chrome and glass tables, built-in bookcases packed with a confusing variety of texts.

As she moved closer to him on the couch, he reflected on the matter of her furniture. The elite and would-be elite in this society appeared to prefer products that directly expressed their industrial origin: plain, unadorned, functional, cold. The masses opted for more fanciful styles, dark and heavy, reproductions of hand-carved furnishings from the preindustrial era, perhaps to relieve their otherwise bleak and restricted lives.

"This is very nice," he said.

When she kissed him, he responded as best he could, recalling video depictions of similar encounters. This led him to a somewhat inappropriate enthusiasm, but he adjusted quickly to her preferences.

He wondered, briefly, what he was doing. It was as if he

stood back and watched himself from a great distance. His behavior was quite inexplicable. As far as he knew, however, it violated no survey directive. There was no directive on this point. The situation had never been contemplated. Certainly it had never been discussed during his long training.

He was surprised to discover himself to be sexually functional. Physiologically, at least, the human female was able to arouse him, to stir him from his long period of sexual latency. Yet the lingering sense of absurdity never left him. He felt dissatisfied with the experience and, afterward, on his way home to his own apartment, depressed—still another new yet somehow familiar sensation to add to his growing category of human emotions.

He had felt no closeness to the woman. And he did want to feel close to someone. He needed to.

That was the madness that had possessed him.

"I'm glad to see you back," Amy said. "I wasn't sure you were going to come back."

"I had a cold," he told her. "I meant to call you."

He sat down in the circle next to Lois.

"Good to see you," she said, touching his arm briefly.

The group proceeded. Jane was having problems with her sister. She put her sister on the cushion and began to shout at her. Then she began to cry.

Brad blinked furiously, feeling his own eyes begin to tear.

Appalled, he sat up straight on his cushion and gritted his teeth. Crying, for him, was an aberrant behavior in all but the youngest of his species. He had adjusted, with some difficulty, to the frequency with which the females, and sometimes even the males, in this group would cry. That was quite different from accepting it in himself.

If anyone noticed his reaction, they made no comment upon it. Today they seemed content to let him sit quietly and watch. And yet, paradoxically, he felt an impulse to participate, to enter into these interactions. But to say what? *I'm beginning to feel. Help me stop this.*

He held his peace.

Afterward he had coffee with Lois and a few other group members at a nearby restaurant. Apparently they did this regularly, although no one had ever invited him before. It was Lois who had suggested that he tag along.

The conversation was light, perhaps a necessary process of decompression from the intensity of the group. He participated as best he could, although there were infuriating gaps in his knowledge. Who were all these strange-sounding musical groupings under discussion? He would have to become better informed about popular music in this culture, if he wished to interact successfully with this particular demographic segment.

He walked Lois to her bus stop. He asked her to accompany him to a new video presentation later that week. Somewhat to his surprise, she consented.

The grass was still brown from its long winter under the snow. But the sun was warm on his skin, and the air was somehow fresher than in the city streets, even though this park was in the heart of the city.

He had never been there before. Lois had suggested it.

"I love this place," she said, running ahead of him, then sprawling on the grass. "God, I'm glad that winter is over. I don't think I could have stood another week of it."

"It's an interesting climate," he said, sitting down beside her. "You really feel every season."

"You're not from around here?"

"No," he said. He paused. "From out west," he said, finally, gesturing vaguely.

"Your parents still live out there?"

"Right," he said, after another pause.

"You're such a mystery man, Brad," she said. "Getting anything out of you is like pulling teeth. You're like some sort of secret agent. Although I guess secret agents don't join therapy groups."

"I'm just a student," he said.

"I don't even know what you're studying."

"Sociology," he said.

"It's funny I never saw you around the university."

"It's a big university."

They watched some joggers race by.

Lois talked on, about her problems with her thesis on George Eliot, her long-running battles with her parents, her latest and definitive breakup with Jack, and how he kept calling her ...

Good material, he told himself.

But in fact he was hardly even listening to her. He was staring

into her eyes, which were very blue. And he was a very long way from home.

It was Lois who broke the kiss.

"I was wondering when we would get around to that," she said. "If we would. I was curious about how it would feel."

"And how did it feel?"

"Good," she said. "I felt good. But also a little uneasy. It feels, you know, a bit incestuous. Maybe I should write Ann Landers."

But she did not resist when he pulled her back toward him.

He lay awake long after she had slipped into sleep, turning over the experience in his mind.

Their physical compatibility had not surprised him, after his encounter with Marie. But this time the quality of the experience had been quite different, and not just different from his coupling with Marie. It was unlike anything he had experienced before. More intense, more urgent, more driven. But he was unable to define that difference in any organized way.

He felt that he had achieved a new insight into these people. Yet it was not something he would be able to document in his report.

He realized that lately there had been many things he had been unable to enter in his report.

"Where are you, Brad?" Amy asked.

"Here," he said.

"You look like you're here," she said. "And you look like there was something for you in Bill's work."

Bill had been working on his mother. He had not only pounded the pillow but kicked it halfway across the room.

Brad had found himself flinching back in horror at the sheer violence of it. He had become accustomed to the violence of these people as depicted in their communications media. He could accept it as an abstraction. But it was something else again to see it at such close quarters. And there was something else that bothered him, something more . . .

"I was a little shaken up," he admitted. "It scared me, Bill's anger."

"What scared you about it?"

"I don't know," he said. "I guess I was afraid he would hurt me." He paused to consider. "No, that doesn't seem quite right. I

think maybe it's more that I'm afraid I could do the same thing."

"Do what, Brad?"

"Lose control like that."

"And what would happen if you did lose control?"

"I don't know."

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Amy said.

"But I'd like to see you put your mother on the cushion and try this line: 'You never loved me enough.' Does that line fit for you? Try it out."

"You never loved me enough," Brad said, tentatively.

And then again, more fiercely: "*You never loved me.*"

It was perfectly true, and perfectly absurd. His mother had never loved him. No one had ever told her she was supposed to. He had not, in fact, seen his mother in more than twenty years, and he had never had much to do with her.

"Again."

"You never loved me."

"And how about your father?"

"He never loved me either. *You never loved me,*" he told the cushion.

Ridiculous. He was being entirely ridiculous. He did not even know who his father was, and his father could not have known him as his child. What he was saying was completely ludicrous. And yet it felt so completely right.

"*You never loved me.*"

He began to pound the cushion. Tears flooded his eyes. He made no attempt to fight them back.

There was no doubt about it now, no shadow of doubt. The impossible was happening. He was going native.

His loneliness was like a physical pain. And everything, today, seemed strange, awkward, *alien*. The taste of his breakfast cereal, the low ceilings of his cramped apartment, the buildings in the street jutting up rigidly toward the sky.

He failed to stop at the streetlight, almost getting run down as he wove between the cars. He fumbled, putting his token in the slot at the subway entrance, and at the reference library he tried to enter through the exit line. Even the air smelled funny today, unfamiliar and faintly sour.

He did not belong here. And yet where did he belong? As he stared blankly into the microfiche viewer, the thoughts raced

through his head. Of his home unit, his nesting group, the mattress in the room he had shared so long with his childhood covivants, the angles and curves of the buildings, the pinkness of the sunshine . . .

He was not homesick. The very concept was a meaningless one for him: the word did not even exist in his true language. It was all so long ago, so far away; he could summon up no nostalgia for it. He thought of his childhood, in fact, with a faint distaste.

He was not so much homesick as homeless. He belonged neither here nor there. He could not stay, and he could not return.

He fought to concentrate, to push ahead with his report. But today, more than ever, it felt like an empty charade. The more he learned about these people, the more mysterious they became to him. And the more he dealt with them, the more he began to resemble them. He would end up just like them, knowing everything and understanding nothing.

Was he the first, the very first, to break down like this? In his training the possibility had never been discussed, it was so far out of the question. Despite the striking morphological similarities, the gulf in psychological makeup was so wide as to present an unbridgeable chasm.

He shut down the microfiche viewer and removed the film. He picked up his notebook and walked out of the library. He wandered aimlessly, staring into store windows filled with bright alien clutter.

He found himself, later, at the door of Lois's apartment. He rang the bell. There was no reply. He turned to leave, then heard movements inside. He rang again.

Sounds of footsteps. The door opened. A man he did not recognize was standing there, wearing jeans and nothing else.

"Yes?" he asked.

Brad took a step backward in confusion, looked again at the number on the door. Then he saw Lois standing behind the man, pulling on a dressing gown.

"Oh," she said.

The man opened the door wider, and Brad stepped forward into the doorway.

"Brad," Lois said. "This is Jack."

Something exploded, then, in his head. A surge of rage so pure and hot that it seemed to burn right through his skull.

He swung his fist, clumsily, at Jack's face. He had never attempted violence on another person before, and he did not succeed this time. Jack grabbed his arm.

"Hey," Jack said, "what the hell are you doing?"

He had no explanation. All the anger had gone out of him. He felt only confusion and shame.

He stood there, speechless, for a moment. And then he pulled free of Jack's grip and turned and fled the building.

"I've ruined everything," he told the group.

He was sobbing almost uncontrollably, his body heaving. He pounded the floor in frustration.

"Like an animal," he said. "A stupid animal."

Lois was there, of course. She looked on from across the room. He was not sure what he saw in her eyes. Some complicated mixture of anger and pity.

The other group members looked on with rapt approval, of the kind they reserved for particularly arduous work, watching Brad the cool one finally breaking through.

"I'm ruined," he said.

"What's ruined, Brad?" Amy asked.

"I'm ruined," he said. "Everything's ruined."

"Why?"

"Because I can feel. I can feel it all now. Anger and sadness and joy. All of it. I can't stand it."

"What can't you stand, Brad?"

"I can't stand *feeling*," he said.

"We don't have much choice about that," she said.

"You don't understand," he told her, pounding the floor again.

"I'm not one of you. I don't belong here!"

"I think we all feel that way from time to time," Amy said.

"I know I have."

"I can't go home," he said.

"None of us can, Brad," Amy said, as the other members of the group nodded in agreement. "We may want to, sometimes, but we can't. We have to stay right here and keep on growing."

"No," he cried, "that isn't it! You just don't understand how I feel."

"I think I do. I think we all do," Amy said. "It's called being human."

He howled like a cornered animal.

A HAUNTED HOUSE

by SUSAN SHEPPARD

An unnerving poem
about Aunt Lucy's house,
a very real house in southern Ohio
with a very real curse.

1. Hepzibah

Whatever you say, it got done.
Quiet now, a fly buzzes my lip
as I sit before a blue square of country air
in my daughter's room. This room I painted
black the day the sun streaked the sky with blood.
Night drops like a lid, innocent enough,
as I watch my little girl in slumber.
Naked. Beautiful. Curled on the sheets.
She is so very still that I am startled
by the sheer whiteness of her body
and still I rock like a boulder
teetering on the edge. A voice
seethes in my head. See. She is
only sleeping. Only sleeping, I say
as I twist soiled rags around my hands
three times and utter her name solidly backward.
Moments pass. I stare at the pooled shadow
of red under her torso. I look
at the shocking cord of satin guts
slip from the mouth of her belly.
My daughter. She is only sleeping,
I say as the warmth of the blade
locks in my hands. Beneath me
a sudden rumble and water surges
the basement in a rush of thunder.
Whatever you say, it got done.

2. Alice

Jesus Christ. God damn. Mother.
 Mother. All of these words you never
 allowed me to say. Now I speak.
 Whose is this fruit that sours
 then ferments in my belly? Such
 a strange alchemy we made.
 Our limbs folding like insects
 in the old barn. Mother.
 Mother. Remember my supper
 waiting cold on the table?
 Mama, can I say it?
 I love you.
 Don't tell.

Putting up tomatoes and cool cucumbers,
 I rinse vinegar from my fingers with clear
 well-water. Now, I am watching her, feel
 the flutter of a dimly-feathered thing
 stir in my stomach, something gravely alien,
 something I dare not name. She moves slowly,
 her body stout like a washtub, strikes a red X
 from her calendar; pencils in a black question
 mark with her sure, thick hand. Three months
 gone, each with their row of question marks
 that seem to fly up into arched brows.
 Tomatoes spill a jell of seeds on
 the counter and she picks up the heavy knife
 to slice away the halves into orange butterflies.
 Today, my mother worries me with her silence.
 Her eyes grow distant. They pour
 like sluggish oil into the black
 woods that completely surround
 our farm.

3. Lunar Return

Houses are vanishing in Southeastern Ohio
 and the road moves ahead straight as a pencil.
 Stars, hard and brittle, tear at the sky. Cold.
 Cold and glittering, a malevolent universe
 squeezed tight inside our eyes. Ground moves

beneath us. The earth unrolls. On the horizon
 the roof peaks and sags, a black tent with doors
 sprung open like turned out pockets. Somewhere
 back in the fabric of dreams, the hissing sound
 from years before. We move careful where the
 corn parts, up the gravel path to a window that
 floats over the garden. A face
 dips the glass. Pale handkerchief
 of sadness.

Colder inside. Where ice crystallizes
 bone. A pit in the floor
 with cans and rags.
 Once a fire. Black bits
 of plaster from the
 upstairs room.

4. Visitation from the Tribe

Party night and the moon
 pulls the shadow of whimsy
 through our bones. Up to the old house
 high on doobee and weed, our forty-dollar
 Plymouth drags and groans over the country
 road. First, we glimpse a sear of light, but discover
 nothing but a metal plate tacked to the tree.
 We stop. Get out. Feel the first
 seam of fear zigzag
 through our bodies.
 Billy's lips are blue from cold or candy
 and he points to the rotting carcass of a dog
 impaled on the wooden fence. The house shifts
 then moans, where the slanted porch grins
 at us like blacked-out teeth.

Something takes hold of me. I walk up
 to the door as testicles shrink inside
 my body. Mama. I've got to do it.
 The latch crumbles in my grasp and
 I pound just the way I would
 hammer her mouth if I could.
 Billy runs over. Shakes me.

For a moment, I think the roof
has collapsed on my head. I look inside.
See my own face distorted in the glass.

5. Again, Sweet Alice

At first I believed I had fallen into water
but my gown rose like clouds over my face
and her hand plummeted my body, the square fist
of it driving down until I felt nothing.
My slipper dipped in a bloom of blood,
True Confessions tossed quickly behind the bed.
I would like to tell you that this
happened in darkness as all dark things
without even the quarter of a moon
to hang onto. But no. The sun hissed
and slid into the room. White, hot
and beautiful. Everything so plain.

I'll cut the devil outta you. My mother's
face broken with a frown, her brow pinched
like a brown monkey. I stare at the print
in her old black dress, pale petals floating
like embryos on a wake of dark water.
You're ruined. You're ruined, she says
as I rise in the air light as ash,
birdlike and singing through my
fluted bones.

6. Hepzibah

I run through the woods swinging the ax
breaking all of the trees into temples
of folded hands. I love Jesus, I say
and hear the swish of my starched skirts,
so far away, like the sound of the sea
I never once got to visit. The sun throws
fingers into the broad backs of hills and
I look at my hands peppered with specks
of black paint, my wrists ringed with
crimson. My daughter asleep in the
upstairs room, there where I left her,
sweetly asleep in the arms of Jesus.

• • •

It's true. I saw him once. Foolish. I always imagined him pure and white, brilliantly floating like a kite against the stained glass of Bishop Baptist Church. No. What I glimpsed was a bent little man, brown and withered like a stalk. He seemed not to see me as I watched him sharpen his tools against the grind. I remember his reflection that surged in the round jar of pickled corn, the sound of thunder from the floor like the waters of a glacier sucked toward the center of the earth.

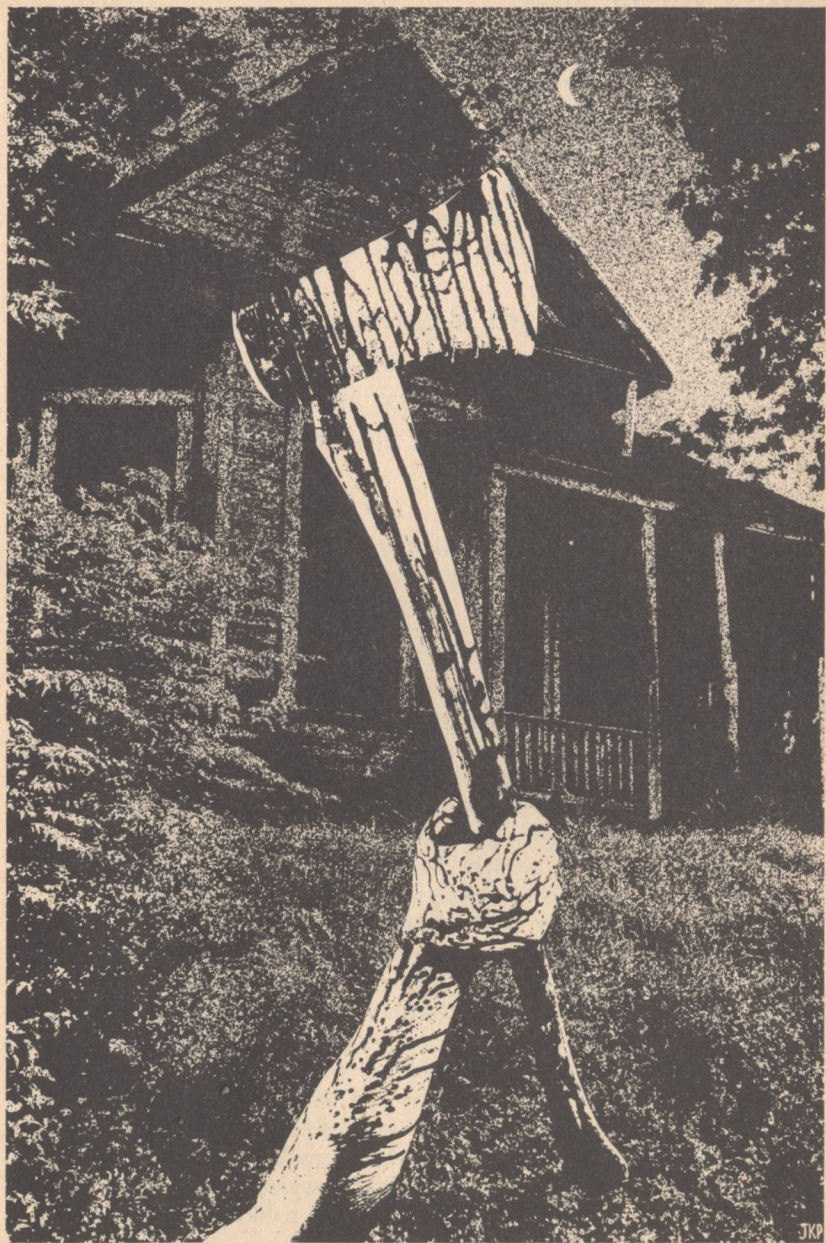
Upon this, I cried out, Blessed be, the Lord has come! Yet, without a word, he vanished like a circle in the air.

These clouds have darkened my eyes. They seem smudged and stagnant. Corners of black walls that swell and close their grip around me.

I stare at the ax. Dare I do it?
The yellow stubs of my teeth clench as I bear down,
pretend I am putting the ax to the stump.
My skull, paper-thin, splits like the milkweed.
I fall easily into a puddle of old clothes.
Cows bellow softly as I climb and spiral
my ladder of red. Surely goodness and mercy
will follow me all of the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

7. Saturn Return

Twenty-eight years and the chilled transit
of Saturn makes her return. This night
only. Two women stand on the singed ground
with palms pressed against the lone chimney.
Here. It's here. One woman bends over a carpet
of blue glass, ivory buttons and charred brick.
Her hair seems a flag of mourning.
She fumbles through the piles of burnt wood,
picks out a piece of plaster and tosses it
into the thick trees. The other woman



stiffens, shivers upright. Oh. Someone
has stepped on my grave, she says. The
light in her face draws shut like a blind.
She turns and walks toward her red car.
The wind rises and cuts with no sound.
Only the soft murmur of distant planets
steering their way toward heaven.

SCRAP WHEN EMPTY

by A.R. MORLAN

Something had left messages for Paul
in the grafitti on the side of the train . . .
and the only thing he knew about them
was that he didn't want to know any more!

JAKE-74 and a tic-tac-toe grid with an x in the lower left-hand corner on a cream-colored Soo Line Color Mark boxcar. WATER BED LOU 7-80 on a rusty Canadien National Boxcar. A smiling mouth with a tongue poking out over SQUIRREL IS NUTS on a dark brown tanker.

Sliding down further into the cracked and taped green vinyl seat of the car (so far down that if there had been a car right behind his, Paul's head would have disappeared from the other driver's view) Paul braced his knees against the dashboard, firmly under the palm-sweat stained steering wheel. Hands at the five and seven o'clock positions, fingernails picking at the peeling vinyl covering. Eyes wide open, scanning each car as it seemed to bow out toward him, then snap back into a gently curving line flowing to Paul's left along with the rest of the northeast-bound train. Long sucker; four engines up front (Paul had driven up to the crossing just as the bell began to clang, the red lights started flashing, and the white-red-black Soo engines *din-din-dined* down the track from the west), at least fifty boxcars, flatbeds, gondolas, tankers, and more boxcars so far, and the line of approaching cars wound out of sight around the Red Owl down the way across the tracks. Stuck, Paul read a lot of words; some stenciled in the cars in white, yellow, blue, and black, words that belonged there, had meaning: NO RUNNING BOARD, 1½ COMP SHOES REQUIRED, WASH INTERIOR AFTER UNLOADING; and the other words, the ones scribbled in dense yellow chalk, quickly sprayed on, or scratched into flaking layers of rusting metal, words that

had no meaning, or maybe forbidden meanings: RAID IRAN, BOMB CARTER, IMP, KID '49'ER—HOPPED FREIGHT IN 49 STATES; these words and numbers, and endless others. Paul preferred the latter, the impromptu bursts of humanity on hot metal and grimy painted surfaces. He tried to read every car, tried to spot the pale, human places on the rumbling, clanking metal boxes. If he had to get held up by the damned thing, he might as well enjoy it. It was either that or stare at the tattoo on his hand, watch the ink slowly shift under the skin. Both train and ink moved at a similar crawl.

JESUS SAVES! on an empty flatbed. Four clean, blank tankers. Another SQUIRREL, another smile on a great Northern boxcar. A newer JAKE, this one an '81, on an old Color Mark.

If this mother doesn't pick up some speed, I might as well turn around and grab a burger at the A&W, Paul thought. He did that a lot, even if the buns on the Papa burgers were kind of hard. Better than lunch at home . . . a lunch at home meant a lukewarm, drowned hot dog on a slice of week-old white (three for 99¢ at the IGA, and *dry*, might as well rip a tile off the ceiling, same effect), with that runny generic catsup, eaten in the front room with two preschoolers, Terri at her job—seven-to-three shift at the paper mill—so the babysitter would be there, all of them watching "Return of the Archons" (Christ all Friday, weren't there any other *Star Treks* in syndication?) on the tube, until he'd finally shout "No, I am not 'of the bod-eee!'" at the set, making the kids laugh and the babysitter edge away from him on the saggy couch. Terri didn't have the time to fix him a brown-bagger, and he was never good at stuffing a sandwich into one of those clingy, fragile little bags. So it was lunch at the A&W more and more often. He picked at the blue lines of his tattoo, traced the *SPA* encircled by one of those dinguses that stood for the word "at"—@. Lunch at the A&W, or the DQ—where he'd been headed a few minutes ago—meant that the kids saw even less of Daddy, but . . . well, they did have Mr. Spock.

Another SQUIRREL, another Soo boxcar. Delicate line drawing of a naked woman rear to him, long hair, slight smile on a sliver of visible face,

(don't I wish. . .)

no caption on a Canadien National boxcar. Another WATER BED LOU on a Burlington boxcar.

There were a lot of cars in back of Paul now, every few box-

cars or so they'd *beep-beep* their anger, cars bitching at other cars. Paul was used to hearing the gripes of his co-workers at the sash and door factory—"Why can't they switch at night?" "They should break the cars when they see there's a lotta cars," "Them big-bucks railroaders just like to see us stranded,"—and he'd add his two-cents worth, too. Better to join in than reveal the vague pleasure he felt when stopped by a train. Sure, it was inconvenient, and in the winter it was a bitch (the busted car heater didn't help), and if the cars were mostly new and clean it was boring, but to Paul, at times like this, the low *thrumthrumthrum* that shook the floorboards of *his* car, sending pleasant tremors into his legs and hands, and the dizzy way the passing cars seemed to leap right at him as they sped past seemed rather . . . inviting. And the crews, the way they'd wave to him in his car, or be talking to each other in the engine, or hanging on the handrails of the caboose, hair whipping in the wind . . . And off the train, they'd walk together uptown, eat at one table at the DQ or A&W, and bar-hop in a pack, sort of united by what they were, what they did. A railroader was a railroader, on or off the train. Not like him, bending over the window assemblies until his neck muscles were rubber bands aching to break. Doing "monkey work," as his educated asshole of a brother-in-law called it two summers ago when Mr. Brain tried to do the same thing. Bastard only lasted three months. Terri blamed Paul for baby brother getting canned, in between bitch sessions about how bad *her* neck ached when she came home. No, it wasn't "monkey work," but it didn't give him an identity, either; he and the guys at the factory didn't bar-hop or eat together, didn't even walk together after work. At home he was just at home. No, not like the railroaders at all.

JESUS LOVES YOU on a closed Chessie boxcar. Couple of blank tankers.

Paul pinched the skin of his hand, watched the blue letters distort under rough fingers. "Makes you look like a convict," Terri had said, once, a dozen times. He was a compulsive doodler; only once he'd had a big safety pin and a fountain pen in his pocket during a study hall . . . At least he hadn't written FUCK SCHOOL or some other girl's name on his hand. SPA, for Samuel Paul Andersen, at least it was his *rightful* tattoo. Screw the convict bullshit. He had a good job, didn't he? Didn't change how the windows turned out. Railroaders, now some of them had tattoos. Didn't make the trains crash.

Six empty, rusted-brown Soo flatbeds. MY NAME IS SOO entwined on the logo of a Color Mark. SPA written in lowercase script surrounded by a loop which began as the tail of the A and ended under the A on a corroded brown Soo boxcar. Three cream colored tankers.

Paul's mouth opened slowly, silently, save for the imperceptible smack of lip flesh parting. His hands dropped into his open lap like over-ripe fruit. He stopped seeing the other cars go past. Paul could still see those three letters surrounded by the loop, so much like the thingie for "at." He had not seen them on a boxcar before. But he had seen them on high school book spines. On matchbook covers. On restroom walls. On the hand that lay in his lap.

A slight June breeze blew in and through the car, just enough to dry out the inside of his open mouth. Paul closed it reflexively. He could feel, not his heart, but his aorta pounding, thudding in the center of his trunk, but the rest of his body was still. He glanced right; he could see the caboose about a dozen cars down, a fist-sized black-and-white child's toy. Just starting to back his way back up the seat, Paul stopped—instead of rushing past him, the train began to slow down, moving so slowly that the wheels made a noise not unlike that of a tight drawer being pulled out of a dresser. The train stopped. Built-up momentum made the cars rock in place. As they rocked, Paul pressed damp fists into his patched jeans pockets, feeling the rough fabric pull at his knuckles. *Just an optical illusion, he reasoned, like the way the cars seem to jump out at me. Just my eyes playing tricks on me. Besides,* he assured himself, *I've never touched any of those cars. Never.*

An air brake released with a hiss, the train shuddered. The cars did a push-me-pull-you dance to the right. *Just an illusion, just an . . .* Paul thought, looking into the rearview mirror. The car behind him was way too close, and his car was much too close to the tracks, and the street being too narrow, he couldn't drive away, back to the factory and screw lunch. He could only wait, like a good little boy in some warped fairytale, for something that just *had* to not be there. Or be something else. Or a joke. Or be some other guy's initials . . . *please, please be someone else's—*

Two flatbeds bearing farm machinery. A rusting Soo gondola. Three tankers. A badly rusted, dirt-brown Soo boxcar, yellow identifying words peeling and flaking off, crookedly stenciled SCRAP WHEN EMPTY near a door held in place with a greying

plank; banged-up old whore of a boxcar, handrails bent, the only clean and new thing on the whole car is the yellow chalk-marked set of initials—

The train stopped again when the boxcar was off to Paul's right. It was so rusted and corroded that it seemed to suck up the sunlight and devour it. Even the wheels failed to reflect the glare of the noon sun. The initials were about ten inches high. They were new; yesterday's thunderstorm surely would have weathered them if they had been drawn before today. Paul knew that if he touched them, the dust would cling to his fingers like dry pollen. But he wasn't about to do that. Doing that would make them real. Even though he could easily see them, and even though they did not go away when he rubbed his eyes or blinked hard, they were not there. If the train would just go away, just chug-a-chug past like the ones in his kid's Golden Books, it would all be okay. He'd just go home, flop on the sofa, and tell the baby sitter to call work and tell them he was sick, had the pukes, the trots, whatever, but he remembered that the kids would be bopping around, and squealing, and Terri would eventually come home and want to know why he was loafing while she had been—

Paul decided that when the train cleared the tracks he'd pop a Roloids and go back to work. No appetite anyhow. But when the train moved left, Paul realized that work wasn't where he wanted to be. It didn't matter if he wasn't there, just put another monkey on the line and let him rip. He sat still while the train moved, sluggishly at first, then gained momentum—

—rusted boxcar bowed out to him, then pulled away. A tanker—

—not wanting to go anywhere but with the train, what else did he have to—

—third tanker, a rusty Soo gondola, a flatbed with a John Deere—

—look forward to? Endless repeats of today, like reruns of—

—flatbed number three with a thresher—

—*Star Trek* the kids would unquestioningly—

—fourth flatbed, boxcar, boxcar, box—

—watch over and over, same thing daily, never getting—

—car, tanker, tanker, box—

—tired of it all, like Paul was *tired-of*—

—(bet *they* don't have to eat runny catsup)—

—car, box—

—this-whole-damned-life (?)—sit-here-and-just-go- nowhere-he-wants-to—

—car, ca—

Paul reaches out for the plastic steering wheel while the breeze which is stronger now because he is or rather the train is moving and blows hair into his eyes so that he has to brush it aside before he can grab hold of the flaking metal rail at the back of the ca—

—(go!)

—boose.

The brakeman waves at the many cars which the train has held up for the past fifteen minutes. Some honk back. One hand waves back, middle finger raised. *Up yours too, buddy.* He notices that the first car in line on the southern side of the tracks, a rusted dirt-brown Subaru whose pale racing stripes are peeling and flaking away, is empty, and is gonna be the center of one hell of a pile-up once the other cars get moving. But it's no skin off his nose. They all got it easy, sitting in their air-conditioned cars while he has to ride for hours at a time on a noisy, (swear I'm going deaf), vibrating caboose all the way to Superior.

Paul would gladly change places with any of them.

An Appreciation: Theodore Sturgeon

by SAMUEL R. DELANY

Theodore Sturgeon, 1918–1985:
we have lost our writer.

His motto was:

"Ask the next question," and he—with a number of his friends—wore a silver pendant, the letter Q with an arrow running through, symbolizing it.

"All my work is about love," he wrote somewhere—possibly several times. It's a statement both seductive and sentimental. But sentimentality is the failing of our great storytellers: Balzac, Dickens, George Eliot . . . Read Sturgeon, and you will discover that this statement is also hugely precise.

For the unstated Sturgeon theme is the evocative precision of language itself. That is what he dazzles, delights, and astonishes us with, again and again, sometimes sentence by sentence, as we read through his stories.

Sturgeon the writer? I read my first Sturgeon story in a fat, new anthology of science fiction tales, when I was a ten- or eleven-year-old boy. The story was "Thunder and Roses." Understand, I was a bright, profoundly unimaginative child. (Much of what's called imagination in children is stark deafness to metaphor coupled with pig-headed literal-mindedness.) Roses didn't have much to do with thunder, so the title was kind of dumb. The story was mostly about this singer named Starr Anthim, who mostly wasn't there, but who sang a kind of anthem, which only made you think about the word itself, its sound and the ways it kept fitting in or not quite fitting in with other words, instead

of just what was happening; and what *was* happening? Well, the tale was full of ordinary guys doing ordinary things like shaving and taking showers, all of which, for some reason, seemed disturbingly more real than I would have thought such things could be in a story, because there were puddles on the bathroom tile after the shower and a crinkled toothpaste tube lying under the mirror. And the only other thing about it was that the world was coming to an end, and everyone felt as powerless as a ten- or eleven-year-old boy to stop it. And when I finished reading it, I was crying . . .

It couldn't have been very good, because *that* wasn't what stories were supposed to do . . . ?

By the time I was twenty-one, Sturgeon was my favorite writer of any genre. And for all my lack of imagination at ten, Sturgeon's tales taught me as much as any just what a range of incredible things stories, and the words that make them up, could, in fact, accomplish.

Sturgeon the man? I met him twenty-five years later. First I got a call at the SF Shop on New York City's 12th Street, where I was signing some books of my own. On the phone for the first time in my life, I heard that tenor voice, with its quality like the middle register of an A-flat clarinet and a pacing I start to call drawl—but that connotes region or class, while what I heard over the phone that afternoon was much more a considered and personal rhythm, overlaid on speech with such geographical variety lingering under the lightness of its Ls and Rs and over the length of its Os and Us, that its articulate U.S. ordinariness put to shame the whole notion of "Midwestern Standard."

What he'd called to tell me was how much he'd liked a book of *mine*!

A few weeks later, in the hotel lobby during a Lunacon, Weena Sturgeon took my arm and said, "Chip, Ted would like to meet you. Why don't you come up in a few minutes. The kids are all there, of course. But if you don't mind them . . . ?" and gave me a room number; and left. Someone with me made the obligatory comment about the fact that the Sturgeons were (or had been at one time) nudists, with jejune speculations on what an audience with them might be like.

Perhaps my imagination is still underdeveloped; I thought it was sad that precisely the social and personal discomforts that nudism, as I understood it, was supposed to defuse seemed to have taken refuge in the silly talk circling it.

Minutes later, I took the elevator up, turned down the hall, knocked on the wood beside the painted metal laundry bin that hung on the door itself, and heard kids laughing.

Someone said, "Come in." Then someone opened the lock.

Yes, the room was filled with Sturgeon children: Tandy, Noel, Robin, Andros . . . and Weena; and a couple of more friends.

Sturgeon was sitting on the bed, back against the headboard, wearing handmade embroidered pants—maybe sandals, I don't remember. A medium height man and deeply tanned, he was on the upper side of middle age, with grey hair grizzled on a thinning chest; the only picture I'd ever seen of him was the Ed Emsh portrait in the fantasia cover for the special Sturgeon issue of *F&SF* for September, 1962. What I saw, there in the hotel room, was that face, with its beard and fine bones—described in one of another article I'd read as "Puckish" or "pixyish." But it was that face aged by a decade. Sturgeon gave out a measured calm that glimmered through the confusion of children's questions and visitors' comments, very natural and very winning. An impossible situation for conversation?

No, not at all.

It was a pleasant, friendly evening, with lots of mutual good feeling; but all saying it makes me want to do is take the cliché "pleasant and friendly" and figure some way to retrieve the meanings that have worn off the words from over-use: because what pleased that evening started like a warmth behind the knees and rose through the body till it reached the shoulders, letting loose—now at a bemused chuckle from Ted, now with someone's observation about some situation two thousand miles away, now with a sterner word to a child and a hug to the same child a moment later—all the tensions, one by one, that comprise the opposite of "pleasant" without reaching pain, so that the expectation and nervousness and awe I'd brought with me could settle into the simpler and more intense feeling of friendship.

A pleasant, friendly evening . . .

Sadly, it seemed a long time before I saw Ted again.

One of the things I'd thought going up to that room; and I thought it again as I left: Sturgeon's stories had starred the whole of my reading life. Now I had met him. And I felt terribly proud and privileged.

If I may strain a metaphor: language is a sky we all live under. It's pretty much a total surround, both to thought and to

action. "Poetry makes nothing happen," Auden wrote at Yeats's death. But once in a while, by luck or by skill, in poetry or in prose, a writer can put words together so that, if they don't *make* things happen, they make us, for a moment, *see* things happening. The range of Sturgeon's work is an immense and astonishing galaxy of such dazzling and precise lights against the night of ordinary language.

I have written before, and I stand by it: "The corpus of science fiction written by Theodore Sturgeon is the single most important body of science fiction by an American to date." But that is because, held up against American writing of its time, Sturgeon's is simply among the best writing, period.

His sf novels, *The Dreaming Jewels*, and *More Than Human*, have delighted sf readers for years, and the argument about whether or not the latter is the best or the second best sf novel ever written has been going on as long as I can remember, so that the final judgment is—finally—silly. You *must* read them. Then, if you don't go on from there to read—and hugely enjoy—*Some of Your Blood* and *Venus Plus X*, I suspect you are *not* really asking the next question. Yet when all due praise is heaped on the novels, I'd still say that the glory of Sturgeon's work is his short stories. In the bibliography I once helped Paul Williams compile, there were about a hundred fifty of them. And a good hundred of them are simply and inarguably superb.

Our acquaintanceship—and I know Ted would have let me call it friendship—was limited to the last decade of his life, during which I met him only four or five times.

The second of those meetings was most of a day I spent with him when he was recording "Bianca's Hands," "The Huckle is a Happy Beast," and the "Britt Svenglund" section from his still unpublished novel, *Godbody*. The record was done for Roy Torgeson's Alternate World Recordings. (*Theodore Sturgeon Reads*, 1976.) My overly compressed account of the meeting at Roy's, our Chinese lunch, and the recording session itself make up the album's liner notes. The next time I saw him was maybe five or six years after that, with his new wife, Jayne, and, again, daughter Tandy, who, instead of being fifteen or sixteen as she had been in that hotel room, was now a new published poet in her twenties with a wonderfully proud and happy father, for all his natural modesty.

Pride? Modesty? Like pleasure and friendship, their nuances

sat so neatly and easily together in Ted that afternoon, while we ate sandwiches in a beige sf convention meeting room, with Jayne and Ted and Tandy and Judy Merrill and Art Saha and half a dozen other people moving around it and through it, I just wish somehow I could fix the delicacy of their angle and interface. But I can't. Which is frustrating. Because Ted himself was a writer who could make just such delicate emotional conjunctions as real as the change in texture from cast face to broken face as you run your thumb over the corner of a cracked brick, or the combination of smooth and rough when you grasp a camshaft sticking from a flange leaking grainy oil.

A few times in our meetings, Ted and I made plans to get together and really sit down and talk—even going as far, the last time I saw him in Vancouver in June of '84, as to fix a summer date. But somehow summer came and went. So did winter. And Ted is dead.

So I must be content—once more—with reading him once more.

But the shock shakes up the sky and sets the stars to shiver. We have lost our writer.

New York,
June, 1985

Bright Segment

by THEODORE STURGEON

"I fix everything," he said.
And that, precisely, is what he did.

He had never held a girl before. He was not terrified; he had used that up earlier when he had carried her in and kicked the door shut behind him and had heard the steady drip of blood from her soaked skirt, and before that, when he had thought her dead there on the curb, and again when she made that sound, that sigh or whispered moan. He had brought her in and when he saw all that blood he had turned left, turned right, put her down on the floor, his brains all clabbered and churned and his temples athump with the unaccustomed exercise. All he could act on was *Don't get blood on the bedspread*. He turned on the overhead light and stood for a moment blinking and breathing hard; suddenly he leaped for the window to lower the blind against the street light staring in and all other eyes. He saw his hands reach for the blind and checked himself; they were red and ready to paint anything he touched. He made a sound, a detached part of his mind recognizing it as the exact duplicate of that agonized whisper she had uttered out there on the dark, wet street, and leapt to the light switch, seeing the one red smudge already there, knowing as he swept his hand over it he was leaving another. He stumbled to the sink in the corner and washed his hands, washed them again, every few seconds looking over his shoulder at the girl's body and the thick flat finger of blood which crept curling toward him over the linoleum.

He had his breath now, and moved more carefully to the window. He drew down the blind and pulled the curtains and looked at the sides and the bottom to see that there were no crevices. In pitch blackness he felt his way back to the opposite wall, going around the edges of the linoleum, and turned on the light again. The finger of blood was a tentacle now, fumbling toward the soft, stain-starved floorboards. From the enamel table beside the stove he snatched a plastic sponge and dropped it on the tentacle's seeking tip and was pleased, it was a reaching thing no more, it was only something spilled that could be mopped up.

He took off the bedspread and hung it over the brass headrail. From the drawer of the china closet and from the gate leg table he took his two plastic table cloths. He covered the bed with them, leaving plenty of overlap, then stood a moment rocking with worry and pulling out his lower lip with a thumb and forefinger. *Fix it right*, he told himself firmly. So she'll die before you fix it, never mind, fix it, right.

He expelled air from his nostrils and got books from the shelf in the china closet—a six-year-old World Almanac, a half-dozen paperbacked novels, a heavy catalog of jewelry findings. He pulled the bed away from the wall and put books one by one under two of the legs so that the bed was tilted slightly down to the foot and slightly to one side. He got a blanket and rolled it and slipped it under the plastic so that it formed a sort of fence down the high side. He got a six-quart aluminum pot from under the sink and set it on the floor by the lowest corner of the bed and pushed the trailing end of plastic down into it. *So bleed now*, he told the girl silently, with satisfaction.

He bent over her and grunted, lifting her by the armpits. Her head fell back as if she had no bones in her neck and he almost dropped her. He dragged her to the bed, leaving a wide red swatch as her skirt trailed through the scarlet puddle she had lain in. He lifted her clear of the floor, settled his feet, and leaned over the bed with her in his arms. It took an unexpected effort to do it. He realized only then how drained, how tired he was, and how old. He put her down clumsily, almost dropped her in an effort to leave the carefully arranged tablecloths undisturbed, and he very nearly fell into the bed with her. He levered himself way with rubbery arms and stood panting. Around the soggy hem of her skirt blood began to gather, and as he watched, began to find its way lazily to the low corner. *So much, so much blood in a*

person, he marveled, and *stop it, how to make it stop if it won't stop?*

He glanced at the locked door, the blinded window, the clock. He listened. It was raining harder now, drumming and hissing in the darkest hours. Otherwise nothing; the house was asleep and the street, dead. He was alone with his problem.

He pulled at his lip, then snatched his hand away as he tasted her blood. He coughed and ran to the sink and spat, and washed his mouth and then his hands.

So all right, go call up....

Call up? Call what, the hospital they should call the cops? Might as well call the cops altogether. *Stupid*. What could I tell them, she's my sister, she's hit by a car, they going to believe me? Tell them the truth, a block away I see somebody push her out of a car, drive off, no lights, I bring her in out of the rain, only inside I find she is bleeding like this, they believe me? *Stupid*. What's the matter with you, mind your own business why don't you.

He thought he would pick her up now and put her back in the rain. Yes and somebody sees you, *stupid*.

He saw that the wide, streaked patch of blood on the linoleum was losing gloss where it lay thin, drying and soaking in. He picked up the sponge, two-thirds red now and the rest its original baby-blue except at one end where it looked like bread drawn with a sharp red pencil. He turned it over so it wouldn't drip while he carried it and took it to the sink and rinsed it, wringing it over and over in the running water. *Stupid*, call up somebody and get help.

Call who?

He thought of the department store where for eighteen years he had waxed floors and vacuumed rugs at night. The neighborhood, where he knew the grocery and the butcher. Closed up, asleep, everybody gone; names, numbers he didn't know and anyway, who to trust? *My God in fifty-three years you haven't got a friend?*

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itself. He whimpered softly and then got up and went to the bed. "Don't be dead," he said aloud, and the way his voice sounded, it frightened him. He put out his hand to her chest, but drew it back when he saw her blouse was torn and blood came from there too.

He swallowed hard and then began fumbling with her clothes. Flat ballet slippers, worn, soggy, thin like paper and little silken things he had never seen before, like just the foot of a stocking. More blood on—but no, that was peeled and chipped enamel on her cold white toes. The skirt had a button at the side and a zipper which baffled him for a moment, but he got it down and tugged the skirt off in an interminable series of jerks from the hem, one side and the other, while she rolled slightly and limply to the motion. Small silken pants, completely soaked and so badly cut on the left side that he snapped them apart easily between his fingers; but the other side was surprisingly strong and he had to get his scissors to cut them away. The blouse buttoned up the front and was no problem; under it was a brassiere which was cut right in two near the front. He lifted it away but had to cut one of the straps with his scissors to free it altogether.

He ran to the sink with his sponge, washed it and wrung it out, filled a saucepan with warm water, and ran back. He sponged the body down; it looked firm but too thin, with its shadow-ladder of ribs down each side and the sharp protrusion of the hip-bones. Under the left breast was a long cut, starting on the ribs in front and curving upward almost to the nipple. It seemed deep but the blood merely welled out. The other cut, though, in her groin, released blood brightly in regular gouts, one after the other, eager but weakly. He had seen the like before, the time Garber pinched his arm off in the elevator cable-room, but then the blood squirted a foot away. Maybe this did, too, he thought suddenly, but now it's slowing up, now it's going to stop, yes, and you, stupid, you have a dead body you can tell stories to the police.

He wrung out the sponge in the water and mopped the wound. Before it could fill up again he spread the sides of the cut and looked down into it. He could clearly see the femoral artery, looking like an end of spaghetti and cut almost through; and then there was nothing but blood again.

He squatted back on his heels, pulling heedlessly at his lip with his bloody hand and trying to think. *Pinch, shut, squeeze. Squeezers. Tweezers!* He ran to his tool-box and clawed it open.

Years ago he had learned to make fine chains out of square silver wire, and he used to pass the time away by making link after tiny link, soldering each one closed with an alcohol torch and a needle-tipped iron. He picked up the tweezers and dropped them in favor of the small spring clamp which he used for holding the link while he worked on it. He ran to the sink and washed the clamp and came back to the bed. Again he sponged away the little lake of blood, and quickly reached down and got the fine jaws of the clamp on the artery near its cut. Immediately there was another gush of blood. Again he sponged it away, and in blaze of inspiration, released the clamp, moved it to the other side of the cut, and clamped it again.

Blood still oozed from the inside of the wound, but that terrible pulsing gush was gone. He sat back on his heels and painfully released a breath he must have held for two minutes. His eyes ached from the strain, and his brain was still whirling, but with these was a feeling, a new feeling almost like an ache or a pain, but it was nowhere and everywhere inside him; it wanted him to laugh but at the same time his eyes stung and hot salt squeezed out through holes too small for it.

After a time he recovered, blinking away his exhaustion, and sprang up, overwhelmed by urgency. *Got to fix everything.* He went to the medicine cabinet over the sink. Adhesive tape, pack of gauze pads. Maybe not big enough; okay tape together, fix right. New tube this sulfa-thia-dia-whatchamacall-um, fix anything, time I got vacuum-cleaner grit in cut hand, infection. Fixed boils too.

He filled a kettle and his saucepan with clean water and put them on the stove. Sew up, yes. He found needles, white thread, dumped them into the water. He went back to the bed and stood musing for a long time, looking at the oozing gash under the girl's breast. He sponged out the femoral wound again and stared pensively into it until the blood slowly covered the clamped artery. He could not be positive, but he had a vague recollection of something about tourniquets, they should be opened up every once in a while or there is trouble; same for an artery, maybe? Better he should sew up the artery; it was only opened, not cut through. If he could find out how to do it and still let it be like a pipe, not like a darned sock.

So into the pot went the tweezers, a small pair of needle-nose pliers, and, after some more thought, a dozen silver broach-pins out of his jewelry kit. Waiting for the water to boil, he inspected

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He glanced at the clock, and then for ten minutes he scrubbed the white enamel table-top with cleanser. He tipped it into the sink, rinsed it at the faucet, and then slowly poured the contents of the kettle over it. He took it to the stove, held it with one hand while he fished in the boiling saucepan with a silver knife until he had the pliers resting with their handles out of the water. He grasped them gingerly with a clean washcloth and carefully, one by one, transferred everything from saucepan to table. By the time he had found the last of the needles and the elusive silver pins, sweat was running into his eyes and the arm that held the table-top threatened to drop right off. But he set his stumpy yellow teeth and kept at it.

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Hospital! Yes, in the movies—

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while quelling the urge to stick the end of the thread into his mouth.

He managed to get four tiny stitches into the artery below the break, out of it above the break. Each one he knotted, with exquisite care so that the thread would not cut the tissue but still would draw the severed edges together. Then he squatted back on his heels to rest, his shoulders afire with tension, his eyes misted. Then, taking a deep breath, he removed the clamp.

Blood filled the wound and soaked the sponges. But it came slowly, without spurting. He shrugged grimly. So what's to do, use a tire patch? He mopped the blood out once more, and quickly filled the incision with ointment, slapping a piece of gauze over it more to hide it than to help it.

He wiped his eyebrows first with one shoulder, then the other, and fixed his eyes on the opposite wall the way he used to do when he worked on his little silver chains. When the mist went away he turned his attention to the long cut on the underside of the breast. He didn't know how to stitch one this size, but he could cook and he knew how to skewer up a chicken. Biting his tongue, he stuck the first of his silver pins into the flesh at right angles to the cut, pressing it across the wound and out the other side. He started the next pin not quite an inch away, and the same with the third. The fourth grated on something in the wound; it startled him like a door slamming and he bit his tongue painfully. He backed the pin out and probe carefully with his tweezers. Yes, something hard in there. He probed deeper with both points of the tweezers, feeling them enter uncut tissue with a soft crunching that only a fearful fingertip could hear. He conquered a shudder and glanced up at the girl's face. He resolved not to look up there again. It was a very dead face.

Stupid! but the self-insult was lost in concentration even as it was born. The tweezers closed on something hard, slippery, and stubborn. He worked it gently back and forth, feeling a puzzled annoyance at this unfamiliar flesh that yielded as he moved. Gradually, very gradually, a sharp angular corner of *something* appeared. He kept at it until there was enough to grasp with his fingers; then he set his tweezers aside and gently worked it loose. Blood began to flow freely before it was half out, but he did not stop until he could draw it free. The light glinted on the strip of hollow-ground steel and its shattered margins; he turned it over twice before it came to him that it was a piece of straight razor.

He set it down on his enamel table, thinking of what the police might have said to him if he had turned her over to them with that story about a car accident.

He stanchd the blood, pulled the wound as wide apart as he could. The nipple writhed under his fingers, its pink halo shrunken and wrinkled; he grunted, thinking that a bug had crawled under his hand, and then aware that whatever the thing meant, it couldn't mean death, not yet anyway. He had to go back and start over, stanching the cut and spreading it, and quickly squeezing in as much ointment as it would hold. Then he went on with his insertion of the silver pins, until there was a little ladder of twelve of them from one end of the wound to the other. He took his thread, doubled it, put the loop around the topmost pin and drew the two parts of the thread underneath. Holding them both in one hand, he gently pinched the edges of the wound together at the pin. Then he drew the loop tight without cutting, crossed the threads and put them under the next pin, and again closed the wound. He continued this all the way down, lacing the cut closed around the ladder of the pins. At the bottom he tied the thread off and cut it. There was blood and ointment all over his handiwork, but when he mopped up it looked good to him.

He stood up and let sensation flow agonizingly into his numb feet. He was sopping wet; he could feel perspiration searching its way down through the hairs of his legs like a migration of bed-bugs. He looked down at himself; wrinkles and water and blood. He looked across at the watery mirror, and saw a bandaged goblin with brow-ridges like a shelf and sunken eyes with a cast to them, with grizzled hair which could be scrubbed only to the color of grime, and with a great gout of blood where the mouth hid behind the bandage. He snatched it down, and looked again. *More better you cover your face, no matter what.* He turned away, not from his face, but with it, in the pained patience of a burro with saddle sores.

Wearily he carried his enameled table-top to the sink. He washed his hands and forearms and took off the handkerchiefs from around his neck and washed his face. Then he got what was left of his sponge and a pan of warm soapy water and came back to the bed.

It took him hours. He sponged the tablecloths on which she lay, shifted her gently so as to put no strain on the wounds, and washed and dried where she had lain. He washed her from head

to toe, going back for clean water, and then had to dry the bed again afterward. When he lifted her head he found her hair matted and tacky with rain and drying blood, and fresh blood with it, so he propped up her shoulders with a big pillow under the plastic and tipped her head back and washed and dried her hair, and found an ugly lump and a bleeding contusion on the back of her head. He combed the hair away from it on each side and put cold water on it, and it stopped bleeding, but there was a lump the size of a plum. He separated half a dozen of the gauze pads and packed them around the lump so that it need not take the pressure off her head; he dared not turn her over.

When her hair was wet and fouled it was only a dark mat, but cleaned and combed, it was the darkest of auburns, perfectly straight. There was a broad lustrous band of it on the bed on each side of her face, which was radiant with pallor, cold as a moon. He covered her with the bedspread, nowhere-everywhere almost-pain, not liking it but afraid to turn away from it ... maybe he would never have it again.

He sighed, a thing that came from his marrow and his years, and doggedly set to work scrubbing the floor. When he had finished, and the needles and thread were put away, the bit of tape which he had not used, the wrappers of the gauze pads, and the pan of blood from the end of the bed disposed of, and all the tools cleaned and back in their box, the night was over and daylight pressed weakly against the drawn blind. He turned out the light and stood without breathing, listening with all his mind, wanting to know from where he stood if she still lived. To bend close and find out she was gone—oh no. He wanted to know from here.

But a truck went by, and a woman called a child, and someone laughed; so he went and knelt by the bed and closed his eyes and slowly put his hand on her throat. It was cool—please, not cold!—and quiet as a lost glove.

Then the hairs on the back of his hand stirred to her breath, and again, the faintest of motions. The stinging came to his eyes and through and through him came the fiery urge to *do*: make some soup, buy some medicine, maybe, for her, a ribbon or a watch; clean the house, run to the store ... and while doing all these things, all at once, to shout and shout great shaking wordless bellows to tell himself over and over again, so he could hear for sure, that she was alive. At the very peak of this

explosion of urges, there was a funny little side-slip and he was fast asleep.

He dreamed someone was sewing his legs together with a big curved needle, and at the same time drawing the thread from his belly; he could feel the spool inside spinning and emptying. He groaned and opened his eyes, and knew instantly where he was and what had happened, and hated himself for the noise he had made. He lifted his hand and churned his fingers to be sure they could feel, and lowered them gently to her throat. It was warm—no, hot, too hot. He pushed back from the bed and scrambled half-across the floor on his knuckles and his numb, rubbery legs. Cursing silently he made a long lunge and caught the wooden chair to him, and used it to climb to his feet. He dared not let it go, so clumped softly with it over to the corner, where he twisted and hung gasping to the edge of the sink, while boiling acid ate downward through his legs. When he could, he splashed cold water on his face and neck and, still drying himself with a towel, stumbled across to the bed. He flung the bedspread off and *stupid!* he almost screamed as it plucked at his fingers on the way. It had adhered to the wound in her groin and he was sure he had ripped it to shreds, torn the whole section out of her clumsily patched artery. And he couldn't see; it must be getting dark outside; how long had he crouched there? He ran to the light switch, leaped back. Yes, bleeding, it was bleeding again—

But a little, only a very little. The gauze was turned up perhaps halfway, and though the exposed wound was wet with blood, blood was not running. It had, while he was asleep, but hardly enough to find its way to the mattress. He lifted the loose corner of the gauze very gently, and found it stuck fast. But the sponges, the little sponges to put on the sulfa-whatchama, they were still in the wound. He'd meant to take them out after a couple of hours, not let the whole clot form around them!

He ran for warm water, his big sponge. Soap in it, yes. He squatted beside the bed, though his legs still protested noisily, and began to bathe the gauze with tiny, gentle strokes.

Something made him look up. She had her eyes open, and was looking down at him. Her face and her eyes were utterly without expression. He watched them close slowly and slowly open again, lackluster and uninterested. "All right, all right," he said harshly, "I fix everything." She just kept on looking. He

nodded violently, it was all that soothes, all that encourages, hope for her, and a total promise for her, but it was only a rapid bobbing of his big ugly head. Annoyed as he always was at his own speechlessness, he went back to work. He got the gauze off and began soaking the edge of one of the sponges. When he thought it was ready to come, he tugged gently at it.

In a high, whispery soprano, "Ho-o-o-o...?" she said; it was like a question and a sob. Slowly she turned her head to the left. "Ho-o-o-o?" She turned her head again and slipped back to unconsciousness.

"I," he said loudly, excitedly, and "I—" and that was all; she couldn't hear him anyway. He held still until his hands stopped trembling, and went on with the job.

The wound looked wonderfully clean, though the skin all around it was dry and hot.

Down inside the cut he could see the artery in a nest of wet jelly; that was probably right—he didn't know, but it looked all right, he wouldn't disturb it. He packed the opening full of ointment, pressed the edges gently together, and put on a piece of tape. It promptly came unstuck, so he discarded it and dried the flesh all around the wound, put on gauze first, then the tape, and this time it held.

The other cut was quite closed, though more so where the pins were than between them. It too was surrounded by hot, dry, red flesh.

The scrape on the back of her head had not bled, but the lump was bigger than ever. Her face and neck were dry and very warm, though the rest of her body seemed cool. He went for a cold cloth and put it across her eyes and pressed it down on her cheeks, and she sighed. When he took it away she was looking at him again.

"You all right?" he asked her, and inanely, "You all right," he told her. A small frown flickered for a moment and then her eyes closed. He knew somehow that she was asleep. He touched her cheeks with the backs of his fingers. "Very hot," he muttered.

He turned out the light and in the dimness changed his clothes. From the bottom of a drawer he took a child's exercise book, and from it a piece of paper with a telephone number in large black penciled script. "I come back," he said to the darkness. She didn't say anything. He went out, locking the door behind him.

Laboriously he called the office from the big drugstore, referring to his paper for each digit and for each, holding the dial



against the stop for a full three or four seconds as if to be sure the number would stick. He got the big boss Mr. Laddie first of all, which was acutely embarrassing; he had not spoken to him in a dozen years. At the top of his bull voice he collided with Laddie's third impatient "Hello?" with "Sick! I—uh, *sick!*" He heard the phone say "—in God's name...?" and Mr. Wismer's laughter, and "Gimme the phone, that's got to be that orangutan of mine," and right in his ear, "Hello?"

"Sick tonight," he shouted.

"What's the matter with you?"

He swallowed. "I can't," he yelled.

"That's just old age," said Mr. Wismer. He heard Mr. Laddie laughing too. Mr. Wismer said, "How many nights you had off in the last fifteen years?"

He thought about it. "No!" he roared. Anyway, it was eighteen years.

"You know, that's right," said Mr. Wismer, speaking to Mr. Laddie without trying to cover his phone. "Fifteen years and never asked for a night off before."

"So who needs him? Give him all his nights off."

"Not at those prices," said Mr. Wismer, and to his phone, "Sure, dummy, take off. Don't work no con games." The phone clicked off on laughter, and he waited there in the booth until he was sure nothing else would be said. Then he hung up his receiver and emerged into the big drugstore where everyone all over was looking at him. Well, they always did. That didn't bother him. Only one thing bothered him, and that was Mr. Laddie's voice saying over and over in his head, "So who needs him?" He knew he would have to stop and face those words and let them and all that went with them go through his mind. But not now, please not now.

He kept them away by being busy; he bought tape and gauze and ointment and a canvas cot and three icebags and, after some thought, aspirin, because someone had told him once . . . and then to the supermarket where he bought enough to feed a family of nine for nine days. And for all his bundles, he still had a thick arm and a wide shoulder for a twenty-five-pound cake of ice.

He got the door open and the ice in the box, and went out in the hall and picked up the bundles and brought those in, and then went to her. She was burning up, and her breathing was like the way seabirds fly into the wind, small beat, a small beat, and a long wait, balancing. He cracked a corner off the ice-cake,

wrapped it in a dishtowel and whacked it angrily against the sink. He crowded the crushed ice into one of the bags and put it on her head. She sighed but did not open her eyes. He filled the other bags and put one on her breast and one on her groin. He wrung his hands uselessly over her until it came to him *she has to eat, losing blood like that.*

So he cooked, tremendously, watching her every second minute. He made minestrone and baked cabbage and mashed potatoes and veal cutlets. He cut a pie and warmed cinnamon buns, and he had hot coffee with ice cream ready to spoon into it. She didn't eat it, any of it, nor did she drink a drop. She lay there and occasionally let her head fall to the side, so he had to run and pick up the icebag and replace it. Once again she sighed, and once he thought she opened her eyes, but couldn't be sure.

On the second day she ate nothing and drank nothing, and her fever was unbelievable. During the night, crouched on the floor beside her, he awoke once with the echoes of weeping still in the room, but he may have dreamed it.

Once he cut the tenderest, juiciest piece of veal he could find on a cutlet, and put it between her lips. Three hours later he pressed them apart to put in another piece, but the first one was still there. The same thing happened with aspirin, little white crumbs on a dry tongue.

And the time soon came when he had busied himself out of things to do, and fretted himself into worry-reflex that operated by itself, and the very act of thinking new thoughts trapped him into facing the old ones, and then of course there was nothing to do but let them run on through, with all the ache and humiliation they carried with them. He was trying to think a new thing about what would happen if he called a doctor, and the doctor would want to take her to a hospital; he would say, "She needs treatment, old man, she doesn't need you," and there it was in his mind, ready to run, so:

Be eleven years old, bulky and strong and shy, standing in the kitchen doorway, holding your wooden box by its string, and trying to shape your mouth so that the reluctant words can press out properly; and there's Mama hunched over a gin bottle like a cat over a half-eaten bird, peering; watch her lipless wide mouth twitch and say, "Don't stand there clackin' and slurpin'! Speak up, boy! What are you tryin' to say, you're leaving?"

So nod, it's easier, and she'll say "Leave then, leave, who needs you?" and you go:

And be a squat, powerful sixteen and go to the recruiting station and watch the sergeant with the presses and creases asking "Whadda you want?" and you try, you try and you can't say it so you nod your head at the poster with the pointing finger, UNCLE SAM NEEDS YOU; and the sergeant glances at it and at you, and suddenly his pointing finger is half an inch away from your nose; crosseyed you watch it while he barks, "Well, Uncle don't need *you!*" and you wait, watching the finger that way, not moving until you understand; you understand things real good, it's just that you hear slowly. So there you hang crosseyed and they all laugh.

Or 'way back, you're eight years old and in school, that Phyllis with the row of springy brown sausage-curls flying when she tosses her head, pink and clean and so pretty; you have the chocolates wrapped in gold paper tied in gold-string mesh; you go up the aisle to her desk and put the chocolates down and run back; she comes down the aisle and throws them so hard the mesh breaks on your desk and she says, loud, "I don't need these and I don't need you, and you know what, you got snot on your face," and you put up your hand and sure enough you have.

That's all. Only every time anyone says, "Who needs him?" or the like, you have to go through all of them, every one. Sooner or later, however much you put it off, you've got to do it all.

I get doctor, you don't need me.

You die, you don't need me.

Please . . .

Far back in her throat, a scraping hiss, and her lips moved. She held his eyes with hers, and her lips moved silently, and a little late for the lips, the hiss came again. He didn't know how he guessed right, but he did and brought water, dribbling it slowly on her mouth. She licked at it greedily, lifting her head up. He put a hand under it, being careful of the lump, and helped her. After a while she slumped back and smiled weakly at the cup. Then she looked up into his face and though the smile disappeared, he felt much better. He ran to the icebox and the stove, and got glasses and straws—one each of orange juice, chocolate milk, plain milk, consommé from a can, and ice water. He lined them up on the chair-seat by the bed and watched them and her

eagerly, like a circus seal waiting to play "America" on the bulb-horns. She did smile this time, faintly, briefly, but right at him, and he tried the consommé. She drank almost half of it through the straw without stopping and fell asleep.

Later, when he checked to see if there was any bleeding, the plastic sheet was wet, but not with blood. *Stupid!* he raged at himself, and stamped out and bought a bedpan.

She slept a lot now, and ate often but lightly. She began to watch him as he moved about; sometimes when he thought she was asleep, he would turn and meet her eyes. Mostly, it was his hands she watched, those next two days. He washed and ironed her clothes, and sat and mended them with straight small stitches; he hung by his elbows to the edges of the enameled table and worked his silver wire, making her a brooch like a flower on a fan, and a pendant on a silver chain, and a bracelet to match them. She watched his hands while he cooked; he made his own spaghetti—tagliatelli, really—rolling and rolling the dough until it was a huge tough sheet, winding it up like a jelly-roll only tight, slicing it in quick, accurate flickers of a paring-knife so it came out like yellow-white flat shoelaces. He had hands which had never learned their limitations, because he had never thought to limit them. Nothing else in life cared for this man but his hands, and since they did everything, they could do anything.

But when he changed her dressings or washed her, or helped with the bedpan, she never looked at his hands. She would lie perfectly still and watch his face.

She was very weak at first and could move nothing but her head. He was glad because her stitches were healing nicely. When he withdrew the pins it must have hurt, but she made not a sound; twelve flickers of her smooth brow, one for each pin as it came out.

"Hurts," he rumbled.

Faintly, she nodded. It was the first communication between them, except for those mute, crowded eyes following him about. She smiled too, as she nodded, and he turned his back and ground his knuckles into his eyes and felt wonderful.

He went back to work on the sixth night, having puttered and fussed over her all day to keep her from sleeping until he was ready to leave, then not leaving until he was sure she was fast asleep. He would lock her in and hurry to work, warm inside

and ready to do three men's work; and home again in the dark early hours as fast as his bandy legs would carry him, bringing her a present—a little radio, a scarf, something special to eat—every single day. He would lock the door firmly and then hurry to her, touching her forehead and cheek to see what her temperature was. Then he would go out of her sight, away back by the sink and undress and change to the long drawers he slept in, and come back and curl up on the camp cot. For perhaps an hour and a half he would sleep like a stone, but after that the slightest rustle of her sheet, the smallest catch of breath, would bring him to her in a bound, croaking, "You all right?" and hanging over her tensely, frantically trying to divine what she might need, what he might do or get for her.

And when the daylight came he would give her warm milk with an egg beaten in it, and then he would bathe her and change her dressings and comb her hair, and when there was nothing left to do for her he would clean the room, scrub the floor, wash clothes and dishes and, interminably, cook. In the afternoon he shopped, moving everywhere at a half-trot, running home again as soon as he could to show her what he had bought, what he had planned for her dinner. All these days, and then these weeks, he glowed inwardly, hugging the glow while he was away from her, fanning it with her presence when they were together.

He found her crying one afternoon late in the second week, staring at the little radio, with the tears streaking her face. He made a harsh cooing syllable and wiped her cheeks with a dry washcloth and stood back with torture on his animal face. She patted his hand weakly, and made a series of faint gestures which utterly baffled him. He sat on the bedside chair and put his face close to hers as if he could tear the meaning out of her with his eyes. There was something different about her; she had watched him, up to now, with the fascinated, uncomprehending attention of a kitten watching a tankful of tropical fish; but now there was something more in her gaze, in the way she moved and in what she did.

"You hurt?" he rasped.

She shook her head. Her mouth moved, and she pointed to it and began to cry again.

"Oh, you hungry. I fix, fix good." He rose but she caught his wrist, shaking her head and crying, but smiling too. He sat down, torn apart by his perplexity. Again she moved her mouth,

pointing to it, shaking her head.

"No talk," he said. She was breathing so hard it frightened him, but when he said that she gasped and half sat up; he caught her shoulders and put her down, but she was nodding urgently. "You can't talk!" he said.

Yes, yes! she nodded.

He looked at her for long time. The music on the radio stopped and someone began to sell used cars in a crackling baritone. She glanced at it and her eyes filled with tears again. He leaned across her and shut the set off. After a profound effort he formed his mouth in the right shape and released a disdainful snort: "Ha! What you want talk? Don't talk. I fix everything, no talk. I—" He ran out of words, so instead slapped himself powerfully on the chest and nodded at her, the stove, the bedpan, the tray of bandages. He said again, "What you want talk?"

She looked up at him, overwhelmed by his violence, and shrank down. He tenderly wiped her cheeks again, mumbling. "I fix everything."

He came home in the dark one morning, and after seeing that she was comfortable according to his iron standards, went to bed. The smell of bacon and fresh coffee was, of course, part of a dream; what else could it be? And the faint sounds of movement around the room had to be his weary imagination.

He opened his eyes on the dream and closed them again, laughing at himself for a crazy stupid. Then he went still inside, and slowly opened his eyes again.

Beside his cot was the bedside chair, and on it was a plate of fried eggs and crisp bacon, a cup of strong black coffee, toast with the gold of butter disappearing into its older gold. He stared at these things in total disbelief, and then looked up.

She was sitting on the end of the bed, where it formed an eight-inch corridor between itself and the cot. She wore her pressed and mended blouse and her skirt. Her shoulders sagged with weariness and she seemed to have some difficulty in holding her head up; her hands hung limply between her knees. But her face was suffused with delight and anticipation as she watched him waking up to his breakfast.

His mouthed writhed and he bared his blunt yellow teeth, and ground them together while he uttered a howl of fury. It was a strangled, rasping sound and she scuttled away from it as if it had

burned her, and crouched in the middle of the bed with her eyes huge and her mouth slack. He advanced on her with his arms raised and his big fists clenched; she dropped her face on the bed and covered the back of her neck with both hands and lay there trembling. For a long moment he hung over her, then slowly dropped his arms. He tugged at the skirt. "Take off," he grated. He tugged it again, harder.

She peeped up at him and then slowly turned over. She fumbled weakly at the button. He helped her. He pulled the skirt away and tossed it on the cot, and gestured sternly at the blouse. She unbuttoned it and he lifted it from her shoulders. He pulled down the sheet, taking it right out from under her. He took her ankles gently in his powerful hands and pulled them down until she was straightened out on the bed, and then covered her carefully. He was breathing hard. She watched him in terror.

In a frightening quiet he turned back to his cot and the laden chair beside it. Slowly he picked up the cup of coffee and smashed in on the floor. Steadily as the beat of a woodman's axe the saucer followed, the plate of toast, the plate of eggs. China and yolk squirted and sprayed over the floor and on the walls. When he had finished he turned back to her. "I fix everything," he said hoarsely. He emphasized each syllable with a thick forefinger as he said again, "I fix everything."

She whipped over on her stomach and buried her face in the pillow, and began to sob so hard he could feel the bed shaking the floor through the soles of his feet. He turned angrily away from her and got a pan and a scrub-brush and a broom and dust-pan, and laboriously, methodically, cleaned up the mess.

Two hours later he approached her where she lay, still on her stomach, stiff and motionless. He had had a long time to think of what to say: "Look, you see, you sick . . . you see?" He said it, as gently as he could. He put his hand on her shoulder but she twitched violently, flinging it away. Hurt and baffled, he backed away and sat down on the couch, watching her miserably.

She wouldn't eat any lunch.

She wouldn't eat any dinner.

As the time approached for him to go to work, she turned over. He still sat on the cot in his long johns, utter misery on his face and in every line of his ugly body. She looked at him and her eyes filled with tears. He met her gaze but did not move. She sighed suddenly and held out her hand. He leaped to it and

pulled it to his forehead and knelt, bowed over it and began to cry. She patted his wiry hair until the storm passed, which it did abruptly, at its height. He sprang away from her and clattered pans on the stove, and in a few minutes brought her some bread and gravy and a parboiled artichoke, rich with olive oil and basil. She smiled wanly and took the plate, and slowly ate while he watched each mouthful and radiated what could only be gratitude. Then he changed his clothes and went to work.

He brought her a red housecoat when she began to sit up, though he would not let her out of bed. He brought her a glass globe in which a flower would keep, submerged in water, for a week, and two live turtles in a plastic bowl and a pale-blue toy rabbit with a music box in it that played "Rock-a-bye Baby" and a blinding vermilion lipstick. She remained obedient and more watchful than ever; when his fussing and puttering were over and he took up his crouch on the cot, waiting for whatever need in her he could divine next, their eyes would meet, and increasingly, his would drop. She would hold the blue rabbit tight to her and watch him unblinkingly, or smile suddenly, parting her lips as if something vitally important and deeply happy was about to escape them. Sometimes she seemed inexpressibly sad, and sometimes she was so restless that he would go to her and stroke her hair until she fell asleep, or seemed to. It occurred to him that he had not seen her wounds for almost two days, and that perhaps they were bothering her during one of those restless spells, and so he pressed her gently down and uncovered her. He touched the scar carefully and she suddenly thrust his hand away and grasped her own flesh firmly, kneading it, slapping it stingingly. Shocked, he looked at her face and saw she was smiling, nodding. "Hurt?" She shook her head. He said, proudly, as he covered her, "I fix. I fix good." She nodded and caught his hand briefly between her chin and her shoulder.

It was that night, after he had fallen into that heavy first sleep on his return from the store, that he felt the warm firm length of her right up against him on the cot. He lay still for a moment, somnolent, uncomprehending while quick fingers plucked at the buttons of his long johns. He brought his hands up and trapped her wrists. She was immediately still, though her breath came swiftly and her heart pounded his chest like an angry little knuckle. He made a labored, inquisitive syllable. "Wh-wha...?"

and she moved against him and then stopped, trembling. He held her wrists for more than a minute, trying to think this out, and at last sat up. He put one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees. He stood up. She clung to him and the breath hissed in her nostrils. He moved to the other side of her bed and bent slowly and put her down. He had to reach back and detach her arms from around his neck before he could straighten up. "You sleep," he said. He fumbled for the sheet and pulled it over her and tucked it around her. She lay absolutely motionless, and he touched her hair and went back to his cot. He lay down and after a long time fell into a troubled sleep. But something woke him; he lay and listened, hearing nothing. He remembered suddenly and vividly the night she had balanced between life and death, and he had awakened to an echo of a sob which was not repeated; in sudden fright he jumped up and went to her, bent down and touched her head. She was lying face down. "You cry?" he whispered. And she shook her head rapidly. He grunted and went back to bed.

It was the ninth week and it was raining; he plodded homeward through the black, shining streets, and when he turned into his own block and saw the dead, slick river stretching between him and the streetlight in front of his house, he experienced a moment of fantasy, of dreamlike disorientation; it seemed to him for a second that none of this had happened, that in a moment the car would flash by him and dip toward the curb momentarily while a limp body tumbled out, and he must run to it and take it indoors, and it would bleed, it would bleed, it might die. . . . He shook himself like a big dog and put his head down against the rain, saying *Stupid!* to his inner self. Nothing could be wrong, now. He had found a way to live, and live that way he would, and he would abide no change in it.

But there was a change, and he knew it before he entered the house; his window, facing the street, had a dull orange glow which could not have been given it by the street light alone. But maybe she was reading one of those paperback novels he had inherited with the apartment; maybe she had to use the bedpan or was just looking at the clock . . . but the thoughts did not comfort him; he was sick with an unaccountable fear as he unlocked the hall door. His own entrance showed light through the crack at the bottom; he dropped his keys as he fumbled with them, and at last

opened the door.

He gasped as if he had been struck in the solar plexus. The bed was made, flat, neat, and she was not in it. He spun around; his frantic gaze saw her and passed her before he could believe his eyes. Tall, queenly in her red housecoat, she stood at the other end of the room, by the sink.

He stared at her in amazement. She came to him, and as he filled his lungs for one of his grating yells, she put a finger on her lips and, lightly, her other hand across his mouth. Neither of these gestures, both even, would have been enough to quiet him ordinarily, but there was something else about her, something which did not wait for what he might do and would not quail before him if he did it. He was instantly confused, and silent. He stared after her as, without breaking stride, she passed him and gently closed the door. She took his hand, but the keys were in the way; she drew them from his fingers and tossed them on the table, and then took his hand again, firmly. She was sure, decisive; she was one who had thought things out and weighed and discarded, and now knew what to do. But she was triumphant in some way, too; she had the pose of a victor and the radiance of the witness to a miracle. He could cope with her helplessness, of any kind, to any degree, but this—he had to think and she gave him no time to think.

She led him to the bed and put her hands on his shoulders, turning him and making him sit down. She sat close to him, her face alight, and when again he filled his lungs, "Shh!" she hissed, sharply, and smilingly covered his mouth with her hand. She took his shoulders again and looked straight into his eyes, and said clearly, "I can talk now, I can talk!"

Numbly he gazed at her.

"Three days already, it was a secret, it was a surprise." Her voice was husky, hoarse even, but very clear and deeper than her light body indicated. "I been practicing, to be sure. I'm all right again, I'm all right. You fix everything!" she said, and laughed.

Hearing that laugh, seeing the pride and joy in her face, he could take nothing away from her. "Ahh . . ." he said, wonderingly.

She laughed again. "I can go, I can go!" she sang. She leapt up suddenly and pirouetted, and leaned over him laughing. He gazed up at her and her flying hair, and squinted his eyes as he would looking into the sun.

"Go?" he blared, the pressure of his confusion forcing the syllable out as an explosive shout.

She sobered immediately, and sat down again close to him. "Oh, honey, don't, *don't* look as if you was knifed or something. You know I can't camp on you, live off you, just forever!"

"No, no you stay," he blurted, anguish in his face.

"Now look," she said, speaking simply and slowly as to a child. "I'm all well again, I can talk now. It wouldn't be right, me staying, locked up here, that bedpan and all. Now wait, wait," she said quickly before he could form a word. "I don't mean I'm not grateful, you been . . . you been, well, I just can't tell you. Look, nobody in my life ever did anything like this, I mean, I had to run away when I was thirteen, I done all sorts of bad things. And I got treated . . . I mean, nobody else . . . look, here's what I mean, up to now I'd steal, I'd rob anybody, what the hell. What I mean, why not, you see?" She shook him gently to make him see; then, recognizing the blankness and misery of his expression, she wet her lips and started over. "What I'm trying to say is, you been so kind, all this—" she waved her hand at the blue rabbit, the turtle tank, everything in the room—"I can't take any more. I mean, not a thing, not breakfast. If I could pay you back some way, no matter what, I would, you know I would." There was a tinge of bitterness in her husky voice. "Nobody can pay you anything. You don't need anything or anybody. I can't give you anything you need, or do anything for you that needs doing, you do it all yourself. If there was something you wanted from me—" She curled her hands inward and placed her fingertips between her breasts, inclining her head with a strange submissiveness that made him ache. "But no, you fix everything," she mimicked. There was no mockery in it.

"No, no, you don't go," he whispered harshly.

She patted his cheek, and her eyes loved him. "I do go," she said, smiling. Then the smile disappeared. "I got to explain to you, those hoods who cut me, I asked for that. I goofed. I was doing something real bad—well, I'll tell you. I was a runner, know what I mean? I mean dope, I was selling it."

He looked at her blankly. He was not catching one word in ten; he was biting and biting only on emptiness and uselessness, aloneness, and the terrible truth of this room without her or the blue rabbit or anything else but what it had contained all these years—linoleum with the design scratched off, six novels he

couldn't read, a stove waiting for someone to cook for, grime and regularity and who needs you?

She misunderstood his expression. "Honey, honey, don't look at me like that, I'll never do it again. I only did it because I didn't care, I used to get glad when people hurt themselves; yeah, I mean that. I never knew someone could be kind, like you; I always thought that was sort of a lie, like the movies. Nice but not real, not for me.

"But I have to tell you, I swiped a cache, my God, twenty, twenty-two Gs worth. I had it all of forty minutes, they caught up with me." Her eyes widened and saw things not in the room. "With a razor, he went to hit me with it so hard he broke it on top of the car door. He hit me here *down* and here *up*, I guess he was going to gut me but the razor was busted." She expelled air from her nostrils, and her gaze came back into the room. "I guess I got the lump on the head when they threw me out of the car. I guess that's why I couldn't talk, I heard of that. Oh *honey!* Don't look like that, you're tearing me apart!"

He looked at her dolefully and wagged his big head helplessly from side to side. She knelt before him suddenly and took both his hands. "Listen, you *got* to understand. I was going to slide out while you were working but I stayed just so I could make you understand. After all you done. . . . See, I'm well, I can't stay cooped up in one room forever. If I could, I'd get work some place near here and see you all the time, honest I would. But my life isn't worth a rubber dime in this town. I got to leave here and that means I got to leave town. I'll be all right, honey. I'll write to you; I'll never forget you, how could I?"

She was far ahead of him. He had grasped that she wanted to leave him; the next thing he understood was that she wanted to leave town too.

"You don't go," he choked. "You need me."

"You don't need me," she said fondly, "and I don't need you. It comes to that, honey; it's the way you fixed it. It's the right way; can't you see that?"

Right in there was the third thing he understood.

He stood up slowly, feeling her hands slide from his, from his knees to the floor as he stepped away from her. "Oh God!" she cried from the floor where she knelt, "you're killing me, taking it this way! Can't you be happy for me?"

He stumbled across the room and caught himself on the lower

shelf of the china closet. He looked back and forward along the dark, echoing corridor of his years, stretching so far and drearily, and he looked at this short bright segment slipping away from him. . . . He heard her quick footsteps behind him and when he turned he had the flatiron in his hand. She never saw it. She came to him bright-faced, pleading, and he put out his arms and she ran inside, and the iron curved around and crashed into the back of her head.

He lowered her gently down on the linoleum and stood for a long time over her, crying quietly.

Then he put the iron away and filled the kettle and a saucepan with water, and in the saucepan he put needles and a clamp and thread and little slabs of sponge and a knife and pliers. From the gateleg table and from a drawer he got his two plastic tablecloths and began arranging them on the bed.

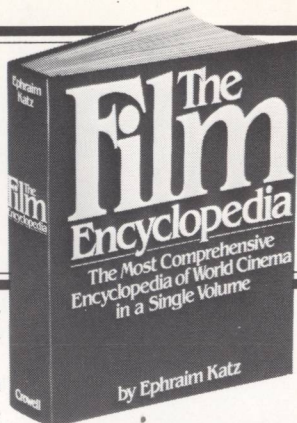
"I fix everything," he murmured as he worked. "Fix it right."

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