

FAIR GAME

Philip K. Dick

Professor Anthony Douglas lowered gratefully into his red-leather easy chair and sighed. A long sigh, accompanied by labored removal of his shoes and numerous grunts as he kicked them into the corner. He folded his hands across his ample middle and lay back, eyes closed.

"Tired?" Laura Douglas asked, turning from the kitchen stove a moment, her dark eyes sympathetic.

"You're darn right." Douglas surveyed the evening paper across from him on the couch. Was it worth it? No, not really. He felt around in his coat pocket for his cigarettes and lit up slowly, leisurely. "Yeah, I'm tired, all right. We're starting a whole new line of research. Whole flock of bright young men in from Washington today. Briefcases and slide rules."

"Not—"

"Oh, I'm still in charge." Professor Douglas grinned expansively. "Perish the thought." Pale gray cigarette smoke billowed around him. "It'll be another few years before they're ahead of me. They'll have to sharpen up their slide rules just a little bit more. . ."

His wife smiled and continued preparing dinner. Maybe it was the atmosphere of the little Colorado town. The sturdy, impassive mountain peaks around them. The thin, chill air. The quiet citizens. In any case, her husband seemed utterly unbothered by the tensions and doubts that pressured other members of his profession. A lot of aggressive newcomers were swelling the ranks of nuclear physics these days. Old-timers were tottering in their positions, abruptly insecure. Every college, every physics department and lab was being invaded by the new horde of skilled young men. Even here at Bryant College, so far off the beaten track.

But if Anthony Douglas worried, he never let it show. He rested happily in his easy chair, eyes shut, a blissful smile on his face. He was tired—but

at peace. He sighed again, this time more from pleasure than fatigue.

"It's true," he murmured lazily. "I may be old enough to be their father, but I'm still a few jumps ahead of them. Of course, I know the ropes better. And—"

"And the wires. The ones worth pulling."

"Those, too. In any case, I think I'll come off from this new line we're doing just about. . ."

His voice trailed off.

"What's the matter?" Laura asked.

Douglas half rose from his chair. His face had gone suddenly white. He stared in horror, gripping the arms of his chair, his mouth opening and closing.

At the window was a great eye. An immense eye that gazed into the room intently, studying him. The eye filled the whole window.

"Good God!" Douglas cried.

The eye withdrew. Outside there was only the evening gloom, the dark hills and trees, the street. Douglas sank down slowly in his chair.

"What was it?" Laura demanded sharply. "What did you see? Was somebody out there?"

Douglas clasped and unclasped his hands. His lips twitched violently. "I'm telling you the truth, Bill. I saw it myself. It was real. I wouldn't say so, otherwise. You know that. Don't you believe me?"

"Did anybody else see it?" Professor William Henderson asked, chewing his pencil thoughtfully. He had cleared a place on the dinner table, pushed back his plate and silver and laid out his notebook. "Did Laura see it?"

"No. Laura had her back turned."

"What time was it?"

"Half an hour ago. I had just got home. About six-thirty. I had my shoes off, taking it easy." Douglas wiped his forehead with a shaking hand.

"You say it was unattached? There was nothing else? Just the—eye?"

"Just the eye. One huge eye looking in at me. Taking in everything. As if.
.."

"As if what?"

"As if it was looking down a microscope."

Silence.

From across the table, Henderson's red-haired wife spoke up. "You always were a strict empiricist, Doug. You never went in for any nonsense before. But this. . . It's too bad nobody else saw it."

"Of course nobody else saw it!"

"What do you mean?"

"The damn thing was looking at *me*. It was *me* it was studying." Douglas's voice rose hysterically. "How do you think I feel—scrutinized by an eye as big as a piano! My God, if I weren't so well integrated, I'd be out of my mind!"

Henderson and his wife exchanged glances. Bill, dark-haired and handsome, ten years Douglas's junior. Vivacious Jean Henderson, lecturer in child psychology, lithe and full-bosomed in her nylon blouse and slacks.

"What do you make of this?" Bill asked her. "This is more along your line."

"It's *your* line," Douglas snapped. "Don't try to pass this off as a morbid projection. I came to you because you're head of the Biology Department."

"You think it's an animal? A giant sloth or something?"

"It must be an animal."

"Maybe it's a joke," Jean suggested. "Or an advertising sign. An oculist's display. Somebody may have been carrying it past the window."

Douglas took a firm grip on himself. "The eye was alive. It looked at me. It considered me. Then it withdrew. As if it had moved away from the lens." He shuddered. "I tell you it was *studying* me!"

"You only?"

"Me. Nobody else."

"You seem curiously convinced it was looking down from above," Jean said.

"Yes, down. Down at me. That's right." An odd expression flickered across Douglas's face. "You have it, Jean. As if it came from up there." He jerked his hand upward.

"Maybe it was God," Bill said thoughtfully.

Douglas said nothing. His face turned ash white and his teeth chattered.

"Nonsense," Jean said. "God is a psychological transcendent symbol expressing unconscious forces."

"Did it look at you accusingly?" asked Bill. "As if you'd done something wrong?"

"No. With interest. With considerable interest." Douglas raised himself. "I have to get back. Laura thinks I'm having some kind of fit. I haven't told her, of course. She's not scientifically disciplined. She wouldn't be able to handle such a concept."

"It's a little tough even for us," Bill said.

Douglas moved nervously toward the door. "You can't think of any explanation? Something thought extinct that might still be roaming around these mountains?"

"None that we know of. If I should hear of any—"

"You said it looked down," Jean said. "Not bending down to peer in at you. Then it couldn't have been an animal or terrestrial being." She was deep in thought. "Maybe we're being observed."

"Not you," Douglas said miserably. "Just me."

"By another race," Bill put in. "You think—"

"Maybe it's an eye from Mars."

Douglas opened the front door carefully and peered out. The night was black. A faint wind moved through the trees and along the highway. His car was dimly visible, a black square against the hills. "If you think of anything, call me."

"Take a couple of phenobarbitals before you hit the sack," Jean suggested. "Calm your nerves."

Douglas was out on the porch. "Good idea. Thanks." He shook his head. "Maybe I'm out of my mind. Good Lord. Well, I'll see you later."

He walked down the steps, gripping the rail tightly. "Good night!" Bill called. The door closed and the porch light clicked off.

Douglas went cautiously toward his car. He reached out into the darkness, feeling for the door handle. One step. Two steps. It was silly. A grown man—practically middle-aged—in the twentieth century. Three steps.

He found the door and opened it, sliding quickly inside and locking it after him. He breathed a silent prayer of thanks as he snapped on the motor and the headlights. Silly as hell. A giant eye. A stunt of some sort.

He turned the thoughts over in his mind. Students? Jokesters? Communists? A plot to drive him out of his mind? He was important. Probably the most important nuclear physicist in the country. And this new project. . .

He drove the car slowly forward, onto the silent highway. He watched each bush and tree as the car gained speed.

A Communist plot. Some of the students were in a left-wing club. Some sort of Marxist study group. Maybe they had rigged up—

In the glare of the headlights something glittered. Something at the edge of the highway.

Douglas gazed at it, transfixed. Something square, a long block in the weeds at the side of the highway, where the great dark trees began. It glittered and shimmered. He slowed down, almost to a stop.

A bar of gold, lying at the edge of the road.

It was incredible. Slowly, Professor Douglas rolled down the window and peered out. Was it really gold? He laughed nervously. Probably not. He had often seen gold, of course. This *looked* like gold. But maybe it was lead, an ingot of lead with a gilt coating.

But—why?

A joke. A prank. College kids. They must have seen his car go past toward the Hendersons' and knew he'd soon be driving back.

Or—or it really *was* gold. Maybe an armored car had gone past. Turned the corner too swiftly. The ingot had slid out and fallen into the weeds. In that case there was a little fortune lying there, in the darkness at the edge of the highway.

But it was illegal to possess gold. He'd have to return it to the Government. But couldn't he saw off just a little piece? And if he did return it there was no doubt a reward of some kind. Probably several thousand dollars.

A mad scheme flashed briefly through his mind. Get the ingot, crate it up, fly it to Mexico, out of the country. Eric Barnes owned a Piper Cub. He could easily get it into Mexico. Sell it. Retire. Live in comfort the rest of his life.

Professor Douglas snorted angrily. It was his duty to return it. Call the Denver Mint, tell them about it. Or the police department. He reversed his car and backed up until he was even with the metal bar. He turned off the motor and slid out onto the dark highway. He had a job to do. As a loyal citizen—and, God knew, fifty tests had shown he *was* loyal—there was a job for him here. He leaned into the car and fumbled in the dashboard for the flashlight. If somebody had lost a bar of gold, it was up to him. . .

A bar of gold. Impossible. A slow, cold chill settled over him, numbing his heart. A tiny voice in the back of his mind spoke clearly and rationally to him: *Who would walk off and leave an ingot of gold?*

Something was going on.

Fear gripped him. He stood frozen, trembling with terror. The dark, deserted highway. The silent mountains. He was alone. A perfect spot. If they wanted to get him—

They?

Who?

He looked quickly around. Hiding in the trees, most likely. Waiting for him. Waiting for him to cross the highway, leave the road and enter the woods. Bend down and try to pick up the ingot. One quick blow as he bent over; that would be it.

Douglas scrambled back into his car and snapped on the motor. He raced the motor and released the brake. The car jerked forward and gained speed. His hands shaking, Douglas bore down desperately on the wheel. He had to get out. Get away before—whoever they were got him.

As he shifted into high he took one last look back, peering around through the open window. The ingot was still there, still glowing among the dark weeds at the edge of the highway. But there was a strange vagueness about it, an uncertain waver in the nearby atmosphere.

Abruptly the ingot faded and disappeared. Its glow receded into darkness.

Douglas glanced up, and gasped in horror.

In the sky above him, something blotted out the stars. A great shape, so huge it staggered him. The shape moved, a disembodied circle of living presence, directly over his head.

A face. A gigantic, cosmic face peering down. Like some great moon, blotting out everything else. The face hung for an instant, intent on him—on the spot he had just vacated. Then the face, like the ingot, faded and sank into darkness.

The stars returned. He was alone.

Douglas sank back against the seat. The car veered crazily and roared down the highway. His hands slid from the wheel and dropped at his sides. He caught the wheel again, just in time.

There was no doubt about it. Somebody was after him. Trying to get him. But no Communists or student practical jokers. Or any beast, lingering from the dim past.

Whatever it was, whoever they were, had nothing to do with Earth. It—they—were from some other world. They were out to get him.

Him.

But—why?

Pete Berg listened closely. "Go on," he said when Douglas halted.

"That's all." Douglas turned to Bill Henderson. "Don't try to tell me I'm out of my mind. I really saw it. It was looking down at me. The whole face

this time, not just the eye."

"You think this was the face that the eye belonged to?" Jean Henderson asked.

"I know it. The face had the same expression as the eye. Studying me."

"We've got to call the police," Laura Douglas said in a thin, clipped voice. "This can't go on. If somebody's out to get him—"

"The police won't do any good." Bill Henderson paced back and forth. It was late, after midnight. All the lights in the Douglas house were on. In one corner old Milton Erick, head of the Math Department, sat curled up, taking everything in, his wrinkled face expressionless.

"We can assume," Professor Erick said calmly, removing his pipe from between his yellow teeth, "they're a nonterrestrial race. Their size and their position indicate they're not Earthbound in any sense."

"But they can't just *stand* in the sky!" Jean exploded. "There's nothing up there!"

"There may be other configurations of matter not normally connected or related to our own. An endless or multiple coexistence of universe systems, lying along a plane of coordinates totally unexplainable in present terms. Due to some singular juxtaposition of tangents, we are, at this moment, in contact with one of these other configurations."

"He means," Bill Henderson explained, "that these people after Doug don't belong to our universe. They come from a different dimension entirely."

"The face wavered," Douglas murmured. "The gold and the face both wavered and faded out."

"Withdrew," Erick stated. "Returned to their own universe. They have entry into ours at will, it would seem, a hole, so to speak, that they can enter through and return again."

"It's a pity," Jean said, "they're so damn big. If they were smaller—"

"Size is in their favor," Erick admitted. "An unfortunate circumstance."

"All this academic wrangling!" Laura cried wildly. "We sit here working out theories and meanwhile they are after him!"

"This might explain gods," Bill said suddenly.

"Gods?"

Bill nodded. "Don't you see? In the past these beings looked across the nexus at us, into our universe. Maybe even stepped down. Primitive people saw them and weren't able to explain them. They built religions around them. Worshipped them."

"Mount Olympus," Jean said. "Of course. And Moses met God at the top of Mount Sinai. We're high up in the Rockies. Maybe contact only comes at high places. In the mountains, like this."

"And the Tibetan monks are situated in the highest land mass in the world," Bill added. "That whole area. The highest and the oldest part of the world. All the great religions have been revealed in the mountains. Brought down by people who saw God and carried the word back."

"What I can't understand," Laura said, "is why they want *him*." She spread her hands helplessly. "Why not somebody else? Why do they have to single him out?"

Bill's face was hard. "I think that's pretty clear."

"Explain," Erick rumbled.

"What is Doug? About the best nuclear physicist in the world. Working on top-secret projects in nuclear fission. Advanced research. The Government is underwriting everything Bryant College is doing because Douglas is here."

"So?"

"They want him because of his ability. Because he *knows* things. Because of their size-relationship to this universe, they can subject our lives to as careful a scrutiny as we maintain in the biology labs of—well, of a culture of *Sarcina Pulmonum*. But that doesn't mean they're culturally advanced over us."

"Of course!" Pete Berg exclaimed. "They want Doug for his knowledge. They want to pirate him off and make use of his mind for their own cultures."

"Parasites!" Jean gasped. "They must have always depended on us. Don't you see? Men in the past who have disappeared, spirited off by these

creatures." She shivered. "They probably regard us as some sort of testing ground, where techniques and knowledge are painfully developed—for their benefit."

Douglas started to answer, but the words never escaped his mouth. He sat rigid in his chair, his head turned to one side.

Outside, in the darkness beyond the house, someone was calling his name.

He got up and moved toward the door. They were all staring at him in amazement.

"What is it?" Bill demanded. "What's the matter, Doug?"

Laura caught his arm. "What's wrong? Are you sick? Say something! *Doug!*"

Professor Douglas jerked free and pulled open the front door. He stepped out onto the porch. There was a faint moon. A soft light hovered over everything.

"Professor Douglas!" The voice again, sweet and fresh—a girl's voice.

Outlined by the moonlight, at the foot of the porch steps, stood a girl. Blonde-haired, perhaps twenty years old. In a checkered skirt, pale Angora sweater, a silk kerchief around her neck. She was waving at him anxiously, her small face pleading.

"Professor, do you have a minute? Something terrible has gone wrong with. . ." Her voice trailed off as she moved nervously away from the house, into the darkness.

"What's the matter?" he shouted.

He could hear her voice faintly. She was moving off.

Douglas was torn with indecision. He hesitated, then hurried impatiently down the stairs after her. The girl retreated from him, wringing her hands together, her full lips twisting wildly with despair. Under her sweater, her breasts rose and fell in an agony of terror, each quiver sharply etched by the moonlight.

"What is it?" Douglas cried. "What's wrong?" He hurried angrily after her. "For God's sake, stand still!"

The girl was still moving away, drawing him farther and farther away from the house, toward the great green expanse of lawn, the beginning of the campus. Douglas was overcome with annoyance. Damn the girl! Why couldn't she wait for him?

"Hold on a minute!" he said, hurrying after her. He started out onto the dark lawn, puffing with exertion. "Who are you? What the hell do you —"

There was a flash. A bolt of blinding light crashed past him and seared a smoking pit in the lawn a few feet away.

Douglas halted, dumfounded. A second bolt came, this one just ahead of him. The wave of heat threw him back. He stumbled and half fell. The girl had abruptly stopped. She stood silent and unmoving, her face expressionless. There was a peculiar waxy quality to her. She had become, all at once, utterly inanimate.

But he had no time to think about that. Douglas turned and lumbered back toward the house. A third bolt came, striking just ahead of him. He veered to the right and threw himself into the shrubs growing near the wall. Rolling and gasping, he pressed against the concrete side of the house, squeezing next to it as hard as he could.

There was a sudden shimmer in the star-studded sky above him. A faint motion. Then nothing. He was alone. The bolts ceased. And—

The girl was gone, also.

A decoy. A clever imitation to lure him away from the house, so he'd move out into the open where they could take a shot at him.

He got shakily to his feet and edged around the side of the house. Bill Henderson and Laura and Berg were on the porch, talking nervously and looking around for him. There was his car, parked in the driveway. Maybe, if he could reach it—

He peered up at the sky. Only stars. No hint of them. If he could get in his car and drive off, down the highway, away from the mountains, toward Denver, where it was lower, maybe he'd be safe.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. Only ten yards to the car. Thirty feet. If he could once get in it—

He ran. Fast. Down the path and along the driveway. He grabbed open

the car door and leaped inside. With one quick motion he threw the switch and released the brake.

The car glided forward. The motor came on with a sputter. Douglas bore down desperately on the gas. The car leaped forward. On the porch, Laura shrieked and started down the stairs. Her cry and Bill's startled shout were lost in the roar of the engine.

A moment later he was on the highway, racing away from town, down the long, curving road toward Denver.

He could call Laura from Denver. She could join him. They could take the train east. The hell with Bryant College. His life was at stake. He drove for hours without stopping, through the night. The sun came up and rose slowly in the sky. More cars were on the road now. He passed a couple of diesel trucks rumbling slowly and cumbersomely along.

He was beginning to feel a little better. The mountains were behind. More distance between him and them. . .

His spirits rose as the day warmed. There were hundreds of universities and laboratories scattered around the country. He could easily continue with his work someplace else. They'd never get him, once he was out of the mountains.

He slowed his car down. The gas gauge was near empty.

To the right of the road was a filling station and a small roadside cafe. The sight of the cafe reminded him he hadn't eaten breakfast. His stomach was beginning to protest. There were a couple of cars pulled up in front of the cafe. A few people were sitting inside at the counter.

He turned off the highway and coasted into the gas station.

"Fill her up!" he called to the attendant. He got out on the hot gravel, leaving the car in gear. His mouth watered. A plateful of hotcakes, side order of ham, steaming black coffee. . . "Can I leave her here?"

"The car?" The white-clad attendant unscrewed the cap and began filling the tank. "What do you mean?"

"Fill her up and park her for me. I'll be out in a few minutes. I want to catch some breakfast."

"Breakfast?"

Douglas was annoyed. What was the matter with the man? He indicated the cafe. A truck driver had pushed the screen door open and was standing on the step, picking his teeth thoughtfully. Inside, the waitress hustled back and forth. He could already smell the coffee, the bacon frying on the griddle. A faint tinny sound of a jukebox drifted out. A warm, friendly sound. "The cafe."

The attendant stopped pumping gas. He put down the hose slowly and turned toward Douglas, a strange expression on his face. "What cafe?" he said.

The cafe wavered and abruptly winked out. Douglas fought down a scream of terror. Where the cafe had been there was only an open field.

Greenish brown grass. A few rusty tin cans. Bottles. Debris. A leaning fence. Off in the distance, the outline of the mountains.

Douglas tried to get hold of himself. "I'm a little tired," he muttered. He climbed unsteadily back into the car. "How much?"

"I just hardly began to fill the—"

"Here." Douglas pushed a bill at him. "Get out of the way." He turned on the motor and raced out onto the highway, leaving the astonished attendant staring after him.

That had been close. Damn close. A trap. And he had almost stepped inside.

But the thing that really terrified him wasn't the closeness. *He was out of the mountains and they had still been ahead of him.*

It hadn't done any good. He wasn't any safer than last night. They were everywhere.

The car sped along the highway. He was getting near Denver—but so what? It wouldn't make any difference. He could dig a hole in Death Valley and still not be safe. They were after him and they weren't going to give up. That much was clear.

He racked his mind desperately. He had to think of something, some way to get loose.

A parasitic culture. A race that preyed on humans, utilized human knowledge and discoveries. Wasn't that what Bill had said? They were after his know-how, his unique ability and knowledge of nuclear physics. He had been singled out, separated from the pack because of his superior ability and training. They would keep after him until they got him. And then—what?

Horror gripped him. The gold ingot. The decoy. The girl had *looked* perfectly real. The cafe full of people. Even the smells of food. Bacon frying. Steaming coffee.

God, if only he were just an ordinary person, without skill, without special ability. If only—

A sudden flapping sound. The car lurched. Douglas cursed wildly. A flat. Of all times. . .

Of all times.

Douglas brought the car to a halt at the side of the road. He switched off the motor and put on the brake. For a while he sat in silence. Finally he fumbled in his coat and got out a mashed package of cigarettes. He lit up slowly and then rolled the window down to let in some air.

He was trapped, of course. There was nothing he could do. The flat had obviously been arranged. Something on the road, sprinkled down from above. Tacks, probably.

The highway was deserted. No cars in sight. He was utterly alone, between towns. Denver was thirty miles ahead. No chance of getting there. Nothing around him but terribly level fields, desolated plains.

Nothing but level ground—and the blue sky above.

Douglas peered up. He couldn't see them, but they were there, waiting for him to get out of his car. His knowledge, his ability, would be utilized by an alien culture. He would become an instrument in their hands. All his learning would be theirs. He would be a slave and nothing more.

Yet, in a way, it was a complement. From a whole society, he alone had been selected. His skill and knowledge, over everything else. A faint glow rose in his cheeks. Probably they had been studying him for some time. The great eye had no doubt often peered down through its telescope, or microscope, or whatever it was, peered down and seen him. Seen his

ability and realized what that would be worth to its own culture.

Douglas opened the car door. He stepped out onto the hot pavement. He dropped his cigarette and calmly stubbed it out. He took a deep breath, stretching and yawning. He could see the tacks now, bright bits of light on the surface of the pavement. Both front tires were flat.

Something shimmered above him. Douglas waited quietly. Now that it had finally come, he was no longer afraid. He watched with a kind of detached curiosity. The something grew. It fanned out over him, swelling and expanding. For a moment it hesitated. Then it descended.

Douglas stood still as the enormous cosmic net closed over him. The strands pressed against him as the net rose. He was going up, heading toward the sky. But he was relaxed, at peace, no longer afraid.

Why be afraid? He would be doing much the same work as always. He would miss Laura and the college, of course, the intellectual companionship of the faculty, the bright faces of the students. But no doubt he would find companionship up above. Persons to work with. Trained minds with which to communicate.

The net was lifting him faster and faster. The ground fell rapidly away. The Earth dwindled from a flat surface to a globe. Douglas watched with professional interest. Above him, beyond the intricate strands of the net, he could see the outline of the other universe, the new world toward which he was heading.

Shapes. Two enormous shapes squatting down. Two incredibly huge figures bending over. One was drawing in the net. The other watched, holding something in its hand. A landscape. Dim forms too vast for Douglas to comprehend.

At last, a thought came. What a struggle.

It was worth it, thought the other creature.

Their thoughts roared through him. Powerful thoughts, from immense minds.

I was right. The biggest yet. What a catch!

Must weigh all of twenty-four ragets!

At last!

Suddenly Douglas's composure left him. A chill of horror flashed through his mind. What were they talking about? What did they mean?

But then he was being dumped from the net. He was falling. Something was coming up at him. A flat, shiny surface. What was it?

Oddly, it looked almost like a frying pan.

—«»—«»—«»—

Administrivia:

Version 3.1

HTML Repackaging by Monica

Style Sheet by the E-Book Design Group

2003.07.07