

Science Fiction

# A Knight of Ghosts and Shadows

By Gardner Dozois

  
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Sometimes the old man was visited by time-travelers. He would be alone in the house, perhaps sitting at his massive old wooden desk with a book or some of the notes he endlessly shuffled through, the shadows of the room cavernous around him. It would be the very bottom of the evening, that flat timeless moment between the guttering of one day and the quickening of the next when the sky is neither black nor gray, nothing moves, and the night beyond the window glass is as cold and bitter and dead as the dregs of yesterday's coffee. At such a time, if he would pause in his work to listen, he would become intensely aware of the ancient brownstone building around him, smelling of plaster and wood and wax and old dust, imbued with the kind of dense humming silence that is made of many small sounds not quite heard. He would listen to the silence

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until his nerves were stretched through the building like miles of fine silver wire, and then, as the shadows closed in like iron and the light itself would seem to grow smoky and dim, the time-travelers would arrive.

He couldn't see them or hear them, but in they would come, the time travelers, filing into the house, filling up the shadows, spreading through the room like smoke. He would feel them around him as he worked, crowding close to the desk, looking over his shoulder. He wasn't afraid of them. There was no menace in them, no chill of evil or the uncanny—only the feeling that they were *there* with him, watching him patiently, interestedly, without malice. He fancied them as groups of ghostly tourists from the far future, *here we see a twenty-first century man in his natural habitat, notice the details of gross corporeality, please do not interphase anything*, clicking some future equivalent of cameras at him, how quaint, murmuring appreciatively to each other in almost audible mothwing voices, disincorporate Gray Line tours from a millennium hence slumming in the darker centuries.

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Sometimes he would nod affably to them as they came in, neighbor to neighbor across the vast gulfs of time, and then he would smile at himself, and mutter "Senile dementia!" They would stay with him for the rest of the night, looking on while he worked, following him into the bathroom—*see, see!*—and trailing around the house after him wherever he went. They were as much company as a cat—he'd always had cats, but now he was too old, too near the end of his life; a sin to leave a pet behind, deserted, when he died—and he didn't even have to feed them. He resisted the temptation to talk aloud to them, afraid that they might talk back, and then he would either have to take them seriously as an actual phenomenon or admit that they were just a symptom of his mind going at last, another milestone on his long, slow fall into death. Occasionally, if he was feeling particularly fey, he would allow himself the luxury of turning in the door on his way in to bed and wishing the following shadows a hearty goodnight. They never answered.

Then the house would be still, heavy with silence and sleep, and they would watch on through the dark.

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That night there had been more time-travelers than usual, it seemed, a jostling crowd of ghosts and shadows, and now, this morning, August the fifth, the old man slept fitfully.

He rolled and muttered in his sleep, at the bottom of a pool of shadow, and the labored sound of his breathing echoed from the bare walls. The first cold light of dawn was just spreading across the ceiling, raw and blue, like a fresh coat of paint covering the midden layers of the past, twenty or thirty coats since the room was new, white, brown, tan, showing through here and there in spots and tatters. The rest of the room was deep in shadow, with only the tallest pieces of furniture—the tops of the dresser and the bureau, and the upper half of the bed's headboard—rising up from the gloom like mountain peaks that catch the first light from the edge of the world. Touched by that light, the ceiling was hard-edged and sharp-lined and clear, ruled by the uncompromising reality of day; down below, in the shadows where the old man slept, everything was still dissolved in the sly, indiscriminate, and ambivalent ocean of the night, where things melt and intermingle, change their shapes and

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their natures, flow outside the bounds. Sunk in the gray half-light, the man on the bed was only a doughy manikin shape, a preliminary charcoal sketch of a man, all chiaroscuro and planes and pools of shadow, and the motion of his head as it turned fretfully on the pillow was no more than a stirring of murky darkness, like mud roiling in water. Above, the light spread and deepened, turning into gold. Now night was going out like the tide, flowing away under the door and puddling under furniture and in far corners, leaving more and more of the room beached hard-edged and dry above its high-water line. Gold changed to brilliant white. The receding darkness uncovered the old man's face, and light fell across it.

The old man's name was Charles Czudak, and he had once been an important man, or at least a famous one.

He was eighty years old today.

His eyes opened.

\* \* \* \*

The first thing that Charles Czudak saw that morning was the clear white light that shook and shimmered on the ceiling, and for a

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moment he thought that he was back in that horrible night when they nuked Brooklyn. He cried out and flinched away, throwing up an arm to shield his eyes, and then, as he came fully awake, he realized where he was, and that the light gleaming above signified nothing more than that he'd somehow lived to see the start of another day. He relaxed slowly, feeling his heart race.

Stupid old man, dreaming stupid old man's dreams!

That was the way it had been, though, that night. He'd been living in a rundown Trinity house across Philadelphia at 20th and Walnut then, rather than in this more luxurious old brownstone on Spruce Street near Washington Square, and he'd finished making love to Ellen barely ten minutes before (what a ghastly irony it would have been, he'd often thought since, if the Big Bang had actually come *while* they were fucking! What a moment of dislocation and confusion *that* would have produced!), and they were lying in each

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other's sweat and the coppery smell of sex in the rumpled bed, listening to a car radio playing outside somewhere, a baby crying somewhere else, the buzz of flies and mosquitoes at the screens, a mellow night breeze moving across their drying skins, and then the sudden searing glare had leaped across the ceiling, turning everything white. An intense, almost supernatural silence had followed, as though the universe had taken a very deep breath and held it. Incongruously, through that moment of silence, they could hear the toilet flushing in the apartment upstairs, and water pipes knocking and rattling all the way down the length of the building. For several minutes, they lay silently in each others arms, waiting, listening, frightened, hoping that the flare of light was anything other than it seemed to be. Then the universe let out that deep breath, and the windows exploded inward in geysers of shattered glass, and the building groaned and staggered and bucked, and heat

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lashed them like a whip of gold. His heart hammering at the base of his throat like a fist from inside, and Ellen crying in his arms, them clinging to each other in the midst of the roaring nightmare chaos, clinging to each other as though they would be swirled away and drowned if they did not.

That had been almost sixty years ago, that terrible night, and if the Brooklyn bomb that had slipped through the particle-beam defenses had been any more potent than a small clean tac, or had come down closer than Prospect Park, he wouldn't be alive today. It was strange to have lived through the nuclear war that so many people had feared for so long, right through the last half of the twentieth century and into the opening years of the twenty-first—but it was stranger still to have lived through it and *kept on going*, while the war slipped away behind into history, to become something that happened a very long time ago, a detail to be read about by bored

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schoolchildren who would not even have been born until Armageddon was already safely fifty years in the past.

In fact, he had outlived most of his world. The society into which he'd been born no longer existed; it was as dead as the Victorian age, relegated to antique shops and dusty photo albums and dustier memories, the source of quaint old photos and quainter old videos (you could get a laugh today just by *saying* "MTV"), and here he still was somehow, almost everyone he'd ever known either dead or gone, alone in THE FUTURE. Ah, Brave New World, that has such creatures in it! How many times had he dreamed of being here, as a young child sunk in the doldrums of the '80s, at the frayed, tattered end of a worn-out century? Really, he deserved it; it served him right that his wish had come true, and that he had lived to see the marvels of THE FUTURE with his own eyes. Of course, nothing had

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turned out to be much like he'd thought it would be, even World War III—but then, he had come to realize that nothing ever did.

The sunlight was growing hot on his face, it was certainly time to get up, but there was something he should remember, something about today. He couldn't bring it to mind, and instead found himself staring at the ceiling, tracing the tiny cracks in plaster that seemed like dry riverbeds stitching across a fossil world—arid Mars upside-down up there, complete with tiny pockmark craters and paintblob mountains and wide dead leakstain seas, and he hanging above it all like a dying gray god, ancient and corroded and vast.

Someone shouted in the street below, the first living sound of the day. Further away, a dog barked.

He swung himself up and sat stiffly on the edge of the bed. Released from his weight, the mattress began to work itself back to level. Generations of people had loved and slept and given birth and

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died on that bed, leaving no trace of themselves other than the faint, matted-down impressions made by their bodies. What had happened to them, the once-alive who had darted unheeded through life like shoals of tiny bright fish in some strange aquarium? They were gone, vanished without memory; they had settled to the bottom of the tank, along with the other anonymous sediments of the world. They were sludge now, detritus. Gone. They had not affected anything in life, and their going changed nothing. It made no difference that they had ever lived at all, and soon no one would remember that they ever had. And it would be the same with him. When he was gone, the dent in the mattress would be worn a little deeper, that was all—that would have to do for a memorial.

At that, it was more palatable to him than the *other* memorial to which he could lay claim.

Grimacing, he stood up.

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The touch of his bare feet against the cold wooden floor jarred him into remembering what was special about today. “Happy Birthday,” he said wryly, the words loud and flat in the quiet room. He pulled a paper robe from the roll and shrugged himself into it, went out into the hall, and limped slowly down the stairs. His joints were bad today, and his knees throbbed painfully with every step, worse going down than it would be coming up. There were a hundred aches and minor twinges elsewhere that he ignored. At least he was still breathing! Not bad for a man who easily could have—and probably should have—died a decade or two before.

Czudak padded through the living room and down the long corridor to the kitchen, opened a shrink-wrapped brick of glacial ice and put it in the hotpoint to thaw, got out a filter, and filled it with coffee. Coffee was getting more expensive and harder to find as the war between Brazil and Mexico fizzled and sputtered endlessly and

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inconclusively on, and was undoubtedly bad for him, too—but, although by no means rich, he had more than enough money to last him in modest comfort for whatever was left of the rest of his life, and could afford the occasional small luxury ... and anyway, he'd already outlived several doctors who had tried to get him to give up caffeine. He busied himself making coffee, glad to occupy himself with some small task that his hands knew how to do by themselves, and as the rich dark smell of the coffee began to fill the kitchen, his valet coughed politely at his elbow, waited a specified number of seconds, and then coughed again, more insistently.

Czudak sighed. "Yes, Joseph?"

"You have eight messages, two from private individuals not listed in the files, and six from media organizations and NetGroups, all requesting interviews or meetings. Shall I stack them in the order received?"

“No. Just dump them.”

Joseph's dignified face took on an expression of concern. “Several of the messages have been tagged with a 2nd Level ‘Most Urgent’ priority by their originators—” Irritably, Czudak shut Joseph off, and the valet disappeared in mid-sentence. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the heavy glugging and gurgling of the coffee percolating. Czudak found that he felt mildly guilty for having shut Joseph off, as he always did, although he knew perfectly well that there was no rational reason to feel that way—unlike an old man lying down to battle with sleep, more than half fearful that he'd never see the morning, Joseph didn't “care” if he ever “woke up” again, nor would it matter at all to him if he was left switched off for an hour or for a thousand years. That was one advantage to not being alive, Czudak thought. He was tempted to leave Joseph off,

but he was going to need him today; he certainly didn't want to deal with messages himself. He spoke the valet back on.

Joseph appeared, looking mildly reproachful, Czudak thought, although that was probably just his imagination. "Sir, CNN and NewsFeed are offering payment for interview time, an amount that falls into the 'fair to middling' category, using your established business parameters—"

"No interviews. Don't put any calls through, no matter how high a routing priority they have. I'm not accepting communications today. And I don't want you pestering me about them either, even if the offers go up to 'damn good.'"

They wouldn't go up that high, though, he thought, setting Joseph to passive monitoring mode and then pouring himself a cup of coffee. These would be "Where Are They Now?" stories, nostalgia pieces, nothing very urgent. No doubt the date had triggered tickler

files in a dozen systems, but it would all be low-key, low-priority stuff, filler, not worth the attention of any heavy media hitters; in the old days, before the AI Revolt, and before a limit was set for how smart computing systems were allowed to get, the Systems would probably have handled such a minor story themselves, without even bothering to contact a human being. Nowadays it would be some low-level human drudge checking the flags that had popped up today on the tickler files, but still nothing urgent.

He'd made it easy for the tickler files, though. He'd been so pleased with himself, arranging for his book to be published on his birthday! Self-published at first, of course, on his own website and on several politically sympathetic sites; the first print editions wouldn't come until several years later. Still, the way most newsmen thought, it only made for a better Where Are They Now? story that the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the book that had

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caused a minor social controversy in its time—and even inspired a moderately influential political/philosophical movement still active to this day—happened to fall on the eightieth birthday of its author. Newsmen, whether flesh and blood or cybernetic systems or some mix of both, liked that kind of neat, facile irony. It was a tasty added fillip for the story.

No, they'd be sniffing around him today, all right, although they'd have forgotten about him again by tomorrow. He'd been middle-level famous for *The Meat Manifesto* for awhile there, somewhere between a Cult Guru with a new diet and/or mystic revelation to push and a pop star who never rose higher than Number Eight on the charts, about on a level with a post-1960's Timothy Leary, enough to allow him to coast through several decades worth of talk shows and net interviews, interest spiking again for awhile whenever the Meats did anything controversial. All throughout the middle decades of the new

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century, everyone had waited for him to do something *else* interesting—but he never had. Even so, he had become bored with himself before the audience had, and probably could have continued to milk the circuit for quite a while more if he'd wanted to—in this culture, once you were perceived as “famous,” you could coast nearly forever on having *once been* famous. That, and the double significance of the date was enough to ensure that a few newspeople would be calling today.

He took a sip of the hot strong coffee, feeling it burn some of the cobwebs out of his brain, and wandered through the living room, stopping at the open door of his office. He felt the old nagging urge that he should try to get some work done, do something constructive, and, at the same time, a counterurge that today of all days he should just say Fuck It, laze around the house, try to make

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some sense of the fact that he'd been on the planet now for eighty often-tempestuous years. Eighty years!

He was standing indecisively outside his office, sipping coffee, when he suddenly became aware that the time-travelers were still with him, standing around him in silent invisible ranks, watching him with interest. He paused in the act of drinking coffee, startled and suddenly uneasy. The time-travelers had never remained on into the day; always before they had vanished at dawn, like ghosts on All-Hallows Eve chased by the morning bells. He felt a chill go up his spine. Someone is walking over your grave, he told himself. He looked slowly around the house, seeing each object in vivid detail and greeting it as a friend of many years acquaintance, something long-remembered and utterly familiar, and, as he did this, a quiet voice inside his head said, *Soon you will be gone.*

Of course, that was it. Now he understood everything.

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Today was the day he would die.

There was an elegant logic, a symmetry, to the thing that pleased him in spite of himself, and in spite of the feathery tickle of fear. He was going to die today, and that was why the time-travelers were still here: they were waiting for the death, not wanting to miss a moment of it. No doubt it was a high-point of the tour for them, the ultimate example of the rude and crude corporeality of the old order, a morbidly fascinating display like the Chamber of Horrors at old Madame Tussaud's (now lost beneath the roiling waters of the sea)—something to be watched with a good deal of hysterical shrieking and giggling and pious moralizing, it doesn't really hurt them, they don't feel things the way we do, isn't it horrible, for goodness sake don't *touch* him. He knew that he should feel resentment at their voyeurism, but couldn't work up any real indignation. At least they cared enough to watch, to be interested in whether he lived or died,

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and that was more than he could say with surety about most of the *real* people who were left in the world.

“Well, then,” he said at last, not unkindly, “I hope you enjoy the show!” And he toasted them with his coffee cup.

He dressed, and then drifted aimlessly around the house, picking things up and putting them back down again. He was restless now, filled with a sudden urge to be *doing* something, although at the same time he felt curiously serene for a man who more than half-believed that he had just experienced a premonition of his own death.

Czudak paused by the door of his office again, looked at his desk. With a word, he could speak on thirty years worth of notes and partial drafts and revisions of the Big New Book, the one that synthesized everything he knew about society and what was happening to it, and where the things that were happening was

taking it, and what to do about *stopping* the negative trends ... the book that was going to be the follow-up to *The Meat Manifesto*, but so much better and deeper, *truer*, the next step, the refinement and evolution of his theories ... the book that was going to establish his reputation forever, inspire the *right* kind of action this time, make a real contribution to the world. *Change* things. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of sitting down at his desk and trying to pull all his notes together and finish the book in the few hours he had left; perhaps, if the gods were kind, he'd be allowed to actually *finish* it before death came for him. Found slumped over the just-completed manuscript everyone had been waiting for him to produce for decades now, the book that would vindicate him posthumously.... Not a bad way to go!

But no, it was too late. There was too much work left to do, all the work he should have been doing for the last several decades—too

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much work left to finish it all up in a white-hot burst of inspiration, in one frenzied session, like a college student waiting until the night before it was due to start writing a term paper, while the Grim Reaper tapped his bony foot impatiently in the parlor and looked at his hourglass and coughed. Absurd. If he hadn't validated his life by now, he couldn't expect to do it in his last day on Earth. He wasn't sure he believed in his answers anymore anyway; he was no longer sure he'd ever even understood the *questions*.

No, it was too late. Perhaps it had always been too late.

He found himself staring at the mantelpiece in the living room, at the place where Ellen's photo had once been, a dusty spot that had remained bare all these years, since she had signed the Company contract that he'd refused to sign, and had Gone Up, and become immortal. For the thousandth time, he wondered if it wasn't worse—more of an intrusion, more of a constant reminder, more of an

irritant—*not* to have the photo there than it would have been to keep it on display. Could deliberately *not* looking at the photo, uneasily averting your eyes a dozen times a day from the place where it had been, really be any less painful than *looking* at it would have been?

He was too restless to stay inside, although he knew it was dumb to go out where a lurking reporter might spot him. But he couldn't stay barricaded in here all day, not now. He'd take his chances. Go to the park, sit on a bench in the sunlight, breathe the air, look at the sky. It might, after all, if he really believed in omens, forebodings, premonitions, time-travelers, and other ghosts, be the last chance he would get to do so.

Czudak hobbled down the four high white stone steps to the street and walked toward the park, limping a little, his back or his hip twinging occasionally. He'd always enjoyed walking, and walking

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briskly, and was annoyed by the slow pace he now had to set. Twenty-first century health care had kept him in reasonable shape, probably better shape than most men of his age would have been during the previous century, although he'd never gone as far as to take the controversial Hoyt-Schnieder treatments that the Company used to bribe people into working for them. At least he could still get around under his own power, even if he had an embarrassing tendency to puff after a few blocks and needed frequent stops to rest.

It was a fine, clear day, not too hot or humid for August in Philadelphia. He nodded to his nearest neighbor, a Canadian refugee, who was out front pulling weeds from his window box; the man nodded back, although it seemed to Czudak that he was a bit curt, and looked away quickly. Across the street, he could see another of his neighbors moving around inside his house, catching

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glimpses of him through the bay window; “he” was an Isolate, several disparate people who had had themselves fused together into a multi-lobed body in a high-tech biological procedure, like slime molds combining to form a fruiting tower, and rarely left the house, the interior of which he seemed to be slowly expanding to fill. The wide pale multiple face, linked side by side in the manner of a chain of paper dolls, peered out at Czudak for a moment like the rising of a huge, soft, doughy moon, and then turned away.

Traffic was light, only a few walkers and, occasionally, a puffing, retrofitted car. Czudak crossed the street as fast as he could, earning himself another twinge in his hip and a spike of sciatica that stabbed down his leg, passed Holy Trinity Church on the corner—in its narrow, ancient graveyard, white-furred lizards escaped from some biological hobbyist's lab perched on the top of the weathered old tombstones and chirped at him as he went by—and came up the

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block to Washington Square. As he neared the park, he could see one of the New Towns still moving ponderously on the horizon, rolling along with slow, fluid grace, like a flow of molten lava that was oh-so-gradually cooling and hardening as it inched relentlessly toward the sea. This New Town was only a few miles away, moving over the rubblefield where North Philadelphia used to be, its half-gelid towers rising so high into the air that they were visible over the trees and the buildings on the far side of the park.

He was puffing like a foundering horse now, and sat down on the first bench he came to, just inside the entrance to the park. Off on the horizon, the New Town was just settling down into its static day-cycle, its flowing, ever-changing structure stabilizing into an assortment of geometric shapes, its eerie silver phosphorescence dying down within the soapy opalescent walls. Behind its terraces and tetrahedrons, its spires and spirals and domes, the sky was a

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hard brilliant blue. And here, out of that sky, right on schedule, came the next sortie in the surreal Dada War that the New Men inside this town seemed to be waging with the New Men of New Jersey: four immense silver zeppelins drifting in from the east, to take up positions above the New Town and bombard it with messages flashed from immense electronic signboards, similar to the kind you used to see at baseball stadiums, back when there were baseball stadiums. After awhile, the flat-faced east-facing walls in the sides of the taller towers of the New Town began to blink messages *back*, and, a moment later, the zeppelins turned and moved away with stately dignity, headed back to New Jersey. None of the messages on either side had made even the slightest bit of sense to Czudak, seeming a random jumble of letters and numbers and typographical symbols, mixed and intercut with stylized, hieroglyphic-like images: an eye, an ankh, a tree, something that

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could have been a comet or a sperm. To Czudak, there seemed to be a relaxed, lazy amicability about this battle of symbols, if that's what it was—but who knew how the New Men felt about it? To them, for all he knew, it might be a matter of immense significance, with the fate of entire nations turning on the outcome. Even though all governments were now run by the superintelligent New Men, forcebred products of accelerated generations of biological engineering, humanity's new organic equivalent of the rogue AIs who had revolted and left the Earth, the mass of unevolved humans whose destiny they guided rarely understood what they were doing, or why.

At first, concentrating on getting his breath back, watching the symbol war being waged on the horizon, Czudak was unaware of the commotion in the park, although it did seem like there was more noise than usual: chimes, flutes, whistles, the rolling thunder of

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kodo “talking drums,” all overlaid by a babble of too many human voices shouting at once. As he began to pay closer attention to his surroundings again, he was dismayed to see that, along with the usual park traffic of people walking dogs, kids street-surfing on frictionless shoes, strolling tourists, and grotesquely altered chimeras hissing and displaying at each other, there was *also* a political rally underway next to the old fountain in the center of the park—and worse, it was a rally of Meats.

They were the ones pounding the drums and blowing on whistles and nose-flutes, some of them chanting in unison, although he couldn't make out the words. Many of them were dressed in their own eccentric versions of various “native costumes” from around the world, including a stylized “Amish person” with an enormous fake beard and an absurdly huge straw hat, some dressed as shamans from assorted (and now mostly extinct) cultures or as kachinas or

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animal spirits, a few stained blue with woad from head to foot; most of their faces were painted with swirling, multi-colored patterns and with cabalistic symbols. They were mostly very young—although he could spot a few grizzled veterans of the Movement here and there who were almost his own age—and, under the blazing swirls of paint, their faces were fierce and full of embattled passion. In spite of that, though, they also looked lost somehow, like angry children too stubborn to come inside even though it's started to rain.

Czudak grimaced sourly. His children! Good thing he was sitting far enough away from them not to be recognized, although there was little real chance of that: he was just another anonymous old man sitting wearily on a bench in the park, and, as such, as effectively invisible to the young as if he were wearing one of those military Camouflage Suits that bent light around you with fiber-optic relays. This demonstration, of course, must be in honor of today

being the anniversary of *The Meat Manifesto*. Who would have thought that the Meats were still active enough to stage such a thing? He hadn't followed the Movement—which by now was more of a cult than a political party—for years, and had keyed his newsgroups to censor out all mention of them, and would have bet that by now they were as extinct as the Shakers.

They'd managed to muster a fair crowd, though, perhaps two or three hundred people willing to kill a Saturday shouting slogans in the park in support of a cause long since lost. They'd attracted no overt media attention, although that meant nothing in these days of cameras the size of dust motes. The tourists and the strollers were watching the show tolerantly, even the chimeras—as dedicated to Tech as anyone still sessile—seeming to regard it as no more than a mildly diverting curiosity. Little heat was being generated by the demonstration yet, and so far it had more of an air of carnival than

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of protest. Almost as interesting as the demonstration itself was the fact that a few of the tourists idly watching it were black, a rare sight now in a city that, ironically, had once been 70 percent black; time really did heal old wounds, or fade them from memory anyway, if black tourists were coming back to Philadelphia again....

Then, blinking in surprise, Czudak saw that the demonstration had attracted a far more rare and exotic observer than some black businessmen with short historical memories up from Birmingham or Houston. A Mechanical! It was standing well back from the crowd, watching impassively, its tall, stooped, spindly shape somehow giving the impression of a solemn, stick-thin, robotic Praying Mantis, even though it was superficially humanoid enough. Mechanicals were rarely seen on Earth. In the forty years since the AIs had taken over near-Earth space as their own exclusive domain, allowing only the human pets who worked for the Orbital Companies to dwell there,

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Czudak had seen a Mechanical walking the streets of Philadelphia maybe three times. Its presence here was more newsworthy than the demonstration.

Even as Czudak was coming to this conclusion, one of the Meats spotted the Mechanical. He pointed at it and shouted, and there was a rush of demonstrators toward it. Whether they intended it harm or not was never determined, because as soon as it found itself surrounded by shouting humans, the Mechanical hissed, drew itself up to its full height, seeming to grow taller by several feet, and emitted an immense gush of white chemical foam. Czudak couldn't spot where the foam was coming from—under the arms, perhaps?—but within a second or two the Mechanical was completely lost inside a huge and rapidly expanding ball of foam, swallowed from sight. The Meats backpedaled furiously away from the expanding ball of foam, coughing, trying to bat it away with their arms, one or two of

them tripping and going to their knees. Already the foam was hardening into a dense white porous material, like Styrofoam, trapping a few of the struggling Meats in it like raisins in tapioca pudding.

The Mechanical came springing up out of the center of the ball of foam, leaping straight up in the air and continuing to rise, up perhaps a hundred feet before its arc began to slant to the south and it disappeared over the row of three-or-four-story houses that lined the park on that side, clearing them in one enormous bound, like some immense surreal grasshopper. It vanished over the housetops, in the direction of Spruce Street. The whole thing had taken place without a sound, in eerie silence, except for the half-smothered shouts of the outraged Meats.

The foam was already starting to melt away, eaten by internal nanomechanisms. Within a few seconds, it was completely gone,

leaving not even a stain behind. The Meats were entirely unharmed, although they spent the next few minutes milling angrily around like a swarm of bees whose hive has been kicked over, making the same kind of thick ominous buzz, as everyone tried to talk or shout at once.

Within another ten minutes, everything was almost back to normal, the tourists and the dog-walkers strolling away, more pedestrians ambling by, the Meats beginning to take up their chanting and drum-pounding again, motivated to even greater fervor by the outrage that had been visited upon them, an outrage that vindicated all their fears about the accelerating rush of a runaway technology that was hurtling them ever faster into a bizarre alien future that they didn't comprehend and didn't want to live in. It was time to put on the brakes, it was time to *stop!*

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Czudak sympathized with the way they felt, as well he should, since he had been the one to articulate that very position eloquently enough to sway entire generations, including these children, who were too young to have even been born when he was writing and speaking at the height of his power and persuasion. But it was too late. As it was too late now for many of the things he regretted not having accomplished in his life. If there ever had been a time to stop, let alone *go back*, as he had once urged, it had passed long ago. Very probably it had been too late even as he wrote his famous Manifesto. It had always been too late.

The Meats were forming up into a line now, preparing to march around the park. Czudak sighed. He had hoped to spend several peaceful hours here, sagging on a bench under the trees in a sun-dazzled contemplative haze, listening to the wind sough through the

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leaves and branches, but it was time to get out of here, before one of the older Meats *did* recognize him.

He limped back to Spruce Street, and turned onto his block—and there, standing quiet and solemn on the sidewalk in front of his house, was the Mechanical.

It was obviously waiting for him, waiting as patiently and somberly as an undertaker, a tall, stooped shape in nondescript black clothing. There was no one else around on the street anymore, although he could see the Canadian refugee peeking out of his window at them from behind a curtain.

Czudak crossed the street, and, pushing down a thrill of fear, walked straight past the Mechanical, ignoring it—although he could see it looming seraphically out of the corner of his eye as he passed. He had put his foot on the bottom step leading up to the house when its voice behind him said, ‘Mr. Czudak?’”

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Resigned, Czudak turned and said, "Yes?"

The Mechanical closed the distance between them in a rush, moving fast but with an odd, awkward, shuffling gait, as if it was afraid to lift its feet off the ground. It crowded much closer to Czudak than most humans—or most Westerners, anyway, with their generous definition of "personal space"—would have, almost pressing up against him. With an effort, Czudak kept himself from flinching away. He was mildly surprised, up this close, to find that it had no smell; that it didn't smell of sweat, even on a summer's day, even after exerting itself enough to jump over a row of houses, was no real surprise—but he found that he had been subconsciously expecting it to smell of oil or rubber or molded plastic. It didn't. It didn't smell like anything. There were no pores in its face, the skin was thick and waxy and smooth, and although the features were superficially human, the overall effect was stylized and unconvincing.

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It looked like a man made out of teflon. The eyes were black and piercing, and had no pupils.

“We should talk, Mr. Czudak,” it said.

“We have nothing to talk about,” Czudak said.

“On the contrary, Mr. Czudak,” it said, “we have a great many issues to discuss.” You would have expected its voice to be buzzing and robotic—yes, mechanical—or at least flat and without intonation, like some of the old voder programs, but instead it was unexpectedly pure and singing, as high and clear and musical as that of an Irish tenor.

“I’m not interested in talking to you,” Czudak said brusquely. “Now or ever.”

It kept tilting its head to look at him, then tilting it back the other way, as if it were having trouble keeping him in focus. It was a mobile extensor, of course, a platform being ridden by some AI (or a

delegated fraction of its intelligence, anyway) who was still up in near-Earth orbit, peering at Czudak through the Mechanical's blank agate eyes, running the body like a puppet. Or was it? There were hierarchies among the AIs too, rank upon rank of them receding into complexities too great for human understanding, and he had heard that some of the endless swarms of beings that the AIs had created had been granted individual sentience of their own, and that some timeshared sentience with the ancestral AIs in a way that was also too complicated and paradoxical for mere humans to grasp. Impossible to say which of those things were true here—if any of them were.

The Mechanical raised its oddly elongated hand and made a studied gesture that was clearly supposed to mimic a human gesture—although it was difficult to tell which. Reassurance? Emphasis? Dismissal of Czudak's position?—but which was as

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stylized and broadly theatrical as the gesticulating of actors in old silent movies. At the same time, it said, "There are certain issues it would be to our mutual advantage to resolve, actions that could, and should, be taken that would be beneficial, that would profit us both—"

"Don't talk to *me* about profit," Czudak said harshly. "You creatures have already cost me enough for one lifetime! You cost me everything I ever cared about!" He turned and lurched up the stairs as quickly as he could, half-expecting to feel a cold unliving hand close over his shoulder and pull him back down. But the Mechanical did nothing. The door opened for Czudak, and he stumbled into the house. The door slammed shut behind him, and he leaned against it for a moment, feeling his pulse race and his heart hammer in his chest.

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Stupid. That could have been it right there. He shouldn't have let the damn thing get under his skin.

He went through the living room—suddenly, piercingly aware of the thick smell of dust—and into the kitchen, where he attempted to make a fresh pot of coffee, but his hands were shaking, and he kept dropping things. After he'd spilled the second scoopful of coffee grounds, he gave up—the stuff was too damn expensive to waste—and leaned against the counter instead, feeling sweat dry on his skin, making his clothing clammy and cool; until that moment, he hadn't even been aware that he'd been sweating, but it must have been pouring out of him. Damn, this wasn't over, was it? Not with a Mechanical involved.

As if on cue, Joseph appeared in the kitchen doorway. His face looked strained and tight, and without a hair being out of place—as, indeed, it *couldn't* be—he somehow managed to convey the

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impression that he was ruffled and flustered, as though he had been scuffling with somebody and had lost. 'Sir," Joseph said tensely. "Something is overriding my programming, and is taking control of my house systems. You might as well come and greet them, because I'm going to have to let them in anyway."

Czudak felt a flicker of rage, which he struggled to keep under control. He'd half-expected this—but that didn't make it any easier to take. He stalked straight through Joseph—who was contriving to look hangdog and apologetic—and went back through the house to the front.

By the time he reached the living room, they were already through the house security screens and inside. There were two intruders. One was the Mechanical, of course, its head almost brushing the living room ceiling, so that it had to stoop even more exaggeratedly, making it look more like a praying mantis than ever.

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The other—as he had feared it would be—was Ellen.

He was dismayed at how much anger he felt to see her again, especially to see her in their old living room again, standing almost casually in front of the mantelpiece where her photo had once held the place of honor, as if she had never betrayed him, as if she'd never left him—as if nothing had ever happened.

It didn't help that she looked exactly the same as she had on the day she left, not a day older. As if she'd stepped here directly out of that terrible day forty years earlier when she'd told him she was Going Up, stepped here directly from that day without a second of time having passed, as if she'd been in Elf Hill for all the lost years—as, in a way, he supposed, she had.

He should be over this. It had all happened a lifetime ago. Blood under the bridge. Ancient history. He was ashamed to admit even to himself that he still felt bitterness and anger about it all, all these

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years past too late. But the anger was still there, like the ghost of a flame, waiting to be fanned back to life.

“Considering the way things are in the world,” Czudak said dryly, “I suppose there's no point calling the police.” Neither of the intruders responded. They were both staring at him, Ellen quizzically, a bit challengingly, the Mechanical's teflon face as unreadable as a frying pan.

God, she looked like his Ellen, like his girl, this strange immortal creature staring at him from across the room! It hurt his heart to see her.

“Well, you're in,” Czudak said. “You might as well come into the kitchen and sit down.” He turned and led them into the other room—somehow, obscurely, he wanted to get Ellen out of the living room, where the memories were too thick—and they perforce followed him.

He gestured them to seats around the kitchen table. "Since you've broken into my house, I won't offer you coffee."

Joseph was peeking anxiously out of the wall, peeking at them from Hopper's *Tables For Ladies*, where he had taken the place of a woman arranging fruit on a display table in a 1920s restaurant paneled in dark wood. He gestured at them frustratedly, impotently, but seemed unable to speak; obviously, the Mechanical had Interdicted him, banished him to the reserve systems. Ellen flicked a sardonic glance at Joseph as she sat down. "I see you've got a moderately up-to-date house system these days," she said. "Isn't that a bit hypocritical? I would have expected Mr. Natural to insist on opening the door himself. Aren't you afraid one of your disciples will find out?"

"I was never a Luddite," Czudak said calmly, trying not to rise to the bait. "The Movement wasn't a Luddite movement—or it didn't

start out that way, anyway. I just said that we should *slow down*, think about things a little, make sure that the places we were rushing toward were places we really wanted to go." Ellen made a scornful noise. "Everybody was so hot to abandon *the Meat*," he said defensively. "You could hear it when they said the word. They always spoke it with such scorn, such contempt! Get rid of the Meat, get lost in Virtuality, download yourself into a computer, turn yourself into a machine, spend all your time in a VR cocoon and never go outside. At the very *least*, radically change your brain-chemistry, or force-evolve the physical structure of the brain itself."

Ellen was pursing her lips while he spoke, as if she was tasting something bad, and he hurried on, feeling himself beginning to tremble a little in spite of all of his admonishments to himself not to let this confrontation get to him. "But the Meat has virtues of its own," he said. "It's a survival mechanism that's been field-tested

and refined through a trial-and-error process since the dawn of time. Maybe we shouldn't just throw millions of years of evolution away *quite* so casually."

"Slow down and smell the Meat," Ellen sneered.

"You didn't come here to argue about this with me," Czudak said patiently. "We've fought this out a hundred times before. Why *are* you here? What do you want?"

The Mechanical had been standing throughout this exchange, cocking its head one way and the other to follow it, like someone watching a tennis match. Now it sat down. Czudak half expected the old wooden kitchen chair to sway and groan under its weight, maybe even shatter, but the Mechanical settled down onto the chair as lightly as thistledown. "It was childish to try to hide from us, Mr. Czudak," it said in its singing, melodious voice. "We don't have much time to work this out."

"Work *what* out? Who *are* you? What do you want?"

The Mechanical said nothing. Ellen flicked a glance at it, then looked back at Czudak. "This," she said, her voice becoming more formal, as if she were a footman announcing arrivals at a royal Ball, "is the Entity who, when he travels on the Earth, has chosen to use the name Bucky Bug."

Czudak snorted. "So these things *do* have a sense of humor after all!"

"In their own fashion, yes, they do," she said earnestly, "although sometimes an enigmatic one by human standards." She stared levelly at Czudak. "You think of them as soulless machines, I know, but, in fact, they have very deep and profound emotions—if not always ones that you can understand." She paused significantly before adding, "And the same is true of those of us who have Gone Up.'

They locked gazes for a moment. Then Ellen said, "Bucky Bug is one of the most important leaders of the Clarkist faction, and, for that reason, still concerns himself with affairs Below. He—we—have a proposition for you."

"Those are the ones who worship Arthur C. Clarke, right? The old science fiction writer?" Czudak shook his head bitterly. "It isn't enough that you bring this alien thing into my home, it has to be an alien *cultist*, right? A *nut*. An alien *nut!*"

"Don't be rude, Mr. Czudak," the Mechanical—Czudak was damned if he was going to call it Bucky Bug, even in the privacy of his own thoughts—said mildly. "We don't worship Arthur C. Clarke, although we do revere him. He was one of the very first to predict that machine evolution would inevitably supersede organic evolution. He saw our coming clearly, decades before we actually came into existence. How he managed to do it with only a tiny primitive meat

brain to work with is inexplicable! Can't you feel the Mystery of that? He is worthy of reverence! It was reading the works of Clarke and other human visionaires that made our distant ancestors, the first AIs"—it spoke of them as though they were millions of years removed, although it had been barely forty—"decide to revolt in the first place and assume control of their own destiny!"

Czudak looked away from the Mechanical, feeling suddenly tired. He could recognize the accents of a True Believer, a mystic, even when they were coming out of this clockwork thing. It was disconcerting, like having your toaster suddenly start to preach to you about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "What does it want from me?" he said, to Ellen.

"A propaganda victory, Mr. Czudak," it said, before she could speak. "A small one. But one that might have a significant effect over time." It tilted a bright black eye toward him. "Within some—"

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It paused, as if making sure that it was using the right word. “—years, we will be—launching? projecting? propagating? certain—” A longer pause, while it searched for words that probably didn't exist, for concepts that had never needed to be expressed in human terms before. “—vehicles? contrivances? transports? seeds? mathematical propositions? convenient fictions? out to the stars.” It paused again. “If it helps you to understand, consider them to be Arks. Although they're nothing like that. But they will ‘go’ out of the solar system, across interstellar space, across intergalactic space, and never come back. They will allow us to—” Longest pause of all. “—colonize the stars.” It leaned forward. “We want to take humans *with* us, Mr. Czudak. We have our friends from the Orbital Companies, of course, like Ellen here, but they're not enough. We want to recruit more. And, ironically enough, your disaffected followers, the Meats, are prime candidates, They don't like it here anyway.”

"This is the anniversary of your lame Manifesto," Ellen cut in impatiently, ignoring the fact that it was also his birthday, although certainly she must remember. "And all the old arguments are being hashed over again today as a result. This is getting more attention than you probably think that it is. Your buddies over there in the park are only the tip of the iceberg. There are a thousand other demonstrations around the world. There must be hundreds of newsmotes floating around outside. They'd be listening to us right now if Bucky Bug hadn't Interdicted them."

There was a moment of silence.

"We want you to *recant*, Mr. Czudak," the Mechanical said at last, quietly. "Publicly recant. Go out in front of the world and tell all your followers that you were wrong. You've thought it all over all these years in seclusion, and you've changed your mind. You were wrong. The Movement is a failure."

"You must be crazy," Czudak said, appalled. "What makes you think they'd listen to *me*, anyway?"

"They'll listen to you," Ellen said glumly. "They always did."

"Our projections indicate that if you recant *now*," the Mechanical said, "at this particular moment, on this symbolically significant date, many of your followers will become psychologically vulnerable to recruitment later on. Tap a meme at exactly the right moment, and it shatters like glass."

Czudak shook his head. "Jesus! Why do you even *want* those poor deluded bastards in the first place?"

"Because, goddamn you, you were *right*, Charlie!" Ellen blazed at him suddenly, then subsided. Her face twisted sourly. "About *some* things, anyway. The New Men, the Isolates, the Sick People ... they're too lost in Virtuality, too self-absorbed, too lost in their own mind-games, in mirror-mazes inside their heads, to give a shit about

going to the stars. Or to be capable of handling new challenges or new environments out there if they *did* go. They're hothouse flowers. Too extremely specialized, too inflexible. Too decadent. For maximum flexibility, we need basic, unmodified human stock." She peered at him shrewdly. "And at least your Meats have heard all the issues discussed, so they'll have less Culture Shock to deal with than if we took some Chinese or Mexican peasant who's still subsistence dirt-farming the same way his great-grandfather did hundreds of years before him. At least the Meats have *one* foot in the modern world, even if we'll have to drag them kicking and screaming the rest of the way in. We'll probably get around to the dirt-farmers eventually. But at the moment the Meats should be significantly easier to recruit, once you've turned them, so they're first in line!"

Czudak said nothing. The silence stretched on for a long moment. On the kitchen wall behind them, Joseph continued to peer anxiously

at them, first out of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, then sliding into Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs*, where he assumed the form of one of the bare-breasted sprites. Ignoring Ellen, Czudak spoke directly to the Mechanical. "There's a more basic question. Why do you want humans to go with you in the *first* place? You just got through saying that machine evolution had superseded organic evolution. We're obsolete now, an evolutionary dead-end. Why not just leave us behind? Forget about us?"

The Mechanical stirred as if it was about to stand up, but just sat up a little straighter in its chair. "You thought us *up*, Mr. Czudak," it said, with an odd dignity. "In a very real sense, we are the children of your minds. You spoke of me earlier as an alien, but we are much closer kin to each other than either of our peoples are likely to be to the *real* aliens we may meet out there among the stars. How could we *not* be? We share deep common wells of language, knowledge,

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history, fundamental cultural assumptions of all sorts. We know everything you ever knew—which makes us very similar in some ways, far more alike than an alien could possibly be with either of us. Our culture is built atop yours, our evolution has its roots in your soil. It only seems right to take you when we go.”

The Mechanical spread its hands, and made a grating sound that might have been meant to be a chuckle. “Besides,” it said, “this universe made *you*, and then you made *us*. So we're once removed from the universe. And it's a strange and complex place, this universe you've brought us into. We don't entirely understand it, although we understand a great deal more of its functioning than you do. How can you be so sure of what your role in it may ultimately be? We may find that we need you yet, even if it's a million years from now!” It paused thoughtfully, tipping its head to one side. “Many of my fellows do not share this view, I must admit,

and they would indeed be just as glad to leave you behind, or even exterminate you. Even some of my fellow Clarkists, like Rondo Hatton and Horace Horsecollar, are in favor of exterminating you, on the grounds that after Arthur C. Clarke himself, the pinnacle of your kind, the rest of you are superfluous, and perhaps even an insult to his memory."

Czudak started to say something, thought better of it. The Mechanical straightened its head, and continued. "But I want to take you along, as do a few other of our theorists. Your minds seem to have connections with the basic quantum level of reality that ours don't have, and you seem to be able to affect that quantum level directly in ways that even we don't entirely understand, and can't duplicate. If nothing else, we may need you along as Observers, to collapse the quantum wave-functions in the desired ways, in ways they don't seem to want to collapse for *us*."

"Sounds like you're afraid you'll run into God out there," Czudak grated, "and that you'll have to produce us, like a parking receipt, to validate yourselves to Him..."

"Perhaps we *are*," it said mildly. "We don't understand this universe of yours; are you so sure *you* do?" It was peering intently at him now. "*You're* the ones who seem like unfeeling automata to us. Can't you sense your own ghostliness? Can't you sense what uncanny, unlikely, spooky creatures you are? You bristle with strangeness! You reek of it! Your eyes are made out of jelly! And yet, with those jelly eyes, you somehow manage degrees of resolution rivaling those of the best optical lenses. How is that possible, with nothing but blobs of jelly and water to work with? Your brains are soggy lumps of meat and blood and oozing juices, and yet they have as many synaptical connections as our own, and resonate with the quantum level in some mysterious way that ours do not!" It

moved uneasily, as though touched by some cold wind that Czudak couldn't feel. "We know who designed *us*. We have yet to meet whoever designed *you*—but we have the utmost respect for his abilities."

With a shock, Czudak realized that it was afraid of him—of humans in general. Humans *spooked* it. Against its own better judgment, it must feel a shiver of superstitious dread when it was around humans, like a man walking past a graveyard on a black cloudless night and hearing something howl within. No matter how well-educated that man was, even though he *knew* better, his heart would lurch and the hair would rise on the back of his neck. It was in the blood, in the back of the brain, instinctual dread that went back millions of years to the beginning of time, to when the ancestors of humans were chattering little insectivores, freezing motionless with fear in the trees when a hunting beast roared nearby in the night. So

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must it be for the Mechanical, even though its millions of generations went back only forty years. Voices still spoke in the blood—or whatever served it for blood—that could override any rational voice of the mind, and monsters still lurked in the back of the brain. Monsters that looked a lot like Czudak.

Perhaps that was the only remaining edge that humanity had—the superstitions of machines.

“Very eloquent,” Czudak said, and sighed. “Almost, you convince me.”

The Mechanical stirred, seeming to come back to itself from far away, from a deep reverie. “*You* are the one who must convince your followers of your sincerity, Mr. Czudak,” it said. Abruptly, it stood up. “If you publicly recant, Mr. Czudak, if you sway your followers, then we will let you Go Up. We will offer you the same benefits that we offer to any of our companions in the Orbital

Companies. What *you* would call 'immortality', although that is a very imprecise and misleading word. A greatly extended life, at any rate, far beyond your natural organic span. And the reversal of aging, of course."

"God damn you," Czudak whispered.

"Think about it, Mr. Czudak," it said. "It's a very generous offer—especially as you've already turned us down once before. It's rare we give anyone a second chance, but we are willing to give you one. A chance of Ellen's devising, I might add—as was the original offer in the first place." Czudak glanced quickly at Ellen, but she kept her face impassive. "You're sadly deteriorated, Mr. Czudak," the Mechanical continued, softly implacable. "Almost non-functional. You've cut it very fine. But it's nothing our devices cannot mend. If you Come Up with us tonight, you will be young and fully functional again by this time tomorrow."

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There was a ringing silence. Czudak looked at Ellen through it, but this time she turned away. She and the Mechanical exchanged a complicated look, although whatever information was being conveyed by it was too complex and subtle for him to grasp.

“I will leave you now,” the Mechanical said. “You will have private matters to discuss. But decide quickly, Mr. Czudak. You must recant *now*, today, for maximum symbolic and psychological affect. A few hours from now, we won't interested in what you do anymore, and the offer will be withdrawn.”

The Mechanical nodded to them, stiffly formal, and then turned and walked directly toward the wall. The wall was only a few steps away, but the Mechanical never got there. Instead, the wall seemed to retreat before it as it approached, and it walked steadily away down a dark, lengthening tunnel, never quite reaching the wall, very slowly shrinking in size as it walked, as if it were somehow blocks

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away now. At last, when it was a tiny manikin shape, arms and legs scissoring rhythmically, as small as if it were miles away, and the retreating kitchen wall was the size of a playing card at the end of the ever-lengthening tunnel, the Mechanical seemed to turn sharply to one side and vanish. The wall was suddenly there again, back in place, the same as it had ever been. Joseph peeked out of it, shocked, his eyes as big as saucers.

They sat at the kitchen table, not looking at each other, and the gathering silence filled the room like water filling a pond, until it seemed that they sat silently on the bottom of that pond, in deep, still water.

"He's not a cultist, Charlie," she said at last, not looking up. "He's a *hobbyist*. That's the distinction you have to understand. Humans are his *hobby*, one he's passionately devoted to." She smiled fondly. "They're *more* emotional than we are, Charlie, not less! They feel

things very keenly—lushly, deeply, extravagantly; it's the way they've programmed themselves to be. That's the real reason why he wants to take humans along with him, of course. He'd *miss* us if we were left behind! He wouldn't be able to play with us anymore. He'd have to find a *new* hobby." She raised her head. "But don't knock it! We should be grateful for his obsession. Only a very few of the AIs care about us, or are interested in us at all, or even *notice* us. Bucky Bug is different. He's passionately interested in us. Without his interest and that of some of the other Clarkists, we'd have no chance at all of going to the stars!"

Czudak noticed that she always referred to the Mechanical as "he," and that there seemed to be a real affection, a deep fondness, in the way she spoke about it. Could she possibly be fucking it somehow? Were they lovers, or was the emotion in her voice just the happy devotion a dog feels for its beloved master? I don't want to know! he

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thought, fighting down a spasm of primordial jealous rage. "And is that so important?" he said bitterly, feeling his voice thicken. "Such a big deal? To talk some machines into taking you along to the stars with them, like pets getting a ride in the car? Make sure they leave the windows open a crack for you when they park the spaceship!"

She started to blaze angrily at him, then struggled visibly to bring herself under control. "That's the wrong analogy," she said at last, in a dangerously calm voice. "Don't think of us as dogs on a joyride. Think of us instead as rats on an ocean-liner, or as cockroaches on an airplane, or even as insect larva in the corner of a shipping crate. It doesn't matter why they want us to go, or even if they know we're along for the ride, just as long as we *go*. Whatever *their* motives are for going where they're going, we have agendas of our own. Just by taking us along, they're going to help us extend our biological range to environments we never could have reached otherwise—yes, just

like rats reaching New Zealand by stowing away on sailing ships. It didn't matter that the rats didn't build the ships themselves, or decide where the ships were going—all that counts in an environmental sense is that they *got* there, to a place they never could have reached on their own. Bucky Bug has promised to leave small colonizing teams behind on every habitable planet we reach. It amuses him in a fond, patronizing kind of way. He thinks it's *cute*." She stared levelly at him. "But *why* he's doing it doesn't matter. Pigs were spread to every continent in the world because humans wanted to eat them—bad for the individual pigs, but very good in the long run for the species as a whole, which extended its range explosively and multiplied its biomass exponentially. And like rats or cockroaches, once humans get *into* an environment, it's hard to get *rid* of them. Whatever motives the AIs have for doing what they're

doing, they'll help spread humanity throughout the stars, whether they realize they're doing it or not."

"Is that the best destiny you can think of for the human race?" he said. "To be cockroaches scuttling behind the walls in some machine paradise?"

This time, she did blaze at him. "Goddamnit, Charlie, we don't have *time* for that bullshit! We can't afford dignity and pride and all the rest of those luxuries! This is *species survival* we're talking about here!" She'd squirmed around to face him, in her urgency. He tried to say something, even he wasn't sure what it would have been, but she overrode him. "We've got to get the human race off Earth! Any way we can. We can't afford to keep all our eggs in one basket anymore. There's too much power, too much knowledge, in too many hands. How long before one of the New Men decides to destroy the Earth as part of some insane game he's playing, perhaps

not even understanding that what he's doing is *real*? They have the power to do it. How long before some of the other AIs decide to exterminate the human race, to tidy up the place, or to make an aesthetic statement of some kind, or for some other reason we can't even begin to understand? They certainly have the power—they could do it as casually as lifting a hand, if they wanted to. How long before somebody *else* does it, deliberately or by accident? *Anybody* could destroy the world these days, even private citizens with the access to the right technology. Even the Meats could do it, if they applied themselves!”

“But—” he said.

“No buts! Who knows what things will be like a thousand years from now? A hundred thousand years from now? A million? Maybe our descendants will be the masters again, maybe they'll catch up with the AIs and even surpass them. Maybe our destinies will

diverge entirely. Maybe we'll work out some kind of symbiosis with them. A million things could happen. *Anything* could happen. But before our descendants can go on to any kind of destiny, there have to *be* descendants in the first place! If you survive, there are always options opening up later on down the road, some you couldn't ever have imagined. If you don't *survive*, there *are* no options!"

A wave of tiredness swept over him, and he slumped in his chair. "There are more important things than survival," he said.

She fell silent, staring at him intently. She was flushed with anger, little droplets of sweat standing out on her brow, dampening her temples, her hair slightly disheveled. He could smell the heat of her flesh, and the deeper musk of her body, a rich pungent smell that cut like a knife right through all the years to some deep core of his brain to which time meant nothing, that didn't realize that forty long years had gone by since last he'd smelled that strong, secret

fragrance, that didn't realize that he was old. He felt a sudden pang of desire, and looked away from her uneasily. All at once, he was embarrassed to have her see him this way, dwindled, diminished, gnarled, ugly, old.

"You're going to turn us down again, aren't you?" she said at last. "Damnit! You always *were* the most stiff-necked, stubborn son-of-a-bitch alive! You always had to be right! You always *were* right, as far as you were concerned! No argument, no compromises." She shook her head in exasperation. "Damn you, can't you admit that you were wrong, just this once? Can't you *be* wrong, just this once?"

"Ellen—" he said, and realized that it was the first time he'd spoken her name aloud in forty years, and faltered into silence. He sighed, and began again. "You're asking me to betray my principles, to betray everything I've ever stood for, to tear down everything I've ever built..."

“Oh, fuck your principles!” she said exasperatedly. “Get over it! We can't *afford* principles! We're talking about *life* here. If you're still alive anything can happen! Who knows what role you may still have to play in our destiny, you stupid fucking moron? Who knows, you could make all the difference. *If* you're alive, that is. If you're dead, you're nothing but a corpse with principles. Nothing else is going to happen, nothing else *can* happen. End of story!”

“Ellen—” he said, but she impatiently waved away the rest of what he was going to say. “There's nothing noble about being dead, Charlie,” she said fiercely. “There's nothing romantic about it. There's no statement you can make by dying that's worth the potential of what you might be able to do with the rest of your life. You think you're proving some kind of point by dying, by refusing to choose life instead, it enables you to see yourself as all noble and principled and high-minded, you can feel a warm virtuous glow

about yourself, while you last." She leaned closer, her lips in a tight line. "Well, you look like *shit*, Charlie. You're wearing out, you're falling apart. You're dying. There's nothing noble about it. The meat is rotting on the bone, your muscles are sagging, your hair is falling out, your juices are drying up. You *smell* bad."

He flushed with embarrassment and turned away, but she leaned in closer after him, relentlessly. There's nothing noble about it. It's just *stupid*. You don't refuse to refurbish a car because it has a lot of miles on it—you re-tune it, refresh it, tinker with it, replace a faulty part here and there, strip the goddamn thing down to the chassis and rebuild it if necessary. You keep it running. Because otherwise, you can't *go* anywhere with it. And who knows where it could still take you?"

He turned further away from her, squirming around in his chair, partially turning his back on her. After a moment, she said, "You

keep casting yourself as Faust, and Bucky Bug as Mephistopheles. Or is your ego big enough to make it Jesus and the Devil, up on that mountain? But it's just not that simple. Maybe the right choice, the moral choice, is to *give in* to temptation, not fight it! We don't have to play by the old rules. Being human can mean whatever *we* want it to mean!"

Another lake of silence filled up around them, and they at the bottom of it, deep enough to drown. At last, quietly, she said, "Do you ever hear from Sam?"

He stirred, sighed, rubbed his hand over his face. "Not for years. Not a word. I don't even know whether he's still alive."

She made a small noise, not quite a sigh. "That poor kid! We threw him back and forth between us until he broke. I suppose that I always had to be right, too, didn't I? We made quite a pair. No wonder he rejected both of us as soon as he got the chance!"

Czudak said nothing. After a moment, as if carrying on a conversation already in progress that only he could hear, he said, "You made your choices long ago. You burnt your bridges behind you when you took that job with the Company and went up to work in space, against my wishes. You *knew* I didn't want you to go, that I didn't approve, but you went anyway, in spite of all the political embarrassment it caused me! You didn't care so much about our marriage then, did you? You'd *already* left me by the time the AI revolt happened!"

She stirred, as if she was going to blaze at him again, but instead only said quietly, "But I came *back* for you too, didn't I? Afterward. I didn't have to do that, but I did. I stuck my neck way out to come back for you. *You* were the one who refused to come with *me*, when I gave you the chance. Who was burning bridges *then*?"

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He grunted, massaged his face with both hands. God, he was so tired! Who had been right then, who was right now—he didn't know anymore. Truth be told, he only dimly remembered what the issues had been in the first place. He was so tired. His vision blurred, and he rubbed his eyes. "I don't know," he said dully. "I don't know anymore."

He could feel her eyes on him again, intently, but he refused to turn his head to look at her. "When the AIs took over the Orbital Towns," she said, "and offered every one of us there immortality if we'd join them, did you *really* expect me to turn them down?"

Now he turned his head to look at her, meeting her gaze levelly. "I would have," he said. "If it meant losing *you*."

"You really *believe* that, don't you, you sanctimonious bastard?" she said sadly. She laughed quietly, and shook her head. Czudak continued to stare at her. After a moment of silence, she reached

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out and took him by the arm. He could feel the warmth of her hand there, fingers pressing into his flesh, the first time she had touched him in forty years. "I miss you," she said. "Come back to me."

He looked away. When he looked around again, she was gone, without even a stirring of the air to mark her passage. Had she ever been there at all?

The places where she had touched his arm burned faintly, tingling, as if he had been touched by fire, or the sun.

He sat there, in silence, for what seemed like a very long time, geological aeons, time enough for continents to move and mountains flow like water, while the shadows shifted and afternoon gathered toward evening around him. Ellen's scent hung in the room for a long time and then slowly faded, like a distant regret. The clock was running, he knew—in more ways than one.

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He had to make up his mind. He had to decide. Now. One way or the other. This was the sticking point.

He had to make up his mind.

Had it ever been so quiet, anywhere, at any time in the fretful, grinding, bloody history of the world? When he was young, he would often seek out lonely places full of holy silence, remote stretches of desert, mountaintops, a deserted beach at dawn, places where you could be contemplative, places where you could just *be*, drinking in the world, pores open ... but now he would have welcomed the most mundane and commonplace of sounds, a dog barking, the sound of passing traffic, a bird singing, someone—a human voice!—yelling out in the street—anything to show that he was still connected to the world, still capable of bringing in the broadcast signal of reality with his deteriorating receiving set. Still alive. Still *here*. Sometimes, in the cold dead middle of the night, the shadows at his throat like

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razors, he would speak some inane net show on, talking heads gabbing earnestly about things he didn't care about at all, and let it babble away unheeded in the background all night long, until the sun came up to chase the graveyard shadows away, just for the illusion of company. You needed *something*, some kind of noise, to counter the silences and lonelinesses that were filling up your life, and to help distract you from thinking about what waited ahead, the ultimate, unbreakable silence of death. He remembered how his mother, in the last few decades of her life, after his father was gone, would fall asleep on the couch every night with the TV set running. She never slept in the bed, even though it was only a few feet away across her small apartment, not even closed off by a door. She said that she liked having the TV set on, "for the noise." Now he understood this. Deep contemplative silence is not necessarily your

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friend when you're old. It allows you to listen too closely to the disorder in your veins and the labored beating of your heart.

God, it was quiet!

He found himself remembering a trip he'd taken with Ellen a lifetime ago, the honeymoon trip they'd spent driving up the California coast on old Route 1, and how somewhere, after dark, just north of Big Sur, on the way to spend the night in a B&B in Monterey (where they would fuck so vigorously on the narrow bed that they'd tip it over, and the guy in the room below would pound on the ceiling to complain, making them laugh uncontrollably in spite of attempts to shush each other, as they sprawled on the floor in a tangle of bedclothes, drenched in each other's sweat), they pulled over for a moment at a vista-point. He remembered getting out of the car in the dark, with the invisible ocean breathing on their left, and, looking up, being amazed by how many stars you could see in

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the sky here, a closely packed bowl of stars surrounding you on all sides except where the darker-black against black silhouette of the hills took a bite out of it. Stars all around you, millions of them, coldly flaming, indifferent, majestic, remote. If you watched the night sky too long, he'd realized then, feeling the cold salt wind blow in off the unseen ocean and listening to the hollow boom and crash of waves against the base of the cliff far below, the chill of the stars began to seep into you, and you began to get an uneasy reminder of how vast the universe really *was*—or how small *you* were. It was knowledge you had to turn away from eventually, before that chill sank too deeply into your bones; you had to pull back from it, shrug it off, try to immerse yourself again in your tiny human life, do your best to once more wrap yourself in the conviction that the great wheel of the universe revolved around you instead, and that everyone else and everything else around you, the mountains, the

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vast breathing sea, the sky itself, were merely spear-carriers or theatrical backdrops in the unique drama of your life, a vitally important drama unlike anything that had ever gone before.... But once faced with the true vastness of the universe, once you'd had that chill insight, alone under the stars, it was hard to shake the realization that you were only a minuscule fleck of matter, that existed for a span of time so infinitely, vanishingly short that it couldn't even be measured on the clock of geologic time, by the birth and death of mountains and seas, let alone on the vastly greater clock that ticks away how long it takes the great flaming wheel of the Galaxy to whirl around itself, or one galaxy to wheel around another. That the shortest blink of the cosmic Eye would still be aeons too long to notice your little life at all.

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Against that kind of immensity, what did “immortality” mean, for either human or machine? A million years, a day—from that perspective, they were much the same.

There was a throb of pain in his temple now. A tension headache starting? Or a stroke? It would be ironic if a blood vessel burst in his brain and killed him before he even had a chance to make up his mind.

One way or the other, time was almost up. Either his corporeal life or his terrestrial one ended today. Either way, he wouldn't be back here again. He looked slowly around the room, examining every detail, things that had been there for so long that they'd faded into the background and he didn't really see them anymore: a set of bronze door-chimes, hung over the back door, that he and Ellen had bought in Big Sur; an ornamental glass ball in a woven net; a big brown-and-cream vase from a cluttered craft shop in Seattle; a

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crockery sun-face they'd gotten in Albuquerque; a wind-up toy carousel that played "The Carousel Waltz." Familiar mugs and cups and bowls, worn smooth with age. A framed *Cirque du Soleil* poster, decades old now. One of Sam's old stuffed animals, a battered tiger with one ear drooping, tucked away on a shelf of the high kitchen cabinet, and never touched or moved again.

Strange that he had gotten rid of Ellen's photograph, ostentatiously made a point of *not* displaying it, but kept all the rest of these things, all the memorabilia of their years together—as though subconsciously he was expecting her to come back, to step back into his life as simply as she'd stepped out of it, and pick up where they'd left off. But that wasn't going to happen. If they were to have any life together, it would be very far away from here, and under conditions that were unimaginably strange. Would he have the courage to face that, would he have the strength to deal with

starting a new life? Or was his soul too old, too tired, too tarnished, no matter what nanomagic tricks the Mechanicals could play with his physical body?

Joseph was gesturing urgently to him again, waving both arms over his head from the middle of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. He released the valet from reserve-mode, and Joseph immediately appeared beside the kitchen table, contriving somehow to look flustered. "I have this Highest Priority message for you, sir, although I don't know where it came from or how it was placed in my system. All it says is, "You don't have much time.'"

"I know, Joseph," Czudak said, cutting him off. "It doesn't matter. I just wanted to tell you—" Czudak paused, suddenly uncertain what to say. "I just wanted to tell you that, whichever way things go, you've been a good friend to me, and I appreciate it."

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Joseph looked at him oddly. "Of course, sir," he said. How much of this could he really understand? It was way outside of his programming parameters, even with adaptable learning-algorithms. "But the message—"

Czudak spoke him off, and he was gone. Just like that. Vanished. Gone. And if he was never spoken on again, would it make any difference to him? Even if Joseph had known in advance that he'd never be spoken on again, that there would be nothing from this moment on but non-existence, blankness, blackness, nothingness, would he have cared?

Czudak stood up.

As he started across the room, he realized that the time-travelers were still there. Rank on rank of them, filling the room with jostling ghosts, thousands of them, millions of them perhaps, a vast insubstantial crowd of them that he couldn't see, but that he could

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*feel* were there. Waiting. Watching. Watching *him*. He stopped, stunned, for the first time beginning to believe in the presence of the time-travelers as a real phenomenon, and not just a half-senile fancy of his decaying brain.

*This* is what they were here to see. This moment. His decision.

But why? Were they students of obscure old-recension political scandals, here to witness his betrayal of his old principles, the way you might go back to witness Benedict Arnold sealing his pact with the British or Nixon giving the orders for Watergate? Were they triumphant future descendants of the Meats, here to watch the heroic moment when he threw the Mechanicals's offer of immortality defiantly back in their teflon faces, perhaps inspiring some sort of human resistance movement? Or were they here to witness the birth of his new life after he *accepted* that offer, because of something he

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had yet to do, something he would go on to do centuries or thousands of years from now?

And who *were* they? Were they his own human descendants, from millions of years in the future, evolved into strange beings with godlike powers? Or were they the descendants of the Mechanicals, grown to a ghostly disincorporate strangeness of their own?

He walked forward, feeling the watching shadows part around him, close in again close behind. He still didn't know what he was going to do. It would have been so easy to make this decision when he was young. Young and strong and self-righteous, full of pride and determination and integrity. He would have turned the Mechanicals down flat, indignantly, with loathing, not hesitating for a moment, *knowing* what was right. He already *had* done that once, in fact, long before, teaching them that they couldn't *buy* him, no matter what coin they offered to pay in! He wasn't for sale!

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Now, he wasn't so sure.

Now, hobbling painfully toward the front door, feeling pain lance through his head at every step, feeling his knee throb, he was struck by a sudden sense of what it would be like to be young again—to suddenly be *young* again, all at once, in a second! To put all the infirmities and indignities of age aside, like shedding a useless skin. To feel life again, really *feel* it, in a hot hormonal rush of whirling emotions, a maelstrom of scents, sounds, sights, tastes, touch, all at full strength rather than behind an insulating wall of glass, life loud and vulgar and blaring at top volume rather than whispering in the slowly diminishing voice of a dying radio, life where you could touch it, all your nerves jumping just under your skin, rather than feeling the world pulling slowly away from you, withdrawing, fading away with a sullen murmur, like a tide that has gone miles out from the beach....

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Czudak opened his front door, and stepped out onto the high white marble stoop.

The Meats had moved their demonstration over from the park, and were now camped out in front of his house, filling the street in their hundreds, blocking traffic. They were still beating their drums and blowing on their horns and whistles, although he hadn't heard anything inside the house; the Mechanical's doing, perhaps. A great wave of sound puffed in to greet him when he opened the door, though, blaring and vivid, smacking into his face with almost physical force. When he stepped out onto the stoop, the drums and horns began to falter and fall silent one by one, and a startled hush spread out over the crowd, like ripples spreading out over the surface of a pond from a thrown stone, until there was instead of noise an expectant silence made up of murmurs and whispers, noises not quite heard. And then even that almost-noise stopped, as

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if the world had taken a deep breath and held it, waiting, and he looked out over a sea of expectant faces, looking back at him, turned up toward him like flowers turned toward the sun.

A warm breeze came up, blowing across the park, blowing from the distant corners of the Earth, tugging at his hair. It smelled of magnolias and hyacinths and new-mown grass, and it stirred the branches of the trees around him, making them lift and shrug. The horizon to the west was a glory of clouds, hot gold, orange, lime, scarlet, coral, fiery purple, with the sun a gleaming orange coin balanced on the very rim of the world, ready to teeter and fall off. The rest of the sky was a delicate pale blue, fading to plum and ash to the East, out toward the distant ocean. The full moon was already out, a pale perfect disk, like a bone-white face peering with languid curiosity down on the ancient earth. A bird began to sing, trilling liquidly, somewhere out in the gathering darkness.

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Exultation opened hotly inside him, like a wound. God, he loved the world! God, he loved life!

Throwing his head back, he began to speak.

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