

Simak, Clifford D - Thing in the Stone, The

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The Thing in the Stone

Clifford D. Simak

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He walked the hills and knew what the hills had seen through geologic time. He listened to the stars and spelled out what the stars were saying. He had found the creature that lay imprisoned in the stone. He had climbed the tree that in other days had been climbed by homing wildcats to reach the den gouged by time and weather out of the cliff's sheer face. He lived alone on a worn-out farm perched on a high and narrow ridge that overlooked the confluence of two rivers. And his next-door neighbor, a most ill-favored man, drove to the county seat, thirty miles away, to tell the sheriff that this reader of the hills, this listener to the stars was a chicken thief.

The sheriff dropped by within a week or so and walked across the yard to where the man was sitting in a rocking chair on a porch that faced the river hills. The sheriff came to a halt at the foot of the stairs that ran up to the porch.

'I'm Sheriff Harley Shepherd,' he said. 'I was just driving by. Been some years since I been out in this neck of the woods. You are new here, aren't you?'

The man rose to his feet and gestured at another chair. 'Been here three years or so,' he said. 'The name is Wallace Daniels. Come up and sit with me.'

The sheriff climbed the stairs and the two shook hands, then sat down in the chairs.

'You don't farm the place,' the sheriff said.

The weed-grown fields came up to the fence that hemmed in the yard.

Daniels shook his head. 'Subsistence farming, if you can call it that. A few chickens for eggs. A couple of cows for milk and butter. Some hogs for meat -- the neighbors help me butcher. A garden of course, but that's about the story.'

'Just as well,' the sheriff said. 'The place is all played out. Old Amos Williams, he let it go to ruin. He never was no farmer.'

'The land is resting now,' said Daniels. 'Give it ten years -- twenty might be better -- and it will be ready once again. The only things it's good for now are the rabbits and the woodchucks and the meadow mice. A lot of birds, of course. I've got the finest covey of quail a man has ever seen.'

'Used to be good squirrel country,' said the sheriff. 'Coon, too. I suppose you still have coon. You have a hunter, Mr. Daniels?'

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'I don't own a gun,' said Daniels.

The sheriff settled deeply into the chair, rocking gently.

'Pretty country out here,' he declared. 'Especially with the leaves turning colors. A lot of hardwood and they are colorful. Rough as hell, of course, this land of yours. Straight up and down, the most of it. But pretty.'

'It's old country,' Daniels said. 'The last sea retreated from this area more than four hundred million years ago. It has stood as dry land since the end of the Silurian. Unless you go up north, on to the Canadian Shield, there aren't many places in this country you can find as old as this.'

'You a geologist, Mr. Daniels?'

'Not really. Interested, is all. The rankest amateur. I need something to fill my time and I do a lot of hiking, scrambling up and down these hills. And you can't do that without coming face to face with a lot of geology. I got interested. Found some fossil brachiopods and got to wondering about them. Sent off for some books and read up on them. One thing led to another and -- '

'Brachiopods? would they be dinosaurs, or what? I never knew there were dinosaurs out this way.'

'Not dinosaurs,' said Daniels. 'Earlier than dinosaurs, at least the ones I found. They're small. Something like clams or oysters. But the shells are hinged in a different sort of way. These were old ones, extinct millions of years ago. But we still have a few brachiopods living now. Not too many of them.'

'It must be interesting.'

'I find it so,' said Daniels.

'You knew old Amos Williams?'

'No. He was dead before I came here. Bought the land from the bank that was settling his estate.'

'Queer old coot,' the sheriff said. 'Fought with all his neighbors. Especially with Ben Adams. Him and Ben had a line fence feud going on for years. Ben said Amos refused to keep up the fence. Amos claimed Ben knocked it down and then sort of, careless-like, hazed his cattle over into Amos's hayfield. How you get along with Ben?'

'All right,' Daniels said. 'No trouble. I scarcely know the man.'

'Ben don't do much farming, either,' said the sheriff. 'Hunts and fishes, hunts ginseng, does some trapping in the winter. Prospects for minerals now and then.'

'There are minerals in these hills,' said Daniels. 'Lead and zinc. But it would cost more to get it out than it would be worth. At present prices, that is.'

'Ben always has some scheme cooking,' said the sheriff. 'Always off on some wild goose chase. And he's a pure pugnacious man. Always has his nose out of joint about something. Always on the prod for trouble. Bad man to have for an enemy. Was in the other day to say someone's been lifting a hen or two of his. You haven't been missing any, have you?'

Daniels grinned. 'There's a fox that levies a sort of tribute on the coop every now and then. I don't begrudge them to him.'

'Funny thing,' the sheriff said. 'There ain't nothing can rile up a farmer like a little chicken stealing. It don't amount to shucks, of course, but they get real hostile at it.'

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'If Ben has been losing chickens,' Daniels said, 'more than likely the culprit is my fox.'

'Your fox? You talk as if you own him.'

'Of course I don't. No one owns a fox. But he lives in these hills with me. I figure we are neighbours. I see him every now and then and watch him. Maybe that means I own a piece of him. Although I wouldn't be surprised if he watches me more than I watch him. He moves quicker than I do.'

The sheriff heaved himself out of the chair.

'I hate to go,' he said. 'I declare it has been restful sitting here and talking with you and looking at the hills. You look at them a lot, I take it.'

'Quite a lot,' said Daniels.

He sat on the porch and watched the sheriff's car top the rise far down the ridge and disappear from sight.

What had it all been about? he wondered. The sheriff hadn't just happened to be passing by. He'd been on an errand. All this aimless, friendly talk had not been for nothing and in the course of it he'd managed to ask lots of questions.

Something about Ben Adams, maybe? Except there wasn't too much against Adams except he was bone-lazy. Lazy in a weasely sort of way. Maybe the sheriff had got wind of Adams' off-and-on moonshining operation and was out to do some checking, hoping that some neighbor might misspeak himself. None of them would, of course, for it was none of their business, really, and the moonshining had built up no nuisance value. What little liquor Ben might make didn't amount to much. He was too lazy for anything he did to amount to much.

From far down the hill he heard the tinkle of a bell. The two cows were finally heading home. It must be much later, Daniels told himself, than he had thought. Not that he paid much attention to what time it was. He hadn't for long months on end, ever since he'd smashed his watch when he'd fallen off the ledge. He had never bothered to have the watch fixed. He didn't need a watch. There was a battered old alarm clock in the kitchen but it was an erratic piece of mechanism and not to be relied upon. He paid slight attention to it.

In a little while, he thought, he'd have to rouse himself and go and do the chores -- milk the cows, feed the hogs and chickens, gather up the eggs. Since the garden had been laid by there hadn't been much to do. One of these days he'd have to bring in the squashes and store them in the cellar and there were those three or four big pumpkins he'd have to lug down the hollow to the Perkins kids, so they'd have them in time to make jack-o-lanterns for Halloween. He wondered if he should carve out the faces himself or if the kids would rather do it on their own.

But the cows were still quite a distance away and he still had time. He sat easy in his chair and stared across the hills.

And they began to shift and change as he stared.

When he had first seen it, the phenomenon had scared him silly. But now he was used to it.

As he watched, the hills changed into different ones. Different vegetation and strange life stirred on them.

He saw dinosaurs this time. A herd of them, not very big ones. Middle Triassic, more than likely. And this time it was only a distant view -- he himself was not to become involved. He would only see, from a distance, what ancient time was like and would not be thrust into the middle of it as most often was the case.

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He was glad. There were chores to do.

Watching, he wondered once again what more he could do. It was not the dinosaurs that concerned him, nor the earlier amphibians, nor all the other creatures that moved in time about the hills.

What disturbed him was that other being that lay buried deep beneath the Platteville limestone.

Someone else should know about it. The knowledge of it should be kept alive so that in the days to come -- perhaps in another hundred years -- when man's technology had reached the point where it was possible to cope with such a problem, something could be done to contact -- and perhaps to free -- the dweller in the stone.

There would be a record, of course, a written record. He would see to that. Already that record was in progress -- a week by week (at times a day to day) account of what he had seen, heard and learned. Three large record books now were filled with his careful writing and another one was well started. All written down as honestly and as carefully and as objectively as he could bring himself to do it.

But who would believe what he had written? More to the point, who would bother to look at it? More than likely the books would gather dust on some hidden shelf until the end of time with no human hand ever laid upon them. And even if someone, in some future time, should take them down and read them, first blowing away the accumulated dust, would he or she be likely to believe?

The answer lay clear. He must convince someone. Words written by a man long dead -- and by a man of no reputation -- could be easily dismissed as the product of a neurotic mind. But if some scientist of solid reputation could be made to listen, could be made to endorse the record, the events that paraded across the hills and lay within them could stand on solid ground, worthy of full investigation at some future date.

A biologist? Or a neuropsychiatrist? Or a paleontologist?

Perhaps it didn't matter what branch of science the man was in. Just so he'd listen without laughter. It was most important that he listen without laughter.

Sitting on the porch, staring at the hills dotted with grazing dinosaurs, the listener to the stars remembered the time he had gone to see the paleontologist.

'Ben,' the sheriff said. 'you're way out in left field. That Daniels fellow wouldn't steal no chickens. He's got chickens of his own.'

'The question is,' said Adams, 'how did he get them chickens?'

'That makes no sense,' the sheriff said. 'He's a gentleman. You can tell that just by talking with him. An educated gentleman.'

'If he's a gentleman,' asked Adams, 'what's he doing out here? This ain't no place for gentlemen. He showed up two or three years ago and moved out to this place. Since that day he hasn't done a tap of work. All he does is wander up and down the hills.'

'He's a geologist,' said the sheriff. 'Or anyway interested in geology. A sort of hobby with him. He tells me he looks for fossils.'

Adams assumed the alert look of a dog that has sighted a rabbit. 'So that is it,' he said. 'I bet you it ain't fossils he is looking for.'

'No,' the sheriff said.

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'He's looking for minerals,' said Adams. 'He's prospecting, that's what he's doing. These hills crawl with minerals. All you have to do is know where to look.'

'You've spent a lot of time looking,' observed the sheriff. 'I ain't no geologist. A geologist would have a big advantage. He would know rocks and such.'

'He didn't talk as if he were doing any prospecting. Just interested in the geology, is all. He found some fossil clams.'

'He might be looking for treasure caves,' said Adams. 'He might have a map or something.'

'You know damn well,' the sheriff said, 'there are no treasure caves.'

'There must be,' Adams insisted. 'The French and Spanish were here in the early days. They were great ones for treasure, the French and Spanish. Always running after mines. Always hiding things in caves. There was that cave over across the river where they found a skeleton in Spanish armour and the skeleton of a bear beside him, with a rusty sword stuck into where the bear's gizzard was.'

'That was just a story,' said the sheriff, disgusted. 'Some damn fool started it and there was nothing to it. Some people from the university came out and tried to run it down. It developed that there wasn't a word of truth in it.'

'But Daniels has been messing around with caves,' said Adams. 'I've seen him. He spends a lot of time in that cave down on Cat Den Point. Got to climb a tree to get to it.'

'You been watching him?'

'Sure I been watching him. He's up to something and I want to know what it is.'

'Just be sure he doesn't catch you doing it,' the sheriff said.

Adams chose to let the matter pass. 'Well, anyhow,' he said, 'if there aren't any treasure caves, there's a lot of lead and zinc. The man who finds it is about to make a million.'

'Not unless he can find the capital to back him,' the sheriff pointed out.

Adams dug at the ground with his heel. 'You think he's all right, do you?'

'He tells me he's been losing some chickens to a fox. More than likely that's what has been happening to yours.'

'If a fox is taking his chickens,' Adams asked, 'why don't he shoot it?'

'He isn't sore about it. He seems to think the fox has got a right to. He hasn't even got a gun.'

'Well, if he hasn't got a gun and doesn't care to hunt himself -- then why won't he let other people hunt? He won't let me and my boys on his place with a gun. He has his place all posted. That seems to me to be un-neighborly. That's one of the things that makes it so hard to get along with him. We've always hunted on that place. Old Amos wasn't an easy man to get along with but he never cared if we did some hunting. We've always hunted all around here. No one ever minded. Seems to me hunting should be free. Seems right for a man to hunt wherever he's a mind to.'

Sitting on the bench on the hard-packed earth in front of the ramshackle house, the sheriff looked about him -- at the listlessly scratching chickens, at the scrawny hound sleeping in the shade, its hide twitching against the few remaining flies, at the clothes-line strung between two trees and loaded with

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drying clothes and dish towels, at the washtub balanced on its edge on a wash
bench leaning against the side of the house.

Christ, he thought, the man should be able to find the time to put up a
decent clothes-line and not just string a rope between two trees.

'Ben,' he said, 'you're just trying to stir up trouble. You resent Daniels,
a man living on a farm who doesn't work at farming, and you're sore because he
won't let you hunt his land. He's got a right to live anywhere he wants to and
he's got a right not to let you hunt. I'd lay off him if I were you. You don't
have to like him, you don't have to have anything to do with him -- but don't go
around spreading fake accusations against the man. He could jerk you up in court
for that.'

2

He had walked into the paleontologist's office and it had taken him a moment
fully to see the man seated toward the back of the room at a cluttered desk. The
entire place was cluttered. There were long tables covered with chunks of rock
with embedded fossils, scattered here and there were stacks of papers. The room
was large and badly lighted. It was a dingy and depressing place.

'Doctor?' Daniels had asked. 'Are you Dr. Thorne?'

The man rose and deposited a pipe in a cluttered ashtray. He was big, burly,
with graying hair that had a wild look to it. His face was seamed and
weather-beaten. When he moved he shuffled like a bear.

'You must be Daniels,' he said. 'Yes, I see you must be. I had you on my
calendar for three o'clock. So glad you could come,'

His great paw engulfed Daniel's hand. He pointed to a chair beside the desk,
sat down and retrieved his pipe from the overflowing tray, began packing it from
a large canister that stood on the desk.

'Your letter said you wanted to see me about something important,' he said.
'But then that's what they all say. But there must have been something about
your letter -- an urgency, a sincerity. I haven't the time, you understand, to
see everyone who writes. All of them have found something, you see. What is it,
Mr. Daniels, that you have found?'

Daniels said, 'Doctor, I don't quite know how to start what I have to say.
Perhaps it would be best to tell you first that something had happened to my
brain.'

Thorne was lighting his pipe. He talked around the stem. 'In such a case,
perhaps I am not the man you should be talking to. There are other people -- '

'No, that's not what I mean,' said Daniels. 'I'm not seeking help. I am
quite all right physically and mentally, too. About five years ago I was in a
highway accident. My wife and daughter were killed and I was badly hurt and -- '

'I am sorry, Mr. Daniels.'

'Thank you -- but that is all in the past. It was rough for a time but I
muddled through it. That's not what I'm here for. I told you I was badly hurt -- '

'Brain damage?'

'Only minor. Or so far as the medical findings are concerned. Very minor
damage that seemed to clear up rather soon. The bad part was the crushed chest
and punctured lung.'

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'But you're all right now?'

'As good as new,' said Daniels. 'But since the accident my brain's been different. As if I had new senses. I see things, understand things that seem impossible.'

'You mean you have hallucinations?'

'Not hallucinations. I am sure of that. I can see the past.'

'How do you mean -- see the past?'

'Let me try to tell you,' Daniels said. 'exactly how it started. Several years ago I bought an abandoned farm in south-western Wisconsin. A place to hole up in, a place to hide away. With my wife and daughter gone I still was recoiling from the world. I had got through the first brutal shock but I needed a place where I could lick my wounds. If this sounds like self-pity -- I don't mean it that way. I am trying to be objective about why I acted as I did, why I bought the farm.'

'Yes. I understand,' said Thorne. 'But I'm not entirely sure hiding was the wisest thing to do.'

'Perhaps not, but it seemed to me the answer. It has worked out rather well. I fell in love with the country. That part of Wisconsin is ancient land. It has stood uncovered by the sea for four hundred million years. For some reason it was not overridden by the Pleistocene glaciers. It has changed, of course, but only as the result of weathering. There have been no great geologic upheavals, no massive erosions -- nothing to disturb it.'

'Mr. Daniels,' said Thorne, somewhat testily, 'I don't quite see what this has to do --'

'I'm sorry. I am just trying to lay the background for what I came to tell you. It came on rather slowly at first and I thought that I was crazy, that I was seeing things, that there had been more brain damage than had been apparent -- or that I was finally cracking up. I did a lot of walking in the hills, you see. The country is wild and rugged and beautiful -- a good place to be out in. The walking made me tired and I could sleep at night. But at times the hills changed. Only a little at first. Later on they changed more and finally they became places I had never seen before, that no one had ever seen before.'

Thorne scowled. 'You are trying to tell me they changed into the past.'

Daniels nodded. 'Strange vegetation, funny-looking trees. In the earlier times, of course, no grass at all. Underbrush of ferns and scouring rushes. Strange animals, strange things in the sky. Saber-tooth cats and mastodons, pterosaurs and uinatheres and --'

'All at the same time?' Thorne asked, interrupting. 'All mixed up?'

'Not at all. The time periods I see seem to be true time periods. Nothing out of place. I didn't know at first -- but when I was able to convince myself that I was not hallucinating I sent away for books. I studied. I'll never be an expert, of course -- never a geologist or paleontologist -- but I learned enough to distinguish one period from another, to have some idea of what I was looking at.'

Thorne took his pipe out of his mouth and perched it in the ashtray. He ran a massive hand through his wild hair.

'It's unbelievable,' he said. 'It simply couldn't happen. You said all this business came on rather slowly?'

'To begin with it was hazy, the past foggily imposed upon the present, then the present would slowly fade and the past came in, real and solid. But it's different now. Once in a while there's a bit of flickering as the present gives way to the past -- but mostly it simply changes, as if at the snap of a finger.'

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The present goes away and I'm standing in the past. The past is all around me.
Nothing of the present is left.'

'But you aren't really in the past? Physically, I mean.'

'There are times when I'm not in it at all. I stand in the present and the distant hills or the river valley changes. But ordinarily it changes all around me, although the funny thing about it is that, as you say, I'm not really in it. I can see it and it seems real enough for me to walk around in it. I can walk over to a tree and put my hand out to feel it and the tree is there, But I seem to make no impact on the past. It's as if I were not there at all. The animals do not see me. I've walked up to within a few feet of dinosaurs. They can't see me or hear or smell me. If they had I'd have been dead a dozen times. It's as if I were walking through a three-dimensional movie. At first I worried a lot about the surface differences that might exist. I'd wake up dreaming of going into the past and being buried up to my waist in a rise of ground that since has eroded away. But it doesn't work that way. I'm walking along in the present and then I'm walking in the past. It's as if a door were there and I stepped through it. I told you I don't really seem to be in the past -- but I'm not in the present, either. I tried to get some proof. I took a camera with me and shot a lot of pictures. When the films were developed there was nothing on them. Not the past -- but what is more important, not the present, either. If I had been hallucinating, the camera should have caught pictures of the present. But apparently there was nothing there for the camera to take. I thought maybe the camera failed or I had the wrong kind of film. So I tried several cameras and different types of film and nothing happened. I got no pictures. I tried bringing something back. I picked flowers, after there were flowers. I had no trouble picking them but when I came back to the present I was empty-handed. I tried to bring back other things as well. I thought maybe it was only live things, like flowers, that I couldn't bring, so I tried inorganic things -- like rocks -- but I never was able to bring anything back.'

'How about a sketch pad?'

'I thought of that but I never used one. I'm no good at sketching -- besides, I figured, what was the use? The pad would come back blank.'

'But you never tried.'

'No,' said Daniels. 'I never tried. Occasionally I do make sketches after I get back to the present. Not every time but sometimes. From memory. But, as I said, I'm not very good at sketching.'

'I don't know,' said Thorne. 'I don't really know. This all sounds incredible. But if there should be something to it -- Tell me, were you ever frightened? You seem quite calm and matter-of-fact about it now, but at first you must have been frightened.'

'At first,' said Daniels, 'I was petrified. Not only was I scared, physically scared -- frightened for my safety, frightened that I'd fallen into a place from which I never could escape -- but also afraid that I'd gone insane. And there was the loneliness.'

'What do you mean -- loneliness?'

'Maybe that's not the right word. Out of place. I was where I had no right to be. Lost in a place where man had not as yet appeared and would not appear for millions of years. In a world so utterly alien that I wanted to hunker down and shiver. But I, not the place, was really the alien there. I still get some of that feeling every now and then. I know about it, of course, and am braced against it, but at times it still gets to me. I'm a stranger to the air and the light of that other time -- it's all imagination, of course.'

'Not necessarily,' said Thorne.

'But the greatest fear is gone now, entirely gone. The fear I was insane. I am convinced now.'

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'How are you convinced? How could a man be convinced?'

'The animals. The creatures I see -- '

'You mean you recognize them from the illustrations in these books you have been reading.'

'No, not that. Not entirely that. Of course the pictures helped. But actually it's the other way around. Not the likeness, but the differences. You see, none of the creatures are exactly like the pictures in the books. Some of them not at all like them. Not like the reconstruction the paleontologists put together. If they had been I might still have thought they were hallucinations, that what I was seeing was influenced by what I'd seen or read. I could have been feeding my imagination on prior knowledge. But since that was not the case, it seemed logical to assume that what I see is real. How could I imagine that Tyrannosaurus had dewlaps all the colors of the rainbow? How could I imagine that some of the saber-tooths had tassels on their ears? How could anyone possibly imagine that the big thunder beasts of the Eocene had hides as colorful as giraffes?'

'Mr. Daniels,' said Thorne, 'I have great reservations about all that you have told me, Every fiber of my training rebels against it. I have a feeling that I should waste no time on it. Undoubtedly, you believe what you have told me. You have the look of an honest man about you. Have you talked to any other men about this? Any other paleontologists or geologists? Perhaps a neuropsychiatrist?'

'No,' said Daniels. 'You're the only person, the only man I have talked with. And I haven't told you all of it. This is really all just background.'

'My God, man -- just background?'

'Yes, just background. You see, I also listen to the stars.' Thorne got up from his chair, began shuffling together a stack of papers. He retrieved the dead pipe from the ashtray and stuck it in his mouth.

His voice, when he spoke, was noncommittal.

'Thank you for coming in,' he said. 'It's been most interesting.'

3

And that was where he had made his mistake. Daniels told himself. He never should have mentioned listening to the stars. His interview had gone well until he had. Thorne had not believed him, of course, but he had been intrigued, would have listened further, might even have pursued the matter, although undoubtedly secretly and very cautiously.

At fault, Daniels knew, had been his obsession with the creature in the stone. The past was nothing -- it was the creature in the stone that was important and to tell of it, to explain it and how he knew that it was there, he must tell about his listening to the stars.

He should have known better, he told himself. He should have held his tongue. But here had been a man who, while doubting, still had been willing to listen without laughter, and in his thankfulness Daniels had spoken too much.

The wick of the oil lamp set upon the kitchen table guttered in the air currents that came in around the edges of the ill-fitting windows. A wind had risen after chores were done and now shook the house with gale-like blasts. On the far side of the room the fire in the wood-burning stove threw friendly, wavering flares of light across the floor and the stovepipe, in response to the wind that swept the chimney top, made gurgling, sucking sounds.

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Thorne had mentioned a neuropsychiatrist, Daniels remembered, and perhaps that was the kind of man he should have gone to see. Perhaps before he attempted to interest anyone in what he could see or hear, he should make an effort to find out why and how he could hear and see these things. A man who studied the working of the brain and mind might come up with new answers -- if answers were to be had.

Had that blow upon his head so rearranged, so shifted some process in his brain that he had gained new capabilities? Was it possible that his brain had been so jarred, so disarranged as to bring into play certain latent talents that possibly, in millennia to come, might have developed naturally by evolutionary means? Had the brain damage short-circuited evolution and given him -- and him alone -- these capabilities, these senses, perhaps a million years ahead of time?

It seemed -- well, not reasonable but one possible explanation. Still, a trained man might have some other explanation.

He pushed his chair back from the table and walked over to the stove. He used the lifter to raise the lid of the rickety old cook stove. The wood in the firebox had burned down to embers. Stooping, he picked up a stick of wood from the woodbox and fitted it in, added another smaller one and replaced the lid. One of these days soon, he told himself, he would have to get the furnace in shape for operation.

He went out to stand on the porch, looking toward the river hills. The wind whooped out of the north, whistling around the corners of the building and booming in the deep hollows that ran down to the river, but the sky was clear -- steely clear, wiped fresh by the wind and sprinkled with stars, their light shivering in the raging atmosphere.

Looking up at the stars, he wondered what they might be saying but he didn't try to listen. It took a lot of effort and concentration to listen to the stars. He had first listened to them on a night like this, standing out here on the porch and wondering what they might be saying, wondering if the stars did talk among themselves. A foolish, vagrant thought, a wild, daydreaming sort of notion, but, voicing it, he had tried to listen, knowing even as he did that it was foolishness but glorying in his foolishness, telling himself how fortunate he was that he could afford to be so inane as to try to listen to the stars -- as a child might believe in Santa Claus or the Easter Rabbit. He'd listened and he'd heard and while he'd been astonished, there could be no doubt about it, no doubt at all that out there somewhere other beings were talking back and forth. He might have been listening in on a party line, he thought, but a party line that carried millions, perhaps billions, of long-distance conversations. Not words, of course, but something (thought, perhaps) that was as plain as words. Not all of it understandable -- much of it, as a matter of fact, not understandable -- possibly because his background and his learning gave him no basis for an understanding. He compared himself to an Australian aborigine listening to the conversation of a couple of nuclear physicists discussing a new theory.

Shortly after that, when he had been exploring the shallow cave down on Cat Den Point, he had picked up his first indication of the creature buried in the stone. Perhaps, he thought, if he'd not listened to the stars, if he'd not known he could listen to the stars, if he'd not trained his mind by listening, he would not have heard the creature buried deep beneath the limestone.

He stood looking at the stars and listening to the wind and, far across the river, on a road that wound over the distant hills, he caught the faint glimmer of headlights as a car made its way through the night. The wind let up for a moment, as if gathering its strength to blow even harder and, in the tiny lull that existed before the wind took up again, he heard another sound -- the sound of an axe hitting wood. He listened carefully and the sound came again but so tossed about by the wind that he could not be sure of its direction.

He must be mistaken, he thought. No one would be out and chopping on a night like this. Coon hunters might be the answer. Coon hunters at times chopped down a tree to dislodge a prey too well hidden to be spotted. The unsportsmanlike

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trick was one that Ben Adams and his overgrown, gangling sons might engage in. But this was no night for coon hunting. The wind would blow away scent and the dogs would be unable to track. Quiet nights were the best for hunting coon. And no one would be insane enough to cut down a tree on a night like this when a swirling wind might catch it and topple it back upon the cutters.

He listened to catch the sound again but the wind, recovering from its lull, was blowing harder than ever now and there was no chance of hearing any sound smaller than the wind.

The next day came in mild and gray, the wind no more than a whisper. Once in the night Daniels had awoken to hear it rattling the windows, pounding at the house and howling mournfully in the tangled hollows that lay above the river. But when he woke again all was quiet and faint light was graying the windows. Dressed and out of doors he found a land of peace -- the sky so overcast that there was no hint of sun, the air fresh, as if newly washed but heavy with the moist grayness that overlay the land. The autumn foliage that clothed the hills had taken on a richer luster than it had worn in the flooding autumn sunlight.

After chores and breakfast Daniels set out for the hills. As he went down the slope towards the head of the first hollow he found himself hoping that the geologic shift would not come about today. There were many times it didn't and there seemed to be no reason to its taking place or its failure to take place. He had tried at times to find some reason for it, had made careful notes of how he felt or what he did, even the course he took when he went for his daily walk, but he had found no pattern. It lay, of course, somewhere in his brain -- something triggered into operation his new capability. But the phenomenon was random and involuntary. He had no control of it, no conscious control, at least. At times he had tried to use it, to bring the geologic shift about -- in each case had failed. Either he did not know how to go about it or it was truly random.

Today, he hoped, his capability would not exercise its option, for he wanted to walk in the hills when they had assumed one of their most attractive moods, filled with gentle melancholy, all their harshness softened by the grayness of the atmosphere, the trees standing silently like old and patient friends waiting for one's coming, the fallen leaves and forest mold so hushed footfalls made no sound.

He went down to the head of the hollow and sat on a fallen log beside a gushing spring that sent a stream of water tinkling down the boulder-strewn creek bed. Here, in May, in the pool below the spring, the marsh marigolds had bloomed and the sloping hillsides had been covered with the pastel of hepaticas. But now he saw no sign of either. The woods had battened down for winter. The summer and the autumn plants were either dead or dying, the drifting leaves interlocking on the forest floor to form cover against the ice and snow.

In this place, thought Daniels, a man walked with a season's ghosts. This was the way it had been for a million years or more, although not always. During many millions of years, in a time long gone, these hills and all the world had basked in an eternal summertime. And perhaps not a great deal more than ten thousand years before a mile-high wall of ice had reared up not too far to the north, perhaps close enough for a man who stood where his house now sat to have seen the faint line of blueness that would have been the top of that glacial barrier. But even then, although the mean temperature would have been lower, there had still been seasons.

Leaving the log, Daniels went on down the hollow, following the narrow path that looped along the hillside, a cow-path beaten down at a time when there had been more cows at pasture in these woods than the two that Daniels owned. Following it, Daniels noted, as he had many times before, the excellent engineering sense of a cow. Cows always chose the easiest grade in stamping out their paths.

He stopped barely beyond the huge white oak that stood at a bend in the path, to have a look at the outside jack-in-the-pulpit plant he had observed

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throughout the years. Its green-purple hood had withered away completely,
leaving only the scarlet fruit cluster which in the bitter months ahead would
serve as food for birds.

As the path continued, it plunged deeper between the hills and here the
silence deepened and the grayness thickened until one's world became private.

There, across the stream bed, was the den. Its yellow maw gaped beneath a
crippled, twisted cedar. There, in the spring, he had watched baby foxes play.
From far down the hollow came the distant quacking of ducks upon the pond in the
river valley. And up on the steep hillside loomed Cat Den Point, the den carved
by slow-working wind and weather out of the sheer rock of the cliff.

But something was wrong.

Standing on the path and looking up the hill, he could sense the wrongness,
although he could not at first tell exactly what it was. More of the cliff face
was visible and something was missing. Suddenly he knew that the tree was no
longer there -- the tree that for years had been climbed by homing wildcats
heading for the den after a night of prowling and later by humans like himself
who wished to seek out the wildcat's den. The cats, of course, were no longer
there -- had not been there for many years. In the pioneer days they had been
hunted almost to extermination because at times they had exhibited the poor
judgment of bringing down a lamb. But the evidence of their occupancy of the
cave could still be found by anyone who looked. Far back in the narrow recesses
of the shallow cave tiny bones and the fragmented skulls of small mammals gave
notice of food brought home by the wildcats for their young.

The tree had been old and gnarled and had stood, perhaps, for several
centuries and there would have been no sense of anyone's cutting it down, for it
had no value as lumber, twisted as it was. And in any case to get it out of the
woods would have been impossible. Yet, last night, when he had stepped out on
the porch, he had seemed to hear in a lull in the wind the sound of chopping --
and today the tree was gone.

Unbelieving, he scrambled up the slope as swiftly as he could. In places the
slope of the wild hillside slanted at an angle so close to forty-five degrees
that he went on hands and knees, clawing himself upward, driven by an illogical
fear that had to do with more than simply a missing tree.

For it was in the cat den that one could hear the creature buried in the
stone.

He could recall the day he first had heard the creature and on that day he
had not believed his senses. For he had been sure the sound came from his own
imagination, was born of his walking with the dinosaurs and eavesdropping on the
stars. It had not come the first time he had climbed the tree to reach the
cave-that-was-a-den. He had been there several times before, finding a perverse
satisfaction at discovering so unlikely a retreat. He would sit on the ledge
that ran before the cave and stare over the froth of treetop foliage that
clothed the plunging hillside, but afforded a glimpse of the pond that lay in
the flood plain of the river. He could not see the river itself -- one must
stand on higher ground to see the river.

He liked the cave and the ledge because it gave him seclusion, a place cut
off from the world, where he still might see this restricted corner of the world
but no one could see him. This same sense of being shut out from the world had
appealed to the wildcats, he had told himself. And here, for them, not only was
seclusion but safety -- and especially safety for their young. There was no way
the den could be approached other than by climbing the tree.

He had first heard the creature when he had crawled into the deepest part of
the shallow cave to marvel at the little heaps of bones and small shattered
skulls where the wildcat kittens, perhaps a century before, had crouched and
snarled at feast. Crouching where the baby wildcats once had crouched, he had
felt the presence welling up at him, coming up to him from the depth of stone
that lay far beneath him. Only the presence at first, only the knowing that
something was down there. He had been skeptical at first, later on believing. In

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time belief had become solid certainty.

He could record no words, of course, for he had never heard any actual sound. But the intelligence and the knowing came creeping through his body, through his fingers spread flat upon the stone floor of the cave, through his knees, which also pressed the stone. He absorbed it without hearing and the more he absorbed the more he was convinced that deep in the limestone, buried in one of the strata, an intelligence was trapped. And finally the time came when he could catch fragments of thoughts -- the edges of the living in the sentience encysted in the rock.

What he heard he did not understand. This very lack of understanding was significant. If he had understood he would have put his discovery down to his imagination. As matters stood he had no knowledge that could possibly have served as a springboard to imagine the thing of which he was made aware. He caught an awareness of tangled life relationships which made no sense at all -- none of which could be understood, but which lay in tiny, tangled fragments of outrageous (yet simple) information no human mind could quite accept. And he was made to know the empty hollowness of distances so vast that the mind reeled at the very hint of them and of the naked emptiness in which those distances must lie. Even in his eavesdropping on the stars he had never experienced such devastating concepts of the other-where-and-when. There was other information, scraps and bits he sensed faintly that might fit into mankind's knowledge. But he never found enough to discover the proper slots for their insertion into the mass of mankind's knowledge. The greater part of what he sensed, however, was simply beyond his grasp and perhaps beyond the grasp of any human. But even so his mind would catch and hold it in all its incomprehensibility and it would lie there festering amid his human thoughts.

They were or it was, he knew, not trying to talk with him -- undoubtedly they (or it) did not know that such a thing as a man existed, let alone himself. But whether the creature (or creatures -- he found the collective singular easier) simply was thinking or might, in its loneliness, be talking to itself -- or whether it might be trying to communicate with something other than himself, he could not determine.

Thinking about it, sitting on the ledge before the cave, he had tried to make some logic of his find, had tried to find a way in which the creature's presence might be best explained. And while he could not be sure of it -- in fact, had no data whatsoever to bolster his belief -- he came to think that in some far geologic day when a shallow sea had lain upon this land, a ship from space had fallen into the sea to be buried deeply in the mud that in later millennia had hardened into limestone. In this manner the ship had become entrapped and so remained to this very day. He realized his reasoning held flaws -- for one thing, the pressure involved in the fashioning of the stone must have been so great as to have crushed and flattened any ship unless it should be made of some material far beyond the range of man's technology.

Accident, he wondered, or a way of hiding? Trapped or planned? He had no way of knowing and further speculation was ridiculous, based as it necessarily must be upon earlier assumptions that were entirely without support.

Scrambling up the hillside, he finally reached the point where he could see that, in all truth, the tree had been cut down. It had fallen downhill and slid for thirty feet or so before it came to rest, its branches entangled with the trunks of other trees which had slowed its plunge. The stump stood raw, the whiteness of its wood shining in the grayness of the day. A deep cut had been made in the downhill side of it and the final felling had been accomplished by a saw. Little piles of brownish sawdust lay beside the stump. A two-man saw, he thought.

From where Daniels stood the hill slanted down at an abrupt angle but just ahead of him, just beyond the stump, was a curious mound that broke the hillside slope. In some earlier day, more than likely, great masses of stone had broken from the cliff face and piled up at its base, to be masked in time by the soil that came about from the forest litter. Atop the mound grew a clump of birch, their powdery white trunks looking like huddled ghosts against the darkness of the other trees.

The cutting of the tree, he told himself once again, had been a senseless piece of business. The tree was worthless and had served no particular purpose except as a road to reach the den. Had someone, he wondered, known that he used it to reach the den and cut it out of malice? Or had someone, perhaps, hidden something in the cave and then cut down the tree so there would be no way in which to reach it?

But who would hold him so much malice as to come out on a night raging with wind working by lantern light, risking his life, to cut down the tree? Ben Adams? Ben was sore because Daniels would not permit hunting on his land but surely that was no sufficient reason for this rather laborious piece of petty spite.

The other alternative -- that something hidden in the cave had caused the tree's destruction -- seemed more likely, although the very cutting of the tree would serve to advertize the strangeness of the place.

Daniels stood puzzled, shaking his head. Then he thought of a way to find out some answers. The day still was young and he had nothing else to do.

He started climbing up the hill, heading for his barn to pick up some rope.

4

There was nothing in the cave. It was exactly as it had been before. A few autumn leaves had blown into the far corners. Chips of weathered stone had fallen from the rocky overhang, tiny evidences of the endless process of erosion which had formed the cave and in a few thousand years from now might wipe it out.

Standing on the narrow ledge in front of the cave, Daniels stared out across the valley and was surprised at the change of view that had resulted from the cutting of the tree. The angles of vision seemed somehow different and the hillside itself seemed changed. Startled, he examined the sweep of the slope closely and finally satisfied himself that all that had changed was his way of seeing it. He was seeing trees and contours that earlier had been masked.

His rope hung from the outcurving rock face that formed the roof of the cave. It was swaying gently in the wind and, watching it, Daniels recalled that earlier in the day he had felt no wind. But now one had sprung up from the west. Below him the treetops were bending to it.

He turned toward the west and felt the wind on his face and a breath of chill. The feel of the wind faintly disturbed him, rousing some atavistic warning that came down from the days when naked roaming bands of proto-men had turned, as he turned now, to sniff the coming weather. The wind might mean that a change in weather could be coming and perhaps he should clamber up the rope and head back for the farm.

But he felt a strange reluctance to leave. It had been often so, he recalled. For here was a wild sort of refuge which barred out the world and the little world that it let in was a different kind -- a more primal and more basic and less complicated world than the one he'd fled from.

A flight of mallards came winging up from the pond in the river valley arrowing above the treetops, banking and slanting up the long curve of the bluff and then, having cleared the bluff top, wheeling gracefully back toward the flyer. He watched them until they dipped down behind the trees that fringed the unseen river.

Now it was time to go. There was no use waiting longer. It had been a fool's errand in the first place; he had been wrong to let himself think something might be hidden in the cave.

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He turned back to the rope and the rope was gone.

For a moment he stared stupidly at the point along the cliff face where the rope had hung, swaying in the breeze. Then he searched for some sign of it, although there was little area to search. The rope could have slid, perhaps, for a short distance along the edge of the overhanging mass of rock but it seemed incredible that it could have slid far enough to have vanished from his sight.

The rope was new, strong, and he had tied it securely to the oak tree on the bluff above the cliff, snugging it tightly around the trunk and testing the knot to make certain that it would not slip.

And now the rope was gone. There had to be a human hand in this. Someone had come along, seen the rope and quietly drawn it up and now was crouched on the bluff above him, waiting for his frightened outburst when he found himself stranded. It was the sort of crude practical joke that any number of people in the community might believe to be the height of humor. The thing to do, of course, was to pay no attention, to remain quiet and wait until the joke would fall upon the jokester.

So he hunkered down upon the ledge and waited. Ten minutes, he told himself, or at least fifteen, would wear out the patience of the jokester. Then the rope would come down and he could climb up and go back to the house. Depending upon who the joker might turn out to be, he'd take him home and pour a drink for him and the two of them, sitting in the kitchen, would have a laugh together.

He found that he was hunching his shoulders against the wind, which seemed to have a sharper bite than when he first had noticed it. It was shifting from the west to north and that was no good.

Squatting on the ledge, he noticed that beads of moisture had gathered upon his jacket sleeve -- not a result of rain, exactly, but of driven mist. If the temperature should drop a bit the weather might turn nasty.

He waited, huddled, listening for a sound -- a scuffling of feet through leaves, the snap of broken brush -- that would betray the presence of someone on the clifftop. But there was no sound at all. The day was muffled. Even the branches of the trees beneath his perch, swaying in the wind, swayed without their usual creaks and groans.

Fifteen minutes must have passed and there had been no sound from atop the cliff. The wind had increased somewhat and when he twisted his head to one side to try to look up he could feel the soft slash of the driving mist against his cheek.

He could keep silent no longer in hope of waiting out the jokester. He sensed, in a sudden surge of panic, that time was running out on him.

'Hey, up there -- ' he shouted.

He waited and there was no response.

He shouted again, more loudly this time.

Ordinarily the cliff across the hollow should have bounced back echoes. But now there were no echoes and his shout seemed dampened, as if this wild place had erected some sort of fence to hem him in.

He shouted again and the misty world took his voice and swallowed it.

A hissing sound started. Daniels saw it was caused by tiny pellets of ice streaming through the branches of the trees. From one breath to another the driven mist had turned to ice.

He walked back and forth on the ledge in front of the cave, twenty feet at most, looking for some way of escape. The ledge went out into space and then sheered off. The slanting projection of rock came down from above. He was neatly

trapped.

He moved back into the cave and hunkered down. Here he was protected from the wind and he felt, even through his rising panic, a certain sense of snugness. The cave was not yet cold. But the temperature must be dropping and dropping rather swiftly or the mist would not have turned to ice. He wore a light jacket and could not make a fire. He did not smoke and never carried matches.

For the first time he faced the real seriousness of his position. It might be days before anyone noticed he was missing. He had few visitors and no one ever paid too much attention to him. Even if someone should find that he was missing and a hunt for him was launched, what were the chances that he would be found? Who would think to look in this hidden cave? How long, he wondered, could a man survive in cold and hunger?

If he could not get out of here, and soon, what about his livestock? The cows would be heading home from pasture, seeking shelter from the storm, and there would be no one there to let them into the barn. If they were not milked for a day or two they would be tormented by swollen udders. The hogs and chickens would go unfed. A man, he thought, had no right to take the kind of chance he had taken when so many living creatures were dependent on him.

He crawled farther back into the cave and stretched himself out on his belly, wedging himself into its deepest recess, an ear laid against the stone.

The creature still was there -- of course it still was there. It was trapped even more securely than himself, held down by, perhaps, several hundred feet of solid rock, which had been built up most deliberately through many millions of years.

It was remembering again. In its mind was another place and, while part of that flow of memory was blurred and wavy, the rest was starkly clear. A great dark plain of rock, one great slab of rock, ran to a far horizon and above that far horizon a reddish sun came up and limned against the great red ball of rising sun was a hinted structure -- an irregularity of the horizon that suggested a place. A castle, perhaps, or a city or a great cliff dwelling -- it was hard to make out what it was or to be absolutely sure that it was anything at all.

Home? Was that black expanse of rock the spaceport of the old home planet? Or might it be only a place the creature had visited before it had come to Earth? A place so fantastic, perhaps, that it lingered in the mind.

Other things mixed into the memory, sensory symbols that might have applied to personalities, life forms, smells, tastes.

Although he could be wrong, Daniels knew, in supplying this entrapped creature with human sensory perceptions, these human sensory perceptions were the only ones he knew about.

And now, listening in on the memory of that flat black expanse of rock and imagining the rising sun which outlined the structure of the far horizon, Daniels did something he had never tried to do before. He tried to talk back to the buried creature, tried to let it know that someone was listening and had heard, that it was not as lonely and as isolated as it might have thought it was.

He did not talk with his tongue -- that would have been a senseless thing to do. Sound could never carry through those many feet of stone. He talked with his mind instead.

Hello, down there, he said. _This is a friend of yours. I've been listening to you for a long, long time and I hope that you can hear me. If you can, let us talk together. Let me try to make you understand about myself and the world I live in and you tell me about yourself and the kind of world you lived in and how you came to be where you are and if there is anything I can do for you, any help that I can give._

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He said that much and no more. Having spoken, he continued lying with his ear against the hard cave floor, listening to find out if the creature might have heard him. But the creature apparently had not heard or, having heard, ignored him as something not worth its attention. It went on thinking about the place where the dull red sun was rising above the horizon.

It had been foolish, and perhaps presumptuous, he knew, for him to have tried to speak to it. He had never tried before; he had simply listened. And he had never tried, either, to speak to those others who talked among the stars -- again he'd simply listened.

What new dimension had been added to himself, he wondered, that would have permitted him to try to communicate with the creature? Had the possibility that he was about to die moved him?

The creature in the stone might not be subject to death -- it might be immortal.

He crawled out of the far recess of the cave and crept out to where he had room to hunker down.

The storm had worsened. The ice now was mixed with snow and the temperature had fallen. The ledge in front of the cave was filmed with slippery ice. If a man tried to walk it he'd go plunging down the cliff face to his death.

The wind was blowing harder. The branches of the trees were waving and a storm of leaves was banking down the hillside, flying with the ice and snow.

From where he squatted he could see the topmost branches of the clump of birches which grew atop the mound just beyond where the cave tree had stood. And these branches, it seemed to him, were waving about far more violently than could be accounted for by wind. They were lashing wildly from one side to the other and even as he watched they seemed to rise higher in the air, as if the trees, in some great agony, were raising their branches far above their heads in a plea for mercy.

Daniels crept forward on his hands and knees and thrust his head out to see down to the base of the cliff.

Not only the topmost branches of the clump of birches were swaying but the entire clump seemed to be in motion, thrashing about as if some unseen hand were attempting to wrench it from the soil. But even as he thought this, he saw that the ground itself was in agitation, heaving up and out. It looked exactly as if someone had taken a time-lapse movie of the development of a frost boil with the film being run at a normal speed. The ground was heaving up and the clump was heaving with it. A shower of gravel and other debris was flowing down the slope, loosened by the heaving of the ground. A boulder broke away and crashed down the hill, crushing brush and shrubs and leaving hideous scars.

Daniels watched in horrified fascination.

Was he witnessing, he wondered, some wonderfully speeded-up geological process? He tried to pinpoint exactly what kind of process it might be. He knew of one that seemed to fit. The mound kept on heaving upward, splintering outward from its center. A great flood of loose debris was now pouring down the slope, leaving a path of brown in the whiteness of the fallen snow. The clump of birch tipped over and went skidding down the slope and out of the place where it had stood a shape emerged.

Not a solid shape, but a hazy one that looked as if someone had scraped some stardust from the sky and molded it into a ragged, shifting form that did not set into any definite pattern, that kept shifting and changing, although it did not entirely lose all resemblance to the shape in which it might originally have been molded. It looked as a loose conglomeration of atoms might look if atoms could be seen. It sparkled softly in the grayness of the day and despite its seeming insubstantiality it apparently had some strength -- for it continued to push itself from the shattered mound until finally it stood free of it.

Having freed itself, it drifted up toward the ledge.

Strangely, Daniels felt no fear, only a vast curiosity. He tried to make out what the drifting shape was but he could not be sure.

As it reached the ledge and moved slightly above it he drew back to crouch within the cave. The shape drifted in a couple of feet or so and perched on the ledge -- either perched upon it or floated just above it.

You spoke, the sparkling shape said to Daniels.

It was not a question, nor a statement either, really, and it was not really speaking. It sounded exactly like the talk Daniels had heard when he'd listened to the stars.

You spoke to it, said the shape, _as if you were a friend_ (although the word was not friend but something else entirely, something warm and friendly).
You offered help to it. Is there help that you can give?

That question at least was clear enough.

'I don't know,' said Daniels. 'Not right now, there isn't. But in a hundred years from now, perhaps -- are you hearing me? Do you know what I am saying?'

You say there can be help, the creature said, _but only after time. Please, what is that time?_

'A hundred years,' said Daniels. 'When the planet goes around the star one hundred times.'

One hundred? asked the creature.

Daniels held up the fingers of both hands. 'Can you see my fingers? The appendages on the tips of my arms?'

See? the creature asked.

'Sense them. Count them.'

Yes, I can count them.

'They number ten,' said Daniels. 'Ten times that many of them would be a hundred.'

It is no great span of time, the creature said. _what kind of help by then?_

'You know genetics? How a creature comes into being, how it knows what kind of thing it is to become, how it grows, how it knows how to grow and what to become. The amino acids that make up the ribonucleic acids and provide the key to the kind of cells it grows and what their functions are.'

I do not know your terms, the creature said, _but I understand. So you know of this? You are not, then, a brute wild creature, like the other life that simply stands and the others that burrow in the ground and climb the standing life forms and run along the ground._

It did not come out like this, of course. The words were there -- or meanings that had the feel of words -- but there were pictures as well of trees, of burrowing mice, of squirrels, of rabbits, of the lurching woodchuck and the running fox.

'Not I,' said Daniels, 'but others of my kind. I know but little of it. There are others who spend all their time in the study of it.'

The other perched on the ledge and said nothing more. Beyond it the trees whipped in the wind and the snow came whirling down, Daniels huddled back from

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the ledge, shivered in the cold and wondered if this thing upon the ledge could
be hallucination.

But as he thought it, the thing began to talk again, although this time it
did not seem to be talking to him. It talked, rather, as the creature in the
stone had talked, remembering. It communicated, perhaps, something he was not
meant to know, but Daniels had no way of keeping from knowing. Sentience flowed
from the creature and impacted on his mind, filling all his mind, barring all
else, so that it seemed as if it were he and not this other who was remembering.

5

First there was space -- endless, limitless space, so far from everything,
so brutal, so frigid, so uncaring that it numbed the mind, not so much from fear
or loneliness as from the realization that in this eternity of space the thing
that was himself was dwarfed to an insignificance no yardstick could measure. So
far from home, so lost, so directionless -- and yet not entirely directionless,
for there was a trace, a scent, a spoor, a knowing that could not be expressed
or understood or even guessed at in the framework of humanity; a trace, a scent,
a spoor that showed the way, no matter how dimly or how hopelessly, that
something else had taken at some other time. And a mindless determination, an
unflagging devotion, a primal urgency that drove him on that faint, dim trail,
to follow where it might lead, even to the end of time or space, or the both of
them together, never to fail or quit or falter until the trail had finally
reached an end or had been wiped out by whatever winds might blow through empty
space.

There was something here. Daniels told himself, that, for all its alienness,
still was familiar, a factor that should lend itself to translation into human
terms and thus establish some sort of link between this remembering alien mind
and his human mind.

The emptiness and the silence, the cold uncaring went on and on and on and
there seemed no end to it. But he came to understand there had to be an end to
it and that the end was here, in these tangled hills above the ancient river.
And after the almost endless time of darkness and uncaring, another almost
endless time of waiting, of having reached the end, of having gone as far as one
might go and then settling down to wait with an ageless patience that never
would grow weary.

You spoke of help, the creature said to him. _why help? You do not know
this other. why should you want to help?_

'It is alive,' said Daniels. 'It's alive and I'm alive and is that not
enough?'

I do not know, the creature said.

'I think it is,' said Daniels.

And how could you help?

'I've told you about this business of genetics. I don't know if I can
explain -- '

I have the terms from your mind, the creature said. _The genetic code._

'Would this other one, the one beneath the stone, the one you guard -- '

Not guard, the creature said. _The one I wait for._

'You will wait for long.'

I am equipped for waiting. I have waited long. I can wait much longer.

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'Someday,' Daniels said, 'the stone will erode away. But you need not wait that long. Does this other creature know its genetic code?'

It knows, the creature said. _It knows far more than I._

'But all of it,' insisted Daniels. 'Down to the last linkage, the final ingredient, the sequences of all the billions of -- '

It knows, the creature said. _The first requisite of all life is to understand itself._

'And it could -- it would -- be willing to give us that information, to supply us its genetic code?'

You are presumptuous, said the sparkling creature (although the word was harder than presumptuous). _That is information no thing gives another. It is indecent and obscene_ (here again the words were not exactly indecent and obscene). _It involves the giving of one's self into another's hands. It is an ultimate and purposeless surrender._

'Not surrender,' Daniels said. 'A way of escaping from its imprisonment. In time, in the hundred years of which I told you, the people of my race could take that genetic code and construct another creature exactly like the first. Duplicate it with exact preciseness.'

But it still would be in stone.

'Only one of it. The original one. That original could wait for the erosion of the rock. But the other one, its duplicate, could take up life again.'

And what, Daniels wondered, if the creature in the stone did not wish for rescue? What if it had deliberately placed itself beneath the stone? What if it simply sought protection and sanctuary? Perhaps, if it wished, the creature could get out of where it was as easily as this other one -- or this other thing -- had risen from the mound.

No, it cannot, said the creature squatting on the ledge. _I was careless. I went to sleep while waiting and I slept too long._

And that would have been a long sleep, Daniels told himself. A sleep so long that dribbling soil had mounded over it, that fallen boulders, cracked off the cliff by frost, had been buried in the soil and that a clump of birch had sprouted and grown into trees thirty feet high. There was a difference here in time rate that he could not comprehend.

But some of the rest, he told himself, he had sensed -- the devoted loyalty and the mindless patience of the creature that tracked another far among the stars. He knew he was right, for the mind of that other thing, that devoted star-dog perched upon the ledge, came into him and fastened on his mind and for a moment the two of them, the two minds, for all their differences, merged into a single mind in a gesture of fellowship and basic understanding, as if for the first time in what must have been millions of years this baying hound from outer space had found a creature that could understand its duty and its purpose.

'We could try to dig it out,' said Daniels. 'I had thought of that, of course, but I was afraid that it would be injured. And it would be hard to convince anyone -- '

No, said the creature, _digging would not do. There is much you do not understand. But this other proposal that you have, that has great merit. You say you do not have the knowledge of genetics to take this action now. Have you talked to others of your kind?_

'I talked to one,' said Daniels, 'and he would not listen. He thought I was mad. But he was not, after all, the man I should have spoken to. In time I could talk with others but not right now. No matter how much I might want to -- I can't. For they would laugh at me and I could not stand their laughter. But in a

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hundred years or somewhat less I could -- '

'_But you will not exist a hundred years_, said the faithful dog. _You are a short-lived species. Which might explain your rapid rise. All life here is short-lived and that gives evolution a chance to build intelligence. When I first came here I found but mindless entities._

'You are right,' said Daniels. 'I can live no hundred years. Even from the very start, I could not live a hundred years, and better than half of my life is gone. Perhaps much more than half of it. For unless I can get out of this cave I will be dead in days.'

Reach out, said the sparkling one. _Reach out and touch me, being._

Slowly Daniels reached out. His hand went through the sparkle and the shine and he had no sense of matter -- it was as if he'd moved his hand through nothing but air.

You see, the creature said, _I cannot help you. There is no way for our energies to interact. I am sorry, friend._ (it was not friend, exactly, but it was good enough, and it might have been, Daniels thought, a great deal more than friend.)

'I am sorry, too,' said Daniels. 'I would like to live.'

Silence fell between them, the soft and brooding silence of a snow-laden afternoon with nothing but the trees and the rock and the hidden little life to share the silence with them.

It had been for nothing, then, Daniels told himself, this meeting with a creature from another world. Unless he could somehow get off this ledge there was nothing he could do. Although why he should so concern himself with the rescue of the creature in the stone he could not understand. Surely whether he himself lived or died should be of more importance to him than that his death would foreclose any chance of help to the buried alien.

'But it may not be for nothing,' he told the sparkling creature. 'Now that you know -- '

My knowing, said the creature, _will have no effect. There are others from the stars who would have the knowledge -- but even if I could contact them they would pay no attention to me. My position is too lowly to converse with the greater ones. My only hope would be people of your kind and, if I'm not mistaken, only with yourself. For I catch the edge of thought that you are the only one who really understands. There is no other of your race who could even be aware of me._

Daniels nodded. It was entirely true. No other human existed whose brain had been jumbled so fortunately as to have acquired the abilities he held. He was the only hope for the creature in the stone and even such hope as he represented might be very slight, for before it could be made effective he must find someone who would listen and believe. And that belief must reach across the years to a time when genetic engineering was considerably advanced beyond its present state.

If you could manage to survive the present this, said the hound from outer space, _I might bring to bear certain energies and techniques -- sufficiently for the project to be carried through. But, as you must realize, I cannot supply the means to survive this crisis._

'Someone may come along,' said Daniels. 'They might hear me if I yelled every now and then.'

He began yelling every now and then and received no answer. His yells were muffled by the storm and it was unlikely, he knew, that there would be men abroad at a time like this. They'd be safe beside their fires.

The sparkling creature still perched upon the ledge when Daniels slumped

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back to rest. The other made an indefinite sort of shape that seemed much like a lopsided Christmas tree standing in the snow.

Daniels told himself not to go to sleep. He must close his eyes only for a moment, then snap them open -- he must not let them stay shut for then sleep would come upon him. He should beat his arms across his chest for warmth -- but his arms were heavy and did not want to work.

He felt himself sliding prone to the cave floor and fought to drive himself erect. But his will to fight was thin and the rock was comfortable. So comfortable, he thought, that he could afford a moment's rest before forcing himself erect. And the funny thing about it was that the cave floor had turned to mud and water and the sun was shining and he seemed warm again.

He rose with a start and he saw that he was standing in a wide expanse of water no deeper than his ankles, black ooze underfoot.

There was no cave and no hill in which the cave might be. There was simply this vast sheet of water and behind him, less than thirty feet away, the muddy beach of a tiny island -- a muddy, rocky island, with smears of sickly green clinging to the rocks.

He was in another time, he knew, but not in another place. Always when he slipped through time he came to rest on exactly the same spot upon the surface of the earth that he had occupied when the change had come.

And standing there he wondered once again, as he had many times before, what strange mechanism operated to shift him bodily in space so that when he was transported to a time other than his own he did not find himself buried under, say, twenty feet of rock or soil or suspended twenty feet above the surface.

But now, he knew, was no time to think or wonder. By a strange quirk of circumstance he was no longer in the cave and it made good sense to get away from where he was as swiftly as he could. For if he stayed standing where he was he might snap back unexpectedly to his present and find himself still huddled in the cave.

He turned clumsily about, his feet tangling in the muddy bottom, and lunged towards the shore. The going was hard but he made it and went up the slimy stretch of muddy beach until he could reach the tumbled rocks and could sit and rest.

His breathing was difficult. He gulped great lungfuls and the air had a strange taste to it, not like normal air.

He sat on the rock, gasping for breath, and gazed out across the sheet of water shining in the high, warm sun. Far out he caught sight of a long, humping swell and watched it coming in. When it reached the shore it washed up the muddy incline almost to his feet. Far out on the glassy surface another swell was forming.

The sheet of water was greater, he realized, than he had first imagined. This was also the first time in his wanderings through the past that he had ever come upon any large body of water. Always before he had emerged on dry land whose general contours had been recognizable -- and there had always been the river flowing through the hills.

Here nothing was recognizable. This was a totally different place and there could be no question that he had been projected farther back in time than ever before -- back to the day of some great epicontinental sea, back to a time, perhaps, when the atmosphere had far less oxygen than it would have in later eons. More than likely, he thought, he was very close in time to that boundary line where life for a creature such as he would be impossible. Here there apparently was sufficient oxygen, although a man must pump more air into his lungs than he would normally. Go back a few million years and the oxygen might fall to the point where it would be insufficient. Go a little farther back and

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find no free oxygen at all.

Watching the beach, he saw the little things skittering back and forth, seeking refuge in spume-whitened piles of drift or popping into tiny burrows. He put his hand down on the rock on which he sat and scrubbed gently at a patch of green. It slid off the rock and clung to his flesh, smearing his palm with a slimy gelatinous mess that felt disgusting and unclean.

Here, then, was the first of life to dwell upon the land -- scarcely creatures as yet, still clinging to the edge of water, afraid and unequipped to wander too far from the side of that wet and gentle mother which, from the first beginning, had nurtured life. Even the plants still clung close to the sea, existing, perhaps, only upon rocky surfaces so close to the beach that occasional spray could reach them.

Daniels found that now he did not have to gasp quite so much for breath. Plowing through the mud up to the rock had been exhausting work in an oxygen-poor atmosphere. But sitting quietly on the rocks, he could get along all right.

Now that the blood had stopped pounding in his head he became aware of silence. He heard one sound only, the soft lapping of the water against the muddy beach, a lonely effect that seemed to emphasize rather than break the silence.

Never before in his life, he realized, had he heard so little sound. Back in the other worlds he had known there had been not one noise, but many, even on the quietest days. But here there was nothing to make a sound -- no trees, no animals, no insects, no birds -- just the water running to the far horizon and the bright sun in the sky.

For the first time in many months he knew again that sense of out-of-placeness, of not belonging, the feeling of being where he was not wanted and had no right to be, an intruder in a world that was out of bounds, not for him alone but for anything that was more complex or more sophisticated than the little skitterers on the beach.

He sat beneath the alien sun, surrounded by the alien water, watching the little things that in eons yet to come would give rise to such creatures as himself, and tried to feel some sort of kinship to the skitterers. But he could feel no kinship.

And suddenly in this place of one-sound-only there came a throbbing, faint but clear and presently louder, pressing down against the water, beating at the little island -- a sound out of the sky.

Daniels leaped to his feet and looked up and the ship was there, plummeting down toward him. But not a ship of solid form, it seemed -- rather a distorted thing, as if many planes of light (if there could be such things as planes of light) had been slapped together in a haphazard sort of way.

A throbbing came from it that set the atmosphere to howling and the planes of light kept changing shape or changing places, so that the ship, from one moment to the next, never looked the same.

It had been dropping fast to start with but now it was slowing down as it continued to fall, ponderously and with massive deliberation, straight toward the island.

Daniels found himself crouching, unable to jerk his eyes and senses away from this mass of light and thunder that came out of the sky.

The sea and mud and rock, even in the full light of the sun, were flickering with the flashing that came from the shifting of the planes of light. Watching it through eyes squinted against the flashes, Daniels saw that if the ship were to drop to the surface it would not drop upon the island, as he first had feared, but a hundred feet or so offshore.

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Not more than fifty feet above the water the great ship stopped and hovered and a bright thing came from it. The object hit the water with a splash but did not go under, coming to rest upon the shallow, muddy bottom of the sea, with a bit less than half of it above the surface. It was a sphere, a bright and shiny globe against which the water lapped, and even with the thunder of the ship beating at his ears, Daniels imagined he could hear the water lapping at the sphere.

Then a voice spoke above this empty world, above the throbbing of the ship, the imagined lapping sound of water, a sad, judicial voice -- although it could not have been a voice, for any voice would have been too puny to be heard. But the words were there and there was no doubt of what they said:

Thus, according to the verdict and the sentence, you are here deported and abandoned upon this barren planet, where it is most devoutly hoped you will find the time and opportunity to contemplate your sins and especially the sin of (and here were words and concepts Daniels could not understand, hearing them only as a blur of sound -- but the sound of them, or something in the sound of them, was such as to turn his blood to ice and at the same time fill him with a disgust and a loathing such as he'd never known before). _It is regrettable, perhaps, that you are immune to death, for much as we might detest ourselves for doing it, it would be a kinder course to discontinue you and would serve better than this course to exact our purpose, which is to place you beyond all possibility of ever having contact with any sort of life again.. Here, beyond the farthest track of galactic intercourse, on this uncharted planet, we can only hope that our purpose will be served. And we urge upon you such self-examination that if, by some remote chance, in some unguessed time, you should be freed through ignorance or malice, you shall find it within yourself so to conduct your existence as not to meet or merit such fate again. And now, according to our law, you may speak any final words you wish._

The voice ceased and after a while came another. And while the terminology was somewhat more involved than Daniels could grasp their idiom translated easily into human terms.

Go screw yourself, it said.

The throbbing deepened and the ship began to move straight up into the sky. Daniels watched it until the thunder died and the ship itself was a fading twinkle in the blue.

He rose from his crouch and stood erect, trembling and weak. Groping behind him for the rock, he found it and sat down again.

Once again the only sound was the lapping of the water on the shore. He could not hear, as he had imagined that he could, the water against the shining sphere that lay a hundred feet offshore. The sun blazed down out of the sky and glinted on the sphere and Daniels found that once again he was gasping for his breath.

Without a doubt, out there in the shallow water, on the mudbank that sloped up to the island, lay the creature in the stone. And how then had it been possible for him to be transported across the hundreds of millions of years to this one microsecond of time that held the answer to all the questions he had asked about the intelligence beneath the limestone? It could not have been sheer coincidence, for this was coincidence of too large an order ever to come about. Had he somehow, subconsciously, gained more knowledge than he had been aware of from the twinkling creature that had perched upon the ledge? For a moment, he remembered, their minds had met and mingled -- at that moment had there occurred a transmission of knowledge, unrecognized, buried in some corner of himself? Or was he witnessing the operation of some sort of psychic warning system set up to scare off any future intelligence that might be tempted to liberate this abandoned and marooned being? And what about the twinkling creature? Could some hidden, unguessed good exist in the thing imprisoned in the sphere -- for it to have commanded the loyalty and devotion of the creature on the ledge beyond the slow erosion of geologic ages? The question raised another: what were good and evil? Who was there to judge?

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The evidence of the twinkling creature was, of course, no evidence at all. No human being was so utterly depraved that he could not hope to find a dog to follow him and guard him even to the death.

More to wonder at was what had happened within his own jumbled brain that could send him so unerringly to the moment of a vital happening. What more would he find in it to astonish and confound him? How far along the path to ultimate understanding might it drive him? And what was the purpose of that driving?

He sat on the rock and gasped for breath. The sea lay flat and calm beneath the blazing sun, its only motion the long swells running in to break around the sphere and on the beach. The little skittering creatures ran along the mud and he rubbed his palm against his trouser leg, trying to brush off the green and slimy scum.

He could wade out, he thought, and have a closer look at the sphere lying in the mud. But it would be a long walk in such an atmosphere and he could not chance it -- for he must be nowhere near the cave up in that distant future when he popped back to his present.

Once the excitement of knowing where he was, the sense of out-of-placeness, had worn off, this tiny mud-flat island was a boring place. There was nothing but the sky and sea and the muddy beach; there was nothing much to look at. It was a place, he thought, where nothing ever happened, or was about to happen once the ship had gone away and the great event had ended. Much was going on, of course, that in future ages would spell out to quite a lot -- but it was mostly happening out of sight, down at the bottom of this shallow sea. The skittering things, he thought, and the slimy growth upon the rock were hardy, mindless pioneers of this distant day -- awesome to look upon and think about but actually not too interesting.

He began drawing aimless patterns in the mud with the toe of one boot. He tried to make a tic-tac-toe layout but so much mud was clinging to his toe that it didn't quite come out.

And then, instead of drawing in the mud, he was scraping with his toe in fallen leaves, stiff with frozen sleet and snow.

The sun was gone and the scene was dark except for a glow from something in the woods just down the hill from him. Driving sheets of snow swirled into his face and he shivered. He pulled his jacket close about him and began to button it. A man, he thought, could catch his death of cold this way, shifting as quickly as he had shifted from a steaming mudbank to the whiplash chill of a northern blizzard.

The yellow glow still persisted on the slope below him and he could hear the sound of human voices. What was going on? He was fairly certain of where he was, a hundred feet or so above the place where the cliff began -- there should be no one down there; there should not be a light.

He took a slow step down the hill, then hesitated. He ought not to be going down the hill -- he should be heading straight for home. The cattle would be waiting at the barnyard gate, hunched against the storm, their coats covered with ice and snow, yearning for the warmth and shelter of the barn. The pigs would not have been fed, nor the chickens either. A man owed some consideration to his livestock.

But someone was down there, someone with a lantern, almost on the lip of the cliff. If the damn fools didn't watch out, they could slip and go plunging down into a hundred feet of space. Coon hunters more than likely, although this was not the kind of night to be out hunting coon. The coons would all be denned up.

But whoever they might be, he should go down and warn them.

He was halfway to the lantern, which appeared to be setting on the ground, when someone picked it up and held it high and Daniels saw and recognized the

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face of the man who held it.

Daniels hurried forward.

'Sheriff, what are you doing here?'

But he had the shamed feeling that he knew, that he should have known from the moment he had seen the light.

'Who is there?' the sheriff asked, wheeling swiftly and tilting the lantern so that its rays were thrown in Daniels' direction. 'Daniels,' he gasped. 'Good God, man, where have you been?'

'Just walking around,' said Daniels weakly. The answer, he knew, was no good at all -- but how could he tell anyone that he had just returned from a trip through time?

'Damn it,' the sheriff said, disgusted. 'We've been hunting you. Ben Adams got scared when he dropped over to your place and you weren't there. He knows how you go walking around in the woods and he was afraid something had happened to you. So he phoned me, and he and his boys began looking for you. We were afraid you had fallen or had been hurt somehow. A man wouldn't last the night in a storm like this.'

'Where is Ben now?' asked Daniels.

The sheriff gestured down the hill and Daniels saw that two men, probably Adams' sons, had a rope snubbed around a tree and that the rope extended down over the cliff.

'He's down on the rope,' the sheriff said. 'Having a look in the cave. He felt somehow you might be in the cave.'

'He had good reason to -- ' Daniels started to say but he had barely begun to speak when the night was rent by a shriek of terror. The shrieking did not stop. It kept on and on. The sheriff thrust the lantern at Daniels and hurried forward.

No guts, Daniels thought. A man who could be vicious enough to set up another for death, to trap him in a cave -- but who, when the chips were down, could not go through with it and had to phone the sheriff to provide a witness to his good intentions -- a man like that lacked guts.

The shrieks had fallen to moaning. The sheriff hauled on the rope, helped by one of Adams' sons. A man's head and shoulders appeared above the cliff top and the sheriff reached out and hauled him to safety.

Ben Adams collapsed on the ground and never stopped his moaning. The sheriff jerked him to his feet.

'What's the matter, Ben?'

'There's something down there,' Adams screamed. 'There is something in the cave -- '

'Something, damn it? what would it be? A cat? A panther?'

'I never seen it. I just knew that it was there. I felt it. It was crouched back inside the cave.'

'How could anything be in there? Someone cut down the tree. How could anything get into the cave?'

'I don't know,' howled Adams. 'It might have been in there when the tree was cut. It might have been trapped in there.'

One of the sons was holding Ben erect and the sheriff moved away. The other son was puffing in the rope and neatly coiling it.

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'Another thing,' the sheriff said, 'how come you thought Daniels might be in that cave? If the tree was cut down he couldn't have used a rope the way you did, for there wasn't any rope. If he had used a rope it would still have been there. I don't know what's going on -- damned if I do. You down messing in that cave and Daniels comes walking out of the woods. I wish someone would tell me.'

Adams, who had been hobbling forward, saw Daniels for the first time and came to a sudden halt.

'Where did you come from?' he demanded. 'Here we been wearing out our guts trying to hunt you down and then --'

'Oh, go on home,' the sheriff said in a disgusted tone of voice. 'There's a fishy smell to this. It's going to take me a little while to get it figured out.'

Daniels reached out his hand to the son who had finished coiling the rope.

'I believe that's my rope,' he said.

Without protest, taken by surprise, the boy handed it to him.

'We'll cut across the woods,' said Ben. 'Home's closer that way.'

'Good night, men,' the sheriff said.

Slowly the sheriff and Daniels climbed the hill.

'Daniels,' said the sheriff, 'you were never out walking in this storm. If you had been you'd have had a whole lot more snow on you than shows. You look like you just stepped from a house.'

'Maybe I wasn't exactly walking around,' Daniels said.

'Would you mind telling me where you were? I don't mind doing my duty as I see it but I don't relish being made to look a fool while I'm doing it.'

'Sheriff, I can't tell you. I'm sorry. I simply cannot tell you.'

'All right, then. What about the rope?'

'It's my rope,' said Daniels. 'I lost it this afternoon.'

'And I suppose you can't tell me about that, either.'

'No, I guess I can't.'

'You know,' the sheriff said, 'I've had a lot of trouble with Ben Adams through the years. I'd hate to think I was going to have trouble with you, too.'

They climbed the hill and walked up to the house. The sheriff's car was parked out on the road.

'Would you come in?' asked Daniels. 'I could find a drink.'

The sheriff shook his head. 'Some other time,' he said. 'Maybe soon. You figure there was something in that cave? Or was it just Ben's imagination? He's a flighty sort of critter.'

'Maybe there wasn't anything,' said Daniels. 'but if Ben thought there was, what difference does it make? Thinking it might be just as real as if there were something there. All of us, sheriff, live with things walking by our sides no one else can see.'

The sheriff shot a quick glance at him. 'Daniels, what's with you?' he asked. 'What is walking by your side or sniffing at your heels? Why did you bury yourself out here in this Godforsaken place? What is going on?'

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He didn't wait for an answer. He got into his car, started it and headed down the road.

Daniels stood in the storm and watched the glowing taillights vanish in the murk of flying snow. He shook his head in bewilderment. The sheriff had asked a question and then had not waited for the answer. Perhaps because it was a question to which he did not want an answer.

Daniels turned and went up the snowy path to the house. He'd like some coffee and a bite to eat -- but first he had to do the chores. He had to milk the cows and feed the pigs. The chickens must wait till morning -- it was too late to feed the chickens. The cows would be waiting at the barn door.

They had waited for a long time and it was not right to make them wait.

He opened the door and stepped into the kitchen.

Someone was waiting for him. It sat on the table or floated so close above it that it seemed to be sitting. The fire in the stove had gone out and the room was dark but the creature sparkled.

You saw? the creature asked.

'Yes,' said Daniels. 'I saw and heard. I don't know what to do. What is right or wrong? Who knows what's right or wrong?'

Not you, the creature said. _Not I. I can only wait. I can only keep the faith._

Perhaps among the stars, thought Daniels, might be those who did know. Perhaps by listening to the stars, perhaps by trying to break in on their conversations and by asking questions, he might get an answer. Certainly there must be some universal ethics. A list, perhaps, of Universal Commandments. Maybe not ten of them. Maybe only two or three -- but any number might be enough.

'I can't stay and talk,' he said. 'I have animals to take care of. Could you stick around? Later we can talk.'

He fumbled for the lantern on the bench against the wall, found the matches on the shelf. He lit the lantern and its feeble flame made a puddle of light in the darkness of the room.

You have others to take care of? asked the creature. _Others not quite like yourself? Others, trusting you, without your intelligence?_

'I guess you could say it that way,' Daniels said, 'I've never heard it put quite that way before.'

Could I go along with you? the creature asked, _it occurs to me, just now, that in many ways we are very much alike._

'Very much -- ' But with the sentence hanging in the air, Daniels stopped.

Not a hound, he told himself. Not the faithful dog. But the shepherd. Could that be it? Not the master but the long-lost lamb?

He reached out a hand towards the creature in a swift gesture of understanding, then pulled it back, remembering it was nothing he could touch.

He lifted the lantern and turned toward the door.

'Come along,' he said.

Together the two of them went through the storm toward the barn and the waiting cows.

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