

Le Croix

by Barry Malzberg

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Depersonalization takes over. As usual, he does not quite feel himself, which is for the best; the man that he knows could hardly manage these embarrassing circumstances. Adaptability, that is the key; swim in the fast waters. There is no other way that he, let alone I could get through. “Pardonnez tout ils,” he says, feeling himself twirling upon the crucifix in the absent Roman breezes, a sensation not unlike flight, “mais ils ne comprennent pas que ils fait.”

Oh my, is that awful. He wishes that he could do better than that. Still, there is no one around, strictly speaking, to criticize and besides, he is merely following impulse which is the purpose of the program. Do what you will. “Ah pere, this is a bitch,” he mutters.

The thief on his left, an utterly untrustworthy type, murmurs foreign curses, not in French, to the other thief; and the man, losing patience with his companions who certainly look as culpable as all hell, stares below. Casting his glance far down he can see the onlookers, not so many as one would think, far less than the texts would indicate but certainly enough (fair is fair and simple Mark had made an effort to get it right) to cast lots over his vestments. They should be starting that stuff just about now.

Ah, well. This too shall pass. He considers the sky, noting with interest that the formation of clouds against the dazzling sunlight must yield the aspect of stigmata. For everything a natural, logical explanation. It is a rational world back here after all. If a little on the monolithic side.

“I wonder how long this is going to go on,” he says to make conversation. “it does seem to be taking a bloody long time.”

“Long time?” the thief on the left says. “Until we die, that's how long, and not an instant sooner. It's easier,” the thief says confidentially, “if you breathe in tight little gasps. Less pain. You're kind of grabbing for the air.”

“Am I? Really?”

“Leave him alone,” the other thief says. “Don't talk to him. Why give

him advice?"

"Just trying to help a mate on the stations, that's all."

"Help Yourself," the second thief grumbles. "That's the only possibility. If I had looked out for myself I wouldn't be in this mess."

"I quite agree," I say. "That's exactly my condition, exactly."

"Ah, stuff it, mate," the thief says.

It is really impossible to deal with these people. The texts imbue them with sentimental focus but truly they are swine. I can grasp Pilate's dilemma. Thinking of Pilate leads into another channel, but before I can truly consider the man's problems a pain of particular dimension slashes through me and there I am, there I am, suspended from the great cross groaning, all the syllables of thought trapped within.

"Ah," I murmur, "ah," he murmurs, "ah monsieurs, c'est le plus," but it is not, to be sure, it is not le plus at all. Do not be too quick to judge.

It goes on, in fact, for an unsatisfactorily extended and quite spiritually laden period of time. The lot-casting goes quickly and there is little to divert on the hillside; one can only take so much of that silly woman weeping before it loses all emotional impact. It becomes a long and screaming difficulty, a passage broken only by the careless deaths of the thieves who surrender in babble and finally, not an instant too soon, the man's brain bursts . . . but there is time, crucifixion being what it is, for slow diminution beyond that. Lessening color; black and grey, if there is one thing to be said about this process, it is exceedingly generous. One will be spared nothing.

Of course I had pointed out that I did not want to be spared anything. "Give me Jesus," I had asked and cooperating in their patient way they had given me Jesus. There is neither irony nor restraint to the process, which is exactly the way that it should be.

Even to the insult of the thieves abusing me.

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Alive to the tenor of the strange and difficult times, I found myself moved to consider the question of religious knowledge versus fanaticism. Hard choices have to be made even in pursuit of self-indulgence. Both were dangerous to the technocratic state of 2219, of course, but of the two religion was considered the more risky because fanaticism could well be turned to the advantage of the institutions. (Then there were the countervailing arguments of course that they were partners, but these I chose to dismiss.) Sexuality was another pursuit possibly inimical to the

state but it held no interest for me; the general Privacy and Social Taboo acts of the previous century had been taken very seriously by my subdivision and

I inherited neither genetic nor socially-derived interest in sex for its own non-procreative sake.

Religion interested me more than fanaticism for a permanent program, but fanaticism was not without its temptations. "Religion after all imposes a certain rigor," I was instructed. "There is some kind of a rationalizing force and also the need to assimilate text. Then too there is the reliance upon another, higher power. One cannot fulfill ultimately narcissistic tendencies. On the other hand—fanaticism dwells wholly within the poles of self. You can destroy the systems, find immortality, lead a crushing revolt, discover immortality within the crevices. It is not to be neglected; it is also purgative and satisfying and removes much of that indecision and social alienation of which you have complained. No fanatic is truly lonely or at least he has learned to cherish his loneliness."

"I think I'd rather have the religious program," I said after due consideration. "The lives of the prophets, the question of the validity of the text, the matters of the passion attract me."

"You will find," they pointed out, "that much of the religious experience is misrepresented. It leads only to an increasing doubt for many, and most of the major religious figures were severely maladjusted. You would be surprised at how many were psychotics whose madness was retrospectively falsified by others for their own purpose."

"Still," I said, "there are levels of feeling worth investigating."

"That, of course, is your decision," they said, relenting. They were nothing if not cooperative; under the promulgated and revised acts of 2202, severely liberalizing board procedures, there have been many improvements of this illusory sort. "If you wish to pursue religion we will do nothing to stop you. It is your inheritance and our decree. We can only warn you that there is apt to be disappointment."

"Disappointment!" I said, allowing some affect for the first time to bloom perilously forth. "I am not interested in disappointment. This is of no concern to me whatsoever; what I am interested in is the truth. After all, and was it not said that it is the truth which will make ye—"

"Never in this lifetime," they cut me off, sadly, sadly, and sent me on my way with a proper program, a schedule of appointments with the technicians, the necessary literature to explain the effects that all of this would have upon my personal landscape, inevitable changes, the rules of

dysfunction, little instances of psychotic break but all of it to be contained within the larger pattern. By the time I exit from the transverse I have used up the literature, and so I dispose of it, tearing it into wide strips, throwing the strips into the empty, sparkling air above the passage lanes, watching them catch the little filters of light for the moment before they flutter soundlessly to the metallic, glittering earth of this most unspeakable time.

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I find myself at one point of the way the Grand Lubavitcher Rabbi of Bruck Linn administering counsel to all who would seek it.

The Lubavitcher Sect of the Judaic religion was, I understand, a twenty or twenty-first reconstitution of the older, stricter European forms which was composed of refugees who fled to Bruck Linn in the wake of one of the numerous purges of that time. Now defunct, the judaicists are, as I understand it, a sect characterized by a long history of ritual persecution from which they flourished, or at least the surviving remnants flourished, but then again the persecution might have been the most important part of the ritual. At this remove in time it is hard to tell. The hypnotics, as the literature and procedures have made utterly clear, work upon personal projections and do not claim historical accuracy, as historical accuracy exists for the historicists, if anyone, and often enough not for them. Times being what they are.

It is, in any case, interesting to be the Lubavitcher Rabbi in Bruck Linn, regardless of the origins of the sect or even of its historical reality; in frock coat and heavy beard I sit behind a desk in cramped quarters surrounded by murmuring advisors and render judgments one by one upon members of the congregation as they appear before me. Penalty for compelled intercourse during a period of uncleanness is three months of abstention swiftly dealt out and despite explanations that the young bride had pleaded for comfort. The Book of Daniel, reinterpreted, does not signal the resumption of Holocaust within the coming month; the congregant is sent away relieved. Two rabbis appear with Talmudic dispute; one says that Zephaniah meant that all pagans and not all things were to be consumed utterly off the face of the Earth, but the other says that the edict of Zephaniah was literal and that one cannot subdivide "pagans" from "all things". I return to the text for clarification, remind them that Zephaniah no less than Second Isaiah or the sullen Ecclesiastes spoke in doubled perversities and advise that the literal interpretation would have made this conference unnecessary, therefore metaphor must apply. My advisors nod in approval at this and there are small claps of admiration. Bemused,

the two rabbis leave. A woman asks for a ruling on mikvah for a pre-menstrual daughter who is nonetheless now fifteen years old, and I reserve decision. A conservative rabbi from Yawk comes to give humble request that I give a statement to the congregation for one of the minor festivals, and I decline pointing out that for the Lubavitcher fallen members of the judaicists are more reprehensible than those who have never arrived. Once again my advisors applaud. There is a momentary break in the consultations and I am left to pace the study alone while advisors and questioners withdraw to give me time for contemplation.

It is interesting to be the Lubavitcher, although somewhat puzzling. One of the elements of which I was not aware was that in addition to the grander passions, the greater personages, I would also find myself enacting a number of smaller roles, the interstices of the religious life, as it were, and exactly as it was pointed out to me there is a great deal of rigor. Emotion does not seem to be part of this rabbi's persona; the question of Talmudic interpretation seems to be quite far from the thrashings of Calvary. Still, the indoctrinative techniques have done their job; I am able to make my way through these roles even as the others, on the basis of encoded knowledge; and although the superficialities I babble seem meaningless to me, they seem to please those who surround. I adjust my cuffs with a feeling of grandeur; Bruck Linn may not be all of the glistening spaces of Rome but it is a not inconsiderable part of the history, and within it I seem to wield a great deal of power. "Rabbi," an advisor says opening the door, "I am temerarious to interrupt your musings, but we have reached a crisis and your intervention is requested at this time."

"What crisis?" I say. "You know I must be allowed to meditate."

"Yes," he says. "Yes, we respect your meditations. It is wrong to impose. I should not," and some edge of agony within his voice, some bleating aspect of his face touches me even as he is about to withdraw. I come from behind the desk saying, "What then, what?" and he says, "Rabbi, it was wrong to bother you, we should protect, we will respect," and now I am really concerned, from large hat to pointed shoe he is trembling and I push past him into the dense and smoky air of the vestibule where congregants, advisors, women and children are gathered. As they see me their faces one by one register intent and then they are pleading, their voices inchoate but massed. Save us, Rabbi, they are saying, save us, and I do not know what is going on here, an awkward position for a Talmudic judge to occupy but I simply do not know; I push my way through the clinging throng pushing them aside, Oh my God, Rabbi, they are saying, oh my God, and I go through the outer doors, look down the street and see

the massed armaments, see the troops eight abreast moving in great columns toward the building, behind them the great engines of destruction, and in the sky, noise, the holocaust, Rabbi, someone says, the holocaust has come, they will kill us, and I feel disbelief. How can this be happening? There was no purge in Bruck Linn to the best of my recollection; there have never been any great purges on this part of the continent. Nevertheless here they are and behind me I can hear the children screaming. It is all that I can do to spread my arms and, toward them, toward the massed congregants and advisors behind, cry, "Stay calm, this is not happening; it is an aspect of the imagination, some misdirection of the machinery." Surely it must be that, some flaws in the fabric of my perceptions being fed through the machines and creating history out of context, and yet the thunder and smell of the armies is great in the air and I realize that they are heading directly toward this place, that they have from the beginning, and that there is nothing I can do to stop them.

"Be calm, be calm," I cry, "you are imagining this, indeed you are all imagining," but the words do not help, and as I look at the people, as they look at me, as the sounds of Holocaust overwhelm, I seem to fall through the situation leaving them to a worse fate or perhaps it is a better, but it is only I who have exited, leaving the rest, these fragments of my imagination, to shore themselves against their ruins, and not a moment too soon, too soon.

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Otherwise, life such as it is proceeds as always. I spend a portion of the time on the hypnotics and in the machinery, but there are commitments otherwise to eat, to sleep, to participate in the minimal but always bizarre social activities of the complex; even, on occasion to copulate, which I accomplish in methodical fashion. The construction, I have been reminded, is only a portion of my life; responsibilities do not cease on its account. I maintain my cubicle, convey the usual depositions from level to level, busy myself in the perpetuation of microcosm. Only at odd times do I find myself thinking of the nature of the hypnotic experiences I have had, and then I try to push these recollections away. They are extremely painful and this subtext, as it were, is difficult to integrate into the outer span of my life. In due course I am assured that the fusion will be made, but in the meantime there is no way to hasten it. "You have changed, Harold," Edna says to me. Edna is my current companion. She is not named Edna, nor I Harold, but these are the names that they have assigned for our contemporary interaction, and Harold is as good as any; it is a name by

which I would as soon be known. Harold in Galilee. And I have spoken his name and it is Harold. She leans toward me confidentially. "You are not the same person that you were."

"That is a common illusion provided by the treatments," I say. "I am exactly the same person. Nothing is any different than it was."

"Yes it is," she murmurs. "You may not realize how withdrawn and distracted you have become." She is a rather pretty woman and there are times, during our more or less mechanical transactions, when I have felt real surges of feeling for her, but they have only been incidental to the main purpose. In truth I can have no feeling for anyone but myself; I was told this a long time ago. She puts a hand on me intensely. "What are they doing to you?"

"Nothing," I say quite truthfully. "They are merely providing a means. Everything that is done I am doing myself; this is the principle of the treatment."

"You are deluded," she says and loops an arm around me, drags me into stinging but pleasurable embrace. Forehead to forehead we lay nestled amidst the bedclothes; I feel the tentative touch of her fingers. "Now," she says, moving her hand against me. "Do it now."

I push against her embrace. "No. It is impossible."

"Why?"

"During the treatments—"

"Nonsense," she says, "you are avoiding me. You are avoiding yourself. The treatments are anaesthetic, don't you see that? They are forcing you to avoid the terms of your life and you cannot do that." Her grasp is more insistent, at the beginning of pain. "Come on," she says. Insistent woman. Against myself, I feel a slow gathering.

"No," I mutter against her cheekbone, "it is impossible. I will not do it now."

"Fool."

"The chemicals. I am awash in chemicals; I remain in a sustaining dose all the time. I would upset all of the delicate balances."

"You understand nothing," she says, but in an inversion of mood turns from me anyway, scurrying to a far point. "Have it as you will. Do you want me to leave?"

"Of course not."

"Of course not. You are so accommodating. Do you want me to

entertain you then?”

“Whatever you will.”

“You have changed utterly. You are not the same. These treatments have rendered you cataleptic. I had hopes for you, Harold, I want you to know that. I thought that there were elements of genuine perception, real thought. How was I to know that all of the time you merely wanted to escape into your fantasies?”

“What did you want me to do?” I say casually. “Overthrow the mentors?”

She shrugs. “Why not?” she says. “It would be something to keep us occupied.”

“I'd rather overthrow myself.”

“You know, Harold,” she says and there is a clear, steady light of implication in her eye, “it is not impossible for me to like you; we could really come to understand one another, work together to deal with this crazy situation, but there is this one overwhelming problem, and do you know what that is?”

“Yes I do,” I say wearily because this has happened before. “I surely do.”

“Don't deprive me of the satisfaction,” she says. “Harold, you are a fool.”

“Well,” I say shrugging, “in these perilous and difficult times, this madly technocratic age of 2219, when we have so become merely the machinery of our institutions, where any search for individuality must be accomplished by moving within rather than without, taking all of this into consideration and what with one thing being like every other thing in this increasingly homogenous world, tell me, aren't we all?”

“Not like you,” she says. “Harold, even in these perilous and difficult times, not like you at all.”

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On the great and empty desert he takes himself to see the form of Satan, manifest in the guise of an itinerant, wandering amidst the sands. Moving with an odd, off-center gait, rolling on limping leg, Satan seems eager for the encounter, and he is ready for it too, ready at last to wrestle the old, damned angel and be done with it, but Satan is taking his time the cunning of the creature and seems even reluctant to make the encounter. Perhaps he is merely being taunted. Once again he thinks of the odd

discrepancy of persona; he is unable in this particular role to work within the first person but is instead a detached observer seeing all of it at a near and yet far remove, imprisoned within the perception, yet not able to effect it. An interesting phenomenon, perhaps he has some fear that to become the persona would be blasphemous. He must discuss this with the technicians sometime. Then again, maybe not. Maybe he will not discuss it with the technicians; it is none of their damned business, any of it, and besides, he has all that he can do to concentrate upon Satan, who in garb of bright hues and dull now comes upon him. "Are you prepared?" Satan says to him. "Are you prepared for the undertaking?"

He looks down at his sandals embedded in the dense and settled sands. "I am ready for the encounter," He says.

"Do you know the consequences?" Satan says. He has a curiously ingratiating voice, a warm and personal manner, an offhand ease which immediately grants a feeling of confidence, but then again this was to be expected. What belies the manner, however, is the face, the riven and broken features, the darting aspect of the eyes, the small crevices in which torment and desert sweat seem to lurk and which compel attention beyond the body which has been broken by the perpetration of many seeming injustices. Satan extends his arm. "Very well, then," Satan says, "let us wrestle."

"Non-disputandum," he says. "I understood that first we were to talk and only after that to struggle."

"Latin is no protection here," Satan says firmly. "All tongues pay homage to me."

"Mais non," he says in his abominable French, "voulez-vous je me porte bien."

"Nor does humor exist in these dark spaces," Satan says. "From walking up and down upon the earth and to and fro I have learned the emptiness of present laughter. Come," he says, leaning forward, his arm extended, "let us wrestle now."

He reaches for that gnarled limb, then brings his hands back. The sun is pitiless overhead but like a painting; he does not feel the heat. His only physical sensation is of the dry and terrible odor seeping from his antagonist. "No," he says. "Mais non, mon frere. Not until we have had the opportunity to speak."

"There is nothing to speak about. There are no sophistries in this emptiness, merely contention."

Do not argue with Satan. He had been warned of this, had known it as his journey toward the darkness had begun, that there was no way in which the ancient and terrible enemy could be engaged with dialectic and yet, non disputandum, he has faded again. Not to do it. Not to try argument; it is time to wrestle and it might as well be done. He seizes the wrist and slowly he and the devil lock.

Coming to grips with that old antagonist it is to the man as if he has found not an enemy but only some long-removed aspect of himself, as if indeed, just as in sex or dreams, he is in the act of completing himself with this engagement. The stolidity of the form, the interlocking of limbs, gives him not a sense of horror, as he might have imagined, but rather comfort. It must have been this way. Their hands fit smoothly together. "Do you see?" Satan says winking and coming to close quarters. "You know that it must always have been meant this way. Touch me, my friend, touch me and find grace," and slowly, evenly, Satan begins to drag him forward.

He understands, he understands what is happening to him: Satan in another of his guises would seduce him with warmth when it is really a mask for evil. He should be fighting against the ancient and terrible enemy with renewed zeal for recognizing this, but it is hard, it is hard to do so when Satan is looking at him with such compassion, when the mesh of their bodies is so perfect. Never has he felt anyone has understood him this well; his secret and most terrible agonies seem to flutter, one by one, birdlike, across the features of the antagonist, and he could if he would sob out all of his agonies knowing that Satan could understand. Who ever would as well? It must have been the same for him. I do not believe, he wants to cry to the devil; I believe none of it; I am taken by strange, shrieking visions and messages in the night; I feel that I must take upon the host of Heaven, and yet these dreams which leave me empty and sick are, I know, madness. I hear the voice of God speaking unto me saying I am the Father, I am the incompleteness which you will fill and know that this must be madness, and yet I cannot deny that voice, can deny no aspect of it, which is what set me here upon the desert, but I am filled with fear, filled with loathing and trembling ... he wants to cry all of this out to Satan, but he will not, he will not, and slowly he finds himself being drawn to the ground.

"Comfort," Satan says in the most confiding and compassionate of whispers, covering him now with his gnarled body so that the sun itself is obscured, all landscape dwindled to the small perception of shifting colors, "comfort: I understand, I am your dearest and closest friend. Who can

ever understand you as I? Who would possibly know your anguish? Easy, be easeful,” Satan says, and he begins to feel the pressure come across his chest. “So easy,” Satan murmurs, “it will be so easy, for only I understand; we can dwell together,” and breath begins to desert him. The devil is draining his respiration.

Understanding that, he understands much else: the nature of the engagement, the quality of deception, exactly what has been done to him. Just as Satan was the most beautiful and best loved of all the angels, so in turn he would be Satan's bride in the act of death. It is the kiss that will convey the darkness, and seeing this, he has a flickering moment of transcendence: he thinks he knows now how he might be able to deal with this. Knowing the devil's meaning will enable him to contest, and yet it would be so easy—inevitable is the word—necessary—to yield to his antagonist and let it be done, let the old, cold, bold intruder have his will, thy will be done, and Satan's too, and the yielding is so close to him now he can feel himself leaning against the network of his being, the empty space where desire might have rested, in the interstices the lunge toward annihilation—*mais non*, he says, *mais non*, *je renounce*, I will not do it!—and forces himself against the figure, understanding finally the nature of this contest, what it must accomplish, in what mood it must be done and wearily, wearily, carrying all of consequence upon him he begins the first and final of all his contests with the devil.

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It is a madly technocratic age, a madly technocratic age, and yet it is not cruel; the devices of our existence, we have been assured, exist only in order to perpetrate our being. Take away the technology and the planet would kill us; take away the institutions and the technology would collapse. There is no way in which we can continue to be supported without the technology and the institutions, and furthermore they are essentially benign. They are essentially benign. This is not rationalization or an attempt to conceal from myself and others the dreadful aspects of our mortality, the engines of our condition grinding us slowly away . . . no, this is a fixed and rational judgment which comes from a true assessment of this life.

It is true that a hundred years ago, in the decades of the great slaughters and even beyond, the institutions were characterized by vengeance, pusillanimity, murder and fear, but no more. In 2160 the oligarchy was finally toppled, the reordering began, and by 2189, the very year in which I was born, the slaughter was already glimpsed within a historical context. I was nurtured by a reasonable state in a reasonable

fashion; if I needed love, I found it; sustenance was there in more forms than the purely physical. I grew within the bounds of the state; indeed, I matured to a full and reasonable compassion. Aware of the limits which were imposed, I did not resent them nor find them stifling.

There was space; there has been space for a long time now. Standing on the high parapet of the dormer, looking out on Intervalley Six and the web of connecting arteries beneath the veil of dust, I can see the small lights of the many friendly cities nodding and winking in the darkness, the penetrating cast of light creating small spokes of fire moving upward in the night. Toward the west the great thrust of South Harvest rears its bulk and spires, lending geometry to a landscape which would otherwise be endless, and I find reassurance in that presence just as I find reassurance in the act of being on the parapet itself. There was a time, and it was not so terribly long ago, that they would not have allowed residents to stand out on the parapet alone; the threat of suicide was constant, but in the last years the statistics have become increasingly favorable, and it is now within the means of all of us if only we will to come out in the night for some air.

Edna is beside me. For once we are not talking; our relationship has become almost endlessly convoluted now, filled with despair, rationalization and dialogue, but in simple awe of the vision she too has stopped talking and it is comfortable, almost companionable standing with her thus, our hands touching lightly, smelling the strange little breezes of our technology. A long time ago people went out in pairs to places like this and had a kind of emotional connection by the solitude and the vision, but now emotions are resolved for more sensible arenas such as the hypnotics. Nevertheless, it is pleasant to stand with her thus. It would almost be possible for me at this moment to conceive some genuine attachment to her, except that I know better; it is not the union but its absence which tantalizes me at this moment, the knowledge that there is no connection which will ever mean as much to us as this landscape. The sensation is unbearably poignant although it does not match in poignance other moments I have had under the hypnotics. At length she turns toward me, her touch more tentative in the uneven light and says, "It hurts me too. It hurts all of us."

"I wasn't really thinking about pain."

"Nevertheless," she says. "Nevertheless. Pain is the constant for all of us. Some can bear it and others cannot. Some can face this on their own terms and others need artificial means of sustention. There is nothing to be done about this."

"I don't need artificial means," I say. "I have elected —"

"Surely," she says. "Surely."

And they are not artificial, I want to add; the experiences under the hypnotics are as real, as personally viable, as much the blocks of personality formulation as anything which this confused and dim woman can offer, as anything which has passed between us. But that would only lead to another of our arguments and I feel empty of that need now. Deep below we can hear the uneven cries of the simulacrum animals let out at last for the nighttime zoo, the intermingled roars of tigers.

"Has it made any difference?" she says. "Any of it?"

"Any of what? I don't understand."

"The treatments. Your treatments."

Tantalizingly, I find myself on the verge of a comment which will anneal everything, but it slips away from me as if so often the case, and I say, "Of course they have made a difference."

"What have you gained?"

"Pardonne? Pardonnez moi?"

"Don't be obscure on me," she says. "That will get you nowhere. Tell me the truth."

I shrug. My habit of lapsing into weak French under stress is an old disability; nonetheless I find it difficult to handle. Most have been more understanding than Edna. "I don't know," I say. "I think so."

"I know. It's done nothing at all."

"Let's go inside now," I say. "It's beginning to chill here."

"You are exactly the same as you were. Only more withdrawn, more stupid. These treatments are supposed to heal?"

"No. Merely broaden. Healing comes from within."

"Broaden! You understand less than ever."

I put a hand to my face, feel the little webbing where years from now deep lines will be. "Let's go inside," I say again. "There's nothing more"

"Why don't you face the truth? These treatments are not meant to help you; they are meant to make you more stupid so that you won't cause any trouble."

I move away from her. "It doesn't matter," I say. "None of it matters. It is of no substance whatsoever. Why do you care for it to be otherwise?"

There is nothing for her to do but to follow me into the funnel. She would argue in position but my withdrawal has offered the most devastating answer of all: I simply do not care. The attitude is not simulated: on the most basic level I refuse to interact.

“You are a fool,” she says, crowding against me for the plunge. “You do not understand what they are doing to you. You’ simply don’t care.”

“Quite right,” I say. “Quite right. Absolutely. Not at all. That is the point now, isn’t it?” The light ceases and we plunge.

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I am in an ashram surrounded by incense and the dull outlines of those who must be my followers. Clumped in the darkness they listen to me chant. It is a mantra which I appear to be singing in a high, cracked chant; it resembles the chanting of the Lubavitchers of Bruck Linn, although far more regularized in the vocal line, and limited in sound. Om or ay or eeh, the sounds are interchangeable and I am quite willing to accept the flow of it, not rationalize, not attempt to control those sounds but rather to let them issue according to my mood. It is peaceful and I am deeply locked within myself; the soft breathing of my followers lending resonance to the syllables which indeed seem to assume a more profound meaning, but at a certain point there is a commotion and the sound of doors crashing and then in the strophes of light I can see that the room has been invaded by what appear to be numerous members of the opposition. They are wearing their dull attack uniforms, even this if nothing else is perceptible in the light and from the glint of weaponry I can see that this is very serious. They move with an awful tread into the room, half a dozen of them, and then the portable incandescence is turned on and we are pinned there in frieze.

I know that it is going to be very bad; the acts of 2013 specifically proscribed exactly what is going on here and yet five years later the pogroms have dwindled to harassment, random isolated incursions. I did not think that in this abandoned church in the burned-out core of the devastated city—they would ever move upon me, and yet it seems now that my luck has suddenly, convulsively run out, as I always knew that it would. Surely in some corner of the heart I must have known this; the om must have always been informed by doom; and yet it is one thing to consider demolition in a corner of the heart and another, quite another, to live it. Ahbdul, one of them says pointing, his finger enormous, dazzling, and as I lift my eyes to it I feel myself subsiding in the wickers of light, Ahbdul, you are in violation of the codes and you have brought woe to all.

In a moment, in one moment, they will plunge toward me. I know how it goes then, what will happen; they will strike at me with their weapons and bring me to a most painful position; they will obliterate consciousness and cause bloodstains; not of the least importance they will humiliate me before my small congregation, which has already witnessed enough humiliation—thank you very much— otherwise why would they have gathered here?—and yet I can tolerate all of that, I suppose. I have dreamed worse, not to say suffered many privations and indignities before opening this small, illegal subunit. In fact, none of this concerns me; what does, I must admit, is the fear that I will show weakness before my congregation. To be humiliated is one thing, but to show fear, beg for mercy, is quite another; I would hardly be able to deal with it. A religious man must put up a stiff front. A religious man whose cult is based upon the regular, monotonic articulation of ancient chants to seek for inner serenity can hardly be seen quivering and shrieking in front of those who have come for tranquility. If tranquility is all that I have to offer, I cannot give them pain. Thinking this, I resolve to be brave and draw myself to full stature or what there is left of it after all these years of controlled diet and deliberate physical mutation. “You will not prevail,” I say.

“You cannot prevail against the force of the om,” and with a signal I indicate to my congregation that I wish to resume the chant, humiliate them by my own transcendence, but they do not attend. Indeed they do not attend at all, so eager do so many of them appear to search out any means of exit open to them. A small alley has been left open by the massed opposition leading to one of the doors, and in their unseemly haste to clear the hall they ignore me. Religious disposition, it would seem, is a function of boredom: give people something really necessary to face in their lives and religion can be ignored, all except for the fanatics who consider religion itself important, of course; but they are disaster-ridden. Like flies these little insights buzz about, gnawing and striking small pieces of psychic flesh while the hall is emptied, the opposition standing there looking at me bleakly, but I find as usual that this insight does me no good whatsoever. It can, indeed, be said merely to magnify my sense of helplessness. “Gentlemen,” I say, raising a hand, “this is a futile business. Join me in a chant.” I kneel, my forehead near the floor, and begin to mumble, hoping that the intensity of this commitment will strike shame within them, convince them that they are dealing with someone so dangerously self-absorbed that all of their attacks would be futile, but even as I commence the syllables I am pulled to my feet by a man in a uniform which I do not recognize, obviously a latecomer to the room. He stares at me from a puffy, heart-shaped face and then raises his hand, strikes me

skillfully across first one cheek and then the other. The collision of flesh is enormous; I feel as if I am spattering within. "Fool," he says, "why have you done this?"

"Why do you care? Why are you asking?" He hits me again. No progression of the sacred blocks of personality; the levels of eminent reason have prepared me for this kind of pain. I realize that I am crying. "Give me a response," he says. "Don't withdraw, don't protest, don't argue; it will lead only to more blows and eventually the same results. Simply answer questions and it will go much easier for both of us. Knowing all of the penalties, knowing of the responsibilities for your acts and what would happen to you if you were discovered, why did you nonetheless persist? Didn't you understand? Didn't you know what danger you brought not only upon yourself but the fools you seduced? Now they too will have to pay."

He is choleric with rage, this man; his face seems to have inflated with blood and reason as he stands there and I begin to comprehend that he is suffering from more than situational stress. Looking at him I want to accentuate that sudden feeling of bonding, but there is every emotion but sympathy in that ruined face and suddenly he hits me again convulsively; this the most painful blow yet because it was not expected. I fall before him and begin to weep. It is not proper context for a martyr, but I never wanted it to be this way; I never imagined that there would be such blood in sacrifice. He puts one strong hand under an arm, drags me grunting to my feet, positions me in front of him as if I were a statue.

"Do you know what we're going to have to do now?" he says. "We're going to have to make an example of you, that's all, we're going to have to kill you. Why did you put us into this position?"

"I am not able to believe that you will do that," I say. I am struggling for tranquility. "You wouldn't kill me, not here in the temple—"

"This is not a temple. It is a dirty cluttered room and you are an old fool who imagines it to be a church."

"Om," I say. The word comes; I did not calculate. "Om. Eeh. Ay."

"You would fight the state regardless. If the state believed in om you would cry for freedom of choice. If the state were stateless you would wish to form institutions within. There is no hope for you people, none at all; you would be aberrants in any culture at any time and you cannot understand this. You want to be isolated, persecuted, to die. It has nothing to do with religion."

"Eeh. Ay. Oooh. Alih. Om."

“Enough,” he says, “enough of this,” and signals to the others at the rear; they come forward slowly, reluctantly, but with gathering speed at the approach, perhaps catching a whiff of death which comes from the syllables. “You wish a public death, you wish a martyrdom; then you will have it. Reports will be issued to all of the provinces. Icons will be constructed. Dispatches will even glorify. You will achieve everything that you were unable in life. But this will do you no good whatsoever.”

The fear is tightly controlled now. Truly, the syllables work. I would not have granted them such efficacy and yet what I have advised my congregants all of this time turns out to be true. They paste over the sickness with the sweet contaminations of courage, grant purchase upon terror, make it possible for the most ignorant and cowardly of men, which must be myself, to face annihilation with constant grace. “Om,” I say. “Eeh. If it were to be done, then it must be done quickly.”

“Ali,” he says, “it is impossible. Nothing will be gained from this and yet you still will not face the truth. It would be so much easier if at least you would give up your bankrupt purchase, if you would understand that you are dying for no reason whatsoever and that it could have been no other way; it would make matters so much easier—”

“Ah,” I say. “Oh.”

“Ali, shit,” the man with the heart-shaped face says and gives a signal to one of the supporters, who closes upon me, a small man in uniform with a highly calibered weapon and puts its cold surfaces against my temple. His hand shakes, imperceptibly to the vision, but I can feel that quiver against the ridged veins. It is remarkable how I have gained in courage and detachment; just a few moments ago it would have seemed impossible. Yet here I am, apparently, prepared to face what I feared the most with implacable ardor. “Now,” the man says. “Do it now.”

There is a pause. Om resonates through me; it will be that with which I will die, carrying me directly to the outermost curved part of the universe. I close my eyes, waiting for transport, but it does not come, and after a while I understand that it will not. Therefore I open my eyes, reasonable passage seeming to have been denied me. The positions are the same except that the leader has moved away some paces and the man carrying the gun has closed his eyes.

“Shoot him, you fool,” the leader says. “Why haven't you shot him?”

“I am having difficulty.”

“Kill him, you bastard.”

There is another long pause. I flutter my eyes. Om has receded. "I can't," the man with the gun says at last. "I can't put him down, just like that. This isn't what I was prepared to do. You didn't say that it would be this way. You promised."

"Ah, shit," the heart-shaped man says again and comes toward us, breaks the connection with a swipe of his hand, knocking the gun arm down and the supporter goes scuttling away squealing. The leader looks at me with hatred, red-tinted veins alight. "You think you've proven something," he says. "Well, you've proven absolutely nothing. Weakness is weakness. I will have to do it myself."

I shrug. It is all that I can do to maintain my demeanor considering the exigencies but I have done it. Will; everything is will. "Om", I murmur.

"Om," he says, "om yourself," and goes to the supporter; the supporter hands him the gun silently; the leader takes it in his left hand, flexes fingers, then puts it against my "temple."

"All right," he says, "it could have been easier but instead it will be more complex. That does not matter, all that matters is consummation."

"Consummate," I say. "Om."

"I don't want to do this," he says with the most immense kindness. "I hope you understand. It's nothing personal; I have little against you; it's just a matter of assignment, of social roles." Unlike the others he seems to need to prepare himself for assassination through a massive act of disconnection. "Nothing personal," he says mildly, "I really don't want to."

I shrug. "I don't wait to die, particularly," I say. "Still, I seem able to face it." And this is the absolute truth. Calm percolates from the center of the corpus to the very brain stem; I seem awash in dispassion. Perhaps it is the knowledge that this is all a figment, that it is a dream and I will not die but awake again only to sterile enclosure and the busy hands of technicians. "Do it," I say. "Do it." Is this the secret of all the martyrs? That at the end, past flesh and panic, they knew when they would awaken and to what? Probably. On the other hand, maybe not. Like everything else it is difficult and complex. Still, it can be met with a reasonable amount of dignity, which is all that we can ask.

"Indeed," he says sadly, "indeed," and fires the gun into my temple killing me instantly and precipitating in one jagged bolt the great religious riots and revivals of the early twenties. And not one moment too soon, Allah and the rest of them be praised.

* * * *

Systematically I face examination in the cold room. It is a necessary part of the procedure. "The only hint of depersonalization other than at the end of the last segment," I say calmly, "has been during the Jesus episodes. I seem unable to occupy it within the first person but feel a profound disassociative reaction in which I am witnessing him as if from the outside, without controlling the actions."

The counselor nods. "Highly charged emotional material obviously," he says. "Disassociative reaction is common in such cases. At some point in your life you must have had a Jesus fixation."

"Not so," I say. "in fact I did not know who he was until I was introduced through the texts."

"Then it must have hit some responsive chord. I wouldn't be unduly concerned about this. As you integrate into the persona it will fall away and you will begin to actively participate."

"I feel no emotional reaction to the material at all. I mean, no more than to any of the others. It's inexplicable to me."

"I tell you," the counselor says with a touch of irritation, "that is of no concern. The process is self-reinforcing. What we are concerned about is your overall reactions, the gross medical signs, the question of organic balances. The psychic reactions will take care of themselves."

I look past him at the walls of the room which contain schematic portraits of the intervalley network. Interspersed are various documents certifying the authenticity of his observer's role. The absence of anything more abstract disturbs me; previously it never occurred to me how deprived our institutions seem to be of artistic effect, but now it does; the hypnotics must be working. There is a clear hunger within me for something more than a schematic response to our condition. "Are you listening to me?" he says. "Did you hear my question?"

"I heard it."

"I am going to administer a gross verbal reaction test now, if you will pay attention."

"I assure you that is not necessary," I say. "I am in excellent contact."

"That is a judgment which we will make."

"Must you?"

"I'm afraid so," the counselor says. "We wish to guard against exactly that which you manifest, which strikes me as a rather hostile, detached response. We do not encourage this kind of side-effect, you see; we

consider it a negative aspect of the treatment.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“It is often necessary to terminate treatment in the face of such reactions, so I would take this very seriously.”

“Why do you do this to us?” I say. I look at his bland, pleasant face, masked by the institutional sheen but nonetheless concealing, I am convinced, as passionate and confused a person as I might be, perhaps a little more passionate and confused since he has not had, after all, the benefit of the treatments. “Why can we simply not go through this on our own terms, take what we can take, miss the rest of it? Why must we be monitored?”

“The procedures “

“Don't tell me of procedures,” I say, leaning forward with a sudden intensity, aware that I am twitching at the joints and extremities in a new fashion, emotionally moved as rarely has been the case. Definitely the treatments are affecting me. “The real reason is that you're afraid that unless we're controlled we might really be changed, that we might begin to react in fashions that you couldn't predict, that we wouldn't be studying religion and fanaticism any more but would actually become religious fanatics and what would you do with us then?”

“Confine you,” my confessor says flatly, “for your own protection. Which is exactly what we want to avoid by the process of what you call monitoring, which is merely certifying that you are in condition to continue the treatments without damage to yourself.”

“Or to the state.”

“Of course to the state. I work for it, you live within it; why should we not have the interests of the state at heart? The state need not be perceived as the enemy by you people, you know.”

“I never perceived—”

“You can't make the state the repository of all your difficulties, the rationalizing force for your inadequacies. The state is a positive force in all of your lives and you have more personal freedom than any citizenry at any time in the history of the world.”

“I never said that it wasn't.”

“In fact,” the counselor says, rising, his face suffused now with what might be passion but then on the other hand might only be the consequence of improper diet, highly spiced intake, the slow closure of

arteries, "we can get damned sick of you people and your attitudes. I'm no less human because I have a bureaucratic job, I want you to know; I have the same problems that you do. The only difference is that I'm trying to apply myself toward constructive purposes, whereas all you want to do is to tear things down." He wipes a hand across his streaming features, shrugs, sits again. "Sorry to overreact," he says. "It's just that a good deal of frustration builds up and it has to be expressed. This isn't easy for any of us, you know. We're not functionaries; we're people just as you are."

There seems nothing with which I can disagree. I consider certain religious virtues which would have to do with the absorption of provocation without malice and remain quietly in my chair, thinking of this and that and many other things having to do with the monitoring conducted by these institutions and what it might suggest about the nature of the interrelation, but thought more and more is repulsive to me; what I concentrate upon, what seems to matter is feeling, and it is feeling which I will cultivate. "Some questions," the counselor says in a more amiable tone. "Just a series of questions which I would like you to answer as briefly and straightforwardly as possible."

"Certainly," I say, echoing his calm. "Tres bonne, merci. Maintenant et pourquoi." "Pourquoi?" he says with a glint in his eye and asks me how often I masturbate.

* * * *

He looks at the man who has come from the tomb. Little sign of his entrapment is upon him; he looks merely as one might who had been in deep sleep for a couple of days. He touches him once gently upon the cheek to assure the pulse of light, then backs away. The crowd murmurs with awe. This is no small feat; here he has clearly outdone the loaves and the fishes. They will hardly be able to dismiss this one; it will cause great difficulty when the reports hit Rome. "How are you?" he says to Lazarus. "Have you been merely sleeping or did you perceive the darkness? What brang you back from those regions?"

Documentary sources indicate no speech from the risen man, of course. But documentary sources are notoriously undependable, and, besides, this is a free reconstruction as he has been so often advised. Perhaps Lazarus will have something to say after all; his eyes bulge with reason and his tongue seems about to burst forward with the liquid syllables of discovery. But only an incoherent babble emerges; the man says nothing.

He moves in closer, still holding the grip. "Were you sleeping?" he says, "or did you perceive?"

“Ah,” Lazarus says. “Eeeh. Om.”

He shrugs and dropping his hand moves away. If a miracle is to succeed, it must do so on its own terms; one must have a detached, almost airy attitude toward the miracles because at the slightest hint of uncertainty or effort they will dissipate. “Very well,” he says, “be on your way. Return to your life.”

The disciples surround him, all but Judas, of course, who as usual is somewhere in the city, probably making arrangements for betrayal. There is nothing to be done; he must suffer Judas exactly as Judas must suffer him; it is the condition of their pact. Peter puts a heavy hand on his shoulder. “What if the man cannot move, master?” he says, always practical. “What if he is unable to complete the journey from the grave.”

“He will be able to.”

Indeed Lazarus seems to have adopted a stiff gait which takes him slowly toward the crowd. The crowd is surprisingly sparse after all; it is not the throng indicated by scriptures, but instead might be only forty or fifty, many of whom are itinerants drawn to the scene in their wanderings. Scriptural sources were often only a foundation for the received knowledge, of course; the scribes had their own problems, their own needs to fill and retrospective falsification was part of their mission ... still, he thinks, it is often embarrassing to see how hollow that rock is upon which the church was built. Oh well. “I think we had better leave now,” Peter says.

“Oh?”

“Indeed,” this man of practicality says. “it will make more of an impression, I think; it will lend more of an air of mystery and have greater lasting effect than if you were to stay around. A certain detachment must be cultivated.”

“We will surround you, Master,” little Mark says, “and leave together hiding your aspect from the populace. In this way you will seem to be attended at all times by a shield.” He beckons to Luke, John, the others. “Come,” Peter says, “nothing can be served by staying here longer. It would be best to move on.”

He does admire the practicality, the disciples simply acting within the situation to bring the maximum interest, and yet reluctance tugs at him. He is really interested in Lazarus. He would like to see what happens next: will the man leave the area of the tomb or will he simply return to it? The rock has merely been pulled aside, the dark opening gapes; Lazarus could simply return to that comfort if he desired, and perhaps he does. Or

perhaps not; it is hard to evaluate the responses of an individual toward death. The man is now shielded from view by the crowd which seems to be touching him, checking for the more obvious aspects of mortality. "Let us wait a moment," he says. "This is very interesting. Let's see what is happening here."

"It would not serve, Master," Peter says.

"It is not a matter of serving, merely one of observation. I am responsible for this man, after all; it is only reasonable that I would take an interest in his condition."

"No," Luke says. He scuttles over, a thin man with bulging, curiously piercing eyes. No wonder he wrote the most elaborate of the gospels dictated, that is to say, all of the disciples being fundamentally illiterate. "That will not serve. It is important that we leave at once, Master."

"Why?"

"The mood of the crowd is uncertain; it could turn ugly at any time. There can be much contemps over miracles, and the superstitious are turned toward fear. The very hills are filled with great portents—"

"Enough," Peter says. "You have a tendency for hyperbole, Luke; there is no danger here. But it would be better, from many standpoints if we were to leave; an air of mystery would serve best."

"Oh, all right," I say. "Je renounces." It is, after all, best to adopt a pose of dignity and to give in to the wishes of the disciples, all of whom at least intermittently take this matter more seriously than I ... they are, after all, in a position of greater vulnerability. I cast one last look at Lazarus, who is now leaning back against the suspended door of the tomb, elbows balanced precariously on stones, trying to assume an easeful posture for the group almost obscuring him. How exactly is one to cultivate a *je ne sais quoi* about death? It is something to consider; of course I will have ample time to consider the issue myself, but Lazarus could hardly yield much information on the subject. The man is speechless, highly inarticulate; one would have hoped that for a miracle such as this that I could have aroused someone less stupid, but nothing to be done. All of existence is tied together in one tapestry, take it all or leave it, no parts. Surrounded by my muttering disciples I walk toward the west, kicking up little stones and puffs of dust with my sandals.

It is disappointing, quite a letdown really, and I would like to discuss this, but not a one of them would want to hear it. I know that they already have sufficient difficulties having given up their lives for the duration of this mission and it would be an embarrassment for them to hear that I too

do not quite know what I am doing. Or perhaps I do. It is hard to tell. In the distance I hear a vague collision of stone. I would not be surprised if Lazarus had gone back into the tomb. Of the tapestry of existence je ne sais pas.

* * * *

As I copulate with Edna, images of martyrdom tumble through my mind, a stricken figure on the cross, stigmata ripped like lightning through the exposed sky, and it is all that I can do under the circumstances to perform, but thy will be done, the will must transcend, and so I force myself into a smaller and smaller corner of her, squeezing out the images with little birdcalls and carrying her whimpers through me. She coils and uncoils like a springy steel object and at long last obtains sexual release; I do so myself by reflex and then fall from her grunting. It is quite mechanical, but in a highly technological culture sexual union could only be such; otherwise it would be quite threatening to the apparatus of the state, or so, at least, I have deduced. She lies beside me, her face closed to all feeling, her fingers clawed around my wrist. I groan deep in my throat and compose for sleep, but it is apparent then that there will be no sleep because suddenly she is moving against me and then sitting upright in the bed, staring. Hands clasped behind my head, elbows jutting at an angle of eighty-five degrees. I regard her bleakly. "I can't talk now," I say. "Please, if you must say something, let it be later. There's nothing right now."

"You mean you have to face your treatments in the morning and you need your rest so that you can be alert for the drugs. That's all you think about now, those treatments.

Where are you living? Here or there? Come on, tell me ...

"I don't want to talk, I told you."

"You've changed," she said. "They've destroyed you. You aren't what you used to be."

There comes a time in every relationship when one has approached terminus, when the expenditure of pain is not worth the pleasure input, where one can feel the raw edges of difference collide through the dissolved flesh of care. Looking at Edna I see that we have reached that point, that there is not much left, and that it will be impossible for me to see her again. This will be the end. After she leaves this time there will be no recurrence. It is this, more than anything else, which enables me to turn from her with equanimity, to confront the bold and staring face of the wall. "Goodnight," I say. "We won't talk about this any more."

“You can't avoid this. You can run from me but not from what has happened. You're not living here any more; you're living in the spaces of your own consciousness. Don't you realize that? You've turned inside; you've shut it out! These aren't experiences that you're having; they're dreams, and all of this is taking place inside you. I hate to see it happen; you're better than this; together we could have helped one another, worked to understand what our lives were, maybe even made progress.”

Too late. I stand. “You'd better leave now, Edna.”

Arms folded across her little breasts, she juts her chin at me. “That won't solve anything at all. Getting rid of me won't change it.”

“The only truth is the truth we create within ourselves.”

“I don't believe that. That's what they tell us, that's how you got started on these treatments, but it isn't so. There's an objective truth and it's outside of this and you're going to have to face it sooner or later. You're just going to have to realize.” I look at her with enormous dispassion and my expression must be a blade which falls heavily across her rhetoric, chopping it, silencing her. At length, and when I know that she is ready to receive the necessary question, I pose it as calmly and flatly as I have ever done and its resonance fills the room, my heart, her eyes until there is nothing else but her flight, and at last that peace which I have promised myself.

“Why?” I say.

* * * *

At Bruck Linn they do not start the pogrom after all, but instead seize me roughly and burl me into detention. It seems that it was only this in which they were interested; they entered in such massive numbers only to make sure that they could scour the area for me if I were not at my appointed place. In detention I am given spartan but pleasant quarters within what appears to be their headquarters, and a plate of condiments on which to nibble, as well as the five sacred books of the Pentauch, which, since they know I am a religious man, they have obviously given for the purposes of recreation. I look through them idly, munching on a piece of cake, but as always find the dead and sterile phrases insufficient on their own to provoke reaction, and it is almost with relief that I see them come into the room, obviously to explain themselves and advise what will happen next. It is high time. There are two of them, both splendidly uniformed, but one is apparently in the role of secretary; unspeaking, he sits in a corner with a recording device. The other has a blunt face and surprisingly expressive eyes. I would not have thought that they were

permitted large wet blue eyes like this.

“You are giving us much difficulty,” he says directly, sitting. “Too much and so we have had to arrange this rather dramatic interview. Our pardon for the melodrama but it could not, you see, be spared; we needed to seize and detain as quickly as possible, and we could not take a chance on riots.”

“Certainly,” I say rather grandly. “I am a world figure. My abduction would not be easy.”

“It is not only that.”

“But that in itself would be enough.”

“No matter,” he says. He looks at me intently. “We're going to have to abort the treatments,” he says. “You are becoming obsessive.”

“What?”

“It has leached out into your personal life and you are beginning to combine treatments and objective reality in a dangerous fashion. Therefore under the contract we are exercising our option to cut them off.”

“I have no understanding of this,” I say. “Treatments? I am the Lubavitcher Rabbi of Bruck Linn and I have been torn from the heart of my congregation in broad daylight by fascists who will tell me this? This is unspeakable. You speak madness.”

“I am afraid,” he says, and those expressive eyes are linked to mine, “that you are displaying precisely those symptoms which have made this necessary. You are not the Lubavitcher Rabbi, let alone of Brooklyn. You are Harold

Thwaite of the twenty-third century; the Lubavitchers are a defunct, forgotten sect, and you are imagining all of this. You have reconceived your life; the partitions have broken; and we are therefore, for your own good, ceasing the treatments and placing you in temporary detention.”

“This is an outrage,” I say. “This is impossible. Pogrom? Pogroms I can understand, I can deal with them. But this madness is beyond me.”

The uniformed man leans toward me and with the gentlest of fingers strokes my cheek. “It will go easier if you cooperate, Harold,” he says. “I know how difficult this must be for you, the shock.”

“My followers will not be easy to deal with. You will have to cut them down with rifle fire. I am sure that you can do this, but the cost in blood and bodies will be very high, and in the long run you will not win. You will

find a terrible outcome. We are God's chosen; we and only the Lubavitchers carry forth his living presence in this century, and you cannot tamper with that presence lacking the most serious consequences.”

And I see to my amazement and to my dismay that the interrogator, the one who has come to intimidate and defile, this man in the hard and terrible uniform of the state, appears to be weeping.

* * * *

I part the Red Sea with a flourish of the cane but the fools nonetheless refuse to cross. “What is wrong with them?” I say to Aaron. “It's perfectly safe.” I move further into the abyss between the waves and turn, but the throng remains on the shore staring with bleak expressions. Only Aaron is beside me. “I'm afraid they don't trust the evidence of sight,” he says, “and also they don't trust you either; they feel that this is merely a scheme to lead them astray and as soon as they step over, the waters will close upon them.”

“That is ridiculous,” I say to him. “Would I take them this far, do so much, walk with the guidance of the Lord to betray the Children of Israel?”

Aaron shrugs, a bucolic sort. “What can I tell you?” he says. “There's no accounting for interpretation.”

* * * *

At the first great hammer to the temple it comes to me that they were all the time as serious as I. More serious, in fact. I was willing to trust the outcome of my rebellion to a higher power, whereas they, solid businessmen to the end, decided to make sure that the matter rested in their own hands.

Nevertheless, it hurts. I never knew that there was so much pain in it until they put me down at the mosque and oh my oh my oh my oh my no passion is worth any of the real blood streaming.

* * * *

“You see now,” the counselor says to me, “that you are clearly in need of help. There is no shame in it; there is precedent for this; it has all happened before. We know exactly how to treat the condition, so if you will merely lie quietly and cooperate, we should have you on your way before long. The fact that you are back in focus now, for instance, is a very promising sign. Just a few hours ago we despaired of this, but you are responding nicely.”

I rear up on my elbows. "Let me out of here," I say. "I demand to be let out of here. You have no right to detain me in this fashion; I have a mission to perform, and I assure you that you will suffer greatly for what you have done. This is a serious business; it is not to be trifled with. Detention will not solve your problems; you are in grave difficulty."

"I urge you to be calm."

"I am perfectly calm." I note that I appear to be lashed to the table by several painless but well contrived restraints, which pass across my torso, digging in only when I flail. It is a painless but humiliating business and I subside, grumbling. "Very well," I said. "You will find what happens when you adopt such measures, and that judgment will sit upon you throughout eternity."

The counselor sighs. He murmurs something about many of them at the beginning not being reasonable, and I do not remind him that this is exactly as Joseph had warned.

* * * *

Tormented by the anguish on the Magdalene's face, the tears which leak unbidden down her cheeks, he says, "It is all right. The past does not matter; All that matters is what happens in the timeless present, the eternal future." He lifts a hand, strokes her cheeks, feeling a strange and budding tenderness working which surprises him in its intensity; it is of a different sort from the more generalized tenderness he has felt through his earlier travels. "Come," he said. "You can join me."

She puts her hand against his. "You don't understand," she says. "This is not what I want."

"What?"

"Talk of paradise, of your father, of salvation; I don't understand any of it. I don't know what you think they want."

"I know what they want."

"You don't know anything," she says. "You are a kind man but of these people you know nothing." She smooths her garments with a free hand. "To them you are merely a diversion, an entertaining element in their lives, someone who amuses them, whereas you think in passionate terms. You will be deeply hurt."

"Of course."

"No," she says, "not in the way you think. Martyrdom will not hurt you; that is, after all, what you seek. It will be something else." Something else,

he thinks. Something else, I think.

She is an attractive woman not without elements of sympathy, but staring at her I remember that she was, until very recently, a prostitute who committed perhaps even darker acts, and that it is an insolent thing which she, of all people, is doing in granting her Savior such rebuke. "Come," I say to her. I should note that, we have been having this dialogue by a river bank, the muddy waters of the river arching over the concealed stones, the little subterranean animals of the river whisking their way somewhere toward the north, the stunted trees of this time holding clumps of birds which eye us mournfully. "It is time to get back to the town."

"Why?"

"Because if we remain out here talking like this much longer some will misconceive. They will not understand why we have been gone so long."

"You are a strange, strange man."

"I am not a man. I am—"

"I would not take all of this so seriously," she says, and reaches toward me, a seductive impact in the brush of her band, seductive clatter in her breath, and oh my Father it is a strange feeling indeed to see what passes between us then, and with halt and stuttering breath I hurl myself upright, thrust her away, and run toward Galilee. Behind me, it cannot be the sound of her laughter which trails. It cannot, it cannot.

* * * *

"Fools," I say, my fingers hurtling through the sacred, impenetrable text, looking for the proper citation. "Can't you understand that you are living at the end of time? The chronologies of the Book of Daniel clearly indicate that the seven beasts emerge from the seven gates in the year 2222, the numbers aligned; it is this generation which will see the gathering of the light." They stare at me with interest but without conviction. "You had better attend," I say. "You have little time, little enough time to repent, and it will go easier for you if you do at the outset."

One of the congregants raises his hand and steps toward me. "Rabbi," he says, "you are suffering from a terrible misapprehension—"

"So are you all," I say with finality, "but misapprehension can itself become a kind of knowledge."

"This is not Bruck Linn and the Book of Daniel has nothing to do with what is happening."

“Fool,” I say, lunging against my restraining cords, “you may conceive of a pogrom, but that cannot alter the truth. All of your murders will not stop the progress of apocalypse for a single moment.”

“There is no apocalypse, rabbi,” the congregant says, “and you are not a rabbi.”

I scream with rage, lunging against the restraints once again and they back away with terror on their solemn faces. I grip the Pentauch firmly and hurl it at them, the pages opening like a bird's wing in flight, but it misses, spatters against an opposing wall, falls in spatters of light. “I have my duties,” I say, “my obligations. You had better let me go out and deliver the summons to the world; keeping me here will not keep back the truth. It cannot be masked, and I assure you that it will go better for you if you cooperate.”

“You are sick, rabbi,” he says very gently. “You are a sick man. Thankfully you are getting the treatment that you so desperately need and you will be better.”

“The great snake,” I point out, “the great snake which lies coiled in guard of the gates is slowly rising; he is shaking off the sleep of ten thousand years.”

“To throw a holy book—”

“No books are holy. At the end of time, awaiting the pitiless and terrible judgment even the sacred texts fall away. All that is left is judgment, mercy, the high winds rising.”

“If you will relax, rabbi—”

“I want to walk to and fro upon the earth and up and down upon it!” I scream. “From all of these wanderings I will come to a fuller knowledge, crouching then at the end of time with the old antagonist to cast lots over the vestments of the saved and the damned alike, bargaining for their garments out of a better world—”

“If you will only be quiet...”

“The snake is quiet too,” I say, “quiet and waiting for the time of judgment, but let me tell you that the silence which you will demand is the silence of the void—”

And so on and so forth, *je ne sais pas*. It is wearying to recount all of those admonitions which continue to rave through the spaces of the room at this time. If there is one thing to say about a Talmudic authority in heat, it is that once launched upon a point he can hardly pause; pauses would form interstices where the golem itself might worm. And of the

golem, of course, little more need be said.

* * * *

“Will you yield?” Satan says to me, putting me into an untenable position upon the sands. His face looms near mine like a lover's; he might be about to implant the most sustained and ominous of kisses. “Yield and it will go easier with you.”

“No,” I say, “never. I will not yield.” The French has fled, likewise the depersonalization, I feel at one with the persona, which is a very good sign, surely a sign that I am moving closer to the accomplishment of my great mission. “You may torture me; you may bring all of your strength to bear; it is possible that you will bend and break me, but you will never hear renunciation.” I grab purchase with my ankles, manage to open up a little bit of space, which of course I do not share with my ancient antagonist, and then with a sly wrench drag him toward me, defy his sense of balance and send him tumbling beside. He gasps, the exhalation of breath full as dead flowers in my face, and it is possible for me now to hurl myself all the way over him, pressing him into the sands. Gasping, he attempts to fling me, but as I collapse on top of him my knee strikes his horned and shaven head, administering a stunning blow and from the opening I see leaching the delicate, discolored blood of Satan. His eyes flutter to attention and then astonishment as I close upon him and my strength is legion. “Do you see?” I say to him. “Do you see now what you have done? You cannot win against the force of light,” and I prepare myself to deliver the blow of vanquishment. Open to all touch he lies beneath me; his mouth opens.

“Stop!” he says weakly, and to my surprise I do so. There is no hurry, after all; he is completely within my power. “That's better,” he says. His respiration is florid. “Stop this nonsense at once. Help me arise.”

“No,” I say, “absolutely not.”

“You don't understand, you fool. This dispute was supposed to be purely dialectical; there was no need to raise arms.” Ali, the cunning of Satan! Defeated on his own terms he would Shift to others, but I have been warned against this too, I have been fully prepared for all the flounderings of the ancient enemy; there is nothing that he can do now to dissuade me, and so I laugh at him, secure in my own power and say, “Dialectical! No, it was a struggle unto the death; those were clearly the terms and you know that as well as I.”

“No,” he says, twitching his head. “No, absolutely not, you never saw this right. There was never the matter of murder; don't you realize that? We aren't antagonists at all! We are two aspects of the overwhelming one;

our search was for fusion in these spaces, and that is what we are now prepared to do.” His head sinks down; he is clearly exhausted. Still he continues muttering. “You fool,” he says. “There is no way that one of us can vanquish the other. To kill either is to kill the self.”

Sophistry! Sophistry! I am so sick of it; I intimate a life, a dark passageway through to the end lit only by the flickering and evil little candles of half-knowledge and witticism, casting ugly pictures on the stones, and the image enrages me; I cannot bear the thought of a life which I contain little more than small alterations of language or perception to make it bearable, reconsideration of a constant rather than changing the unbearable constant itself, but this is to what I have been condemned. Not only Satan, but I will have to live by rhetoric; there will be nothing else.

But at least, this first time on the desert, rhetoric will not have to prevail. Perhaps for the only time in my life I will have the opportunity to undertake the one purposive act, an act of circumstance rather than intellection.

And so, without wishing to withhold that moment any longer, I wheel fiercely upon Satan. “I’ve had enough of this shit,” I say. “I’ve got to deal with it; I cannot go on like this forever; there has to be a time for confrontation.” The words seem a bit confused, but my action is not; I plunge a foot into his face. It yields in a splatter of bone, and in that sudden rearrangement I look upon his truest form.

“Well,” says Satan through flopping jaw. “Well, well.” He puts a claw to a slipped cheekbone, “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Oh, yes,” I say, “but you don’t have to take all of us with you.”

His eyes, surprisingly mild, radiate, of all things, compassion. “You don’t understand,” he says. He falls to his knees like a great, stricken bird. “You don’t understand anything at all.”

“I do enough.”

“I’m not here by choice,” Satan murmurs. “I’m here because you want me. Do you think that this is easy? Being thrown out of Heaven and walking up and down the spaces of the earth, and to and fro upon it, and the plagues and the cattle and the boils? I’ve just been so busy, but it was you who brought me into being, or again—” Satan says, drawing up his knees to a less anguished posture, fluttering on the desert floor, “—is this merely rationalization? I am very good at sophistry, you know, but this isn’t easy; there’s a great deal of genuine pain in it. I have feelings too.”

I stand, considering him. What he is saying is very complex and doubtless I should attend to it more closely (I sense that it would save me the most atrocious difficulty later on if only I would) but there is a low sense of accomplishment in having dealt with this assignment so effectively, and I do not want to lose it so easily. It may be one of the least equivocal moments in a life riven, as we all know, with conflicts. "I'm dying," Satan says. "Won't you at least reach out a hand to comfort me?"

The appeal is grotesque and yet I am moved. He is, after all, a creature of circumstance no less than any of the rest of us. I kneel beside him, trying not to show my revulsion at the smell of leaking mortality from him. Satan extends a hand. "Hold me," he says. "Hold me; you owe me at least that. You called me into being; you have to take responsibility for my vanquishment. Or are you denying complicity?"

"No," I say, "I can hardly do that." I extend my hand. His claw, my fingers, interlock.

"You see," Satan says gratefully, "you know at least that you're implicated. There may be some hope in that for all of us and now if you will permit me, I believe that I am going to die."

Grey and greenish blood spills from his mouth, his nasal passages, eyes and ears. It vaults into the desert and as I stare fascinated, he dies with quick muffled little sighs not unlike the sounds of love. It is an enormous and dignified accomplishment not noted in all the Scripture, and I am held by the spectacle for more than a few moments.

But as his claw slips away, as touch is abandoned, I have a vision and in that vision I see what I should have known before going through all of this. I see what might have saved me all of this passage, which is to say that knowing he is dead there is a consequent wrench in my own corpus indicating an echoing, smaller death, and as I realize that he has told me the truth, that the divestment of Satan has resulted only in my own reduction, I stand in the desert stunned, knowing that none of this—and I am here to testify, gentlemen, I am here to testify!—is going to be as simple as I thought.

* * * *

"Even the minor prophets have problems," I point out in the mosque. "The fact that I am not famous and that many of my judgments are vague does not mean that they are not deeply felt or that I will not suffer the fate of Isaiah; Jeremiah, Zephaniah, had their problems. Ezekiel had a limp and was tormented by self-hatred. Hosea had blood visions too."

They took at me bleakly, those fifteen. This is what my flock has

dwindled into, and I should be grateful to have them, what with all of the efforts to discredit and those many threats of violence made toward those who would yet remain with me. They are quite stupid, the intelligent ones long since having responded to the pressure, but they are all I have, and I am grateful, I suppose, to have them. "Attend," I say. "The institutions cannot remain in this condition. Their oppression is already the source of its own decay; they panic, they can no longer control the uprising. The inheritors of these institutions are stupid; they do not know why they work or how, but just mechanically reiterate the processes for their own fulfillment, massacre to protect themselves, oppress because oppression is all they know of the machinery. But their time is limited; the wind is rising and the revolution will be heard," and so on and so forth, the usual rhetorical turns and flourishes done so skillfully that they occupy only the most fleeting part of my attention. Actually I am looking at the door. It is the door which I consider; from the left enter three men in the dress of the sect, but I have never seen them before and by some furtive, heightened expressions of their eyes I know that they have not come here on a merciful business.

They consult with one another against the wall and it is all that I can do to continue speaking. I must not show a lapse of rhetoric, I must not let them know that I suspect them, because all that I hold is the prospect of my inattention, but as my customary prose rolls and thunders I am already considering the way out of here. My alternatives are very limited. The windows are barred, the walls are blank behind me, there only exits are at the edge of the hall and what has happened to the guards? Did they not screen this group? Are they not supposed to protect me, or are they all part of the plot? "Be strong, be brave," I am telling my followers, but I do not feel strong or brave myself; I feel instead utterly perplexed and filled with a fear which is very close to self-loathing. Their conference concluded, the men scatter, one going for a seat in the center, the other two parting and sliding against the walls. They fumble inside their clothing; I am sure they have firearms.

I am sure that the assassins, on my trail for so very long, have at last stalked me to this point; but I am in a very unique and difficult position because, if I show any fear whatsoever, if I react to their presence, they will doubtless slay me in the mosque, causing the most unusual consternation to my followers assembled; but on the other hand, if I proceed through the speech and toward an orderly dismissal, all that will happen is that I will make the slaying more convenient and allow for less witnesses, to say nothing of giving them an easier escape. Anything I do, in short, is calculated to work against me, and yet I am a man who has

always believed in dignity, the dignity of position, that is to say, taking a stand, following it through whatever the implications; and so I continue, my rhetoric perhaps a shade florid now, my sentences not as routinely parsed as I would wish but it is no go, no go at all; they have a different method, I see, as the seated one arises and moves briskly toward me. "This is not right," I say as he comes up to me, takes me by an elbow. "You could at least have let me finished; if I was willing to take this through, then you could have gone along with me." The congregants murmur.

"You'd better come with me, Harold," he says. "You need help."

"Take your hands off me."

"I'm afraid I'd best not do that," he says gently, gesturing toward the two in the back who begin to come toward me solemnly. "You see, what we have to do is to jolt you out of these little fugues, these essays in martyrdom, and it would be best if you cooperated; the more you cooperate, the quicker you see that it becomes evident that you are accepting reality, and therefore the more quickly you will be back to yourself. Come," he says, giving me a hearty little tug, "let's just bounce out of here now," and the others flank me fore and aft and quite forcefully I am propelled from the rostrum. To my surprise my congregants do not express dismay, nor are there scenes of riot or dislocation as I might have expected; on the contrary they look at me with bleak, passive interest, as I am shoved toward the door. It is almost, I think, as if they had expected me to come exactly to this state and they are glad that I am being taken off in this fashion.

"Can't you see," I say gesticulating to them, "can't you see what is happening here? They don't want you to know the truth, they don't want you to accept the truth of your lives; that's why they're taking me away from here, because I was helping you to face the truth."

"Come on, Harold," they murmur taking me away. "All of this has its place, but after a while it's just best to cooperate; just go along," and now they have me through the doors, not a single one of my congregants making the slightest attempt to fracture their progress. I shake a fist at them.

"For God's sake," I say, "don't any of you care, don't you know what's going on here?" and so on and so forth, the sounds of my rhetoric filling my ears, if hardly all of the world, and outside I am plunged repeatedly into the brackish waters of Galilee, which to no one's surprise at all (or at least not to mine) hardly lend absolution.

* * * *

“You'd better destroy them,” I say in a conversational tone, settling myself more comfortably underneath the gourd. “They're a rotten bunch of people as you all note. Not a one of them has but a thought of their own pleasure, to say nothing of the sexual perversity.”

“I may not,” he says reasonably. He is always reasonable, which is a good thing if one is engaged in highly internalized dialogues. What would I do if he were to lose patience and scream? I could hardly deal with it. “After all, it's pretty drastic, and besides that, without life there is no possibility of repentance.”

“Don't start that again,” I say. “You sent me all of these miles, through heat and water, fire and pain to warn them of doom, and you would put both of us in a pretty ridiculous position, wouldn't you, if you didn't follow through? They'd never take me seriously again.”

“You let me decide that, Jonah,” he says, and there is no arguing with him when he gets into one of these moods, no possibility of argument whatsoever when he becomes stubborn, and so I say, “We'll see about this in the morning,” much as if I were controlling the situation rather than he, which is not quite true of course, and slip into a thick doze populated with the images of sea and flying fish, but at the bottom of the sleep is pain, and when I bolt from it it is with terrible pain through the base of being, my head in anguish, my head as if it were carved open, and looking upward I see that the gourd which he had so kindly spread for me has shriveled overnight, and I am now being assaulted by a monotonous eastern sun. “Art thou very angry?” he says companionably, lapsing into archaicism as is his wont.

“Of course I am very angry,” I say, “You have allowed my gourd to die. And besides I want to know when you're going to get rid of these people. Looking down from this elevation I can see very distinctly that the city is still standing.”

“Ah,” he says as I scratch at my head, trying to clobber the sun away, “thou takest pity upon the gourd which was born in a night and died in a night; why should I not take pity upon forty thousand people who cannot discern their right hand from their left to say nothing of much cattle?”

“Sophistry,” I say, “merely sophistry.”

“Unfortunately,” he says, “there is no room for your reply,” and smites me wildly upon the head, causing me to stumble into the ground, Gomorrah still upright, and I am afflicted (and not for the first time I might add) with perception of the absolute perversity of this creature who dwelleth within me. At all times.

* * * *

The thieves have died, but I am still alive to the pain of the sun when I feel the nails slide free and I plunge a hundred feet into the arms of the soldiers. They cushion my fall, lave my body with strong liquids, murmur to me until slowly I come over the sill of consciousness to stare at them. Leaning over me is a face which looks familiar. "Forgive them," I say weakly, "forgive them, they know not what they do."

"They know what they do."

"Jamais," I say and to clarify, "never."

"You have not been crucified," he says. "You'd better accept that."

"Then this must be hell," I say, "and I still in it." He slaps me across the face, a dull blow with much resonance.

"You're just not being reasonable," he says. "You are not a reasonable man."

"Help me up there, then," I say. "It is not sufficient. Help me up there and crucify me again."

"Harold—"

"Jesu," I say admonishingly and close my eyes waiting for ascent and the perfect striations of the nails through the wrist: vaulting, stigmata.

* * * *

The face looking at me is Edna's, but this is strange because Edna will not be born for several centuries yet, and what is even stranger than that is the fact that despite this I recognize her. How can this be? Nevertheless, one must learn to cope with dislocations of this sort if one is to be a satisfactory martyr. "They asked me to come here and speak to you," she says. "I don't know why I'm here. I don't think it will be of any use whatsoever. But I will talk to you. You have got to stop this nonsense now, do you bear me?"

"You could help by getting me out of here," I say, plucking at my clothing. "My appearance is disgusting and it is hardly possible for me to do the work when I am confined to a place like this. Or at least you could have them hurry and order up the crucifixion. Get it over with. There's no reason to go on this way; it's absolutely futile."

"That's what they want me to talk to you about. They seem to think that this is something that can be reasoned with. I keep on telling them that this is ridiculous; you're too far gone but they say to try so I will. They're as stupid as you. All of you are stupid; you've let the process take over and

you don't even understand it. Face reality, Harold, and get out of this or it is going to go very badly—”

“Jesu,” I remind her.

“Do you see?” she says to someone in the distance. “It's absolutely hopeless. Nothing can come of this. I told you that it was a waste.”

“Try,” the voice says. “You have to try.” She leans toward me. Her face is sharp, her eyes glow fluorescent in the intensity. “Listen, Harold,” she says. “You are not Jesu or anyone else any of your religious figures. This is 2219 and you have been undergoing an administered hypnotic procedure enabling you to live through certain of your religious obsessions, but as is very rarely the case with others you have failed to come back all of the way at one point, and now they say you're in blocked transition or something. They're quite able to help you and to reverse the chemotherapeutic process, but in order to begin you have to accept these facts, that we are telling you the truth, that they are trying to help you. That isn't too much, is it? I mean, that isn't too much of an admission for you to make; and in return look at the wonderful life you'll have. Everything will be just as it was before, and you can remember how you loved it that way.”

“Let me out of here,” I say. “Where are my robes? Where are my disciples? Where are the sacred scrolls and the voice of the Lord? You cannot take all of this away; you will be dealt with very harshly.”

“There are no sacred scrolls or followers. All of those people died a long time ago. This is your last chance, Harold; you'd better take it. Who knows what the alternative might be? Who knows what these people might be capable of doing?”

“Magdalene,” I say reasonably, “simply because you're a whore does not mean that you always speak the truth. That is a sentimental fallacy.”

Her face congests and she spits. I leave it rest there. A celebration. A stigmata.

* * * *

Conveyed rapidly toward Calvary I get a quick glimpse of the sun appearing in strobes of light as they drive me with heavy kicks toward the goal. The yoke is easy at this time and burdens light; it is a speedy journey that I have made from the court to this place and it will be an easier one yet that I will make to Heaven. A few strokes of the hammer, some pain at the outset: blood, unconsciousness, ascension. Nothing will be easier than this, I think; the getting to this condition has far outweighed in difficulty this final stage. Struggling with the sacred texts has been boring, the

miracles sheer propaganda; now at last I will find some consummative task worthy of my talents.

“Faster,” they shout, “faster!” and I trot to their urging. Vite, vite, vite to that great mountain where I will show them at last that passion has as legitimate a place in this world as any of their policies and procedures and will last; I will convince them as I have already convinced myself a hell of a lot longer. Brava passione! Brava!

* * * *

So they yank me from the restraints and toss me into the center of the huge room to meet the actors. There they all are, there they are: congregants, disciples, Romans, pagans, troopers, all of the paraphernalia and armament of my mission. Edna and the Magdalene are somewhere, but concealed; I have to take their presence on faith. I have had to take everything on faith, and at the end it destroys me; this is my lesson.

“Enough of this!” they cry. Or at least one of them says this; it is very difficult to be sure. The shout must come from an individual but then again it would appear to be a collective shout; they all feel this way. “This is your last chance, your very last chance to cooperate before it becomes very difficult.”

“I don't know.”

“Ne rien,” they cry. A great clout strikes, knocking me to the floor. It hurts like hell. Attende bien, I could have expected nothing less; I have waited for it so very long. Still, one tries to go on. I scramble for purchase, hurl myself upright. My capacity to absorb pain, oh happy surprise, seems limitless after all.

“Listen!” they say, not without a certain sympathy, “Listen, this is very serious business; it cannot go on; the matter of the treatments themselves is at stake. The treatment process is complex and expensive and there are complications, great difficulties—”

I confront them reasonably. I am a reasonable man. I always have been. “I will see you with my Father in Heaven,” I say. “That is where I will see you and not a bloody moment sooner.”

“Don't you understand? Don't you realize what you are doing? The penalties can be enormous. This must stay controlled; otherwise—”

“Otherwise,” I say. “Otherwise you will lose your world and it is well worth losing. I have considered this. I have given it a great deal of thought. Martyrdom is not a posture, not at all; martyrdom springs from the heart. I am absolutely serious; it did not begin that way but that is the way it has

ended. I will not yield. I will not apologize. I will not be moved. Thy will be done, pater noster, and besides, once you get going you can't just turn it off, if you have any respect, if you have any respect at all."

There is a sound like that of engines. They close upon me. I know exactly what they have in mind but am nonetheless relieved.

It would have had to be this way. "I will not yield," I say to them quietly. "I will not apologize. I will not be moved. This isn't folklore, you know; this is real pain and history."

They tear me apart.

* * * *

I think of Satan now and am glad that we were able to have that little conversation in the desert the second time, to really get to know one another and to establish a relationship. He was quite right, of course, the old best loved angel, and I wish I'd had the grace to acknowledge it at the time. We wanted him; we called him into it. It was better to have him outside than in that split and riven part of the self. Oh how I would like to embrace him now.

* * * *

They leave me on the Cross for forty days and forty nights. On the forty-first the jackals from the south finally gnaw the wood to ash and it collapses. I am carried off, what is left of me, in their jaws and on to further adventures I cannot mention in bowels and partitions of the Earth.

The End