

## Dominoes

C.M. Kornbluth

### Dominoes

"Money!" his wife screamed at him. "You're killing yourself, Will. Pull out of the market and let's go some place where we can live like human—"

He slammed the apartment door on her reproaches and winced, standing in the carpeted corridor, as an ulcer twinge went through him. The elevator door rolled open and the elevator man said, beaming: "Good morning, Mr. Born. It's a lovely day today."

"I'm glad, Sam," W. J. Born said sourly. "I just had a lovely, lovely breakfast." Sam didn't know how to take it, and compromised by giving him a meager smile.

"How's the market look, Mr. Born?" he hinted as the car stopped on the first floor. "My cousin told me to switch from Lunar Entertainment, he's studying to be a pilot, but the Journal has it listed for growth."

W. J. Born grunted: "If I knew I wouldn't tell you. You've got no business in the market. Not if you think you can play it like a craps-table."

He fumed all through his taxi ride to the office. Sam, a million Sams, had no business in the market. But they were in, and they had built up the Great Boom of 1975 on which W. J. Born Associates was coasting merrily along. For how long? His ulcer twinged again at the thought.

He arrived at 9:15. Already the office was a maelstrom. The clattering tickers, blinking boards and racing mes-

sengers spelled out the latest, hottest word from markets in London, Paris, Milan, Vienna. Soon New York would chime in, then Chicago, then San Francisco.

Maybe this would be the day. Maybe New York would open on a significant decline in Moon Mining and Smelting. Maybe Chicago would nervously respond with a slump in commodities and San Francisco's Utah Uranium would plummet in sympathy. Maybe panic in the Tokyo Exchange on the heels of the alarming news from the States — panic relayed across Asia with the rising sun to Vienna, Milan, Paris, London, and crashing like a shock-wave into the opening New York market again.

Dominoes, W. J. Born thought. A row of dominoes. Flick one and they all topple in a heap. Maybe this would be the day.

Miss Ulig had a dozen calls from his personal crash-priority clients penciled in on his desk pad already. He ignored them and said into her good-morning smile: "Get me Mr. Loring on the phone."

Loring's phone rang and rang while W. J. Born boiled inwardly. But the lab was a barn of a place, and when he was hard at work Loring was deaf and blind to distractions. You had to hand him that. He was screwy, he was insolent, he had an inferiority complex that stuck out a yard, but he was a worker.

Loring's insolent voice said hi his ear: "Who's this?" "Born," he snapped. "How's it going?" There was a long pause, and Loring said casually: "I worked all night. I think I got it licked." "What do you mean?"

Very irritated: "I said I think I got it licked. I sent a clock and a cat and a cage of white mice out for two hours. They came back okay."

"You mean—" W. J. Born began hoarsely, and moistened his lips. "How many years?" he asked evenly. "The mice didn't say, but I think they spent two hours

in 1977."

"I'm coming right over," W. J. Born snapped, and hung up. His office staff stared as he strode out.

If the man was lying—! No; he didn't lie. He'd been sopping up money for six months, ever since he bulled his way into Bern's office with his time-machine project, but he hadn't lied once. With brutal frankness he had admitted his own failures and his doubts that the thing ever would be made to work. But now, W. J. Born rejoiced, it had turned into the smartest gamble of his career. Six months and a quarter of a million dollars—a two-year forecast on the market was worth a billion! Four thousand to one, he gloated; four thousand to one! Two hours to learn when the Great Bull Market of 1975 would collapse and then back to his office armed with the information, ready to buy up to the very crest of the boom and then get out at the peak, wealthy forever, forever beyond the reach of fortune, good or bad!

He stumped upstairs to Loring's loft in the West 70's.

Loring was badly overplaying the role of casual roughneck. Gangling, redheaded and unshaved, he grinned at Born and said: "Watcha think of soy futures, W. J.? Hold or switch?"

W. J. Born began automatically: "If I knew I wouldn't —oh, don't be silly. Show me the confounded thing."

Loring showed him. The whining generators were unchanged; the tall Van de Graaf accumulator still looked like something out of a third-rate horror movie. The thirty square feet of haywired vacuum tubes

and resistances were still an incomprehensible tangle. But since his last visit a phone booth without a phone had been added. A sheet-copper disk set into its ceiling was connected to the machinery by a ponderous cable. Its floor was a slab of polished glass.

"That's it," Loring said. "I got it at a junkyard and fixed it up pretty. You want to watch a test on the mice?"

"No," W. J. Born said. "I want to try it myself. What do you think I've been paying you for?" He paused. "Do you guarantee its safety?"

"Look, W. J.," Loring said, "I guarantee nothing. I think this will send you two years into the future. I think if you're back in it at the end of two hours you'll snap

back to the present. I'll tell you this, though. If it does send you into the future, you had better be back in it at the end of two hours. Otherwise you may snap back into the same space as a strolling pedestrian or a moviBg\_car—and an H-bomb will be out of your league."

W. J. Born's ulcer twinged. With difficulty he asked: "Is there anything else I ought to know?"

"Nope," Loring said after considering for a moment. "You're just a paying passenger."

"Then let's go." W. J. Born checked to make sure that he had his memorandum book and smooth-working pen in his pocket and stepped into the telephone booth.

Loring closed the door, grinned, waved and vanished—literally vanished, while Born was looking at him.

Born yanked the door open and said: "Loring! What the devil—" And then he saw that it was late afternoon instead of early morning. That Loring was nowhere hi the loft. That the generators were silent and the tubes dark and cold. That there was a mantle of dust and a faint musty smell.

He rushed from the big room and down the stairs. It was the same street in the West 70's. Two hours, he thought, and looked at his watch. It said 9:55, but the sun unmistakably said it was late afternoon. Something had happened. He resisted an impulse to grab a passing high-school boy and ask him what year it was. There was a newsstand down the street, and Born went to it faster than he had moved in years. He threw down a dime and snatched a Post dated—September 11th, 1977. He had done it.

Eagerly he riffled to the Post's meager financial page. Moon Mining and Smelting had opened at 27. Uranium at 19. United Com at 24. Catastrophic lows! The crash had come!

He looked at his watch again, in panic. Nine-fifty-nine. It had said 9:55. He'd have to be back in the phone booth by 11:55 or—he shuddered. An H-bomb would be out of his league.

Now to pinpoint the crash. "Cab!" he yelled, waving

his paper. It eased to the curb. "Public library," W. J. Born grunted, and leaned back to read the Post with glee. The headline said: 25000 RIOT HERE FOR UPPED JOBLESS DOLE. Naturally; naturally. He gasped as he saw who had won the 1976 presidential election. Lord, what odds he'd be able to get back in 1975 if he wanted to bet on the nomination! NO CRIME WAVE, SAYS COMMISSIONER. Things hadn't changed very much after all. BLONDE 'MODEL

HACKED IN TUB/ MYSTERY BOYFRIEND SOUGHT. He read

that one all the way through, caught by a two-column photo of the blonde model for a hosiery account. And then he noticed that the cab wasn't moving. It was caught in a rock-solid traffic jam. The tune was 10:05.

"Driver," he said.

The man turned around, soothing and scared. A fare was a fare; there was a depression on. "It's all right, mister. We'll be out of here in a minute. They turn off the Drive and that blocks the avenue for a couple of minutes, that's all. We'll be rolling in a minute."

They were rolling in a minute, but for a few seconds only. The cab inched agonizingly along while W. J.

Born twisted the newspaper in his hands. At 10:13 he threw a bill at the driver and jumped from the cab.

Panting, he reached the library at 10:46 by his watch. By the time that the rest of the world was keeping on that day it was quitting-time in the midtown offices. He had bucked a stream of girls in surprisingly short skirts and surprisingly big hats all the way.

He got lost in the marble immensities of the library and his own panic. When he found the newspaper room his watch said 11:03. W. J. Born panted to the girl at the desk: "File of the Stock Exchange Journal for 1975, 1976 and 1977."

"We have the microfilms for 1975 and 1976, sir, and loose copies for this year."

"Tell me," he said, "what year for the big crash? That's what I want to look up."

"That's 1975, sir. Shall I get you that?"

"Wait," he said. "Do you happen to remember the

month?"

"I think it was March or August or something like that, sir." ~~~

"Get me the whole file, please," he said. Nineteen seventy-five. His year—his real year. Would he have a month? A week? Or—?

"Sign this card, mister," the girl was saying patiently. "There's a reading machine, you just go sit there and I'll bring you the spool."

He scribbled his name and went to the machine, the only one vacant in a row of a dozen. The tune on his

watch was 11:05. He had fifty minutes.

The girl dawdled over cards at her desk and chatted with a good-looking young page with a stack of books while sweat began to pop from Born's brow. At last she disappeared into the stacks behind her desk.

Born waited. And waited. And waited. Eleven-ten. Eleven-fifteen. Eleven-twenty.

An H-bomb would be out of his league. His ulcer stabbed him as the girl appeared again, daintily carrying a spool of 35-millimeter film between thumb and forefinger, smiling brightly at Born. "Here we are," she said, and inserted the spool hi the machine and snapped a switch. Nothing happened.

"Oh, darn," she said. "The light's out. I told the electrician."

Born wanted to scream and then to explain, which would have been just as foolish.

"There's a free reader," she pointed down the line. W. J. Born's knees tottered as they walked to it. He looked at his watch—11:27. Twenty-eight minutes to go. The ground-glass screen lit up with a shadow of the familiar format; January 1st, 1975. "You just turn the crank," she said, and showed him. The shadows spun past on the screen at dizzying speed, and she went back to her desk.

Born cranked the film up to April, 1975, the month he had left 91 minutes ago, and to the sixteenth day of April,

the very day he had left. The shadow on the ground glass was the same paper he had seen that morning: SYNTHETICS SURGE TO NEW VIENNA PEAK.

Trembling he cranked into a vision of the future; the Stock Exchange Journal for April 17th, 1975.

Three inch type screamed: SECURITIES CRASH IN

## GLOBAL CRISIS: BANKS CLOSE; CLIENTS STORM BROKERAGES!

Suddenly he was calm, knowing the future and safe from its blows. He rose from the reader and strode firmly into the marble halls. Everything was all right now. Twenty-six minutes was time enough to get back to the machine. He'd have a jump of several hours on the market; his own money would be safe as houses; he could get his personal clients off the hook.

He got a cab with miraculous ease and rolled straight to the loft building in the West 70's without hindrance. At 11:50 by his watch he was closing the door of the phone booth in the dusty, musty-smelling lab.

At 11:54 he noticed an abrupt change in the sunlight that filtered through the dirt-streaked windows and stepped calmly out. It was April 17th, 1975, again. Loring was sound asleep beside a gas hotplate on which coffee simmered. W. J. Born turned off the gas and went downstairs softly. Loring was a screwy, insolent, insecure young man, but by his genius he had enabled W. J. Born to harvest his fortune at the golden moment of perfection.

Back in his office he called his floor broker and said firmly: "Cronin, get this straight. I want you to sell every share of stock and every bond in my personal account immediately, at the market, and to require certified checks in payment."

Cronin asked forthrightly: "Chief, have you gone crazy?"

"I have not. Don't waste a moment, and report regularly to me. Get your boys to work. Drop everything else."

Born had a light, bland lunch sent in and refused to see anybody or take any calls except from the floor broker.

Cronin kept reporting that the dumping was going right along, that Mr. Born must be crazy, that the unheard-of demand for certified checks was causing alarm, and finally at the close, that Mr. Born's wishes were being carried out. Born told him to get the checks to him immediately.



They arrived in an hour, drawn on a dozen New York banks. W. J. Born called hi a dozen senior messengers, and dealt out the checks, one bank to a messenger. He told them to withdraw the cash, rent safe-deposit boxes of the necessary sizes in those banks where he did not already have boxes, and deposit the cash.

He then phoned the banks to confirm the weird arrangement. He was on first-name terms with at least one vice president in each bank, which helped enormously.

W. J. Born leaned back, a happy man. Let the smash come. He turned on his flashboard for the first time that day. The New York closing was sharply off. Chicago was worse. San Francisco was shaky—as he watched, the flashing figures on the composite price index at San Francisco began to drop. In five minutes it was a screaming nosedive into the pit. The closing bell stopped it short of catastrophe.

W. J. Born went out to dinner after phoning his wife that he would not be home. He returned to the office and watched a board in one of the outer rooms that carried Tokyo Exchange through the night hours, and congratulated himself as the figures told a tale of panic and rum. The dominoes were toppling, toppling, toppling.

He went to his club for the night and woke early, eating alone in an almost-deserted breakfast room. The ticker, in the lobby sputtered a good-morning as he drew on his gloves against the chilly April dawn. He stopped to watch. The ticker began spewing a tale of disaster on the great bourses of Europe, and Mr. Born walked to his office. Brokers a-plenty were arriving early, muttering hi little crowds hi the lobby and elevators.

"What do you make of it, Born?" one of them asked.

"What goes up must come down," he said. "I'm safely out."

"So I hear," the man told him, with a look that Born decided was envious.

Vienna, Milan, Paris and London were telling their sorry story on the boards in the customers' rooms. There were a few clients silting up the place already, and the night staff had been busy taking orders by phone 'for the opening. They all were to sell at the market.

W. J. Born grinned at one of the night men and cracked a rare joke: "Want to buy a brokerage house, Willard?"

Willard glanced at the board and said: "No thanks, Mr. Born. But it was nice of you to keep me in mind."

Most of the staff drifted hi early; the sense of crisis was heavy hi the air. Born instructed his staff to do what they could for his personal clients first, and holed up in his office.

The opening bell was the signal for hell to break loose. The tickers never had the ghost of a chance of keeping up with the crash, unquestionably the biggest and steepest hi the history of finance. Born got some pleasure out of the fact that his boys' promptness had cut the losses of his personal clients a little. A very important banker called in midmorning to ask Born into a billion-dollar pool that would shore up the market by a show of confidence. Born said no, knowing that no show of confidence would keep Moon Mining and Smelting from opening at 27 on September 11th, 1977. The banker hung up abruptly.

Miss Ulig asked: "Do you want to see Mr. Loring? He's here."

"Send him in."

Loring was deathly pale, with a copy of the Journal rolled up hi his fist. "I need some mone\*- he said.

W. J. Born shook his head. "You see what, going on," he said. "Money's tight. I've enjoyed our association, Loring, but I think it's tune to end it. You've had a quarter of a million dollars clear; I make no claims on your process—"

"It's gone," Loring said hoarsely. "I haven't paid for,

the damn equipment—not ten cents on the dollar yet. I've been playing the market. I lost a hundred and fifty thousand on soy futures this morning. They'll dismantle my stuff and haul it away. I've got to have

some money."

"No!" W. J. Born barked. "Absolutely not!"

"They'll come with a truck for the generators this afternoon. I stalled them. My stocks kept going up. And now— all I wanted was enough in reserve to keep working. I've got to have money."

"No," said Born. "After all, it's not my fault."

Loring's ugly face was close to his. "Isn't it?" he snarled. And he spread out the paper on the desk.

Born read the headline—again—of the Stock Exchange Journal for April 17th, 1975: SECURITIES CRASH IN GLOBAL CRISIS: BANKS CLOSE; CLIENTS STORM BROKERAGES! But this time he was not too rushed to read on: "A world-wide slump in securities has wiped out billions of paper dollars since it started shortly before closing yesterday at the New York Stock Exchange. No end to the catastrophic flood of sell orders is yet in sight. Veteran New York observers agreed that dumping of securities on the New York market late yesterday by W. J. Born of W. J. Born Associates pulled the plug out of the big boom which must now be consigned to memory. Banks have been hard-hit by the—"

"Isn't it?" Loring snarled. "Isn't it?" His eyes were crazy as he reached for Born's thin neck.

Dominoes, W. J. Born thought vaguely through the pain, and managed to hit a button on his desk. Miss Ulig came in and screamed and went out again and came back with a couple of husky customers' men, but it was too late.