

# The Subliminal Man

## J. G. Ballard

J. G. Ballard is a British writer who has been called a “poet of death.” But Ballard, especially in the early part of his career, also wrote excellent extrapolative science fiction on social themes, and this haunting story is one of his finest.

Here Ballard speaks of the enslavement of the unconscious, of an economic system that forces people to consume against their will through the use of technology. Ballard makes an important assumption—the belief (at least implicitly) that people would not want to consume at high rates if they were not “forced” to do so. In a profound sense, “The Subliminal Man” is a basic critique of the underlying dichotomy that pervades the concept of advertising—that of needs versus wants. We all have basic needs like food, sex, clothing, and shelter. Almost everything else (including the book you are now reading) is wants, often artificially created by the culture in which we live. Think how much more difficult resistance would become if the technology of subliminal advertising were forced upon us. This threat goes beyond the financial difficulties that families would be in. We would also be threatened with dehumanization, for it is the ability to think and choose that separates us from the rest of the animal world.

Ballard’s story also assumes that industry will continue to manufacture products that will easily and quickly wear out, or if this is not the case, then it will find ways to make us dissatisfied with the products we now have. There is little evidence that things will change for the better.

“The signs, Doctor! Have you see the signs?”

Frowning with annoyance, Dr. Franklin quickened his pace and hurried down the hospital steps toward

the line of parked cars. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of a thin, scruffy young man in

ragged sandals and lime-stained jeans waving to him from the far side of the drive, then break into a run when he saw Franklin try to evade him.

“Dr. Franklin! The signs!”

Head down, Franklin swerved around an elderly couple approaching the outpatients department. His car was over a hundred yards away. Too tired to start running himself, he waited for the young man to catch him up.

“All right, Hathaway, what is it this time?” he snapped irritably. “I’m getting sick of you hanging around here all day.”

Hathaway lurched to a halt in front of him, uncut black hair like an awning over his eyes. He brushed it back with a clawlike hand and turned on a wild smile, obviously glad to see Franklin and oblivious of the latter’s hostility.

“I’ve been trying to reach you at night, Doctor, but your wife always puts the phone down on me,” he explained without a hint of rancor, as if well used to this kind of snub. “And I didn’t want to look for you inside the Clinic.” They were standing by a privet hedge that shielded them from the lower windows of the main administrative block, but Franklin’s regular rendezvous with Hathaway and his strange messianic cries had already been the subject of amused comment.

Franklin began to say: “I appreciate that—” but Hathaway brushed this aside. “Forget it, Doctor, there are more important things happening now. They’ve started to build the first big signs! Over a hundred feet high, on the traffic islands just outside town. They’ll soon have all the approach roads covered. When they do we might as well stop thinking.

“Your trouble is that you’re thinking too much,” Franklin told him. “You’ve been rambling about these signs for weeks now. Tell me, have you actually seen one signaling?”

Hathaway tore a handful of leaves from the hedge, exasperated by this irrelevancy. “Of course I haven’t, that’s the whole point, Doctor. - He dropped his voice as a group of nurses walked past, watching him uneasily out of the corners of their eyes. “The construction gangs were out again last night, laying huge power cables. You’ll see them on the way home. Everything’s nearly ready now.”

“They’re traffic signs,” Franklin explained patiently. “The flyover

has just been completed. Hathaway, for God’s sake, relax. Try to think of Dora and the child.”

“I am thinking of them!” Hathaway’s voice rose to a controlled scream. “Those cables were 40,000-volt lines, Doctor, with terrific switch gear. The trucks were loaded with enormous metal scaffolds. Tomorrow they’ll start lifting them up all over the city, they’ll block off half the sky! What do you think Dora will be like after six months of that? We’ve got to stop them, Doctor, they’re trying to transistorize our brains!”

Embarrassed by Hathaway’s high-pitched shouting, Franklin had momentarily lost his sense of direction and helplessly searched the sea of cars for his own. “Hathaway, I can’t waste any more time talking to you. Believe me, you need skilled help; these obsessions are beginning to master you.”

Hathaway started to protest, and Franklin raised his right hand firmly. "Listen. For the last time, if you can show me one of these new signs, and prove that it's transmitting subliminal commands, I'll go to the police with you. But you haven't got a shred of evidence, and you know it. Subliminal advertising was banned thirty years ago, and the laws have never been repealed. Anyway, the technique was unsatisfactory; any success it had was marginal. Your idea of a huge conspiracy with all these thousands of giant signs everywhere is preposterous."

"All right, Doctor." Hathaway leaned against the bonnet of one of the cars. His moods seemed to switch abruptly from one level to the next. He watched Franklin amiably. "What's the matter—lost your car?"

"All your damned shouting has confused me." Franklin pulled out his ignition key and read the number off the tag: -NYN 299-566-36721---can you see it?"

Hathaway leaned around lazily, one sandal up on the bonnet, surveying the square of a thousand or so cars facing them. "Difficult, isn't it, when they're all identical, even the same color? Thirty years ago there were about ten different makes, each in a dozen colors."

Franklin spotted his car, began to walk toward it. "Sixty years ago there were a hundred makes. What of it? The economies of standardization are obviously bought at a price.<sup>9</sup>

Hathaway drummed his palm lightly on the roofs. "But these cars

aren't all that cheap, Doctor. In fact, comparing them on an average income basis with those of thirty years ago they're about forty percent more expensive. With only one make being produced you'd expect a substantial reduction in price, not an increase."

"Maybe," Franklin said, opening his door. "But mechanically the cars of today are far more sophisticated. They're lighter, more durable, safer to drive."

Hathaway shook his head skeptically. "They bore me. The same model, same styling, same color, year after year. It's a sort of communism." He rubbed a greasy finger over the windshield. "This is a new one again, isn't it, Doctor? Where's the old one—you only had it for three months?"

"I traded it in," Franklin told him, starting the engine. "If you ever had any money you'd realize that it's the most economical way of owning a car. You don't keep driving the same one until it falls apart. It's the same with everything else—television sets, washing machines, refrigerators. But you aren't faced with the problem—you haven't got any."

Hathaway ignored the gibe, and leaned his elbow on Franklin's window. "Not a bad idea, either, Doctor. It gives me time to think. I'm not working a twelve-hour day to pay for a lot of things I'm too busy to use before they're obsolete."

He waved as Franklin reversed the car out of its line, then shouted into the wake of exhaust: "Drive with your eyes closed, Doctor!"

On the way home Franklin kept carefully to the slowest of the four-speed lanes. As usual after his discussions with Hathaway he felt vaguely depressed. He realized that unconsciously he envied Hathaway his footloose existence. Despite the grimy cold-water apartment in the shadow and roar of the flyover, despite his nagging wife and their sick child, and the endless altercations with the landlord and the supermarket credit manager, Hathaway still retained his freedom intact. Spared any responsibilities, he could resist the smallest encroachment upon him by the rest of society, if only by generating obsessive

fantasies such as his latest one about subliminal advertising.

The ability to react to stimuli, even irrationally, was a valid criterion of freedom. By contrast, what freedom Franklin possessed was peripheral, sharply demarcated by the manifold responsibilities in the center of his life—the three mortgages on his home, the mandatory

rounds of cocktail and TV parties, the private consultancy occupying most of Saturday which paid the installments on the multitude of household gadgets, clothes and past holidays. About the only time he had to himself was driving to and from work.

But at least the roads were magnificent. Whatever other criticisms might be leveled at the present society, it certainly knew how to build roads. Eight-, ten- and twelve-lane expressways interlaced across the continent, plunging from overhead causeways into the giant car parks in the center of the cities, or dividing into the great suburban arteries with their multiacre parking aprons around the marketing centers. Together the roadways and car parks covered more than a third of the country's entire area, and in the neighborhood of the cities the proportion was higher. The old cities were surrounded by the vast, dazzling abstract sculptures of the cloverleaves and flyovers, but even so the congestion was unremitting.

The ten-mile journey to his home in fact covered over twenty-five miles and took him twice as long as it had done before the construction of the expressway, the additional miles contained within the three giant cloverleaves. New cities were springing from the motels, cafés and car marts around the highways. At the slightest hint of an intersection a shantytown of shacks and filling stations sprawled away among the forest of electric signs and route indicators, many of them substantial cities.

All around him cars bulleted along, streaming toward the suburbs. Relaxed by the smooth motion of the car, Franklin edged outward into the next speed lane. As he accelerated from 40 to 50 mph a strident, ear-jarring noise drummed out from his tires, shaking the chassis of the car. Ostensibly as an aid to lane discipline, the surface of the road was covered with a mesh of smaller rubber studs, spaced progressively farther apart in each of the lanes so that the tire hum resonated exactly on 40, 50, 60 and 70 mph. Driving at an intermediate speed for more than a few seconds became physiologically painful, and soon resulted in damage to the car and tires.

When the studs wore out they were replaced by slightly different patterns, matching those on the latest tires, so that regular tire changes were necessary, increasing the safety and efficiency of the expressway. It also increased the revenues of the car and tire manufacturers, for most cars over six months old soon fell to pieces under the steady battering, but this was regarded as a desirable end, the greater turnover Judith started to protest he added firmly: "Look, I don't want a new infrared barbecue spit, we've only had this one for two months. Damn it, it's not even a different model."

"But, darling, don't you see, it makes it cheaper if you keep buying new ones. We'll have to trade ours in at the end of the year anyway, we signed the contract, and this way we save at least twenty dollars. These Spot Bargains aren't just a gimmick, you know. I've been glued to that set all day." A note of irritation had crept into her voice, but Franklin sat his ground, doggedly ignoring the clock.

"Right, we lose twenty dollars. It's worth it." Before she could remonstrate he said: "Judith, please, you probably took the wrong number down anyway." As she shrugged and went over to the bar he called: "Make it a stiff one. I see we have health foods on the menu."

"They're good for you, darling. You know you can't live on ordinary foods all the time. They don't contain any proteins or vitamins. You're always saying we ought to be like people in the old days and eat nothing but health foods."

“I would, but they smell so awful.” Franklin lay back, nose in the glass of whiskey, gazing at the darkened skyline outside.

A quarter of a mile away, gleaming out above the roof of the neighborhood supermarket, were the five red beacon lights. Now and then, as the headlamps of the Spot Bargainers swung up across the face of the building, he could see the square massive bulk of the giant sign clearly silhouetted against the evening sky.

“Judith!” He went into the kitchen and took her over to the window. “That sign, just behind the supermarket. When did they put it up?”

“I don’t know.” Judith peered at him curiously. “Why are you so worried, Robert? Isn’t it something to do with the airport?”

Franklin stared thoughtfully at the dark hull of the sign. “So everyone probably thinks.”

Carefully he poured his whiskey into the sink.

After parking his car on the supermarket apron at seven o’clock the next morning, Franklin carefully emptied his pockets and stacked the coins in the dashboard locker. The supermarket was already busy with early-morning shoppers and the line of thirty turnstiles clicked and slammed. Since the introduction of the “24-hour spending day” the shopping complex was never closed. The bulk of the shoppers were discount buyers, housewives contracted to make huge volume purchases of food, clothing and appliances against substantial overall price cuts, and forced to drive around all day from supermarket to supermarket, frantically trying to keep pace with their purchase schedules and grappling with the added incentives inserted to keep the schemes alive.

Many of the women had teamed up, and as Franklin walked over to the entrance a pack of them charged toward their cars, stuffing their pay slips into their bags and gesticulating at each other. A moment later their cars roared off in a convoy to the next marketing zone.

A large neon sign over the entrance listed the latest discount—a mere 5 percent—calculated on the volume of turnover. The highest discounts, sometimes up to 25 percent, were earned in the housing estates where junior white-collar workers lived. There, spending had a strong social incentive, and the desire to be the highest spender in the neighborhood was given moral reinforcement by the system of listing all the names and their accumulating cash totals on a huge electric sign in the supermarket foyers. The higher the spender, the greater his contribution to the discounts enjoyed by others. The lowest-spending were regarded as social criminals, free-riding on the backs of others.

Luckily this system had yet to be adopted in Franklin’s neighborhood. Not because the professional men and their wives were able to exercise more discretion, but because their higher incomes allowed them to contract into more expensive discount schemes operated by the big department stores in the city.

Ten yards from the entrance Franklin paused, looking up at the huge metal sign mounted in an enclosure at the edge of the car park. Unlike the other signs and billboards that proliferated everywhere, no attempt had been made to decorate it, or disguise the gaunt bare rectangle of riveted steel mesh. Power lines wound down its sides, and the concrete surface of the car park was crossed by a long scar where a cable had been sunk.

Franklin strolled along, then fifty feet from the sign stopped and turned, realizing that he would be late for

the hospital and needed a new carton of cigarettes. A dim but powerful humming emanated from the transformers below the sign, fading as he retraced his steps to the supermarket.

Going over to the automats in the foyer, he felt for his change, then whistled sharply when he remembered why he had deliberately emptied his pockets.

“The cunning thing!” he said, loud enough for two shoppers to stare at him. Reluctant to look directly at the sign, he watched its reflection in one of the glass door panes, so that any subliminal message would be reversed.

Almost certainly he had received two distinct signals-“Keep Away” and “Buy Cigarettes.” The people who normally parked their cars along the perimeter of the apron were avoiding the area under the enclosure, the cars describing a loose semicircle fifty feet around it.

He turned to the janitor sweeping out the foyer. “What’s that sign for?”

The man leaned on his broom, gazing dully at the sign. “Dunno,” he said, “must be something to do with the airport.” He had an almost fresh cigarette in his mouth, but his right hand reached unconsciously to his hip pocket and pulled out a pack. He drummed the second cigarette absently on his thumbnail as Franklin walked away.

Everyone entering the supermarket was buying cigarettes.

Cruising quietly along the 40 mph lane, Franklin began to take a closer interest in the landscape around him. Usually he was either too tired or too preoccupied to do more than think about his driving, but now he examined the expressway methodically, scanning the roadside cafés for any smaller versions of the new signs. A host of neon displays covered the doorways and windows, but most of them seemed innocuous, and he turned his attention to the larger billboards erected along the open stretches of the expressway. Many of these were as high as four-story houses, elaborate three-dimensional devices in which giant, glossy-skinned housewives with electric eyes and teeth jerked and postured around their ideal kitchens, neon flashes exploding from their smiles.

The areas of either side of the expressway were wasteland, continuous junkyards filled with cars and trucks, washing machines and refrigerators, all perfectly workable but jettisoned by the economic pressure of the succeeding waves of discount models. Their intact chrome hardly tarnished, the mounds of metal shells and cabinets glittered in the sunlight. Nearer the city the billboards were sufficiently close together to hide them, but now and then, as he slowed to approach one of the flyovers, Franklin caught a glimpse of the huge pyramids of metal, gleaming silently like the refuse grounds of some forgotten El Dorado.

That evening Hathaway was waiting for him as he came down the hospital steps. Franklin waved him across the court, then led the way quickly to his car.

“What’s the matter, Doctor?” Hathaway asked as Franklin wound up the windows and glanced around the lines of parked cars. “Is someone after you?”

Franklin laughed somberly. “I don’t know. I hope not, but if what you say is right, I suppose there is.”

Hathaway leaned back with a chuckle, propping one knee up on the dashboard. “So you’ve seen something, Doctor, after all.”

“Well, I’m not sure yet, but there’s just a chance you may be right. This morning at the Fairlawne supermarket . . .” He broke off, uneasily remembering the huge blank sign and the abrupt way in which he had turned back to the supermarket as he approached it, then described his encounter.

Hathaway nodded slowly. “I’ve seen the sign there. It’s big, but not as big as some that are going up. They’re building them everywhere now. All over the city. What are you going to do, Doctor?”

Franklin gripped the wheel tightly. Hathaway’s thinly veiled amusement irritated him. “Nothing, of course. Damn it, it may be just autosuggestion; you’ve probably got me imagining—”

Hathaway sat up with a jerk, his face mottled and savage. “Don’t be absurd, Doctor! If you can’t believe your own senses what chance have you left? They’re invading your brain, if you don’t defend yourself they’ll take it over. completely! We’ve got to act now, before we’re all paralyzed.”

Wearily Franklin raised one hand to restrain him. “Just a minute. Assuming that these signs are going up everywhere, what would be their object? Apart from wasting the enormous amount of capital invested in all the other millions of signs and billboards, the amounts of discretionary spending power still available must be infinitesimal. Some of the present mortgage and discount schemes reach half a century ahead, so there can’t be much slack left to take up. A big trade war would be disastrous.”

“Quite right, Doctor,” Hathaway rejoined evenly, “but you’re forgetting one thing. What would supply that extra spending power? A big increase in production. Already they’ve started to raise the working day from twelve hours to fourteen. In some of the appliance plants

around the city Sunday working is being introduced as a norm.

Can you visualize it, Doctor—a seven-day week, everyone with at least three jobs?”

Franklin shook his head. “People won’t stand for it.”

“They will. Within the last twenty-five years the gross national product has risen by fifty percent, but so have the average hours worked. Ultimately we’ll all be working and spending twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. No one will dare refuse. Think what a slump would mean—millions of layoffs, people with time on their hands and nothing to spend it on. Real leisure, not just time spent buying things.” He seized Franklin by the shoulder. “Well, Doctor, are you going to join me?”

Franklin freed himself. Half a mile away, partly hidden by the four story bulk of the Pathology Department, was the upper half of one of the giant signs, workmen still crawling across its girders. The airlines over the city had deliberately been routed away from the hospital, and the sign obviously had no connection with approaching aircraft.

“Isn’t there a prohibition on subliminal living? How can the unions accept it?”

“The fear of a slump. You know the new economic dogmas. Unless output rises by a steady inflationary five percent the economy is stagnating. Ten years ago increased efficiency alone would raise output, but the advantages there are minimal now and only one thing is left. More work. Increased consumption and subliminal advertising will provide the spur.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“I can’t tell you, Doctor, unless you accept equal responsibility for it.

“Sounds rather quixotic,” Franklin commented. “Tilting at windmills. You won’t be able to chop those things down with an ax. “

“I won’t try.” Hathaway suddenly gave up and opened the door. “Don’t wait too long to make up your mind, Doctor. By then it may not be yours to make up.” With a wave he was gone.

On the way home Franklin’s skepticism returned. The idea of the conspiracy was preposterous, and the economic arguments were too plausible. As usual, though, there had been a hook in the soft bait Hathaway dangled before him-Sunday working. His own consultancy had been extended into Sunday morning with his appointment as visiting factory doctor to one of the automobile plants that had started

Sunday shifts. But instead of resenting this incursion into his already meager hours of leisure he had been glad. For one frightening reason he needed the extra income.

Looking out over the lines of scurrying cars, he noticed that at least a dozen of the great signs had been erected along the expressway. As Hathaway had said, more were going up everywhere, rearing over the supermarkets in the housing developments like rusty metal sails.

Judith was in the kitchen when he reached home, watching the TV program on the handset over the cooker. Franklin climbed past a big cardboard carton, its seals still unbroken, which blocked the doorway, kissed her on the cheek as she scribbled numbers down on her pad. The pleasant odor of pot-roast chicken-or, rather, a gelatine dummy of a chicken fully flavored and free of any toxic or nutritional properties-mollified his irritation at finding her still playing the Spot Bargains.

He tapped the carton with his foot. “What’s this?”

“No idea, darling, something’s always coming these days, I can’t keep up with it all.” She peered through the glass door at the chicken-an economy 12-pounder, the size of a turkey, with stylized legs and wings and an enormous breast, most of which would be discarded at the end of the meal (there were no dogs or cats these days; the crumbs from the rich man’s table saw to that)-and then glanced at him pointedly.

“You look rather worried, Robert. Bad day?”

Franklin murmured noncommittally. The hours spent trying to detect false clues in the faces of the Spot Bargain announcers had sharpened Judith’s perceptions, and he felt a pang of sympathy for the legion of husbands similarly outmatched.

“Have you been talking to that crazy beatnik again?”

“Hathaway? As a matter of fact, I have. He’s not all that crazy.” He stepped backward into the carton, almost spilling his drink. “Well, what is this thing? As I’ll be working for the next fifty Sundays to pay for it I’d like to find out.”

He searched the sides, finally located the label. “A TV set? Judith, do we need another one? We’ve already got three. Lounge, dining room, and the handset. What’s the fourth for?”

“The guest room, dear; don’t get so excited. We can’t leave a handset in the guest room, it’s rude. I’m trying to economize, but four TV sets is the bare minimum. All the magazines say so.”

“And three radios?” Franklin stared irritably at the carton. “If we do invite a guest here how much time is he

going to spend alone in his room watching television? Judith, we’ve got to call a halt. It’s not as if these things

were free, or even cheap. Anyway, television is a total waste of time. There’s only one program. It’s ridiculous

to have four sets. “

“Robert, there are four channels.”

“But only the commercials are different.” Before Judith could reply the telephone rang. Franklin lifted the kitchen receiver, listened to the gabble of noise that poured from it. At first he wondered whether this was some offbeat prestige commercial, then realized it was Hathaway in a manic swing.

“Hathaway!” he shouted back. “Relax, man! What’s the matter now?”

Doctor, -you’ll have to believe me this time. I tell you I got on to one of the islands with a stroboscope, they’ve got hundreds of high speed shutters blasting away like machine guns straight into people’s faces and they can’t see a thing, it’s fantastic! The next big campaign’s going to be cars and TV sets; they’re trying to swing a two month model change—can you imagine it, Doctor, a new car every two months? God Almighty, it’s just-“

Franklin waited impatiently as the five-second commercial break cut in (all telephone calls were free, the length of the commercial extending with range-for long-distance calls the ratio of commercial to conversation was as high as 10: 1, the participants desperately trying to get a word in edgewise to the interminable interruptions), but just before it ended he abruptly put the telephone down, then removed the receiver from the cradle.

Judith came over and took his arm. “Robert, what’s the matter? You look terribly strained.”

Franklin picked up his drink and walked through into the lounge. “It’s just Hathaway. As you say, I’m getting a little too involved with him. He’s starting to prey on my mind.”

He looked at the dark outline of the sign over the supermarket, its red warning lights glowing in the night sky. Blank and nameless, like an area forever closed off in an insane mind, what frightened him was its total anonymity-

“Yet I’m not sure,” he muttered. “So much of what Hathaway says makes sense. These subliminal techniques are the sort of last ditch attempt You’d expect from an overcapitalized industrial system.”

He waited for Judith to reply, then looked up at her. She stood in the center of the carpet, hands folded limply, her sharp, intelligent face curiously dull and blunted. He followed her gaze out over the rooftops, then with an effort turned his head and quickly switched on the TV set.

“Come on,” he said grimly. “Let’s watch television. God, we’re going to need that fourth set.”

A week later Franklin began to compile his inventory. He saw nothing more of Hathaway; as he left the hospital in the evening the familiar scruffy figure was absent. When the first of the explosions sounded

dimly around the city and he read of the attempts to sabotage the giant signs, he automatically assumed that Hathaway was responsible, but later he heard on a newscast that the detonations had been set off by construction workers excavating foundations.

More of the signs appeared over the rooftops, isolated on the palisaded islands near the suburban shopping centers. Already there were over thirty on the ten-mile route from the hospital, standing shoulder to shoulder over the speeding cars like giant dominoes. Franklin had given up his attempt to avoid looking at them, but the slim possibility that the explosions might be Hathaway's counterattack kept his suspicions alive.

He began his inventory after hearing the newscast, discovered that in the previous fortnight he and Judith had traded in their

Car (previous model 2 months old)

2 TV sets (4 months)

Power mower (7 months)

Electric cooker (5 months)

Hair dryer (4 months)

Refrigerator (3 months)

2 radios (7 months)

Record player (5 months)

Cocktail bar (8 months)

Half these purchases had been made by himself, but exactly when he could never recall realizing at the time. The car, for example, he had left in the garage near the hospital to be greased, that evening had signed for the new model as he sat at its wheel, accepting the salesman's assurance that the depreciation on the two-month trade-in was virtually less than the cost of the grease job. Ten minutes later, as he sped along the expressway, he suddenly realized that he had bought a new car. Similarly, the TV sets had been replaced by identical models after developing the same irritating interference pattern (curiously, the new sets also displayed the pattern, but as the salesman assured them, this promptly vanished two days later).

Not once had he actually decided of his own volition that he wanted something and then gone out to a store and bought it!

He carried the inventory around with him, adding to it as necessary quietly and without protest analyzing these new sales techniques, wondering whether total capitulation might be the only way of defeating them. As long as he kept up even a token resistance, the inflationary, growth curve would show a controlled annual 10 percent climb. With that resistance removed, however, it would begin to rocket upward out of control . . . .

Then, driving home from the hospital two months later, he saw one of the signs for the first time.

He was in the 40 mph lane, unable to keep up with the flood of new cars, had just passed the second of the three clover leafs when the traffic half a mile away began to slow down. Hundreds of cars had driven,, up onto the grass verge, and a large crowd was gathering around one ,~ of the signs. Two small black figures were climbing up the metal face \_~ and a series of huge gridlock patterns of light flashed on and off, illuminating the evening air. The patterns were random and broken, as if the sign was being tested for the first time.

Relieved that Hathaway's suspicions had been completely groundless, Franklin turned off onto the soft shoulder, then walked forward through the spectators as the lights blinked and stuttered in their faces... Below, behind the steel palisades around the island, was a large group~,~ of police and engineers, craning up at the men scaling the sign a hundred feet over their heads.

Suddenly Franklin stopped, the sense of relief fading instantly. With a jolt he saw that several of the police on the ground were armed with shotguns, and that the two policemen climbing the sign carried submachine guns slung over their shoulders. They were converging on a third figure, crouched by a switchbox on the penultimate tier, a ragged bearded man in a grimy shirt, a bare knee poking through his jeans .

Hathaway!

Franklin hurried toward the island, the sign hissing and spluttering, fuses blowing by the dozen.

Then the flicker of lights cleared and steadied, blazing out continuously, and together the crowd looked up at the decks of brilliant letters. The phrases, and every combination of them possible, were entirely familiar, and Franklin knew that he had been reading them unconsciously in his mind for weeks as he passed up and down the expressway.

BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW

NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW

YES YES

Sirens blaring, two patrol cars swung up onto the verge through the crowd and plunged across the damp grass. Police spilled from its doors, batons in their hands, quickly began to force back the crowd. Franklin held his ground as they approached, started to say: "Officer, I know the man-" but the policeman punched him in the chest with the flat-of his hand. Winded, he stumbled back among the cars, leaned helplessly against a fender as the police began to break the windshields, the hapless drivers protesting angrily, those farther back rushing for their vehicles.

The noise fell away abruptly when one of the submachine guns fired a brief roaring burst, then rose in a massive gasp of horror as Hathaway, arms outstretched, let out a cry of triumph and pain, and jumped.

"But, Robert, what does it really matter?" Judith asked as Franklin sat inertly in the lounge the next morning. "I know it's tragic for his wife and daughter, but Hathaway was in the grip of an obsession. If he hated advertising signs so much why didn't he dynamite those we can see, instead of worrying so much about those we can't?"

Franklin- stared at the TV screen, hoping the program would distract him.

“Hathaway was right,” he said simply.

“Was he? Advertising is here to stay. We’ve no real freedom of choice, anyway. We can’t spend more than we can afford; the finance companies soon clamp down.”

“You accept that?” Franklin went over to the window. A quarter

of a mile away, in the center of the estate, another of the signs was being erected. It was due east from them, and in the early- morning light the shadows of its rectangular superstructure fell across the garden, reaching almost to the steps of the French windows at his feet. As a concession to the neighborhood, and perhaps to allay any suspicions while it was being erected by an appeal to petty snobbery, the lowest sections had been encased in mock - Tudor paneling.

Franklin stared at it numbly, counting the half-dozen police lounging by their patrol cars as the construction gang unloaded prefabricated grilles from a couple of trucks. Then he looked at the sign by the supermarket, trying to repress his memories of Hathaway and the pathetic attempts the man had made to convince Franklin and gain his help.

He was still standing there an hour later when Judith came in, putting on her hat and coat, ready to visit the supermarket.

Franklin followed her to the door. “I’ll drive you down there, Judith,” he said in a flat voice dead voice. “I have to see about booking a new car. The next models are coming out at the end of the month. With luck we’ll get one of the early deliveries.”

They walked out into the trim drive, the shadows of the great signs swinging across the quiet neighborhood as the day progressed, sweeping over the heads of the people on their way to the supermarket like the dark blades of enormous scythes.