

Julian

by Kate Wilhelm

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THE YEAR Julian was twelve he received a telescope for Christmas. A telescope in a great city is a particularly useless gift, he had learned. There had been three nights since the first of the year, and this was May, when he had been able to see the sky well enough to use it, and what little he had seen he might have observed just as easily with his own eyes. The moon was good, but he quickly became bored with looking at dark and light patches that could have been craters, or clouds, or smudges on his lens. What the telescope was good for was to observe the city.

The city climbed a hill in the section where Julian lived. His apartment building was high enough for him to be able to look out over the roofs of many buildings all the way to the river and up the hillside across it. He could see small boats, fishing boats, tugs laboring with barges, people on the bank walking, kissing, throwing stuff into the water.

In March a demolition crew had started to raze a tall gray office building a block from Julian's window. All spring Julian had been plagued with a series of minor complaints that had kept him out of school -- sore throats, stomachaches, headaches. He had watched the destruction of the building from start to finish. Now it was no more than a pile of trash. On this day Julian had got up with a stomachache, and as soon as his parents had gone to work, and his younger sister had left for school, he had got out his telescope to watch the workmen with their bulldozers and cranes clean up the mess they had made.

He swept the scene slowly, pausing to watch two men chug-a-lug from a thermos, moved on to where a grader was pushing the trash into a heap of different proportions. He raised the telescope to see what had been revealed by the removal of the last wall, and there were tops of buildings, more windows to investigate, the river, and on a hill across the river, revealed to him for the first time, was a motel. It was a grand location, with a view of the river below it and the city sprawling upward. He found the motel swimming pool with no difficulty; there were two children playing in it, and a woman nearby in a canvas chair. A man was cutting grass. A dog ran after him opening its mouth, probably barking. The man stopped to pick up a stone and throw it at the dog. There were seven cars in the parking area. Julian began to examine the building itself.

There were three black women with cleaning carts, and a man with a tool box who went into one of the rooms. He watched a maid run her vacuum cleaner in four passes and then leave a room. There were two doors with Do Not Disturb signs. He began to go down the row of second-floor rooms. The third one had one side of the drapes opened in an irregular way, as if the fabric had caught on a chair or something and had remained like that, unnoticed by the occupant. Working carefully Julian focused on the opening, then brought the room into sharp view. He could see little of it, the foot of the bed, a space, part of a dresser, the alcove where the bath was. As he studied it, a naked woman appeared. She came from the side of the bed, stopped at the dresser.

She was doing something in front of the mirror, her hands out of sight, only

her back profile visible, from her head down to her calves. He couldn't see the floor. She was skinny, but his heart was pumping hard anyway, because a skinny naked lady was better than no naked lady at all. He wanted her to turn around and face him. Again and again he wiped his hands on his jeans, although his mouth was dry; his eyes were burning from not blinking. He had seen his sister, of course, but she was only eight and that was different. He had seen pictures of naked ladies, and that was different too. This was the real thing, this counted. He was afraid to touch the telescope now, for fear he would move it, lose her, and have trouble finding her again. Her hair was long and brown, lank, it looked oily; there was a hollow place on the side of her hip. She was almost as flat as he was. She moved back a step and he caught his breath as her breast in profile came into his range. It was like a small bag, not the high, nipple-pointed breast of the ladies in the magazines. She was old, he decided, and again, it was better to see an old naked lady than no naked lady at all. Now she turned and walked away from him, and he wiped his hands as he stared at the way her ass moved when she walked.

He leaned back weakly and became aware of his heart pounding and the clamminess of his hands, and the dryness of his mouth. Also he had an erection, and he couldn't do anything about it, because what if there was someone out there in one of those rooms with a telescope watching his every movement?

He looked at the room, still empty, and wondered how long she would be in there, wondered if she was on the john or in the shower, wondered if she would reappear with a towel around her, or a robe on. The pounding in his chest and the pounding in his groin became one painful rhythmic beat. Maybe she had an accident, fell in the shower, was drowning. His head began to ache, and his eyes were tearing. When he felt he could stand it no longer, she stepped into view once more, dripping, her hair streaming water. She had hair on her lower belly, glistening wet, and little rivulets of water running down her smooth rounded stomach; her breasts were pink and...

Suddenly he ejaculated and involuntarily knocked the telescope askew. When he could train it on the motel window again, she was gone. Exhausted, he threw himself on his bed, face down in the pillow, and he fell asleep.

He woke up in a paroxysm of terror, fighting the sheet, battling his pillow, gasping for air. He had been dreaming, had a nightmare, but there was no memory of it. He went to the bathroom and washed his face, then got on clean clothes -- his others were sweat-soaked and smelled foul -- and lay down again, this time with a comic book. He didn't read it, or even track the pictures. He dozed, woke with a jerk of fear, and got up, afraid of another nightmare. He noticed his telescope at the window and put it away without a glance outside. It was only twelve, but he felt that the day already had been endlessly long, as if he had a fever that was distorting his perceptions of time.

His mother called during her lunch hour.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Reading comics."

"How do you feel?"

"Okay."

"Julian, is your stomach still hurting?" There was a new note of anxiety in

her voice.

He made an effort to sound natural, but even to him his voice sounded strange, toneless. "I feel okay now, Mom."

After a silence while she considered, she said, "I'm calling Esther Manning to drop by. Let her in when she rings. And just lie around and take it easy."

"I don't need anyone to look at me, Mom. I'm okay now."

"Yes, I expect you are, but it won't hurt. Bye, honey. See you later."

Mrs. Manning was a tall heavy woman, not fat, but broad and big-boned. She could tell fortunes with playing cards, and knew many strange and esoteric things, like when and where to go out and find wild mushrooms, and if it was going to snow, and when to go out to hear migrating geese. One time when Julian had stayed home from school, she had dropped in, and when his mother had mentioned his complaint, she had turned to Julian and winked quite openly.

She arrived an hour after his mother's call.

"Ah, Julian, another headache? A sore throat? A singularly bad case of boredom?" She smiled widely and went ahead of him into the apartment. At the entrance he had been in shadows, but now in the light from a broad tall window, she paused to examine his face, find her manner changed. "Back into bed, my boy, and I'll read you a story."

He protested that he did not want to go to bed, that he did not want her or anyone to read to him now, because he was too old, that he wanted to finish his model plane, but in the end he lay down and listened to her begin "The Hound of the Baskervilles."

She read with expression that often was comical, sometimes chilling. Julian began to feel better, less dopey and strange, more relaxed. After half an hour she stopped to make tea, and he tagged along to the kitchen with her, talking about the moors. "It's just like that in real life," she was saying, washing her hands at the sink. She turned to find a towel, and he stared at her wet hands, and for a moment felt the room spin sickeningly. She took a step toward him, reaching for him with her wet hands, and he fainted.

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For the next week Julian was hustled from doctor to doctor, to laboratories where they took blood samples and x-rays of his head and made other tests. At the end of the time his doctor said they had found nothing.

"We want to talk to you," his father said that night, and Julian felt crushed by a sudden depression.

His father waited for him to sit down, his mother was already in her chair. "Julian, you have missed twelve days of school this spring. You say you're sick but no one can find any germs, or anything else they can point to. What have you to say about that?"

Julian shifted uncomfortably and stared at the beige carpeting. It was dirty under his feet, not bad, but grayer than the rest of the room.

"Julian! Look at me! If you are sick we want you to get well. If you aren't sick, we want to know why you pretend you are. Are you just too bored with school to sit through it every day? If that's it, for heaven's sake, say so.

We can understand that."

Julian shrugged. When he said his head ached, it usually did; and if he stayed home with a stomachache, it really hurt for a while.

"Julian." His mother spoke now for the first time. "Is something else bothering you? Something on your mind? Something that puzzled you or frightened you?"

He stared at her uncomprehendingly, then shook his head.

"Honey, sometimes it isn't easy to tell parents if things are really bothering you. Sometimes it's much easier to tell someone new, someone who has studied kids, a child psychologist, someone like that. Is there anything you'd like to talk over with someone like that?"

Again he shook his head. "I guess I just don't like school too much. It's boring," he mumbled.

He could sense his father's relief. His mother leaned back in her chair and her face smoothed out again, and he knew he had said the right thing.

That night he had another nightmare, the third that week. He did not call anyone, or make any noise, and when he got up he did not turn on any lights for fear his mother would come to see what was wrong. He sat in a straight chair in his dark bedroom, shivering and wide-eyed. There was no memory of what the nightmare had been about. Only when he began to fall asleep in the chair, sitting upright, did he go back to bed.

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He got by in high school, and his first years of college. He knew he was a constant source of disappointment to his parents, and he was a constant source of unhappiness to himself because of his own behavior that he realized was highly neurotic. He had irrational dislikes that set him apart from others. He would not shower or bathe. He washed all over, using as little water as possible. He refused to go swimming, or to participate in any water sport at all. If it rained he carried an umbrella and wore gloves, no matter what month or what the temperature was. He knew he was considered a prude because he did not like girlie magazines or nudie shows. People probably thought he was a latent homosexual because he avoided girls altogether. He knew he was afraid of them, and that this fear was as senseless as the others on the long list that made life hellish for him.

One day his psychology class discussed childhood fears. There were the usual things -- menacing shadows of tree limbs on the bedroom floor; the creakings of houses that went unnoticed by daylight and became magnified after dark; a mother's illness and absence with its accompanying feeling of abandonment. Nothing very different from those discussed by the professor had been revealed. It was both reassuring and disturbing to find such predictable patterns. Then Kim spoke up.

"I came out of a deep sleep with fires blazing all around me and I thought I was in hell, that I had died and gone to hell. I had a bunch of nightmares after that, and to this day I have a pretty irrational few of fire. What had happened was that our electricity had gone off during the night, and it was in the middle of winter, so my mother had taken me out to the living room to sleep in front of the fireplace. And I woke up."

Other more specific, more personal experiences came out then. One remembered

early fears related to brakes squealing and metal clashing -- a carryover from being in an accident when she was two. Another recalled awakening to find himself in a bathroom filled with steam, and the fear of being scalded in the tub of hot water -- his mother's desperate attempt to relieve his croup as a baby had been to open his congested bronchial passages with steam.

Julian listened and tried to remember something from his own past that was similar. There had been a mild episode when he had been left alone at night once and the apartment had been filled with noises, but he knew that was not in the same category as the fears being discussed now. He had had nightmares off and on for years, but he had decided they were induced by a difficult passage over the threshold of puberty. He never had recalled any content of the nightmares anyway.

"How about your fear of water, Julian?" Rachel asked gently.

He hated her for bringing that up. It wasn't the same kind of thing, he felt certain. "I almost drowned once," he said shortly, harshly. There were some nods, and even a glimmer of sympathy here and there. Someone else began to talk.

Later he walked back to his dorm wondering why he had lied, why he had felt that rush of hatred for Rachel, the only girl on campus whom he thought he might be able to talk to, or ask out. Quickly there came the rationalization that he felt safe fantasizing about her because she was so unattainable.

Rachel caught up with him. "I'm sorry I brought that up," she said, putting her hand on his arm. "That was bitchy. I thought it might help you to talk about it while others were talking about the same kinds of things."

She was pretty, one of the best students on campus, and one of the most popular. He was amazed that she was aware of him enough to know he feared water. Kim must have told her. He felt certain her hand on his arm was an apology even more than her words. Brusquely he shook her off and strode ahead faster.

"It's all right. Forget it," he said, and turned in toward the nearest building.

The following year he was forced to take a health class to fulfill his requirements, and he sat through it glumly, bored, sometimes doing homework for other more demanding classes, sometimes simply brooding over his present life, his future, his past. All seemed equally hopeless. The teaching assistant was talking about various organs of the body, their relative size and importance.

"The largest organ of all, of course, is the skin. And probably it's the most complex. It's flexible, we can bend our joints and it gives, we can gain or lose weight. It has a one-way permeability. Perspiration can get out, but from the other direction it is totally waterproof..."

Julian clutched the desk top while the room spun. He saw the naked woman walking toward him, wet all over. He closed his eyes hard and put his head down on the desk and waited for the nausea and dizziness to pass; when he felt able, he got up and left the room.

Blindly he walked, then sat down, and again put his head down, his eyes closed.

His head ached, his eyes teared, and he stared through the eyepiece of the

telescope fixedly, holding his breath until suddenly there she was. She was dripping wet, her hair was streaming water. He stared at the glistening pubic hair, and the little rivulets that ran down her smooth rounded belly. Her breasts were full and high, pink, with beads of water, one little stream running crazily down one side, vanishing in the crease below her breast. He looked at her face, glowing, beautiful, and her hair fluffing out, alive and soft, just a touch of wave in it, feathery about her face.

He had come then and never saw her again.

She had gone into the shower an old withered woman and had come out a beautiful girl gleaming with water on her body, in her hair. She had not dried herself. There had been no towel at all.

"She absorbed it!" he whispered. "She absorbed all the water!"

That was what his twelve-year-old self had rejected knowing. He had recognized it as impossible, as something grotesque and alien and too frightening to think about, and had buried it as deeply as he could.

The knowledge had lain in his mind like a snake in a bag, writhing, twisting, shooting out its venom now and then to poison his life, to bring him nightmares and make him afraid of girls and water and wet hands and rain on hair and a million other things that had separated him from everyone else.

He went over it again and again, recalling more details each time. There had been drops of water in her eyebrows, and he had seen them vanish, and beads of water on her upper lip... She had been smiling slightly, as if she felt extraordinarily good...

"Julian? Are you sleeping?"

He started at the voice close to his face and opened his eyes to see Rachel kneeling on the grass in front of him. Behind her there were two men from his health class, Kim and Robert.

"Are you okay?" Rachel moved back and held out her hand. "It's raining, you're getting awfully wet."

He stared at her hand for a long time, then looked at her face, back at her hand. Water was running off her finger, running along her wrist. He looked at her hair, cut so short that it was like a shiny black cap on her head; water ran down it onto her face, collected on her eyelashes. She blinked it away, watching him, waiting.

Suddenly Julian jumped up and pulled her to her feet also, grabbed her and swung her around and around, shouting, "It's all right! It's all right now!"

Rachel was laughing with him, gasping for breath, and Kim and Robert stood, uncomfortable and self-conscious, until Robert mumbled something about a term paper and they hurried off together with an air of relief.

"Tell me about it," Rachel demanded. "Let's walk in the rain, and you tell me what happened."

They walked, but Julian didn't want to talk yet. He wanted to watch the rain hitting grass, watch it roll off leaves and darken tree trunks, and bejewel flowers. He watched it collect in his palm, overflow, and run down like a miniature waterfall.

Two hours later they ended up in Rachel's apartment, which she shared with two other girls. "Let me change and get a raincoat and then we'll go let you change and then find someplace to talk," she said, toweling her head.

"How long would it take your hair to dry if you didn't do anything?" Julian asked, watching.

"In this weather? An hour, hour and a half. Why?"

"How long for hair down to your shoulders?"

"Three hours, unless you are out in the sun, or have a fan on it, or the wind. What are you driving at?"

And Julian told her, not all of it, but most. He finished saying, "I got so scared, or excited, that I knocked the telescope aside and by the time I got it focused again she was out of sight. I went to bed and fell asleep and had a nightmare that woke me up, and when I was really awake again, I had forgotten all about it, every bit of it, even using the telescope to snoop with. I never used it again for anything."

Rachel had become still as he talked, her eyes open wide, very dark blue, and, he thought, very disbelieving. Suddenly she shivered. "I'm freezing. Wait a minute while I change."

She hurried away and in a few moments came back in dry jeans and a sweater, carrying an umbrella. Her hair was still damp enough to cling to her head.

They didn't talk on the way to Julian's dorm, and she waited in the lounge while he went up and got dry clothes on, and then they went to The Caves, where they found a booth in the rear of the dark room well away from the pinball machines and the Foos Ball games and the tiny dance floor. Neither spoke until their pitcher of beer and bowl of peanuts had been delivered.

"It's too much, isn't it?" Julian said then. "You don't believe me..."

She shook her head. "It isn't that I think you're lying or anything like that. But you could remember wrong."

He reached across the table and felt her hair, still slightly damp. "Her hair became absolutely dry within a minute or two, no more than that. She was dry all over within a minute."

"There could have been a fan on her, or maybe she dried her hair before she came out, or she wore a shower cap."

He shook his head.

"Julian, it has to be something like that, anything else is impossible. People can't simply dry off like that. You were a little kid. You could remember it wrong."

Again he shook his head. "Let's drop it. Hungry? I'm starved."

"Julian, wait..." But he had waved to the waitress, and she became silent, watching him.

"It's all right," Julian said. "Don't let it bug you. Okay?"

"Sure."

They ordered. Julian asked her about her summer plans and hardly listened to her answer, which seemed involved and complicated. He had to go back to Cincinnati, he knew, and to check out the people who had been there. When? He didn't know the date, just that it had been late in the school season, near the end of his sixth grade. There had been seven cars parked there, he remembered clearly, and recalled the man cutting grass, the dog running, children playing in the pool.

"Julian? Please, let's just eat and get out of here."

Rachel's voice was strained, and he realized that the waitress had brought their orders.

"Sorry," he said. Rachel looked at her soup. He did not know anything else to say. What he would have given last year to be sitting across the table from her, talking with her like this, he thought, and then, not only last year, last month even. Or yesterday. It never occurred to him to wonder why she was with him, why she was bothering. He felt only impatience. He wanted to eat and go back to his room and call his father for money. There had to be a decent reason, not just a little jaunt to Cincinnati. Special study course? Research project? He would think of something. He looked up to find Rachel studying him again.

"Will you do me a favor?" she asked quietly. "Will you talk to Dr. Yates?"

He shook his head. "No reason now," he said, smiling. "Yesterday there was, but not now."

"You know I switched my major from math to psychology. I don't pretend to know much yet, but I think what you're doing is dangerous, more than repressing a memory even."

"Your quiche is getting cold," he said. "I'm okay. Just don't do the Jewish mother bit."

Carefully she put down her fork, gathered her purse and umbrella, and stood up. "I have to run, Julian. See you around."

He watched her go, then finished his French Dip sandwich, ate her quiche, which she had hardly touched, and went to his dorm to call home.

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The next morning, Saturday, he flew to Cincinnati, and went straight to the motel, which had been changed drastically by the addition of two new wings, and a much larger pool, and tennis courts. It was now owned by a chain, and the manager was unhelpful.

"I don't know anything about it back then," she said. She was in her forties, with hard brown eyes and polished white hair that looked like plaster. "The company bought it two years ago and remodeled, rebuilt, and I've been here almost the whole time. Before that I don't know."

He counted his money and knew he could not afford to hang around until the courthouse opened on Monday in order to check the record of sales of the motel. On the flight back he brooded about his naiveté in thinking that just like that he could find out anything. He needed time, all summer if necessary. He would find that woman who was not a woman, was not human at all. He would find her, or it.

In Cincinnati he washed dishes and slept in a dormitory at the YMCA, and he learned that the motel had changed hands four times in the past ten years. The last owner lived in Atlanta.

In Atlanta the previous owner sent him to San Antonio where he was told about a tornado that had wrecked the business eight years ago and killed Mrs. Gunn, the wife of the owner then. Mr. Gunn had gone to a farm on the Ohio, near Waterton.

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"You were supposed to turn over the books when you sold the business," Julian said. "But you didn't. Where are your books, Mr. Gunn?"

The old man blinked lazily and shrugged. "Damned if I know. So water-soaked wasn't no reason to turn 'em over to no one. Roof got torn off, you know. Whole damn roof, whoosh right off."

"You must have them somewhere," Julian said desperately, glancing about the trailer where Timothy Gunn lived, on the rear of his son's property.

"Might be here somewhere," the old man agreed. "Wouldn't pay me to stir around, get excited and hot hunting for 'em."

"I'll buy them," Julian said quickly. "Ten dollars."

The old man smiled and shook his head.

"Twenty. It's all I have, Mr. Gunn. Please. I'm trying to find my mother. For ten years I thought she was dead until this summer when I learned my father had driven her away, and she went to your motel. I have to find her. She might be sick, need help." Julian blinked back tears of frustration at this senile old man and his complacent grin.

"Calm down, son. Just take it easy. Reckon them books ain't going to do me a hell of a lot of good, now are they? Ten dollars, you say?" He went to the bed and pulled out a storage drawer, drew out the books.

"I just need that one, for May," Julian said quickly.

"All or nothing," the old man said, as if driving a hard bargain. "Just keep cluttering up the place with all that old junk. All or nothing."

Julian almost snatched the books away from him, and yanked the right one to the top of the stack. There were watermarks on the cover, but inside the ink was legible. He flipped pages and found May. There it was, it had to be! May 29, 30, 31. Stella Johnson. Stella! He almost laughed.

"Reckon you found what you're looking for," the old man said genially. He sat down again, dismissing Julian. "Good luck, son. Ten years is a hell of a long time to be without someone you care anything for."

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"Hey, that's a pretty heavy foot you got there, kid." The man in the passenger seat stirred and sat upright yawning. Julian was driving his car, somewhere between Phoenix and Los Angeles.

"Sorry," Julian said. He slowed down to sixty. "She sure wants to run,

doesn't she? Great car."

The man nodded and started talking cars. This was Julian's third ride since leaving Ohio, and this would take him home. Stella Johnson had given an address in Los Angeles, had auto tags from California. His parents had moved to Los Angeles three years ago; he could make that his base of operations, search records again -- he was getting good at that -- and he would find her.

"You in training for the Indy or something?" the man beside him growled. "Stop the car. I'd better drive awhile."

Julian had nudged it up to ninety again.

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At the address Stella Johnson had given there was a gas station that had gone out of business so long ago that it was boarded up with wood turned ashen with age; twelve-foot trees were growing from the cracks in the broken concrete, and many years' accumulation of dumped trash behind it made a hill as high as its roof. He was not surprised. The license number had been bogus also.

For three days he had scurried around town looking up women named Johnson, then he had given it up. There was no reason to believe her name was less phony than any other information she had given.

Julian sat by the pool in his parents' back yard, and although he heard his mother approach, he did not look up. He waited to see if she had found yet another way to ask the two questions they besieged him with every day: What is the matter? and what are your plans?

"Julian? You okay?"

"Sure, Mother."

They had been so happy to learn that he had lost his phobia about water. For a week his parents had been practically manic in their relief, only to have new apprehensions creep in that made them exchange worried glances, or, worse, avoid looking directly at each other when he was around. He could imagine their whispered conversations about him when they thought he was sleeping. -Is he crazy, I mean really crazy this time? Or, you have to try to get him to see a doctor. He's your son.- Strange how he was always someone else's son if there was trouble, and "my son" when either of them wanted to brag a little.

"Julian, you know how worried we are about you. You don't say anything. You sit here for hours brooding. You have letters you haven't even bothered to open. You're in trouble of some kind, aren't you? That girl who keeps writing? Rachel? Money? A bad drug experience? You see, I can't even narrow it down to a possible cause. Julian, please let us help you. If you need professional advice of any kind..."

That was it, professional advice. From the start he had thought that he alone had caught a glimpse of one of them, but maybe that was wrong. Others might have seen them, might have reported them. Maybe there was a growing dossier on them, with every tidbit welcomed.

That afternoon he told Sergeant Manuel Vargas what he had seen ten years earlier. The sergeant nodded and wrote it all down.

"Not much to go on, now is there?" he asked. "We'll put the license number through a routine check, but ten years is a long time, kid."

Julian knew the sergeant would do nothing. Another nut report, that was how he thought of it. He had not asked to see the motel registration book, or anything else, but simply had made notes while Julian talked and then soothed him enough to get rid of him.

At the FBI office he talked to a young man named Walter Montgomery who wore a sports shirt and no tie, which surprised Julian. He thought they always wore three-piece suits.

"Julian," the agent said soberly, "I think you should talk to a psychiatrist. You were twelve, right? She excited you sexually and you even had an orgasm. In your mind she became young and beautiful and desirable. You couldn't face the knowledge that an old woman might have excited you, so you altered her to suit your preconceived idea of what a beautiful girl should look like. She sounds pretty much like a centerfold cutie to me. The illusion you created, your excitement, and your guilt over spying all combined to give you a nightmare that's still with you. I can't help you, but a psychiatrist is trained to deal with this kind of thing. There's nothing shameful about it, or really very complex, it seems to me. It's a natural development."

"And her address, the phony license plate?"

"So she was hiding from someone or something. People do it all the time. Ran away from her old man, didn't want him to track her down. Must be a thousand reasons why people do a vanishing act. And ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent of the time it's harmless."

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"Julian, you saved all my letters! And I thought you never even opened them!" Rachel sat on the floor emptying a box that he had packed hastily when he had moved out of the dorm to this apartment that they shared. "I wonder what your parents think of me. A pursuing bitch, I guess."

"Ha! You should have heard my mother's voice when I mentioned, rather obliquely I thought, that I might like to have my own apartment this year. She nearly shrieked with joy. Her very next words were, 'How's that nice girl, Rachel?'" He grinned at her, then went back to the term paper he was working on. His grades had picked up this year, and it seemed likely he would make straight A's, something he had never done in his life. He thought the shock might kill off both parents. For the first time since his early childhood his parents felt good about him, and he was at peace with himself. He looked up a moment later; a light rain was falling, and for a second he had a feeling of fear, but it passed so quickly that it might not have existed at all. Sometimes he remembered like that, a passing rush of adrenaline, a fleeting memory. Finally he had accepted the FBI agent's theory that his prepubescent self had played a trick on him, accepted it out of desperation, he knew, but still there had been nothing else he could have done.

"What are you doing with all these?" Rachel asked. She had found the stack of motel registration books.

"The old man made me buy them all, or none. So there they are."

"Instincts of a pack rat," she muttered, and began leafing through one of the books.

He added a few lines to his paper, read a paragraph, made a note to consult his textbook, and started to write again.

"You were thirteen, not twelve," Rachel said. "It was ten years ago."

"Twelve," he said, not looking up, keeping his place in the book with one finger while he wrote. "I was in the sixth grade."

"Not according to this," she said firmly.

Irritably he closed his book with his pencil in it, and went to take the registration book from her. There were eight of them altogether, all the years Mr. and Mrs. Gunn had owned the motel. Rachel was right, Stella Johnson had registered ten years before. He snatched up another book and opened it to May -- there she was again. And again.

Two books had been flooded until little in them was legible, but the other six all showed that year after year Stella Johnson had spent the last three days of May in that motel.

The rush of adrenalin was like a surf increasing before a storm. He stared at the entries, compared the signatures, the license numbers, the addresses, and in his mind he saw the smiling young woman, hair fluffing out, skin glowing with health.

"Julian!"

Rachel's voice was almost too distant to be audible; he knew she was at his side, her hand shaking his arm, but when he turned toward her, that other face was still there. He blinked and shook his head, and although the vision faded, the surf pounded, pounded.

"Julian, are you all right? I thought you were going to pass out or something. Look, it's a coincidence. You just happened to pick a woman who has business in Cincinnati every year. Maybe she has a parent in a home there. Maybe she's having a lifelong affair with someone whom she meets each spring. Maybe she stays in the motel several different times each year. Have you looked through the other months?"

He had not thought of it, but now he went through them all. She was there only in May.

"Whatever the reason," Rachel said, "no doubt it is entirely harmless and innocent. None of your business. You have to let it drop, Julian. You're going to graduate in two weeks. You have finals and term papers to finish. You have to let it drop."

She had faded out again as she spoke. Stella Johnson would be there this May, he realized. He would find her.

He got through the rest of his term with no clear memory of what he did. His grades, steadily high all year, plummeted, and one professor called him for a conference and suggested a medical check-up. Mononucleosis, he suggested, could be the reason for the sudden lassitude.

Rachel insisted on going to Cincinnati with him. They drove her VW and arrived on the twenty-eighth. "Now what?" Rachel asked despondently, surveying the room. Everything in it was either brown or gold, even a picture on the wall. They were on the first floor, steps from the swimming pool area,

and squeals and shouts were very audible.

"You take a swim. I want to look around. I'll meet you at the pool in half an hour."

She shook her head. "I'll come with you. The pool is solid kids, in case you didn't notice."

He shrugged, and together they strolled back to the lobby, a large open room with half a dozen vinyl-covered chairs, some dim lamps, a tiny newsstand to one side, doorways into two halls, and an arch that led to the elevators.

Julian nodded. It would be simple to sit here and watch anyone checking in. They looked over the dining room and the coffee shop, and he checked entrances and exits. There was no way Stella Johnson could avoid going through the main lobby.

That night he told Rachel that he was planning to stay in the lobby the following day until Stella Johnson appeared and he found out her room number.

"And what am I supposed to do while you do your private eye act?"

"Whatever you want. I don't care."

"I know you don't care! You don't care about anything now, do you? You're too busy chasing a childhood illusion!"

"I didn't ask you to come, remember. I didn't even want you to come!"

"Well, maybe I won't stay very long! This is crazy! You know this is crazy, don't you?"

Furiously he stalked out of the room and sat by the pool glowering at the children in the water. Crazy, it kept coming back to that. In a little while Rachel came and sat by him.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. "I'll go downtown tomorrow and do a little shopping, buy a couple of books. If she doesn't come tomorrow, can we go home? Will that satisfy you?"

He nodded. She would come.

....

Late in the afternoon the next day the manager of the motel asked him why he was loitering in the lobby. It was the same woman he had talked to the year before, but obviously she did not remember him at all. He mumbled something about his wife visiting her family, and small rooms giving him claustrophobia, but after that he knew the desk clerk was keeping an eye on him.

Stella Johnson showed up at four-thirty. He recognized her instantly. She wore sunglasses that covered nearly half her face, and her hair was hidden by a scarf, but he felt certain enough to approach the desk and start examining the tourist brochures as she registered. About mid to late thirties, he estimated, noticing the small lines about her mouth, and the way her hand was already starting to look bony. He stayed close enough to hear her room number when the clerk gave her a key, and then wandered to the window, ostentatiously checked his watch, and left. She was on the second floor, number twenty-two.

"What are you going to do now?" Rachel asked. She was subdued and looked frightened.

"Sometime before she has a chance to leave, I'm going to grab her and keep her for a day or two and then put her in a shower. You'll see. And then I'm going to deliver her to the FBI."

Rachel paled. "That's kidnapping! You can't do that! Julian, please, just call the police and tell them; let them take care of it now."

"I went through that once," he said brusquely. "Not again." He thought, then said, "I'll follow her tomorrow, see where she goes. There might be a lot of them, maybe they meet here every year."

The upper rooms all had two entrance doors, one from the balcony that led down to the pool area, and an inside door to the hallway and elevators inside. Julian missed Stella Johnson when she left the motel. At ten-thirty he put in a call to her room and no one answered the telephone. At eleven he watched the cleaning woman enter and he knew he had lost her.

"I don't want to hang around here all day," Rachel said. "She won't be back until God knows when. Do you plan to sit and watch her door all day long?"

"Let's go to the zoo," Julian said. "Spend the afternoon there, have a nice dinner, see a movie if you want. Okay?"

She was right, Stella Johnson probably would be out all day, and on the next day, before eleven, she would check out and vanish again. On the way to the zoo he stopped at a supermarket and bought canned fruit, tuna fish, peanut butter and bread, lemonade mix, whatever else he could think of to last a few days. He knew where he could take Stella Johnson to a duck-hunting camp his father had used regularly. No one would be there this time of year. Rachel watched him with large frightened eyes, but she said nothing.

All afternoon they wandered about the zoo. It was very hot, and the park was crowded. Gradually he worked his way toward a concession stand he remembered from his childhood, and was relieved to see that it still had the same assortment of junk for sale.

"Look," he said, pointing to a board covered with tin badges. "I had a collection of them when I was a kid. Let's get one."

Rachel dragged back. She had been watchful and wary all afternoon, but had not questioned him, had not brought up Stella Johnson once. "I have a headache," she said now, tugging on his arm. "Let's go back and get some rest."

"In a minute." He made his way through the kids who pressed in on the stand. "One of those," he said, pointing to a Junior Detective Badge. Away from the crowd he carefully pinned it to the inside of his wallet while Rachel watched, tight-lipped.

She wanted to return to the motel, but he took her to dinner first, then walked her through the downtown area, pointing out places, stores, streets that held memories for him. It was nearly eleven when they got back to their room.

"What are you planning?" she asked then, standing at the door, pressed against it as if for support.

"I'll wait an hour, until no one's still wandering around, then I'm going up to her room and pretend I'm a local detective investigating an accident she might have witnessed. I'll ask her to go with me to file a report. I know where I can take her for a couple of days."

Rachel shook her head. "You'll go to prison for kidnapping. You might even be shot."

Julian didn't reply. He went to the bathroom to wash his face and hands, comb his hair.

"Julian, you haven't slept since we found her name in those books, two weeks ago. You're too tired to be able to think clearly. We can just follow her when she leaves the motel, see where she goes, and then take time to make real plans, not this cobbled-up scheme that will get you killed."

He lay on the bed, his hands under his head, and tried to find a flaw in his reasoning.

Rachel sat by him. "You know I love you. And you love me. We can have so much together. This has been the best year of our lives. Everything's ahead of us, just waiting. And you're risking it all. This obsession will ruin everything for us."

Julian wished she would shut up. "Tomorrow," he said, "you should check out and get a cab to the airport and fly home. You have nothing to do with this. If anyone questions you, say we had a fight and I left in the car."

She bit her lip, got up and wandered to the mirror, back to the side of the bed where she regarded him for a moment. Then she sighed. "I'm going to the coffee shop. I'll bring some back for both of us."

When she was gone he went to the mirror and looked at himself carefully. It was true, he had not slept much in the past two weeks, and it showed; his eyes were deeply hollowed, his face, always slightly thin, now looked emaciated. Curious how he had not even thought about feeling tired, or jumpy from not sleeping. The pounding surf kept him alert, wide awake, ready to spring. He checked his pocket again to make certain he had keys to Rachel's car, counted his money again, and studied the map again to make certain he remembered the road to the hunting camp. He opened the door when he heard Rachel kick it. She came in holding two paper cups covered with plastic lids.

"Yours is the one with the cross, sugared," she said.

He was grateful that she did not start another scene. He sipped the coffee, sitting on the bed, leaning against the headboard.

"There's a party out by the pool," Rachel said. "You'd better wait until they break it up. There's no way you can avoid them."

He checked his watch. He would give them half an hour. Rachel finished her coffee and came to the bed.

"Can we just lie quietly together," she said, "until it's time?"

Julian drained his cup and put it down and she lay beside him. He held her comfortably, not very hard, and she put one hand on his chest, the way they slept every night. Neither spoke. Once he wanted to look at his watch again, but his arm was under her and she was relaxed. He decided not to make her

move. He felt himself drifting and he jerked.

"It's only ten after twelve," she murmured. "Try to rest a few more minutes. You're so tired."

He never knew when he fell asleep, or that he was falling asleep. He dreamed that he was wide awake, waiting for the clock hands to move, watching them fixedly in order to catch the motion.

He woke up with a pounding headache; his mouth was lined with rank rat fur. He pushed himself away from the bed groggily, still fully dressed. Rachel was sitting near the window. The room was very bright even with the drapes closed.

"What time is it?" he demanded.

"One, a little after."

"You put something in the coffee? You did that to me!"

She nodded. "Some of the sleeping pills I got last summer. I had to do something. It was all I could think of." She looked and sounded miserable.

"Get out!" he croaked. "Get the hell out of here, out of my apartment, out of my life! Just clear all the way out!"

He yanked the telephone up and dialed Room 22. No one answered. He called the desk and asked if she had checked out; she had.

Rachel did not move until he was finished. Then she came toward him, one hand outstretched, and he felt his own hands clenching. She stopped.

"Can't we even talk about it?"

"Right now I'd like to kill you," he said savagely.

She shook her head hard and closed the space between them in one flash of motion. He slapped her, knocking her backward. She stumbled over a pillow on the floor, caught herself on the foot of the bed, and hung there, gasping. Julian turned and went into the bathroom. He was shaking so hard he thought he might be having a seizure. He stripped and turned on the shower and stood under it until his hands stopped twitching, and he was able to breathe normally. When he returned to the room, Rachel was gone, her suitcase, her jacket, books, everything of hers was gone.

....

Julian waited for his guests, ignoring the nervousness of the others in the apartment. John was unable to stay in any one place more than a few seconds. He flitted like a butterfly trying to decide which flower in a garden was best for his needs. Kim kept looking at Julian, then quickly away, as if afraid his own uncertainty might infect Julian. Julian smiled at him. He alone in the room was not nervous, not uncertain.

Near the windows, Corinne was finishing annotating a manuscript. She brought it to Julian.

"I circled the statements you probably should refute," she said. "Like where they say you're copying Jesus. They have no understanding at all, and that will make people uneasy, and besides, it isn't true."

He nodded. He had read the article thoroughly and knew its every flaw. And he knew it did not really matter what they said; the fact that the article was scheduled for publication the first week in May was what was important.

Dolly Kearns was the photographer and Eric Mendel the writer, who showed up promptly at two. Dolly nodded in approval at the apartment. It was austere, with no ornamentation at all, except a white marble fountain with softly falling water. The fountain was simple, unadorned, four feet high. The only furniture in the room was a wooden bench with cushions, pillows on the floor, several lamps, and a large desk. Venetian blinds covered the windows.

The disciples bowed silently to the guests and filed out the door, leaving Julian, who was seated on the floor.

"Julian Grange?" Eric Mendel asked.

"Just Julian."

"Julian. You read the article? Is there anything you'd like to add, a statement maybe?"

Julian shook his head. "Many things will be printed about me, most of them untrue, some as true as the writer's understanding permits. It does not matter." He paid no attention to Dolly Kearns, who was moving about the room snapping pictures as he talked.

"It is true that you actually baptize people?"

"The act of baptism as a purification rite predates Christianity by thousands of years," Julian said. "It is so old that it fades into the oblivion of prehistory. It was revived in the time of Jesus as a symbol that is immediately understood by everyone who experiences it. Since then it has become perverted and has lost much of its meaning. It has become so closely associated with specific religious rites that it is no longer available to outsiders who do not share those particular beliefs."

"But you do baptize?"

Julian smiled. "You will print what you will. And people will read what they will. But I do have a statement, something you can add to your article. This spring I will show you a miracle."

"Some people say you've worked miracles already, getting kids off drugs, straightening out delinquents, things like that," Dolly Kearns said, snapping her pictures.

"Those are miracles only if you believe there is no human potential that can be awakened. People who come to know there is a higher life attainable within their grasp, not in a mysterious hereafter, have no further need for their addictions. They shed them with ease, without pangs or regrets. That is the human potential, and in itself is miraculous. That is not the kind of miracle I will show the world this spring."

"When will this miracle take place?" Eric Mendel asked, not writing now.

"Memorial Day."

....

Julian's book was published in April. One reviewer said it was so simple that

any schoolchild could have written it in a single page. Its message was: You are not a machine. Machines were invented to serve humanity. Human potential is as yet unimaginable because no one has demonstrably reached an upper limit. Human beings are so narcotized, sedated, polluted, conditioned, and lied to that only an outside force can shock them into wakefulness and awareness. And so on.

"He promises nothing," the reviewer complained, "and yet he has followers, people who must want to hear how foul life is, and that it can be better, because that is all that is in his book."

"In less than a year," another critic said, this time a psychologist, "Julian appeared out of nowhere with a message that has been stated repeatedly by scores of others, and yet he has found disciples. It is the mysterious rite of baptism that he employs that is irresistible," the psychologist went on. "Those people who flock to him do not want reason and logic, they want and need mysteries, and Julian is providing them."

Julian read all the reviews, the letters to editors complaining about his blasphemous usurpation of the Christian rites, the psychological analyses of his meteoric rise. When his followers urged him to reply to his critics, he shook his head, smiling.

"One cannot respond with reason when it is the unreason of belief and faith that is questioned. Only those who experience the purification can understand its meaning. To all others it must remain illogical, a blasphemy, paganism revived, whatever they choose to call it."

The article that Eric Mendel had written was published early in May. Julian read: "It is his absolute belief in his own words that turns an audience of skeptics into a roomful of people who are shaken in their own beliefs, people who wonder why they have held to beliefs that suddenly seem so childish and even harmful. When Julian talks about the water cycle, how the rain cleanses as it falls, cleaning the air, then the land and the rivers, only to return to the ocean where the process starts again, one realizes that this is important. It is an elementary school lesson repeated by this remarkable man, and somehow it takes on a significance that was missing before. He tells his audience that the ancients knew about the powers of water to heal, to cleanse the body and the spirit, and they go away believing, or longing to believe so fiercely that they are drawn back again and again. Those who undergo the purification rite are changed, and whether it is subjective only matters little because the change they experience influences their lives..."

Julian put the magazine down and stared at the little fountain that never was turned off. A year, he thought, it had taken only a year to come to this. For three days and nights he had sat by a swimming pool studying the water in sunlight, under artificial lights, by starlight, the water churned by dozens of bodies, when it lay unmarred by a ripple, cratered by raindrops... And it had come to him whole and complete, everything had appeared, nothing had been omitted, no detail that he later had to improvise. He felt that he had opened a gate that day and from then on had simply followed the path he had found. He seldom had to think about what he would say or do under any circumstances; the words came, the acts flowed of their own accord.

Kim and John entered the room and waited. He gazed at the fountain another few seconds, then went to his favorite cushion and sat down, motioning for them to seat themselves also.

"You have the hall rented?"

Kim nodded. He was Julian's age, not yet twenty-five; he had been the first disciple, and was still the one Julian turned to first.

"And the necessary stage is being prepared, the pool, everything?" Julian knew it was all going according to plan; the questions were ritualistic, they all accepted that. Kim and John were here for special instructions.

"You have rented the house for my meditations and seclusion?"

Again Kim nodded.

Without further questioning Julian told them what they were to do. Neither objected or asked for reasons. They listened attentively, and when he was finished he embraced them and they left. He returned to the fountain. After a moment he dipped his hands in the water and watched it run down the sides of his hands, down his fingers, off his finger tips.

....

"Who are you?" Stella Johnson demanded. She was about forty, he thought, with a hard voice, but frightened eyes.

"Julian. I have known you for twelve years, Stella Johnson. You destroyed my life."

She took a backward step, staring at him. "You're crazy. I've never seen you before."

"But I saw you." Julian turned the key in the lock and put the key inside his pocket.

"Why did you have them bring me here? My friends will call the police. You can't simply kidnap a person and get away with it." They were all the right words, but there was no conviction behind them. When he did not reply, she whispered, "What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing. Keep you here for three days and then take you to a gathering where I am to speak. Nothing more than that, unless you desire it."

She was watching him fixedly. Now she sank down into a chair. "Why? It doesn't make any sense. Why me?"

Julian smiled at her. "We both know how to make you reveal that you are not human."

"You don't know anything about me," she said. "You can't."

He nodded. "There will be time. Perhaps you will tell me."

"I might kill you," she said desperately.

"I thought of that. My friends are outside in the camper they brought you in. They will take turns watching, and if you emerge they will catch you and take you to the police and charge you with murder. It might not stick, you might claim self-defense and get off, but during the interrogations, the days and nights under constant surveillance, I'm afraid your secret would be revealed."

She leaned back and closed her eyes.

Julian sat down with a book and started to read.

The second day she begged him to permit her to bathe, and he gave her a wash basin of warm water and watched as the water vanished. She looked nearer fifty than forty. He gave her fruit and vegetables to eat, and a glass of water late in the afternoon. She looked like a fifty-five-to-sixty-year-old woman.

Once she tried to attack him with a pan from the kitchen, but he overpowered her easily and took the pan from her. She was frail and weak.

"You'll kill me!" she cried. "Is that what you want, to kill me? I haven't done anything to you. I haven't harmed anyone."

"You destroyed my life," he said again. "For twelve years I've lived with a nightmare. You, or others like you, permeate our history. The witch hunters knew about you, didn't they? They tried to find you by dunking suspects into water. The test was not who drowned, but who came out young and beautiful. How long have you been here? How many of you are there? Why are you here?"

She sat down again and closed her eyes. That night she told him she was dying. She looked like a mummy. She was too weak to rise from the bed. Her hair was thin and lank, her arms withered, her face sunken in. Julian brought the basin and bathed her, then again, and still again.

"It is not enough!" she moaned. "Please, permit me to bathe."

"No! I will bring you water, all that you can have. It ends tomorrow night. For one more day I'll watch over you, keep you alive and well enough."

"And then?"

"It depends on you."

"I won't cooperate in any way!"

"But you will. Willingly or not, you will cooperate."

She turned away from him, forty again, or fifty.

"The Egyptians knew about you, didn't they? They knew mummies could be revived with water, brought back to glorious youth. In their worship of Isis, they ritualistically submerged celebrants, didn't they?"

She did not answer.

In the morning he gave her oranges and apples, but no water. At noon he offered her more fruit, and again late in the afternoon. Throughout the day while she aged minute by minute, she advanced by years.

"I will scream that you are forcing me, that you kidnapped me and starved me," she whispered hoarsely. "They won't let you half-drown a helpless old woman."

"If you make a scene," Julian said, "you will be thrown into the pool and kept there by my followers until the police arrive, fifteen minutes, half an hour, however long it takes. There will be cameras, video tapes, witnesses. I will denounce you as a witch, as the devil in human form."

She shuddered. "Again. There is no end to it."

"If you cooperate," Julian went on, ignoring her dread, "you will enter the water exactly like the others. You will allow the ceremony to proceed normally, and you will walk out of the water transformed. A miracle. My followers will take you to a dressing room where you will be helped into clothes. There is a back door. Your car will be waiting for you. No one will follow you."

"I don't believe you."

"As you choose."

She was a bent, shriveled woman when he led her to his car, seated her, and got in to drive into the city for the Memorial Day service. Kim and John followed closely in the camper.

"Where are you from?" Julian asked, gently now, no longer a victim of the pounding surf that had been with him most of his life. She was an old woman near death, not a threat.

"It does not matter where," she said after a long silence. "We developed a disease in space and came here hoping for aid, but we found primitive people, no help. We could not return home. We stayed." Her voice was hesitant, ancient.

"You personally, or your people?"

The silence was prolonged. He reached into the glove compartment and got out a thermos of water and handed it to her. She drank carefully, emptied it.

"You are immortal then?"

She laughed harshly. "We die every day. One by one we have been hunted, tortured, persecuted. We don't dare try to form alliances with your people. We don't dare try to stay in our own group for fear we will all be massacred together. Today there are so few of us."

"I used to try to understand why you were drawn to this city year after year," Julian said, keeping his tone light. He let amusement seep into it as he said, "I imagined you had a spaceship here somewhere and every year you all gathered for a ceremony of some sort."

She looked out the window. They were in the suburbs of the city.

"I stopped thinking that," he went on. "I began to think you were spies from another star, that you came here to transmit information out into space. It isn't anything like that, is it?"

Wearily she said, "In the beginning when we knew we were dying, our bioengineers transformed us, and they erred. There was not enough time to study the humans thoroughly. It was a desperate gamble. If we could become enough like the humans we found, perhaps we could escape the disease. Humans are immune, it does not attack carbon-based organisms..." She sighed and her words were slurring when she went on. "We acquired great wealth. It takes great wealth to pursue scientific study, and we waited until your technology developed to produce the equipment we need. We studied and learned much, and learning much, we found that our disease is incurable. So we die, minute by minute, day by day, and yet we live on and on." Now she looked at him, her mouth twisted in a death's-head grin. "It is a pity we cannot tell our people of our dilemma. They would appreciate the irony."

"Why do you come here every year?" Julian asked gently.

"Our time is not like yours," she said in her croaking voice. "A day, a year, neither is what you experience. In a day we can empty ourselves to each other, all we have learned, all we have gained. And we can fill ourselves, give each other hope enough to continue... A year, to you so long, is nothing: a blink, and it is gone. Only these shells keep time in a way our brains cannot fathom." She passed her hand over her chest, down her stomach, her thighs. Her hand shook as with palsy. She lifted it and watched it a moment, then let it fall. Suddenly she sat up straight and her voice was louder and firmer when she exclaimed, "You put something in the water, didn't you?"

"Yes. A mild tranquilizer. You won't even fall asleep, but you won't worry and become upset. It won't hurt you, Stella. It will let you relax."

She moaned and made a grab toward the key.

"I thought you might try something on the way in," Julian said kindly, holding her away with one hand. "I thought you might wait until we got on a crowded street and then try to get the key, or try to jump from the car, or call for help. I thought you might tell me pretty stories to distract me, and then make the attempt. Just relax now, Stella. No one is going to hurt you." He talked almost crooningly as he drove, and she slumped back against the seat, her eyes open, but unfocused.

....

Julian took her to a dressing room where he helped her undress and then laid her on a cot. Gently he washed her, even her hair, and as he ministered to her, she revived, and regained some of her strength. He stopped bathing her when she appeared to be in her mid-sixties. He helped her don a tunic that tied at her shoulders and fell to her thighs in a straight line.

"Soon," he said, "you will feel completely normal. I'll leave two young women with you. They will accompany you to the stage when it is time. What happens then is your decision."

He went to the door and beckoned Corinne and Mary, who silently entered the room and took up their posts. Then he went to the stage.

He talked for an hour. He told his audience they were not machines, but thinking, rational human beings. They were not ciphers, or entries in a file clerk's ledger, or numbers in a computer, but feeling, perceiving human beings. He told them all past was prologue. There was nothing that was not in his book until the last ten minutes. Then he paused, and when he continued, his manner was changed. He had been intense from the start, but now he was like a wire that is charged and taut with suppressed energy.

"When I was a boy," he said, the words ringing, "I had a vision. I became frightened by it and my parents took me to doctors and psychiatrists. They could find nothing wrong with me, but I was changed, and they all knew it. My life was changed. My dreams were changed. I had a vision that has persisted in my head from that day until this, and I have spent my life trying to bring understanding to that vision. I want to share it with you tonight."

He paused again, then went on in a low voice. "In my vision I saw an old woman who had come to realize that her whole life was a monstrous lie. They told her she was insignificant and she believed them. They told her she was a number, that everyone else was a number, that numbers are infinite and go on

forever, that none of them matters. And she believed them..."

No one moved in the auditorium. It was so quiet the thousand people there might have been holding their breath. Julian could feel their power become his power and he was the surf, his voice rising and falling, an irresistible force, as he recounted the lies of their lives.

"I had a vision!" he cried. "This woman found the strength to say NO! This woman found herself. She shed her own past, repudiated the lies, refused the self she had become. In my vision this old woman was purified."

He smiled self-deprecatingly. "I was a boy," he said. "I did not understand..."

He spoke of his search for understanding through education, through religion, philosophy, psychology. "And in the spring last year I had a vision once more. In it a door opened onto a path, and I could see all the steps that would lead me to this place on this night. At the end of the path..." His voice fell to a near whisper. "At the end of the path is the light of understanding, the light of acceptance, the light of love, the light of glory. I say to you that tonight you will see that light with me!"

The chorus from a local Unitarian church began the "Ode To Joy" and he quickly left the stage. Kim met him, his cheeks wet with tears.

"How is she?" Julian asked.

"Fine. The tranquilizer has worn off, but she's calm. Will you see the celebrants now?"

It was customary for Julian to greet each person who had come for the purification ceremony. He went from one curtained cubicle to the next, embracing each follower in turn, welcoming them. When he entered the room where Stella Johnson was being held, he stood by the door and did not approach her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "I heard you, there are loud-speakers. Did you tell me the truth back in the car?"

"Yes. That is the door. Your clothes are here, your car is outside."

She bowed her head. "There are certain patterns," she murmured, "that recur. You are playing a very dangerous game. In the end it will cost you everything." She looked at him. "You will not search for me, for anyone else?"

"Never."

"I will do what you say. And we will part. I shall watch your career with great interest, Julian."

"Good-by, Stella Johnson," he said, and left her room. Outside her door he took a deep breath and started toward the stage to finish it.

"Julian!"

He stopped at the voice, and when he turned, Rachel was there. "I thought you might come," he said.

"You have her, don't you? Julian, there's an FBI man out there. He came to my apartment and asked me questions yesterday. He said she has vanished, that she checked into the motel and then vanished. He'll arrest you. He thinks you're crazy!"

"And you? Do you think that?"

"Julian, please, let her go now. If she's hiding from anything or anyone, she'll not make a scene or cause you trouble if you just let her go! If she is what you think she is, you have to surrender her to the government! Think what it would mean to everyone if we could learn what she can do. They won't let you have this secret all to yourself."

She was very pale and frightened.

"I can't. Don't be so afraid, Rachel."

"I have my car outside. I'll hide you. Please come with me now. I love you, Julian."

"I know. And I love you." He turned and continued to the stage where the curtains were now being drawn to reveal the pool. Three steps led up to it. There was a small platform around it, three steps down the other side. It was Spartan in its simplicity. He went up the three steps and down into the water, which came to his waist. It was body temperature.

The first one came from backstage. She was twenty, Candace. There was a rapt expression on her face, her eyes never left his as she approached, then held out her hand for him to take.

"Candace, you have been afraid and now you repudiate fear." He submerged her, one hand firm under her neck, still holding her hand. She stiffened, then relaxed, and he drew her up. "Candace, you have been lied to, and believing the lies, you have become the machine they said you are. You repudiate hypocrisy and lies." He submerged her again; this time she was perfectly relaxed. Then, "Candace, you have searched yourself for strength and found it. You have rejected the lie that evil is part of being human, and you have rejected evil. With this act you proclaim that purification is at hand, that the self can purify the self."

He smiled at her and submerged her a third time, and when he drew her up from the water, she was radiant. From the audience there was a collective sigh. Disappointment? Satisfaction? He could not tell.

William was next, a forty-year-old ex-policeman. At first he was more tense than Candace had been, but by the end, he too was obviously ecstatic.

Now Stella Johnson came up the steps, hesitated only a moment, then extended her hand. It was cold and shaking.

"There's no television," she whispered, hardly moving her lips.

"No." And he began the ceremony. When he tried to raise her, she resisted, and not until she squeezed his hand did he lift her from the water. Now he could feel the charge in the air, feel the hushed quality in the auditorium, as the air before an electrical storm is hushed. He said the words as if in a dream, staring into her face. Already she was younger, stronger, vibrant. He submerged her again, and again she signaled when she wanted to be raised. He was the surf, pounding, pounding, crashing on the shore, crashing against boulders.

"...purification is at hand, that the self can purify the self." He lowered her into the water and watched her face. Her eyes were open, a faint smile curved her bright lips. Her hair streamed out about her face. She ran her free hand down her body, up again, felt her breasts, then her cheek, and she smiled at him. Then she signaled and he raised her.

He was blinded by a white light that filled the room, that burned his eyes and paralyzed him. She was with him in the light, smiling, still holding his hand. Nothing else existed. Slowly she raised his hand to her lips and kissed it lightly, then she turned and mounted the steps from the pool. The attendants were there with a robe, and she waved them away and walked off the stage, her hair feathery about her head, no water dripping from her body as she moved.

Someone in the audience screamed, and for a moment there was panic as people leaped up, started to surge toward the stage. Julian held up his hands. "Stop," he said quietly. He turned toward the side of the stage where Mildred was waiting.

She looked like a person in deep shock, or ecstasy. Down in the audience his followers were getting the people back to their seats, and in a moment the ceremony continued.

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When it was over Julian held up his hands once more. "Purification is at hand! The self can purify the self!" The curtain closed, and only then did he leave the pool. Kim met him with a robe. Beyond the stage there was a dead quiet that suddenly broke into a wild clamor.

"Where is she?" It was the FBI agent, Walter Montgomery. "There are hundreds of people who aren't going to stay out there very long. Your people can't hold them back. And I want her before they break through. Where is she?"

"Who?" Kim asked, trying to push Julian forward. "You have to change before they get in," he said. "They all want to touch you, to gaze at you."

"You know damn well who I mean," Montgomery snapped. "That old lady. You snatched her after all, didn't you? And drugged her. She was glassy-eyed from dope. Where is she now?"

Kim stopped pushing and stared at Montgomery. He turned to Julian. "He didn't see."

Julian shook his head. "Mr. Montgomery, I don't know where she is. I have to change now." The noise was getting louder.

Rachel was beside Montgomery. She said, "Julian, what happened? Why are those people trying to break down the doors? What happened?" She was near hysteria.

"You didn't see either, did you?" he asked gently. "I'm sorry, Rachel. I'm truly sorry." He went past her to his dressing room. He was stopped one more time. Eric Mendel was standing by the door. He looked dazed. Hesitantly he reached out and touched Julian's robe, then touched his hand. Julian smiled at him, and went inside the room. Before the door closed he could hear Montgomery demanding to know what Mendel thought had happened, what the hell was going on.

Kim slipped into the dressing room, started to reach out to help Julian

undress, and drew back his hand.

Julian looked at him wonderingly. "What is it?"

"I'm afraid to touch you. It was a miracle, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Julian said. "Yes, a true miracle." The clamor increased, then died down as the sound of many feet drew closer, and that too stopped as outside the door they gathered and waited silently.

The End