

# **RICHARD MATHESON**

## **SHORT STORY COLLECTION**

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## **1 - Death Ship**

Mason saw it first.

He was sitting in front of the lateral viewer taking notes as the ship cruised over the new planet. His pen moved quickly over the graph-spaced chart he held before him. In a little while they'd land and take specimens. Mineral, vegetable, animal-if there were any. Put them in the storage lockers and take them back to Earth. There the technicians would evaluate, appraise, judge. And, if everything was acceptable, stamp the big, black INHABITABLE on their brief and open another planet for colonization from overcrowded Earth.

Mason was jotting down items about general topography when the glitter caught his eye.

"I saw something," he said.

He flicked the viewer to reverse lensing position.

"Saw what?" Ross asked from the control board.

"Didn't you see a flash?"

Ross looked into his own screen.

"We went over a lake, you know," he said.

"No, it wasn't that," Mason said. "This was in that clearing beside the lake."

"I'll look," said Ross, "but it probably was the lake."

His fingers typed out a command on the board and the big ship wheeled around in a smooth arc and headed back.

"Keep your eyes open now," Ross said. "Make sure. We haven't got any time to waste."

"Yes sir."

Mason kept his unblinking gaze on the viewer, watching the earth below move past like a slowly rolled tapestry of woods and fields and rivers. He was thinking, in spite of himself, that maybe the moment had arrived at last. The moment in which Earthmen would come upon life beyond Earth, a race evolved from other cells and other muds. It was an exciting thought. 1997 might be the year. And he and Ross and Carter might now be riding a new *Santa Maria* of discovery, a silvery, bulleted galleon of space.

"There!" he said. "There it is!"

He looked over at Ross. The captain was gazing into his viewer plate. His face bore the expression Mason knew well. A look of smug analysis, of impending decision.

"What do you think it is?" Mason asked, playing the strings of vanity in his captain.

"Might be a ship, might not be," pronounced Ross.

Well, for God's sake, let's go down and see, Mason wanted to say, but knew he couldn't. It would have to be Ross's decision. Otherwise they might not even stop.

"I guess it's nothing," he prodded.

He watched Ross impatiently, watched the stubby fingers flick buttons for the viewer. "We might

stop,” Ross said. “We have to take samples anyway. Only thing I’m afraid of is...”

He shook his head. Land, man! The words bubbled up in Mason’s throat. For God’s sake, let’s go down!

Ross evaluated. His thickish lips pressed together appraisingly. Mason held his breath.

Then Ross’s head bobbed once in that curt movement which indicated consummated decision. Mason breathed again. He watched the captain spin, push and twist dials. Felt the ship begin its tilt to upright position. Felt the cabin shuddering slightly as the gyroscope kept it on an even keel. The sky did a ninety-degree turn, clouds appeared through the thick ports. Then the ship was pointed at the planet’s sun and Ross switched off the cruising engines. The ship hesitated, suspended a split second, then began dropping toward the earth.

“Hey, we settin’ down already?”

Mickey Carter looked at them questioningly from the port door that led to the storage lockers. He was rubbing greasy hands over his green jumper legs.

“We saw something down there,” Mason said.

“No kiddin’,” Mickey said, coming over to Mason’s viewer. “Let’s see.”

Mason flicked on the rear lens. The two of them watched the planet billowing up at them.

“I don’t know whether you can... oh, yes, there it is,” Mason said. He looked over at Ross.

“Two degrees east,” he said.

Ross twisted a dial and the ship then changed its downward movement slightly.

“What do you think it is?” Mickey asked.

“Hey!”

Mickey looked into the viewer with even greater interest. His wide eyes examined the shiny speck enlarging on the screen.

“Could be a ship,” he said. “Could be.”

Then he stood there silently, behind Mason, watching the earth rushing up.

“Reactors,” said Mason.

Ross jabbed efficiently at the button and the ship’s engines spouted out their flaming gases. Speed decreased. The rocket eased down on its roaring fire jets. Ross guided.

“What do *you* think it is?” Mickey asked Mason.

“I don’t know,” Mason answered. “But if it’s a ship,” he added, half wishfully thinking, “I don’t see how it could possibly be from Earth. We’ve got this run all to ourselves.”

“Maybe they got off course,” Mickey dampened without knowing.

Mason shrugged. “I doubt it,” he said.

“What if it is a ship?” Mickey said. “And it’s not ours?”

Mason looked at him and Carter licked his lips.

“Man,” he said, “that’d be somethin’.”

“Air spring,” Ross ordered.

Mason threw the switch that set the air spring into operation. The unit which made possible a landing without then having to stretch out on thick-cushioned couches. They could stand on deck and hardly feel the impact. It was an innovation on the newer government ships.

The ship hit on its rear braces.

There was a sensation of jarring, a sense of slight bouncing. Then the ship was still, its pointed nose straight up, glittering brilliantly in the bright sunlight.

“I want us to stay together,” Ross was saying. “No one takes any risks. That’s an order.”

He got up from his seat and pointed at the wall switch that let atmosphere into the small chamber in the corner of the cabin.

“Three to one we need our helmets,” Mickey said to Mason.

“You’re on,” Mason said, setting into play their standing bet about the air or lack of it in every new planet they found. Mickey always bet on the need for apparatus. Mason for unaided lung use. So far, they’d come out about even.

Mason threw the switch, and there was a muffled sound of hissing in the chamber. Mickey got the

helmet from his locker and dropped it over his head. Then he went through the double doors. Mason listened to him clamping the doors behind him. He kept wanting to switch on the side viewers and see if he could locate what they'd spotted. But he didn't. He let himself enjoy the delicate nibbling of suspense.

Through the intercom they heard Mickey's voice.

"Removing helmet," he said.

Silence. They waited. Finally, a sound of disgust.

"I lose again," Mickey said.

The others followed him out.

"God, did they hit!"

Mickey's face had an expression of dismayed shock on it. The three of them stood there on the greenish-blue grass and looked.

It *was* a ship. Or what was left of a ship for, apparently, it had struck the earth at terrible velocity, nose first. The main structure had driven itself about fifteen feet into the hard ground. Jagged pieces of superstructure had been ripped off by the crash and were lying strewn over the field. The heavy engines had been torn loose and nearly crushed the cabin. Everything was deathly silent, and the wreckage was so complete they could hardly make out what type of ship it was. It was as if some enormous child had lost fancy with the toy model and had dashed it to earth, stamped on it, banged on it insanely with a rock.

Mason shuddered. It had been a long time since he'd seen a rocket crash. He'd almost forgotten the everpresent menace of lost control, of whistling fall through space, of violent impact. Most talk had been about being lost in an orbit. This reminded him of the other threat in his calling. His throat moved unconsciously as he watched.

Ross was scuffing at a chunk of metal at his feet.

"Can't tell much," he said. "But I'd say it's our own."

Mason was about to speak, then changed his mind.

"From what I can see of that engine up there, I'd say it was ours," Mickey said.

"Rocket structure might be standard," Mason heard himself say, "everywhere."

"Not a chance," Ross said. "Things don't work out like that. It's ours all right. Some poor devils from Earth. Well, at least their death was quick."

"Was it?" Mason asked the air, visualizing the crew in their cabin, rooted with fear as their ship spun toward earth, maybe straight down like a fired cannon shell, maybe end-over-end like a crazy, fluttering top, the gyroscope trying in vain to keep the cabin always level.

The screaming, the shouted commands, the exhortations to a heaven they had never seen before, to a God who might be in another universe. And then the planet rushing up and blasting its hard face against their ship, crushing them, ripping the breath from their lungs. He shuddered again, thinking of it.

"Let's take a look," Mickey said.

"Not sure we'd better," Ross said. "We say it's ours. It might not be."

"Jeez, you don't think anything is still alive in there, do you?" Mickey asked the captain.

"Can't say," Ross said.

But they all knew he could see that mangled hulk before him as well as they. Nothing could have survived that.

The look. The pursed lips. As they circled the ship. The head movement, unseen by them.

"Let's try that opening there," Ross ordered. "And stay together. We still have work to do. Only doing this so we can let the base know which ship this is." He had already decided it was an Earth ship.

They walked up to a spot in the ship's side where the skin had been laid open along the welded seam. A long, thick plate was bent over as easily as a man might bend paper.

"Don't like this," Ross said. "But I suppose..."

He gestured with his head and Mickey pulled himself up to the opening. He tested each handhold gingerly, then slid on his work gloves as he found some sharp edge. He told the other two and they reached into their jumper pockets. Then Mickey took a long step into the dark maw of the ship.

"Hold *on*, now!" Ross called up. "Wait until I get there."

He pulled himself up, his heavy boot toes scraping up the rocket skin. He went into the hole too.

Mason followed.

It was dark inside the ship. Mason closed his eyes for a moment to adjust to the change. When he opened them, he saw two bright beams searching up through the twisted tangle of beams and plates. He pulled out his own flash and flicked it on.

"God, is this thing wrecked," Mickey said, awed by the sight of metal and machinery in violent death. His voice echoed slightly through the shell. Then, when the sound ended, an utter stillness descended on them. They stood in the murky light and Mason could smell the acrid fumes of broken engines.

"Watch the smell, now," Ross said to Mickey who was reaching up for support. "We don't want to get ourselves gassed."

"I will," Mickey said. He was climbing up, using one hand to pull his thick, powerful body up along the twisted ladder. He played the beam straight up.

"Cabin is all out of shape," he said, shaking his head.

Ross followed him up. Mason was last, his flash moving around endlessly over the snapped joints, the wild jigsaw of destruction that had once been a powerful new ship. He kept hissing in disbelief to himself as his beam came across one violent distortion of metal after another.

"Door's sealed," Mickey said, standing on a pretzel-twisted catwalk, bracing himself against the inside rocket wall. He grabbed the handle again and tried to pull it open.

"Give me your light," Ross said. He directed both beams at the door and Mickey tried to drag it open. His face grew red as he struggled. He puffed.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "It's stuck."

Mason came up beside them. "Maybe the cabin is still pressurized," he said softly. He didn't like the echoing of his own voice.

"Doubt it," Ross said, trying to think. "More than likely the jamb is twisted." He gestured with his head again. "Help Carter."

Mason grabbed one handle and Mickey the other. Then they braced their feet against the wall and pulled with all their strength. The door held fast. They shifted their grip, pulled harder.

"Hey, it slipped!" Mickey said. "I think we got it."

They resumed footing on the tangled catwalk and pulled the door open. The frame was twisted, the door held in one corner. They could only open it enough to wedge themselves in sideways.

The cabin was dark as Mason edged in first. He played his light beam toward the pilot's seat. It was empty. He heard Mickey squeeze in as he moved the light to the navigator's seat.

There was no navigator's seat. The bulkhead had been stove in there, the viewer, the table and the chair all crushed beneath the bent plates. There was a clicking in Mason's throat as he thought of himself sitting at a table like that, in a chair like that, before a bulkhead like that.

Ross was in now. The three beams of light searched. They all had to stand, legs spraddled, because the deck slanted.

And the way it slanted made Mason think of something. Of shifting weights, of *things* sliding down...

Into the corner where he suddenly played his shaking beam.

And felt his heart jolt, felt the skin on him crawling, felt his unblinking eyes staring at the sight. Then felt his boots thud him down the incline as if he were driven.

"Here," he said, his voice hoarse with shock.

He stood before the bodies. His foot had bumped into one of them as he held himself from going down any further, as he shifted his weight on the incline.

Now he heard Mickey's footsteps, his voice. A whisper. A bated, horrified whisper.

"*Mother of God.*"

Nothing from Ross. Nothing from any of them then but stares and shuddering breaths.

Because the twisted bodies on the floor were theirs, all three of them.

And all three... dead.

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Mason didn't know how long they stood there, wordlessly, looking down at the still, crumpled figures on the deck.

How does a man react when he is standing over his own corpse? The question plied unconsciously at his mind. What does a man say? What are his first words to be? A poser, he seemed to sense, a loaded question.

But it was happening. Here he stood-and there he lay dead at his own feet. He felt his hands grow numb and he rocked unsteadily on the tilted deck.

"God."

Mickey again. He had his flash pointed down at his own face. His mouth twitched as he looked. All three of them had their flash beams directed at their own faces, and the bright ribbons of light connected their dual bodies.

Finally Ross took a shaking breath of the stale cabin air.

"Carter," he said, "find the auxiliary light switch, see if it works." His voice was husky and tightly restrained.

"Sir?"

"The light switch-the light switch!" Ross snapped.

Mason and the captain stood there, motionless, as Mickey shuffled up the deck. They heard his boots kick metallic debris over the deck surface. Mason closed his eyes, but was unable to take his foot away from where it pressed against the body that was his. He felt bound.

"I don't understand," he said to himself.

"Hang on," Ross said.

Mason couldn't tell whether it was said to encourage him or the captain himself.

Then they heard the emergency generator begin its initial whining spin. The light flickered, went out. The generator coughed and began humming and the lights flashed on brightly.

They looked down now. Mickey slipped down the slight deck hill and stood beside them. He stared down at his own body. Its head was crushed in. Mickey drew back, his mouth a box of unbelieving terror.

"I don't get it," he said. "I don't get it. What is this?"

"Carter," Ross said.

"That's *me!*" Mickey said. "God, it's *me!*"

"Hold on!" Ross ordered.

"The three of us," Mason said quietly, "and we're all dead."

There seemed nothing to be said. It was a speechless nightmare. The tilted cabin all bashed in and tangled. The three corpses all doubled over and tumbled into one corner, arms and legs flopped over each other. All they could do was stare.

Then Ross said, "Go get a tarp. Both of you."

Mason turned. Quickly. Glad to fill his mind with simple command. Glad to crowd out tense horror with activity. He took long steps up the deck. Mickey backed up, unable to take his unblinking gaze off the heavy-set corpse with the green jumper and the caved-in, bloody head.

Mason dragged a heavy, folded tarp from the storage locker and carried it back into the cabin, legs and arms moving in robotlike sequence. He tried to numb his brain, not think at all until the first shock had dwindled.

Mickey and he opened up the heavy canvas sheet with wooden motions. They tossed it out and the thick, shiny material fluttered down over the bodies. It settled, outlining the heads, the torsos, the one arm that stood up stiffly like a spear, bent over wrist and hand like a grisly pennant.

Mason turned away with a shudder. He stumbled up to the pilot's seat and slumped down. He stared at his outstretched legs, the heavy boots. He reached out and grabbed his leg and pinched it, feeling almost relief at the flaring pain.

"Come away," he heard Ross saying to Mickey, "I said, *come away!*"

He looked down and saw Ross half dragging Mickey up from a crouching position over the bodies. He held Mickey's arm and led him up the incline.

"We're dead," Mickey said hollowly. "That's us on the deck. We're *dead*."

Ross pushed Mickey up to the cracked port and made him look out.

"There," he said. "There's our ship over there. Just as we left it. This ship isn't ours. And those bodies. They... can't be ours."

He finished weakly. To a man of his sturdy opinionation, the words sounded flimsy and extravagant. His throat moved, his lower lip pushed out in defiance of this enigma. Ross didn't like enigmas. He stood for decision and action. He wanted action now.

"You saw yourself down there," Mason said to him. "Are you going to say it isn't you?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Ross bristled. "This may seem crazy, but there's an explanation for it. There's an explanation for everything."

His face twitched as he punched his bulky arm.

"This is me," he claimed. "I'm solid." He glared at them as if daring opposition. "I'm alive," he said.

They stared blankly at him.

"I don't get it," Mickey said weakly. He shook his head and his lips drew back over his teeth.

Mason sat limply in the pilot's seat. He almost hoped that Ross's dogmatism would pull them through this. That his staunch bias against the inexplicable would save the day. He wanted for it to save the day. He tried to think for himself, but it was so much easier to let the captain decide.

"We're all dead," Mickey said.

"Don't be a fool!" Ross exclaimed. "Feel yourself!"

Mason wondered how long it would go on. Actually, he began to expect a sudden awakening, him jolting to a sitting position on his bunk to see the two of them at their tasks as usual, the crazy dream over and done with.

But the dream went on. He leaned back in the seat and it was a solid seat. From where he sat he could run his fingers over solid dials and buttons and switches. All real. It was no dream. Pinching wasn't even necessary.

"Maybe it's a vision," he tried, vainly attempting thought, as an animal mired tries hesitant steps to solid earth.

"That's enough," Ross said.

Then his eyes narrowed. He looked at them sharply. His face mirrored decision. Mason almost felt anticipation. He tried to figure out what Ross was working on. Vision? No, it couldn't be that. Ross would hold no truck with visions. He noticed Mickey staring open-mouthed at Ross. Mickey wanted the consoling of simple explanation too.

"Time warp," said Ross.

They still stared at him.

"What?" Mason asked.

"Listen," Ross punched out his theory. More than his theory, for Ross never bothered with that link in the chain of calculation. His certainty.

"Space bends," Ross said. "Time and space form a continuum. Right?"

No answer. He didn't need one.

"Remember they told us once in training of the possibility of circumnavigating time. They told us we could leave Earth at a certain time. And when we came back we'd be back a year earlier than we'd calculated. Or a year later.

"Those were just theories to the teachers. Well, I say it's happened to us. It's logical, it could happen. We could have passed right through a time warp. We're in another galaxy, maybe different space lines, maybe different time lines."

He paused for effect.

"I say we're in the future," he said.

Mason looked at him.

"How does that help us?" he asked. "If you're right."

"We're not dead!" Ross seemed surprised that they didn't get it.

"If it's in the future," Mason said quietly, "then we're going to die."

Ross gaped at him. He hadn't thought of that. Hadn't thought that his idea made things even worse. Because there was only one thing worse than dying. And that was knowing you were going to die. And where. And how.

Mickey shook his head. His hands fumbled at his sides. He raised one to his lips and chewed nervously on a blackened nail.

"No," he said weakly, "I don't get it."

Ross stood looking at Mason with jaded eyes. He bit his lips, feeling nervous with the unknown crowding him in, holding off the comfort of solid, rational thinking. He pushed, he shoved it away. He persevered.

"Listen," he said, "we're agreed that those bodies aren't ours."

No answer.

"Use your heads!" Ross commanded. "Feel yourself!"

Mason ran numbed fingers over his jumper, his helmet, the pen in his pocket. He clasped solid hands of flesh and bone. He looked at the veins in his arms. He pressed an anxious finger to his pulse. It's true, he thought. And the thought drove lines of strength back into him. Despite all, despite Ross's desperate advocacy, he was alive. Flesh and blood were his evidence.

His mind swung open then. His brow furrowed in thought as he straightened up. He saw a look almost of relief on the face of a weakening Ross.

"All right then," he said, "we're in the future."

Mickey stood tensely by the port. "Where does that leave us?" he asked.

The words threw Mason back. It was true, where did it leave them?

"How do we know how distant a future?" he said, adding weight to the depression of Mickey's words. "How do we know it isn't in the next twenty minutes?"

Ross tightened. He punched his palm with a resounding smack.

"How do we know?" he said strongly. "We don't go up, we can't crash. That's how we know."

Mason looked at him.

"Maybe if we went up," he said, "we might bypass our death altogether and leave it in this space-time system. We could get back to the space-time system of our own galaxy and..."

His words trailed off. His brain became absorbed with twisting thought.

Ross frowned. He stirred restlessly, licked his lips. What had been simple was now something else again. He resented the uninvited intrusion of complexity.

"We're alive now," he said, getting it set in his mind, consolidating assurance with reasonable words, "and there's only one way we can stay alive."

He looked at them, decision reached. "We have to stay here," he said.

They just looked at him. He wished that one of them, at least, would agree with him, show some sign of definition in their minds.

"But... what about our orders?" Mason said vaguely.

"Our orders don't tell us to kill ourselves!" Ross said. "No, it's the only answer. If we never go up again, we never crash. We... we avoid it, we prevent it!"

His head jarred once in a curt nod. To Ross, the thing was settled.

Mason shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't..."

"I do," Ross stated. "Now let's get out of here. This ship is getting on our nerves."

Mason stood up as the captain gestured toward the door. Mickey started to move, then hesitated. He looked down at the bodies.

"Shouldn't we...?" he started to inquire.

"What, what?" Ross asked, impatient to leave.

Mickey stared at the bodies. He felt caught up in a great, bewildering insanity.

"Shouldn't we... bury ourselves?" he said.

Ross swallowed. He would hear no more. He herded them out of the cabin. Then, as they started down through the wreckage, he looked in at the door. He looked at the tarpaulin with the jumbled



mound of bodies beneath it. He pressed his lips together until they were white.

"I'm alive," he muttered angrily.

Then he turned out the cabin light with tight, vengeful fingers and left.

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They all sat in the cabin of their own ship. Ross had ordered food brought out from the lockers, but he was the only one eating. He ate with a belligerent rotation of his jaw as though he would grind away all mystery with his teeth.

Mickey stared at the food.

"How long do we have to stay?" he asked, as if he didn't clearly realize that they were to remain permanently.

Mason took it up. He leaned forward in his seat and looked at Ross.

"How long will our food last?" he said.

"There's edible food outside, I've no doubt," Ross said, chewing.

"How will we know which is edible and which is poisonous?"

"We'll watch the animals," Ross persisted.

"They're a different type of life," Mason said. "What they can eat might be poisonous to us. Besides, we don't even know if there are any animals here."

The words made his lips raise in a brief, bitter smile. And he'd actually been hoping to contact another people. It was practically humorous.

Ross bristled. "We'll... cross each river as we come to it," he blurted out as if he hoped to smother all complaint with this ancient homily.

Mason shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

Ross stood up.

"Listen," he said. "It's easy to ask questions. We've all made a decision to stay here. Now let's do some concrete thinking about it. Don't tell me what we can't do. I know that as well as you. Tell me what we can do."

Then he turned on his heel and stalked over to the control board. He stood there glaring at blank-faced gauges and dials. He sat down and began scribbling rapidly in his log as if something of great note had just occurred to him. Later Mason looked at what Ross had written and saw that it was a long paragraph which explained in faulty but unyielding logic why they were all alive.

Mickey got up and sat down on his bunk. He pressed his large hands against his temples. He looked very much like a little boy who had eaten too many green apples against his mother's injunction and who feared retribution on both counts. Mason knew what Mickey was thinking. Of that still body with the skull forced in. The image of himself brutally killed in collision. He, Mason, was thinking of the same thing. And, behavior to the contrary, Ross probably was too.

Mason stood by the port looking out at the silent hulk across the meadow. Darkness was falling. The last rays of the planet's sun glinted off the skin of the crashed rocket ship. Mason turned away. He looked at the outside temperature gauge. Already it was seven degrees and it was still light. Mason moved the thermostat needle with his right forefinger.

Heat being used up, he thought. The energy of our grounded ship being used up faster and faster. The ship drinking its own blood with no possibility of transfusion. Only operation would recharge the ship's energy system. And they were without motion, trapped and stationary.

"How long can we last?" he asked Ross again, refusing to keep silence in the face of the question.

"We can't live in this ship indefinitely. The food will run out in a couple of months. And a long time before that the charging system will go. The heat will stop. We'll freeze to death."

"How do we know the outside temperature will freeze us?" Ross asked, falsely patient.

"It's only sundown," Mason said, "and already it's... minus thirteen degrees."

Ross looked at him sullenly. Then he pushed up from his chair and began pacing.

"If we go up," he said, "we risk... *duplicating* that ship over there."

"But would we?" Mason wondered. "We can only die once. It seems we already have. In this galaxy. Maybe a person can die once in every galaxy. Maybe that's afterlife. Maybe..."

"Are you through?" asked Ross coldly.

Mickey looked up.

"Let's go," he said. "I don't want to hang around here."

He looked at Ross.

Ross said, "Let's not stick out our necks before we know what we're doing. Let's think this out."

"I have a wife!" Mickey said angrily. "Just because you're not married-"

"Shut up!" Ross thundered.

Mickey threw himself on the bunk and turned to face the cold bulkhead. Breath shuddered through his heavy frame. He didn't say anything. His fingers opened and closed on the blanket, twisting it, pulling it out from under his body.

Ross paced the deck, abstractedly punching at his palm with a hard fist. His teeth clicked together, his head shook as one argument after another fell before his bullheaded determination. He stopped, looked at Mason, then started pacing again. Once he turned on the outside spotlight and looked to make sure it was not imagination.

The light illumined the broken ship. It glowed strangely, like a huge, broken tombstone. Ross snapped off the spotlight with a soundless snarl. He turned to face them. His broad chest rose and fell heavily as he breathed.

"All right," he said. "It's *your* lives too. I can't decide for all of us. We'll hand vote on it. That thing out there may be something entirely different from what we think. If you two think it's worth the risk of our lives to go up, we'll... go up."

He shrugged. "Vote," he said. "I say we stay here."

"I say we go," Mason said.

They looked at Mickey.

"Carter," said Ross, "what's your vote?"

Mickey looked over his shoulder with bleak eyes.

"Vote," Ross said.

"Up," Mickey said. "Take us up. I'd rather die than stay here."

Ross's throat moved. Then he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"All right," he said quietly. "We'll go up."

"God have mercy on us," Mickey muttered as Ross went quickly to the control board.

The captain hesitated a moment. Then he threw switches. The great ship began shuddering as gases ignited and began to pour like channeled lightning from the rear vents. The sound was almost soothing to Mason. He didn't care any more; he was willing, like Mickey, to take a chance. It had only been a few hours. It had seemed like a year. Minutes had dragged, each one weighted with oppressive recollections. Of the bodies they'd seen, of the shattered rocket-even more of the Earth they would never see, of parents and wives and sweethearts and children. Lost to their sight forever. No, it was far better to try to get back. Sitting and waiting was always the hardest thing for a man to do. He was no longer conditioned for it.

Mason sat down at his board. He waited tensely. He heard Mickey jump up and move over to the engine control board.

"I'm going to take us up easy," Ross said to them. "There's no reason why we should... have any trouble."

He paused. They snapped their heads over and looked at him with muscle-tight impatience.

"Are you both ready?" Ross asked.

"*Take us up,*" Mickey said.

Ross jammed his lips together and shoved over the switch that read: *Vertical Rise*.

They felt the ship tremble, hesitate. Then it moved off the ground, headed up with increasing velocity. Mason flicked on the rear viewer. He watched the dark earth recede, tried not to look at the white patch in the corner of the screen, the patch that shone metallically under the moonlight.

"Five hundred," he read. "Seven-fifty... one thousand... fifteen hundred..."

He kept waiting. For explosion. For an engine to give out. For their rise to stop.

They kept moving up.

"Three thousand," Mason said, his voice beginning to betray the rising sense of elation he felt. The planet was getting farther and farther away. The other ship was only a memory now. He looked across at Mickey. Mickey was staring, open-mouthed, as if he were about ready to shout out "*Hurry!*" but was afraid to tempt the fates.

"Six thousand... *seven thousand!*" Mason's voice was jubilant. "We're *out* of it!"

Mickey's face broke into a great, relieved grin. He ran a hand over his brow and flicked great drops of sweat on the deck.

"God," he said, gasping, "my God."

Mason moved over to Ross's seat. He clapped the captain on the shoulder.

"We made it," he said. "Nice flying."

Ross looked irritated.

"We shouldn't have left," he said. "It was nothing all the time. Now we have to start looking for another planet." He shook his head. "It wasn't a good idea to leave," he said.

Mason stared at him. He turned away shaking his head, thinking... you can't win.

"If I ever see another glitter," he thought aloud, "I'll keep my big mouth shut. To hell with alien races anyway."

Silence. He went back to his seat and picked up his graph chart. He let out a long shaking breath. Let Ross complain, he thought, I can take anything now. Things are normal again. He began to figure casually what might have occurred down there on that planet.

Then he happened to glance at Ross.

Ross was thinking. His lips pressed together. He said something to himself. Mason found the captain looking at him.

"Mason," he said.

"What?"

"Alien race, you said."

Mason felt a chill flood through his body. He saw the big head nod once in decision. Unknown decision. His hands started to shake. A crazy idea came. No, Ross wouldn't do that, not just to assuage vanity. Would he?

"I don't..." he started. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mickey watching the captain too.

"*Listen*," Ross said. "I'll tell you what happened down there. I'll *show* you what happened!"

They stared at him in paralyzing horror as he threw the ship around and headed back.

"What are you doing!" Mickey cried.

"Listen," Ross said. "Didn't you understand me? Don't you see how we've been tricked?"

They looked at him without comprehension. Mickey took a step toward him.

"Alien race," Ross said. "That's the short of it. That time-space idea is all wet. But I'll tell you what idea isn't all wet. So we leave the place. What's our first instinct as far as reporting it? Saying it's uninhabitable? We'd do more than that. We wouldn't report it at all."

"Ross, you're not taking us back!" Mason said, standing up suddenly as the full terror of returning struck him.

"You bet I am!" Ross said, fiercely elated.

"You're crazy!" Mickey shouted at him, his body twitching, his hands clenched at his sides menacingly.

"Listen to me!" Ross roared at them. "Who would be benefited by us not reporting the existence of that planet?"

They didn't answer. Mickey moved closer.

"Fools!" he said. "Isn't it obvious? There *is* life down there. But life that isn't strong enough to kill us or chase us away with force. So what can they do? They don't want us there. So what can they do?"

He asked them like a teacher who cannot get the right answers from the dolts in his class.

Mickey looked suspicious. But he was curious now, too, and a little timorous as he had always been with his captain, except in moments of greatest physical danger. Ross had always led them, and it was hard to rebel against it even when it seemed he was trying to kill them all. His eyes moved to the viewer screen where the planet began to loom beneath them like a huge dark ball.

"We're alive," Ross said, "and I say there never *was* a ship down there. We saw it, sure. We *touched* it. But you can see anything if you believe it's there! All your senses can tell you there's something when there's nothing. All you have to do is *believe* it!"

"What are you getting at?" Mason asked hurriedly, too frightened to realize. His eyes fled to the altitude gauge. Seventeen thousand... sixteen thousand... fifteen...

"Telepathy," Ross said, triumphantly decisive. "I say those men, or whatever they are, saw us coming. And they didn't want us there. So they read our minds and saw the death fear, and they decided that the best way to scare us away was to show us our ship crashed and ourselves dead in it. And it worked... until now."

"So it worked!" Mason exploded. "Are you going to take a chance on killing us just to prove your damn theory?"

"It's *more* than a theory!" Ross stormed, as the ship fell, then Ross added with the distorted argument of injured vanity, "My orders say to pick up specimens from every planet. I've always followed orders before and, by God, I still will!"

"You saw how cold it was!" Mason said. "No one can live there anyway! Use your head, Ross!"

"Damn it, *I'm* captain of this ship!" Ross yelled, "and I give the orders!"

"Not when our lives are in your hands!" Mickey started for the captain.

"Get back!" Ross ordered.

That was when one of the ship's engines stopped and the ship yawed wildly.

"You fool!" Mickey exploded, thrown off balance. "You *did* it, you *did* it!"

Outside the black night hurtled past.

The ship wobbled violently. *Prediction true* was the only phrase Mason could think of. His own vision of the screaming, the numbing horror, the exhortations to a deaf heaven-all coming true. That hulk would be this ship in a matter of minutes. Those three bodies would be...

"Oh... *damn!*" He screamed it at the top of his lungs, furious at the enraging stubbornness of Ross in taking them back, of causing the future to be as they saw-all because of insane pride.

"No, they're not going to fool us!" Ross shouted, still holding fast to his last idea like a dying bulldog holding its enemy fast in its teeth.

He threw switches and tried to turn the ship. But it wouldn't turn. It kept plunging down like a fluttering leaf. The gyroscope couldn't keep up with the abrupt variations in cabin equilibrium and the three of them found themselves being thrown off balance on the tilting deck.

"Auxiliary engines!" Ross yelled.

"It's no use!" Mickey cried.

"*Damn it!*" Ross clawed his way up the angled deck, then crashed heavily against the engine board as the cabin inclined the other way. He threw switches over with shaking fingers.

Suddenly Mason saw an even spout of flame through the rear viewer again. The ship stopped shuddering and headed straight down. The cabin righted itself.

Ross threw himself into his chair and shot out furious hands to turn the ship about. From the floor Mickey looked at him with a blank, white face. Mason looked at him, too, afraid to speak.

"Now shut up!" Ross said disgustedly, not even looking at them, talking like a disgruntled father to his sons. "When we get down there you're going to see that it's true. That ship'll be gone. And we're going to go looking for those bastards who put the idea in our minds!"

They both stared at their captain humbly as the ship headed down backwards. They watched Ross's hands move efficiently over the controls. Mason felt a sense of confidence in his captain. He stood on the deck quietly, waiting for the landing without fear. Mickey got up from the floor and stood beside him, waiting.

The ship hit the ground. It stopped. They had landed again. They were still the same. And...

"Turn on the spotlight," Ross told them.

Mason threw the switch. They all crowded to the port. Mason wondered for a second how Ross could possibly have landed in the same spot. He hadn't even appeared to be following the calculations made on the last landing.

They looked out.

Mickey stopped breathing. And Ross's mouth fell open.

*The wreckage was still there.*

They had landed in the same place and they had found the wrecked ship still there. Mason turned away from the port and stumbled over the deck. He felt lost, a victim of some terrible universal prank, a man accursed.

"You said..." Mickey said to the captain.

Ross just looked out of the port with unbelieving eyes.

"Now we'll go up again," Mickey said, grinding his teeth. "And we'll *really* crash this time. And we'll be killed. Just like those... those..."

Ross didn't speak. He stared out of the port at the refutation of his last clinging hope. He felt hollow, void of all faith in belief in sensible things.

Then Mason spoke.

"We're not going to crash-" he said somberly-"ever."

"What?"

Mickey was looking at him. Ross turned and looked too.

"Why don't we stop kidding ourselves?" Mason said. "We all know what it is, don't we?"

He was thinking of what Ross had said just a moment before. About the senses giving evidence of what was believed. Even if there was nothing there at all...

Then, in a split second, with the knowledge, he saw Ross and he saw Carter. As they *were*. And he took a short shuddering breath, a last breath until illusion would bring breath and flesh again.

"Progress," he said bitterly, and his voice was an aching whisper in the phantom ship. "The Flying Dutchman takes to the universe."

## **2 - Nightmare At 20,000 Feet**

"Seat belt, please," said the stewardess cheerfully as she passed him.

Almost as she spoke, the sign above the archway which led to the forward compartment lit up-fasten seat belt-with, below, its attendant caution-NO smoking. Drawing in a deep lungful, Wilson exhaled it in bursts, then pressed the cigarette into the armrest tray with irritable stabbing motions.

Outside, one of the engines coughed monstrosly, spewing out a cloud of fume which fragmented into the night air. The fuselage began to shudder and Wilson, glancing through the window, saw the exhaust of flame jetting whitely from the engine's nacelle. The second engine coughed, then roared, its propeller instantly a blur of revolution. With a tense submissiveness, Wilson fastened the belt across his lap.

Now all the engines were running and Wilson's head throbbed in unison with the fuselage. He sat rigidly, staring at the seat ahead as the DC-7 taxied across the apron, heating the night with the thundering blast of its exhausts.

At the edge of the runway, it halted. Wilson looked out through the window at the leviathan glitter of the terminal. By late morning, he thought, showered and cleanly dressed, he would be sitting in the office of one more contact discussing one more specious deal the net result of which would not add one jot of meaning to the history of mankind. It was all so damned-

Wilson gasped as the engines began their warm-up race preparatory to takeoff. The sound, already loud, became deafening-waves of sound that crashed against Wilson's ears like club blows. He opened his mouth as if to let it drain. His eyes took on the glaze of a suffering man, his hands drew in like tensing claws.

He started, legs retracting, as he felt a touch on his arm. Jerking aside his head, he saw the stewardess

who had met him at the door. She was smiling down at him.

"Are you all right?" he barely made out her words.

Wilson pressed his lips together and agitated his hand at her as if pushing her away. Her smile flared into excess brightness, then fell as she turned and moved away.

The plane began to move. At first lethargically, like some behemoth struggling to overthrow the pull of its own weight. Then with more speed, forcing off the drag of friction. Wilson, turning to the window, saw the dark runway rushing by faster and faster. On the wing edge, there was a mechanical whining as the flaps descended. Then, imperceptibly, the giant wheels lost contact with the ground, the earth began to fall away. Trees flashed underneath, buildings, the darting quicksilver of car lights. The DC-7 banked slowly to the right, pulling itself upward toward the frosty glitter of the stars.

Finally, it levelled off and the engines seemed to stop until Wilson's adjusting ear caught the murmur of their cruising speed. A moment of relief slackened his muscles, imparting a sense of well-being. Then it was gone. Wilson sat immobile, staring at the NO SMOKING sign until it winked out, then, quickly, lit a cigarette. Reaching into the seat-back pocket in front of him, he slid free his newspaper.

As usual, the world was in a state similar to his. Friction in diplomatic circles, earthquakes and gunfire, murder, rape, tornadoes and collisions, business conflicts, gangsterism. God's in his heaven, all's right with the world, thought Arthur Jeffrey Wilson.

Fifteen minutes later, he tossed the paper aside. His stomach felt awful. He glanced up at the signs beside the two lavatories. Both, illuminated, read OCCUPIED. He pressed out his third cigarette since takeoff and, turning off the overhead light, stared out through the window.

Along the cabin's length, people were already flicking out their lights and reclining their chairs for sleep. Wilson glanced at his watch. Eleven-twenty. He blew out tired breath. As he'd anticipated, the pills he'd taken before boarding hadn't done a bit of good.

He stood abruptly as the woman came out of the lavatory and, snatching up his bag, he started down the aisle.

His system, as expected, gave no cooperation. Wilson stood with a tired moan and adjusted his clothing. Having washed his hands and face, he removed the toilet kit from the bag and squeezed a filament of paste across his toothbrush.

As he brushed, one hand braced for support against the cold bulkhead, he looked out through the port. Feet away was the pale blue of the inboard propeller. Wilson visualized what would happen if it were to tear loose and, like a tri-bladed cleaver, come slicing in at him.

There was a sudden depression in his stomach. Wilson swallowed instinctively and got some paste-stained saliva down his throat. Gagging, he turned and spat into the sink, then, hastily, washed out his mouth and took a drink. Dear God, if only he could have gone by train; had his own compartment, taken a casual stroll to the club car, settled down in an easy chair with a drink and a magazine. But there was no such time or fortune in this world.

He was about to put the toilet kit away when his gaze caught on the oilskin envelope in the bag. He hesitated, then, setting the small briefcase on the sink, drew out the envelope and undid it on his lap.

He sat staring at the oil-glossed symmetry of the pistol. He'd carried it around with him for almost a year now. Originally, when he'd thought about it, it was in terms of money carried, protection from holdup, safety from teenage gangs in the cities he had to attend. Yet, far beneath, he'd always known there was no valid reason except one. A reason he thought more of every day. How simple it would be—here, now—

Wilson shut his eyes and swallowed quickly. He could still taste the toothpaste in his mouth, a faint nettling of peppermint on the buds. He sat heavily in the throbbing chill of the lavatory, the oily gun resting in his hands. Until, quite suddenly, he began to shiver without control. God, let me go! his mind cried out abruptly.

"Let me go, *let me go*." He barely recognized the whimpering in his ears.

Abruptly, Wilson sat erect. Lips pressed together, he rewrapped the pistol and thrust it into his bag, putting the briefcase on top of it, zipping the bag shut. Standing, he opened the door and stepped outside, hurrying to his seat and sitting down, sliding the overnight bag precisely into place. He indented the

armrest button and pushed himself back. He was a business man and there was business to be conducted on the morrow. It was as simple as that. The body needed sleep, he would give it sleep.

Twenty minutes later, Wilson reached down slowly and depressed the button, sitting up with the chair, his face a mask of vanquished acceptance. Why fight it? he thought. It was obvious he was going to stay awake. So that was that.

He had finished half of the crossword puzzle before he let the paper drop to his lap. His eyes were too tired. Sitting up, he rotated his shoulders, stretching the muscles of his back. Now what? he thought. He didn't want to read, he couldn't sleep. And there were still-he checked his watch-seven to eight hours left before Los Angeles was reached. How was he to spend them? He looked along the cabin and saw that, except for a single passenger in the forward compartment, everyone was asleep.

A sudden, overwhelming fury filled him and he wanted to scream, to throw something, to hit somebody. Teeth jammed together so rabidly it hurt his jaws, Wilson shoved aside the curtains with a spastic hand and stared out murderously through the window.

Outside, he saw the wing lights blinking off and on, the lurid flashes of exhaust from the engine cowlings. Here he was, he thought; twenty-thousand feet above the earth, trapped in a howling shell of death, moving through polar night toward-

Wilson twitched as lightning bleached the sky, washing its false daylight across the wing. He swallowed. Was there going to be a storm? The thought of rain and heavy winds, of the plane a chip in the sea of sky was not a pleasant one. Wilson was a bad flyer. Excess motion always made him ill. Maybe he should have taken another few Dramamines to be on the safe side. And, naturally, his seat was next to the emergency door. He thought about it opening accidentally; about himself sucked from the plane, falling, screaming.

Wilson blinked and shook his head. There was a faint tingling at the back of his neck as he pressed close to the window and stared out. He sat there motionless, squinting. He could have sworn-

Suddenly, his stomach muscles jerked in violently and he felt his eyes strain forward. There was something crawling on the wing.

Wilson felt a sudden, nauseous tremor in his stomach. Dear God, had some dog or cat crawled onto the plane before takeoff and, in some way managed to hold on? It was a sickening thought. The poor animal would be deranged with terror. Yet, how, on the smooth, wind-blasted surface, could it possibly discover gripping places? Surely that was impossible. Perhaps, after all, it was only a bird or-

The lightning flared and Wilson saw that it was a man.

He couldn't move. Stupefied, he watched the black form crawling down the wing. *Impossible.* Somewhere, cased in layers of shock, a voice declared itself but Wilson did not hear. He was conscious of nothing but the titanic, almost muscle tearing leap of his heart-and of the man outside.

Suddenly, like ice-filled water thrown across him, there was a reaction; his mind sprang for the shelter of explanation. A mechanic had, through some incredible oversight, been taken up with the ship and had managed to cling to it even though the wind had torn his clothes away, even though the air was thin and close to freezing.

Wilson gave himself no time for refutation. Jarring to his feet, he shouted: "Stewardess! Stewardess!" his voice a hollow, ringing sound in the cabin. He pushed the button for her with a jabbing finger.

"Stewardess!"

She came running down the aisle, her face tightened with alarm. When she saw the look on his face, she stiffened in her tracks.

"There's a man out there! A man!" cried Wilson. "*What?*" Skin constricted on her cheeks, around her eyes.

"Look, *look!*" Hand shaking, Wilson dropped back into his seat and pointed out the window. "He's crawling on the-"

The words ended with a choking rattle in his throat. There was nothing on the wing.

Wilson sat there trembling. For a while, before he turned back, he looked at the reflection of the stewardess on the window. There was a blank expression on her face.

At last, he turned and looked up at her. He saw her red lips part as though she meant to speak but she said nothing, only placing the lips together again and swallowing. An attempted smile distended briefly at her features.

"I'm sorry," Wilson said. "It must have been a-"

He stopped as though the sentence were completed. Across the aisle a teenage girl was gaping at him with sleepy curiosity.

The stewardess cleared her throat. "Can I get you anything?" she asked.

"A glass of water," Wilson said.

The stewardess turned and moved back up the aisle.

Wilson sucked in a long breath of air and turned away from the young girl's scrutiny. He felt the same. That was the thing that shocked him most. Where were the visions, the cries, the pummelling of fists on temples, the tearing out of hair?

Abruptly he closed his eyes. There had been a man, he thought. There had, actually, been a man. That's why he felt the same. And yet, there couldn't have been. He knew that clearly.

Wilson sat with his eyes closed, wondering what Jacqueline would be doing now if she were in the seat beside him. Would she be silent, shocked beyond speaking? Or would she, in the more accepted manner, be fluttering around him, smiling, chattering, pretending that she hadn't seen? What would his sons think? Wilson felt a dry sob threatening in his chest. Oh, God-

"Here's your water, sir."

Twitching sharply, Wilson opened his eyes.

"Would you like a blanket?" inquired the stewardess.

"No." He shook his head. "Thank you," he added, wondering why he was being so polite.

"If you need anything, just ring," she said.

Wilson nodded.

Behind him, as he sat with the untouched cup of water in his hand, he heard the muted voices of the stewardess and one of the passengers. Wilson tightened with resentment. Abruptly, he reached down and, careful not to spill the water, pulled out the overnight bag. Unzipping it, he removed the box of sleeping capsules and washed two of them down. Crumpling the empty cup, he pushed it into the seat-pocket in front of him, then, not looking, slid the curtains shut. There-it was ended. One hallucination didn't make insanity.

Wilson turned onto his right side and tried to set himself against the fitful motion of the ship. He had to forget about this, that was the most important thing. He mustn't dwell on it. Unexpectedly, he found a wry smile forming on his lips. Well, by God, no one could accuse him of mundane hallucinations anyway. When he went at it, he did a royal job. A naked man crawling down a DC-7's wing at twenty-thousand feet, there was a chimera worthy of the noblest lunatic.

The humour faded quickly. Wilson felt chilled. It had been so clear, so vivid. How could the eyes see such a thing when it did not exist? How could what was in his mind make the physical act of seeing work to its purpose so completely? He hadn't been groggy, in a daze-nor had it been a shapeless, gauzy vision. It had been sharply three-dimensional, fully a part of the things he saw which he *knew* were real. That was the frightening part of it. It had not been dreamlike in the least. He had looked at the wing and-

Impulsively, Wilson drew aside the curtain.

He did not know, immediately, if he would survive. It seemed as if all the contents of his chest and stomach were bloating horribly, the excess pushing up into his throat and head, choking away breath, pressing out his eyes. Imprisoned in this swollen mass, his heart pulsed strickenly, threatening to burst its case as Wilson sat, paralyzed.

Only inches away, separated from him by the thickness of a piece of glass, the man was staring at him.

It was a hideously malignant face, a face not human. Its skin was grimy, of a wide pored coarseness; its nose a squat, discoloured lump; its lips misshapen, cracked, forced apart by teeth of a grotesque size and crookedness; its eyes recessed and small- unblinking. All framed by shaggy, tangled hair which sprouted, too, in furry tufts from the man's ears and nose, birdlike, down across his cheeks.

Wilson sat riven to his chair, incapable of response. Time stopped and lost its meaning. Function and



analysis ceased. All were frozen in an ice of shock. Only the beat of heart went on-alone, a frantic leaping in the darkness. Wilson could not so much as blink. Dull-eyed, breathless, he returned the creature's vacant stare.

Abruptly then, he closed his eyes and his mind, rid of the sight, broke free. It isn't there, he thought. He pressed his teeth together, breath quavering in his nostrils. It isn't there, *it simply is not there!*

Clutching at the armrests with pale-knuckled fingers, Wilson braced himself. There is no man out there, he told himself. It was impossible that there should be a man out there crouching on the wing looking at him.

He opened his eyes-

-to shrink against the seat back with a gagging inhalation. Not only was the man still there but he was grinning. Wilson turned his fingers in and dug the nails into his palms until pain flared. He kept it there until there was no doubt in his mind that he was fully conscious.

Then, slowly, arm quivering and numb, Wilson reached up for the button which would summon the stewardess. He would not make the same mistake again-cry out, leap to his feet, alarm the creature into flight. He kept reaching upward, a tremor of aghast excitement in his muscles now because the man was watching him, the small eyes shifting with the movement of his arm.

He pressed the button carefully once, twice. Now come, he thought. Come with your objective eyes and see what I see- but *hurry*.

In the rear of the cabin, he heard a curtain being drawn aside and, suddenly, his body stiffened. The man had turned his caliban head to look in that direction. Paralyzed, Wilson stared at him. Hurry, he thought. For God's sake, hurry!

It was over in a second. The man's eyes shifted back to Wilson, across his lips a smile of monstrous cunning. Then with a leap, he was gone.

"Yes, sir?"

For a moment, Wilson suffered the fullest anguish of madness. His gaze kept jumping from the spot where the man had stood to the stewardess's questioning face, then back again. Back to the stewardess, to the wing, to the stewardess, his breath caught, his eyes stark with dismay.

"What *is* it?" asked the stewardess.

It was the look on her face that did it. Wilson closed a vice on his emotions. She couldn't possibly believe him. He realized it in an instant.

"I'm-I'm sorry," he faltered. He swallowed so dryly that it made a clicking noise in his throat. "It's nothing. I-apologize."

The stewardess obviously didn't know what to say. She kept leaning against the erratic yawing of the ship, one hand holding on to the back of the seat beside Wilson's, the other stirring limply along the seam of her skirt. Her lips were parted slightly as if she meant to speak but could not find the words.

"Well," she said finally and cleared her throat, "if you-need anything."

"Yes, yes. Thank you. Are we-going into a storm?"

The stewardess smiled hastily. "Just a small one," she said. "Nothing to worry about."

Wilson nodded with little twitching movements. Then, as the stewardess turned away, breathed in suddenly, his nostrils flaring. He felt certain that she already thought him mad but didn't know what to do about it because, in her course of training, there had been no instruction on the handling of passengers who thought they saw small men crouching on the wing.

*Thought?*

Wilson turned his head abruptly and looked outside. He stared at the dark rise of the wing, the spouting flare of the exhausts, the blinking lights. He'd *seen* the man-to that he'd swear. How could he be completely aware of everything around him-be, in all ways, sane and still imagine such a thing? Was it logical that the mind, in giving way, should, instead of distorting all reality, insert, within the still intact arrangement of details, one extraneous sight?

No, not logical at all.

Suddenly, Wilson thought about war, about the newspaper stories which recounted the alleged existence of creatures in the sky who plagued the Allied pilots in their duties. They called them gremlins,

he remembered. Were there, actually, such beings? Did they, truly, exist up here, never falling, riding on the wind, apparently of bulk and weight, yet impervious to gravity?

He was thinking that when the man appeared again.

One second the wing was empty. The next, with an arcing descent, the man came jumping down to it. There seemed no impact. He landed almost fragily, short, hairy arms outstretched as if for balance. Wilson tensed. Yes, there was knowledge in his look. The man—was he to think of it as a man?—somehow understood that he had tricked Wilson into calling the stewardess in vain. Wilson felt himself tremble with alarm. How could he prove the man's existence to others? He looked around desperately. That girl across the aisle. If he spoke to her softly, woke her up, would she be able to—

No, the man would jump away before she could see. Probably to the top of the fuselage where no one could see him, not even the pilots in their cockpit. Wilson felt a sudden burst of self-condemnation that he hadn't gotten that camera Walter had asked for. Dear Lord, he thought, to be able to take a picture of the man.

He leaned in close to the window. What was the man doing?

Abruptly, darkness seemed to leap away as the wing was chalked with lightning and Wilson saw. Like an inquisitive child, the man was squatted on the hitching wing edge, stretching out his right hand toward one of the whirling propellers.

As Wilson watched, fascinatedly appalled, the man's hand drew closed and closer to the blurring gyre until, suddenly, it jerked away and the man's lips twitched back in a soundless cry. He's lost a finger! Wilson thought, sickened. But, immediately, the man reached forward again, gnarled finger extended, the picture of some monstrous infant trying to capture the spin of a fan blade.

If it had not been so hideously out of place it would have been amusing for, objectively seen, the man, at that moment, was a comic sight—a fairy tale troll somehow come to life, wind whipping at the hair across his head and body, all of his attention centred on the turn of the propeller. How could this be madness? Wilson suddenly thought. What self-revelation could this farcical little horror possibly bestow on him?

Again and again, as Wilson watched, the man reached forward. Again and again jerked back his fingers, sometimes, actually, putting them in his mouth as if to cool them. And, always, apparently checking, he kept glancing back across at his shoulder looking at Wilson. *He knows*, thought Wilson. Knows that this is a game between us. If I am able to get someone else to see him, then he loses. If I am the only witness, then he wins. The sense of faint amusement was gone now. Wilson clenched his teeth. Why in hell didn't the pilots see!

Now the man, no longer interested in the propeller, was settling himself across the engine cowl like a man astride a bucking horse. Wilson stared at him. Abruptly a shudder plaited down his back. The little man was picking at the plates that sheathed the engine, trying to get his nails beneath them.

Impulsively, Wilson reached up and pushed the button for the stewardess. In the rear of the cabin, he heard her coming and, for a second, thought he'd fooled the man, who seemed absorbed with his efforts. At the last moment, however, just before the stewardess arrived, the man glanced over at Wilson. Then, like a marionette jerked upward from its stage by wires, he was flying up into the air.

"Yes?" She looked at him apprehensively.

"Will you—sit down, please?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Well, I—"

"Please."

She sat down gingerly on the seat beside his.

"What is it, Mr. Wilson?" she asked.

He braced himself.

"That man is still outside," he said.

The stewardess stared at him.

"The reason I'm telling you this," Wilson hurried on, "is that he's starting to tamper with one of the engines."

She turned her eyes instinctively toward the window.

"No, no, don't look," he told her. "He isn't there now." He cleared his throat viscidly. "He-jumps away whenever you come here."

A sudden nausea gripped him as he realized what she must be thinking. As he realized what he, himself, would think if someone told him such a story, a wave of dizziness seemed to pass across him and he thought-I *am* going mad!

"The point is this," he said, fighting off the thought. "If I'm not imagining this thing, the ship is in danger."

"Yes," she said.

"I know," he said. "You think I've lost my mind."

"Of course not," she said.

"All I ask is this," he said, struggling against the rise of anger. "Tell the pilots what I've said. Ask them to keep an eye on the wings. If they see nothing-all right. But if they do-"

The stewardess sat there quietly, looking at him. Wilson's hands curled into fists that trembled in his lap.

"Well?" he asked.

She pushed to her feet. "I'll tell them," she said.

Turning away, she moved along the aisle with a movement that was, to Wilson, poorly contrived-too fast to be normal yet, clearly, held back as if to reassure him that she wasn't fleeing. He felt his stomach churning as he looked out at the wing again.

Abruptly, the man appeared again, landing on the wing like some grotesque ballet dancer. Wilson watched him as he set to work again, straddling the engine casing with his thick, bare legs and picking at the plates.

Well, what was he so concerned about? thought Wilson. That miserable creature couldn't pry up rivets with his fingernails. Actually, it didn't matter if the pilots saw him or not-at least as far as the safety of the plane was concerned. As for his own personal reasons-

It was at that moment that the man pried up one edge of a plate.

Wilson gasped. "Here, quickly!" he shouted, noticing, up ahead, the stewardess and the pilot coming through the cockpit doorway.

The pilot's eyes jerked up to look at Wilson, then abruptly, he was pushing past the stewardess and lurching up the aisle.

"Hurry!" Wilson cried. He glanced out the window in time to see the man go leaping upward. That didn't matter now. There would be evidence.

"What's going on?" the pilot asked, stopping breathlessly beside his seat.

"He's torn up one of the engine plates!" said Wilson in a shaking voice.

"He's what?"

"The man outside!" said Wilson. "I tell you he's-!"

"Mister Wilson, keep your voice down!" ordered the pilot. Wilson's jaw went slack.

"I don't know what's going on here," said the pilot, "but-"

"Will you look?!" shouted Wilson.

"Mister Wilson, I'm warning you."

"For God's sake!" Wilson swallowed quickly, trying to repress the blinding rage he felt. Abruptly, he pushed back against his seat and pointed at the window with a palsied hand. "Will you, for God's sake, *look?*" he asked.

Drawing in an agitated breath, the pilot bent over. In a moment, his gaze shifted coldly to Wilson's. "Well?" he asked.

Wilson jerked his head around. The plates were in their normal position.

"Oh, now wait," he said before the dread could come. "I saw him pry that plate up."

"Mister Wilson, if you don't-"

"*I said I saw him pry it up,*" said Wilson.

The pilot stood there looking at him in the same withdrawn, almost aghast way as the stewardess had. Wilson shuddered violently.

"Listen, I *saw* him!" he cried. The sudden break in his voice appalled him.

In a second, the pilot was down beside him. "Mister Wilson, please," he said. "All right, you saw him. But remember there are other people aboard. We mustn't alarm them."

Wilson was too shaken to understand at first.

"You-mean you've *seen* him then?" he asked.

"Of course," the pilot said, "but we don't want to frighten the passengers. You can understand that."

"Of course, of course, I don't want to-"

Wilson felt a spastic coiling in his groin and lower stomach. Suddenly, he pressed his lips together and looked at the pilot with malevolent eyes.

"I understand," he said.

"The thing we have to remember-" began the pilot.

"We can stop now," Wilson said.

"Sir?"

Wilson shuddered. "Get out of here," he said.

"Mister Wilson, what-?"

"*Will you stop?*" Face whitening, Wilson turned from the pilot and stared out at the wing, eyes like stone.

He glared back suddenly.

"Rest assured I'd not say another word!" he snapped.

"Mr. Wilson, try to understand our-"

Wilson twisted away and stared out venomously at the engine. From a corner of his vision, he saw two passengers standing in the aisle looking at him. *Idiots!* his mind exploded. He felt his hands begin to tremble and, for a few seconds, was afraid that he was going to vomit. It's the motion, he told himself. The plane was bucking in the air now like a storm-tossed boat.

He realized that the pilot was still talking to him and, refocusing his eyes, he looked at the man's reflection in the window. Beside him, mutely sombre, stood the stewardess. Blind idiots, both of them, thought Wilson. He did not indicate his notice of their departure. Reflected on the window, he saw them heading toward the rear of the cabin. They'll be discussing me now, he thought. Setting up plans in case I grow violent.

He wished now that the man would reappear, pull off the cowling plate and ruin the engine. It gave him a sense of vengeful pleasure to know that only he stood between catastrophe and the more than thirty people aboard. If he chose, he could allow that catastrophe to take place. Wilson smiled without humour. There would be a royal suicide, he thought.

The little man dropped down again and Wilson saw that what he'd thought was correct-the man had pressed the plate back into place before jumping away. For, now, he was prying it up again and it was raising easily, peeling back like skin excised by some grotesque surgeon. The motion of the wing was very broken but the man seemed to have no difficulty staying balanced.

Once more Wilson felt panic. What was he to do? No one believed him. If he tried to convince them any more they'd probably restrain him by force. If he asked the stewardess to sit by him it would be, at best, only a momentary reprieve. The second she departed or, remaining, fell asleep, the man would return. Even if she stayed awake beside him, what was to keep the man from tampering with the engines on the other wing? Wilson shuddered, a coldness of dread misting along his bones.

*Dear God, there was nothing to be done.*

He twitched as, across the window through which he watched the little man, the pilot's reflection passed. The insanity of the moment almost broke him-the man and the pilot within feet of each other, both seen by him yet not aware of one another. No, that was wrong. The little man had glanced across his shoulder as the pilot passed. As if he knew there was no need to leap off any more, that Wilson's capacity for interfering was at an end. Wilson suddenly trembled with mind-searing rage. I'll kill you! he thought! You filthy little animal, I'll *kill* you!

Outside, the engine faltered.

It lasted only for a second, but, in that second, it seemed to Wilson as if his heart had, also, stopped. He pressed against the window, staring. The man had bent the cowling plate far back and now was on

his knees, poking a curious hand into the engine.

"Don't," Wilson heard the whimper of his own voice begging.

*"Don't."*

Again, the engine failed. Wilson looked around in horror. Was everyone deaf? He raised his hand to press the button for the stewardess, then jerked it back. No, they'd lock him up, restrain him somehow. And he was the only one who knew what was happening, the only one who could help.

"God..." Wilson bit his lower lip until the pain made him whimper. He twisted around again and jolted. The stewardess was hurrying down the rocking aisle. She'd heard it! He watched her fixedly and saw her glance at him as she passed his seat.

She stopped three seats down the aisle. Someone else had heard! Wilson watched the stewardess as she leaned over, talking to the unseen passenger. Outside, the engine coughed again. Wilson jerked his head around and looked out with horror pinched eyes.

*"Damn you!"* he whined.

He turned again and saw the stewardess coming back up the aisle. She didn't look alarmed. Wilson stared at her with unbelieving eyes. It wasn't possible. He twisted around to follow her swaying movement and saw her turn in at the kitchen.

*"No."* Wilson was shaking so badly now he couldn't stop. No one had heard.

No one knew.

Suddenly, Wilson bent over and slid his overnight bag out from under the seat. Unzipping it, he jerked out his briefcase and threw it on the carpeting. Then, reaching in again, he grabbed the oilskin envelope and straightened up. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the stewardess coming back and pushed the bag beneath the seat with his shoes, shoving the oilskin envelope beside himself. He sat there rigidly, breath quavering in his chest, as she went by.

Then he pulled the envelope into his lap and untied it. His movements were so feverish that he almost dropped the pistol.

He caught it by the barrel, then clutched at the stock with white knuckled fingers and pushed off the safety catch. He glanced outside and felt himself grow cold.

The man was looking at him.

Wilson pressed his shaking lips together. It was impossible that the man knew what he intended. He swallowed and tried to catch his breath. He shifted his gaze to where the stewardess was handing some pills to the passenger ahead, then looked back at the wing. The man was turning to the engine once again, reaching in. Wilson's grip tightened on the pistol. He began to raise it.

Suddenly, he lowered it. The window was too thick. The bullet might be deflected and kill one of the passengers. He shuddered and stared out at the little man. Again the engine failed and Wilson saw an eruption of sparks cast light across the man's animal features. He braced himself. There was only one answer.

He looked down at the handle of the emergency door. There was a transparent cover over it. Wilson pulled it free and dropped it. He looked outside. The man was still there, crouched and probing at the engine with his hand. Wilson sucked in trembling breath. He put his left hand on the door handle and tested. It wouldn't move downward. Upward there was play.

Abruptly, Wilson let go and put the pistol in his lap. No time for argument, he told himself. With shaking hands, he buckled the belt across his thighs. When the door was opened, there would be a tremendous rushing out of air. For the safety of the ship, he must not go with it.

Now. Wilson picked the pistol up again, his heartbeat staggering. He'd have to be sudden, accurate. If he missed, the man might jump onto the other wing-worse, onto the tail assembly where, inviolate, he could rupture wires, mangle flaps, destroy the balance of the ship. No, this was the only way. He'd fire low and try to hit the man in the chest or stomach. Wilson filled his lungs with air. Now, he thought. *Now.*

The stewardess came up the aisle as Wilson started pulling at the handle. For a moment, frozen in her steps, she couldn't speak. A look of stupefied horror distended her features and she raised one hand as if imploring him. Then, suddenly, her voice was shrilling above the noise of the engines.

*"Mr. Wilson, no!"*

"Get back!" cried Wilson and he wrenched the handle up.

The door seemed to disappear. One second it was by him, in his grip. The next, with a hissing roar, it was gone.

In the same instant, Wilson felt himself enveloped by a monstrous suction which tried to tear him from his seat. His head and shoulders left the cabin and, suddenly, he was breathing tenuous, freezing air. For a moment, eardrums almost bursting from the thunder of the engines, eyes blinded by the arctic winds, he forgot the man. It seemed he heard a prick of screaming in the maelstrom that surrounded him, a distant shout.

Then Wilson saw the man.

He was walking across the wing, gnarled form leaning forward, talon twisted hands outstretched in eagerness. Wilson flung his arm up, fired. The explosion was like a popping in the roaring violence of the air. The man staggered, lashed out and Wilson felt a streak of pain across his head. He fired again at immediate range and saw the man go flailing backward-then, suddenly, disappear with no more solidity than a paper doll swept in a gale. Wilson felt a bursting numbness in his brain. He felt the pistol torn from failing fingers.

Then all was lost in winter darkness.

He stirred and mumbled. There was a warmth trickling in his veins, his limbs felt wooden. In the darkness, he could hear a shuffling sound, a delicate swirl of voices. He was lying, face up, on something-moving, joggling. A cold wind sprinkled on his face, he felt the surface tilt beneath him.

He sighed. The plane was landed and he was being carried off on a stretcher. His head wound, likely, plus an injection to quiet him.

"Nuttier way of tryin' to commit suicide / ever heard of," said a voice somewhere.

Wilson felt the pleasure of amusement. Whoever spoke was wrong, of course. As would be established soon enough when the engine was examined and they checked his wound more closely. Then they'd realize that he'd saved them all.

Wilson slept without dreams.

### 3 - Witch War

Seven pretty little girls sitting in a row.

Outside, night, pouring rain-war weather. Inside, toasty warm. Seven overalled little girls chatting. Plaque on the wall saying: P.G. CENTER. Sky clearing its throat with thunder, picking and dropping lint lightning from immeasurable shoulders. Rain hushing the world, bowing the trees, pocking earth. Square building, low, with one wall plastic. Inside, the buzzing talk of seven pretty little girls. "So I say to him-'Don't give me that, Mr. High and Mighty.' So he says, 'Oh yeah?' And I say, 'Yeah!' "

"Honest, will I ever be glad when this thing's over. I saw the cutest hat on my last furlough. Oh, what I wouldn't give to wear it!"

"You too? Don't I *know* it! You just can't get your hair right.

Not in *this* weather. Why don't they let us get rid of it?" "*Men!* They make me sick." Seven gestures, seven postures, seven laughter's ringing thin beneath thunder. Teeth showing in girl giggles. Hands tireless, painting pictures in the air.

P.G. Centre. Girls. Seven of them. Pretty. Not one over sixteen. Curls. Pigtails. Bangs. Pouting little lips-smiling, frowning, shaping emotion on emotion. Sparkling young eyes- glittering, twinkling, narrowing, cold or warm.

Seven healthy young bodies restive on wooden chairs. Smooth adolescent limbs. Girls-pretty girls-seven of them.

An army of ugly shapeless men, stumbling in mud, struggling along the pitch black muddy road.

Rain a torrent. Buckets of it thrown on each exhausted man. Sucking sound of great boots sinking into oozy yellow-brown mud, pulling loose. Mud dripping from heels and soles.

Plodding men-hundreds of them-soaked, miserable, depleted. Young men bent over like old men. Jaws hanging loosely, mouth gasping at black wet air, tongues lolling, sunken eyes looking at nothing, betraying nothing.

Rest.

Men sink down in the mud, fall on their packs. Heads thrown back, mouths open, rain splashing on yellow teeth. Hands immobile-scrawny heaps of flesh and bone. Legs without motion-khaki lengths of worm-eaten wood. Hundreds of useless limbs fixed to hundreds of useless trunks.

In back, ahead, beside, rumble trucks and tanks and tiny cars. Thick tires splattering mud. Fat treads sinking, tearing at mucky slime. Rain drumming wet fingers on metal and canvas.

Lightning flashbulbs without pictures. Momentary burst of light. The face of war seen for a second-made of rusty guns and turning wheels and faces staring.

Blackness. A night hand blotting out the brief storm glow. Windblown rain flitting over fields and roads, drenching trees and trucks. Rivulets of bubbly rain tearing scars from the earth. Thunder, lightning.

A whistle. Dead men resurrected. Boots in sucking mud again-deeper, closer, nearer. Approach to a city that bars the way to a city that bars the way to a...

An officer sat in the communication room of the P.G. Centre. He peered at the operator, who sat hunched over the control board, phones over his ears, writing down a message.

The officer watched the operator. They are coming, he thought. Cold, wet and afraid they are marching at us. He shivered and shut his eyes.

He opened them quickly. Visions fill his darkened pupils- of curling smoke, flaming men, unimaginable horrors that shape themselves without words or pictures.

"Sir," said the operator, "from advance observation post. Enemy forces sighted."

The officer got up, walked over to the operator and took the message. He read it, face blank, mouth parenthesized. "Yes," he said.

He turned on his heel and went to the door. He opened it and went into the next room. The seven girls stopped talking. Silence breathed on the walls.

The officer stood with his back to the plastic window. "Enemies," he said, "two miles away. Right in front of you."

He turned and pointed out the window. "Right out there. Two miles away. Any questions?"

A girl giggled.

"Any vehicles?" another asked.

"Yes. Five trucks, five small command cars, two tanks."

"That's too easy," laughed the girl, slender fingers fussing with her hair.

"That's all," said the officer. He started from the room. "Go to it," he added and, under his breath, "Monsters!"

He left.

"Oh, me," sighed one of the girls, "here we go again."

"What a bore," said another. She opened her delicate mouth and plucked out chewing gum. She put it under her chair seat.

"At least it stopped raining," said a redhead, tying her shoelaces.

The seven girls looked around at each other. *Are you ready?* said their eyes. *I'm ready, I suppose.* They adjusted themselves on the chairs with girlish grunts and sighs. They hooked their feet around the legs of their chairs. All gum was placed in storage. Mouths were tightened into prudish fixity. The pretty little girls made ready for the game.

Finally they were silent on their chairs. One of them took a deep breath. So did another. They all tensed their milky flesh and clasped fragile fingers together. One quickly scratched her head to get it over with. Another sneezed prettily.

"Now," said a girl on the right end of the row.

Seven pairs of beady eyes shut. Seven innocent little minds began to picture, to visualize, to transport.

Lips rolled into thin gashes, faces drained of colour, bodies shivered passionately. Their fingers

twitching with concentration, seven pretty little girls fought a war.

The men were coming over the rise of a hill when the attack came. The leading men, feet poised for the next step, burst into flame.

There was no time to scream. Their rifles slapped down into the muck, their eyes were lost in fire. They stumbled a few steps and fell, hissing and charred, into the soft mud.

Men yelled. The ranks broke. They began to throw up their weapons and fire at the night. More troops puffed incandescently, flared up, were dead.

"Spread out!" screamed an officer as his gesturing fingers sprouted flame and his face went up in licking yellow heat.

The men looked everywhere. Their dumb terrified eyes searched for an enemy. They fired into the fields and woods. They shot each other. They broke into flopping runs over the mud.

A truck was enveloped in fire. Its driver leaped out, a two-legged torch. The truck went bumping over the road, turned, wove crazily over the field, crashed into a tree, exploded and was eaten up in blazing light. Black shadows flitted in and out of the aura of light around the flames. Screams rent the night.

Man after man burst into flame, fell crashing on his face in the mud. Spots of searing light lashed the wet darkness- screams-running coals, sputtering, glowing, dying-incendiary ranks-trucks cremated-tanks blowing up.

*A little blonde, her body tense with repressed excitement. Her lips twitch, a giggle hovers in her throat. Her nostrils dilate. She shudders in giddy fright. She imagines, imagines... ..*

A soldier runs headlong across a field, screaming, his eyes insane with horror. A gigantic boulder rushes at him from the black sky.

His body is driven into the earth, mangled. From the rock edge, fingertips protrude.

The boulder lifts from the ground, crashes down again, a shapeless trip hammer. A flaming truck is flattened. The boulder flies again to the black sky.

*A pretty brunette, her face a feverish mask. Wild thoughts tumble through her virginal brain. Her scalp grows taut with ecstatic fear. Her lips draw back from clenching teeth. A gasp of terror hisses from her lips. She imagines, imagines. ...*

A soldier falls to his knees. His head jerks back. In the light of burning comrades, he stares dumbly at the white foamed wave that towers over him.

It crashes down, sweeps his body over the muddy earth, fills his lungs with salt water. The tidal wave roars over the field, drowns a hundred flaming men, tosses their corpses in the air with thundering whitecaps.

Suddenly the water stops, flies into a million pieces and disintegrates.

*A lovely little redhead, hands drawn under her chin in tight bloodless fists. Her lips tremble, a throb of delight expands her chest. Her white throat contracts, she gulps in a breath of air. Her nose wrinkles with dreadful joy. She imagines, imagines...*

A running soldier collides with a lion. He cannot see in the darkness. His hands strike wildly at the shaggy mane. He clubs with his rifle butt.

A scream. His face is torn off with one blow of thick claws. A jungle roar billows in the night.

A red-eyed elephant tramples wildly through the mud, picking up men in its thick trunk, hurling them through the air, mashing them under driving black columns.

Wolves bound from the darkness, spring, tear at throats. Gorillas scream and bounce in the mud, leap at falling soldiers.

A rhinoceros, leather skin glowing in the light of living torches, crashes into a burning tank, wheels, thunders into blackness, is gone.

Fangs-claws-ripping teeth-shrieks-trumpeting-roars. The sky rains snakes.

Silence. Vast brooding silence. Not a breeze, not a drop of rain, not a grumble of distant thunder. The battle is ended.

Gray morning mist rolls over the burned, the torn, the drowned, the crushed, the poisoned, the



sprawling dead.

Motionless trucks-silent tanks, wisps of oily smoke still rising from their shattered hulks. Great death covering the field. Another battle in another war.

Victory-everyone is dead.

The girls stretched languidly. They extended their arms and rotated their round shoulders. Pink lips grew wide in pretty little yawns. They looked at each other and tittered in embarrassment. Some of them blushed. A few looked guilty.

Then they all laughed out loud. They opened more gum-packs, drew compacts from pockets, spoke intimately with schoolgirl whispers, with late-night dormitory whispers.

Muted giggles rose up fluttering in the warm room.

"Aren't we awful?" one of them said, powdering her pert nose.

Later they all went downstairs and had breakfast.

#### 4 - Disappearing Act

*These entries are from a school notebook which was found two weeks ago in a Brooklyn candy store. Next to it on the counter was a half finished cup of coffee. The owner of the store said no one had been there for three hours prior to the time he first noticed the book.*

#### Saturday morning early

I shouldn't be writing this. What if Mary found it? Then what? The end, that's what, five years out the window.

But I have to put it down. I've been writing too long. There's no peace unless I put things on paper. I have to get them out and simplify my mind. But it's so hard to make things simple and so easy to make them complicated.

Thinking back through the months.

Where did it start? An argument of course. There must have been a thousand of them since we married. And always the same one, that's the horror.

Money.

"It's not a question of confidence in your writing," Mary will say. "It's a question of bills and are we or aren't we going to pay them?"

"Bills for what?" I'll say. "For necessities? No. For things we don't even need."

"Don't need!" And off we go. God, how impossible life is without money. Nothing can overcome it, it's everything when it's anything. How can I write in peace with endless worries of money, money, money? The television set, the refrigerator, the washer-none of them paid for yet. And the bed she wants...

But despite all, I-I with wide-eyed idiocy keep making it even worse.

Why did I have to storm out of the apartment that first time? We'd argued, sure, but we'd argued before. Vanity, that's all. After seven years-*seven!*-of writing I've made only \$316 from it. And I'm still working nights at the lousy part-time typing job. And Mary has to keep working at the same place with me. Lord knows she has a perfect right to doubt. A perfect right to keep insisting I take that full-time job Jim keeps offering me on his magazine.

All up to me. An admission of lack, a right move and everything would be solved. No more night work. Mary could stay home the way she wants to, the way she should. The right move, that's all.

So, I've been making the wrong one. God, it makes me sick.

Me, going out with Mike. Both of us glassy-eyed imbeciles meeting Jean and Sally. For months now, pushing aside the obvious knowledge that we were being fools. Losing ourselves in a new experience. Playing the ass to perfection.

And, last night, both of us married men, going with them to their club apartment and...

Can't I say it? Am I afraid, too weak? Fool!

Adulterer.

How can things get so mixed up? I love Mary. Very much. And yet, even loving her, I did this thing.

And to make it all even more complicated, I enjoyed it. Jean is sweet and understanding, passionate, a sort of symbol of lost things. It was wonderful. I can't say it wasn't.

But how can wrong be wonderful? How can cruelty be exhilarating? It's all perverse, it's jumbled and confused and enraging.

### Saturday afternoon

She's forgiven me, thank God. I'll never see Jean again. Everything will be all right.

This morning I went and sat on the bed and Mary woke up. She stared up at me, then looked at the clock. She'd been crying.

"Where have you been?" she asked in that thin little girl's voice she gets when she's scared.

"With Mike," I told her. "We drank and talked all night."

She stared a second more. Then she took my hand slowly and pressed it against her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said and tears came to her eyes.

I had to put my head next to hers so she wouldn't see my face. "Oh, Mary," I said. "I'm sorry too."

I'll never tell her. She means too much to me. I *can't* lose her.

### Saturday night

We went down to Mandel's Furniture Mart this afternoon and got a new bed.

"We can't afford it, honey," Mary said. "Never mind," I said. "You know how lumpy the old one is. I want my baby to sleep in style."

She kissed my cheek happily. She bounced on the bed like an excited kid. "Oh, feel how soft!" she said.

Everything is all right. Everything except the new batch of bills in today's mail. Everything except for my latest story which won't get started. Everything except for my novel which has bounced five times. Burney House *has* to take it. They've held it long enough. I'm counting on it. Things are coming to a head with my writing. With everything. More and more I get the feeling that I'm a wound-up spring.

Well, Mary's all right.

### Sunday night

More trouble. Another argument. I don't even know what it was about. She's sulking. I'm burning. I can't write when I'm upset. She knows that.

I feel like calling Jean. At least *she* was interested in my writing. I feel like saying the hell with everything. Getting drunk, jumping off a bridge, something. No wonder babies are happy. Life is simple for them. Some hunger, some cold, a little fear of darkness. That's all. Why bother growing up? Life gets too complicated.

Mary just called me for supper. I don't feel like eating. I don't even feel like staying in the house. Maybe I'll call up Jean later. Just to say hello.

### Monday morning

Damn, damn, damn!

Not only to hold the book for over three months. That's not bad enough, oh no! They had to spill coffee all over the manuscript and send me a *printed* rejection slip to boot. I could kill them! I wonder if

they think they know what they're doing?

Mary saw the slip. "Well, what *now*?" she said disgustedly.

"Now?" I said. I tried not to explode.

"Still think you can write?" she said.

I exploded. "Oh, they're the last judge and jury, aren't they?" I raged. "They're the final word on my writing aren't they?"

"You've been writing seven years," she said. "Nothing's happened."

"And I'll write seven more," I said. "A hundred, a *thousand*!"

"You won't take that job on Jim's magazine?"

"No, I will not."

"You said you would if the book failed."

"I *have* a job," I said, "and you have a job and that's the way it is and that's the way it's going to stay."

"It's not the way *I'm* going to stay!" she snapped.

She may leave me. Who cares! I'm sick of it all anyway. Bills, bills. Writing, writing. Failures, failures, *failures*! And little old life dribbling on, building up its beautiful, brain-bursting complexities like an idiot with blocks.

You! Who run the world, who spin the universe. If there's anybody listening to me, make the world simpler! I don't believe in anything but I'd give... *anything*. If only...

Oh, what's the use? I don't care anymore.

I'm calling Jean tonight.

### Monday afternoon

I just went down to call up Jean about Saturday night. Mary is going to her sister's house that night. She hasn't mentioned me going with her so *I'm* certainly not going to mention it.

I called Jean last night but the switchboard operator at the Club Stanley said she was out. I figured I'd be able to reach her today at her office.

So I went to the corner candy store to look up the number. I probably should have memorized it by now. I've called her enough. But somehow, I never bothered. What the hell, there are always telephone books.

She works for a magazine called *Design Handbook* or *Designer's Handbook* or something like that. Odd, I can't remember that either. Guess I never gave it much thought.

I do remember where the office is though. I called for her there a few months ago and took her to lunch. I think I told Mary I was going to the library that day.

Now, as I recall, the telephone number of Jean's office was in the upper right hand corner of the right page in the directory. I've looked it up dozens of times and that's where it always was.

Today it wasn't.

I found the word *Design* and different business names starting with that word. But they were in the lower left hand corner of the left page, just the opposite. And I couldn't seem to find any name that clicked. Usually as soon as I see the name of the magazine I think: *there it is*. Then I look up the number. Today it wasn't like that.

I looked and looked and thumbed around but I couldn't find anything like *Design Handbook*. Finally I settled for the number of *Design Magazine* but I had the feeling it wasn't the one I was searching for.

I... I'll have to finish this later. Mary just called me for lunch, dinner, what have you? The big meal of the day anyway since we both work at night.

### Later

It was a good meal. Mary can certainly cook. If only there weren't those arguments. I wonder if Jean can cook.

At any rate the meal steadied me a little. I needed it. I was a little nervous about that telephone call.

I dialled the number. A woman answered.

"*Design Magazine*," she said.

"I'd like to talk to Miss Lane," I told her.

"Who?"

"Miss Lane."

"One moment," she said. And I knew it was the wrong number. Every other time I'd called the woman who answered had said, "All right" immediately and connected me with Jean.

"What was that name again?" she asked.

"Miss Lane. If you don't know her, I must have the wrong number."

"You might mean Mr. Payne."

"No, no. Before, the secretary who answered always knew right away who I wanted. I have the wrong number. Excuse me."

I hung up. I was pretty irritated. I've looked that number up so many times it isn't funny.

Now, I can't find it.

Of course I didn't let it get me at first. I thought maybe the phone book in the candy store was an old one. So I went down the street to the drugstore. It had the same book.

Well, I'll just have to call her from work tonight. But I wanted to get her this afternoon so I'd be sure she'd save Saturday night for me.

I just thought of something. That secretary. Her voice. It was the same one who used to answer for *Design Handbook*.

But... Oh, I'm dreaming.

### Monday night

I called the club while Mary was out of the office getting us some coffee.

I told the switchboard operator the same way I've told her dozens of times. "I'd like to speak to Miss Lane, please."

"Yes sir, one moment," she said.

There was silence a long time. I got impatient. Then the phone clicked again.

"What was that name?" the operator asked.

"Miss Lane, Miss *Lane*," I said. "I've called her any number of times."

"I'll look at the list again," she said.

I waited some more. Then I heard her voice again.

"I'm sorry. No one by that name is listed here."

"But I've called her any number of times there."

"Are you sure you have the right number?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure. This is the Club Stanley, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, that's where I'm calling."

"I don't know what to say," she said. "All I can tell you is that I'm certain there isn't anyone by that name living here."

"But I just called *last night*! You said she wasn't in."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember."

"Are you sure? Absolutely sure?"

"Well, if you want, I'll look at the list again. But no one by that name is on it, I'm positive."

"And no one by that name moved out within the last few days?"

"We haven't had a vacancy for a year. Rooms are hard to get in New York, you know."

"I know," I said, and hung up.

I went back to my desk. Mary was back from the drugstore.

She told me my coffee was getting cold. I said I was calling Jim in regard to that job. That was an

ill-chosen lie. Now she'll start in on that again.

I drank my coffee and typed a while. But I didn't know what I was doing. I was trying hard to settle my mind.

She has to be somewhere, I thought. I know I didn't dream all those moments together. I know I didn't imagine all the trouble I had keeping it a secret from Mary. And I know that Mike and Sally didn't...

Sally! Sally lived at the Club Stanley too.

I told Mary I had a headache and was going out for an aspirin. She said there must be some in the men's room. I told her they were a kind I didn't like. I get involved in the flimsiest lies!

I half ran to the nearby drugstore. Naturally I didn't want to use the phone at work again.

The same operator answered my ring.

"Is Miss Sally Norton there?" I asked.

"One moment please," she said, and I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. She always knew the regular members right away. And Sally and Jean had been living there for at least *two years*.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No one by that name is listed here."

I groaned. "Oh my God."

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No Jean Lane and no Sally Norton live there?"

"Are you the same party who called a little while ago?"

"Yes."

"Now look. If this is a joke..."

"A joke! Last night I called you and you told me Miss Lane was out and would I like to leave a message. I said no. Then I call tonight and you tell me there's nobody there by that name."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I was on the board last night but I don't recall what you say. If you like I'll connect you with the house manager."

"No, never mind," I said and hung up.

Then I dialled Mike's number. But he wasn't home. His wife Gladys answered, told me Mike had gone bowling.

I was a little nervous or I wouldn't have slipped up.

"With the boys?" I asked her.

She sounded kind of slighted. "Well, I *hope* so," she said.

I'm getting scared.

### Tuesday night

I called Mike again tonight. I asked him about Sally.

"Who?"

"Sally."

"Sally who?" he asked.

"You know damn well Sally who, you hypocrite!"

"What is this, a gag?" he asked.

"Maybe it is," I said. "How about cutting it out?"

"Let's start all over," he said. "Who the hell is Sally?"

"You don't know Sally Norton?"

"No. Who is she?"

"You never went on a date with her and Jean Lane and me?"

"Jean Lane! What are you talking about?"

"You don't know Jean Lane either?"

"No, I *don't* and this is getting very unfunny. I don't know what you're trying to pull but cut it out. As two married men we..."

"Listen!" I almost shouted into the phone. "Where were you three weeks ago Saturday night?"  
He was silent a moment.

"Wasn't that the night you and I bached while Mary and Glad went to see the fashion show at..."

"Bached! There was no one with us?"

"Who?"

"No girls? Sally? Jean?"

"Oh, here we go again," he groaned. "Look, pal, what's eating you? Anything I can do?"

I slumped against the wall of the telephone booth.

"No," I said weakly "No."

"Are you sure you're all right? You sound upset as hell."

I hung *up*. *I am* upset. I have a feeling as though I'm starving and there isn't a scrap of food in the whole world to feed me.

What's wrong?

### Wednesday afternoon

There was only one way to find out if Sally and Jean had really disappeared.

I had met Jean through a friend I knew at college. Her home is in Chicago and so is my friend Dave's. He was the one who gave me her New York address, the Club Stanley. Naturally I didn't tell Dave I was married.

So I'd looked up Jean and I went out with her and Mike went out with her friend Sally. That's the way it was, I *know* it happened.

So today I wrote a letter to Dave. I told him what had happened. I begged him to check up at her home and write quickly and tell me it was a joke or some amazing set of coincidences. Then I got out my address book.

*Dave's name is gone from the book.*

Am I really going crazy? I know perfectly well that the address was in there. I can remember the night, years ago, when I carefully wrote it down because I didn't want to lose contact with him after we graduated from college. I can even remember the ink blot I made when I wrote it because my pen leaked.

The page is blank.

I remember his name, how he looked, how he talked, the things we did, the classes we took together.

I even had a letter of his he sent me one Easter vacation while I was at school. I remember Mike was over at my room. Since we lived in New York there wasn't time to get home because the vacation was only for a few days.

But Dave had gone home to Chicago and, from there, sent us a very funny letter, special delivery. I remember how he sealed it with wax and stamped it with his ring for a gag.

The letter is gone from the drawer where I always kept it.

And I had three pictures of Dave taken on graduation day. Two of them I kept in my picture album. They're still there...

But he's not on them.

They're just pictures of the campus with buildings in the background.

I'm afraid to go on looking. I could write the college or call them and ask if Dave ever went there.

But I'm afraid to try.

### Thursday afternoon

Today I went out to Hempstead to see Jim. I went to his office. He was surprised when I walked in. He wanted to know why I'd travelled so far just to see him.

"Don't tell me you've decided to take that job offer," he said.



I asked him, "Jim, did you ever hear me talking about a girl named Jean in New York?"

"Jean? No, I don't think so."

"Come on, Jim. I did mention her to you. Don't you remember the last time you and I and Mike played poker? I told you about her then."

"I don't remember, Bob," he said. "What about her?"

"I can't find her. And I can't find the girl Mike went out with. And Mike denies that he ever knew either of them."

He looked confused so I told him again. Then he said, "What's this? Two old married men gallivanting around with..."

"They were just friends," I cut in. "I met them through a fellow I knew at college. Don't get any bright ideas."

"All right, all right, skip it. Where do I fit in?"

"I *can't find* them. They're gone. I can't even prove they existed."

He shrugged. "So what?" Then he asked me if Mary knew about it. I brushed that off.

"Didn't I mention Jean in any of my letters?" I asked him.

"Couldn't say. I never keep letters."

I left soon after that. He was getting too curious. I can see it now. He tells his wife, his wife tells Mary-fireworks.

When I rode to work late this afternoon I had the most awful feeling that I was something temporary. When I sat down it was like resting on air.

I guess I must be cracking. Because I bumped into an old man deliberately to find out if he saw me or felt me. He snarled and called me a clumsy idiot.

I was grateful for that.

### Thursday night

Tonight at work I called up Mike again to see if he remembered Dave from college.

The phone rang, then it clicked off. The operator cut in and asked, "What number are you calling, sir?" A chill covered me. I gave her the number. She told me there wasn't any such number.

The phone fell out of my hand and clattered on the floor. Mary stood up at her desk and looked over. The operator was saying, "Hello, hello, hello..." I hurriedly put the phone back in the cradle.

"What happened?" Mary asked when I came back to my desk.

"I dropped the phone." I said.

I sat and worked and shivered with cold.

I'm afraid to tell Mary about Mike and his wife Gladys.

I'm afraid she'll say she never heard of them.

### Friday

Today I checked up on *Design Handbook*. Information told me there was no such publication listed. But I went over to the city anyway. Mary was angry about me going. But I had to go.

I went to the building. I looked at the directory in the lobby. And even though I knew I wouldn't find the magazine listed there, it was still a shock that made me feel sick and hollow.

I was dizzy as I rode up the elevator. I felt as if I were drifting away from everything.

I got off at the third floor at the exact spot where I'd called for Jean that afternoon.

There was a textile company there.

"There never was a magazine here?" I asked the receptionist.

"Not as long as I can remember," she said. "Of course I've only been here three years."

I went home. I told Mary I was sick and didn't want to go to work tonight. She said all right she wouldn't go either. I went into the bedroom to be alone. I stood in the place where we're going to put the new bed when it's delivered next week.

Mary came in. She stood in the doorway restively.

"Bob, what's the matter?" she asked. "Don't I have a right to know?"

"Nothing," I told her.

"Oh, please don't tell me that," she said. "I know there is."

I started toward her. Then I turned away.

"I... I have to write a letter," I said.

"Who to?"

I flared up. "That's my business," I said. Then I told her to Jim.

She turned away. "I wish I could believe you," she said.

"What does *that* mean?" I asked. She looked at me for a long moment and then turned away again.

"Give *Jim* my best," she said, and her voice shook. The way she said it made me shudder.

I sat down and wrote the letter to Jim. I decided he might help. Things were too desperate for secrecy. I told him that Mike was gone. I asked him if he remembered Mike.

Funny. My hand hardly shook at all. Maybe that's the way it is when you're almost gone.

### Saturday

Mary had to work on some special typing today. She left early.

After I had breakfast I got the bank book out of the metal box in the bedroom closet. I was going down to the bank to get the money for the bed.

At the bank I filled out a withdrawal slip for \$97. Then I waited in line and finally handed the slip and the book to the teller.

He opened it and looked up with a frown.

"This supposed to be funny?" he asked.

"What do you mean, funny?"

He pushed the book across to me. "Next," he said.

I guess I shouted. "What's the matter with you!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the men at the front desks jump up and hurry over. A woman behind me said, "Let me at the window, if you please."

The man came fussing up.

"What seems to be the trouble, sir?" he asked me.

"The teller refuses to honour my bank book," I told him.

He asked for the book and I handed it to him. He opened it. Then he looked up in surprise. He spoke quietly.

"This book is blank," he said.

I grabbed it and stared at it, my heart pounding.

It was completely unused.

"Oh, my God," I moaned.

"Perhaps we can check on the number of the book," the man said. "Why don't you step over to my desk?"

But there wasn't any number on the book. I saw that. And I felt tears coming into my eyes.

"No," I said. "No." I walked past him and started toward the doorway

"One moment, sir," he called after me.

I ran out and ran all the way home.

I waited in the front room for Mary to come home. I'm waiting now. I'm looking at the bank book. At the line where we both signed our names. At the spaces where we had made our deposits. Fifty dollars from her parents on our first anniversary



Two hundred and thirty dollars from my veteran's insurance dividend. Twenty dollars. Ten dollars.  
All blank.  
Everything is going. Jean. Sally. Mike. Names fluttering away and the people with them.  
Now this. What's next?

### Later

I know.  
Mary hasn't come home.  
I called up the office. I heard Sam answer and I asked him if Mary was there. He said I must have the wrong number, no Mary works there. I told him who I was. I asked him if I worked there.  
"Stop the kidding around," he said. "See you Monday night."  
I called up my cousin, my sister, her cousin, her sister, her parents. No answer. Not even ringing.  
None of the numbers work. Then they're all gone.

### Sunday

I don't know what to do. All day I've been sitting in the living room looking out at the street. I've been watching to see if anybody I know comes by the house. But they don't. They're all strangers.  
I'm afraid to leave the house. That's all there is left. Our furniture and our clothes.  
I mean *my* clothes. Her closet is empty. I looked into it this morning when I woke up and there wasn't a scrap of clothing left. It's like a magic act, everything disappearing, it's like...  
I just laughed. I must be...  
I called the furniture store. It's open Sunday afternoons. They said they had no record of us buying a bed. Would I like to come in and check?  
I hung up and looked out the window some more.  
I thought of calling up my aunt in Detroit. But I can't remember the number. And it isn't in my address book any more. The entire book is blank. Except for my name on the cover stamped in gold.  
My name. Only my name. What can I say? What can I do? Everything is so simple. There's *nothing* to do.  
I've been looking at my photograph album. Almost all the pictures are different. There aren't any people on them.  
Mary is gone and all of our friends and our relatives.  
It's funny  
In the wedding picture I sit all by myself at a huge table covered with food. My left arm is out and bent as though I were embracing my bride. And all along the table are glasses floating in the air.  
Toasting me.

### Monday morning

I just got back the letter I sent Jim. It has NO SUCH ADDRESS stamped on the envelope.  
I tried to catch the mailman but I couldn't. He was gone before I woke up.  
I went down to the grocer before. He knew me. But when I asked him about Mary he said stop kidding, I'd die a bachelor and we both knew it.  
I have only one more idea. It's a risk, but I'll have to take it. I'll have to leave the house and go downtown to the Veteran's Administration. I want to see if my records are there. If they are, they'll have something about my schooling and about my marriage and the people who were in my life.  
I'm taking this book with me. I don't want to lose it. If I lost it, then I wouldn't have a thing in the world to remind me that I'm not insane.

## Monday night

The house is gone.

I'm sitting in the corner candy store.

When I got back from the V.A. I found an empty lot there. I asked some of the boys playing there if they knew me. They said they didn't. I asked them what happened to the house. They said they'd been playing in that empty lot since they were babies.

The V.A. didn't have any records about me. Not a thing.

That means I'm not even a person now. All I have is all I am, my body and the clothes on it. All the identification papers are gone from my wallet.

My watch is gone too. Just like that. From my wrist.

It had an inscription on the back. I remember it.

*To my own darling with all my love. Mary.*

I'm having a cup of cof

## 5 - Duel

At 11:32 a.m., Mann passed the truck.

He was heading west, en route to San Francisco. It was Thursday and unseasonably hot for April. He had his suit coat off, his tie removed and shirt collar opened, his sleeve cuffs folded back. There was sunlight on his left arm and on part of his lap. He could feel the heat of it through his dark trousers as he drove along the two-lane highway. For the past twenty minutes, he had not seen another vehicle going in either direction.

Then he saw the truck ahead, moving up a curving grade between two high green hills. He heard the grinding strain of its motor and saw a double shadow on the road. The truck was pulling a trailer.

He paid no attention to the details of the truck. As he drew behind it on the grade, he edged his car toward the opposite lane. The road ahead had blind curves and he didn't try to pass until the truck had crossed the ridge. He waited until it started around a left curve on the downgrade, then, seeing that the way was clear, pressed down on the accelerator pedal and steered his car into the eastbound lane. He waited until he could see the truck front in his rear-view mirror before he turned back into the proper lane.

Mann looked across the countryside ahead. There were ranges of mountains as far as he could see and, all around him, rolling green hills. He whistled softly as the car sped down the winding grade, its tires making crisp sounds on the pavement.

At the bottom of the hill, he crossed a concrete bridge and, glancing to the right, saw a dry stream bed strewn with rocks and gravel. As the car moved off the bridge, he saw a trailer park set back from the highway to his right. How can anyone live out here? he thought. His shifting gaze caught sight of a pet cemetery ahead and he smiled. Maybe those people in the trailers wanted to be close to the graves of their dogs and cats.

The highway ahead was straight now. Mann drifted into a reverie, the sunlight on his arm and lap. He wondered what Ruth was doing. The kids, of course, were in school and would be for hours yet. Maybe Ruth was shopping; Thursday was the day she usually went. Mann visualized her in the supermarket, putting various items into the basket cart. He wished he were with her instead of starting on another sales trip. Hours of driving yet before he'd reach San Francisco; Three days of hotel sleeping and restaurant eating, hoped-for contacts and likely disappointments. He sighed; then, reaching out impulsively, he switched on the radio. He revolved the tuning knob until he found a station playing soft, innocuous music. He hummed along with it, eyes almost out of focus on the road ahead.

He stared as the truck roared past him on the left, causing his car to shudder slightly. He watched the truck and trailer cut in abruptly for the westbound lane and frowned as he had to brake to maintain a safe distance behind it. What's with you? he thought.

He eyed the truck with cursory disapproval. It was a huge gasoline tanker pulling a tank trailer, each of them having six pairs of wheels. He could see that it was not a new rig but was dented and in need of renovation, its tanks painted a cheap-looking silvery colour. Mann wondered if the driver had done the painting himself. His gaze shifted from the word flammable printed across the back of the trailer tank, red letters on a white background, to the parallel reflector lines painted in red across the bottom of the tank to the massive rubber flaps swaying behind the rear tires, then back up again. The reflector lines looked as though they'd been clumsily applied with a stencil. The driver must be an independent trucker, he decided, and not too affluent a one, from the looks of his outfit. He glanced at the trailer's license plate. It was a California issue.

Mann checked his speedometer. He was holding steady at 55 miles an hour, as he invariably did when he drove without thinking on the open highway. The truck driver must have done a good 70 to pass him so quickly. That seemed a little odd. Weren't truck drivers supposed to be a cautious lot?

He grimaced at the smell of the truck's exhaust and looked at the vertical pipe to the left of the cab. It was spewing smoke, which clouded darkly back across the trailer. Christ, he thought. With all the furore about air pollution, why do they keep allowing that sort of thing on the highways?

He scowled at the constant fumes. They'd make him nauseated in a little while, he knew. He couldn't lag back here like this. Either he slowed down or he passed the truck again. He didn't have the time to slow down. He'd gotten a late start. Keeping it at 55 all the way, he'd just about make his afternoon appointment. No, he'd have to pass.

Depressing the gas pedal, he eased his car toward the opposite lane. No sign of anything ahead. Traffic on this route seemed almost nonexistent today. He pushed down harder on the accelerator and steered all the way into the eastbound lane.

As he passed the truck, he glanced at it. The cab was too high for him to see into. All he caught sight of was the back of the truck driver's left hand on the steering wheel. It was darkly tanned and square-looking, with large veins knotted on its surface.

When Mann could see the truck reflected in the rear view mirror, he pulled back over to the proper lane and looked ahead again.

He glanced at the rear view mirror in surprise as the truck driver gave him an extended horn blast. What was that? he wondered; a greeting or a curse? He grunted with amusement, glancing at the mirror as he drove. The front fenders of the truck were a dingy purple colour, the paint faded and chipped; another amateurish job. All he could see was the lower portion of the truck; the rest was cut off by the top of his rear window.

To Mann's right, now, was a slope of shale like earth with patches of scrub grass growing on it. His gaze jumped to the clapboard house on top of the slope. The television aerial on its roof was sagging at an angle of less than 40 degrees. Must give great reception, he thought.

He looked to the front again, glancing aside abruptly at a sign printed in jagged block letters on a piece of plywood: night crawlers-bait. What the hell is a night crawler? he wondered. It sounded like some monster in a low-grade Hollywood thriller.

The unexpected roar of the truck motor made his gaze jump to the rear view mirror. Instantly, his startled look jumped to the side mirror. By God, the guy was passing him *again*. Mann turned his head to scowl at the leviathan form as it drifted by. He tried to see into the cab but couldn't because of its height. What's with him, anyway? he wondered. What the hell are we having here, a contest? See which vehicle can stay ahead the longest?

He thought of speeding up to stay ahead but changed his mind. When the truck and trailer started back into the westbound lane, he let up on the pedal, voicing a newly incredulous sound as he saw that if he hadn't slowed down, he would have been prematurely cut off again. Jesus Christ, he thought. What's *with* this guy?

His scowl deepened as the odour of the truck's exhaust reached his nostrils again. Irritably, he cranked up the window on his left. Damn it, was he going to have to breathe that crap all the way to San Francisco? He couldn't afford to slow down. He had to meet Forbes at a quarter after three and that was that.

He looked ahead. At least there was no traffic complicating matters. Mann pressed down on the accelerator pedal, drawing close behind the truck. When the highway curved enough to the left to give him a completely open view of the route ahead, he jarred down on the pedal, steering out into the opposite lane.

The truck edged over, blocking his way.

For several moments, all Mann could do was stare at it in blank confusion. Then, with a startled noise, he braked, returning to the proper lane. The truck moved back in front of him.

Mann could not allow himself to accept what apparently had taken place. It had to be a coincidence. The truck driver couldn't have blocked his way on purpose. He waited for more than a minute, then flicked down the turn-indicator lever to make his intentions perfectly clear and, depressing the accelerator pedal, steered again into the eastbound lane.

Immediately, the truck shifted, barring his way.

"*Jesus Christ!*" Mann was astounded. This was unbelievable. He'd never seen such a thing in twenty-six years of driving. He returned to the westbound lane, shaking his head as the truck swung back in front of him.

He eased up on the gas pedal, falling back to avoid the truck's exhaust. Now what? he wondered. He still had to make San Francisco on schedule. Why in God's name hadn't he gone a little out of his way in the beginning, so he could have travelled by freeway? This damned highway was two lane all the way.

Impulsively, he sped into the eastbound lane again. To his surprise, the truck driver did not pull over. Instead, the driver stuck his left arm out and waved him on. Mann started pushing down on the accelerator. Suddenly, he let up on the pedal with a gasp and jerked the steering wheel around, raking back behind the truck so quickly that his car began to fishtail. He was fighting to control its zigzag whipping when a blue convertible shot by him in the opposite lane. Mann caught a momentary vision of the man inside it glaring at him.

The car came under his control again. Mann was sucking breath in through his mouth. His heart was pounding almost painfully. My God! he thought. *He wanted me to hit that car head on.* The realization stunned him. True, he should have seen to it himself that the road ahead was clear; that was his failure. But to wave him on... Mann felt appalled and sickened. Boy, oh, boy, oh, boy, he thought. This was really one for the books. That son of a bitch had meant for not only him to be killed but a totally uninvolved passerby as well. The idea seemed beyond his comprehension. On a California highway on a Thursday morning? *Why?*

Mann tried to calm himself and rationalize the incident. Maybe it's the heat, he thought. Maybe the truck driver had a tension headache or an upset stomach; maybe both. Maybe he'd had a fight with his wife. Maybe she'd failed to put out last night. Mann tried in vain to smile. There could be any number of reasons. Reaching out, he twisted off the radio. The cheerful music irritated him.

He drove behind the truck for several minutes, his face a mask of animosity. As the exhaust fumes started putting his stomach on edge, he suddenly forced down the heel of his right hand on the horn bar and held it there. Seeing that the route ahead was clear, he pushed in the accelerator pedal all the way and steered into the opposite lane.

The movement of his car was paralleled immediately by the truck. Mann stayed in place, right hand jammed down on the horn bar. Get out of the way, you son of a bitch! he thought. He felt the muscles of his jaw hardening until they ached. There was a twisting in his stomach.

"*Damn!*" He pulled back quickly to the proper lane, shuddering with fury. "You miserable son of a bitch," he muttered, glaring at the truck as it was shifted back in front of him. What the hell is wrong with you? I pass your goddamn rig a couple of times and you go flying off the deep end? Are you nuts or something? Mann nodded tensely. Yes, he thought; he *is*. No other explanation.

He wondered what Ruth would think of all this, how she'd react. Probably, she'd start to honk the horn and would keep on honking it, assuming that, eventually, it would attract the attention of a policeman. He looked around with a scowl. Just where in hell *were* the policemen out here, anyway? He made a scoffing noise. What policemen? Here in the boondocks? They probably had a sheriff on

horseback, for Christ's sake.

He wondered suddenly if he could fool the truck driver by passing on the right. Edging his car toward the shoulder, he peered ahead. No chance. There wasn't room enough. The truck driver could shove him through that wire fence if he wanted to. Mann shivered. And he'd want to, sure as hell, he thought.

Driving where he was, he grew conscious of the debris lying beside the highway: beer cans, candy wrappers, ice-cream containers, newspaper sections browned and rotted by the weather, a for sale sign torn in half. Keep America beautiful, he thought sardonically. He passed a boulder with the name will jasper painted on it in white. Who the hell is Will Jasper? he wondered. What would he think of this situation?

Unexpectedly, the car began to bounce. For several anxious moments, Mann thought that one of his tires had gone flat. Then he noticed that the paving along this section of highway consisted of pitted slabs with gaps between them. He saw the truck and trailer jolting up and down and thought: I hope it shakes your brains loose. As the truck veered into a sharp left curve, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the driver's face in the cab's side mirror. There was not enough time to establish his appearance.

"Ah," he said. A long, steep hill was looming up ahead. The truck would have to climb it slowly. There would doubtless be an opportunity to pass somewhere on the grade. Mann pressed down on the accelerator pedal, drawing as close behind the truck as safety would allow.

Halfway up the slope, Mann saw a turnout for the east-bound lane with no oncoming traffic anywhere in sight. Flooring the accelerator pedal, he shot into the opposite lane. The slow-moving truck began to angle out in front of him. Face stiffening, Mann steered his speeding car across the highway edge and curved it sharply on the turnout. Clouds of dust went billowing up behind his car, making him lose sight of the truck. His tires buzzed and crackled on the dirt, then, suddenly, were humming on the pavement once again.

He glanced at the rear view mirror and a barking laugh erupted from his throat. He'd only meant to pass. The dust had been an unexpected bonus. Let the bastard get a sniff of something rotten smelling in *his* nose for a change! he thought. He honked the horn elatedly, a mocking rhythm of bleats. Screw you, Jack!

He swept across the summit of the hill. A striking vista lay ahead: sunlit hills and flatland, a corridor of dark trees, quadrangles of cleared-off acreage and bright-green vegetable patches; far off, in the distance, a mammoth water tower. Mann felt stirred by the panoramic sight. Lovely, he thought. Reaching out, he turned the radio back on and started humming cheerfully with the music.

Seven minutes later, he passed a billboard advertising chuck's cafe. No thanks, Chuck, he thought. He glanced at a gray house nestled in a hollow. Was that a cemetery in its front yard or a group of plaster statuary for sale?

Hearing the noise behind him, Mann looked at the rear view mirror and felt himself go cold with fear. The truck was hurtling down the hill, pursuing him.

His mouth fell open and he threw a glance at the speedometer. He was doing more than 60! On a curving downgrade, that was not at all a safe speed to be driving. Yet the truck must be exceeding that by a considerable margin, it was closing the distance between them so rapidly. Mann swallowed, leaning to the right as he steered his car around a sharp curve. Is the man *insane*? he thought.

His gaze jumped forward searchingly. He saw a turnoff half a mile ahead and decided that he'd use it. In the rear view mirror, the huge square radiator grille was all he could see now. He stamped down on the gas pedal and his tires screeched unnervingly as he wheeled around another curve, thinking that, surely, the truck would have to slow down here.

He groaned as it rounded the curve with ease, only the sway of its tanks revealing the outward pressure of the turn. Mann bit trembling lips together as he whipped his car around another curve. A straight descent now. He depressed the pedal farther, glanced at the speedometer. Almost 70 miles an hour! He wasn't used to driving this fast!

In agony, he saw the turnoff shoot by on his right. He couldn't have left the highway at this speed, anyway; he'd have overturned. Goddamn it, what was wrong with that son of a bitch? Mann honked his horn in frightened rage. Cranking down the window suddenly, he shoved his left arm out to wave the

truck back. "*Back!*" he yelled. He honked the horn again. "Get back, you crazy bastard!"

The truck was almost on him now. He's going to kill me! Mann thought, horrified. He honked the horn repeatedly, then had to use both hands to grip the steering wheel as he swept around another curve. He flashed a look at the rear view mirror. He could see only the bottom portion of the truck's radiator grille. He was going to lose control! He felt the rear wheels start to drift and let up on the pedal quickly. The tire treads bit in, the car leaped on, regaining its momentum.

Mann saw the bottom of the grade ahead, and in the distance there was a building with a sign that read chuck's cafe. The truck was gaining ground again. This is insane! he thought, enraged and terrified at once. The highway straightened out. He floored the pedal: 74 now-75. Mann braced himself, trying to ease the car as far to the right as possible.

Abruptly, he began to brake, then swerved to the right, raking his car into the open area in front of the cafe. He cried out as the car began to fishtail, then careened into a skid. *Steer with it!* screamed a voice in his mind. The rear of the car was lashing from side to side, tires spewing dirt and raising clouds of dust. Mann pressed harder on the brake pedal, turning further into the skid. The car began to straighten out and he braked harder yet, conscious, on the sides of his vision, of the truck and trailer roaring by on the highway. He nearly sideswiped one of the cars parked in front of the cafe, bounced and skidded by it, going almost straight now. He jammed in the brake pedal as hard as he could. The rear end broke to the right and the car spun half around, sheering sideways to a neck-wrenching halt thirty yards beyond the cafe.

Mann sat in pulsing silence, eyes closed. His heartbeats felt like club blows in his chest. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. If he were ever going to have a heart attack, it would be now. After a while, he opened his eyes and pressed his right palm against his chest. His heart was still throbbing labouredly. No wonder, he thought. It isn't every day I'm almost murdered by a truck.

He raised the handle and pushed out the door, then started forward, grunting in surprise as the safety belt held him in place. Reaching down with shaking fingers, he depressed the release button and pulled the ends of the belt apart. He glanced at the cafe. What had its patrons thought of his break-neck appearance? he wondered.

He stumbled as he walked to the front door of the cafe. truckers welcome, read a sign in the window. It gave Mann a queasy feeling to see it. Shivering, he pulled open the door and went inside, avoiding the sight of its customers. He felt certain they were watching him, but he didn't have the strength to face their looks. Keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead, he moved to the rear of the cafe and opened the door marked gents.

Moving to the sink, he twisted the right-hand faucet and leaned over to cup cold water in his palms and splash it on his face. There was a fluttering of his stomach muscles he could not control.

Straightening up, he tugged down several towels from their dispenser and patted them against his face, grimacing at the smell of the paper. Dropping the soggy towels into a waste-basket beside the sink, he regarded himself in the wall mirror. Still with us, Mann, he thought. He nodded, swallowing. Drawing out his metal comb, he neatened his hair. You never know, he thought. You just never know. You drift along, year after year, presuming certain values to be fixed; like being able to drive on a public thoroughfare without somebody trying to murder you. You come to depend on that sort of thing. Then something occurs and all bets are off. One shocking incident and all the years of logic and acceptance are displaced and, suddenly, the jungle is in front of you again. *Man, part animal, part angel.* Where had he come across that phrase? He shivered.

It was entirely an animal in that truck out there.

His breath was almost back to normal now. Mann forced a smile at his reflection. All right, boy, he told himself. It's over now. It was a goddamned nightmare, but it's over. You are on your way to San Francisco. You'll get yourself a nice hotel room, order a bottle of expensive Scotch, soak your body in a hot bath and forget. Damn right, he thought. He turned and walked out of the washroom.

He jolted to a halt, his breath cut off. Standing rooted, heartbeat hammering at his chest, he gaped through the front window of the cafe.

The truck and trailer were parked outside.

Mann stared at them in unbelieving shock. It wasn't possible. He'd seen them roaring by at top speed. The driver had won; he'd *won*. He'd had the whole damn highway to himself! *Why had he turned back?*

Mann looked around with sudden dread. There were five men eating, three along the counter, two in booths. He cursed himself for having failed to look at faces when he'd entered. Now there was no way of knowing who it was. Mann felt his legs begin to shake.

Abruptly, he walked to the nearest booth and slid in clumsily behind the table. Now wait, he told himself; just wait. Surely, he could tell which one it was. Masking his face with the menu, he glanced across its top. Was it that one in the khaki work shirt? Mann tried to see the man's hands but couldn't. His gaze flicked nervously across the room. Not that one in the suit, of course. Three remaining. That one in the front booth, square faced, black-haired? If only he could see the man's hands, it might help. One of the two others at the counter? Mann studied them uneasily. Why hadn't he looked at faces when he'd come in?

Now *wait*, he thought. Goddamn it, *wait!* All right, the truck driver was in here. That didn't automatically signify that he meant to continue the insane duel. Chuck's Cafe might be the only place to eat for miles around. It *was* lunch time, wasn't it? The truck driver had probably intended to eat here all the time. He'd just been moving too fast to pull into the parking lot before. So he'd slowed down, turned around and driven back, that was all. Mann forced himself to read the menu. Right, he thought. No point in getting so rattled. Perhaps a beer would help relax him.

The woman behind the counter came over and Mann ordered a ham sandwich on rye toast and a bottle of Coors. As the woman turned away, he wondered, with a sudden twinge of self-reproach, why he hadn't simply left the cafe, jumped into his car and sped away. He would have known immediately, then, if the truck driver was still out to get him. As it was, he'd have to suffer through an entire meal to find out. He almost groaned at his stupidity.

Still, what if the truck driver *had* followed him out and started after him again? He'd have been right back where he'd started. Even if he'd managed to get a good lead, the truck driver would have overtaken him eventually. It just wasn't in him to drive at 80 and 90 miles an hour in order to stay ahead. True, he might have been intercepted by a California Highway Patrol car. What if he weren't, though?

Mann repressed the plaguing thoughts. He tried to calm himself. He looked deliberately at the four men. Either of two seemed a likely possibility as the driver of the truck: the square faced one in the front booth and the chunky one in the jumpsuit sitting at the counter. Mann had an impulse to walk over to them and ask which one it was, tell the man he was sorry he'd irritated him, tell him anything to calm him, since, obviously, he wasn't rational, was a manic-depressive, probably. Maybe buy the man a beer and sit with him awhile to try to settle things.

He couldn't move. What if the truck driver were letting the whole thing drop? Mightn't his approach rile the man all over again? Mann felt drained by indecision. He nodded weakly as the waitress set the sandwich and the bottle in front of him. He took a swallow of the beer, which made him cough. Was the truck driver amused by the sound? Mann felt a stirring of resentment deep inside himself. What right did that bastard have to impose this torment on another human being? It was a free country, wasn't it? Damn it, he had every right to pass the son of a bitch on a highway if he wanted to!

"Oh, hell," he mumbled. He tried to feel amused. He was making entirely too much of this. Wasn't he? He glanced at the pay telephone on the front wall. What was to prevent him from calling the local police and telling them the situation? But, then, he'd have to stay here, lose time, make Forbes angry, probably lose the sale. And what if the truck driver stayed to face them? Naturally, he'd deny the whole thing. What if the police believed him and didn't do anything about it? After they'd gone, the truck driver would undoubtedly take it out on him again, only worse. *God!* Mann thought in agony.

The sandwich tasted flat, the beer unpleasantly sour. Mann stared at the table as he ate. For God's sake, why was he just *sitting* here like this? He was a grown man, wasn't he? Why didn't he settle this damn thing once and for all?

His left hand twitched so unexpectedly, he spilled beer on his trousers. The man in the jump suit had risen from the counter and was strolling toward the front of the cafe. Mann felt his heartbeat thumping as the man gave money to the waitress, took his change and a toothpick from the dispenser and went

outside. Mann watched in anxious silence.

The man did not get into the cab of the tanker truck.

It had to be the one in the front booth, then. His face took form in Mann's remembrance: square, with dark eyes, dark hair; the man who'd tried to kill him.

Mann stood abruptly, letting impulse conquer fear. Eyes fixed ahead, he started toward the entrance. Anything was preferable to sitting in that booth. He stopped by the cash register, conscious of the hitching of his chest as he gulped in air. Was the man observing him? he wondered. He swallowed, pulling out the clip of dollar bills in his right-hand trouser pocket. He glanced toward the waitress. *Come on*, he thought. He looked at his check and, seeing the amount, reached shakily into his trouser pocket for change. He heard a coin fall onto the floor and roll away. Ignoring it, he dropped a dollar and a quarter onto the counter and thrust the clip of bills into his trouser pocket.

As he did, he heard the man in the front booth get up. An icy shudder spasmed up his back. Turning quickly to the door, he shoved it open, seeing, on the edges of his vision, the square faced man approach the cash register. Lurching from the cafe, he started toward his car with long strides. His mouth was dry again. The pounding of his heart was painful in his chest.

Suddenly, he started running. He heard the cafe door bang shut and fought away the urge to look across his shoulder. Was that a sound of other running footsteps now? Reaching his car, Mann yanked open the door and jarred in awkwardly behind the steering wheel. He reached into his trouser pocket for the keys and snatched them out, almost dropping them. His hand was shaking so badly he couldn't get the ignition key into its slot. He whined with mounting dread. *Come on!* he thought.

The key slid in, he twisted it convulsively. The motor started and he raced it momentarily before jerking the transmission shift to drive. Depressing the accelerator pedal quickly, he raked the car around and steered it toward the highway. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the truck and trailer being backed away from the cafe.

Reaction burst inside him. "No!" he raged and slammed his foot down on the brake pedal. This was idiotic! Why the hell should he run way? His car slid sideways to a rocking halt and, shouldering out the door, he lurched to his feet and started toward the truck with angry strides. *All right, Jack*, he thought. He glared at the man inside the truck. You want to punch my nose, okay, but no more goddamn tournament on the highway.

The truck began to pick up speed. Mann raised his right arm. "Hey!" he yelled. He knew the driver saw him. "*Hey!*" He started running as the truck kept moving, engine grinding loudly. It was on the highway now. He sprinted toward it with a sense of martyred outrage. The driver shifted gears, the truck moved faster. "Stop!" Mann shouted. "Damn it, *stop!*"

He thudded to a panting halt, staring at the truck as it receded down the highway, moved around a hill and disappeared. "You son of a bitch," he muttered. "You goddamn, miserable son of a bitch."

He trudged back slowly to his car, trying to believe that the truck driver had fled the hazard of a fistfight. It was possible, of course, but, somehow he could not believe it.

He got into his car and was about to drive onto the highway when he changed his mind and switched the motor off. That crazy bastard might just be tooling along at 15 miles an hour, waiting for him to catch up. Nuts to that, he thought. So he blew his schedule; screw it. Forbes would have to wait, that was all. And if Forbes didn't care to wait, that was all right, too. He'd sit here for a while and let the nut get out of range, let him think he'd won the day. He grinned. You're the bloody Red Baron, Jack; you've shot me down. Now go to hell with my sincerest compliments. He shook his head. Beyond belief, he thought.

He really should have done this earlier, pulled over, waited. Then the truck driver would have had to let it pass. *Or picked on someone else*, the startling thought occurred to him. Jesus, maybe that was how the crazy bastard whiled away his work hours! Jesus Christ Almighty! was it possible?

He looked at the dashboard clock. It was just past 12:30. Wow, he thought. All that in less than an hour. He shifted on the seat and stretched his legs out. Leaning back against the door, he closed his eyes and mentally perused the things he had to do tomorrow and the following day. Today was shot to hell, as far as he could see.



When he opened his eyes, afraid of drifting into sleep and losing too much time, almost eleven minutes had passed. The nut must be an ample distance off by now, he thought; at least 11 miles and likely more, the way he drove. Good enough. He wasn't going to try to make San Francisco on schedule now, anyway. He'd take it real easy.

Mann adjusted his safety belt, switched on the motor, tapped the transmission pointer into drive position and pulled onto the highway, glancing back across his shoulder. Not a car in sight. Great day for driving. Everybody was staying at home. That nut must have a reputation around here. When Crazy Jack is on the highway, lock your car in the garage.

Mann chuckled at the notion as his car began to turn the curve ahead.

Mindless reflex drove his right foot down against the brake pedal. Suddenly, his car had skidded to a halt and he was staring down the highway. The truck and trailer were parked on the shoulder less than 90 yards away.

Mann couldn't seem to function. He knew his car was blocking the west-bound lane, knew that he should either make a U-turn or pull off the highway, but all he could do was gape at the truck.

He cried out, legs retracting, as a horn blast sounded behind him. Snapping up his head, he looked at the rear view mirror, gasping as he saw a yellow station wagon bearing down on him at high speed. Suddenly, it veered off toward the eastbound lane, disappearing from the mirror. Mann jerked around and saw it hurtling past his car, its rear end snapping back and forth, its back tires screeching. He saw the twisted features of the man inside, saw his lips move rapidly with cursing.

Then the station wagon had swerved back into the westbound lane and was speeding off. It gave Mann an odd sensation to see it pass the truck. The man in that station wagon could drive on, unthreatened. Only he'd been singled out. What happened was demented. Yet it was happening.

He drove his car onto the highway shoulder and braked. Putting the transmission into neutral, he leaned back, staring at the truck. His head was aching again. There was a pulsing at his temples like the ticking of a muffled clock.

What was he to do? He knew very well that if he left his car to walk to the truck, the driver would pull away and re-park farther down the highway. He may as well face the fact that he was dealing with a madman. He felt the tremor in his stomach muscles starting up again. His heartbeat thudded slowly, striking at his chest wall. Now what?

With a sudden, angry impulse, Mann snapped the transmission into gear and stepped down hard on the accelerator pedal. The tires of the car spun sizzingly before they gripped; the car shot out onto the highway. Instantly, the truck began to move. He even had the motor on! Mann thought in raging fear. He floored the pedal, then, abruptly, realized he couldn't make it, that the truck would block his way and he'd collide with its trailer. A vision flashed across his mind, a fiery explosion and a sheet of flame incinerating him. He started braking fast, trying to decelerate evenly, so he wouldn't lose control.

When he'd slowed down enough to feel that it was safe, he steered the car onto the shoulder and stopped it again, throwing the transmission into neutral.

Approximately eighty yards ahead, the truck pulled off the highway and stopped.

Mann tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. *Now* what? he thought. Turn around and head east until he reached a cut-off that would take him to San Francisco by another route? How did he know the truck driver wouldn't follow him even then? His cheeks twisted as he bit his lips together angrily. No! He wasn't going to turn around!

His expression hardened suddenly. Well, he wasn't going to *sit* here all day, that was certain. Reaching out, he tapped the gearshift into drive and steered his car onto the highway once again. He saw the massive truck and trailer start to move but made no effort to speed up. He tapped at the brakes, taking a position about 30 yards behind the trailer. He glanced at his speedometer. Forty miles an hour. The truck driver had his left arm out of the cab window and was waving him on. What did that mean? Had he changed his mind? Decided, finally, that this thing had gone too far? Mann couldn't let himself believe it.

He looked ahead. Despite the mountain ranges all around, the highway was flat as far as he could see. He tapped a fingernail against the horn bar, trying to make up his mind. Presumably, he could continue all

the way to San Francisco at this speed, hanging back just far enough to avoid the worst of the exhaust fumes. It didn't seem likely that the truck driver would stop directly on the highway to block his way. And if the truck driver pulled onto the shoulder to let him pass, he could pull off the highway, too. It would be a draining afternoon but a safe one.

On the other hand, outracing the truck might be worth just one more try. This was obviously what that son of a bitch wanted. Yet, surely, a vehicle of such size couldn't be driven with the same daring as, potentially, his own. The laws of mechanics were against it, if nothing else. Whatever advantage the truck had in mass, it had to lose in stability, particularly that of its trailer. If Mann were to drive at, say, 80 miles an hour and there were a few steep grades-as he felt sure there were-the truck would have to fall behind.

The question was, of course, whether he had the nerve to maintain such a speed over a long distance. He'd never done it before. Still, the more he thought about it, the more it appealed to him; far more than the alternative did.

Abruptly, he decided. *Right*, he thought. He checked ahead, then pressed down hard on the accelerator pedal and pulled into the eastbound lane. As he neared the truck, he tensed, anticipating that the driver might block his way. But the truck did not shift from the westbound lane. Mann's car moved along its mammoth side. He glanced at the cab and saw the name Keller printed on its door. For a shocking instant, he thought it read killer and started to slow down. Then, glancing at the name again, he saw what it really was and depressed the pedal sharply. When he saw the truck reflected in the rear view mirror, he steered his car into the westbound lane.

He shuddered, dread and satisfaction mixed together, as he saw that the truck driver was speeding up. It was strangely comforting to know the man's intentions definitely again. That plus the knowledge of his face and name seemed, somehow, to reduce his stature. Before, he had been faceless, nameless, an embodiment of unknown terror. Now, at least, he was an individual. All right, Keller, said his mind, let's see you beat me with that purple silver relic now. He pressed down harder on the pedal. *Here we go*, he thought.

He looked at the speedometer, scowling as he saw that he was doing only 74 miles an hour. Deliberately, he pressed down on the pedal, alternating his gaze between the highway ahead and the speedometer until the needle turned past 80. He felt a flickering of satisfaction with himself. All right, Keller, you son of a bitch, top that, he thought.

After several moments, he glanced into the rear view mirror again. Was the truck getting closer? Stunned, he checked the speedometer. Damn it! He was down to 76! He forced in the accelerator pedal angrily. *He mustn't go less than 80!* Mann's chest shuddered with convulsive breath.

He glanced aside as he hurtled past a beige sedan parked on the shoulder underneath a tree. A young couple sat inside it, talking. Already they were far behind, their world removed from his. Had they even glanced aside when he'd passed? He doubted it.

He started as the shadow of an overhead bridge whipped across the hood and windshield. Inhaling raggedly, he glanced at the speedometer again. He was holding at 81. He checked the rear view mirror. Was it his imagination that the truck was gaining ground? He looked forward with anxious eyes. There had to be some kind of town ahead. To hell with time; he'd stop at the police station and tell them what had happened. They'd have to believe him. Why would he stop to tell them such a story if it weren't true? For all he knew, Keller had a police record in these parts. *Oh, sure, we're on to him*, he heard a faceless officer remark. *That crazy bastard's asked for it before and now he's going to get it.*

Mann shook himself and looked at the mirror. The truck *was* getting closer. Wincing, he glanced at the speedometer, goddamn it, pay attention! raged his mind. He was down to 74 again! Whining with frustration, he depressed the pedal. Eighty!-80! he demanded of himself. There was a murderer behind him!

His car began to pass a field of flowers; lilacs, Mann saw, white and purple stretching out in endless rows. There was a small shack near the highway, the words field fresh flowers painted on it. A brown-cardboard square was propped against the shack, the word funerals printed crudely on it. Mann saw himself, abruptly, lying in a casket, painted like some grotesque mannequin. The overpowering smell of flowers seemed to fill his nostrils. Ruth and the children sitting in the first row, heads bowed. All his

relatives-

Suddenly, the pavement roughened and the car began to bounce and shudder, driving bolts of pain into his head. He felt the steering wheel resisting him and clamped his hands around it tightly, harsh vibrations running up his arms. He didn't dare look at the mirror now. He had to force himself to keep the speed unchanged. Keller wasn't going to slow down; he was sure of that. *What if he got a flat tire, though?* All control would vanish in an instant. He visualized the somersaulting of his car, its grinding, shrieking tumble, the explosion of its gas tank, his body crushed and burned and-

The broken span of pavement ended and his gaze jumped quickly to the rear view mirror. The truck was no closer, but it hadn't lost ground, either. Mann's eyes shifted. Up ahead were hills and mountains. He tried to reassure himself that upgrades were on his side, that he could climb them at the same speed he was going now. Yet all he could imagine were the downgrades, the immense truck close behind him, slamming violently into his car and knocking it across some cliff edge. He had a horrifying vision of dozens of broken, rusted cars lying unseen in the canyons ahead, corpses in every one of them, all flung to shattering deaths by Keller.

Mann's car went rocketing into a corridor of trees. On each side of the highway was a eucalyptus windbreak, each trunk three feet from the next. It was like speeding through a high-walled canyon. Mann gasped, twitching, as a large twig bearing dusty leaves dropped down across the windshield, then slid out of sight. Dear God! he thought. He was getting near the edge himself. If he should lose his nerve at this speed, it was over. Jesus! That would be ideal for Keller! he realized suddenly. He visualized the square faced driver laughing as he passed the burning wreckage, knowing that he'd killed his prey without so much as touching him.

Mann started as his car shot out into the open. The route ahead was not straight now but winding up into the foothills.

Mann willed himself to press down on the pedal even more. Eighty-three now, almost 84.

To his left was a broad terrain of green hills blending into mountains. He saw a black car on a dirt road, moving toward the highway. *Was its side painted white?* Mann's heartbeat lurched. Impulsively, he jammed the heel of his right hand down against the horn bar and held it there. The blast of the horn was shrill and racking to his ears. His heart began to pound. Was it a police car? *Was it?*

He let the horn bar up abruptly. *No, it wasn't.* Damn! his mind raged. Keller must have been amused by his pathetic efforts. Doubtless, he was chuckling to himself right now. He heard the truck driver's voice in his mind, coarse and sly. *You think you gonna get a cop to save you, boy? Shee-it. You gonna die.* Mann's heart contorted with savage hatred. *You son of a bitch!* he thought. Jerking his right hand into a fist, he drove it down against the seat. Goddamn you, Keller! I'm going to kill you, if it's the last thing I do!

The hills were closer now. There would be slopes directly, long steep grades. Mann felt a burst of hope within himself. He was sure to gain a lot of distance on the truck. No matter how he tried, that bastard Keller couldn't manage 80 miles an hour on a hill. But I can! cried his mind with fierce elation. He worked up saliva in his mouth and swallowed it. The back of his shirt was drenched. He could feel sweat trickling down his sides. A bath and a drink, first order of the day on reaching San Francisco. A long, hot bath, a long, cold drink. Cutty Sark. He'd splurge, by Christ. He rated it.

The car swept up a shallow rise. Not steep enough, goddamn it! The truck's momentum would prevent its losing speed. Mann felt mindless hatred for the landscape. Already, he had topped the rise and tilted over to a shallow downgrade. He looked at the rear view mirror. *Square*, he thought, everything about the truck was square: the radiator grille, the fender shapes, the bumper ends, the outline of the cab, even the shape of Keller's hands and face. He visualized the truck as some great entity pursuing him, insentient, brutish, chasing him with instinct only.

Mann cried out, horror-stricken, as he saw the road repairs sign up ahead. His frantic gaze leaped down the highway. Both lanes blocked, a huge black arrow pointing toward the alternate route! He groaned in anguish, seeing it was dirt. His foot jumped automatically to the brake pedal and started

pumping it. He threw a dazed look at the rear view mirror. The truck was moving as fast as ever! It *couldn't*, though! Mann's expression froze in terror as he started turning to the right.

He stiffened as the front wheels hit the dirt road. For an instant, he was certain that the back part of the car was going to spin; he felt it breaking to the left. "No, don't!" he cried. Abruptly, he was jarring down the dirt road, elbows braced against his sides, trying to keep from losing control. His tires battered at the ruts, almost tearing the wheel from his grip. The windows rattled noisily. His neck snapped back and forth with painful jerks. His jolting body surged against the binding of the safety belt and slammed down violently on the seat. He felt the bouncing of the car drive up his spine. His clenching teeth slipped and he cried out hoarsely as his upper teeth gouged deep into his lip.

He gasped as the rear end of the car began surging to the right. He started to jerk the steering wheel to the left, then, hissing, wrenched it in the opposite direction, crying out as the right rear fender cracked into a fence pole, knocking it down. He started pumping at the brakes, struggling to regain control. The car rear yawed sharply to the left, tires shooting out a spray of dirt. Mann felt a scream tear upward in his throat. He twisted wildly at the steering wheel. The car began careening to the right. He hitched the wheel around until the car was on course again. His head was pounding like his heart now, with gigantic, throbbing spasms. He started coughing as he gagged on dripping blood.

The dirt road ended suddenly, the car regained momentum on the pavement and he dared to look at the rear view mirror. The truck was slowed down but was still behind him, rocking like a freighter on a storm-tossed sea, its huge tires scouring up a pall of dust. Mann shoved in the accelerator pedal and his car surged forward. A good, steep grade lay just ahead; he'd gain that distance now. He swallowed blood, grimacing at the taste, then fumbled in his trouser pocket and tugged out his handkerchief. He pressed it to his bleeding lip, eyes fixed on the slope ahead. Another fifty yards or so. He writhed his back. His undershirt was soaking wet, adhering to his skin. He glanced at the rear view mirror. The truck had just regained the highway. *Tough!* he thought with venom. Didn't get me, did you, Keller?

His car was on the first yards of the upgrade when steam began to issue from beneath its hood. Mann stiffened suddenly, eyes widening with shock. The steam increased, became a smoking mist. Mann's gaze jumped down. The red light hadn't flashed on yet but had to in a moment. How could this be happening? Just as he was set to get away! The slope ahead was long and gradual, with many curves. He knew he couldn't stop. Could he U-turn unexpectedly and go back down? the sudden thought occurred. He looked ahead. The highway was too narrow, bound by hills on both sides. There wasn't room enough to make an uninterrupted turn and there wasn't time enough to ease around. If he tried that, Keller would shift direction and hit him head on. "Oh, my God!" Mann murmured suddenly.

*He was going to die.*

He stared ahead with stricken eyes, his view increasingly obscured by steam. Abruptly, he recalled the afternoon he'd had the engine steam cleaned at the local car wash. The man who'd done it had suggested he replace the water hoses, because steam cleaning had a tendency to make them crack. He'd nodded, thinking that he'd do it when he had more time. *More time!* The phrase was like a dagger in his mind. He'd failed to change the hoses and, for that failure, he was now about to die.

He sobbed in terror as the dashboard light flashed on. He glanced at it involuntarily and read the word hot, black on red. With a breathless gasp, he jerked the transmission into low. Why hadn't he done that right away! He looked ahead. The slope seemed endless. Already, he could hear a boiling throb inside the radiator. How much coolant was there left? Steam was clouding faster, hazing up the windshield. Reaching out, he twisted at a dashboard knob. The wipers started flicking back and forth in fan-shaped sweeps. There had to be enough coolant in the radiator to get him to the top. *Then* what? cried his mind. He couldn't drive without coolant, even downhill. He glanced at the rear view mirror. The truck was falling behind. Mann snarled with maddened fury. *If it weren't for that goddamned hose, he'd be escaping now!*

The sudden lurching of the car snatched him back to terror. If he braked now, he could jump out, run, and scramble up that slope. Later, he might not have the time. He couldn't make himself stop the car, though. As long as it kept on running, he felt bound to it, less vulnerable. God knows what would happen if he left it.

Mann started up the slope with haunted eyes, trying not to see the red light on the edges of his vision. Yard by yard, his car was slowing down. Make it, make it, pleaded his mind, even though he thought that it was futile. The car was running more and more unevenly. The thumping percolation of its radiator filled his ears. Any moment now, the motor would be choked off and the car would shudder to a stop, leaving him a sitting target. *No*, he thought. He tried to blank his mind.

He was almost to the top, but in the mirror he could see the truck drawing up on him. He jammed down on the pedal and the motor made a grinding noise. He groaned. It had to make the top! Please, God, help me! screamed his mind. The ridge was just ahead. Closer. Closer. Make it. "Make it." The car was shuddering and clanking, slowing down-oil, smoke, and steam gushing from beneath the hood. The windshield wipers swept from side to side. Mann's head throbbed. Both his hands felt numb. His heartbeat pounded as he stared ahead. Make it, please, God, make it. Make it. *Make it!*

*Over!* Mann's lips opened in a cry of triumph as the car began descending. Hand shaking uncontrollably, he shoved the transmission into neutral and let the car go into a glide. The triumph strangled in his throat as he saw that there was nothing in sight but hills and more hills. Never mind! He was on a downgrade now, a long one. He passed a sign that read, trucks use low gears next 12 miles. Twelve miles! Something would come up. It had to.

The car began to pick up speed. Mann glanced at the speedometer. Forty-seven miles an hour. The red light still burned. He'd save the motor for a long time, too, though; let it cool for twelve miles, if the truck was far enough behind.

His speed increased. Fifty... 51. Mann watched the needle turning slowly toward the right. He glanced at the rear-view mirror. The truck had not appeared yet. With a little luck, he might still get a good lead. Not as good as he might have if the motor hadn't overheated but enough to work with. There had to be some place along the way to stop. The needle edged past 55 and started toward the 60 mark.

Again, he looked at the rear view mirror, jolting as he saw that the truck had topped the ridge and was on its way down. He felt his lips begin to shake and crimped them together. His gaze jumped fitfully between the steam obscured highway and the mirror. The truck was accelerating rapidly. Keller doubtless had the gas pedal floored. It wouldn't be long before the truck caught up to him. Mann's right hand twitched unconsciously toward the gearshift. Noticing, he jerked it back, grimacing, glanced at the speedometer. The car's velocity had just passed 60. Not enough! He had to use the motor now! He reached out desperately.

His right hand froze in mid-air as the motor stalled; then, shooting out the hand, he twisted the ignition key. The motor made a grinding noise but wouldn't start. Mann glanced up, saw that he was almost on the shoulder, jerked the steering wheel around. Again, he turned the key, but there was no response. He looked up at the rear view mirror. The truck was gaining on him swiftly. He glanced at the speedometer. The car's speed was fixed at 62. Mann felt himself crushed in a vice of panic. He stared ahead with haunted eyes.

Then he saw it, several hundred yards ahead: an escape route for trucks with burned-out brakes. There was no alternative now. Either he took the turnout or his car would be rammed from behind. The truck was frighteningly close. He heard the high-pitched wailing of its motor. Unconsciously, he started easing to the right, then jerked the wheel back suddenly. He mustn't give the move away! He had to wait until the last possible moment. Otherwise, Keller would follow him in.

Just before he reached the escape route, Mann wrenched the steering wheel around. The car rear started breaking to the left, tires shrieking on the pavement. Mann steered with the skid, braking just enough to keep from losing all control. The rear tires grabbed and, at 60 miles an hour, the car shot up the dirt trail, tires slinging up a cloud of dust. Mann began to hit the brakes. The rear wheels side slipped and the car slammed hard against the dirt bank to the right. Mann gasped as the car bounced off and started to fishtail with violent whipping motions, angling toward the trail edge. He drove his foot down on the brake pedal with all his might. The car rear skidded to the right and slammed against the bank again. Mann heard a grinding rend of metal and felt himself heaved downward suddenly, his neck snapped, as the car plowed to a violent halt.

As in a dream, Mann turned to see the truck and trailer swerving off the highway. Paralyzed, he

watched the massive vehicle hurtle toward him, staring at it with a blank detachment, knowing he was going to die but so stupefied by the sight of the looming truck that he couldn't react. The gargantuan shape roared closer, blotting out the sky. Mann felt a strange sensation in his throat, unaware that he was screaming.

Suddenly, the truck began to tilt. Mann stared at it in choked-off silence as it started tipping over like some ponderous beast toppling in slow motion. Before it reached his car, it vanished from his rear window.

Hands palsied, Mann undid the safety belt and opened the door. Struggling from the car, he stumbled to the trail edge, staring downward. He was just in time to see the truck capsize like a foundering ship. The tanker followed, huge wheels spinning as it overturned.

The storage tank on the truck exploded first, the violence of its detonation causing Mann to stagger back and sit down clumsily on the dirt. A second explosion roared below, its shock wave buffeting across him hotly, making his ears hurt. His glazed eyes saw a fiery column shoot up toward the sky in front of him, then another.

Mann crawled slowly to the trail edge and peered down at the canyon. Enormous gouts of flame were towering upward, topped by thick, black, oily smoke. He couldn't see the truck or trailer, only flames. He gaped at them in shock, all feeling drained from him.

Then, unexpectedly, emotion came. Not dread, at first, and not regret; not the nausea that followed soon. It was a primeval tumult in his mind: the cry of some ancestral beast above the body of its vanquished foe.

## 6 - Mute

The man in the dark raincoat arrived in German Corners at two-thirty that Friday afternoon. He walked across the bus station to a counter behind which a plump, grey-haired woman was polishing glasses.

'Please,' he said, 'Where might I find authority?'

The woman peered through rimless glasses at him. She saw a man in his late thirties, a tall, good-looking man.

'Authority?' she asked.

'Yes - how do you say it? The constable? The -?'

'Sheriff?'

'Ah.' The man smiled. 'Of course. The sheriff. Where might I find him?'

After being directed, he walked out of the building into the overcast day. The threat of rain had been constant since he'd woken up that morning as the bus was pulling over the mountains into Casca Valley. The man drew up his collar, then slid both hands into the pockets of his raincoat and started briskly down Main Street.

Really, he felt tremendously guilty for not having come sooner; but there was so much to do, so many problems to overcome with his own two children. Even knowing that something was wrong with Holger and Fanny, he'd been unable to get away from Germany until now - almost a year since they'd last heard from the Nielsens. It was a shame that Holger had chosen such an out of the way place for his corner of the four-sided experiment.

Professor Werner walked more quickly, anxious to find out what had happened to the Nielsens and their son. Their progress with the boy had been phenomenal -really an inspiration to them all. Although, Werner felt, deep within himself, that something terrible had happened he hoped they were all alive and well. Yet, if they were, how to account for the long silence?

Werner shook his head worriedly. Could it have been the town? Elkenberg had been compelled to move several times in order to avoid the endless prying - sometimes innocent, more often malicious - into *his* work. Something similar might have happened to Nielsen. The workings of the small town

composite mind could, sometimes, be a terrible thing.

The sheriff's office was in the middle of the next block. Werner strode more quickly along the narrow sidewalk, then pushed open the door and entered the large, warmly heated room.

'Yes?' the sheriff asked, looking up from his desk.

'I have come to inquire about a family,' Werner said, 'The name of Nielsen.'

Sheriff Harry Wheeler looked blankly at the tall man.

Cora was pressing Paul's trousers when the call came. Setting the iron on its stand, she walked across the kitchen and lifted the receiver from the wall telephone.

'Yes?' she said.

'Cora, it's me.'

Her face tightened. 'Is something wrong, Harry?'

He was silent.

'Harry?'

*'The one from Germany is here'*

Cora stood motionless, staring at the calendar on the wall, the numbers blurred before her eyes.

'Cora, did you hear me?'

She swallowed dryly. 'Yes.'

'I - I have to bring him out to the house,' he said.

She closed her eyes.

'I know,' she murmured and hung up.

Turning, she walked slowly to the window. It's going to rain, she thought. Nature was setting the scene well.

Abruptly, her eyes shut, her fingers drew in tautly, the nails digging at her palms.

'No.' It was almost a gasp. No.'

After a few moments she opened her tear glistening eyes and looked out fixedly at the road. She stood there numbly, thinking of the day the boy had come to her.

If the house hadn't burned in the middle of the night there might have been a chance. It was twenty-one miles from German Corners but the state highway ran fifteen of them and the last six - the six miles of dirt road that led north into the wood sloped hills - might have been navigated had there been more time.

As it happened, the house was a night-lashing sheet of flame before Bernhard Klaus saw it.

Klaus and his family lived some five miles away on Skytouch Hill. He had gotten out of bed around one-thirty to get a drink of water. The window of the bathroom faced north and that was why, entering, Klaus saw the tiny flaring blaze out in the darkness.

'*Gott'n'immel!*' he slung startled words together and was out of the room before he'd finished. He thumped heavily down the carpeted steps, then, feeling at the wall for guidance, hurried for the living room.

'Fire at Nielsen house!' he gasped after agitated cranking had roused the night operator from her nap.

The hour, the remoteness, and one more thing doomed the house. German Corners had no official fire brigade. The security of its brick and timbered dwellings depended on voluntary effort. In the town itself this posed no serious problem. It was different with those houses in the outlying areas.

By the time Sheriff Wheeler had gathered five men and driven them to the fire in the ancient truck, the house was lost. While four of the six men pumped futile streams of water into the leaping, crackling inferno, Sheriff Wheeler and his deputy, Max Ederman, circuted the house.

There was no way in. They stood in back, raised arms warding off the singeing buffet of heat, grimacing at the blaze.

'They're done for!' Ederman yelled above the windswept roar.

Sheriff Wheeler looked sick. 'The *boy*,' he said but Ederman didn't hear.

Only a waterfall could have doused the burning of the old house. All the six men could do was prevent ignition of the woods that fringed the clearing. Their silent figures prowled the edges of the glowing aura,

stamping out sparks, hosing out the occasional flare of bushes and tree foliage.

They found the boy just as the eastern hill peaks were being edged with grey morning.

Sheriff Wheeler was trying to get close enough to see into one of the side windows when he heard a shout. Turning, he ran towards the thick woods that sloped downwards a few dozen yards behind the house. Before he'd reached the underbrush, Tom Poulter emerged from them, his thin frame staggering beneath the weight of Paal Nielsen.

'Where'd you find him?' Wheeler asked, grabbing the boy's legs to ease weight from the older man's back.

'Down the hill,' Poulter gasped. 'Lyin' on the ground.'

'Is he burned?'

'Don't look it. His pyjamas ain't touched.'

'Give him here,' the sheriff said. He shifted Paal into his own strong arms and found two large, green pupilled eyes staring blankly at him.

'You're awake,' he said, surprised.

The boy kept staring at him without making a sound.

'You all right, son?' Wheeler asked. It might have been a statue he held, Paal's body was so inert, his expression so dumbly static.

'Let's get a blanket on him,' the sheriff muttered aside and started for the truck. As he walked he noticed how the boy stared at the burning house now, a look of mask-like rigidity on his face.

'Shock,' murmured Poulter and the sheriff nodded grimly.

They tried to put him down on the cab seat, a blanket over him but he kept sitting up, never speaking. The coffee Wheeler tried to give him dribbled from his lips and across his chin. The two men stood beside the truck while Paal stared through the windshield at the burning house.

'Bad off,' said Poulter, 'Can't talk, cry nor nothing.'

'He isn't burned,' Wheeler said, perplexed, 'How'd he get out of the house without getting burned?'

'Maybe his folks got out too,' said Poulter.

'Where are they then?'

The older man shook his head. 'Dunno, Harry.'

'Well, I better take him home to Cora,' the sheriff said, 'Can't leave him sitting out here.'

'Think I'd better go with you,' Poulter said, 'I have t' get the mail sorted for delivery.'

'All right.'

Wheeler told the other four men he'd bring back food and replacements in an hour or so. Then Poulter and he climbed into the cab beside Paal and he jabbed his boot toe on the starter. The engine coughed spasmodically, groaned over, then caught. The sheriff raced it until it was warm, then eased it into gear. The truck rolled off slowly down the dirt road that led to the highway.

Until the burning house was no longer visible, Paal stared out the back window, face still immobile. Then, slowly, he turned, the blanket slipping off his thin shoulders. Tom Poulter put it back over him.

'Warm enough?' he asked.

The silent boy looked at Poulter as if he'd never heard a human voice in his life.

As soon as she heard the truck turn off the road, Cora Wheeler's quick right hand moved along the stove-front switches. Before her husband's bootfalls sounded on the back porch steps, the bacon lay neatly in strips across the frying pan, white moons of pancake batter were browning on the griddle, and the already brewed coffee was heating.

'Harry,'

There was a sound of pitying distress in her voice as she saw the boy in his arms. She hurried across the kitchen.

'Let's get him to bed,' Wheeler said, 'I think maybe he's in shock.'

The slender woman moved up the stairs on hurried feet, threw open the door of what had been David's room, and moved to the bed. When Wheeler passed through the doorway she had the covers peeled back and was plugging in an electric blanket.

'Is he hurt?' she asked.



'No.' He put Paal down on the bed.

'Poor darling,' she murmured, tucking in the bedclothes around the boy's frail body. 'Poor little darling.' She stroked back the soft blond hair from his forehead and smiled down at him.

'There now, go to sleep, dear. It's all right. Go to sleep.'

Wheeler stood behind her and saw the seven-year-old boy staring up at Cora with that same dazed, lifeless expression. It hadn't changed once since Tom Poulter had brought him out of the woods.

The sheriff turned and went down to the kitchen. There he phoned for replacements, then turned the pancakes and bacon, and poured himself a cup of coffee. He was drinking it when Cora came down the back stairs and returned to the stove.

'Are his parents -?' she began.

'I don't know,' Wheeler said, shaking his head, 'We couldn't get near the house.'

'But the boy -?'

'Tom Poulter found him outside.'

'Outside.'

'We don't know how he got out,' he said, 'All we know's he was there.'

His wife grew silent. She slid pancakes on a dish and put the dish in front of him. She put her hand on his shoulder.

'You look tired,' she said, 'Can you go to bed?'

'Later,' he said.

She nodded, then, patting his shoulder, turned away. 'The bacon will be done directly,' she said.

He grunted. Then, as he poured maple syrup over the stack of cakes, he said, 'I expect they are dead, Cora. It's an awful fire; still going when I left. Nothing we could do about it.'

'That poor boy,' she said.

She stood by the stove watching her husband eat wearily.

'I tried to get him to talk,' she said, shaking her head, 'but he never said a word.'

'Never said a word to us either,' he told her, 'Just stared.'

He looked at the table, chewing thoughtfully.

'Like he didn't even know how to talk,' he said.

A little after ten that morning the waterfall came - a waterfall of rain - and the burning house sputtered and hissed into charred, smoke-fogged ruins.

Red-eyed and exhausted, Sheriff Wheeler sat motionless in the truck cab until the deluge had slackened. Then, with a chest-deep groan, he pushed open the door and slid to the ground. There, he raised the collar of his slicker and pulled down the wide-brimmed Stetson more tightly on his skull. He walked around to the back of the covered truck.

'Come on,' he said, his voice hoarsely dry. He trudged through the clinging mud towards the house.

The front door still stood. Wheeler and the other men by-passed it and clambered over the collapsed living room wall. The sheriff felt thin waves of heat from the still-glowing timbers and the throat-clogging reek, of wet, smouldering rugs and upholstery turned his edgy stomach.

He stepped across some half-burned books on the floor and the roasted bindings crackled beneath his tread. He kept moving, into the hall, breathing through gritted teeth, rain spattering off his shoulders and back. I hope they got out, he thought, I hope to God they got out.

They hadn't. They were still in their bed, no longer human, blackened to a hideous, joint twisted crisp. Sheriff Wheeler's face was taut and pale as he looked down at them.

One of the men prodded a wet twig at something on the mattress.

'Pipe,' Wheeler heard him say above the drum of rain, 'Must have fell asleep smokin'.'

'Get some blankets,' Wheeler told them, 'Put them in the back of the truck.'

Two of the men turned away without a word and Wheeler heard them clump away over the rubble.

He was unable to take his eyes off Professor Holger Nielsen and his wife Fanny, scorched into grotesque mockeries of the handsome couple he remembered - the tall, big-framed Holger, calmly imperious; the slender, auburn-haired Fanny, her face a soft, rose cheeked -

Abruptly, the sheriff turned and stumped from the room, almost tripping over a fallen beam.

The boy - what would happen to the boy now? That day was the first time Paal had ever left this house in his life. His parents were the fulcrum of his world; Wheeler knew that much. No wonder there had been that look of shocked incomprehension on Paal's face.

Yet how did he know his mother and father were dead?

As the sheriff crossed the living room, he saw one of the men looking at a partially charred book.

'Look at this,' the man said, holding it out.

Wheeler glanced at it, his eyes catching the title: *The Unknown Mind*.

He turned away tensely. 'Put it down!' he snapped, quitting the house with long, anxious strides. The memory of how the Nielsens looked went with him; and something else. A question.

*How did Paal get out of the house?*

Paal woke up.

For a long moment he stared up at the formless shadows that danced and fluttered across the ceiling. It was raining out. The wind was rustling tree boughs outside the window, causing shadow movements in this strange room. Paal lay motionless in the warm centre of the bed, air crisp in his lungs, cold against his pale cheeks.

Where were they? Paal closed his eyes and tried to sense their presence. They weren't in the house. Where then? Where were his mother and father?

*Hands of my mother.* Paal washed his mind clean of all but the trigger symbol. They rested on the ebony velvet of his concentration - pale, lovely hands, soft to touch and be touched by, the mechanism that could raise his mind to the needed level of clarity.

In his own home it would be unnecessary. His own home was filled with the sense of them. Each object touched by them possessed a power to bring their minds close. The very air seemed charged with their consciousness, filled with a constancy of attention.

Not here. He needed to lift himself above the alien drag of here.

*Therefore, I am convinced that each child is born with this instinctive ability.* Words given to him by his father appearing again like dew-jewelled spider web across the fingers of his mother's hands. He stripped it off. The hands were free again, stroking slowly at the darkness of his mental focus. His eyes were shut; a tracery of lines and ridges scarred his brow, his tightened jaw was bloodless. The level of awareness, like waters, rose.

His senses rose along, unbidden.

Sound revealed its woven maze - the rushing, thudding, drumming, dripping rain; the tangled knit of winds through air and tree and gabled eave; the crackling settle of the house; each whispering transience of process.

Sense of smell expanded to a cloud of brain-filling odours - wood and wool, damp brick and dust and sweet starched linens. Beneath his tensing fingers weave became apparent - coolness and warmth, the weight of covers, the delicate, skin-scarring press of rumpled sheet. In his mouth the taste of cold air, old house. Of sight, only the hands.

Silence; lack of response. He'd never had to wait so long for answers before. Usually, they flooded on him easily. His mother's hands grew clearer. They pulsed with life. Unknown, he climbed beyond. *This bottom level sets the stage for more important phenomena.* Words of his father. He'd never gone above that bottom level until now.

Up, up. Like cool hands drawing him to rarified heights. Tendrils of acute consciousness rose towards the peak, searching desperately for a holding place. The hands began breaking into clouds. The clouds dispersed.

It seemed he floated towards the blackened tangle of his home, rain a glistening lace before his eyes. He saw the front door standing, waiting for his hand. The house drew closer. It was engulfed in licking mists. Closer, closer -

*Paal, no.*

His body shuddered on the bed. Ice frosted his brain. The house fled suddenly, bearing with itself a horrid image of two black figures lying on -

Paal jolted up, staring and rigid. Awareness maelstromed into its hiding place. One thing alone remained. He knew that they were gone. He knew that they had guided him, sleeping, from the house. Even as they burned.

That night they knew he couldn't speak.

There was no reason for it, they thought. His tongue was there, his throat looked healthy. Wheeler looked into his opened mouth and saw that. But Paal did not speak.

'So *that's* what it was,' the sheriff said, shaking his head gravely. It was near eleven. Paal was asleep again.

'What's that, Harry?' asked Cora, brushing her dark blonde hair in front of the dressing table mirror.

'Those times when Miss Frank and I tried to get the Nielsens to start the boy in school.' He hung his pants across the chair back. 'The answer was always no. Now I see why.'

She glanced up at his reflection. 'There must be something wrong with him, Harry,' she said.

'Well, we can have Doc Steiger look at him but I don't think so.'

'But they were college people,' she argued, 'There was no earthly reason why they shouldn't teach him how to talk. Unless there was some reason he *couldn't*.'

Wheeler shook his head again.

'They were strange people, Cora,' he said, 'Hardly spoke a word themselves. As if they were too good for talking - or something.' He grunted disgustedly. 'No wonder they didn't want that boy to school.'

He sank down on the bed with a groan and shucked off boots and calf-high stockings. 'What a day,' he muttered.

'You didn't find anything at the house?'

'Nothing. No identification papers at all. The house is burned to a cinder. Nothing but a pile of books and they don't lead us anywhere.'

'Isn't there any way?'

'The Nielsens never had a charge account in town. And they weren't even citizens so the professor wasn't registered for the draft.'

'Oh.' Cora looked a moment at her face reflected in the oval mirror. Then her gaze lowered to the photograph on the dressing table - David as he was when he was nine. The Nielsen boy looked a great deal like David, she thought. Same height and build. Maybe David's hair had been a trifle darker but -

'What's to be done with him?' she asked.

'Couldn't say, Cora,' he answered, 'We have to wait till the end of the month, I guess. Tom Poulter says the Nielsens got three letters the end of every month. Come from Europe, he said. We'll just have to wait for them, then write back to the addresses on them. May be the boy has relations over there.'

'Europe,' she said, almost to herself. 'That far away.'

Her husband grunted, then pulled the covers back and sank down heavily on the mattress.

'Tired,' he muttered.

He stared at the ceiling. 'Come to bed,' he said.

'In a little while.'

She sat there brushing distractedly at her hair until the sound of his snoring broke the silence. Then, quietly, she rose and moved across the hall.

There was a river of moonlight across the bed. It flowed over Paal's small, motionless hands. Cora stood in the shadows a long time looking at the hands. For a moment she thought it was David in his bed again.

It was the sound.

Like endless club strokes across his vivid mind, it pulsed and throbbed into him in an endless, garbled din. He sensed it was communication of a sort but it hurt his ears and chained awareness and locked incoming thoughts behind dense, impassable walls.

Sometimes, in an infrequent moment of silence he would sense a fissure in the walls and, for that

fleeting moment, catch hold of fragments - like an animal snatching scraps of food before the trap jaws clash together.

But then the sound would start again, rising and falling in rhythmless beat, jarring and grating, rubbing at the live, glistening surface of comprehension until it was dry and aching and confused.

'Paal,' she said.

A week had passed; another week would pass before the letters came.

'Paal, didn't they ever talk to you? Paal?'

Fists striking at delicate acuteness. Hands squeezing sensitivity from the vibrant ganglia of his mind.

'Paal, don't you know your name? Paal? *Paal.*'

There was nothing physically wrong with him. Doctor Steiger had made sure of it. There was no reason for him not to talk.

'We'll teach you, Paal. It's all right, darling. We'll teach you.' Like knife strokes across the weave of consciousness. '*Paal. Paal.*'

Paal. It was himself; he sensed that much. But it was different in the ears, a dead, depressive sound standing alone and drab, without the host of linked associations that existed in his mind. In thought, his name was more than letters. It was *him*, every facet of his person and its meaning to himself, his mother and his father, to his life. When they had summoned him or thought his name it had been more than just the small hard core which sound made of it. It had been everything interwoven in a flash of knowing, unhampered by sound.

'Paal, don't you understand? It's your name. Paal Nielsen. Don't you understand?'

Drumming, pounding at raw sensitivity. Paal. The sound kicking at him. *Paal. Paal.* Trying to dislodge his grip and fling him into the maw of sound.

'Paal. Try, Paal. Say it after me. Pa-al. *Pa-al.*'

Twisting away, he would run from her in panic and she would follow him to where he cowered by the bed of her son.

Then, for long moments, there would be peace. She would hold him in her arms and, as if she understood, would not speak. There would be stillness and no pounding clash of sound against his mind. She would stroke his hair- and kiss away sobless tears. He would lie against the warmth of her, his mind, like a timid animal, emerging from its hiding place again - to sense a flow of understanding from this woman.

Feeling that needed no sound.

Love - wordless, unencumbered, and beautiful.

Sheriff Wheeler was just leaving the house that morning when the phone rang. He stood in the front hallway, waiting until Cora picked it up.

'Harry!' he heard her call. 'Are you gone yet?'

He came back into the kitchen and took the receiver from her. 'Wheeler,' he said into it.

'Tom Poulter, Harry,' the postmaster said, 'Them letters is in.'

'Be right there,' Wheeler said and hung up.

'The letters?' his wife asked.

Wheeler nodded.

'*Oh,*' she murmured so that he barely heard her.

When Wheeler entered the post office twenty minutes later, Poulter slid the three letters across the counter. The sheriff picked them up.

'Switzerland,' he read the postmarks, 'Sweden, Germany.'

'That's the lot,' Poulter said, 'Like always. On the thirtieth of the month.'

'Can't open them, I suppose,' Wheeler said.

'Y'know I'd say yes if I could, Harry,' Poulter answered, 'But law's law. You know that. I got t'send them back unopened. That's the law.'

'All right.' Wheeler took out his pen and copied down the return addresses in his pad. He pushed the

letters back. 'Thanks.'

When he got home at four that afternoon, Cora was in the front room with Paal. There was a look of confused emotion on Paal's face - a desire to please coupled with a frightened need to flee the disconcertion of sound. He sat beside her on the couch looking as if he were about to cry.

'Oh, *Paal*,' she said as Wheeler entered. She put her arms around the trembling boy. 'There's nothing to be afraid of, darling.'

She saw her husband.

'What did they *do* to him?' she asked, unhappily.

He shook his head. 'Don't know,' he said, 'He should have been put in school though.'

'We can't very well put him in school when he's like *this*,' she said.

'We can't put him anywhere till we see what's what,' Wheeler said, 'I'll write those people tonight.'

In the silence, Paal felt a sudden burst of emotion in the woman and he looked up quickly at her stricken face.

*Pain.*

He felt it pour from her like blood from a mortal wound.

And while they ate supper in an almost silence, Paal kept sensing tragic sadness in the woman. It seemed he heard sobbing in a distant place. As the silence continued he began to get momentary flashes of remembrance in her pain-opened mind. He saw the face of another boy. Only it swirled and faded and there was *his* face in her thoughts. The two faces, like contesting wraiths, lay and overlay upon each other as if fighting for the dominance of her mind.

All fleeing, locked abruptly behind black doors as she said, 'You have to write to them, I suppose.'

'You know I do, Cora,' Wheeler said.

Silence. Pain again. And when she tucked him into bed, he looked at her with such soft, apparent pity on his face that she turned quickly from the bed and he could feel the waves of sorrow break across his mind until her footsteps could no longer be heard. And; even then, like the faint fluttering of bird wings in the night, he felt her pitiable despair moving in the house...

'What are you writing?' she asked.

Wheeler looked over from his desk as midnight chimed its seventh stroke in the hall. Cora came walking across the room and set the tray down at his elbow. The steamy fragrance of freshly brewed coffee filled his nostrils as he reached for the pot.

'Just telling them the situation,' he said, 'About the fire, the Nielsens dying. Asking them if they're related to the boy or know any of his relations over there.'

'And what if his relations don't do any better than his parents?'

'Now, Cora,' he said, pouring cream, 'I thought we'd already discussed that. It's not our business.'

She pressed pale lips together.

'A frightened child is my business,' she said angrily, 'Maybe you -'

She broke off as he looked up at her patiently, no argument in his expression.

'Well,' she said, turning from him, 'It's true.'

'It's not our business, Cora.' He didn't see the tremor of her lips.

'So he'll just go on not talking, I suppose! Being afraid of shadows!'

She whirled. 'It's *criminal*!' she cried, love and anger bursting from her in a twisted mixture.

'It's got to be done, Cora.' He said quietly. 'It's our duty.'

"*Duty.*" She echoed it with an empty lifelessness in her voice.

She didn't sleep. The liquid flutter of Harry's snoring in her ears, she lay staring at the jump of shadows on the ceiling, a scene enacted in her mind.

A summer's afternoon; the back doorbell ringing. Men standing on the porch, John Carpenter among them, a blanket-covered stillness weighing down his arms, a blank look on his face. In the silence, a drip of water on the sunbaked boards - slowly, unsteadily, like the beats of a dying heart. *He was swimming in the lake, Miz Wheeler and -*

She shuddered on the bed as she had shuddered then - numbly, mutely. The hands beside her were a crumpled whiteness, twisted by remembered anguish. All these years waiting, waiting for a child to bring

life into her house again.

Af breakfast she was hollow-eyed and drawn. She moved about the kitchen with a wilful tread, sliding eggs and pancakes on her husband's plate, pouring coffee, never speaking once.

Then he had kissed her goodbye and she was standing at the living room window watching him trudge down the path to the car. Long after he'd gone, staring at the three envelopes he'd stuck into the side clip of the mailbox.

When Paal came downstairs he smiled at her. She kissed his cheek, then stood behind him, wordless and watching, while he drank his orange juice. The way he sat, the way he held his glass; it was so like -

While Paal ate his cereal she went out to the mailbox and got the three letters, replacing them with three of her own - just in case her husband ever asked the mailman if he'd picked up three letters at their house that morning.

While Paal was eating his eggs, she went down into the cellar and threw the letters into the furnace. The one to Switzerland burned, then the ones to Germany and Sweden. She stirred them with a poker until the pieces broke and disappeared like black confetti in the flames.

Weeks passed; and, with every day, the service of his mind grew weaker.

'Paal, dear, don't you understand?' The patient, loving voice of the woman he needed but feared. 'Won't you say it once for me? Just for me? *Paal?*'

He knew there was only love in her but sound would destroy him. It would chain his thoughts - like putting shackles on the wind.

'Would you like to go to school, Paal? Would you? *School?*'

Her face a mask of worried devotion.

'Try to talk, Paal. Just *try*:'

He fought it off with mounting fear. Silence would bring him scraps of meaning from her mind. Then sound returned and grossed each meaning with unwieldy flesh. Meanings joined with sounds. The links formed quickly, frighteningly. He struggled against them. Sounds could cover fragile, darting symbols with a hideous, restraining dough, dough that would be baked in ovens of articulation, then chopped into the stunted lengths of words.

Afraid of the woman, yet wanting to be near the warmth of her, protected by her arms. Like a pendulum he swung from dread to need and back to dread again.

And still the sounds kept shearing at his mind.

'We can't wait any longer to hear from them,'

'Harry said, 'He'll have to go to school, that's all.'

'No,' she said.

He put down his newspaper and looked across the living room at her. She kept her eyes on the movements of her knitting needles.

'What do you mean, no?' he asked, irritably. 'Every time I mention school you say no. Why *shouldn't* he go to school?'

The needles stopped and were lowered to her lap. Cora stared at them.

'I don't know,' she said, 'It's just that - ' A sigh emptied from her. 'I don't know,' she said.

'He'll start on Monday,' Harry said.

'But he's frightened,' she said.

'Sure he's frightened. You'd be frightened too if you couldn't talk and everybody around you was talking. He needs education, that's all.'

'But he's not *ignorant*, Harry. I - I swear he understands me sometimes. *Without* talking.' 'How?'

'I don't know. But - well, the Nielsens weren't stupid people. They wouldn't just *refuse* to teach him.'

'Well, whatever they taught him,' Harry said, picking up his paper, 'it sure doesn't show.'

When they asked Miss Edna Frank over that afternoon to meet the boy she was determined to be impartial.

That Paal Nielsen had been reared in miserable fashion was beyond cavil, but the maiden teacher had decided not to allow the knowledge to affect her attitude. The boy needed understanding. The cruel

mistreatment of his parents had to be undone and Miss Frank had elected herself to the office.

Striding with a resolute quickness down German Corners' main artery, she recalled that scene in the Nielsen house when she and Sheriff Wheeler had tried to persuade them to enter Paal in school.

And such a smugness in their faces, thought Miss Frank, remembering. Such a polite disdain. *We do not wish our boy in school*, she heard Professor Nielsen's words again. Just like that, Miss Frank recalled. Arrogant as you please. *We do not wish* - Disgusting attitude.

Well, at least the boy was out of it now. That fire was probably the blessing of his life, she thought.

'We wrote to them four, five weeks ago,' the sheriff explained, 'and we haven't gotten an answer yet. We can't just let the boy go on the way he is. He needs schooling.'

'He most certainly does,' agreed Miss Frank, her pale features drawn into their usual sum of unyielding dogmatism. There was a wisp of moustache on her upper lip, her chin came almost to a point. On Halloween the children of German Corners watched the sky above her house.

'He's very shy,' Cora said, sensing that harshness in the middle-aged teacher. 'He'll be terribly frightened. He'll need a lot of understanding.'

'He shall receive it,' Miss Frank declared. 'But let's see the boy.'

Cora led Paal down the steps speaking to him softly. 'Don't be afraid, darling. There's nothing to be afraid of.'

Paal entered the room and looked into the eyes of Miss Edna Frank.

Only Cora felt the stiffening of his body - as though, instead of the gaunt virgin, he had looked into the petrifying gaze of the Medusa. Miss Frank and the sheriff did not catch the flare of iris in his bright, green eyes, the minute twitching at one corner of his mouth. None of them could sense the leap of panic in his mind.

Miss Frank sat smiling, holding out her hand.

'Come here, child,' she said and, for a moment, the gates slammed shut and hid away the shimmering writhe.

'Come on, darling,' Cora said, 'Miss Frank is here to help you.' She led him forward, feeling beneath her fingers the shuddering of terror in him.

Silence again. And, in the moment of it, Paal felt as though he were walking into a century-sealed tomb. Dead winds gushed out upon him, creatures of frustration slithered on his heart, strange flying jealousies and hates rushed by - all obscured by clouds of twisted memory. It was the purgatory that his father had pictured to him once in telling him of myth and legend. This was no legend though.

Her touch was cool and dry. Dark wrenching terrors ran down her veins and poured into him. Inaudibly, the fragment of a scream tightened his throat. Their eyes met again and Paal saw that, for a second, the woman seemed to know that he was looking at her brain.

Then she spoke and he was free again, limp and staring.

'I think we'll get along just fine,' she said.

*Maelstrom!*

He lurched back on his heels and fell against the sheriff's wife.

All the way across the grounds, it had been growing, growing - as if he were a Geiger counter moving towards some fantastic pulsing strata of atomic force. Closer, yet closer, the delicate controls within him stirring, glowing, trembling, reacting with increasing violence to the nearness of power. Even though his sensitivity had been weakened by over three months of sound he felt this now, strongly. As though he walked into a centre of vitality.

It was *the young*.

Then the door opened, the voices stopped, and all of it rushed through him like a vast, electric current - all wild and unharnessed. He clung to her, fingers rigid in her skirt, eyes widened, quick breaths falling from his parted lips. His gaze moved shakily across the rows of staring children faces and waves of distorted energies kept bounding out from them in a snarled, uncontrolled network.

Miss Frank scraped back her chair, stepped down from her six-inch eminence and started down the aisle towards them.

'Good morning,' she said, crisply. 'We're just about to start our classes for the day.'

'I - do hope everything will be all right,' Cora said. She glanced down. Paal was looking at the class through a welling haze of tears. 'Oh, *Paal*.' She leaned over and ran her fingers through his blond hair, a worried look on her face. 'Paal, don't be afraid, dear,' she whispered.

He looked at her blankly.

'Darling, there's nothing to be - '

'Now just you leave him here,' Miss Frank broke in, putting her hand on Paal's shoulder. She ignored the shudder that rippled through him. 'He'll be right at home in no time, Mrs. Wheeler. But you've got to leave him by himself.'

'Oh, but - ' Cora started.

'No, believe me, it's the only way,' Miss Frank insisted. 'As long as you stay he'll be upset. Believe me. I've seen such things before.'

At first he wouldn't let go of Cora but clung to her as the one familiar thing in this whirlpool of frightening newness. It was only when Miss Frank's hard, thin hands held him back that Cora backed off slowly, anxiously, closing the door and cutting off from Paal the sight of her soft pity.

He stood there trembling, incapable of uttering a single word to ask for help. Confused, his mind sent out tenuous shoots of communication but in the undisciplined tangle they were broken off and lost. He drew back quickly and tried, in vain, to cut himself off. All he could manage to do was let the torrent of needling thoughts continue unopposed until they had become a numbing, meaningless surge.

'Now, Paal,' he heard Miss Frank's voice and looked up gingerly at her. The hand drew him from the door. "*Come along*.'

He didn't understand the words but the brittle sound of them was clear enough, the flow of irrational animosity from her was unmistakable. He stumbled along at her side, threading a thin path of consciousness through the living undergrowth of young, untrained minds; the strange admixture of them with their retention of born sensitivity overlaid with the dulling coat of formal inculcation.

She brought him to the front of the room and stood him there, his chest labouring for breath as if the feelings around him were hands pushing and constraining on his body.

'This is Paal Nielsen, class,' Miss Frank announced, and sound drew a momentary blade across the stunted weave of thoughts. 'We're going to have to be very patient with him. You see his mother and father never taught him how to talk.'

She looked down at him as a prosecuting lawyer might gaze upon exhibit A.

'He can't understand a word of English,' she said.

Silence a moment, writhing. Miss Frank tightened her grip on his shoulder.

'Well, we'll help him learn, won't we, class?'

Faint mutterings arose from them; one thin, piping, 'Yes, Miss Frank.'

'Now, Paal,' she said. He didn't turn. She shook his shoulder. '*Paal*,' she said.

He looked at her.

'Can you say your name?' she asked. 'Paal? Paal Nielsen? Go ahead. Say your name.'

Her fingers drew in like talons.

'Say it. Paal. *Pa-al*.'

He sobbed. Miss Frank released her hand.

'You'll learn,' she said calmly.

It was not encouragement.

He sat in the middle of it like hooked bait in a current that swirled with devouring mouths, mouths from which endlessly came mind-deadening sounds.

'This is a boat. A boat sails on the water. Then men who live on the boat are called sailors.'

And, in the primer, the words about the boat printed under a picture of one.

Paal remembered a picture his father had shown him once. It had been a picture of a boat too; but his father had not spoken futile words about the boat. His father had created about the picture every sight



and sound heir to it. Great blue rising swells of tide. Grey-green mountain waves, their white tops lashing. Storm winds whistling through the rigging of a bucking, surging, shuddering vessel. The quiet majesty of an ocean sunset, joining, with a scarlet seal, sea and sky.

'This is a farm. Men grow food on the farm. The men who grow food are called farmers.'

Words. Empty, with no power to convey the moist, warm feel of earth. The sound of grain fields rustling in the wind like golden seas. The sight of sun setting on a red barn wall. The smell of soft lea winds carrying, from afar, the delicate clank of cowbells.

'This is a forest. A forest is made of trees.'

No sense of presence in those black, dogmatic symbols whether sounded or looked upon. No sound of winds rushing like eternal rivers through the high green canopies. No smell of pine and birch, oak and maple and hemlock. No feel of treading on the century-thick carpet of leafy forest floors.

Words. Blunt, sawed-off lengths of hemmed-in meaning; incapable of evocation, of expansion. Black figures on white. This is a cat. This is a dog. Cat, dog. This is a man. This is a woman. Man, woman. Car. Horse. Tree. Desk. Children. Each word a trap, stalking his mind. A snare set to enclose fluid and unbounded comprehension.

Every day she stood him on the platform.

'Paal,' she would say, pointing at him, 'Paal. Say it. Paal.'

He couldn't. He stared at her, too intelligent not to make the connection, too much afraid to seek further.

'Paal.' A bony finger prodding at his chest. 'Paal. Paal *Paal!*'

He fought it He had to fight it He blanked his gaze and saw nothing of the room around him, concentrating only on his mother's hands. He knew it was a battle. Like a gelling of sickness, he had felt each new encroachment on his sensitivity.

'You're not listening, Paal Nielsen!' Miss Frank would accuse, shaking him, 'You're a stubborn, ungrateful boy. Don't you want to be like *other* children?'

Staring eyes; and her thin, never-to-be-kissed lips stirring, pressing in.

'Sit down,' she'd say. He didn't move. She'd move him off the platform with rigid fingers.

'Sit *down*,' she'd say as if talking to a mulish puppy.

Every day.

She was awake in an instant; in another instant, on her feet and hurrying across the darkness of the room. Behind her, Harry slept with labouring breaths. She shut away the sound and let her hand slip off the door knob as she started across the hall.

'*Darling.*'

He was standing by the window looking out. As she spoke, he whirled and, in the faint illumination of the night light, she could see the terror written on his face.

'Darling, come to bed.' She led him there and tucked him in, then sat beside him, holding his thin, cold hands.

'What is it, dear?'

He looked at her with wide, pained eyes.

'*Oh* - ' She bent over and pressed her warm cheek to his. 'What are you afraid of?'

In the dark silence it seemed as if a vision of the schoolroom and Miss Frank standing in it crossed her mind.

'Is it the school?' she asked, thinking it only an idea which had occurred to her.

The answer was in his face.

'But school is nothing to be afraid of, darling,' she said, 'You-'

She saw tears welling in his eyes, and abruptly she drew him up and held him tightly against herself. *Don't be afraid*, she thought. *Darling, please don't be afraid. I'm here and I love you just as much as they did. I love you even more* -

Paal drew back. He stared at her as if he didn't understand.

As the car pulled up in back of the house Werner saw a woman turn away from the kitchen window.

'If we'd only heard from you,' said Wheeler, 'but there was never a word. You can't blame us for adopting the boy. We did what we thought was best.'

Werner nodded with short, distracted movements of his head.

'I understand,' he said quietly. 'We received no letters however.'

They sat in the car in silence, Werner staring through the windshield, Wheeler looking at his hands.

Holger and Fanny *dead*, Werner was thinking. A horrible discovery to make. The boy exposed to the cruel blunderings of people who did not understand. That was, in a way, even more horrible.

Wheeler was thinking of those letters and of Cora. He should have written again. Still, those letters should have reached Europe. Was it possible they were all miss sent?

'Well,' he said, finally, 'You'll - want to see the boy.'

'Yes,' said Werner.

The two men pushed open the car doors and got out.

They walked across the back yard and up the wooden porch steps. Have you taught him how to speak? -Werner almost said but couldn't bring himself to ask. The concept of a boy like Paal exposed to the blunt, deadening forces of usual speech was something he felt uncomfortable thinking about.

'I'll get my wife,' said Wheeler, 'The living room's in there.'

After the sheriff had gone up the back stairs, Werner walked slowly through the hall and into the front room. There he took off his raincoat and hat and dropped them over the back of a wooden chair. Upstairs he could hear the faint sound of voices - a man and woman. The woman sounded upset.

When he heard footsteps, he turned from the window.

The sheriff's wife entered beside her husband. She was smiling politely, but Werner knew she wasn't happy to see him there,

'Please sit down,' she said.

He waited until she was in a chair, then settled down on the couch.

'What is it you want?' asked Mrs. Wheeler.

'Did your husband tell you -?'

'He told me who you were,' she interrupted, 'but not why you want to see Paul.'

'*Paul?*' asked Werner, surprised.

'We - ' Her hands sought out each other nervously. ' - we changed it to Paul. It - seemed more appropriate. For a Wheeler, I mean.'

'I see.' Werner nodded politely.

Silence.

'Well,' Werner said then, 'You wish to know why I am here to see - the boy. I will explain as briefly as possible.'

Ten years ago, in Heidelberg, four married couples -the Elkenbergs, the Kalders, the Nielsens, and my wife and I - decided to try an experiment on our children -some not yet born. An experiment of the mind.

'We had accepted, you see, the proposition that ancient man, deprived of the dubious benefit of language, had been telepathic'

Cora started in her chair.

'Further,' Werner went on, not noticing, 'that the basic organic source of this ability is still functioning though no longer made use of - a sort of ethereal tonsil, a higher appendix - not used but neither useless.'

'So we began our work, each searching for physiological facts while, at the same time, developing the ability in our children. Monthly correspondence was exchanged, a systematic methodology of training was arrived at slowly. Eventually, we planned to establish a colony with the grown children, a colony to be gradually consolidated until these abilities would become second nature to its members.'

'*Paal is one of these children.*'

Wheeler looked almost dazed.

'This is *a fact*?' he asked.

'A fact,' said Werner.

Cora sat numbly in her chair staring at the tall German. She was thinking about the way Paal seemed to understand her without words. Thinking of his fear of the school and Miss Frank. Thinking of how many times she had woken up and gone to him even though he didn't make a sound.

'What?' she asked, looking up as Werner spoke.

'I say - may I see the boy now?'

'He's in school,' she said, 'He'll be home in - '

She stopped as a look of almost revulsion crossed Werner's face.

'*School*?' he asked.

'Paal Nielsen, stand.'

The young boy slid from his seat and stood beside the desk. Miss Frank gestured to him once and, more like an old man than a boy, he trudged up to the platform and stood beside her as he always did.

'Straighten up,' Miss Frank demanded, 'Shoulders back.'

The shoulders moved, the back grew flat.

'What's your name?' asked Miss Frank.

The boy pressed his lips together slightly. His swallowing made a dry, rattling noise.

'*What is your name* ?'

Silence in the classroom except for the restive stirring of the young. Erratic currents of their thought deflected off him like random winds.

'*Your name*,' she said.

He made no reply.

The virgin teacher looked at him and, in the moment that she did, through her mind ran memories of her childhood. Of her gaunt, mania-driven mother keeping her for hours at a time in the darkened front parlour, sitting at the great round table, her fingers arched over the smoothly worn ouija board - making her try to communicate with her dead father.

Memories of those terrible years were still with her -always with her. Her minor sensitivity being abused and twisted into knots until she hated every single thing about perception. Perception was an evil, full of suffering and anguish.

The boy must be freed of it.

'Class,' she said, 'I want you all to think of Paal's name.' (This was his name no matter what Mrs. Wheeler chose to call him.) 'Just think of it. Don't say it. Just think: Paal, Paal, Paal. When I count three. Do you understand?'

They stared at her, some nodding.' *Yes*, Miss Frank,' piped up her only faithful.

'All right,' she said, 'One - two - *three*.'

It flung into his mind like the blast of a hurricane, pounding and tearing at his hold on wordless sensitivity. He trembled on the platform, his mouth fallen ajar.

The blast grew stronger, all the power of the young directed into a single, irresistible force. Paal, *Paal*, *PAAL!!* It screamed into the tissues of his brain.

Until, at the very peak of it, when he thought his head would explode, it was all cut away by the voice of Miss Frank scalpelling into his mind.

'*Say it! Paul!*'

'Here he comes,' said Cora. She turned from the window. 'Before he gets here, I want to apologize for my rudeness.'

'Not at all,' said Werner, distractedly, 'I understand perfectly. Naturally, you would think that I had come to take the boy away. As I have said, however, I have no legal powers over him - being no relation. I simply want to see him as the child of my two colleagues -whose shocking death I have only now learned of.'

He saw the woman's throat move and picked out the leap of guilty panic in her mind. She had destroyed the letters her husband wrote. Werner knew it instantly but said nothing. He sensed that the

husband also knew it; she would have enough trouble as it was.

They heard Paal's footsteps on the bottom step of the front porch.

'I *will* take him out of school,' Cora said.

'Perhaps not,' said Werner, looking towards the door. In spite of everything he felt his heartbeat quicken, felt the fingers of his left hand twitch in his lap. Without a word, he sent out the message. It was a greeting the four couples had decided on; a sort of password.

*Telepathy*, he thought, *is the communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another independently of the recognized channels of sense.*

Werner sent it twice before the front door opened.

Paal stood there, motionless.

Werner saw recognition in his eyes, but, in the boy's mind, was only confused uncertainty. The misted vision of Werner's face crossed it. In his mind, all the people had existed - Werner, Elkenberg, Kalder, all their children. But now it was locked up and hard to capture. The face disappeared.

'Paul, this is Mister Werner,' Cora said.

Werner did not speak. He sent the message out again - with such force that Paal could not possibly miss it. He saw a look of uncomprehending dismay creep across the boy's features, as if Paal suspected that something was happening yet could not imagine what.

The boy's face grew more confused. Cora's eyes moved concernedly from him to Werner and back again. Why didn't Werner speak? She started to say something, then remembered what the German had said.

'Say, what -?' Wheeler began until Cora waved her hand and stopped him.

*Paal, think!* - Werner thought desperately - *Where is your mind?*

Suddenly, there was a great, wracking sob in the boy's throat and chest. Werner shuddered.

'My name is Paal,' the boy said.

The voice made Werner's flesh crawl. It was unfinished, like a puppet voice, thin, wavering, and brittle.

'My name is Paal.'

He couldn't stop saying it. It was as if he were whipping himself on, knowing what had happened and trying to suffer as much as possible with the knowledge.

'My name is Paal. My name is Paal.' An endless, frightening babble; in it, a panic-stricken boy seeking out an unknown power which had been torn from him.

'My name is Paal.' Even held tightly in Cora's arms, he said it. 'My name is Paal.' Angrily, pitifully, endlessly. *'My name is Paal. My name is Paal.'*

Werner closed his eyes.

*Lost.*

Wheeler offered to take him back to the bus station, but Werner told him he'd rather walk. He said goodbye to the sheriff and asked him to relay his regrets to Mrs. Wheeler, who had taken the sobbing boy up to his room.

Now, in the beginning fall of a fine, mist like rain, Werner walked away from the house, from Paal.

It was not something easily judged, he was thinking. There was no right and wrong of it. Definitely, it was not a case of evil versus good. Mrs. Wheeler, the sheriff, the boy's teacher, the people of German Corners - they had, probably, all meant well. Understandably, they had been outraged at the idea of a seven-year-old boy's not having been taught to speak by his parents. Their actions were, in light of that, justifiable and good.

It was simply that, so often, evil could come of misguided good.

No, it was better left as it was. To take Paal back to Europe - back to the others - would be a mistake. He could if he wanted to; all the couples had exchanged papers giving each other the right to take over rearing of the children should anything happen to the parents. But it would only confuse Paal further. He had been a trained sensitive, not a born one. Although, by the principle they all worked on, all

children were born with the atavistic ability to telepath, it was so easy to lose, so difficult to recapture.

Werner shook his head. It was a pity. The boy was without his parents, without his talent, even without his name.

He had lost everything.

Well, perhaps, not everything.

As he walked, Werner sent his mind back to the house to discover them standing at the window of Paal's room, watching sunset cast its fiery light on German Corners. Paal was clinging to the sheriff's wife, his cheek pressed to her side. The final terror of losing his awareness had not faded but there was something else counterbalancing it. Something Cora Wheeler sensed yet did not fully realize.

Paal's parents had not loved him. Werner knew this. Caught up in the fascination of their work they had not had the time to love him as a child. Kind, yes, affectionate, always; still, they had regarded Paal as their experiment in flesh.

Which was why Cora Wheeler's love was, in part, as strange a thing to Paal as all the crushing horrors of speech. It would not remain so. For, in that moment when the last of his gift had fled, leaving his mind a naked rawness, she had been there with her love, to soothe away the pain. And always would be there.

'Did you find who you were looking for?' the grey-haired woman at the counter asked Werner as she served him coffee.

'Yes. Thank you,' he said.

'Where was he?' asked the woman.

Werner smiled.

'At home,' he said.

## 7 - Mad House

He sits down at his desk. He picks up a long, yellow pencil and starts to write on a pad. The lead point breaks.

The ends of his lips turn down. The eye pupils grow small in the hard mask of his face. Quietly, mouth pressed into an ugly, lipless gash, he picks up the pencil sharpener.

He grinds off the shavings and tosses the sharpener back in the drawer. Once more he starts to write. As he does so, the point snaps again and the lead rolls across the paper.

Suddenly his face becomes livid. Wild rage clamps the muscles of his body. He yells at the pencil, curses it with a stream of outrage. He glares at it with actual hate. He breaks it in two with a brutal snap and flings it into the wastebasket with a triumphant, "There! See how you like it in *there!*"

He sits tensely on the chair, his eyes wide, his lips trembling. He shakes with a frenzied wrath; it sprays his insides with acid.

The pencil lies in the wastebasket, broken and still. It is wood, lead, metal, rubber; all dead, without appreciation of the burning fury it has caused.

And yet...

He is quietly standing by the window, peering out at the street. He is letting the tightness sough away. He does not hear the rustle in the wastebasket which ceases immediately.

Soon his body is normal again. He sits down. He uses a fountain pen.

He sits down before his typewriter.

He inserts a sheet of paper and begins tapping on the keys.

His fingers are large. He hits two keys at once. The two strikers are jammed together. They stand in the air, hovering impotently over the black ribbon.

He reaches over in disgust and slaps them back. They separate, flap back into their separate berths. He starts typing again.

He hits a wrong key. The start of a curse falls from his lips, unfinished. He snatches up the round eraser and rubs the unwanted letter from the sheet of paper.

He drops the eraser and starts to type again. The paper has shifted on the roller. The next sentences

are on a level slightly above the original. He clenches a fist, ignores the mistake.

The machine sticks. His shoulders twitch, he slams a fist on the space bar with a loud curse. The carriage jumps, the bell tinkles. He shoves the carriage over and it crashes to a halt.

He types faster. Three keys stick together. He clenches his teeth and whines in helpless fury. He smacks the type arms. They will not come apart. He forces them to separate with bent, shaking fingers. They fall away. He sees that his fingers are smudged with ink. He curses out loud, trying to outrage the very air for revenge on the stupid machine.

Now he hits the keys brutally, fingers falling like the stiff claws of a derrick. Another mistake, he erases savagely. He types still faster. Four keys stick together.

He screams.

He slams his fist on the machine. He clutches at the paper and rips it from the machine in jagged pieces. He welds the fragments in his fist and hurls the crumpled ball across the room. He beats the carriage over and slams the cover down on the machine.

He jumps up and glares down.

"You fool!" he shouts with a bitter, revolted voice. "You stupid, idiotic, asinine *fool!*"

Scorn drips from his voice. He keeps talking, he drives himself into a craze.

"You're no damn good. You're no damn good at all. I'm going to break you in pieces. I'm going to crack you into splinters, melt you, *kill* you! You stupid, moronic, lousy goddamn machine!"

He quivers as he yells. And he wonders, deep in the self-isolated recesses of his mind whether he is killing himself with anger, whether he is destroying his system with fury.

He turns and stalks away. He is too outraged to notice the cover of the machine slip down and hear the slight whirring of metal such as he might hear if the keys trembled in their slots.

He is shaving. The razor will not cut. Or the razor is too sharp and cuts too much.

Both times a muffled curse billows through his lips. He hurls the razor on the floor and kicks it against the wall.

He is cleaning his teeth. He draws the fine silk floss between his teeth. It shreds off. A fuzzy bit remains in the gap. He tries to press another piece down to get that bit out. He cannot force the white thread down. It snaps in his fingers.

He screams. He screams at the man in the mirror and draws back his hand, throws the floss away violently. It hits the wall.

It hangs there and waves in the rush of angry breeze from the man.

He has torn another piece of floss from the container. He is giving the dental floss another chance. He is holding back his fury. If the floss knows what is good for it, it will plunge down between the teeth and draw out the shredded bit immediately.

It does. The man is mollified. The systematic juices leave off bubbling, the fires sink, the coals are scattered.

But the anger is still there, apart. Energy is never lost; a primal law.

He is eating.

His wife places a steak before him. He picks up the knife and fork and slices. The meat is tough, the blade is dull.

A spot of red puffs up in the flesh of his cheeks. His eyes narrow. He draws the knife through the meat. The blade will not sever the browned flesh.

His eyes widen. Withheld tempest tightens and shakes him. He saws at the meat as though to give it one last opportunity to yield.

The meat will not yield.

He howls. "*God damn it!*" White teeth jam together. The knife is hurled across the room.

The woman appears, alarm etching transient scars on her forehead. Her husband is beyond himself. Her husband is shooting poison through his arteries. Her husband is releasing another cloud of animal temper. It is mist that clings. It hangs over the furniture, drips from the walls.

It is alive.

So through the days and nights. His anger falling like frenzied axe blows in his house, on everything he owns. Sprays of teeth-grinding hysteria clouding his windows and falling to his floors. Oceans of wild, uncontrolled hate flooding through every room of his house; filling each iota of space with a shifting, throbbing life.

He lay on his back and stared at the sun-mottled ceiling.

The last day, he told himself. The phrase had been creeping in and out of his brain since he'd awakened.

In the bathroom he could hear the water running. He could hear the medicine cabinet being opened and then closed again. He could hear the sound of her slippers shuffling on the tile floor.

Sally, he thought, don't leave me.

"I'll take it easy if you stay," he promised the air in a whisper.

But he knew he couldn't take it easy. That was too hard. It was easier to fly off the handle, easier to scream and rant and attack.

He turned on his side and stared out into the hall at the bathroom door. He could see the line of light under the door. Sally is in there, he thought. Sally, my wife, whom I married many years ago when I was young and full of hope.

He closed his eyes suddenly and clenched his fists. It came on him again. The sickness that prevailed with more violence every time he contracted it. The sickness of despair, of lost ambition. It ruined everything. It cast a vapour of bitterness over all his comings and goings. It jaded appetite, ruined sleep, destroyed affection.

"Perhaps if we'd had children," he muttered and knew before he said it that it wasn't the answer.

Children. How happy they would be watching their wretched father sinking deeper into his pit of introspective fever each day.

All right, tortured his mind, let's have the facts. He gritted his teeth and tried to make his mind a blank. But, like a dull-eyed idiot, his mind repeated the words that he muttered often in his sleep through restless, tossing nights.

I'm forty years old. I teach English at Fort College. Once I had hoped to be a writer. I thought this would be a fine place to write. I would teach class part of the day and write with the rest of my time. I met Sally at school and married her. I thought everything would be just fine. I thought success was inevitable. Eighteen years ago.

*Eighteen years.*

How, he thought, did you mark the passing of almost two decades? The time seemed a shapeless lump of failing efforts, of nights spent in anguish; of the secret, the answer, the revelation always being withheld from him. Dangled overhead like cheese swinging in a maddening arc over the head of a berserk rat.

And resentment creeping. Days spent watching Sally buy food and clothing and pay rent with his meagre salary. Watching her buy new curtains or new chair covers and feeling a stab of pain every time because he was that much farther removed from the point where he could devote his time to writing. Every penny she spent he felt like a blow at his aspirations.

He forced himself to think that way. He forced himself to believe that it was only the time he needed to do good writing.

But once a furious student had yelled at him, "You're just a third-rate talent hiding behind a desk!"

He remembered that. Oh, God, how he remembered that moment. Remembered the cold sickness that had convulsed him when those words hit his brain. Recalled the trembling and the shaky unreason of his voice.

He had failed the student for the semester despite good marks. There had been a great to-do about it. The student's father had come to the school. They had all gone before Dr. Ramsay, the head of the English Department.

He remembered that too; the scene could crowd out all other memories. Him, sitting on one side of the

conference table, facing the irate father and son. Dr. Ramsay stroking his beard until he thought he'd hurl something at him. Dr. Ramsay had said-well let's see if we can't straighten out this matter.

They had consulted the record book and found the student was right. Dr. Ramsay had looked up at him in great surprise. Well, I can't see what... he had said and let his syrupy voice break off and looked probingly at him, waiting for an explanation.

And the explanation had been hopeless, a jumbled and pointless affair. Irresponsible attitude, he had said, flaunting of unpardonable behavior; morally a failure. And Dr. Ramsay, his thick neck getting red, telling him in no uncertain terms that morals were not subject to the grading system at Fort College.

There was more but he'd forgotten it. He'd made an effort to forget it. But he couldn't forget that it would be years before he made a professorship. Ramsay would hold it back. And his salary would go on being insufficient and bills would mount and he would never get his writing done.

He regained the present to find himself clutching the sheets with taut fingers. He found himself glaring in hate at the bathroom door. Go on!-his mind snapped vindictively-Go home to your precious mother. See if I care. Why just a trial separation? Make it permanent. Give me some peace. Maybe I can do some writing then.

*Maybe I can do some writing then.*

The phrase made him sick. It had no meaning anymore. Like a word that is repeated until it becomes gibberish that sentence, for him, had been used to extinction. It sounded silly; like some bit of cliché from a soap opera. Hero saying in dramatic tones- Now, by God, maybe I can do some writing. Senseless.

For a moment, though, he wondered if it was true. Now that she was leaving could he forget about her and really get some work done? Quit his job? Go somewhere and hole up in a cheap furnished room and write?

You have \$123.89 in the bank, his mind informed him. He pretended it was the only thing that kept him from it. But, far back in his mind, he wondered if he could write anywhere. Often the question threw itself at him when he was least expecting it. You have four hours every morning, the statement would rise like a menacing wraith. You have time to write many thousands of words. Why don't you?

And the answer was always lost in a tangle of because and wells and endless reasons that he clung to like a drowning man at straws.

The bathroom door opened and she came out, dressed in her good red suit.

For no reason at all, it seemed, he suddenly realized that she'd been wearing that same outfit for more than three years and never a new one. The realization angered him even more. He closed his eyes and hoped she wasn't looking at him. I hate her, he thought. I hate her because she has destroyed my life.

He heard the rustle of her skirt as she sat at the dressing table and pulled out a drawer. He kept his eyes shut and listened to the Venetian blinds tap lightly against the window frame as morning breeze touched them. He could smell her perfume floating lightly on the air.

And he tried to think of the house empty all the time. He tried to think of coming home from class and not finding Sally there waiting for him. The idea seemed, somehow, impossible. And that angered him. Yes, he thought, she's gotten to me. She's worked on me until I am so dependent of her for really unessential things that I suffer under the delusion that I cannot do without her.

He turned suddenly on the mattress and looked at her.

"So, you're really going," he said in a cold voice.

She turned briefly and looked at him. There was no anger on her face. She looked tired... "Yes," she said. "I'm going."

Good riddance. The words tried to pass his lips. He cut them off.

"I suppose you have your reasons," he said.

Her shoulders twitched a moment in what he took for a shrug of weary amusement.

"I have no intention of arguing with you," he said. "Your life is your own."

"Thank you," she murmured.

She's waiting for apologies, he thought. Waiting to be told that he didn't hate her as he'd said. That he hadn't struck *her* but all his twisted and shattered hopes; the mocking spectacle of his own lost faith.



"And just how long is this *trial* separation going to last?" he said, his voice acidulous.

She shook her head.

"I don't know, Chris," she said quietly. "It's up to you."

"Up to me," he said. "It's always up to me, isn't it?"

"Oh, please darl- Chris. I don't want to argue anymore. I'm too tired to argue."

"It's easier to just pack and run away."

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were very dark and unhappy.

"Run away?" she said. "After eighteen years you accuse me of that? Eighteen years of watching you destroy yourself. And me along with you. Oh, don't look surprised. I'm sure you know you've driven me half insane too."

She turned away and he saw her shoulders twitch. She brushed some tears from her eyes.

"It's n-not just because you hit me," she said. "You kept saying that last night when I said I was leaving. Do you think it would matter if..." She took a deep breath. "If it meant you were angry with me? If it was that I could be hit every day. But you didn't hit me. I'm nothing to you. I'm not wanted."

"Oh, stop being so..."

"No," she broke in. "That's why I'm going. Because I can't bear to watch you hate me more every day for something that... that isn't my fault."

"I suppose you..."

"Oh, don't say anymore," she said, getting up. She hurried out of the room and he heard her walk into the living room. He stared at the dressing table.

Don't say anymore?-his mind asked as though she were still there. Well, there's more to say; lots more. You don't seem to realize what I've lost. You don't seem to understand. I had hopes, oh God, what hopes I had. I was going to write prose to make the people sit up and gasp. I was going to tell them things they needed badly to know. I was going to tell them in so entertaining a way that they would never realize that the truth was getting to them. I was going to create immortal works.

Now when I die, I shall only be dead. I am trapped in this depressing village, entombed in a college of science where men gape at dust and do not even know that there are stars above their heads. And what can I do, what can...?

The thoughts broke off. He looked miserably at her perfume bottles, at the powder box that tinkled "Always" when the cover was lifted off.

*I'll remember you. Always.*

*With a heart that's true. Always.*

The words are childish and comical, he thought. But his throat contracted and he felt himself shudder.

"Sally," he said. So quietly that he could hardly hear it himself.

After a while he got up and dressed.

While he was putting on his trousers a rug slid from under him and he had to grab the dresser for support. He glared down, heart pounding in the total fury he had learned to summon in the space of seconds.

"Damn you," he muttered.

He forgot Sally. He forgot everything. He just wanted to get even with the rug. He kicked it violently under the bed. The anger plunged down and disappeared. He shook his head. I'm sick, he thought. He thought of going in to her and telling her he was sick.

His mouth tightened as he went into the bathroom. I'm not sick, he thought. Not in body anyway. It's my mind that's ill and she only makes it worse.

The bathroom was still damply warm from her use of it. He opened the window a trifle and got a splinter in his finger. He cursed the window in a muffled voice. He looked up. Why so quiet? he asked. So *she* won't hear me?

"Damn you!" he snarled loudly at the window. And he picked at his finger until he had pulled out the sliver of wood.

He jerked at the cabinet door. It stuck. His face reddened. He pulled harder and the door flew open

and cracked him on the wrist. He spun about and grabbed his wrist, threw back his head with a whining gasp. \*

He stood there, eyes clouded with pain, staring at the ceiling. He looked at the crack that ran in a crazy meandering line across the ceiling. Then he closed his eyes.

And began to sense something. Intangible. A sense of menace. He wondered about it. Why it's myself, of course, he answered then. It is the moral decrepitude of my own subconscious. It is bawling out to me, saying: You are to be punished for driving your poor wife away to her mother's arms. You are not a man. You are a-

"Oh, shut up," he said.

He washed his hands and face. He ran an inspecting finger over his chin. He needed a shave. He opened the cabinet door gingerly and took out his straight razor. He held it up and looked at it.

The handle has expanded. He told himself that quickly as the blade appeared to fall out of the handle wilfully. It made him shiver to see it flop out like that and glitter in the light from the cabinet light fixture.

He stared in repelled fascination at the bright steel. He touched the blade edge. So sharp, he thought. The slightest touch would sever flesh. What a hideous thing it was.

*"It's my hand."*

He said it involuntarily and shut the razor suddenly. It *was* his hand, it had to be. It couldn't have been the razor moving by itself. That was sick imagination.

But he didn't shave. He put the razor back in the cabinet with a vague sense of forestalling doom.

Don't care if we *are* expected to shave every day, he muttered. I'm not taking a chance on my hand slipping. I'd better get a safety razor anyway. This kind isn't for me, I'm too nervous.

Suddenly, impelled by those words, the picture of him eighteen years before flew into his brain.

He remembered a date he'd had with Sally. He remembered telling her he was so calm it was akin to being dead. Nothing bothers me, he'd said. And it was true, at the time. He remembered too telling her he didn't like coffee, that one cup kept him awake at night. That he didn't smoke, didn't like the taste or smell. I like to stay healthy, he'd said. He remembered the exact words.

*"And now,"* he muttered at his lean and worn reflection.

Now he drank gallons of coffee a day. Until it sloshed like a black pool in his stomach and he couldn't sleep any more than he could fly. Now he smoked endless strings of finger-yellowing cigarettes until his throat felt raw and clogged, until he couldn't write in pencil because his hand shook so much.

But all that stimulation didn't help his writing any. Paper still remained blank in the typewriter. Words never came, plots died on him. Characters eluded him, mocking him with laughter from behind the veil of their non-creation.

And time passed. It flew by faster and faster, seeming to single him out for highest punishment. He-a man who had begun to value time so, neurotically that it overbalanced his life and made him sick to think of its passing.

As he brushed his teeth he tried to recall when this irrational temper had first begun to control him. But there was no way of tracing its course. Somewhere in mists that could not be pierced, it had started. With a word of petulance, an angry contraction of muscles. With a glare of unrecallable animosity.

And from there, like a swelling amoeba, it had gone its own perverted and downward course of evolution, reaching its present nadir in him; a taut embittered man who found his only solace in hating.

He spit out white froth and rinsed his mouth. As he put down the glass, it cracked and a barb of glass drove into his hand.

"Damn!" he yelled.

He spun on his heel and clenched his fist. It sprang open instantly as the sliver sank into his palm. He stood with tears on his cheeks, breathing heavily. He thought of Sally listening to him, hearing once more the audible evidence of his snapping nerves.

Stop it!-he ordered himself. You can never do anything until you rid yourself of this enervating temper.

He closed his eyes. For a moment he wondered why it seemed that everything was happening to him lately. As if some revenging power had taken roost in the house, pouring a savage life into inanimate

things. Threatening him. But the thought was just a faceless, passing figure in the crushing horde of thoughts that mobbed past his mind's eye; seen but not appreciated.

He drew the glass sliver from his palm. He put on his dark tie.

Then he went into the dining room, consulting his watch. It was ten thirty already. More than half the morning was gone.

More than half the time for sitting and trying to write the prose that would make people sit up and gasp.

It happened that way more often now than he would even admit to himself. Sleeping late, making up errands, doing anything to forestall the terrible moment when he must sit down before his typewriter and try to wrench some harvest from the growing desert of his mind.

It was harder every time. And he grew more angry every time; and hated more. And never noticed until now, when it was too late, that Sally had grown desperate and could no longer stand his temper or his hate.

She was sitting at the kitchen table drinking dark coffee. She too drank more than she once had. Like him, she drank it black, without sugar. It jangled her nerves too. And she smoked now although she'd never smoked until a year before. She got no pleasure from it. She drew the fumes deep down into her lungs and then blew them out quickly. And her hands shook almost as badly as his did.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down across from her. She started to get up.

"What's the matter? Can't you stand the sight of me?"

She sat back and took a deep pull on the cigarette in her hand. Then she stamped it out on the saucer.

He felt sick. He wanted to get out of the house suddenly. It felt alien and strange to him. He had the feeling that she had renounced all claim to it, that she had retreated from it. The touch of her fingers and the loving indulgences she had bestowed on every room; all these things were taken back. They had lost tangibility because she was leaving. She was deserting it and it was not their home anymore. He felt it strongly.

Sinking back against the chair he pushed away his cup and stared at the yellow oilcloth on the table. He felt as if he and Sally were frozen in time; that seconds were drawn out like some fantastic taffy until each one seemed an eternity. The clock ticked slower. And the house was a different house.

"What train are you getting?" he asked, knowing before he spoke that there was only one morning train.

"Eleven forty-seven," she said.

When she said it, he felt as if his stomach were pulled back hard against his backbone. He gasped, so actual was the physical pain. She glanced up at him.

"Burned myself," he said hastily, and she got up and put her cup and saucer in the sink.

Why did I say that?-he thought. Why couldn't I say that I gasped because I was filled with terror at the thought of her leaving me? Why do I always say the things I don't mean to say? I'm not bad. But every time I speak I build higher the walls of hatred and bitterness around me until I cannot escape from them.

With words I have knit my shroud and will bury myself therein.

He looked at her back and a sad smile raised his lips. I can think of words when my wife is leaving me. It is very sad.

Sally had walked out of the kitchen. His mind reverted to its sullen attitude. This is a game we're playing. Follow the leader. You walk in one room, head high, the justified spouse, the injured party. I am supposed to follow, slope shouldered and contrite, pouring out apologetic hecatombs.

Once more conscious of himself, he sat tensely at the table, rage making his body tremble.

Consciously he relaxed and pressed his left hand over his eyes. He sat there trying to lose his misery in silence and blackness.

It wouldn't work.

And then his cigarette really burned him and he sat erect. The cigarette hit the floor scattering ashes. He bent over and picked it up. He threw it at the waste can and missed. To hell with it, he thought. He

got up and dumped his cup and saucer in the sink. The saucer broke in half and nicked his right thumb. He let it bleed. He didn't care.

She was in the extra room finishing her packing.

The extra room. The words tortured him now. When had they stopped calling it "the nursery"? When had it begun to eat her insides out because she was so full of love and wanted children badly? When had he begun to replace this loss with nothing better than volcanic temper and days and nights of sheath-scraped nerves?

He stood in the doorway and watched her. He wanted to get out the typewriter and sit down and write reams of words. He wanted to glory in his coming freedom. Think of all the money he could save. Think of how soon he could go away and write all the things he'd always meant to write.

He stood in the doorway, sick.

Is all this possible?-his mind asked, incredulous. Possible that she was leaving? But she and he were man and wife. They had lived and loved in this house for more than eighteen years. Now she was leaving. Putting articles of clothing in her old black suitcase and leaving. He couldn't reconcile himself to that. He couldn't understand it or ally it with the functions of the day. Where did it fit into the pattern?-the pattern that was Sally right there cleaning and cooking and trying to make their home happy and warm.

He shivered and, turning abruptly, went back into the bedroom.

He slumped on the bed and stared at the delicately whirring electric clock on their bedside table.

Past eleven, he saw. In less than an hour I have to hold class for a group of idiot freshmen. And, on the desk in the living room, is a mountain of mid-term examinations with essays that I must suffer through, feeling my stomach turn at their paucity of intelligence, their adolescent phraseology.

And all that tripe, all those miles of hideous prose, had been wound into an eternal skein in his head. And there it sat unravelling into his own writing until he wondered if he could stand the thought of living anymore. I have digested the worst, he thought. Is it any wonder that I exude it piecemeal?

Temper began again, a low banking fire in him, gradually fanned by further thinking. I've done no writing this morning. Like every morning after every other morning as time passes. I do less and less. I write nothing. Or I write worthless material. I could write better when I was twenty than I can now.

I'll *never* write anything good!

He jolted to his feet and his head snapped around as he looked for something to strike at, something to break, something to hate with such hate that it would wither in the blast.

It seemed as though the room clouded. He felt a throbbing. His left leg banged against a corner of the bed.

He gasped in fury. He wept. Tears of hate and repentance and self commiseration. I'm lost, he thought. Lost. There is nothing.

He became very calm, icy calm. Drained of pity, of emotion. He put on his suit coat. He put on his hat and got his briefcase off the dresser.

He stopped before the door to the room where she still fussed with her bag. So she will have something to occupy herself with now, he thought, so she won't have to look at me. He felt his heart thudding like a heavy drum beat.

"Have a nice time at your mother's," he said dispassionately.

She looked up and saw the expression on his face. She turned away and put a hand to her eyes. He felt a sudden need to run to her and beg her forgiveness. Make everything right again.

Then he thought again of papers and years of writing undone. He turned away and walked across the living room. The small rug slipped a little and it helped to focus the strength of anger he needed. He kicked it aside and it fluttered against the wall in a rumpled heap.

He slammed the door behind him.

His mind gibbered. Now, soap opera like, she has thrown herself on the coverlet and is weeping tears of martyr-tinged sorrow. Now she is digging nails into the pillow and moaning my name and wishing she were dead.

His shoes clicked rapidly on the sidewalk. God help me, he thought. God help all us poor wretches

who would create and find that we must lose our hearts for it because we cannot afford to spend our time at it.

It was a beautiful day. His eyes saw that but his mind would not attest to it. The trees were thick with green and the air warm and fresh. Spring breezes flooded down the streets. He felt them brush over him as he walked down the block, crossed Main Street to the bus stop.

He stood there on the corner looking back at the house.

She is in there, his mind persisted in analysis. In there, the house in which we've lived for more than eight years. She is packing or crying or doing something. And soon she will call the Campus Cab Company. A cab will come driving out. The driver will honk the horn, Sally will put on her light spring coat and take her suitcase out on the porch. She will lock the door behind her for the last time.

"No-"

He couldn't keep the word from strangling in his throat. He kept staring at the house. His head ached. He saw everything weaving. I'm sick, he thought.

"I'm sick!"

He shouted it. There was no one around to hear. He stood gazing at the house. She is going away forever, said his mind.

Very well then! I'll write, write, write. He let the words soak into his mind and displace all else.

A man had a choice, after all. He devoted his life to his work or to his wife and children and home. It could not be combined; not in this day and age. In this insane world where God was second to income and goodness to wealth.

He glanced aside as the green-striped bus topped the distant hill and approached. He put the briefcase under his arm and reached into his coat pocket for a token. There was a hole in the pocket. Sally had been meaning to sew it. Well, she would never sew it now. What did it matter anyway?

I would rather have my soul intact than the suit of clothes I wear.

Words, words, he thought, as the bus stopped before him. They flood through me now that she is leaving. Is that evidence that it is her presence that clogs the channels of thought?

He dropped the token in the coin box and weaved down the length of the bus. He passed a professor he knew and nodded to him distractedly. He slumped down on the back seat and stared at the grimy, rubberized floor boards.

This is a great life, his mind ranted. I am so pleased with this, my life and these, my great and noble accomplishments.

He opened the briefcase a moment and looked in at the thick prospectus he had outlined with the aid of Dr. Ramsay.

First week-1. *Everyman*. Discussion of. Reading of selections from *Classic Readings For College Freshmen*. 2. *Beowulf*. Reading of. Class discussion. Twenty minute quotation quiz.

He shoved the sheaf of papers back into the briefcase. It sickens me, he thought. I hate these things. The classics have become anathema to me. I begin to loathe the very mention of them. Chaucer, the Elizabethan poets, Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare. What higher insult to a man than to grow to hate these names because he must share them by part with unappreciative clods? Because he must strain them thin and make them palatable for the dullards who should better be digging ditches.

He got off the bus downtown and started down the long slope of Ninth Street.

Walking, he felt as though he were a ship with its hawser cut, prey to a twisted network of currents. He felt apart from the city, the country, the world. If someone told me I were a ghost, he thought, I would be inclined to believe.

What is she doing now?

He wondered about it as the buildings floated past him. What is she thinking as I stand here and the town of Fort drifts by me like vaporous stage flats? What are her hands holding? What expression has she on her lovely face?

She is alone in the house, our house. What might have been our *home*. Now it is only a shell, a hollow box with sticks of wood and metal for furnishings. Nothing but inanimate dead matter.

No matter what John Morton said.

Him with his gold leaves parting and his test tubes and his God of the microscope. For all his erudite talk and his papers of slideruled figures; despite all that-it was simple witchcraft he professed. It was idiocy. The idiocy that prompted that ass Charles Fort to burden the world with his nebulous fancies. The idiocy that made that fool of a millionaire endow this place and from the arid soil erect these huge stone structures and house within a zoo of wild-eyed scientists always searching for some fashion of elixir while the rest of the clowns blew the world out from under them.

No, there is nothing right with the world, he thought as he plodded under the arch and onto the wide, green campus.

He looked across at the huge Physical Sciences Centre, its granite face beaming in the late morning sun.

Now she is calling the cab. He consulted his watch. No. She is in the cab already. Riding through the silent streets. Past the houses and down into the shopping district. Past the red brick buildings spewing out yokels and students. Through the town that was a potpourri of the sophisticated and the rustic.

Now the cab was turning left on Tenth Street. Now it was pulling up the hill, topping it. Gliding down toward the railroad station. Now...

"Chris!"

His head snapped around and his body twitched in surprise. He looked toward the wide-doored entrance to the Mental Sciences Building. Dr. Morton was coming out.

We attended school together eighteen years ago, he thought. But I took only a small interest in science. I preferred wasting my time on the culture of the centuries. That's why I'm an associate and he's a doctor and the head of his department.

All this fled like racing winds through his mind as Dr. Morton approached, smiling. He clapped Chris on the shoulder.

"Hello there," he said. "How are things?"

"How are they ever?"

Dr. Morton's smile faded.

"What is it, Chris?" he asked.

I won't tell you about Sally, Chris thought. Not if I die first. You'll never know it from me.

"The usual," he said.

"Still on the outs with Ramsay?"

Chris shrugged. Morton looked over at the large clock on the face of the Mental Sciences Building.

"Say, look," he said. "Why are we standing here? Your class isn't for a half hour yet, is it?"

Chris didn't answer. He's going to invite me for coffee, he thought. He's going to regale me with more of his inane theories. He's going to use me as whipping boy for his mental merry-go-round.

"Let's get some coffee," Morton said, taking Chris's arm. They walked along in silence for a few steps.

"How's Sally?" Morton asked then.

"She's fine," he answered in an even voice.

"Good. Oh, incidentally. I'll probably drop by tomorrow or the next day for that book I left there last Thursday night."

"All right."

"What were you saying about Ramsay now?"

"I wasn't."

Morton skipped that. "Been thinking anymore about what I told you?" he asked.

"If you're referring to your fairy tale about my house-no. I haven't been giving it any more thought than it deserves- which is none."

They turned the corner of the building and walked toward Ninth Street.

"Chris, that's an indefensible attitude," Morton said. "You have no right to doubt when you don't know."

Chris felt like pulling his arm away, turning and leaving Morton standing there. He was sick of words

and words and words. He wanted to be alone. He almost felt as if he could put a pistol to his head now, get it over with. Yes, I could-he thought. If someone handed it to me now it would be done in a moment.

They went up the stone steps to the sidewalk and crossed over to the Campus Cafe. Morton opened the door and ushered Chris in. Chris went in back and slid into a wooden booth.

Morton brought two coffees and sat across from him.

"Now listen," he said, stirring in sugar, "I'm your best friend. At least I regard myself as such. And I'm damned if I'll sit by like a mute and watch you kill yourself."

Chris felt his heart jump. He swallowed. He got rid of the thoughts as though they were visible to Morton.

"Forget it," he said. "I don't care what proofs you have. I don't believe any of it."

"What'll it take to convince you, damn it?" Morton said. "Do you have to lose your life first?"

"Look," Chris said pettishly. "I don't believe it. That's *it*. Forget it now, let it go."

"Listen, Chris, I can show you..."

"You can show me nothing!" Chris cut in.

Morton was patient. "It's a recognized phenomenon," he said.

Chris looked at him in disgust and shook his head.

"What dreams you white frocked kiddies have in the sanctified cloister of your laboratories. You can make yourself believe anything after a while. As long as you can make up a measurement for it."

"Will you listen to me, Chris? How many times have you complained to me about splinters, about closet doors flying open, about rugs slipping? How many times?"

"Oh, for God's sake, don't start *that* again. I'll get up and walk out of here. I'm in no mood for your lectures. Save them for those poor idiots who pay tuition to hear them."

Morton looked at him with a shake of his head.

"I wish I could get to you," he said.

"Forget it."

"Forget it?" Morton squirmed. "Can't you see that you're in danger because of your temper?"

"I'm telling you, John..."

"Where do you think that temper of yours goes? Do you think it disappears? No. It doesn't. It goes into your rooms and into your furniture and into the air. It goes into Sally. It makes everything sick; including you. It crowds you out. It welds a link between animate and inanimate. *Psychobolie*. Oh, don't look so petulant; like a child who can't stand to hear the word *spinach*. Sit down, for God's sake. You're an adult; listen like one."

Chris lit a cigarette. He let Morton's voice drift into a non-intelligent hum. He glanced at the wall clock. Quarter to twelve. In two minutes, if the schedule was adhered to, she would be going. The train would move and the town of Fort would pass away from her.

"I've told you any number of times," Morton was saying. "No one knows what matter is made of. Atoms, electrons, pure energy-all words. Who knows where it will end? We guess, we theorize, we make up means of measurement. But we don't know."

"And that's for matter. Think of the human brain and its still unknown capacities. It's an uncharted continent, Chris. It may stay that way for a long time. And all that time the suspected powers will still be affecting us and, maybe, affecting matter, even if we *can't* measure it on a gauge."

"And I say you're poisoning your house. I say your temper has become ingrained in the structure, in every article you touch. All of them influenced by you and your ungovernable rages. And I think too that if it weren't for Sally's presence acting as an abortive factor, well... you might actually be attacked by..."

Chris heard the last few sentences.

"Oh, stop this gibberish!" he snapped angrily. "You're talking like a juvenile after his first Tom Swift novel."

Morton sighed. He ran his fingers over the cup edge and shook his head sadly.

"Well," he said, "all I can do is hope that nothing breaks down. It's obvious to me that you're not going to listen."

"Congratulations on one statement I can agree with," said Chris. He looked at his watch. "And now if you'll excuse me I'll go and listen to saddle-shoed cretins stumble over passages they haven't the slightest ability to assimilate."

They got up.

"I'll take it," said Morton but Chris slapped a coin on the counter and walked out. Morton followed, putting his change into his pocket slowly.

In the street he patted Chris on the shoulder.

"Try to take it easy," he said. "Look, why don't you and Sally come out to the house tonight? We could have a few rounds of bridge."

"That's impossible," Chris said.

The students were reading a selection from *King Lear*. Their heads were bent over the books. He stared at them without seeing them.

I've got to resign myself to it, he told himself. I've got to forget her, that's all. She's gone. I'm not going to bewail the fact. I'm not going to hope against hope that she'll return. I don't *want* her back. I'm better off without her. Free and unfettered now.

His thoughts drained off. He felt empty and helpless. He felt as though he could never write another word for the rest of his life. Maybe, he thought, sullenly displeased with the idea, maybe it was only the upset of her leaving that enabled my brain to find words. For, after all, the words I thought of, the ideas that nourished, though briefly, were all to do with her-her going and my wretchedness because of it.

He caught himself short. No!-he cried in silent battle. I will not let it be that way. I'm strong. This feeling is only temporary, I'll very soon have learned to do without her. And then I'll do work. Such work as I have only dreamed of doing. After all, haven't I lived eighteen years more? Haven't those years filled me to overflowing with sights and sounds, ideals, impressions, interpretations?

He trembled with excitement.

Someone was waving a hand in his face. He focused his eyes and looked coldly at the girl.

"Well?" he said.

"Could you tell us when you're going to give back our midterm papers, Professor Neal?" she asked.

He stared at her, his right cheek twitching. He felt about to hurl every invective at his command into her face. His fists closed.

"You'll get them back when they're marked," he said tensely.

"Yes, but..."

"You heard me," he said.

His voice rose at the end of the sentence. The girl sat down.

As he lowered his head he noticed that she looked at the boy next to her and shrugged her shoulders, a look of disgust on her face.

"Miss..."

He fumbled with his record book and found her name.

"Miss Forbes!"

She looked up, her features drained of colour, her red lips standing out sharply against her white skin. Painted alabaster idiot. The words clawed at him.

"You may get out of this room," he ordered sharply.

Confusion filled her face.

"Why?" she asked in a thin, plaintive voice.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," he said, the fury rising. "I said get out of this room!"

"But..."

"*Do you hear me!*" he shouted.

Hurriedly she collected her books, her hands shaking, her face burning with embarrassment. She kept her eyes on the floor and her throat moved convulsively as she edged along the aisle and went out the doorway.

The door closed behind her. He sank back. He felt a terrible sickness in himself. Now, he thought,



they will all turn against me in defence of an addle-witted little girl. Dr. Ramsay would have more fuel for his simple little fire.

And they were right.

He couldn't keep his mind from it. They *were* right. He knew it. In that far recess of mind which he could not cow with thoughtless passion, he knew he was a stupid fool. I have no right to teach others. I cannot even teach myself to be a human being. He wanted to cry out the words and weep confessions and throw himself from one of the open windows.

"The whispering will stop!" he demanded fiercely.

The room was quiet. He sat tensely, waiting for any signs of militance. I am your teacher, he told himself, I am to be obeyed, I am...

The concept died. He drifted away again. What were students or a girl asking about mid-term papers? What was anything?

He glanced at his watch. In a few minutes the train would pull into Centralia. She would change to the main line express to Indianapolis. Then up to Detroit and her mother. Gone.

Gone. He tried to visualize the word, put it into living terms. But the thought of the house without her was almost beyond his means. Because it wasn't the house without her; it was something else.

He began to think of what John had said.

Was it possible? He was in a mood to accept the incredible. It was incredible that she had left him. Why not extend the impossibilities that were happening to him?

All right then, he thought angrily. The house is alive. I've given it this life with deadly outpourings of wrath. I hope to God that when I get back there and enter the door, the roof collapses. I hope the walls buckle and I'm crushed to pulp by the crushing weight of plaster and wood and brick. That's what I want. Some agency to do away with me. I cannot drive myself to it. If only a gun would commit my suicide for me. Or gas blow its deadly fumes at me for the asking or a razor slice my flesh upon request.

The door opened. He glanced up. Dr. Ramsay stood there, face drawn into a mask of indignation. Behind him in the hall Chris could see the girl, her face streaked with tears.

"A moment, Neal," Ramsay said sharply and stepped back into the hall again.

Chris sat at the desk staring at the door. He felt suddenly very tired, exhausted. He felt as if getting up and moving into the hall was more than he could possibly manage. He glanced at the class. A few of them were trying to repress smiles.

"For tomorrow you will finish the reading of *King Lear*," he said. Some of them groaned.

Ramsay appeared in the doorway again, his cheeks pink.

"Are you coming, Neal?" he asked loudly.

Chris felt himself tighten with anger as he walked across the room and out into the hall. The girl lowered her eyes. She stood beside Dr. Ramsay's portly frame.

"What's this I hear, Neal?" Ramsay asked.

That's right, Chris thought. Don't ever call me professor. I'll never be one, will I? You'll see to that, you bastard.

"I don't understand," he said, as coolly as possible.

"Miss Forbes here claims you ejected her from class for no reason at all."

"Then Miss Forbes is lying quite stupidly," he said. Let me hold this anger, he thought. Don't let it flood loose. He shook with holding it back.

The girl gasped and took out her handkerchief again. Ramsay turned and patted her shoulder.

"Go in my office, child. Wait for me."

She turned away slowly. Politician!-cried Neal's mind. How easy it is for you to be popular with them. You don't have to deal with their bungling minds.

Miss Forbes turned the corner and Ramsay looked back.

"Your explanation had better be good," he said. "I'm getting a little weary, Neal, of your behaviour."

Chris didn't speak. Why am I standing here?-he suddenly wondered. Why, in all the world, am I standing in this dim lit hall and, voluntarily, listening to this pompous boor berate me?

"I'm waiting, Neal."

Chris tightened. "I told you she was lying," he said quietly.

"I choose to believe otherwise," said Dr. Ramsay, his voice trembling.

A shudder ran through Chris. His head moved forward and he spoke slowly, teeth clenched.

"You can believe anything you damn well please."

Ramsay's mouth twitched.

"I think it's time you appeared before the board," he muttered.

"Fine!" said Chris loudly. Ramsay made a move to close the classroom door. Chris gave it a kick and it banged against the wall. A girl gasped.

"What's the matter?" Chris yelled. "Don't you want your students to hear me tell you off? Don't you even want them to suspect that you're a dolt, a windbag, an ass!"

Ramsay raised shaking fists before his chest. His lips trembled violently.

"This will do, Neal!" he cried.

Chris reached out and shoved the heavy man aside, snarling, "Oh, *get* out of my way!"

He started away. The hall fled past him. He heard the bell ring. It sounded as though it rang in another existence. The building throbbed with life; students poured from classrooms.

"Neal!" called Dr. Ramsay.

He kept walking. Oh, God, let me out of here, I'm suffocating, he thought. My hat, my briefcase. Leave them. Get out of here. Dizzily he descended the stairs surrounded by milling students. They swirled about him like an unidentifiable tide. His brain was far from them.

Staring ahead dully he walked along the first floor hall. He turned and went out the door and down the porch steps to the campus sidewalk. He paid no attention to the students who stared at his ruffled blond hair, his mussed clothes. He kept walking. I've done it, he thought belligerently. I've made the break. *I'm free!*

I'm sick.

All the way down to Main Street and out on the bus he kept renewing his stores of anger. He went over those few moments in the hallway again and again. He summoned up the vision of Ramsay's stolid face, repeated his words. He kept himself taut and furious. I'm glad, he told himself forcibly. Everything is solved. Sally has left me. Good. My job is done. Good. Now I'm free to do as I like. A strained and angry joy pounded through him. He felt alone, a stranger in the world and glad of it.

At his stop, he got off the bus and walked determinedly toward the house pretending to ignore the pain he felt at approaching it. It's just an empty house, he thought. Nothing more. Despite all puerile theories, it is nothing but a house.

Then, when he went in, he found her sitting on the couch.

He almost staggered as if someone had struck him. He stood dumbly, staring at her. She had her hands tightly clasped. She was looking at him.

He swallowed.

"Well," he managed to say.

"I..." Her throat contracted. "Well..."

"Well *what!*" he said quickly and loudly to hide the shaking in his voice.

She stood up. "Chris, please. Won't you... ask me to stay?" She looked at him like a little girl, pleading.

The look enraged him. All his day dreams shattered; he saw the growing thing of new ideas ground under foot.

"Ask you to stay!" he yelled at her. "By God, I'll ask you nothing!"

"Chris! Don't!"

She's buckling, cried his mind. She's cracking. Get her now. Get her out of here. Drive her from these walls!

"Chris," she sobbed, "be kind. Please be kind."

*"Kind!"*

He almost choked on the word. He felt a wild heat coursing his body.

"Have *you* been kind? Driving me crazy, into a pit of despair. I can't get out. Do you understand? Never. Never! Do you understand that! I'll never write. I *can't* write! You drained it out of me! You killed it! Understand *that*? Killed it!"

She backed away toward the dining room. He followed her, hands shaking at his sides, feeling that she had driven him to this confession and hating her the more for it.

"Chris," she murmured in fright.

It seemed as if his rage grew cell-like, swelling him with fury until he was nothing of bone and blood but a hating accusation made flesh.

"I don't want you!" he yelled. "You're right, I don't want you! Get out of here!"

Her eyes were wide, her mouth an open wound. Suddenly she ran past him, eyes glistening with tears. She fled through the front doorway.

He went to the window and watched her running down the block, her dark brown hair streaming behind her.

Dizzy suddenly, he sank down on the couch and closed his eyes. He dug his nails into his palms. Oh God, I *am* sick, his mind churned.

He twitched and looked around stupidly. What was it? This feeling that he was sinking into the couch, into the floorboards, dissolving in the air, joining the molecules of the house. He whimpered softly, looking around. His head ached; he pressed a palm against his forehead.

"What?" he muttered. "What?"

He stood up. As though there were fumes he tried to smell them. As though it were a sound he tried to hear it. He turned around to see it. As though there were something with depth and length and width; something menacing.

He wavered, fell back on the couch. He stared around. There was nothing, all intangible. It might only be in the mind. The furniture lay as it did before. The sunlight filtered through the windows, piercing the gauzelike curtains, making gold patterns on the inlaid wooden floor. The walls were still creamy, the ceiling was as it was before. Yet there was this darkening, darkening...

*What?*

He pushed up and walked dizzily around the room. He forgot about Sally. He was in the dining room. He touched the table, he stared at the dark oak. He went into the kitchen. He stood by the sink and looked out the window.

Far up the block, he saw her walking, stumbling. She must have been waiting for the bus. Now she couldn't wait any longer and she was walking away from the house, away from him.

"I'll go after her," he muttered.

No, he thought. No, I won't go after her like a...

He forgot like what. He stared down at the sink. He felt drunk. Everything was fuzzy on the edges. She's washed the cups. The broken saucer was thrown away.

He looked at the nick on his thumb. It was dried. He'd forgotten about it.

He looked around suddenly as if someone had sneaked behind him. He stared at the wall. Something was rising. He felt it. It's not me. But it had to be; it had to be imagination.

*Imagination!*

He slammed a fist on the sink. I'll write. Write, *write*. Sit down and drain it all away in words; this feeling of anguish and terror and loneliness. Write it out of my system.

He cried, "Yes!"

He ran from the kitchen. He refused to accept the instinctive fear in himself. He ignored the menace that seemed to thicken the very air.

A rug slipped. He kicked it aside. He sat down. The air hummed. He tore off the cover on the typewriter. He sat nervously, staring at the keyboard. The moment before attack. It was in the air. But

it's *my* attack!-he thought triumphantly, my attack on stupidity and fear.

He rolled a sheet into the typewriter. He tried to collect his throbbing thoughts. Write, the word called in his mind. Write- *now*.

"Now!" he cried.

He felt the desk lurch against his shins.

The flaring pain knifed open his senses. He kicked the desk in automatic frenzy. More pain. He kicked again. The desk flung back at him. He screamed.

*He'd seen it move.*

He tried to back off, the anger torn from him. The typewriter keys moved under his hands. His eyes swept down. He couldn't tell whether he was moving the keys or whether they moved by themselves. He pulled hysterically, trying to dislodge his fingers but he couldn't. The keys were moving faster than his eye could see. They were a blur of motion. He felt them shredding his skin, peeling his fingers. They were raw. Blood started to ooze out.

He cried out and pulled. He managed to jerk away his fingers and jump back in the chair.

His belt buckle caught, the desk drawer came flying out. It slammed into his stomach. He yelled again. The pain was a black cloud pouring over his head.

He threw down a hand to shove in the drawer. He saw the yellow pencils lying there. They glared. His hand slipped, it banged into the drawer.

One of the pencils jabbed at him.

He always kept the points sharp. It was like the bite of a snake. He snapped back his hand with a gasp of pain. The point was jammed under a nail. It was imbedded in raw, tender flesh. He cried out in fury and pain. He pulled at the pencil with his other hand. The point flew out and jabbed into his palm. He couldn't get rid of the pencil, it kept dragging over his hand. He pulled at it and it made black, jagged lines on his skin. It tore the skin open.

He heaved the pencil across the room. It bounced on the wall. It seemed to jump as it fell on the eraser. It rolled over and was still.

He lost his balance. The chair fell back with a rush. His head banged sharply against the floorboards. His out-clutched hand grabbed at the window sill. Tiny splinters flashed into his skin like invisible needles. He howled in deathly fear. He kicked his legs. The mid-term papers showered down over him like the beating wings of insane bird flocks.

The chair snapped up again on its springs. The heavy wheels rolled over his raw, bloody hands. He drew them back with a shriek. He reared a leg and kicked the chair over violently. It crashed on the side against the mantelpiece. The wheels spun and chattered like a swarm of furious insects.

He jumped up. He lost his balance and fell again, crashing against the window sill. The curtains fell on him like a python. The rods snapped. They flew down and struck him across the scalp. He felt warm blood trickle across his forehead. He thrashed about on the floor. The curtains seemed to writhe around him like serpents. He screamed again. He tore at them wildly. His eyes were terror-stricken.

He threw them off and lurched up suddenly, staggering around for balance. The pain in his hands assailed him. He looked at them. They were like raw butcher meat, skin hanging down in shreds. He had to bandage them. He turned toward the bathroom.

At his first step the rug slid from under him, the rug he had kicked aside. He felt himself rush through the air. He reached down his hands instinctively to block the fall.

The white pain made his body leap. One finger snapped. Splinters shot into his raw fingers, he felt a burning pain in one ankle.

He tried to scramble up but the floor was like ice under him. He was deadly silent. His heart thudded in his chest. He tried to rise again. He fell, hissing with pain.

The bookshelf loomed over him. He cried out and flung up an arm. The case came crashing down on him. The top shelf drove into his skull. Black waves dashed over him, a sharp blade of pain drove into his head. Books showered over him. He rolled on his side with a groan. He tried to crawl out from underneath. He shoved the books aside weakly and they fell open. He felt the page edges slicing into his

fingers like razor blades.

The pain cleared his head. He sat up and hurled the books aside. He kicked the bookcase back against the wall. The back fell off it and it crashed down.

He rose up, the room spinning before his eyes. He staggered into the wall, tried to hold on. The wall shifted under his hands it seemed. He couldn't hold on. He slipped to his knees, pushed up again.

"Bandage myself," he muttered hoarsely.

The words filled his brain. He staggered up through the quivering dining room, into the bathroom.

He stopped. No! Get out of the house! He knew it was not his will that brought him in there.

He tried to turn but he slipped on the tiles and cracked his elbow against the edge of the bathtub. A shooting pain barbed into his upper arm. The arm went numb. He sprawled on the floor, writhing in pain. The walls clouded; they welled around him like a blank shroud.

He sat up, breath tearing at his throat. He pushed himself up with a gasp. His arm shot out, he pulled open the cabinet door. It flew open against his cheek, tearing a jagged rip in the soft flesh.

His head snapped back. The crack in the ceiling looked like a wide idiot smile on a blank, white face. He lowered his head, whimpering in fright. He tried to back away.

His hand reached out. For iodine, for gauze!-his mind cried.

His hand came out with the razor.

It flopped in his hand like a new caught fish. His other hand reached in. For iodine, for gauze!-shrieked his mind.

His hand came out with dental floss. It flooded out of the tube like an endless white worm. It coiled around his throat and shoulders. It choked him.

The long shiny blade slipped from its sheath.

He could not stop his hand. It drew the razor heavily across his chest. It slit open the shirt. It sliced a valley through his chest. Blood spurted out.

He tried to hurl away the razor. It stuck to his hand. It slashed at him, at his arms and hands and legs and body.

At his throat.

A scream of utter horror flooded from his lips. He ran from the bathroom, staggering wildly into the living room.

"Sally!" he screamed, "Sally, Sally, Sally..."

The razor touched his throat. The room went black. Pain. Life ebbing away into the night. Silence over all the world.

The next day Dr. Morton came.

He called the police.

And later the coroner wrote in his report:

*Died of self-inflicted wounds.*

## **8 - A Flourish Of Strumpets**

One evening in 1959 the doorbell rang.

Frank and Sylvia Gussett had just settled down to watch television. Frank put his gin and tonic on the table and stood. He walked into the hall and opened the door.

It was a woman.

'Good evening,' she said. 'I represent the Exchange.'

'The Exchange?' Frank smiled politely.

'Yes,' said the woman. 'We're beginning an experimental programme in this neighbourhood. As to our service -'

Their service was a venerable one. Frank gaped.

'Are you *serious*?' he asked.

'Perfectly,' the woman said.

'But - good Lord, you can't - come to our very houses and - and - that's against the law! I can have you arrested!'

'Oh, you wouldn't want to do *that*,' said the woman. She absorbed blouse enhancing air.

'Oh, wouldn't I?' said Frank and closed the door in her face.

He stood there breathing hard. Outside, he heard the sound of the woman's spike heels clacking down the porch steps and fading off.

Frank stumbled into the living room.

'It's unbelievable,' he said.

Sylvia looked up from the television set 'What is?' she asked.

He told her.

'*What!*' She rose from her chair, aghast.

They stood looking at each other a moment. Then Sylvia strode to the phone and picked up the receiver.

She spun the dial and told the operator, '*I want the police.*'

'Strange business,' said the policeman who arrived a few minutes later.

'Strange indeed,' mused Frank.

'Well, what are you going to *do* about it?' challenged Sylvia.

'Not much we *can* do right off, ma'am,' explained the policeman. 'Nothing to go on.'

'But my description - ' said Frank.

'We can't go around arresting every woman we see in spike heels and a white blouse,' said the policeman. 'If she comes back, you let us know. Probably just a sorority prank, though.'

'Perhaps he's right,' said Frank when the patrol car had driven off.

Sylvia replied. 'He'd better be.'

'Strangest thing happened last night,' said Frank to Maxwell as they drove to work.

Maxwell snickered. 'Yeah, she came to our house too,' he said.

'She did?' Frank glanced over, startled, at his grinning neighbour.

'Yeah,' said Maxwell. 'Just my luck the old lady had to answer the door.'

Frank stiffened. '*We* called the police,' he said.

'What for?' asked Maxwell. 'Why fight it?'

Frank's brow furrowed. 'You mean you - don't think it was a sorority girl prank?' he asked.

'Hell, no, man,' said Maxwell, 'it's for real.' He began to sing:

*I'm just a poor little door-to-door whore; A want-to-be-good But misunderstood. ...*

'What on earth?' asked Frank.

'Heard it at a stag party,' said Maxwell. 'Guess this isn't the first town they've hit.'

'*Good Lord*' muttered Frank, blanching.

'Why not?' asked Maxwell. 'It was just a matter of time. Why should they let all that home trade go to waste?'

'That's *execrable*,' declared Frank.

'Hell it is,' said Maxwell. 'It's progress.'

The second one came that night; a black-root blonde, slit-skirted and sweated to within an inch of her breathing life.

'*Hel-lo*, honey,' she said when Frank opened the door. 'The name's Janie. Interested?'

Frank stood rigid to the heels. 'I - ' he said.

'Twenty-three and fancy free,' said Janie.

Frank shut the door, quivering.

'*Again?*' asked Sylvia as he tottered back.

'Yes,' he mumbled.

'Did you get her address and phone number so we can tell the police?'

'I forgot,' he said.

'Oh!' Sylvia stamped her mule. 'You said you were going to.'

'I know,' Frank swallowed. 'Her name was - Janie.'

'That's a *big* help,' Sylvia said. She shivered. 'Now what are we going to do?'

Frank shook his head.

'Oh, this is *monstrous*,' she said. 'That we should be exposed to such - ' She trembled with fury.

Frank embraced her. 'Courage,' he whispered.

'I'll get a dog,' she said. 'A vicious one.'

'No, no,' he said, 'we'll call the police again. They'll simply have to station someone out here.'

Sylvia began to cry. 'It's monstrous,' she sobbed, 'that's all.'

'Monstrous,' he agreed.

'What's that you're humming?' she asked at breakfast.

He almost spewed out whole wheat toast.

'Nothing,' he said, choking. 'Just a song I heard.'

She patted him on the back. 'Oh.'

He left the house, mildly shaken. It is monstrous, he thought.

That morning, Sylvia bought a sign at a hardware store and hammered it into the front lawn. It read no soliciting. She underlined the soliciting. Later she went out again and underlined the underline.

'Came right to your door you say?' asked the FBI man Frank phoned from the office.

'*Right to the door*,' repeated Frank, 'bold as you please.'

'My, my,' said the FBI man. He clucked.

'Notwithstanding,' said Frank sternly, 'the police have refused to station a man in our neighbourhood.'

'I see,' said the FBI man.

'Something has got to be done,' declared Frank. 'This is a gross invasion of privacy.'

'I certainly is,' said the FBI man, 'and we will look into the matter, never fear.'

After Frank had hung up, the FBI man returned to his bacon sandwich and thermos of buttermilk.

'*I'm just a poor little* - ' he had sung before catching himself. Shocked, he totted figures the remainder of his lunch hour.

The next night it was a perky brunette with a blouse front slashed to forever.

'No!' said Frank in a ringing voice.

She wiggled sumptuously. 'Why?' she asked.

'*I do not have to explain myself to you!*' he said and shut the door, heart pistoning against his chest.

Then he snapped his fingers and opened the door again. The brunette turned, smiling.

'Changed your mind, honey?' she asked.

'No. I mean yes,' said Frank, eyes narrowing. 'What's your address?'

The brunette looked mildly accusing.

'Now, honey,' she said. 'You wouldn't be trying to get me in trouble, would you?'

'She wouldn't tell me,' he said dismally when he returned to the living room.

Sylvia looked despairing. 'I phoned the police again,' she said.

'And -?'

'And *nothing*. There's the smell of corruption in this.'

Frank nodded gravely. 'You'd better get that dog,' he said. He thought of the brunette. 'A *big* one,' he added.

'Wowie, that Janie,' said Maxwell.

Frank down shifted vigorously and yawed around a corner on squealing tyres. His face was adamant.

Maxwell clapped him on the shoulder.

'Aw, come off it, Frankie-boy,' he said, 'you're not fooling me any. You're no different from the rest of us.'

'I'll have no part in it,' declared Frank, 'and that's all there is to it.'

'So keep telling that to the Mrs.,' said Maxwell. 'But get in a few kicks on the side like the rest of us. Right?'

'Wrong,' said Frank. '*All* wrong. No *wonder* the police can't do anything. I'm probably the only willing witness in town.'

Maxwell guffawed.

It was a raven-haired, limp-lidded vamp that night. On her outfit spangles moved and glittered at strategic points.

'Hel-lo, honey lamb,' she said. 'My name's - '

' *What have you done with our dog?*' challenged Frank.

'Why, nothing, honey, nothing,' she said. 'He's just off getting acquainted with my poodle Winifred. Now about *us* - '

Frank shut the door without a word and waited until the twitching had eased before returning to Sylvia and television.

*Semper*, by God oh God, he thought as he put on his pyjamas later, *fidelis*.

The next two nights they sat in the darkened living room and, as soon as the woman rang the doorbell, Sylvia phoned the police.

'Yes,' she whispered, furiously, 'they're right out there *now*. Will you please send a patrol car *this instant?*'

Both nights the patrol car arrived after the women had gone.

'Complicity,' muttered Sylvia as she daubed on cold cream. 'Plain out-and-out complicity.'

Frank ran cold water over his wrists.

That day Frank phoned city and state officials who promised to look into the matter.

That night it was a redhead sheathed in a green knit dressy that hugged all that was voluminous and there was much of that.

'Now, see here - ' Frank began.

'Girls who were here before me,' said the redhead, 'tell me you're not interested. Well, I always say, where there's a disinterested husband there's a listening wife.'

'Now you see here - ' said Frank.

He stopped as the redhead handed him a card. He looked at it automatically.

39-26-36 MARGIE

(specialties) By appointment only

'If you don't want to set it up here, honey,' said Margie, 'you just meet me in the Cyprian Room of the Hotel Fillmore.'

'I *beg* your pardon,' said Frank and flung the card away.

'Any evening between six and seven,' Margie chirped.

Frank leaned against the shut door and birds with heated wings buffeted at his face.

'Monstrous,' he said with a gulp. 'Oh, *m-monstrous*.'

'Again ?' asked Sylvia.

'But with a difference,' he said vengefully. 'I have traced them to their lair and tomorrow I shall lead the police there.'

'Oh, Frank!' said Sylvia, embracing him. 'You're wonderful.'

'Th-thank you,' said Frank.

When he came out of the house the next morning he found the card on one of the porch steps. He picked it up and slid it into his wallet.

Sylvia mustn't see it, he thought.

It would hurt her.

Besides he had to keep the porch neat.

Besides, it was important evidence.

That evening he sat in a shadowy Cyprian Room booth revolving a glass of sherry between two



fingers. Jukebox music softly thrummed; there was the mumble of post-work conversation in the air.

Now, thought Frank. *When Margie arrives, I'll duck into the phone booth and call the police, then keep her occupied in conversation until they come. That's what I'll do. When Margie -*

Margie arrived.

Frank sat like a Medusa victim. Only his mouth moved. It opened slowly. His gaze rooted on the jutting opulence of Margie as she waggled along the aisle, then came to gelatinous rest on a leather-topped bar stool.

Five minutes later he cringed out of a side door.

'Wasn't *there?*' asked Sylvia for a third time.

'I *told* you,' snapped Frank, concentrating on his breaded cutlet.

Sylvia was still a moment. Then her fork clinked down.

'We'll have to move, then,' she said. 'Obviously, the authorities have no intention of doing *anything*.'

'What difference does it make *where* we live?' he mumbled.

She didn't reply.

'I mean,' he said, trying to break the painful silence, 'well, who knows, maybe it's an inevitable cultural phenomenon. Maybe -'

'*Frank Gussett!*' she cried. '*Are you defending that awful Exchange ?*'

'No, no, of course not,' he blurted. 'It's execrable. Really! But - well, maybe it's Greece all over again. Maybe it's Rome. Maybe it's -'

'I don't care *what* it is!' she cried. 'It's *awful!*'

He put his hand on hers. 'There, there,' he said.

39-26-36, he thought.

That night, in the frantic dark, there was a desperate reaffirmation of their love.

'It *was* nice, *wasn't* it?' asked Sylvia, plaintively.

'Of course,' he said. 39-26-36.

'That's right!' said Maxwell as they drove to work the next morning, 'a cultural phenomenon. You hit it on the head, Frankie boy. An inevitable goddamn cultural phenomenon. First the houses. Then the lady cab drivers, the girls on street corners, the clubs, the teenage pickups roaming the drive-in movies. Sooner or later they had to branch out more; put it on a door-to-door basis. And naturally, the syndicates are going to run it, pay off complainers. Inevitable. You're so right, Frankie boy; so right.'

Frank drove on, nodding grimly.

Over lunch he found himself humming, '*Mar-gie. I'm always thinkin of you -*'

He stopped, shaken. He couldn't finish the meal. He prowled the streets until one, marble-eyed. The mass mind, he thought, that evil old mass mind.

Before he went into his office he tore the little card to confetti and snowed it into a disposal can.

In the figures he wrote that afternoon the number 39 cropped up with dismaying regularity.

Once with an exclamation point.

'I almost think you're defending this - this *thing*,' accused Sylvia. 'You and your cultural phenomenon's!'

Frank sat in the living room listening to her bang dishes in the kitchen sink. Cranky old thing, he thought. MARGIE (*specialties*)

*Will you stop!* he whispered furiously to his mind.

That night while he was brushing his teeth, he started to sing, '*I'm just a poor little -*'

'Damn!' he muttered to his wild-eyed reflection.

That night there were dreams. Unusual ones.

The next day he and Sylvia argued.

The next day Maxwell told him his system.

The next day Frank muttered to himself more than once. 'I'm so tired of it all.'

The next night the women stopped coming.

*'It is possible?'* said Sylvia. 'Are they actually going to leave us alone?'

Frank held her close. 'Looks like it,' he said faintly. *Oh, I'm despicable*, he thought.

A week went by. No women came. Frank woke daily at six a.m. and did a little dusting and vacuuming before he left for work.

'I like to help you,' he said when Sylvia asked. She looked at him strangely. When he brought home bouquets three nights in a row she put them in water with a quizzical look on her face.

It was the following Wednesday night.

The doorbell rang. Frank stiffened. They'd *promised* to stop coming!

'I'll get it,' he said.

'Do,' she said.

He clumped to the door and opened it.

'Evening, sir.'

Frank stared at the handsome, moustached young man in the jaunty sports clothes.

'I'm from the Exchange,' the man said. 'Wife home?'

## 9 - From Shadowed Places

Dr. Jennings hooked in towards the kerb, the tyres of his Jaguar spewing out a froth of slush. Braking hard, he jerked the key loose with his left hand while his right clutched for the satchel at his side. In a moment, he was on the street, waiting for a breach in traffic.

His gaze leaped upward to the windows of Peter Lang's apartment. Was Patricia all right? She'd sounded awful on the phone - tremulous, near to panic. Jennings lowered his eyes and frowned uneasily at the line of passing cars. Then, as an opening appeared in the procession, he lunged forward.

The glass door swung pneumatically shut behind him as he strode across the lobby. *Father, hurry! Please! I don't know what to do with him!* Patricia's stricken voice re-echoed in his mind. He stepped into the elevator and pressed the tenth-floor button. *I can't tell you on the phone! You've got to come!* Jennings stared ahead with sightless eyes, unconscious of the whispering closure of the doors.

Patricia's three-month engagement to Lang had certainly been a troubled one. Even so, he wouldn't feel justified in telling her to break it off. Lang could hardly be classified as one of the idle rich. True, he'd never had to face a job of work in his entire twenty-seven years. Still, he wasn't indolent or helpless. One of the world's ranking hunter-sportsmen, he handled himself and his chosen world with graceful authority. There was a readily mined vein of humour in him and a sense of basic justice despite his air of swagger. Most of all, he seemed to love Patricia very much.

Still, all this trouble -

Jennings twitched, blinking his eyes into focus. The elevator doors were open. Realizing that the tenth floor had been reached, he lurched into the corridor, shoe heels squeaking on the polished tile. Without thinking, he thrust the satchel underneath his arm and began pulling off his gloves. Before he'd reached the apartment, they were in his pocket and his coat had been unbuttoned.

A pencilled note was tacked unevenly to the door. *Come in*. Jennings felt a tremor at the sight of Pat's misshapen scrawl. Bracing himself, he turned the knob and went inside.

He froze in unexpected shock. The living room was a shambles, chairs and tables overturned, lamps broken, a clutter of books hurled across the floor, and, scattered everywhere, a debris of splintered glasses, matches, cigarette butts. Dozens of liquor stains islanded the white carpeting. On the bar, an upset bottle trickled scotch across the counter edge while, from the giant wall speakers, a steady rasping flooded the room.

Jennings stared, aghast. *Peter must have gone insane.*

Thrusting his bag onto the hall table, he shed his hat and coat, then grabbed his bag again, and hastened down the steps into the living-room. Crossing to the built-in high fidelity unit, he switched it off.

*'Father?'*

'Yes.' Jennings heard his daughter sob with relief and hurried towards the bedroom.

They were on the floor beneath the picture window. Pat was on her knees embracing Peter who had drawn his naked body into a heap, arms pressed across his face. As Jennings knelt beside them, Patricia looked at him with terror-haunted eyes.

'He tried to jump,' she said, 'He tried to kill himself.' Her voice was fitful, hoarse.

'All right.' Jennings drew away the rigid quiver of her arms and tried to raise Lang's head. Peter gasped, recoiling from his touch, and bound himself again into a ball of limbs and torso. Jennings stared at his constricted form. Almost in horror, he watched the crawl of muscles in Peter's back and shoulders. Snakes seemed to writhe beneath the sun-darkened skin.

'How long has he been like this?' he asked.

'I don't know.' Her face was a mask of anguish. 'I don't know.'

'Go in the living room and pour yourself a drink,' her father ordered, 'I'll take care of him.'

'He tried to jump right through the window.'

'Patricia...'

She began to cry and Jennings turned away; tears were what she needed. Once again, he tried to uncurl the inflexible knot of Peter's body. Once again, the young man gasped and shrank away from him.

'Try to relax,' said Jennings, 'I want to get you on your bed.'

No,' said Peter, his voice a pain-thickened whisper.

'I can't help you, boy, unless - '

Jennings stopped, his face gone blank. In an instant, Lang's body had lost its rigidity. His legs were straightening out, his arms were slipping from their tense position at his face. A stridulous breath swelled out his lungs.

Peter raised his head.

The sight made Jennings gasp. If ever a face could be described as tortured, it was Lang's. Darkly bearded, bloodless, stark-eyed, it was the face of a man enduring inexplicable torment.

'What *is* it?' Jennings asked, appalled.

Peter grinned; it was the final, hideous touch that made the doctor shudder. 'Hasn't Patty told you?' Peter, answered.

'Told me what?'

Peter hissed, apparently amused. 'I'm being hexed,' he said, 'Some scrawny - '

'Darling, *don't*,' begged Pat.

'What are you talking about?' demanded Jennings.

'Drink?' asked Peter. 'Darling?'

Patricia pushed unsteadily to her feet and started for the living room. Jennings helped Lang to his bed.

'What's this all about?' he asked.

Lang fell back heavily on his pillow. 'What I said,' he answered, 'Hexed. Cursed. Witch doctor.' He snickered feebly. 'Bastard's killing me. Been three months now - almost since Patty and I met.'

'Are you -?' Jennings started.

'Codeine ineffectual,' said Lang, 'Even morphine -got some. Nothing.' He sucked in at the air. 'No fever, no chills. No symptoms for the AMA. Just - someone killing me.' He peered up through slitted eyes. 'Funny?'

*"Are you serious ?"*

Peter snorted. 'Who the hell knows?' he said, 'Maybe it's delirium tremens. God knows I've drunk enough today to - ' The tangle of his dark hair rustled on the pillow as he looked towards the window. 'Hell, it's night,' he said. He turned back quickly. 'Time?' he asked.

'After ten,' said Jennings, 'What about -?'

'Thursday, isn't it?' asked Lang.

Jennings stared at him.

'No, I see it isn't.' Lang started coughing dryly. 'Drink!' he called. As his gaze jumped towards the doorway, Jennings glanced across his shoulder. Patricia was back.

'It's all spilled,' she said, her voice like that of a frightened child.

'All right, don't worry,' muttered Lang, 'Don't need it. I'll be dead soon anyway.'

*'Don't talk like that!'*

'Honey, I'd be glad to die right now,' said Peter, staring at the ceiling. His broad chest hitched unevenly as he breathed. 'Sorry, darling, I don't mean it. Uh-oh, here we go again.' He spoke so mildly that his seizure caught them by surprise.

Abruptly, he was floundering on the bed, his muscle-knotted legs kicking like pistons, his arms clamped down across the drumhide tautness of his face. A noise like the shrilling of a violin wavered in his throat, and Jennings saw saliva running from the corners of his mouth. Turning suddenly, the doctor lurched across the room for his bag.

Before he'd reached it, Peter's thrashing body had fallen from the bed. The young man reared up, screaming, on his face the wide-mouthed, slavering frenzy of an animal. Patricia tried to hold him back but, with a snarl, he shoved her brutally side and staggered for the window.

Jennings met him with the hypodermic. For several moments, they were locked in reeling struggle, Peter's distended, teeth-bared face inches from the doctor's, his vein corded hands scrabbling for Jennings' throat. He cried out hoarsely as the needle pierced his skin and, springing backwards, lost his balance, fell. He tried to stand, his crazed eyes looking towards the window. Then the drug was in his blood and he was sitting with the flaccid posture of a rag doll. Torpor glazed his eyes. 'Bastard's killing me,' he muttered.

They laid him on the bed and covered up the sluggish twitching of his body.

'Killing me,' said Lang, 'Black bastard.'

'Does he really *believe* this?' Jennings asked.

'Father, *look* at him,' she answered.

'You believe it too?'

'I don't know.' She shook her head impotently. 'All I know is that I've seen him change from what he was to - *this*. He isn't sick, Father. There's nothing wrong with him.' She shuddered. 'Yet he's dying.'

'Why didn't you call me sooner?'

'I couldn't,' she said, 'I was afraid to leave him for a second.'

Jennings drew his fingers from the young man's fluttering pulse. 'Has he been examined at all?'

She nodded tiredly. 'Yes,' she answered, 'When it started getting worse, he went to see a specialist. He thought, perhaps his brain - ' She shook her head. 'There's nothing wrong with him.'

'But why does he say he's being -?' Jennings found himself unable to speak the word.

'*I don't know*,' she said, 'Sometimes, he seems to believe it. Mostly he jokes about it.'

'But on what grounds -?'

'Some incident on his last safari,' said Patricia, 'I don't really know what happened. Some - Zulu native threatened him; said he was a witch doctor and was going to - ' Her voice broke into a wracking sob. 'Oh, God, how can such a thing be true? How can it *happen* ?'

'The point, I think, is whether Peter, actually, believes it's happening,' said Jennings. He turned to Lang. 'And, from the look of him - '

'Father, I've been wondering if - ' Patricia swallowed. 'If maybe Doctor Howell could help him.'

Jennings stared at her for a moment. Then he said, 'You *do* believe it, don't you?'

'Father, *try to understand*.' There was a trembling undertone of panic in her voice, 'You've only seen Peter now and then. I've watched it happening to him almost day by day. Something is destroying him! I don't know what it is, but I'll try anything to stop it. *Anything*.'

'All right.' He pressed a reassuring hand against her back. 'Go phone while I examine him.'

After she'd gone into the living room - the telephone connected in the bedroom had been ripped from the wall - Jennings drew the covers down and looked at Peter's bronzed and muscular body. It was trembling with minute vibrations - as if, within the chemical imprisoning of the drug, each separate nerve still pulsed and throbbed.

Jennings clenched his teeth in vague distress. Somewhere, at the core of his perception, where the rationale of science had yet to filter, he sensed that medical inquiry would be pointless. Still, he felt distaste for what Patricia might be setting up. It went against the grain of learned acceptance. It offended

mentality.

It, also, frightened him.

The drug's effect was almost gone now, Jennings saw. Ordinarily, it would have rendered Lang unconscious for six to eight hours. Now - in *forty minutes* - he was in the living room with them, lying on the sofa in his bathrobe, saying, 'Patty, it's ridiculous. What good's another doctor going to do?'

'All right then, it's ridiculous!' she said, 'What would you *like* for us to do - just stand around and watch you -?' She couldn't finish.

'Shhh.' Lang stroked her hair with trembling fingers. 'Patty, Patty. Hang on, darling. Maybe I can beat it.'

'You're *going* to beat it.' Patricia kissed his hand. 'It's both of us, Peter. I won't go on without you.'

'Don't *you* talk like that.' Lang twisted on the sofa. 'Oh, Christ, it's starting up again.' He forced a smile.

'No, I'm all right,' he told her, 'Just - crawly, sort of.' His smile flared into a sudden grimace of pain. 'So this Doctor Howell is going to solve my problem, is he? How?'

Jennings saw Patricia bite her lip. 'It's a - *her*, darling,' she told Lang.

'Great,' he said. He twitched convulsively. 'That's what we need. What is she, a chiropractor?'

'She's an anthropologist.'

'*Dandy*. What's she going to do, explain the ethnic origins of superstition to me?' Lang spoke rapidly as if trying to outdistance pain with words.

'She's been to Africa,' said Pat, 'She - '

'So have I,' said Peter, 'Great place to visit. Just don't screw around with witch doctors.' His laughter withered to a gasping cry. 'Oh, God, you scrawny, black bastard, if I had you here!' His hands clawed out as if to throttle some invisible assailant.

'I beg your pardon - '

They turned in surprise. A young Negro woman was looking down at them from the entrance hall.

'There was a card on the door,' she said.

'Of course; we'd forgotten.' Jennings was on his feet now. He heard Patricia whispering to Lang, 'I *meant* to tell you. Please don't be biased.' Peter looked at her sharply, his expression even more surprised now. '*Biased?*' he said.

Jennings and his daughter moved across the room.

'Thank you for coming.' Patricia pressed her cheek to Dr. Howell's.

'It's nice to see you, Pat,' said Dr. Howell. She smiled across Patricia's shoulder at the doctor.

'Had you any trouble getting here?' he asked.

'No, no, the subway never fails me.' Lurice Howell unbuttoned her coat and turned as Jennings reached to help her. Pat looked at the overnight bag that Lurice had set on the floor, then glanced at Peter.

Lang did not take his eyes from Lurice Howell as she approached him, flanked by Pat and Jennings.

'Peter, this is Dr. Howell,' said Pat, 'She and I went to Columbia together. She teaches anthropology at City College.'

Lurice smiled. 'Good evening,' she said.

'Not so very,' Peter answered. From the corners of his eyes Jennings saw the way Patricia stiffened.

Dr. Howell's expression did not alter. Her voice remained the same. 'And who's the scrawny, black bastard you wish you had here?' she asked.

Peter's face went momentarily blank. Then, his teeth clenched against the pain, he answered, 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'A question,' said Lurice.

'If you're planning to conduct a seminar on race relations, skip it,' muttered Lang, 'I'm not in the mood.'

'*Peter.*'

He looked at Pat through pain-filmed eyes. 'What do you want?' he demanded, 'You're already convinced I'm prejudiced, so - ' He dropped his head back on the sofa arm and jammed his eyes shut. 'Jesus, stick a *knife* in me,' he rasped.

The straining smile had gone from Dr. Howell's lips. She glanced at Jennings gravely as he spoke. 'I've examined him,' he told her, 'There's not a sign of physical impairment, not a hint of brain injury.'

'How should there be?' she answered, quietly, 'It's not disease. It's juju.'

Jennings stared at her. 'You - '

'*There* we go,' said Peter, hoarsely, 'Now we've got it.' He was sitting up again, whitened fingers digging at the cushions. 'That's the answer. *Juju*:

'Do you doubt it?' asked Lurice.

'I *doubt* it.'

'The way you doubt your prejudice?'

'Oh, Jesus. *God*: Lang filled his lungs with a guttural, sucking noise. 'I was hurting and I wanted something to hate so I picked on that lousy savage to - ' He fell back heavily. 'The hell with it. Think what you like.' He clamped a palsied hand across his eyes. 'Just let me die. Oh, Jesus, Jesus God, sweet Jesus, *let me die*.' Suddenly, he looked at Jennings. 'Another shot?' he begged.

'Peter, your heart can't - '

'*Damn* my heart!' Peter's head was rocking back and forth now. '*Half* strength then! You can't refuse a dying man!'

Pat jammed the edge of a shaking fist against her lips, trying not to cry.

'*Please!*' said Peter.

After the injection had taken effect, Lang slumped back, his face and neck soaked with perspiration. 'Thanks,' he gasped. His pale lips twitched into a smile as Patricia knelt beside him and began to dry his face with a towel. 'Greetings, love,' he muttered. She couldn't speak.

Peter's hooded eyes turned to Dr. Howell. 'All right, I'm sorry, I apologize,' he told her curtly. 'I thank you for coming, but I don't believe it.'

'Then why is it working?' asked Lurice.

'I don't even know what's happening!' snapped Lang.

'I think you do,' said Dr. Howell, an urgency rising in her voice, 'And I know, Mr. Lang. Juju is the most fearsome pagan sorcery in the world. Centuries of mass belief alone would be enough to give it terrifying power. It *has* that power, Mr. Lang. You know it does.'

'And how do *you* know, Dr. Howell?' he countered.

'When I was twenty-two,' she said, 'I spent a year in a Zulu village doing field work for my Ph.D. While I was there, the *ngombo* took a fancy to me and taught me almost everything she knew.'

'*Ngombo*?' asked Patricia.

'*Witch doctor*,' said Peter, in disgust.

'I thought witch doctors were men,' said Jennings.

'No, most of them are women,' said Lurice, 'Shrewd, observant women who work very hard at their profession.'

'*Frauds*,' said Peter.

Lurice smiled at him. 'Yes,' she said, 'They are. Frauds. Parasites. Loafers. Scaremongers. Still - ' Her smile grew hard. ' - What do you suppose is making you feel as if a thousand spiders were crawling all over you?'

For the first time since he'd entered the apartment, Jennings saw a look of fear on Peter's face. ' *You know that?*' Peter asked her.

'I know everything you're going through,' said Dr. Howell, 'I've been through it myself.'

'*When?*' demanded Lang. There was no derogation in his voice now.

'During that year,' said Dr. Howell, 'A witch doctor from a nearby village put a death curse on me. Kuringa saved me from it.'

'Tell me,' said Peter, breaking in on her. Jennings noticed that the young man's breath was quickening. It appalled him to realize that the second injection was already beginning to lose its effect.

'Tell you what?' said Lurice, 'About the long-nailed fingers scraping at your insides? About the feeling that you have to pull yourself into a ball in order to crush the snake uncoiling in your belly?'

Peter gaped at her.

'The feeling that your blood has turned to acid?' said Lurice, 'That, if you move, you'll crumble because your bones have all been sucked hollow?'

Peter's lips began to shake.

'The feeling that your brain is being eaten by a pack of furry rats? That your eyes are just about to melt and dribble down your cheeks like jelly? That -?'

'That's enough.' Lang's body seemed to jolt as he shuddered so spasmodically.

'I only said these things to convince you that I know,' said Lurice, 'I remember my own pain as if I'd suffered it this morning instead of seven years ago. I can help you if you'll let me, Mr. Lang. Put aside your scepticism. You *do* believe it or it couldn't hurt you, don't you see that?'

'Darling, *please*,' said Patricia.

Peter looked at her. Then his gaze moved back to Dr. Howell.

'We mustn't wait much longer, Mr. Lang,' she warned.

'All *right*!' He closed his eyes. 'All right then, *try*. I sure as hell can't get any worse.'

'*Quickly*,' begged Patricia.

'Yes.' Lurice Howell turned and walked across the room to get her overnight bag.

It was as she picked it up that Jennings saw the look cross her face - as if some formidable complication had just occurred to her. She glanced at them. 'Pat,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Come here a moment.'

Patricia pushed up hurriedly and moved to her side. Jennings watched them for a moment before his eyes shifted to Lang. The young man was starting to twitch again. It's *coming*, Jennings thought. *Juju is the most fearsome pagan sorcery in the world* -

'What?'

Jennings glanced at the women. Pat was staring at Dr. Howell in shock.

'I'm sorry,' said Lurice, 'I should have told you from the start, but there wasn't any opportunity.'

Pat hesitated. 'It has to be that way?' she asked.

'Yes. It does.'

Patricia looked at Peter with a questioning apprehension in her eyes. Abruptly, then, she nodded. 'All right,' she said, 'but *hurry*:'

Without another word, Lurice Howell went into the bedroom. Jennings watched his daughter as she looked intently at the door behind which the Negro woman had closeted herself. He could not fathom the meaning of her look. For now the fear in Pat's expression was of a different sort.

The bedroom door opened and Dr. Howell came out. Jennings, turning from the sofa, caught his breath. Lurice was naked to the waist and garbed below with a skirt composed of several coloured handkerchiefs knotted together. Her legs and feet were bare. Jennings gaped at her. The blouse and skirt she'd worn had revealed nothing of her voluptuous breasts, the sinuous abundance of her hips. Suddenly conscious of his blatant observation, Jennings turned his eyes towards Pat. Her expression, as she stared at Dr. Howell, was unmistakable now.

Jennings looked back at Peter. Due to its masking of pain, the young man's face was more difficult to read.

'Please understand, I've never done this before,' said Lurice, embarrassed by their staring silence.

'We understand,' said Jennings, once more unable to take his eyes from her.

A bright red spot was painted on each of her tawny cheeks and, over her twisted, twine-held hair, she wore a helmet-like plume of feathers, each of a chestnut hue with a vivid white eye at the tip. Her breasts thrust out from a tangle of necklaces made of animals' teeth, skeins of brightly coloured yarn, beads, and strips of snake skin. On her left arm - banded at the bicep with a strip of angora fleece - was slung a small shield of dappled oxhide.

The contrast between the bag and her outfit was marked enough. The effect of her appearance in the Manhattan duplex created a ripple of indefinable dread in Jennings as she moved towards them with a shy, almost childlike defiance - as if her shame were balanced by a knowledge of her physical wealth. Jennings was startled to see that her stomach was tattooed, hundreds of tiny welts forming a design of

concentric circles around her navel.

'Kuringa insisted on it,' said Lurice as if he'd asked, 'It was her price for teaching me her secrets.' She smiled fleetingly. 'I managed to dissuade her from filing my teeth to a point.'

Jennings sensed that she was talking to hide her embarrassment and he felt a surge of empathy for her as she set her bag down, opened it and started to remove its contents.

'The welts are raised by making small incisions in the flesh,' she said, 'and pressing into each incision a dab of paste.' She put, on the coffee table, a vial of grumous liquid, a handful of small, polished bones. 'The paste I had to make myself. I had to catch a land crab with my bare hands and tear off one of its claws. I had to tear the skin from a living frog and the jaw from a monkey.' She put on the table a bundle of what looked like tiny lances. 'The claws, the skin, and the jaw, together with some plant ingredients, I pounded into the paste.'

Jennings looked surprised as she withdrew an LP record from the bag and set it on the turntable.

'When I say "*Now*", Doctor,' she asked, 'will you put on the needle arm?'

Jennings nodded mutely, watching her with what was close to fascination. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing. Ignoring the slit-eyed stare of Lang, the uncertain surveillance of Patricia, Lurice set the various objects on the floor. As she squatted, Pat could not restrain a gasp. Underneath the skirt of handkerchiefs, Lurice's loins were uncovered.

'Well, I may not live,' said Peter - his face was almost white now - 'but it looks as if I'm going to have a fascinating death.'

Lurice interrupted him. 'If the three of you will sit in a circle,' she said. The prim refinement of her voice coming from the lips of what seemed a pagan goddess struck Jennings forcibly as he moved to assist Lang.

The seizure came as Peter tried to stand. In an instant, he was in the throes of it, grovelling on the floor, his body doubled, his knees and elbows thumping at the rug. Abruptly, he flopped over, forcing back his head, the muscles of his spine tensed so acutely that his back arched upward from the floor. Pale foam ribboned from the slash of his mouth, his staring eyes seemed frozen in their sockets.

'Lurice!' screamed Pat.

'There's nothing we can do until it passes,' said Lurice. She stared at Lang with sickened eyes. Then, as his bathrobe came undone and he was thrashing naked on the rug, she turned away, her face tightening with a look that Jennings, glancing at her, saw, to his added disquietude, was a look of fear. Then he and Pat were bent across Lang's afflicted body, trying to hold him in check.

'*Let him go*,' said Lurice, 'There's nothing you can do.'

Patricia glared at her in frightened animosity. As

Peter's body finally shuddered into immobility, she drew the edges of his robe together and refastened the sash.

'*Now*. Into the circle, quickly,' said Lurice, clearly forcing herself against some inner dread. 'No, he has to sit alone,' she said, as Patricia braced herself beside him, supporting his back.

'He'll fall,' said Pat, an undercurrent of resentment in her voice.

'Patricia, if you want my help -!'

Uncertainly, her eyes drifting from Peter's pain-wasted features to the harried expression on Lurice's face, Patricia edged away and settled herself.

'Cross-legged, please,' said Lurice, 'Mr. Lang?'

Peter grunted, eyes half-closed.

'During the ceremony, I'll ask you for a token of payment. Some unimportant personal item will suffice.'

Peter nodded. 'All right; let's *go*,' he said, 'I can't take much more.'

Lurice's breasts rose, quivering, as she drew in breath. 'No talking now,' she murmured. Nervously, she sat across from Peter and bowed her head. Except for Lang's stentorian breathing, the room grew deathly still. Jennings could hear, faintly, in the distance, the sounds of traffic. It seemed impossible to



adjust his mind to what was about to happen: an attempted ritual of jungle sorcery - in a New York City apartment.

He tried, in vain, to clear his mind of misgivings. He didn't believe in this. Yet here he sat, his crossed legs already beginning to cramp. Here sat Peter Lang, obviously close to death with not a symptom to explain it. Here sat his daughter, terrified, struggling mentally against that which she herself had initiated. And there most bizarre of all, sat - not Dr. Howell, an intelligent professor of anthropology, a cultured, civilized woman - but a near-naked African witch doctor with her implements of barbarous magic.

There was a rattling noise. Jennings blinked his eyes and looked at Lurice. In her left hand, she was clutching the sheaf of what looked like miniature lances. With her right, she was picking up the cluster of tiny, polished bones. She shook them in her palm like dice and tossed them onto the rug, her gaze intent on their fall.

She stared at their pattern on the carpeting, then picked them up again. Across from her, Peter's breath was growing tortured. What if he suffered another attack? Jennings wondered. Would the ceremony have to be restarted?

He twitched as Lurice broke the silence.

'Why do you come here?' she asked. She looked at Peter coldly, almost glaring at him. 'Why do you consult me? Is it because you have no success with women?'

'What?' Peter stared at her bewilderedly.

'Is someone in your house sick? Is that why you come to me?' asked Lurice, her voice imperious. Jennings realized abruptly that she was - completely now - a witch doctor questioning her male client, arrogantly contemptuous of his inferior status.

'Are *you* sick?' She almost spat the words, her shoulders jerking back so that her breasts hitched upwards. Jennings glanced involuntarily at his daughter. Pat was sitting like a statue, cheeks pale, lips a narrow, bloodless line.

'Speak up, man!' ordered Lurice - ordered the scowling *ngombo*.

'Yes! I'm sick!' Peter's chest lurched with breath. '*I'm sick.*'

'Then speak of it,' said Lurice, 'Tell me how this sickness came upon you.'

Either Peter was in such pain now that any notion of resistance was destroyed - or else he had been captured by the fascination of Lurice's presence. Probably it was a combination of the two, thought Jennings as he watched Lang begin to speak, his voice compelled, his eyes held by Lurice's burning stare.

'One night, this man came sneaking into camp,' he said, 'He tried to steal some food. When I chased him, he got furious and threatened me. He said he'd kill me.' Jennings wondered if Lurice had hypnotized Peter, the young man's voice was so mechanical.

'And he carried, in a sack at his side - ' Lurice's voice seemed to prompt like a hypnotist's.

'He carried a doll,' said Peter. His throat contracted as he swallowed. 'It spoke to me,' he said.

'The fetish spoke to you,' said Lurice, 'What did the fetish say?'

'It said that I would die. It said that, when the moon was like a bow, I would die.'

Abruptly, Peter shivered and closed his eyes. Lurice threw down the bones again and stared at them. Abruptly, she flung down the tiny lances.

'It is not Mbwiri nor Hebiezo,' she said, 'It is not Atando nor Fuofuo nor Sovi. It is not Kundi or Sogbla. It is not a demon of the forest that devours you. It is an evil spirit that belongs to a *ngombo* who has been offended. The *ngombo* has brought evil to your house. The evil spirit of the *ngombo* has fastened itself upon you in revenge for your offence against its master. Do you understand?'

Peter was barely able to speak. He nodded jerkily. 'Yes.'

'Say - *Yes, I understand.*'

'Yes.' He shuddered. 'Yes. I understand.'

'You will pay me now,' she told him.

Peter stared at her for several moments before lowering his eyes. His twitching fingers reached into the pockets of his robe and came out empty. Suddenly, he gasped, his shoulders hitching forward as a spasm of pain rushed through him. He reached into his pockets a second time as if he weren't sure that they were empty. Then, frantically, he wrenched the ring from the third finger of his left hand and held it out.

Jennings's gaze darted to his daughter. Her face was like stone as she watched Peter handing over the ring she'd given him.

"Now," said Lurice.

Jennings pushed to his feet and, stumbling because of the numbness in his legs, he moved to the turntable and lowered the needle arm in place. Before he'd settled back into the circle, the record started playing.

In a moment, the room was filled with drum-beats, with a chanting of voices and a slow, uneven clapping of hands. His gaze intent on Lurice, Jennings had the impression that everything was fading at the edges of his vision, that Lurice, alone, was visible, standing in a dimly nebulous light.

She had left her oxhide shield on the floor and was holding the bottle in her hand. As Jennings watched, she pulled the stopper loose and drank the contents with a single swallow. Vaguely, through the daze of fascination that gripped his mind, Jennings wondered what it was she'd drunk.

The bottle thudded on the floor.

Lurice began to dance.

She started languidly. Only her arms and shoulders moved at first, their restless sinuating timed to the cadence of the drumbeats. Jennings stared at her, imagining that his heart had altered its rhythm to that of the drums. He watched the writhing of her shoulders, the serpentine gestures she was making with her arms and hands. He heard the rustling of her necklaces. Time and place were gone for him. He might have been sitting in a jungle glade, watching the somnolent twisting of her dance.

'Clap hands,' said the *ngombo*.

Without hesitation, Jennings started clapping in time with the drums. He glanced at Patricia. She was doing the same, her eyes still fixed on Lurice. Only Peter sat motionless, looking straight ahead, the muscles of his jaw quivering as he ground his teeth together. For a fleeting moment, Jennings was a doctor once again, looking at his patient in concern. Then turning back, he was redrawn into the mindless captivation of Lurice's dance.

The drumbeats were accelerating now, becoming louder. Lurice began to move within the circle, turning slowly, arms and shoulders still in undulant motion. No matter where she moved, her eyes remained on Peter, and Jennings realized that her gesturing was exclusively for Lang - drawing, gathering gestures as if she sought to lure him to her side.

Suddenly, she bent over, her breasts dropping heavily, then jerking upward as their muscles caught. She shook herself with feverish abandon, swinging her breasts from side to side and rattling her necklaces, her wild face hovering inches over Peter's. Jennings felt his stomach muscles pulling in as Lurice drew her talon shaped fingers over Peter's cheeks, then straightened up and pivoted, her shoulders thrust back carelessly, her teeth bared in a grimace of savage zeal. In a moment, she had spun around to face her client again.

A second time she bent herself, this time stalking back and forth in front of Peter with a catlike gait, a rabid crooning in her throat. From the corners of his eyes, Jennings saw his daughter straining forward and he glanced at her. The expression on her face was terrible.

Suddenly, Patricia's lips flared back as in a soundless cry and Jennings looked back quickly at Lurice. His breath choked off. Leaning over, she had clutched her breasts with digging fingers and was thrusting them at Peter's face. Peter stared at her, his body trembling. Crooning again, Lurice drew back. She lowered her hands and Jennings tightened as he saw that she was pulling at the skirt of handkerchiefs. In a moment, it had fluttered to the carpeting and she was back at Peter. It was then that Jennings knew exactly What she'd drunk.

No.' Patricia's venom thickened voice made him twist around, his heartbeat lurching. She was starting to her feet.

'Pat!' he whispered.

She looked at him and, for a moment, they were staring at each other. Then, with a violent shudder, she sank to the floor again and Jennings turned away from her.

Lurice was on her knees in front of Peter now, rocking back and forth and rubbing at her thighs with flattened hands. She couldn't seem to breathe. Her open mouth kept sucking at the air with wheezing

noises. Jennings saw perspiration trickling down her cheeks; he saw it glistening on her back and shoulders. No, he thought. The word came automatically, the voicing of some alien dread that seemed to rise up, choking, in him. No. He watched Lurice's hand clutch upwards at her breasts again, preferring them to Peter. *No*. The word was lurking terror in his mind. He kept on staring at Lurice, fearing what was going to happen, fascinated at its possibility. Drumbeats throbbed and billowed in his ears. His heartbeat pounded.

*No!*

Lurice's hands had clawed out suddenly and torn apart the edges of Lang's robe. Patricia's gasp was hoarse, astounded. Jennings only caught a glimpse of her distorted face before his gaze was drawn back to Lurice. Swallowed by the frenzied thundering of the drums, the howl of chanting voices, the explosive clapping, he felt as if his head were going numb, as if the room were tilting. In a dreamlike haze, he saw Lurice's hands begin to rub at Peter's flesh. He saw a look of nightmare on the young man's face as torment closed a vice around him - torment that was just as much carnality as agony. Lurice moved closer to him. Closer. Now her writhing, sweat-laved body pendulated inches from his own, her hands caressing wantonly.

'Come into me.' Her voice was bestial, gluttonous. 'Come into me.'

'*Get away from him.*' Patricia's guttural warning tore Jennings from entrancement. Jerking around, he saw her reaching for Lurice - who, in that instant, clamped herself on Peter's body.

Jennings lunged at Pat, not understanding why he should restrain her, only sensing that he must. She twisted wildly in his grip, her hot breath spilling on his cheeks, her body violent in rage.

'Get away from him!' she screamed at Lurice, '*Get your hands away from him!*'

'Patricia!'

'Let me go!'

Lurice's scream of anguish paralysed them. Stunned, they watched her flinging back from Peter and collapsing on her back, her legs jerked in, arms flung across her face. Jennings felt a burst of horror in himself. His gaze leaped up to Peter's face. The look of pain had vanished from it. Only stunned bewilderment remained.

'What is it?' gasped Patricia.

Jennings' voice was hollow, awed. '*She's taken it away from him,*' he said.

'Oh, my God -' Aghast, Patricia watched her friend.

*The feeling that you have to pull yourself into a ball in order to crush the snake uncoiling in your belly.* The words assaulted Jennings' mind. He watched the rippling crawl of muscles underneath Lurice's flesh, the spastic twitching of her legs. Across the room, the record stopped and, in the sudden stillness, he could hear a shrill whine quavering in Lurice's throat. *The feeling that your blood has turned to acid, that, if you move, you'll crumble because your bones have all been sucked hollow.* Eyes haunted, Jennings watched her suffering Peter's agony. *The feeling that your brain is being eaten by a pack of furry rats, that your eyes are just about to melt and dribble down your cheeks like jelly.* Lurice's legs kicked out. She twisted onto her back and started rolling on her shoulders. Her legs jerked in until her feet were resting on the carpet. Convulsively, she reared her hips. Her stomach heaved with tortured breath, her swollen breasts lolled from side to side.

'Peter!'

Patricia's horrified whisper made Jennings' head snap up. Peter's eyes were glittering as he watched Lurice's thrashing body. He had started pushing to his knees, a look not human drawn across his features. Now his hands were reaching for Lurice. Jennings caught him by the shoulders, but Peter didn't seem to notice. He kept reaching for Lurice.

'Peter.'

Lang tried to shove him aside but Jennings tightened his grip. '*For God's sake - Peter!*'

The noise Lang uttered made Jennings's skin crawl. He clamped his fingers brutally in Peter's hair and jerked him around so that they faced each other.

'Use your mind, man!' Jennings ordered, 'Your *mind!*'

Peter blinked. He stared at Jennings with the eyes of a newly awakened man. Jennings pulled his hands away and turned back quickly.

Lurice was lying motionless on her back, her dark eyes staring at the ceiling. With a gasp, Jennings leaned over and pressed a finger underneath her left breast. Her heartbeat was nearly imperceptible. He looked at her eyes again. They had the glassy stare of a corpse. He gaped at them in disbelief. Suddenly, they closed and a protracted, body-wracking shudder passed through Lurice. Jennings watched her, open-mouthed, unable to move. No, he thought. It was impossible. She couldn't be -

'*Lurice!*' he cried.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. After several moments, her lips stirred feebly as she tried to smile.

'It's over now,' she whispered.

The car moved along Seventh Avenue, its tyres hissing on the slush. Across the seat from Jennings, Dr. Howell slumped, motionless, in her exhaustion. A shamed, remorseful Pat had bathed and dressed her, after which Jennings had helped her to his car. Just before they'd left the apartment, Peter had attempted to thank her, then, unable to find the words, had kissed her hand and turned away in silence.

Jennings glanced at her. 'You know,' he said, 'if I hadn't actually seen what happened tonight, I wouldn't believe it for a moment. I'm still not sure that I do.'

'It isn't easy to accept,' she said.

Jennings drove in silence for a while before he spoke again. 'Dr. Howell?'

'Yes?'

He hesitated. Then he asked, 'Why did you do it?'

'If I hadn't,' said Lurice, 'your future son-in-law would have died before the night was over. You have no idea how close he came.'

'Granting that,' said Jennings, 'what I mean is - why did you deliberately subject yourself to such - abasement?'

'There was no alternative,' she answered, 'Mr. Lang couldn't possibly have coped with what was happening to him. I could. It was as simple as that. Everything else was - unfortunate necessity.'

'And something of a Pandora's box as well,' he said.

'I know,' she said, 'I was afraid of it but there was nothing I could do.'

'You told Patricia what was going to happen?'

'No,' said Lurice, 'I couldn't tell her everything. I tried to brace her for the shock of what was coming but, of course, I had to withhold some of it. Otherwise she might have refused my help - and her fiance would have died.'

'It was an aphrodisiac in that bottle, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' she answered, 'I had to lose myself. If I hadn't, personal inhibitions would have kept me from doing what was necessary.'

'What happened just before the end of it - ' Jennings began.

'Mr. Lang's apparent lust for me?' said Lurice, 'It was only a derangement of the moment. The sudden extraction of the pain left him, for a period of seconds, without conscious volition. Without, if you will, civilized restraint. It was an animal who wanted me, not a man. You saw that, when you ordered him to use his mind, the lust was controlled.'

'But the animal was there,' said Jennings, grimly.

'It's always there,' she answered. 'The trouble is that people forget it.'

Minutes later, Jennings parked in front of Dr. Howell's apartment house and turned to her.

'I think we both know how much sickness you exposed - and cured tonight,' he said.

'I hope so,' said Lurice. 'Not for myself but - ' She smiled a little '*Not for myself I make this prayer,*' she recited, 'Are you familiar with that?'

'I'm afraid I'm not.'

He listened quietly as Dr. Howell recited again. Then, as he started to get out of the car, she held him back. 'Please don't,' she said, 'I'm fine now.' Pushing open the door, she stood on the sidewalk. For several moments, they looked at each other. Then Jennings reached over and squeezed her hand.

'Good night, my dear,' he said.

Lurice Howell returned his smile. 'Good night, Doctor.' She closed the door and turned away.

Jennings watched her walk across the sidewalk and enter her apartment house. Then, drawing his car into the street again, he made a U turn and started back towards Seventh Avenue. As he drove, he began remembering the Countee Cullen poem that Lurice had spoken for him.

*Not for myself I make this prayer  
But for this race of mine  
That stretches forth from shadowed places  
Dark hands for bread and wine.*

Jennings' fingers tightened on the wheel. 'Use your mind, man,' he said, 'Your *mind*.'

## 10 - Big Surprise

Old Mr. Hawkins used to stand by his picket fence and call to the little boys when they were coming home from school.

'Lad!' he would call. 'Come here, lad!' Most of the little boys were afraid to go near him, so they laughed and made fun of him in voices that shook. Then they ran away and told their friends how brave they'd been. But once in a while a boy would go up to Mr. Hawkins when he called, and Mr. Hawkins would make his strange request. That was how the verse got started:

*Dig me a hole, he said, Winking his eyes,  
And you will find A big surprise.*

No one knew how long they'd heard the children chanting it. Sometimes the parents seemed to recall having heard it years ago.

Once a little boy started to dig the hole but he got tired after a while and he didn't find any big surprise. He was the only one who had ever tried -

One day Ernie Willaker was coming home from school with two of his friends. They walked on the other side of the street when they saw Mr. Hawkins in his front yard standing by the picket fence.

'Lad!' they heard him call. 'Come here, lad!'

'He means you, Ernie,' teased one of the boys.

'He does not,' said Ernie.

Mr. Hawkins pointed a finger at Ernie. 'Come here, lad!' he called.

Ernie glanced nervously at his friends.

'Go on,' said one of them. 'What're ya scared of?'

'Who's scared?' said Ernie. 'My ma says I have to come home right after school is all.'

'Yella,' said his other friend. 'You're scared of old man Hawkins.'

'Who's scared!'

'Go *on*, then.'

'Lad!' called Mr. Hawkins. 'Come here, lad.'

'Well.' Ernie hesitated. 'Don't *go* nowhere,' he said.

'We won't. We'll stick around.'

'Well - ' Ernie braced himself and crossed the street, trying to look casual. He shifted his books to his left hand and brushed back his hair with his right. *Dig me a hole, he says*, muttered in his brain.

Ernie stepped up to the picket fence. 'Yes, sir?' he asked.  
'Come closer, lad,' the old man said, his dark eyes shining.  
Ernie took a forward step.  
'Now you aren't afraid of Mister Hawkins, are you?' said the old man winking.  
'No, sir,' Ernie said.  
'Good,' said the old man. 'Now listen, lad. How would you like a big surprise?'  
Ernie glanced across his shoulder. His friends were still there. He grinned at them. Suddenly he gasped as a gaunt hand clamped over his right arm. 'Hey, leggo!' Ernie cried out.

'Take it easy, lad,' soothed Mr. Hawkins. 'No one's going to hurt you.'  
Ernie tugged. Tears sprang into his eyes as the old man drew him closer. From the corner of an eye Ernie saw his two friends running down the street.

'L-leggo,' Ernie sobbed.  
'Shortly,' said the old man. 'Now then, would you like a big surprise?'  
'No-no, thanks, mister.'  
'Sure you would,' said Mr. Hawkins. Ernie smelled his breath and tried to pull away, but Mr. Hawkins's grip was like iron.  
'You know where Mr. Miller's field is?' asked Mr. Hawkins.  
'Y-yeah.'  
'You know where the big oak tree is?'  
'Yeah. Yeah, I know.'  
'You go to the oak tree in Mr. Miller's field and face towards the church steeple. You understand?'  
'Y-y-yeah.'  
The old man drew him closer. 'You stand there and you walk ten paces. You understand? Ten paces.'  
'Yeah -'  
'You walk ten paces and you dig down ten feet. *How many feet ?*' He prodded Ernie's chest with a boney finger.

'T-ten,' said Ernie.  
'That's it,' said the old man. 'Face the steeple, walk ten paces, dig ten feet - and there you'll find a big surprise.' He winked at Ernie. 'Will you do it, lad?'  
'I - yeah, sure. *Sure.*'  
Mr. Hawkins let go and Ernie jumped away. His arm felt completely numb.  
'Don't forget, now,' the old man said.  
Ernie whirled and ran down the street as fast as he could. He found his friends waiting at the corner.  
'Did he try and murder you?' one of them whispered.  
'Nanh,' said Ernie, 'He ain't so m-much.'

'What'd he want?'  
'What d'ya s'pose?'  
They started down the street, all chanting it.

*Dig me a hole, he said,, Winking his eyes,  
And you will find A big surprise.*

Every afternoon they went to Mr. Miller's field and sat under the big oak tree.  
'You think there's somethin' down there really?'  
'Nanh.'  
'What if there *was* though?'  
'What?'  
'Gold, maybe.'  
They talked about it every day, and every day they faced the steeple and walked ten paces. They

stood on the spot and scuffed the earth with the tips of their sneakers.

'You s'pose there's gold down there really?'

'Why should he tell us?'

'Yeah, why not dig it up himself?'

'Because he's too old, stupid.'

'Yeah? Well, if there's gold down there we split it three ways.'

They became more and more curious. At night they dreamed about gold. They wrote *gold* in their school books. They thought about all the things they could buy with gold. They started walking past Mr. Hawkins's house to see if he'd call them again and they could ask him if it was gold. But he never called them.

Then, one day, they were coming home from school and they saw Mr. Hawkins talking to another boy.

'He told us *we* could have the gold!' said Ernie.

'Yeah!' they stormed angrily. 'Let's go!'

They ran to Ernie's house and Ernie went down to the cellar and got shovels. They ran up the street, over lots, across the dump, and into Mr. Miller's field. They stood under the oak tree, faced the steeple, and paced ten times. 'Dig,' said Ernie.

Their shovels sank into the black earth. They dug without speaking, breath whistling through their nostrils. When the hole was about three feet deep, they rested.

'You think there's gold down there really?'

'I don't know but we're gonna find out before that other kid does.'

'Yeah!'

'Hey, how we gonna get out if we dig ten feet?' one of them said.

'We'll cut out steps,' said Ernie.

They started digging again. For over an hour they shovelled out the cool, wormy earth and piled it high around the hole. It stained their clothes and their skin. When the hole was over their heads one of them went to get a pail and a rope. Ernie and the other boy kept digging and throwing the earth out of the hole. After a while the dirt rained back on their heads and they stopped. They sat on the damp earth wearily, waiting for the other boy to come back. Their hands and arms were brown with earth.

'How far're we down?' wondered the boy.

'Six feet,' estimated Ernie.

The other boy came back and they started working again. They kept digging and digging until their bones ached.

'Aaah, the heck with it,' said the boy who was pulling up the pail. 'There's ain't nothin' down there.'

'He said ten feet,' Ernie insisted.

'Well, I'm quittin',' said the boy.

'You're yella!'

'Tough,' said the boy.

Ernie turned to the boy beside him. 'You'll have to pull the dirt up,' he said.

'Oh - okay,' muttered the boy.

Ernie kept digging. When he looked up now, it seemed as if the sides of the hole were shaking and it was all going to cave in on him. He was trembling with fatigue.

'Come on,' the other boy finally called down. 'There ain't nothin' down there. You dug ten feet.'

'Not yet,' gasped Ernie.

'How deep ya goin', *China*?'

Ernie leaned against the side of the hole and gritted his teeth. A fat worm crawled out of the earth and tumbled to the bottom of the hole.

'I'm goin' home,' said the other boy. 'I'll catch it if I'm late for supper.'

'You're yella too,' said Ernie miserably.

'Aaaah - *tough*.'

Ernie twisted his shoulders painfully. 'Well, the gold is all mine,' he called up.

'There ain't no gold,' said the other boy.

'Tie the rope to something so I can get out when I find *the gold*,' said Ernie.

The boy snickered. He tied the rope to a bush and let it dangle down into the hole. Ernie looked up and saw the crooked rectangle of darkening sky. The boy's face appeared, looking down.

'You better not get stuck down there,' he said.

'I ain't gettin' stuck.' Ernie looked down angrily and drove the shovel into the ground. He could feel his friend's eyes on his back.

'Ain't you scared?' asked the other boy.

'What of?' snapped Ernie without looking up.

'I dunno,' said the boy.

Ernie dug.

'Well,' said the boy, 'I'll see ya.' Ernie grunted. He heard the boy's footsteps move away. He looked around the hole and a faint whimper sounded in his throat. He felt cold. 'Well, I ain't leavin',' he mumbled. The gold was his.

He wasn't going to leave it for that other kid.

He dug furiously, piling the dirt on the other side of the hole. It kept getting darker.

'A little more,' he told himself, gasping. 'Then I'm goin' home with the gold.'

He stepped hard on the shovel and there was a hollow sound beneath him. Ernie felt a shudder running up his back. He forced himself to keep on digging. Will I give *them* the horse laugh, he thought. Will I give *them* -

He had uncovered part of a box - a long box. He stood there looking down at the wood and shivering. *And you will find* -

Quivering, Ernie stood on top of the box and stamped on it. A deeply hollow sound struck his ears. He dug away more earth and his shovel scraped on the ancient wood. He couldn't uncover the entire box - it was too long.

Then he saw that the box had a two-part cover and there was a clasp on each part.

Ernie clenched his teeth and struck the clasp with the edge of his shovel. Half of the cover opened.

Ernie screamed. He fell back against the earth wall and stared in voiceless horror at the man who was sitting up.

'Surprise!' said Mr. Hawkins.

## 11 - Lazarus II

'But I died,' he said.

His father looked at him without speaking. There was no expression on his face. He stood over the bed and -

Or was it the bed?

His eyes left his father's face. He looked down and it wasn't the bed. It was an experimental table. He was in the laboratory.

His eyes moved back to those of his father. He felt so heavy. So stiff. 'What is it?' he asked.

And suddenly realized that the sound of his voice was different. A man didn't know the actual sound of his voice, they said. But when it changed so much, he knew. He could tell when it was no longer the voice of a man.

'Peter,' his father spoke at last, 'I know you'll despise me for what I've done. I despise myself already.'

But Peter wasn't listening. He was trying to think. Why was he so heavy? Why couldn't he lift his head?

'Bring me a mirror,' he said.

That voice. That grating wheezing voice.



He thought he trembled.  
His father didn't move.

'Peter,' he said, 'I want you to understand this wasn't my idea. It was your -'  
'A mirror.'

A moment longer his father stood looking down at him. Then he turned and walked across the dark-tiled floor of the laboratory.

Peter tried to sit up. At first he couldn't. Then the room seemed to move and he knew he was sitting but there was no feeling. What was wrong? Why didn't he feel anything in his muscles? His eyes looked down.

His father took a mirror from his desk.

But Peter didn't need it. He had seen his hands.

Metal hands.

Metal arms. Metal shoulders. Metal chest. Metal trunk, metal legs, metal feet.

*Metal man!*

The idea made him shudder. But the metal body was still. I sat there without moving.

*His body?*

He tried to close his eyes. But he couldn't. They weren't his eyes. Nothing was his.

Peter was a robot.

His father came to him quickly.

'Peter, I never meant to do this,' he said in a flat voice. 'I don't know what came over me - it was your mother.'

'Mother,' said the machine hollowly.

'She said she couldn't live without you. You know how devoted she is to you.'

'Devoted,' he echoed.

Peter turned away. He could hear the clockwork of himself ticking in a slow, precise way. He could hear the machinery of his body with the tissue of his brain.

'You brought me back,' he accused.

His brain felt mechanical too. The shock of finding his body gone and replaced with *this*. It numbed his thinking.

'I'm back,' he said, trying to understand. 'Why?'

Peter's father ignored his question.

He tried to get off the table, tried to raise his arms. At first they hung down, motionless. Then, he heard a clicking in his shoulders and his arms raised up. His small glass eyes saw it and his brain knew that his arms were up.

Suddenly it swept over him. All of it.

'But I'm dead!' he cried.

He did not cry. The voice that spoke his anguish was a soft, rasping voice. An unexcited voice.

'Only your body died,' his father said, trying to convince himself.

'But I'm dead!' Peter screamed.

Not screamed. The machine spoke in a quiet, orderly way. A machine like way.

It made his mind seethe.

'Was this her idea?' he thought and was appalled to hear the hollow voice of the machine echo his thought.

His father didn't reply, standing miserably by the table, his face gaunt and lined with weariness. He was thinking that all the exhausting struggle had been for nothing. He was wondering, half in fright, if towards the end he had not been more interested in what he was doing than in why.

He watched the machine walk, clank rather, to the window, carrying his son's brain in its metal case.

Peter stared out of the window. He could see the campus. See it? The red glass eyes in the skull could see, the steel skull that held his brain. The eyes registered, his brain translated. He had no eyes of his

own.

'What day is it?' he asked.

'Saturday, March tenth,' he heard the quiet voice of his father say, 'Ten o'clock at night.'

Saturday. A Saturday he'd never wanted to see. The enraging thought made him want to whirl and confront his father with vicious words. But the big steel frame clicked mechanically and eased around with a creaking sound.

'I've been working on it since Monday morning when -'

'When I killed myself,' said the machine.

His father gasped, stared at him with dull eyes. He had always been so assured, so brittle, so confident. And Peter had always hated that assurance. Because he had never been assured of himself. Himself.

It brought him back. Was this himself? Was a man only his mind? How often had he claimed that to be so. On those quiet evenings after dinner when other teachers came over and sat in the living room with him and his parents. And, while his mother sat by him, smiling and proud, he would claim that a man was his mind and nothing more. Why had she done this to him?

He felt that fettered helplessness again. The feeling of being trapped. He *was* trapped. In a great, steel-jawed snare, this body his father had made.

He had felt the same rigid terror for the past six months. The same feeling that escape was blocked in every direction. That he would never get away from the prison of his life; that chains of daily schedule hung heavy on his limbs. Often he wanted to scream.

He wanted to scream now. Louder than he ever had before. He had chosen the only remaining exit and even that was blocked. Monday morning he had slashed open his veins and the blanket of darkness had enveloped him.

Now he was back again. His body was gone. There were no veins to cut, no heart to crush or stab, no lungs to smother. Only his brain, lean and suffering. But he was back.

He stood facing the window again. Looking out over the Fort College campus. Far across he could see - the red glass lenses could see - the building where he had taught Sociological Surveys.

'Is my brain uninjured?' he asked.

Strange how the feeling seemed to abate now. A moment ago he had wanted to scream out of lungs that were no longer there. Now he felt apathetic.

'As far as I can tell,' said his father.

'That's fine,' Peter said, the machine said, 'That's just fine.'

'Peter, I want you to understand this wasn't my idea.'

The machine stirred. The voice gears rubbed a little and grated but no words came. The red eyes shone out the window at the campus.

'I promised your mother,' his father said, 'I had to, Peter. She was hysterical. She - there was no other way.'

'And besides, it was a most interesting experiment,' said the voice of the machine, his son.

Silence.

'Peter Dearfield,' said Peter, said the turning, twinkling gears in the steel throat, 'Peter Dearfield is resurrected!' He turned to look at his father. He knew in his mind that a living heart would have been beating heavily, but the little wheels turned methodically. The hands did not tremble, but hung in polished muteness at his steel sides. There was no heart to beat. And no breath to catch, for the body was not alive but a machine.

'Take out my brain,' Peter said.

His father began to put on his vest; his tired fingers buttoned it slowly.

'You can't leave me like this.'

'Peter, I - I must.'

'For the experiment?'

'For your mother.'

'You hate her and you hate me!'

His father shook his head.

'Then I'll do it myself,' intoned the machine.

The steel hands reached up.

'You can't,' said his father, 'You can't harm yourself.' 'Damn you!'

No outraged cry followed. Did his father know that, in his mind. Peter was screaming? The sound of his voice was mild. It could not enrage. Could the well-modulated requests of a machine be heeded?

The legs moved heavily. The clanking body moved toward Doctor Dearfield. He raised his eyes.

'And have you taken out the ability to kill?' asked the machine.

The old man looked at the machine standing before him. The machine that was his only son.

'No,' he said, wearily, 'You can kill me.'

The machine seemed to falter. Gears struck teeth, reversed themselves.

'Experiment successful,' said the flat voice, 'You've made your own son into a machine.'

His father stood there with a tired look on his face.

'Have I?' he said.

Peter turned from his father with a clicking of gears not trying to speak, and moved over to the wall mirror.

'Don't you want to see your mother?' asked his father.

Peter made no answer. He stopped before the mirror and the little glass eyes looked at themselves.

He wanted to tear the brain out of its steel container and hurl it away.

No mouth. No nose. A gleaming red eye on the right and a gleaming red eye on the left.

A head like a bucket. All with little rivets like tiny bumps on his new metal skin.

'And you did all this for *her*,' he said.

He turned on well-oiled heels. The red eyes did not show the hate behind them. 'Liar,' said the machine. 'You did it for yourself- for the pleasure of experimenting.'

If only he could rush at his father. If he could only stamp and flail his arms wildly and scream until the laboratory echoed with screams.

But how could he? His voice went on as before. A whisper, a turning of oiled wheels, spinning like gears in a clock.

His brain turned and turned.

'You thought you'd make her happy, didn't you?' Peter said, 'You thought she'd run to me and embrace me. You thought she'd kiss my soft, warm skin. You thought she'd look into my blue eyes and tell me how handsome I -'

'Peter this will do no -'

' - how *handsome* I am. Kiss me on the mouth.'

He stepped toward the old doctor on slow, steel legs. His eyes flickered in the fluorescent light of the small laboratory.

'Will she kiss my mouth?' Peter asked, 'You haven't given me one.'

His father's skin was ashen. His hands trembled.

'You did it for yourself,' said the machine, 'You never cared about her - or about me.'

'Your mother is waiting,' his father said quietly putting on his coat.

'I'm not going.'

'Peter, she's waiting.'

The thought made Peter's mind swell up in anguish. It ached and throbbed in its hard, metal casing. Mother, mother, how can I look at you now? After what I've done. Even though these aren't my own eyes, how can I look at you now?

'She mustn't see me like this,' insisted the machine.

'She's waiting to see you.'

Wo/

Not a cry, but a mannerly turning of wheels.

'She *wants* you, Peter.'

He felt helpless again. Trapped. He was back. His mother was waiting for him.

The legs moved him. His father opened the door and he went out to his mother.

She stood up suddenly from the bench, one hand clutching her throat, the other holding her dark, leather handbag. Her eyes were fastened on the robot. The colour left her cheeks.

'Peter,' she said. Only a whisper.

He looked at her. At her grey hair, her soft skin, the gentle mouth and eyes. The stooped form, the old overcoat she'd worn so many years because she'd insisted that he take her extra money and buy clothes for himself.

He looked at his mother who wanted him so much she would not let even death take him from her.

'Mother,' said the machine, forgetting for a moment.

Then he saw the twitching in her face. And he realized what he was.

He stood motionless; her eyes fled to his father standing beside him. And Peter saw what her eyes said.

They said - why like *this*?

He wanted to turn and run. He wanted to die. When he had killed himself the despair was a quiet one, a despair of hopelessness. It had not been this brain-bursting agony. His life had ebbed away silently and peacefully. Now he wanted to destroy it in an instant, violently.

'Peter,' she said.

But she did not smother him with kisses. How could she, his brain tortured. Would anyone kiss a suit of armour?

How long would she stand there, staring at him? He felt the rage mounting in his mind.

'Aren't you satisfied?' he said.

But something went wrong inside him and his words were jumbled into a mechanical croaking. He saw his mother's lips tremble. Again she looked at his father. Then back at the machine. Guiltily.

'How do you - feel, Peter?'

There was no hollow laughter even though his brain wanted to send out hollow laughter. Instead the gears began to grind and he heard nothing but the friction of gnashing teeth. He saw his mother try to smile, then fail to conceal her look of sick horror.

'*Peter*,' she wailed, slumping to the floor.

'I'll tear it apart,' he heard his father saying huskily,

'I'll destroy it.'

For Peter there was an upsurge of hope.

But then his mother stopped trembling. She pulled away from her husband's grip.

'No,' she said and Peter heard the granite like resolve in her voice, the strength he knew so well.

'I'll be all right in a minute,' she said.

She walked straight towards him, smiling.

'It's all right, Peter,' she said.

'Am I handsome, Mother?' he asked.

'Peter, you -'

'Don't you want to kiss me, Mother?' asked the machine.

He saw her throat move. He saw tears on her cheeks. Then she leaned forward. He could not feel her lips press against the cool steel. He only heard it, a slight thumping against the metal skin.

'Peter,' she said, 'Forgive us for what we've done.'

All he could think was -

*Can a machine forgive?*

They took him out the back doorway of the Physical Sciences Centre. They tried to hustle him to the car. But halfway down the walk Peter saw everything spin around and there was a stabbing in his brain as the mass of his new body crashed backward on the cement.

His mother gasped and looked down at him in fright.

His father bent over and Peter saw his fingers working on the right knee joint. His voice was muffled as he worked.

'How does your brain feel?'

He didn't answer. The red eyes glinted.

'Peter,' his father said urgently.

He didn't answer. He stared at the dark trees that lined Eleventh Street.

'You can get up now,' his father said.

'No.'

'Peter, not here.'

'I'm not getting up,' the machine said.

'Peter, please,' his mother begged.

'No, I can't, Mother, I can't.'

Spoken like a hideous metal monster.

'Peter, you can't stay *there*.'

The memory of all the years before stopped him. He would not get up.

'Let them find me,' he said, 'Maybe *they'll* destroy me.'

His father looked around with worried eyes. And, suddenly, Peter realised that no one knew of this but his parents. If the board found out, his father would be pilloried. He found the idea pleased him.

But his wired reflexes were too slow to stop his father from placing hands on his chest and pulling open a small hinged door.

Before he could swing one of his clumsy arms, his father flicked his mechanism and, abruptly, the arm stopped as the connection between his will and the machinery was broken.

Doctor Dearfield pushed a button and the robot stood and walked stiffly to the car. He followed behind, his frail chest labouring for breath. He kept thinking what a horrible mistake he had made to listen to his wife. Why did he always let her alter his decisions?

Why had he allowed her to control their son when he lived? Why had he let her convince him to bring their son back when he had made a last, desperate attempt to escape?

His robot son sat in the back seat stiffly. Doctor Dearfield slid into the car beside his wife.

'Now he's perfect,' he said, 'Now you can lead him around as you please. A pity he wasn't so agreeable in life. Almost as pliable, almost as machine-like. But not quite. He didn't do *everything* you wanted him to.'

She looked at her husband with surprise, glancing back at the robot as if afraid it might hear. It was her son's mind. And she had said a man was his mind.

The sweet, unsullied mind of her son! The mind she had always protected and sheltered from the ugly taint of worldliness. He was her life. She did not feel guilty for having him brought back. If only he weren't so...

'Are you satisfied, Ruth?' asked her husband, 'Oh, don't worry; he can't hear me.'

But he could. He sat there and listened. Peter's brain heard.

'You're not answering me,' said Doctor Dearfield, starting the motor.

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'You have to talk about it,' he said, 'What have you planned for him now? You always made it a point to live his life before.'

'Stop it, John.'

'No, you've broken my silence, Ruth. I must have been insane to listen to you. Insane to let myself get interested in a such - hideous project. To bring you back your dead son.'

'Is it hideous that I love my son and want him with me?'

'It's hideous that you defy his last desire on Earth! To be dead and free of you and at peace at last.'

'Free of me, free of me,' she screamed angrily, 'Am I such a monster?'

'No,' he said quietly, 'But, with my help, you've certainly made our son a monster.'

She did not speak. Peter saw her lips draw into a thin line.

'What will he do now?' asked her husband, 'Go back to his classes? Teach sociology?'

'I don't know,' she murmured.

'No, of course you don't. All you ever worried about was his being near you.'

Doctor Dearfield turned the corner. He started up College Avenue.

'I know,' he said, 'We'll use him for an ashtray.'

'John, stop it!'

She slumped forward and Peter heard her sobbing. He watched his mother with the red glass eyes of the machine he lived in.

'Did you - h-have to make him so-so -'

'So ugly?'

'I-'

'Ruth, I *told* you what he'd look like. You just glossed over my words. All you could think of was getting your claws into him again.'

'I didn't, I didn't,' she sobbed.

'Did you ever respect a single one of his wishes?' her husband asked. '*Did* you? When he wanted to write, would you let him? No! You scoffed. Be practical, darling, you said. It's a pretty thought but we must be practical. Your father will get you a nice position with the college.'

She shook her head silently.

'When we wanted to go to New York to live, would you let him? When he wanted to marry Elizabeth, would you let him?'

The angry words of his father faded as Peter looked out at the dark campus on his right. He was thinking, dreaming, of a pretty, dark-haired girl in his class. Remembering the day she'd spoken to him. Of the walks, concerts, the soft, exciting kisses, the tender, shy caresses.

If only he could sob, cry out.

But a machine could not cry and it had no heart to break.

'Year after year,' his father's voice fluttered back into hearing, 'Turning him into a machine even then.'

And Peter's mind pictured the long, elliptical walk around the campus. The walk he had so many times trudged to and from classes, briefcase gripped firmly in his hand. The dark grey hat on his balding head, balding at twenty-eight! The heavy overcoat in winter, the grey tweed suit in fall and spring. The lined seersucker during the hot months when he taught summer session.

Nothing but depressing days that stretched on endlessly.

Until he had ended them.

'He's still my son,' he heard his mother saying.

'Is he?' mocked his father.

'It's still his mind, and a man's mind is everything.'

'What about his body?' her husband persisted, 'What about his hands? They are just two pronged claws like *hooks*. Will you hold his hands as you used to? Those riveted metal arms - would you let him put those arms around you and embrace you?'

'John, *please* -'

'What will you do with him? Put him in a closet? Hide him when guests come? What will you -'

'I don't want to *talk* about it!'

'You *must* talk about it! What about his face? Can you kiss that face?'

She trembled and, suddenly, her husband drove the car to the kerb and stopped it with a jerk. He grabbed her shoulder and turned her forcibly around.

'*Look at him!* Can you kiss that metal face? Is it your son, is *that* your son?'

She could not look. And it was the final blow at Peter's brain. He knew that she had not loved his mind, his personality, his character at all. It was the living person she had doted upon, the body *she* could direct, the hands *she* could hold - the responses *she* could control.

'You never loved him,' his father said cruelly. 'You *possessed* him. You *destroyed* him.'  
'Destroyed!' she moaned in anguish.

And then they both spun around in horror. Because the machine had said, 'Yes. Destroyed.'  
His father was staring at him.  
'I thought -' he said, thinly.  
'I am now, in objective form, what I have always been,' said the robot. 'A well-controlled machine.'  
The throat gears made sound.  
'Mother, take home your Little boy,' said the machine.  
But Doctor Dearfield had already turned the car around and was heading back.

## 12 - Graveyard Shift

DEAR PA:

I am sending you this note under Rex's collar because I got to stay here. I hope this note gets to you all right.

I couldn't deliver the tax letter you sent me with because the Widow Blackwell is killed. She is upstairs. I put her on her bed. She looks awful. I wish you would get the sheriff and the coronor Wilks.

Little Jim Blackwell, I don't know where he is right now. He is so scared he goes running around the house and hiding from me. He must have got awful scared by whoever killed his ma. He don't say a word. He just runs around like a scared rat. I see his eyes sometimes in the dark and then they are gone. They got no electric power here you know.

I came out toward sundown bringing that note. I rung the bell but there was no answer so I pushed open the front door and looked in.

All the shades was down. And I heard someone running light in the front room and then feet running upstairs. I called around for the Widow but she didn't answer me.

I started upstairs and saw Jim looking down through the banister posts. When he saw me looking at him, he run down the hall and I ain't seen him since.

I looked around the upstairs rooms. Finally, I went in the Widow Blackwell's room and there she was dead on the floor in a puddle of blood. Her throat was cut and her eyes was wide open and looking up at me. It was an awful sight.

I shut her eyes and searched around some and I found the razor. The Widow has all her clothes on so I figure it were only robbery that the killer meant.

Well, Pa, please come out quick with the sheriff and the coroner Wilks. I will stay here and watch to see that Jim don't go running out of the house and maybe get lost in the woods. But come as fast as you can because I don't like sitting here with her up there like that and Jim sneaking around in the dark house.

LUKE

DEAR GEORGE:

We just got back from your sister's house. We haven't told the papers yet so I'll have to be the one to let you know.

I sent Luke out there with a property tax note and he found your sister murdered. I don't like to be the one to tell you but somebody has to. The sheriff and his boys are scouring the countryside for the killer. They figure it was a tramp or something. She wasn't raped though and, far as we can tell, nothing was stolen.

What I mean more to tell you about is little Jim.

That boy is fixing to die soon from starvation and just plain scaredness. He won't eat nothing. Sometimes, he gulps down a piece of bread or a piece of candy but as soon as he starts to chewing, his face gets all twisted and he gets violent sick and throws up. I don't understand it at all.

Luke found your sister in her room with her throat cut ear to ear. Coroner Wilks says it was a strong, steady hand that done it because the cut is deep and sure. I am terribly sorry to be the one to tell you all this but I think it is better you know. The funeral will be in a week.

Luke and I had a long time rounding up the boy. He was like lightning. He ran around in the dark and squealed like a rat. He showed his teeth at us when we'd corner him with a lantern. His skin is all white and the way he rolls his eyes back and foams at his mouth is something awful to see.

We finally caught him. He bit us and squirmed around like an eel. Then he got all stiff and it was like carrying a two-by-four, Luke said.

We took him into the kitchen and tried to give him something to eat. He wouldn't take a bite. He gulped down some milk like he felt guilty about it. Then, in a second, his face twists and he draws back his lips and the milk comes out.

He kept trying to run away from us. Never a single word out of him. He just squeaks and mutters like a monkey talking to itself.

We finally carried him upstairs to put him to bed. He froze soon as we touched him and I thought his eyes would fall out he opened them so wide. His jaw fell slack and he stared at us like we was boogie men or trying to slice open his throat like his ma's.

He wouldn't go into his room. He screamed and twisted in our hands like a fish. He braced his feet against the wall and tugged and pulled and scratched. We had to slap his face and then his eyes got big and he got like a board again and we carried him in his room.

When I took off his clothes, I got a shock like I haven't had in years, George. That boy is all scars and bruises on his back and chest like someone has strung him up and tortured him with pliers or hot iron or God knows what all. I got a downright chill seeing that. I know they said the widow wasn't the same in her head after her husband died, but I can't believe she done this. It is the work of a crazy person.

Jim was sleepy but he wouldn't shut his eyes. He kept looking around the ceiling and the window and his lips kept moving like he was trying to talk. He was moaning kind of low and shaky when Luke and I went out in the hall.

No sooner did we leave him than he's screaming at the top of his voice and thrashing in his bed like someone was strangling him. We rushed in and I held the lantern high but we couldn't see anything. I thought the boy was sick with fear and seeing things.

Then, as if it was meant to happen, the lantern ran out of oil and all of a sudden we saw white faces staring at us from the walls and ceiling and the window.

It was a shaky minute there, George, with the kid screaming out his lungs and twisting on his bed but never getting up. And Luke trying to find the door and me feeling for a match but trying to look at those horrible faces at the same time.

Finally, I found a match and I got it lit and we couldn't see the faces any more, just part of one on the window.

I sent Luke down to the car for some oil and when he come back we lit the lantern again and looked at the window and saw that the face was painted on it so's to light up in the dark. Same thing for the faces on the walls and the ceiling. It was enough to scare a man half out of his wits to think of anybody doing that inside a little boy's room.

We took him to another room and put him down to bed. When we left him he was squirming in his sleep and muttering words we couldn't understand. I left Luke in the hall outside the room to watch. I went and looked around the house some more.

In the Widow's room I found a whole shelf of psychology books. They was all marked in different places. I looked in one place and it told about a thing how they can make rats go crazy by making them think there is food in a place when there isn't. And another one about how they can make a dog lose its appetite and starve to death by hitting big pieces of pipe together at the same time when the dog is trying to eat.

I guess you know what I think. But it is so terrible I can hardly believe it. I mean that Jim might have got so crazy that he cut her. He is so small I don't see how he could.

You are her only living kin, George, and I think you should do something about the boy. We don't



want to put him in an orphan home. He is in no shape for it. That is why I am telling you all about him so you can judge.

There was another thing. I played a record on a phonograph in the boy's room. It sounded like wild animals all making terrible noises and even louder than them was a terrible high laughing.

That is about all, George. We will let you know if the sheriff finds the one who killed your sister because no one really believes that Jim could have done it. I wish you would take the boy and try to fix him up.

Until I hear,

SAM DAVIS

DEAR SAM:

I got your letter and am more upset than I can say.

I knew for a long time that my sister was mentally unbalanced after her husband's death, but I had no idea in the world she was gone so far.

You see, when she was a girl she fell in love with Phil. There was never anyone else in her life. The sun rose and descended on her love for him. She was so jealous that, once, because he had taken another girl to a party, she crashed her hands through a window and nearly bled to death.

Finally, Phil married her. There was never a happier couple, it seemed. She did anything and everything for him. He was her whole life.

When Jim was born I went to see her at the hospital. She told me she wished it had been born dead because she knew that the boy meant so much to Phil and she hated to have Phil want anything but her.

She never was good to Jim. She always resented him. And, that day, three years ago, when Phil drowned saving Jim's life, she went out of her mind. I was with her when she heard about it. She ran into the kitchen and got a carving knife and took it running through the streets, trying to find Jim so she could kill him. She finally fainted in the road and we took her home.

She wouldn't even look at Jim for a month. Then she packed up and took him to that house in the woods. Since then I never saw her.

You saw yourself, the boy is terrified of everyone and everything. Except one person. My sister planned that. Step by step she planned it - God help me for never realizing it before. In a whole, monstrous world of horrors she built around that boy she left him trust and need for only one person - *her*. She was Jim's only shield against those horrors. She knew that, when she died, Jim would go completely mad because there wouldn't be anyone in the world he could turn to for comfort.

I think you see now why I say there isn't any murderer.

Just bury her quick and send the boy to me. I'm not coming to the funeral.

GEORGE BARNES

### **13 - The Man Who Made The World**

*Doctor Janishefsky sat in his office, leaning back in a great leather chair, hands folded. He had a reflective air and a well-trimmed goatee. He hummed a few bars of - 'It Ain't Whatcha Do, It's The Way That You Do It: He broke off and looked up with a kindly smile as the nurse entered. Her name was Mudde.*

NURSE MUDDE: Doctor, there is a man in the waiting room who says he made the world.

DOCTOR J: Oh?

NURSE MUDDE: Shall I let him in?

DOCTOR J: By all means, Nurse Mudde. Show the man in.

*Nurse Mudde left. A small man entered. He was five foot five wearing a suit made for a man six*

*foot five. His hands were near-hidden by the sleeve ends, his trouser-leg bottoms creased sharply at the shoe tops, assuming the function of unattached spats. The shoes were virtually invisible. As was the gentleman's mouth lurking behind a moustache of mouse-like proportions.*

DOCTOR J: Won't you have a seat Mr. -

SMITH: Smith. *(He sits.)*

DOCTOR J: Now. *(They regard each other.)*

DOCTOR J: My nurse tells me you made the world.

SMITH: Yes. *(In a confessional tone)* I did.

DOCTOR J *(settling back in his chair)*: All of it?

SMITH: Yes.

DOCTOR J: And everything in it?

SMITH: Take a little, give a little.

DOCTOR J: You're sure of this?

SMITH *(with an expression that clearly says - I am telling the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me)*: Quite sure.

DOCTOR J *(nods once)*: When did you do this thing?

SMITH: Five years ago.

DOCTOR J: How old are you?

SMITH: Forty-seven.

DOCTOR J: Where were you the other forty-two years?

SMITH: I wasn't.

DOCTOR J: You mean you started out -

SMITH: Forty-two years old. That's correct.

SMITH *(shaking his head)*: No. It isn't.

DOCTOR J: It's five years old.

SMITH: That's correct.

DOCTOR J: What about fossils? What about the age of rocks? Uranium into lead. What about diamonds?

SMITH *(not to be bothered)*: Illusions.

DOCTOR J: You made them up.

SMITH: That's -

DOCTOR J *(breaking in)*: Why?

SMITH: To see if I could.

DOCTOR J: I don't -

SMITH: Anyone can make a world. It takes ingenuity to make one and then make the people on it think that it's existed for millions of years.

DOCTOR J: How long did all this take you?

SMITH: Three and a half months. World time.

DOCTOR J: What do you mean by that?

SMITH: Before I made the world I lived beyond time.

DOCTOR J: Where's that?

SMITH: Nowhere.

DOCTOR J: In the cosmos?

SMITH: That's correct.

DOCTOR J: You didn't like it there?

SMITH: No. It was boring.

DOCTOR J: And that's why -

SMITH: I made the world.

DOCTOR J: Yes. But - how did you make it?

SMITH: I had books.

DOCTOR J: Books?

SMITH: Instruction books.

DOCTOR J: Where did you get them?

SMITH: I made them up.

DOCTOR J: You mean you wrote them?

SMITH: I - made them up.

DOCTOR J: How?

SMITH (*moustache bristling truculently*): I made them up.

DOCTOR J (*lips pursed*): So there you were out in the cosmos with a handful of books.

SMITH: That's correct.

DOCTOR J: What if you had dropped them?

SMITH: (*chooses not to answer this patent absurdity*).

DOCTOR J: Mister Smith.

SMITH: Yes?

DOCTOR J: Who made you?

SMITH: (*shakes his head*): I don't know.

DOCTOR J: Were you always like this? (*He points at Mr. Smith's lowly frame.*)

SMITH: I don't think so. I think that I was punished.

DOCTOR J: For what?

SMITH: For making the world so complicated.

DOCTOR J: I should think so.

SMITH: It's not my fault. I just made it, I didn't say it would work right.

DOCTOR J: You just started your machine and then walked away.

SMITH: That's -

DOCTOR J: Then what are you doing here?

SMITH: I told you. I think I've been punished.

DOCTOR J: Oh yes. For making it too complicated. I forgot.

SMITH: That's correct.

DOCTOR J: Who punished you?

SMITH: I don't remember.

DOCTOR J: That's convenient.

SMITH (*looks morose*).

DOCTOR J: Might it be God?

SMITH (*shrugs*): It might.

DOCTOR J: He might have a few fingers in the rest of the Universe.

SMITH: He might. But I made the world.

DOCTOR J: Enough, Mr. Smith, you did not make the world.

SMITH (*insulted*): Yes, I did too.

DOCTOR J: And you created me?

SMITH (*concedingly*): Indirectly.

DOCTOR J: Then uncreate me.

SMITH: I can't.

DOCTOR J: Why?

SMITH: I just started things. I don't control them now.

DOCTOR J (*sighs*): Then what are you worried about, Mr. Smith.

SMITH: I have a premonition.

DOCTOR J: What about?

SMITH: I'm going to die.

DOCTOR J: So -?

SMITH: Someone has to take over. Or else -

DOCTOR J: Or else -?

SMITH: The whole world will go.  
DOCTOR J: Go where?  
SMITH: Nowhere. Just disappear.  
DOCTOR J: How can it disappear if it works independently of you?  
SMITH: It will be taken away to punish me.  
DOCTOR J: You?  
SMITH: Yes.  
DOCTOR J: You mean if you die, the entire world will disappear?  
SMITH: That's correct.  
DOCTOR J: If I shot you, the instant you died I would disappear?  
SMITH: That's -  
DOCTOR J: I have advice.  
SMITH: Yes? You will help?  
DOCTOR J: Go to see a reputable psychiatrist.  
SMITH (*standing*): I should have known. I have no more to say.  
DOCTOR J (*shrugs*): As you will.  
SMITH: I'll go but you'll be sorry about this.  
DOCTOR J: I dare say you are already sorry, Mr. Smith.  
SMITH: Goodbye. (*Mr. Smith exits. Doctor Janishefsky calls for his nurse over the interphone.*  
Nurse Mudde enters.)  
NURSE M: Yes, doctor?  
DOCTOR J: Nurse Mudde, stand by the window and tell me what you see.  
NURSE M: What I -?  
DOCTOR J: What you see. I want you to tell me what Mr. Smith does after he comes out of the building.  
NURSE M (*shrugs*): Yes, doctor. (*She goes to the window.*)  
DOCTOR J: Has he come out yet?  
NURSE M: No.  
DOCTOR J: Keep watching.  
NURSE MUDDE: There he is. He's stepping off the kerb. He's walking across the street.  
DOCTOR J: Yes.  
NURSE M: He's stopping now in the middle of the street. He's turning. He's looking up at this window. There's a look of - of - *realization* on his face. He's coming back. (*She screams.*) He's been hit by a car. He's lying on the street.  
DOCTOR J: What is it, Nurse Mudde?  
NURSE M (*reeling*): Everything is - is *fading*! Doctor Janishefsky, it's fading! (*Another scream.*)

DOCTOR J: Don't be absurd, Nurse Mudde. Look at me. Can you honestly say that. (*He stops talking. She cannot honestly say anything. She is not there. Doctor Janishefsky, who is not really Doctor Janishefsky, floats alone in the cosmos in his chair, which is not really a chair. He looks at the chair beside him.*) I hope you've learned your lesson. I'm going to put your toy back but don't you dare go near it. So you're bored are you? Scalliwag! You just behave yourself or I'll take away your books too! (*He snorts.*) So you made them up, did you? (*He looks around.*) How about picking them up, jackanapes!

SMITH (*who is not really Smith*): Yes father.

## 14 - Deadline

There are at least two nights a year a doctor doesn't plan on and those are Christmas Eve and New

Year's Eve. On Christmas Eve it was Bobby Dascouli's arm burns I was salving and swathing them about the time I would have been nestled in an easy chair with Ruth eyeing the Technicolor doings of the Christmas tree.

So it came as no surprise that ten minutes after we got to my sister Mary's house for the New Year's Eve party my answering service phoned and told me there was an emergency call downtown.

Ruth smiled at me sadly and shook her head. She kissed me on the cheek. 'Poor Bill,' she said.

'Poor Bill indeed,' I said, putting down my first drink of the evening, two-thirds full. I patted her much-evident stomach.

'Don't have that baby till I get back,' I told her.

'I'll do my bestest,' she said.

I gave hurried goodbyes to everyone and left; turning up the collar of my overcoat and crunching over the snow-packed walk to the Ford; milking the choke and finally getting the engine started. Driving downtown with that look of dour reflection I've seen on many a GP's face at many a time.

It was after eleven when my tyre chains rattled onto the dark desertion of East Main Street. I drove three blocks north to the address and parked in front of what had been a refined apartment dwelling when my father was in practice. Now it was a boarding house, ancient, smelling of decay.

In the vestibule I lined the beam of my pencil flashlight over the mail boxes but couldn't find the name. I rang the landlady's bell and stepped over to the hall door. When the buzzer sounded I pushed it open.

At the end of the hall a door opened and a heavy woman emerged. She wore a black sweater over her wrinkled green dress, striped anklets over her heavy stockings, saddle shoes over the anklets. She had no make-up on; the only colour in her face was a chapped redness in her cheeks. Wisps of steel-grey hair hung across her temples. She picked at them as she trundled down the dim hallway towards me.

'You the doctor?' she asked.

I said I was.

'I'm the one called ya,' she said. 'There's an old guy up the fourth floor says he's dyin'.'

'What room?' I asked.

'I'll show ya.'

I followed her wheezing ascent up the stairs. We stopped in front of room 47 and she rapped on the thin panelling of the door, then pushed it open.

'In here,' she said.

As I entered I saw him lying on an iron bed. His body had the flaccidity of a discarded doll. At his sides, frail hands lay motionless, topographed with knots of vein, islanded with liver spots. His skin was the brown of old page edges, his face a wasted mask. On the caseless pillow, his head lay still, its white hair straggling across the stripes like threading drifts of snow. There was a pallid stubble on his cheeks. His pale blue eyes were fixed on the ceiling.

As I slipped off my hat and coat I saw that there was no suffering evident. His expression was one of peaceful acceptance. I sat down on the bed and took his wrist. His eyes shifted and he looked at me.

'Hello,' I said, smiling.

'Hello.' I was surprised by the cognisance in his voice.

The beat of his blood was what I expected however - a bare trickle of life, a pulsing almost lost beneath the fingers. I put down his hand and laid my palm across his forehead. There was no fever. But then he wasn't sick. He was only running down.

I patted the old man's shoulder and stood, gesturing towards the opposite side of the room. The landlady clumped there with me.

'How long has he been in bed?' I asked.

'Just since this afternoon,' she said. 'He come down to my room and said he was gonna die tonight.'

I stared at her. I'd never come in contact with such a thing. I'd read about it; everyone has. An old man or woman announces that, at a certain time, they'll die and, when the time comes, they do. Who knows what it is; will or prescience or both. All one knows is that it is a strangely awesome thing.

'Has he any relatives?' I asked.

'None I know of,' she said.

I nodded.

'Don't understand it,' she said.

'What?'

'When he first moved in about a month ago he was all right. Even this afternoon he didn't look sick.'

'You never know,' I said.

'No. You don't.' There was a haunted and uneasy flickering back deep in her eyes.

'Well, there's nothing I can do for him,' I said. 'He's not in pain. It's just a matter of time.'

The landlady nodded.

'How old is he?' I asked.

'He never said.'

'I see.' I walked back to the bed.

'I heard you,' the old man told me.

'Oh?'

'You want to know how old I am.'

'How old are you?'

He started to answer, then began coughing dryly. I saw a glass of water on the bedside table and, sitting, I propped the old man while he drank a little. Then I put him down again.

'I'm one year old,' he said.

It didn't register. I stared down at his calm face. Then, smiling nervously, I put the glass down on the table.

'You don't believe that,' he said.

'Well -' I shrugged.

'It's true enough,' he said.

I nodded and smiled again.

'I was born on December 31, 1958,' he said, 'At midnight.'

He closed his eyes. 'What's the use?' he said, 'I've told a hundred people and none of them understood.'

'Tell me about it,' I said.

After a few moments, he drew in breath, slowly.

'A week after I was born,' he said, 'I was walking and talking. I was eating by myself. My mother and father couldn't believe their eyes. They took me to a doctor. I don't know what he thought but he didn't do anything. What could he do? I wasn't sick. He sent me home with my mother and father. Precocious growth, he said.'

'In another week we were back again. I remember my mother's and father's faces when we drove there. They were afraid of me.'

'The doctor didn't know what to do. He called in specialists and they didn't know what to do. I was a normal four-year old boy. They kept me under observation. They wrote papers about me. I didn't see my father and mother anymore.'

The old man stopped for a moment, then went on in the same mechanical way.

'In another week I was six,' he said. 'In another week, eight. Nobody understood. They tried everything but there was no answer. And I was ten and twelve. I was fourteen and I ran away because I was sick of being stared at.'

He looked at the ceiling for almost a minute.

'You want to hear more?' he asked then.

'Yes,' I said, automatically. I was amazed at how easily he spoke.

'In the beginning I tried to fight it,' he said. 'I went to doctors and screamed at them. I told them to find out what was wrong with me. But there wasn't anything wrong with me. I was just getting two years older every week.'

'Then I got the idea.'

I started a little, twitching out of the reverie of staring at him. 'Idea?' I asked.

'This is how the story got started,' the old man said.

'What story?'

'About the old year and the new year,' he said. 'The old year is an old man with a beard and a scythe. You know. And the new year is a little baby.'

The old man stopped. Down in the street I heard a tyre-screeching car turn a corner and speed past the building.

'I think there have been men like me all through time,' the old man said. 'Men who live for just a year. I don't know how it happens or why; but, once in while, it does. That's how the story got started. After a while, people forgot how it started. They think it's a fable now. They think it's symbolic; but it isn't.'

The old man turned his worn face towards the wall.

'And I'm 1959,' he said, quietly. 'That's who I am.'

The landlady and I stood in silence looking down at him. Finally, I glanced at her. Abruptly, as if caught in guilt, she turned and hurried across the floor. The door thumped shut behind her.

I looked back at the old man. Suddenly, my breath seemed to stop. I leaned over and picked up his hand. There was no pulse. Shivering, I put down his hand and straightened up. I stood looking down at him. Then, from where I don't know, a chill laced up my back. Without thought, I extended my left hand and the sleeve of my coat slid back across my watch.

*To the second.*

I drove back to Mary's house unable to get the old man's story out of my mind - or the weary acceptance in his eyes. I kept telling myself it was only a coincidence, but I couldn't quite convince myself.

Mary let me in. The living room was empty.

'Don't tell me the party's broken up already?' I said.

Mary smiled. 'Not broken up,' she said, 'Just continued at the hospital.'

I stared at her, my mind swept blank. Mary took my arm.

'And you'll never guess,' she said, 'what time Ruth had the sweetest little boy.'

## **15 - Buried Talents**

A man in a wrinkled, black suit entered the fairgrounds. He was tall and lean, his skin the color of drying leather. He wore a faded sport shirt underneath his suit coat, white with yellow stripes. His hair was black and greasy, parted in the middle and brushed back flat on each side. His eyes were pale blue. There was no expression on his face. It was a hundred and two degrees in the sun but he was not perspiring.

He walked to one of the booths and stood there watching people try to toss ping-pong balls into dozens of little fish bowls on a table. A fat man wearing a straw hat and waving a bamboo cane in his right hand kept telling everyone how easy it was. "Try your luck!" he told them. "Win a prize! There's nothing to it!" He had an unlit, half-smoked cigar between his lips which he shifted from side to side as he spoke.

For awhile, the tall man in the wrinkled, black suit stood watching. Not one person managed a ping-pong ball into a fish bowl. Some of them tried to throw the balls in. Others tried to bounce them off the table. None of them had any luck.

At the end of seven minutes, the man in the black suit pushed between the people until he was standing by the booth. He took a quarter from his right hand trouser pocket and laid it on the counter. "Yes, sir!" said the fat man. "Try your luck!" He tossed the quarter into a metal box beneath the counter. Reaching down, he picked three grimy ping-pong balls from a basket. He clapped them on the counter and the tall

man picked them up.

"Toss a ball in the fish bowl!" said the fat man. "Win a prize! There's nothing to it!" Sweat was trickling down his florid face. He took a quarter from a teenage boy and set three ping-pong balls in front of him.

The man in the black suit looked at the three ping-pong balls on his left palm. He hefted them, his face immobile. The man in the straw hat turned away. He tapped at the fish bowls with his cane. He shifted the stump of cigar in his mouth. "Toss a ball in the fish bowl!" he said. "A prize for everybody! Nothing to it!"

Behind him, a ping-pong ball clinked into one of the bowls. He turned and looked at the bowl. He looked at the man in the black suit. "There you are!" he said. "See that? Nothing to it! Easiest game on the fairgrounds!"

The tall man threw another ping-pong ball. It arced across the booth and landed in the same bowl. All the other people trying missed.

"Yes, sir!" the fat man said. "A prize for everybody! Nothing to it!" He picked up two quarters and set six ping-pong balls before a man and wife.

He turned and saw the third ping-pong ball dropping into the fish bowl. It didn't touch the neck of the bowl. It didn't bounce. It landed on the other two balls and lay there.

"See?" the man in the straw hat said. "A prize on his very first turn! Easiest game on the fairgrounds!" Reaching over to a set of wooden shelves, he picked up an ashtray and set it on the counter. "Yes, sir! Nothing to it!" he said. He took a quarter from a man in overalls and set three ping-pong balls in front of him.

The man in the black suit pushed away the ashtray. He laid another quarter on the counter. "Three more ping-pong balls," he said.

The fat man grinned. "Three more ping-pong balls it is!" he said. He reached below the counter, picked up three more balls and set them on the counter in front of the man. "Step right up!" he said. He caught a ping-pong ball which someone had bounced off the table. He kept an eye on the tall man while he stooped to retrieve some ping-pong balls on the ground.

The man in the black suit raised his right hand, holding one of the ping-pong balls. He threw it overhand, his face expressionless. The ball curved through the air and fell into the fish bowl with the other three balls. It didn't bounce.

The man in the straw hat stood with a grunt. He dumped a handful of ping-pong balls into the basket underneath the counter. "Try your luck and win a prize!" he said. "Easy as pie!" He set three ping-pong balls in front of a boy and took his quarter. His eyes grew narrow as he watched the tall man raise his hand to throw the second ball. "No leaning in," he told the man.

The man in the black suit glanced at him. "I'm not," he said.

The fat man nodded. "Go ahead," he said.

The tall man threw the second ping-pong ball. It seemed to float across the booth. It fell through the neck of the bowl and landed on top of the other four balls.



"Wait a second," said the fat man, holding up his hand.

The other people who were throwing stopped. The fat man leaned across the table. Sweat was running down beneath the collar of his long-sleeved shirt. He shifted the soggy cigar in his mouth as he scooped the five balls from the bowl. He straightened up and looked at them. He hooked the bamboo cane over his left forearm and rolled the balls between his palms.

"Okay, folks!" he said. He cleared his throat. "Keep throwing! Win a prize!" He dropped the balls into the basket underneath the counter. Taking another quarter from the man in overalls, he set three ping-pong balls in front of him.

The man in the black suit raised his hand and threw the sixth ball. The fat man watched it arc through the air. It fell into the bowl he'd emptied. It didn't roll around inside. It landed on the bottom, bounced once, straight up, then lay motionless.

The fat man grabbed the ashtray, stuck it on the shelf and picked up a fish bowl like the ones on the table. It was filled with pink colored water and had a goldfish fluttering around in it. "There you go!" he said. He turned away and tapped on the empty fish bowls with his cane. "Step right up!" he said. "Toss a ball in the fish bowl! Win a prize! There's nothing to it!"

Turning back, he saw the man in the wrinkled suit had pushed away the goldfish in the bowl and placed another quarter on the counter. "Three more ping-pong balls," he said.

The fat man looked at him. He shifted the damp cigar in his mouth.

"Three more ping-pong balls," the tall man said.

The man in the straw hat hesitated. Suddenly, he noticed people looking at him and, without a word, he took the quarter and set three ping-pong balls on the counter. He turned around and tapped the fish bowls with his cane. "Step right up and try your luck!" he said. "Easiest game on the fairgrounds!" He removed his straw hat and rubbed the left sleeve of his shirt across his forehead. He was almost bald. The small amount of hair on his head was plastered to his scalp by sweat. He put his straw hat back on and set three ping-pong balls in front of a boy. He put the quarter in the metal box underneath the counter.

A number of people were watching the tall man now. When he threw the first of the three ping-pong balls into the fish bowl some of them applauded and a small boy cheered. The fat man watched suspiciously. His small eyes shifted as the man in the black suit threw his second ping-pong ball into the fish bowl with the other two balls. He scowled and seemed about to speak. The scatter of applause appeared to irritate him.

The man in the wrinkled suit tossed the third ping-pong ball. It landed on top of the other three. Several people cheered and all of them clapped.

The fat man's cheeks were redder now. He put the fish bowl with the goldfish back on its shelf. He gestured toward a higher shelf. "What'll it be?" he asked.

The tall man put a quarter on the counter. "Three more ping-pong balls," he said in a brisk voice. He picked up three more ping-pong balls from the basket and rolled them between his palms.

"Don't give him the bad ones now," someone said in a mocking voice.

"No bad ones!" the fat man said. "They're all the same!" He set the balls on the counter and picked up the quarter. He tossed it into the metal box underneath the counter. The man in the black suit raised his hand.

"Wait a second," the fat man said. He turned and reached across the table. Picking up the fish bowl, he turned it over and dumped the four ping-pong balls into the basket. He seemed to hesitate before he put the empty fish bowl back in place.

Nobody else was throwing now. They watched the tall man curiously as he raised his hand and threw the first of his three ping-pong balls. It curved through the air and landed in the same fish bowl, dropping straight down through the neck. It bounced once, then was still. The people cheered and applauded. The fat man rubbed his left hand across his eyebrows and flicked the sweat from his fingertips with an angry gesture.

The man in the black suit threw his second ping-pong ball. It landed on the same fish bowl.

"Hold it," said the fat man.

The tall man looked at him.

"What are you doing?" the fat man asked.

"Throwing ping-pong balls," the tall man answered. Everybody laughed. The fat man's face got redder. "I know that!" he said.

"It's done with mirrors," someone said and everybody laughed again.

"Funny," said the fat man. He shifted the wet cigar in his mouth and gestured curtly. "Go on," he said.

The tall man in the black suit raised his hand and threw the third ping-pong ball. It arced across the booth as though it were being carried by an invisible hand. It landed in the fish bowl on top of the other two balls. Everybody cheered and clapped their hands.

The fat man in the straw hat grabbed a casserole dish and dumped it on the counter. The man in the black suit didn't look at it. He put another quarter down. "Three more ping-pong balls," he said.

The fat man turned away from him. "Step right up and win a prize!" he called. "Toss a ping-pong ball-!"

The noise of disapproval everybody made drowned him out. He turned back, bristling. "Four rounds to a customer!" he shouted.

"Where does it say that?" someone asked.

"That's the rule!" the fat man said. He turned his back on the man and tapped the fish bowls with his cane. "Step right up and win a prize!" he said.

"I came here yesterday and played five rounds!" a man said loudly.

"That's because you didn't win!" a teenage boy replied. Most of the people laughed and clapped but some of them booed. "Let him play!" a man's voice ordered. Everybody took it up immediately. "Let him play!" they demanded.

The man in the straw hat swallowed nervously. He looked around, a truculent expression on his face. Suddenly, he threw his hands up. "All right!" he said. "Don't get so excited!" He glared at the tall man as he picked up the quarter. Bending over, he grabbed three ping-pong balls and slammed them on the counter. He leaned in close to the man and muttered, "If you're pulling something fast, you'd better cut it out. This is an honest game."

The tall man stared at him. His face was blank. His eyes looked very pale in the leathery tan of his face. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"No one can throw that many balls in succession into those bowls," the fat man said.

The man in the black suit looked at him without expression. "I can," he said.

The fat man felt a coldness on his body. Stepping back, he watched the tall man throw the ping-pong balls. As each of them landed in the same fish bowl, the people cheered and clapped their hands.

The fat man took a set of steak knives from the top prize shelf and set it on the counter. He turned away quickly. "Step right up!" he said. "Toss a ball in the fish bowl! Win a prize!" His voice was trembling.

"He wants to play again," somebody said.

The man in the straw hat turned around. He saw the quarter on the counter in front of the tall man. "No more prizes," he said.

The man in the black suit pointed at the items on top of the wooden shelves—a four-slice electric toaster, a short wave radio, a drill set and a portable typewriter. "What about them?" he asked.

The fat man cleared his throat. "They're only for display," he said. He looked around for help.

"Where does it say that?" someone demanded.

"That's what they are, so just take my word for it!" the man in the straw hat said. His face was dripping with sweat.

"I'll play for them," the tall man said.

"Now look!" The fat man's face was very red. "They're only for display, I said! Now get the hell-!"

He broke off with a wheezing gasp and staggered back against the table, dropping his cane. The faces of the people swam before his eyes. He heard their angry voices as though from a distance. He saw the blurred figure of the man in the black suit turn away and push through the crowd. He straightened up and blinked his eyes. The steak knives were gone.

Almost everybody left the booth. A few of them remained. The fat man tried to ignore their threatening grumbles. He picked a quarter off the counter and set three ping-pong balls in front of a boy. "Try your luck," he said. His voice was faint. He tossed the quarter into the metal box underneath the counter. He

leaned against a corner post and pressed both hands against his stomach. The cigar fell out of his mouth. "God," he said.

It felt as though he was bleeding inside.

## 16 - Slaughter House

*I submit for your consideration, the following manuscript which was mailed to this office some weeks ago. It is presented with neither evidence nor judgment as to its validity. This determination is for the reader to make.*

Samuel D. Machildon, Associate Secretary, Rand Society for Psychical Research

### I

This occurred many years ago. My brother Saul and I had taken a fancy to the old, tenantless Slaughter House. Since we were boys the yellow-edged pronouncement-FOR SALE- had hung lopsided in the grimy front window. We had vowed with boyish ambition that, when we were old enough, the sign must come down.

When we had attained our manhood, this aspiration somehow remained. We had a taste for the Victorian, Saul and I. His painting was akin to that roseate and buxom transcription of nature so endeared by the nineteenth century artists. And my writing, though far from satisfactory realization, bore the definite stamp of prolixity, was marked by that meticulous sweep of ornate phrase which the modernists decry as dullness and artifice.

Thus, for the headquarters of our artistic labours, what better retreat than the Slaughter House, that structure which matched in cornice and frieze our intimate partialities? None, we decided, and acted readily on that decision.

The yearly endowment arranged by our deceased parents, albeit meager, we knew to suffice, since the house was in gross need of repair and, moreover, without electricity.

There was also, if hardly credited by us, a rumour of ghosts. Neighbourhood children quite excelled each other in relating the harrowing experiences they had undergone with various of the more eminent spectres. We smiled at their clever fancies, never once losing the conviction that purchase of the house would be wholly practical and satisfactory.

The real estate office bumbled with financial delight the day we took off their hands what they had long considered a lost cause, having even gone so far as to remove the house from their listings. Convenient arrangements were readily fashioned and, in a matter of hours, we had moved all belongings from our uncommodious flat to our new, relatively large house.

Several days were then spent in the most necessary task of cleaning. This presented itself as far more difficult a project than first anticipated. Dust lay heavy throughout the halls and rooms. Our energetic dusting would send clouds of it billowing expansively, filling the air with powdery ghosts of dirt. We noted in respect to that observation that many a spectral vision might thus be made explicable if the proper time were utilized in experiment.

In addition to dust on all places of lodgement, there was thick grime on glass surfaces ranging from downstairs windows to silver scratched mirrors in the upstairs bath. There were loose banisters to repair, door locks to recondition, yards of thick rugging out of whose mat to beat decades of dust, and a multitude of other chores large and small to be performed before the house could be deemed liveable.

Yet, even with grime and age admitted, that we had come by an obvious bargain was beyond dispute. The house was completely furnished, moreover furnished in the delightful mode of the early 1900s. Saul and I were thoroughly enchanted. Dusted, aired, scrubbed from top to bottom, the house proved indeed a fascinating purchase. The dark luxurious drapes, the patterned rugs, the graceful furniture, the yellow keyed spinet; everything was complete to the last detail, that detail being the portrait of a rather lovely

young woman which hung above the living room mantel.

When first we came upon it, Saul and I stood speechless before its artistic quality. Saul then spoke of the painter's technique and finally, in rapt adulation, discussed with me the various possibilities as to the identity of the model.

It was our final conjecture that she was the daughter or wife of the former tenant, whoever he had been, beyond having the name of Slaughter.

Several weeks passed by. Initial delight was slaked by full-time occupancy and intense creative effort.

We rose at nine, had our breakfast in the dining room, then proceeded to our work, I in my sleeping chamber, Saul in the solarium, which we had been able to improvise into a small studio. Each in our places, the morning passed quietly and effectively. We lunched at one, a small but nourishing meal and then resumed work for the afternoon.

We discontinued our labours about four to have tea and quiet conversation in our elegant front room. By this hour it was too late to go on with our work, since darkness would be commencing its surrounding pall on the city. We had chosen not to install electricity both for reasons of monetary prudence and the less sordid one of pure aesthetics.

We would not, for the world, have distorted the gentle charm of the house by the addition of blatant, sterile electric light. Indeed we preferred the flickering silence of candlelight in which to play our nightly game of chess. We needed no usurping of our silence by noxious radio Heating's, we ate our bakery bread unsinged and found our wine quite adequately cooled from the old icebox. Saul enjoyed the sense of living in the past and so did I. We asked no more.

But then began the little things, the intangible things, the things without reason.

Walking on the stairs, in the hallway, through the rooms, Saul or I, singly or together, would stop and receive the strangest impulse in our minds; of fleeting moment yet quite definite while existent.

It is difficult to express the feeling with adequate clarity. It was as if we heard something although there was no sound, as though we saw something when there was nothing before the eye. A sense of shifting presence, delicate and tenuous, hidden from all physical senses and yet, somehow, perceived.

There was no explaining it. In point of fact we never spoke of it together. It was too nebulous a feeling to discuss, incapable of being materialized into words. Restless though it made us, there was no mutual comparison of sensation nor could there be. Even the most abstract of thought formation could not approach what we were experiencing.

Sometimes I would come upon Saul casting a hurried glance over his shoulder, or surreptitiously reaching out to stroke empty air as though he expected his fingers to touch some invisible entity. Sometimes he would catch me doing the same. On occasion we would smile awkwardly, both of us appreciating the moment without words.

But our smiles soon faded. I almost think we were afraid to deride this unknown aegis for fear that it might prove itself actual. Not that my brother or I were superstitious in the least degree. The very fact that we purchased the house without paying the slightest feance to the old wives' tales about its supposed anathema seems to belie the suggestion that we were, in any manner, inclined toward mystic apprehensions. Yet the house did seem, beyond question, to possess some strange potency.

Often, late at night, I would lie awake, knowing somehow that Saul was also awake in his room and that we both were listening and waiting, consciously certain about our expectation of some unknown arrival which was soon to be effected.

And effected it was.

## II

It was perhaps a month and a half after we had moved into Slaughter House that the first hint was shown as to the house's occupants other than ourselves.

I was in the narrow kitchen cooking supper on the small gas stove. Saul was in the dining alcove arranging the table for supper. He had spread a white cloth over the dark, glossy mahogany and, on it, placed two plates with attendant silver. A candelabrum of six candles glowed in the center of the table

casting shadows over the snowy cloth.

Saul was about to place the cups and saucers beside the plates as I turned back to the stove. I twisted the knob a trifle to lower the flame under the chops. Then, as I began to open the icebox to get the wine, I heard Saul gasp loudly and, something thumped on the dining-room rug. I whirled and hurried out of the kitchen as fast as I could.

One of the cups had fallen to the floor, its handle snapping off. I hurriedly picked it up, my eyes on Saul.

He was standing with his back to the living room archway, his right hand pressed to his cheek, a look of speechless shock contorting his handsome features.

"What is it?" I asked, placing the cup on the table.

He looked at me without answering and I noticed how his slender fingers trembled on his whitening cheek.

"Saul, what *is* it?"

"A hand," he said. "A hand. *It touched my cheek.*"

I believe my mouth fell open in surprise. I had, deep within the inner passages of my mind, been expecting something like this to happen. So had Saul. Yet now that it had, a natural sense of oppressive impact was on both of our shoulders.

We stood there in silence. How can I express my feeling at that moment? It was as though something tangible, a tide of choking air, crept over us like some shapeless, lethargic serpent. I noticed how Saul's chest moved in convulsive leaps and depressions and my own mouth hung open as I gasped for breath.

Then, in an added moment, the breathless vacuum was gone, the mindless dread dissolved. I managed to speak, trusting to break this awesome spell with words.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

His slender throat contracted. He forced a smile to his lips, a smile more frightened than pleasant.

"I hope not," he replied.

He reinforced his smile with some effort.

"Can it really be?" he went on, his joviality failing noticeably.

"Can it really be that we've been duped into buying ourselves a haunted house?"

I maintained an effort to join in with his spirit of artificial gusto for the sake of our own minds. But it could not long last nor did I feel any abiding comfort in Saul's feigned composure. We were both exceptionally hypersensitive, had been ever since our births, mine some twenty-seven years before, his twenty-five. We both felt this bodiless premonition deep in our senses.

We spoke no more of it, whether from distaste or foreboding I cannot say. Following our unenjoyable meal, we spent the remainder of the evening at pitifully conducted card games. I suggested, in one unguarded moment of fear, that it might be worth our consideration to have electrical outlets installed in the house.

Saul scoffed at my apparent submission and seemed a little more content to retain the relative dimness of candlelight than the occurrence before dinner would have seemed to make possible in him. Notwithstanding that, I made no issue of it.

We retired to our rooms quite early as we usually do. Before we separated, however, Saul said something quite odd to my way of thinking. He was standing at the head of the stairs looking down, I was about to open the door to my room.

"Doesn't it all seem familiar?" he asked.

I turned to face him, hardly knowing what he was talking about.

"Familiar?" I asked of him.

"I mean," he tried to clarify, "as though we'd been here before. No, more than just been here. Actually *lived* here."

I looked at him with a disturbing sense of alarm gnawing at my mind. He lowered his eyes with a nervous smile as though he'd said something he was just realizing he should not have said. He stepped off quickly for his room, muttering a most uncordial good night to me.

I then retired to my own room, wondering about the unusual restlessness which had seemed to possess Saul throughout the evening manifesting itself not only in his words but in his impatient card play, his fidgety pose on the chair upon which he sat, the agitated flexing of his fingers, the roving of his beautiful dark eyes about the living room. As though he were looking for something.

In my room, I disrobed, effected my toilet and was soon in bed. I had lain there about an hour when I felt the house shake momentarily and the air seemed abruptly permeated with a weird, discordant humming that made my brain throb.

I pressed my hands over my ears and then seemed to wake up, my ears still covered. The house was still. I was not at all sure that it had not been a dream. It might have been a heavy truck passing the house, thus setting the dream into motion in my upset mind. I had no way of being absolutely certain.

I sat up and listened. For long minutes I sat stock still on my bed and tried to hear if there were any sounds in the house. A burglar perhaps or Saul prowling about in quest of a midnight snack. But there was nothing. Once, while I glanced at the window, I thought I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a momentary glare of bluish light shining underneath my door.

But, when I quickly turned my head, my eyes saw only the deepest of blackness and, at length, I sank back on my pillow and fell into a fitful sleep.

### III

The next day was Sunday. Frequent wakings during the night and light, troubled sleep had exhausted me. I remained in bed until ten-thirty although it was my general habit to rise promptly at nine each day, a habit I had acquired when quite young.

I dressed hastily and walked across the hall, but Saul was already up. I felt a slight vexation that he had not come in to speak to me as he sometimes did nor even looked in to tell me it was past rising time.

I found him in the living room eating breakfast from a small table he had placed in front of the mantelpiece. He was sitting in a chair that faced the portrait.

His head moved around quickly as I came in. He appeared nervous to me.

"Good morning," he said.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" I said. "You know I never sleep this late."

"I thought you were tired," he said. "What difference does it make?"

I sat down across from him, feeling rather peevish as I took a warm biscuit from beneath the napkin and broke it open.

"Did you notice the house shaking last night?" I asked.

"No. Did it?"

I made no reply to the flippant air of his counter-question. I took a bite from my biscuit and put it down.

"Coffee?" he said. I nodded curtly and he poured me a cup, apparently oblivious to my pique.

I looked around the table.

"Where is the sugar?" I asked.

"I never use it," he answered. "You know that."

"I use it," I said.

"Well, you weren't up, John," he replied with an antiseptic smile.

I rose abruptly and went into the kitchen. I opened up one side of the cabinet and retrieved the sugar bowl with irritable fingers.

Then, as I passed it, about to leave the room, I tried to open the other side of the cabinet. It would not open. The door had been stuck quite fast since we moved in. Saul and I had decided in facetious keeping with neighbourhood tradition that the cabinet contained shelf upon shelf of dehydrated ghosts.

At the moment, however, I was in little humour for droll fancies. I pulled at the door knob with rising anger. That I should suddenly insist on that moment to open the cabinet only reflected the ill-temper Saul's neglect could so easily create in me. I put down the sugar bowl and placed both hands on the knob.

"What on earth are you doing?" I heard Saul ask from the front room.

I made no answer to his question but pulled harder on the cabinet knob. But it was as if the door were imbedded solidly into the frame and I could not loosen it the least fraction of an inch.

"What were you doing?" Saul asked as I sat down.

"Nothing," I said and the matter ended. I sat eating with little if any appetite. I do not know whether I felt more anger than hurt. Perhaps it was more a sense of injury since Saul is usually keenly sensitive to my responses, but that day he seemed not the slightest particle receptive. And it was that blase dispassion in him, so different from his usual disposition, that had so thoroughly upset me.

Once, during the meal, I glanced up at him to discover that his eyes were directed over my shoulder, focusing on something behind me. It caused a distinct chill to excite itself across my back.

"What are you looking at?" I asked of him.

His eyes refocused themselves on me and the slight smile he held was erased from his lips.

"Nothing," he replied.

Nonetheless I twisted about in my chair to look. But there was only the portrait over the mantel and nothing more.

"The portrait?" I asked.

He made no answer but stirred his coffee with deceptive composure.

I said, "Saul, I'm talking to you."

His dark eyes on me were mockingly cold. As though they meant to say, Well, so you are but that is hardly a concern of mine, is it?

When he would not speak I chose to attempt an alleviation of this inexplicable tension which had risen between us. I put down my cup.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked.

His gaze moved up to me quickly, almost, I could not avoid the realization, almost suspiciously.

"Why do you ask?" he spoke distrustingly.

"Is it such an odd question?"

Again he made no reply. Instead he patted his thin lips with his napkin and pushed back his chair as though to leave.

"Excuse me," he muttered, more from habit than politeness, I sensed.

"Why are you being so mysterious?" I asked with genuine concern.

He was on his feet, ready to move away, his face virtually blank.

"I'm not," he said. "You're imagining things."

I simply could not understand this sudden alteration in him nor relate it to any equivalent cause. I stared incredulously at him as he turned away and began walking toward the hallway with short, impatient steps.

He turned left to pass through the archway and I heard his quick feet jumping up the carpeted steps. I sat there unable to move, looking at the spot from which he had just disappeared.

It was only after a long while that I turned once more to examine the portrait more carefully.

There seemed nothing unusual about it. My eyes, moved over the well-formed shoulders to the slender, white throat, the chin, the cupid-bowed red lips, the delicately upturned nose, the frank green eyes. I had to shake my head. It was only the portrait of a woman and no more. How could this affect any man of sense? How could it affect Saul?

I could not finish my coffee but let it stand cold on the table. I rose, pushed back my chair and started upstairs. I went directly to my brother's room and turned the knob to enter, then felt a stiffening in my body as I realized he had locked himself in. I turned away from his door, tight-lipped and thoroughly annoyed, disturbed beyond control.

As I sat in my room most of the day, sporadically reading, I listened for his footsteps in the hall. I tried to reason out the situation in my mind, to resolve this alien transformation in his attitude towards me.

But there seemed no resolution save that of assuming headache, imperfect sleep or other equally dissatisfying explanations. They served not at all to decipher his uneasiness, the foreign way in which his eye regarded me, his marked disinclination to speak civilly.



It was then, against my will I must state clearly, that I began to suspect other than ordinary causes and to yield a momentary credence to local accounts of the house in which we lived. We had not spoken of that hand he had felt, but was it because we believed it was imagination or because we knew it wasn't?

Once during the afternoon, I stood in the hallway with closed eyes, listening intently as though I meant to capture some particular sound and ferret it out. In the deep quiet I stood wavering back and forth on the floor, the very stillness ringing in my ears.

I heard nothing. And the day passed with slow, lonely hours. Saul and I had a morose supper together during which he rejected all extended conversation and multiple offers of card games and chess during the later evening.

After he had finished his meal, he returned immediately to his room and I, after washing the dishes, returned to mine and soon retired.

The dream returned again, yet not in certainty a dream, I thought lying there in the early morning. And had it not been a dream only a hundred trucks could have made such a vibration as that which shook the house in my fancy. And the light which shone beneath the door was too bright for candlelight, a glaring blue lucency of illumination. And the footsteps I heard were very audible. Were they only in my dream however? I could not be sure.

#### IV

It was nearly nine-thirty before I rose and dressed, strongly irritated that my work schedule was being thus altered by concern. I completed my toilet quickly and went out into the hall, anxious to lose myself in occupation.

Then, as I looked automatically toward Saul's room I noticed that the door was slightly ajar. I immediately assumed he was already up and at work above in the solarium, so I did not stop to see. Instead, I hurried downstairs to make myself a hasty breakfast, noticing as I entered the kitchen that the room was just as I had left it the night before.

After a moderate breakfast I went upstairs again and entered Saul's room.

It was with some consternation that I found him still on his bed. I say "on" rather than "in" since the blankets and sheets had been, and violently so, it appeared, thrown aside and were hanging down in twisted swirls upon the wooden floor.

Saul lay on the bottom sheet, clad only in a pyjama trousers, his chest, shoulders and face dewed with tiny drops of perspiration.

I bent over and shook him once, but he only mumbled in sleep-ridden lethargy. I shook him again with hardened fingers and he rolled over angrily.

"Leave me alone," he spoke in thickened irritability. "You know I've been..."

He stopped, as though, once more, he was about to speak of something he should not.

"You've been what?" I inquired, feeling a rising heat of aggravation in my system.

He said nothing but lay there on his stomach, his face buried in the white pillow.

I reached down and shook him again by the shoulder, this time more violently. At this he pushed up abruptly and almost screamed at me.

"Get out of here!"

"Are you going to paint?" I asked shaking nervously.

He rolled on his side and squirmed a little, preparatory to sleeping again. I turned away with a harsh breath of anger.

"You make your own breakfast," I said, feeling yet more fury at the senseless import of my words. As I pulled shut the door in leaving I thought I heard Saul laughing.

I went back to my room and started to work on my play though hardly with success. My brain could not grasp concentration. All I could think of was the uncommon way in which my pleasant life had been usurped.

Saul and I had always been exceptionally close to one another. Our lives had always been inseparable, our plans were always mutual plans, our affections invariably directed primarily upon each other. This had

been so since our boyhood when in grade school other children laughingly called us The Twins in contraction of our fuller title-The Siamese Twins. And, even though I had been two years ahead of Saul in school we were always together, choosing our friends with a regard to each other's tastes and distastes, living, in short, with and for each other.

Now this; this enraging schism in our relationship. This harsh severance of comradely association, this abrupt, painful transmutation from intimacy to callous inattention.

The change was of such a gravity to me that almost immediately I began to look for the most grave of causes. And, although the implied solution seemed at the very least tenuous, I could not help but entertain it willingly. And, once more entertained, I could not remove myself from the notion.

In the quiet of my room, I pondered of ghosts.

Was it then possible that the house was haunted? Hastily I mulled over the various implications, the various intimations that the theory was verifiable.

Excluding the possibility that they were dream content, there were the heaving vibrations and the weird, high-pitched humming which had assailed my brain. There was the eerie blue light I had dreamed or actually seen beneath my door. And, finally, the most damning of evidence, there was Saul's statement that he had felt a hand on his cheek. *A cold, damp hand!*

Yet, despite all, it is a difficult thing to admit the existence of ghosts in a coldly factual world. One's very instincts rebel at the admission of such maddening possibility. For, once the initial step is made into the supernatural, there is no turning back, no knowing where the strange road leads except that it is quite unknown and quite terrible.

So actual were the premonitions I began to feel that I put aside my unused writing tablet and pen and rushed into the hall and to Saul's room as though something were awry there.

The ludicrous, unexpected sound of his snoring set me momentarily at ease. But my smile was short-lived, vanishing instantly when I saw the half-empty liquor bottle on his bedside table.

The shock of it made my flesh grow cold. And the thought came-he is corrupted, although I had no knowledge of its source.

As I stood there above his spread-eagled form, he groaned once and turned on his back. He had dressed, but his slept-in attire was now dishevelled and crumpled. His face, I noted, was unshaven and extremely haggard and the bloodshot gaze he directed at me was that of one stranger to another.

"What do you want?" he asked in hoarse, unnatural tones.

"Are you out of your mind?" I said. "What in God's name...?"

"Get out of here," he said again to me, his brother.

I stared at his face and, although I knew it could be only the result of drink distorting his unshaven features, I could not dispel the apprehension that he was, somehow, coarse, and a shudder of strange revulsion ran through me.

I was about to take the bottle away from him when he swung at me, a wildly inaccurate flinging of the arm, his sense of direction blunted by a drink-thickened brain.

"I said, get *out* of here!" he shouted in a fury, streaks of mottled red leaping into his cheeks.

I backed away, almost in fright, then turned on my heel and hurried into the hall, trembling with the shock of my brother's unnatural behaviour. I stood outside his door for a long time, listening to him toss restlessly on his bed, groaning. And I felt close to tears.

Then, without thought, I descended the darkening stairway, moved across the living room and dining alcove and entered the small kitchen. There, in the black silence, I held aloft a spluttering match and then lit the heavy candle I retrieved from the stove.

My footsteps, as I moved about the kitchen, seemed oddly muffled, as though I were hearing them through thick, cotton padding in my ears. And I began to get the most incongruous sensation that the very silence was drumming roughly in my ears.

As I passed the left hand side of the cabinet I found myself swaying heavily as though the dead, motionless air had suddenly become mobile and were buffeting me about. The silence was a roaring now and, suddenly, I clutched out for support and my twitching fingers knocked a dish onto the tile floor.

A positive shudder ran through me then because the sound of the breaking dish had been hollow and unreal, the sound of something greatly distant. If I had not seen the porcelain fragments lying on the dark tile I might have sworn the dish had not shattered at all.

With a sense of mounting restlessness I pushed my index fingers into my ears and twisted them around as if to ease what seemed an obstruction. Then I clenched my fist and struck the fastened cabinet door, almost desperate for the comfort of logical sound. But no matter how strong my blows, the sound came to my ears no louder than that of someone far away knocking at some door.

I turned hastily to the small icebox, very anxious now to make my sandwiches and coffee and be out of there, up in my room once more.

I put the bread on a tray, poured a cupful of the steaming black coffee and put the coffee pot down on its burner again. Then, with distinct trepidation, I bent over and blew out the candle.

The dining alcove and living room were oppressively dark now. My heart began to thud heavily as I moved across the rug, my footsteps muffled as I walked. I held the tray in stiff, unfeeling fingers, my gaze directed straight ahead. As I moved, my breath grew more harsh, bursting from my nostrils as I held my lips pressed tightly together lest they begin shaking with fright.

The blackness and the dead, utter silence seemed to crush in on me like solid walls. I held my throat stiff, my every muscle suspended by will for fear that relaxation would cause me to shake without control.

Halfway to the hall I heard it.

A soft, bubbling laughter which seemed to permeate the room like a cloud of sound.

A swamping wave of coldness covered my body and my footsteps halted abruptly as my legs and body stiffened.

The laughter did not cease. It continued, moving about me as if someone-or some *thing*-circled me on soundless tread, its eyes always on me. I began to tremble and, in the stillness, I could hear the rattling of the cup on my tray.

Then, suddenly, a damp, cold hand pressed against my cheek!

With a terrified howl of fear, I dropped the tray and ran wildly into the hall and up the stairs, my weakening legs propelling me forward in the blackness. As I ran there was another gush of liquid laughter behind me, like a thin trail of icy air in the stillness.

I locked the door to my room and hurled myself on the bed, pulling the bedspread over myself with shaking fingers. My eyes tightly shut, I lay there with heart pounding against the mattress; And, in my mind, the hideous cognition that all my fears were justified was a knife stabbing at delicate tissues.

It was all true.

As actually as if a living human hand had touched me, I had felt that cold and soggy hand on my cheek. But what living person was down there in the darkness?

For a short time I belied to tell myself it had been Saul executing a cruel and vicious joke. But I knew it had not been, for I would have heard his footsteps and I had heard none, either before or now.

The clock was chiming ten when I was at last able to summon the courage to throw off the spread, scabble for the box of matches on my bedside table and light the candle.

At first the guttering light assuaged fear slightly. But then I saw how little it illuminated the silent darkness and I avoided, with a shudder, the sight of huge and shapeless walls. I cursed the old house for its lack of electricity. Fear might be eased in blazing lamplight. As it was, the imperfect flickering of that tiny flame did nothing to allay my fears.

I wanted to go across the hall and see if Saul were all right. But I was afraid to open my door, imagining hideous apparitions lurking there in the blackness, hearing once more in my mind the ugly, viscid laughter. I hoped that Saul was so hopelessly under alcoholic influence that nothing short of an earthquake could awaken him.

And, though I yearned to be near him even if he were treating me faithlessly, I felt no courage whatsoever. And, quickly undressing, I hastened to my bed and buried my head beneath the blankets again.

I woke suddenly, shivering and afraid. The bedclothes were gone from my body, the black silence as awful as it had been earlier in the night.

I reached for the blankets anxiously, my fingers groping for them. They had fallen from the edge of the bed. I rolled on my side hurriedly and reached down, my fingers recoiling as they came in contact with the icy floorboards.

Then, as I reached for the blankets, I saw the light beneath the door.

It remained in sight only the fragment of a second but I knew I had seen it. And, as it passed abruptly from my eyes, the throbbing began. My room seemed filled with the humming pulsations. I could feel the bed shaking beneath me and my skin growing taut and frigid; my teeth chattering together.

Then the light appeared again and I heard the sound of bare feet and knew it was Saul walking in the night.

Driven more by fear for his safety than by courage, I threw my legs over the side of the bed and padded to the door, shuddering at the iciness of the flooring beneath my soles.

Slowly I opened the door, my body held tight in anticipation of what I might see.

But the hall was pitch black and I walked out and over to the door of Saul's room, listening to see if I could hear the sound of his breathing. But before I could judge anything, the hall below was suddenly illumined with that unearthly blue glow and I turned and rushed, again instinctively, to the head of the stairs and stood there clutching the old banister, staring down.

Below, an aura of intense brilliant blue light was passing through the hall moving in the direction of the living room.

My heart leaped! Saul was following it, arms ahead of him in the familiar pose of the somnambulist, his eyes staring ahead and glittering in the shapeless blue effulgence.

I tried to call his name but found that my voice could make no utterance. I tried to move for the stairs to wrest my Saul away from this terror. But a wall, invisible in the blackness, held me back. It grew close and airless. I struggled violently but it was to no avail. My muscles were strengthless against the horrible, impossible power that clutched me.

Then, suddenly, my nostrils and brain were assaulted by a pungent, sickly odour that made my senses reel. My throat and stomach burned with almost tangible fire. The darkness grew more intense. It seemed to cling to me like hot, black mud, constricting my chest so that I could hardly breathe. It was like being buried alive in a black oven, my body bound and rebound with heavy grave wrappings. I trembled, sobbing and ineffectual.

Then, abruptly, it all passed and I stood there in the cold hallway soaked with perspiration, weak from my frantic efforts. I tried to move but could not, tried to remember Saul, but was incapable of preventing the thought of him from slipping from my numbed brain. I shivered and turned to go back to my room but, at the first step, my legs buckled and I pitched forward heavily on the floor. The icy surface of it pressed against my flesh and, my body wracked by shivering, I lost consciousness.

When my eyes opened again I still lay crumpled on the cold floor.

I rose to a sitting position, the hall before my eyes wavering in alternate tides of light and darkness. My chest felt tight and a remorseless chill gripped my body. I pulled myself up to a bent-over stance and staggered to Saul's room, a cough burning in my throat as I stumbled across the floor and against his bed.

He was there and looked emaciated. He was unshaved and the dark wiry beard on his skin seemed like some repugnant growth. His mouth was open and emitting sounds of exhausted slumber and his smooth, white chest rose and fell with shallow movements.

He made no motion as I tugged weakly at his shoulder. I spoke his name and was shocked at the hoarse, grating sound of my own voice. I spoke it again, and he stirred with a grumble and opened one eye to look at me.

"I'm sick," I muttered, "Saul, I'm sick."

He rolled on one side, turning on his back to me. A sob of anguish tore at my throat.

"Saul!"

He seemed to snap his body around insanely then, his hands clenched into bony, white fists at his sides.

"Get out of here!" he screamed. "Leave me alone or I'll kill you!"

The body-shaking impact of his words drove me back from the bed to where I stood dumbly staring at him, breath stabbing at my throat. I saw him toss his body back over as if he wanted to break it. And I heard him mutter to himself miserably, *"Why does the day have to last so long?"*

A spasm of coughing struck me then and, my chest aching with fiery pains, I struggled back to my own room and got into bed with the movements of an old man. I fell back on the pillow and pulled up the blankets, then lay there shivering and helpless.

There I slept all day in spasmodic periods offset by waking moments of extreme pain. I was unable to rise to get myself food or water. All I could do was lie there, shaking and weeping. I felt beaten as much by Saul's cruelty to me as by the physical suffering. And the pain in my body was extremely severe. So much so that during one seizure of coughing it was so awful I began to cry like a child, hitting the mattress with weak, ineffective fists and kicking my legs deliriously.

Yet, even then, I think I wept for more than the pain. I wept for my only brother who loved me not.

It seemed that night came more swiftly than I had ever seen it come before. I lay alone in the darkness praying through mute lips that no harm should come to him.

I slept a while and then, abruptly, I was awake, staring at the light beneath the door, hearing the high-pitched humming in my ears. And I realized in that moment that Saul still loved me but that the house had corrupted his love.

And from this knowledge came resolution, from despair I gained amazing heart. I struggled to my feet and swayed there dizzily until the streaks before my eyes dispersed. Then I put on my robe and slippers, went to the door and threw it open.

What made things happen as they did I cannot say. Perhaps it was my feeling of courage that caused the black obstruction in the hall to melt before me. The house was trembling with the vibrations and the humming. Yet they seemed to lessen as I moved down the stairway and, all of a sudden, the blue light vanished from the living room and I heard loud and furious rumblings there.

When I entered, the room was in its usual order. A candle was burning on the mantel. But my eyes were riveted to the center of the floor.

Saul stood there, half naked and motionless, his body poised as though he were dancing, his eyes fastened to the portrait.

I spoke his name sharply. His eyes blinked and, slowly, his head turned to me. He didn't seem to comprehend my presence there for, suddenly, his glance flew about the room and he cried out in despairing tones:

"Come back! Come back!"

I called his name again and he stopped looking around but directed his gaze at me. His face was gaunt and cruelly lined in the flickering candlelight. It was the face of a lunatic. He gnashed his teeth together and started to move toward me.

"I'll kill you," he muttered in liquid tones. "I'll *kill* you."

I backed away.

"Saul, you're out of your mind. You don't..."

I could say no more for he rushed at me, his hands extended as if he would clutch at my throat. I tried to step aside but he grabbed hold of my robe and pulled me against him.

We began to struggle, I begging him to throw off this terrible spell he was under, he panting and gnashing his teeth. My head was being shaken from side to side and I saw our monstrous shadows heaving on the walls.

Saul's grip was not his own. I have always been stronger than he but, at that moment, his hands seemed like cold iron. I began to choke and his face blurred before my eyes. I lost balance and we both fell heavily to the floor. I felt the prickly rug against my cheek, his cold hands tightening on my throat.

Then my hand came in contact with something cold and hard. It was the tray I had dropped the night before, I realized. I gripped it and, realizing that he was out of his mind and meant to kill me, I picked it up and drove it across his head with all the power I had remaining.

It was a heavy metal tray and Saul sank to the floor as if struck dead, his hands slipping from my bruised throat. I struggled up, gasping for breath, and looked at him.

Blood was running from a deep gash in his forehead where the edge of the tray had struck.

"Saul!" I screamed, horrified at what I'd done.

Frantically I leaped up and rushed to the front door. As I flung it open I saw a man walking by in the street. I ran to the porch railing and called to him.

"Help!" I cried. "Call an ambulance!"

The man lurched and looked over at me with startled fright.

"For God's sake!" I beseeched him. "My brother has struck his head! Please call an ambulance!"

For a long moment he stared at me, open-mouthed, then broke into a nervous flight up the street. I called after him but he would not stop to listen. I was certain he would not do as I'd asked.

As I turned back, I saw my bloodless face in the hall mirror, and realized with a start that I must have frightened the wits out of the man. I felt weak and afraid again, the momentary strength sapped from me. My throat was dry and raw, my stomach on edge. I was barely able to walk back to the living room on trembling stalks of legs.

I tried to lift Saul to a couch but dead weight was too much for me and I sank to my knees beside him. My body slumped forward and, half crouched, half lay by the side of my brother. The harsh sound of my breathing was the only sound I could hear. My left hand stroked Saul's hair absently and quiet tears flowed from my eyes.

I cannot say how long I had been there when the throbbing began again; as if to show me that it hadn't really gone away.

I still crouched there like a dead thing, my brain almost in coma. I could feel my heart beating like some old clock in my chest, the dull-edged and muffled pendulum hitting against my ribs with a lifeless rhythm. All sound registered with similar force, the clock on the mantel, my heart and the endless throbbing; all blending into one horrible beat that became a part of me, that became *me*. I could sense myself sinking deeper and deeper as a drowning man slips helplessly beneath the silent waters.

Then I thought I heard a tapping of feet through the room, the rustling of skirts and, far off, a hollow laughter of women.

I raised my head abruptly, my skin tight and cold.

A figure in white stood in the doorway.

It began to move toward me and I rose with a strangled cry on my lips only to collapse into darkness.

## VI

What I had seen had been not a ghost but an intern from the hospital. The man I had called in the street had, apparently, done what I'd asked. It will give some indication of the state I was in when I reveal that I heard neither the ringing of the front doorbell nor the pounding of the intern's fist on the half-open door. Indeed, had the door not been open, I am certain that I would be dead now.

They took Saul to the hospital to have his head cared for. There being nothing wrong with me but nervous exhaustion, I remained in the house. I had wanted to go with Saul, but was told that the hospital was overcrowded and I would do more good by staying home in bed.

I slept late the next morning, rising about eleven. I went downstairs and had a substantial breakfast, then returned to my room and slept a few hours more. About two, I had some lunch. I planned to leave the house well before darkness to make sure nothing further happened to me. I could find a room in a hotel. It was clear that we would have to desert the place regardless of whether we sold it or not. I anticipated some trouble with Saul on that point but made up my mind to stand firm on my decision.

About five o'clock I dressed and left my room, carrying a small bag for the night. The day was almost gone and I hurried down the stairs, not wishing to remain in the house any longer. At the bottom of the

staircase I stepped across the entry hall and closed my hand over the doorknob.

The door would not open.

At first I would not allow myself to believe this. I stood there tugging, trying to combat the cold numbness that was spreading itself over my body. Then I dropped my bag and pulled at the knob with both hands but to no avail. It was as securely fastened as the cabinet door in the kitchen.

Suddenly, I turned from the door and ran into the living room but all the windows were jammed fast into their frames. I looked around the room, whimpering like a child, feeling unspoken hate for myself for letting myself be trapped again. I cursed loudly and, as I did, a cold wind lifted the hat from my head and hurled it across the floor.

Abruptly, I placed my shaking hands over my eyes and stood there trembling violently, afraid of what might happen any second, my heart hammering against my chest. The room seemed to chill markedly and I heard that grotesque humming noise again that came as if from another world. It sounded like laughter to me, laughter that mocked me for my poor, feeble efforts to escape.

Then, with equal suddenness, I remembered Saul again, remembered that he needed me and I pulled away my hands from my eyes and screamed aloud:

"Nothing in this house can harm me!"

Sudden cessation of the sound gave me added courage. If my will could successfully defy the ungodly powers of the place, then perhaps it could also destroy them. If I went upstairs, if I slept in Saul's bed, then I too would know what he had experienced and thus be enabled to help him.

I felt no lack of confidence in my will to resist, never once stopping to think that my ideas might not be my own.

Quickly, two steps at a time, I rushed up the stairs and into my brother's room. There I quickly removed my hat, overcoat and suit coat, loosened my tie and collar and sat down on the bed. Then, after a moment, I lay down and looked up at the darkening ceiling. I tried to keep my eyes open but, still fatigued, I soon fell asleep.

It seemed only a moment before I was fully awake, my body tingling with sensations of not unpleasant character. I could not understand the strangeness of it. The darkness seemed alive. It shimmered under my gaze as I lay there, warm with a heat that betokened sensualism although there was hardly any apparent cause for such a feeling.

I whispered Saul's name without thinking. Then the thought of him was taken from my brain as if invisible fingers had plucked it away.

I remember rolling over and laughing to myself, behaviour most extraordinary if not unseemly for a person of my steady inclinations. The pillow felt like silk against my face and my senses began to fade. The darkness crept over me like warm syrup, soothing my body and mind. I muttered senselessly to myself, feeling as if my muscles were sucked dry of all energy, heavy as rock and lethargic with a delicious exhaustion.

Then, when I had almost slipped away, I felt another presence in the room. To my incredulous realization, it was not only familiar to me but I had absolutely no fear of it. Only an inexplicable sense of languorous expectation.

Then she came to me, the girl in the portrait.

I stared at the blue haze about her for only a moment for this quickly faded and, in my arms, was a vibrantly warm body. I remember no one feature of her behaviour for everything was lost in overall sensation, a sensation mixed of excitement and revulsion, a sense of hideous yet overpowering rapacity. I hung suspended in a cloud of ambivalence, my soul and body corroded with unnatural desire. And in my mind and echoing on my tongue I spoke a name over and over again.

The name *Clarissa*.

How can I judge the number of sick, erotic moments I spent there with her? Sense of time completely vanished from the scheme of things. A thick giddiness enveloped me. I tried to fight it but it was no use. I was consumed as my brother Saul had been consumed by this foul presence from the grave of night.

Then, in some inconceivable fashion, we were no longer on the bed but downstairs, whirling about in



the living room dancing wildly and closely. There was no music, only that incessant, beating rhythm I had heard those nights before. Yet now it seemed like music to me as I spun about the floor holding in my arms the ghost of a dead woman, entranced by her stunning beauty yet, at the same time, repelled by my uncontrollable hunger for her.

Once I closed my eyes for a second and felt a terrible coldness crawling in my stomach. But when I opened them it was gone and I was happy once more. *Happy?* It seems hardly the word now. Say rather hypnotized, torpid, my brain a numbed vessel of flesh unable to remove me one iota from this clutching spell.

Dancing went on and on. The floor was filled with couples. I am sure of that and yet I recall no aspect of their dress or form. All I remember is their faces, white and glistening, their eyes dull and lifeless, their mouths hanging open like dark, bloodless wounds.

Around and around and then a man with a large tray standing in the hallway arch and sudden immersion in the dark; empty and still.

## VII

I awoke with a sense of complete exhaustion.

I was soaked with perspiration, dressed only in my bottom undergarment. My clothes lay scattered across the floor, apparently thrown about in a frenzy. The bedclothes also lay in disordered heaps on the floor. From all appearances, I had gone insane the night before.

The light from the window annoyed me for some reason and, quickly, I shut my eyes, reluctant to believe it was morning again. I turned over onto my stomach and put my head beneath the pillow. I could still remember the enticing odor of her hair. The memory of it made my body shudder with odious craving.

Then a warmth began to cover my back and I raised myself up with a muttering frown. The sunlight was streaming through the windows onto my back. With a restless movement I pushed myself up, threw my legs over the side of the bed and got up to draw the shades.

It was a little better without the glare. I threw myself on the bed again, closed my eyes tightly and crowded the pillow over my head. I felt the light.

It sounds incredible, I know, but I felt it as surely as do certain creeper plants that climb towards the light without ever seeing it. And, in feeling light, I yearned all the more for darkness. I felt like some nocturnal creature somehow forced into brightness, repelled and pained by it.

I sat on the bed and looked around, a sound of unremitting complaint in my throat. I bit my lips, clenched and unclenched my hands, wanting to strike out violently at something, at anything. I found myself standing over an unlit candle, blowing sharply on it. I knew, even then, the senselessness of the act and yet I did it nevertheless, trying, in vain, to make an invisible flame go out so that night could return through its dark roads. Bringing back Clarissa.

*Clarissa.*

A clicking sound filled my throat and my body positively writhed. Not in pain or pleasure but in a combination of the two. I put my brother's robe over my body and wandered out into the silent hallway. There were no physical wants, no hunger, thirst, or other needs. I was a detached body, a comatose slave to the tyranny which had shackled me and now refused to let me go.

I stood at the head of the stairway, listening intently, trying to imagine her gliding up to meet me, warm and vibrant in her mist of blue. *Clarissa.* I closed my eyes quickly, my teeth grated together and, for a split second, I felt my body stiffen with fright. For a moment I was returned to myself.

But then, in another breath, I was enslaved again. I stood there, feeling myself a part of the house, as much a portion of it as the beams or the windows. I breathed its breath, felt its soundless heartbeat in my own. I became at one with an inanimate body, knowing its past life, sensing the dead hands that had curled their fingers on the arms of the chairs, on banisters, on doorknobs, hearing the labored tread of invisible footsteps moving through the house, the laughter of long-consumed humour.

If, in those moments, I lost my soul, it became a part of the emptiness and stillness that surrounded me,



an emptiness I could not sense nor a stillness feel for being drugged. Drugged with the formless presence of the past. I was no longer a living person. I was dead in all but those bodily functions which kept me from complete satisfaction.

Quietly, and without passion, the thought of killing myself drifted through my mind. It was gone in a moment but its passage had stirred no more in me than apathetic recognition. My thoughts were on the life beyond life. And present existence was no more than a minor obstruction which I could tumble with the slightest touch of razored steel, the minutest drop of poison. I had become the master of life for I could view its destruction with the most complete apathy.

Night. Night! When would it come? I heard my voice, thin and hoarse, crying out in the silence.

"Why does the day have to last so long!"

The words shocked me back again, for Saul had spoken them. I blinked, looked around me as if just realizing where I was. What was this terrible power over me? I tried to break its hold but, in the very effort, slipped back again.

To find myself once more in that strange coma which suspends the mortally ill in that slender portion of existence between life and death. I was hanging on a thread over the pit of everything that was hidden to me before. Now I could see and hear and the power to cut the thread was in my hands. I could let myself hang until the strands parted one by one and lowered me slowly down. Or I could wait until driven beyond endurance, then end it suddenly, cut myself loose and plunge down into the darkness; that signal darkness where she and hers remained always. Then I would have her maddening warmth. Maybe it was her coldness. Her comfort then. I could pass eternal moments with her and laugh at the robot world.

I wondered if it would help to get dead drunk and lose all consciousness till night.

I descended the stairs on unfeeling legs and sat for a long time before the mantel looking up at her. I had no idea what time it was nor did I care. Time was relative, even forgotten. I neither knew of it nor cared about it. Had she smiled at me then? Yes, her eyes glowed, how they glowed in the dimness. That smell again. Not pleasant yet something excitingly musky and pungent about it.

What was Saul to me? The idea filled my mind. He was no relation of mine. He was a stranger from another society, another flesh, another life. I felt complete dispassion toward him. You hate him, said the voice in my mind.

That was when it all collapsed like a flimsy house of cards.

For those words caused such a rebellion in my innermost mind that, suddenly, my eyes were cleared as though scales had fallen from them. I looked about, my head snapping crazily. What in God's name was I doing, still here in the house?

With a shiver of angry fear I jumped to my feet and ran upstairs to dress. As I passed the hall clock I saw with a start that it was past three in the afternoon.

As I dressed, normal sensations returned one by one. I felt the cold floor beneath my bare feet, became aware of hunger and thirst, heard the deep silence of the house.

Everything flooded over me. I knew why Saul had wanted to die, why he loathed the day and waited for the night with such angry impatience. I could explain it to him now and he would understand because I had been through it myself.

And, as I ran down the stairs, I thought about the dead of Slaughter House, so outraged at their own inexplicable curse that they tried to drag the living down into their endless hell.

Over, over!-exulted my mind as I locked the front door behind me and started through the misty rain to the hospital.

I did not see the shadow behind me, crouching on the porch.

## VIII

When the woman at the hospital desk told me that Saul had been discharged two hours before my arrival, I was too stunned to speak. I clutched at the counter, staring at her, hearing myself tell her that she must be mistaken. My voice was hoarse, unnatural. The woman shook her head.

I sagged against the counter then, all the drive gone out of me. I felt very tired and afraid. A sob broke

in my throat as I turned away and I saw people staring at me while I moved across the tile floor with unsteady motions. Everything seemed to swirl about me. I staggered, almost fell. Someone clutched my arm and asked me if I were all right. I muttered something in reply and pulled away from the person without even noting if it were a man or a woman.

I pushed out through the door and into the gray light. It was raining harder and I pulled up my coat collar. Where was he? The question burned in my mind and the answer to it came quickly, too quickly. Saul was back in the house. I felt sure of it.

The idea made me start running up the dark street toward the trolley-car tracks. I ran for endless blocks. All I remember is the rain driving against my face and the gray buildings floating by. There were no people in the streets and all the taxicabs were full. It was getting darker and darker.

My legs almost buckled and I was thrown against a lamppost and clung to it, afraid of falling into the streaming gutter.

An ugly clanging filled my ears. I looked up, then chased after the trolley car and caught it at the next block. I handed the conductor a dollar and had to be called back for my change. I stood hanging from a black strap, swaying back and forth with the motion of the car, my mind tormented by thoughts of Saul alone in that house of horror.

The warm, stale air of the car began to make me sick to the stomach. I could smell the raincoats and the wet clothes of the people caught in the rain as well as the smell of dripping umbrellas and packages soaked. I closed my eyes and stood there, teeth clenched, praying that I would get home before it was too late.

I got off the car at last and ran up the block as fast as I could. The rain sprayed over my face and ran into my eyes, almost blinding me. I slipped and went sprawling on the sidewalk, skinning my hands and knees. I pushed up with a whine, feeling the clothes soaked against me. I kept running wildly, only sensing the direction by instinct until I stopped and saw through the thick veil of rain, the house in front of me, high and dark.

It seemed to crawl over the ground toward me and clutch me to itself for I found myself standing and shivering on the wooden porch. I coughed and felt the chill through my flesh.

I tried the door. At first I could not believe it. It was still locked and Saul had no key! I almost cried in gratitude. I ran down from the porch. Where was he then? I had to find him. I started down the path.

Then, as surely as if I had been tapped on the shoulder I whirled about and stared up at the porch. A flash of lightning illuminated the darkness and I saw the broken, jagged-edged window. My breath caught and I stared at it, my heart pounding like a heavy piston in my chest.

He *was* in there. Had she come already? Was he lying upstairs in bed smiling to himself in the blackness, waiting for her luminous self to come and envelop him?

I had to save him. Without hesitation I ran up on the porch and unlocked the door, leaving it wide open so that we could escape.

I moved across the rug and onto the steps. The house was quiet. Even the storm seemed apart from it. The rushing sound of the rain seemed to grow less and less distinct. Then I turned with a gasp as the front door slammed shut behind me.

I was trapped. The thought drove barbs of fear into me and I almost ran down to try and escape. But I remembered Saul and fought to quicken resolution. I had conquered the house once and I could do it again. I had to. For him.

I started up the stairs again. Outside the flashes of lightning were like false neon trying to invade the austerity of the house. I held onto the banister tightly, muttering beneath my breath to keep attention from degrading into fright, afraid to let the spell of the house beset me again.

I reached the door to my brother's room. There I stopped and leaned against the wall, eyes closed. What if I found him dead? I knew the sight would unnerve me. The house might defeat me then, taking me in that moment of utter despair and twisting my soul from my grip.

I would not let myself conceive of it. I would not allow myself the realization that without Saul life was empty, a meaningless travesty. He *was* alive.

Nervously, my hands numbed with fright, I pushed open the door. The room was a stygian cave. My

throat contracted and I took a deep breath. I clenched tight fists at my sides.

"Saul?" I called his name softly.

The thunder roared and my voice disappeared beneath the swell. A flash of lightning brought a split second of daylight into the room and I looked around quickly, hoping to see him. Then it was dark again and silent except for the endless rain falling on the windows and roof. I took another step across the rug, cautiously, my ears tense, trying to hear. Every sound made me start. I twitched and shuffled across the floor. Was he here? But he must be. If he were here in the house, this was the room he would be in.

"Saul?" I called, louder. "Saul, answer me."

I began to walk toward the bed.

Then the door slammed behind me and there was a rushing sound behind me in the darkness. I whirled to meet it. I felt his hand clamp on my arm.

"Saul!" I cried.

Lightning filled the room with hideous light and I saw his twisted white face, the candlestick held in his right hand.

Then he struck me a violent blow on the forehead, driving a wedge of agonizing pain into my brain. I felt his hand release me as I slumped to my knees and my face brushed against his bare leg as I fell forward. The last sound I heard before my mind fell into the darkness was laughing and laughing and laughing.

## IX

I opened my eyes. I was still lying on the rug. Outside it was raining even harder. The sound of it was like the crashing of a waterfall. Thunder still rolled in the sky and flashes of lightning made the night brilliant.

In one flash I looked at the bed. The sight of the covers and sheets all thrown about insanely made me push up. Saul was downstairs with *her*!

I tried to get to my feet but the pain in my head drove me back to my knees. I shook my head feebly, running trembling hands over my cheeks, feeling the gouged wound in my forehead, the dried blood which had trickled down across one temple. I swayed back and forth on my knees, moaning. I seemed to be back in that void again, struggling to regain my hold on life. The power of the house surrounded me. The power which I knew was her power. A cruel and malignant vitality which tried to drink out the life force from me and draw me down into the pit.

Then, once more, I remembered Saul, my brother, and the remembrance brought me back the strength I needed.

"No!" I cried out as if the house had told me I was now its helpless captive. And I pushed to my feet, ignoring the dizziness, stumbling through a cloud of pain across the room, gasping for breath. The house was throbbing and humming, filled with that obnoxious smell.

I ran drunkenly for the door, found myself running into the bed. I drew back with almost a snarl at the numbing pain in my shins. I turned in the direction of the door and ran again. I did not even hold my arms ahead of me and had no chance to brace myself when I ran into the door dizzily.

The excruciating pain of my nose being near broken caused a howl of agony to pass my lips. Blood immediately began gushing down across my mouth and I had to keep wiping it away. I jerked open the door and ran into the hall, feeling myself on the border of insanity. The hot blood kept running down across my chin and I felt it dripping and soaking into my coat. My hat had fallen off but I still wore my raincoat over my suit.

I was too bereft of perception to notice that nothing held me back at the head of the stairs. I half ran, half slid down the stairs, goaded on by that humming, formless laughter which was music and mockery. The pain in my head was terrible. Every downward step made it feel as if someone drove one more nail into my brain.

"Saul, Saul!" I cried out, running into the living room, gagging as I tried to call his name a third time.

The living room was dark, permeated with that sickly odour. It made my head reel but I kept moving. It seemed to thicken as I moved for the kitchen. I ran into the small room and leaned against the wall, almost unable to breathe, pinpoints of light spinning before my eyes.

Then, as lightning illuminated the room I saw the left cupboard door wide open and, inside, a large bowl filled with what looked like flour. As I stared at it, tears rolled down my cheeks and my tongue felt like dry cloth in my mouth.

I backed out of the kitchen choking for breath, feeling as if my strength were almost gone. I turned and ran into the living room, still looking for my brother.

Then, in another flash of lightning, I looked at her portrait. It was different and the difference froze me to the spot. Her face was no longer beautiful. Whether it was shadow that did it or actual change, her expression was one of vicious cruelty. The eyes glittered, there was an insane cast to her smile. Even her hands, once folded in repose, now seemed more like claws waiting to strike out and kill.

It was when I backed away from her that I stumbled and fell over the body of my brother.

I pushed up to my knees and stared down in the blackness. One flash of lightning after another showed me his white, dead face, the smile of hideous knowledge on his lips, the look of insane joy in his wide-open eyes. My mouth fell open and breath caught in me. It seemed as if my world was ending. I could not believe it was true. I clutched at my hair and whimpered, almost believing that in a moment, Mother would wake me from my nightmare and I would look across at Saul's bed, smile at his innocent sleep and lie down again secure with the memory of his dark hair on the white pillow.

But it did not end. The rain slapped frenziedly at the windows and thunder drove deafening fists against the earth.

I looked up at the portrait. I felt as dead as my brother. I did not hesitate. Calmly I stood and walked to the mantel. There were matches there. I picked up the box.

Instantly, she divined my thoughts for the box was torn from my fingers and hurled against the wall. I dove for it and was tripped by some invisible force. Those cold hands clutched at my throat. I felt no fright but tore them away with a snarl and dove for the matches again. Blood began running faster and I spat out some.

I picked up the box. It was torn away again, this time to burst and spray matches all over the rug. A great hum of anguish seemed to rock the house as I reached for a match. I was grabbed. I tore loose. I fell to my knees and slapped at the rug in the darkness as lightning ceased. My arms were held tightly. Something cold and wet ran around in my stomach.

With maniacal fury I pressed my teeth against a match I saw in the lightning and bit at the head. There was no rewarding flare. The house was trembling violently now and I heard rustlings about me as if she had called them all to fight me, to save their cursed existence.

I bit at another match. A white face stared at me from the rug and I spit blood at it. It disappeared. I tore one arm loose and grabbed a match. I jerked myself to the mantel and dragged the match across the rough wood. A speck of flame flared up in my fingers and I was released.

The throbbing seemed more violent now. But I knew it was helpless against flame. I protected the flame with my hand though, lest that cold wind come again and try to blow it out. I held the match against a magazine that was lying on a chair and it flared up. I shook it and the pages puffed into flame. I threw it down on the rug.

I went around in that light striking one match after another, avoiding the sight of Saul lying there. She had destroyed him but now I would destroy her forever.

I ignited the curtains. I started the rug to smouldering. I set fire to the furniture. The house rocked and a whistling sigh rose and ebbed like the wind.

At last I stood erect in the flaming room, my eyes riveted on the portrait. I walked slowly toward it. She knew my intentions for the house rocked even harder and a shrieking began that seemed to come from the walls. And I knew then that the house was controlled by her and that her power was in that portrait.

I drew it down from the wall. It shook in my very hands as if it were alive. With a shudder of repugnance I threw it on the flames.

I almost fell while the floor shuddered almost as if an earthquake were striking the land. But then it stopped and the portrait was burning and the last effect of her was gone. I was alone in an old burning house.

I did not want anyone to know about my brother. I did not want anyone to see his face like that.

So I lifted him and put him on the couch. I do not understand to this day how I could lift him up when I felt so weak. It was a strength not my own.

I sat at his feet, stroking his hand until the flames grew too hot. Then I rose. I bent over him and kissed him on the lips for a last goodbye. And I walked from the house into the rain.

And I never came back. Because there was nothing to ever come back for.

*This is the end of the manuscript. There seems no adequate evidence to ascribe the events recounted as true. But the following facts, taken from the city's police files, might prove of interest.*

*In 1901, the city was severely shocked by the most wholesale murder ever perpetrated in its history.*

*At the height of a party being held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Marlin Slaughter and their daughter Clarissa, an unknown person poisoned the punch by placing a very large amount of arsenic in it. Everyone died. The case was never solved although various theories were put forth as to its solution. One thesis had it that the murderer was one of those who died.*

*As to the identity of this murderer, supposition had it that it was not a murderer but a murderess. Although nothing definite exists to go by, there are several testimonies which refer to that poor child Clarissa" and indicate that the young woman had been suffering for some years from a severe mental aberration which her parents had tried to keep a secret from the neighbours and the authorities. The party in mention was supposed to have been planned to celebrate what her parents took for the recovery of her faculties.*

*As to the body of the young man later supposed to be in the wreckage, a thorough search has revealed nothing. It may be that the entire story is imagination, fabricated by the one brother in order to conceal the death of the other, said death probably being unnatural. Thus, the older brother knowing the story of the house tragedy may have used it for a fantastic evidence in his favour.*

*Whatever the truth, the older brother has never been heard of again either in this city or in any of the adjacent localities.*

*And that's the story S.D.M.*

## **17 - The Near Departed**

THE SMALL MAN OPENED the door and stepped in out of the glaring sunlight. He was in his early fifties, a spindly, plain looking man with receding gray hair. He closed the door without a sound, then stood in the shadowy foyer, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the change in light. He was wearing a black suit, white shirt, and black tie. His face was pale and dry-skinned despite the heat of the day.

When his eyes had refocused themselves, he removed his Panama hat and moved along the hallway to the office, his black shoes soundless on the carpeting.

The mortician looked up from his desk. "Good afternoon," he said.

"Good afternoon." The small man's voice was soft.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, you can," the small man said.

The mortician gestured to the arm chair on the other side of his desk. "Please."

The small man perched on the edge of the chair and set the Panama hat on his lap. He watched the mortician open a drawer and remove a printed form.

"Now," the mortician said. He withdrew a black pen from its onyx holder. "Who is the deceased?" he asked gently.

"My wife," the small man said.

The mortician made a sympathetic noise. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Yes." The small man gazed at him blankly.

"What is her name?" the mortician asked.

"Marie," the small man answered quietly. "Arnold."

The mortician wrote the name. "Address?" he asked.

The small man told him.

"Is she there now?" the mortician asked.

"She's there," the small man said.

The mortician nodded.

"I want everything perfect," the small man said. "I want the best you have."

"Of course," the mortician said. "Of course."

"Cost is unimportant," said the small man. His throat moved as he swallowed dryly. "Everything is unimportant now. Except for this."

"I understand."

"She always had the best. I saw to it."

"Of course."

"There'll be many people," said the small man. "Everybody loved her. She's so beautiful. So young. She has to have the very best. You understand?"

"Absolutely," the mortician reassured him. "You'll be more than satisfied, I guarantee you."

"She's so beautiful," the small man said. "So young."

"I'm sure," the mortician said.

The small man sat without moving as the mortician asked him questions. His voice did not vary in tone as he spoke. His eyes blinked so infrequently the mortician never saw them doing it.

When the form was completed, the small man signed and stood. The mortician stood and walked around the desk. "I guarantee you you'll be satisfied," he said, his hand extended.

The small man took his hand and gripped it momentarily. His palm was dry and cool.

"We'll be over at your house within the hour," the mortician told him.

"Fine," the small man said.

The mortician walked beside him down the hallway.

"I want everything perfect for her," the small man said. "Nothing but the very best."

"Everything will be exactly as you wish."

"She deserves the best." The small man stared ahead. "She's so beautiful," he said. "Everybody loved her. Everybody. She's so young and beautiful."

"When did she die?" the mortician asked.

The small man didn't seem to hear. He opened the door and stepped into the sunlight, putting on his Panama hat. He was halfway to his car when he replied, a faint smile on his lips, "As soon as I get home."

## **18 - The Distributor**

### **July 20**

Time to move.

He'd found a small, furnished house on Sylmar Street. The Saturday morning he moved in, he went around the neighbourhood introducing himself.

"Good morning," he said to the old man pruning ivy next door. "My name is Theodore Gordon. I just moved in."

The old man straightened up and shook Theodore's hand. "How do," he said. His name was Joseph Alston.

A dog came shuffling from the porch to sniff Theodore's cuffs. "He's making up his mind about you," said the old man.

"Isn't that cute?" said Theodore.

Across the street lived Inez Ferrel. She answered the door in a housecoat, a thin woman in her late thirties. Theodore apologized for disturbing her.

"Oh, that's all right," she said. She had lots of time to herself when her husband was selling on the road.

"I hope we'll be good neighbors," said Theodore.

"I'm sure we will," said Inez Ferrel. She watched him through the window as he left.

Next door, directly across from his own house, he knocked quietly because there was a *Nightworker Sleeping* sign. Dorothy Backus opened the door—a tiny, withdrawn woman in her middle thirties.

"I'm so glad to meet you," said Theodore.

Next door lived the Walter Mortons. As Theodore came up the walk, he heard Bianca Morton talking loudly to her son, Walter, Jr.

"You are not old enough to stay out till three o'clock in the morning!" she was saying. "Especially with a girl as young as Katherine McCann!"

Theodore knocked and Mr. Morton, fifty-two and bald, opened the door.

"I just moved in across the street," said Theodore, smiling at them.

Patty Jefferson let him in next door. As he talked to her Theodore could see, through the back window, her husband Arthur filling a rubber pool for their son and daughter.

"They just love that pool," said Patty, smiling.

"I bet they do," said Theodore. As he left, he noticed the vacant house next door.

Across the street from the Jeffersons lived the McCanns and their fourteen-year-old daughter Katherine. As Theodore approached the door he heard the voice of James McCann saying, "Aah, he's nuts. Why should I take his lawn edger? Just because I borrowed his lousy mower a couple of times."

"Darling, *please*" said Faye McCann. "I've got to finish these notes in time for the Council's next meeting."

"Just because Kathy goes out with his lousy son..." grumbled her husband.

Theodore knocked on the door and introduced himself. He chatted briefly with them, informing Mrs. McCann that he certainly would like to join the National Council for Christians and Jews. It was a worthy organization.

"What's your business, Gordon?" asked McCann.

"I'm in distribution," said Theodore.

Next door, two boys mowed and raked while their dog gambolled around them.

"Hello there," said Theodore. They grunted and watched him as he headed for the porch. The dog ignored him.

"I just *told* him." Henry Putnam's voice came through the living room window: "Put a coon in my department and I'm through. That's all."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Irma Putnam.

Theodore's knock was answered by the undershirted Mr. Putnam. His wife was lying on the sofa. Her heart, explained Mr. Putnam. "Oh, I'm sorry," Theodore said.

In the last house lived the Gorses.

"I just moved in next door," said Theodore. He shook Eleanor Gorse's lean hand and she told him that her father was at work.

"Is that him?" asked Theodore, pointing at the portrait of a stony-faced old man that hung above a mantel crowded with religious objects.

"Yes," said Eleanor, thirty-four and ugly.

"Well, I hope we'll be good neighbours," Theodore said.

That afternoon, he went to his new office and set up the darkroom.

## July 23

That morning, before he left for the office, he checked the telephone directory and jotted down four numbers. He dialled the first.

"Would you please send a cab to 12057 Sylmar Street?" he said. "Thank you."

He dialled the second number. "Would you please send a repairman to my house," he said. "I don't get any picture. I live at 12070 Sylmar Street."

He dialled the third number: "I'd like to run this ad in Sunday's edition," he said. "1957 Ford. Perfect



Condition. Seven-hundred eighty-nine dollars. That's right, seven-hundred eighty-nine. The number is DA-4-7408."

He made the fourth call and set up an afternoon appointment with Mr. Jeremiah Osborne. Then he stood by the living room window until the taxicab stopped in front of the Backus house.

As he was driving off, a television repair truck passed him. He looked back and saw it stop in front of Henry Putnam's house.

*Dear sirs,* he typed in the office later, *Please send me ten booklets for which I enclose one hundred dollars in payment.* He put down the name and address.

The envelope dropped into the out box.

## July 27

When Inez Ferrel left her house that evening, Theodore followed in his car. Downtown, Mrs. Ferrel got off the bus and went into a bar called the Irish Lantern. Parking, Theodore entered the bar cautiously and slipped into a shadowy booth.

Inez Ferrel was at the back of the room perched on a bar stool. She'd taken off her jacket to reveal a clinging yellow sweater. Theodore ran his gaze across the studied exposition of her bust.

At length, a man accosted her and spoke and laughed and spent a modicum of time with her. Theodore watched them exit, arm in arm. Paying for his coffee, he followed. It was a short walk; Mrs. Ferrel and the man entered a hotel on the next block.

Theodore drove home, whistling.

The next morning, when Eleanor Gorse and her father had left with Mrs. Backus, Theodore followed.

He met them in the church lobby when the service was over. Wasn't it a wonderful coincidence, he said, that he, too, was a Baptist? And he shook the indurate hand of Donald Gorse.

As they walked into the sunshine, Theodore asked them if they wouldn't share his Sunday dinner with him. Mrs. Backus smiled faintly and murmured something about her husband. Donald Gorse looked doubtful.

"Oh, please," begged Theodore. "Make a lonely widower happy."

"Widower," tasted Mr. Gorse.

Theodore hung his head. "These many years," he said. "Pneumonia."

"Been a Baptist long?" asked Mr. Gorse.

"Since birth," said Theodore with fervour. "It's been my only solace."

For dinner he served lamb chops, peas, and baked potatoes. For dessert, apple cobbler and coffee.

"I'm so pleased you'd share my humble food," he said.

"This is, truly, loving thy neighbour as thyself." He smiled at Eleanor who returned it stiffly.

That evening, as darkness fell, Theodore took a stroll. As he passed the McCann house, he heard the telephone ringing, then James McCann shouting, "It's a *mistake*, damn it! Why in the lousy hell should I sell a '57 Ford for seven-hundred eighty-nine bucks!"

The phone slammed down. "God *damn*!" howled James McCann.

"Darling, please be *tolerant*!" begged his wife.

The telephone rang again.

Theodore moved on.

## August 1

At exactly two-fifteen a.m. Theodore slipped outside, pulled up one of Joseph Alston's longest ivy plants and left it on the sidewalk.

In the morning, as he left the house, he saw Walter Morton, Jr., heading for the McCann house with a blanket, a towel and a portable radio. The old man was picking up his ivy.

"Was it pulled up?" asked Theodore.

Joseph Alston grunted.

"So *that* was it," said Theodore.

"*What?*" the old man looked up.

"Last night," said Theodore, "I heard some noise out here. I looked out and saw a couple of boys."

"You seen their faces?" asked Alston, his face hardening.

"No, it was too dark," said Theodore. "But I'd say they were-oh, about the age of the Putnam boys. Not that it was them, of course."

Joe Alston nodded slowly, looking up the street.

Theodore drove up to the boulevard and parked. Twenty minutes later, Walter Morton, Jr., and Katherine McCann boarded a bus.

At the beach, Theodore sat a few yards behind them.

"That Mack is a character," he heard Walter Morton say. "He gets the urge, he drives to Tijuana, just for kicks."

In a while Morton and the girl ran into the ocean, laughing. Theodore stood and walked to a telephone booth.

"I'd like to have a swimming pool installed in my backyard next week," he said. He gave the details.

Back on the beach he sat patiently until Walter Morton and the girl were lying in each other's arms. Then, at specific moments, he pressed a shutter hidden in his palm. This done, he returned to his car, buttoning his shirt front over the tiny lens. On his way to the office, he stopped at a hardware store to buy a brush and a can of black paint.

He spent the afternoon printing the pictures. He made them appear as if they had been taken at night and as if the young couple had been engaged in something else.

The envelope dropped softly into the out box.

## August 5

The street was silent and deserted. Tennis shoes soundless on the paving, Theodore moved across the street.

He found the Morton's lawn mower in the backyard. Lifting it quietly, he carried it back across the street to the McCann garage. After carefully raising the door, he slid the mower behind the work bench. The envelope of photographs he put in a drawer behind a box of nails.

Returning to his house then, he phoned James McCann and, muffledly, asked if the Ford was still for sale.

In the morning, the mailman placed a bulky envelope on the Gorses' porch. Eleanor Gorse emerged and opened it, sliding out one of the booklets. Theodore watched the furtive look she cast about, the rising of dark colour in her cheeks.

As he was mowing the lawn that evening he saw Walter Morton, Sr., march across the street to where James McCann was trimming bushes. He heard them talking loudly. Finally, they went into McCann's garage from which Morton emerged pushing his lawn mower and making no reply to McCann's angry protests.

Across the street from McCann, Arthur Jefferson was just getting home from work. The two Putnam boys were riding their bicycles, their dog racing around them.

Now, across from where Theodore stood, a door slammed. He turned his head and watched Mr. Backus, in work clothes, storming to his car, muttering disgustedly, "*A swimming pool!*" Theodore looked to the next house and saw Inez Ferrel moving in her living room.

He smiled and mowed along the side of his house, glancing into Eleanor Gorse's bedroom. She was sitting with her back to him, reading something. When she heard the clatter of his mower she stood and left the bedroom, pushing the bulky envelope into a bureau drawer.

## August 15

Henry Putnam answered the door.

"Good evening," said Theodore. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Just chatting in the den with Irma's folks," said Putnam. "They're drivin' to New York in the mornin'."

"Oh? Well, I'll only be a moment." Theodore held out a pair of BB guns. "A plant I distribute for was getting rid of these," he said. "I thought your boys might like them."

"Well, *sure*," said Putnam. He started for the den to get his sons.

While the older man was gone, Theodore picked up a couple of matchbooks whose covers read *Putnam's Wines and Liquors*. He'd slipped them into his pocket before the boys were led in to thank him.

"Mighty nice of you, Gordon," said Putnam at the door. "Sure appreciate it."

"My pleasure," said Theodore.

Walking home, he set the clock-radio for three-fifteen and lay down. When the music began, he moved outside on silent feet and tore up forty-seven ivy plants, strewing them over Alston's sidewalk.

"Oh, No," he said to Alston in the morning. He shook his head, appalled.

Joseph Alston didn't speak. He glanced down the block with hating eyes.

"Here, let me help you," Theodore said. The old man shook his head but Theodore insisted. Driving to the nearest nursery he brought back two sacks of peat moss; then squatted by Alston's side to help him replant.

"You hear anything last night?" the old man asked.

"You think it was those boys again?" asked Theodore, open-mouthed.

"Ain't say in'," Alston said.

Later, Theodore drove downtown and bought a dozen postcard photographs. He took them to the office.

*Dear Walt*, he printed crudely on the back of one, *Got these here in Tijuana. Hot enough for you?* In addressing the envelope, he failed to add *Jr.* to *Mr. Walter Morton*.

Into the out box.

## August 23

"Mrs. Ferrel!"

She shuddered on the bar stool. "Why, Mister-"

"Gordon," he provided, smiling. "How nice to see you again."

"Yes." She pressed together lips that trembled.

"You come here often?" Theodore asked.

"Oh, no, *never*" Inez Ferrel blurted. "I'm-just supposed to meet a friend here tonight. A *girl* friend."

"Oh, I see," said Theodore. "Well, may a lonely widower keep you company until she comes?"

"Why..." Mrs. Ferrel shrugged. "I guess." Her lips were painted brightly red against the alabaster of her skin. The sweater clung adhesively to the hoisted jut of her breasts.

After a while, when Mrs. Ferrel's friend didn't show up, they slid into a darkened booth. There, Theodore used Mrs. Ferrel's powder room retreat to slip a pale and tasteless powder in her drink. On her return she swallowed this and, in minutes, grew stupefied. She smiled at Theodore.

"I like you Misser Gor'n," she confessed. The words crawled viscidly across her lolling tongue.

Shortly thereafter, he led her, stumbling and giggling, to his car and drove her to a motel. Inside the room, he helped her strip to stockings, garter belt and shoes and, while she posed with drugged complacency, Theodore took flashbulb pictures.

After she'd collapsed at two a.m. Theodore dressed her and drove her home. He stretched her fully dressed across her bed. After that he went outside and poured concentrated weed killer on Alston's

replanted ivy.

Back in the house he dialled the Jefferson's number.

"Yes," said Arthur Jefferson irritably.

"*Get out of this neighbourhood or you'll be sorry,*" whispered Theodore, then hung up.

In the morning he walked to Mrs. Ferrel's house and rang the bell.

"Hello," he said politely. "Are you feeling better?"

She stared at him blankly while he explained how she'd gotten violently ill the night before and he'd taken her home from the bar. "I do hope you're feeling better," he concluded.

"Yes," she said, confusedly, "I'm-all right."

As he left her house he saw a red-faced James McCann approaching the Morton house, an envelope in his hand. Beside him walked a distraught Mrs. McCann.

"We must be *tolerant*, Jim," Theodore heard her say.

### August 31

At two-fifteen a.m. Theodore took the brush and the can of paint and went outside.

Walking to the Jefferson house he set the can down and painted, jaggedly, across the door-nigger!

Then he moved across the street allowing an occasional drip of paint. He left the can under Henry Putnam's back porch, accidentally upsetting the dog's plate. Fortunately, the Putnams' dog slept indoors.

Later, he put more weed killer on Joseph Alston's ivy.

In the morning, when Donald Gorse had gone to work, he took a heavy envelope and went to see Eleanor Gorse. "Look at this," he said, sliding a pornographic booklet from the envelope. "I received this in the mail today. *Look* at it." He thrust it into her hands.

She held the booklet as if it were a spider.

"Isn't it hideous?" he said.

She made a face. "*Revolt*ing," she said.

"I thought I'd check with you and several others before I phoned the police," said Theodore. "Have you received any of this filth?"

Eleanor Gorse bristled. "Why should I receive them?" she demanded.

Outside, Theodore found the old man squatting by his ivy. "How are they coming?" he asked.

"They're dyin'."

Theodore looked stricken. "How can this be?" he asked.

Alston shook his head.

"Oh, this is *horrible*," Theodore turned away, clucking. As he walked to his house he saw, up the street, Arthur Jefferson cleaning off his door and, across the way, Henry Putnam watching carefully.

She was waiting on his porch.

"Mrs. McCann," said Theodore, surprised, "I'm so glad to see you."

"What I came to say may not make you so glad," she said unhappily.

"Oh?" said Theodore. They went into his house.

"There have been a lot of... *things* happening in this neighbourhood since you moved in," said Mrs. McCann after they were seated in the living room.

"Things?" asked Theodore.

"I think you know what I mean," said Mrs. McCann. "However, this-this *bigotry* on Mr. Jefferson's door is too much, Mr. Gordon, too much."

Theodore gestured helplessly. "I don't understand."

"Please don't make it difficult," she said. "I may have to call the authorities if these things don't stop, Mr. Gordon. I hate to think of doing such a thing but-"

"*Authorities*?" Theodore looked terrified.

"None of these things happened until you moved in, Mr. Gordon," she said. "Believe me, I hate what I'm saying but I simply have no choice. The fact that none of these things has happened to you-"

She broke off startledly as a sob wracked Theodore's chest. She stared at him. "Mr. Gordon-" she began uncertainly.

"I don't know what these things are you speak of," said Theodore in a shaking voice, "but I'd *kill* myself before I harmed another, Mrs. McCann."

He looked around as if to make sure they were alone.

"I'm going to tell you something I've never told a single soul," he said. He wiped away a tear. "My name isn't Gordon," he said. "It's Gottlieb. I'm a Jew. I spent a year at Dachau."

Mrs. McCann's lips moved but she said nothing. Her face was getting red.

"I came from there a broken man," said Theodore. "I haven't long to live, Mrs. McCann. My wife is dead, my three children are dead. I'm all alone. I only want to live in peace-in a little place like this-among people like you."

"To be a neighbour, a friend..."

"Mr.-*Gottlieb*" she said brokenly.

After she was gone, Theodore stood silent in the living room, hands clenched whitely at his sides. Then he went into the kitchen to discipline himself.

"Good morning, Mrs. Backus," he said an hour later when the little woman answered the door, "I wonder if I might ask you some questions about our church?"

"Oh. Oh, yes." She stepped back feebly. "Won't you- come in?"

"I'll be very still so as not to wake your husband," Theodore whispered. He saw her looking at his bandaged hand. "I burned myself," he said. "Now, about the church. Oh, there's someone knocking at your back door."

"There is?"

When she'd gone into the kitchen, Theodore pulled open the hall closet door and dropped some photographs behind a pile of overshoes and garden tools. The door was shut when she returned.

"There wasn't anyone," she said.

"I could have sworn..." He smiled deprecatingly. He looked down at a circular bag on the floor. "Oh, does Mr. Backus bowl?"

"Wednesdays and Fridays when his shift is over," she said. "There's an all-night alley over on Western Avenue."

"I love to bowl," said Theodore.

He asked his questions about the church, then left. As he started down the path he heard loud voices from the Morton house.

"It wasn't bad enough about Katherine McCann and *those* awful pictures," shrieked Mrs. Morton. "Now this... *filth!*"

"But, Mom!" cried Walter, Jr.

## September 14

Theodore awoke and turned the radio off. Standing, he put a small bottle of greyish powder in his pocket and slipped from the house. Reaching his destination, he sprinkled powder into the water bowl and stirred it with a finger until it dissolved.

Back in the house he scrawled four letters reading: *Arthur Jefferson is trying to pass the colour line. He is my cousin and should admit he is black like the rest of us. I am doing this for his own good.*

He signed the letter *John Thomas Jefferson* and addressed three of the envelopes to Donald Gorse, the Mortons, and Mr. Henry Putnam.

This completed, he saw Mrs. Backus walking toward the boulevard and followed. "May I walk you?" he asked.

"Oh," she said. "All right."

"I missed your husband last night," he told her.

She glanced at him.

"I thought I'd join him bowling," Theodore said, "but I guess he was sick again."

"Sick?"

"I asked the man behind the counter at the alley and he said that Mr. Backus hadn't been coming in because he was sick."

"Oh," Mrs. Backus's voice was thinly stricken.

"Well, maybe next Friday," said Theodore.

Later, when he came back, he saw a panel truck in front of Henry Putnam's house. A man came out of the alley carrying a blanket-wrapped body which he laid in the truck. The Putnam boys were crying as they watched.

Arthur Jefferson answered the door. Theodore showed the letter to Jefferson and his wife. "It came this morning," he said.

"This is *monstrous*!" said Jefferson, reading it.

"Of *course* it is," said Theodore.

While they were talking, Jefferson looked through the window at the Putnam house across the street.

### September 15

Pale morning mist engulfed Sylmar Street. Theodore moved through it silently. Under the back porch of the Jeffersons' house he set fire to a box of damp papers. As it began to smoulder he walked across the yard and, with a single knife stroke, slashed apart the rubber pool. He heard it pulsing water on the grass as he left. In the alley he dropped a book of matches that read *Putnam's Wines and Liquors*.

A little after six that morning he woke to the howl of sirens and felt the small house tremble at the heavy trucks passing by. Turning on his side, he yawned, and mumbled, "Goody."

### September 17

It was a paste-complexioned Dorothy Backus who answered Theodore's knock.

"May I drive you to church?" asked Theodore.

"I-I don't believe I-I'm not... feeling too well," stumbled Mrs. Backus.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Theodore said. He saw the edges of some photographs protruding from her apron pocket.

As he left he saw the Mortons getting in their car, Bianca wordless, both Walters ill at ease. Up the street, a police car was parked in front of Arthur Jefferson's house.

Theodore went to church with Donald Gorse who said that Eleanor was feeling ill.

"I'm so sorry," Theodore said.

That afternoon, he spent a while at the Jefferson house helping clear away the charred debris of their back porch. When he saw the slashed rubber pool he drove immediately to a drug store and bought another one.

"But they love that pool," said Theodore, when Patty Jefferson protested. "You told me so yourself." He winked at Arthur Jefferson but Jefferson was not communicative that afternoon.

### September 23

Early in the evening Theodore saw Alston's dog walking in the street. He got his BB gun and, from the bedroom window, soundlessly, fired. The dog nipped fiercely at its side and spun around. Then, whimpering, it started home.

Several minutes later, Theodore went outside and started pulling up the door to the garage. He saw the old man hurrying down his alley, the dog in his arms.



"What's wrong?" asked Theodore.

"Don't know," said Alston in a breathless, frightened voice. "He's hurt."

"Quickly!" said Theodore. "Into my car!"

He rushed Alston and the dog to the nearest veterinary, passing three stop signs and groaning when the old man held his hand up, palsiedly, and whimpered, "*Blood!*"

For three hours Theodore sat in the veterinary's waiting room until the old man staggered forth, his face a greyish white.

"No," said Theodore, jumping to his feet.

He led the old man, weeping, to the car and drove him home. There, Alston said he'd rather be alone so Theodore left. Shortly afterward, the black and white police car rolled to a stop in front of Alston's house and the old man led the two officers past Theodore's house.

In a while, Theodore heard angry shouting up the street. It lasted quite a long time.

## September 27

"Good evening," said Theodore. He bowed.

Eleanor Gorse nodded stiffly.

"I've brought you and your father a casserole," said Theodore, smiling, holding up a towel-wrapped dish. When she told him that her father was gone for the night, Theodore clucked and sighed as if he hadn't seen the old man drive away that afternoon.

"Well then," he said, proffering the dish, "for *you*. With my sincerest compliments."

Stepping off the porch he saw Arthur Jefferson and Henry Putnam standing under a street lamp down the block. While he watched, Arthur Jefferson struck the other man and, suddenly, they were brawling in the gutter. Theodore broke into a hurried run.

"But this is *terrible!*" he gasped, pulling the men apart.

"Stay out of this!" warned Jefferson, then, to Putnam, challenged, "You better tell me how that paint can got under your porch! The police may believe it was an accident I found that matchbook in my alley but I don't!"

"I'll tell you nothing," Putnam said, contemptuously. "*Coon.*"

"Coon! Oh, of course! You'd be the first to believe that, you stupid-!"

Five times Theodore stood between them. It wasn't until Jefferson had, accidentally, struck him on the nose that tension faded. Curtly, Jefferson apologized; then, with a murderous look at Putnam, left.

"Sorry he hit you," Putnam sympathized. "Damned nigger."

"Oh, surely you're mistaken," Theodore said, daubing at his nostrils. "Mr. Jefferson told me how afraid he was of people believing this talk. Because of the value of his two houses, you know."

"Two?" asked Putnam.

"Yes, he owns the vacant house next door to his," said Theodore. "I assumed you knew."

"No," said Putnam warily.

"Well, you see," said Theodore, "if people think Mr. Jefferson is a Negro, the value of his houses will go down."

"So will the values of all of them," said Putnam, glaring across the street. "That dirty, son-of-a-"

Theodore patted his shoulder. "How are your wife's parents enjoying their stay in New York?" he asked as if changing the subject.

"They're on their way back," said Putnam.

"Good," said Theodore.

He went home and read the funny papers for an hour. Then he went out.

It was a florid faced Eleanor Gorse who opened to his knock. Her bathrobe was disarrayed, her dark eyes feverish.

"May I get my dish?" asked Theodore politely.

She grunted, stepping back jerkily. His hand, in passing, brushed on hers. She twitched away as if he'd

stabbed her.

"Ah, you've eaten it all," said Theodore, noticing the tiny residue of powder on the bottom of the dish. He turned. "When will your father return?" he asked.

Her body seemed to tense. "After midnight," she muttered.

Theodore stepped to the wall switch and cut off the light. He heard her gasp in the darkness. "No," she muttered.

"Is this what you want, Eleanor?" he asked, grabbing harshly.

Her embrace was a mindless, fiery swallow. There was nothing but ovening flesh beneath her robe.

Later, when she lay snoring satedly on the kitchen floor, Theodore retrieved the camera he'd left outside the door.

Drawing down the shades, he arranged Eleanor's limbs and took twelve exposures. Then he went home and washed the dish.

Before retiring, he dialled the phone.

"Western Union," he said. "I have a message for Mrs. Irma Putnam of 12070 Sylmar Street."

"That's me," she said.

"Both parents killed in auto collision this afternoon," said Theodore. "Await word regarding disposition of bodies. Chief of Police, Tulsa, Okla-"

At the other end of the line there was a strangled gasp, a thud; then Henry Putnam's cry of "Irma!" Theodore hung up.

After the ambulance had come and gone, he went outside and tore up thirty-five of Joseph Alston's ivy plants. He left, in the debris, another matchbook reading *Putnam's Wines and Liquors*.

## September 28

In the morning, when Donald Gorse had gone to work, Theodore went over. Eleanor tried to shut the door on him **but** he pushed in.

"I want money," he said. "These are my collateral." He threw down copies of the photographs and Eleanor recoiled, gagging. "Your father will receive a set of these tonight," he said, "unless I get two hundred dollars."

"But I-!"

"Tonight."

He left and drove downtown to the Jeremiah Osborne Realty office where he signed over, to Mr. George Jackson, the vacant house at 12069 Sylmar Street. He shook Mr. Jackson's hand.

"Don't you worry now," he comforted. "The people next door are black too."

When he returned home, there was a police car in front of the Backus house.

"What happened?" he asked Joseph Alston who was sitting quietly on his porch.

"Mrs. Backus," said the old man lifelessly. "She tried to kill Mrs. Ferrel."

"Is that right?" said Theodore.

That night, in his office, he made his entries on page 700 of the book.

*Mrs. Ferrel dying of knife wounds in local hospital. Mrs. Backus in jail; suspects husband of adultery. J. Alston accused of dog poisoning, probably more. Putnam boys accused of shooting Alston's dog, ruining his lawn. Mrs. Putnam dead of heart attack. Mr. Putnam being sued for property destruction. Jeffersons thought to be black. McCanns and Mortons deadly enemies. Katherine McCann believed to have had relations with Walter Morton, Jr. Morton, Jr. being sent to school in Washington. Eleanor Gorse has hanged herself Job completed.*

Time to move.



## 19 - Born Of Man And Woman

### X

This day when it had light mother called me a retch. You retch she said. I saw in her eyes the anger. I wonder what it is a retch.

This day it had water falling from upstairs. It fell all around. I saw that. The ground of the back I watched from the little window. The ground it sucked up the water like thirsty lips. It drank too much and it got sick and runny brown. I didn't like it.

Mother is a pretty I know. In my bed place with cold walls around I have a paper things that was behind the furnace. It says on it SCREEN-STARS. I see in the pictures faces like of mother and father. Father says they are pretty. Once he said it.

And also mother he said. Mother so pretty and me decent enough. Look at you he said and didn't have the nice face. I touched his arm and said it is alright father. He shook and pulled away where I couldn't reach.

Today mother let me off the chain a little so I could look out the little window. That's how I saw the water falling from upstairs.

### XX

This day it had goodness in the upstairs. As I know, when I looked at it my eyes hurt. After I look at it the cellar is red.

I think this was church. They leave the upstairs. The big machine swallows them and rolls out past and is gone. In the back part is the lit tie mother. She is much small than me. I am big. It is a secret but I have pulled the chain out of the wall. I can see out the little window all I like.

In this day when it got dark I had eat my food and some bugs. I hear laughs upstairs. I like to know why there are laughs for. I took the chain from the wall and wrapped it around me. I walked squish to the stairs. They creak when I walk on them. My legs slip on them because I don't walk on stairs. My feet stick to the wood.

I went up and opened a door. It was a white place. White as white jewels that come from upstairs sometime. I went in and stood quiet. I hear the laughing some more. I walk to the sound and look through to the people. More people than I thought was. I thought I should laugh with them.

Mother came out and pushed the door in. It hit me and hurt. I fell back on the smooth floor and the chain made noise. I cried. She made a hissing noise into her and put her hand on her mouth. Her eyes got big.

She looked at me. I heard father call. What fell he called. She said a iron board. Come help pick it up she said. He came and said now is *that* so heavy you need. He saw me and grew big. The anger came in his eyes. He hit me. I spilled some of the drip on the floor from one arm. It was not nice. It made ugly green on the floor.

Father told me to go to the cellar. I had to go. The light it hurt some now in my eyes. It is not so like that in the cellar.

Father tied my legs and arms up. He put me on my bed. Upstairs I heard laughing while I was quiet there looking on a black spider that was swinging down to me. I thought what father said. Ohgod he said. And only eight.

### XXX

This day father hit in the chain again before it had light. I have to try pull it out again. He said I was bad to come upstairs. He said never do that again or he would beat me hard. That hurts.

I hurt. I slept the day and rested my head against the cold wall. I thought of the white place upstairs.

### XXXX

I got the chain from the wall out. Mother was upstairs. I heard little laughs very high. I looked out the window. I saw all little people like the little mother and little fathers too. They are pretty.

They were making nice noise and jumping around the ground. Their legs was moving hard. They are like mother and father. Mother says all right people look like they do.

One of the little fathers saw me. He pointed at the window. I let go and slid down the wall in the dark. I curled up as they would not see. I heard their talks by the window and foots running. Upstairs there was a door hitting. I heard the little mother call upstairs. I heard heavy steps and I rushed to my bed place. I hit the chain in the wall and lay down on my front.

I heard mother come down. Have you been at the window she said. I heard the anger. Stay away from the window. You have pulled the chain out again.

She took the stick and hit me with it. I didn't cry. I can't do that. But the drip ran all over the bed. She saw it and twisted away and made a noise. Oh mygod mygod she said why have you *done* this to me? I heard the stick go bounce on the stone floor. She ran upstairs. I slept the day.

XXXXX

This day it had water again. When mother was upstairs I heard the little one come slow down the steps. I hidded myself in the coal bin for mother would have anger if the little mother saw me.

She had a little live thing with her. It walked on the arms and had pointy ears. She said things to it.

It was all right except the live thing smelled me. It ran up the coal and looked down at me. The hairs stood up. In the throat it made an angry noise. I hissed but it jumped on me.

I didn't want to hurt it. I got fear because it bit me harder than the rat does. I hurt and the little mother screamed. I grabbed the live thing tight. It made sounds I never heard. I pushed it all together. It was all lumpy and red on the black coal.

I hid there when mother called. I was afraid of the stick. She left. I crept over the coal with the thing. I hid it under my pillow and rested on it. I put the chain in the wall again.

X

This is another times. Father chained me tight. I hurt because he beat me. This time I hit the stick out of his hands and made noise. He went away and his face was white. He ran out of my bed place and locked the door.

I am not so glad. All day it is cold in here. The chain comes slow out of the wall. And I have a bad anger with mother and father. I will show them. I will do what I did that once.

I will screech and laugh loud. I will run on the walls. Last I will hang head down by all my legs and laugh and drip green all over until they are sorry they didn't be nice to me.

If they try to beat me again I'll hurt them. I will

## 20 - Descent

It was impulse, Les pulled the car over to the kerb and stopped it. He twisted the shiny key and the motor stopped. He turned to look across Sunset Boulevard, across the green hills that dropped away steeply to the ocean.

'Look, Ruth,' he said.

It was late afternoon. Far out across the palisades they could see the Pacific shimmering with reflections of the red sun. The sky was a tapestry dripping gold and crimson. Streamers of billowy, pink-edged clouds hung across it.

'It's so pretty,' Ruth said.

His hand lifted from the car seat to cover hers. She smiled at him a moment, then the smile faded as

they watched the sunset again.

'It's hard to believe,' Ruth said.

'What?' he asked.

'That we'll never see another.'

He looked soberly at the brightly coloured sky. Then he smiled but not in pleasure.

'Didn't we read that they'd have artificial sunsets?' he said. 'You'll look out the windows of your room and see a sunset. Didn't we read that somewhere?'

'It won't be the same,' she said, 'will it, Les?'

'How could it be?'

'I wonder,' she murmured, 'What it will be really like.'

'A lot of people would like to know,' he said.

They sat in silence watching the sun go down. It's funny he thought, you try to get underneath to the real meaning of a moment like this but you can't. It passes and when it's over you don't know or feel any more than you did before. It's just one more moment added to the past. You *don't* appreciate what you have until it's taken away.

He looked over at Ruth and saw her looking solemnly and strangely at the ocean.

'Honey,' he said quietly and gave her, with the word, his love.

She looked at him and tried to smile.

'We'll still be together,' he told her.

'I know,' she said. 'Don't pay any attention to me.'

'But I will,' he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. 'I'll look after you. Over the earth -'

'Or under it,' she said.

Bill came out of the house to meet them. Les looked at his friend as he steered the car into the open concrete space by the garage. He wondered how Bill felt about leaving the house he'd just finished paying for. Free and clear, after eighteen years of payments, and tomorrow it would be rubble. Life is a bastard, he thought, switching off the engine.

'Hello, kid,' Bill said to him. 'Hi, beautiful,' to Ruth.

'Hello, handsome,' Ruth said.

They got out of the car and Ruth took the package off the front seat. Bill's daughter Jeannie came running out of the house. 'Hi, Les! Hi, Ruth!'

'Say, Bill, whose car are we going to take tomorrow?' Les asked him.

'I don't know, kid,' Bill said. 'We'll talk it over when Fred and Grace get here.'

'Carry me piggy-back, Les,' Jeannie demanded.

He swung her up. *I'm glad we don't have a child, I'd hate to take a child down there tomorrow.*

Mary looked up from the stove as they moved in. They all said hello and Ruth put the package on the table.

'What's that?' Mary asked.

'I baked a pie,' Ruth told her.

'Oh, you didn't have to do that,' Mary said.

'Why not? It may be the last one I'll ever bake.'

'It's not that bad,' Bill said. 'They'll have stoves down there.'

'There'll be so much rationing it won't be worth the effort,' Ruth said.

'The way my true love bakes that'll be good fortune,' Bill said.

'Is *that* so!' Mary glared at her grinning husband, who patted her behind and moved into the living room with Les. Ruth stayed in the kitchen to help.

Les put down Bill's daughter.

Jeannie ran out. 'Mama, I'm gonna help you make dinner!'

'How nice,' they heard Mary say.

Les sank down on the big cherry-coloured couch and Bill took the chair across the room by the window.

'You come up through Santa Monica?' he asked.

'No, we came along the Coast Highway,' Les said. 'Why?'

'Jesus, you should have gone through Santa Monica,' Bill said. 'Everybody's going crazy - breaking store windows, turning cars upside down, setting fire to everything. I was down there this morning. I'm lucky I got the car back. Some jokers wanted to roll it down Wilshire Boulevard.'

'What's the matter, are they crazy?' Les said. 'You'd think this was the end of the world.'

'For some people it is,' Bill said. 'What do you think M.G.M. is going to do down there, make cartoons?'

'Sure,' said Les. *Tom and Jerry in the Middle of the Earth.*

Bill shook his head. 'Business is going out of its mind,' he said. 'There's no place to set up everything down there. Everybody's flipping. Look at that paper.'

Les leaned forward and took the newspaper off the coffee table. It was three days old. The main stories, of course, covered the details of the descent - the entry schedules at the various entrances: the one in Hollywood, the one in Reseda, the one in downtown Los Angeles. In large type across eight columns, the front page headline read: *Remember! The Bomb Falls At Sunset!* Newspapers had been carrying the warning for a week. And tomorrow was the day.

The rest of the stories were about robbery, rape, arson, and murder.

'People just can't take it,' Bill said, 'They have to flip.'

'Sometimes I feel like flipping myself,' said Les.

'Why?' Bill said with a shrug. 'So we live under the ground instead of over it. What the hell will change? Television will still be lousy.'

'Don't tell me we aren't even leaving that above ground?'

'No, didn't you see?' Bill said. He pushed up and walked over to the coffee table. He picked up the paper Les had dropped. 'Where the hell is it?' he muttered to himself, ruffling through the pages.

'There.' Bill held out the paper.

### TELEVISION TO GO ON SCIENTISTS PROMISE

'Consolation?' Les said.

'Sure,' Bill said, tossing down the paper. 'Now we'll be able to watch the bomb smear us.'

He went back to his chair.

Les shook his head. 'Who's going to build television sets down there?'

'Kid, there'll be everything down - what's up, beautiful?'

Ruth stood in the archway that opened on the living room.

'Anybody want wine?' she asked. 'Beer?'

Bill said beer and Les said wine, then Bill went on.

'Maybe that promise of television is a little farfetched,' he said. 'But, otherwise, there'll be business as usual. Oh, maybe it'll be on a different level, but it'll be there. Christ, somebody's gonna want something for all the money they've invested in the Tunnels.'

'Isn't their life enough?'

Bill went on talking about what he'd read concerning life in The Tunnels - the exchange set-up, the transportation system, the plans for substitute food production and all the endless skein of details that went into the creation of a new society in a new world.

Les didn't listen. He sat looking past his friend at the purple and red sky that topped the shifting dark blue of the ocean. He heard the steady flow of Bill's words without their content; he heard the women moving in the kitchen. What *would* it be like? - he wondered. Nothing like this. No aquamarine broadloom, wall to wall, no vivid colours, no fireplace with copper screening, most of all no picture windows with the beautiful world outside for them to watch. He felt his throat tighten slowly. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow -

Ruth came in with the glasses and handed Bill his beer and Les his wine. Her eyes met those of her

husband for a moment and she smiled. He wanted to pull her down suddenly and bury his face in her hair. He wanted to forget. But she returned to the kitchen and he said 'What?' to Bill's question.

'I said I guess we'll go to the Reseda entrance.'

'I guess it's as good as any other,' Les said.

'Well, I figure the Hollywood and the downtown entrances will be jammed,' Bill said. 'Christ, you really threw down that wine.'

Les felt the slow warmth run down into his stomach as he put down the glass.

'This thing getting you, kid?' Bill asked.

'Isn't it getting you?'

'Oh... ' Bill shrugged. 'Who knows? Maybe I just make noise to hide what it's doing to me. I guess. I feel it for Jeannie more than anything else. She's only five.'

Outside they heard a car pull up in front of the house and Mary called to say that Fred and Grace were there. Bill pressed palms on his knees and pushed up.

'Don't let it get you,' he said with a grin. 'You're from New York. It won't be any different from the subway.'

Les made a sound of disgruntled amusement.

'Forty years in the subway,' he said.

'It's not that bad,' Bill said, starting out of the room. 'The scientists claim they'll find some way to de-radiate the country and get things growing again.'

'When?'

'Maybe twenty years,' Bill said, and then he went out to welcome his guests.

'But how do we know what they *really* look like?' Grace said. 'All the pictures they print are only artist's *conceptions* of what the living quarters are like down there. They may be *holes* in the wall for all we know.'

'Don't be a knocker, kid, be a booster,' Bill told her.

'Uh!' Grace grunted. 'I think you're oblivious to the *-terror* of this horrible descent into the ground.'

They were all in the living room full of steak and salad and biscuits and pie and coffee. Les sat on the cherry-coloured couch, his arm round Ruth's slender waist. Grace and Fred sat on the yellow studio couch, Mary and Bill in separate chairs. Jeannie was in bed. Warmth filtered from the fireplace where a low, steady log fire burned. Fred and Bill drank beer from cans and the rest drank wine.

'Not oblivious, kid,' Bill said. 'Just adjusting. We have to do it. We might as well make the best of it.'

'Easily said, easily said,' Grace repeated. 'But I for one *certainly* don't look forward to living in those tunnels. I expect to be miserable. I don't know how Fred feels, but those are *my* sentiments. I don't think it really *matters* to Fred.'

'Fred is an adjuster,' Bill said. 'Fred is not a knocker.'

Fred smiled a little and said nothing. He was a small man sitting by his wife like a patient boy with his mother in the dentist's office.

'Oh!' Grace again. 'How can you be so *blase* about it is beyond me. How can it be *anything* but bad?' No theatres, no restaurants, no travelling -'

'No beauty parlours,' said Bill with a short laugh.

'Yes, no beauty parlours,' said Grace. 'If you don't think *that's* important to a woman - *well*.'

'We'll have our loved ones,' Mary said. 'I think that's most important. And we'll be alive.'

Grace shrugged. 'All right we'll be alive, we'll be together,' she said. 'But I'm afraid I just can't call that life - living in a *cellar* the rest of my life.'

'Don't go,' Bill said. 'Show 'em how tough you are.'

'Very funny,' Grace said.

'I bet some people *will* decide not to go down there,' Les said.

'If they're *crazy*,' said Grace. 'Uh! What a *hideous* way to die.'

'Maybe it's better than going underground,' Bill said, 'Who knows? Maybe a lot of people will spend a quiet day at home tomorrow.'

'*Quiet?*' said Grace, 'Don't worry, Fred and I will be down in those tunnels bright and early

tomorrow.'

'I'm not worried,' said Bill.

They were quiet for a moment, then Bill said, 'The Reseda entrance all right with everybody? We might as well decide now.'

Fred made a small palms-up gesture with his hands.

'All right with me,' he said. 'Whatever the majority decides.'

'Kid, let's face it,' Bill said. 'You're the most important person we've got here. An electrician's going to be a big man down there.'

Fred smiled. 'That's okay,' he said. 'Anything you decide.'

'You know,' Bill said. 'I wonder what the hell we mailmen are going to do down there.'

'And we bank tellers,' Les said.

'Oh, there'll be money down there,' Bill said. 'Where America goes, money goes. Now what about the car? We can only take one for six. Shall we take mine? It's the biggest.'

'Why not *ours*?' Grace said.

'Doesn't matter a damn to me,' Bill said. 'We can't take them down with us anyway.'

Grace stared bitterly at the tire, her frail hands opening and closing in her lap.

'Oh, why don't we *stop* the bomb! Why don't we attack *first* ?'

'We can't stop it now,' Les said.

'I wonder if they have tunnels too,' said Mary.

'Sure,' Bill said. 'They're probably sitting in their houses right now just like us, drinking wine and wondering what'll it be like to go underground.'

'Not *them*,' Grace said, bitterly. 'What do *they* care?'

Bill smiled dryly. 'They care.'

'There doesn't seem any point,' Ruth said.

Then they all sat in silence watching their last fire of a cool California evening. Ruth rested her head on Les's shoulder as he slowly stroked her blonde hair. Bill and Mary caught each other's eye and smiled a little. Fred sat and stared with gentle, melancholy eyes at the glowing logs while Grace opened up and closed her hands and looked very old.

And, outside, the stars shone down for a million times the millionth year.

Ruth and Les were sitting on their living room floor listening to records when Bill sounded his horn. For a moment they looked at each other without a word, a little frightened, the sunlight filtering between the blinds and falling like golden ladders across their legs. What can I say? - he wondered suddenly - Are there any words in the world that can make this minute easier for her?

Ruth moved against him quickly and they clung together as hard as they could. Outside the horn blew again.

'We'd better go,' Les said quietly.

'All right,' she said.

They stood up and Les went to the front door.

'We'll be right out!' he called.

Ruth moved into the bedroom and got their coats and the two small suitcases they were allowed to take. All their furniture, their clothes, their books, their records - they had to be left behind.

When she went back to the living room, Les was turning off the record player.

'I wish we could take more books,' he said.

'They'll have libraries, honey,' she said.

'I know,' he said. 'It just - isn't the same.'

He helped her on with her coat and she helped him on with his. The apartment was very quiet and warm.

'It's so nice,' she said.

He looked at her a moment as if in question, then, hurriedly, he picked up the suitcases and opened the door.

'Come on, baby,' he said.

At the door she turned and looked back. Abruptly she walked over to the record player and turned it on. She stood there emotionlessly until the music sounded, then she went back to the door and closed it firmly behind them.

'Why did you do that?' Les asked.

She took his arm and they started down the path to the car.

'I don't know,' she said, 'Maybe I just want to leave our home as if it were alive.'

A soft breeze blew against them as they walked and, overhead, palm trees swayed their ponderous leaves.

'It's a nice day,' she said.

'Yes, it is,' he said and her fingers tightened on his arm.

Bill opened the door for them.

'Hop in, kids,' he said. 'And we'll get rolling.'

Jeannie got on her knees on the front seat and talked to Les and Ruth as the car started up the street. Ruth turned and watched the apartment house disappear.

'I felt the same way about our house,' Mary said.

'Don't fret, Ma,' Bill said. 'We'll make out down thar.'

'What's *down thar*?' Jeannie asked.

'God knows,' said Bill, then, 'Daddy's joking, baby. Down thar means down *there*.'

'Say, Bill, do you think we'll be living near each other in The Tunnels?' Les asked.

'I don't know, kid,' Bill said. 'It goes by district. *We'll* be pretty close together I guess, but Fred and Grace won't, living way the hell over in Venice the way they do.'

'I can't say I'm sorry,' Mary said. 'I don't relish the idea of listening to Grace complain for the next twenty years.'

'Oh, Grace is all right,' Bill said, 'All she needs is a good swift kick where it counts once in a while.'

Traffic was heavy on the main boulevards that ran east for the two city entrances. Bill drove slowly along Lincoln Boulevard towards Venice. Outside of Jeannie's chattering none of them spoke. Ruth and Les sat close to each other, hands clasped, eyes straight ahead. Today, the words kept running through his mind: *we're going underground, we're going underground today*.

At first nothing happened when Bill honked the horn. Then the front door of the little house jerked open and Grace came running wildly across the broad lawn, still wearing her dressing gown and slippers, her grey-black hair hanging down in long braids.

'Oh my God, what's happened?' Mary said as Bill pushed quickly from the car to meet Grace. He pulled open the gate in time to catch Grace as one of her slipper heels dug into the soft earth throwing her off balance.

'What's *wrong*?' he asked, bracing her with his hands.

'It's *Fred*!' she cried.

Bill's face went blank and his gaze jumped suddenly to the house standing silent and white in the sunshine. Les and Mary got out of the car quickly.

'What's wrong with - ' Bill started, cutting off his words nervously.

'He won't go!' Grace cried, her face a mask of twisted fright.

They found him as Grace said he'd been all morning -fists clenched, sitting motionless in his easy chair by the window that overlooked the garden. Bill walked over to him and laid a hand on his thin shoulder.

'What's up, buddy?' he asked.

Fred looked up, a smile starting at the corners of his small mouth. 'Hi,' he said quietly.

'You're not going?' Bill asked.

Fred took a breath and seemed about to say something else, then he stopped. 'No,' he said as if he were politely refusing peas at dinner.

'Oh, my God, I *told* you, I *told* you!' Grace sobbed. 'He's *insane*!'

'All right, Grace, *take it easy*.' Bill snapped irritably and she pressed the soaked handkerchief to her mouth. Mary put her arm around Grace.

'Why not, pal?' Bill asked his friend.

Another smile twitched momentarily on Fred's lips. He shrugged slightly.

'Don't want to,' he said.

'Oh, Fred, Fred, how can you *do* this to me?' Grace moaned, standing nervously by the front door, right hand to her throat. Bill's mouth tightened but he kept his eyes on Fred's motionless face.

'What about Grace?' he asked.

'Grace should go,' Fred answered. 'I want her to go, I don't want her to die.'

'How can I live down there *alone*?' Grace sobbed.

Fred didn't answer, he just sat there looking straight ahead as if he felt embarrassed by all this attention, as if he was trying to gather in his mind the right thing to say.

'Look,' he started, 'I know this is terrible and - and it's arrogant - but I just can't go down there.'

His mouth grew firm. 'I won't,' he said.

Bill straightened up with a weary breath.

'Well,' he said hopelessly.

'I - ' Fred had opened up his right fist and was un-crumpling a small square of paper. 'Maybe - this will say - say what I mean.'

Bill took it and read it. Then he looked down at Fred and patted his shoulder once.

'Okay, pal,' he said and he put the paper in his coat. He looked at Grace.

'Get dressed if you're coming,' he said.

'*Fred!*' she almost screamed his name. 'Are you going to *do* this terrible thing to me?'

'Your husband is staying,' Bill told her. 'Do you want to stay with him?'

'I don't want to *die!*'

Bill looked at her a moment, then turned away.

'Mary, help her dress,' he said.

While they went to the car, Grace sobbing and stumbling on Mary's arm, Fred stood in the front doorway and watched his wife leave. She hadn't kissed him or embraced him, only retreated from his goodbye with a sob of angry fear. He stood there without moving a muscle and the breeze ruffled his thin hair.

When they were all in the car Bill took the paper out of his pocket.

'I'm going to read you what your husband wrote,' he said flatly and he read: '*If a man dies with the sun in his eyes, he dies a man. If a man goes with dirt on his nose -he only dies.*'

Grace looked at Bill with bleak eyes, her hands twisting endlessly in her lap.

'Mama, why isn't Uncle Fred coming?' Jeannie asked as Bill started the car and made a sharp U-turn.

'He wants to stay,' was all Mary said.

The car picked up speed and headed toward Lincoln Boulevard. None of them spoke and Les thought of Fred sitting back there alone in his little house, waiting. *Alone*. The thought made his throat catch and he gritted his teeth. Was there another poem beginning in Fred's mind now, he thought, one that started - *If a man dies and there is no one there to hold his hand* -

'Oh, *stop* it, stop the car!' Grace cried.

Bill pulled over to the kerb.

'I don't want to go down there alone,' Grace said miserably, 'It's not fair to make me go alone. I -'

She stopped talking and bit her lip. 'Oh - ' She leaned over. 'Goodbye, Mary,' she said and she kissed her. 'Goodbye, Ruth,' and kissed her. Then Les and Jeannie, and she managed a brief, rueful smile at Bill.

'I hate you,' she said.

'I *love* you,' he answered.

They watched her go back down the block, first walking, then, as she got nearer to the house, half running with a child-like excitement. They saw Fred come to the gate and then Bill started the car and he drove away and they were alone together.

'You'd never think Fred felt that way, would you?' Les said.

'I don't know, kid,' Bill said. 'He always used to stay in his garden when he wasn't working. He liked to wear a pair of shorts and tee shirt and let the sun fall on him while he trimmed the hedges or mowed the lawn or something. I can understand him feeling the way he does. If he wants to die that way, why



not? He's old enough to know what he wants.' He grinned. 'It's Grace that surprises me.'

'Don't you think it was a little unfair of him sort of *pushing* Grace into staying with him?' Ruth asked.

'What's fair or unfair?' Bill said. 'It's a man's life and a man's love. Where's the book that tells a man how to die and how to love?'

He turned the car onto Lincoln Boulevard.

They reached the entrance a little after noon and one of the hundreds in the concentrated police force directed them to the field down the road and told them to park there and walk back.

'Jesus, would you look at those cars,' Bill said as he drove slowly along the road that was thick with walking people.

Cars, thousands of them. Les thought of the field he'd seen once after the Second World War. It had been filled with bombers, wing to wing as far as the eye could see. This was just like it, only these were cars and the war wasn't over, it was just beginning.

'Isn't it dangerous to leave all the cars here?' Ruth asked. 'Won't it make a target?'

'Kid, no matter where the bomb falls it's going to smear everything,' Bill said.

'Besides,' said Les, 'the way the entrances are built I don't think it matters much where the bomb lands.'

They all got out and stood for a moment as if they weren't sure exactly what to do. Then Bill said, 'Well, let's go,' and patted the hood of his car. 'So long, clunk -R.I.P.'

'In pieces?' Les said.

There were long lines at each of the twenty desks before the entrance. People filed slowly by and gave their names and addresses and were assigned to various bunker rows. They didn't talk much, they just held their suitcases and moved along with little steps towards the entrance to The Tunnels.

Ruth held Les's arm with clenched fingers and he felt a tautness growing around the edges of his stomach, as if the muscles there were slowly calcifying. Each short, undramatic step took them closer to the entrance, further from the sky and the sun and the stars and the moon. And suddenly Les felt very sick and afraid. He wanted to grab Ruth's hand and drive back to their apartment and stay there till it ended. Fred was right -he couldn't help feeling it. Fred was right to know that a man couldn't leave the only home he'd ever had and burrow into the earth like a mole and still be himself. Something would happen down there, something would change. The artificial air, the even banks of bulbed sunshine, the electric moon and the fluorescent stars invented at the behest of some psychological study that foretold aberration if they were taken away completely. Did they suppose these things would be enough? Could they possibly believe that a man might crawl beneath the ground in one great living grave for twenty years and keep his soul?

He felt his body tighten involuntarily and he wanted to scream out at all the stupidity in the world that made men scourge themselves before their own whips to then-own destruction in one endless chain of blind sadisms. His breath caught and he glanced at Ruth and he saw that she was looking at him.

'Are you all right?'

He drew in a shaking breath. 'Yes,' he said, 'All right.'

He tried to numb his mind but without success. He kept looking at all the people around him, wondering if they felt as he did this fierce anger at what was happening, at what, basically, they had allowed to happen. Did they think too of the night before, of the stars and the crisp air and sounds of earth? He shook his head. It was torture to think about them.

He looked over at Bill as the five of them shuffled slowly down the long concrete ramp to the elevators. Bill was holding Jeannie's hand in his, looking down at her without any expression on his face. Then Les saw him turn and nudge Mary with the suitcase he held in his other hand. Mary looked at him and Bill winked.

'Where are we going, papa?' Jeannie asked, and her voice echoed shrilly off the white tile walls.

Bill's throat moved. 'I told you,' he replied. 'We're going to live under the ground a while.'

'How long?' Jeannie asked.

'Don't talk any more, baby,' Bill said. 'I don't know.'

There was no sound in the elevator. There were a hundred people in it and it was as still as a tomb as it went down. And down. And down.

## 21 - Girl Of My Dreams

He woke up, grinning, in the darkness. Carrie was having a nightmare. He lay on his side and listened to her breathless moaning. Must be a good one, he thought. He reached out and touched her back. The nightgown was wet with her perspiration. Great, he thought. He pulled his hand away as she squirmed against it, starting to make faint noises in her throat; it sounded as if she were trying to say 'No'.

No, hell, Greg thought. Dream, you ugly bitch; what else are you good for? He yawned and pulled his left arm from beneath the covers. Three-sixteen. He wound the watch stem sluggishly. Going to get me one of those electric watches one of these days, he thought. Maybe this dream would do it. Too bad Carrie had no control over them. If she did, she could really make it big.

He rolled onto his back. The nightmare was ending now; or coming to its peak, he was never sure which. What difference did it make anyway? He wasn't interested in the machinery, just the product. He grinned again, reaching over to the bedside table for his cigarettes. Lighting one, he blew up smoke. Now he'd have to comfort her, he thought with a frown. That was the part he could live without. Dumb little creep. Why couldn't she be blonde and beautiful? He expelled a burst of smoke. Well, you couldn't ask for everything. If she were good-looking, she probably wouldn't have these dreams. There were plenty of other women to provide the rest of it.

Carrie jerked violently and sat up with a cry, pulling the covers from his legs. Greg looked at her outline in the darkness. She was shivering. 'Oh, no,' she whispered. He watched her head begin to shake. 'No. No.' She started to cry, her body hitching with sobs. Oh, Christ, he thought, this'll take hours. Irritably, he pressed his cigarette into the ashtray and sat up.

'Baby?' he said.

She twisted around with a gasp and stared at him. 'Come 'ere,' he told her. He opened his arms and she flung herself against him. He could feel her narrow fingers gouging at his back, the soggy weight of her breasts against his chest. Oh, boy, he thought. He kissed her neck, grimacing at the smell of her sweat-damp skin. Oh, boy, what I go through. He caressed her back. Take it easy, baby,' he said, 'I'm here.' He let her cling to him, sobbing weakly. 'Bad dream?' he asked. He tried to sound concerned.

'Oh, Greg.' She could barely speak. 'It was horrible, oh, God, how horrible.'

He grinned. It *was* a good one.

'Which way?' he asked.

Carrie perched stiffly on the edge of the seat, looking through the windshield with troubled eyes. Any second now, she'd pretend she didn't know; she always did. Greg's fingers tightened slowly on the wheel. One of these days, by God, he'd smack her right across her ugly face and walk out, free. Damn freak. He felt the skin begin to tighten across his cheeks. 'Well?' he asked.

'I don't-'

'Which way, Carrie?' God, he'd like to twist back one of her scrawny arms and break the damn thing; squeeze that skinny neck until her breath stopped.

Carrie swallowed dryly. 'Left,' she murmured.

Bingo! Greg almost laughed aloud, slapping down the turn indicator. *Left* - right into the Eastridge area, the money area. You dreamed it right this time, you dog, he thought; this is It. All he had to do now was play it smart and he'd be free of her for good. He'd sweated it out and now it was payday!

The tyres made a crisp sound on the pavement as he turned the car onto the quiet, tree-lined street. 'How far?' he asked. She didn't answer and he looked at her threateningly. Her eyes were shut.

'How far? I said.'

Carrie clutched her hands together. 'Greg, please -' she started. Tears were squeezing out beneath her lids.

'Damn it!'

Carrie whimpered and said something. 'What?' he snapped. She drew in wavering breath. 'The middle of the next block,' she said.

'Which side?'

'The right.'

Greg smiled. He leaned back against the seat and relaxed. That was more like it. Dumb bitch tried the same old I-forget routine every time. When would she learn that he had her down cold? He almost chuckled. She never would, he thought; because, after this one, he'd be gone and she could dream for nothing.

'Tell me when we reach it,' he said.

'Yes,' she answered. She had turned her face to the window and was leaning her forehead against the cold glass. Don't cool it too much, he thought, amused; keep it hot for Daddy. He pressed away the rising smile as she turned to look at him. Was she picking up on him? Or was it just the usual? It was always the same. Just before they reached wherever they were going, she'd look at him intently as if to convince herself that it was worth the pain. He felt like laughing in her face. Obviously, it was worth it. How else could a beast like her land someone with his class? Except for him, her bed would be the emptiest, her nights the longest.

'Almost there?' he asked.

Carrie looked to the front again. 'The white one,' she said.

'With the half-circle drive?'

She nodded tightly. 'Yes.'

Greg clenched his teeth, a spasm of avidity sweeping through him. Fifty thousand if it was worth a nickel, he thought. Oh, you bitch, you crazy bitch, you really nailed it for me this time! He turned the wheel and pulled in at the kerb. Cutting the engine, he glanced across the street. The convertible would come from that direction, he thought. He wondered who'd be driving it. Not that it mattered.

'Greg?'

He turned and eyed her coldly. 'What?'

She bit her lip, then started to speak.

'No,' he said, cutting her off. He pulled out the ignition key and shoved open the door. 'Let's go,' he said. He slid out, shut the door and walked around the car. Carrie was still inside. 'Let's go, baby,' he said, the hint of venom in his voice.

'Greg, please -'

He shuddered at the cost of repressing an intense desire to scream curses at her, jerk open the door and drag her out by her hair. His rigid fingers clamped on the handle and he opened the door, waited. Christ, but she was ugly - the features, the skin, the body. She'd never looked so repugnant to him. '*I said lets go?*' he told her. He couldn't disguise the tremble of fury in his voice.

Carrie got out and he shut the door. It was getting colder. Greg drew up the collar of his topcoat, shivering as they started up the drive towards the front door of the house. He could use a heavier coat, he thought; with a nice, thick lining. A real sharp one, maybe black. He'd get one, one of these days - and maybe real soon too. He glanced at Carrie, wondering if she had any notion of his plans. He doubted it even though she looked more worried than ever. What the hell was with her? She'd never been this bad before. Was it because it was a kid? He shrugged. What difference did it make? She'd perform.

'Cheer up,' he said, 'It's a school day. You won't have to see him.' She didn't answer.

They went up two steps onto the brick porch and stopped before the door. Greg pushed the button and, deep inside the house, melodic chimes sounded. While they waited, he reached inside his topcoat pocket and touched the small leather notebook. Funny how he always felt like some kind of weird salesman when they were operating. A salesman with a damned closed market, he thought, amused. No one else could offer what he had to sell, that was for sure.

He glanced at Carrie. 'Cheer up,' he told her, 'We're helping them, aren't we?'

Carrie shivered. 'It won't be too much, will it, Greg?'

'I'll decide on-'

He broke off as the door was opened. For a moment, he felt angry disappointment that the bell had

not been answered by a maid. Then he thought: Oh, what the hell, the money's still here - and he smiled at the woman who stood before them. 'Good afternoon,' he said.

The woman looked at him with that half polite, half suspicious smile most women gave him at first. 'Yes?' she asked.

'It's about Paul,' he said.

The smile disappeared, the woman's face grew blank. 'What?' she asked.

'That's your son's name, isn't it?'

The woman glanced at Carrie. Already, she was disconcerted, Greg could see.

'He's in danger of his life,' he told her, 'Are you interested in hearing more about it?'

'*What's happened to him?*'

Greg smiled affably. 'Nothing yet,' he answered. The woman caught her breath as if, abruptly, she were being strangled.

'You've taken him,' she murmured.

Greg's smile broadened. 'Nothing like that,' he said.

'Where is he then?' the woman asked.

Greg looked at his wristwatch, feigning surprise. 'Isn't he at school?' he asked.

Uneasily confused, the woman stared at him for several moments before she twisted away, pushing at the door. Greg caught hold of it before it shut. 'Inside,' he ordered.

'Can't we wait out -?'

Carrie broke off with a gasp as he clamped his fingers on her arm and pulled her into the hall. While he shut the door, Greg listened to the rapid whir and click of a telephone being dialled in the kitchen. He smiled and took hold of Carrie's arm again, guiding her into the living room. 'Sit,' he told her.

Carrie settled gingerly on the edge of a chair while he appraised the room. Money was in evidence wherever he looked; in the carpeting and drapes, the period furniture, the accessories. Greg pulled in a tight, exultant breath and tried to keep from grinning like an eager kid; this was it all right. Dropping onto the sofa, he stretched luxuriously, leaned back and crossed his legs, glancing at the name on a magazine lying on the end table beside him. In the kitchen, he could hear the woman saying, 'He's in Room Fourteen; Mrs. Jennings' class.'

A sudden clicking sound made Carrie gasp. Greg turned his head and saw, through the back drapes, a collie scratching at the sliding glass door; beyond, he noted, with renewed pleasure, the glint of swimming pool water. Greg watched the dog. It must be the one that would -

'Thank you,' said the woman gratefully. Greg turned back and looked in that direction. The woman hung up the telephone receiver and her footsteps tapped across the kitchen floor, becoming soundless as she stepped onto the hallway carpeting. She started cautiously toward the front door.

'We're in here, Mrs. Wheeler,' said Greg.

The woman caught her breath and whirled in shock. 'What *is* this?' she demanded.

'Is he all right?' Greg asked.

'*What do you want?*'

Greg drew the notebook from his pocket and held it out. 'Would you like to look at this?' he asked.

The woman didn't answer but peered at Greg through narrowing eyes. 'That's right,' he said, 'We're selling something.'

The woman's face grew hard.

'*Your son's life,*' Greg completed.

The woman gaped at him, momentary resentment invaded by fear again. Jesus, you look stupid, Greg felt like telling her. He forced a smile. 'Are you interested?' he asked.

'Get out of here before I call the police.' The woman's voice was husky, tremulous.

'You're not interested in your son's life then?'

The woman shivered with fear-ridden anger. 'Did you hear me?' she said.

Greg exhaled through clenching teeth.

'Mrs. Wheeler,' he said, 'unless you listen to us - *carefully* - your son will soon be dead.' From the corners of his eyes, he noticed Carrie wincing and felt like smashing in her face. That's right, he thought

with savage fury. Show her how scared you are, you stupid bitch!

Mrs. Wheeler's lips stirred falteringly as she stared at Greg. 'What are you talking about?' she finally asked.

'Your son's life, Mrs. Wheeler.'

'Why should you want to hurt my boy?' the woman asked, a sudden quaver in her voice. Greg felt himself relax. She was almost in the bag.

'Did I say that we were going to hurt him?' he asked, smiling at her quizzically, 'I don't remember saying that, Mrs. Wheeler.'

'Then-?'

'Sometime before the middle of the month,' Greg interrupted, 'Paul will be run over by a car and killed.'

'What?'

Greg did not repeat.

'What car?' asked the woman. She looked at Greg in panic. 'What car?' she demanded.

'We don't know exactly.'

'Where?' the woman asked. 'When?'

'That information,' Greg replied, 'is what we're selling.'

The woman turned to Carrie, looking at her frightenedly. Carrie lowered her gaze, teeth digging at her lower lip. The woman looked back at Greg as he continued.

'Let me explain,' he said, 'My wife is what's known as a "sensitive". You may not be familiar with the term. It means she has visions and dreams. Very often, they have to do with real people. Like the dream she had last night - about your son.'

The woman shrank from his words and, as Greg expected, an element of shrewdness modified her expression; there was now, in addition to fear, suspicion.

'I know what you're thinking,' he informed her. 'Don't waste your time. Look at this notebook and you'll see -'

'Get out of here,' the woman said.

Greg's smile grew strained. 'That again?' he asked. 'You mean you really don't care about your son's life?'

The woman managed a smile of contempt. 'Shall I call the police now?' she asked. 'The *bunco* squad?'

'If you really want to,' answered Greg, 'but I suggest you listen to me first.' He opened the notebook and began to read. '*January twenty-second: Man named Jim to fall from roof while adjusting television aerial Ramsay Street. Two-story house, green with white trim.* Here's the news item.'

Greg glanced at Carrie and nodded once, ignoring her pleading look as he stood and walked across the room. The woman cringed back apprehensively but didn't move. Greg held up the notebook page. 'As you can see,' he said, 'the man didn't believe what we told him and did fall off his roof on January twenty-second; it's harder to convince them when you can't give any details so as not to give it all away.' He clucked as if disturbed. 'He should have paid us, though,' he said. 'It would have been a lot less expensive than a broken back.'

'Who do you think you're -?'

'Here's another,' Greg said, turning a page. 'This should interest you. *February twelfth, afternoon: Boy, 13, name unknown, to fall into abandoned well shaft, fracture pelvis. Lives on Darien Circle, etcetera, etcetera, you can see the details here,*' he finished, pointing at the page. 'Here's the newspaper clipping. As you can see, his parents were just in time. They'd refused to pay at first, threatened to call the police like you did.' He smiled at the woman. 'Threw us out of the house as a matter of fact,' he said. 'On the afternoon of the twelfth, though, when I made a last-minute phone check, they were out of their minds with worry. Their son had disappeared and they had no idea where he was - I hadn't mentioned the well shaft, of course.'

He paused for a moment of dramatic emphasis, enjoying the moment fully. 'I went over to their house,'

he said, 'they made their payment and I told them where their son was.' He pointed at the clipping. 'He was found, as you see - down in an abandoned well shaft. With a broken pelvis.'

'Do you really -?'

'- expect you to believe all this?' Greg completed her thought. 'Not completely; no one ever does at first. Let me tell you what you're thinking right now. You're thinking that we cut out these newspaper items and made up this story to fit them. You're entitled to believe that if you want to -' his face hardened, '- but, if you do, you'll have a dead son by the middle of the month, you can count on that.'

He smiled cheerfully. 'I don't believe you'd enjoy hearing how it's going to happen,' he said.

The smile began to fade. 'And it *is* going to happen, Mrs. Wheeler, whether you believe it or not.'

The woman, still too dazed by fright to be completely sure of her suspicion, watched Greg as he turned to Carrie. 'Well?' he said.

'I don't -'

'*Let's have it,*' he demanded.

Carrie bit her lower lip and tried to restrain the sob.

'What are you going to do?' the woman asked.

Greg turned to her with a smile. 'Make our point,' he said. He looked at Carrie again. 'Well?'

She answered, eyes closed, voice pained and feeble.

'There's a throw rug by the nursery door,' she said. 'You'll slip on it while you're carrying the baby.'

Greg glanced at her in pleased surprise; he hadn't known there was a baby. Quickly, he looked at the woman as Carrie continued in a troubled voice, 'There's a black widow spider underneath the playpen on the patio, it will bite the baby, there's a -'

'Care to check these items, Mrs. Wheeler?' Greg broke in. Suddenly, he hated her for her slowness, for her failure to accept. 'Or shall we just walk out of here,' he said, sharply, '*and let that blue convertible drag Paul's head along the street until his brains spill out?*'

The woman looked at him in horror. Greg felt a momentary dread that he had told her too much, then relaxed as he realized that he hadn't. 'I suggest you check,' he told her, pleasantly. The woman backed away from him a little bit, then turned and hurried toward the patio door. 'Oh, incidentally,' Greg said, remembering. She turned. 'That dog out there will try to save your son but it won't succeed; the car will kill it, too.'

The woman stared at him, as if uncomprehending, then turned away and, sliding open the patio door, went outside. Greg saw the collie frisking around her as she moved across the patio. Leisurely, he returned to the sofa and sat down.

'Greg-?'

He frowned grimacingly, jerking up his hand to silence her. Out on the patio, there was a scraping noise as the woman overturned the playpen. He listened intently. There was a sudden gasp, then the stamping of the woman's shoe on concrete, an excited barking by the dog. Greg smiled and leaned back with a sigh. Bingo.

When the woman came back in, he smiled at her, noticing how heavily she breathed.

'That could happen any place,' she said, defensively.

'Could it?' Greg's smile remained intact. 'And the throw rug?'

'Maybe you looked around while I was in the kitchen.'

'We didn't.'

'*Maybe you guessed.*'

'And maybe we didn't,' he told her, chilling his smile. 'Maybe everything we've said is true. You want to gamble on it?'

The woman had no reply. Greg looked at Carrie. 'Anything else?' he asked. Carrie shivered fitfully.

'An electric outlet by the baby's crib,' she said. 'She has a bobby pin beside her, she's been trying to put it in the plug and -'

'Mrs. Wheeler?' Greg looked inquisitively at the woman. He snickered as she turned and hurried from the room. When she was gone, he smiled and winked at Carrie. 'You're really on today, baby,' he said. She returned his look with glistening eyes. 'Greg, please don't make it too much,' she murmured.

Greg turned away from her, the smile withdrawn. Relax, he told himself; relax. After today, you'll be free of her. Casually, he slipped the notebook back into his topcoat pocket.

The woman returned in several minutes, her expression now devoid of anything but dread. Between two fingers of her right hand she was carrying a bobby pin. *'How did you know?'* she asked. Her voice was hollow with dismay.

'I believe I explained that, Mrs. Wheeler,' Greg replied. 'My wife has a gift. She knows exactly where and when that accident will occur. Do you care to buy that information?'

The woman's hands twitched at her sides. 'What do you want?' she asked.

'Ten thousand dollars in cash,' Greg answered. His fingers flexed reactively as Carrie gasped but he didn't look at her. He fixed his gaze on the woman's stricken face. 'Ten thousand...' she repeated dumbly.

'That's correct. Is it a deal?'

'But we don't -'

*'Take it or leave it, Mrs. Wheeler.* You're not in a bargaining position. Don't think for a second that there's anything you can do to prevent the accident. Unless you know the exact time and place, it's going to happen.' He stood abruptly, causing her to start. 'Well?' he snapped, 'what's it going to be? Ten thousand dollars or your son's life?'

The woman couldn't answer. Greg's eyes flicked to where Carrie sat in mute despair. 'Let's go,' he said. He started for the hall.

*'Wait:*

Greg turned and looked at the woman. 'Yes?'

'How - do I know -?' she faltered.

'You don't,' he broke in, 'you don't know a thing. *We* do.'

He waited another few moments for her decision, then walked into the kitchen and, removing his memo pad from an inside pocket, slipped the pencil free and jotted down the telephone number. He heard the woman murmuring pleadingly to Carrie and, shoving the pad and pencil into his topcoat pocket, left the kitchen. 'Let's go,' he said to Carrie who was standing now. He glanced disinterestedly at the woman. 'I'll phone this afternoon,' he said. 'You can tell me then what you and your husband have decided to do.' His mouth went hard. *'It'll be the only call you'll get,'* he said.

He turned and walked to the front door, opened it. 'Come on, come on,' he ordered irritably. Carrie slipped by him, brushing at the tears on her cheeks. Greg followed and began to close the door, then stopped as if remembering something.

'Incidentally,' he said. He smiled at the woman. 'I wouldn't call the police if I were you. There's nothing they could charge us with even if they found us. And, of course, we couldn't tell you then - and your son would have to die.' He closed the door and started for the car, a picture of the woman printed in his mind: standing, dazed and trembling, in her living room, looking at him with haunted eyes. Greg grunted in amusement.

She was hooked.

Greg drained his glass and fell back heavily on the sofa arm, making a face. It was the last cheap whiskey he'd ever drink; from now on, it was exclusively the best. He turned his head to look at Carrie. She was standing by the window of their hotel living room, staring at the city. What the hell was she brooding about now? Likely, she was wondering where that blue convertible was. Momentarily, Greg wondered himself. Was it parked? - moving? He grinned drunkenly. It gave him a feeling of power to know something about that car that even its owner didn't know: namely, that, in eight days, at two-sixteen on a Thursday afternoon, it would run down a little boy and kill him.

He focused his eyes and glared at Carrie. 'All right, say it,' he demanded. 'Get it out.'

She turned and looked at him imploringly. 'Does it have to be so much?' she asked.

He turned his face away from her and closed his eyes.

'Greg, does it-'

'Yes!'' He drew in shaking breath. God, would he be glad to get away from her!

'What if they can't pay?'

*'Tough:*

The sound of her repressed sob set his teeth on edge. 'Go in and lie down,' he told her.

'Greg, he hasn't got a chance!'

He twisted around, face whitening. 'Did he have a better chance before we came?' he snarled. 'Use your head for once, God damn it! If it wasn't for us, he'd be as good as dead already!'

'Yes, but-'

'I said go in and lie down!'

'You haven't seen the way it's going to happen, Greg!'

He shuddered violently, fighting back the urge to grab the whiskey bottle, leap at her and smash her head in. '*Get out of here.*' he muttered.

She stumbled across the room, pressing the back of a hand against her lips. The bedroom door thumped shut and he heard her fall across the bed, sobbing. Damn wet-eye bitch! He gritted his teeth until his jaws hurt, then poured himself another inch of whiskey, grimacing as it burned its way into his stomach. They'll come through, he told himself. Obviously, they had the money and, obviously, the woman had believed him. He nodded to himself. They'll come through, all right. Ten thousand; his passport to another life. Expensive clothes. A class hotel. Good-looking women; maybe one of them for keeps. He kept nodding. One of these days, he thought.

He was reaching for his glass when he heard the muffled sound of Carrie talking in the bedroom. For several moments, his outstretched hand hovered between the sofa and the table. Then, in an instant, he was on his feet, lunging for the bedroom door. He flung it open. Carrie jerked around, the phone receiver in her hand, her face a mask of dread. Thursday, the fourteenth!' she blurted into the mouthpiece. 'Two-sixteen in the afternoon!' She screamed as Greg wrenched the receiver from her hand and slammed his palm on the cradle, breaking the connection.

He stood quivering before her, staring at her face with widened, maniac eyes. Slowly, Carrie raised her hand to avert the blow. 'Greg, please don't -' she began.

Fury deafened him. He couldn't hear the heavy, thudding sound the earpiece made against her cheek as he slammed it across her face with all his might. She fell back with a strangled cry. 'You bitch,' he gasped. 'You bitch, you bitch, you bitch!' He emphasized each repetition of the word with another savage blow across her face. He couldn't see her clearly either; she kept wavering behind a film of blinding rage. Everything was finished! She'd blown the deal! The Big One was gone! *God damn it, I'll kill you!* He wasn't certain if the words exploded in his mind or if he were shouting them into her face.

Abruptly, he became aware of the telephone receiver clutched in his aching hand; of Carrie lying, open-mouthed and staring on the bed, her features mashed and bloody. He lost his grip and heard, as if it were a hundred miles below, the receiver thumping on the floor. He stared at Carrie, sick with horror. Was she dead? He pressed his ear against her chest and listened. At first, he could hear only the pulse of his own heart throbbing in his ears. Then, as he concentrated, his expression tautly rabid, he became aware of Carrie's heartbeat, faint and staggering. She wasn't dead! He jerked his head up.

She was looking at him, mouth slack, eyes dumbly stark.

'Carrie?'

No reply. Her lips moved soundlessly. She kept on staring at him. 'What?' he asked. He recognized the look and shuddered. '*What?*'

'Street,' she whispered.

Greg bent over, staring at her mangled features. 'Street,' she whispered, '... night.' She sucked in wheezing, blood choked breath. 'Greg.' She tried to sit up but couldn't. Her expression was becoming one of terrified concern. She whispered, 'Man... razor... you - oh, *no!*'

Greg felt himself enveloped in ice. He clutched at her arm. 'Where?' he mumbled. She didn't answer and his fingers dug convulsively into her flesh. 'Where?' he demanded. 'When?' He began to shiver uncontrollably. 'Carrie, *when?!*'

It was the arm of a dead woman that he clutched. With a gagging sound, he jerked his hand away. He gaped at her, unable to speak or think. Then, as he backed away, his eyes were drawn to the calendar on the wall and a phrase crept leadenly across his mind: *one of these days*. Quite suddenly, he began to



laugh and cry. And before he fled, he stood at the window for an hour and twenty minutes, staring out, wondering who the man was, where he was right now and just what he was doing.

## 22 - Blood Son

The people on the block decided definitely that Jules was crazy when they heard about his composition.

There had been suspicions for a long time.

He made people shiver with his blank stare. His coarse guttural tongue sounded unnatural in his frail body. The paleness of his skin upset many children. It seemed to hang loose around his flesh. He hated sunlight.

And his ideas were a little out of place for the people who lived on the block.

Jules wanted to be a vampire.

People declared it common knowledge that he was born on a night when winds uprooted trees. They said he was born with three teeth. They said he'd used them to fasten himself on his mother's breast drawing blood with the milk.

They said he used to cackle and bark in his crib after dark. They said he walked at two months and sat staring at the moon whenever it shone.

Those were things that people said.

His parents were always worried about him. An only child, they noticed his flaws quickly.

They thought he was blind until the doctor told them it was just a vacuous stare. He told them that Jules, with his large head, might be a genius or an idiot. It turned out he was an idiot.

He never spoke a word until he was five. Then, one night coming up to supper, he sat down at the table and said "Death."

His parents were torn between delight and disgust. They finally settled for a place in between the two feelings. They decided that Jules couldn't have realized what the word meant.

But Jules did.

From that night on, he built up such a large vocabulary that everyone who knew him was astonished. He not only acquired every word spoken to him, words from signs, magazines, books; he made up his own words.

Like-*nighttouch*. Or-*killove*. They were really several words that melted into each other. They said things Jules felt but couldn't explain with other words.

He used to sit on the porch while the other children played hopscotch, stickball and other games. He sat there and stared at the sidewalk and made up words.

Until he was twelve Jules kept pretty much out of trouble.

Of course there was the time they found him undressing Olive Jones in an alley. And another time he was discovered dissecting a kitten on his bed.

But there were many years in between. Those scandals were forgotten.

In general he went through childhood merely disgusting people.

He went to school but never studied. He spent about two or three terms in each grade. The teachers all knew him by his first name. In some subjects like reading and writing he was almost brilliant.

In others he was hopeless.

One Saturday when he was twelve, Jules went to the movies. He saw *Dracula*.

When the show was over he walked, a throbbing nerve mass, through the little girl and boy ranks.

He went home and locked himself in the bathroom for two hours.

His parents pounded on the door and threatened but he wouldn't come out.

Finally he unlocked the door and sat down at the supper table. He had a bandage on his thumb and a satisfied look on his face.

The morning after he went to the library. It was Sunday. He sat on the steps all day waiting for it to

open. Finally he went home.

The next morning he came back instead of going to school.

He found *Dracula* on the shelves. He couldn't borrow it because he wasn't a member and to be a member he had to bring in one of his parents.

So he stuck the book down his pants and left the library and never brought it back.

He went to the park and sat down and read the book through. It was late evening before he finished.

He started at the beginning again, reading as he ran from street light to street light, all the way home.

He didn't hear a word of the scolding he got for missing lunch and supper. He ate, went in his room and read the book to the finish. They asked him where he got the book. He said he found it.

As the days passed Jules read the story over and over. He never went to school.

Late at night, when he had fallen into an exhausted slumber, his mother used to take the book into the living room and show it to her husband.

One night they noticed that Jules had underlined certain sentences with dark shaky pencil lines.

Like: "The lips were crimson with fresh blood and the stream had trickled over her chin and stained the purity of her lawn death robe."

Or: "When the blood began to spurt out, he took my hands in one of his, holding them tight and, with the other seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound..."

When his mother saw this, she threw the book down the garbage chute.

In the next morning when Jules found the book missing he screamed and twisted his mother's arm until she told him where the book was.

Then he ran down to the cellar and dug in the piles of garbage until he found the book.

Coffee grounds and egg yolk on his hands and wrists, he went to the park and read it again.

For a month he read the book avidly. Then he knew it so well he threw it away and just thought about it.

Absence notes were coming from school. His mother yelled. Jules decided to go back for a while.

He wanted to write a composition.

One day he wrote it in class. When everyone was finished writing, the teacher asked if anyone wanted to read their composition to the class.

Jules raised his hand.

The teacher was surprised. But she felt charity. She wanted to encourage him. She drew in her tiny jab of a chin and smiled.

"All right," she said. "Pay attention children. Jules is going to read us his composition."

Jules stood up. He was excited. The paper shook in his hands.

"My Ambition by..."

"Come to the front of the class, Jules, dear."

Jules went to the front of the class. The teacher smiled lovingly. Jules started again.

"My Ambition by Jules Dracula."

The smile sagged.

"When I grow up I want to be a vampire."

The teacher's smiling lips jerked down and out. Her eyes popped wide.

"I want to live forever and get even with everybody and make all the girls vampires. I want to smell of death."

"Jules!"

"I want to have a foul breath that stinks of dead earth and crypts and sweet coffins."

The teacher shuddered. Her hands twitched on her green blotter. She couldn't believe her ears. She looked at the children. They were gaping. Some of them were giggling. But not the girls.

"I want to be all cold and have rotten flesh with stolen blood in the veins."

"That will... hrrumph!"

The teacher cleared her throat mightily.

"That will be all Jules," she said.

Jules talked louder and desperately.

"I want to sink my terrible white teeth in my victims' necks. I want them to..."

"Jules! Go to your seat this instant!"

"I want them to slide like razors in the flesh and into the veins," read Jules ferociously

The teacher jolted to her feet. Children were shivering. None of them were giggling.

"Then I want to draw my teeth out and let the blood flow easy in my mouth and run hot in my throat and..."

The teacher grabbed his arm. Jules tore away and ran to a corner. Barricaded behind a stool he yelled:

"And drip off my tongue and run out my lips down my victims' throats! I want to drink girls' blood!"

The teacher lunged for him. She dragged him out of the corner. He clawed at her and screamed all the way to the door and the principal's office.

"That is my ambition! That is my ambition! *That is my ambition?*"

It was grim.

Jules was locked in his room. The teacher and the principal sat with Jules's parents. They were talking in sepulchral voices.

They were recounting the scene.

All along the block parents were discussing it. Most of them didn't believe it at first. They thought their children made it up.

Then they thought what horrible children they'd raised if the children could make up such things.

So they believed it.

After that everyone watched Jules like a hawk. People avoided his touch and look. Parents pulled their children off the street when he approached. Everyone whispered tales of him.

There were more absence notes.

Jules told his mother he wasn't going to school anymore. Nothing would change his mind. He never went again.

When a truant officer came to the apartment Jules would run over the roofs until he was far away from there.

A year wasted by

Jules wandered the streets searching for something; he didn't know what. He looked in alleys. He looked in garbage cans. He looked in lots. He looked on the east side and the west side and in the middle.

He couldn't find what he wanted.

He rarely slept. He never spoke. He stared down all the time. He forgot his special words.

Then.

One day in the park, Jules strolled through the zoo.

An electric shock passed through him when he saw the vampire bat.

His eyes grew wide and his discoloured teeth shone dully in a wide smile.

From that day on, Jules went daily to the zoo and looked at the bat. He spoke to it and called it the Count. He felt in his heart it was really a man who had changed.

A rebirth of culture struck him.

He stole another book from the library. It told all about wild life.

He found the page on the vampire bat. He tore it out and threw the book away.

He learned the selection by heart.

He knew how the bat made its wound. How it lapped up the blood like a kitten drinking cream. How it walked on folded wing stalks and hind legs like a black furry spider. Why it took no nourishment but blood.

Month after month Jules stared at the bat and talked to it. It became the one comfort in his life. The one symbol of dreams come true.

One day Jules noticed that the bottom of the wire covering the cage had come loose.

He looked around, his black eyes shifting. He didn't see anyone looking. It was a cloudy day. Not many people were there. Jules tugged at the wire. It moved a little. Then he saw a man come out of the monkey house. So he pulled back his hand and strolled away whistling a song he had just made up.

Late at night, when he was supposed to be asleep he would walk barefoot past his parents' room. He would hear his father and mother snoring. He would hurry out, put on his shoes and run to the zoo.

Every time the watchman was not around, Jules would tug at the wiring.

He kept on pulling it loose.

When he was finished and had to run home, he pushed the wire in again. Then no one could tell.

All day Jules would stand in front of the cage and look at the Count and chuckle and tell him he'd soon be free again.

He told the Count all the things he knew. He told the Count he was going to practice climbing down walls head first.

He told the Count not to worry. He'd soon be out. Then, together, they could go all around and drink girls' blood.

One night Jules pulled the wire out and crawled under it into the cage.

It was very dark.

He crept on his knees to the little wooden house. He listened to see if he could hear the Count squeaking.

He stuck his arm in the black doorway. He kept whispering.

He jumped when he felt a needle jab in his finger.

With a look of great pleasure on his thin face, Jules drew the fluttering hairy bat to him.

He climbed down from the cage with it and ran out of the zoo; out of the park. He ran down the silent streets.

It was getting late in the morning. Light touched the dark skies with gray. He couldn't go home. He had to have a place.

He went down an alley and climbed over a fence. He held tight to the bat. It lapped at the dribble of blood from his finger.

He went across a yard and into a little deserted shack.

It was dark inside and damp. It was full of rubble and tin cans and soggy cardboard and excrement.

Jules made sure there was no way the bat could escape.

Then he pulled the door tight and put a stick through the metal loop.

He felt his heart beating hard and his limbs trembling. He let go of the bat. It flew to a dark corner and hung on the wood.

Jules feverishly tore off his shirt. His lips shook. He smiled a crazy smile.

He reached down into his pants pocket and took out a little pen knife he had stolen from his mother.

He opened it and ran a finger over the blade. It sliced through the flesh.

With shaking fingers he jabbed at his throat. He hacked. The blood ran through his fingers.

"Count! Count!" he cried in frenzied joy. "Drink my red blood! Drink me! Drink me!"

He stumbled over the tin cans and slipped and felt for the bat. It sprang from the wood and soared across the shack and fastened itself on the other side.

Tears ran down Jules's cheeks.

He gritted his teeth. The blood ran across his shoulders and across his thin hairless chest.

His body shook in fever. He staggered back toward the other side. He tripped and felt his side torn open on the sharp edge of a tin can.

His hands went out. They clutched the bat. He placed it against his throat. He sank on his back on the cool wet earth. He sighed.

He started to moan and clutch at his chest. His stomach heaved. The black bat on his neck silently lapped his blood.

Jules felt his life seeping away.

He thought of all the years past. The waiting. His parents. School. Dracula. Dreams. For this. This sudden glory.

Jules's eyes flickered open.

The inside of the reeking shack swam about him.

It was hard to breathe. He opened his mouth to gasp in the air. He sucked it in. It was foul. It made him cough. His skinny body lurched on the cold ground.

Mists crept away in his brain.

One by one like drawn veils.

Suddenly his mind was filled with terrible clarity.

He felt the aching pain in his side.

He knew he was lying half naked on garbage and letting a flying bat drink his blood.

With a strangled cry, he reached up and tore away the furry throbbing bat. He flung it away from him. It came back, fanning his face with its vibrating wings.

Jules staggered to his feet.

He felt for the door. He could hardly see. He tried to stop his throat from bleeding so.

He managed to get the door open.

Then, lurching into the dark yard, he fell on his face in the long grass blades.

He tried to call out for help.

But no sounds save a bubbling mockery of words came from his lips.

He heard the fluttering wings.

Then, suddenly they were gone.

Strong fingers lifted him gently. Through dying eyes Jules saw the tall dark man whose eyes shone like rubies.

"My son," the man said.

## 23 - One For The Books

When he woke up that morning, he could talk French.

There was no warning. At six-fifteen, the alarm went off as usual and he and his wife stirred. Fred reached out a sleep-deadened hand and shut off the bell. The room was still for a moment.

Then Eva pushed back the covers on her side and he pushed back the covers on his side. His vein gnarled legs dropped over the side of the bed. He said, '*Bon matin*, Eva.'

There was a slight pause.

'Wha'?' she asked.

'*Je dis bon matin*,' he said.

There was a rustle of nightgown as she twisted around to squint at him. '*What'd* you say?'

'All I said was good -'

Fred Elderman stared back at his wife.

'What *did* I say?' he asked in a whisper... 'You said '*bone mattin* or -'

'*Jes dis bon matin. C'est un bon matin, n'est ce pas?*'

The sound of his hand being clapped across his mouth was like that of a fast ball thumping in a catcher's mitt. Above the knuckle-ridged gag, his eyes were shocked.

'Fred, what IS it?'

Slowly, the hand drew down from his lips.

'I dunno, Eva,' he said, awed. Unconsciously, the hand reached up, one finger of it rubbing at his

hair-ringed bald spot. 'It sounds like some - some kind of foreign talk.'

'But you don't know no foreign talk, Fred,' she told him.

That's just it.'

They sat there looking at each other blankly. Fred glanced over at the clock.

'We better get dressed,' he said.

While he was in the bathroom, she heard him singing, '*Elle fit un fromage, du lait de ses moutons, ron, ron, du lait de ses moutons,*' but she didn't dare call it to his attention while he was shaving.

Over breakfast coffee, he muttered something.

'What?' she asked before she could stop herself.

*'Je'dis que veut dire ceci?'*

He heard the coffee go down her gulping throat.

'I mean,' he said, looking dazed, 'what does this mean?'

'Yes, what *does it*? You never talked no foreign language before.'

'I *know* it,' he said, toast suspended half-way to his open mouth. 'What - what kind of language is it?'

'S-sounds t'me like French.'

*French?* I don't know no French?'

She swallowed more coffee. 'You do now,' she said weakly.

He stared at the table cloth.

*'Le diable s'en mele,'* he muttered.

Her voice rose. 'Fred, *what?*'

His eyes were confused. 'I said the devil has something to do with it.'

'Fred, you're -'

She straightened up in the chair and took a deep breath. 'Now,' she said, let's not profane, Fred.

There has to be a good reason for this/ No reply. 'Well, *doesn't* there, Fred?'

'Sure, Eva. *Sure.* But -'

'No buts about it,' she declared, plunging ahead as if she were afraid to stop. 'Now is there any reason in this world why you should know how to talk French' - she snapped her thin fingers - 'just like that?'

He shook his head vaguely.

'Well,' she went on, wondering what to say next, 'let's see then.' They looked at each other in silence. 'Say something,' she decided. 'Let's - ' She groped for words. 'Let's see what we... have here.' Her voice died off.

'Say somethin?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Go on.'

*'Un gémissement se fit entendre. Les dogues se mettent d aboyer. Ces gants me vont bien. Il va sur les quinze ans -'*

'Fred?'

*'Il fit fabriquer une exacte representation du monstre.'*

'Fred, hold on!' she cried, looking scared.

His voice broke off and he looked at her, blinking.

'What... what did you say this time, Fred?' she asked.

'I said - a moan was heard. His mastiffs began to bark. These gloves fit me. He will soon be fifteen years old and -'

'What?'

'And he has an exact copy of the monster made. *Sans meme l'entamer.'*

'Fred?'

He looked ill. 'Without even scratchin,' he said.

At that hour of the morning, the campus was quiet. The only classes that early were the two seven-thirty Economics lectures and they were held on the White Campus. Here on the Red there was no sound. In an hour the walks would be filled with chatting, laughing, loafer-clicking student hordes, but for now there was peace.

In far less than peace, Fred Elderman shuffled along the east side of the campus, headed for the administration building. Having left a confused Eva at home, he'd been trying to figure it out as he went to work.

What was it? When had it begun? *C'est une heure*, said his mind.

He shook his head angrily. This was terrible. He tried desperately to think of what could have happened, but he couldn't. It just didn't make sense. He was fifty-nine, a janitor at the university with no education to speak of, living a quiet, ordinary life. Then he woke up one morning speaking articulate French.

*French.*

He stopped a moment and stood in the frosty October wind, staring at the cupola of Jeramy Hall. He's cleaned out the French office the night before. Could that have anything to do with -

'No, that was ridiculous. He started off again, muttering under his breath - unconsciously. *'Je suis, tu es, il est, elle est, nous sommes, vous etes -'*

At eight-ten, he entered the History Department office to repair a sink in the washroom. He worked on it for an hour and seven minutes, then put the tools back in the bag and walked out into the office.

'Mornin,' he said to the professor sitting at a desk.

'Good morning, Fred,' said the professor.

Fred Elderman walked out into the hall thinking how remarkable it was that the income of Louis XVI, from the same type of taxes, exceeded that of Louis XV by 130 million livres and that the exports which had been 106 million in 1720 were 192 million in 1746 and -

He stopped in the hall, a stunned look on his lean face.

That morning, he had occasion to be in the offices of the Physics, the Chemistry, the English and the Art Departments.

The Windmill was a little tavern near Main Street. Fred went there on Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings to nurse a couple of draught beers and chat with his two friends -Harry Bullard, manager of Hogan's Bowling Alleys, and Lou Peacock, postal worker and amateur gardener.

Stepping into the doorway of the dim lit saloon that evening, Fred was heard - by an exiting patron - to murmur, *'Je connais tous ces braves gens,'* then look around with a guilty twitch of cheek. 'I mean...' he muttered, but didn't finish.

Harry Bullard saw him first in the mirror. Twisting his head around on its fat column of neck, he said. 'Cmon in, Fred, the whisky's fine,' then, to the bartender, 'Draw one for the elder man,' and chuckled.

Fred walked to the bar with the first smile he'd managed to summon that day. Peacock and Bullard greeted him and the bartender sent down a brimming stein.

'What's new, Fred?' Harry asked.

Fred pressed his moustache between two foam-removing fingers.

'Not much,' he said, still too uncertain to discuss it. Dinner with Eva had been a painful meal during which he'd eaten not only food but an endless and detailed running commentary on the Thirty Years War, the Magna Charta and boudoir information about Catherine the Great. He had been glad to retire from the house at seven-thirty, murmuring an unmanageable, *'Bon nuit, ma chere.'*

'What's new with you?' he asked Harry Bullard now.

'Well,' Harry answered, 'we been paintin' down at the alleys. You know, redecoratin.'

That right?' Fred said. 'When painting with coloured beeswax was inconvenient, Greek and Roman easel painters used *tempera* - that is, colours fixed upon a wood or stucco base by means of such a medium as -'

He stopped. There was a bulging silence.

'Hanh?' Harry Bullard asked.

Fred swallowed nervously. 'Nothing,' he said hastily. 'I was just - ' He stared down into the tan depths of his beer. 'Nothing,' he repeated.

Bullard glanced at Peacock, who shrugged back.

'How are your hothouse flowers coming, Lou?' Fred inquired, to change the subject.

The small man nodded. 'Fine. They're just fine.'

'Good,' said Fred, nodding, too. '*Vi sono poi di cinquante bastimenti in porto,*' He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes.

'What's that?' Lou asked, cupping one ear.

Fred coughed on his hastily swallowed beer. 'Nothing,' he said.

'No, what did ya say?' Harry persisted, the half-smile on his broad face indicating that he was ready to hear a good joke.

'I - I said there are more than fifty ships in the harbour,' explained Fred morosely.

The smile faded. Harry looked blank.

'What harbour?' he asked.

Fred tried to sound casual. 'I - it's just a joke I heard today. But I forgot the last line.'

'Oh,' Harry stared at Fred, then returned to his drink. 'Yeah.'

They were quiet for a moment. Then Lou asked Fred, 'Through for the day?'

'No. I have to clean up the Math office later.'

Lou nodded. That's too bad.'

Fred squeezed more foam from his moustache. Tell me something,' he said, taking the plunge impulsively. 'What would you think if you woke up one morning talking French?'

Who did that?' asked Harry, squinting.

'Nobody,' Fred said hurriedly. 'Just... *supposing*, I mean. Supposing a man was too - well, to *know* things he never learned. You know what I mean? Just *know* them. As if they were always in his mind and he was seeing them for the first time.'

'What kind o' things, Fred?' asked Lou.

'Oh... history. Different... languages. Things about... books and paintings and... atoms and - chemicals.' His shrug was jerky and obvious. Things like that.'

'Don't get ya, buddy,' Harry said, having given up any hopes that a joke was forthcoming.

'You mean he knows things he never learned?' Lou asked. That it?'

There was something in both their voices - a doubting incredulity, a holding back, as if they feared to commit themselves, a suspicious reticence.

Fred sloughed it off. 'I was just supposing. Forget it. It's not worth talking about.'

He had only one beer that night, leaving early with the excuse that he had to clean the Mathematics office. And, all through the silent minutes that he swept and mopped and dusted, he kept trying to figure out what was happening to him.

He walked home in the chill of night to find Eva waiting for him in the kitchen.

'Coffee, Fred?' she offered.

'I'd like that,' he said, nodding. She started to get up. 'No, *s'accomadi, la prego,*' he blurted.

She looked at him, grim-faced.

'I mean,' he translated, 'sit down, Eva. I can get it.'

They sat there drinking coffee while he told her about his experiences.

'It's more than I can figure, Eva,' he said. 'It's... scary, in a way. I know so many things I never knew. I have no idea where they come from. Not the least idea.' His lips pressed together. 'But I *know* them,' he said, 'I certainly know them.'

'More than just... French now?' she asked.

He shook his head worriedly. 'Lots more,' he said. 'Like - ' He looked up from his cup. 'Listen to this. Main progress in producing fast particles has been made by using relatively small voltages and repeated acceleration. In most of the instruments used, charged particles are driven around in circular or spiral orbits with the help of a - You listenin', Eva?'

He saw her Adam's apple move. 'I'm listenin',' she said.

' - help of a magnetic field. The acceleration can be applied in different ways. *In* the so-called betatron of Kerst and Serber - '



'What does it *mean*, Fred?' she interrupted.

'I don't know,' he said helplessly. 'It's... just words in my head. I know what it means when I say something in a foreign tongue, but... this?'

She shivered, clasping at her forearms abruptly.

'It's not right,' she said.

He frowned at her in silence for a long moment.

'What do you mean, Eva?' he asked then.

'I don't know, Fred,' she said quietly and shook her head once, slowly. 'I just don't know.'

She woke up about midnight and heard him mumbling in his sleep.

The natural logarithms of whole numbers from ten to two hundred. Number one - *zero* - two point three oh two six. *One* - two point three nine seven nine. *Two* - two point -'

'Fred, go t'sleep,' she said, frowning nervously.

'- four eight four nine.'

She prodded him with an elbow. 'Go t'sleep, Fred.'

'*Three* - two point -'

'Fred!'

'Huh?' He moaned and swallowed dryly, turned on his side.

In the darkness, she heard him shape the pillow with sleep-heavy hands.

'Fred?' she called softly.

He coughed. 'What?'

'I think you better go t'Doctor Boone t'morra mornin!'

She heard him draw in a long breath, then let it filter out evenly until it was all gone.

'I think so, too,' he said in a blurry voice.

On Friday morning, when he opened the door to the waiting room of Doctor William Boone, a draft of wind scattered papers from the nurse's desk.

'Oh,' he said apologetically. '*Le chieggo scuse. Non ne val la pena.*'

Miss Agnes McCarthy had been Doctor Boone's receptionist-nurse for seven years and in that time she'd never heard Fred Elderman speak a single foreign word.

Thus she goggled at him, amazed. 'What's that you said?' she asked.

Fred's smile was a nervous twitch of the lips.

'Nothing,' he said, 'miss.'

Her returned smile was formal. 'Oh.' She cleared her throat. 'I'm sorry Doctor couldn't see you yesterday.'

'That's all right,' he told her.

'He'll be ready in about ten minutes.'

Twenty minutes later, Fred sat down beside Boone's desk and the heavy-set doctor leaned back in his chair with an, 'Ailing, Fred?'

Fred explained the situation.

The doctor's cordial smile became, in order, amused, fixed, strained and finally nonexistent.

'This is really so?' he demanded.

Fred nodded with grim deliberation. '*Je me laisse con-seiller.*'

Doctor Boone's heavy eyebrows lifted a noticeable jot. 'French,' he said. 'What'd you say?'

Fred swallowed. 'I said I'm willing to be advised.'

'Son of a gun,' intoned Doctor Boone, plucking at his lower lip. '*Son* of a gun.' He got up and ran exploring hands over Fred's skull. 'You haven't received a head blow lately, have you?'

'No,' said Fred. 'Nothing.'

'Hmmm.' Doctor Boone drew away his hands and let them drop to his sides. 'Well, no apparent bumps or cracks,' He buzzed for Miss McCarthy. Then he said, 'Well, let's take a try at the X-rays.'

The X-rays revealed no breaks or blots.

The two men sat in the office, discussing it.

'Hard to believe,' said the doctor, shaking his head. Fred 'sighed despondently. 'Well, don't take on so,' Boone said. 'It's nothing to be disturbed about. So you're a quiz kid, so what?'

Fred ran nervous fingers over his moustache. 'But there's no sense to it. Why is it happening? What is it? The fact is, I'm a little scared.'

'Nonsense, Fred. *Nonsense*. You're in good physical condition. That I guarantee.'

'But what about my - ' Fred hesitated - 'my brain?'

Doctor Boone stuck out his lower lip in consoling derision, shaking his head. I wouldn't worry about that, either.' He slapped one palm on the desk top. 'Let me think about it, Fred. Consult a few associates. You know - *analyse* it. Then I'll let you know. Fair enough?'

He walked Fred to the door.

'In the meantime,' he prescribed, 'no worrying about it. There isn't a thing to worry about.'

His face as he dialled the phone a few minutes later was not unworried, however.

'Fetlock?' he said, getting his party. 'Got a poser for you.'

Habit more than thirst brought Fred to the Windmill that evening. Eva had wanted him to stay home and rest, assuming that his state was due to overwork; but Fred had insisted that it wasn't his health and left the house, just managing to muffle his '*Au revoir*.'

He joined Harry Bui lard and Lou Peacock at the bar and finished his first beer in a glum silence while Harry revealed why they shouldn't vote for Legislator Milford Carpenter.

Tell ya the man's got a private line t'Moscow,' he said. 'A few men like that in office and we're in for it, take my word.' He looked over at Fred staring into his beer. 'What's with it, elder man?' he asked, clapping Fred on the shoulder.

Fred told them - as if he were telling about a disease he'd caught.

Lou Peacock looked incredulous. 'So that's what you were talking about the other night!'

Fred nodded.

'You're not kiddin' us now?' Harry asked. 'Y'know *every-thing*'

'Just about,' Fred admitted sadly.

A shrewd look overcame Harry's face.

'What if I ask ya somethin' ya *don't* know?'

'I'd be happy,' Fred said in a despairing voice.

Harry beamed. 'Okay. I won't ask you about atoms nor chemicals nor anythin' like that. I'll just ask ya t'tell me about the country between my home town Au Sable and Tarva.' He hit the bar with a contented slap.

Fred looked hopeful briefly, but then his face blanked and he said in an unhappy voice. 'Between Au Sable and Tarva, the route is through typical cut-over land that once was covered with virgin pine (*danger: deer on the highway*) and now has only second-growth oak, pine and poplar. For years after the decline of the lumber industry, picking huckleberries was one of the chief local occupations.'

Harry gaped.

'Because the berries were known to grow in the wake of fires,' Fred concluded, 'residents deliberately set many fires that roared through the country.'

'That's a damn dirty lie!' Harry said, chin trembling belligerently.

Fred looked at him in surprise.

'You shouldn't ought to go around tellin' lies like that,' Harry said. 'You call that knowin' the countryside - telling *lies* about it?'

'Take it easy, Harry,' Lou cautioned.

'Well,' Harry said angrily, 'he shouldn't ought to tell lies like that.'

'I didn't say it,' Fred answered hopelessly. 'It's more as though I -I *read it off*.'

'Yeah? Well...' Harry fingered his glass restlessly.

'You really know *everything*? ' Lou asked, partly to ease the tension, partly because he was awed.

'I'm afraid so,' Fred replied.

'You ain't just... playin' a trick?'

Fred shook his head. 'No trick.'

Lou Peacock looked small and intense. 'What can you tell me,' he asked in a back-alley voice, 'about orange roses?'

The blank look crossed Fred's face again. Then he recited.

'Orange is not a fundamental colour but a blend of red and pink of varied intensity and yellow. There was very few orange roses prior to the Pernatia strain. All orange, apricot, chamois and coral roses finish with pink more or less accentuated. Some attain that lovely shade - *Cuisse de Nymphe emue*.'

Lou Peacock was open-mouthed. 'Ain't that something?' Harry Bullard blew out heavy breath. 'What d'ya know about Carpenter?' he asked pugnaciously.

'Carpenter, Milford, born 1898 in Chicago, Illi -'

'Never mind,' Harry cut in. 'I ain't interested. He's a Commie; that's all I gotta know about him.'

'The elements that go into a political campaign,' quoth Fred helplessly, 'are many - the personality of the candidates, the issues - if any - the attitude of the press, economic groups, traditions, the opinion polls, the -'

'I tell ya he's a Commie!' Harry declared, voice rising.

'You voted for him last election,' Lou said. 'As I re -'

'I did *not*!' snarled Harry, getting redder in the face.

The blank look appeared on Fred Elderman's face. 'Remembering things that are not so is a kind of memory distortion that goes by several names as *pathological lying* or *mythomania*.'

'You callin' me a liar, Fred?'

'It differs from ordinary lying in that the speaker comes to believe his own lies and -'

'Where did you get that black eye?' a shocked Eva asked Fred when he came into the kitchen later. 'Have you been fighting at *your* age?'

Then she saw the look on his face and ran for the refrigerator. She sat him on a chair and held a piece of beefsteak against his swelling eye while he related what had happened.

'He's a bully,' she said. 'A bully!'

'No, I don't blame him,' Fred disagreed. 'I insulted him. I don't even know what I'm saying any more. I'm - I'm all mixed up.'

She looked down at his slumped form, an alarmed expression on her face. 'When is Doctor Boone going to *do* something for you?'

'I don't know.'

A half hour later, against Eva's wishes, he went to clean up the library with a fellow janitor; but the moment he entered the huge room, he gasped, put his hands to his temples and fell down on one knee, gasping, 'My head! *My head!*'

It took a long while of sitting quietly in the downstairs hallway before the pain in his skull stopped. He sat there staring fixedly at the glossy tile floor, his head feeling as if it had just gone twenty-nine rounds with the heavyweight champion of the world.

Fetlock came in the morning. Arthur B., forty-two, short and stocky, head of the Department of Psychological Sciences, he came bustling along the path in porkpie hat and chequered overcoat, jumped up on the porch, stepped across its worn boards and stabbed at the bell button. While he waited, he clapped leather-gloved hands together energetically and blew out breath clouds.

'Yes?' Eva asked when she opened the door.

Professor Fetlock explained his mission, not noticing how her face tightened with fright when he announced his field. Reassured that Doctor Boone had sent him, she led Fetlock up the carpeted steps, explaining, 'He's still in bed. He had an attack last night.'

'Oh?' said Arthur Fetlock.

When introductions had been made and he was alone with the janitor, Professor Fetlock fired a rapid series of questions, Fred Elderman, propped up with pillows, answered them as well as he could.

This attack,' said Fetlock, 'what happened?'

'Don't know, Professor, Walked in the library and - well, it was as if a ton of cement hit me on the head. No - *in* my head.'

'Amazing. And this knowledge you say you've acquired -are you conscious of an *increase* in it since your ill-fated visit to the library?'

Fred nodded. 'I know more than ever.'

The professor bounced the fingertips of both hands against each other. 'A book on language by Pei. Section 9-B in the library, book number 429.2, if memory serves. Can you quote from it?'

Fred looked blank, but words followed almost immediately. 'Leibnitz first advanced the theory that all language came not from a historically recorded source but from proto-speech. In some respects he was a precursor of -'

'Good, good,' said Arthur Fetlock. 'Apparently a case of spontaneous telepathic manifestations coupled with clairvoyance.'

'Meaning?'

'Telepathy, Elderman. Telepathy! Seems every book or educated mind you come across, you pick clean of content. You worked in the French office, you spoke French. You worked in the Mathematics office, you quoted numbers, tables, axioms. Similarly with all other offices, subjects and individuals.' He scowled, purse-lipped. 'Ah, but why?'

'*Causa qua re*,' muttered Fred.

A brief wry sound in Professor Fetlock's throat. 'Yes, I wish I knew, too. However...' He leaned forward. 'What's that?'

'How come I can learn so much?' Fred asked worriedly, 'I mean -'

'No difficulty there,' stated the stocky psychologist. 'You see, no man ever utilized the full learning capacity of the brain. It still has an immense potential. Perhaps that's what's happening to you - you're realising this potential.'

'But how?'

'Spontaneously realised telepathy and clairvoyance plus infinite retention and unlimited potential.' He whistled softly. 'Amazing. Positively amazing. Well, I must be going.'

'But what'll I do?' Fred begged.

'Why, enjoy it,' said the professor expansively. 'It's a perfectly fantastic gift. Now look - if I were to gather together a group of faculty members, would you be willing to speak to them? Informally, of course.'

'But -'

'They should be entranced, positively entranced. I must do a paper for the *Journal*.'

'But what does it mean, Professor?' Fred Elderman asked, his voice shaking.

'Oh, we'll look into it, never fear. Really, this is revolutionary. An unparalleled phenomenon.' He made a sound of delighted disbelief. 'In-credible.'

When Professor Fetlock had gone, Fred sat defeatedly in his bed. So there was nothing to be done - nothing but spout endless, inexplicable words and wonder into the nights what terrible thing was happening to him. Maybe the professor was excited; maybe it was exciting intellectual fare for outsiders. For him, it was only grim and increasingly frightening business.

'Why? Why? It was the question he could neither answer nor escape.

He was thinking that when Eva came in. He lifted his gaze as she crossed the room and sat down on the bed.

'What did he say?' she asked anxiously.

When he told her, her reaction was the same as his.

That's all? Enjoy it?' She pressed her lips together in anger. 'What's the matter with him? Why did Doctor Boone send him?'

He shook his head, without an answer.

There was such a look of confused fear on his face that she 'reached out her hand suddenly and touched his cheek. 'Does your head hurt, dear?'

'It hurts inside,' he said. 'In my... ' There was a clicking in his throat. 'If one considers the brain as a tissue which is only moderately compressible, surrounded by two variable factors - the blood it contains and the spinal fluid which surrounds it and fills the ventricles inside the brain we have - '

He broke off spasmodically and sat there, quivering.

'God help us,' she whispered.

'As Sextus Empiricus says in his *Arguments Against Belief in a God*, those who affirm, positively, that God exists cannot avoid falling into an impiety. For - '

'Fred stop it!'

He sat looking at her dazedly.

'Fred, you don't... know what you're saying. Do you?'

'No. I never do. I just - Eva, what's going on!'

She held his hand tightly and stroked it. 'It's all right, Fred. Please don't worry so.'

But he did worry. For behind the complex knowledge that filled his mind, he was still the same man, simple, uncomprehending - and afraid.

Why was it happening?

It was as if, in some hideous way, he were a sponge filling more and more with knowledge and there would come a time when there was no room left and the sponge would explode.

Professor Fetlock stopped him in the hallway Monday morning. 'Elderman, I've spoken to the members of the faculty and they're all as excited as I. Would this afternoon be too soon? I can get you excused from any work you may be required to do.'

Fred looked bleakly at the professor's enthusiastic face. 'It's all right.'

'Splendid! Shall we say four-thirty then? My offices?'

'All right.'

'And may I make a suggestion?' asked the professor. 'I'd like you to tour the university - all of it.'

When they separated, Fred went back down to the basement to put away his tools.

At four twenty-five, he pushed open the heavy door to the Department of Psychological Sciences. He stood there, waiting patiently, one hand on the knob, until someone in the large group of faculty members saw him. Professor Fetlock disengaged himself from the group and hurried over.

'Elderman,' he said, 'come in, come in.'

'Professor, has Doctor Boone said anything more?' Fred insisted. 'I mean about - '

'No, nothing. Never fear, we'll get to it. But come along. I want you to - Ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please!'

Fred was introduced to them, standing in their midst, trying to look at ease when his heart and nerves were pulsing with a nervous dread.

'And did you follow my suggestion,' Fetlock asked loudly, 'and tour all the departments in the university?'

'Yes... sir.'

'Good, good.' Professor Fetlock nodded emphatically. 'That should complete the picture then. Imagine it, ladies and gentlemen - the sum total of knowledge in our entire university - all in the head of this one man!'

There were sounds of doubt from the faculty.

'No, no, I'm serious!' claimed Fetlock. 'The proof of the pudding is quite ample. Ask away.'

Fred Elderman stood there in the momentary silence, thinking of what Professor Fetlock had said. The knowledge of an entire university in his head. That meant there was no more to be gotten here then.

What now?

Then the questions came - and the answers, dead-voiced and monotonous.

'What will happen to the sun in fifteen million years?'

'If the sun goes on radiating at its present rate for fifteen million years, its whole weight will be transformed into radiation.'

'What is a root tone?'

'In harmonic units, the constituent tones seem to have unequal harmonic values. Some seem to be more important and dominate the sounding unity. These roots are -'

All the knowledge of an entire university in his head.

'The five orders of Roman architecture.'

Tuscan, Doric, Corinthian, Ionic, Composite. Tuscan being a simplified Doric, Doric retaining the triglyphs, Corinthian characterised by -'

No more knowledge there he didn't possess. His brain crammed with it. Why?

'Buffer capacity?'

The buffer capacity of a solution may be defined as  $dx/dpH$  where  $dx$  is the small amount of strong acid or -'

Why?

'A moment ago. French.'

*'Il n'y a qu'un instant.'*

Endless questions, increasingly excited until they were almost being shouted.

'What is literature involved with?'

'Literature is, of its nature, involved with ideas because it deals with Man in society, which is to say that it deals with formulations, valuations and -'

Why?

'Rules for masthead lights on steam vessels?' A laugh.

'A steam vessel when under way shall carry (a) on or in front of the foremast or, if a vessel without a foremast, then in the forepart of the vessel, a bright, white light so constructed as to -'

No laughter. Questions.

'How would a three-stage rocket take off?'

'The three-stage rocket would take off vertically and be given a slight tilt in an easterly direction, Brennschluss taking place about -'

'Who was Count Bernadotte?'

'What are the by-products of oil?'

'Which city is -'

'How can -'

'What is -'

'When did -'

And when it was over and he had answered every question they asked, there was a great, heavy silence. He stood trembling and yet numb, beginning to get a final knowledge.

The phone rang then and made everyone start.

Professor Fetlock answered it. 'For you Elderman.'

Fred walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver.

'Fred?' he heard Eva say.

*'Oui'*

'What?'

He twitched. 'I'm sorry, Eva. I mean yes, it's I.'

He heard her swallowing on the other end of the line. 'Fred,' I... just wondered why you didn't come home, so I called your office and Charlie said -'

He told her about the meeting.

'Oh,' she said. 'Well, will you be - home for supper?'

The last knowledge was seeping, rising slowly.

'I'll try, Eva. I think so, yes.'

'I been worried, Fred.'

He smiled sadly. 'Nothing to worry about, Eva.'

Then the message sliced abruptly across his mind and he said, 'Good-bye Eva,' and dropped the receiver. I have to go/ he told Fetlock and the others.

He didn't exactly hear what they said in return. The words, the transition from room to hall were blurred over by his sudden, concentrated need to get out on the campus.

The questioning faces were gone and he was hurrying down the hall on driven feet, his action as his speech had been - unmotivated, beyond understanding. Something drew him on. He had spoken without knowing why; now he rushed down the long hallway without knowing why.

He rushed across the lobby, gasping for breath. The message he said. *Come. It's time.*

These things, these many things - who would want to know them? These endless facts about all earthly knowledge.

*Earthly knowledge...*

As he came half tripping, half running down the building steps into the early darkness, he saw the flickering bluish white light in the sky. It was aiming over the trees, the buildings, straight at him.

He stood petrified, staring at it, and knew exactly why he had acquired all the knowledge he had.

The blue-white light bore directly at him with a piercing, whining hum. Across the dark campus, a young girl screamed.

*Life on the other planets*, the last words crossed his mind, *is not only possibility but high probability.*

Then the light hit him and bounced straight back up to its source, like lightning streaking in reverse from lightning rod to storm cloud, leaving him in awful blackness.

They found the old man wandering across the campus grass like a somnambulant mute. They spoke to him, but his tongue was still. Finally, they were obliged to look in his wallet, where they found his name and address and took him home.

A year later, after learning to talk all over again, he said his first stumbling words. He said them one night to his wife when she found him in the bathroom holding a sponge in his hand.

'Fred, what are you doing?'

*I been squeezed,* he said.

## 24 - Lemmings

'Where do they all come from?' Reordon asked.

'Everywhere,' said Carmack.

They were standing on the coast highway. As far as they could see there was nothing but cars. Thousands of cars were jammed bumper to bumper and pressed side to side. The highway was solid with them.

'There come some more,' said Carmack.

The two policemen looked at the crowd of people walking towards the beach. Many of them talked and laughed. Some of them were very quiet and serious. But they all walked towards the beach.

Reordon shook his head. 'I don't get it,' he said for the hundredth time that week. 'I just don't get it.'

Carmack shrugged.

'Don't think about it,' he said. 'It's happening. What else is there?'

'But it's *crazy*.'

'Well, there they go,' said Carmack.

As the two policemen watched, the crowd of people moved across the grey sands of the beach and walked into the water. Some of them started swimming. Most of them couldn't because of their clothes. Carmack saw a young woman flailing at the water and dragged down by the fur coat she was wearing.

In several minutes they were all gone. The two policemen stared at the place where the people had walked into the water.

'How long does it go on?' Reordon asked.

'Until they're gone, I guess,' said Carmack.

'But *why*?'

'You ever read about the Lemmings?' Carmack asked.

'No.'

'They're rodents who live in the Scandinavian countries. They keep breeding until all their food supply is gone. Then they move across the country, ravaging everything in their way. When they reach the sea they keep going. They swim until their strength is gone. Millions of them.'

'You think that's what *this* is?' asked Reordon.

'Maybe,' said Carmack.

'People aren't rodents!' Reordon said angrily.

Carmack didn't answer.

They stood on the edge of the highway waiting but nobody appeared.

'Where are they?' asked Reordon.

'Maybe they've all gone in,' Carmack said.

'*All* of them?'

'It's been going on for more than a week,' Carmack said. 'People could have gotten here from all over. Then there are the lakes.'

Reordon shuddered. 'All of them,' he said.

'I don't know,' said Carmack, 'but they've been coming right along until now.'

'Oh, God,' said Reordon.

Carmack took out a cigarette and lit it. 'Well,' he said, 'what now?'

Reordon sighed. 'Us?' he said.

'You go,' Carmack said. 'I'll wait a while and see if there's anyone else.'

'All right.' Reordon put his hand out. 'Good-bye, Carmack,' he said.

They shook hands. 'Good-bye, Reordon/ Carmack said.

He stood smoking his cigarette and watching his friend walk across the grey sand of the beach and into the water until it was over his head. He saw Reordon swim a dozen yards before he disappeared.

After a while he put out his cigarette and looked around. Then he walked into the water too.

A million cars stood empty along the beach.

## **25 - No Such Thing As A Vampire**

In the early autumn of the year 18... Madame Alexis Gheria awoke one morning to a sense of utmost torpor. For more than a minute, she lay inertly on her back, her dark eyes staring upward. How wasted she felt. It seemed as if her limbs were sheathed in lead. Perhaps she was ill, Petre must examine her and see.

Drawing in a faint breath, she pressed up slowly on an elbow. As she did, her nightdress slid, rustling, to her waist. How had it come unfastened? she wondered, looking down at herself.

Quite suddenly, Madame Gheria began to scream.

In the breakfast room, Dr. Petre Gheria looked up, startled, from his morning paper. In an instant, he had pushed his chair back, slung his napkin on the table and was rushing for the hallway. He dashed across its carpeted breadth and mounted the staircase two steps at a time.

It was a near hysterical Madame Gheria he found sitting on the edge of her bed looking down in horror at her breasts. Across the dilated whiteness of them, a smear of blood lay drying.

Dr. Gheria dismissed the upstairs maid, who stood frozen in the open doorway, gaping at her mistress. He locked the door and hurried to his wife.

'Petre!' she gasped.

'Gently.' He helped her lie back across the bloodstained pillow.

'Petre, what *is* it?' she begged.

'Lie still, my dear.' His practised hands moved in swift search over her breasts. Suddenly, his breath



choked off. Pressing aside her head, he stared down dumbly at the pinprick lancements on her neck, the ribbon of tacky blood that twisted downward from them.

'My *throat*,' Alexis said.

'No, it's just a - ' Dr. Gheria did not complete the sentence. He knew exactly what it was.

Madame Gheria began to tremble. 'Oh, my God, my *God*,' she said.

Dr. Gheria rose and foundered to the wash-basin. Pouring in water, he returned to his wife and washed away the blood. The wound was clearly visible now -two tiny punctures close to the jugular. A grimacing Dr. Gheria touched the mounds of inflamed tissue in which they lay. As he did, his wife groaned terribly and turned her face away.

'Now listen to me,' he said, his voice apparently calm. 'We will not succumb, immediately, to superstition, do you hear? There are any number of -'

'I'm going to die,' she said.

'Alexis, do you hear me?' He caught her harshly by the shoulders.

She turned her head and stared at him with vacant eyes. 'You know what it is,' she said.

Dr. Gheria swallowed. He could still taste coffee in his mouth.

'I know what it appears to be,' he said, 'and we shall -not ignore the possibility. However -'

'I'm going to die,' she said.

'Alexis!' Dr. Gheria took her hand and gripped it fiercely. 'You *shall not be taken from me*,' he said.

Solta was a village of some thousand inhabitants situated in the foothills of Rumania's Bihor Mountains. It was a place of dark traditions. People, hearing the bay of distant wolves, would cross themselves without a thought. Children would gather garlic buds as other children gather flowers, bringing them home for the windows. On every door there was a painted cross, at every throat a metal one. Dread of the vampire's blighting was as normal as the dread of fatal sickness. It was always in the air.

Dr. Gheria thought about that as he bolted shut the windows of Alexis' room. Far off, molten twilight hung above the mountains. Soon it would be dark again. Soon the citizens of Solta would be barricaded in their garlic-reeking houses. He had no doubt that every soul of them knew exactly what had happened to his wife. Already the cook and upstairs maid were pleading for discharge. Only the inflexible discipline of the butler, Karel, kept them at their jobs. Soon, even that would not suffice. Before the horror of the vampire, reason fled.

He'd seen the evidence of it that very morning when he'd ordered Madam's room stripped to the walls and searched for rodents or venomous insects. The servants had moved about the room as if on a floor of eggs, their eyes more white than pupil, their fingers twitching constantly to their crosses. They had known full well no rodent or insects would be found. And Gheria had known it. Still, he'd raged at them for their timidity, succeeding only in frightening them further.

He turned from the window with a smile.

'There now,' said he, 'nothing alive will enter this room tonight.'

He caught himself immediately, seeing the flare of terror in her eyes.

'Nothing at *all* will enter,' he amended.

Alexis lay motionless on her bed, one pale hand at her breast, clutching at the worn silver cross she'd taken from her jewel box. She hadn't worn it since he'd given her the diamond-studded one when they were married. How typical of her village background that, in this moment of dread, she should seek protection from the unadorned cross of her church. She was such a child. Gheria smiled down gently at her.

'You won't be needing that, my dear,' he said, 'you'll be safe tonight.'

Her fingers tightened on the crucifix.

'No, no, wear it if you will,' he said. 'I only meant that I'll be at your side all night.'

'You'll stay with me?'

He sat on the bed and held her hand.

'Do you think I'd leave you for a moment?' he said.

Thirty minutes later, she was sleeping. Dr. Gheria drew a chair beside the bed and seated himself. Removing his glasses, he massaged the bridge of his nose with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

Then, sighing, he began to watch his wife. How incredibly beautiful she was. Dr. Gheria's breath grew strained.

'There is no such thing as a vampire,' he whispered to himself.

There was a distant pounding. Dr. Gheria muttered in his sleep, his fingers twitching. The pounding increased; an agitated voice came swirling from the darkness. 'Doctor!' it called.

Gheria snapped awake. For a moment, he looked confusedly towards the locked door.

'Dr. Gheria?' demanded Karel.

'What?'

'Is everything all right?'

'Yes, everything is -'

Dr. Gheria cried out hoarsely, springing for the bed. Alexis' nightdress had been torn away again. A hideous dew of blood covered her chest and neck.

Karel shook his head.

'Bolted windows cannot hold away the creature, sir,' he said.

He stood, tall and lean, beside the kitchen table on which lay the cluster of silver he'd been polishing when Gheria had entered.

'The creature has the power to make itself a vapour which can pass through any opening however small,' he said.

'But the cross!' cried Gheria. 'It was still at her throat - untouched! Except by - blood,' he added in a sickened voice.

'This I cannot understand,' said Karel, grimly. 'The cross should have protected her.'

'But why did I see nothing?'

'You were drugged by its mephitic presence,' Karel said. 'Count yourself fortunate that you were not also attacked.'

'I do not count myself fortunate!' Dr. Gheria struck his palm, a look of anguish on his face. 'What am I to do, Karel?' he asked.

'Hang garlic,' said the old man. 'Hang it at the windows, at the doors. Let there be no opening unblocked by garlic'

Gheria nodded distractedly. 'Never in my life have I seen this thing,' he said, brokenly. 'Now, my own wife -'

'I have seen it,' said Karel. 'I have, myself, put to its rest one of these monsters from the grave.'

'The stake -?' Gheria looked revolted.

The old man nodded slowly.

Gheria swallowed. 'Pray God you may put this one to rest as well,' he said.

'Petre?'

She was weaker now, her voice a toneless murmur. Gheria bent over her. 'Yes, my dear,' he said.

'It will come again tonight,' she said.

'No.' He shook his head determinedly. 'It cannot come. The garlic will repel it.'

'My cross didn't,' she said, 'you didn't.'

'The garlic will,' he said. 'And see?' He pointed at the bedside table. 'I've had black coffee brought for me. I won't sleep tonight.'

She closed her eyes, a look of pain across her sallow features.

'I don't want to die,' she said. 'Please don't let me die, Petre.'

'You won't,' he said. 'I promise you; the monster shall be destroyed.'

Alexis shuddered feebly. 'But if there is no way, Petre,' she murmured.

'There is always a way,' he answered.

Outside the darkness, cold and heavy, pressed around the house. Dr. Gheria took his place beside the bed and began to wait. Within the hour, Alexis slipped into a heavy slumber. Gently, Dr. Gheria released her hand and poured himself a cup of steaming coffee. As he sipped it hotly, bitter, he looked around the room. Door locked, windows bolted, every opening sealed with garlic, the cross at Alexis' throat. He

nodded slowly to himself. It will work, he thought. The monster would be thwarted.

He sat there, waiting, listening to his breath.

Dr. Gheria was at the door before the second knock.

'Michael!' He embraced the younger man. 'Dear Michael, I was sure you'd come!'

Anxiously, he ushered Dr. Vares towards his study. Outside darkness was just falling.

'Where on earth are all the people of the village?' asked Vares. 'I swear, I didn't see a soul as I rode in.'

'Huddling, terror-stricken, in their houses,' Gheria said, 'and all my servants with them save for one.'

'Who is that?'

'My butler, Karel,' Gheria answered. 'He didn't answer the door because he's sleeping. Poor fellow, he is very old and has been doing the work of five.' He gripped Vares' arm. 'Dear Michael,' he said, 'you have no idea how glad I am to see you.'

Vares looked at him worriedly. 'I came as soon as I received your message,' he said.

'And I appreciate it,' Gheria said. 'I know how long and hard a ride it is from Cluj.'

'What's wrong?' asked Vares. 'Your letter only said -'

Quickly, Gheria told him what had happened in the past week.

'I tell you, Michael, I stumble at the brink of madness,' he said. 'Nothing works! Garlic, wolfsbane, crosses, mirrors, running water - useless! No, don't say it! This isn't superstition nor imagination! This is *happening!* A vampire is destroying her! Each day she sinks yet deeper into that - deadly torpor from which -'

Gheria clinched his hands. 'And yet I cannot understand it,' he muttered, brokenly, 'I simply cannot understand it.'

'Come, sit, sit.' Doctor Vares pressed the older man into a chair, grimacing at the pallor of him. Nervously, his fingers sought for Gheria's pulse beat.

'Never mind me,' protested Gheria. 'It's Alexis we must help.' He pressed a sudden, trembling hand across his eyes. 'Yet how?' he said. He made no resistance as the younger man undid his collar and examined his neck.

'You, too,' said Vares, sickened.

'What does that matter?' Gheria clutched at the younger man's hand. 'My friend, my dearest friend,' he said, 'tell me that it is not I! Do I do this hideous thing to her?'

Vares looked confounded. '*You?*' he said. 'But -'

'I know, I know,' said Gheria, 'I, myself, have been attacked. Yet nothing follows, Michael! What breed of horror is this which cannot be impeded? From what unholy place does it emerge? I've had the countryside examined foot by foot, every graveyard ransacked, every crypt inspected! There is no house within the village that has not yet been subjected to my search. I tell you, Michael, there is nothing! Yet, there *is* something -something which assaults us nightly, draining us of life. The village is engulfed by terror - and I as well! I never see this creature, never hear it! Yet, every morning, I find my beloved wife -'

Vares' face was drawn and pallid now. He stared intently at the older man.

'What am I to do, my friend?' pleaded Gheria. 'How am I to save her?'

Vares had no answer.

'How long has she - been like this?' asked Vares. He could not remove his stricken gaze from the whiteness of Alexis' face.

'For days,' said Gheria. 'The retrogression has been constant.'

Dr. Vares put down Alexis' flaccid hand. 'Why did you not tell me sooner?' he asked.

'I thought the matter could be handled,' Gheria answered, faintly. 'I know now that it - cannot.'

Vares shuddered. 'But, surely - ' he began.

'There is nothing left to be done,' said Gheira. 'Everything has been tried, *everything!*' He stumbled to the window and stared out bleakly into the deepening night.

'And now it comes again, he murmured, 'And we are helpless before it.'

'Not helpless, Petre.' Vares forced a cheering smile to his lips and laid his hand upon the older man's shoulder. 'I will watch her tonight.'

'It's useless.'

'Not at all, my friend,' said Vares, nervously. 'And now you must sleep.'

'I will not leave her,' said Gheria.

'But you need rest.'

'I cannot leave,' said Gheria. 'I will not be separated from her.'

Vares nodded. 'Of course,' he said. 'We will share the hours of watching then.'

Gheria" sighed. 'We can try,' he said, but there was no sound of hope in his voice.

Some twenty minutes later, he returned with an urn of steaming coffee which was barely possible to smell through the heavy mist of garlic fumes which hung in the air. Trudging to the bed, Gheria set down the tray. Dr. Vares had drawn a chair up beside the bed.

'I'll watch first,' he said. 'You sleep, Petre.'

'It would do no good to try,' said Gheria. He held a cup beneath the spigot and the coffee gurgled out like smoking ebony.

'Thank you,' murmured Vares as the cup was handed to him. Gheria nodded once and drew himself a cupful before he sat.

'I do not know what will happen to Solta if this creature is not destroyed,' he said. 'The people are paralysed by terror.'

'Has it - been elsewhere in the village?' Vares asked him.

Gheria sighed exhaustedly. 'Why need it go elsewhere?' he said. 'It is finding all it - craves within these walls.' He stared despondently at Alexis. 'When we are gone,' he said, 'it will go elsewhere. The people know that and are waiting for it.'

Vares set down his cup and rubbed his eyes.

'It seems impossible,' he said, 'that we, practitioners of a science, should be unable to -'

'What can science effect against it?' said Gheria. 'Science which will not even admit its existence? We could bring, into this very room, the foremost scientists of the world and they would say - my friends, you have been deluded. There is no vampire. All is mere trickery.'

Gheria stopped and looked intently at the younger man. He said, 'Michael?'

Vares' breath was slow and heavy. Putting down his cup of untouched coffee, Gheria stood and moved to where Vares sat slumped in his chair. He pressed back an eyelid, looked down briefly at the sightless pupil, then withdrew his hand. The drug was quick, he thought. And most effective. Vares would be insensible for more than time enough.

Moving to the closet, Gheria drew down his bag and carried it to the bed. He tore Alexis' nightdress from her upper body and, within seconds, had drawn another syringe full of her blood; this would be the last withdrawal, fortunately. Stanching the wound, he took the syringe to Vares and emptied it into the young man's mouth, smearing it across his lips and teeth.

That done, he strode to the door and unlocked it. Returning to Vares, he raised and carried him into the hall. Karel would not awaken; a small amount of opiate in his food had seen to that. Gheria laboured down the steps beneath the weight of Vares' body. In the darkest corner of the cellar, a wooden casket waited for the younger man. There he would lie until the following morning when the distraught Dr. Petre Gheria would, with sudden inspiration, order Karel to search the attic and cellar on the remote, nay fantastic possibility that -

Ten minutes later, Gheria was back in the bedroom checking Alexis' pulse beat. It was active enough; she would survive. The pain and torturing horror she had undergone would be punishment enough for her. As for Vares -

Dr. Gheria smiled in pleasure for the first time since Alexis and he had returned from Cluj at the end of the summer. Dear spirits in heaven, would it not be sheer enchantment to watch old Karel drive a stake through Michael Vares' damned cuckolding heart!

## 26 - First Anniversary

Just before he left the house on Thursday morning, Adeline asked him, "Do I still taste sour to you?" Norman looked at her reproachfully.

"Well, do I?"

He slipped his arms around her waist and nibbled at her throat.

"Tell me now," said Adeline.

Norman looked submissive.

"Aren't you going to let me live it down?" he asked.

"Well, you *said* it, darling. And on our first anniversary too!"

He pressed his cheek to hers. "So I said it," he murmured. "Can't I be allowed a faux pas now and then?"

"You haven't answered me."

"Do you taste sour? Of course you don't." He held her close and breathed the fragrance of her hair. "Forgiven?"

She kissed the tip of his nose and smiled and, once more, he could only marvel at the fortune which had bestowed on him such a magnificent wife. Starting their second year of marriage, they were still like honeymooners.

Norman raised her face and kissed her.

"Be damned," he said.

"What's wrong? Am I sour again?"

"No." He looked confused. "Now I can't taste you at all."

Now you can't taste her at all," said Dr. Phillips.

Norman smiled. "I know it sounds ridiculous," he said.

"Well, it's unique, I'll give it that," said Phillips.

"More than you think," added Norman, his smile grown a trifle laboured.

"How so?"

"I have no trouble tasting anything else."

Dr. Phillips peered at him awhile before he spoke. "Can you smell her?" he asked then.

"Yes."

"You're sure."

"Yes. What's that got to do with-" Norman stopped. "You mean that the senses of taste and smell go together," he said.

Phillips nodded. "If you can smell her, you should be able to taste her."

"I suppose," said Norman, "but I can't."

Dr. Phillips grunted wryly. "Quite a poser."

"No ideas?" asked Norman.

"Not offhand," said Phillips, "though I suspect it's allergy of some kind."

Norman looked disturbed.

"I hope I find out soon," he said.

Adeline looked up from her stirring as he came into the kitchen. "What did Dr. Phillips say?" "That I'm allergic to you." "He didn't say that," she scolded.

"Sure he did."

"Be serious now."

"He said I have to take some allergy tests."

"He doesn't think it's anything to worry about, does he?" asked Adeline.

"No."

"Oh, good." She looked relieved.

"Good, nothing," he grumbled. "The taste of you is one of the few pleasures I have in life."

"You stop that." She removed his hands and went on stirring. Norman slid his arm around her and rubbed his nose on the back of her neck. "Wish I could taste you," he said. "I like your flavour."

She reached up and caressed his cheek. "I love you," she said.

Norman twitched and made a startled noise.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He sniffed. "What's that?" He looked around the kitchen. "Is the garbage out?" he asked.

She answered quietly. "Yes, Norman."

"Well, something sure as hell smells awful in here. Maybe-" He broke off, seeing the expression on her face. She pressed her lips together and, suddenly, it dawned on him. "Honey, you don't think I'm saying-"

"Well, *aren't* you?" Her voice was faint and trembling.

"Adeline, come on."

"First, I taste sour. Now-"

He stopped her with a lingering kiss.

"I love you," he said, "understand? I *love* you. Do you think I'd try to hurt you?"

She shivered in his arms. "You *do* hurt me," she whispered.

He held her close and stroked her hair. He kissed her gently on the lips, the cheeks, the eyes. He told her again and again how much he loved her.

He tried to ignore the smell.

Instantly, his eyes were open and he was listening. He stared up sightlessly into the darkness. Why had he woken up? He turned his head and reached across the mattress. As he touched her, Adeline stirred a little in her sleep.

Norman twisted over on his side and wriggled close to her. He pressed against the yielding warmth of her body, his hand slipping languidly across her hip. He lay his cheek against her back and started drifting downward into sleep again.

Suddenly, his eyes flared open. Aghast, he put his nostrils to her skin and sniffed. An icy barb of dread hooked at his brain; *my God, what's wrong?* He sniffed again, harder. He lay against her, motionless, trying not to panic.

If his senses of taste and smell were atrophying, he could understand, accept. They weren't, though. Even as he lay there, he could taste the acrid flavour of the coffee that he'd drunk that night. He could smell the faint odour of mashed-out cigarettes in the ashtray on his bedside table. With the least effort, he could smell the wool of the blanket over them.

Then *why*? She was the most important thing in his life. It was torture to him that, in bits and pieces, she was fading from his senses.

It had been a favourite restaurant since their days of courtship.

They liked the food, the tranquil atmosphere, the small ensemble which played for dining and for dancing. Searching in his mind, Norman had chosen it as the place where they could best discuss this problem. Already, he was sorry that he had. There was no atmosphere that could relieve the tension he was feeling; and expressing.

"What *else* can it be?" he asked, unhappily. "It's nothing physical." He pushed aside his untouched supper. "It's got to be my mind."

"But why, Norman?"

"*If I only knew,*" he answered.

She put her hand on his. "Please don't worry," she said.

"How can I help it?" he asked. "It's a nightmare. I've *lost* part of you, Adeline."

"Darling, don't," she begged, "I can't bear to see you unhappy"

"I *am* unhappy," he said. He rubbed a finger on the tablecloth. "And I've just about made up my mind to see an analyst." He looked up. "It's got to be my mind," he repeated. "And- damnit!-I resent it. I want to root it out."

He forced a smile, seeing the fear in her eyes.

"Oh, the hell with it," he said. "I'll go to an analyst; he'll fix me up. Come on, let's dance."

She managed to return his smile.

"Lady, you're just plain gorgeous," he told her as they came together on the dance floor.

"*Oh, I love you so,*" she whispered.

It was in the middle of their dance that the feel of her began to change.

Norman held her tightly, his cheek forced close to hers so that she wouldn't see the sickened expression on his face.

And now it's gone?" finished Dr. Bernstrom. Norman expelled a burst of smoke and jabbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "Correct," he said, angrily.

"When?"

"This morning," answered Norman. The skin grew taut across his cheeks. "No taste. No smell." He shuddered fitfully "And now no sense of touch."

His voice broke. "What's wrong?" he pleaded. "What kind of breakdown *is* this?"

"Not an incomprehensible one," said Bernstrom.

Norman looked at him anxiously. "What then?" he asked. "Remember what I said: it has to do only with my wife. Outside of her-"

"I understand," said Bernstrom.

"*Then what is it?*"

"You've heard of hysterical blindness."

"Yes."

"Hysterical deafness."

"Yes, but-"

"Is there any reason, then, there couldn't be an hysterical restraint of the other senses as well?"

"All right, but why?"

Dr. Bernstrom smiled.

"That, I presume," he said, "is why you came to see me."

Sooner or later, the notion had to come. No amount of love could stay it. It came now as he sat alone in the living room, staring at the blur of letters on a newspaper page.

Look at the facts. Last Wednesday night, he'd kissed her and, frowning, said, "You taste sour, honey." She'd tightened, drawn away. At the time, he'd taken her reaction at its obvious value: she felt insulted. Now, he tried to summon up a detailed memory of her behaviour afterward.

Because, on Thursday morning, he'd been unable to taste her at all.

Norman glanced guiltily toward the kitchen where Adeline was cleaning up. Except for the sound of her occasional footsteps, the house was silent.

Look at the facts, his mind persisted. He leaned back in the chair and started to review them.

Next, on Saturday, had come that dankly fetid stench. Granted, she should feel resentment if he'd accused her of being its source. But he hadn't; he was sure of it. He'd looked around the kitchen, asked her if she'd put the garbage out. Yet, instantly, she'd assumed that he was talking about her.

And, that night, when he'd woken up, he couldn't smell her.

Norman closed his eyes. His mind must really be in trouble if he could justify such thoughts. He loved Adeline; needed her. How could he allow himself to believe that *she* was, in any way, responsible for what had happened?

Then, in the restaurant, his mind went on, unbidden, while they were dancing, she'd, suddenly, felt cold to him. She'd suddenly felt-he could not evade the word-*pulpy*.

And, then, this morning-

Norman flung aside the paper. *Stop it!* Trembling, he stared across the room with angry, frightened eyes. It's me, he told himself, *me!* He wasn't going to let his mind destroy the most beautiful thing in his life. He wasn't going to let-

It was as if he'd turned to stone, lips parted, eyes widened, blank. Then, slowly-so slowly that he heard the delicate crackling of bones in his neck-he turned to look toward the kitchen. Adeline was moving around.

Only it wasn't footsteps he heard.

He was barely conscious of his body as he stood. Compelled, he drifted from the living room and across the dining alcove, slippers noiseless on the carpeting. He stopped outside the kitchen door, his face a mask of something like revulsion as he listened to the sounds she made in moving.

Silence then. Bracing himself, he pushed open the door. Adeline was standing at the opened refrigerator. She turned and smiled.

"I was just about to bring you-" She stopped and looked at him uncertainly. "Norman?" she said.

He couldn't speak. He stood frozen in the doorway, staring at her.

"Norman, what is it?" she asked.

He shivered violently.

Adeline put down the dish of chocolate pudding and hurried toward him. He couldn't help himself; he shrank back with a tremulous cry, his face twisted, stricken.

"*Norman, what's the matter?*"

"I don't know," he whimpered.

Again, she started for him, halting at his cry of terror. Suddenly, her face grew hard as if with angry understanding.

"What is it now?" she asked. "I want to know."

He could only shake his head.

"I want to know, Norman!"

"No." Faintly, frightenedly.

She pressed trembling lips together. "I can't take much more of this," she said. "I mean it, Norman."

He jerked aside as she passed him. Twisting around, he watched her going up the stairs, his expression one of horror as he listened to the noises that she made. Jamming palsied hands across his ears, he stood shivering uncontrollably. *It's me!* he told himself again, again; until the words began to lose their meaning-*me, it's me, it's me, it's me!*

Upstairs, the bedroom door slammed shut. Norman lowered his hands and moved unevenly to the stairs. She had to know that he loved her, that he wanted to believe it was his mind. She had to understand.

Opening the bedroom door, he felt his way through the darkness and sat on the bed. He heard her turn and knew that she was looking at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'm... sick."

"No," she said. Her voice was lifeless.

Norman stared at her. "What?"

"There's no problem with other people, our friends, tradesmen..." she said. "They don't see me enough. With you, it's different. We're together too often. The strain of hiding it from you hour after hour, day after day, for a whole year, is too much for me. I've lost the power to control your mind. All I can do is blank away your senses one by one."

"You're not-"

"-telling you those things are real? I am. They're real. The taste, the smell, the-and what you heard tonight."

He sat immobile, staring at the dark form of her.

"I should have taken all your senses when it started," she said. "It would have been easy then. Now it's too late."

"What are you talking about?" He could barely speak.

"It isn't fair!" cried her voice. "I've been a good wife to you! Why should I have to go back? I *won't* go back! I'll find somebody else. I won't make the same mistake next time!"

Norman jerked away from her and stood on wavering legs, his fingers clutching for the lamp.

"*Don't touch it!*" ordered the voice.

The light flared blindingly into his eyes. He heard a thrashing on the bed and whirled. He couldn't even scream. Sound coagulated in his throat as he watched the shapeless mass rear upward, dripping decay.



"All right!" the words exploded in his brain with the illusion of sound. "All right, then *know* me!"

All his senses flooded back at once. The air was clotted with the smell of her. Norman recoiled, lost balance, fell. He saw the mouldering bulk rise from the bed and start for him. Then his mind was swallowed in consuming blackness and it seemed as if he fled along a night-swept hall pursued by a suppliant voice which kept repeating endlessly, "Please! I don't want to go back! *None of us want to go back!* Love me, let me stay with you! love me, love me, love me..."

## 27 - Button, Button

The package was lying by the front door—a cube-shaped carton sealed with tape, the name and address printed by hand:

MR. AND MRS. ARTHUR LEWIS, 217 E. 37TH STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10016.

Norma picked it up, unlocked the door, and went into the apartment. It was just getting dark.

After she put the lamb chops in the broiler, she made herself a drink and sat down to open the package.

Inside the carton was a push-button unit fastened to a small wooden box. A glass dome covered the button. Norma tried to lift it off, but it was locked in place. She turned the unit over and saw a folded piece of paper Scotch-taped to the bottom of the box. She pulled it off: "Mr. Steward will call on you at eight p.m."

Norma put the button unit beside her on the couch. She sipped the drink and reread the typed note, smiling.

A few moments later, she went back into the kitchen to make the salad.

The doorbell rang at eight o'clock. "I'll get it," Norma called from the kitchen. Arthur was in the living room, reading.

There was a small man in the hallway. He removed his hat as Norma opened the door. "Mrs. Lewis?" he inquired politely.

"Yes?"

"I'm Mr. Steward."

"Oh, yes." Norma repressed a smile. She was sure now it was a sales pitch.

"May I come in?" asked Mr. Steward.

"I'm rather busy," Norma said. "I'll get you your watcha-macallit, though." She started to turn.

"Don't you want to know what it is?"

Norma turned back. Mr. Steward's tone had been offensive. "No, I don't think so," she said.

"It could prove very valuable," he told her.

"Monetarily?" she challenged.

Mr. Steward nodded. "Monetarily," he said.

Norma frowned. She didn't like his attitude. "What are you trying to sell?" she asked.

"I'm not selling anything," he answered.

Arthur came out of the living room. "Something wrong?"

Mr. Steward introduced himself.

"Oh, the..." Arthur pointed toward the living room and smiled. "What is that gadget, anyway?"

"It won't take long to explain," replied Mr. Steward. "May I come in?"

"If you're selling something..." Arthur said.

Mr. Steward shook his head. "I'm not."

Arthur looked at Norma. "Up to you," he said.

He hesitated. "Well, why not?" he said.

They went into the living room and Mr. Steward sat in Norma's chair. He reached into an inside coat pocket and withdrew a small sealed envelope. "Inside here is a key to the bell-unit dome," he said. He set the envelope on the chair side table. "The bell is connected to our office."

"What's it for?" asked Arthur.

"If you push the button," Mr. Steward told him, "somewhere in the world, someone you don't know will die. In return for which you will receive a payment of fifty thousand dollars."

Norma stared at the small man. He was smiling.

"What are you talking about?" Arthur asked him.

Mr. Steward looked surprised. "But I've just explained," he said.

"Is this a practical joke?" asked Arthur.

"Not at all. The offer is completely genuine."

"You aren't making sense," Arthur said. "You expect us to believe..."

"Whom do you represent?" demanded Norma.

Mr. Steward looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to tell you that," he said. "However, I assure you the organization is of international scope."

"I think you'd better leave," Arthur said, standing.

Mr. Steward rose. "Of course."

"And take your button unit with you."

"Are you sure you wouldn't care to think about it for a day or so?"

Arthur picked up the button unit and the envelope and thrust them into Mr. Steward's hands. He walked into the hall and pulled open the door.

"I'll leave my card," said Mr. Steward. He placed it on the table by the door.

When he was gone, Arthur tore it in half and tossed the pieces onto the table. "God!" he said.

Norma was still sitting on the sofa. "What do you think it was?" she asked.

"I don't care to know," he answered.

She tried to smile but couldn't. "Aren't you curious at all?"

"No," he shook his head.

After Arthur returned to his book, Norma went back to the kitchen and finished washing the dishes.

"Why won't you talk about it?" Norma asked later.

Arthur's eyes shifted as he brushed his teeth. He looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"Doesn't it intrigue you?"

"It offends me," Arthur said.

"I know, but-" Norma rolled another curler in her hair "-doesn't it intrigue you, too?"

"You think it's a practical joke?" she asked as they went into the bedroom.

"If it is, it's a sick one."

Norma sat on the bed and took off her slippers.

"Maybe it's some kind of psychological research."

Arthur shrugged. "Could be."

"Maybe some eccentric millionaire is doing it."

"Maybe."

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Arthur shook his head.

"Why?"

"Because it's immoral," he told her.

Norma slid beneath the covers. "Well, I think it's intriguing," she said.

Arthur turned off the lamp and leaned over to kiss her. "Good night," he said.

"Good night." She patted his back.

Norma closed her eyes. Fifty thousand dollars, she thought.

In the morning, as she left the apartment, Norma saw the card halves on the table. Impulsively, she dropped them into her purse. She locked the front door and joined Arthur in the elevator.

While she was on her coffee break, she took the card halves from her purse and held the torn edges together. Only Mr. Steward's name and telephone number were printed on the card.

After lunch, she took the card halves from her purse again and Scotch-taped the edges together. Why am I doing this? she thought.

Just before five, she dialled the number.

"Good afternoon," said Mr. Steward's voice.

Norma almost hung up but restrained herself. She cleared her throat. "This is Mrs. Lewis," she said.

"Yes, Mrs. Lewis." Mr. Steward sounded pleased.

"I'm curious."

"That's natural," Mr. Steward said.

"Not that I believe a word of what you told us."

"Oh, it's quite authentic," Mr. Steward answered.

"Well, whatever..." Norma swallowed. "When you said someone in the world would die, what did you mean?"

"Exactly that," he answered. "It could be anyone. All we guarantee is that you don't know them. And, of course, that you wouldn't have to watch them die."

"For fifty thousand dollars," Norma said.

"That is correct."

She made a scoffing sound. "That's crazy."

"Nonetheless, that is the proposition," Mr. Steward said. "Would you like me to return the button unit?"

Norma stiffened. "Certainly not." She hung up angrily.

The package was lying by the front door; Norma saw it as she left the elevator. Well, of all the nerve, she thought. She glared at the carton as she unlocked the door. I just won't take it in, she thought. She went inside and started dinner.

Later, she carried her drink to the front hall. Opening the door, she picked up the package and carried it into the kitchen, leaving it on the table.

She sat in the living room, sipping her drink and looking out the window. After awhile, she went back into the kitchen to turn the cutlets in the broiler. She put the package in a bottom cabinet. She'd throw it out in the morning.

"Maybe some eccentric millionaire is playing games with people," she said.

Arthur looked up from his dinner. "I don't understand you."

"What does that mean?"

"Let it go," he told her.

Norma ate in silence. Suddenly, she put her fork down. "Suppose it's a genuine offer," she said.

Arthur stared at her.

"Suppose it's a genuine offer."

"All right, suppose it is!" He looked incredulous. "What would you like to do? Get the button back and push it? Murder someone?"

Norma looked disgusted. "Murder."

"How would *you* define it?"

"If you don't even know the person?" Norma asked.

Arthur looked astounded. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

"If it's some old Chinese peasant ten thousand miles away? Some diseased native in the Congo?"

"How about some baby boy in Pennsylvania?" Arthur countered. "Some beautiful little girl on the next block?"

"Now you're loading things."

"The point is, Norma," he continued, "that *who* you kill makes no difference. It's still murder."

"The point is," Norma broke in, "if it's someone you've never seen in your life and never will see, someone whose death you don't even have to know about, you still wouldn't push the button?"

Arthur stared at her, appalled. "You mean you would?"

"Fifty thousand dollars, Arthur."

"What has the amount..."

"Fifty thousand dollars, Arthur," Norma interrupted. "A chance to take that trip to Europe we've always talked about."

"Norma, no."

"A chance to buy that cottage on the Island."

"Norma, no." His face was white. "For God's sake, no!"

She shuddered. "All right, take it easy," she said. "Why are you getting so upset? It's only talk."

After dinner, Arthur went into the living room. Before he left the table, he said, "I'd rather not discuss it anymore, if you don't mind."

Norma shrugged. "Fine with me."

She got up earlier than usual to make pancakes, eggs, and bacon for Arthur's breakfast.

"What's the occasion?" he asked with a smile.

"No occasion." Norma looked offended. "I wanted to do it, that's all."

"Good," he said. "I'm glad you did."

She refilled his cup. "Wanted to show you I'm not..." she shrugged.

"Not what?"

"Selfish."

"Did I say you were?"

"Well-" She gestured vaguely. "-last night..."

Arthur didn't speak.

"All that talk about the button," Norma said. "I think you-well, misunderstood me."

"In what way?" His voice was guarded.

"I think you felt-" She gestured again. "-that I was only thinking of myself."

"Oh."

"I wasn't."

"Norma."

"Well, I wasn't. When I talked about Europe, a cottage on the Island..."

"Norma, why are we getting so involved in this?"

"I'm not involved at all." She drew in a shaking breath. "I'm simply trying to indicate that..."

"What?"

"That I'd like for us to go to Europe. Like for us to have a nicer apartment, nicer furniture, nicer clothes. Like for us to finally have a baby, for that matter."

"Norma, we will," he said.

"When?"

He stared at her in dismay. "Norma..."

"When?"

"Are you-" He seemed to draw back slightly. "Are you really saying...?"

"I'm saying that they're probably doing it for some research project!" she cut him off. "That they want to know what average people would do under such a circumstance! That they're just saying someone would die, in order to study reactions, see if there'd be guilt, anxiety, whatever! You don't really think they'd kill somebody, do you?"

Arthur didn't answer. She saw his hands trembling. After awhile, he got up and left.

When he'd gone to work, Norma remained at the table, staring into her coffee. I'm going to be late, she thought. She shrugged. What difference did it make? She should be home anyway, not working in an office.

While she was stacking the dishes, she turned abruptly, dried her hands, and took the package from the bottom cabinet. Opening it, she set the button unit on the table. She stared at it for a long time before taking the key from its envelope and removing the glass dome. She stared at the button. How ridiculous, she thought. All this over a meaningless button.

Reaching out, she pressed it down. For us, she thought angrily.

She shuddered. Was it happening? A chill of horror swept across her.

In a moment, it had passed. She made a contemptuous noise. Ridiculous, she thought. To get so worked up over nothing.

She had just turned the supper steaks and was making herself another drink when the telephone rang. She picked it up. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Lewis?"

"Yes?"

"This is the Lenox Hill Hospital."

She felt unreal as the voice informed her of the subway accident, the shoving crowd. Arthur pushed from the platform in front of the train. She was conscious of shaking her head but couldn't stop.

As she hung up, she remembered Arthur's life insurance policy for \$25,000, with double indemnity for-

"No." She couldn't seem to breathe. She struggled to her feet and walked in to the kitchen numbly. Something cold pressed at her skull as she removed the button unit from the wastebasket. There were no nails or screws visible. She couldn't see how it was put together.

Abruptly, she began to smash it on the sink edge, pounding it harder and harder, until the wood split. She pulled the sides apart, cutting her fingers without noticing. There were no transistors in the box, no wires or tubes. The box was empty.

She whirled with a gasp as the telephone rang. Stumbling into the living room, she picked up the receiver.

"Mrs. Lewis?" Mr. Steward asked.

It wasn't her voice shrieking so; it couldn't be. "You said I wouldn't know the one that died!"

"My dear lady," Mr. Steward said, "do you really think you knew your husband?"

## **28 - Brother To The Machine**

He stepped into the sunlight and walked among the people. His feet carried him away from the black tube depths. The distant roar of underground machinery left his brain to be replaced by myriad whispers of the city.

Now he was walking the main street. Men of flesh and men of steel passed him by, coming and going. His legs moved slowly and his footsteps were lost in a thousand footsteps.

He passed a building that had died in the last war. There were scurrying men and robots pulling off the rubble to build again. Over their heads hung the control ship and he saw men looking down to see that work was done properly.

He slipped in and out among the crowd. No fear of being seen. Only inside of him was there a difference. Eyes would never know it. Visio-poles set at every corner could not glean the change. In form and visage he was just like all the rest.

He looked at the sky. He was the only one. The others didn't know about the sky. It was only when you broke away that you could see. He saw a rocket ship flashing across the sun and control ships hovering in a sky rich with blue and fluffy clouds.

The dull-eyed people glanced at him suspiciously and hurried on. The blank-faced robots made no sign. They clanked on past, holding their envelopes and their packages in long metal arms.

He lowered his eyes and kept walking. A man cannot look at the sky, he thought. It is suspect to look at the sky.

"Would you help a buddy?"

He paused and his eyes flicked down to the card on the man's chest.

*Ex-Space Pilot. Blind. Legalized Beggar.*

Signed by the stamp of the Control Commissioner. He put his hand on the blind man's shoulder. The

man did not speak but passed by and moved on, his cane clacking on the sidewalk until he had disappeared. It was not allowed to beg in this district. They would find him soon.

He turned from watching and strode on. The visio-poles had seen him pause and touch the blind man. It was not permitted to pause on business streets, to touch another.

He passed a metal news dispenser and, brushing by, pulled out a sheet. He continued on and held it up before his eyes.

*Income Taxes Raised. Military Draft Raised. Prices Raised.*

Those were the story heads. He turned it over. On the back was an editorial that told why Earth forces had been compelled to destroy all the Martians.

Something clicked in his mind and his fingers closed slowly in a tight fist.

He passed his people, men and robots both. What distinction now? he asked himself. The common classes did the same work as the robots. Together they walked or drove through the streets carrying and delivering.

To be a man, he thought. No longer is it a blessing, a pride, a gift. To be brother to the machine, used and broken by invisible men who kept their eyes on poles and their fists bunched in ships that hung over all their heads, waiting to strike at opposition.

When it came to you one day that this was so, you saw there was no reason to go on with it.

He stopped in the shade and his eyes blinked. He looked in the shop window. There were tiny baby creatures in a cage.

*Buy a Venus Baby For Your Child,* said the card.

He looked into the eyes of the small tentacled things and saw there intelligence and pleading misery. And he passed on, ashamed of what one people can do to another people.

Something stirred within his body. He lurched a little and pressed his hand against his head. His shoulders twitched. When a man is sick, he thought, he cannot work. And when a man cannot work, he is not wanted.

He stepped into the street and a huge Control truck ground to a stop inches before him.

He walked away jerkily, leaped upon the sidewalk. Someone shouted and he ran. Now the photo-cells would follow him. He tried to lose himself in the moving crowds. People whirled by, an endless blur of faces and bodies.

They would be searching now. When a man stepped in front of a vehicle he was suspect. To wish death was not allowed. He had to escape before they caught him and took him to the Adjustment Centre. He couldn't bear that.

People and robots rushed past him, messengers, delivery boys, the bottom level of an era. All going somewhere. In all these scurrying thousands, only he had no place to go, no bundle to deliver, no slavish duty to perform. He was adrift.

Street after street, block on block. He felt his body weaving. He was going to collapse soon, he felt. He was weak. He wanted to stop. But he couldn't stop. Not now. If he paused - sat down to rest - they would come for him and take him to the Adjustment Centre. He didn't want to be adjusted. He didn't want to be made once more into a stupid shuffling machine. It was better to be in anguish and to understand.

He stumbled on. Bleating horns tore at his brain. Neon eyes blinked down at him as he walked.

He tried to walk straight, but his system was giving way. Were they following? He would have to be careful. He kept his face blank and he walked as steadily as he could.

His knee joint stiffened and, as he bent to rub it in his hands, a wave of darkness leaped from the ground and clawed at him. He staggered against a plate-glass window.

He shook his head and saw a man staring from inside. He pushed away. The man came out and stared at him in fear. The photo-cells picked him up and followed him. He had to hurry. He couldn't be brought back to start all over again. He'd rather be dead.

A sudden idea. Cold water. Only to drink?

I'm going to die, he thought. But I will know why I am dying and that will be different. I have left the laboratory where, daily, I was sated with calculations for bombs and gases and bacterial sprays.

All through those long days and nights of plotting destruction, the truth was growing in my brain. Connections were weakening, indoctrinations faltering as effort fought with apathy.

And, finally, something gave, and all that was left was weariness and truth and a great desire to be at peace.

And now he had escaped and he would never go back. His brain had snapped forever and they would never adjust him again.

He came to the citizen's park, last outpost for the old, the crippled, the useless. Where they could hide away and rest and wait for death.

He entered through the wide gate and looked at the high walls which stretched beyond eye. The walls that hid the ugliness from outside eyes. It was safe here. They did not care if a man died inside the citizen's park.

This is my island, he thought. I have found a silent place. There are no probing photo-cells here and no ears listening. A person can be free here.

His legs felt suddenly weak and he leaned against a blackened dead tree and sank down into the mouldy leaves lying deep on the ground.

An old man came by and stared at him suspiciously. The old man walked on. He could not stop to talk for minds were still the same even when the shackles had been burst.

Two old ladies passed him by. They looked at him and whispered to one another. He was not an old person. He was not allowed in the citizen's park. The Control Police might follow him. There was danger and they hurried on, casting frightened glances over their lean shoulders. When he came near they scurried over the hill.

He walked. Far off he heard a siren. The high, screeching siren of the Control Police cars. Were they after him? Did they know he was there? He hurried on, his body twitching as he loped up a sun-baked hill and down the other side. The lake, he thought, I am looking for the lake.

He saw a fountain and stepped down the slope and stood by it. There was an old man bent over it. It was the man who had passed him. The old man's lips enveloped the thin stream of water.

He stood there quietly, shaking. The old man did not know he was there. He drank and drank. The water dashed and sparkled in the sun. His hands reached out for the old man. The old man felt his touch and jerked away, water running across his grey-bearded chin. He backed away, staring open-mouthed. He turned quickly and hobbled away.

He saw the old man run. Then he bent over the fountain. The water gurgled in his mouth. It ran down and up into his mouth and poured out again, tastelessly.

He straightened up suddenly, a sick burning in his chest. The sun faded to his eye, the sky became black. He stumbled about on the pavement, his mouth opening and closing. He tripped over the edge of the walk and fell to his knees on the dry ground.

He crawled in on the dead grass and fell on his back, his stomach grinding, water running over his chin.

He lay there with the sun shining on his face and he looked at it without blinking. Then he raised his hands and put them over his eyes.

An ant crawled across his wrist. He looked at it stupidly. Then he put the ant between two fingers and squashed it to a pulp.

He sat up. He couldn't stay where he was. Already they might be searching the park, their cold eyes scanning the hills, moving like a horrible tide through his last outpost where old people were allowed to think if they were able to.

He got up and staggered around clumsily and started up the path, stiff-legged, looking for the lake.

He turned a bend and walked in a weaving line. He heard whistles. He heard a distant shout. They were looking for him. Even here in the citizen's park where he thought he could escape. And find the lake in peace.

He passed an old shut-down merry-go-round. He saw the little wooden horses in gay poses, galloping high and motionless, caught fast in time. Green and orange with heavy tassels, all thick-covered with dust.

He reached a sunken walk and started down it. There were grey stone walls on both sides. Sirens

were all around in the air. They knew he was loose and they were coming to get him now. A man could not escape. It was not done.

He shuffled across the road and moved up the path. Turning, he saw, far off, men running. They wore black uniforms and they were waving at him. He hurried on, his feet thudding endlessly on the concrete walk.

He ran off the path and up a hill and tumbled in the grass. He crawled into scarlet-leaved bushes and watched through waves of dizziness as the men of the Control Police dashed by.

Then he got up and started off, limping, his eyes staring ahead.

At last, the shifting, dull glitter of the lake. He hurried on now, stumbling and tripping. Only a little way. He lurched across a field. The air was thick with the smell of rotting grass. He crashed through the bushes and there were shouts and someone fired a gun. He looked back stiffly to see the men running after him.

He plunged into the water, flopping on his chest with a great splash. He struggled forward, walking on the bottom until the water had flooded over his chest, his shoulders, his head. Still walking while it washed into his mouth and filled his throat and weighted his body, dragging him down.

His eyes were wide and staring as he slid gently forward onto his face on the bottom. His fingers closed in the silt and he made no move.

Later, the Control Police dragged him out and threw him in the black truck and drove off.

And, inside, the technician tore off the sheeting and shook his head at the sight of tangled coils and water-soaked machinery.

'They go bad,' he muttered as he probed with pliers and picks. 'They crack up and think they are men and go wandering. Too bad they don't work as good as people.'

## 29 - Full Circle

The city editor called him in. 'Here,' he said. He tossed a ticket across his desk. 'For tonight.'

Walt picked up the ticket. 'Are you kidding?' he asked.

Barton rested his head on his hands. He looked mildly quizzical. He said, 'Thompson, do I strike you as the kidding sort?'

Walt grinned. 'Yeah,' he said, 'like Macbeth.'

He started out. At the door, he turned. 'How shall it be?' he asked. 'Straight? Humorous? Allegorical? Historical-pastoral? Scene undivided or poem unlimited?'

'You may get the hell out of here,' Barton said.

As he moved through the press room, Walt looked at the ticket again. *January 25, 2231.*

*Terwilliger's Living Marionettes*, it announced. *Larg and Fellow Martians in 'Rip Van Winkle:*

'Oh me, oh my,' cried his wife, 'we will starve to death. You are a lazy good-for-nothing, you Rip Van Winkle!'

I sat lost in a heaving lava bed of children.

Their eyes were like abacus beads sliding. They couldn't sit still. They plucked at clothes and nose. They sucked and gobbled on candy bars. They whispered, they giggled, they threw paper rocket ships at each other.

Incidentally, they watched Terwilliger's Living Marionettes.

'You go and you find some work!' howled Mrs. Rip Van Winkle.

It drew an appreciative chuckle from oldsters at conditions before Position Bureau assured one hundred per cent employment. Mrs. R. Van W. tearing at his mop-hued wig - Martians are bald as we know.

'You get out of this house and get a job!'

'Yah, yah!' replied Rip in a breathless squeak. 'Yah, yah, I go.'

He sticks a floppy hat on his large skull. His head swells outsize to his body. It makes him look like a caricature.

He is bent over and skinny. He is all angular joints and spaghetti extremities. He is dressed in old



patched clothes hanging like robes on a skeleton. He is two feet tall.

'Yah, yah,' he says, repeating the line because kiddies guffaw when he says it. Guffaws drift to plucking, eating, shifting, picking, throwing, whispering, shouting.

Rip gets his gun. It falls apart. There are gales of appreciation. The auditorium is dark except for the stage.

The scene is an old Dutch kitchen, says the programme. Preindustrial period. Around 1750, to judge from the set. That's a long time ago. A pretty good story to last six centuries. But does it last so we may enjoy - or perhaps so we may scoff?

She is chasing him out of the kitchen with a broom, an obsolete cleaning utensil. Straw, bound together for purpose of collecting dirt and trash in a contiguous pile. 'Kiddies don't know that. They think it's something for hitting.

'You get out of here, you lazy good-for-nothing!' she howls.

She hits him over the head. Once. Twice. *Bang, bang!* Kiddies roar, tug at their clothes, their neighbours' clothes, clap their pudgy pink hands, show their white teeth in savage pleasure.

Savage? Dear reader, do you raise eyebrows at that word applied to your children? Do you put down your paper, purse indignant lips? Do you ask yourself in silent outrage - who is this jackanapes, this critic, this vile assaulter on the high-blown walls of parenthood?

You do? But read on.

Out goes Rip! Flying through the double door. *Flop!* Into the dust of the road. Mrs. R. Van W. boots the dog, Wolf, after its master. The dog is only a doll made up as a dog. The Martians are too small. A real dog would fill the stage. A real dog might eat the actors.

'And don't come back without a job!' she cries out, fierce and indignant.

She plops in a chair. Her wig slips over her face. Pandemonium. The curtain dances out and meets itself. It shudders to a draping halt.

In the return to self I think of how almost shocking it was to see that wig come sliding off.

Like dignity fluttering down to fall beneath trampling feet.

Intermission.

The play forgotten, the kiddies crowded into the aisles. Time to stuff in more candy and soda and ice cream and cake and fighting. More rocket ships arched in graceful swoops through the theatre air.

I remained in my seat, listening to the raging storm of children together. Watching the maelstrom of activity that is the mark of youth. I picked the ticket stub from my coat pocket.

*Terwilliger's Living Marionettes.*

A minor note of prescience tugged at my mind. The words were contradictory I realized suddenly - apparently for the first time.

Marionettes are not living.

And I sat thinking - of the little man and his ragged clothes, of the shrill-voiced woman, hitting and shrieking.

And then I realized that the children were howling at living things. And something tightened in me.

And stayed tight.

Second act.

The mass of children was somehow shoehorned back in place. The auditorium was like an overstuffed trunk, its edges bulging. Bits of children popped up from the pressure of excitement.

The curtain opened. A flitting moment of hush. Then another scene.

Rip and his flat-faced dog trudged into a country glade. Dandruff-crowned mountains from the background, undulating slightly as breezes move the backdrop. *The power to move mountains*, the phrase occurs to me.

'Oh my, oh my, I'm so tired,' says Rip.

He flops down and his feet go in the air. No one notices the look of pain that flares up in his narrow face - no one except me. I look at him carefully as he goes on mouthing childish words. This is Larg, the star. And are those lines in his face from makeup or from misery?

He leans against a fake tree trunk and looks around.

*Brrooml Brrooml*

'Oh my, what is that?' he asks his dog.

His dog says '*Woof!*' Without its face changing an iota.' *Woof!*' again. Its voice drops down from the sky. It is noticeable because it is the only real marionette in this marionette show.

*Brrooml*

Up jumps Rip. He says, 'I will look and see what it is!'

He starts off, pretending to walk while the backdrop creaks along on rollers and the tree is tugged offstage by dreadfully visible wires.

I watched him.

I forgot the show. The Martian was limping. There were lines of anguish in his face, obviously not etched with makeup pencils.

He was in pain. But no one noticed it. Not the parents, not the children. Who looks for pain in a piece of wood?

But perhaps I bestow a sensitivity on myself which was not present at that moment.

For it is later now, you see, and as I sit here writing of it, I have it *all*. Not just disconcerting fragments born in the midst of seething children.

Why tell more of the show? It's not important. The little men, perhaps six inches tall, bowling marbles while someone in back shook a sheet of tin and made theatrical thunder. That's not important.

The giving to Rip of drink from a minute barrel. Rip choking and coughing, lying down to sleep. And the curtain closing and the lights staying out. And the children rustling like swishing grasses in the blackness.

All unimportant.

And the rest of it too. The curtain opening on Rip, still there, long white whiskers on his face. Rip getting up.

Perhaps it *is* important that Larg looked more natural as a tired old man than he had before. But the rest is of no moment.

And as I sat there, paying scant attention, I decided to go backstage and talk to Larg if I could. It would be better, I thought, than just handing in an ordinary review. Barton liked ingenuity.

But that was a pretext. There was more - more than just a Rip Van Winkle and a twenty-year sleep and an afternoon's entertainment for a mob of pink-chopped children.

And so it ended. Rip back in town, his wife dead, the old political regime unseated, Rip almost shot as a spy. And the happy ending, as per requirement, with Rip sitting under a tree, children about him. Happy days are here again. Curtain.

One call for the actors. They stood stiffly, nodding their heads. Their eyes glittered from the footlights. And it was a sick glitter, the glitter in their eyes.

I went backstage. The little Martians were rushing around, carrying costumes, equipment, scenery. They didn't look at me. They ran past my legs. Their heads just reached my kneecaps. It was like a dream. You don't see Martians en masse very often. It was like being Gulliver all of a sudden.

I saw a man sitting on a stool, leaning against the wall as he read a paper. Every once in a while he'd lift his eyes to see if the Martians were doing their jobs right. He'd order them about harshly.

'Go on! Hurry up! Grab that flat, you two. Not that way, you dope! *Right* side up, *right* side up!'

And they all kept running around like tiny deaf-mutes, labouring at a hopeless task.

I looked around. But I couldn't see Larg. I went over to the man. He looked up. 'No one's allowed back here.'

'I'm from the *Globe*,' I told him, showing my card. His face changed. He looked interested.

'Yeah?' he said, 'How'd you like the show? Good, haah?'

I nodded. What else could I do?

'You give us a good write up?' he asked.

'Maybe,' I said, 'If you'll let me look around back here. Maybe talk to a few of your- actors.'

'What actors? Oh - them. What do you wanna talk to them for?' he asked.

'Don't they talk?' I asked.

He squinted. 'Yeah,' he admitted. As though he were telling me that, sure, the parrot could talk but you can't very well converse with it.

'Look,' he said, 'You wanna see Mr. Terwilliger? He can tell you anything you wanna know.'

'I want to see Larg,' I told him.

He looked at me curiously. 'What for?'

'Just to talk to him.'

He looked at me blankly. Then he shrugged his thick shoulders.

'Go ahead, buddy,' he said, 'if you wanna waste your time. Say you'll give us a good write up?'

'Read the *Globe* tomorrow,' I answered.

'Yeah, I'll - he said, 'I'll just -

He pointed to his left. 'The Marshie is back there in the dressing room.'

'Doesn't he work?' I asked. All the other 'Marshies' were working.

The man looked disgusted. 'He's *s'posed* to work,' he said. 'But he's a goof-off. Thinks he's the star.'

His voice went up to a squeak as he mimicked Larg. "'I'm sick, I'm sick!'"

'I understand.' I nodded.

I went back and stood by the door. Inside I could hear a faint flutter of coughing - like the coughing of a frail old woman.

I knocked.

The coughing increased. Then I heard him ask who it was.

'May I come in and speak to you?' I asked. 'I'm from the *Globe*.'

There was a long moment of silence. I stood there restlessly. Finally I heard him cough once more.

Then he said, 'I can't keep you out.'

The room was very dimly lit. Larg was sitting on a shabby couch, his small oddly-proportioned body dwarfed the pillow he leaned on. He had his tube like legs propped up before him.

He looked up as I came in. He didn't say anything - just looked. And then he lowered his eyes again. A cough rocked his small body.

I sat down on a chair across from him. I didn't speak. I kept watching him. He looked up finally. His eyes were yellow - and bitter. 'Well?' he said.

His voice was pitched lower than it had been while he was portraying Rip Van Winkle.

I told him my name. I asked him how he was.

He looked at me clinically. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. His gaze was expressionless. A slight cough shook him. Then his pointed shoulders twitched back.

'Why should you care?' he asked.

I started to answer. But he interrupted.

'It's an interview you want, isn't it?' he said. 'An "interview with the funny little marionette. With the ugly, little yellow-eyed Martian.'

'I didn't come to-'

'To be insulted?'

His voice was shrill again. He pushed himself back against the pillow and his small stubby nostrils flared out. Then he closed his eyes. Suddenly. His hands dropped in his lap.

'No, of course not,' he said. 'You want some pleasant little anecdote. Boy on Mars yearning for the theatre life.'

The big chance - cheers - flowers - romance of the footlights. God bless Earth.'

He opened his eyes and looked at me. 'That's what you want, isn't it?' he asked.

I was quiet for a moment. Then I said, 'I didn't come for an interview. I'm only supposed to write up the performance.'

'Then why are you here?' he asked. 'Curiosity? Burning desire to goggle?'

'No,' I said.

Then we sat in painful silence. I had no idea of what to say I felt terribly ill at ease.

Not because I was alone with a strange extraterrestrial being. That wasn't it. I've seen enough pictures, enough shows, enough movies. The shock of appearances wears down quickly.

I'll tell you why I was shocked.

Because I was realizing more and more that this small 'creature', as you would call him, *wasn't* a mere creature.

He was not, as I had been brought up to believe, some subspecies of animal life with only gifts for mimicking other languages. Not at all. He was an intelligent person.

And he hated me. That's why I felt ill at ease. Because to be hated by an animal is nothing. But to be hated by a rational being is a lot.

'What do you want?' he asked.

'I'd - like to talk to you.' I hesitated.

He started to speak. But then a violent fit of coughing tore at his voice. His fragile hands shot out to grab a towel from the couch beside him.

He plunged his face into it. And I sat there watching, his toothpick shoulders tremble. And hearing his pathetic gagging muffled in the towel, and the horrible coughing.

The coughing eased. He gasped for breath. There were tears shining in his eyes. 'Go away please,' he said, his voice broken and humiliated. He avoided my gaze.

'You need a doctor,' I said.

His chest shuddered again. It was laughter this time. Laughter that had no amusement in it.

'You're very amusing,' he wheezed. 'Now will you leave me alone?'

I spoke impatiently - as we do when we do not understand. 'Listen, I'm not trying to be funny. You're ill and you need a doctor.'

The coughing stopped. He looked at me. 'You don't understand,' he said, 'I'm a Martian.'

'I don't see...'

'You're supposed to laugh at me!'

And I felt myself tighten with rage. No - not at him. The rage was for those far-flung generations that had taught me and my brothers to consider Martians as inferior stock.

Because here - in a split second - the entire lie had been flung into my teeth. And there is no more stunning and enraging shock than to have centuries of lies explode in your face.

He leaned weakly against the pillow, the towel held in his lap. I noticed that it was spotted with dark splotches. His blood. When he saw that I noticed, he quickly folded the towel so that Only clean surfaces showed.

'Larg,' I said, 'if you feel up to it, will you tell me about yourself? And about your people?'

'For publication?' he asked, his tone slightly less cynical. 'For an amusing froth in the Sunday supplement?'

I shook my head. 'No, just for me.'

He looked at me carefully. I couldn't tell whether he believed me or not. But I *could* still feel his shrinking, his distaste for me.

He said, 'I suppose you saw my people working backstage.'

I nodded. 'Yes, I did.'

He rubbed a hand over his pale lips. 'They're like me,' he said, 'all sick. All exiles. Exiles of economy.'

'I don't...'

He coughed once. 'We're all here, you see, because we need the money.'

'Can't you work on your own planet?'

He glanced at me as though he thought I joked. Then he shook his head. 'No, there's nothing there,' he said. 'Nothing.'

We sat in silence a moment. Once again he began to cough into the towel, his face colouring apoplectically. When the spasm had passed his breath came in tortured gasps.

'You'd better not speak any more,' I said.

'Why not?' he said. 'It doesn't make any difference.'

'Are you married, Larg?' I asked.

He smiled bitterly at something I could not see. 'I think so,' he said, 'I'm not sure - anymore.'

'When did you see your wife last?'

He looked down at his hands. Blankly. 'Fifteen years ago,' he said.

'Fifteen!'

'Yes.'

'But-but why?'

'It's very simple,' he said, the undercurrent of hate and resentment hard in his voice. 'I was teacher of history at the Rakasa School, as you Earth people called it' He paused. 'Before you tore it down,' he said.

He leaned back his head and stared at the ceiling. 'I needed work to support my wife and our children. I joined this company. Other men became miners in their own mines. Labourers, servants, slaves...'

He looked down at me. And it was as though his people looked with murderous hate upon ours. A hate time could never wipe out. 'The rest died,' he said, 'seven millions of them.'

I sat there, numb with the shock of his words. I just couldn't understand them, believe them.

For I, like you, had heard of these things, read distorted glossed-over reports on the decimation of the Martian race. Studied from history books that told of disease and drought and famine. Of internecine warfare, of savage death-attacks on Earth military posts on Mars. Of racial suicide due to psychotic pride.

The blame has always been displaced. Twisted, contorted, dropped on the Martians, on Nature, on everything - except us. It is never placed on us.

Those were the thoughts I had. And through all my thinking I could hear the fragile flutter of Larg's breath. Like the last feeble protest of a murdered race.

And then, like a loyal Earthman, I would not even then accept the blame. 'I never knew,' I said. 'I don't expect you'll believe me, but I never knew.'

He sighed. 'What does it matter?' he said.

Silence again. Nervously I took out my cigarettes. I offered him one. He shook his head. I noticed the bluish veins in his forehead. I lit the cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke to the side.

'Why did you do that?' he asked.

I didn't understand. 'Do what?' I asked.

'Blow the smoke away from me?'

I still didn't know. I shrugged. 'I don't go around blowing smoke at people's faces,' I said.

He stared at me for a long moment. Then something seemed to resolve itself in his expression. He relaxed back against the pillow. 'So,' he said, 'I'm people.'

He made a sound of tired amusement. 'Why, I'd forgotten it,' he said ironically.

And what could I say? Let me admit it - as we all should admit it. I was penitent and mute before this fellow creature. Yes, *fellow* creature, though we have not earned even the right to claim him as brother.

Does that shock you, reader? Does that offend your sensibilities? I can well imagine that it does. For how should a man feel if he is told that what he has always regarded as inferior to him is equal? And, perhaps, *superior*. How should a man greet the news that his standards are wrong?

No, I expect little sympathy for this account. No man loves another who has shown his frailty to the light.

But I write anyway. For I, too, was one of you just this early evening. I, too, believed myself a liberal mind, thought that I had won my personal triumph over bigotry. I, too, felt perfectly justified in standing on the soapbox of the universe and crying - 'I am of the clean, the pure in heart!'

Well, I was wrong. You see that. Or maybe you don't.

'What's your name, young man?' Larg asked.

Once again I felt shock. And yet it was obvious that he was no child, no mere cynical youth. He was much older than I and much wiser.

'My name?' I faltered. 'Walter. Walter Thompson.'

And I knew he would never forget it then. He nodded - and looked at me without rancour for the first time. 'You know my name,' he said quietly.

And the way he said it, it was a gentle, unspoken invitation to friendship.

'Why did you come back here?' he asked.

I started to speak. But then I had to stop. Because I had no answer. 'I don't know,' I finally admitted, shaking my head. 'I'm afraid I just don't know.'

And for the first time, Larg smiled at me. 'Well, that's a novelty,' he said, his gentle voice bubbling with an undercurrent of kind amusement. 'You're the first Earth-man I ever met who admitted not knowing everything.'

I tried to smile back. But, somehow, I couldn't. 'I could give you any number of reasons why I didn't come back here,' I said, 'but for a reason I *did*... I'm stumped.'

He sat up a little. His eyes became bright and interested. He cleared his throat delicately and put his hands on his kneecaps.

'I have found that to be commonplace among you Earth people,' he said, 'the ready knowledge of why you *don't* do things. But no attendant ability to explain why you *do* execute them.'

He smiled again. And we both smiled, one at the other. As men smile when they are friends.

'If you would really like to interview me,' he said, 'I wouldn't mind. Not now.'

Hurriedly I put out my cigarette in an ashtray. The outlines of a plan were rising in my mind.

'Listen, Larg,' I said.

He listened.

'I'm no intellect,' I said. 'I haven't the ability to split hairs - or to delve into sociological aspects or philosophy or anything like that.'

'But I *can* report. And this situation cries for reporting. I want to tell the readers about you. Not about Rip Van Winkle. Not about the funny little guy from Mars.'

I felt my throat contract. 'I don't think about you that way anymore,' I said. 'I think you're as good as the rest of

Then I twisted my shoulders impatient with my own words.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I don't mean to sound smug or self-righteous. Believe me, I'm ashamed - terribly ashamed. For myself and for my people. But I - I just don't know how to put it.'

'You see, I've been brought up to believe the things I believed about you. That others still believe. And now that those beliefs have been pretty well kicked out from under me - well, I'm a little fuzzy at the edges.'

Our eyes met. And I thought suddenly how differences in appearance disappear when you look at minds instead of faces.

Larg seemed a brother then. Not an Earth-brother or a Mars-brother. I mean a brother - a person possessing that non-racial, universal trait which is separate from feature or environment. That sense of being which may exist in the savage and not in the priest. Or in the Martian and not in the Earthman. A dignity, a self-respect, a soul.

Larg looked at me, smiling. 'You've said it very well,' he said.

I put out my hand. Then I jerked it back. I wasn't sure. I started to speak to cover the move. And Larg said, 'Yes, I'd *like* to shake your hand.'

He extended his small fingers. I grasped them as gently as I could. Something beyond anything I had ever felt surged up in me. I can't explain it. But if it ever happens to you you'll know it.

We clasped hands for a long moment.

'I wish I could give you something more than words,' I told him, 'Something substantial. A doctor, a letter from your wife and children, a promise to get you home - anything. But I - I can't.'

He smiled. 'You've given me much,' he said, 'something more valuable than you may realize. For you have an excess of it each day, I'm sure.'

He looked at me carefully. 'You've given me friendship,' he said, 'understanding, respect.'

Then he closed his eyes. His lips tightened. 'Those are things that *we* must have as well as you,' he said quietly; 'those are things without which no being is complete.'

When Walt came in the next morning the city editor called him in. He tossed the review across his desk.

'Finish this off,' he said, 'I started the deletions.'

Walt asked, 'What deletions?'

'Cut out all that stuff about the murder of a race. Larg and his noble character. Handle it straight. The show, the kids' reactions. That's all we want.'

Walt looked at Barton in disbelief. 'You're not going to run it?' he asked. '

Barton's eyelids flickered. 'You know our policy, Thompson. You knew damn well we couldn't run it.'

'No, *I didn't*.' Walt clenched his fists. 'I thought this was a newspaper. Not somebody's propaganda sheet - not some rich man's solace.'

Barton looked up at him like a harried father. 'Where have you been, Walter?' he said patiently. 'Welcome back to society.'

Walt tossed the review back on Barton's desk. 'It goes like that or not at all,' he snapped.

'Then not at all,' Barton said. 'Look, Walt, what are you jumping on me for? *I don't* make policy.'

'You help it along!'

'Sit down, Walt,' Barton said, gesturing.

Walt slumped down in the chair facing Barton's desk. The editor leaned back.

'I've been wondering how long it would take you to come up with something like this,' he said. 'It's been overdue. Usually you kids get it out of your system right after college. They don't let it linger inside them until they're married and have a kid like you.'

Barton fingered the review.

'We *can't* run it, kid,' he said, 'You know that as well as I do. No matter how true it is.'

'Then truth isn't the criterion anymore,' Walt said acidly.

'Was it ever?' Barton said. 'We killed it. The same way I'll have to kill "our review unless you doctor it. Let's be practical about this.'

'Practical!'

They stared at each other.

'Is it an order?' Walt asked, 'Am I ordered to cut its heart out?'

Barton shrugged. 'Call it an order then,' he said. 'Pin it on me if it will make you feel any better.'

Walt's face tightened. 'Sure,' he said, 'that will make me feel just fine.'

Barton sighed. 'Well, here it is, Walt. It's out of my hands, it's policy.'

'Policy!' Walt jumped to his feet. 'God damn the word!'

They were silent. Barton held out the review. Walt didn't budge.

'I know how you feel, Walter,' Barton said, 'But you're in a trap, don't you see? *I'm* in a trap. We all are. And we can't afford to tear ourselves loose.'

Walt took the review.

'I know what you're going through,' said Barton.

'No, you don't,' Walt said very quietly, 'Not anymore.' He turned at the door. 'And some day,' he said, 'I'll be just like you.'

He rewrote the story. He cut, chiselled, reworded. It emerged from his efforts clean and pleasant and without subversion. He sent it downstairs and it was printed.

That night he read it as he rode home on the pneumatic tube. He thought about Larg reading it. First anxiously, then with rising disappointment. Then at last with despairing bitterness.

They would never see each other again.

He crumpled the paper and threw it down a disposal chute as he got off the tube car. 'He thinks *he* has troubles,' he muttered angrily, about Larg, as he walked home.

He thought of the red tape involved in leaving one job and getting another. It took the Position Bureau at least six months. And in the meantime there were bills to be paid. He thought of them. Food bills, clothing bills, payments on the ground-car and the house and the furniture and everything.

He almost hated Larg for injecting dissatisfaction into his life.

Then, after supper, he sat in his clean bright living room and thought of it again. Full circle, he thought.

That was what it amounted to.

Larg couldn't do anything about it. *He* couldn't do anything about it. Both of them, knowing the situation for what it was, were powerless to change it. They were hemmed in. Bound within an enchanted circle of economics, of policy.

'What's the matter?' asked his wife that night.

'I'm sick, that's what's the matter,' he said. 'I'm very damned sick.'

### 30 - By Appointment Only

At 11:14 that morning, Mr. Pangborn came into the barbershop. Wiley looked up from his *Racing Form*. "Morning," he said. He glanced at his wrist watch and smiled. "You're right on time."

Mr. Pangborn did not return the smile. He removed his suit coat wearily and hung it on the rack. He trudged across the clean-swept floor and sank down in the middle chair. Wiley put down his *Racing Form* and stood. He stretched and yawned. "You don't look so hot, Mr. Pangborn," he said.

"I don't feel so hot," Mr. Pangborn replied.

"Sorry to hear that," Wiley said. He cranked up the chair and locked it. "Usual?" he asked.

Mr. Pangborn nodded. "Okeydoke," said Wiley. He pulled a clean cloth from its shelf and shook it out. "Whatcha been doin' with yourself?" he asked.

Mr. Pangborn signed. "Not much."

"Kind o' run down, are you?" Wiley asked, wrapping tissue around his customer's neck.

"That's the word," said Mr. Pangborn. "What've *you* been doing?"

"Not a hell of a lot," Wiley answered. He pinned the cloth in place. "Drove up to Vegas last week." He made a rueful sound. "Lost a pile."

"Too bad," said Mr. Pangborn.

"Oh, well," Wiley grinned. "Easy come, easy go." He picked up the electric clipper and switched it on. "Maria!" he called.

She made an inquiring noise in the back room.

"Mr. Pangborn's here."

"Be right out," she said.

Wiley started working on the back of Mr. Pangborn's neck. Mr. Pangborn closed his eyes. "That's it," Wiley told him. "Take it easy."

Mr. Pangborn shifted on the chair uncomfortably.

"You sure don't look so hot," said Wiley.

Mr. Pangborn sighed again. "I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

"What's the problem?" Wiley asked.

"The leg," said Mr. Pangborn. "The back. My right arm, off and on. My stomach."

"*Jesus*," Wiley said, concerned. "You seen your doctor?"

"He doesn't know what it is," Mr. Pangborn answered scornfully. "I don't bother going to him anymore. All he ever does is send me to specialists."

Wiley clucked. "That's lousy, Mr. Pangborn."

Mr. Pangborn exhaled. "Dr. Rand's the only one who ever helps," he said.

"He *does*?" Wiley looked delighted. "Hey, I'm glad to hear that," he said. "I wasn't sure whether I should even mention him or not, him not being an MD and all. My brother swore up and down that he was something else, though."

"He is," said Mr. Pangborn. "If it weren't for him--"

"Hello, Mr. Pangborn," said Maria.

Mr. Pangborn glanced aside and managed a smile. "Maria," he said.

"How are you today?" she asked.

"Getting by," he said.



Maria set her manicuring table and chair beside the barber chair. As she sat down, her bust swelled out against the tightness of her sweater. "You look tired," she said.

Mr. Pangborn nodded. "I am," he said. "I don't sleep too well."

"That's a shame," she sympathized. She began to work on his nails.

"Well, I'm glad this Rand is working out," Wiley said. "I'll have to try him myself sometime."

"He's good," said Mr. Pangborn. "The only one who's given me relief."

"Good deal," said Wiley.

It was quiet for awhile, as Wiley cut Mr. Pangborn's hair and Maria did his nails. Then Mr. Pangborn asked, "Business slow today?"

"No," said Wiley. "I do it all by appointment now." He smiled. "It's the only way."

When Mr. Pangborn had gone, Maria carried his hair and nail clippings into the back room. Unlocking the cupboard, she took out the doll labelled pangborn. Wiley finished dialling the telephone and watched her as she replaced the doll's hair and nails with the fresh clippings.

"Rand?" he said when the receiver was lifted at the other end of the line. "Wiley. Pangborn was just in. When's he seeing you again?" He listened. "Okay," he said, "give him something for his back and we'll take that pin out for a couple o' weeks. All right?" He listened. "And, Rand," he said, "your check was late again this month. *Watch that.*"

He hung up and walked over to Maria. As she worked, he slid his hands up inside her sweater and cupped them over her breasts. Maria pressed back against him with a sigh, her face tightening. "When's the next appointment?" she asked.

Wiley grinned. "Not till one-thirty," he answered.

By the time he'd locked the door, hung up the out to lunch sign and returned to the back room, Maria was waiting for him on the bed. Wiley took his clothes off, running his gaze over her brown body as it writhed on the mattress. "You little Haitian bitch," he muttered, grinning.

At twenty minutes after one, Mr. Walters came into the shop. Removing his coat, he hung it on the rack and sat down in the middle chair. Wiley put down his *Racing Form* and stood. He made a clucking sound. "Hey, you don't look so hot, Mr. Walters," he said.

"I don't feel so hot," Mr. Walters replied.

### 31 - Mantage

#### FADEOUT.

The old man had succumbed. From its movie heaven, an ethereal choir paeaned. Amid roiling pink clouds they sang: *A Moment or Forever*. It was the title of the picture. Lights blinked on. The voices stopped abruptly, the curtain was lowered, the theatre boomed with p.a. resonance; a quartet singing *A Moment or Forever* on the Decca label. Eight hundred thousand copies a month.

Owen Crowley sat slumped in his seat, legs crossed, arms slackly folded. He stared at the curtain. Around him, people stood and stretched, yawned, chatted, laughed. Owen sat there, staring. Next to him, Carole rose and drew on her suede jacket. Softly, she was singing with the record, "*Your mind is the clock that ticks away a moment or forever.*"

She stopped. "Honey?"

Owen grunted. "Are you coming?" she asked.

He sighed. "I suppose." He dragged up his jacket and followed her as she edged toward the aisle, shoes crunching over pale popcorn buds and candy wrappers. They reached the aisle and Carole took his arm.

"Well?" she asked. "What did you think?"

Owen had the burdening impression that she had asked him that question a million times; that their relationship consisted of an infinitude of movie-going and scant more. Was it only two years since they'd met; five months since their engagement? It seemed, momentarily, like the dreariest of eons.

"What's there to think?" he said. "It's just another movie."  
"I thought you'd like it," Carole said, "being a writer yourself."

He trudged across the lobby with her. They were the last ones out. The snack counter was darkened, the soda machine stilled of technicolored bubblings. The only sound was the whisper of their shoes across the carpeting, then the click of them as they hit the outer lobby.

"What is it, Owen?" Carole asked when he'd gone a block without saying a word.

"They make me mad," he said.

"Who does?" Carole asked.

"The damn stupid people who make those damn stupid movies," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because of the way they gloss over everything."

"What do you mean?"

"This writer the picture was about," said Owen. "He was a lot like I am; talented and with plenty of drive. But it took him almost ten years to get things going. *Ten years*. So what does the stupid picture do? Glosses over them in a few minutes. A couple of scenes of him sitting at his desk, looking broody, a couple of clock shots, a few trays of mashed-out butts, some empty coffee cups, a pile of manuscripts. Some bald-headed publishers with cigars shaking their heads no at him, some feet walking on the sidewalk; and that's it. Ten years of hard labour. It makes me mad."

"But they have to do that, Owen," Carole said. "That's the only way they have of showing it."

"Then life should be like that too," he said.

"Oh, you wouldn't like that," she said.

"You're wrong. I would," he said. "Why should I struggle ten years or more on my writing? Why not get it over with in a couple of minutes?"

"It wouldn't be the same," she said.

"That's for sure," he said.

An hour and forty minutes later, Owen sat on the cot in his furnished room staring at the table on which sat his typewriter and the half-completed manuscript of his third novel *And Now Gomorrah*.

Why not indeed? The idea had definite appeal. He knew that, someday, he'd succeed. It had to be that way. Otherwise, what was he working so hard for? But that transition, that was the thing. That indefinite transition between struggle and success. How wonderful if that part could be condensed, abbreviated.

*Glossed over.*

"You know what I wish?" he asked the intent young man in the mirror.

"No, what?" asked the man.

"I wish," said Owen Crowley, "that life could be as simple as a movie. All the drudgery set aside in a few flashes of weary looks, disappointments, coffee cups and midnight oil, trays of butts, no's and walking feet. Why not?"

On the bureau, something clicked. Owen looked down at his clock. It was 2:43 a.m.

Oh, well. He shrugged and went to bed. Tomorrow, another five pages, another night's work at the toy factory.

A year and seven months went by and nothing happened. Then, one morning, Owen woke up, went down to the mail box and there it was.

*We are happy to inform you that we want to publish your novel Dream Within a Dream.*

"Carole! Carole!" He pounded on her apartment door, heart drumming from the half-mile sprint from the subway, the leaping ascent of the stairs. "*Carole!*"

She jerked open the door, face stricken. "Owen, what-?" she began, then cried out, startled, as he swept her from the floor and whirled her around, the hem of her nightgown whipping silkenly. "Owen, what is it?" she gasped.

"Look! Look!" He put her down on the couch and, kneeling, held out the crumpled letter to her.

"*Oh, Owen!*"

They clung to each other and she laughed, she cried. He felt the unbound softness of her pressing at him through the filmy silk, the moist cushioning of her lips against his cheek, her warm tears trickling down his face. "Oh, Owen. *Darling.*'

She cupped his face with trembling hands and kissed him; then whispered, "And you were worried."  
"No more," he said. "No more!"

The publisher's office stood aloofly regal above the city; draped, panelled, still. "If you'll sign here, Mr. Crowley," said the editor. Owen took the pen.

"*Hurray! Hurroo!*" He polkaed amid a debris of cocktail glasses, red-eyed olives, squashed hors d'oeuvres and guests. Who clapped and stamped and shouted and erected monumental furies in the neighbours' hearts. Who flowed and broke apart like noisy quicksilver through the rooms and halls of Carole's apartment. Who devoured regimental rations. Who flushed away Niagara's of converted alcohol. Who nuzzled in a fog of nicotine. Who gambled on the future census in the dark and fur-coat-smelling bedroom.

Owen sprang. He howled. "An Indian I am!" He grabbed the laughing Carole by her spilling hair. "An Indian I am, I'll scalp you! No, I won't, I'll kiss you!" He did to wild applause and whistles. She clung to him, their bodies moulding. The clapping was like rapid fire. "And for an encore!" he announced.

Laughter. Cheers. Music pounding. A graveyard of bottles on the sink. Sound and movement. Community singing. Bedlam. A policeman at the door. "*Come in, come in, defender of the weal!*" "Now, let's be having a little order here, there's people want to sleep."

Silence in the shambles. They sat together on the couch, watching dawn creep in across the sills, a night gowned Carole clinging to him, half asleep; Owen pressing his lips to her warm throat and feeling, beneath the satin skin, the pulsing of her blood.

"*I love you,*" whispered Carole. Her lips, on his, wanted, took. The electric rustle of her gown made him shudder. He brushed the straps and watched them slither from the pale curving of her shoulders. "Carole, Carole." Her hands were cat claws on his back.

The telephone rang, rang. He opened an eye. There was a heated pitchfork fastened to the lid. As the lid moved up it plunged the pitchfork into his brain. "*Ooh!*" He winced his eyes shut and the room was gone. "Go away," he muttered to the ringing, ringing; to the cleat shoed, square-dancing goblins in his head.

Across the void, a door opened and the ringing stopped. Owen sighed.

"Hello?" said Carole. "Oh. Yes, he's here."

He heard the crackle of her gown, the nudging of her fingers on his shoulder. "Owen," she said. "Wake up, darling."

The deep fall of pink-tipped flesh against transparent silk was what he saw. He reached but she was gone. Her hand closed over his and drew him up. "The phone," she said.

"More," he said, pulling her against himself.

"The phone."

"Can wait," he said. His voice came muffled from her nape. "I'm breakfasting."

"Darling, the phone."

"Hello?" he said into the black receiver.

"This is Arthur Means, Mr. Crowley," said the voice.

"*Yes!*" There was an explosion in his brain but he kept on smiling anyway because it was the agent he'd called the day before.

"Can you make it for lunch?" asked Arthur Means.

Owen came back into the living room from showering. From the kitchen came the sound of Carole's slippers on linoleum, the sizzle of bacon, the dark odour of percolating coffee.

Owen stopped. He frowned at the couch where he'd been sleeping. How had he ended there? He'd been in bed with Carole.

The streets, by early morning, were a mystic lot. Manhattan after midnight was an island of intriguing silences, a vast acropolis of crouching steel and stone. He walked between the silent citadels, his

footsteps like the ticking of a bomb.

"Which will explode!" he cried. "*Explode!*" cried back the streets of shadowed walls. "Which will explode and throw my shrapnel words through all the world!"

Owen Crowley stopped. He flung out his arms and held the universe. "You're mine!" he yelled.

"*Mine,*" the echo came.

The room was silent as he shed his clothes. He settled on the cot with a happy sigh, crossed his legs and undid lace knots. What time was it? He looked over at the clock. 2:58 a.m.

Fifteen minutes since he'd made his wish.

He grunted in amusement as he dropped his shoe. Weird fancy, that. Yes, it was exactly fifteen minutes if you chose to ignore the one year, seven months and two days since he'd stood over there in his pyjamas, fooling with a wish. Granted that, in thinking back, those nineteen months seemed quickly past; but not that quickly. If he wished to, he could tally up a reasonable itemization of every miserable day of them.

Owen Crowley chuckled. Weird fancy indeed. Well, it was the mind. The mind was a droll mechanism.

"Carole, let's get married!"

He might have struck her. She stood there, looking dazed.

"What?" she asked.

"*Married!*"

She stared at him. "You mean it?"

He slid his arms around her tightly. "Try me," he said.

"Oh, Owen." She clung to him a moment, then, abruptly, drew back her head and grinned.

"This," she said, "is not so sudden."

It was a white house, lost in summer foliage. The living room was large and cool and they stood together on the walnut floor, holding hands. Outside, leaves were rustling.

"Then by the authority vested in me," said Justice of the Peace Weaver, "by the sovereign state of Connecticut, I now pronounce you man and wife." He smiled. "You may kiss the bride," he said.

Their lips parted and he saw the tears glistening in her eyes.

"How do, Miz Crowley," he whispered.

The Buick hummed along the quiet country road. Inside, Carole leaned against her husband while the radio played, *A Moment or Forever*, arranged for strings. "Remember that?" he asked.

"Mmmm hmmm." She kissed his cheek.

"Now where," he wondered, "is that motel the old man recommended?"

"Isn't that it up ahead?" she asked.

The tires crackled on the gravel path, then stopped. "Owen, look," she said. He laughed. *Aldo Weaver, Manager*, read the bottom line of the rust-streaked wooden sign.

"Yes, brother George, he marries all the young folks round about," said Aldo Weaver as he led them to their cabin and unlocked the door. Then Aldo crunched away and Carole leaned her back against the door until the lock clicked. In the quiet room, dim from tree shade, Carole whispered, "Now you're mine."

They were walking through the empty, echoing rooms of a little house in Northport. "Oh, yes," said Carole happily. They stood before the living room windows, looking out into the shadow-dark woods beyond. Her hand slipped into his. "Home," she said, "*sweet home.*"

They were moving in and it was furnished. A second novel sold, a third. John was born when winds whipped powdery snow across the sloping lawn; Linda on a sultry, cricket rasping summer night. Years cranked by, a moving backdrop on which events were painted.

He sat there in the stillness of his tiny den. He'd stayed up late correcting the galleys on his forthcoming novel *One Foot in Sea*. Now, almost nodding, he twisted together his fountain pen and set it down. "My God, my God," he murmured, stretching. He was tired.

Across the room, standing on the mantel of the tiny fireplace, the clock buzzed once. Owen looked at

it. 3:15 a.m. It was well past his-

He found himself staring at the clock and, like a slow-tapped tympani, his heart was felt. Seventeen minutes later than the last time, thought persisted; thirty-two minutes in all.

Owen Crowley shivered and rubbed his hands as if at some imaginary flame. Well, this is idiotic, he thought; idiotic to dredge up this fantasy every year or so. It was the sort of nonsense that could well become obsession.

He lowered his gaze and looked around the room. The sight of time-worn comforts and arrangements made him smile. This house, its disposition, that shelf of manuscripts at his left. These were measurable. The children alone were eighteen months of slow transition just in the making.

He clucked disgustedly at himself. This was absurd; rationalizing to himself as if the fancy merited rebuttal. Clearing his throat, he tidied up the surface of his desk with energetic movements. There. And there.

He leaned back heavily in his chair. Well, maybe it was a mistake to repress it. That the concept kept returning was proof enough it had a definite meaning. Certainly, the flimsiest of delusions fought against could disorient the reason. All men knew that.

Well, then, face it, he decided. Time was constant; that was the core. What varied was a person's outlook on it. To some it dragged by on tar-held feet, to others fled on blurring wings. It just happened he was one of those to whom time seemed overly transient. So transient that it fostered rather than dispelled the memory of that childish wish he'd made that night more than five years before.

That was it, of course. Months seemed a wink and years a breath because he viewed them so. And- The door swung open and Carole came across the rug, holding a glass of warmed milk.

"You should be in bed," he scolded.

"So should you," she answered, "yet I see you sitting here. Do you know what time it is?"

"I know," he said.

She settled on his lap as he sipped the milk. "Galleys done?" she asked. He nodded and slid an arm around her waist. She kissed his temple. Out in the winter night, a dog barked once.

She sighed. "It seems like only yesterday, doesn't it?" she said.

He drew in faint breath. "I don't think so," he said. "Oh, *you*." She punched him gently on the arm.

"This is Artie," said his agent. "Guess what?"

Owen gasped. "*No!*"

He found her in the laundry room, stuffing bedclothes into the washer. "Honey!" he yelled. Sheets went flying.

"It's happened!" he cried.

"What?"

"The movies, the movies! They're buying *Nobles and Heralds!*"

"No!"

"Yes! And, get this now, sit down and get it, go ahead and sit or else you'll fall! - they're paying *twelve thousand, five hundred dollars* for it!"

"Oh!"

"And that's not all! They're giving me a ten-week guarantee to do the screenplay at, *get this - seven hundred and fifty dollars* a week!"

She squeaked. "We're rich."

"Not quite," he said, floor-pacing, "but it's only the beginning, folks, *on-ly* the beginning!"

October winds swept in like tides over the dark field. Spotlight ribbons wiped across the sky.

"I wish the kids were here," he said, his arm around her.

"They'd just be cold and cranky, darling," Carole said.

"Carole, don't you think-"

"Owen, you know I'd come with you if I could; but we'd have to take Johnny out of school and, besides, it would cost so much. It's only ten weeks, darling. Before you know it-"

"Flight twenty-seven for Chicago and Los Angeles," intoned the speaker, "now boarding at Gate

Three."

"*So soon.*" Suddenly, her eyes were lost, she pressed her wind-chilled cheek to his. "Oh, darling, I'll miss you so."

The thick wheels squeaked below, the cabin walls shook. Outside, the engines roared faster and faster. The field rushed by. Owen looked back. Colored lights were distant now. Somewhere among them, Carole stood, watching his plane nose up into the blackness. He settled back and closed his eyes a moment. A dream, he thought. Flying west to write a movie from his own novel. Good God, a veritable dream.

He sat there on a corner of the leather couch. His office was capacious. A peninsula of polished desk extended from the wall, an upholstered chair parked neatly against it. Tweed drapes concealed the humming air conditioner, tasteful reproductions graced the walls and, beneath his shoes, the carpet gave like sponge. Owen sighed.

A knocking broke his reverie. "Yes?" he asked. The snugly-sweltered blonde stepped in. "I'm Cora. I'm your secretary," she said. It was Monday morning.

"Eighty-five minutes, give or take," said Morton Zucker-smith, Producer. He signed another notification. "That's a good length." He signed another letter. "You'll pick these things up as you go along." He signed another contract. "It's a world of its own." He stabbed the pen into its onyx sheath and his secretary exited, bearing off the sheaf of papers. Zuckersmith leaned back in his leather chair, hands behind his head, his polo shirted chest broadening with air. "A world of its own, kiddy," he said. "Ah. Here's our girl."

Owen stood, his stomach muscles twitching as Linda Carson slipped across the room, one ivory hand extended. "Morton, dear," she said.

"Morning, darling." Zuckersmith engulfed her hand in his, then looked toward Owen. "Dear, I'd like you to meet your writer for *The Lady and the Herald*"

"I've been so anxious to meet you," said Linda Carson, nee Virginia Ostermeyer. "I loved your book. How can I tell you?"

He started up as Cora entered. "Don't get up," she said. "I'm just bringing you your pages. We're up to forty-five."

Owen watched her as she stretched across the desk. Her sweaters grew more skin like every day. The tense expansion of her breathing posed threats to every fibre.

"How does it read?" he asked.

She took it for an invitation to perch across the couch arm at his feet. "I think you're doing *wonderfully*," she said. She crossed her legs and frothy slip lace sighed across her knees. "You're very talented." She drew in chest-enhancing air. "There's just a few things here and there," she said. "I'd tell you what they were right now but - well, it's lunchtime and -"

They went to lunch; that day and others after. Cora donned a mantle of stewardship, guiding him as though he were re-sourceless. Bustling in with smiles and coffee every morning, telling him what foods were best prepared at dinner and, fingering his arm, leading him to the commissary every afternoon for orange juice; hinting at a p.m. continuance of their relationship; assuming a position in his life he had no desire for. Actually sniffing one afternoon after he'd gone to lunch without her; and, as he patted her shoulder in rough commiseration, pressing against him suddenly, her firm lips taking their efficient due, the taut convexities of her indenting him. He drew back, startled. "*Cora.*"

She patted his cheek: "Don't think about it, darling. You have important work to do." Then she was gone and Owen was sitting at his desk, alarm diffusing to his fingertips. A week, another week.

"Hi," said Linda. "How are you?"

"Fine," he answered as Cora entered, clad in hugging gabardine, in clinging silk. "Lunch? I'd love to. Shall I meet you at the-? Oh. All right!" He hung up. Cora stared at him.

As he slipped onto the red leather seat he saw, across the street, Cora at the gate, watching him grimly.

"Hello, Owen," Linda said. The Lincoln purred into the line of traffic. This is nonsense, Owen thought. He'd have to try a second time with Cora. The first discouragement she'd taken for nobility; the gesture

of a gallant husband toward his wife and children. At least she seemed to take it so. Good God, what complication.

It was lunch together on the Strip; then, later, dinner, Owen trusting that enough hours devoted to Linda would convince Cora of his lack of interest. The next night it was dinner and the Philharmonic; two nights later, dancing and a drive along the shore; the next, a preview in Encino.

At what specific juncture the plan went wrong Owen never knew. It gained irrevocable form the night when, parked beside the ocean, radio music playing softly, Linda slipped against him naturally, her world-known body pressing close, her lips a succulence at his. "*Darling.*"

He lay starkly awake, thinking of the past weeks; of Cora and Linda; of Carole whose reality had faded to the tenuous form of daily letters and a weekly voice emitting from the telephone, a smiling picture on his desk.

He'd almost finished with the screenplay. Soon he'd fly back home. So much time had passed. Where were the joints, the sealing place? Where was the evidence except in circumstantial shards of memory? It was like one of those effects they'd taught him at the studio; a *montage*, a series of quickly paced scenes. That's what life seemed like; a series of quickly paced scenes that flitted across the screen of one's attention, then were gone.

Across the hotel room, his travelling clock buzzed once. He would not look at it.

He ran against the wind, the snow, but Carole wasn't there. He stood, eyes searching, in the waiting room, an island of man and luggage. Was she ill? There'd been no acknowledgment of his telegram but- "Carole?" The booth was hot and stale.

"Yes," she said.

"My God, darling, did you *forget*?"

"No," she said.

The taxi ride to Northport was a jading travelogue of snow-cottoned trees and lawns, impeding traffic lights and tire chains rattling over slush-gravied streets. She'd been so deadly calm on the phone. No, I'm not sick. Linda has a little cold. John is fine. I couldn't get a sitter. A chill of premonitions troubled at him.

Home at last. He'd dreamed of it like this, standing silently among the skeletal trees, a mantle of snow across its roof, a rope of wood smoke spiralling from its chimney. He paid the driver with a shaking hand and turned expectantly. The door stayed shut. He waited but the door stayed shut.

He read the letter that she'd finally given him. *Dear Mrs. Crowley*, it began, *I thought you ought to know. . .* His eyes sought out the childish signature below. *Cora Bailey*.

"Why that dirty, little-" He couldn't say it; something held him back.

"Dear God." She stood before the window, trembling. "To this very moment I've been praying it was a lie. But now..."

She shiveled at his touch. "*Don't.*"

"You wouldn't go with me," he charged. "You *wouldn't* go-"

"*Is that your excuse?*" she asked.

"Wha'm I gonna do?" he asked, fumbling at his fourteenth Scotch and water. "*Wha'?* I don' wanna lose 'er, Artie. I don' wanna lose 'er an' the children. Wha'm I gonna do?"

"I don't know," said Artie.

"That dirty li'l-" Owen muttered. "Hadn't been for her..."

"Don't blame the silly little slut for this," said Artie. "She's just the icing. You're the one who baked the cake."

"*Wha'm I gonna do?*"

"Well, for one thing, start working at life a little more. It isn't just a play that's taking place in front of you. You're on the stage, you have a part. Either you play it or you're a pawn. No one's going to feed you dialogue or action, Owen. You're on your own. Remember that."

"*I wonder,*" Owen said. Then and later in the silence of his hotel room.

A week, two weeks. Listless walks through a Manhattan that was only noise and loneliness. Movies stared at, dinners at the Automat, sleepless nights, the alcoholized search for peace. Finally, the desperate

phone call. "Carole, take me back, *please* take me back."

"Oh, darling. *Come home to me.*"

Another cab ride, this time joyous. The porch light burning, the door flung open, Carole running to him. Arms around each other, walking back into their home together.

*The Grand Tour!* A dizzying whirl of places and events. Misted England in the spring; the broad, the narrow streets of Paris; Spree-bisected Berlin and Rhone-bisected Geneva. Milan of Lombardy, the hundred crumbling-castled islands of Venice, the culture trove of Florence, Marseilles braced against the sea, the Alps-protected Riviera, Dijon the ancient. A second honeymoon; a rush of desperate renewal, half seen, half felt like flashes of uncertain heat in a great, surrounding darkness.

They lay together on the river bank. Sunlight scattered glittering coins across the water, fish stirred idly in the thermal drift. The contents of their picnic basket lay in happy decimation. Carole rested on his shoulder, her breath a warming tickle on his chest.

"Where has the time all gone to?" Owen asked; not of her or anyone but to the sky.

"Darling, you sound upset," she said, raising on an elbow to look at him.

"I am," he answered. "Don't you remember the night we saw that picture *A Moment or Forever?* Don't you remember what I said?"

"No."

He told her; of that and of his wish and of the formless dread that sometimes came upon him. "It was just the first part I wanted fast, though," he said, "*not the whole thing.*"

"Darling, darling," Carole said, trying not to smile, "I guess this must be the curse of having an imagination. Owen, it's been over seven years. *Seven years.*"

He held his watch up. "Or fifty-seven minutes," he said.

Home again. Summer, fall, and winter. *Wind from the South* selling to the movies for \$100,000; Owen turning down the screenplay offer. The aging mansion overlooking the Sound, the hiring of Mrs. Halsey as their housekeeper. John packed off to military academy, Linda to private school. As a result of the European trip, one blustery afternoon in March, the birth of George.

Another year. Another. Five years, ten. Books assured and flowing from his pen. *Lap of Legends Old*, *Crumbling Satires*, *Jiggery Pokery*, and *The Dragon Fly*. A decade gone, then more. The National Book Award for *No Dying and No Tomb*. The Pulitzer Prize for *Bacchus Night*.

He stood before the window of his panelled office, trying to forget at least a single item of another panelled office he'd been in, that of his publisher the day he'd signed his first contract there. But he could forget nothing; not a single detail would elude him. As if, instead of twenty-three years before, it had been yesterday. How could he recall it all so vividly unless, actually-

"Dad?" He turned and felt a frozen trap jaw clamp across his heart. John strode across the room. "I'm going now," he said.

"What? *Going?*" Owen stared at him; at this tall stranger, at this young man in military uniform who called him Dad.

"Old Dad," laughed John. He clapped his father's arm. "Are you dreaming up another book?"

Only then, as if cause followed effect, Owen knew. Europe raged with war again and John was in the army, ordered overseas. He stood there, staring at his son, speaking with a voice not his; watching the seconds rush away. Where had *this* war come from? What vast and awful machinations had brought it into being? *And where was his little boy?* Surely he was not this stranger shaking hands with him and saying his goodbyes. The trap jaw tightened. Owen whimpered.

But the room was empty. He blinked. Was it all a dream, all flashes in an ailing mind? On leaden feet, he stumbled to the window and watched the taxi swallow up his son and drive away with him.

"Goodbye," he whispered. "God protect you."

No one feeds you dialogue, he thought; but was that *he* who spoke?

\* \* \*



The bell had rung and Carole answered it. Now, the handle of his office door clicked once and she was standing there, face bloodless, staring at him, in her hand the telegram. Owen felt his breath stop.

"No," he murmured; then, gasping, started up as, soundlessly, Carole swayed and crumpled to the floor.

"At least a week in bed," the doctor told him. "Quiet; lots of rest. The shock is most severe."

He shambled on the dunes; numbed, expressionless. Razored winds cut through him, whipped his clothes and lashed his gray-streaked hair to threads. With lightless eyes, he marked the course of foam flecked waves across the Sound. Only yesterday that John went off to war, he thought; only yesterday he came home proudly rigid in his academy uniform; only yesterday he was in shorts and grammar school; only yesterday he thundered through the house leaving his wake of breathless laughter; only yesterday that he was born when winds whipped powdery snow across-

"Dear God!" Dead. *Dead!* Not twenty-one and *dead*; all his life a moment passed, a memory already slipping from the mind.

"*I take it back!*" Terrified, he screamed it to the rushing sky. "I take it back, I never meant it!" He lay there, scraping at the sand, weeping for his boy yet wondering if he ever had a boy at all.

"*Attendez, M'sieurs, M'dames! Nice!*"

"Oh my; already?" Carole said. "That was quick now, children, wasn't it?"

Owen blinked. He looked at her; at this portly, gray-haired woman across the aisle from him. She smiled. She *knew* him?

"What?" he asked.

"Oh, why do I talk to you?" she grumbled. "You're always in your thoughts, your thoughts." Hissing, she stood and drew a wicker basket from the rack. *Was this some game?*

"Gee, Dad, look at *that!*"

He gaped at the teenaged boy beside him. And who was *he*? Owen Crowley shook his head a little. He looked around him. *Nice*? In France again? What about the war?

The train plunged into blackness. "Oh, *damn!*" snapped Linda. On Owen's other side she struck her match again and, in the flare, he saw, reflected in the window, the features of another middle-aged stranger and it was himself. The present flooded over him. The war over and he and his family abroad: Linda, twenty-one, divorced, bitter, slightly alcoholic; George, fifteen, chubby, flailing in the glandular limbo between women and erector sets; Carole, forty-six, newly risen from the sepulchre of menopause, pettish, somewhat bored; and he himself, forty-nine, successful, coldly handsome, still wondering if life were made of years or seconds. All this passing through his mind before Riviera sunlight flooded into their compartment again.

Out on the terrace it was darker, cooler. Owen stood there, smoking, looking at the spray of diamond pinpoints in the sky. Inside, the murmuring of gamblers was like a distant, insect hum.

"Hello, Mr. Crowley."

She was in the shadows, palely gowned; a voice, a movement.

"You know my name?" he asked.

"But you're famous," was her answer.

Awareness fluttered in him. The straining flattery of club women had turned his stomach more than once. But then she'd glided from the darkness and he saw her face and all awareness died. Moonlight creamed her arms and shoulders; it was incandescent in her eyes.

"My name is Alison," she said. "Are you glad to meet me?"

The polished cruiser swept a banking curve into the wind, its bow slashing at the waves, flinging up a rainbowed mist across them. "You little idiot!" he laughed. "You'll drown us yet!"

"You and I!" she shouted back. "Entwining under fathoms! I'd *love* that, wouldn't you?"

He smiled at her and touched her thrill-flushed cheek. She kissed his palm and held him with her eyes. *I love you*. Soundless; a movement of her lips. He turned his head and looked across the sun-jewelled Mediterranean. Just keep going on, he thought. Never turn. Keep going till the ocean swallows us. *I won't go back*.

Alison put the boat on automatic drive, then came up behind him, sliding warm arms around his waist,

pressing her body to his. "You're off again," she murmured. "Where are you, darling?"

He looked at her. "How long have we known each other?" he asked.

"A moment, forever, it's all the same," she answered, teasing at his ear lobe with her lips.

"A moment or forever," he murmured. "Yes."

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Just brooding on the tyranny of clocks."

"Since time is so distressing to you, love," she said, pushing open the cabin door, "let's not waste another second of it."

The cruiser hummed across the silent sea.

"What, *hiking*?' Carole said. "At *your* age?"

"Though it may disturb you," Owen answered, tautly, "I, at least, am not yet prepared to surrender to the stodgy blandishments of old age."

"So I'm senile now!" she cried.

"*Please*," he said.

"She thinks you're *old*?" said Alison. "Good God, how little that woman knows you!"

Hikes, skiing, boat rides, swimming, horseback riding, dancing till sun dispersed the night. Him telling Carole he was doing research for a novel; not knowing if she believed him; not, either, caring much. Weeks and weeks of stalking the elusive dead.

He stood on the sun-drenched balcony outside Alison's room. Inside, ivory-limbed, she slept like some game-worn child. Owen's body was exhausted, each inadequate muscle pleading for surcease; but, for the moment, he was not thinking about that. He was wondering about something else; a clue that had occurred to him when he was lying with her.

In all his life, it seemed as if there never was a clear remembrance of physical love. Every detail of the moments leading to the act were vivid but the act itself was not. Equally so, all memory of his ever having cursed aloud was dimmed, uncertain.

*And these were the very things that movies censored.*

"Owen?" Inside, he heard the rustle of her body on the sheets. There was demand in her voice again; honeyed but authoritative. He turned. Then let me *remember* this, he thought. Let every second of it be with me; every detail of its fiery exaction, its flesh-born declarations, its drunken, sweet derangement. Anxiously, he stepped through the doorway.

Afternoon. He walked along the shore, staring at the mirror-flat blueness of the sea. It was true then. There was no distinct remembrance of it. From the second he'd gone through the doorway until now, all was a virtual blank. Yes, *true!* He knew it now. Interims were void; time was rushing him to his script-appointed end. He was a player, yes, as Artie said, but the play had already been written.

He sat in the dark train compartment, staring out the window. Far below slept moon-washed Nice and Alison; across the aisle slept George and Linda, grumbled Carole in a restless sleep. How angry they had been at his announcement of their immediate departure for home.

And now, he thought, and *now*. He held his watch up and marked the posture of its luminous hands. *Seventy-four minutes.*

How much left?

"You know, George," he said, "when I was young and not so young I nursed a fine delusion. I thought my life was being run out like a motion picture. It was never certain, mind you, only nagging doubt but it dismayed me; oh, indeed it did. Until, one day a little while ago, it came to me that everyone has an uncontrollable aversion to the inroads of mortality. Especially old ones like myself, George. How we are inclined to think that time has, somehow, tricked us, making us look the other way a moment while, now unguarded, it rushes by us, bearing on its awful, tracking shoulders, our lives."

"I can see that," said George and lit his pipe again.

Owen Crowley chuckled: "George, George," he said. "Give full humour to your nutty sire. He'll not be with you too much longer."

"Now stop that talk," said Carole, knitting by the fire. "Stop that silly talk."

"Carole?" he called. "My dear?" Wind from the Sound obscured his trembling voice. He looked

around. "Here, *you!* *Here!*"

The nurse primped mechanically at his pillow. She chided, "Now, now, Mr. Crowley. You mustn't tire yourself."

"Where's my wife? For pity's sake go fetch her. I can't-"

"Hush now, Mr. Crowley, don't start in again."

He stared at her, at this semi-moustached gaucherie in white who fussed and wheedled. "What?" he murmured. "*What?*" Then something drew away the veil and he knew. Linda was getting her fourth divorce, shuttling between her lawyer's office and the cocktail lounges; George was a correspondent in Japan, a brace of critic-feted books to his name. And Carole, Carole?

Dead.

"No," he said, quite calmly. "No, no, that's not true. I tell you, fetch her. Oh, there's a pretty thing." He reached out for the falling leaf.

The blackness parted; it filtered into unmarked greyness. Then his room appeared, a tiny fire in the grate, his doctor by the bed consulting with the nurse; at the foot of it, Linda standing like a sour wraith.

Now, thought Owen. Now was just about the time. His life, he thought, had been a brief engagement; a flow of scenes across what cosmic retina? He thought of John, of Linda Carson, of Artie, of Morton Zuckersmith and Cora; of George and Linda and Alison; of Carole; of the legioned people who had passed him during his performance. They were all gone, almost faceless now.

"What... time?" he asked.

The doctor drew his watch. "Four-oh-eight," he said, "a.m."

*Of course.* Owen smiled. He should have known it all along. A dryness in his throat thinned the laugh to a rasping whisper. They stood there, staring at him.

"Eighty-five minutes," he said. "A good length. Yes; *a good length.*"

Then, just before he closed his eyes, he saw them-letters floating in the air, imposed across their faces and the room. And they were words but words seen in a mirror, white and still.

## THE END

Or was it just imagination?

*Fadeout.*

## 32 - Dress Of White Silk

Quiet is here and all in me.

Granma locked me in my room and won't let me out. Because it's happened she says. I guess I was bad. Only it was the dress. Momma's dress I mean. She is gone away forever. Granma says your momma is in heaven. I don't know how. Can she go in heaven if she's dead?

Now I hear Granma. She is in momma's room. She is putting mommas dress down the box. Why does she always? And locks it too. I wish she didn't. It's a pretty dress and smells sweet so. And warm. I love to touch it against my cheek. But I can't never again. I guess that is why Granma is mad at me.

But I amnt sure. All day it was only like every day. Mary Jane came over to my house. She lives across the street. Every day she comes to my house and play. Today she was.

I have seven dolls and a fire truck. Today Granma said play with your dolls and it. Don't you go inside your mommas room now she said. She always says it. She just means not mess up I think. Because she says it all the time. Don't go in your mommas room. Like that.

But it's nice in mommas room. When it rains I go there. Or when Granma is doing her nap I do. I don't make noise. I just sit on the bed and touch the white cover. Like when I was only small. The room smells like sweet.

I make believe momma is dressing and I am allowed in. I smell her white silk dress. Her going out for night dress. She called it that I don't remember when.

I hear it moving if I listen hard. I make believe to see her sitting at the dressing table. Like touching on perfume or something I mean. And see her dark eyes. I can remember.

It's so nice if it rains and I see eyes on the window. The rain sounds like a big giant outside. He says shush shush so everyone will be quiet. I like to make believe that in mommas room.

What I like almost best is to sit at mommas dressing table. It is like pink and big and smells sweet too. The seat in front has a pillow sewed in it. There are bottles and bottles with bumps and have collared perfume in them. And you can see almost your whole self in the mirror.

When I sit there I make believe to be momma. I say be quiet mother I am going out and you can not stop me. It is something I say I don't know why like I hear it in me. And oh stop your sobbing mother they will not catch me I have my magic dress.

When I pretend I brush my hair long. But I only use my own brush from my room. I didn't never use mommas brush. I don't think granma is mad at me for that because I never use mommas brush. I wouldn't never.

Sometimes I did open the box up. Because I know where Granma puts the key. I saw her once when she wouldn't know I saw her. She puts the key on the hook in momma's closet. Behind the door I mean.

I could open the box lots of times. That's because I like to look at mommas dress. I like best to look at it. It is so pretty and feels soft and like silky. I could touch it for a million years.

I kneel on the rug with roses on it. I hold the dress in my arms and like breathe from it. I touch it against my cheek. I wish I could take it to sleep with me and hold it. I like to. Now I can't. Because Granma says. And she says I should burn it up but I loved her so. And she cries about the dress.

I wasn't never bad with it. I put it back neat like it was never touched. Granma never knew. I laughed that she never knew before. But she knows now I did it I guess. And shell punish me. What did it hurt her? Wasn't it my mommas dress?

What I like real best in mommas room is look at the picture of momma. It has a gold thing around it. Frame is what Granma says. It is on the wall on top the bureau.

Momma is pretty. Your momma was pretty Granma says. Why does she? I see momma there smiling on me and she *is* pretty. For always.

Her hair is black. Like mine. Her eyes are even pretty like black. Her mouth is red so red. I like the dress and it's the white one. It is all down on her shoulders. Her skin is white almost white like the dress. And so are her hands. She is so pretty. I love her even if she is gone away forever. I love her so much.

I guess I think that's what made me bad. I mean to Mary Jane.

Mary Jane came from lunch like she does. Granma went to do her nap. She said don't forget now no going to your mommas room. I told her no Granma. And I was saying the truth but then Mary Jane and I was playing fire truck. Mary Jane said I bet you haven't no mother I bet you made up it all she said.

I got mad at her. I have a momma I know. She made me mad at her to say I made up it all. She said I'm a liar. I mean about the bed and the dressing table and the picture and the dress even and everything.

I said well I'll show you smarty.

I looked into grammas room. She was doing her nap still. I went down and said Mary Jane to come on because Granma won't know.

She wasn't so smart after then. She giggled like she does. Even she made a scaredy noise when she hit into the table in the hall upstairs. I said you're a scaredy cat to her. She said back well *my* house isn't so dark like this. Like that was so much.

We went in mommas room. It was more dark than you could see. I said this is my momma's room I suppose I made up it all.

She was by the door and she wasn't smart then either. She didn't say any word. She looked around the room. She jumped when I got her arm. Well come on I said.

I sat on the bed and said this is my mommas bed see how soft it is. She didn't say nothing. Scaredy

cat I said. Am not she said like she does.

I said to sit down how can you tell if it's soft if you don't sit down. She sat down by me. I said feel how soft it is. Smell how sweet it is.

I closed my eyes but funny it wasn't like always. Because Mary Jane was there. I told her to stop feeling the cover. You said to she said. Well stop it I said.

See I said and I pulled her up. That's the dressing table. I took her and brought her there. She said let go. It was so quiet and like always. I started to feel bad. Because Mary Jane was there. Because it was in my momma's room and momma wouldn't like Mary Jane there.

But I had to show her the things because. I showed her the mirror. We looked at each other in it. She looked white. Mary Jane is a scaredy cat I said. Am not am not she said anyway nobody's house is so quiet and dark inside. Anyway she said it smells.

I got mad at her. No it doesn't smell I said. Does so she said you said it did. I got madder too. It smells like sugar she said. It smells like sick people in your momma's room.

Don't say my momma's room is like sick people I said to her.

Well you didn't show me no dress and you're lying she said there isn't no dress. I felt all warm inside so I pulled her hair. I'll show you I said you're going to see my mommas dress and you'll better not call me a liar.

I made her stand still and I got the key off the hook. I kneeled down. I opened the box with the key.

Mary Jane said pew that smells like garbage.

I put my nails in her and she pulled away and got mad. Don't you pinch me she said and she was all red. I'm telling my mother on you she said. And anyway it's not a white dress it's dirty and ugly she said.

Its not dirty I said. I said it so loud I wonder why Granma didn't hear. I pulled out the dress from the box. I held it up to show her how it's white. It fell open like the rain whispering and the bottom touched on the rug.

It is too white I said all white and clean and silky.

No she said she was so mad and red it has a hole in it. I got more madder. If my momma was here shed show you I said. You got no momma she said all ugly. I hate her.

*I have.* I said it way loud. I pointed my finger to momma's picture. Well who can see in this stupid dark room she said. I pushed her hard and she hit against the bureau. See then I said mean look at the picture. That's my momma and she's the most beautiful lady in the world.

She's ugly she has funny hands Mary Jane said. She hasn't I said she's the most beautiful lady in the world!

Not not she said *she has buck teeth.*

I don't remember then. I think the dress moved in my arms. Mary Jane screamed. I don't remember what. It got dark and the curtains were closed I think I couldn't see anyway. I couldn't hear nothing except buck teeth funny hands buck teeth funny hands even when no one was saying it.

There was something else because I think I heard someone call *don't let her say that!* I couldn't hold to the dress. And I had it on me I can't remember. Because I was grown up strong. But I was a little girl still I think I mean outside.

I think I was terrible bad then.

Granma took me away from there I guess. I don't know. She was screaming god help us it's happened it's happened. Over and over. I don't know why. She pulled me all the way here to my room and locked me in. She won't let me out. Well I'm not so scared. Who cares if she locks me in a million billion years? She doesn't have to even give me supper. I'm not hungry anyway.

I'm full.

### 33 - Miss Stardust

Dear Harry:

How are things in the baked bean industry? Cracky good, I trust - as we used to say in those halcyon days of yore when thou and mou were dripping young ichor over our public relations courses at ye olde M.U.

I swan things *should* be cracky good, what with your future intact and paid-for Cadillac. Second-rank publicity man for Altshuler's Boston Beauties. Kid, you're living.

As for me - nothing. I'm on the ropes from this dang Miss Stardust contest. I s'pose you've read some accounts of the debacle by our comrades-in-legs, the roving reporters. Well, buddy, the inside tale is still to be wagged. So I'm waggin'. List.

To begin with, as they prose in Victorian ghost stories, I have my little agency, single, entrepreneurial and struggling. I have no complaints. There are my steady customers - Garshbiller's Candied Dental Floss, Los Alamos Insect Bombs, The Blue Underwear Company, and, but of course, the ever popular Mae Bushkins Imperial Foundations. All said clients guaranteed to knock me out a steady if nonstratopsheric return.

So what happens? You remember that joker from my home town I told you about once, Gad Simpkins? You know, the one who was going to parachute down a mine shaft? The one who was going to walk tightrope across a burning Bessemer converter? Sure you do.

What happens but the jerk decides to swim the English Channel backstroke. Damn fool thing to try in any man's book, but that was Gad to the socks. Always one for a new twist.

Well, to cut short the prelims, Gad doesn't know a soul. He's small potatoes, strictly a benchwarmer in the minor leagues. He comes to me. Joe, he says, you got to handle my publicity for the swim. This is dynamite, he says to me. I look him over. Change your brand, I tell him. He retires.

But comes two plot thickeners. For one, Los Alamos Insect Bombs is kaput, after one of its larger items blows up a customer's seven-room house and adjoining garage, while he and family are out to the movies.

Result: A - One less client. B - Enough loss to create one wry look on the kisser of my beloved, which says as clearly as if she'd intoned the words in her gravelly snarl: *'Penury. It's upon us!'*

This is the first thing. The second is edging on the subtler side, but still enough to egg me on. I am getting sick of dental floss and foundations and blue underwear. I am tired of catering to torsos and teeth. I want a little magic in my latter days. Besides the fact, as I say, that I covet a little needed jack to improve my low-caste status at Home Sweet Home.

But enough of that. Sufficient to say that I give the job a run for its money. All the tricks of the trade, from squibs to bits of semi-droll fluff in *The New Yorker* magazine. I get Gad on the radio, he desports like the idiot he is. You know the rest. Good solid publicity, interest snowballing, project going strong. Is it my fault Gadstone Simpkins swims into a rock twenty yards out from the Gallic shoreline?

So I toss my greying shock of hair to the side, and am preparing my retreat to blue underwear, when to the house comes a party of three. They are directors of a proposed contest to determine who is to be a certain Miss Stardust.

I elucidate, this being the crux of my sombre plaint. The winner of this here contest is to be declared best-looking head not only on Earth, not only in the Solar System, but in the whole blarsted galaxy. This includes *beaucoup* stars and this, my skinny info about the heavens informs me, includes the chance of a goodly sum of probable life-sustaining planets. As well as our own nine, one of which we already know contains a strange brand of living matter.

Ergo - mishmosh.

However, at the moment these three talent-seeking gents come to see me, I am not thinking overhard about such wraithlike topics. I know as much astronomy as I know where last year's taxes went. When it comes to supernova and escape velocities, I am on a par with the guy who can lose a bass drum in a telephone booth.

This, I hasten to add, disturbs me not one whit. Because the three characters like my publicity work on Gad's ill-fated plunge. I have imagination. I have the fresh approach. I have journalistic *joie de vivre*. Outcome - they want me to handle the Miss Stardust contest at a juicy figure (not one of their prospective contestants - a retainer).

I sign the contract. Hastily. I am now head rah-rah man for a setup that determines which babe has the face that launches a thousand spaceships.

So I get hep. I start ladling out the pabulum of publicity articles and ads disguised as news. 8 x 10 glossies make the rounds. Miss Georgia and Miss New York and Miss Transylvania and Miss Hemoglobin and Miss The Girl We'd Most Like To Be Trapped in a Cement Mixer With.

Prizes are announced. A huge silver loving cup. A Hollywood contract. A car. Others. The applications pour in.

Interest picks up. The boardwalk at Long Harbour starts to get prettied up. The judges are picked, five of them. Two are local dignitaries, fugitives from the Chamber of Commerce. One is a Mayor Grassblood on his yearly vacation from Gall Stone, Arizona. Another is Marvin O'Shea, president of a chemical plant. Last and not least is Gloober, of Gloober and Gloober, old firm of good repute that turns out bathing suits. (Guess what kind of bathing suits all contestants are going to wear.)

Everything is going cracky good. Excitement fills the air. Drivel fills the columns. Merchants are rubbing their gnarled palms together, oiling up the wheels on their cash register drawers. Middle-aged men are packing duds and combing out toupees to attend the festival. Joy to the world. Everyone is animate. Especially me. I am raking in such matchless coin that I am tempted to slip Mae Bushkin the word to take a flying leap into blue underwear while drawing candied dental floss between the gaps in her bridge. But caution prevails. My wife's middle name. She says you never can tell.

Truer words were never growled.

Because what happens, but three days before the contest starts Mrs. Local Dignitary Number One gets a severe case of galloping undefinable, and ends up in the hospital. Old Man Local Dignitary Number One gets the shakes, cancels his job, and his to the bedside with roses and condolences. A sordid marital gesture, but rough on the contest.

We replace him with Sam Sampson, who owns five car lots. This is not too bad, because we now sidestep the need to hire cars for the babes to ride around Long Harbour in, and cause all male viewers to wax pop-eyed viewing how little material old man Gloober weaves into his bathing suits.

So we are all squared off again. Until Marvin O'Shea, president of a chemical plant, is driving to see an infirm aunt in La Jolla, when his right rear goes 'pow', and he and his ever-nagging go ploughing through the last two cabins of Mackintoshe's Little Hawaiian Motel.

The duo is not seriously injured, but both end up in the white place, flat on their backs and sniffing flowers of compassion. That takes care of another judge.

With mutters of 'jinx' in our ears we find ourselves yet another replacement. Said replacement promptly gets himself in a drunken street brawl, and we have to ease him out of the picture fast. He screams foul and, true, it does seem undue odd. The joker has laid off the bottle for twenty-seven years. But testimony prevails. It emerges clear that the old gent had enough alcohol in him to light seventeen hurricane lamps.

We make the bid to replace this unfortunate with one Saul Mendelheimer, owner and producer of Mendelheimer's Garden-of-Eden Pickles. Mendelheimer acquiesces. We are set again. The machine shudders on.

Then, the day before the contest is to start, the pier collapses. Luckily no one is on it but Lewisohn Tamarkis, who is arranging floral wreaths. He dog-paddles to shore, whilst cursing all living things, and drives off, dripping Pacific Ocean on the seat covers of his 1948 Studebaker.

Our brows knit with grave suspicions. Mutters of 'Communists' falling from many a furtive lip, we acquire the Municipal Auditorium. This is not so good as the outdoors, but our hands are tied. I for one, being a superstitious crank, think there is a curse operating on the show. I have dealt with such ill-fated projects in my time and, say I, once a deal starts going sour there's nothing you can do.

This Miss Stardust contest was accursed, I decided. I didn't know the half of it.

So where was I? Oh, yeah. Well, we finally manage to reach the morning of the show with five breathing, walking judges. The day dawns bright and rainy. First time it rains on that date since 1867. We're all burned. The judges sit in their hotel suite and grouse. Get to the auditorium, I tell them. Then I

run around trying to get things rolling.

First I send out sixteen Sampson cars with loudspeakers, and Long Harbour is informed that The Show Will Go On. On top of each car is a broad, gamuting from Miss Alsace-Lorraine to Miss Pitkin Avenue. They are dressed in flesh-coloured bathing suits and transparent raincoats. They hold umbrellas with one hand and wave with the other. They giggle and give the come-on over the mike. If this, plus flesh-coloured suits, fails, I will concede all to be over, and will wire Mae Bushkin for a rematch.

Also I send out little boys with handbills. I snatch a few minutes of radio time and get a local happy voice announcer to give out with a come one, come all. I send up a balloon. *See Miss Stardust Today!!* it says. Someone shoots it down. A prankster, I think.

Not so.

After a morning of hasty relations with the public, I hie to the auditorium for a last confab with the judges. I note that carpenters are still banging away on the judges' booth on stage. A dry Lewisohn Tamarkis and crew are heaving bouquets around. I think, we may get this show on the road yet.

Then it comes.

I step into the elevator and zip up the shaft. I patter down the hallway. I enter the judges' room.

'Men,' I say.

And that's all.

Because they are sitting paralysed in their chairs, gaping at a thing in the middle of the floor to which my eyes move.

My lower jaw hits the laces on my Florsheims.

Ever see a vacuum cleaner? With a head of cabbage on top? With a jacket on? Standing in the middle of a rug and giving you the eye?

Kiddo, I did.

I am verging on swoon when it addresses me.

'You are in charge?' it inquires.

I do not reply. My tongue is tied. It is strapped. My eyes roll out and bounce on the floor. Nearly.

The thing looks piqued - as much as a head of cabbage can look piqued.

'Very well,' he-she-it says, 'since no one present seems capable of speech, I shall state our case and depart.'

*Our case.* I feel my skin tightening. We are all riven to our spots. We listen to the mechanical voice of the thing. No mouth is to be seen. Its pronunciation is stilted. It is something like hearing a monologue from that train that says *'Bromo Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer'*

'This contest,' it says, 'is declared void.'

Then, as he looks us over with his one oval eye, I get me a glimmer. In my long years as drudge, rabble-rouser and savant of the public taste, I have seen many a weirdie in operation.

So I watch this article with sage eyes. I ponder the angle.

'I will elucidate,' says cabbage head, 'should your silence indicate vacuity of perception. You have, most inappropriately, named this tourney the Miss Stardust contest. Since your microbic Earth, as you call it, represents no more than the most infinitesimal mote in this galaxy, your choice of contest titling is more than inexpedient. It has been considered noxiously naive and insulting to a serious degree.'

*Too clever,* I thought, too all-fire verbose. Nobody spiels like so except the English Department at Cambridge. This is a frame, I deduce. Someone is kidding us.

Used to know a guy named Campbell Gault. He made those novelties like joy buzzers and fake spiders and ashtrays that look like outhouses. Old Camp used to make robots, too. Once during the war he had a steel Hirohito clanking up old 42nd Street singing *I'm a Japanese Sandman*. Clever, and just the sort of John to play a gag like this.

'Is this understood?' says cabbage skull with a toss of his leaves.

I smile knowingly. I look at the transfixed judges.

'All right,' I say, 'Let's cut it. We have work to do.'

'Sit down,' says the thing. 'I am not addressing you.'



'Go find yourself some corned beef,' I say.

'I warn you.'

'Bromo Seltzer, Bromo Seltzer,' I reply.

I find myself pinned to the broadloom by a bluish ray that buzzes out from the vacuum cleaner. It feels something like when you stand on one of those penny Foot Easers. Lots of vibration, and a numbing sensation. But I'm not standing on anything. I'm flat on my back.

'Hey!' I yell, confounded.

'May that strike some reason into you,' quoth the vacuum cleaner. 'I will now conclude my statement.'

The thing rolls around the floor, concluding.

'As I was saying before this intemperate intrusion on my words,' he says, 'since your molecular planet is but the minutest portion of the vast spaces which this contest presumes to encompass, we can only assume grave intolerance, and demand retraction.'

'May I...' commences Mendelheimer of Mendel-heimer's Garden-of-Eden Pickles, 'May I, ulp, inquire... w-w-where you are from?'

'I have just arrived from Asturi Cridenta, as you might call it in your primitive linguistics.'

'A... a... a...' Mendelheimer gags.

'An extraterrestrial!' gasps Sam Sampson, who reads science fiction, between hooking car lovers.

'W-what do you want?'

That's me, a faint squeak in the vicinity of the carpet.

'One of two things,' replies the interplanetary vegetable. 'A change in the contest title, or representation.'

'But...' from me.

'I will remind you,' said the appliance from outer space, 'We have the necessary potency to apply coercion on this body.'

'*Co-ercion?*' says Gloober of Gloober and etcetera.

'We have already attempted to disappoint furtherance of this affair,' says you-know-what, 'but to no apparent avail.'

'The accidents,' murmur I.

'The pier!' cries Mendelheimer.

'The fight!' Sampson snaps words and lingers.

'The rain,' says the vacuum cleaner.

'I *knew* it!' ejaculates Local Dignitary Number Two. 'It never rains in Long Harbour unless there is foul play!'

'This is beside the actual point,' says our visitor.

'Being now aware of our potential effect, judge accordingly.'

Outside, rain is dribbling on the windows. Inside, Judges are dribbling on their cravats. I am pale, and fain would conk out. We look at the cabbage, which poses a truculent pose on the rug.

'How d-did you get in here?' asks Mendelheimer.

'Make your decision,' states the thing. 'You will have the contest title changed, or accord us due representation.'

'But, look,' I start in, forgetting momentarily my head-to-toe hotfoot.

His eye is on me. I subside.

'We are not here to haggle.' The Bromo-Seltzer train rattles angrily over a trestle. 'The decision is made. Do not strain our patience.'

Public relations to the rescue.

'But, look,' I proceed. 'We've already got a thousand posters that read *Miss Stardust Contest*. We've advertised that name. We've sold advance-ticket blocks and the tickets read *Admit One to the Miss Stardust Contest*. Concessionaires have balloons that read...'

'Balloons can be punctured,' says cabbage head, yet testier.

'You did that,' I murmur, '*too?*'

'Enough of this!' bristles the vacuum cleaner from the black velocities. 'If you wish to retain your title, then we demand representative rights.'

In my true hack mind, Harry, already are wheels turning and buzzers buzzing and little factory workers hustling. The potential spread is before my mental eyes.

SEE MISS STARDUST!! THE BEAUTY OF THE HEAVENS!!! PULCHRITUDE FROM BEYOND THE STARS!!!! THE GREATEST, THE MOST SENSATIONAL!!!!

Exclamation point.

'All right,' I say, getting the jump on a stunned board of judges, 'You've got it.'

'Now, *one* moment please.' The mayor of Gall Stone, Arizona, starts a slow-fission bombast. 'This calls for discussion.'

'Discussion!' I say, still flat on my back. 'What do you want them to do - disintegrate the Municipal Auditorium?'

Local Dignitary Number Two leaps to his brogans.

'No sir!' he cries. 'Not the Municipal Auditorium!'

Silence upon the babbling. The vacuum cleaner gives us the once-over heavily.

'Make your decision,' he warns.

So we all nod, pale at the gills.

'Very well,' he says.

'How long will it take to get your entry here?' I inquire politely.

'I will inform the member units of the alliance,' he tells us. 'The entries will be here within the hour.'

'Entry-zzzz?' I gurgle.

'There are several thousand,' He says.

I sag back on the carpeting. I appraise the ceiling and wish I am back plugging the virtues of blue underwear. I envision a stage sagging with several thousand interplanetary broads. I cannot envision the sight of female vacuum cleaners in Gloober bathing suits.

'Thousands?' gulps Mendelheimer.

'I note reluctance,' says cabbage skull. 'Your alternative is the simple act of changing the contest title.'

'We're ruined,' says Gloober.

The yellow eye softens.

'As a matter of actual point,' he says, 'I named such a high figure in hopes of forcing you to accept the alternative. However, I see that you cannot. Know then that beyond your own system, our alliance has determined its own Miss Stardust, though hardly,' he added snottily, 'by that title. We will consent to allow her to represent the remainder of this galaxy. She, plus the four contestants from your own system, will make five. Fairness beyond this you cannot expect to receive.'

'Four... in our system?' Sampson asks.

'There is no movable life on the four outermost planets of your system.'

Now I am no devotee of Astronomy, Harry, but, even for me, this is a hell of a way to get the word about life on other worlds. From the lips of an abusive cabbage. Lips? What lips?

Well, to make a grotesque story short, we accept the conditions. We pick up his under-the-deck deal. If the talking Hoover can make piers collapse and skies liquify, who are we to argue with him? We say, 'You win,'<sup>5</sup> and everything is cracky bad.

After that the vacuum cleaner from another world exits. Exeunt all on his heels, to view him passing through the hall ceiling, head first. We discover later, from a gibbering roof janitor, that cabbage head gazookahs himself up through the skylight and floats up to his interstellar crockery, which is hovering fifty feet over the building. Said saucer then whips into the blue yonder and is gone. As is the composure of one formerly sane janitor.

The judges and I have a session. A couple of them get brave and cry fraud. I tell them off. I inform them that they are not pinned to the floor by blue light and I am. They reflect on this.

The upshot is we have cards painted for the contestants we expect. I do the painting, not wishing to let some hand-painter blab about the new cards he did I consult Sampson for the information. There should

be a card for Miss Mercury, he says, one for Miss Venus, two others for Miss Mars and Miss Jupiter. Of course, he says, they doubtless have different names for their planets. Notwithstanding, blusters Mayor Grassblood, if they are taking part in an Earth contest, they'll take our names for them or leave them. I remind him of cabbage head making the rain, collapsing the pier and playing elevator with himself through the floors. Grass-blood pauses a moment to reflect on that.

We deduce a slight problem on the title card for the last contestant We cannot call her Miss Stardust because, by the standards of the contest, she ain't yet. But the vacuum cleaner says she is *their* Miss Stardust. So what to do? We settle for an unsatisfactory Miss Outer Space.

'The monster will not take a shine to that,' forbodes Mendelheimer.

We hush him up. We retire to the elevator, punchy but unbowed, wondering what the day will bring. It brings headaches.

We decide to spread none of this about since we're not sure. I don't mean we're not sure the vacuum cleaner doesn't mean business, we're not sure we should let cat from bag, lest the walls of the auditorium get kicked down by the eager.

But, as per usual, some creep on the inside gives out with a strictly-between-you-and-me, and before you can say Coma Berenices the place is crawling with rumour. Add the eyewitness of one hysterical frump who sights the crockery take off over the auditorium, and you have the seeds, the ripe beginning, and the rotten harvest.

I am stopped. Is it true about the saucer, they ask, about the literate head of cabbage? Ha ha, I say, that's a good one.

Reaching the stage forty minutes and many ha ha's later, I find out how good a one it really is.

The contestants have shown with their delegate, coach and chaperone, cabbage head. All the babes who are stacked in Earthly manner are gaping like kids at a sideshow. They stand around in their Gloober suits with their eyes popping out.

This the delegate does not like. Because, when I extend my hand with a Kingfish smile, the big yellow eye flashes over me like the headlight on a locomotive. I see there is nothing to shake anyway, swallow a faux pas lump, and pretend not to notice.

'Well, you made it,' I chirp.

'Did you doubt it?' says he in a surly gasp which has all the amiability of a Bendix washer conversing.

'No! No!' I say, jollity flecking off my ashen jowls. 'Not at all. We've been waiting for you.'

He ignores that. He gives the people on stage the single eye. He hisses.

'My wards are losing patience with your goggling Earthians. I demand you have the contest started immediately and see to it that this offensive staring ceases.'

I nod, I smile, I make the rounds dispersing, my stomach doing pushups. That completed, I return to the vacuum cleaner. He says something which makes my heart bounce like a handball.

'If,' he says, 'I note the slightest prejudice toward my wards, the remotest suggestion of alien regard - there will be severe repercussions.'

And so drags on stage the contest nee Miss Stardust.

Ever have a dream where everything goes wrong? Where no matter what you try, it backfires? Where you're the eternal blunderer? That's what I feel like in that contest. The thing is a shambles.

There is a long rumble of curiosity when, after a few Earth babes have minced on and off stage, we hold up the card that reads *Miss Mercury*. Then a few hoots and cat-calls. These suddenly ending when the kid herself makes her entrance.

Now if a technicolour rock comes bobbing out on a stage, Harry, what would you do? The same as the audience did, I speck. Eyeballs protrude, faces blank, jaws gape; in a thousand brains comes the sole query:

Wot in 'ell is this?

Then some visiting fireman gives out with a guffaw and that starts it off. They all decide this is a wonderful gag. I glance a queasy shot over my trembling shoulder and see murder in that yellow eye. My Adam's apple does a swan dive into my lungs, and I turn back.

Applause now. Great little gag that, ha ha. Bring on some more. Some more comes.

Miss Venus.

A hothouse plant with eyes. It slips across the stage on its bottom fronds. The eyes, three, look around the audience. They look ever so slightly disgusted.

Another roar from the audience, this one a little forced. Like the roar of a man who, by gosh, is going to have a good time even if his hair *is* starting to stand on end. This gag is almost *too* good. A guy could swear that green plant was walking around by itself, the wires are so well concealed.

I smell a breath over my shoulder. Rather foul.

'This reception is highly unsatisfactory,' bubbles cabbage head. 'You will alleviate the situation or there will be increasing trouble for you.'

I look at him. I think of flying saucers and ray guns and California going up in toto.

That in mind, I bounce out on stage as Miss Venus exits. I raise the mike from the floor. I raise my palsied arms.

'May I have your attention,' my voice booms through the place. Only electrically.

Brief pause in pandemonium.

'Listen, people,' I say, 'I know this is hard to swallow but those two contestants you just saw are really from Mercury and...'

I am laughed to scorn. I am inundated by Bronx cheers. A cushion flies in the air. Mocking airplanes fashioned from programmes fill the auditorium sky. Confetti drizzles from the balconies.

'Wait a minute!' I shout. 'Your attention please.'

More noise. I wait for the subsiding. I see flash-bulb lightning everywhere. Story and pix will be in the newspapers post-haste. For the first time, unworked-for publicity gives me a pain. Let's face it, I'm scared, Harry. When heroes were made, I was sleeping one off in the next room.

'Let's be fair to these contestants,' I say, my voice a lustrous croak, 'Let's show them some real Earthlike sportsmanship.'

I then let loose a flimsy wave of hand, sheathe the mike in the floor, beckon to the m.c. to take over, and traipse off stage. Right into the vacuum cleaner. I raise a shaky smile to the edifice of his dubious good nature. He glares at me.

'Miss Mercury is grossly offended,' he tells me. 'She states that if she is not chosen winner of the contest, there will be severe retaliation by her elders.'

'What!'

I recoil against the curtain.

'Now wait a second,' I gasp. 'Have a heart. We can't rig the contest just because...'

I'm talking to deaf ears. To no ears, to be correct.

'You created your own problem,' he says, 'when you named your contest as you did.'

'Buddy, I didn't name it!'

'Beside the actual point,' he says, and wheels off. I turn back to the stage with haunted blinkers. Just in time to get a fast load of Miss Mars making her debut on old Earth.

More like an hors d'oeuvre than a female. The trunk and head are two Spanish olives, and the legs and arms are toothpicks stuck in them. I hang onto the curtain ropes with a sorry groan. The audience isn't catcalling so much now. It is sinking in. Even though it's a hard thing to admit and still claim sanity. You see a couple of olives stroll on stage, preceded by an ambulating tropical plant and a rainbow rock that crawls and first you laugh it off, then the creeps get to you.

The creeps are getting to them.

Miss Jupiter doesn't help any when she slides across stage in a transparent globe. She looks like a dirty iceberg. No face, arms, legs - no nothing. I hear someone in the audience gag. Someone says ugh. All we need now, I am thinking, is...

'Miss Mars has informed me,' the vacuum cleaner says, 'that unless she wins first prize, her injured emotions will result in venomous impulses toward revenge against this planet.'

'Now, *wait* a minute, buddy,' I implore.

'Finish the contest quickly,' he says.

'My wards are becoming violently ill at the sight of Earth people en masse.'

'What do you mean, ill?'

'They find your appearance surpassingly repugnant,' he says.

'Now, *look*,' I say.

He is gone.

I watch him roll off. They find *us* repugnant. If I were not ready to cry I would laugh. But I am ready to cry.

Highlight of the show, Miss Stardust, their own Miss Stardust, comes out of the wings.

I can't say she walked. She didn't roll. It wasn't a crawl. You might say she slobbered her way across the stage.

She was an orange jellyfish with a skirt and eyes. She was some jello quivering from the bowl in search of whipped cream. I better shut up, I'm making myself sick.

No, I keep telling myself, *she* wouldn't do that. She couldn't possibly think that...

'Our Miss Stardust has informed me...' starts the delegate.

That's all, brother.

'Oh she has!' I yell. 'What's the matter with Venus and Jupiter, are they sick?'

'They also demand first prize,' says the vacuum cleaner with the head like a cabbage.

I melt, I drip into the floorboards and disappear between the cracks. In wishful imagination anyway. I really just stand there, my mouth offering a large home for needy flies.

'How can they *all* win?' I ask in a gurgling mutter.

'Beside the actual point,' *he* says and I think in unison.

Briefly, my dander goes up again.

'I think you came here just to start trouble,' I tell him.

His eye is on me like an exterminator's lining sights on a particularly odious specimen.

'We do not like you Earthmen,' he says. 'My wards and I find you both obnoxious to the mind and unwholesome to the eye. My wards and I will be glad when they have all won first prize and can leave your loathsome presence.'

I stare at his receding dustbag back. I ponder slipping out the back way and hopping a raft for South America. In the pit the band is playing 'I'm in Love with the Man in the Moon,' the only interplanetary song they know. The judges are stumbling off stage for a break, looking for a good ten fingers of anything potent. They had become judges in the hope of rousing senile corpuscles by viewing luscious femalia. Instead... this.

I shepherd them all into a dressing room the size of an occupied closet. They all stand there with untended sweat drops dripping from their portly faces. They direct smitten eyes in my direction.

'We have a first-class hellish problem,' I tell them. I enlarge.

'But... *that's impossible!*' cries Local Dignitary Number Two, unable to smite his noble brow because the room is too small.

'I've told him that,' I say, 'He's not buying.'

Gloober of etcetera and etcetera sinks down into a chair which just manages to support ample him.

'I'm sick,' he announces.

Grassblood pounds his well-pounded palm.

'This is un-American!' he says and purses lips.

'And I have a niece who wanted to win the contest,' says Mendelheimer sadly.

'What!' cries Local Dig 2. 'Fraud! Calumny!'

'Awright awready - *stow it?* That is an angry me, fed up to here.

I ease immediate tension. I tell Mendelheimer that even if his niece, Miss Alimentary Canal, is impartially judged best-looking head, she can't win now because we are hung up. One of the outer spacers *has* to get the prize.

'Or... *what!*' asks Gloober of.

'Or else we get pulverized,' I say.

'You think they can really do this thing?' asks Mendelheimer.

'Buddy, after what I've seen that character do, I'll take his word on the rest.'

'But which contestant should we give it to?' Sampson poses the big question.

Local Dig 2 throws up his hands in municipal despair.

'We are trapped!' he cries.

I think so too.

Well, we have to adjourn, because the contest must go on. I advise them to stall as long as possible, measure everything twice, ogle slow. They file back to their stand with the gaiety of nobles climbing into tumbrils. They sit there, and I know they are worried when Miss Brooklyn writhes by and they don't bat an eyelash. When such a stack passing before the eye causes no reaction, you are either powerful worried or you are dead.

Again I attempt to reason with cabbage head.

'Look,' I say, 'You're intelligent. Isn't it obvious that we can't give *one* prize to *five* contestants?'

Earthian math is lost on him.

'This contest must end soon,' is all he tells me. 'This superficial chatter is merely irritating us further. There is obviously no competition between my lovely wards and those hideous creatures parading out there. No judge, be he of Earth or Heaven, could possibly award a prize to such manifest hideousness.'

Glimmers. A germ.

'*Hideous?*' I say. 'You think they're hideous?'

'You are *all* hideous.'

I turn away. Suddenly I have it. My brain is clicking at last. I rush to a phone and make my bid to save poor Earth.

Then I ease on stage and slide in beside Sampson. There, while eyeing morsels of perfect 36-22-36, I slip him the word from the corner of my mouth.

He breaks into the smile reserved for cash buyers of this year's Cadillac. Then he leans over and whispers the news to Gall Stone's civic pride. The mayor passes it on to Mendelheimer's shell-like ears, Mendelheimer to Gloober, and Gloober to Loc Dig 2.

Now they are all grinning and looking with revitalized leers at passing pulchritude, and I am feeling like a very clever publicity man.

This is probably the longest beauty contest known to man. It has to be. My plan needs time, and we have to buy it expensive. We have the contestants coming on frontways, sideways and backwards. Singly, in pairs, in groups, and in a long zoftic line. They do everything but walk on their hands. The babes start jawing about it. Even the audience gets a gutfull of willowy shapes. And when glassy-eyed males get tired of looking at babes, man, you've overdone it.

But by then it is all right, because my plan is ready to go.

I go to the mike.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' I say. 'Before we announce our winner, I want to add another surprise award to our list of prizes. We had formerly announced the loving cup, the car, the Hollywood contract, the year's free servicing and chassis work at Max Factor's, and other smaller items. Now we have another prize.'

I pause for my coup.

'A month's vacation in the Mediterranean with none other than...'

I wave my arm toward the wings.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' I am it, '*Mister Universe!*'

The big blond giant comes padding out in his tights, and fed-up housewives do nip-ups in their seats.

While the cheers and groans ring out over my weary but joyous head, I gaze off stage.

As I figure, the broads from space are crowding around their delegate. I nod to the m.c. and amble off the boards, my mind cool with victory.

So we're hideous, are we? Well, that's too bad. If they want the first prize, they have to take that vacation too.

A month in the Mediterranean with Mister Manifest Hideousness. Take it or leave it.

Cabbage head spies me now, and whizzes across the floor. I gulp as he approaches, the feeling of victory sort of dying. That eye looks *mad*.

'You attempt trickery!' he accuses me.

Trickery?' I make with the bland face.

'You intend to carry this ruse out?' he asks.

'Mister,' I say, 'this is *our* contest. We'll give you first prize, but we have the right to say what the prize will be.'

'Beside the actual point,' he says.

'*What?*' I feel something giving.

'How *dare* you proclaim that creature Mister Universe!' he gargles, 'Are you not aware that the Universe contains more galaxies than there are stars in your *own* galaxy?'

'Huh?'

'This calls for drastic action. I must call immediately on the alliance of galaxies. There will be a contest held in this building to decide who is really entitled to the name Mister Universe. Let me see, there are approximately seven million, five hundred and ninety-five thousand base representatives which, divided into their integral parts, makes...'

Harry, what do you say? Can you use a weak assistant to help you push beans? Harry, I'll work for nothing. Please!

JOE

### 34 - Crickets

After supper, they walked down to the lake and looked at its moon-reflecting surface.

"Pretty, isn't it?" she said.

"Mmm-hmm."

"It's been a nice vacation."

"Yes, it has," he said.

Behind them, the screen door on the hotel porch opened and shut. Someone started down the gravel, path towards the lake. Jean glanced over her shoulder.

"Who is it?" asked Hal without turning.

"That man we saw in the dining room," she said.

In a few moments, the man stood nearby on the shoreline. He didn't speak or look at them. He stared across the lake at the distant woods.

"Should we talk to him?" whispered Jean.

"I don't know," he whispered back.

They looked at the lake again and Hal's arm slipped around her waist.

Suddenly the man asked:

"Do you hear them?"

"Sir?" said Hal.

The small man turned and looked at them. His eyes appeared to glitter in the moonlight.

"I asked if you heard them," he said.

There was a brief pause before Hal asked, "Who?"

"The crickets."

The two of them stood quietly. Then Jean cleared her throat. "Yes, they're nice," she said.

"*Nice?*" The man turned away. After a moment, he turned back and came walking over to them.

"My name is John Morgan," he said.

"Hal and Jean Galloway," Hal told him and then there was an awkward silence.

"It's a lovely night," Jean offered.

"It would be if it weren't for them," said Mr. Morgan. "The crickets."

"Why don't you like them?" asked Jean.

Mr. Morgan seemed to listen for a moment, his face rigid. His gaunt throat moved. Then he forced a smile.

"Allow me the pleasure of buying you a glass of wine," he said.

"Well-" Hal began.

"Please." There was a sudden urgency in Mr. Morgan's voice.

The dining hall was like a vast shadowy cavern. The only light came from the small lamp on their table which cast up formless shadows of them on the walls.

"Your health," said Mr. Morgan, raising his glass. The wine was dry and tart. It trickled in chilly drops down Jean's throat, making her shiver.

"So what about the crickets?" asked Hal.

Mr. Morgan put his glass down.

"I don't know whether I should tell you," he said. He looked at them carefully. Jean felt restive under his surveillance and reached out to take a sip from her glass.

Suddenly, with a movement so brusque that it made her hand twitch and spill some wine, Mr. Morgan drew a small, black notebook from his coat pocket. He put it on the table carefully.

"There," he said.

"What is it?" asked Hal.

"A code book," said Mr. Morgan.

They watched him pour more wine into his glass, then set down the bottle and the bottle's shadow on the table cloth. He picked up the glass and rolled its stem between his fingers.

"It's the code of the crickets," he said.

Jean shuddered. She didn't know why. There was nothing terrible about the words. It was the way Mr. Morgan had spoken them.

Mr. Morgan leaned forward, his eyes glowing in the lamplight.

"Listen," he said. "They aren't just making indiscriminate noises when they rub their wings together." He paused. "*They're sending messages*," he said.

Jean felt as if she were a block of wood. The room seemed to shift balance around her, everything leaning towards her.

"Why are you telling us?" asked Hal.

"Because now I'm sure," said Mr. Morgan. He leaned in close. "Have you ever really listened to the crickets?" he asked. "I mean really? If you had you'd have heard a rhythm to their noises. A pace-a definite beat.

"I've listened," he said. "For seven years I've listened. And the more I listened the more I became convinced that their noise was a code; that they were sending messages in the night.

"Then-about a week ago-I suddenly heard the pattern. It's like a Morse code only, of course, the sounds are different."

Mr. Morgan stopped talking and looked at his black notebook.

"And there it is," he said. "After seven years of work, here it is. I've deciphered it."

His throat worked convulsively as he picked up his glass and emptied it with a swallow.

"Well-what are they saying?" Hal asked, awkwardly.

Mr. Morgan looked at him.

"Names," he said. "Look, I'll show you."

He reached into one of his pockets and drew out a stubby pencil. Tearing a blank page from his notebook, he started to write on it, muttering to himself.



"Pulse, pulse-silence-pulse, pulse, pulse-silence-pulse- silence-"

Hal and Jean looked at each other. Hal tried to smile but couldn't. Then they were looking back at the small man bent over the table, listening to the crickets and writing.

Mr. Morgan put down the pencil. "It will give you some idea," he said, holding out the sheet to them. They looked at it.

MARIE CADMAN, it read. JOHN JOSEPH ALSTER. SAMUEL-

"You see," said Mr. Morgan. "Names."

"Whose?" Jean had to ask it even though she didn't want to.

Mr. Morgan held the book in a clenching hand.

"*The names of the dead*," he answered.

Later that night, Jean climbed into bed with Hal and pressed close to him. "I'm cold," she murmured.

"You're scared."

"Aren't you?"

"Well," he said, "if I am, it isn't in the way you think."

"How's that?"

"I don't believe what he said. But he might be a dangerous man. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Where'd he get those names?"

"Maybe they're friends of his," he said. "Maybe he got them from tombstones. He might have just made them up." He grunted softly. "But I don't think the crickets told him," he said.

Jean snuggled against him.

"I'm glad you told him we were tired," she said. "I don't think I could have taken much more."

"Honey," he said, "here that nice little man was giving us the lowdown on crickets and you disparage him."

"Hal," she said, "I'll never be able to enjoy crickets for the rest of my life."

They lay close to each other and slept. And, outside in the still darkness, crickets rubbed their wings together until morning came.

Mr. Morgan came rapidly across the dining room and sat down at their table.

"I've been looking for you all day," he said. "You've got to help me."

Hal's mouth tightened. "Help you how?" he asked, putting down his fork.

"They know I'm on to them," said Mr. Morgan. "They're after me."

"Who, the crickets?" Hal asked, jadedly.

"I don't know," said Mr. Morgan. "Either them or-"

Jean held her knife and fork with rigid fingers. For some reason, she felt a chill creeping up her legs.

"Mr. Morgan." Hal was trying to sound patient.

"Understand me," Mr. Morgan pleaded. "The crickets are under the command of the dead. The dead send out these messages."

"Why?"

"They're compiling a list of all their names," said Mr. Morgan. "They keep sending the names through the crickets to let the others know."

"*Why?*" repeated Hal.

Mr. Morgan's hands trembled. "I don't know, I don't know," he said. "Maybe when there are enough names, when enough of them are ready, they'll-" His throat moved convulsively. "*They'll come back*," he said.

After a moment, Hal asked, "What makes you think you're in any danger?"

"Because while I was writing down more names last night," said Mr. Morgan, "*they spelled out my name.*"

Hal broke the heavy silence.

"What can we do?" he asked in a voice that bordered on uneasiness.

"Stay with me," said Mr. Morgan, "so they can't get me."

Jean looked nervously at Hal.

"I won't bother you," said Mr. Morgan. "I won't even sit here, I'll sit across the room. Just so I can see you."

He stood up quickly and took out his notebook.

"Will you watch this?" he asked.

Before they could say another word, he left their table and walked across the dining room, weaving in and out among the white-clothed tables. About fifty feet from them, he sat down, facing them. They saw him reach forward and turn on the table lamp.

"What do we do now?" asked Jean.

"We'll stay here a little while," said Hal. "Nurse the bottle along. When it's empty, we'll go to bed."

"Do we have to stay?"

"Honey, who knows what's going on in that mind of his? I don't want to take any chances."

Jean closed her eyes and exhaled wearily. "What a way to polish off a vacation," she said.

Hal reached over and picked up the notebook. As he did, he became conscious of the crickets rasping outside. He flipped through the pages. They were arranged in alphabetical order, on each page three letters with their pulse equivalents.

"He's watching us," said Jean.

"Forget him."

Jean leaned over and looked at the notebook with him. Her eyes moved over the arrangements of dots and dashes.

"You think there's anything to this?" she asked.

"Let's hope not," said Hal.

He tried to listen to the crickets' noise and find some point of comparison with the notes. He couldn't. After several minutes, he shut the book.

When the wine bottle was empty, Hal stood. "Beddy-bye," he said.

Before Jean was on her feet, Mr. Morgan was halfway to their table. "You're leaving?" he asked.

"Mr. Morgan, it's almost eleven," Hal said. "We're tired. I'm sorry but we have to go to bed."

The small man stood wordless, looking from one to the other with pleading, hopeless eyes. He seemed about to speak, then his narrow shoulders slumped and his gaze dropped to the floor. They heard him swallowing.

"You'll take care of the book?" he asked.

"Don't you want it?"

"No." Mr. Morgan turned away. After a few paces, he stopped and glanced back across his shoulder. "Could you leave your door open so I can-call?"

"All right, Mr. Morgan," he said.

A faint smile twitched Mr. Morgan's lips.

"Thank you," he said and walked away.

It was after four when the screaming woke them. Hal felt Jean's fingers clutching at his arm as they both jolted to a sitting position, staring into the darkness.

"*What is it?*" gasped Jean.

"I don't know." Hal threw off the covers and dropped his feet to the floor.

"Don't leave me!" said Jean.

"Come on then!"

The hall had a dim bulb burning overhead. Hal sprinted over the floorboards towards Mr. Morgan's room. The door to it was closed although it had been left open before. Hal banged his fist on it. "Mr. Morgan!" he called.

Inside the room, there was a sudden, rustling, crackling sound-like that of a million, wildly shaken tambourines. The noise made Hal's hand jerk back convulsively from the door knob.

"What's *that*?" Jean asked in a terrified whisper.

He didn't answer. They stood immobile, not knowing what to do. Then, inside, the noise stopped. Hal took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

The scream gagged in Jean's throat.

Lying in a pool of blood splotched moonlight was Mr. Morgan, his skin raked open as if by a thousand tiny razor blades. There was a gaping hole in the window screen.

Jean stood paralyzed, a fist pressed against her mouth while Hal moved to Mr. Morgan's side. He knelt down beside the motionless man and felt at Mr. Morgan's chest where the pyjama top had been sliced to ribbons. The faintest of heartbeats pulsed beneath his trembling fingers.

Mr. Morgan opened his eyes. Wide, staring eyes that recognized nothing, that looked right through Hal.

"P-H-I-L-I-P M-A-X-W-E-L-L." Mr. Morgan spelled out the name in a bubbling voice.

"M-A-R-Y G-A-B-R-I-E-L," spelled Mr. Morgan, eyes stark and glazed.

His chest lurched once. His eyes widened.

"J-O-H-N M-O-R-G-A-N," he spelled.

Then his eyes began focusing on Hal. There was a terrible rattling in his throat. As though the sounds were wrenched from him one by one by a power beyond his own, he spoke again.

"H-A-R-O-L-D G-A-L-L-O-W-A-Y," he spelled, "J-E-A-N G-A-L-L-O-W-A-Y"

Then they were alone with a dead man. And outside in the night, a million crickets rubbed their wings together.

### 35 - Legion Of Plotters

Then there was the man who sniffed interminably...

He sat next to Mr Jasper on the bus. Every morning he would come grunting up the front step and weave along the aisle to plop himself down beside Mr Jasper's slight form.

And - *sniff!* he would go as he perused his morning paper - *sniff, sniff!*

Mr Jasper would writhe. And wonder why the man persisted in sitting next to him. There were other seats available, yet the man invariably dropped his lumpish frame beside Mr Jasper and sniffed the miles away, winter and summer.

It wasn't as if it were cold out. Some Los Angeles mornings were coldish, granted. But they certainly did not warrant this endless sniffing as though pneumonia were creeping through the man's system.

And it gave Mr Jasper the willies.

He made several attempts to remove himself from the man's sphere of sniffing. First of all, he moved back two seats from his usual location. The man followed him. I *see*, surmised a near-fuming Mr Jasper, the man is in the habit of sitting by me and hasn't noticed that I've moved back two seats.

The following day Mr Jasper sat on the other side of the aisle. He sat with irascible eye watching the man weave his bulk up the aisle. Then his vitals petrified as the man's tweeded person plumped down by him. He glared an abominating glare out the window.

*Sniff!* - went the man - *Sa-niff!* - and Mr Jasper's dental plates ground together in porcelain fury.

The next day he sat near the back of the bus. The man sat next to him. The next day he sat near the front of the bus. The man sat next to him. Mr Jasper sat amidst his corroding patience for a mile and a third. Then, jaded beyond endurance, he turned to the man.

'Why are you following me?' he asked, his voice a trembling plaint.

The man was caught in mid-sniff. He gaped at Mr Jasper with cow like, uncomprehending *eyes*. Mr Jasper stood and stumbled the bus length away from the man. There he stood swaying from the overhead bar, his eyes as stone. The way that sniffing fool had looked at him, he brooded. It was insufferable. As if, by heaven, *he* had done something offensive!

Well, at least, he was momentarily free of those diurnally dripping nostrils. Crouched muscles unflexed gratefully. He signed with relief.

And the boy standing next to him whistled twenty-three choruses of *Dixie*.

Mr Jasper sold neckties.

It was an employment ridden with vexations, an employment guaranteed to scrape away the lining of any but the most impassive stomachs.

Mr Jasper's stomach walls were of the most susceptible variety.

They were stormed daily by aggravation, by annoyance and by women. Women who lingered and felt the wool and cotton and silk and walked away with no purchase. Women who beleaguered Mr Jasper's inflammable mind with interrogations and decrees and left no money but only a rigid Mr Jasper, one jot nearer to inevitable detonation.

With every taxing customer, a gushing host of brilliantly nasty remarks would rise up in Mr Jasper's mind, each one surpassing the one before. His mind would positively ache to see them free, to let them pour like torrents of acid across his tongue and, burning hot, spout directly into the women's faces.

But invariably close was the menacing phantom of floorwalker or store buyer. It flitted through his mind with ghostly dominion, shunting aside his yearning tongue, calcifying his bones with unspent wrath.

Then there were the women in the store cafeteria... They talked while they ate and they smoked and blew clouds of nicotine into his lungs at the very moment he was trying to ingest a bowl of tomato soup into his ulcerated stomach. *Poof!* went the ladies and waved their pretty hands to dispel the unwanted smoke.

Mr Jasper got it all.

Eyes beginning to emboss, he would wave it back. The women returned it. Thus did the smoke circulate until thinned out or reinforced by new, yet more intense, exhalations. *Poof!* And between waving and ladling and swallowing, Mr Jasper had spasms. The tannic acid of his tea hardly served to stem the course of burning in his stomach. He would pay his forty cents with oscillating fingers and return to work, a cracking man.

To face a full afternoon of complaints and queries and thumbing of merchandise and the topping of all by the girl who shared the counter with him and chewed gum as though she wanted the people in Arabia to hear her chewing. The smacking and the popping and the grinding made Mr Jasper's insides do frenzied contortions, made him stand statue like and disordered or else burst out with a hissing:

*'Stop that disgusting sound!'*

Life was full of irritations.

Then there were the neighbours, the people who lived upstairs and on the sides. The society of *them*, that ubiquitous brotherhood which always lived in the apartments around Mr Jasper.

They were a unity, those people. There was a touchstone of attitude in their behaviour, a distinct criterion of method.

It consisted of walking with extra weighty tread, of reassembling furniture with sustained regularity, of throwing wild and noisy parties every other night and inviting only those people who promised to wear hobnailed boots and dance the chicken reel. Of arguing about all subjects at top voice, of playing only cowboy and hillbilly music on a radio whose volume knob was irretrievably stuck at its farthest point. Of owning a set of lungs disguised as a two to twelve months old child, which puffed out each morning to emit sounds reminiscent of the lament of air raid sirens.

Mr Jasper's present nemesis was Albert Radenhausen, Junior, age seven months, possessor of one set of incredibly hardy lungs which did their best work between four and five in the morning.

Mr Jasper would find himself rolling on to his thin back in the dark, furnished, two-room apartment. He would find himself staring at the ceiling and waiting for the sound. It got to a point where his brain dragged him from needed sleep exactly ten seconds before four each morning. If Albert Radenhausen, Junior, chose to slumber on, it did no good to Mr Jasper. He just kept waiting for the cries.

He would try to sleep, but jangling concentration made him prey, if not to the expected wailing, then to the host of other sounds which beset his hypersensitive ears.

A car coughing past in the street. A rattle of Venetian blind. A set of lone footsteps somewhere in the house. The drip of a faucet, the barking of a dog, the rubbing legs of crickets, the creaking of wood. Mr Jasper could not control it all. Those sound makers he could not stuff, pad, twist off, adjust to - kept plaguing him. He would shut his eyes until they hurt, grip tight fists at his sides.

Sleep still eluded. He would jolt up, heaving aside the sheets and blankets, and sit there staring numbly into the blackness, waiting for Albert Radenhausen, Junior, to make his utterance so he could lie down again.

Analysing in the blackness, his mind would click out progressions of thought. Unduly sensitive? - he would comment within. I deny this vociferously. I am aware, Mr Jasper would self-claim. No more. I have ears. I can hear, can't I?

It was suspicious.

What morning in the litter of mornings that notion came, Mr Jasper could not recall. But once it had come it would not be dismissed. Though the definition of it was blunted by passing days, the core remained unremovable.

Sometimes in a moment of teeth-gritting duress, the idea would reoccur. Other times it would be only a vague current of impression flowing beneath the surface.

But it stuck. All these things that happened to him. Were they subjective or objective, within or without? They seemed to pile up so often, each detail linking until the sum of provocations almost drove him mad. It almost seemed as though it were done with intent. As if...

*As if it were a plan.*

Mr Jasper experimented.

Initial equipment consisted of one white pad, lined, plus his ball-point pen. Primary approach consisted of jotting down various exasperations with the time of their occurrence, the location, the sex of the offender and the relative grossness of the annoyance; this last aspect gradated by numbers ranging from one to ten.

Example one, clumsily notated while still half asleep.

*Baby crying, 4.52 a.m., next door to room, male, 7.*

Following this entry, Mr Jasper settled back on his flattened pillow with a sigh approximating satisfaction. The start was made. In a few days he would know with assurance if his unusual speculation was justified.

Before he left the house at eight-seventeen a.m., Mr Jasper had accumulated three more entries; viz:

*Loud thumping on floor, 6.33 a.m., upstairs from room, male (guess), 5.*

*Traffic noise, 7.00 a.m. outside of room, males, 6.*

*Radio on loud, 7.40 a.m. on, upstairs from room, female, 7.*

One rather odd facet of Mr Jasper's efforts came to his attention as he left his small apartment. This was, in short, that he had put down much of his temper through this simple expedient of written analysis. Not that the various noises had failed, at first, to set his teeth on edge and cause his hands to flex involuntarily at his sides. They had not. Yet the translation of amorphous vexation into words, the reduction of an aggravation to one succinct memorandum somehow helped. It was strange but pleasing.

The bus trip to work provided further notations.

The sniffing man drew one immediate and automatic entry. But once that irritant was disposed of, Mr Jasper was alarmed to note the rapid accumulation of four more. No matter where he moved on the bus there was fresh cause for drawing pen-point from scabbard and stabbing out more words.

*Garlic breath, 8.27 a.m., bus, male, 7.*

*Heavy jostling, 8.28 a.m., bus, both sexes, 8.*

*Feet stepped on. No apology, 8.29 a.m., bus, woman, 9.*

*Driver telling me to go to back of bus, 8.33 a.m., bus, male, 9-*

Then Mr Jasper found himself standing again beside the man with the uncommon cold. He did not take the pad from his pocket but his eyes closed and his teeth clamped together bitterly. Later he erased the original grading for the man.

*10!* he wrote in a fury.

And at lunch, amidst usual antagonisations, Mr Jasper, with a fierce and jaundiced eye, saw system to it all.

He seized on a blank pad page.

*1. At least one irritation per five minutes. (Twelve per hour.) Not perfectly timed. Some occurring two in a minute.*

*Clever. Trying to throw me off the track by breaking continuity.*

*2. Each of the 12 hourly irritations is worse than the one before. The last of the 12 almost makes me explode.*

*THEORY: By placing the irritations so that each one tops the preceding one the final hourly addition is thus designed to provide maximum nerve impact: i.e. - Steering me into insanity!*

He sat there, his soup getting cold, a wild scientific lustre to his eyes, investigatory heat churning up his system. Yes, by Heaven, yes, yes, yes!

But he must make sure.

He finished his lunch, ignoring smoke and chattering and unpalatable food. He slunk back to his counter. He spent a joyous afternoon scribbling down entries in his journal of convulsions.

The system held.

It stood firm before unbiased test. One irritation per five minutes. Some of them, naturally, were so subtle that only a man with Mr Jasper's intuitive grasp, a man with a quest, could notice them. These aggravations were underplayed.

And cleverly so! - realised Mr Jasper. Underplayed and intended to dupe.

Well, he would not be duped.

*Tie rack knocked over, 1.18 p.m., store, female, 7.*

*Fly walking on hand, 1.43 p.m., store, female (?), 8.*

*Faucet in washroom splashing clothes, 2.19 p.m., store (sex), 9.*

*Refusal to buy tie because torn, 2.38 p.m., store, WOMAN, 10.*

These were typical entries for the afternoon.

They were jotted down with a bellicose satisfaction by a shaking Mr Jasper. A Mr Jasper whose incredible theory was being vindicated.

About three o'clock he decided to eliminate those numbers from one to five since no provocations were mild enough to be judged so leniently.

By four he had discarded every grading but nine and ten.

By five he was seriously considering a new system which began at ten and ranged up to twenty-five.

Mr Jasper had planned to compile at least a week's annotations before preparing his case. But, somehow, the shocks of the day weakened him. His entries grew more heated, his penmanship less

legible.

And, at eleven that night, as the people next door got their second wind and resumed their party with a great shout of laughter, Mr Jasper hurled his pad against the wall with a choking oath and stood there trembling violently. It was definite.

They were out to get him.

Suppose, he thought, there was a secret legion in the world. And that their prime devotion was to drive him from his senses.

Wouldn't it be possible for them to do this insidious thing without another soul knowing it? Couldn't they arrange their maddening little intrusions on his sanity so cleverly that it might always seem as if *he* were at fault; that he was only a hypersensitive little man who saw malicious intent in every accidental irritation? Wasn't that possible?

*Yes.* His mind pounded out the acceptance over and over.

It was conceivable, feasible, possible and, by heaven, he believed it!

Why not? Couldn't there be a great sinister legion of people who met in secret cellars by guttering candlelight? And sat there, beady eyes shining with nasty intent, as their leader spoke of more plans for driving Mr Jasper straight to hell?

Sure! Agent X assigned to the row behind Mr Jasper at a movie, there to talk during parts of the picture in which Mr Jasper was most absorbed, there to rattle paper bags at regular intervals, there to masticate popcorn deafeningly until Mr Jasper hunched up, blind-raging, into the aisle and stomped back to another seat.

And here, Agent Y would take over with candy and crinkly wrappers and extra moist sneezes.

Possible. More than possible. It could have been going on for years without his ever acquiring the slightest inkling of its existence. A subtle, diabolical intrigue, near impossible to detect. But now, at last, stripped of its concealing robes, shown in all its naked, awful reality.

Mr Jasper lay abed, cogitating.

No, he thought with a scant remainder of rationality, it is silly. It is a point outlandishly taken.

Why should these people do these things? That was all one had to ask. What was their motive?

Wasn't it absurd to think that all these people were out to get him? Dead, Mr Jasper was worth nothing. Certainly his two thousand dollar policy subdivided among a vast hidden legion would not amount to more than three or four cents a plotter. Even if he were to be coerced into naming them all as his beneficiaries.

Why, then, did Mr Jasper find himself drifting helplessly into the kitchenette? Why, then, did he stand there so long, balancing the long carving knife in his hand? And why did he shake when he thought of his idea?

Unless it was true.

Before he retired Mr Jasper put the carving blade into its cardboard sheath. Then, almost automatically, he found himself sliding the knife into the inside pocket of his suit coat.

And, horizontal in the blackness, eyes open, his flat chest rising and falling with unsteady beat, he sent out his bleak ultimatum to the legion that might be: 'If you are there, I will take no more.'

Then there was Albert Radenhausen, Junior, again at four in the morning. Jolting Mr Jasper into waking state, touching one more match to his inflammable system. There were the footsteps, the car horns, the dogs barking, the blinds rattling, the faucet dripping, the blankets bunching, the pillow flattening, the pyjamas twisting. And morning with its burning toast and bad coffee and broken cup and loud radio upstairs and broken shoelace.

And Mr Jasper's body grew rigid with unspeakable fury and he whined and hissed and his muscles petrified and his hands shook and he almost wept. Forgotten was his pad and list, lost in violent temper. Only one thing remained. And that... was self-defence.

For Mr Jasper knew then there *was* a legion of plotters and he knew also that the legion was redoubling its efforts because he *did* know and would fight back.

He fled the apartment and hurried down the street, his mind tormented. He must get control, he *must!*

It was the crucial moment, the time of ferment. If he let the course of things go on unimpeded, the madness *would* come and the legion would have its victim.

*Self-defence!*

He stood, white-jawed and quivering, at the bus stop, trying with utmost vigour to resist. Never mind that exploding exhaust! Forget that strident giggle of passing female agent. Ignore the rising, mounting crescendo of split nerves. They would not win! His mind a rigid, waiting spring, Mr Jasper vowed victory.

On the bus, the man's nostrils drew mightily and people bumped into Mr Jasper and he gasped and knew that any moment he was going to scream and it would happen.

*Sniff, sniff! went the man -SNIFF!*

Mr Jasper moved away tensely. The man had never sniffed that loudly before. It was in the plan. Mr Jasper's hand fluttered up to touch the hard length of knife beneath his coat.

He shoved through packed commuters. Someone stepped on his foot. He hissed. His shoelace broke again. He bent over to fix it, and someone's knee hit the side of his head. He straightened up dizzily in the lurching bus, a strangled curse almost prying through his pressed, white lips.

One last hope remaining. *Could* he escape? The question punched away his senses. A new apartment? He'd moved before. On what he could afford there was no way of finding anything better. He'd always have the same type of neighbours.

A car instead of bus travel? He couldn't afford it.

Leave his miserable job? All sales jobs were just as bad and it was all he knew and he was getting older.

And even if he changed everything - *everything!* - the legion would still pursue him, tracking him down ruthlessly from tension to tension until the inevitable breakdown.

*He was trapped.*

And, suddenly, standing there with all the people looking at him, Mr Jasper saw the hours ahead, the days, the years -an agonizing, crushing heap of annoyances and irritations and mind-searing aggravations. His head snapped around as he looked at everybody.

And his hair almost stood on end because he realised that all the people in the bus were members of the legion too. And he was helpless in their midst, a pawn to be buffeted about by their vicious, inhuman presence, his rights and individual sanctities endlessly subject to their malevolent conspiracy.

*'No!'* He screamed it out at them.

And his hand flew in beneath his coat like an avenging bird. And the blade flashed and the legion backed away screaming and, with a frenzied lunge, Mr Jasper fought his war for sanity.

*MAN STABS SIX IN CROWDED BUS; IS SHOT BY POLICE*

*No Motive Found For Wild Attack*

### **36 - The Holiday Man**

"You'll be late, " she said.

He leaned back tiredly in his chair.

"I know," he answered.

They were in the kitchen having breakfast. David hadn't eaten much. Mostly, he'd drunk black coffee and stared at the tablecloth. There were thin lines running through it that looked like intersecting highways.

"Well?" she said.

He shivered and took his eyes from the tablecloth.

"Yes," he said. "All right."

He kept sitting there.

"David," she said.



"I know, I know," he said, "I'll be late." He wasn't angry. There was no anger left in him.

"You certainly will," she said, buttering her toast. She spread on thick raspberry jam, then bit off a piece and chewed it cracklingly.

David got up and walked across the kitchen. At the door he stopped and turned. He stared at the back of her head.

"Why couldn't I?" he asked again.

"Because you can't," she said. "That's all."

"But *why*?"

"Because they need you," she said. "Because they pay you well and you couldn't do anything else. Isn't it obvious?"

"They could find someone else."

"Oh, stop it," she said. "You know they couldn't."

He closed his hands into fists. "Why should I be the one?" he asked.

She didn't answer. She sat eating her toast.

"Jean?"

"There's nothing more to say," she said, chewing. She turned around. "Now, will you go?" she said.

"You shouldn't be late today."

David felt a chill in his flesh.

"No," he said, "not today."

He walked out of the kitchen and went upstairs. There, he brushed his teeth, polished his shoes and put on a tie. Before eight he was down again. He went into the kitchen.

"Goodbye," he said.

She tilted up her cheek for him and he kissed it. "Bye, dear," she said. "Have a-" She stopped abruptly.

"-nice day?" he finished for her. "Thank you." He turned away. "I'll have a lovely day."

Long ago he had stopped driving a car. Mornings he walked to the railroad station. He didn't even like to ride with someone else or take a bus.

At the station he stood outside on the platform waiting for the train. He had no newspaper. He never bought them any more. He didn't like to read the papers.

"Mornin', Garret."

He turned and saw Henry Coulter who also worked in the city. Coulter patted him on the back.

"Good morning," David said.

"How's it goin'?" Coulter asked.

"Fine. Thank you."

"Good. Lookin' forward to the Fourth?"

David swallowed. "Well..." he began.

"Myself, I'm takin' the family to the woods," said Coulter. "No lousy fireworks for us. Pilin' into the old bus and headin' out till the fireworks are over."

"Driving," said David.

"Yes, sir," said Coulter. "Far as we can."

It began by itself. No, he thought; *not now*. He forced it back into its darkness.

"-tising business," Coulter finished.

"What?" he asked.

"Said I trust things are goin' well in the advertising business."

David cleared his throat.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Fine." He always forgot about the lie he'd told Coulter.

When the train arrived he sat in the No Smoking car, knowing that Coulter always smoked a cigar en route. He didn't want to sit with Coulter. Not now.

All the way to the city he sat looking out the window. Mostly he watched road and highway traffic;

but, once, while the train rattled over a bridge, he stared down at the mirror like surface of a lake. Once he put his head back and looked up at the sun.

He was actually to the elevator when he stopped.

"Up?" said the man in the maroon uniform. He looked at David steadily. "Up?" he said. Then he closed the rolling doors.

David stood motionless. People began to cluster around him. In a moment, he turned and shouldered by them, pushing through the revolving door. As he came out, the oven heat of July surrounded him. He moved along the sidewalk like a man asleep. On the next block he entered a bar.

Inside, it was cold and dim. There were no customers. Not even the bartender was visible. David sank down in the shadow of a booth and took his hat off. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

He couldn't do it. He simply could not go up to his office. No matter what Jean said, no matter what anyone said. He clasped his hands on the table edge and squeezed them until the ringers were pressed dry of blood. He just *wouldn't*.

"Help you?" asked a voice.

David opened his eyes. The bartender was standing by the booth, looking down at him.

"Yes, uh... beer," he said. He hated beer but he knew he had to buy something for the privilege of sitting in the chilly silence undisturbed. He wouldn't drink it.

The bartender brought the beer and David paid for it. Then, when the bartender had gone, he began to turn the glass slowly on the table top. While he was doing this it began again. With a gasp, he pushed it away. No!, he told it, savagely.

In a while he got up and left the bar. It was past ten. That didn't matter of course. They knew he was always late. They knew he always tried to break away from it and never could.

His office was at the back of the suite, a small cubicle furnished only with a rug, sofa, and a small desk on which lay pencils and white paper. It was all he needed. Once, he'd had a secretary but he hadn't liked the idea of her sitting outside the door and listening to him scream.

No one saw him enter. He let himself in from the hall through a private door. Inside, he relocked the door, then took off his suit coat and laid it across the desk. It was stuffy in the office so he walked across the floor and pulled up the window.

Far below, the city moved. He stood watching it. How many of them? he thought.

Sighing heavily, he turned. Well, he was here. There was no point in hesitating any longer. He was committed now. The best thing was to get it over and clear out.

He drew the blinds, walked over to the couch and lay down. He fussed a little with the pillow, then stretched once and was still. Almost immediately, he felt his limbs going numb.

It began.

He did not stop it now. It trickled on his brain like melted ice. It rushed like winter wind. It spun like blizzard vapor. It leaped and ran and billowed and exploded and his mind was filled with it. He grew rigid and began to gasp, his chest twitching with breath, the beating of his heart a violent stagger. His hands drew in like white talons, clutching and scratching at the couch. He shivered and groaned and writhed. Finally he screamed. He screamed for a very long while.

When it was done, he lay limp and motionless on the couch, his eyes like balls of frozen glass. When he could, he raised his arm and looked at his wristwatch. It was almost two.

He struggled to his feet. His bones felt sheathed with lead but he managed to stumble to his desk and sit before it.

There he wrote on a sheet of paper and, when he was finished, slumped across the desk and fell into exhausted sleep.

Later, he woke up and took the sheet of paper to his superior, who, looking it over, nodded.

"Four hundred eighty-six, huh?" the superior said. "You're sure of that?"

"I'm sure," said David, quietly. "I watched every one." He didn't mention that Coulter and his family were among them.

"All right," said his superior. "Let's see now. Four hundred fifty-two from traffic accidents, eighteen from drowning, seven from sun-stroke, three from fireworks, six from miscellaneous causes."

Such as a little girl being burned to death, David thought. Such as a baby boy eating ant poison. Such as a woman being electrocuted; a man dying of snake bite.

"Well," his superior said, "let's make it oh, four hundred and fifty. It's always impressive when more people die than we predict."

"Of course," David said.

The item was on the front page of all the newspapers that afternoon. While David was riding home the man in front of him turned to his neighbour and said, "What I'd like to know is *how can they tell?*"

David got up and went back on the platform on the end of the car. Until he got off, he stood there listening to the train wheels and thinking about Labor Day.

### 37 - Return

Professor Robert Wade was just sitting down on the thick fragrant grass when he saw his wife Mary come rushing past the Social Sciences Building and onto the campus.

She had apparently run all the way from the house -a good half mile. And with a child in her. Wade clenched his teeth angrily on the stem of his pipe.

Someone had told her.

He could see how flushed and breathless she was as she hurried around the ellipse of walk facing the Liberal Arts Building. He pushed himself up.

Now she was starting down the wide path that paralleled the length of the enormous granite faced Physical Sciences Centre. Her bosom rose and fell rapidly. She raised her right hand and pushed back wisps of dark brown hair.

Wade called, 'Mary! Over here!' and gestured with his pipe.

She slowed down, gasping in the cool September air. Her eyes searched over the wide sunlit campus until she saw him. Then she ran off the walk onto the grass. He could see the pitiful fright marring her features and his anger faded. Why did anyone have to tell her?

She threw herself against him. 'You said you wouldn't go this time,' she said, the words spilling out in gasps. 'You said s-someone else would go this time.'

'Shhh, darling,' he soothed. 'Get your breath.'

He pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and gently patted her forehead.

'Robert, why?' she asked.

'Who told you?' he asked, 'I told them not to.'

She pulled back and stared at him. 'Not tell me!' she said. 'You'd go without telling me?'

'Is it surprising that I don't want you frightened?' he said. 'Especially now, with the baby coming?'

'But Robert,' she said, 'you have to tell me about a thing like that.'

'Come on,' he said, 'let's go over to that bench.'

They started across the green, arms around each other.

'You said you wouldn't go,' she reminded him.

'Darling, it's my job.'

They reached the bench and sat down. He put his arm around her.

'I'll be home for supper,' he said. 'It's just an afternoon's work.'

She looked terrified.

'To go five hundred years into the future!' she cried. 'Is that just an afternoon's work?'

'Mary,' he said, 'you know John Randall has travelled five years and I've travelled a hundred. Why do you start worrying now?'

She closed her eyes. 'I'm not just starting,' she murmured. 'I've been in agony ever since you men invented that - *that thing*.'

Her shoulders twitched and she began to cry again. He gave her his handkerchief with a helpless look

on his face.

'Listen,' he said, 'do you think John would let me go if there was any danger? Do you think Doctor Phillips would?'

'But why you?' she asked. 'Why not a student?'

'We have no right to send a student, Mary.'

She looked out at the campus, plucking at the handkerchief.

'I knew it would be no use talking,' she said.

He had no reply.

'Oh, I know it's your job,' she said, 'I have no right to complain. It's just that -' She turned to him.

'Robert, don't lie to me. Will you be in danger. Is there any chance at all that you... won't come back?'

He smiled reassuringly. 'My dear, there's no more risk than there was the other time. After all it's -' He stopped as she pressed herself against him.

'There'd be no life for me without you,' she said. 'You know that. I'd die.'

'Shhh,' he said. 'No talk of dying. Remember there are two lives in you now. You've lost your right to private despair.' He raised her chin with his hand. 'Smile?' he said. 'For me? There. That's better. You're much too pretty to cry.'

She caressed his hand.

'Who told you?' he asked.

'I'm not snitching,' she said with a smile. 'Anyway, the one who told me assumed that I already knew.'

'Well, now you know,' he said. 'I'll be back for supper. Simple as that.' He started to knock the ashes out of his pipe. 'Any errand you'd like me to perform in the twenty-fifth century?' he asked, a smile tugging at the corners of his lean mouth.

'Say hello to Buck Rogers,' she said, as he pulled out his watch. Her face grew worried again, and she whispered, 'How soon?'

'About forty minutes.'

'Forty min -' She grasped his hand and pressed it against her cheek. 'You'll come back to me?' she said, looking into his eyes.

'I'll be back,' he said, patting her cheek fondly. Then he put on a face of mock severity.

'Unless,' he said, 'you have something for supper I don't like.'

He was thinking about her as he strapped himself into a sitting position in the dim time chamber.

The large, gleaming sphere rested on a base of thick conductors. The air crackled with the operation of giant dynamos.

Through the tall, single-paned windows, sunlight streamed across the rubberized floors like out flung bolts of gold cloth. Students and instructors hurried in and out among the shadows, checking, preparing Transposition T-3. On the wall a buzzer sounded ominously.

Everyone on the floor made their final adjustments, then walked quickly to the large, glass-fronted control room and entered.

A short, middle-aged man in a white lab coat came out and strode over to the chamber. He peered into its gloomy interior.

'Bob?' he said, 'you want to see me?'

'Yes,' Wade said. 'I just wanted to say the usual thing. On the vague possibility that I'm unable to return, I-'

'Usual thing!' snorted Professor Randall. 'If you think there's any possibility of it at all, get out of that chamber. We're not that interested in the future.' He squinted into the chamber. 'You smiling?' he asked. 'Can't see clearly.'

'I'm smiling.'

'Good. Nothing to worry about. Just keep strapped in, mind your p's and q's and don't go flirting with any of those Buck Rogers women.'

Wade chuckled. 'That reminds me,' he said. 'Mary asked me to say hello to Buck Rogers. Anything you'd like me to do?'

'Just be back in an hour,' growled Randall. He reached in and shook hands with Wade. 'All strapped?' 'All strapped,' Wade answered.

'Good. We'll bounce you out of here in, uh -' Randall looked up at the large red-dialled clock on the firebrick wall. 'In eight minutes. Check?'

'Check,' Wade said. 'Say good-bye to Doctor Phillips for me.'

'Will do. Take care, Bob.'

'See you.'

Wade watched his friend walk back across the floor to the control room. Then, taking a deep breath, he pulled the thick circular door shut and turned the wheel locking it. All sound was cut off.

'Twenty-four seventy-five, here I come,' he muttered.

The air seemed heavy and thin. He knew it was only an illusion. He looked quickly at the control board clock. Six minutes. Or five? No matter. He was ready. He rubbed a hand over his brow. Sweat dripped from his palm.

'Hot,' he said. His voice was hollow, unreal.

Four minutes.

He let go of the bracing handle with his left hand and, reaching into his back pants pocket, he drew out his wallet. As he opened it to look at Mary's picture, his fingers lost their grip, and the wallet thudded on the metal deck.

He tried to reach it. The straps held him back. He glanced nervously at the clock. Three and a half minutes. Or two and a half? He'd forgotten when John had started the count.

His watch registered a different time. He gritted his teeth. He couldn't leave the wallet there. It might get sucked into the whirring fan and be destroyed and destroy him as well.

Two minutes was time enough.

He fumbled at the waist and chest straps, pulled them open and picked up the wallet. As he started to re-buckle the straps, he squinted once more at the clock. One and a half minutes. Or -

Suddenly the sphere began to vibrate.

Wade felt his muscles contract. The slack waist band snapped open and whipped against the bulkhead. A sudden pain filled his chest and stomach. The wallet fell again.

He grabbed wildly for the bracing handles, exerted all his strength to keep himself pressed to the seat.

He was hurled through the universe. Stars whistled past his ear. A fist of icy fear punched at his heart.

'Mary!' he cried through a tight, fear bound throat.

Then his head snapped back against the metal. Something exploded in his brain, and he slumped forward. The rushing darkness blotted out consciousness.

It was cool. Pure, exhilarating air washed over the numbed layers of his brain. The touch of it was a pleasant balm to him.

Wade opened his eyes and gazed fixedly at the dull grey ceiling. He twisted his head to follow the drop of the walls. Slight twinges fluttered in his flesh. He winced and moved his head back to its original position.

'Professor Wade.'

He started up at the voice, fell back in hissing pain.

'Please remain motionless, Professor Wade,' the voice said.

Wade tried to speak but his vocal chords felt numb and heavy.

'Don't try to speak,' said the voice. 'I'll be in presently.'

There was a click, then silence.

Slowly Wade turned his head to the side and looked at the room.

It was about twenty feet square with a fifteen foot ceiling. The walls and ceiling were of a uniform dullish grey. The floor was black; some sort of tile. In the far wall was the almost invisible outline of a door.

Beside the couch on which he lay was an irregularly shaped three-legged structure. Wade took it for a chair.

There was nothing else. No other furniture, pictures, rugs, or even source of light. The ceiling seemed

to be glowing. Yet, at every spot he concentrated his gaze, the glow faded into lustreless grey.

He lay there trying to recall what had happened. All he could remember was the pain, the flooding tide of blackness.

With considerable pain he rolled onto his right side and got a shaky hand into his rear trouser pocket.

Someone had picked his wallet up from the chamber deck and put it back in his pocket. Stiff-fingered, he drew it out, opened it, and looked at Mary smiling at him from the porch of their home.

The door opened with a gasp of compressed air and a robed man entered.

His age was indeterminate. He was bald, and his wrinkleless features presented an unnatural smoothness like that of an immobile mask.

'Professor Wade/ he said.

Wade's tongue moved ineffectively. The man came over to the couch and drew a small plastic box from his robe pocket. Opening it, he took out a small hypodermic and drove it into Wade's arm.

Wade felt a soothing flow of warmth in his veins. It seemed to unknot ligaments and muscles, loosen his throat and activate his brain centres.

'That's better,' he said. 'Thank you.'

'Quite all right,' said the man, sitting down on the three-legged structure and sliding the case into his pocket. 'I imagine you'd like to know where you are.'

'Yes, I would.'

'You've reached your goal professor - 2475 -exactly.'

'Good. Very good,' Wade said. He raised up on one elbow. The pain had disappeared. 'My chamber,' he said, 'Is it all right?'

'I dare say,' said the man. 'It's down in the machine laboratory.'

Wade breathed easier. He slid the wallet into his pocket.

'Your wife was a lovely woman,' said the man.

'Was?' Wade asked in alarm.

'You didn't think she was going to live five hundred years, did you?' said the man.

Wade looked dazed. Then an awkward smile raised his lips.

'It's a little difficult to grasp,' he said. 'To me she's still alive.'

He sat up and put his legs over the edge of the couch.

'I'm Clemolk,' said the man. 'I'm an historian. You're in the History Pavilion in the city Greenhill.'

'United States?'

'Nationalist States,' said the historian.

Wade was silent a moment. Then he looked up suddenly and asked, 'Say, how long have I been unconscious?'

'You've been "unconscious", as you call it, for a little more than two hours.'

Wade jumped up. 'My God,' he said anxiously, 'I'll have to leave.'

Clemolk looked at him blandly. 'Nonsense,' he said, 'Please sit down.'

'But-'

'Please. Let me tell you what you're here for.'

Wade sat down, a puzzled look on his face. A vague uneasiness began to stir in him.

'Here for?' he muttered.

'Let me show you something,' Clemolk said.

He drew a small control board from his robe and pushed one of its many buttons.

The walls seemed to fall away. Wade could see the exterior of the building. High up, across the huge entablature were the words: history is living. After a moment the wall was there again, solid and opaque.

'Well?' Wade asked.

'We build our history texts, you see, not on records but on direct testimony.'

'I don't understand.'

'We transcribe the testimony of people who lived in the times we wish to study.'

'But how?'

'By the re-formation of disincarnate personalities.'

Wade was dumbfounded. '*The dead?*' he asked hollowly.

'We call them the bodiless,' replied Clemolk.

'In the natural order, Professor,' the historian said, 'man's personality exists apart from and independent of his corporeal frame. We have taken this truism and used it to our advantage. Since the personality retains indefinitely - although in decreasing strength - the memory of its physical form and habiliments, it is only a matter of supplying the organic and inorganic materials to this memory.'

'But that's incredible,' Wade said. 'At Fort - that's the college where I teach - we have psychical research projects. But nothing approaching this.' Suddenly he paled. 'Why am I here?'

'In your case,' Clemolk said, 'we were spared the difficulty of re-forming a long bodiless personality from your time period. You reached our period in your chamber.'

Wade clasped his shaking hands and blew out a heavy breath.

'This is all very interesting,' he said, 'But I can't stay long. Suppose you ask me what you want to know.'

Clemolk drew out the control board and pushed a button. 'Your voice will be transcribed now,' he said.

He leaned back and clasped his colourless hands on his lap.

'Your governmental system,' he said. 'Suppose we start with that.'

'... and, as it had done to all other mediums, advertising corrupted television,' Wade finished.

'Yes,' Clemolk said, 'it all balances nicely with what we already know.'

'Now, may I see my chamber?' Wade asked.

Clemolk's eyes looked at him without flickering. His motionless face was getting on Wade's nerves.

'I think you can *see* it,' Clemolk said, getting up.

Wade got up and followed the historian through the doorway into a long similarly shaded and illuminated hall.

You can *see* it.

Wade's brow was twisted into worried lines. Why the emphasis on that word, as though to see the chamber was all he would be allowed to do?

Clemolk seemed unaware of Wade's uneasy thoughts.

'As a scientist,' he was saying, 'you should be interested in the aspects of re-formation. Every detail is clearly defined. The only difficulty our scientists have yet to cope with is the strength of memory and its effect on the re-formed body. The weaker the memory, you see, the sooner the body disintegrates.'

Wade wasn't listening. He was thinking about his wife.

'You see,' Clemolk went on, 'although, as I said, these disincarnate personalities are re-formed in a vestigial pattern that includes every item to the last detail - including clothes and personal belongings - they last for shorter and shorter periods of time.'

'The time allowances vary. A re-formed person, from your period, say, would last about three quarters of an hour.'

The historian stopped and motioned Wade toward a door that had opened in the wall of the hallway.

'Here,' he said, 'we'll take the tube over to the laboratory.'

They entered a narrow, dimly lit chamber. Clemolk directed Wade to a wall bench.

The door slid shut quickly and a hum rose in the air. Wade had the immediate sensation of being back in the time chamber again. He felt the pain, the crushing weight of depression, the wordless terror billowing up in memory.

'Mary.' His lips soundlessly formed her name\_

The chamber was resting on a broad metal platform. Three men, similar to Clemolk in appearance were examining its exterior surface.

Wade stepped up on the platform and touched the smooth metal with his palms. It comforted him to feel it. It was a tangible link with the past - and his wife.

Then a look of concern crossed his face. Someone had locked the door. He frowned. Opening it from

the outside was a difficult and imperfect method.

One of the students spoke. 'Will you open it? We didn't want to cut it open.'

A pang of fear coursed through Wade. If they had cut it open, he would have been stranded forever. 'I'll open it,' he said. 'I have to leave now anyway.'

He said it with forced belligerence, as though he dared them to say otherwise.

The silence that greeted his remark frightened him. He heard Clemolk whisper something.

Pressing his lips together, he began hesitantly to move his fingers over the combination dials.

In his mind, Wade planned quickly, desperately. He would open the door, jump in and pull it shut behind him before they could make a move.

Clumsily, as if they were receiving only vague direction from his brain, his fingers moved over the thick dials on the centre of the door. His lips moved as he repeated to himself the numbers of the combination: 3.2 - 5.9 - 7.6 - 9.01. He paused, then tugged at the handle.

The door would not open.

Drops of perspiration beaded on his forehead and ran down his face. The combination had eluded him.

He struggled to concentrate and remember. He had to remember! Closing his eyes, he leaned against the chamber. Mary, he thought, please help me. Again he fumbled at the dials.

Not 7.6 he suddenly realized. It was 7.8.

His eyes flashed open. He turned the dial to 7.8. The lock was ready to open.

'You'd b-better step back,' Wade said, turning to the four men. 'There's liable to be an escape of... locked-in gases.' He hoped they wouldn't guess how desperately he was lying.

The students and Clemolk stepped back a little. They were still close, but he had to risk it.

Wade jerked open the door and in his plunge through the opening, slipped on the smooth platform surface and crashed down on one knee. Before he could rise, he felt himself grabbed on both sides.

Two students started to drag him off the platform.

'No!' he screamed. 'I have to go back!'

He kicked and struggled, his fists flailed the air. Now the other two men held him back. Tears of rage flew from his eyes as he writhed furiously in their grip, shrieking, 'Let me go!'

A sudden pain jabbed Wade's back. He tore away from one student and dragged the others around in a last surge of enraged power. A glimpse of Clemolk showed the historian holding another hypodermic.

Wade would have tried to lunge for him, but on the instant a complete lassitude watered his limbs. He slumped down on his knees, glassy-eyed, one numbing hand outflung in vain appeal.

'Mary,' he muttered hoarsely.

Then he was on his back and Clemolk was standing over him. The historian seemed to waver and disappear before Wade's clouding eyes.

'I'm sorry,' Clemolk was saying, 'You can't go back - ever.'

Wade lay on the couch again, staring at the ceiling and still turning over Clemolk's words in his mind.

'It's impossible that you return. You've been transposed in time. You now belong to this period.'

Mary was waiting.

Supper would be on the stove. He could see her setting the table, her slender fingers putting down plates, cups, sparkling glasses, silverware. She'd be wearing a clean, fluffy apron over her dress.

Then the food was ready. She'd be sitting at the table waiting for him. Deep within himself Wade felt the unease and unspoken terror in her mind.

He twisted his head on the couch in agony. Could it possibly be true? Was he really imprisoned five centuries from his rightful existence?

It was insane. But he was *here*. The yielding couch was definitely under him, the grey walls around him. Everything was real.

He wanted to surge up and scream, to strike out blindly and break something. The fury burst in his system. He drove his fists into the couch and yelled without meaning or intelligence, a wild outraged cry.



Then he rolled on his side, facing the door. The fierce anger abated. He compressed his mouth into a thin shaking line.

'Mary,' he whispered in lonely terror.

The door open... And Mary came in.

Wade sat up stiffly, gaping, blinking, believing himself mad.

She was still there, dressed in white, her eyes warm with love for him.

He couldn't speak. He doubted that his muscles would sustain him, yet he rose up waveringly.

She came to him.

There was no terror in her look. She was smiling with a radiant happiness. Her comforting hand brushed over his cheek.

A sob broke on his lips at the touch of her hand. He reached out with shaking arms and grasped her, embraced her tightly, pressing his face into her silky hair.

'Oh Mary, Mary,' he mumbled.

'Shhh, my darling,' she whispered. 'It's all right now.'

Happiness flooded his veins as he kissed her warm lips. The terror and lonely fright were gone. He ran trembling fingers over her face.

They sat down on the couch. He kept caressing her arms, her hands, her face, as though he couldn't believe it was true.

'How did you get here?' he asked, in a shaky voice.

'I'm here. Isn't that enough?'

'Mary.'

He pressed his face against her soft body. She stroked his hair and he was comforted.

Then, as he sat there, eyes tightly shut, a terrible thought struck him.

'Mary,' he said, almost afraid to ask.

'Yes, my darling.'

'How did you get here?'

'Is it so -'

'How?' He sat up and stared into her eyes. 'Did they send the time chamber for you?' he asked.

He knew they hadn't. Yet he clutched at the possibility.

She smiled sadly. 'No, my dear,' she said.

He felt himself shudder. He almost drew back in revulsion.

Then you're - ' His eyes were wide with shock, his face drained of colour.

She pressed against him and kissed his mouth.

'Darling,' she begged, 'does it matter so? It's me. See? It's really me. Oh, my darling, we have so little time. Please love me. I've waited so long for this moment'

He pressed his cheek against hers, clutching her to him.

'Oh my God, Mary, Mary,' he groaned. 'What am I to do? How long will you stay?'

*A person, from your period, say, would last about three quarters of an hour.* The remembrance of Clemolk's words was like a whip lash on tender flesh.

'Forty min - ' he started and couldn't finish.

'Don't think about it darling,' she begged. 'Please. We're together for now.'

But, as they kissed, a thought made his flesh crawl.

I am kissing a dead woman - his mind would not repress the words - I am holding her in my arms.

They sat quietly together. Wade's body grew more tense with each passing second.

How soon?... Disintegrate... How could he bear it? Yet he could bear less to leave her.

'Tell me about our baby,' he said, trying to drive away the fear. 'Was it a boy or a girl?'

She was silent.

'Mary?'

'You don't know? No, of course you don't.'

'Know what?'

'I can't tell you about our child.'

'Why?'

'I died when it was born.'

He tried to speak but the words shattered in his throat. Finally he could ask, 'Because I didn't return?'

'Yes,' she replied softly. 'I had no right to. But I didn't want to live without you.'

'And they refuse to let me go back,' he said bitterly. Then he ran his fingers through her thick hair and kissed her. He looked into her face. 'Listen,' he said, 'I'm going to return.'

'You can't change what's done.'

'If I come back,' he said, 'it *isn't* done. I can change it.'

She looked at him strangely. 'Is it possible -' she began, and her words died in a groan. 'No, no, it can't be!'

'Yes!' he said, 'It *is* poss -' He stopped abruptly, his heart lurching wildly. She had been speaking of something else.

Under his fingers her left arm was disappearing. The flesh seemed to be dissolving, leaving her arm rotted and shapeless.

He gasped in horror. Terrified, she looked down at her hands. They were falling apart, bits of flesh spiralling away like slender streamers of white smoke.

'No!' she cried, 'Don't let it happen!'

'Mary!'

She tried to take his hands but she had none herself. Quickly she bent over and kissed him. Her lips were cold and shaking.

'So soon,' she sobbed. 'Oh, go away! Don't watch me, Robert! Please don't watch me!' Then she started up, crying out, 'Oh, my dear, I had hoped for -'

The rest was lost in a soft, guttural bubbling. Her throat was beginning to disintegrate.

Wade leaped up and tried to embrace her to hold back the horror, but his clutch only seemed to hasten the dissolution. The sound of her breaking down became a terrible hiss.

He staggered back with a shriek, holding his hands before him as though to ward off the awful sight.

Her body was breaking apart in chunks. The chunks split into fizzing particles which dissolved in the air. Her hands and arms were gone. The shoulders started to disappear. Her feet and legs burst apart and the swirls of gaseous flesh spun up into the air.

Wade crashed into the wall, his shaking hands over his face. He didn't want to look, but he couldn't help himself. Drawing his fingers down, he watched in a sort of palsied fascination.

Now her chest and shoulders were going. Her chin and lower face were flowing into an amorphous cloud of flesh that gyrated like windblown snow.

Last to go were her eyes. Alone, hanging on a veil of grey wall, they burned into his. In his mind came the last message from her living mind: 'Good-bye, my darling. I shall always love you.'

He was alone.

His mouth hung open, and his eyes were circles of dumb disbelief. For long minutes he stood there, shivering helplessly, looking hopefully - hopelessly - around the room. There was nothing, not the least sensory trace of her passing.

He tried to walk to the couch, but his legs were useless blocks of wood. And all at once the floor seemed to fly up into his face.

White pain gave way to a sluggish black current that claimed his mind.

Clemolk was sitting in the chair.

'I'm sorry you took it so badly,' he said.

Wade said nothing, his gaze never leaving the historian's face. Heat rose in his body, his muscles twitched.

'We could probably re-form her again,' Clemolk said carelessly, 'but her body would last an even shorter period the second time. Besides, we haven't the -'

'What do you want?'

'I thought we might talk some more about 1975 while there's -'

'You thought that, did you!' Wade threw himself into a sitting position, eyes bright with crazed fury. 'You keep me prisoner, you torture me with the ghost of my wife. Now you want to talk!'

He jolted to his feet, fingers bent into arcs of taut flesh.

Clemolk stood up, too, and reached into his robe pocket. The very casualness of the move further enraged Wade. When the historian drew out the plastic case, Wade knocked it to the floor with a snarl.

'Stop this,' Clemolk said mildly, his visage still unruffled.

'I'm going back,' roared Wade. 'I'm going back and you're not stopping me!'

'I'm not stopping you,' said Clemolk, the first signs of peevishness sounding in his voice. 'You're stopping yourself. I've told you. You should have considered what you were doing before entering your time chamber. And, as for your Mary -'

The sound of her name pronounced with such dispassionate smugness broke the floodgates of Wade's fury. His hand shot out and fastened around Clemolk's thin ivory column of neck.

'Stop,' Clemolk said, his voice cracking. 'You can't go back. I tell you -'

His fish eyes were popping and blurred. A gurgle of delicate protest filled his throat as his frail hands fumbled at Wade's clutching fingers. A moment later the historian's eyes rolled back and his body went limp. Wade released his fingers and put Clemolk down on the couch.

He ran to the door, his mind filled with conflicting plans. The door wouldn't open. He pushed it, threw his weight against it, tried to dig his nails along its edge to pull it open. It was tightly shut. He stepped back, his face contorted with hopeless frenzy.

Of course!

He sprang to Clemolk's inert body, reached in the robe pocket, and drew out the small control board. It had no connections in the robe. Wade pushed a button.

The great sign was above him: history is living. With an impatient gasp, Wade pushed another, still another. He heard his voice.

'... The governmental system was based on the existence of three branches, two of which were supposedly subject to popular vote...'

He pushed another button - and yet another.

The door seemed to draw a heavy breath and opened noiselessly. Wade ran to it and through it. It closed behind him.

Now to find the machine lab. What if the students were there? He had to risk it.

He raced down the padded hallway, looking for the tube door. It was a nightmare of running. Back and forth he rushed frantically, muttering to himself. He stopped and forced himself back, pushing buttons as he went, ignoring sounds and sights around him - the fading walls, the speaking dead. He almost missed the tube door as he passed it. Its outline blended with the wall.

'Stop!'

He heard the weak cry behind him and glanced hurriedly over his shoulder. Clemolk, stumbling along the hall, waving him down. He must have recovered and got out while Wade was carrying on his desperate search.

Wade entered the tube quickly, and the door slid shut. He breathed a sigh of relief as he felt the chamber rush through its tunnel. Something made him turn around. He gasped at the sight of the uniformed man who sat on the bench facing him. In the man's hand was a dull black tube that pointed straight at Wade's chest.

'Sit down,' said the man.

Defeated, Wade slumped down in a dejected heap. Mary. The name was a broken lament in his mind.

'Why do you re-forms get so excited?' the man asked. 'Why do you? Answer me that?'

Wade looked up, a spark of hope igniting in him. The man thought -

'I - I expected to go soon,' Wade said hurriedly. 'In a matter of minutes. I wanted to get down to the machine lab.'

'Why there, for heaven's sake?'

'I heard there was a time chamber there,' Wade said anxiously. 'I thought -'

'Thought you'd use it?'

'Yes, that's it. I want to go back to my own time. I'm lonely.'

'Haven't you been told?' asked the man.

'Told what?'

The tube sighed to a halt. Wade started up. The man waved his weapon and Wade sank down again. Had they passed it?

'As Soon as your re-formed body returns to air,' the man was saying, 'your psychic force returns to the original moment of death - hrumph - separation from the body I mean.'

Wade was distracted by nervous fear. 'What?' he asked vaguely, looking around.

'Personal force, personal force,' bumbled the man. 'At the moment it leaves your re-formed body, it will return to the moment you originally - uh - died. In your case that would be - when?'

'I don't understand.'

The man shrugged. 'No matter, no matter. Take my word for it. You'll soon be back in your own time.'

'What about the machine lab?' Wade asked again.

'Next stop,' said the man.

'Can we go there, I mean?'

'Oh,' grumbled the man, 'I suppose I could drop in and take a look at it. Think they'd let me know. Never any cooperation with the military. Invariably -' His voice trailed off. 'No,' he resumed. 'On second thought, I'm in a hurry.'

Wade watched the man lower his weapon. He clenched his teeth and braced himself to lunge.

'Well,' said the man, 'On third thought...'

Closing his eyes, Wade slumped back and exhaled a long shuddering breath through his pale lips.

It was still intact, its gleaming metal reflecting the tiers of bright overhead lights - and the circular door was open.

There was only one student in the lab. He was sitting at a bench. He looked up as they entered.

'Can I help you, Commander?' he asked.

'No need. No need,' said the officer in an annoyed voice. 'The re-form and myself are here to see the time chamber.' He waved toward the platform. 'That it?'

'Yes, that's it,' said the student, looking at Wade. Wade averted his face. He couldn't tell whether the student was one of the four who had been there before. They all looked alike. The student went back to his work.

Wade and the Commander stepped up on the platform. The Commander peered into the interior of the sphere.

'Well,' he mused, 'who brought it here, I'd like to know.'

'I don't know,' Wade answered. 'I've never seen one.'

'And you thought you could use it!' The Commander laughed.

Wade glanced around nervously to make sure the student wasn't watching. Turning back, he scanned the sphere rapidly and saw that it wasn't fastened in any way. He started as a loud buzzer sounded and looking around quickly, saw the student push a button on the wall. He tightened in fear.

On a small televue screen built into the wall, Clemolk's face had appeared. Wade couldn't hear the historian's voice but his face showed excitement at last.

Wade spun back, facing the chamber, and asked, 'Think I could see what it's like inside?'

'No, no,' said the Commander. 'You'll play tricks.'

'I won't,' he said, 'I'll just-'

'Commander!' cried the student.

The Commander turned. Wade gave him a shove, and the corpulent officer staggered forward, his arms flailing the air for balance, and a look of astonished outrage on his face.

Wade dove into the time chamber, cracking his knees on the metal deck, and scrambled around.

The student was rushing toward the sphere, pointing one of those dull black tubes ahead of him.

Wade grabbed the heavy door and with a grunt of effort pulled it shut. The heavy circle of metal grated into place, cutting off a flash of blue flame that was directed at him. Wade spun the wheel around feverishly until the door was securely fixed.

They would be cutting the chamber open any moment.

His eyes swept over the dials as his fingers worked on the strap buckles. He saw that the main dial was still set at five hundred years and reaching over, flipped it to reverse position.

Everything seemed ready. He had to take a chance that it was. There was no time to check. Already a deadly cutting flame might be directed at the metal globe.

The straps were fastened. Wade braced himself and threw the main switch. Nothing happened. A cry of mortal terror broke through his lips. His eyes darted around. His fingers shook over the control board as he tested the connections.

A plug was loose. Grabbing it with both hands to steady it, he slid it into its socket. At once the chamber began to vibrate. The high screech of its mechanism was music to him.

The universe poured by again, the black night washing over him like ocean waves. This time he didn't lose consciousness.

He was secure.

The chamber stopped vibrating. The silence was almost deafening. Wade sat breathlessly in the semi-darkness, gasping in air. Then he grabbed the wheel and turned it quickly. He kicked open the door and jumped down into the apparatus lab of Fort College and looked around, hungry for the sight of familiar things.

The lab was empty. One wall light shone down bleakly in the silence, casting great shadows of machines, sending his own shadow leaping up the walls. He touched benches, stools, gauges, machines, anything, just to convince himself that he was back.

'It's real.' He said it over and over.

An overpowering weakness of relief fell over him like a mantle. He leaned against the chamber. Here and there he saw black marks on the metal, and pieces of it were hanging loose. He felt almost a love for it. Even partly destroyed it had gotten him back.

Suddenly he looked at the clock. Two in the morning... Mary... He had to get home. Quickly, quickly.

The door was locked. He fumbled for keys, got the door open and rushed down the hall. The building was deserted. He reached the front door, unlocked it, remembered to lock it behind him, although he was shaking with excitement.

He tried to walk, but he kept breaking into a run, and his mind raced ahead in anticipation. He was on the porch, through the doorway, rushing up to the bedroom... Mary, Mary, he was calling... He was bursting through the doorway... She was standing by the window. She whirled, saw him, a look of glorious happiness crossed her face. She cried out in tearful joy... They were holding each other, kissing; together, together.

'Mary,' he murmured in a choked-up voice as, once more, he began running.

The tall black Social Sciences Building was behind him. Now the campus was behind him, and he was running happily down University Avenue.

The street lights seemed to waver before him. His chest heaved with shuddering breaths. A burning ache stabbed at his side. His mouth fell open. Exhausted, he was forced to slow down to a walk. He gasped in air, started to run again.

Only two more blocks.

Ahead the dark outline of his home stood out against the sky. There was a light in the living room. She was awake. She hadn't given up!

His heart flew out to her. The desire for her warm arms was almost more than he could bear.

He felt tired. He slowed down, felt his limbs trembling violently. Excitement. His body ached. He felt numb.

'Mary,' he sobbed, 'I'm sick.'

He was on their walk. The front door was open. Through the screen door, he could see the stairs to the second floor. He paused, his eyes glittering with a sick hunger.

'Home,' he muttered.

He staggered up the path, up the porch steps. Shooting pains wracked his body. His head felt as though it would explode.

He pulled open the screen door and lurched to the living room arch.

John Randall's wife was sleeping on the couch.

There was no time to talk. He wanted Mary. He turned and stumbled to the stairs. He started up.

He tripped, almost fell. He groped for the banister with his right hand. A scream gurgled up and died in his throat. *The hand was dissolving in air.* His mouth fell open as the horror struck him.

'No!' He tried to scream it but only a mocking wheeze escaped his lips.

He struggled up. The disintegration was going on faster. His hands. His wrists. They were flying apart. He felt as though he had been thrown into a vat of burning acid.

His mind twisted over itself as he tried to understand. And all the while he kept dragging himself up the stairs, now on his ankles, now on his knees, the corroded remnants of his disappearing legs.

Then he knew all of it. Why the chamber door was locked. Why they wouldn't let him see his own corpse.

Why his body had lasted so long. It was because he had reached 2475 alive and *then* had died. Now he had to return to that year. He could not be with her *even in death*.

'Mary!'

He tried to scream for her. She had to know. But no sound came. He felt pieces of his throat falling out. Somehow he had to reach her, let her know that he had come back.

He reached the top of the landing and through the open door of their room saw her lying on the bed, sleeping in exhausted sorrow.

He called. No sound. Tears of rage poured from his anguished eyes. Now he was at the door, trying to force himself into the room.

*There'd be no life for me without you.*

Her remembered words tortured him. His crying was like a gentle bubbling of lava.

Now he was almost gone. The last of him poured over the rug like a morning mist, the blackness of his eyes like dark shiny beads in a swirling fog.

'Mary, Mary -' he could only think it now '- how very much I love you.'

She didn't awaken.

He willed himself closer and drank in the fleeting sight of her. A massive despair weighed on his mind. A faint groan fluttered over his wraith.

Then, the woman, smiling in her uneasy sleep, was alone in the room except for two haunted eyes which hung suspended for a moment and then were gone; like tiny worlds that flare up in birth and, in the same moment, die.

### 38 - 'Tis The Season To Be Jelly'

Pa's nose fell off at breakfast. It fell right into Ma's coffee and displaced it. Prunella's wheeze blew out the gut lamp.

'Land o' goshen, Dad,' Ma said, in the gloom, 'If ya know'd it was ready t'plop, whyn't ya tap it off y'self?'

'Didn't know,' said Pa.

'That's what ya said the last time, Paw,' said Luke, choking on his bark bread. Uncle Rock snapped his fingers beside the lamp. Prunella's wheezing shot the flicker out.

'Shet off ya laughin', gal,' scolded Ma. Prunella toppled off her rock in a flurry of stumps, spilling liverwort mush.

Tarnation take it!' said Uncle Eyes.

'Well, combust the wick, combust the wick!' demanded Grampa, who was reading when the light went out. Prunella wheezed, thrashing on the dirt.

Uncle Rock got sparks again and lit the lamp.

'Where was I now?' said Grampa.

'Git back up here,' Ma said. Prunella scrabbled back onto her rock, eye streaming tears of laughter. 'Giddy chile,' said Ma. She slung another scoop of mush on Prunella's board. 'Go to,' she said. She picked Pa's nose out of her corn coffee and pitched it at him.

'Ma, I'm fixin' t'ask 'er t'*day*,' said Luke.

'Be ya, son?' said Ma, 'Thet's nice.'

'Ain't no pu'pose to it!' Grampa said, 'The dang force o' life is spent!'

'Now, Pa,' said Pa, 'Don't fuss the young 'uns' mind-to.'

'Says right hyeh!' said. Grampa, tapping at the journal with his wrist, 'We done let in the wavelenths of anti-life, that's what we done!'

'*Manure*,' said Uncle Eyes, 'Ain't we livin'?'

'I'm talkin' 'bout the coming generations, ya dang fool!' Grampa said. He turned to Luke. 'Ain't no pu'pose to it, boy!' he said, 'You can't have no young 'uns no how!'

'Thet's what they tole Pa 'n' me too,' soothed Ma, 'An' we got two lovely chillun. Don't ya pay no mind t'Grampa, son.'

'We's comin' apart!' said Grampa, 'Our cells is unlockin'! Man says right hyeh! We's like jelly, breakin'-down jelly!'

'Not me,' said Uncle Rock.

'When you fixin' t'ask 'er, son?' asked Ma.

'We done bollixed the pritecktive canopee!' said Grampa.

'Can o' what?' said Uncle Eyes.

'This mawnin',' said Luke.

'We done pregnayted the clouds!' said Grampa.

'She'll be mighty glad,' said Ma. She rapped Prunella on the skull with a mallet. 'Eat with ya mouth, chile,' she said.

'We'll get us hitched up come May,' said Luke.

'We done low-pressured the weather sistem!' Grampa said.

'We'll get ya corner ready,' said Ma.

Uncle Rock, cheeks flaking, chewed mush.

'We done screwed up the dang master plan!' said Grampa.

'Aw, shet yer ravin' craw!' said Uncle Eyes.

'Shet yer own!' said Grampa.

'Let's have a little ear-blessin' harminy round hyeh,' said Pa, scratching his nose. He spat once and downed a flying spider. Prunella won the race.

'Dang leg,' said Luke, hobbling back to the table. He punched the thigh bone back into play. Prunella ate wheezingly.

'Leg aloosenin' agin, son?' asked Ma.

'She'll hold, I reckon,' said Luke.

'Says right hyeh!' said Grampa, 'we'uns clompin' round under a killin' umbrella. A umbrella o' death!'

'*Bull*,' said Uncle Eyes. He lifted his middle arm and winked at Ma with the blue one. 'Go 'long,' said Ma, grumming off a chuckle. The east wall fell in.

'Thar she goes,' observed Pa.

Prunella tumbled off her rock and rolled out, wheezing, through the opening. 'High-speerited gal,' said Ma, brushing cheek flakes off the table.

'What about my corner now?' asked Luke.

'Says right hyeh!' said Grampa, 'lectric charges is afummadiddled! 'Tomic structure's unseamin'!!'

'We'll prop 'er up again,' said Ma. 'Don't ya fret none, Luke.'

'Have us a wing-ding,' said Uncle Eyes, 'Jute beer 'n' all'

'Ain't no pu'pose to it!' said Grampa, 'We done smithereened the whole kiboodle!'

'Now, Pa,' said Ma, 'Ain't no pu'pose in apreachin' doom nuther. Ain't they been apreachin' it since I was a tyke? Ain't no reason in the wuld why Luke hyeh shouldn't hitch hisself up with Annie Lou. Ain't he got him two strong arms and four strong legs? Ain't no sense in settin' out the dance o' life.'

'We'uns ain't got naught t'fear but fear its own self,' observed Pa.

Uncle Rock nodded and raked a sulphur match across his jaw to light his punk.

'Ya gotta have faith,' said Ma. 'Ain't no sense in Godless gloomin' like them signtist fellers.'

'Stick 'em in the army, I say,' said Uncle Eyes, 'Poke a Z-bomb down their britches an' send 'em jiggin' at the enemy!'

'Spray 'em with fire acids,' said Pa.

'Stick 'em in a jug o' germ juice,' said Uncle Eyes, 'Whiff a fog o' vacuum viriss up their snoots. Give 'em hell Columbia.'

'That'll teach 'em,' Pa observed.

*' We wawked t'gether through the yallar rain.*

*Our luv was stronger than the blisterin' pain The sky was boggy and yer skin was new My hearts was beatin'*

*- Annie, I luv you.*

Luke raced across the mounds, phantom like in the purple light of his gutbucket. His voice swirled in the soup as he sang the poem he'd made up in the well one day. He turned left at Fallout Ridge, followed Missile Gouge to Shockwave Slope, posted to Radiation Cut and galloped all the way to Mushroom Valley. He wished there were horses. He had to stop three times to reinsert his leg.

Annie Lou's folks were hunkering down to dinner when Luke arrived. Uncle Slow was still eating breakfast.

'Howdy, Mister Mooncalf,' said Luke to Annie Lou's pa.

'Howdy, Hoss,' said Mr. Mooncalf.

'Pass,' said Uncle Slow.

'Draw up sod,' said Mr. Mooncalf, 'Plenty chow fer all'

'Jest et,' said Luke, 'Whar's Annie Lou?'

'Out the well fetchin' whater,' Mr. Mooncalf said, ladling bitter vetch with his flat hand.

'The,' said Uncle Slow.

'Reckon I'll help 'er lug the bucket then,' said Luke.

'How's ya folks?' asked Mrs. Mooncalf, salting pulse seeds.

'Jest fine,' said Luke, 'Top o' the heap.'

'Mush,' said Uncle Slow.

'Glad t'hear it, Hoss,' said Mr. Mooncalf.

'Give 'em our crawlin' best,' said Mrs. Mooncalf.

'Sure will,' said Luke.

'Dammit,' said Uncle Slow.

Luke surfaced through the air hole and cantered toward the well, kicking aside three littles and one big that squished irritably.

'How is yo folks?' asked the middle little.

'None o' yo dang business,' said Luke.

Annie Lou was drawing up the water bucket and holding on to the side of the well. She had an armful of loose bosk blossoms.

Luke said, 'Howdy.'

'Howdy, Hoss,' she wheezed, flashing her tooth in a smile of love.

'What happened t'yer other ear?' asked Luke.

'Aw, Hoss,' she giggled. Her April hair fell down the well. 'Aw, pshaw,' said Annie Lou.

'Tell ya,' said Luke, 'Somep'n on my cerebeelum. Got that wud from Grampa,' he said, proudly,



'Means I got me a mindful.'

'That right?' said Annie Lou, pitching bosk blossoms in his face to hide her rising colour.

'Yep,' said Luke, grinning shyly. He punched at his thigh bone. 'Dang leg,' he said.

'Givin' ya trouble agin, Hoss?' asked Annie Lou.

'Don't matter none,' said Luke. He picked a swimming spider from the bucket and plucked at its legs.

'Sh'luvs me,' he said, blushing, 'Sh'luvs me not. Ow!' The spider flipped away, teeth clicking angrily.

Luke gazed at Annie Lou, looking from eye to eye.

'Well,' he said, 'Will ya?'

'Oh, Hoss!' She embraced him at the shoulders and waist. 'I thought you'd never ask!'

'Ya *will*?'

'*Sho*!'

'Creeps!' cried Luke, 'I'm the happiest Hoss wot ever lived!'

At which he kissed her hard on the lip and went off racing across the flats, curly mane streaming behind, yelling and whooping.

'Ya-hoo! I'm so happy! I'm so happy, happy, happy!'

His leg fell off. He left it behind, dancing.

### 39 - Shock Wave

'I tell you there's something wrong with her,' said Mr. Moffat.

Cousin Wendall reached for the sugar bowl.

Then they're right,' he said. He spooned the sugar into his coffee.

They are *not*,' said Mr. Moffat, sharply. They most certainly are *not*.'

'If she isn't working,' Wendall said.

'She *was* working until just a month or so ago,' said Mr. Moffat. 'She was working *fine* when they decided to replace her the first of the year.'

His fingers, pale and yellowed, lay tensely on the table. His eggs and coffee were untouched and cold before him.

'Why are you so upset?' asked Wendall. 'She's just an organ.'

'*She is more*,' Mr. Moffat said. 'She was in before the church was even finished. Eighty years she's been there. *Eighty*.'

That's pretty long,' said Wendall, crunching jelly smeared toast. 'Maybe too long.'

There's nothing wrong with her,' defended Mr. Moffat. 'Leastwise, there never was before. That's why I want you to sit in the loft with me this morning.'

'How come you haven't had an organ man look at her?' Wendall asked.

'He'd just agree with the rest of them,' said Mr. Moffat, sourly. 'He'd just say she's too old, too worn.'

'Maybe she is,' said Wendall.

'*She is not*,' Mr. Moffat trembled fitfully.

'Well, I don't know,' said Wendall. 'She's pretty old, though.'

'She worked fine before,' said Mr. Moffat. He stared into the blackness of his coffee. The gall of them,' he muttered, 'Planning to get rid of her. The *gall*.'

He closed his eyes. 'Maybe she knows,' he said.

The clocklike tapping of their heels perforated the stillness in the lobby.

This way,' Mr. Moffat said.

Wendall pushed open the arm-thick door and the two men spiralled up the marble staircase. On the second floor, Mr. Moffat shifted the briefcase to his other hand and searched his keyring. He unlocked the door and they entered the musty darkness of the loft. They moved through the silence, two faint, echoing sounds.

'Over here,' said Mr. Moffat.

'Yes, I see,' said Wendall.

The old man sank down on the glass-smooth bench and turned the small lamp on. A wedge of bulb light forced aside the shadows.

'Think the sun'll show?' asked Wendall.

'Don't know,' said Mr. Moffat.

He unlocked and rattled up the organ's rib-skinned top, then raised the music rack. He pushed the finger-worn switch across its slot.

In the brick room to their right there was a sudden hum, a mounting rush of energy. The air-gauge needle quivered across its dial.

'She's alive now,' Mr. Moffat said.

Wendall grunted in amusement and walked across the loft. The old man followed.

'What do you think?' he asked inside the brick room.

Wendall shrugged.

'Can't tell,' he said. He looked at the turning of the motor. 'Single-phase induction,' he said. 'Runs by magnetism.'

He listened. 'Sounds all right to me,' he said.

He walked across the small room.

'What's this?' he asked, pointing.

'Relay machines,' said Mr. Moffat. 'Keep the channels filled with wind.'

'And this is the fan?' asked Wendall.

The old man nodded.

'Mmm-hmm.' Wendall turned. 'Looks all right to me,' he said.

They stood outside looking up at the pipes. Above the glossy wood of the enclosure box, they stood like giant pencils painted gold.

'Big,' said Wendall.

'She's *beautiful*,' said Mr. Moffat.

'Let's hear her,' Wendall said.

They walked back to the keyboards and Mr. Moffat sat before them. He pulled out a stop and pressed a key into its bed.

A single tone poured out into the shadowed air. The old man pressed a volume pedal and the note grew louder. It pierced the air, tone and overtones bouncing off the church dome like diamonds hurled from a sling.

Suddenly, the old man raised his hand.

'*Did you hear?*' he asked.

'Hear what?'

'It *trembled*,' Mr. Moffat said.

As people entered the church, Mr. Moffat was playing Bach's chorale-prelude *Aus der Tiefe rufe ich* (From the Depths, I cry). His fingers moved certainly on the manual keys, his spindling shoes walked a dance across the pedals; and the air was rich with moving sound.

Wendall leaned over to whisper, 'There's the sun.'

Above the old man's grey-wreathed pate, the sunlight came filtering through the stained-glass window. It passed across the rack of pipes with a mistlike radiance.

Wendall leaned over again.

'Sounds all right to me,' he said.

'*Wait*,' said Mr. Moffat.

Wendall grunted. Stepping to the loft edge, he looked down at the nave. The three-aisled flow of people was branching off into rows. The echoing of their movements scaled up like insect scratchings. Wendall watched them as they settled in the brown-wood pews. Above and all about them moved the organ's music.

'*Ssst.*'

Wendall turned and moved back to his cousin.

'What is it?' he asked.

*'Listen:*

Wendall cocked his head.

'Can't hear anything but the organ and the motor,' he said.

'That's it,' the old man whispered. *'You're not sup-posed to hear the motor.'*

Wendall shrugged. 'So,' he said.

The old man wet his lips. 'I think it's starting,' he murmured.

Below, the lobby doors were being shut. Mr. Moffat's gaze fluttered to his watch propped against the music rack, thence to the pulpit where the Reverend had appeared. He made of the chorale-prelude's final chord a shimmering pyramid of sound, paused, then modulated, *mezzo forte*, to the key of G. He played the opening phrase of the Doxology.

Below, the Reverend stretched out his hands, palms up, and the congregation took its feet with a rustling and crackling. An instant of silence filled the church. Then the singing began.

Mr. Moffat led them through the hymn, his right hand pacing off the simple route. In the third phrase an adjoining key moved down with the one he pressed and an alien dissonance blurred the chord. The old man's fingers twitched; the dissonance faded.

*'Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.'*

The people capped their singing with a lingering amen. Mr. Moffat's fingers lifted from the manuals, he switched the motor off, the nave remurmured with the crackling rustle and the dark-robed Reverend raised his hands to grip the pulpit railing.

'Dear Heavenly Father,' he said, 'we, Thy children, meet with Thee today in reverent communion.'

Up in the loft, a bass note shuddered faintly.

Mr. Moffat hitched up, gasping. His gaze jumped to the switch (off), to the air-gauge needle (motionless), toward the motor room (still).

*.' You heard that?'* he whispered.

'Seems like I did,' said Wendall.

*'Seems?'* said Mr. Moffat tensely.

'Well...' Wendall reached over to flick a nail against the air dial. Nothing happened. Grunting, he turned and started toward the motor room. Mr. Moffat rose and tiptoed after him.

'Looks dead to me,' said Wendall.

*.'/ hope so,'* Mr. Moffat answered. He felt his hands begin to shake.

The offertory should not be obtrusive but form a staidly moving background for the clink of coins and whispering of bills. Mr. Moffat knew this well. No man put holy tribute to music more properly than he.

Yet, that morning...

The discords surely were not his. Mistakes were rare for Mr. Moffat. The keys resisting, throbbing beneath his touch like things alive; was that imagined? Chords thinned to fleshless octaves, then, moments later, thick with sound; was it he? The old man sat, rigid, hearing the music stir unevenly in the air. Ever since the Responsive Reading had ended and he'd turned the organ on again, it seemed to possess almost a wilful action.

Mr. Moffat turned to whisper to his cousin.

Suddenly, the needle of the other gauge jumped from *mezzo* to *forte* and the volume flared. The old man felt his stomach muscles clamped. His pale hands jerked from the keys and, for a second, there was only the muffled sound of ushers' feet and money falling into baskets.

Then Mr. Moffat's hands returned and the offertory murmured once again, refined and inconspicuous. The old man noticed, below, faces turning, tilting upward curiously and a jaded pressing rolled in his lips.

'Listen,' Wendall said when the collection was over, 'how do you *know* it isn't you?'

'Because it isn't,' the old man whispered back. 'It's *her*.'

That's crazy,' Wendall answered. 'Without you playing, she's just a contraption.'

'No,' said Mr. Moffat, shaking his head, '*no*. She's more.'

'Listen,' Wendall said, 'you said you were bothered because they're getting rid of her.'

The old man grunted.

'So,' said Wendall, 'I think you're doing these things yourself, unconscious-like.'

The old man thought about it. Certainly, she was an instrument; he knew that. Her soundings were governed by his feet and fingers, weren't they? Without them, she was, as Wendall had said, a contraption. Pipes and levers and static rows of keys; knobs without function, arm-long pedals and pressuring air.

'Well, what do you think?' asked Wendall.

Mr. Moffat looked down at the nave.

'Time for the Benediction,' he said.

In the middle of the Benediction postlude, the *swell to great stop* pushed out and, before Mr. Moffat's jabbing hand had shoved it in again, the air resounded with a thundering of horns, the church air was gorged with swollen, trembling sound.

*'It wasn't me,'* he whispered when the postlude was over, *'I saw it move by itself:'*

'Didn't see it,' Wendall said.

Mr. Moffat looked below where the Reverend had begun to read the words of the next hymn.

*'We've got to stop the service,'* he whispered in a shaking voice.

'We can't do that,' said Wendall.

'But something's going to happen, I know it,' the old man said.

'What can happen?' Wendall scoffed. 'A few bad notes is all.'

The old man sat tensely, staring at the keys. In his lap, his hands wrung silently together. Then, as the Reverend finished reading, Mr. Moffat played the opening phrase of the hymn. The congregation rose and, following that instant's silence, began to sing.

This time no one noticed but Mr. Moffat.

Organ tone possesses what is called 'inertia', an impersonal character. The organist cannot change this tonal quality; it is inviolate.

Yet, Mr. Moffat clearly heard, reflected in the music, his own disquiet. Hearing it sent chills of prescience down his spine. For thirty years he had been organist here. He knew the workings of the organ better than any man. Its pressures and reactions were in the memory of his touch.

That morning, it was a strange machine he played on.

A machine whose motor, when the hymn was ended, would not stop.

'Switch it off again,' Wendall told him.

'*I did,*' the old man whispered frightenedly.

*'Try it again'*

Mr. Moffat pushed the switch. The motor kept running. He pushed the switch again. The motor kept running. He clenched his teeth and pushed the switch a seventh time.

The motor stopped.

*'I don't like it,'* said Mr. Moffat faintly.

'Listen, I've seen this before,' said Wendall. 'When you push the switch across the slot, it pushes a copper contact across some porcelain. That's what joins the wires so the current can flow.'

'Well, you push that switch enough times, it'll leave a copper residue on the porcelain so's the current can move across it. Even when the switch is off. I've seen it before.'

The old man shook his head.

'*She knows,*' he said.

'That's *crazy*,' Wendall said. *'Is it?'*

They were in the motor room. Below, the Reverend was delivering his sermon.

'Sure it is,' said Wendall 'She's an organ, not a person.'

'I don't know any more,' said Mr. Moffat hollowly.

'Listen,' Wendall said, 'you want to know what it probably is?'

'She knows they want her out of here,' the old man said, 'that's what it is.'

'Oh, come on,' said Wendall, twisting impatiently, 'I'll tell you what it is. This is an old church - and this

old organ's been shaking the walls for eighty years. Eighty years of that and walls are going to start warping, floors are going to start settling. And when the floor settles, this motor here starts tilting and wires go and there's arcing.'

'Arcing?'

'Yes,' said Wendall. 'Electricity jumping across gaps.'

'I don't see,' said Mr. Moffat.

'All this here extra electricity gets into the motor,' Wendall said. 'There's electromagnets in these relay machines. Put more electricity into them, there'll be more force. Enough to cause those things to happen maybe.'

'Even if it's so,' said Mr. Moffat, 'Why is she fighting me?'

'Oh, stop talking like that,' said Wendall.

'But I know,' the old man said, '*I feel*.'

'It needs repairing is all,' said Wendall. 'Come on let's go outside. It's hot in here.'

Back on his bench, Mr. Moffat sat motionless, staring at the keyboard steps.

Was it true, he wondered, that everything was as Wendall had said - partly due to faulty mechanics, partly due to him? He mustn't jump to rash conclusions if this were so. Certainly, Wendall's explanations made sense.

Mr. Moffat felt a tingling in his head. He twisted slightly, grimacing.

Yet, there were these things which happened: the keys going down by themselves, the stop pushing out, the volume flaring, the sound of emotion in what should be emotionless. Was this mechanical defect; was this defection on his part? It seemed impossible.

The prickling stir did not abate. It mounted like a flame. A restless murmur fluttered in the old man's throat. Beside him, on the bench, his fingers twitched.

Still, things might not be so simple, he thought. Who could say conclusively that the organ was nothing but inanimate machinery? Even if what Wendall had said were true, wasn't it feasible that these very factors might have given strange comprehension to the organ? Tilting floors and ruptured wires and arcing and overcharged electro-magnets - mightn't these have bestowed cognizance?

Mr. Moffat sighed and straightened up. Instantly, his breath was stopped.

The nave was blurred before his eyes. It quivered like a gelatinous haze. The congregation had been melted, run together. They were welded substance in his sight. A cough he heard was hollow detonation miles away. He tried to move but couldn't. Paralysed, he sat there.

And it came.

It was not thought in words so much as raw sensation. It pulsed and tremored in his mind electrically. *Fear - Dread - Hatred* - all cruelly unmistakable.

Mr. Moffat shuddered on the bench. Of himself, there remained only enough to think, in horror - *She does know!* The rest was lost beneath overcoming power. It rose up higher, filling him with black contemplations. The church was gone, the congregation gone, the Reverend and Wendall gone. The old man pendulumed above a bottomless pit while fear and hatred, like dark winds, tore at him possessively.

'Hey, what's wrong?'

Wendall's urgent whisper jarred him back. Mr. Moffat blinked.

'What happened?' he asked.

'You were turning on the organ.'

'Turning on-?'

'And *smiling*' Wendall said.

There was a trembling sound in Mr. Moffat's throat.

Suddenly, he was aware of the Reverend's voice reading the words of the final hymn.

No,' he murmured.

'What is it?' Wendall asked.

*'I can't turn her on'*

'What do you mean?'

*'I can't.'*

'Why?'

'I don't know. I just-'

The old man felt his breath thinned as, below, the Reverend ceased to speak and looked up, waiting. No, thought Mr. Moffat, No, I *mustn't*. Premonition clamped a frozen hand on him. He felt a scream rising in his throat as he watched his hand reach forward and push the switch.

The motor started.

Mr. Moffat began to play. Rather, the organ seemed to play, pushing up or drawing down his fingers at its will. Amorphous panic churned the old man's insides. He felt an overpowering urge to switch the organ off and flee.

He played on.

He started as the singing began. Below, armed in their pews, the people sang, elbow to elbow, the wine-red hymnals in their hands.

No,' gasped Mr. Moffat.

Wendall didn't hear him. The old man sat staring as the pressure rose. He watched the needle of the volume gauge move past *mezzo* toward *forte*. A dry whimper filled his throat. No, please, he thought, *please*.

Abruptly, the *swell to great* stop slid out like the head of some emerging serpent. Mr. Moffat thumbed it in desperately. The *swell unison* button stirred. The old man held it in; he felt it throbbing at his finger pad. A dew of sweat broke out across his brow. He glanced below and saw the people squinting up at him. His eyes fled to the volume needle as it shook toward *grand crescendo*.

'Wendall, try to-!'

There was no time to finish. The *swell to great* stop slithered out again, the air ballooned with sound. Mr. Moffat jabbed it back. He felt keys and pedals dropping in their beds. Suddenly, the *swell unison* button was out. A peal of unchecked clamour filled the church. No time to speak.

The organ was alive.

He gasped as Wendall reached over to jab a hand across the switch. Nothing happened, though. Wendall cursed and worked the switch back and forth. The motor kept on running.

Now pressure found its peak, each pipe shuddering with storm winds. Tones and overtones flooded out in a paroxysm of sound. The hymn fell mangled underneath the weight of hostile chords.

'Hurry!' Mr. Moffat cried.

'It won't go off!' Wendall shouted back.

Once more, the *swell to great* stop jumped forward. Coupled with the volume pedal, it clubbed the walls with dissonance. Mr. Moffat lunged for it. Freed, the *swell unison* button jerked out again. The raging sound grew thicker yet. It was a howling giant shouldering the church.

*Grand crescendo*. Slow vibrations filled the floors and walls.

Suddenly, Wendall was leaping to the rail and shouting, 'Out! Get out!'

Bound in panic, Mr. Moffat pressed at the switch again and again; but the loft still shook beneath him. The organ still galed out music that was no longer music but attacking sound.

'Get out!' Wendall shouted at the congregation, '*Hurry!*'

The windows went first.

They exploded from their frames as though cannon shells had pierced them. A hail of shattered rainbow showered on the congregation. Women shrieked, their voices pricking at the music's vast ascension. People lurched from their pews. Sound flooded at the walls in tide like waves, breaking and receding.

The chandeliers went off like crystal bombs.

*'Hurry Wendall* yelled.

Mr. Moffat couldn't move. He sat staring blankly at the manual keys as they fell like toppling dominoes. He listened to the screaming of the organ.

Wendall grabbed his arm and pulled him off the bench. Above them, two last windows were

disintegrated into clouds of glass. Beneath their feet, they felt the massive shudder of the church.

'No!' The old man's voice was inaudible; but his intent was clear as he pulled his hand from Wendall's and stumbled backward toward the railing.

'Are you crazy?' Wendall leaped forward and grabbed the old man brutally. They spun around in battle. Below, the aisles were swollen. The congregation was a fear-mad boil of exodus.

'Let me go!' screamed Mr. Moffat, his face a bloodless mask. 'I have to stay!'

'No, you don't!' Wendall shouted. He grabbed the old man bodily and dragged him from the loft. The storming dissonance rushed after them on the staircase, drowning out the old man's voice.

'You don't understand!' screamed Mr. Moffat, '*I have to stay!*'

Up in the trembling loft, the organ played alone, its stops all out, its volume pedals down, its motor spinning, its bellows shuddering, its pipe mouths bellowing and shrieking.

Suddenly, a wall cracked open. Arch frames twisted, grinding stone on stone. A jagged block of plaster crumbled off the dome, falling to the pews in a cloud of white dust. The floors vibrated.

Now the congregation flooded from the doors like water. Behind their screaming, shoving ranks, a window frame broke loose and somersaulted to the floor. Another crack ran crazily down a wall. The air swam thick with plaster dust.

Bricks began to fall.

Out on the sidewalk, Mr. Moffat stood motionless staring at the church with empty eyes.

It had been he. How could he have failed to know it? His fear, his dread, his hatred. His fear of being also scrapped, replaced; his dread of being shut out from the things he loved and needed; his hatred of a world that had no use for aged things.

It had been he who turned the overcharged organ into a maniac machine.

Now, the last of the congregation was out. Inside, the first wall collapsed.

It fell in a clamorous rain of brick and wood and plaster. Beams tottered like trees, then fell quickly, smashing down the pews like sledges. The chandeliers tore loose, adding their explosive crash to the din.

Then, up in the loft, the bass notes began.

The notes were so low they had no audible pitch. They were vibrations in the air. Mechanically, the pedals fell, piling up a mountainous chord. It was the roar of some titanic animal, the thundering of a hundred, storm-tossed oceans, the earth sprung open to swallow every life. Floors buckled, walls caved in with crumbling roars. The dome hung for an instant, then rushed down and mangled half the nave. A monstrous cloud of plaster and mortar dust enveloped everything. Within its swimming opacity, the church, with a crackling, splintering, crashing, thundering explosion, went down.

Later, the old man stumbled dazedly across the sunlit ruins and heard the organ breathing like some unseen beast dying in an ancient forest.

## 40 - Through Channels

*Click*

*Swish swish swish*

All set, Sergeant?

Set.

Okay. This recording made on January fifteenth, nineteen fifty-four, twenty-third precinct police... '

*Swish*

... in the presence of Detective James Taylor and, uh, Sergeant Louis Ferazzio.

*Swish swish*

Name, please.

Huh?

What's your name, son?

My name?

Come on, son, we're trying to help you.

*Swish*

L-Leo.

Last name.

I d-don't... Leo.

What's your last name, son?

Vo... Vo...

All right, son. Take it easy.

V-Vogel.

Leo Vogel. That it?

Yeah.

Address?

T-twenny two thirty, avena J.

Age?

I'm... almost... Where's... my ma?

*Swish swish*

Turn it off a minute, Sergeant.

Right.

*Click*

*Click*

*Swish*

All right, son. Okay now?

Y-yeah. But where...?

You're how old?

Fi-fifteen.

Now, uh, where were you last night from six o'clock till you went home?

I was... at... at the show. Ma give... give me the dough.

How come you didn't stay home to watch television with your parents?

'Cause. Because...

Yes?

The Le-Lenottis was comin' over to watch it with them.

They came often?

N-no. It was the first time they'd... ever come.

Uh-huh. So your mother sent you to the movies.

Y-yeah.

Sergeant, give the kid some of that coffee. And see if you can him find a blanket.

Right away, chief



Now, uh, son. What time did you get out of the movies?

Time? I... don't know what time.

About nine-thirty, would you say?

I guess. I don't know... w-what time. All I...

Yes?

Nothin'.

Well, you saw the show only once, didn't you?

*Swish*

Huh?

You saw it only once. You didn't see any picture twice, did you?

No. No, I only seen it once.

Okay. That would make it, uh...

*Swish*

... roughly about nine-thirty, then, that you got out of the movies. You went home right away?

Yeah... I mean no.

Where did you stop?

I had a Coke at the... at the drugstore.

I see. Then you went home.

Ye-

*Swish.*

... yeah, then I went home.

The house was dark?

Yeah. But... they never used no lights when they watched TV.

Uh-huh. You went in?

Y-yeah.

Take a sip of that coffee, son, before it gets cold. Take it easy, take it easy. Don't choke on it. There.

Okay?

Yeah.

All right then. Now... oh, good. Put it over his shoulders, Sergeant. There we go. Better?

Mmmm

Okay. Let's get on with it. And believe me, son, this is no more fun for us than it is for you. We saw it too.

I want mama. I want her. Please, can I...

Oh. What did I... well, shut it off, Sergeant. Here kid. You don't have a handkerchief, do you? Here. Did you shut it off, Sergeant?

Oh. Right away.

*Swish click*

*Click*

When you went in, was there anything... peculiar?

What?

You told us last night you smelled something.

Yeah. It... it... There was a funny smell.

Anything you know?

Huh?

Did it smell like anything you ever smelled before?

No. It wasn't much. Not in the... hall.

All right. So you went into the living room.

No. No. I went... Ma. Can I...

*Swish swish*

Come on, son, snap out of it. We know you've had a bad time. But we're trying to help.

*Swish swish swish*

You, uh, didn't go in the living room. Didn't you think you should mention that smell?

I... h-heard the set on and...

Set?

The TV set. I thought-I figured they were still watchin'.

And?

And ma didn't like me to... b-bust in on them. So I went up to my room so's I wouldn't... you know.

Bother them.

Y-yeah.

Okay. How long were you up there?

I was... I don't know how long. Maybe an hour.

And?

There... wasn't no sound downstairs.

Nothing at all?

No. There wasn't nothing at all.

Didn't that make you suspicious?

Yeah. Well, I figured... they'd... laugh at somethin' or talk loud or...

Dead quiet.

Yeah. Dead quiet.

Did you go down then?

L-later I went. I was goin' to bed. I figured I...

You wanted to say goodnight.

Yeah. I...

*Swish*

You went down and opened the living room door?

Yeah, I... yeah.

What did you see?

I... I... Oh, can't ya... I want my ma. Lemme alone. I want her!

Kid! Hold him, Sergeant. Take it easy!

*Swish swish*

I'm sorry, kid. Did it hurt? I had to calm you. I know...how you feel, Leo. We saw it too. We feel sick and... awful too.

*Swish*

Just a few more questions and we'll take you to your aunt's. Now first. The television set. Was it on?

Yeah. It was on.

And you... smelled something?

Yeah. Like in the hall. Only worse. Only lots worse.

That smell.

That smell. Dead. A dead stink. Like a pile o' dead... dead... I don't know. Garbage. Piles of it.

No one was talking?

No, there was no thin'. 'Cept the TV.

What was on it?

I already told ya.

I know, I know. Tell us again. For the record.

It was... like I said...just them letters. Great big letters.

What were they?

F... uh... F-E-E-D.

F-E-E-D?

Y-yeah. Big crooked-like letters.

You'd seen them before?

Yeah. I told ya. They was on our set all the time... Not all the time. Plenty though.

Your parents never wondered about it?

No. They said... they figured it was a sort of commercial. You know.

But the things you saw.

I don't know. Ma said... it was for kids. Some, I mean.

What-did you see?

*Swish swish swish*

Sort of... mouths. Big ones. Wide. Open, all open. They wasn't p-people.

*Swish*

What did it look like? I mean, couldn't you tell what it was?

No. I mean... they was like... bugs, maybe, or maybe... w-worms. Big ones. All mouths. Wide open.

All right.

*Swish*

You, uh, said the letters flashed on, then off and you saw the... mouths, and then the letters again?

Yeah. Like that.

This happen every night?

Yeah.

Same time?

No. Different times.

Between programs?

No. Anytime.

Was it always on the same channel?

No. All different ones. No matter which one we had... we seen them.

And...

I wanna go. Can't I... Ma! Where is she? I want her. I want her.

*Swish click*

*Click*

A few more questions, Leo, and that's it. Now, you said your parents never had the set checked. No, I told you. They thought it was-  
All right.

*Swish*

You went in the living room. You said something about slipping, didn't you?  
Yeah. On that stuff.  
What stuff?  
I don't know. Greasy stuff. Like hot grease. It stunk awful.  
And then you... you found...

*Swish*

I found them. Ma. And Pa. And the Lenottis. They was... Ohhh, I wanna...  
Leo! What about the set, Leo? What about it?  
Huh, what?  
The picture on the set. You said something about it.  
I, yeah... I...  
It was the letters, wasn't it, Leo?  
Yeah, yeah. Them letters. Them big crooked letters. They was up there. On the set. I seen them.  
And... and...  
What?  
One of the E's. It kinda... faded. It went away. And... and...  
What, Leo?  
The other letters. They come together. So... so there was only three.  
And it was a word.

*Swish swish swish*

Take him to his aunt, Sergeant.  
And the tube went black...  
All right, Leo. The sergeant'll take you ho-to your aunt's.  
I turned on the lights.  
All right, Leo.  
I turned on the light! Ma! MAMA!  
*Click*

## **41 - Long Distance Call**

Just before the telephone rang, storm winds toppled the tree outside her window and jolted Miss Keene from her dreaming sleep. She flung herself up with a gasp, her frail hands crumpling twists of sheet in either palm. Beneath her flesh-less chest the heart jerked taut, the sluggish blood spurted. She sat in rigid muteness, her eyes staring at the night.

In another second, the telephone rang.

Who *on earth*? The question shaped unwittingly in her brain. Her thin hand faltered in the darkness, the fingers searching a moment and then Miss Elva Keene drew the cool receiver to her ear.

'Hello,' she said.

Outside a cannon of thunder shook the night, twitching Miss Keene's crippled legs. *I've missed the voice*, she thought, *the thunder has blotted out the voice*.

'Hello,' she said again.

There was no sound. Miss Keene waited in expectant lethargy. Then she repeated, 'Hel-lo,' in a cracking voice. Outside the thunder crashed again.

Still no voice spoke, not even the sound of a phone being disconnected met her ears. Her wavering hand reached out and thumped down the receiver with an angry motion.

'Inconsideration,' she muttered, thudding back on her pillow. Already her infirm back ached from the effort of sitting.

She forced out a weary breath. Now she'd have to suffer through the whole tormenting process of going to sleep again - the composing of jaded muscles, the ignoring of abrasive pain in her legs, the endless, frustrating struggle to turn off the faucet in her brain and keep unwanted thoughts from dripping. Oh, well, it had to be done; Nurse Phillips insisted on proper rest. Elva Keene breathed slowly and deeply, drew the covers to her chin and laboured hopefully for sleep.

In vain.

Her eyes opened and, turning her face to the window, she watched the storm move off on lightning legs. *Why can't I sleep*, she fretted, *why must I always lie here awake like this?*

She knew the answer without effort. When a life was dull, the smallest element added seemed unnaturally intriguing. And life for Miss Keene was the sorry pattern of lying flat' or being propped on pillows, reading books which Nurse Phillips brought from the town library, getting nourishment, rest, medication, listening to her tiny radio - and waiting, *waiting* for something different to happen.

Like the telephone call that wasn't a call.

There hadn't even been the sound of a receiver replaced in its cradle. Miss Keene didn't understand that. Why would anyone call her exchange and then listen silently while she said 'Hello,' over and over again? *Had* it actually been anyone calling?

What she should have done, she realised then, was to keep listening until the other person tired of the joke and put down the receiver. What she should have done was to speak out forcefully about the inconsideration of a prankish call to a crippled maiden lady, in the middle of a stormy night. Then, if there *had* been someone listening, whoever it was would have been properly chastened by her angry words and...

'Well, of course.'

She said it aloud in the darkness, punctuating the sentence with a cluck of somewhat relieved disgust. Of course, the telephone was out of order. Someone had tried to contact her, perhaps Nurse Phillips to see if she was all right. But the other end of the line had broken down in some way, allowing her phone to ring but no verbal communication to be made. Well, of course, that was the case.

Miss Keene nodded once and closed her eyes gently. *Now to sleep*, she thought. Far away, beyond the county, the storm cleared its murky throat. *I hope no one is worrying*, Elva Keene thought, *that would be too bad*.

She was thinking that when the telephone rang again.

*There*, she thought, *they are trying to reach me again*. She reached out hurriedly in the darkness, fumbled until she felt the receiver, then pulled it to her ear.

'Hello,' said Miss Keene.

Silence.

Her throat contracted. She knew what was wrong, of course, but she didn't like it, no, not at all.

'Hello?' she said tentatively, not yet certain that she was wasting breath.

There was no reply. She waited a moment, then spoke a third time, a little impatient now, loudly, her shrill voice ringing in the dark bedroom. *'Hello!'*

Nothing. Miss Keene had the sudden urge to fling the receiver away. She forced down that curious instinct - no, she must wait; wait and listen to hear if anyone hung up the phone on the other end of the line.

So she waited.

The bedroom was very quiet now, but Elva Keene kept straining to hear; either the sound of a receiver going down or the buzz which usually follows. Her chest rose and fell in delicate lurches, she closed her eyes in concentration, then opened them again and blinked at the darkness. There was no sound from the telephone; not a click, not a buzz, not a sound of someone putting down a receiver.

'Hello!' she cried suddenly, then pushed away the receiver.

She missed her target. The receiver dropped and thumped once on the rug. Miss Keene nervously clicked on the lamp, wincing as the leprous bulb light filled her eyes. Quickly, she lay on her side and tried to reach the silent, voiceless telephone.

But she couldn't stretch far enough and crippled legs prevented her from rising. Her throat tightened. My God, must she leave it there all night, silent and mystifying.

Remembering then, she reached out abruptly and pressed the cradle arm. On the floor, the receiver clicked, then began to buzz normally. Elva Keene swallowed and drew in a shaking breath as she slumped back on her pillow.

She threw out hooks of reason then and pulled herself back from panic. *This is ridiculous, she thought, getting upset over such a trivial and easily explained incident. It was the storm, the night, the way in which I'd been shocked from sleep. (What was it that had awakened me?) AH these things piled on the mountain of teeth-grinding monotony that's my life. Yes, it was bad, very bad.* But it wasn't the incident that was bad. It was her reaction to it.

Miss Elva Keen numbed herself to further premonitions. *'I shall sleep now'* she ordered her body with a petulant shake. She lay very still and relaxed. From the floor she could hear the telephone buzzing like the drone of far-off bees. She ignored it.

Early the next morning, after Nurse Phillips had taken away the breakfast dishes, Elva Keen called the telephone company.

This is Miss Elva,' she told the operator.

'Oh, yes, Miss Elva,' said the operator, a Miss Finch. 'Can I help you?'

'Last night my telephone rang twice,' said Elva Keene. 'But when I answered it, no one spoke. And I didn't hear any receiver drop. I didn't even hear a dial tone - just silence.'

'Well, I'll tell you, Miss Elva,' said the cheery voice of Miss Finch, 'that storm last night just about ruined half our service. We're being flooded with calls about knocked down lines and bad connections. I'd say you're pretty lucky your phone is working at all.'

'Then you think it was probably a bad connection,' prompted Miss Keene, 'caused by the storm?'

'Oh, yes, Miss Elva, that's all.'

'Do you think it will happen again?'

'Oh, it *may*,' said Miss Finch. 'It *may*. I really couldn't tell you, Miss Elva. But if it does happen again, you just call me and then I'll have one of our men check on it.'

'All right,' said Miss Elva. 'Thank you, dear.'

She lay on her pillows all morning in a relaxed torpor. *It gives one a satisfied feeling, she thought, to solve a mystery, slight as it is. It had been a terrible storm that caused the bad connection. And no wonder when it had even knocked down the ancient oak-tree beside the house. That was the noise that had awakened me of course, and a pity it was that the dear tree had fallen. How it shaded the house in hot summer months. Oh, well, I suppose I should be grateful,* she thought, *that the tree fell across the road and not across the house.*

The day passed uneventfully, an amalgam of eating, reading Angela Thirkell and the mail (two throw-away advertisements and the light bill), plus brief chats with Nurse Phillips. Indeed, routine had set in so properly that when the telephone rang early that evening, she picked it up without even thinking.

'Hello,' she said.

Silence.

It brought her back for a second. Then she called Nurse Phillips.

'What is it?' asked the portly woman as she trudged across the bedroom rug.

'This is what I was telling you about,' said Elva Keene, holding out the receiver. 'Listen!'

Nurse Phillips took the receiver in her hand and pushed back grey locks with the earpiece. Her placid face remained placid. 'There's nobody there,' she observed.

'That's right,' said Miss Keene. 'That's right. Now you just listen and see if you can hear a receiver being put down. I'm sure you won't.'

Nurse Phillips listened for a moment, then shook her head. 'I don't hear anything,' she said and hung up.

'Oh, wait!' Miss Keene said hurriedly. 'Oh, well, it doesn't matter,' she added, seeing it was already down. 'If it happens too often, I'll just call Miss Finch and they'll have a repairman check on it.'

'I see,' Nurse Phillips said and went back to the living room and Faith Baldwin.

Nurse Phillips left the house at eight, leaving on the bedside table, as usual, an apple, a cookie, a glass of water and the bottle of pills. She puffed up the pillows behind Miss Keene's fragile back, moved the radio and telephone a little closer to the bed, looked around complacently, then turned for the door, saying, 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

It was fifteen minutes later when the telephone rang. Miss Keene picked up the receiver quickly. She didn't bother saying hello this time - she just listened.

At first it was the same - an absolute silence. She listened a moment more, impatiently. Then, on the verge of replacing the receiver, she heard the sound. Her cheek twitched, she jerked the telephone back to her ear.

'Hello?' she asked tensely.

A murmuring, a dull humming, a rustling sound - what was it? Miss Keene shut her *eyes* tightly, listening hard, but she couldn't identify the sound; it was too soft, too undefined, it deviated from a sort of whining vibration... to an escape of air... to a bubbling sibilance. *It must be the sound of the connection*, she thought, *it must be the tele-phone itself making the noise. Perhaps a wire blowing in the wind somewhere, perhaps...*

She stopped thinking then. She stopped breathing. The sound had ceased. Once more, silence rang in her ears. She could feel the heartbeats stumbling in her chest again, the walls of her throat closing in. *Oh, this is ridiculous*, she told herself. *I've already been through this - it was the storm, the storm!*

She lay back on her pillows, the receiver pressed to her ear, nervous breaths faltering from her nostrils. She could feel unreasoning dread rise like a tide within her, despite all attempts at sane deduction. Her mind kept slipping off the glassy perch of reason; she kept falling deeper and deeper.

Now she shuddered violently as the sounds began again. They couldn't *possibly* be human sounds, she knew, and yet there was something about them, some inflection, some almost identifiable arrangement of...

Her lips shook and a whine began to hover in her throat. But she couldn't put down the telephone, she simply couldn't. The sounds held her hypnotised. Whether they were the rise and fall of the wind or the muttering of faulty mechanisms, she didn't know, but they would not let her go.

'Hello ?' she murmured, shakily.

The sounds rose in volume. They rattled and shook in her brain.

'Hello!' she screamed.

'H-e-l-l-o,' answered a voice on the telephone. Then Miss Keene fainted dead away.

'Are you certain it was someone saying *hello*?' Miss Finch asked Miss Elva over the telephone. 'It might have been the connection, you know.'

'I tell you it was a *man*!' a shaking Elva Keene screeched. 'It was the same man who kept listening to me say hello over and over and over again without answering me back. The same one who made terrible noises over the telephone!'

Miss Finch cleared her throat politely. 'Well, I'll have a man check your line, Miss Elva, as soon as he can. Of course, the men are very busy now with all the repairs on storm wreckage, but as soon as it's possible...'

'And what am I going to do if this - this *person* calls again?'

'You just hang up on him, Miss Elva.'

'But he keeps calling!'

'Well.' Miss Finch's affability wavered. 'Why don't you find out who he is, Miss Elva? If you can do that, why, we can take immediate action, you see and

After she'd hung up, Miss Keene lay against the pillows tensely, listening to Nurse Phillips sing husky love songs over the breakfast dishes. Miss Finch didn't believe her story, that was apparent. Miss Finch thought she was a nervous old woman falling prey to imagination. Well, Miss Finch would find out differently.

'I'll just keep calling her and calling her until she *does*,' she said irritably to Nurse Phillips just before afternoon nap.

'You just do that,' said Nurse Phillips. 'Now take your pill and lie down,'

Miss Keene lay in grumpy silence, her vein-rutted hands knotted at her sides. It was ten after two and, except for the bubbling of Nurse Phillips's front room snores, the house was silent in the October afternoon. *It makes me angry*, thought Elva Keene, *that no one will take this seriously. Well* - her thin lips pressed together - *the next time the telephone rings I'll make sure that Nurse Phillips listens until she does hear something.*

Exactly then the phone rang.

Miss Keene felt a cold tremor lace down her body. Even in the daylight with sunbeams speckling her flowered coverlet, the strident ringing frightened her. She dug porcelain teeth into her lower lip to steady it. *Shall I answer it?* the question came and then, before she could even think to answer, her hand picked up the receiver. A deep ragged breath; she drew the phone slowly to her ear. She said, 'Hello?'

The voice answered back, 'Hello?' - hollow and inanimate.

'Who is this?' Miss Keene asked, trying to keep her throat clear.

'Hello?'

'Who's calling, please?'

'Hello?'

'Is anyone there!'

'Hello?'

'Please ... !'

'Hello?'

Miss Keene jammed down the receiver and lay on her bed trembling violently, unable to catch her breath. *What is it*, begged her mind, *what in God's name is it?*

'Margaret!' she cried. 'Margaret!'

In the front room she heard Nurse Phillips grunt abruptly and then start coughing.

'Margaret, please...!'

Elva Keene heard the large bodied woman rise to her feet and trudge across the living room floor. *I must compose my-self*, she told herself, fluttering hands to her fevered cheeks. *I must tell her exactly what happened, exactly.*

'What is it?' grumbled the nurse. 'Does your stomach ache?'

Miss Keene's throat drew in tautly as she swallowed. 'He just called again,' she whispered.

'Who?'

'That man!'

'What Man?'

'The one who keeps calling!' Miss Keene cried. 'He keeps saying hello over and over again. That's all he says - hello, hello, hel -'

'Now stop this,' Nurse Phillips scolded stolidly. 'Tie back and...'

'I don't *want* to lie back!' she said frenziedly. 'I want to know who this terrible person is who keeps frightening me!'

'Now don't work yourself into a state,' warned Nurse Phillips. 'You know how upset your stomach gets.'

Miss Keene began to sob bitterly. 'I'm afraid. I'm afraid of him. Why does he keep calling me?'



Nurse Phillips stood by the bed looking down in bovine inertia. 'Now, what did Miss Finch tell you?' she said softly.

Miss Keene's shaking lips could not frame the answer.

'Did she tell you it was the connection?' the nurse soothed. 'Did she?'

'But it isn't! It's a man, a *man*!'

Nurse Phillips expelled a patient breath. 'If it's a man,' she said, 'then just hang up. You don't have to talk to him. Just hang up. Is that so hard to do?'

Miss Keene shut tear-bright eyes and forced her lips into a twitching line. In her mind the man's subdued and listless voice kept echoing. Over and over, the inflection never altering, the question never deferring to her replies - just repeating itself endlessly in doleful apathy. *Hello? Hello?* Making her shudder to the heart.

'Look,' Nurse Phillips spoke.

She opened her eyes and saw the blurred image of the nurse putting the receiver down on the table.

'There,' Nurse Phillips said, 'nobody can call you now. You leave it that way. If you need anything all you have to do is dial. Now isn't that all right? Isn't it?'

Miss Keene looked bleakly at the nurse. Then, after a moment, she nodded once. Grudgingly.

She lay in the dark bedroom, the sound of the dial tone humming in her ear; keeping her awake. *Or am I just telling myself that?* she thought. *Is it really keeping me awake? Didn't I sleep that first night with the receiver off the hook? No, it wasn't the sound, it was something else.*

She closed her eyes obdurately. *I won't listen*, she told herself, *I just won't listen to it*. She drew in trembling breaths of the night. But the darkness would not fill her brain and blot away the sound.

Miss Keene felt around on the bed until she found her bed jacket. She draped it over the receiver, swathing its black smoothness in woolly turns. Then she sank back again, stern breathed and taut. *I will sleep*, she demanded, *I will sleep*.

She heard it still.

Her body grew rigid and abruptly, she unfolded the receiver from its thick wrappings and slammed it down angrily on the cradle. Silence filled the room with delicious peace. Miss Keene fell back on the pillow with a feeble groan. *Now to sleep*, she thought.

And the telephone rang.

Her breath snuffed off. The ringing seemed to permeate the darkness, surrounding her in a cloud of ear-lancing vibration. She reached out to put the receiver on the table again, then jerked her hand back with a gasp, realising she would hear the man's voice again.

Her throat pulsed nervously. *What I'll do*, she planned, *what I'll do is take off the receiver very quickly - very quickly - and put it down, then push down on the arm and cut off the line. Yes, that's what I'll do!*

She tensed herself and spread her hand out cautiously until the ringing phone was under it. Then, breath held, she followed her plan, slashed off the ring, reached quickly for the cradle arm...

And stopped, frozen, as the man's voice reached out through the darkness to her ears. 'Where are you?' he asked. 'I want to talk to you.'

Claws of ice clamped down on Miss Keene's shuddering chest. She lay petrified, unable to cut off the sound of the man's dull, expressionless voice, asking, 'Where are you? I want to talk to you.'

A sound from Miss Keene's throat, thin and fluttering.

And the man said, 'Where are you? I want to talk to you.'

'No, no,' sobbed Miss Keene.

'Where are you? I want to...'

She pressed the cradle arm with taut white fingers. She held it down for fifteen minutes before letting it go.

'I tell you I won't have it!'

Miss Keene's voice was a frayed ribbon of sound. She sat inflexibly on the bed, straining her frightened anger through the mouthpiece vents.

'You say you hang up on this man and he still calls?' Miss Finch inquired.

'I've *explained* all that!' Elva Keene burst out. 'I had to leave the receiver off the phone all night so he wouldn't call. And the buzzing kept me awake. I didn't get a *wink* of sleep! Now, I want this line checked, do you hear me? I want you to stop this terrible thing!'

Her eyes were like hard, dark beads. The phone almost slipped from her palsied fingers.

'All right, Miss Elva,' said the operator. 'I'll send a man out today.'

Thank you, dear, thank you,' Miss Keene said. 'Will you call me when

Her voice stopped abruptly as a clicking sound started on the telephone.

'The line is busy,' she announced.

The clicking stopped and she went on. To repeat, will you let me know when you find out who this terrible person is V

'Surely, Miss Elva, surely. And I'll have a man check your telephone this afternoon. You're at 127 Mill Lane, aren't you?'

That's right, dear. You will see to it, won't you?'

'I promise faithfully, Miss Elva. First thing today.'

Thank you, dear,' Miss Keene said, drawing in relieved breath.

There were no calls from the man all that morning, none that afternoon. Her tightness slowly began to loosen. She played a game of cribbage with Nurse Phillips and even managed a little laughter. It was comforting to know that the telephone company was working on it now. They'd soon catch that awful man and bring back her peace of mind.

But when two o'clock came, then three o'clock - and still no repairman at her house - Miss Keene began worrying again.

'What's the *matter* with that girl?' she said pettishly. 'She promised me faithfully that a man would come this afternoon.'

'He'll be here,' Nurse Phillips said. 'Be patient.'

Four o'clock arrived and no man. Miss Keene would not play cribbage, read her book or listen to her radio. What had begun to loosen was tightening again, increasing minute by minute until at five o'clock, when the telephone rang, her hand spurted out rigidly from the flaring sleeve of her bed jacket and clamped down like a claw on the receiver. *If the man speaks*, raced her mind, *if he speaks I'll scream until my heart stops*.

She pulled the receiver to her ear. 'Hello?'

'Miss Elva, this is Miss Finch.'

Her *eyes* closed and breath fluttered through her lips. 'Yes,' she said.

'About those calls you say you've been receiving.'

'Yes?' In her mind, Miss Finch's words cutting - 'those calls you *say* you've been receiving.'

'We sent a man out to trace them,' continued Miss Finch. 'I have his report here.'

Miss Keene caught her breath. 'Yes?'

'He couldn't find anything.'

Elva Keene didn't speak. Her grey head lay motionless on the pillow, the receiver pressed to her ear.

'He says he traced the - the difficulty to a fallen wire on the edge of town.'

'Fallen wire?'

Yes, Miss Elva.' Miss Finch did not sound happy,

'You're telling me I didn't hear anything?'

Miss Finch's voice was firm. 'There's no way anyone could have phoned you from that location,' she said.

'I tell you a *man* called me!'

Miss Finch was silent and Miss Keene's fingers tightened convulsively on the receiver.

'There must be a phone there,' she insisted. 'There must be *some* way that man was able to call me.'

'Miss Elva, the wire is lying on the ground.' She paused. 'Tomorrow, our crew will put it back up and you won't be...'

'There *has* to be a way he could call me!'  
'Miss Elva, there's no one out there!'  
'Out where, *where*?'  
The operator said, 'Miss Elva, it's the cemetery.'

In the black silence of her bedroom, a crippled maiden lady lay waiting. Her nurse would not remain for the night; her nurse had patted her and scolded her and ignored her.

She was waiting for a telephone call.

She could have disconnected the phone, but she had not the will. She lay there waiting, waiting, thinking.

Of the silence - of ears that had not heard, seeking to hear again. Of sounds bubbling and muttering - the first stumbling attempts at speech by one who had not spoken - how long? Of - *hello ? hello ?* - first greeting by one long silent. Of - *where are you ?* Of (that which made her lie so rigidly) the clicking and the operator speaking her address. Of -

The telephone ringing.

A pause. Ringing. The rustle of a nightgown in the dark.

The ringing stopped.

Listening.

And the telephone slipping from white fingers, the *eyes* staring, the thin heartbeats slowly pulsing.

Outside, the cricket-rattling night.

Inside, the words still sounding in her brain - giving terrible meaning to the heavy, choking silence.

'Hello, Miss Elva. I'll be right over.'

## 42 - Shoofly

A fly descended in an arcing plummet, landing on the desk top, several inches from the edge of Pressman's right hand.

Automatically, he made a brushing movement toward it, and the fly appeared to leap up, soaring into the air.

Pressman continued reading the contract, then stopped to raise his left hand from the desk and make a thrusting motion with it, so the edge of his shirtsleeve was pulled back from his watch. Thirteen minutes after twelve. Typical of Masters. My money, your wait.

Pressman laid aside his pen to knead the back of his neck, wincing at the pain it caused. A headache in the offing? Maybe he should take another aspirin.

His laugh was like a cough. God forbid he nicked himself. His blood was doubtless nearing the consistency of water after all the aspirin he'd been downing in the past few weeks.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them, groaning softly. Come on, Masters.

Something touched the back of his right hand, and he twitched, eyes opening in time to see the fly take off and disappear again. "You little shit," he muttered.

He turned his high-backed chair to face the window. The fly was on the windowsill. At first it didn't move. Then as Pressman watched intently, it began to stroke its legs together.

*Little swine*, he thought, *your legs and body swarming with germs*. Unconsciously, he rubbed the fingers of his left hand on the back of his right.

He checked his watch again. Close to quarter after. *See you at noon, then*, he heard Masters' supercilious voice in his head. Sure, Ed. In a pig's patootie.

He stared at the fly, wondering if it was conscious of his observation. They didn't see the same way people did. *Compound*. The word floated up in recollection. Pressman smiled without amusement. A single strand of memory left over from Biology I. Six-sided lenses, four thousand of them in each eye. No wonder you could never sneak up on them.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Pressman turned his chair back, conscious, as he did, of the

fly taking off.

Doreen was peering in. "I'm going to lunch, Mr. Pressman." He nodded, and she began to close the door, then opened it again as Pressman asked, "Did Masters call about our meeting?"

"No, sir." She shook her head.

He sighed. "I guess I won't be having lunch today."

Doreen smiled politely and closed the door. *A lot you care*, Pressman thought. He grimaced at a stabbing pain in his stomach. Much good it would do him to have lunch, anyway. His innards were, as usual, filigreed with cobwebs of gas.

Picking up his pen, he started looking at the Barker contract once again. May as well do something useful while he waited for Masters to arrive.

The fly blurred across his eye line, then dropped to the desk. "Get out o' here," he muttered, slapping at it backhand. The fly sailed upward. "And stay away," he told it. Go find a garbage can to sit in.

He tried to concentrate on the contract, but a twinge of discomfort hit his stomach again and he straightened up, a tight expression on his face. He looked across his office toward the small refrigerator underneath the bar. *A glass of milk*, he told himself. *Coat your stomach walls with soothing primer.*

Pushing back his chair, he saw the dark form of the fly swoop down and land on the contract. "Good, *you* read it," he muttered, standing. He walked to the refrigerator, leaned over, and opened its door. Removing a half-pint container of milk, he opened the spout with difficulty, tearing it. He picked up a glass from the bar and held it over the sink, pouring milk into it, spilling some because of the torn spout. "Son of a bitch," he muttered.

Returning to the desk, he saw that the fly was still on the contract, rubbing its legs together. *Don 't worry about getting shit on the contract*, he addressed it in his mind. *It's a piece of shit already.*

He sat on his chair and the fly was gone. *Jesus Christ, they move fast*, he thought. He took a sip of milk and set the glass down, looking at his watch again. *You bastard*, he thought. *What do you care if I'm stuck here, tuning up an ulcer?*

He picked up his pen and started reading the contract, then slammed his pen down, grabbed the glass of milk, and spun his chair toward the window. The throbbing in his head was getting worse. Pressman took another sip, and stared out at the city. *Gray*, he thought. *Cheerless*. "Like my life," he heard himself say.

He kneaded the back of his neck some more, teeth set against the pain.

*Your neck muscles need retoning, Roy*, he heard Dr. Kirby's voice. *Do some isometrics or they'll atrophy.*

"Thank you, Dr. Kirby," he muttered and then slapped down at his left leg with a look of sudden anger as the fly landed on it. Pressman groaned as pain exploded in his head.

Gradually, the pain diminished and he turned his chair back to the desk, setting down the glass. Maybe he should just forget about waiting for Masters. *Sure thing*, he told himself. *Who needs a two-hundred-thousand-dollar deal?*

The headache was expanding. Pressman closed his eyes. If only he-

He jerked his right hand as the fly came down on it. His eyes jumped open, but the fly had already gone. "Son of a *bitch*" he muttered. *God*, he hated flies. Always had. Filthy vermin. Strolling on crap, then on our Caesar salads.

*Just try to calm down, will you?* he told himself. He looked at the glass of milk. Maybe he could plop two Alka-Seltzers in it, fizz it up. Combination Cocktail, Executive-style.

The fly came swooping down and lighted on his desk beside the glass of milk. He eyed it somberly. And knew.

He had to kill it.

Pressman drew in a long, slow breath. Odd that he'd been watching it with not quite idle curiosity but certainly without intent. Absorbed in more integral matters, true-Masters' insulting tardiness, the Barker contract, his afflictions. But to miss the obvious, it now seemed obvious, at least. That was odd. "Mr. Fly, you have to die," he announced.

He looked around. Weapon of choice? He grunted with amusement. Barker's contract might be good. He visualized Barker's bushy eyebrows raising as he caught sight of a dab of fly guts partially obscuring Paragraph Three, Item One. No, better not.

Carefully, he reached to his right and eased open the middle drawer of his desk. *The prospectus for Shipdale Industries? Perfect. Thin enough to fold with ease, thick enough to splatter Mr. Fly to hell with one sharp, downward blow. "Yeah," he muttered, grinning. Say your prayers, you little bastard. Old Mortality is on his way. Your guts are mine.*

Pressman drew out the prospectus with extreme slowness. *Take your time*, he told himself. Patience must predominate. Let the prey grow overly secure, slicking up his goddamn hairy little legs. He folded the prospectus once, the long way. Prospectus of Doom. He repressed another grin. *It descended from the Heavens like a Juggernaut of paper-plastic, smashing Mr. F. to that giant Shit Pile in the Sky.*

He kept his gaze fixed on the fly. They have to take off backward, he recalled. Have to snap the Juggernaut Prospectus well behind it, catch that little ass as it was zooming upward to the rear.

Pressman clenched his teeth, grimacing. No. The fly was too close to the glass; he might shatter it and splash milk everywhere, soak the contract. Wouldn't do.

He narrowed his eyes, considered. The hunter must outwile the hunted. And outwait him. Reaching out, he flicked the fingers of his right hand toward the fly. It shot up, vanishing. Pressman felt a pang of anxious disappointment. He shook it off. *He'll be back*, he reassured himself. He leaned back in his chair and waited. *The Great White Hunter hunkered in the long grass, slitted eyes observing, weapon on his lap, primed to fire.* Pressman chuckled at the image.

The fly did not return. Pressman scowled and checked his watch. Jesus Christ. Twelve fucking thirty soon. He should have had Doreen call Masters' office moments prior to noon to make sure he was coming.

Pressman found himself gazing at the standing photographs along the back edge of his desk. Brenda. Laurie. Ken. He reached inside his jacket to withdraw the pack of cigarettes. One left. Nineteen additional nails driven, without hesitation, into his coffin. He lit the cigarette and tossed the crumpled package into the wastebasket. Exhaling smoke, he looked around. Well, damn it, where'd he go? Hiding, is he? Skulking in the brush?

*What if it's a female?* he thought. Pregnant. With a bellyful of eggs. Jesus. Now he really had to kill it. Prevent those dozens-hundreds, maybe-of baby flies from fouling up the office. Leprous maggots wriggling on his drapes and carpeting. The image nauseated him.

He stared, again, at the photographs. When was the last time he did that? Ages. They were backdrop, nothing more. Life props. Decoration. Yet here he was staring at them.

At Brenda: forty-one, red-haired (courtesy of rinses, not of nature), five foot six, a hundred fifty pounds; unpleasantly plump, he'd felt an urge to tell her for some time now. Vestiges of that bright face he'd gone ape-shit over eighteen years ago. Now overlaid with that unpleasant "We are not amused" look.

He looked around in irritation. "Well, where the hell *are* you, you little shit?" he asked the unseen fly. "You're not gonna get away from me, so let's stop the horseplay and *land*."

He closed his eyes, wincing. The headache again. "Screw it." Pulling out the top drawer of his desk, he plucked up the aspirin bottle, pried off its cap, and shook the last two tablets from inside. He'd finished the new bottle *already*?

He washed the aspirin down with a sip of milk and set the glass back on the desk. "A-ha. Now we've got the means."

He submerged the tip of his right index finger into the milk, then dabbed a smear of it across the top of his desk. *Bait.*

He leaned back in his chair again. *Give up, beast; surrender; there is no escape. With any luck, you'll reincarnate in twenty seconds anyway.*

Pressman took a deep pull on the cigarette and coughed. *Like a goddamn furnace blast inside my mouth and throat.* With sudden anger, he stabbed his cigarette into the ashtray, mashing it to a pulp of

paper and tobacco. "Kill you before you kill me," he muttered.

He looked for the fly. No sign of it. *Well, I can wait, you little creep*, he thought. *I have a brain. You have shit flecks on your legs. No contest. You're a goner.*

He looked at Brenda's photograph again. Jesus, what a pointless life this woman led! "Well, hell, she's done her time," he said sardonically. God knew she reminded him of it often enough. "I've done my time, Roy." As though their marriage and her motherhood had been twenty years in stir.

He wondered if she was having an affair. Time wise, highly feasible. Assuming she could steal some Magic Moments from her quest to purchase every goddamn female adornment in the city.

He stared at Laurie's photograph. *Need an update there*, he thought, a sense of cold embitterment twisting at him. This photo was thirteen-year-old Laurie Ann: Daddy's girl, the angel, the delight. Pre-high school, pre-sexual experimentation. Pressman scowled. Pre-abortion. Pre-the moody, withdrawn specter of that former Laurie who now drifted mutely through the house, a look of sour estrangement ingrained on her no-longer-pretty face.

And Ken. He glared at the photograph of his son. Grades in permanent residence in the cellar. Car impounded, insurance cancelled, accident trial impending. Drugs? What else? There'd been the short-term bout with marijuana. Now what was it? Cocaine? That angry energy seemed far more chemical than natural. He and Ken had, once, had a relationship as well. No more. *Jesus fucking Christ, did anything work out in life?!*

A darting movement crossed his eye line. The fly was back on the desk. Pressman didn't hesitate this time, slapping at it, backhand, with the folded prospectus. Even as he swung, he knew he'd miss. The fly had sailed up out of sight at least a second before the folded plastic smacked the desk. "God *damn*" he snarled. His head snapped around as he searched for the fly.

There it was, on the back edge of the desk. Pressman pushed up slowly to his feet. *All right, you shit*. He raised the prospectus carefully. *Mr. Fly, your life is at its walloping, squishy end. Right-*

"-now!" he cried, swinging downward, concentrating on putting a hard snap on the folded prospectus. "Got ya!" he exulted through clenching teeth.

He looked at the desk, smile fading. *Wait a second*, said a voice inside his head, perplexed, offended. He looked at the prospectus. Nothing.

"How could I miss?" he muttered. "How the fucking hell could I *miss*?"

He winced. Those pains in his gut again, midguts slashing at his stomach walls with razor blades. "God," he said. He closed his eyes. The headache had swelled, too. "God damn it, one thing at a time!" he ordered his body. He drew in a shaking breath and couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs.

Pressman opened his eyes. The fly was on the desk again, near the dab of milk. With a grimace, he slammed down the prospectus, barely missing the glass, completely missing the fly. It darted upward, out of sight, then, diving down again, was back, perched on the desk once more. "You son of a bitch," Pressman muttered. *You're playing with me, aren't you? This is recreation in your goddamn little world*. Elude the Prospectus. Piss off the Executive. The Sport of Flies.

He held the prospectus tightly. This time he would not be premature. This time, he would be more cunning. He raised the prospectus slowly and with infinite precision. *The hunter raised his weapon*, said his mind. *Fuck off!* he yelled at it. The fly stood motionless. *Does he see what I'm doing?* Pressman wondered. *Is his little bastard fly face grinning with anticipation?*

Pressman swung down as quickly as he could, well behind the standing fly. Too late; it shot up in the air. "Bastard!" Pressman cried. "You miserable, fucking little bastard!" His shoulders jerked around as he searched for the fly's location.

It was on the windowsill again. Pressman lunged, smashing the prospectus downward, missing. The fly swept over to the desk again, descended, landing. Pressman hurled the prospectus, hitting the glass. It skidded across the desk top, spouting milk, then toppled off the edge. "God *damn* it!" Pressman raged.

He had to stop, bend over, both hands on the desk top, bracing himself. His head was pounding. It felt as though it were expanding and contracting like a fire driven bellows. Pressman groaned. The pains were slashing at his stomach even more. He slumped back in his chair. *Control* he told himself. He

closed his eyes, breath labouring. *That's right, have a fucking heart attack*, he thought. *That's all you need*. That bastard Masters. If he'd only come on time.

Pressman swallowed. *Throat's so dry*, he thought, opening his eyes. He started to reach for the glass of milk. *It's gone, you idiot*, he mocked himself. Lying on the floor. Should he pick it up and dry the carpeting? Fuck it. Let Doreen.

"Oh, shit," he murmured. There were splashes of milk across the Barker contract. He pulled out his handkerchief and laid it, open, on the page, watched spots appear on it. He closed his eyes and rubbed them hard. When they refocused, he saw the fly. It was sitting on his handkerchief. *Sucking up milk spots with his damned proboscis*, he thought.

He looked intently at the fly. He had to kill it; that was certain. Destroy it utterly. His problems would be solved if-

Pressman winced. His problems solved if he could kill the fly? That was insane.

Still, it had a kind of dark charm. Wouldn't it be great if all his problems were encapsulated in that grubby little shit-devouring creep of an insect; that sawed-off, pulsating, hairy, silk-winged, goddamn, crazy-making-!

Whoa, he told himself. *This is a fly, Roy*. Not the Cosmic Nemesis. A fly. A dirty, little fly. Period. Pressman didn't move. He watched the fly. It wasn't much, God knew. Dirty. Stupid. Driven. Insignificant. Still, it had him on the run. He grunted with amusement. *What are flies, anyway?* he wondered. *Why the hell do they exist at all? Did God create them just to plague us? Make us sick?* What was their goddamn *raison d'être*?

Pressman drew in a quivering breath and shuddered. He felt a tingling underneath his skin as though low-wattage current were being transmitted through his flesh. Odd sensation. Anticipation, was it? Excitement at the prospect of destroying Mr. Fly?

Not with the prospectus, though. He shook his head in disapproval. Too stiff; no flexibility. *My kingdom for a swatter*, Pressman thought. He looked around. "Ah," he said. He pushed up sharply, shoving back his chair against the wall. The fly buzzed off the desk. *Didn't like that, did you, little shit?* Pressman thought.

He picked the newspaper off the sofa and fingered through its sections. World and National News? Local News? Theatre? Financial? His laugh was like a seal bark. Sports! How perfect. The sport of kings was not horse racing after 'all; it was fly splatting. Pressman turned slowly, folding the Sports section with great care so it was broader at the end than at the handle. He hefted it. *A goodly weapon, sirrah*, said his mind. *The lethal smite shall be simplicity itself* He'd hit the fly so hard the little bastard would have newsprint on his hairy ass.

"Okay, Mr. Fly. Prepare to die," he rhymed. He told himself that it was cool amusement in his voice, not vengeful hatred. Told himself the shaking of his hands was natural; the ongoing tingle of his flesh, a normal sign of keen anticipation; the trembling of his breath, no more than might be expected.

The fly was on the handkerchief again. *Perfect*, Pressman thought. *He cannot resist the milk-soaked landing strip on Barker Field*. His mushy death was nigh.

Pressman's pace diminished to an inching, mini-stepped advance, his gaze fixed, steady and unblinking, on the fly. *The prey continues feeding*, the PBS narrator in his brain intoned, *unaware of the approaching stalker, so intent on sucking moo juice up its snout that-*

Pressman stopped to contain his snicker. *Cut it out*, he told himself. *This is serious fucking business*. He nodded in agreement. *Right*, he thought. *Advance. Prepare for decimation*.

He moved up slowly on the desk, winced. Surely the fly must see him now with one of those eight thousand goddamn lenses. Pressman clenched his teeth and held his breath, edging closer. *Time to meet your Maker, Fly-boy (girl)*.

Pressman lunged, slamming down the folded pages on the handkerchief. *Gotcha!* No sign of escaping flight; the little shit was history. Pressman sang, "Dingdong, the fly is dead!"

The body wasn't on the handkerchief. He stiffened, flipping over the newspaper section. *Oh, now, wait a second. "I-did-not-see-him-fly-away,"* he said through gritting teeth.

His eyes moved quickly, an expression of incredulous denial on his face. The fly was standing on the left rear corner of the desk, unharmed, unflustered. *Jesus Christ Almighty*, Pressman thought. He swore to God he didn't see it-

"Wait a second, *wait* a second, let's not-" His agitated voice broke off. He raised the folded newspaper.

The fly shot up and veered away. Amazingly, Pressman's leaping gaze was able to track it to its landing on the drape. Jesus Christ, it looked bigger now. Pressman scowled at the impression. Against the beige drape, it was an optical illusion, nothing more. He started around the desk, gaze fastened on the fly.

He grunted in startled alarm as his right foot stepped on the fallen glass. It rolled beneath his shoe, throwing him off balance, causing him to flail toward the desk. The elbow of his right arm crashed on the desk top. Pressman cried out at the pain, a look of wide-eyed, staring shock contorting his features as he flopped down on the carpeting. "*Jesus Christ Almighty*." Pressman's voice was breathless and agonized as he clutched the elbow, the newspaper swatter dropping from his fingers. He lay sprawled across the carpeting, eyes closed, face a twisted mask. Jesus, Jesus, *Jesus!* It felt as though his head was near explosion.

It took some minutes for the throbbing ache to fade. Pressman felt tears dribbling down his cheeks, forced out from underneath the lids by pain. *Dear God*, he kept thinking over and over.

Finally, he opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the fly still on the drape. Pressman felt a welling surge of hatred deep inside himself. *You bastard, you*, he thought. *You lousy, mother-fucking son-of-a-bitch bastard!*

He started to push up, almost setting down his right hand on the fallen glass. *Sure!* his mind exploded. Snatching up the glass, he hurled it to his left, wincing at the streak of pain inside his elbow. He heard the glass break shatteringly against the wall. *Good!* he thought. *Let that bitch pick up the pieces!*

He was balanced on his knees now, wavering slightly, gaze locked on the fly. *Its little claws are buried in the drape*, he thought. Was it happy? Giddy with delight because he'd seen his hunter topple? "Bastard," Pressman muttered. "You are going to *die*" He knew his tone was aberrant. He didn't care. He reached down to grab the folded newspaper, wincing again at the elbow pain. Jesus Christ, did he break it? A half-made smile peeled back his lips. *With my luck, yes.*

He stood up slowly. *Never mind*, he told himself. It didn't matter. Broken elbow, fractured skull, obliterated spine, it wouldn't matter. With his final, dying breath, he'd kill that fucking little bastard.

He edged up toward the window, leaning backward. Gaze unmoving, he raised the folded paper slowly, swung so hard it made him grunt. The fly sailed out, then in, and landed on the drape again. Pressman smacked at it with the newspaper, missed. It skimmed away, buzzing loudly. Pressman slapped the folded paper at it, trying to hit it in the air. It soared up, landing on the drape above his head, beyond his reach.

"*Oh, no!*" Pressman's features contorted with rage. Clutching upward at the drape, he yanked down hard. The rod brace snapped off from the wall; the drape came thrashing down.

"God *damn* you!" Pressman whirled, his look deranged.

The fly was landing on the desk again. Good God, it *did* look bigger. "No!" he snarled. He leaped at the desk and started smashing at the fly in midair as it flew, down on the desk when it landed. He paid no attention to the photographs he knocked across the carpeting. "You bastard, *die!*" he shouted, swinging with maddened rage. He hit the water thermos, and it bounced to the floor, rolled floppily across the carpeting. The Barker contract and his handkerchief went sailing next. *Fuck 'em!*

The fly had vanished. Pressman stopped and tried to listen for its buzzing flight. But his breathing was too loud, his chest heaving as he sucked in breath. He swallowed dryly. "*Damn*," he muttered. "*Damn*." This wasn't funny anymore. The fly *did* represent his troubles now. *And I will not go off the fucking edge at forty-seven, driven by a goddamned insect!* His head jerked from side to side as he searched for it. He paid no attention to the shooting pains in his neck, the fiery stabbing in his stomach, the quick expansion and contraction of his head. *Only one thing matters now. One thing-*



The thought broke off; he flashed a death's-head grin. The fly was on the sofa, black against the beige upholstery. *Thank God the decorator talked me out of dark brown*, he thought, advancing.

He closed in on the sofa, pushed aside the coffee table with his right leg. *Got you now*, he thought. He felt his heartbeat getting faster. *Good. Get that damned adrenaline rushing*. He nodded jerkily, the death's-head grin frozen to his lips. *You bastard, you are going to die. To die!*

He flung himself at the sofa, using his entire body as a weapon, snapping the newspaper swatter as he fell. The fly swept upward to his left; he heard it bounce off the shade of the end table lamp, drop downward to the table. He lunged at it, his shredding swatter brandished high. It slapped down loudly on the table. Pressman snarled, elated. *"Yeah!"* He couldn't believe his eyes. The fly was in the air again, settling quickly on the lampshade. Pressman didn't hesitate. Lurching up, he swung the paper swatter sideways, slamming it against the shade. The lamp went crashing to the floor; the fly went darting off. *"God damn you!"* Pressman screamed. He slung the newspaper pages at the fly. They opened up and flapped to the carpeting like a wounded bird. Pressman twisted around in rabid fury. Where the hell *was* it? *Where?!* *"God damn you."* He could barely speak. He felt a dash of spittle on his chin and slapped it off, eyes wild as he continued searching.

He saw a movement in the mirror hung above the bar and zeroed in his gaze. For a fraction of a second, he believed that there were now *two* flies and felt a chill rush up his back along the spine. Then he scowled in fury at his own stupidity, realizing that it was only a reflection of the fly, darting around in tight, concentric circles above the bar, its buzzing clearly audible. Pressman started toward the bar. *Wait!* a voice warned in his mind. He had no weapon now. He looked around in desperate need. No time to waste! Another newspaper section? That was no improvement. A folded magazine? No better than the prospectus.

"God damn it, I've got to have *something!*," he muttered frenziedly.

*Yes!* He virtually dived at the sofa, landing on it with his left knee, snatching up a pillow. Good! More hitting area! He shoved up backward to his feet, almost losing balance as he turned toward the bar. He staggered briefly, then regained himself and stalked in on the bar, eyes unmoving, gaze narrowed at the circling fly. *Now, you bastard; now*. He winced at the sobbing noise his indrawn breath made. *Easy*, he ordered. *Don't let it get away now*. The two flies coalesced with a movement so abrupt he couldn't follow it. The fly was on the mirror. "Now," he mumbled. "Here I come."

Pressman gripped the pillow corner hard, fingers digging in like talons. He swung at the mirror, hit it. The fly took off. He swung again, knocking a bottle of scotch against a stand of glasses, smashing them. *"You-!"* He couldn't finish, swinging at the fly again, trying to knock it out of the air. Another bottle crashed, more glasses. The fly was on the mirror once again. Pressman swung the pillow fiercely in backhand smash that knocked the mirror askew. The fly came out so swiftly from its surface that it glanced off Pressman's cheek. He howled in sickened fury, swinging the pillow back and forth berserkly in the air, his face a mask of hatred and revulsion. *"Bastard! Stand and fight!"* he shouted.

He saw the fly. The little bastard was back on his desk! Resting. "No, no rest," Pressman muttered, reeling forward. He reached the desk and slammed the pillow down at the fly. He looked at the desk; God damn it, how could he keep *missing?!* He swung the pillow back and forth across the desk, knocking off the penstand set, the paperweight, the cigarette lighter, the lamp and telephone and letter basket-he sent them all tumbling to the floor with vengeful, maniacal cries, lost hold of the pillow so it flew across the office, hitting the door.

Pressman stood immobile, panting, a look of stunned disbelief on his face. The fly was on the window, hanging, motionless. It *wasn't* his imagination; it was bigger. *Bigger*. Jesus Christ in Heaven, *bigger!* It wasn't a fly! It was a-what, a *what?* "Oh, Jesus Christ." Pressman tried but was unable to repress a high-pitched sob. *Good God*, he thought. *It's me.*

*It's me.*

He slumped down on the chair and pressed his left hand across the eyes. The hand was shaking. *He* was shaking. He'd virtually destroyed his office, all in vain. Just to kill a poor, defenceless-

Pressman's laugh was frightening to him-a choking, demented sound. *Defenceless?* He lowered the hand and looked around his office. Sure, defenceless. As the Antichrist. Lord of the Flies. Wasn't that a

nickname for the Devil?

"Shut up," Pressman mumbled to himself. "Shut *up*." He closed his eyes with a feeble moan. His stomach was roiling hotly, burgeoning with acids. His brain was pressing outward at his skull, threatening to crack it open. Every muscle in his neck and shoulders ached with pulsing pain. *I'm going to die. Not the fly. Me.*

He blinked at the buzzing noise, looked down. It wasn't the fly but the telephone. Exhaustedly, he hauled the two parts upward, using the wire, set the cradle on the empty desk, then the receiver down on top of it. The buzzing stopped. He leaned back in the chair. Stiffening as the fly came zooming down and landed on the back of his right hand.

*Oh, Jesus*, Pressman thought. He couldn't move. His heart was pounding. Couldn't the fly feel it in the veins of his hand? He stared incredulously at it. After all this, on his hand again? His *hand*?

He watched the fly in frozen, breathless silence. It wasn't bigger; it was still the same. That had been a stupid, momentary delusion. Now what, though? There it was in front of him, standing on his hand, for Christ's sake! Did it know? Did it understand that one of them must die? Was it offering itself in sacrifice for the survival of his sanity?

But how? It was blocking his right hand, washing its legs. The prisoner on death row pomading his hair? Or the winner grooming on the giant body of his conquest? Pressman's face distended at the thought. *Don't lose it!* he commanded himself. *This is your last chance. Lose it and you're done.*

*Yes*, he thought then, smiling. Slowly, he slid his left hand across his lap, gaze fixed on the fly. He mustn't move his right hand, not a tremor's worth. Let him have the right hand. It's his platform, his pulpit. Let him preach his sermon on the fishes and the loaves-in his case, the maggots and the turds. His left hand was the Power and the Glory. Inching, he raised his left arm to the level of the chair arm, then slipped its hand across the edge, snaking it down to the left-hand pocket of his suit coat. Thank *God* he didn't have the time to hang it in the closet when he came in this morning.

Pressman reached into the pocket, gaze unmoving on the fly. His fingers gripped the billfold edge and raised it, slowly, from the pocket. Upward-slowly-slowly. Across the arm. *How fitting*, it occurred to him. The weapon: *him*. Ensconced between those leather sides. Driver's license. Social Security. Health and automobile insurance. Membership and credit cards. He even had a reduced Photostat of his birth certificate in there. His life contained within those black walls. Fitting, then, that it should-

*Dear God, let it be*, he pleaded. He raised the billfold slowly, very slowly. Was it watching him, amused? Was every single goddamn one of those eight thousand lenses focused on his pitiful attempt? After everything he'd tried before, it struck him as beyond belief how truly slow his downward movement was this time. The wallet slapped against his hand, stinging the skin. He saw the fly's dead body tumble off.

Something surged up in him: a cry, a fury, a bestial joy. He shoved back the chair and toppled forward to his knees on the carpeting. The fly lay motionless on its back, legs in the air. With a savage snarl, Pressman reached down, pinching it between the thumb and index finger of his right hand. Lifting it, he laid it on his left palm; then, with a sound he later refused to think about-a lunatic chortling that vibrated in his throat-he pressed down on its body with his right thumb, grinding it to a yellow paste flecked with hair, wing, and leg parts. Even when it was reduced to a smear on his skin, he kept rubbing, teeth clenched, a crazed smile on his lips, the quivering sound in his throat rising steadily in volume. He started, looking up, heartbeat thudding hard. The telephone was ringing. Pressman stared at it as though he didn't understand what it was, as though it was some odd device unknown in his primitive world.

Then he blinked, returning, swallowed, reached up, lifted the receiver, and carried it to his head. "Yes?" he said. Was that his voice? Good God, was that his *voice*? He averted his face and cleared his throat strenuously, then turned back. "Hello?" he said into the mouthpiece.

"That you, Pressman?" asked the voice.

He shuddered. "Yes."

"Masters. Just now noticed, on my calendar, that I was going to stop there on my way to lunch. Too late now; meeting ran on longer than I thought it would. Have to put it off a few days."

Pressman nodded. "Yes."

"No help for it," Masters told him.

"Of course." His voice was back now, its smooth, professional tone. "Listen; these things happen. No point in letting little things disturb us."

"Right," said Masters. "Call you in a day or two."

Pressman kept on nodding. "Yes," he said. "Of course."

He was speaking into a dead receiver; Masters had already hung up. Pressman noticed how his left hand trembled as he set the receiver back in place.

He sat in silence for more than half an hour. Fifteen minutes into it, he noticed the spot on his left palm and wiped it off with a tissue from his desk drawer, threw the tissue into the wastebasket.

At one-sixteen Doreen came back. Pressman tried to tell her not to come in when she knocked, but she opened the door automatically. "I'm back, Mr.-" Pressman felt a biting pain inside his stomach as she looked around the office in astonishment.

He drew in a breath. "A fly," he said. "Drove me nuts before I could kill it."

After she was gone, a coldness gripped at Pressman as he understood her look.

In the seven years they'd rented here, there'd never been a fly inside his office.

"Oh," he murmured. He felt as though he'd just been hollowed out. A fly descended in an arcing plummet, landing on the desk top several inches from the edge of Pressman's right hand.

### 43 - Old Haunts

Originally he'd intended to spend the one night in town at the Hotel Tiger. But it had occurred to him that maybe his old room was available. It was summer session now and there might not be a student living there. It was certainly worth a try. He could think of nothing more pleasant than sleeping in his old room, in his old bed.

The house was the same. He moved up the cement steps, smiling at their still crumbled edges. Same old steps, he thought, still on the bum. As was the sagging screen door to the porch and the doorbell that had to be pushed in at an angle before connection was made. He shook his head, smiling, and wondered if Miss Smith were still alive.

It wasn't Miss Smith who answered the bell. His heart sank as, instead of her tottering old form, a husky middle-aged woman came bustling to the door.

"Yes?" she said, her voice a harsh, inhospitable sound.

"Is Miss Smith still here?" he asked, hoping, in spite of everything, that she was.

"No, Miss Ada's been dead for years."

It was like a slap on his face. He felt momentarily stunned as he nodded at the woman.

"I see," he said then. "I see. I used to room here while I was in college, you see, and I thought..." Miss Smith dead.

"You going to school?" the woman asked.

He didn't know whether to take it as insult or praise.

"No, no," he said, "I'm just passing through on my way to Chicago. I graduated many years ago. I wondered if... anyone was living in the old room."

"The hall room, you mean?" the woman asked, regarding him clinically.

"That's right."

"Not till fall," she said.

"Could I...look at it?"

"Well, I..."

"I thought I might stay overnight," he said, hastily, "that is, if-"

"Oh, *that's* all right." The woman warmed her tone. "If that's what you want."

"I would," he said. "Sort of renew old acquaintanceship, you know."

He smiled self-consciously, wishing he hadn't said that.

"What would you want to pay?" asked the woman, more concerned with money than with memories.

"Well, I tell you," he said, impulsively, "I used to pay twenty dollars a month. Suppose I pay you that?"

"For one night?"

He felt foolish. But he couldn't back down now even though he felt that his offer had been a nostalgic blunder. No room was worth twenty dollars a night.

He caught himself. Why quibble? It was worth that much to relive old memories. Twenty dollars was nothing to him anymore. The past was.

"Glad to pay it," he said. "Well worth it to me."

He slid the bills from his wallet with awkward fingers and held them out to her.

He glanced at the bathroom as they walked down the dim lit hall. The familiar sight made him smile. There was something wonderful about returning. He couldn't help it; there just was.

"Yes, Miss Ada's been dead nigh onto five years," the woman said.

His smile faded.

When the woman opened the door to the room he wanted to stand there for a long moment looking at it before letting himself enter once more. But she stood waiting for him and he knew he'd feel ridiculous asking her to wait so he took a deep breath and went in.

*Time travel.* The phrase crossed his mind as he entered the room. Because it seemed as if he was suddenly back; the new student stepping into the room for the first time, suitcase in hand, at the beginning of a new adventure.

He stood there mutely, looking around the room, a sense of inexplicable fright taking hold of him. The room seemed to bring back everything. *Everything.* Mary and Norman and Spencer and David and classes and concerts and parties and dances and football games and beer-busts and all-night talks and everything. Memories crowded on him until it seemed that they would crush him.

"It's a little dusty but I'll clean it up when you go out to eat," the woman said. "I'll go get you some sheets."

He didn't hear her words or her footsteps moving down the hallway. He stood there possessed by the past.

He didn't know what it was that made him shudder and look around suddenly. It wasn't a sound or anything he saw. It was a feeling in his body and mind; a sense of unreasonable foreboding.

He jumped with a gasp as the door slammed violently shut. "It's the wind does it," said the woman returning with sheets for his old bed.

Broadway The traffic light turned red and he eased down the brake. His gaze moved across the store fronts.

There was the Crown Drug Store, still the same. Next to it, Flora Dame's Shoe Store. His eyes moved across the street. The Glendale Shop was still there. Barth's Clothes was still in its old location too.

Something in his mind seemed to loosen and he realized that he had been afraid of seeing the town changed. For when he'd turned the corner onto Broadway and seen that Mrs. Sloane's Book Shoppe and The College Grille were gone he'd felt almost a sense of betrayal. The town he remembered existed intact in his mind and it gave him a tense, restless feeling to see it partially changed. It was like meeting an old friend and discovering, with a shock, that one of his legs was gone.

But enough things were the same to bring the solemn smile back to his lips.

The College Theatre where he and his friends had gone to midnight shows on Saturday nights after a date or long hours of study. The Collegiate Bowling Alleys; upstairs from them, the pool room.

And downstairs...

Impulsively, he pulled the car to the curb and switched off the motor. He sat there looking, for a moment, at the entrance to the Golden Campus. Then he slid quickly from the car.

The same old awning hung over the doorway, its once gaudy colours worn conservative by time and

weather. He moved forward, a smile playing on his lips.

Then a sense of overpowering depression struck him as he stood looking down the steep, narrow staircase. He caught hold of the railing with his fingers and, after hesitating, let himself down slowly. He hadn't remembered the stairway being *this* narrow.

Near the bottom of the stairs, a whirring sound reached his ears. Someone was waxing the small dance floor with rotary brushes. He moved down the last step and saw the small black man following the gently bucking machine around the floor. He saw and heard the metal nose of the polisher bump into one of the columns that marked the boundaries of the dance floor.

Another frown crossed his face. The place was so small, so dingy. Surely memory hadn't erred that badly. No, he hastily explained to himself. No, it was because the place was empty and there were no lights. It was because the jukebox wasn't frothing with coloured bubbles and there were no couples dancing.

Unconsciously, he slid his hands into his trouser pockets, a pose he hadn't assumed more than once or twice since he'd left college eighteen years before. He moved closer to the dance floor, nodding once to the low, battered bandstand as one would to an old acquaintance.

He stood by the dance floor edge and thought of Mary.

How many times had they circled that tiny area, moving to the rhythms that pulsed from the glowing jukebox? Dancing slowly, their bodies intimately close, her warm hand idly stroking the back of his neck. How many times? Something tightened in his stomach. He could almost see her face again. He turned away quickly from the dance floor and looked at the dark wooden booths.

A forced smile raised his lips. Were they still there? He moved around the edge of a column and started for the back.

"You lookin' for somebody?" the old black man asked.

"No, no," he said. "I just want to look at something."

He moved down the rows of booths, trying to ignore the feeling of awkwardness. Which one is it? he asked himself. He couldn't remember; they all looked the same. He stopped, hands on hips, and looked at all the booths, shaking his head slowly. On the dance floor, the black man finished his polishing, pulled the plug out and drew the lumbering machine away. The place grew deathly still.

He found them in the third booth he looked at. Worn thin, the letters almost as dark as the surrounding wood but, most assuredly, there. He slid into the booth and looked at them.

*B.J.* Bill Johnson. And, under the initials, the year 1939.

He thought about all the nights he and Spence and Dave and Norm had sat in this booth dissecting the universe with the deft, assured scalpels of college seniors.

"We thought we had it all," he murmured. "Every darn bit of it."

Slowly, he took off his hat and set it down on the table. What he wished for now was a glass of the old beer: that thick, malty brew that filled your veins and pumped your heart, as Spence used to say.

He nodded his head in appreciation, toasting a quiet toast.

"To you," he whispered. "The unbeatable past."

As he said it, he looked up from the table and saw a young man standing far across the room at the shadowy foot of the stairway. Johnson looked at the young man, unable to see him sharply without his glasses on.

After a moment, the young man turned and went back up the stairs. Johnson smiled to himself. Come back at six, he thought. The place doesn't open till six.

That made him think again of all the nights he'd spent down here in the musty dimness, drinking beer, talking, dancing, spending his youth with the casual improvidence of a millionaire.

He sat silent in the semi-darkness, memories swirling about him like a restless tide, lapping at his mind, forcing him to keep his lips pressed together because he knew that all this was gone forever.

In the midst of it, the memory of her came again. Mary, he thought and he wondered what had ever become of Mary?

It started again as he walked under the archway that led to the campus. An uneasy feeling that past and present were blending, that he was tightrope-walking between the two of them, on the verge of falling into either one.

The feeling dogged his steps, chilling the sense of elation he felt at being back.

He'd look at a building, thinking of the classes he'd taken there, the people he'd known there. Then, almost in the same moment, he'd see his present life, the dull empty rounds of selling. The months and years of solitary driving around the country. Ending only in return to a home he disliked, a wife he did not love.

He kept thinking about Mary. What a fool he'd been to let her go. To think, with the thoughtless assurance of youth, that the world was replete with endless possibilities. He'd thought it a mistake to choose so early in life and embrace the present good. He'd been a great one for looking for greener pastures. He'd kept looking until all his pastures were brown with time.

That feeling again: a combination of sensations. A creeping dissatisfaction that gnawed at him and choked him-and a restless, pursued feeling. An inescapable urge to look over his shoulder and see who was following him. He couldn't dismiss it and it bothered and upset him.

Now he was walking along the east side of the campus, his suit coat thrown over his right arm, his woven hat cocked back on his balding head. He could feel small sweat drops trickling down his back as he walked.

He wondered if he should stop and sit on the campus awhile. There were several students sprawled out under the trees, laughing and chatting.

But he was leery of speaking to students anymore. Just before he'd come onto the campus, he'd stopped at the Campus Cafe for a glass of iced tea. He'd sat next to a student there and tried to start a conversation.

The young man had treated him with insufferable deference. He hadn't said anything about it, of course, but it had been highly offensive.

Something else had happened too. While he was moving for the cashier's booth, a young man had walked by outside. Johnson had thought he knew him and had raised his arm to catch the student's attention.

Then he'd realized it was impossible that he knew any of the current students and he'd guiltily lowered his arm. He had paid his check, feeling very depressed.

The depression still clung to him as he walked up the steps of the Liberal Arts Building.

He turned at the head of the steps and looked back over the campus. In spite of deflated sentiment, it gave him a lift to see the campus still the same. It, at least, was unchanged and there was some sense of continuity in the world.

He smiled and turned, then turned again. *Was* there someone following him? The feeling was certainly strong enough. His worried gaze moved over the campus without seeing anything unusual. With an irritated shrug, he walked into the building.

It was still the same too and it made him feel good to walk on the dark tile floors again, beneath the ceiling murals, up the marble steps, through the soundproof, air-cooled halls.

He didn't notice the face of the student who walked by him even though their shoulders almost touched. He did seem to notice the student looking at him. But he wasn't sure and, when he looked over his shoulder, the student had turned a corner.

The afternoon passed slowly. He walked from building to building, entering each one religiously, looking at bulletin boards, glancing into classrooms and smiling carefully-timed smiles at everything.

But he was beginning to feel a desire to run away. He resented the fact that no one spoke to him. He thought of going to the alumni director and chatting with him but he decided against it. He didn't want to seem pretentious. He was just an ex-student quietly visiting the scenes of his college days. That was all. No point in making a show of it.

As he walked back to the room that evening after supper, he had the definite impression that someone was following him.

Yet, whenever he stopped with a suspicious frown and looked back, there was nothing. Only the sound of cars honking down on Broadway or the laughter of young men up in their rooms.

On the porch steps of the house he stopped and looked up the street, an uneasy chill running down his back. Probably perspired too much this afternoon, he thought. Now the cooling air was chilling him. After all, he wasn't as young as-

He shook his head, trying to rid his mind of the phrase. A man's as young as he feels, he told himself authoritatively and nodded once curtly to impress the fact on his mind.

The woman had left the front door unlocked. As he entered, he heard her talking on the telephone in Miss Smith's bedroom. Johnson nodded to himself. How many times had he spoken to Mary on that old phone? What was the number again? 4458.

That was it. He smiled proudly at being able to remember it.

How many times had he sat there in the old black rocker exchanging light conversation with her? His face fell. Where was she now? Was she married and did she have children? Did she-

He stopped, tensing, as a floor board creaked behind him. He waited a moment, expecting to hear the woman's voice. Then he looked back quickly.

The hallway was empty.

With a swallow, he entered his room and shut the door firmly. He fumbled for the light switch and finally found it.

He smiled again. This was more like it. He walked around his old room, running his hand over the top of the bureau, the student's desk, the mattress on the bed. He tossed down his hat and coat on the desk and settled down on the bed with a weary sigh. A grin lit his face as the old springs groaned. Same old springs, he thought.

He threw up his legs and fell back on the pillow. God, but it felt good. He ran his fingers over the bedspread, stroking it affectionately.

The house was very still. Johnson turned on his stomach and glanced out the window. There was the old alley, the big oak tree still towering over the house. He shook his head at the chest-filling sensation that thoughts of the past caused in him.

Then he started as the door thudded slightly in its frame. He looked quickly over his shoulder. *It's the wind does it*, the woman's words came to him.

He was certainly overwrought, he decided, but all these things were disturbing. Well, that was understandable. The day had been an emotional experience. To relive the past and regret the present was a full day's work for any man.

He was drowsy after the heavy meal he'd eaten at the Black and Gold Inn. He pushed himself up and shuffled over to the light switch.

The room plunged into darkness and he felt his way cautiously back to the bed. He lay down with a satisfied grunt.

It was still a good old bed. How many nights had he slept there, his brain seething with the contents of books he'd been studying? He reached down and loosened his belt, pretending he didn't feel a twinge of remorse at the way his once slender body had thickened. He sighed as the pressure on his stomach was eased. Then he rolled on his side in the warm, airless room and closed his eyes.

He lay there for a few minutes listening to the sound of a car passing in the street. Then he rolled onto his back with a groan. He stretched out his legs, let them go slack. Then he sat up and, reaching down, untied his shoes and dropped them on the floor. He fell back on the pillow and turned on his side again with a sigh.

It came slowly.

At first he thought it was his stomach bothering him. Then he realized it wasn't just his stomach muscles but every muscle in his body. He felt bands of ligament drawing in and a shudder ran through his frame.

He opened his eyes and blinked in the darkness. What in God's name was wrong? He stared at the desk and saw the dark outline of his hat and coat. Again, he closed his eyes. He had to relax. There were some big customers coming up in Chicago.

It's *cold*, he thought irritably, fumbling around at his side and finally drawing the bedspread over his stout body. He felt his skin crawling. He found himself listening but there was no other sound than the harshness of his own breathing. He twisted uncomfortably, wondering how the room could have gotten so cold all of a sudden. He must have gotten a chill.

He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes.

In an instant, his body stiffened and all sound was paralyzed in his throat.

There, leaning over him, bare inches from him, was the whitest, the most hating face he had ever seen in his entire life.

He lay there, staring up in numb, open-mouthed horror at the face.

"*Get out,*" said the face, its grating voice hoarse with malevolence. "*Get out. You can't come back.*"

For a long time after the face had disappeared, Johnson lay there, barely able to breathe, his hands in rigid knots at his sides, his eyes wide and staring. He kept trying to think but the memory of the face and the words spoken petrified his mind.

He didn't stay. When strength had returned, he got up, and managed to sneak out without attracting the attention of the woman. He drove quickly from the town, his face pale, thinking only of what he'd seen.

*Himself.*

The face of himself when he was in college. His young self hating this coarsened interloper for intruding on what could never be his again. And the young man in the Golden Campus; that had been his younger self. The student passing the Campus Cafe had been himself as he once was. And the student in the hallway and the resentful presence that had followed him around the campus, hating him for coming back and pawing at the past-they had all been him.

He never went back and he never told anyone what had happened. And when, in rare moments, he spoke of his college days, it was always with a shrug and a cynical smile to show how little it had really meant to him.

#### 44 - Wet Straw

It began some months after his wife died.

He had moved into a boarding house. There he lived a sheltered life; sale of her bonds had provided money. A book a day, concerts, solitary meals, visits to the museum-these sufficed. He listened to his radio and napped and thought a good deal. Life was good enough.

One night he put down his book and undressed. He turned out the lights and opened the window. He sat down on the bed and stared a moment at the floor. His eyes ached a little. Then he lay down and put his arms behind his head. There was a cold draft from the window, so he pulled the covers over his head and closed his eyes.

It was very still. He could hear his own regular breathing. The warmth began to cover him. The heat fondled his body and soothed it. He sighed heavily and smiled.

In an instant, his eyes were open.

There was a thin breeze stroking his cheek, and he could smell something like wet straw. It was not to be mistaken.

Reaching out, he could touch the wall and feel the breeze from the window. Yet, under the covers, where there had been only warmth before, was another breeze. And a damp, chilling smell of wet straw.

He threw the covers from him and lay on the bed, breathing harshly.

Then he laughed in his mind. A dream, a nightmare. Too much reading. Bad food.

He pulled up the covers and closed his eyes. He kept his head outside the blankets and slept.

The next morning he forgot about it. He had breakfast and went to the museum. There he spent the morning. He visited all the rooms and looked at everything.

When he was about to leave, he felt a desire to go back and look at a painting he had only glanced at



before.

He stopped in front of it.

It was a painting of a countryside. There was a big barn down in the valley.

He began to breathe heavily, and his fingers played on his tie. How ridiculous, he thought after a moment, that such a thing should make me nervous.

He turned away. At the door he looked back at the painting.

The barn had frightened him. Only a barn, he thought, a barn in a painting.

After dinner he returned to his room.

As soon as he opened the door he remembered the dream. He went to the bed. He drew up the blanket and the sheets and shook them.

There was no smell of wet straw. He felt like a fool.

That night, when he went to bed, he left the window closed. He turned out the lights and got in bed and pulled the covers over his head.

At first it was the same. Silent and breathless and the creeping warmth.

Then the breeze began again and he distinctly felt his hair ruffled by it. He could smell wet straw. He stared into the blackness and breathed through his mouth so he wouldn't have to smell the straw.

Somewhere in the dark, he saw a square of greyish light.

It's a window, he thought, suddenly.

He looked longer and his heart jumped as a sudden flash of light showed in the window. It was like lightning. He listened. He smelled the wet straw.

He heard it starting to rain.

He became frightened and pulled the covers off his head.

The warm room was around him. It was not raining. It was oppressively hot because the window was closed.

He stared at the ceiling and wondered why he was having this illusion.

Again he pulled up the blanket to make sure. He lay still and kept his eyes tightly closed.

The smell was in his nostrils again. The rain was beating violently on the window. He opened his eyes and watched it and made out sheets of rain in the flashes. Then, rain began to beat above him, too, on a wooden roof. He was in some place with a wooden roof and wet straw.

He was in a barn.

That was why the picture had frightened him. But why frightened?

He tried to touch the window, but he couldn't reach it. The breeze blew on his hand and arm. He wanted to touch the window. Maybe, he delighted in the thought, maybe open it and stick his head out in the rain and then pull down the covers quickly to see if his hair were wet.

He began to sense himself surrounded by space. There was no feeling of confinement in the bed. He felt the mattress, yet it was as though he lay on it in an open place. The breeze blew over his entire body. And the smell was more pronounced.

He listened. He heard a squeak and then a horse whinnying. He listened a while longer.

Then he realized he couldn't feel the whole mattress.

*It felt as though he were lying on a cold wooden floor from his waist down.*

He reached out his hands in alarm and felt the edge of the blankets. He pulled them down.

He was covered with sweat and his pyjamas stuck to his body. He got out of bed and turned on the light. A refreshing breeze came through the window when he opened it.

His legs shook as he walked, and he had to grab at the dresser to keep from falling.

In the mirror he saw his face pale with fear. He held up his hand and watched it shake. His throat was dry.

He went to the bathroom and got a drink of water. Then he went to the room and looked down at his bed. Nothing there but the tangled blanket and sheets and the stain where he had perspired. He held up the blanket and the sheets. He shook them before the light and examined them minutely. There was

nothing.

He took up a book and read for the rest of the night.

The next day he went to the museum again and looked at the picture.

He tried to remember if he had ever been in a barn. Had it been raining and had he stared out a window at the lightning?

He remembered.

It was on his honeymoon. They had gone for a walk and been caught in the rain and stayed in a barn until it stopped. There had been a horse down in the stall and mice running and wet straw.

But what did it mean? There was no reason to remember it now.

That night he was afraid to go to bed. He put it off. At last, -when his eyes would not stay open, he lay down fully dressed and left the window closed. He didn't use a blanket.

He slept heavily and there was no dream.

Toward early morning, he woke up. It was just getting light. Without thinking, he pulled a blanket off the chair and threw it over himself.

There was no wait. He was suddenly in the barn.

There was no sound. It was not raining. There was a gray light in the window. Could it be that it was also morning in his imaginary barn?

He smiled drowsily. It was all too charming. He would have to try it in the afternoon to see if the barn were fully lighted.

He started to pull the blanket off his head, when there was a rustle by his side.

He caught his breath. His heart seemed to stop and there was a tingling in his scalp.

A soft sigh reached his ears.

Something warm and moist brushed over his hand.

With a scream, he flung off the blanket and jumped onto the floor.

He stood there staring at the bed and clutching the blanket in his hands. His heart struck with gigantic beats.

He sank down weakly on the bed. The sun was just rising.

For a week, he slept sitting up in a chair. At last, he had to have a good night's rest and lay down on the bed, fully dressed. He would never use a blanket again. Sleep came, dreamless and black.

He didn't know what time it was when he woke up. A sob caught in his throat. *He was in the barn again.* Lightning flashed in the window and rain was pounding on the roof.

He felt around in dread, but there was no blanket anywhere. His hands slapped at the air, frenziedly.

Suddenly, he looked at the window. If he could open it, he might escape! He stretched out his hand as far as he could. Closer. Closer. He was almost there. Another inch and his fingers would touch it.

*'John.'*

A sudden reflex made his hand plunge through the glass. He felt the rain spattering across the back of his hand and his wrist burned terribly. He jerked back his hand and stared in terror at where the voice had come from.

Something white stirred at his side and a warm hand caressed his arm.

*"John,"* came the murmur. *John.*

He couldn't speak. He reached around clutching agonizingly for his blanket. But only the breeze blew over his fingers. There was a cold wooden floor under him.

He whimpered in fright. His name was spoken again.

Then the lightning flashed and he saw his wife lying by him, smiling at him.

Suddenly, the edge of the blanket was in his hand, and pulling it down, he rolled off the bed onto the floor.

Something was running across his wrist; there was a dull ache in his arm.

He stood up and put on the light. The bright glare filled the room.

He saw his arm covered with blood. He picked a piece of glass from his wrist and dropped it on the floor in horror.

On his lower arm, the prints of her fingers were red.

He tore the sheet from the bed and ran down the hall to the bathroom. He washed the blood off and poured iodine into the thick gash and bandaged it. The burning made him dizzy. Drops of cold sweat ran into his eyes.

One of the boarders came in. John told him he had cut himself accidentally. When the man saw the blood running he ran and called a doctor on the telephone.

John sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched his blood dripping on the tiles.

The next day the cut was cleaned and bandaged.

The doctor was dubious about the explanation. John told him he did it with a knife; but there was no knife to be found, and there were thick patterns of blood all over the sheets and blanket.

He was told to stay in his room and keep his arm still.

He read most of the day and thought about how he had cut himself on a dream.

The thought of her excited him. She was still beautiful.

Memories became vivid.

They had lain in each other's arms in the straw and listened to the rain. He couldn't remember what they'd said.

He was not afraid she was coming back. His outlook on life was realistic. She was dead and buried.

It was some aberration of the mind. Some mental climax that had put itself off until now.

Then he looked at his wrist and saw the bandage.

It hadn't been her fault though. She didn't ask him to crash his hand through the glass.

Perhaps he could be with her in one existence and have her money in another.

Something held him from it. It *had* been frightening. The wet straw and the darkness, the mice and the rain, the bone stiffening chill.

He made up his mind what he would do.

That night he turned out the lights early. He got on his knees beside the bed.

He put his head under the covers. If anything went wrong he had only to pull away quickly.

He waited.

Soon he smelled the straw and heard the rain and looked for her. He called her name softly.

There was a rustling. A warm hand caressed his cheek. He started at first. Then he smiled. Her face appeared and she put her cheek against his. The perfume of her hair intoxicated him.

Words filled his mind.

*John. We are always one. Promise? Never part? If one of us dies the other will wait? If I die you'll wait and I'll find a way to come to you? I'll come to you and take you with me.*

*And now I have gone. You made me that drink and I died. And you opened the window so the breeze would come in. And now I am back.*

He began to shake.

Her voice became harsher, he could hear her teeth grinding. Her breath was faster. Her fingers touched his face. They ran through his hair and fondled his neck.

He began to moan. He asked her to let go. There was no answer. She breathed faster still. He tried to pull away. He felt the floor of his room with his feet. He tried hard to pull his head from under the blanket. But her grasp was very strong.

She began to kiss his lips. Her mouth was cold, her eyes wide open. He stared into them while her breath mingled with his.

Then she threw back her head and she was laughing and lightning was bursting through the window. Rain was thundering on the roof and the mice shrieked and the horse stamped and made the barn shake.

Her fingers clenched on his neck. He pulled with all his might and gritted his teeth and wrenched from her grasp. There was a sudden pain, and he rolled across the floor.

When the landlady came in two days later to clean, he was in the same position. His arms were sprawled in the dried puddle of blood and his body was taut and cold. His head was not to be found.

## 45 - Prey

Amelia arrived at her apartment at six-fourteen. Hanging her coat in the hall closet, she carried the small package into the living room and sat on the sofa. She nudged off her shoes while she unwrapped the package on her lap. The wooden box resembled a casket. Amelia raised its lid and smiled. It was the ugliest doll she'd ever seen. Seven inches long and carved from wood, it had a skeletal body and an oversized head. Its expression was maniacally fierce, its pointed teeth completely bared, its glaring eyes protuberant. It clutched an eight-inch spear in its right hand. A length of fine, gold chain was wrapped around its body from the shoulders to the knees. A tiny scroll was wedged between the doll and the inside wall of its box. Amelia picked it up and unrolled it. There was handwriting on it. *This is He Who Kills*, it began. *He is a deadly hunter*. Amelia smiled as she read the rest of the words. Arthur would be pleased.

The thought of Arthur made her turn to look at the telephone on the table beside her. After a while, she sighed and set the wooden box on the sofa. Lifting the telephone to her lap, she picked up the receiver and dialed a number.

Her mother answered.

"Hello, Mom," Amelia said.

"Haven't you left yet?" her mother asked.

Amelia steeled herself. "Mom, I know it's Friday night-" she started.

She couldn't finish. There was silence on the line. Amelia closed her eyes. Mom, please, she thought. She swallowed. "There's this man," she said. "His name is Arthur Breslow. He's a high school teacher."

"You aren't coming," her mother said.

Amelia shivered. "It's his birthday," she said. She opened her eyes and looked at the doll. "I sort of promised him we'd... spend the evening together."

Her mother was silent. There aren't any good movies playing tonight, anyway, Amelia's mind continued. "We could go tomorrow night," she said.

Her mother was silent.

"Mom?"

"Now even Friday night's too much for you."

"Mom, I see you two, three nights a week."

"To visit," said her mother. "When you have your own room here."

"Mom, *let's not start on that again*" Amelia said. I'm not a child, she thought. Stop treating me as though I were a child!

"How long have you been seeing him?" her mother asked.

"A month or so."

"Without telling me," her mother said.

"I had every intention of telling you." Amelia's head was starting to throb. I will *not* get a headache, she told herself. She looked at the doll. It seemed to be glaring at her. "He's a nice man, Mom," she said.

Her mother didn't speak. Amelia felt her stomach muscles drawing taut. I won't be able to eat tonight, she thought.

She was conscious suddenly of huddling over the telephone.

She forced herself to sit erect. *I'm thirty-three years old*, she thought. Reaching out, she lifted the doll from its box. "You should see what I'm giving him for his birthday," she said. "I found it in a curio shop on Third Avenue. It's a genuine Zuni fetish doll, extremely rare. Arthur is a buff on anthropology. That's why

I got it for him."

There was silence on the line. All right, *don't talk*, Amelia thought. "It's a hunting fetish," she continued, trying hard to sound untroubled. "It's supposed to have the spirit of a Zuni hunter trapped inside it. There's a golden chain around it to prevent the spirit from-" She couldn't think of the word; ran a shaking finger over the chain. "-escaping, I guess," she said. "His name is He Who Kills. You should see his face." She felt warm tears trickling down her cheeks.

"Have a good time," said her mother, hanging up.

Amelia stared at the receiver, listening to the dial tone. Why is it always like this? she thought. She dropped the receiver onto its cradle and set aside the telephone. The darkening room looked blurred to her. She stood the doll on the coffee-table edge and pushed to her feet. I'll take my bath now, she told herself. I'll meet him and we'll have a lovely time. She walked across the living room. A lovely time, her mind repeated emptily. She knew it wasn't possible. Oh, *Monti* she thought. She clenched her fists in helpless fury as she went into the bedroom.

In the living room, the doll fell off the table edge. It landed head down and the spear point, sticking into the carpet, braced the doll's legs in the air.

The fine, gold chain began to slither downward.

It was almost dark when Amelia came back into the living room. She had taken off her clothes and was wearing her terrycloth robe. In the bathroom, water was running into the tub.

She sat on the sofa and placed the telephone on her lap. For several minutes, she stared at it. At last, with a heavy sigh, she lifted the receiver and dialled a number.

"Arthur?" she said when he answered;

"Yes?" Amelia knew the tone-pleasant but suspecting. She couldn't speak.

"Your mother," Arthur finally said.

That cold, heavy sinking in her stomach. "It's our night together," she explained. "Every Friday-" She stopped and waited. Arthur didn't speak. "I've mentioned it before," she said.

"I know you've mentioned it," he said.

Amelia rubbed at her temple.

"She's still running your life, isn't she?" he said.

Amelia tensed. "I just don't want to hurt her feelings anymore," she said. "My moving out was hard enough on her."

"I don't want to hurt her feelings either," Arthur said. "But how many birthdays a year do I have? We *planned* on this."

"I know." She felt her stomach muscles tightening again.

"Are you really going to let her do this to you?" Arthur asked. "One Friday night out of the whole year?"

Amelia closed her eyes. Her lips moved soundlessly. I just can't hurt her feelings anymore, she thought. She swallowed. "She's my mother," she said.

"Very well," he said. "I'm sorry. I was looking forward to it, but-" He paused. "I'm sorry," he said. He hung up quietly.

Amelia sat in silence for a long time, listening to the dial tone. She started when the recorded voice said loudly, "Please hang up." Putting the receiver down, she replaced the telephone on its table. So much for my birthday present, she thought. It would be pointless to give it to Arthur now. She reached out, switching on the table lamp. She'd take the doll back tomorrow.

The doll was not on the coffee table. Looking down, Amelia saw the gold chain lying on the carpet. She eased off the sofa edge onto her knees and picked it up, dropping it into the wooden box. The doll was not beneath the coffee table. Bending over, Amelia felt around underneath the sofa.

She cried out, jerking back her hand. Straightening up, she turned to the lamp and looked at her hand. There was something wedged beneath the index fingernail. She shivered as she plucked it out. It was the head of the doll's spear. She dropped it into the box and put the finger in her mouth. Bending over again, she felt around more cautiously beneath the sofa.

She couldn't find the doll. Standing with a weary groan, she started pulling one end of the sofa from the

wall. It was terribly heavy. She recalled the night that she and her mother had shopped for the furniture. She'd wanted to furnish the apartment in Danish modern. Mother had insisted on this heavy, maple sofa; it had been on sale. Amelia grunted as she dragged it from the wall. She was conscious of the water running in the bathroom. She'd better turn it off soon.

She looked at the section of carpet she'd cleared, catching sight of the spear shaft. The doll was not beside it. Amelia picked it up and set it on the coffee table. The doll was caught beneath the sofa, she decided; when she'd moved the sofa, she had moved the doll as well.

She thought she heard a sound behind her-fragile, skittering. Amelia turned. The sound had stopped. She felt a chill move up the backs of her legs. "It's He Who Kills," she said with a smile. "He's taken off his chain and gone-"

She broke off suddenly. There had definitely been a noise inside the kitchen; a metallic, rasping sound. Amelia swallowed nervously. What's going on? she thought. She walked across the living room and reached into the kitchen, switching on the light. She peered inside. Everything looked normal. Her gaze moved falteringly across the stove, the pan of water on it, the table and chair, the drawers and cabinet doors all shut, the electric clock, the small refrigerator with the cookbook lying on top of it, the picture on the wall, the knife rack fastened to the cabinet side-

-its small knife missing.

Amelia stared at the knife rack. Don't be silly, she told herself. She'd put the knife in the drawer, that's all. Stepping into the kitchen, she pulled out the silverware drawer. The knife was not inside it.

Another sound made her look down quickly at the floor. She gasped in shock. For several moments, she could not react; then, stepping to the doorway, she looked into the living room, her heartbeat thudding. Had it been imagination? She was sure she'd seen a movement.

"Oh, come on," she said. She made a disparaging sound. She hadn't seen a thing.

Across the room, the lamp went out.

Amelia jumped so startledly, she rammed her right elbow against the doorjamb. Crying out, she clutched the elbow with her left hand, eyes closed momentarily, her face a mask of pain.

She opened her eyes and looked into the darkened living room. "Come on," she told herself in aggravation. Three sounds plus a burned-out bulb did not add up to anything as idiotic as-

She willed away the thought. She had to turn the water off. Leaving the kitchen, she started for the hall. She rubbed her elbow, grimacing.

There was another sound. Amelia froze. Something was coming across the carpet toward her. She looked down dumbly. No, she thought.

She saw it then-a rapid movement near the floor. There was a glint of metal, instantly, a stabbing pain in her right calf. Amelia gasped. She kicked out blindly. Pain again. She felt warm blood running down her skin. She turned and lunged into the hall. The throw rug slipped beneath her and she fell against the wall, hot pain lancing through her right ankle. She clutched at the wall to keep from falling, then went sprawling on her side. She thrashed around with a sob of fear.

More movement, dark on dark. Pain in her left calf, then her right again. Amelia cried out. Something brushed along her thigh. She scrabbled back, then lurched up blindly, almost falling again. She fought for balance, reaching out convulsively. The heel of her left hand rammed against the wall, supporting her. She twisted around and rushed into the darkened bedroom. Slamming the door, she fell against it, panting. Something banged against it on the other side, something small and near the floor.

Amelia listened, trying not to breathe so loudly. She pulled carefully at the knob to make sure the latch had caught. When there were no further sounds outside the door, she backed toward the bed. She started as she bumped against the mattress edge. Slumping down, she grabbed at the extension phone and pulled it to her lap. Whom could she call? The police? They'd think her mad. Mother? She was too far off.

She was dialling Arthur's number by the light from the bathroom when the doorknob started turning. Suddenly, her fingers couldn't move. She stared across the darkened room. The door latch clicked. The telephone slipped off her lap. She heard it thudding onto the carpet as the door swung open. Something

dropped from the outside knob.

Amelia jerked back, pulling up her legs. A shadowy form was scurrying across the carpet toward the bed. She gaped at it.

It isn't true, she thought. She stiffened at the tugging on her bedspread. *It was climbing up to get her.* No, she thought; *it isn't true.* She couldn't move. She stared at the edge of the mattress.

Something that looked like a tiny head appeared. Amelia twisted around with a cry of shock, flung herself across the bed and jumped to the floor. Plunging into the bathroom, she spun around and slammed the door, gasping at the pain in her ankle. She had barely thumbed in the button on the doorknob when something banged against the bottom of the door. Amelia heard a noise like the scratching of a rat. Then it was still.

She turned and leaned across the tub. The level of the water was almost to the overflow drain. As she twisted shut the faucets, she saw drops of blood falling into the water. Straightening up, she turned to the medicine-cabinet mirror above the sink.

She caught her breath in horror as she saw the gash across her neck. She pressed a shaking hand against it. Abruptly, she became aware of pain in her legs and looked down. She'd been slashed along the calves of both legs. Blood was running down her ankles, dripping off the edges of her feet. Amelia started crying. Blood ran between the fingers of the hand against her neck. It trickled down her wrist. She looked at her reflection through a glaze of tears.

Something in her aroused her, a wretchedness, a look of terrified surrender. *No*, she thought. She reached out for the medicine-cabinet door. Opening it, she pulled out iodine, gauze and tape. She dropped the cover of the toilet seat and sank down gingerly. It was a struggle to remove the stopper of the iodine bottle. She had to rap it hard against the sink three times before it opened.

The burning of the antiseptic on her calves made her gasp. Amelia clenched her teeth as she wrapped gauze around her right leg.

A sound made her twist toward the door. She saw the knife blade being jabbed beneath it. *It's trying to stab my feet*, she thought; *it thinks I'm standing there.* She felt unreal to be considering its thoughts. *This is He Who Kill*, the scroll flashed suddenly across her mind. *He is a deadly hunter.* Amelia stared at the poking knife blade. God, she thought.

Hastily, she bandaged both her legs, then stood and, looking into the mirror, cleaned the blood from her neck with a wash-rag. She swabbed some iodine along the edges of the gash, hissing at the fiery pain.

She whirled at the new sound, heartbeat leaping. Stepping to the door, she leaned down, listening hard. There was a faint metallic noise inside the knob.

The doll was trying to unlock it.

Amelia backed off slowly, staring at the knob. She tried to visualize the doll. Was it hanging from the knob by one arm, using the other to probe inside the knob lock with the knife? The vision was insane. She felt an icy prickling on the back of her neck. *I mustn't let it in*, she thought.

A hoarse cry pulled her lips back as the doorknob button popped out. Reaching out impulsively, she dragged a bath towel off its rack. The doorknob turned, the latch clicked free. The door began to open.

Suddenly the doll came darting in. It moved so quickly that its figure blurred before Amelia's eyes. She swung the towel down hard, as though it were a huge bug rushing at her. The doll was knocked against the wall. Amelia heaved the towel on top of it and lurched across the floor, gasping at the pain in her ankle. Flinging open the door, she lunged into the bedroom.

She was almost to the hall door when her ankle gave. She pitched across the carpet with a cry of shock. There was a noise behind her. Twisting around, she saw the doll come through the bathroom doorway like a jumping spider. She saw the knife blade glinting in the light. Then the doll was in the shadows, coming at her fast. Amelia scrabbled back. She glanced over her shoulder, saw the closet and backed into its darkness, clawing for the doorknob.

Pain again, an icy slashing at her foot. Amelia screamed and heaved back. Reaching up, she yanked a topcoat down. It fell across the doll. She jerked down everything in reach. The doll was buried

underneath a mound of blouses, skirts and dresses. Amelia pitched across the moving pile of clothes. She forced herself to stand and limped into the hall as quickly as she could. The sound of thrashing underneath the clothes faded from her hearing. She hobbled to the door. Unlocking it, she pulled the knob.

The door was held. Amelia reached up quickly to the bolt. It had been shot. She tried to pull it free. It wouldn't budge. She clawed at it with sudden terror. It was twisted out of shape. "No," she muttered. *She was trapped.* "Oh, God." She started pounding on the door. "Please help me! *Help* me!"

Sound in the bedroom. Amelia whirled and lurched across the living room. She dropped to her knees beside the sofa, feeling for the telephone, but her fingers trembled so much that she couldn't dial the numbers. She began to sob, then twisted around with a strangled cry. The doll was rushing at her from the hallway.

Amelia grabbed an ashtray from the coffee table and hurled it at the doll. She threw a vase, a wooden box, a figurine. She couldn't hit the doll. It reached her, started jabbing at her legs. Amelia reared up blindly and fell across the coffee table. Rolling to her knees, she stood again. She staggered toward the hall, shoving over furniture to stop the doll. She toppled a chair, a table. Picking up a lamp, she hurled it at the floor. She backed into the hall and, spinning, rushed into the closet, slammed the door shut.

She held the knob with rigid fingers. Waves of hot breath pulsed against her face. She cried out as the knife was jabbed beneath the door, its sharp point sticking into one of her toes. She shuffled back, shifting her grip on the knob. Her robe hung open. She could feel a trickle of blood between her breasts. Her legs felt numb with pain. She closed her eyes. Please, someone help, she thought.

She stiffened as the doorknob started turning in her grasp. Her flesh went cold. It couldn't be stronger than she: it *couldn't* be. Amelia tightened her grip. *Please*, she thought. The side of her head bumped against the front edge of her suitcase on the shelf.

The thought exploded in her mind. Holding the knob with her right hand, she reached up, fumbling, with her left. The suitcase clasps were open. With a sudden wrench, she turned the doorknob, shoving at the door as hard as possible. It rushed away from her. She heard it bang against the wall. The doll thumped down.

Amelia reached up, hauling down her suitcase. Yanking open the lid, she fell to her knees in the closet doorway, holding the suitcase like an open book. She braced herself, eyes wide, teeth clenched together. She felt the doll's weight as it banged against the suitcase bottom. Instantly, she slammed the lid and threw the suitcase flat. Falling across it, she held it shut until her shaking hands could fasten the clasps. The sound of them clicking into place made her sob with relief. She shoved away the suitcase. It slid across the hall and bumped against the wall. Amelia struggled to her feet, trying not to listen to the frenzied kicking and scratching inside the suitcase.

She switched on the hall light and tried to open the bolt. It was hopelessly wedged. She turned and limped across the living room, glancing at her legs. The bandages were hanging loose. Both legs were streaked with caking blood, some of the gashes still bleeding. She felt at her throat. The cut was still wet. Amelia pressed her shaking lips together. She'd get to a doctor soon now.

Removing the ice pick from its kitchen drawer, she returned to the hall. A cutting sound made her look toward the suitcase. She caught her breath. The knife blade was protruding from the suitcase wall, moving up and down with a sawing motion. Amelia stared at it. She felt as though her body had been turned to stone.

She limped to the suitcase and knelt beside it, looking, with revulsion at the sawing blade. It was smeared with blood. She tried to pinch it with the fingers of her left hand, pull it out. The blade was twisted, jerked down, and she cried out, snatching back her hand. There was a deep slice in her thumb. Blood ran down across her palm. Amelia pressed the finger to her robe. She felt as though her mind was going blank.

Pushing to her feet, she limped back to the door and started prying at the bolt. She couldn't get it loose. Her thumb began to ache. She pushed the ice pick underneath the bolt socket and tried to force it off the wall. The ice pick point broke off. Amelia slipped and almost fell. She pushed up, whimpering. There was no time, no time. She looked around in desperation.



The window! She could throw the suitcase out! She visualized it tumbling through the darkness. Hastily, she dropped the ice pick, turning toward the suitcase.

She froze. The doll had forced its head and shoulders through the rent in the suitcase wall. Amelia watched it struggling to get out. She felt paralyzed. The twisting doll was staring at her. No, she thought, it isn't true. The doll jerked free its legs and jumped to the floor.

Amelia jerked around and ran into the living room. Her right foot landed on a shard of broken crockery. She felt it cutting deep into her heel and lost her balance. Landing on her side, she thrashed around. The doll came leaping at her. She could see the knife blade glint. She kicked out wildly, knocking back the doll. Lunging to her feet, she reeled into the kitchen, whirled, and started pushing shut the door.

Something kept it from closing. Amelia thought she heard a screaming in her mind. Looking down, she saw the knife and a tiny wooden hand. The doll's arm was wedged between the door and the jamb! Amelia shoved against the door with all her might, aghast at the strength with which the door was pushed the other way. There was a cracking noise. A fierce smile pulled her lips back and she pushed berserkly at the door. The screaming in her mind grew louder, drowning out the sound of splintering wood.

The knife blade sagged. Amelia dropped to her knees and tugged at it. She pulled the knife into the kitchen, seeing the wooden hand and wrist fall from the handle of the knife. With a gagging noise, she struggled to her feet and dropped the knife into the sink. The door slammed hard against her side; the doll rushed in.

Amelia jerked away from it. Picking up the chair, she slung it toward the doll. It jumped aside, then ran around the fallen chair. Amelia snatched the pan of water off the stove and hurled it down. The pan clanged loudly off the floor, spraying water on the doll.

She stared at the doll. It wasn't coming after her. It was trying to climb the sink, leaping up and clutching at the counter side with one hand. It wants the knife, she thought. It has to have its weapon.

She knew abruptly what to do. Stepping over to the stove, she pulled down the broiler door and twisted the knob on all the way. She heard the puffing detonation of the gas as she turned to grab the doll.

She cried out as the doll began to kick and twist, its maddened thrashing flinging her from one side of the kitchen to the other. The screaming filled her mind again and suddenly she knew it was the spirit in the doll that screamed. She slid and crashed against the table, wrenched herself around and, dropping to her knees before the stove, flung the doll inside. She slammed the door and fell against it.

The door was almost driven out. Amelia pressed her shoulder, then her back against it, turning to brace her legs against the wall. She tried to ignore the pounding scrabble of the doll inside the broiler. She watched the red blood pulsing from her heel. The smell of burning wood began to reach her and she closed her eyes. The door was getting hot. She shifted carefully. The kicking and pounding filled her ears. The screaming flooded through her mind. She knew her back would get burned, but she didn't dare to move. The smell of burning wood grew worse. Her foot ached terribly.

Amelia looked up at the electric clock on the wall. It was four minutes to seven. She watched the red second hand revolving slowly. A minute passed. The screaming in her mind was fading now. She shifted uncomfortably, gritting her teeth against the burning heat on her back.

Another minute passed. The kicking and the pounding stopped. The screaming faded more and more. The smell of burning wood had filled the kitchen. There was a pall of gray smoke in the air. That they'll see, Amelia thought. Now that it's over, they'll come and help. That's the way it always is.

She started to ease herself away from the broiler door, ready to throw her weight back against it if she had to. She turned around and got on her knees. The reek of charred wood made her nauseated. She had to know, though. Reaching out, she pulled down the door.

Something dark and stifling rushed across her and she heard the screaming in her mind once more as hotness flooded over her and into her. It was a scream of victory now.

Amelia stood and turned off the broiler. She took a pair of ice tongs from its drawer and lifted out the blackened twist of wood. She dropped it into the sink and ran water over it until the smoke had stopped. Then she went into the bedroom, picked up the telephone and depressed its cradle. After a moment, she

released the cradle and dialled her mother's number.

"This is Amelia, Mom," she said. "I'm sorry I acted the way I did. I want us to spend the evening together. It's a little late, though. Can you come by my place and we'll go from here?" She listened. "Good," she said. "I'll wait for you."

Hanging up, she walked into the kitchen, where she slid the longest carving knife from its place in the rack. She went to the front door and pushed back its bolt, which now moved freely. She carried the knife into the living room, took off her bathrobe and danced a dance of hunting, of the joy of hunting, of the joy of the impending kill.

Then she sat down, cross-legged, in the corner. He Who Kills sat, cross-legged, in the corner, in the darkness, waiting for the prey to come.

## 46 - The Children Of Noah

It was just past three a.m. when Mr Ketchum drove past the sign that read *Zachry: pop. 67*. He groaned. Another in an endless string of Maine seaside towns. He closed his eyes hard a second, then opened them again and pressed down on the accelerator. The Ford surged forward under him. Maybe, with luck, he'd reach a decent motel soon. It certainly wasn't likely there'd be one in Zachry: pop. 67.

Mr Ketchum shifted his heavy frame on the seat and stretched his legs. It had been a sour vacation. Motoring through New England's historic beauty, communing with nature and nostalgia was what he'd planned. Instead, he'd found only boredom, exhaustion and over-expense.

Mr Ketchum was not pleased.

The town seemed fast asleep as he drove along its Main Street. The only sound was that of the car's engine, the only sight that of his raised head beams splaying out ahead, lighting up another sign. *Speed 15 Limit*.

'Sure, sure,' he muttered disgustedly, pressing down on the gas pedal. Three o'clock in the morning and the town fathers expected him to creep through their lousy hamlet. Mr Ketchum watched the dark buildings rush past his window.

Goodbye Zachry, he thought. Farewell, pop. 67.

Then the other car appeared in the rear-view mirror. About half a block behind, a sedan with a turning red spotlight on its roof. He knew what kind of car it was. His foot curled off the accelerator and he felt his heartbeat quicken. Was it possible they hadn't noticed how fast he was going?

The question was answered as the dark car pulled up to the Ford and a man in a big hat leaned out of the front window. Pull over!' he barked.

Swallowing dryly, Mr Ketchum eased his car over to the kerb. He drew up the emergency brake, turned the ignition key and the car was still. The police car nosed in towards the kerb and stopped. The right front door opened.

The glare of Mr Ketchum's headlights outlined the dark figure approaching. He felt around quickly with his left foot and stamped down on the knob, dimming the lights. He swallowed again. Damned nuisance this. Three a.m. in the middle of nowhere and a hick policeman picks him up for speeding. Mr Ketchum gritted his teeth and waited.

The man in the dark uniform and wide-brimmed hat leaned over into the window. 'Licence.'

Mr Ketchum slid a shaking hand into his inside pocket and drew out his billfold. He felt around for his licence. He handed it over, noticed how expressionless the face of the policeman was. He sat there quietly while the policeman held a flashlight beam on the licence.

'From New Jersey.'

'Yes, that... that's right,' said Mr Ketchum.

The policeman kept staring at the licence. Mr Ketchum stirred restlessly on the seat and pressed his lips together. 'It hasn't expired,' he finally said.

He saw the dark head of the policeman lift. Then, he gasped as the narrow circle of flashlight blinded

him. He twisted his head away.

The light was gone. Mr Ketchum blinked his watering eyes.

'Don't they read traffic signs in New Jersey?' the policeman asked.

'Why, I... You mean the sign that said p-population sixty-seven?'

'No, I don't mean that sign,' said the policeman.

'Oh.' Mr Ketchum cleared his throat. 'Well, that's the only sign I saw,' he said.

'You're a bad driver then.'

'Well, I'm-'

'The sign said the speed limit is fifteen miles an hour. You were doing fifty.'

'Oh. I... I'm afraid I didn't see it.'

'The speed limit is fifteen miles an hour whether you see it or not.'

'Well... at - at *this* hour of the morning?'

'Did you see a timetable on the sign?' the policeman asked.

'No, of course not. I mean, I didn't see the sign at all/

'*Didn't* you?'

Mr Ketchum felt hair prickling along the nape of his neck. 'Now, now see here,' he began faintly, then stopped and stared at the policeman. 'May I have my licence back?' he finally asked when the policeman didn't speak.

The policeman said nothing. He stood on the street, motionless.

'May I -?' Mr Ketchum started.

'Follow our car,' said the officer abruptly and strode away.

Mr Ketchum stared at him, dumbfounded. *Hey wait!* he almost yelled. The officer hadn't even given him back his licence. Mr Ketchum felt a sudden coldness in his stomach.

'What *is* this?' he muttered as he watched the policeman getting back into his car. The police car pulled away from the kerb, its roof light spinning again.

Mr Ketchum followed.

'This is ridiculous,' he said aloud. They had no right to do this. Was this the Middle Ages? His thick lips pressed into a jaded mouth line as he followed the police car along Main Street.

Two blocks up, the police car turned. Mr Ketchum saw his headlights splash across a glass store front. *Hand's Groceries* read the weather-worn letters.

There were no lamps on the street. It was like driving along an inky passage. Ahead were only the three red eyes of the police car's rear lights and spotlight; behind only impenetrable blackness. The end of a perfect day, thought Mr Ketchum; picked up for speeding in Zachry, Maine. He shook his head and groaned. Why hadn't he just spent his vacation in Newark; slept late, gone to shows, eaten, watched television?

The police car turned right at the next corner, then, a block up, turned left again and stopped. Mr Ketchum pulled up behind it as its lights went out. There was no sense in this. This was only cheap melodrama. They could just as easily have fined him on Main Street. It was the rustic mind. Debasing someone from a big city gave them a sense of vengeful eminence.

Mr Ketchum waited. Well, he wasn't going to haggle. He'd pay his fine without a word and depart. He jerked up the hand brake. Suddenly he frowned, realising that they could fine him anything they wanted. They could charge him \$500 if they chose! The heavy man had heard stories about small town police, about the absolute authority they wielded. He cleared his throat viscidly. Well, this is absurd, he thought. What foolish imagination.

The policeman opened the door.

'Get out,' he said.

There was no light in the street or in any building. Mr Ketchum swallowed. All he could really see was the black figure of the policeman.

'Is this the - station?' he asked.

'Turn out your lights and come on,' said the policeman.

Mr Ketchum pushed in the chrome knob and got out. The policeman slammed the door. It made a loud, echoing noise-as if they were inside an unlighted warehouse instead of on a street. Mr Ketchum glanced upward. The illusion was complete. There were neither stars nor moon. Sky and earth ran together blackly.

The policeman's hard fingers clamped on his arm. Mr Ketchum lost balance a moment, then caught himself and fell into a quick stride beside the tall figure of the policeman.

'Dark here,' he heard himself saying in a voice not entirely familiar.

The policeman said nothing. The other policeman fell into step on the other side of him. Mr Ketchum told himself: These damned hick-town Nazis were doing their best to intimidate him. Well they wouldn't succeed.

Mr Ketchum sucked in a breath of the damp, sea-smelling air and let it shudder out. A crummy town of 67 and they have two policemen patrolling the streets at three in the morning. Ridiculous.

He almost tripped over the step when they reached it. The policeman on his left side caught him under the elbow.

'Thank you,' Mr Ketchum muttered automatically. The policeman didn't reply. Mr Ketchum licked his lips. Cordial oaf, he thought and managed a fleeting smile to himself. There, that was better. No point in letting this get to him.

He blinked as the door was pulled open and, despite himself, felt a sigh of relief filtering through him. It was a police station all right. There was the podiumed desk, there a bulletin board, there a black, pot-bellied stove unlit, there a scarred bench against the wall, there a door, there the floor covered with cracked and grimy linoleum that had once been green.

'Sit down and wait,' said the first policeman.

Mr Ketchum looked at his lean, angled face, his swarthy skin. There was no division in his eyes between iris and pupil. It was all one darkness. He wore a dark uniform that fitted him loosely.

Mr Ketchum didn't get to see the other policeman because both of them went into the next room. He stood watching the closed door a moment. Should he leave, drive away? No, they'd have his address on the licence. Then again, they might actually want him to attempt to leave. You never knew what sort of warped minds these small-town police had. They might even - shoot him down if he tried to leave.

Mr Ketchum sat heavily on the bench. No, he was letting imagination run amuck. This was merely a small town on the Maine seacoast and they were merely going to fine him for-

Well, why didn't they fine him then? What was all this play-acting? The heavy man pressed his lips together. Very well, let them play it the way they chose. This was better than driving anyway. He closed his eyes. I'll just rest them, he thought.

After a few moments he opened them again. It was damned quiet. He looked around the dimly lit room. The walls were dirty and bare except for a clock and one picture that hung behind the desk. It was a painting - more likely a reproduction - of a bearded man. The hat he wore was a seaman's hat. Probably one of Zachry's ancient mariners. No; probably not even that. Probably a Sears Roebuck print: *Bearded Seaman*.

Mr Ketchum grunted to himself. Why a police station should have such a print was beyond him. Except, of course, that Zachry was on the Atlantic. Probably its main source of income was from fishing. Anyway, what did it matter? Mr Ketchum lowered his gaze.

In the next room he could hear the muffled voices of the two policemen. He tried to hear what they were saying but he couldn't. He glared at the closed door. Come *on*, will you? he thought. He looked at the clock again. Three twenty-two. He checked it with his wrist watch. About right. The door opened and the two policemen came out.

One of them left. The remaining one - the one who had taken Mr Ketchum's licence - went over to the raised desk and switched on the gooseneck lamp over it, drew a big ledger out of the top drawer and started writing in it. *At last*, thought Mr Ketchum.

A minute passed.

'I -' Mr Ketchum cleared his throat. 'I beg your -'

His voice broke off as the cold gaze of the policeman raised from the ledger and fixed on him.

'Are you... That is, am I to be - fined now?'

The policeman looked back at the ledger. 'Wait,' he said.

'But it's past three in the mor - ' Mr Ketchum caught himself. He tried to look coldly belligerent. 'Very well/ he said curtly. 'Would you kindly tell me how long it will be?'

The policeman kept writing in the ledger. Mr Ketchum sat there stiffly, looking at him. *Insufferable*, he thought. This was the last damned time he'd ever go within a hundred miles of this damned New England.

The policeman looked up. 'Married?' he asked.

Mr Ketchum stared at him.

'Are you married?'

'No, I - it's on the licence,' Mr Ketchum blurted. He felt a tremor of pleasure at his retort and, at the same time, an impaling of strange dread at talking back to the man.

'Family in Jersey?' asked the policeman.

'Yes. I mean no, Just a sister in Wiscons - '

Mr Ketchum didn't finish. He watched the policeman write it down. He wished he could rid himself of this queasy distress.

'Employed?' asked the policeman.

Mr Ketchum swallowed. 'Well,' he said, 'I - I have no one particular em - '

'Unemployed,' said the policeman.

'Not at all; not at *all*,' said Mr Ketchum stiffly. 'I'm a - a free-lance salesman. I purchase stocks and lots from...' His voice faded as the policeman looked at him. Mr Ketchum swallowed three times before the lump stayed down. He realised that he was sitting on the very edge of the bench as if poised to spring to the defence of his life. He forced himself to settle back. He drew in a deep breath. Relax, he told himself. Deliberately, he closed his *eyes*. There. He'd catch a few Winks. May as well make the best of this, he thought.

The room was still except for the tinny, resonant ticking of the clock. Mr Ketchum felt his heart pulsing with slow, dragging beats. He shifted his heavy frame uncomfortably on the hard bench. *Ridiculous*, he thought.

Mr Ketchum opened his eyes and frowned. That damned picture. You could almost imagine that bearded seaman was looking at you.

*Uhr*

Mr Ketchum's mouth snapped shut, his eyes jerked open, irises flaring. He started forward on the bench, then shrank back.

A swarthy-faced man was bent over him, hand on Mr Ketchum's shoulder.

'Yes?' Mr Ketchum asked, heart jolting.

The man smiled.

'Chief Shipley,' he said. 'Would you come into my office?'

'Oh,' said Mr Ketchum. 'Yes. Yes.'

He straightened up, grimacing at the stiffness in his back muscles. The man stepped back and Mr Ketchum pushed up with a grunt, his eyes moving automatically to the wall clock. It was a few minutes past four.

'Look,' he said, not yet awake enough to feel intimidated. 'Why can't I pay my fine and leave?' Shipley's smile was without warmth.

'We run things a little different here in Zachry,' he said.

They entered a small musty-smelling office.

'Sit down,' said the chief, walking around the desk while Mr Ketchum settled into a straight-backed chair that creaked.

'I don't understand why I can't pay my fine and leave.'

'In due course,' said Shipley.

'But - ' Mr Ketchum didn't finish. Shipley's smile gave the ' impression of being no more than a

diplomatically veiled warning. Gritting his teeth, the heavy man cleared his throat and waited while the chief looked down at a sheet of paper on his desk. He noticed how poorly Shipley's suit fitted. Yokels, the heavy man thought, don't even know how to dress.

'I see you're not married,' Shipley said.

Mr Ketchum said nothing. Give them a taste of their own no-talk medicine he decided.

'Have you friends in Maine?' Shipley asked.

'Why?'

'Just routine questions, Mr Ketchum,' said the chief. Tour only family is a sister in Wisconsin?'

Mr Ketchum looked at him without speaking. What had all this to do with a traffic violation?

'Sir?' asked Shipley.

'I already told you; that is, I told the officer. I don't see -'

'Here on business?'

Mr Ketchum's mouth opened soundlessly.

'Why are you asking me all these questions?' he asked. *Stop shaking!* he ordered himself furiously.

'Routine. Are you here on business?'

'I'm on my vacation. And I don't see this at all! I've been patient up to now but, *blast it*, I demand to be fined and released!'

'I'm afraid that's impossible,' said the chief.

Mr Ketchum's mouth fell open. It was like waking up from a nightmare and discovering that the dream was still going on. 'I - I don't understand,' he said.

'You'll have to appear before the judge.'

'But that's ridiculous.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, it is. I'm a citizen of the United States. I demand my rights.'

Chief Shipley's smile faded.

'You limited those rights when you broke our law,' he said. 'Now you have to pay for it as we declare.'

Mr Ketchum stared blankly at the man. He realised that he was completely in their hands. They could fine him anything they pleased or put him in jail indefinitely. All these questions he'd been asked; he didn't know why they'd asked them but he knew that his answers revealed him as almost rootless, with no one who cared if he lived or -

The room seemed to totter. Sweat broke out on his body.

'You can't *do* this,' he said; but it was not an argument.

'You'll have to spend the night in jail,' said the chief. 'In the morning you'll see the judge.'

'But this is ridiculous!' Mr Ketchum burst out. '*Ridiculous!*'

He caught himself. 'I'm entitled to one phone call,' he said quickly. 'I can make a telephone call. It's my legal right.'

'It would be,' said Shipley, 'if there was any telephone service in Zachry.'

When they took him to his cell, Mr Ketchum saw a painting in the hall. It was of the same bearded seaman. Mr Ketchum didn't notice if the eyes followed him or not.

Mr Ketchum stirred. A look of confusion lined his sleep-numbed face. There was a clanking sound behind him; he reared up on his elbow.

A policeman came into the cell and set down a covered tray.

'Breakfast,' he said. He was older than the other policemen, even older than Shipley. His hair was iron-grey, his cleanly shaved face seamed around the mouth and eyes. His uniform fitted him badly.

As the policeman started relocking the door, Mr Ketchum asked, 'When do I see the judge?'

The policeman looked at him a moment. 'Don't know/' he said and turned away.

'Wait!' Mr Ketchum called out.

The receding footsteps of the policeman sounded hollowly on the cement floor. Mr Ketchum kept staring at the spot where the policeman had been. Veils of sleep peeled from his mind.

He sat up, rubbed deadened fingers over his eyes and held up his wrist. Seven minutes past nine. The heavy man grimaced. By God, they were going to hear about this! His nostrils twitched. He sniffed, started to reach for the tray; then pulled back his hand.

'No,' he muttered. He wouldn't eat their damned food. He sat there stiffly, doubled at the waist, glaring at his sock-covered feet.

His stomach grumbled uncooperatively.

'Well,' he muttered after a minute. Swallowing, he reached over and lifted off the tray cover.

He couldn't check the *oh* of surprise that passed his lips.

The three eggs were fried in butter, bright yellow eyes focused straight on the ceiling, ringed about with long, crisp lengths of meaty, corrugated bacon. Next to them was a platter of four book-thick slices of toast spread with creamy butter swirls, a paper cup of jelly leaning on them. There was a tall glass of frothy orange juice, a dish of strawberries bleeding in alabaster cream. Finally a tall pot from which wavered the pungent and unmistakable fragrance of freshly brewed coffee.

Mr Ketchum picked up the glass of orange juice. He took a few drops in his mouth and rolled them experimentally over his tongue. The citric acid tingled deliciously on his warm tongue. He swallowed. If it was poisoned it was by a master's hand. Saliva tided in his mouth. He suddenly remembered that, just before he was picked up, he'd been meaning to stop at a cafe for food.

While he ate, warily but decidedly, Mr Ketchum tried to figure out the motivation behind this magnificent breakfast.

It was the rural mind again. They regretted their blunder. It seemed a flimsy notion, but there it was. The food was superb. One thing you had to say for these New Englanders; they could cook like a son-of-a-gun. Breakfast for Mr Ketchum was usually a sweet roll, heated, and coffee. Since he was a boy in his father's house he hadn't eaten a breakfast like this.

He was just putting down his third cup of well-creamed coffee when footsteps sounded in the hall. Mr Ketchum smiled. Good timing, he thought. He stood.

Chief Shipley stopped outside the cell. 'Had your breakfast?'

Mr Ketchum nodded. If the chief expected thanks he was in for a sad surprise. Mr Ketchum picked up his coat.

The chief didn't move.

'Well ...?' said Mr Ketchum after a few minutes. He tried to put it coldly and authoritatively. It came out somewhat less.

Chief Shipley looked at him expressionlessly. Mr Ketchum felt his breath faltering.

'May I inquire -?' he began.

'Judge isn't in yet,' said Shipley.

'But...' Mr Ketchum didn't know what to say.

'Just came into tell you,' said Shipley. He turned and was gone.

Mr Ketchum was furious. He looked down at the remains of his breakfast as if they contained the answer to this situation. He drummed a fist against his thigh. *Insufferable!* What were they trying to do - intimidate him? Well, by God-

- they were succeeding.

Mr Ketchum walked over to the bars. He looked up and down the empty hallway. There was a cold knot inside him. The food seemed to have turned to dry lead in his stomach. He banged the heel of his right hand once against the cold bar. By God! By *God!*

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when Chief Shipley and the old policeman came to the cell door. Wordlessly the policeman opened it. Mr Ketchum stepped into the hallway and waited again, putting on his coat while the door was relocked.

He walked in short, inflexible strides between the two men, not even glancing at the picture on the wall. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Judge is sick,' said Shipley. 'We're taking you out to his house to pay your fine.'

Mr Ketchum sucked in his breath. He wouldn't argue with them; he just wouldn't. 'All right,' he said. 'If that's the way you have to do it.'

'Only way to do it,' said the chief, looking ahead, his face an expressionless mask.

Mr Ketchum pressed down the corners of a slim smile. This was better. It was almost over now. He'd pay his fine and clear out.

It was foggy outside. Sea mist rolled across the street like driven smoke. Mr Ketchum pulled on his hat and shuddered. The damp air seemed to filter through his flesh and dew itself around his bones.

Nasty day, he thought. He moved down the steps, *eyes* searching for his Ford.

The old policeman opened the back door of the police car and Shipley gestured towards the inside.

'What about *my* car?' Mr Ketchum asked.

'We'll come back here after you see the judge,' said Shipley.

'Oh. I...'

Mr Ketchum hesitated. Then he bent over and squeezed into the car, dropping down on the back seat. He shivered as the cold of the leather pierced trouser wool. He edged over as the chief got in.

The policeman slammed the door shut. Again that hollow sound, like the slamming of a coffin lid in a crypt. Mr Ketchum grimaced as the simile occurred to him.

The policeman got into the car and Mr Ketchum heard the motor cough into liquid life. He sat there breathing slowly and deeply while the policeman out-choked warmth into the engine. He looked out the window at his left.

The fog was *just* like smoke. They might have been parked in a burning garage. Except for that bone-gripping dampness. Mr Ketchum cleared his throat. He heard the chief shift on the seat beside him.

'Cold,' Mr Ketchum said, automatically.

The chief said nothing.

Mr Ketchum pressed back as the car pulled away from the kerb, V-turned and started slowly down the fog-veiled street. He listened to the crisp sibilance of the tyres on wet paving, the rhythmic swish of the wipers as they cleared off circle segments on the misted windshield.

After a moment he looked at his watch. Almost three. Half a day shot in this blasted Zachry.

He looked out through the window again as the town ghosted past. He thought he saw brick buildings along the kerb but he wasn't sure. He looked down at his white hands, then glanced over at Shipley. The chief was sitting stiffly upright on the seat, staring straight ahead. Mr Ketchum swallowed. The air seemed stagnant in his lungs.

On Main Street the fog seemed thinner. Probably the sea breezes, Mr Ketchum thought. He looked up and down the street. All the stores and offices looked closed. He glanced at the other side of the street. Same thing.

'Where is everybody?' he asked.

'What?'

'I said where *is* everybody?'

'Home,' the chief said.

'Rut it's Wednesday,' said Mr Ketchum. 'Aren't your -stores open?'

'Bad day,' said Shipley. 'Not worth it.'

Mr Ketchum glanced at the sallow faced chief, then withdrew his look hastily. He felt cold premonition spidering in his stomach again. What in God's name *is* this? he asked himself. It had been bad enough in the cell. Here, tracking through this sea of mist, it was altogether worse.

'That's right,' he heard his nerve-sparked voice saying. 'There are only sixty-seven people, aren't there?'

The chief said nothing.

'How... h-how old is Zachry?'

In the silence he heard the chiefs finger joints crackle dryly.

'Hundred fifty years,' said Shipley.

'That old,' said Mr Ketchum. He swallowed with effort. His throat hurt a little. Come *on*, he told himself. *Relax*.

'How come it's named Zachry?' The words spilled out, uncontrolled.



'Noah Zachry founded it,' said the chief.

'Oh. Oh. I see. I guess that picture in the station...?'

That's right,' said Shipley.

Mr Ketchum blinked. So that was Noah Zachry, founder of this town they were driving through - *- block after block after block*. There was a cold, heavy sinking in Mr Ketchum's stomach as the idea came to him.

In a town so big, why were there only 67 people?

He opened his mouth to ask it, then couldn't. The answer might be wrong.

'Why are there only -?' The words came out anyway before he could stop them. His body jolted at the shock of hearing them.

'What?'

'Nothing, nothing. That is - ' Mr Ketchum drew in a shaking breath. No help for it. He had to know.

'How come there are only sixty-seven?'

'They go away,' said Shipley.

Mr Ketchum blinked. The answer came as such an anticlimax. His brow furrowed. Well, what else? he asked himself defensively. Remote antiquated, Zachry would have little attraction for its younger generations. Mass gravitation to more interesting places would be inevitable.

The heavy man settled back against the seat. Of course. Think how much I want to leave the dump, he thought, and I don't even live here.

His gaze slid forward through the windshield, caught by something. A banner hanging across the street, barbecue tonight. Celebration, he thought. They probably went berserk every fortnight and had themselves a rip roaring taffy pull or fishnet-mending orgy.

'Who was Zachry anyway?' he asked. The silence was getting to him again.

'Sea captain,' said the chief.

'Oh?'

'Whaled in the South Seas,' said Shipley.

Abruptly, Main Street ended. The police car veered left on to a dirt road. Out the window Mr Ketchum watched shadowy bushes glide by. There was only the sound of the engine labouring in second and of gravelly dirt spitting out from under the tyres. Where does the judge live, on a mountain top? He shifted his weight and grunted.

The fog began thinning now. Mr Ketchum could see grass and trees, all with a greyish cast to them. The car turned and faced the ocean. Mr Ketchum looked down at the opaque carpet of fog below. The car kept turning. It faced the crest of the hill again.

Mr Ketchum coughed softly. 'Is... uh, that the judge's house up there?' he asked.

'Yes,' the chief answered.

'High,' said Mr Ketchum.

The car kept turning on the narrow, dirt road, now facing the ocean, now Zachry, now the bleak, hill-topping house. It was a greyish white house, three storeys high, at each end of it the crag of an attic tower. It looked as old as Zachry itself, thought Mr Ketchum. The car turned. He was facing the fog-crusted ocean again.

Mr Ketchum looked down at his hands. Was it a deception of the light or were they really shaking? He tried to swallow but there was no moisture in his throat and he coughed instead, rattlingly. This was so *stupid*, he thought; there's no reason in the world for this. He saw his hands clench together.

The car was moving up the final rise towards the house now. Mr Ketchum felt his breaths shortening. *I don't want to go*, he heard someone saying in his mind. He felt a sudden urge to shove out the door and run. Muscles tensed emphatically.

He closed his eyes. For God's sake, *stop* it! he yelled at himself. There was nothing wrong about this but his distorted interpretation of it. These were modern times. Things had explanations and people had reasons. Zachry's people had a reason too; a narrow distrust of city dwellers. This was their socially acceptable revenge. That made sense. After all -

The car stopped. The chief pushed open the door on his side and got out. The policeman reached back and opened the other door for Mr Ketchum. The heavy man found one of his legs and foot to be numb. He had to clutch at the top of the door for support. He stamped the foot on the ground.

'Went to sleep,' he said.

Neither of the men answered. Mr Ketchum glanced at the house; he squinted. He had seen a dark green drape slip back into place? He winced and made a startled noise as his arm was touched and the chief gestured towards the house. The three men started towards it.

'I, uh... don't have much cash on me, I'm afraid/ he said. 'I hope a traveller's check will be all right.'

'Yes,' said the chief.

They went up to the porch steps, stopped in front of the door. The policeman turned a big, brass key-head and Mr Ketchum heard a bell ring tinnily inside. He stood looking through the door curtains. Inside, he could make out the skeletal form of a hat rack. He shifted weight and the boards creaked under him. The policeman rang the bell again.

'Maybe he's - too sick,' Mr Ketchum suggested faintly.

Neither of the men looked at him. Mr Ketchum felt his muscles tensing. He glanced back over his shoulder. Could they catch him if he ran for it?

He looked back disgustedly. You pay your fine and you leave, he explained patiently to himself. That's all; you pay your fine and you leave.

Inside the house there was dark movement. Mr Ketchum looked up, startled in spite of himself. A tall woman was approaching the door.

The door opened. The woman was thin, wearing an ankle-length black dress with a white oval pin at her throat. Her face was swarthy, seamed with threadlike lines. Mr Ketchum slipped off his hat automatically.

'Come in,' said the woman.

Mr Ketchum stepped into the hall.

'You can leave your hat there,' said the woman, pointing towards the hat rack that looked like a tree ravaged by flame. Mr Ketchum dropped his hat over one of the dark pegs. As he did, his eye was caught by a large painting near the foot of the staircase. He started to speak but the woman said, 'This way.'

They started down the hall. Mr Ketchum stared at the painting as they passed it.

'Who's that woman,' he asked, 'standing next to Zachry?'

'His wife,' said the chief.

'But she-'

Mr Ketchum's voice broke off suddenly as he heard a whimper rising in his throat. Shocked, he drowned it out with a sudden clearing of the throat. He felt ashamed of himself. Still... Zachry's wife?

The woman opened a door. 'Wait in here,' she said.

The heavy man walked in. He turned to say something to the chief. Just in time to see the door shut.

'Say, uh...' He walked to the door and put his hand on the knob. It didn't turn.

He frowned. He ignored the pile-driver beats of his heart. 'Hey, what's going on?' Cheerily bluff, his voice echoed off the walls. Mr Ketchum turned and looked around. The room was empty. It was a square empty room.

He turned back to the door, lips moving as he sought the proper words.

'Okay,' he said, abruptly, 'it's very -' He twisted the knob sharply. 'Okay, it's a very funny joke.' By God, he was mad. 'I've taken all I'm -'

He whirled at the sound, teeth bared.

There was nothing. The room was still empty. He looked around dizzily. What was that sound? A dull sound, like water rushing.

'Hey,' he said automatically. He turned to the door. 'Hey!' he yelled, 'cut it out! Who do you think you are anyway?'

He turned on weakening legs. The sound was louder. Mr Ketchum ran a hand over his brow. It was covered with sweat. It was warm in there.

'Okay, okay,' he said, 'it's a fine joke but -'

Before he could go on, his voice had corkscrewed into an awful, wracking sob. Mr Ketchum staggered a little. He stared at the room. He whirled and fell back against the door. His out flung hand touched the wall and jerked away.

It was hot.

'Huh?' he asked incredulously.

This was impossible. This was a joke. This was their deranged idea of a little joke. It was a game they played. Scare the City Slicker was the name of the game.

'Okay!' he yelled. '*Okay?* It's funny, it's very funny! Now let me out of here or there's going to be trouble!'

He pounded at the door. Suddenly he kicked it. The room was getting hotter. It was almost as hot as an -

Mr Ketchum was petrified. His mouth sagged open.

The questions they'd asked him. The loose way the clothes fit everyone he'd met. The rich food they'd given him to eat. The empty streets. The savage like swarthy colouring of the men, of the woman. The way they'd all looked at him. And the woman in the painting, Noah Zachry's wife - *a native woman with her teeth filed to a point.*

BARBECUE TONIGHT.

Mr Ketchum screamed. He kicked and pounded on the door. He threw his heavy body against it. He shrieked at the people outside.

'Let me out! *Let me out!* LET... ME... OUT!'

The worst part about it was, he just couldn't believe it was really happening.

## 47 - The Disinheritors

Let me tell you about one of the last persons who went on a picnic with her husband, George Grady.

This person's name was Alice and she had blonde hair and a mind of her own. She was twenty-eight by the calendar and her husband was thirty-two. They liked to daydream sometimes as most people do. That's not why they went on a picnic but it bears mentioning.

George worked for the city. This meant working six days and having one free. The week they went on the picnic, the day was Wednesday.

So on this Wednesday morning, Alice and George got up very early, even before their electric rooster had clarioned the dawn. They whispered while they dressed and completed their toilets, and then went downstairs to the kitchen.

They had breakfast and made sandwiches and sliced pickles and George took out hard-boiled egg yolks, mixed them with pepper and other condiments and shoved the result back into the eggs again and called them works of art.

Then, when they had all the sandwiches neatly folded into waxed paper and the thermos bottle gurgling full with coffee, they tumbled out of their little homestead.

Their automobile stood waiting in the early-morning air. Into its damp, oily interior they piled and went chugging off to the country, up hills and down dales and so on. They drove until there were no more billboards, which is a long drive from any city.

When they reached the point where nature had a thin breathing ground before dying into the next suburb, George turned off the superhighway and drove down an old lane encrusted with high grass and bushes and foliage-dripping trees.

At length he turned the nose of their faithful runabout into a rich forest glade. He shut off the motor and they got out and spread a blanket on the ground where they could look over a mirror-sheened lake.

Then they sat down and admired God's handiwork and made appropriate remarks. Alice pulled up her thin knees and put her equally thin arms around them. George took off his hat and arranged the few remaining strands of his hair. As usual he regaled Alice with tales about the boys at work and what cards they were. Alice didn't care. Neither did George, for that matter.

After a while they ate the food in the mesh basket and smacked their respective lips and said there's nothing like eating in the country. And George ate five sandwiches and belched to the north.

Then, when filled up to the chin line, he groaned an immense groan, loosened his belt and rolled on his back. He yawned and, through his gaping gold-toothed mouth, announced his intentions of sleeping the ensuing two years.

Alice said, let's take a walk and admire the scenery. She said we need it to digest all that food we ate. She said it's a crime to waste all this beauty, this is such a gorgeous, gorgeous spot. She said George are you asleep and he said yes.

She got up clucking accusingly.

She left him snoring and walked out of the glade and down a wood-rimmed path.

It was a warm day. Sunlight patted the earth with warm hands. Overhead the breeze whispered in the leaves and the rustle of the woodlands was a song. Birds chirped and twittered and gave forth, and Alice was consumed with a passion for Nature. She skipped. And she sang.

She reached a hill and walked up with a mountaineer's crouch. At the summit she pushed lean fists into her hips and looked down possessively at the dark forest floor ahead.

Down there it looked like a murky auditorium with all the trees like patient customers waiting for the show to start. Hardly any light penetrated the thick canopy of their leafy coiffures.

Alice clapped her hands in wordless delight and went down a path which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and had. Leaves mumbled crackling incantations beneath her descending feet.

At the foot of the path, she found a little bridge arching its mouldy back over a brook that gurgled and bubbled over smooth stones.

Alice stood on the bridge and peered into the crystal torrent. She saw herself as in a melting glass. Her reflection ran, burst, and jumped together again. It made her giggle.

I am lost in the woods, she said to herself. I am li'l Goldilocks and I am lost in the nassy ole woods.

She tittered, wrinkling her thin-cheeked face.

Then she wondered what on earth had made her think of Goldilocks after all those years. She put her eyebrows together. They huddled in a conference. Brain cells tried harder.

She let it go.

That was a mistake.

I am Goldilocks, she insisted in song as she turned from the rail and skipped off the squeaking bridge.

Alice stopped short and gaped.

My God, she said.

There was a little house in the deepest shadow of the glade, sitting at the feet of the forest. That's odd, Alice said to no one. I didn't see that house before. Did the shadows hide it then? I didn't see it at all from the top of the hill.

And, of course, she hadn't.

Alice crunched over the leafy woods rug toward the little house.

Half of her tugged back, sensing a strangeness. Here she had just finished saying she was Goldilocks. And the next second *there* was a little house and if it wasn't the house of the three bears, then what was it?

She advanced with timid, half-cowed steps. Then she stopped.

It was a cute house. Just like a fairytale house with carved eaves and sills and frames. Alice got a kick out of it. She skipped up to the house feeling young.

She decided to talk in infantile gibberish as she peered through a dusty pane.

Ooh me ooh my, she cooed, isn't this a pwitty little housey wousey.

She couldn't see the inside very clearly. The windows were blurry. I shall go to the door; the. thought

arranged itself from the mass of incohesions in her brain. She believed it to be her own thought and went to the door.

She touched it. She pushed it open. Wow bwidget, she said, and peered in.

It was just like the room in the illustration from her Goldilocks book, which she hadn't looked in for twenty years.

Twenty? The ghastly realization weakened her delight. She pouted over the brutality of time.

Then she said, I won't even think about *that*. I'll be gay.

So, little Goldilocks went into the little house and there in the middle of the room were three chairs.

Well, I'll be goddamned, said Alice, not preserving the spirit of the moment very well.

She looked at the chairs incredulously.

There was the big one. There was the mama-size one. There was the baby one.

Ulp, said Alice.

She looked around. Everything fitted. She was astounded. No kidding. This was it. Insane. But as true as she was standing there.

Alice went over to the big chair. She wondered what this all added up to. Of course, she couldn't guess.

Her lips toyed with the idea of smiling as she perched herself gingerly on the edge of the papa chair. A tentative giggle erased gravity from her plain features. She felt young again. I'm li'l Goldilocks and I'll kill the first love-child that says I ain't.

She looked around with lips fumbling to repress a smile of wicked delight. I don't like this chair, she thought. I don't like it because I'm Goldilocks and I'm not supposed to like it.

She sat bolt upright.

I really *am* Goldilocks, she thought. I'm living it out fair and square.

This was a giddy thought for Mrs. Alice Grady, wed a decade, childless, with greying strands of hair and a dreamworld that life had stepped on.

I don't like this chair, she declared.

And, oddly enough, she didn't like it. So she stood up. The momentary thought struck her that George would have got a charge out of this little place. Well, it was his own fault, sleeping away his life. She couldn't be blamed for thinking that.

Alice grew up for a moment in wondering who owned this charming little house. Was it an exhibit for some fur-coat company, some chair manufacturer? Eh? she said, but the walls answered not.

She went to the window and peered out.

She couldn't see very well. But she did notice that it was getting darker.

However, there were still poles of sunlight leaning against the treetops and poking into the earth. Alice stared at the golden ribbons angling through the gloom. She sighed. It was a fairy tale, no fooling. It was unreality becoming real.

This frightened her.

Because people don't care for unreality becoming real. It pricks their well-fed minds, you see, with something like a hunger pang. They prefer the logical stuffiness of expectancy. It is only at certain times that they weaken, letting imagination in.

That's the time to get them.

So, frightened by shapeless apprehension, Alice clacked heels to the door. It opened without trouble. And that made the difference.

She said, oh, what the hell, why be a worry wart? Once a month maybe, with luck, George takes me out and this is the day for this month so I'm not going to waste it.

She turned and went back into the room with an air of satisfied bravado.

She tried the second chair just for the sake of plot. Uh-uh, she said in piping girlish tones. She stood up with churling disdain on her face.

Sidestepping, she plopped herself down on the smallest chair. Ah, *ha*, she declared assertively, this chair is the schmaltz. I will sit here and think.

She thought.

Now this *is* odd. Where did this house come from? Does it belong to some eccentric millionaire? No, not in a government park. Then what did it mean? Who lived there? Tell me three bears do, she said to herself, and I'll give you a shot in the teeth.

But if it wasn't three bears, who was it? She scratched her head. Or were it? Or...

Giving it up, Alice jumped up and ran into the next room.

Well, I'll be double-damned, she proclaimed in astonishment.

There was a table.

Just like the table in her childhood book, *The Three Bears*. A low, rough-hewn table, stained and aged. And right on this table were three steaming bowls of porridge.

Alice's jaw sagged. This was a kick in the pants and no joke. What was there to make of it?

She stared at the table and the bowls, and a shiver ran down her twenty-eight-plus-year-old spine. She glanced fearfully over her shoulder. Don't know as I care to run into three bears, she said in awed tones.

Her brow pushed together into fleshy rills and ridges. This is too much, she thought. To think of living a fairytale is one thing. To live it is another thing. This is just a little bit bone chilling. I know there's a logical explanation for all this, but...

This is their highest and their lowest moment. They always know there's a logical explanation. But their boundaries of logic are always too narrow to include the explanation that does exist.

So Alice sought for solidity.

I just left George, she said. He was snoring on the ground full of logical devilled eggs and natural pickles and tangible coffee. And we are married according to solid tradition and we live at a substantial 184 Sumpter Street. George makes a corporeal \$92.80 per week and we play bridge with the flesh and blood Nelsons.

She was still frightened.

Locating a lump in her throat, she swallowed it. She said, I think I'll be going now.

But she didn't move. She said, come on feet; move. But the feet remained idle. She was losing control. Now I am scared she said, scared motionless. Or maybe I'm not as frightened as I think I am. After all, she told herself, this is only a weird coincidence. This is probably the house of three nutty old people who, when they see someone coming, put three different-sized bowls of porridge on the table and hide in a closet.

Hello! called Goldilocks, is anyone t'home?

Not a soul answered and the wind chuckled evilly down the chimney.

Hello? called Alice, wishing that a crotchety old man would rush in and say - ho! what are you doing in this government museum, you interloper, it's past closing time; out you go!

No answer. No sound. Just a dead quiet house and three porridge bowls breathing aromatic steam into the air.

Alice sniffed.

Mighty good, she had to admit. But she said, I'll be switched if I eat any because, well, for one reason, I just ate a whole pile of food and I'm not at all... *Good God!*

Alice was starving.

Or she believed she was. Same thing. It was getting to her.

Alice got scared for real, and crossed her arms which had gone goose-fleshed. She backed away into the next room. She bumped into the papa chair and cried out -oh!

She stood shivering for a moment.

Then she calmed down. After all, she reasoned, was anyone hooting at her. Had she seen any ghostly faces? Had any invisible fingers clawed at her? No!

And that's the way they figure, of course. If they don't see things that fit into the pattern of what they think of as frightening and evil, they don't worry about anything. A strength. And a weakness.

So Alice was calm again. Were there three bears within twenty miles? In the zoo. Behind thick bars.

What was the worry?

It was a little house that belonged to someone. That was all. A papa and a mama and a baby. Or three old ladies of diminishing stature. Or three retired men. They lived there and, at the moment, they were out chopping wood or getting water or gathering nuts in May.

It was all right. Quite all right. Soon she would leave and run back up the hill to George and tell him what he'd missed. And next Thursday, at bridge with the flesh and blood Nelsons, would she have an anecdote or would she have an anecdote?

Alice went back into the other room again. She muttered to her little self, I'll be a cwooss-eyed, knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, lop-eared I don't know what. Here I must have ate at least a gross of basket lunch. And now I'm hungry. Must have been the walk.

She sat at the table in the little chair. It occurred to her that if she fitted the little chair, the person who sat in the big chair must be about seven feet tall.

Now, do I dare, she thought. Does I have the temerity to eat some of this powwidge?

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. Could it be that the porridge was poisoned, drugged, an oatmeal mickey?

She sniffed.

Why should it be? her mind inquired. Who in the hell is going to leave poisoned porridge in a government park? That would constitute a felony and a misdemeanour and be damn nasty in the bargain.

She showed her teeth in a smile.

After all, she argued, it isn't every day that a gal gets a chance to play Goldilocks. Let's take advantage.

She took another giant whiff of the porridge in the big bowl. Mmmmm, she said, this smells scrumptious. She reached for the big spoon.

No, that wasn't cricket.

She reached in her dress pocket and plucked out a wooden spoon which had been a spear for the gherkins. She sniffed it. Not too pickley. Not by any means.

She took a little porridge from the edge of the big bowl, feeling like a perfect criminal when the cereal all mushed together again, forming a smooth, unbroken surface.

She inhaled the warm mealy odour, her nose wrinkling with pleasure. Oh, this is so good and warm and I'll just taste a little now and... *Yow!*

It was burning hot. The spoon jerked in her fingers and the porridge splattered on the floor. She looked around in frightened guilt, sucking in mouthfuls of air. Her mouth cooled, her scorched tongue became a cooling lump of numb flesh.

Damn, she muttered, why didn't I forget the plot and try the little bowl first crack out of the bag? No use running this thing into the ground. Alice still felt chipper, It is the one admirable quality these people have; a sense of humour which bubbles up to the very moment of destruction.

So Alice Grady alias Goldilocks tasted some porridge from the smallest bowl.

Ah, she said, this is just right. Haven't had anything so good since I was a kid.

And she ate it all up without a qualm.

Not only without a qualm but with a sort of perverse pleasure, wondering who was going to cry at the sight of the empty bowl.

However, when she had finished, Alice looked up from the bowl and felt guilt break out into drops on her forehead.

Now I've done it, she thought. Where do I get such nerve? This is a stranger's home. I'm no better than a housebreaker. I could be sent to jail for this. This eating I just did constitutes a burglary. I better get out and quick too, before the people come back.

She got up, and with a sense of penitence, picked up the cereal from the floor and threw it and the spoon into the cold fireplace.

She looked around and shook her head. No use trying to think otherwise. There was something

definitely phony here.

Well I'm going now, she said loudly as though someone were arguing the point with her. I'm going back to George and tell him all about this.

First you must see if there are really three beds upstairs, said a voice in her mind that didn't sound familiar.

She frowned. Oh no, she said, I'm leaving right off.

Oh no, said the voice insolently, you've got to see if there are three beds upstairs. You're Goldilocks, remember?

Alice looked worried. She chewed her lip. But she went to the staircase and started up. It seemed very much as if someone were piling stones in her stomach. She felt them getting heavier and heavier. They were cold stones.

She stopped abruptly and yawned.

I'm getting sleepy, she said.

That brought her up short, drove a bolt of icy dread through her. Someone with chilled hands was knocking on the door to her heart. I'm scared, she admitted at last. I want to go. I want to leave. This is spooky. It's wrong. I'm scared and I want to go.

How about getting up there and seeing if there are really three beds!

There was no use denying it. It wasn't her own mind speaking.

The porridge!

Clever girl. Too late. Too late.

She struggled to turn and go down the stairs. But she couldn't. She simply had to go to the bedroom. It wasn't a vague compulsion, it was an order. Alice Grady was losing touch. She was drifting away. With her remaining strength she tried to scream. Her throat closed up.

It was getting darker still. The hallway was dim. And her brain was whirling and her limbs felt like running lead. God protect me, she tried to whisper but the words died in a trembling of her lips. George, the name came forth in a crusty mumble. George save me!

Alice stumbled into the little bedroom, bleary-eyed, and the fear in her a jumble of words that weren't words. Tears ran down her numbed cheeks and her stomach hurt with a cutting pain. She cried out once.

Then, driven on, she went to the big bed and fell on it.

No no! cracked the voice in her head, this is too hard.

And she struggled up like an uncoiled robot and fell on the second bed. Her mind called out - no, this one is too soft and you don't like it one bit!

With eyes closed and a burning fever in her body Alice staggered to her feet and then pitched across the small bed with a choking shriek.

She felt the soft coverlet pressing against her cheek. And the voice droned off into swirling blackness - this is the right bed. This is the right bed at last.

And when she woke up, she knew what it was all about.

The house was gone and she was lying on the forest leaves.

She got up with a smile and walked slowly up the night-shrouded hill. She even laughed aloud at that fool, Alice Grady, who had let stupid imagination get the better of her.

I was waiting for her in the car. She smiled a little as she slid in beside me.

'So,' she said, 'how long have you been one?'

'Years now,' I said, 'Remember that time Alice and George went to the seashore? About five years ago?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

'Well, George and I went down to Davey Jones's locker with a mermaid,' I told her, 'and he lost his mind and I came back using his body for my home.'

She smiled and I started the car.

'What about the Nelsons?' she asked.



'They've been with us for a long time,' I said.  
'How many real people are left on earth now?' she asked.  
'About fifty or so,' I said.  
'It's really very clever,' she said 'Alice Grady never suspected it for a second.'  
'Of course not,' I said. 'That's the charm of it.'  
And it is charming how *we* are inheriting the earth. Without a shot. With no one's ever knowing.  
One by one we've taken your bodies and made them our own. We've let your minds destroy themselves by letting your childishness extend itself beyond intelligence; until it reaches that inevitable point where we can gain complete control.  
And soon there will be only us and no more earth people. Oh, the outward picture will remain. But the plan will change.  
And until our work is done, the remainder of genuine earth people will never know about it.  
A little more than fifty left.  
Watch out.  
You're one of them.  
*And you know.*

## 48 - Third From The Sun

*Escaping a known danger is highly advisable...if you can know the unknown danger ahead!*

HIS EYES were open five seconds before the alarm was set to go off. There was no effort in waking. It was sudden. Coldly conscious, he reached out his left hand in the dark and pushed in the stop. The alarm glowed a second, then faded.

At his side, his wife put her hand on his arm.

"Did you sleep?" he asked.

"No, did you?"

"A little," he said. "Not much."

She was silent for a few seconds. He heard her throat contract. She shivered. He knew what she was going to say.

"We're still going?" she asked.

He twisted his shoulders on the bed and took a deep breath.

"Yes," he said, and felt her fingers tighten on his arm.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"About five."

"We'd better get ready."

"Yes, we'd better."

They made no move.

"You're sure we can get on the ship without anyone noticing?" she asked.

"They think it's just another test flight. Nobody will be checking."

She didn't say anything. She moved a little closer to him. He felt how cold her skin was.

"I'm afraid," she said.

He took her hand and held it in a tight grip. "Don't be," he said. "We'll be safe."

"It's the children I'm worried about."

"We'll be safe," he repeated.

She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it gently.

"All right," she said.

They both sat up in the darkness. He heard her stand. Her night garment rustled to the floor. She didn't pick it up. She stood still, shivering in the cold morning air.

"You're sure we don't need anything else with us?" she asked.

“No, nothing. I have all the supplies we need in the ship. Anyway...”

“What?”

“We can’t carry anything past the guard,” he said. “He has to think you and the kids are just coming to see me off.”

SHE began dressing. He threw off the covering and got up. He went across the cold floor to the closet and dressed.

“I’ll get the children up,” she said, “if they aren’t already.” He grunted, pulling clothes over his head. At the door she stopped. “Are you sure—” she began.

“Hm?”

“Won’t the guard think it’s funny that... that our neighbors are coming down to see you off, too?”

He sank down on the bed and fumbled for the clasps on his shoes.

“We’ll have to take that chance,” he said. “We need them with us.”

She sighed. “It seems so cold. So calculating.”

He straightened up and saw her silhouette in the doorway.

“What else can we do?” he asked tensely. “We can’t interbreed our own children.”

“No,” she said. “It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Nothing, darling. I’m sorry.”

She closed the door. Her footsteps disappeared down the hall. The door to the children’s room opened. He heard their two voices. A cheerless smile raised his lips. You’d think it was a holiday, he thought.

He pulled on his shoes. At least the kids didn’t know what was happening. They thought they were going to take him down to the field. They thought they’d come back and tell all their schoolmates. They didn’t know they’d never come back.

He finished clasping his shoes and stood up. He shuffled over to the bureau and turned on the light. He looked at himself in the mirror. It was odd, such an undistinguished looking man planning this.

Cold. Calculating. Her words filled his mind again. Well, there was no other way. In a few years, probably less, the whole planet would go up with a blinding flash. This was the only way out. Escaping, starting all over again with a few people on a new planet.

He stared at the reflection.

“There’s no other way,” he said.

He glanced around the bedroom.

Good-by, this part of my life. Turning off the lamp was like turning off a light in his mind. He closed the door gently behind him and slid his fingers off the worn handle.

His son and daughter were going down the ramp. They were talking in mysterious whispers. He shook his head in slight amusement.

His wife waited for him. They went down together, holding hands.

“I’m not afraid, darling,” she said. “It’ll be all right.”

“Sure,” he said. “Sure it will.”

They all went in to eat. He sat down with his children. His wife poured out juice for them. Then she went to get the food.

“Help your mother, doll,” he told his daughter. She got up.

“Pretty soon, haah, pop?” his son said. “Pretty soon, haah?”

“Take it easy,” he cautioned. “Remember what I told you. If you say a word of it to anybody, I’ll have to leave you behind.”

A dish shattered on the floor. He darted a glance at his wife. She was staring at him, her lips trembling.

She averted her eyes and bent down. She fumbled at the pieces, picked up a few. Then she dropped them all, stood up and pushed them against the wall with her shoe.

“As if it mattered,” she said nervously. “As if it mattered whether the place is clean or not.”

The children were watching her in surprise.

"What is it?" asked the daughter.

"Nothing, darling, nothing," she said. "I'm just nervous. Go back to the table. Drink your juice. We have to eat quickly. The neighbors will be here soon."

"Pop, why are the neighbors coming with us?" asked his son.

"Because," he said vaguely. "Because they want to. Now forget it. Don't talk about it so much."

THE room was quiet. His wife brought over their food and set it down. Only her footsteps broke the silence. The children kept glancing at each other, at their father. He kept his eyes on his plate. The food tasted thick and flat in his mouth and he felt his heart thudding against the wall of his chest. Last day. This is the last day. It felt like a silly, dangerous plan.

"You'd better eat," he told his wife.

She sat down and began to eat mechanically, without enthusiasm. Suddenly the door buzzer sounded. The eating utensil skidded out of her nerveless fingers and clattered on the floor. He reached out quickly and put his hand on hers.

"All right, darling," he said. "It's all right." He turned to the children. "Go answer the door," he told them.

"Both of us?" his daughter asked.

"Both of you."

"But..."

"Do as I say."

They slid off their chairs and left the room, glancing back at their parents.

When the sliding door shut off their view, he turned back to his wife. Her face was pale and tight; she had her lips pressed together.

"Darling, please," he said. "Please. You know I wouldn't take you if I wasn't sure it was safe. You know how many times I've flown the ship before. And I know just where we're going. It's safe. Believe me, it's safe."

SHE pressed his hand against her cheek. She closed her eyes and large tears ran out under her lids and down her cheeks.

"It's not that so m-much," she said. "It's just... leaving, never coming back. We've been here all our lives. It isn't like... like moving. We can't come back. Ever."

"Listen, darling," his voice was tense and hurried, "you know as well as I do. In a matter of years, maybe less, there's going to be another war, a terrible one. There won't be a thing left. We have to leave. For our children, for ourselves..."

He paused, testing the words in his mind.

"For the future of life itself," he finished weakly. He was sorry he said it. Early on a prosaic morning, over everyday food, that kind of talk didn't sound right. Even if it was true.

"Just don't be afraid," he said. "We'll be all right."

She squeezed his hand.

"I know," she said quietly. "I know."

There were footsteps coming toward them. He pulled out a tissue and gave it to her. She hastily dabbed at her face.

The door slid open. The neighbors and their son and daughter came in. The children were excited. They had trouble keeping it down.

"Good morning," the neighbor said.

The neighbor's wife went to his wife and the two of them went over by the window and talked in low voices. The children stood around, fidgeted, and looked nervously at each other.

"You've eaten?" he asked his neighbor.

"Yes," his neighbor said. "Don't you think we'd better be going?"

"I suppose so," he said.

They left all the dishes on the table. His wife went upstairs and got outer garments for the family.

He and his wife stayed on the porch a moment while the rest went out to the ground car.

"Should we lock the door?" he asked.

She smiled helplessly and ran a hand through her hair. She shrugged helplessly. "Does it matter?"

He locked the door and followed her down the walk. She turned as he came up to her.

"It's a nice house," she murmured.

"Don't think about it," he said.

They turned their backs on their home and got in the ground car.

"Did you lock it?" asked the neighbor.

"Yes."

The neighbor smiled wryly. "So did we," he said. "I tried not to, but then I had to go back."

They moved through the quiet streets. The edges of the sky were beginning to redden. The neighbor's wife and the four children were in back. His wife and the neighbor were in front with him.

"Going to be a nice day," said his neighbor.

"I suppose so," he said.

"Have you told your children?" the neighbor asked softly.

"Of course not."

"I haven't, I haven't," insisted his neighbor. "I was just asking."

"Oh."

They rode in silence a while.

"Do you ever get the feeling that we're... running out?" asked the neighbor.

He tightened. "No," he said. "No! We're the ones who were run out on-all of us."

"I guess it's better not to talk about it," his neighbor said hastily.

"Much better," he said.

As they drove up to the guardhouse at the gate, he turned to the back.

"Remember," he said, "not a word from any of you."

THE guard, sleepy and not caring much, recognized him right away as the chief test pilot for the new ship. That was enough. The family was coming down to watch him off, he told the guard. No objection. The guard let them drive to the ship's platform.

The car stopped under the huge columns. They all got out and stared up.

Far above them, its nose pointed toward the sky, the great metal ship was just beginning to reflect the early morning glow.

"Let's go," he said. "Quickly."

As they hurried toward the ship's elevator, he stopped for a moment to look back. The guard house looked deserted. He looked around at everything and tried to fix it all in his memory.

He bent over and picked up some dirt. He put it in his pocket.

"Good-bye," he whispered.

He ran to the elevator.

The doors shut in front of them. There was no sound in the rising cubicle but the hum of the motor and a few self-conscious coughs from the children. He looked down at them. To have to leave so young, he thought, unable to help.

He closed his eyes. His wife's hand rested on his arm. He looked at her. Their eyes met and she smiled at him.

"And I thought it would be difficult," she whispered.

The elevator shuddered to a stop. The doors slid open and they went out. It was getting lighter. He hurried them along the enclosed platform.

They all climbed through the narrow doorway in the ship's side. He hesitated before following them. He wanted to say something fitting the moment. It burned in him to say something fitting the moment. There wasn't a thing to say.

HE SWUNG in and grunted as he pulled the door shut and turned the wheel tight.

"That's it," he said. "Come on, everybody."

Their footsteps echoed on the metal decks and ladders as they went up to the control room.

The children ran to the ports and looked out. They gasped when they saw how high they were. Their mothers stood behind them, looking down at the ground. Their eyes were frightened. The children's were not.

"So high," said his daughter.

He patted her head gently. "So high," he repeated.

Then he, turned abruptly and went over to the instrument panel. He stood there, hesitantly. He heard someone come up behind him.

"Shouldn't we tell the children?" asked his wife. "Shouldn't we let them know it's their last look?"

"Go ahead," he said.

He waited to hear her footsteps. There were none. He turned. She kissed him on the cheek. Then she went to tell the children.

He threw over the switch. Deep in the belly of the ship, a spark ignited the fuel. A concentrated rush of gas flooded from the vents. The bulkheads began to shake.

He heard his daughter crying. He tried not to listen, extended a trembling hand toward the lever, then glanced back suddenly. They were all staring at him. He put his hand on the lever and threw it over.

The ship quivered a brief second and then they felt it rush along the smooth incline. It flashed into the air, faster and faster. They all heard the wind rushing past.

He watched the children turn to the ports and look out again.

"Good-bye," they said.

He sank down wearily at the control panel. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his neighbor sit down next to him.

"You know just where we're going?" his neighbor asked.

"On that chart there."

His neighbor looked at the chart. His eyebrows wiggled in surprise.

"Another solar system?"

"That's right. There's a planet there with an oxygen atmosphere that can support our kind of life. We'll probably have it all to ourselves. No hatred. No war."

"We'll be safe," his neighbor said. "And the race will be safe."

He nodded and looked back at his and his neighbor's family. They were still staring out the ports.

"I said," his neighbor repeated, "which one of these planets is it?"

He leaned over the chart, pointed. "That small one there," he said.

"This one, third from the sun?"

"That's right," he said. "The green planet with the single moon."

## **49 - When The Waker Sleeps**

If one flew over the city at this time of this day, which was like any other day in the year 3850, one would think all life had disappeared.

Sweeping over the rustless spires, one would search in vain for the sight of human activity. One's gaze would scan the great ribboned highways that swept over and under each other like the weave of some tremendous loom. But there would be no autocars to see; nothing but the empty lanes and the coloured traffic lights clicking out their mindless progressions.

Dipping low and weaving in and out among the glittering towers, one might see the moving walks, the studied revolution of the giant street ventilators, hot in the winter and cool in summer, the tiny doors opening and closing, the park fountains shooting their methodical columns of water into the air.

Farther along, one would flit across the great open field on which the glossy spaceships stood lined before their hangars. Farther yet, one would catch sight of the river, the metal ships resting along shore, delicate froth streaming from their sterns caused by the never-ending operation of their vents.

Again, one would glide over the city proper, seeking some sign of life in the broad avenues, the network of streets, the painstaking pattern of dwellings in the living area, the metal fastness of the commercial section.

The search would be fruitless.

All movement below would be seen to be mechanical. And, knowing what city this was, one's eyes would stop the search for citizens and seek out those squat metal structures which stood a half mile apart. These circular buildings housed the never-resting machines, the humming geared servants of the city's people.

These were the machines that did all: cleared the air of impurities, moved the walks and opened the doors, sent their synchronized impulses into the traffic lights, operated the fountains and the spaceships, the river vessels and the ventilators.

These were the machines in whose flawless efficacy the people of the city placed their casual faith.

At the moment, these people were resting on their pneumatic couches in rooms. And the music that seeped from their wall speakers, the cool breezes that flowed from their wall ventilators, the very air they breathed -all these were of and from the machines, the unfailing, the trusted, the infallible machines.

Now there was a buzzing in ears. Now the city came alive.

There was a buzzing, buzzing.

From the black swirl of slumber, you heard it. You wrinkled up your classic nose and twitched the twenty neural rods that led to the highways of your extremities.

The sound bore deeper, cut through swaths of snooze and poked an impatient finger in the throbbing matter of your brain. You twisted your head on the pillow and grimaced.

There was no cessation. With stupored hand, you reached out and picked up the receiver. One eye propped open by dint of will, you breathed a weary mutter into the mouth-piece.

'Captain Rackley!' The knifing voice put your teeth on edge.

'Yes,' you said.

'You will report to your company headquarters immediately!'

That swept away sleep and annoyance as a petulant old man brushes chessmen from his board. Stomach muscles drew into play and you were sitting. Inside your noble chest, that throbbing meat ball, source of blood velocity, saw fit to swell and depress with marked emphasis. Your sweat glands engaged in proper activity, ready for action, danger, heroism.

'Is it...?' you started.

'Report immediately!' the voice crackled, and there was a severe click in your ear.

You, Justin Rackley, dropped the receiver - plunko - in its cradle and leaped from bed in a shower of fluttering bedclothes.

You raced to your wardrobe door and flung it open. Plunging into the depths, you soon emerged with your skintight pants, the tunic for your forty-two chest. You donned said trousers and tunic, flopped upon a nearby seat and plunged your arches into black military boots.

And your face reflected oh-so-grim thoughts. Combing out your thick blond hair, you were sure you knew what the emergency was.

The Rustons! They were at it again!

Awake now, you wrinkled your nose with conscious aplomb. The Rustons made revolting food for thought with their twelve legs, sign of alien progenitors, and their exudation of foul reptilian slime.

As you scurried from your room, leaped across the balustrade and down the stairs, you wondered once again where these awful Rustons had originated, what odious interbreeding produced their monster race. You wondered where they lived, where proliferated their grisly stock, held their meetings of war, began the upward slither to those great Earth fissures from which they massed in attack.

With nothing approaching answers to these endless questions, you ran out of the dwelling and flew down the steps to your faithful autocar. Sliding in, pushing buttons, levers, pedals, what have you, you soon had it darting through the streets toward the broad highway that led to headquarters.

At this time of day, naturally, there were very few people about. In point of fact you saw none. It was

only a few minutes later, when you turned sharply and zoomed up the ramp to the highway, that you saw the other autocars whizzing toward the tower five miles distant. You guessed, and were correct in guessing, that they were fellow officers, all similarly ripped from slumber by mobilization.

Buildings flew past as you pushed pedals deeper into their cavities, your face always grim, alive to danger, grand warrior! True, you were not averse to the chance for activity after a month of idleness. But the circumstances *were* slightly distasteful. To think of the Rustons made a fellow shudder, eh?

What made them pour from their unknown pits? Why did they seek to destroy the machines, let the acid canker of their ooze eat through metal, make the teeth fall off the gears like petals off a dying flower? What was their purpose? Did they mean to ruin the city? Govern its inhabitants? Or slaughter them? Ugly questions, questions without answers.

Well, you thought as you drove into headquarters parking area, thank heaven the Rustons had only managed to get at a few of the outer machines, yours blessedly not included.

They, at least, had no more idea than you where the Great Machine was, that fabulous fountainhead of energy, driver of all machines.

You slid the seat of your military trousers across the seat of the autocar and jumped out into the wide lot. Your black boots clacked as you ran toward the entrance. Other officers were getting out of autocars, too, running across the area. None of them said anything; they all looked grim. Some of them nodded curtly at you as you all stood together in the rising elevator. Bad business, you thought.

With a tug at the groin, the door gave a hydraulic gasp and opened. You stepped out and padded silently down the hall to the high-ceilinged briefing room.

Already the room was almost filled. The young men, invariably handsome and muscular, stood in gregarious formations, discussing the Rustons in low voices. The grey soundproof walls sucked in their comments and returned dead air.

The men gave you a look and a nod when you entered, then returned to their talking. Justin Rackley, captain, that's you, sat down in a front seat.

Then you looked up. The door to Upper Echelons was jerked open. The General came striding through, a sheaf of papers in his square fist. *His* face was grim too.

He stepped up on the rostrum and slapped the papers on the thick table which stood there. Then he plumped down on the edge of it and kicked his boot against one of its legs until all your fellow officers had broken up their groups and hurriedly taken seats. With silence creeping over all heads, he pursed his lips and banged a palm on the table surface.

'Gentlemen,' he said with that voice which seemed to issue from an ancient tomb, 'once more the city lies in grave danger.'

He then paused and looked capable of handling all emergencies. You hoped that someday you might be General and look capable of handling all emergencies. No reason why not, you thought.

'I will not take up precious time,' the General went on, taking up precious time. 'You all know your positions, you all know your responsibilities. When this briefing is concluded, you will report to the arsenal and draw out your ray guns. Always remember that the Rustons must not be allowed to enter the machinery and live. Shoot to kill. The rays are *not* harmful, repeat, *not* harmful to the machinery.'

He looked over you eager young men.

'You also know,' he said, 'the dangers of Ruston poisoning. For this reason, that the slightest touch of their stingers can lead to abysmal agonies of death, you will be assigned, as you also know, a nurse trained in the combating of systemic poisons. Therefore, after leaving the arsenal, you will report to the Preventive Section.'

He winked, a thoroughly out-of-place wink.

'And remember,' he said, with a broad roll of import in his voice, 'this is *war!* And *only* war!'

This, of course, brought on appreciative smiles, a smattering of leers and many unmilitary asides. Upon which the General snapped out of his brief role as chuckling confrere and returned to strict autocratic detachment.

'Once assigned a nurse, those of you whose machines are more than fifteen miles from the city will report to the spaceport, there to be assigned a spacecar. All of you will then proceed with utmost

dispatch. Questions?"

No questions.

'I need hardly remind you,' completed the General, 'of the importance of this defence. As you are well aware, should Rustons penetrate our city, spread their ravaging to the core of our machine system, should they - heaven forfend! - locate the Great Machine, we may then expect nothing but the most merciless of butchery. The city would be undone, we would all be annihilated, Man would be overthrown.'

The men looked at him with clenched fists, patriotism lurching through their brains like drunken satyrs, yours included, Justin Rackley.

'That is all,' said the General, waving his hand. 'Good shooting.'

He jumped down from the platform and swept through the doorway, the door opening magically a split second before his imperious nose stood to shatter on its surface.

You stood up, muscles tingling. Onward! Save our fair city!

You stepped through the broken ranks. The elevator again, standing shoulder to shoulder with your comrades, a fluttering sense of hyperawareness coursing your healthy young body.

The arsenal room. Sound lost in the heavily padded interior. You, on line, grim-faced always, shuffling along, weapon bound. A counter; it was like an exchange market. You showed the man your identity card and he handed you a shiny ray gun and a shoulder case of extra ray pellets.

Then you passed through the door and scuffed down the rubberized steps to the Preventive Section. Corpuscles took a carnival ride through your veins.

You were fourth in line and she was fourth in line; that's how she was assigned to you.

You perused her contours, noting that her uniform, although similar to yours, somehow hung differently on her. This sidetracked martial contemplations for the nonce. *Zowie hoopla* - your libido clapped its calloused hands.

'Captain Rackley,' said the man, 'this is Miss Lieutenant Forbes. She is your only guarantee against death should you be stung by a Ruston. See that she remains close by at all times.'

This seemed hardly an onerous commission and you saluted the man. You then exchanged a flicker of lids with the young lady and intoned a gruff command relative to departure. This roused the two of you to walk to the elevator.

Riding down in silence, you cast glances at her. Long forgotten threnodies twitched into life in your revitalized brain. You were much taken by the dark ringlets that hung over her forehead and massed on her shoulders like curled black fingers. Her eyes, you noted, were brown and soft as eyes in a dream. And why shouldn't they be?

Yet something lacked. Some retardation kept bringing you down from ethereal cogitation. Could it, you wondered, be duty? And, remembering what you were out to do, you suddenly feared again. The pink clouds marched away in military formation.

Miss Lieutenant Forbes remained silent until the spacecar which you were assigned was flitting across the sky beyond the outskirts of the city. Then, following your somewhat banal overtures regarding the weather, she smiled her pretty little smile and showed her pretty little dimples.

'I am but sixteen,' she announced.

Then this is your first time.'

'Yes,' she replied, gazing afar. 'I am very frightened.'

You nodded, you patted her knee with what you meant to be a parental manner, but which, posthaste, brought the crimson of modesty flaming into her cheeks.

'Just stay close to me,' you said, trying hard for a double meaning. 'I'll take care of you.'

Primitive, but good enough for sixteen. She blushed more deeply.

The city towers flashed beneath. Far off, like a minute button on the fringes of spiderweb, you saw your machine. You eased the wheel forward; the tiny ship dipped down and began a long glide toward Earth. You kept your eyes on the control board with strict attention, wondering about this strange sense of excitement running pell-mell through your body, not knowing whether it presaged combat fatigue of



one sort or another.

This was war. The city first. Hola!

The ship floated down to and hovered over the machine as you threw on the air brakes. Slowly, it sank to the roof like a butterfly settling on a flower...

You threw off the switch, heart pounding, all forgotten but the present danger. Grabbing the ray gun, you jumped out and ran to the edge of the roof.

Your machine was beyond the perimeter of the city. There were fields about. Your keen eyes flashed over the ground.

There was no sign of the enemy.

You hurried back to the ship. She was still sitting inside watching you. You turned the knob and the communicator system spilled out its endless drones of information. You stood impatiently until the announcer spoke your machine number and said the Rustons were within a mile of it.

You heard her drawn-in breath and noted the upward cast of frightened eyes in your direction. You turned off the set.

'Come, we'll go inside,' you said, holding the ray gun in a delightfully shaking hand. It was fun to be frightened. A fine sense of living dangerously. Wasn't that why you were here?

You helped her out. Her hand was cold. You squeezed it and gave her a half smile of confidence. Then, locking the door to the spacecar, to keep the foe out, you went down the stairs. As you entered the main room, your head was at once filled with the smooth hum of machinery.

Here, at this juncture of the adventure, you put down your ray gun and ammunition and explained the machinery to her. It is to be noted that you had no particular concern for the machinery as you spoke, being more aware of her proximity. Such charm, such youth, crying out for comfort.

You soon held her hand again. Then you had your arm around her lithesome waist and she was close. Something other than military defence planned itself in your mind.

Came the moment when she flicked up her drowsy lids and looked you smack-dab in the eye, as is the archaic literary passage. You found her violet eyes somewhat unbalancing. You drew her closer. The perfume of her rosy breath tied casual knots in your limbs. And yet there was still something holding you back.

*Swish! Slap!*

She stiffened and cried out.

The Rustons were at the walls!

You raced for the table upon which your ray gun rested. On the couch next to the table was your ammunition. You slung the case over your shoulder. She ran up to you and, sternly, you handed her the preventive case. You felt like the self-assured General when he was in a grim mood.

'Keep the needles loaded and handy,' you said. 'I may...'

The sentence died as another great slobbering Ruston slapped against the wall. The sound of its huge suckers slurped on the outside. They were searching for the machinery in the basement.

You checked the gun. It was ready.

'Stay here,' you muttered. 'I have to go down.'

You didn't hear what she said. You dashed down the stairs and came bouncing out into the basement just as the first horror gushed over the edge of a window onto its metal floor like a stream of gravity-defying lava.

The row of blinking yellow eyes turned on you; your flesh crawled. The great brown-gold monstrosity began to scuttle across toward the machines with an oily squish. You almost froze in fear.

Then instinct came to the fore. You raised the gun quickly. A crackling, brilliantine-blue ray leaped from the muzzle, touched the scaly body and enveloped it. Screeching and the smell of frying oil filled the air. When the ray had dissipated, the dead Ruston lay black and smoking on the floor, its slime running across the welded seams.

You heard the sound of suckers behind. You whirled, blasted the second of the Rustons into greasy

oblivion. Still another slid over the window edge and started toward you. Another burst from the gun and another scorched hulk lay twitching on the metal.

You swallowed a great lump of excitement in your throat, your head snapping around, your body leaping from side to side. In a second, two more of them were moving toward you. Two bursts of ray; one missed. The second monster was almost upon you before you burst it into flaming chunks as it reared up to plunge its black stingers in your chest.

You turned quickly, cried out in horror.

One Ruston was just slipping down the stairs, another swishing toward you, the long stingers aimed at your heart. You pressed the button. A scream caught in your throat.

You were out of pellets!

You leaped to the side and the Ruston fell forward. You tore open the case and fumbled with the pellets. One fell and shattered uselessly on the metal. Your hands were ice, they shook terribly. The blood pounded through your veins, your hair stood on end. You felt scared and amused.

The Ruston lunged again as you slid the pellet into the ray gun. You dodged again - not enough! The end of one stinger slashed through your tunic, laid open your arm. You felt the burning poison shoot into your system.

You pressed the button and the monster disappeared in a cloud of unguent smoke. The basement machinery was secure against attack - the Rustons had bypassed it.

You leaped for the stairway. You had to save the machines, save her, save yourself!

Your boots banged up the metal stairs. You lunged into the great room of machines and swept a glance around.

A gasp tore open your mouth. She was collapsed on a couch, sprawled, inert. A Ruston line of slime ran down the front of her swelling tunic.

You whirled and, as you did, the Ruston vanished into the machinery, pushing its scaly body through the gear spaces. The slime dropped from its body and watery jaws. The machine stopped, started again, the racked wheels groaning.

The city! You leaped to the machine's edge and shot a blast from the ray gun into it! The brilliantine-blue ray licked out, missed the Ruston. You fired again. The Ruston moved too fast, hid behind the wheels. You ran around the machine, kept on firing.

You glanced at her. How long did the poison take? They never said. Already in your flesh, however, the burning had begun. You felt as if you were going up in flames, as if great pieces of your body were about to fall off.

You had to get an injection for yourself and her.

Still the Ruston eluded you. You had to stop and put another pellet in the gun. The interior began to whirl around you; you were overpoweringly dizzy. You pressed the button again and again. The ray darted into the machine.

You reeled around with a sob and tore open your collar. You could hardly breathe. The smell of the singed suet, of the rays, filled your head. You stumbled around the machine, shot out another ray at the fast-moving Ruston.

Then, finally, when you were about to keel over, you got a good target. You pressed the button, the Ruston was enveloped in flame, fell in molten bits beneath the machine, was swallowed up by the waste exhaust.

You dropped the ray gun and staggered over to her.

The hypodermics were on the table.

You tore open her tunic and jabbed a needle into her soft white shoulder, shudderingly injected the antidote into her veins. You stuck another into your own shoulder, felt the sudden coolness run through your flesh and your bloodstream.

You sank down beside her, breathing heavily and closing your eyes. The violence of activity had exhausted you. You felt as though you would have to rest a month after this. And, of course, you would.

She groaned. You opened your eyes and looked at her. Your heavy breathing began again, but this

time you knew where the excitement was coming from. You kept looking at her. A warm heat lapped at your limbs, caressed your heart. Her eyes were on you.

'I...' you said.

Then all holding back was ended, all doubt undone. The city, the Rustons, the machines - the danger was over and forgotten. She ran a caressing hand over your cheek.

'And when next you opened your eyes,' finished the doctor, 'you were back in this room.'

Rackley laughed, his head quivering on the pillow, his hands twitching in glee.

'But my dear doctor,' he laughed, 'how fantastically clever of you to know everything. *However* do you do it, naughty man?'

The doctor looked down at the tall handsome man who lay on the bed, still shaking with breathless laughter.

'You forget,' he said, 'I inject you. Quite natural that I should know what happens then.'

'Oh, quite! Quite!' cried Justin Rackley. 'Oh, it was utterly, utterly fantastic. Imagine me!' He ran strong fingers over the swelling biceps of his arm. 'Me, a hero!'

He clapped his hands together and deep laughter rumbled in his chest, his white teeth flashed against the glowing tan of his face. The sheet slipped, revealing the broad suppleness of his chest, the tightly ridged stomach muscles.

'Oh, dear me,' he sighed. 'Dear me, what *would* this dull existence be without your blessed injections to ease our endless boredom?'

The doctor looked coldly at him, his strong white fingers tightening into a bloodless fist. The thought plunged a cruel knife into his brain - this is the end of our race, the sorry peak of Man's evolution. This is the final corruption.

Rackley yawned and stretched his arms. 'I must rest.' He peered up at the doctor. 'It was such a *fatiguing* dream.'

He began to giggle, his great blond head lolling on the pillow. His hands striking at the sheet as though he would die of amusement.

'Do tell me,' he gasped, 'what on earth have you in those utterly delightful injections? I've asked you so often.'

The doctor picked up his plastic bag. 'Merely a combination of chemicals designed to exacerbate the adrenals on one hand and, on the other, to inhibit the higher brain centres. In short,' he finished, 'a potpourri of intensification and reduction.'

'Oh, you always say that,' said Justin Rackley. 'But it *is* delightful. Utterly, charmingly delightful. You will be back in a month for my next dream and my dream playback?'

The doctor blew out a weary gust of breath. 'Yes,' he said, making no effort to veil his disgust. 'I'll be back next month.'

Thank heavens,' said Rackley, 'I'm done with that awful Ruston dream for another five months. Ugh! It's so frightfully vile! I like the pleasanter dreams about mining and transporting ores from Mars and the Moon, and the adventures in food centres. They're so much nicer. But...' His lips twitched. '*Do* have more of those pretty young girls in them.'

His strong, weary body twisted in delight.

'Oh, *do*' he murmured, his eyes shutting.

He sighed and turned slowly and exhaustedly onto his broad, muscular side.

The doctor walked through the deserted streets, his face tight with the old frustration. Why? Why? His mind kept repeating the word.

Why must we continue to sustain life in the cities? For what purpose? Why do we not let civilization in its last outpost die as it means to die? Why struggle to keep such men alive?

Hundreds, thousands of Justin Rackleys - well-kept animals, mechanically bred and fed and massaged into fair and handsome form. Mechanically restrained, too, from physically turning into the fat white slugs that, mentally, they already were and would bodily resemble if left untended. Or die.

Why not let them? Why visit them every month, fill their veins with hypnotic drugs and sit back and watch them, one by one, go bursting into their dream worlds to escape boredom? Must he endlessly send his suggestions into their loosened brainways, fly them to planets and moons, crowd all forms of love and grand adventure into their mock-heroic dreams?

The doctor slumped tiredly and went into another dorm-building. More figures, strongly or beautifully made, passive on couches. More dream injections.

He made them, watched the figures stand and stumble to the wardrobes. Explorers' outfits this time, pith helmets and attractive shorts, snake boots and bared limbs. He stood at the window, saw them clamber into their autocars and drive away. He sat back and waited for them to return, knowing every move they would make, because he made them in his mind.

They would go out to the hydroponics tanks and fight off an invasion of Energy Eaters. Bigger than the Rustons and made of pure force, they threatened to suck the sustenance from the plants in the growing trays, the living, formless meat swelling immortally in the nutrient solutions. The Energy Eaters would be beaten off, of course. They always were.

Naturally. They were only dreams. Creatures of fantastic illusion, conjured in eager dreaming minds by chemical magic and dreary scientific incantation.

But what would all these Justin Rackleys say, these handsome and hopeless ruins of torpid flesh, if they found out how they were being fooled?

Found out that the Rustons were only mental fictions for objectifying simple rust and wear and converting them into fanciful monsters. Monsters which alone could feebly arouse the dim instinct for self-preservation which just barely existed in this lost race. Energy Eaters - beetles and spores and exhausted growth solutions. Mine Borers - vaporous beasties that had to be blasted out of the Lunar and Martian metal deposits. And others, still others, all of them threats to that which runs and feeds and renews a city.

And what would they say, these Justin Rackleys, upon the discovery that each of them, in his 'dreams', had done genuine manual work? That their ray guns were spray guns or grease guns or air hammers, their death rays no more than streams of lubrication for rusting machines or insecticides or liquid fertilizer?

What would they say if they found out how they were tricked into breeding with aphrodisiacs in the guise of anti-poison shots? How they, with no healthy interest in procreation, were drugged into the furtherance of their spineless strain, a strain whose only function was to sustain the life-giving machines.

In a month he would return to Justin Rackley, *Captain* Justin Rackley. A month for rest, these people were so devoid of energy. It took a month to build up even enough strength to endure an injection of hypnotics, to oil a machine or tend a tray, and to bring forth one puny cell of life.

All for the machines, the city, for man...

The doctor spat on the immaculate floor of the room with the pneumatic couches.

The people were the machines, more than the machines themselves. A slave race, a detestable residue, hopeless, without hope.

Oh, how they would wail and swoon, he thought, getting grim pleasure in the notion, were they allowed to walk through that vast subterranean tunnel to the giant chamber where the Great Machine stood, that supposed source of all energy, and saw why they had to be tricked into working. The Great Machine had been designed to eliminate all human labour, tending the minor machines, the food plants, the mining.

But some wise one on the Control Council, centuries before, had had the wit to smash the Great Machine's mechanical brain. And now the Justin Rackleys would have to see, with their own unbelieving eyes, the rust, the rot, the giant twisted death of it... But they wouldn't.

Their job was to dream of adventurous work, and work while dreaming.

For how long?

*'... Then spare me your slanders, and read this rather at night than in the daytime, and give it not to young maidens, if there be any ... But I fear nothing for this book, since it is extracted from a high and splendid source, from which all that has issued has had a great success*  
- Balzac: *Contes Drolatiques*, Prologue

It was the one Uncle Lyman told in the summer house that did it. Talbert was just coming up the path when he heard the punch line: ' "My God!" cried the actress, "I thought you said *sarsaparilla*!" '

Guffaws exploded in the little house. Talbert stood motionless, looking through the rose trellis at the laughing guests. Inside his contour sandals his toes flexed ruminatively. He thought.

Later he took a walk around Lake Bean and watched the crystal surf fold over and observed the gliding swans and stared at the goldfish and thought.

'I've been thinking,' he said that night.

'No,' said Uncle Lyman, haplessly. He did not commit himself further. He waited for the blow.

Which fell.

'Dirty jokes,' said Talbert Bean III.

'I beg your pardon?' said Uncle Lyman.

'Endless tides of them covering the nation,'

'I fail,' said Uncle Lyman, 'to grasp the point.' Apprehension gripped his voice.

'I find the subject fraught with witchery,' said Talbert.

'With-?'

'Consider,' said Talbert. 'Every day, all through our land, men tell off-colour jokes; in bars and at ball games; in theatre lobbies and at places of business; on street corners and in locker rooms. At home and away, a veritable deluge of jokes.'

Talbert paused meaningfully.

'Who makes them up?' he asked.

Uncle Lyman stared at his nephew with the look of a fisherman who has just hooked a sea serpent - half awe, half revulsion.

'I'm afraid -' he began.

'I want to know the source of these jokes,' said Talbert. 'Their genesis; their fountainhead,'

'Why?' asked Uncle Lyman. Weakly.

'Because it is relevant,' said Talbert. 'Because these jokes are a part of a culture heretofore unplumbed. Because they are an anomaly; a phenomenon ubiquitous yet unknown.'

Uncle Lyman did not speak. His pallid hands curled limply on his half-read *Wall Street Journal*. Behind the polished octagons of his glasses his *eyes* were suspended berries.

At last he sighed.

'And what part,' he inquired sadly, 'am I to play in this quest?'

'We must begin,' said Talbert, 'with the joke you told in the summer house this afternoon. Where did you hear it?'

'Kulpritt,' Uncle Lyman said. Andrew Kulpritt was one of the battery of lawyers employed by Bean Enterprises.

'Capital,' said Talbert. 'Call him up and ask him where *he* heard it.'

Uncle Lyman drew the silver watch from his pocket.

'It's nearly midnight, Talbert,' he announced.

Talbert waved away chronology.

'Now,' he said. 'This is important.'

Uncle Lyman examined his nephew a moment longer. Then, with a capitulating sigh, he reached for one of Bean Mansion's thirty-five telephones.

Talbert stood toe-flexed on a bearskin rug while Uncle Lyman dialled, waited and spoke.

'Kulpritt?' said Uncle Lyman. 'Lyman Bean. Sorry to wake you up but Talbert wants to know where you heard the joke about the actress who thought the director said *sarsaparilla*.'

Uncle Lyman listened. 'I said - ' he began again.

A minute later he cradled the receiver heavily.

Prentiss,' he said.

'Call him up,' said Talbert.

'Talbert; Uncle Lyman asked.

'Now,' said Talbert.

A long breath exuded between Uncle Lyman's lips. Carefully, he folded his *Wall Street Journal*. He reached across the mahogany table and tamped out his ten-inch cigar. Sliding a weary hand beneath his smoking jacket, he withdrew his tooled leather address book.

Prentiss heard it from George Sharper, C.P.A. Sharper heard it from Abner Ackerman, M.D. Ackerman heard it from William Cozener, Prune Products. Cozener heard it from Rod Tassell, Mgr, Cyprian Club. Tassell heard it from O. Winterbottom.

Winterbottom heard it from H. Alberts. Alberts heard it from D. Silver, Silver from B. Phryne, Phryne from E. Kennelly.

By an odd twist Kennelly said he heard it from Uncle Lyman.

There is a complicity here,' said Talbert. These jokes are not self-generative.'

It was four a.m. Uncle Lyman slumped, inert and dead-eyed, on his chair.

There has to be a source,' said Talbert.

Uncle Lyman remained motionless.

'You're not interested,' said Talbert incredulously.

Uncle Lyman made a noise.

'I don't understand,' said Talbert. 'Here is a situation pregnant with divers fascinations. *Is* there a man or woman who has never heard an off-colour joke? I say not. Yet, is there a man or woman who knows where these jokes come from? Again I say not.'

Talbert strode forcefully to his place of musing at the twelve foot fireplace. He poised there, staring in.

'I may be a millionaire,' he said, 'but I am sensitive.' He turned. 'And this phenomenon excites me.'

Uncle Lyman attempted to Sleep while retaining the face of a man awake.

'I have always had more money than I needed,' said Talbert. 'Capital investment was unnecessary. Thus I turned to investing the other asset my father left - my brain.'

Uncle Lyman stirred; a thought shook loose.

'What ever happened,' he asked, 'to that society of yours, the S.P.C.S.P.C.A.?''

'Eh? The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals? The past.'

'And your interest in world problems. What about that sociological treatise you were writing

'*Slums: a Positive View*, you mean?' Talbert brushed it aside. 'Inconsequence.'

'And isn't there anything left of your political party, the Pro-antidisestablishmentarianists?'

'Not a shred. Scuttled by reactionaries from within.'

'What about Bimetallism?'

'Oh, that!' Talbert smiled ruefully. 'Passe, dear Uncle. I had been reading too many Victorian novels.'

'Speaking of novels, what about your literary criticisms? Nothing doing with *The Use of the Semicolon in Jane Austen?* or *Horatio Alger: the Misunderstood Satirist?* To say nothing of *Was Queen Elizabeth Shakespeare?*'

'*Was Shakespeare Queen Elizabeth,*' corrected Talbert. 'No, Uncle, nothing doing with them. They had momentary interest, nothing more

'I suppose the same holds true for *The Shoe Horn: Pro and Con*, eh? And those scientific articles - *Relativity Re-Examined* and *Is Evolution Enough?*'

'Dead and gone,' said Talbert, patiently, 'dead and gone. These projects needed me once. Now I go on to better things.

'Like who writes dirty jokes,' said Uncle Lyman.

Talbert nodded.

'Like that,' he said.

When the butler set the breakfast tray on the bed Talbert said, 'Redfield, do you know any jokes?'

Redfield looked out impassively through the face an improvident nature had neglected to animate.

'Jokes, sir?' he inquired.

'You know,' said Talbert. 'Jollities.'

Redfield stood by the bed like a corpse whose casket had been upended and removed.

'Well, sir,' he said, a full thirty seconds later, 'once, when I was a boy I heard one

'Yes?' said Talbert eagerly.

I believe it went somewhat as follows,' Redfield said. 'When - uh - *When* is a portmanteau not a -'

'No, no,' said Talbert, shaking his head. 'I mean *dirty* jokes.'

Redfield's eyebrows soared. The vernacular was like a fish in his face.

'You don't know any?' said a disappointed Talbert.

'Begging your pardon, sir,' said Redfield. 'If I may make a suggestion. May I say that the chauffeur is more likely to -'

'You know any dirty jokes, Harrison?' Talbert asked through the tube as the Rolls Royce purred along Bean Road towards Highway 27.

Harrison looked blank for a moment. He glanced back at Talbert. Then a grin wrinkled his carnal jowls.

'Well, sir,' he began, 'there's this guy sittin' by the runway eatin' an onion, see?'

Talbert undipped his four-colour pencil.

Talbert stood in an elevator rising to the tenth floor of the Gault Building.

The hour ride to New York had been most illuminating. Not only had he transcribed seven of the most horrendously vulgar jokes he had ever heard in his life but had extracted a promise from Harrison to take him to the various establishments where these jokes had been heard.

The hunt was on.

Max Axe,' detective agency read the words on the frosty-glassed door. Talbert turned the knob and went in.

Announced by the beautiful receptionist, Talbert was ushered into a sparsely furnished office on whose walls were a hunting licence, a machine gun, and framed photographs of the Seagram factory, the St Valentine's. Day Massacre in colour and Herbert J. Philbrick who had led three lives.

Mr Axe shook Talbert's hand.

'What could I do for ya?' he asked.

'First of all,' said Talbert, 'do you know any dirty jokes?'

Recovering, Mr Axe told Talbert the one about the monkey and the elephant.

Talbert jotted it down. Then he hired the agency to investigate the men Uncle Lyman had phoned and uncover anything that was meaningful.

After he left the agency, Talbert began making the rounds with Harrison. He heard a joke the first place they went.

'There's this midget in a frankfurter suit, see?' it began.

It was a day of buoyant discovery. Talbert heard the joke about the cross-eyed plumber in the harem, the one about the preacher who won an eel at a raffle, the one about the fighter pilot who went down in flames and the one about the two Girl Scouts who lost their cookies in the Laundromat.

Among others.

'I want,' said Talbert, 'one round-trip aeroplane ticket to San Francisco and a reservation at the Hotel Millard Filmore.'

'May I ask,' asked Uncle Lyman, 'why?'

'While making the rounds with Harrison today,' explained Talbert, 'a salesman of ladies' undergarments told me that a veritable cornucopia of off-colour jokes exists in the person of Harry Shuler, bellboy at the Millard Filmore. This salesman said that, during a three-day convention at that hotel, he had heard more

new jokes from Shuler than he had heard in the first thirty-nine years of his life.'

'And you are going to -?' Uncle Lyman began.

'Exactly,' said Talbert. 'We must follow where the spoor is strongest.'

Talbert,' said Uncle Lyman, 'why do you *do* these things?'

'I am searching,' said Talbert simply.

For what, damn it!' cried Uncle Lyman.

'For *meaning*,' said Talbert.

Uncle Lyman covered his eyes. 'You are the image of your mother,' he declared.

'Say nothing of her,' charged Talbert. 'She was the finest woman who ever trod the earth.'

Then how come she got trampled to death at the funeral of Rudolph Valentino?' Uncle Lyman charged back.

That is a base canard,' said Talbert, 'and you know it. Mother just happened to be passing the church on her way to bringing food to the Orphans of the Dissolute Seamen - one of her many charities - when she was accidentally caught up in the waves of hysterical women and swept to her awful end.'

A pregnant silence bellied the vast room. Talbert stood at a window looking down the hill at Lake Bean which his father had had poured in 1923.

Think of it,' he said after a moment's reflection. The nation alive with off-colour jokes - the *world* alive! And the same jokes, Uncle, *the same jokes*. How? *How*? By what strange means do these jokes o'erleap oceans, span continents? By what incredible machinery are these jokes promulgated over mountain and dale?'

He turned and met Uncle Lyman's mesmeric stare.

'*I mean to know*,' he said.

At ten minutes before midnight Talbert boarded the plane for San Francisco and took a seat by the window. Fifteen minutes later the plane roared down the runway and nosed up into the black sky.

Talbert turned to the man beside him.

'Do you know any dirty jokes, sir?' he inquired, pencil poised.

The man stared at him. Talbert gulped.

'Oh, I *am* sorry,' he said, 'Reverend.'

When they reached the room Talbert gave the bellboy a crisp five dollar bill and asked to hear a joke.

Shuler told him the one about the man sitting by the runway eating an onion, see? Talbert listened, toes kneading inquisitively in his shoes. The joke concluded, he asked Shuler where this and similar jokes might be overheard. Shuler said at a wharf spot known as Davy Jones' Locker Room.

Early that evening, after drinking with one of the West Coast representatives of Bean Enterprises, Talbert took a taxi to Davy Jones' Locker Room. Entering its dim, smoke-fogged interior, he took a place at the bar, ordered a Screwdriver and began to listen.

Within an hour's time he had written down the joke about the old maid who caught her nose in the bathtub faucet, the one about the three travelling salesmen and the farmer's ambidextrous daughter, the one about the nurse who thought they were Spanish olives and the one about the midget in the frankfurter suit. Talbert wrote this last joke under his original transcription of it, underlining changes in context attributable to regional influence.

At 10.16, a man who had just told Talbert the one about the hillbilly twins and their two-headed sister said that Tony, the bartender, was a virtual faucet of off-colour, jokes, limericks, anecdotes, epigrams and proverbs.

Talbert went over to the bar and asked Tony for the major source of his lewdiana. After reciting the limerick about the sex of the asteroid vermin, the bartender referred Talbert to a Mr Frank Bruin, salesman, of Oakland, who happened not to be there that night.

Talbert at once retired to a telephone directory where he discovered five Frank Bruins in Oakland. Entering a booth with a coat pocket sagging change, Talbert began dialling them.

Two of the five Frank Bruins were salesmen. One of them, however, was in Alcatraz at the moment. Talbert traced the remaining Frank Bruin to Hogan's Alleys in Oakland where his wife said that, as usual on Thursday nights, her husband was bowling with the Moonlight Mattress Company All-Stars.



Quitting the bar, Talbert chartered a taxi and started across the bay to Oakland, toes in ferment.  
*Veni, vidi, vici?*

Bruin was not a needle in a haystack.

The moment Talbert entered Hogan's Alleys his eye was caught by a football huddle of men encircling a portly, rosy-domed speaker. Approaching, Talbert was just in time to hear the punch line followed by an explosion of composite laughter. It was the punch line that intrigued.

' "My God!" cried the actress, ' Mr Bruin had uttered, ' "I thought you said a banana split!" ' '

This variation much excited Talbert who saw in it a verification of a new element - the interchangeable kicker.

When the group had broken up and drifted, Talbert accosted Mr Bruin and, introducing himself, asked where Mr Bruin had heard that joke.

'Why d'ya ask, boy?' asked Mr Bruin.

'No reason,' said the crafty Talbert.

'I don't remember where I heard it, boy,' said Mr Bruin finally. 'Excuse me, will ya?'

Talbert trailed after him but received no satisfaction -unless it was in the most definite impression that Bruin was concealing something.

Later, riding back to the Millard Filmore, Talbert decided to put an Oakland detective agency on Mr Bruin's trail to see what could be seen.

When Talbert reached the hotel there was a telegram waiting for him at the desk.

MR RODNEY TASSEL RECEIVED LONG DISTANCE CALL FROM MR GEORGE BULLOCK, CARTHAGE HOTEL, CHICAGO. WAS TOLD JOKE ABOUT MIDGET IN SALAMI SUIT. MEANINGFUL? -AXE.

Talbert's eyes ignited.

Tally,' he murmured, '*ho.*'

An hour later he had checked out of the Millard Filmore, taxied to the airport and caught a plane for Chicago.

Twenty minutes after he had left the hotel, a man in a dark pin-stripe approached the desk clerk and asked for the room number of Talbert Bean III. When informed of Talbert's departure the man grew steely-eyed and immediately retired to a telephone booth. He emerged ashen.

'I'm sorry,' said the desk clerk, 'Mr Bullock checked out this morning.'

'Oh.' Talbert's shoulders sagged. All night on the plane he had been checking over his notes, hoping to discern a pattern to the jokes which would encompass type, area of genesis and periodicity. He was weary with fruitless concentration. Now this.

'And he left no forwarding address?' he asked.

'Only Chicago, sir,' said the clerk.

'I see.'

Following a bath and luncheon in his room, a slightly refreshed Talbert settled down with the telephone and the directory. There were 47 George Bullocks in Chicago. Talbert checked them off as he phoned.

At 3.00 o'clock he slumped over the receiver in a dead slumber. At 4.21, he regained consciousness and completed the remaining eleven calls. The Mr Bullock in question was not at home, said his housekeeper, but was expected in that evening.

'Thank you kindly,' said a bleary-eyed Talbert and, hanging up, thereupon collapsed on the bed - only to awake a few minutes past seven and dress quickly. Descending to the street, he gulped down a sandwich and a glass of milk, then hailed a cab and made the hour ride to the home of George Bullock.

The man himself answered the bell.

'Yes?' he asked.

Talbert introduced himself and said he had come to the Hotel Carthage early that afternoon to see him.

'Why?' asked Mr Bullock.

'So you could tell me where you heard that joke about the midget in the salami suit,' said Talbert.

'Sir?'

'I said-'

'I heard what you said, sir,' said Mr Bullock, 'though I cannot say that your remark makes any noticeable sense.'

'I believe sir,' challenged Talbert, 'that you are hiding behind fustian.'

'Behind fustian, sir?' retorted Bullock. 'I'm afraid -'

'The game is up, sir!' declared Talbert in a ringing voice. 'Why don't you admit it and tell me where you got that joke from?'

'I have not the remotest conception of what you're talking about, sir!' snapped Bullock, his words belied by the pallor of his face.

Talbert flashed a Mona Lisa smile.

'Indeed?' he said.

And, turning lightly on his heel, he left Bullock trembling in the doorway. As he settled back against the taxi cab seat again, he saw Bullock still standing there staring at him. Then Bullock whirled and was gone.

'Hotel Carthage,' said Talbert, satisfied with his bluff.

Riding back, he thought of Bullock's agitation and a thin smile tipped up the corners of his mouth. No doubt about it.

The prey was being run to earth. Now if his surmise was valid there would likely be -

A lean man in a raincoat and a derby was sitting on the bed when Talbert entered his room. The man's moustache, like a muddy toothbrush, twitched.

'Talbert Bean?' he asked.

Talbert bowed.

The same,' he said.

The man, a Colonel Bishop, retired, looked at Talbert with metal blue eyes.

'What is your game, sir?' he asked tautly.

'I don't understand,' toyed Talbert.

'I think you do,' said the Colonel, 'and you are to come with me.'

'Oh?' said Talbert.

He found himself looking down the barrel of a .45 calibre Webley Fosbery.

'Shall we?' said the Colonel.

'But of course,' said Talbert coolly. 'I have not come all this way to resist now.'

The ride in the private plane was a long one. The windows were blacked out and Talbert hadn't the faintest idea in which direction they were flying. Neither the pilot nor the Colonel spoke, and Talbert's attempts at conversation were discouraged by a chilly silence. The Colonel's pistol, still levelled at Talbert's chest, never wavered, but it did not bother Talbert. He was exultant. All he could think was that his search was ending; he was, at last, approaching the headwaters of the dirty joke. After a time, his head nodded and he dozed - to dream of midgets in frankfurter suits and actresses who seemed obsessed by sarsaparilla or banana splits or sometimes both. How long he slept, and what boundaries he may have crossed, Talbert never knew. He was awakened by a swift loss of altitude and the steely voice of Colonel Bishop: 'We are landing, Mr Bean.' The Colonel's grip tightened on the pistol.

Talbert offered no resistance when his eyes were blindfolded. Feeling the Webley Fosbery in the small of his back, he stumbled out of the plane and crunched over the ground of a well-kept airstrip. There was a nip in the air and he felt a bit lightheaded: Talbert suspected they had landed in a mountainous region; but what mountains, and on what continent, he could not guess. His ears and nose conveyed nothing of help to his churning mind.

He was shoved - none too gently - into an automobile, and then driven swiftly along what felt like a dirt road. The tyres crackled over pebbles and twigs.

Suddenly the blindfold was removed. Talbert blinked and looked out the windows. It was a black and cloudy night: he could see nothing but the limited vista afforded by the headlights.

'You are well isolated,' he said, appreciatively. Colonel Bishop remained tight-lipped and vigilant.

After a fifteen-minute ride along the dark road, the car pulled up in front of a tall, unlighted house. As the motor was cut Talbert could hear the pulsing rasp of crickets all around.

'Well,' he said.

'Emerge,' suggested Colonel Bishop.

'Of course.' Talbert bent out of the car and was escorted up the wide porch steps by the Colonel. Behind, the car pulled away into the night.

Inside the house, chimes bonged hollowly as the Colonel pushed a button. They waited in the darkness and, in a few moments, approaching footsteps sounded.

A tiny aperture opened in the heavy door, disclosing a single bespectacled eye. The eye blinked once and, with a faint accent Talbert could not recognise, whispered furtively, 'Why did the widow wear black garters?'

'In remembrance,' said Colonel Bishop with great gravity, 'of those who passed beyond.'

The door opened.

The owner of the eye was tall, gaunt, of indeterminable age and nationality, his hair a dark mass wisped with grey. His face was all angles and facets, his eyes piercing behind large, horn-rimmed glasses. He wore flannel trousers and a checked jacket.

'This is the Dean,' said Colonel Bishop.

'How do you do,' said Talbert.

'Come in, come *in*,' the Dean invited, extending his large hand to Talbert. 'Welcome, Mr Bean.' He shafted a scolding look at Bishop's pistol. 'Now, Colonel,' he said, 'indulging in melodramatics again? Put it away, dear fellow, put it away.'

'We can't be too careful,' grumped the Colonel.

Talbert stood in the spacious grace of the entry hall looking around. His gaze settled, presently, on the cryptic smile of the Dean, who said: 'So. You have found us out, sir.'

Talbert's toes whipped like pennants in a gale.

He covered his excitement with, 'Have I?'

'Yes,' said the Dean. 'You have. And a masterful display of investigative intuition it was,'

Talbert looked around.

'So,' he said, voice bated. 'It is *here*.'

'Yes,' said the Dean. 'Would you like to see it?'

'*More than anything in the world*,' said Talbert fervently.

'Come then,' said the Dean.

'Is this wise?' the Colonel warned.

'Come,' repeated the Dean.

The three men started down the hallway. For a moment, a shade of premonition darkened Talbert's mind. It was being made so easy. Was it a trap? In a second the thought had slipped away, washed off by a current of excited curiosity.

They started up a winding marble staircase.

'How did you suspect?' the Dean inquired. 'That is to say - what prompted you to probe the matter?'

'I just thought,' said Talbert meaningfully. 'Here are all these jokes yet no one seems to know where they come from. Or *care*.'

'Yes,' observed the Dean, 'we count upon that disinterest. What man in ten million ever asks, where did you hear that joke? Absorbed in memorising the joke for future use, he gives no thought to its source. This, of course, is our protection.'

The Dean smiled at Talbert. 'But not/ he amended, 'from men such as you.'

Talbert's flush went unnoticed.

They reached the landing and began walking along a wide corridor lit on each side by the illumination of candelabra. There was no more talk. At the end of the corridor they turned right and stopped in front

of massive, iron-hinged doors.

'Is this wise?' the Colonel asked again.

'Too late to stop now,' said the Dean and Talbert felt a shiver flutter down his spine. What if it *was* a trap? He swallowed, then squared his shoulders. The Dean had said it. It was too late to stop now.

The great doors tracked open.

'*Et voila,*' said the Dean.

The hallway was an avenue. Thick wall-to-wall carpeting sponged beneath Talbert's feet as he walked between the Colonel and the Dean. At periodic intervals along the ceiling hung music-emitting speakers; Talbert recognised the *Gaiete Parisienne*. His gaze moved to a petitpointed tapestry on which Dionysian acts ensued above the stitched motto, 'Happy Is the Man Who Is Making Something.'

'Incredible,' he murmured. 'Here; in this house.'

'Exactly,' said the Dean.

Talbert shook his head wonderingly.

'To think,' he said.

The Dean paused before a glass wall and, braking, Talbert peered into an office. Among its rich appointments strode a young man in a striped silk weskit with brass buttons, gesturing meaningfully with a long cigar while, cross legged on a leather couch, sat a happily sweated blonde of rich dimensions.

The man stopped briefly and waved to the Dean, smiled, then returned to his spirited dictating.

'One of our best,' the Dean said.

'But,' stammered Talbert, 'I thought that man was on the staff of-'

'He is,' said the Dean. 'And, in his spare time, he is also one of us.'

Talbert followed on excitement-numbed legs.

'But I had no idea,' he said. 'I presumed the organisation to be composed of men like Bruin and Bullock.'

'They are merely our means of promulgation,' explained the Dean. 'Our word of mouthers, you might say. Our *creators* come from more exalted ranks - executives, statesmen, the better professional comics, editors, novelists - '

The Dean broke off as the door to one of the other offices opened and a barely bearded man in hunting clothes emerged. He shouldered past them muttering true things to himself.

'Off again?' the Dean asked pleasantly. The big man grunted. It was a true grunt. He clumped off, lonely for a veldt.

'*Unbelievable,*' said Talbert. 'Such men as these?'

'Exactly,' said the Dean.

They strolled on past the rows of busy offices. Talbert tourist-eyed, the Dean smiling his mandarin smile, the Colonel working his lips as if anticipating the kiss of a toad.

'But where did it all begin?' a dazed Talbert asked.

'That is history's secret,' rejoined the Dean, Veiled behind time's opacity. Our venture does have its honoured past, however. Great men have graced its cause - Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, Dickens, Swinburne, Rabelais, Balzac; oh, the honour roll is long. Shakespeare, of course, and his friend Ben Jonson. Still farther back, Chaucer, Boccaccio. Further yet, Horace and Seneca, Demosthenes and Pautus. Aristophanes, Apulieus. Yea, in the palaces of Tutankhamen was our work done; in the black temples of Ahriman, the pleasure dome of Kubla Khan. Where did it begin? Who knows? Scraped on rocks, in many a primordial cave, are certain drawings. And there are those among us who believe that these were left by the earliest members of the Brotherhood. But this, of course, is only legend

Now they had, reached the end of the hallway and were starting down a cushioned ramp.

'There must be vast sums of money involved in this,' said Talbert.

'*Heaven forefend,*' declared the Dean, stopping short. 'Do not confuse our work with alley vending. Our workers contribute freely of their time and skill, caring for naught save the Cause.'

'Forgive me,' Talbert said. Then, rallying, he asked, 'What Cause?'

The Dean's gaze fused on inward things. He ambled on slowly, arms behind his back.

'The Cause of Love,' he said, 'as opposed to Hate. Of Nature, as opposed to the Unnatural. Of Humanity, as opposed to Inhumanity. Of Freedom, as opposed to Constraint. Of Health, as opposed to Disease. Yes, Mr Bean, disease. The disease called bigotry; the frighteningly communicable disease that taints all it touches; turns warmth to chill and joy to guilt and good to bad. What Cause?' He stopped dramatically. The Cause of Life, Mr Bean - as opposed to Death!

The Dean lifted a challenging finger. We see ourselves,' he said, 'as an army of dedicated warriors marching on the strongholds of prudery. Knights Templar with a just and joyous mission.'

'Amen to that,' a fervent Talbert said.

They entered a large, cubicle-bordered room. Talbert saw men; some typing, some writing, some staring, some on telephones, talking in a multitude of tongues. Their expressions were, as one, intently aloft. At the far end of the room, expression unseen, a man stabbed plugs into a many-eyed switchboard.

'Our Apprentice Room,' said the Dean, 'wherein we groom our future

His voice died off as a young man exited one of the cubicles and approached them, paper in hand, a smile tremulous on his lips.

'Oliver,' said the Dean, nodding once.

'I've done a joke, sir,' said Oliver. 'May I -?'

'But of course,' said the Dean.

Oliver cleared viscid anxiety from his throat, then told a joke about a little boy and girl watching a doubles match on the nudist colony tennis court. The Dean smiled, nodding. Oliver looked up, pained.

'No?' he said.

'It is not without merit,' encouraged the Dean, 'but, as it now stands, you see, it smacks rather too reminiscently of the duchess-butler effect, *Wife of Bath* category. Not to mention the justifiably popular double reverse bishop-barmaid gambit.'

'Oh, sir,' grieved Oliver, 'I'll never prevail.'

'Nonsense,' said the Dean, adding kindly, '*son*. These shorter jokes are, by all odds, the most difficult to master. They must be cogent, precise; must say something of pith and moment.'

'Yes, sir,' murmured Oliver.

'Check with Wojciechowski and Sforzini,' said the Dean. 'Also Ahmed El-Hakim. They'll brief you on use of the Master Index. Eh?' He patted Oliver's back.

'Yes, sir.' Oliver managed a smile and returned to his cubicle. The Dean sighed.

'A sombre business,' he declared. 'He'll never be Class-A. He really shouldn't be in the composing end of it at all but -' He gestured meaningfully. '- there is sentiment involved.'

'Oh?' said Talbert.

'Yes,' said the Dean. 'It was his great grandfather who, on June 23, 1848, wrote the first Travelling Salesman joke, American strain.'

The Dean and the Colonel lowered their heads a moment in reverent commemoration. Talbert did the same.

'And so we have it,' said the Dean. They were back downstairs, sitting in the great living room, sherry having been served.

'Perhaps you wish to know more,' said the Dean.

'Only one thing,' said Talbert.

'And that is, sir?'

'Why have you shown it to me?'

'Yes,' said the Colonel, fingering at his armpit holster, 'why indeed?'

The Dean looked at Talbert carefully as if balancing his reply.

'You haven't guessed?' he said, at last. 'No, I can see you haven't. Mr Bean... you are not unknown to us. Who has not heard of your work, your unflagging devotion to sometimes obscure but always worthy causes? What man can help but admire your selflessness, your dedication, your proud defiance of convention and prejudice?' The Dean paused and leaned forward.

'Mr Bean,' he said softly. 'Talbert - may I call you that? - *we want you on our team.*'

Talbert gaped. His hands began to tremble. The Colonel, relieved, grunted and sank back into his chair.

No reply came from the flustered Talbert, so the Dean continued. Think it over. Consider the merits of our work. With all due modesty, I think I may say that here is your opportunity to ally yourself with the greatest cause of your life.'

'I'm speechless,' said Talbert. 'I hardly - that is - how can I...'

But, already, the light of consecration was stealing into his eyes.

## 51 - The Test

He was 80 and this was his fourth test.

The night before the test, Les helped his father study in the dining room. Jim and Tommy were asleep upstairs and, in the living room, Terry was sewing, her face expressionless as the needle moved with a swiftly rhythmic piercing and drawing.

Tom Parker sat very straight, his lean, vein-ribbed hands clasped together on the table top, his pale blue eyes looking intently at his son's lips as though it might help him to understand better.

"All right," Les said, reading from the sample test Doctor Trask had gotten them. "Repeat the following sequences of numbers."

"Sequence of numbers," Tom murmured, trying to assimilate the words as they came. But words were not quickly assimilated any more; they seemed to lie upon the tissues of his brain like insects on a sluggish carnivore. He said the words in his mind again - *sequence of ... sequence of numbers* - there he had it. He looked at his son and waited.

"Well?" he said, impatiently, after a moment's silence.

"Dad, I've already given you the first one," Les told him.

"Well..." His father grasped for the proper words. "Kindly give me the, the... do me the kindness of..."

Les exhaled wearily. "Eight-five-eleven-six," he said.

The old lips stirred, the old machinery of Tom's mind began turning slowly.

"Eight... f-ive..." The pale eyes blinked slowly.

"Elevensix," Tom finished in a breath, then straightened himself proudly.

Yes, good, he thought, very good. They wouldn't fool him tomorrow; he'd beat their murderous law. His lips pressed together and his hands clasped tightly on the white table cloth.

"What?" he said then, refocusing his eyes as Les said something. "Speak up," he said, irritably. "Speak up."

"I gave you another sequence," Les said quietly. "Here, I'll read it again."

Tom leaned forward a little, ears straining.

"Nine-two-sixteen-seven-three," Les said.

Tom cleared his throat with effort. "Speak slower," he told his son. He hadn't quite gotten that. How did they expect anyone to retain such a ridiculously long string of numbers?

"What, *what*?" he asked angrily as Les read the numbers again.

"Dad, the examiner will be reading the questions faster than *I'm* reading them. You-"

"I'm quite aware of that," Tom interrupted stiffly. "Quite aware. Let me remind you... however, this is... not a test. It's study, it's for *study*. Foolish to go rushing through everything. *Foolish*. I have to learn this, this... this *test*" he finished, angry at his son and angry at the way desired words hid themselves from his mind.

Les shrugged and looked down at the test again. "Nine-two-sixteen-seven-three," he read slowly.

"Nine-two-six-seven-"

"Sixteen-seven, Dad."

"I said that."

"You said six, Dad."

"Don't you suppose I know what I said!"

Les closed his eyes a moment. "All right, Dad," he said.

"Well, are you going to read it again or not?" Tom asked him sharply.

Les read the numbers off again and, as he listened to his father stumble through the sequence, he glanced into the living room at Terry.

She was sitting there, features motionless, sewing. She'd turned off the radio and he knew she could hear the old man faltering with the numbers.

All right, Les heard himself saying in his mind as if he spoke to her. All right, I know he's old and useless. Do you want me to tell him that to his face and drive a knife into his back? You know and I know that he won't pass the test. Allow me, at least, this brief hypocrisy. Tomorrow the sentence will be passed. Don't make me pass it tonight and break the old man's heart.

"That's correct, I believe," Les heard the dignified voice of his father say and he refocused his eyes on the gaunt, seamed face.

"Yes, that's right," he said, hastily.

He felt like a traitor when a slight smile trembled at the corners of his father's mouth. I'm cheating him, he thought.

"Let's go on to something else," he heard his father say and he looked down quickly at the sheet. What would be easy for him? he thought, despising himself for thinking it.

"Well, come on, Leslie," his father said in a restrained voice. "We have no time to waste."

Tom looked at his son thumbing through the pages and his hands closed into fists. Tomorrow, his life was in the balance and his son just browsed through the test paper as if nothing important were going to happen tomorrow.

"Come on, come on," he said peevishly.

Les picked up a pencil that had string attached to it and drew a half-inch circle on a piece of blank paper. He held out the pencil to his father.

"Suspend the pencil point over the circle for three minutes," he said, suddenly afraid he'd picked the wrong question. He'd seen his father's hands trembling at meal times or fumbling with the buttons and zippers of his clothes.

Swallowing nervously, Les picked up the stop watch, started it, and nodded to his father.

Tom took a quivering breath as he leaned over the paper and tried to hold the slightly swaying pencil above the circle.

Les saw him lean on his elbow, something he wouldn't be allowed to do on the test; but he said nothing.

He sat there looking at his father. Whatever colour there had been was leaving the old man's face and Les could see clearly the tiny red lines of broken vessels under the skin of his cheeks. He looked at the dry skin, creased and brownish, dappled with liver spots. Eighty years old, he thought, how does a man feel when he's eighty years old?

He looked in at Terry again. For a moment, her gaze shifted and they were looking at each other, neither of them smiling or making any sign. Then Terry looked back to her sewing.

"I believe that's three minutes," Tom said in a taut voice.

Les looked down at the stop watch. "A minute and a half, Dad," he said, wondering if he should have lied again.

"Well, keep your eyes on the watch then," his father said, perturbedly, the pencil penduluming completely out of the circle. "This is supposed to be a test, not a, a - *a party*."

Les kept his eyes on the wavering pencil point, feeling a sense of utter futility at the realization that this was only pretence, that nothing they did could save his father's life.

At least, he thought, the examinations weren't given by the sons and daughters who had voted the law

into being. At least he wouldn't have to stamp the black inadequate on his father's test and thus pronounce the sentence.

The pencil wavered over the circle edge again and was returned as Tom moved his arm slightly on the table, a motion that would automatically disqualify him on that question.

"That watch is slow!" Tom said in a sudden fury.

Les caught his breath and looked down at the watch. Two and a half minutes. "Three minutes," he said, pushing in the plunger.

Tom slapped down the pencil irritably. "*There*," he said. "Fool test anyway." His voice grew morose. "Doesn't prove a thing. Not a thing."

"You want to do some money questions, Dad?"

"Are they the next questions in the test?" Tom asked, looking over suspiciously to check for himself.

"Yes," Les lied, knowing that his father's eyes were too weak to see even though Tom always refused to admit he needed glasses. "Oh, wait a second, there's one before that," he added, thinking it would be easier for his father. "They ask you to tell time."

"That's a foolish question," Tom muttered. "What do they-"

He reached across the table irritably and picked up the watch and glanced down at its face.

"Ten-fifteen," he said, scornfully.

Before Les could think to stop himself, he said, "But it's eleven fifteen, Dad."

His father looked, for a moment, as though his face had been slapped. Then he picked up the watch again and stared down at it, lips twitching, and Les had the horrible premonition that Tom was going to insist it really was 10:15.

"Well, that's what I meant," Tom said abruptly. "Slipped out wrong. Course it's eleven fifteen, any fool can see that. Eleven fifteen. Watch is no good. Numbers too close. Ought to throw it away. Now-"

Tom reached into his vest pocket and pulled out his own gold watch. "Here's a *watch*" he said, proudly. "Been telling perfect time for... sixty years! That's a watch. Not like this."

He tossed Les's watch down contemptuously and it flipped over on its face and the crystal broke.

"Look at that," Tom said quickly, to cover the jolting of embarrassment. "Watch can't take anything."

He avoided Les's eyes by looking down at his own watch. His mouth tightened as he opened the back and looked at Mary's picture; Mary when she was in her thirties, golden-haired and lovely.

Thank God, she didn't have to take these tests, he thought, at least she was spared that. Tom had never thought he could believe that Mary's accidental death at fifty-seven was fortunate, but that was before the tests.

He closed the watch and put it away.

"You just leave that watch with me, tonight," he said grumpily. "I'll see you get a decent... uh, *crystal* tomorrow."

"That's all right, Dad. It's just an old watch."

"That's *all* right," Tom said. "That's all right. You just leave it with me. I'll get you a decent... crystal. Get you one that won't break, one that won't break. You just leave it with me."

Tom did the money questions then, questions like *How many quarters in a five dollar bill?* and *If I took 36 cents from your dollar, how much change would you have left?*

They were written questions and Les sat there timing his father. It was quiet in the house, warm. Everything seemed very normal and ordinary with the two of them sitting there and Terry sewing in the living room.

That was the horror.

Life went on as usual. No one spoke of dying. The government sent out letters and the tests were given and those who failed were requested to appear at the government centre for their injections. The law operated, the death rate was steady, the population problem was contained, all officially, impersonally, without a cry or a sensation.

But it was still loved people who were being killed.



"Never mind hanging over that watch," his father said. "I can do these questions without you... hanging over that watch."

"Dad, the examiners will be looking at their watches."

"The examiners are the examiners," Tom snapped. "You're not an examiner."

"Dad, I'm trying to help y-"

"Well, help me then, *help* me. Don't sit there hanging over that watch."

"This is your test, Dad, not mine," Les started, a flush of anger creeping up his cheeks. "If-"

"My test, yes, my test!" his father suddenly raged. "You all saw to that, didn't you? All saw to it that, that-"

Words failed again, angry thoughts piling up in his brain.

"You don't have to yell, Dad."

"I'm not yelling!"

"Dad, the boys are sleeping!" Terry suddenly broke in.

"I don't care if-!" Tom broke off suddenly and leaned back in the chair, the pencil falling unnoticed from his fingers and rolling across the table cloth. He sat shivering, his thin chest rising and falling in jerks, his hands twitching uncontrollably on his lap.

"Do you want to go on, Dad?" Les asked, restraining his nervous anger.

"I don't ask much," Tom mumbled to himself. "Don't ask much in life."

"Dad, shall we go *on*?"

His father stiffened. "*If you can spare the time*," he said with slow, indignant pride. "*If you can spare the time*."

Les looked at the test paper, his fingers gripping the stapled sheets rigidly. Psychological questions? No, he couldn't ask them. How did you ask your eighty-year-old father his views on sex? - your flint-surfaced father to whom the most innocuous remark was "obscene."

"Well?" his father asked in a rising voice.

"There doesn't seem to be anymore," Les said. "We've been at it almost four hours now."

"What about all those pages you just skipped?"

"Most of those are for the... the physical, Dad."

He saw his father's lips press together and was afraid Tom was going to say something about that again. But all his father said was, "A fine friend. Fine friend."

"Dad, you-"

Les's voice broke off. There was no point in talking about it anymore. Tom knew perfectly well that Doctor Trask couldn't make out a bill of health for this test the way he'd done for the three tests previous.

Les knew how frightened and insulted the old man was because he'd have to take off his clothes and be exposed to doctors who would probe and tap and ask offensive questions. He knew how afraid Tom was of the fact that when he redressed, he'd be watched from a peephole and someone would mark on a chart how well he dressed himself. He knew how it frightened his father to know that, when he ate in the government cafeteria at the midpoint of the day-long examination, eyes would be watching him again to see if he dropped a fork or a spoon or knocked over a glass of water or dribbled gravy on his shirt.

"They'll ask you to sign your name and address," Les said, wanting his father to forget about the physical and knowing how proud Tom was of his handwriting.

Pretending that he grudged it, the old man picked up the pencil and wrote. I'll fool them, he thought as the pencil moved across the page with strong, sure motions.

*Mr. Thomas Parker*, he wrote, *2719 Brighton Street, Blairtown, New York.*

"And the date," Les said.

The old man wrote, *January 17, 2003*, and something cold moved in the old man's vitals.

Tomorrow was the test.

They lay beside each other, neither of them sleeping. They had barely spoken while undressing and when Les had leaned over to kiss her goodnight she'd murmured something he didn't hear.

Now he turned over on his side with a heavy sigh and faced her. In the darkness, she opened her eyes

and looked over at him.

"Asleep?" she asked softly.

"No."

He said no more. He waited for her to start.

But she didn't start and, after a few moments, he said, "Well, I guess this is... it." He finished weakly because he didn't like the words; they sounded ridiculously melodramatic.

Terry didn't say anything right away. Then, as if thinking aloud, she said, "Do you think there's any chance that-"

Les tightened at the words because he knew what she was going to say.

"No," he said. "He'll never pass."

He heard Terry swallowing. Don't say it, he thought, pleadingly. Don't tell me I've been saying the same thing for fifteen years. I know it. I said it because I thought it was true.

Suddenly, he wished he'd signed the *Request For Removal* years before. They needed desperately to be free of Tom; for the good of their children and themselves. But how did you put that need into words without feeling like a murderer? You couldn't say: I hope the old man fails, I hope they kill him. Yet anything else you said was only a hypocritical substitute for those words because that was exactly how you felt.

Medical terms, he thought, charts about declining crops and lowered standing of living and hunger ratio and degrading health level, they'd used all those as arguments to support passage of the law. Well, they were lies, obvious, groundless lies. The law had been passed because people wanted to be left alone, because they wanted to live their own lives.

"Les, what if he passes?" Terry said.

He felt his hands tightening on the mattress.

"Les?"

"I don't know, honey," he said.

Her voice was firm in the darkness. It was a voice at the end of patience. "You have to know," it said.

He moved his head restlessly on the pillow. "Honey, don't push it," he begged. "Please."

"Les, if he passes that test it means five more years. *Five more years*, Les. Have you thought what that means?"

"Honey, he can't pass that test."

"But, what if he does?"

"Terry, he missed three-quarters of the questions I asked him tonight. His hearing is almost gone, his eyes are bad, his heart is weak, he has arthritis." His fist beat down hopelessly on the bed. "He won't even pass the *physical*" he said, feeling himself tighten in self-hatred for assuring her that Tom was doomed.

If only he could forget the past and take his father for what he was now a helpless, mind-jading old man who was ruining their lives. But it was hard to forget how he'd loved and respected his father, hard to forget the hikes in the country, the fishing trips, the long talks at night and all the many things his father and he had shared together.

That was why he'd never had the strength to sign the request. It was a simple form to fill out, much simpler than waiting for the five-year tests. But it had meant signing away the life of his father, requesting the government to dispose of him like some unwanted garbage. He could never do that.

And yet, now his father was eighty and, in spite of moral upbringing, in spite of life taught Christian principles, he and Terry were horribly afraid that old Tom might pass the test and live another five years with them, another five years of fumbling around the house, undoing instructions they gave to the boys, breaking things, wanting to help but only getting in the way and making life an agony of held-in nerves.

"You'd better sleep," Terry said to him.

He tried to but he couldn't. He lay staring at the dark ceiling and trying to find an answer but finding no answer.

The alarm went off at six. Les didn't have to get up until eight but he wanted to see his father off. He

got out of bed and dressed quietly so he wouldn't wake up Terry.

She woke up anyway and looked up at him from her pillow. After a moment, she pushed up on one elbow and looked sleepily at him.

"I'll get up and make you some breakfast," she said.

"That's all right," Les said. "You stay in bed."

"Don't you want me to get up?"

"Don't bother, honey," he said. "I want you to rest."

She lay down again and turned away so Les wouldn't see her face. She didn't know why she began to cry soundlessly; whether it was because he didn't want her to see his father or because of the test. But she couldn't stop. All she could do was hold herself rigid until the bedroom door had closed.

Then her shoulders trembled and a sob broke the barrier she had built in herself.

The door to his father's room was open as Les passed. He looked in and saw Tom sitting on the bed, leaning down and fastening his dark shoes. He saw the gnarled fingers shaking as they moved over the straps.

"Everything all right, Dad?" Les asked.

His father looked up in surprise. "What are you doing up this hour?" he asked.

"Thought I'd have breakfast with you," Les told him.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence. Then his father leaned over the shoes again. "That's not necessary," he heard the old man's voice telling him.

"Well, I think I'll have some breakfast anyway," he said and turned away so his father wouldn't argue.

"Oh... *Leslie*."

Les turned.

"I trust you didn't forget to leave that watch out," his father said. "I intend to take it to the jeweller's today and have a decent... decent crystal put on it, one that won't break."

"Dad, it's just an old watch," Les said. "It's not worth a nickel."

His father nodded slowly, one palm wavering before him as if to ward off argument. "Never-the-less," he stated slowly, "I intend to-"

"All right, Dad, all right. I'll put it on the kitchen table."

His father broke off and looked at him blankly a moment. Then, as if it were impulse and not delayed will, he bent over his shoes again.

Les stood for a moment looking down at his father's gray hair, his gaunt, trembling fingers. Then he turned away.

The watch was still on the dining room table. Les picked it up and took it in to the kitchen table. The old man must have been reminding himself about the watch all night, he thought. Otherwise he wouldn't have managed to remember it.

He put fresh water in the coffee globe and pushed the buttons for two servings of bacon and eggs. Then he poured two glasses of orange juice and sat down at the table.

About fifteen minutes later, his father came down wearing his dark blue suit, his shoes carefully polished, his nails manicured, his hair slicked down and combed and brushed. He looked very neat and very old as he walked over to the coffee globe and looked in.

"Sit down, Dad," Les said. "I'll get it for you."

"I'm not helpless," his father said. "Stay where you are."

Les managed to smile. "I put some bacon and eggs on for us," he said.

"Not hungry," his father replied.

"You'll need a good breakfast in you, Dad."

"Never did eat a big breakfast," his father said, stiffly, still facing the stove. "Don't believe in it. Not good for the stomach."

Les closed his eyes a moment and across his face moved an expression of hopeless despair. Why did I bother getting up? he asked himself defeatedly. All we do is argue.

No. He felt himself stiffening. No, he'd be cheerful if it killed him.

"Sleep all right, Dad?" he asked.

"Course I slept all right," his father answered. "Always sleep fine. Fine. Did you think I wouldn't because of a-"

He broke off suddenly and turned accusingly at Les. "Where's that watch?" he demanded.

Les exhaled wearily and held up the watch. His father moved jerkily across the linoleum, took it from him and looked at it a moment, his old lips pursed.

"Shoddy workmanship," he said. "Shoddy." He put it carefully in his side coat pocket. "Get you a decent crystal," he muttered. "One that won't break."

Les nodded. "That'll be swell, Dad."

The coffee was ready then and Tom poured them each a cup. Les got up and turned off the automatic griller. He didn't feel like having bacon and eggs either now.

He sat across the table from his stern-faced father and felt hot coffee trickling down his throat. It tasted terrible but he knew that nothing in the world would have tasted good to him that morning.

"What time do you have to be there, Dad?" he asked to break the silence.

"Nine o'clock," Tom said.

"You're sure you don't want me to drive you there?"

"Not at all, not at all," his father said as though he were talking patiently to an irritably insistent child.

"The tube is good enough. Get me there in plenty of time."

"All right, Dad," Les said and sat there staring into his coffee. There must be something he could say, he thought, but he couldn't think of anything. Silence hung over them for long minutes while Tom drank his black coffee in slow, methodical sips.

Les licked his lips nervously, then hid the trembling of them behind his cup. Talking, he thought, talking and talking of cars and tube conveyers and examination schedules, when all the time both of them knew that Tom might be sentenced to death that day.

He was sorry he'd gotten up. It would have been better to wake up and just find his father gone. He wished it could happen that way, *permanently*. He wished he could wake up some morning and find his father's room empty, the two suits gone, the dark shoes gone, the work clothes gone, the handkerchiefs, the socks, the garters, the braces, the shaving equipment, all those mute evidences of a life gone.

But it wouldn't be like that. After Tom failed the test, it would be several weeks before the letter of final appointment came and then another week or so before the appointment itself. It would be a hideously slow process of packing and disposing of and giving away of possessions, a process of meals and meals and meals together, of talking to each other, of a last dinner, of a long drive to the government centre, of a ride up in a silent, humming elevator, of-

*Dear God!*

He found himself shivering helplessly and was afraid for a moment that he was going to cry.

Then he looked up with a shocked expression as his father stood.

"I'll be going now," Tom said.

Les's eyes fled to the wall clock. "But it's only a quarter to seven," he said tensely. "It doesn't take that long to-"

"Like to be in plenty of time," his father said firmly. "Never like to be late."

"But my God, Dad, it only takes an hour at the most to get to the city," he said, feeling a terrible sinking in his stomach.

His father shook his head and Les knew he hadn't heard. "It's early, Dad," he said, loudly, his voice shaking a little.

"Never-the-less," his father said.

"But you haven't *eaten* anything."

"Never did eat a big breakfast," Tom started. "Not good for the-"

Les didn't hear the rest of it, the words about lifetime habit and not good for the digestion and

everything else his father said. He felt waves of merciless horror breaking over him and he wanted to jump and throw his arms around the old man and tell him not to worry about the test because it didn't matter, because they loved him and would take care of him.

But he couldn't. He sat rigid with sick fright, looking up at his father. He couldn't even speak when his father turned at the kitchen door and said in a voice that was calmly dispassionate because it took every bit of strength the old man had to make it so, "I'll see you tonight, Leslie."

The door swung shut and the breeze that ruffled across Les's cheeks chilled him to the heart.

Suddenly, he jumped up with a startled grunt and rushed across the linoleum. As he pushed through the doorway he saw his father almost to the front door.

"Dad!"

Tom stopped and looked back in surprise as Les walked across the dining room, hearing the steps counted in his mind, *one, two, three, four, five*.

He stopped before his father and forced a faltering smile to his lips.

"Good luck, Dad," he said. "I'll... see you tonight." He had been about to say, "I'll be rooting for you," but he couldn't.

His father nodded once, just once, a curt nod as of one gentleman acknowledging another.

"Thank you," his father said and turned away.

When the door shut, it seemed as if, suddenly, it had become an impenetrable wall through which his father could never pass again.

Les moved to the window and watched the old man walk slowly down the path and turn left onto the sidewalk. He watched his father start up the street, then straighten himself, throw back his lean shoulders and walk erect and briskly into the gray of morning.

At first Les thought it was raining. But then he saw that the shimmering moistness wasn't on the window at all.

He couldn't go to work. He phoned in sick and stayed home. Terry got the boys off to school and, after they'd eaten breakfast, Les helped her clear away the morning dishes and put them in the washer. Terry didn't say anything about his staying home. She acted as if it were normal for him to be home on a weekday.

He spent the morning and afternoon puttering in the garage shop, starting seven different projects and losing interest in them.

Around five, he went into the kitchen and had a can of beer while Terry made supper. He didn't say anything to her. He kept pacing around the living room, staring out the window at the overcast sky, then pacing again.

"I wonder where he is," he finally said, back in the kitchen again.

"He'll be back," she said and he stiffened a moment, thinking he heard disgust in her voice. Then he relaxed, knowing it was only his imagination.

When he dressed after taking a shower, it was five-forty. The boys were home from playing and they all sat down to supper. Les noticed a place set for his father and wondered if Terry had set it there for his benefit.

He couldn't eat anything. He kept cutting the meat into smaller and smaller pieces and mashing butter into his baked potato without tasting any of it.

"What is it?" he asked as Jim spoke to him.

"Dad, if Grandpa don't pass the test, he gets a month, don't he?"

Les felt his stomach muscles tightening as he stared at his older son. *Gets a month, don't he?* -the last of Jim's question muttered on in his brain.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"My Civics book says old people get a month to live after they don't pass their test. That's right, isn't it?"

"No, it *isn't*," Tommy broke in. "Harry Senker's grandma got her letter after only two weeks."

"How do *you* know?" Jim asked his nine-year-old brother, "Did you *see* it?"

"That's enough," Les said.

"Don't *have* t' see it!" Tommy argued. "Harry told me that-"

"That's *enough*!"

The two boys looked suddenly at their white-faced father.

"We won't talk about it," he said.

"But what-"

"Jimmy," Terry said, warningly.

Jimmy looked at his mother, then, after a moment, went back to his food and they all ate in silence.

The death of their grandfather means nothing to them, Les thought bitterly, nothing at all. He swallowed and tried to relax the tightness in his body. Well, why *should* it mean anything to them? he told himself; it's not their time to worry yet. Why force it on them now? They'll have it soon enough.

When the front door opened and shut at 6:10, Les stood up so quickly, he knocked over an empty glass.

"Les, *don't*" Terry said suddenly and he knew, immediately, that she was right. His father wouldn't like him to come rushing from the kitchen with questions.

He slumped down on the chair again and stared at his barely touched food, his heart throbbing. As he picked up his fork with tight fingers, he heard the old man cross the dining room rug and start up the stairs. He glanced at Terry and her throat moved.

He couldn't eat. He sat there breathing heavily, and picking at the food. Upstairs, he heard the door to his father's room close.

It was when Terry was putting the pie on the table that Les excused himself quickly and got up.

He was at the foot of the stairs when the kitchen door was pushed open. "Les," he heard her say, urgently.

He stood there silently as she came up to him.

"Isn't it better we leave him alone?" she asked.

"But, honey, I-"

"Les, if he'd passed the test, he would have come into the kitchen and told us."

"Honey, he wouldn't know if-"

"He'd know if he passed, you know that. He told us about it the last two times. If he'd passed, he'd have-"

Her voice broke off and she shuddered at the way he was looking at her. In the heavy silence, she heard a sudden splattering of rain on the windows.

They looked at each other a long moment. Then Les said, "I'm going up."

"Les," she murmured.

"I won't say anything to upset him," he said. "I'll..."

A moment longer they stared at each other. Then he turned away and trudged up the steps. Terry watched him go with a bleak, hopeless look on her face.

Les stood before the closed door a minute, bracing himself. I won't upset him, he told himself; I *won't*.

He knocked softly, wondering, in that second, if he were making a mistake. Maybe he should have left the old man alone, he thought unhappily.

In the bedroom, he heard a rustling movement on the bed, then the sound of his father's feet touching the floor.

"Who is it?" he heard Tom ask.

Les caught his breath. "It's me, Dad," he said.

"What do you want?"

"May I see you?"

Silence inside. "Well..." he heard his father say then and his voice stopped. Les heard him get up and heard the sound of his footsteps on the floor. Then there was the sound of paper rattling and a bureau drawer being carefully shut.

Finally the door opened.

Tom was wearing his old red bathrobe over his clothes and he'd taken off his shoes and put his slippers on.

"May I come in, Dad?" Les asked quietly.

His father hesitated a moment. Then he said, "Come in," but it wasn't an invitation. It was more as if he'd said, This is your house, I can't keep you from this room.

Les was going to tell his father that he didn't want to disturb him but he couldn't. He went in and stood in the middle of the throw rug, waiting.

"Sit down," his father said and Les sat down on the upright chair that Tom hung his clothes on at night. His father waited until Les was seated and then sank down on the bed with a grunt.

For a long time they looked at each other without speaking, like total strangers, each waiting for the other one to speak. How did the test go? Les heard the words repeated in his mind. How did the test go, how did the test go? He couldn't speak the words. How did the-

"I suppose you want to know what... happened," his father said then, controlling himself visibly.

"Yes," Les said. "I..." He caught himself. "Yes," he repeated and waited.

Old Tom looked down at the floor for a moment. Then, suddenly, he raised his head and looked defiantly at his son.

"*I didn't go*," he said.

Les felt as if all his strength had suddenly been sucked into the floor. He sat there, motionless, staring at his father.

"Had no intention of going," his father hurried on. "No intention of going through all that foolishness. Physical tests, m-mental tests, putting *b-b-blocks* in a board and... Lord knows what all! Had no intention of going."

He stopped and stared at his son with angry eyes as if he were daring Les to say he had done wrong. But Les couldn't say anything.

A long time passed. Les swallowed and managed to summon the words. "What are you... going to do?"

"Never mind that, never mind," his father said, almost as if he were grateful for the question. "Don't you worry about your Dad. Your Dad knows how to take care of himself."

And suddenly Les heard the bureau drawer shutting again, the rustling of a paper bag. He almost looked around at the bureau to see if the bag were still there. His head twitched as he fought down the impulse.

"W-ell," he faltered, not realizing how stricken and lost his expression was.

"Just never mind now," his father said again, quietly, almost gently. "It's not your problem to worry about. Not your problem at all."

But it is! Les heard the words cried out in his mind. But he didn't speak them. Something in the old man stopped him; a sort of fierce strength, a taut dignity he knew he mustn't touch.

"I'd like to rest now," he heard Tom say then and he felt as if he'd been struck violently in the stomach. I'd like to rest now, to rest now, the words echoed down long tunnels of the mind as he stood. Rest now, rest now...

He found himself being ushered to the door where he turned and looked at his father. *Goodbye*. The word stuck in him.

Then his father smiled and said, "Good night, Leslie."

"*Dad*."

He felt the old man's hand in his own, stronger than his, more steady; calming him, reassuring him. He felt his father's left hand grip his shoulder.

"Good night, son," his father said and, in the moment they stood close together Les saw, over the old man's shoulder, the crumpled drugstore bag lying in the corner of the room as though it had been thrown there so as not to be seen.

Then he was standing in wordless terror in the hall, listening to the latch clicking shut and knowing that, although his father wasn't locking the door, he couldn't go into his father's room.

For a long time he stood staring at the closed door, shivering without control. Then he turned away.

Terry was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs, her face drained of colour. She asked the question with her eyes as he came down to her.

"He... didn't go," was all he said.

She made a tiny, startled sound in her throat. "But-"

"He's been to the drugstore," Les said. "I... saw the bag in the corner of the room. He threw it away so I wouldn't see it but I... saw it."

For a moment, it seemed as if she were starting for the stairs but it was only a momentary straining of her body.

"He must have shown the druggist the letter about the test," Les said. "The... druggist must have given him... pills. Like they all do."

They stood silently in the dining room while rain drummed against the windows.

"What shall we do?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"Nothing," he murmured. His throat moved convulsively and breath shuddered through him.

"Nothing,"

Then he was walking numbly back to the kitchen and he could feel her arm tight around him as if she were trying to press her love to him because she could not speak of love.

All evening, they sat there in the kitchen. After she put the boys to bed, she came back and they sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and talking in quiet, lonely voices.

Near midnight, they left the kitchen and just before they went upstairs, Les stopped by the dining room table and found the watch with a shiny new crystal on it. He couldn't even touch it.

They went upstairs and walked past the door of Tom's bedroom. There was no sound inside. They got undressed and got in bed together and Terry set the clock the way she set it every night. In a few hours they both managed to fall asleep.

And all night there was silence in the old man's room.

And the next day, silence.

## 52 - The Likeness Of Julie OCTOBER.

Eddy Foster had never noticed the girl in his English class until that day.

It wasn't because she sat behind him. Any number of times, he'd glanced around while Professor Euston was writing on the blackboard or reading to them from *College Literature*. Any number of times, he'd seen her as he left or entered the classroom. Occasionally, he'd passed her in the hallways or on the campus. Once, she'd even touched him on the shoulder during class and handed him a pencil which had fallen from his pocket.

Still, he'd never noticed her the way he noticed other girls. First of all, she had no figure-or if she did she kept it hidden under loose-fitting clothes. Second, she wasn't pretty and she looked too young. Third, her voice was faint and high-pitched.

Which made it curious that he should notice her that day. All through class, he'd been thinking about the redhead in the first row. In the theatre of his mind he'd staged her-and himself-through an endless carnal play. He was just raising the curtain on another act when he heard the voice behind him.

"Professor?" it asked.

"Yes, Miss Eldridge."

Eddy glanced across his shoulder as Miss Eldridge asked a question about *Beowulf*. He saw the plainness of her little girl's face, heard her faltering voice, noticed the loose yellow sweater she was wearing. And, as he watched, the thought came suddenly to him.

*Take her.*

Eddy turned back quickly, his heartbeat jolting as if he'd spoken the words aloud. He repressed a grin. What a screwy idea that was. *Take her?* With no figure? With that kid's face of hers?

That was when he realized it was her face which had given him the idea. The very childishness of it



seemed to needle him perversely.

There was a noise behind him. Eddy glanced back. The girl had dropped her pen and was bending down to get it. Eddy felt a crawling tingle in his flesh as he saw the strain of her bust against the tautening sweater. Maybe she had a figure after all. That was more exciting yet. A child afraid to show her ripening body. The notion struck dark fire in Eddy's mind.

*Eldridge, Julie*, read the year book. *St. Louis, Arts & Sciences*. As he'd expected, she belonged to no sorority or organizations. He looked at her photograph and she seemed to spring alive in his imaginations-shy, withdrawn, existing in a shell of warped repressions. He had to have her.

Why? He asked himself the question endlessly but no logical answer ever came. Still, visions of her were never long out of his mind-the two of them locked in a cabin at the *Hiway Motel*, the wall heater crowding their lungs with oven air while they rioted in each other's flesh; he and this degraded innocent.

The bell had rung and, as the students left the classroom, Julie dropped her books.

"Here, let me pick them up," said Eddy.

"Oh." She stood motionless while he collected them. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the ivory smoothness of her legs. He shuddered and stood with the books.

"Here," he said.

"Thank you." Her eyes lowered and the faintest of colour touched her cheeks. She wasn't so bad-looking, Eddy thought. And she did have a figure. Not much of one but a figure.

"What is it we're supposed to read for tomorrow?" he heard himself asking.

"The-'Wife of Bath's Tale,' isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, is that it?" Ask her for a date, he thought.

"Yes. I think so."

He nodded. Ask her now, he thought.

"Well," said Julie. She began to turn away.

Eddy smiled remotely at her and felt his stomach muscles trembling.

"Be seeing you," he said.

We stood in the darkness staring at her window. Inside the room, the light went on as Julie came back from the bathroom. She wore a terry cloth robe and was carrying a towel, a washcloth, and a plastic soap box. Eddy watched her put the washcloth and soap box on her bureau and sit down on the bed.

He stood there rigidly, watching her with eyes that did not blink. What was he doing here? he thought. If anybody caught him, he'd be arrested. He had to leave.

Julie stood. She undid the sash at her waist and the bathrobe slipped to the floor. Eddy froze. He parted his lips, sucking at the damp air. She had the body of a woman-full-hipped with breasts that both jutted and hung. And with that pretty child's face-Eddy felt hot breath forcing out between his lips. He muttered, "*Julie, Julie, Julie*-" Julie turned away to dress.

The idea was insane. He knew it but he couldn't get away from it. No matter how he tried to think of something else, it kept returning.

He'd invite her to a drive-in movie, drug her Coke there, take her to the *Hiway Motel*. To guarantee his safety afterward, he'd take photographs of her and threaten to send them to her parents if she said anything.

The idea was insane. He knew it but he couldn't fight it. He had to do it now-now when she was still a stranger to him; an unknown female with a child's face and a woman's body. That was what he wanted; not an individual.

No! It was insane! He cut his English class twice in succession. He drove home for the weekend. He saw a lot of movies. He read magazines and took long walks. He could beat this thing.

Miss Eldridge?"

Julie stopped. As she turned to face him, the sun made ripples on her hair. She looked very pretty, Eddy thought.

"Can I walk with you?" he asked.

"All right," she said.

They walked along the campus path.

"I was wondering," said Eddy, "if you'd like to go to the drive-in movie Friday night." He was startled at the calmness of his voice.

"Oh," said Julie. She glanced at him shyly. "What's playing?" she asked.

He told her.

"That sounds very nice," she said.

Eddy swallowed. "Good," he answered. "What time shall I pick you up?"

He wondered, later, if it made her curious that he didn't ask her where she lived.

There was a light burning on the porch of the house she roomed in. Eddy pushed the bell and waited, watching two moths flutter around the light. After several moments, Julie opened the door. She looked almost beautiful, he thought. He'd never seen her dressed so well.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," he answered. "Ready to go?"

"I'll get my coat." She went down the hall and into her room. In there, she'd stood naked that night, her body glowing in the light. Eddy pressed his teeth together. He'd be all right. She'd never tell anyone when she saw the photographs he was going to take.

Julie came back down the hallway and they went out to the car. Eddy opened the door for her.

"Thank you," she murmured. As she sat down, Eddy caught a glimpse of stockinged knees before she pulled her skirt down. He slammed the door and walked around the car. His throat felt parched.

Ten minutes later, he nosed the car onto an empty ramp in the last row of the drive-in theatre and cut the engine. He reached outside and lifted the speaker off its pole and hooked it over the window. There was a cartoon playing.

"You want some popcorn and Coke?" he asked, feeling a sudden bolt of dread that she might say no.

"Yes. Thank you," Julie said.

"I'll be right back." Eddy pushed out of the car and started for the snack bar. His legs were shaking.

He waited in the milling crowd of students, seeing only his thoughts. Again and again, he shut the cabin door and locked it, pulled the shades down, turned on all the lights, switched on the wall heater. Again and again, he walked over to where Julie lay stupefied and helpless on the bed.

"Yours?" said the attendant.

Eddy started. "Uh-two popcorns and a large and a small Coke," he said.

He felt himself begin to shiver convulsively. He couldn't do it. He might go to jail the rest of his life. He paid the man mechanically and moved off with the cardboard tray. The photographs, you idiot, he thought. They're your protection. He felt angry desire shudder through his body. Nothing was going to stop him. On the way back to the car, he emptied the contents of the packet into the small Coke.

Julie was sitting quietly when he opened the door and slid back in. The feature had begun.

"Here's your Coke," he said. He handed her the small cup with her box of popcorn.

"Thank you," said Julie.

Eddy sat watching the picture. He felt his heart thud slowly like a beaten drum. He felt bugs of perspiration running down his back and sides. The popcorn was dry and tasteless. He kept drinking Coke to wet his throat. Soon now, he thought. He pressed his lips together and stared at the screen. He heard Julie eating popcorn, he heard her drinking Coke.

The thoughts were coming faster now: the door locked, the shades drawn, the room a bright-lit oven as they twisted on the bed together. Now they were doing things that Eddy almost never thought of-wild, demented things. It was her face, he thought; that damned angel's face of hers. It made the mind seek out every black avenue it could find.

Eddy glanced over at Julie. He felt his hands retract so suddenly that he spilled Coke on his trousers. Her empty cup had fallen on the floor, the box of popcorn turned over on her lap. Her head was lying on the seat back and, for one hideous moment, Eddy thought she was dead.

Then she inhaled raspily and turned her head towards him. He saw her tongue move, dark and sluggish, on her lips.

Suddenly, he was deadly calm again. He picked the speaker off the window and hung it up outside. He threw out the cups and boxes. He started the engine and backed out into the aisle. He turned on his parking lights and drove out of the theatre.

*Hiway Motel.* The sign blinked off and on a quarter of a mile away. For a second, Eddy thought he read *No Vacancy* and he made a frightened sound. Then he saw that he was wrong. He was still trembling as he circled the car around the drive and parked to one side of the office.

Bracing himself, he went inside and rang the bell. He was very calm and the man didn't say a word to him. He had Eddy fill out the registration card and gave him the key.

Eddy pulled his car into the breezeway beside the cabin. He put his camera in the room, then went out and looked around. There was no one in sight. He ran to the car and opened the door. He carried Julie to the cabin door, his shoes crunching quickly on the gravel. He carried her into the dark room and dropped her on the bed.

Then it was his dream coming true. The door was locked. He moved around the room on quivering legs, pulling down the shades. He turned on the wall heater. He found the light switch by the door and pushed it up. He turned on all the lamps and pulled their shades off. He dropped one of them and it rolled across the rug. He left it there. He went over to where Julie lay.

In falling to the bed, her skirt had pulled up to her thighs. He could see the tops of her stockings and the garter buttons fastened to them. Swallowing, Eddy sat down and drew her up into a sitting position. He took her sweater off. Shakily, he reached around her and unhooked her bra; her breasts slipped free. Quickly, he unzipped her skirt and pulled it down.

In seconds, she was naked. Eddy propped her against the pillows, posing her. *Dear God, the body on her.* Eddy closed his eyes and shuddered. *No,* he thought, *this is the important part.* First get the photographs and you'll be safe. She can't do anything to you then; she'll be too scared. He stood up, tensely, and got his camera. He set the dials. He got her centred on the viewer. Then he spoke.

"Open your eyes," he said.

Julie did.

He was at her house before six the next morning, moving up the alley cautiously and into the yard outside her window. He hadn't slept all night. His eyes felt dry and hot.

Julie was on her bed exactly as he'd placed her. He looked at her a moment, his heartbeat slow and heavy. Then he raked a nail across the screen. "Julie," he said.

She murmured indistinctly and turned onto her side. She faced him now.

"Julie."

Her eyes fluttered open. She stared at him dazedly. "Who's that?" she asked.

"Eddy. Let me in."

"Eddy?"

Suddenly, she caught her breath and shrank back and he knew that she remembered.

"Let me in or you're in trouble," he muttered. He could feel his legs begin to shake.

Julie lay motionless a few seconds, eyes fixed on his. Then she pushed to her feet and weaved unsteadily towards the door. Eddy turned for the alley. He strode down it nervously and started up the porch steps as she came outside.

"What do you want?" she whispered. She looked exciting, half asleep, her clothes and hair all mussed.

"Inside," he said.

Julie stiffened. "No."

"All right, come on," he said, taking her hand roughly. "We'll talk in my car."

She walked with him to the car and, as he slid in beside her, he saw that she was shivering.

"I'll turn on the heater," he said. It sounded stupidly inane. He was here to threaten her, not comfort. Angrily, he started the engine and drove away from the curb.

"Where are we going?" Julie asked.

He didn't know at first. Then, suddenly, he thought of the place outside of town where dating students always parked. It would be deserted at this hour. Eddy felt a swollen tingling in his body and he pressed down on the accelerator. Sixteen minutes later, the car was standing in the silent woods. A pale mist hung

across the ground and seemed to lap at the doors.

Julie wasn't shivering now; the inside of the car was hot.

"What is it?" she asked, faintly.

Impulsively, Eddy reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out the photographs. He threw them on her lap.

Julie didn't make a sound. She just stared down at the photographs with frozen eyes, her fingers twitching as she held them.

"Just in case you're thinking of calling the police," Eddy faltered. He clenched his teeth. *Tell her!* he thought savagely. In a dull, harsh voice, he told her everything he'd done the night before. Julie's face grew pale and rigid as she listened. Her hands pressed tautly at each other. Outside, the mist appeared to rise around the windows like a chalky fluid. It surrounded them.

"You want money?" Julie whispered.

"Take off your clothes," he said. It wasn't his voice, it occurred to him. The sound of it was too malignant, too inhuman.

Then Julie whimpered and Eddy felt a surge of blinding fury boil upward in him. He jerked his hand back, saw it flail out in a blur of movement, heard the sound of it striking her on the mouth, felt the sting across his knuckles.

*"Take them off!"* His voice was deafening in the stifling closeness of the car. Eddy blinked and gasped for breath. He stared dizzily at Julie as, sobbing, she began to take her clothes off. There was a thread of blood trickling from a corner of her mouth. *No, don't,* he heard a voice beg in his mind. *Don't do this.* It faded quickly as he reached for her with alien hands.

When he got home at ten that morning there was blood and skin under his nails. The sight of it made him violently ill. He lay trembling on his bed, lips quivering, eyes staring at the ceiling. *I'm through,* he thought. He had the photographs. He didn't have to see her any more. It would destroy him if he saw her any more. Already, his brain felt like rotting sponge, so bloated with corruption that the pressure of his skull caused endless overflow into his thoughts. Trying to sleep, he thought, instead, about the bruises on her lovely body, the ragged scratches, and the bite marks. He heard her screaming in his mind.

*He would not see her any more.*

## DECEMBER

Julie opened her eyes and saw tiny falling shadows on the wall. She turned her head and looked out through the window. It was beginning to snow. The whiteness of it reminded her of the morning Eddy had first shown her the photographs.

*The photographs.* That was what had woken her. She closed her eyes and concentrated. They were burning. She could see the prints and negatives scattered on the bottom of a large enamel pan-the kind used for developing film. Bright flames crackled on them and the enamel was smudging.

Julie held her breath. She pushed her mental gaze further- to scan the room that was lit by the flaming enamel pan-until it came to rest upon the broken thing that dangled and swayed, suspended from the closet hook.

She sighed. It hadn't lasted very long. That was the trouble with a mind like Eddy's. The very weakness which made it vulnerable to her soon broke it down. Julie opened her eyes, her ugly child's face puckered in a smile. Well, there were others.

She stretched her scrawny body languidly. Posing at the window, the drugged Coke, the motel photographs-these were getting dull by now although that place in the woods was wonderful. Especially in the early morning with the mist outside, the car like an oven. That she'd keep for a while; and the violence of course. The rest would have to go. She'd think of something better next time.

Philip Harrison had never noticed the girl in his Physics class until that day-

I had the weight that night  
I mean I had the blues and no one hides the blues away  
You got to wash them out  
Or you end up riding a slow drag to nowhere  
You got to let them fly  
I mean you got to

I play trumpet in this barrelhouse off Main Street  
Never mind the name of it  
It's like scumpteen other cellar drink dens  
Where the downtown ofays bring their loot and jive talk  
And listen to us try to blow out notes  
As white and pure as we can never be

Like I told you, I was gully low that night  
Brassing at the great White way  
Lipping back a sass in jazz that Rone got off in words  
And died for  
Hitting at the jug and loaded  
Spiking gin and rage with shaking miseries  
I had no food in me and wanted none  
I broke myself to pieces in a hungry night

This white I'm getting off on showed at ten  
Collared him a table near the stand  
And sat there nursing at a glass of wine  
Just casing us  
All the way into the late watch he was there  
He never budged or spoke a word  
But I could see that he was picking up  
On what was going down  
He got into my mouth, man  
He bothered me

At four I crawled down off the stand  
And that was when this ofay stood and put his grabber on my arm  
'May I speak to you?' he asked The way I felt I took no shine  
To pink hands wrinkling up my gaberline  
'Broom off, stud,' I let him know  
'Please,' he said, 'I have to speak to you.'

Call me blowtop, call me Uncle Tom  
Man, you're not far wrong  
Maybe my brain was nowhere  
But I sat down with Mister Pink and told him - lay his racket  
'You've lost someone,' he said.

It hit me like a belly chord  
'What do you know about it, white man?'  
I felt that hating pick up tempo in my guts again

'I don't know anything about it,' he replied  
'I only know you've lost someone  
'*You've told it to me with your horn a hundred times.*'  
I felt evil crawling in my belly  
'Let's get this straight,' I said  
'Don't hype me, man; don't give me stuff  
'Listen to me then,' he said.

'Jazz isn't only music  
'It's a language too  
'A language born of protest  
'Torn in bloody ragtime from the womb of anger and despair  
'A secret tongue with which the legions of abused  
'Cry out their misery and their troubled hates.'  
'This language has a million dialects and accents  
'It may be a tone of bitter sweetness whispered in a brass-lined throat  
'Or rush of frenzy screaming out of reed mouths  
'Or hammering at strings in vibrant piano hearts  
'Or pulsing, savage, under taut-drawn hides

'In dark-peaked stridencies it can reveal the aching core of sorrow  
'Or cry out the new millennium  
'Its voices are without number  
'Its forms beyond statistic  
'It is, in very fact, *an endless tonal revolution*  
'The pleading furies of the damned  
'Against the cruelty of their damnation  
'I know this language, friend,' he said.

'What about my -?' I began and cut off quick  
'Your - *what*, friend?' he inquired  
'Someone near to you; I know that much  
'Not a woman though; your trumpet wasn't grieving for a woman loss  
'Someone in your family; your father maybe  
'Or your brother.'

I gave him words that tiger-prowled behind my teeth  
'You're hanging over trouble, man  
'Don't break the thread  
'Give it to me straight.'  
So Mister Pink leaned in and laid it down  
'I have a sound machine,' he said  
'Which can convert the forms of jazz  
'Into the sympathies which made them  
'If, into my machine, I play a sorrowing blues  
'From out the speaker comes the human sentiment  
'Which felt those blues  
'And fashioned them into the secret tongue of jazz.'

He dug the same old question stashed behind my eyes  
'How do I know you've lost someone?' he asked

'I've heard so many blues and stomps and strutting jazzes  
'Changed, in my machine, to sounds of anger, hopelessness and joy  
'That I can understand the language now  
'The story that you told was not a new one  
'Did you think you were inviolate behind your tapestry of woven brass?'

'Don't hype me, man,' I said  
I let my fingers rigor mortis on his arm  
He didn't ruffle up a hair  
'If you don't believe me, come and see,' he said  
'Listen to my machine  
'Play your trumpet into it  
'You'll see that everything I've said is true.'  
I felt shivers like a walking bass inside my skin  
'Well, will you come?' he asked.

Rain was pressing drum rolls on the roof  
As Mister Pink turned tires onto Main Street  
I sat dummied in his coupe  
My sacked-up trumpet on my lap  
Listening while he rolled off words  
Like Stacy runnings on a tinkle box

'Consider your top artists in the genre  
'Armstrong, Bechet, Waller, Hines  
'Goodman, Mezzrow, Spanier, dozens more both male and female  
'Jews and Negroes all and why?  
'Why are the greatest jazz interpreters  
'Those who live beneath the constant gravity of prejudice?  
'I think because the scaldings of external bias  
'Focus all their vehemence and suffering  
'To a hot, explosive core  
'And, from this nucleus of restriction  
'Comes all manner of fissions, violent and slow  
'Breaking loose in brief expression  
'Of the tortures underneath  
'Crying for deliverance in the unbreakable code of jazz.'  
He smiled. '*Unbreakable till now*,' he said.

'Rip bop doesn't do it  
'Jump and mop-mop only cloud the issue  
'They're like jellied coatings over true response  
'Only the authentic jazz can break the pinions of repression  
'Liberate the heart-deep mournings  
'Unbind the passions, give freedom to the longing essence  
'You understand?' he asked.  
'I understand,' I said, knowing why I came.

Inside his room, he flipped the light on, shut the door  
Walked across the room and slid away a cloth that covered his machine  
'Come here,' he said

I suspicioned him of hyping me but good  
His jazz machine was just a jungleful of scraggy tubes and wheels  
And scumpteen wires boogity-boogity  
Like a black-snake brawl  
I double-o'ed the heap  
'That's really in there, man,' I said  
And couldn't help but smile a cutting smile  
Right off he grabbed a platter, stuck it down  
'Heebie-Jeebies; Armstrong  
'First, I'll play the record by itself,' he said

Any other time I'd bust my conk on Satchmo's scatting  
But I had the crawling heavies in me  
And I couldn't even loosen up a grin  
I stood there feeling nowhere  
While Daddy-O was tromping down the English tongue  
*Rip-bip-dee-doo-dee-doot-doo!*  
The Satch recited in his Model T baritone  
Then white man threw a switch

In one hot second all the crazy scat was nixed  
Instead, all pounding in my head  
There came a sound like bottled blowtops scuffling up a jamboree  
Like twenty tongue-tied hipsters in the next apartment Having them a ball  
Something frosted up my spine  
I felt the shakes do get-off chorus in my gut  
And even though I knew that Mister Pink was smiling at me  
I couldn't look him back  
My heart was set to knock a doorway through my chest  
Before he cut his jazz machine

'You see?' he asked.  
I couldn't talk. He had the up on me  
'Electrically, I've caught the secret heart of jazz  
'Oh, I could play you many records  
'That would illustrate the many moods  
'Which generate this complicated tongue  
'But I would like for you to play in my machine  
'Record a minute's worth of solo  
'Then we'll play the record through the other speaker  
'And we'll hear exactly what you're feeling  
'Stripped of every sonic superficial. Right?'

I had to know  
I couldn't leave that place no more than fly  
So, while white man set his record maker up,  
I unsacked my trumpet, limbering up my lip  
All the time the heebies rising in my craw  
Like ice cubes piling

Then I blew it out again



The weight  
The dragging misery  
The bringdown blues that hung inside me  
Like twenty irons on a string  
And the string stuck to my guts with twenty hooks  
That kept on slicing me away  
I played for Rone, my brother

Rone who could have died a hundred different times and ways  
Rone who died, instead, down in the Murder Belt  
Where he was born  
Rone who thought he didn't have to take that same old stuff  
Rone who forgot and rumbled back as if he was a man  
And not a spade  
Rone who died without a single word  
Underneath the boots of Mississippi peckerwoods  
Who hated him for thinking he was human  
And kicked his brains out for it

That's what I played for  
I blew it hard and right  
And when I finished and it all came rushing back on me  
Like screaming in a black-walled pit  
I felt a coat of evil on my back  
With every scream a button that held the dark coat closer  
Till I couldn't get the air

That's when I crashed my horn on his machine  
That's when I knocked it on the floor  
And crunched it down and kicked it to a thousand pieces  
'You fool!' That's what he called me  
'*You damned black fool!*'  
All the time until I left

I didn't know it then  
I thought that I was kicking back for every kick  
That took away my only brother  
But now it's done and I can get off all the words  
I should have given Mister Pink

Listen, white man; listen to me good  
Buddy ghee, it wasn't you  
I didn't have no hate for you

Even though it was your kind that put my brother  
In his final place  
I'll knock it to you why I broke your jazz machine

I broke it 'cause I had to  
'Cause it did just what you said it did  
And, if I let it stand,

It would have robbed us of the only thing we have  
That's ours alone  
The thing no boot can kick away  
Or rope can choke

You cruel us and you kill us  
But listen, white man,  
These are only needles in our skin  
But if I'd let you keep on working your machine  
You'd know all our secrets  
And you'd steal the last of us  
And we'd blow away and never be again  
Take everything you want, Man  
You will because you have  
But don't come scuffling for our souls.

## 54 - The Edge

It was almost two before there was a chance for lunch. Until then his desk was snow-banked with demanding papers, his telephone rang constantly and an army of insistent visitors attacked his walls. By twelve, his nerves were pulled like violin strings knotted to their tightest. By one, the strings drew close to shearing; by one-thirty they began to snap. He had to get away; now, immediately; flee to some shadowy restaurant booth, have a cocktail and a leisurely meal; listen to somnolent music. He had to.

Down on the street, he walked beyond the zone of eating places he usually frequented, not wishing to risk seeing anyone he knew. About a quarter of a mile from the office he found a cellar restaurant named Franco's. At his request, the hostess led him to a rear booth where he ordered a martini; then, as the woman turned away, he stretched out his legs beneath the table and closed his eyes. A grateful sigh murmured from him. This was the ticket. Dim-lit comfort. Muzak thrumming at the bottom fringe of audibility, a curative drink. He signed again. A few more days like this, he thought, and I'm gone.

'Hi, Don.'

He opened his eyes in time to see the man drop down across from him, 'How goes it?' asked the man. 'What?' Donald Marshall stared at him.

'Gawd,' said the man. 'What a day, what a day.' He grinned tiredly. 'You, too?'

'I don't believe -' began Marshall.

'Ah!' the man said, nodding, pleased, as a waitress brought the martini. 'That for me. Another, please; dryer than dry.'

'Yes, sir,' said the waitress and was gone.

'There,' said the man, stretching. 'No place like Franco's for getting away from it all, eh?'

'Look here,' said Marshall, smiling awkwardly. 'I'm afraid you've made a mistake.'

'Hmmm?' The man leaned forward, smiling back.

'I say I'm afraid you've made a mistake.'

'I have?' The man grunted. 'What'd I do, forget to shave? I'm liable to. No?' he said as Marshall frowned. 'Wrong tie?'

'You don't understand,' said Marshall.

What?'

Marshall cleared his throat. 'I'm - not who you think I am,' he said.

'Huh?' The man leaned forward again, squinting. He straightened up, chuckling. 'What's the story, Don?' he asked.

Marshall fingered at the stem of his glass. 'Yes, what is the story?' he said, less politely now.

'I don't get you,' said the man.

'Who do you think I am?' asked Marshall, his voice rising a little.

The man began to speak, gaped a trifle, then began to speak again. 'What do you mean who do I -?' He broke off as the waitress brought the second martini. They both sat quietly until she was gone.

'Now,' said the man curiously.

'Look, I'm not going to accuse you of anything,' said Marshall, 'but you don't know me. You've never met me in your whole life.'

'I don't -!' The man couldn't finish; he looked flabbergasted. '*I don't know you?*' he said.

Marshall had to laugh. 'Oh this is ludicrous,' he said.

The man smiled appreciatively. 'I knew you were ribbing me,' he admitted, 'but - ' He shook his head. 'You had me going there for a second.'

Marshall put down his glass, the skin beginning to tighten across his cheeks.

'I'd say this had gone about far enough,' he said. 'I'm in no mood for - '

'Don,' the man broke in. 'What's wrong?'

Marshall drew in a deep breath, then let it waver out. 'Oh, well,' he said, 'I suppose it's an honest mistake.' He forced a smile. 'Who *do* you think I am?'

The man didn't answer. He looked at Marshall intently.

'Well?' asked Marshall, beginning to lose patience.

'This isn't a joke?' said the man,

'Now, look - '

'No, wait, wait,' the man said, raising one hand. 'I... suppose it's possible there could be two men who look so much alike they - '

He stopped abruptly and looked at Marshall. 'Don, you're *not* ribbing me, are you?'

'Now listen to me -!'

'All right, I apologise,' said the man. He sat gazing at Marshall for a moment; then he shrugged and smiled perplexedly. 'I could have sworn you were Don Marshall,' he said.

Marshall felt something cold gathering around his heart.

'I am,' he heard himself say.

The only sound in the restaurant was that of the music and the delicate clink of silverware.

'What is this?' asked the man.

'You tell me,' said Marshall in a thin voice.

'You - ' The man looked carefully at him. 'This is not a joke,' he said.

'Now see here!'

'All right, all right, The man raised both his hands in a conciliatory gesture. 'It's not a joke. You claim I don't know you. All right. Granting that leaves us with - with *this*: a man who not only looks exactly like my friend but has exactly the same name. Is this possible?'

'Apparently so,' said Marshall.

Abruptly, he picked up his glass and took momentary escape in the martini. The man did the same. The waitress came for their orders and Marshall told her to come back later.

'What's your name?' he asked then.

'Arthur Nolan,' said the man.

Marshall gestured conclusively. 'I don't know you,' he said. There was a slight loosening of tension in his stomach.

The man leaned back and stared at Marshall. 'This is fantastic,' he said. He shook his head. 'Utterly fantastic'

Marshall smiled and lowered his eyes to the glass.

'Where do you work?' asked the man.

'American-Pacific Steamship,' Marshall answered, glancing up. He felt the beginning of enjoyment in himself. This was, certainly, something to take one's mind off the wrack of the day.

The man looked examiningly at him; and Marshall sensed the enjoyment fading.

Suddenly the man laughed.

'You must have had one sweet hell of a morning, buddy,' he said.

'What?'

'No more,' said the man.

'Listen -'

'I capitulate,' said Nolan, grinning. 'You're curdling my gin.'

'Listen to me, damn it!' snapped Marshall.

The man looked startled. His mouth fell open and he put his drink down. 'Don, what is it?' he asked, concerned now.

'You do not know me,' said Marshall, very carefully. 'I do not know you. Will you kindly accept that?'

The man looked around as if for help. Then he leaned in close and spoke, his voice soft and worried.

'Don, listen. Honestly. You don't know me?'

Marshall drew in a deep breath, teeth clenched against rising fury. The man drew back. The look on his face was, suddenly, frightening to Marshall.

'One of us is out of his mind,' Marshall said. The levity he'd intended never appeared in his voice.

Nolan swallowed raggedly. He looked down at his drink as if unable to face the other man.

Marshall suddenly laughed. 'Dear Lord,' he said, 'What a scene. You really think you know me, don't you?'

The man grimaced. 'The Don Marshall I know,' he said, 'also works for American-Pacific.'

Marshall shuddered. 'That's impossible,' he said.

'No,' said the man flatly.

For a moment Marshall got the notion that this was some sort of insidious plot against him; but the distraught expression on the man's face weakened the suspicion. He took a sip of his martini, then, carefully, set down the glass and laid his palms on the table as if seeking the reinforcement of its presence.

'American-Pacific Steamship Lines?' he asked.

The man nodded once. 'Yes.'

Marshall shook his head obdurately; 'No,' he said. 'There's no other Marshall in our offices. Unless,' he added, quickly, 'one of our clerks downstairs -'

'You're an -' The man broke off nervously. 'He's an executive,' he said.

Marshall drew his hands in slowly and put them in his lap. 'Then I don't understand,' he said. He wished, instantly, he hadn't said it.

'This... man told you he worked there?' he asked quickly.

'Yes.'

'Can you prove he works there?' Marshall challenged, his voice breaking, 'Can you prove his name is really Don Marshall?'

'Don, I -'

'Well, *can* you?'

'Are you married?' asked the man.

Marshall hesitated. Then, clearing his throat, he said, 'I am.'

Nolan leaned forward. 'To Ruth Foster?' he asked.

Marshall couldn't hide his involuntary gasp.

'Do you live on the Island?' Nolan pressed.

'Yes,' said Marshall weakly, 'but -'

'In Huntington?'

Marshall hadn't even the strength to nod.

'Did you go to Columbia University?'

'Yes, but -' His teeth were on edge now.

'Did you graduate in June, nineteen forty?'

'No!' Marshall clutched at this. 'I graduated in January, nineteen forty-one. Forty-one!'

'Were you a lieutenant in the Army?' asked Nolan, paying no attention.

Marshall felt himself slipping. 'Yes,' he muttered, 'but you said -'

*'In the Eighty-Seventh Division?'*

'Now wait a minute!' Marshall pushed aside the nearly empty glass as if to make room for his rebuttal. 'I can give you two very good explanations for this... this fool confusion.'

One: a man who looks like me and knows a few things about me is pretending to be me; Lord knows why.

Two: you know about me and you're trying to snare me into something. No, you can argue all you like!' he persisted, almost frantically, as the man began to object. 'You can ask all the questions you like; but I know who I am and I know who I know!'

'Do you?' asked the man. He looked dazed.

Marshall felt his legs twitch sharply.

'Well, I have no intention of s-sitting here and arguing with you,' he said. 'This entire thing is absurd. I came here for some peace and quiet - a place I've never even been to before and -'

'Don, *we eat here all the time.*' Nolan looked sick.

'That's nonsense!'

Nolan rubbed a hand across his mouth. 'You... you actually think this is some kind of *con* game?' he asked.

Marshall stared at him. He could feel the heavy pulsing of his heart.

'Or that - *my God* - that there's a man impersonating you? Don...' The man lowered his eyes. 'I think - well, if I were you/ he said quietly, 'I'd - go to a doctor, a -'

'Let's stop this, shall we?' Marshall interrupted coldly. 'I suggest one of us leave.' He looked around the restaurant. 'There's plenty of room in here.'

He turned his eyes quickly from the man's stricken face and picked up his martini. 'Well?' he said.

The man shook his head. 'Dear God,' he murmured.

'I said let's stop it,' Marshall said through clenched teeth.

'That's it?' asked Nolan, incredulously. 'You're willing to -to let it go at that?'

Marshall started to get up.

'No, no, wait,' said Nolan. 'TU go.' He stared at Marshall blankly. 'I'll go,' he repeated.

Abruptly, he pushed to his feet as if there were a leaden mantle around his shoulders.

'I don't know what to say,' he said, 'but - for God's sake, Don - see a doctor.'

He stood by the side of the booth a moment longer, looking down at Marshall. Then, hastily, he turned and walked towards the front door. Marshall watched him leave.

When the man had gone he sank back against the booth wall and stared into his drink. He picked up the toothpick and mechanically stirred the impaled onion around in the glass. When the waitress came he ordered the first item he saw on the menu.

While he ate he thought about how insane it had been. For, unless the man Nolan was a consummate actor, he had been sincerely upset by what had happened.

What *had* happened? An out-and-out case of mistaken identity was one thing. A mistaken identity which seemed not quite wholly mistaken was another. How had the man known these things about him? About Ruth, Huntington, American-Pacific, even his lieutenantcy in the 87th Division? *How?*

Suddenly, it struck him.

Years ago he'd been a devotee of fantastic fiction - stories which dealt with trips to the moon, with travelling through time, with all of that. And one of the ideas used repeatedly was that of the alternate universe: a lunatic theory which stated that for every possibility there was a separate universe. Following his theory there might, conceivably, be a universe in which he knew this Nolan, ate at Franco's with him regularly and had graduated from Columbia a semester earlier.

It was absurd, really, yet there it was. What if, in entering Franco's, he had, accidentally, entered a universe one jot removed from the one he'd existed in at the office? What if, the thought expanded, people were, without knowing it, continually entering these universes one jot removed? What if he himself had continually entered them and never known until today - when, in an accidental entry, he had gone one step too far?

He closed his eyes and shuddered. Dear Lord, he thought; dear, heavenly Lord, I *have* been working too hard. He felt as if he were standing at the edge of a cliff waiting for someone to push him off. He tried hard not to think about his talk with Nolan. If he thought about it he'd have to fit into the pattern. He wasn't prepared to do that yet.

After a while he paid his check and left the restaurant, the food like cold lead in his stomach. He cabbed to Pennsylvania Station and, after a short wait, boarded a North Shore train. All the way to Huntington, he sat in the smoker car staring out at the passing countryside, an unlit cigarette between his fingers. The heavy pressure in his stomach wouldn't go away.

When Huntington was reached, he walked across the station to the cab stand and, deliberately, got into one of them.

'Take me home, will you?' he looked intently at the driver.

'Sure thing, Mr Marshall,' said the driver, smiling.

Marshall sank back with a wavering sigh and closed his eyes. There was a tingling at his fingertips.

'You're home early,' said the driver. 'Feeling poorly?'

Marshall swallowed. 'Just a headache,' he said.

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

As he rode home, Marshall kept staring at the town, despite himself, looking for discrepancies, for *differences*. But there were none; everything was just the same. He felt the pressure letting up.

Ruth was in the living room, sewing.

'Don.' She stood up and hurried to him. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, no,' he said putting down his hat. 'Just a headache.'

'Oh.' She led him, sympathetically, to a chair and helped him off with his suit coat and shoes. 'I'll get you something right away,' she said.

'Fine.' When she was gone upstairs, Marshall looked around the familiar room and smiled at it. It was all right now.

Ruth was coming down the stairs when the telephone rang. He started up, then fell back again as she called, 'I'll get it, darling.'

'All right,' he said.

He watched her in the hallway as she picked up the receiver and said hello. She listened. 'Yes, darling,' she said automatically. 'You -'

Then she stopped and, holding out the receiver, stared at it as if it were something monstrous in her hand.

She put it back to her ear. 'You... won't be home until late?' she asked in a faint voice.

Marshall sat there gaping at her, the beats of his heart like someone striking at him. Even when she turned to look at him, the receiver lowered in her hand, he couldn't turn away. Please, he thought. Please don't say it. *Please*.

'Who are you?' she asked.

## 55 - The Creeping Terror

### THESIS SUBMITTED AS PARTIAL REQUIREMENT FOR MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE

The phenomenon known in scientific circles as the Los Angeles Movement came to light in the year

1972 when Doctor Albert Grimsby, A.B., B.S., A.M., Ph.D., professor of physics at the California Institute of Technology, made an unusual discovery.

*'I have made an unusual discovery,' said Doctor Grimsby.*

*'What is that?' asked Doctor Maxwell.*

*'Los Angeles is alive.'*

*Doctor Maxwell blinked.*

*'I beg your pardon,' he said.*

*'I can understand your incredulity,' said Doctor Grimsby. 'Nevertheless...'*

*He drew Doctor Maxwell to the laboratory bench.*

*'Look into this microscope,' he said, 'under which I have isolated a piece of Los Angeles.;*

*Doctor Maxwell looked. He raised his head, a look of astonishment on his face.'*

*'it moves,' he said.*

Having made this strange discovery, Doctor Grimsby, oddly enough, saw fit to promulgate it only in the smallest degree. It appeared as a one-paragraph item in the *Science News Letter* of June 2, 1972, under the heading:

### ***CALTECH PHYSICIST FINDS SIGNS OF LIFE IN L.A.***

Perhaps due to unfortunate phrasing, perhaps to normal lack of interest, the item aroused neither attention nor comment. This unfortunate negligence proved ever after a plague to the man originally responsible for it. In later years it became known as 'Grimsby's Blunder'.

Thus was introduced to a then unresponsive nation a phenomenon which was to become in the following years a most shocking threat to that nation's very existence.

Of late, researchers have discovered that knowledge concerning the Los Angeles Movement predates Doctor Grimsby's find by years. Indeed, hints of this frightening crisis are to be found in works published as much as fifteen years prior to the ill-fated 'Caltech Disclosure'.

Concerning Los Angeles, the distinguished journalist, John Gunther, wrote: 'What distinguishes it is... it's octopus like growth.'<sup>(1)</sup>

Yet another reference to Los Angeles mentions that: 'In its amoeba like growth it has spread in all directions... '<sup>(2)</sup>

Thus can be seen primitive approaches to the phenomenon which are as perceptive as they are unaware. Although there is no present evidence to indicate that any person during that early period actually knew of the fantastic process, there can, hardly be any doubt that many sensed it, if only imperfectly.

Active speculation regarding freakish nature behaviour began in July and August of 1972. During a period of approximately forty-seven days the states of Arizona and Utah in their entirety and great portions of New Mexico and lower Colorado were inundated by rains that frequently bettered the five-inch mark.

Such water fall in previously arid sections aroused great agitation and discussion. First theories placed responsibility for this uncommon rainfall on previous south western atomic tests.<sup>(8)</sup> Government disclaiming of this possibility seemed to increase rather than eliminate mass credulity to this later disproved supposition.

Other 'precipitation postulations' as they were then known in Investigative parlance can be safely relegated to the category of 'crackpotia.'<sup>(4)</sup> These include theories that excess commercial air flights were upsetting the natural balance of the clouds, that deranged Indian rain-makers had unwittingly come upon some lethal condensation factor and were applying it beyond all sanity, that strange frost from outer space was seeding Earth's overhead and causing this inordinate precipitation.

And, as seems an inevitable concomitant to all alien deportment in nature, hypotheses were propounded that this heavy rainfall presaged *Deluge II*. It is clearly recorded that several minor religious

groups began hasty construction of 'Salvation Arks'. One of these arks can still be seen on the outskirts of the small town of Dry Rot, New Mexico, built on a small hill, 'still waiting for the flood'.(5)

Then came that memorable day when the name of a farmer Cyrus Mills became a household word.

*'Tarnation!'* said farmer Mills.

*He gaped in rustic amazement at the object he had come across in his corn field. He approached it cautiously. He prodded it with a sausage finger.*

*'Tarnation,' he repeated, less volubly.*

*Jason Gullwhistle of the United States Experimental Farm Station No. 3, Nebraska, drove his station wagon out to farmer Milk's farm in answer to an urgent phone call. Farmer Mills took Mr Gullwhistle out to the object.*

*'That's odd,' said Jason Gullwhistle. 'It looks like an orange tree.'*(9)

*Close investigation revealed the truth of this remark. It was, indeed, an orange tree.*

*'Incredible,' said Jason Gullwhistle. 'An orange tree in the middle of a Nebraska corn field. I never.'*

*Later they returned to the house for a lemonade and there found Mrs Mills in halter and shorts wearing sunglasses and an old chewed-up fur jacket she had exhumed from her crumbling hope chest.*

*'Think I'll drive into Hollywood/ said Mrs Mills, sixty-five if she was a day.*

By nightfall every wire service had embraced the item, every paper of any prominence whatever had featured it as a humorous insertion on page one.

Within a week, however, the humour had vanished as reports came pouring in from every corner of the state of Nebraska as well as portions of Iowa, Kansas and Colorado; reports of citrus trees discovered in corn and wheat fields as well as more alarming reports relative to eccentric behaviour in the rural populace.

Addiction to the wearing of scanty apparel became noticeable, an inexplicable rise in the sales of frozen orange juice manifested itself and oddly similar letters were received by dozens of chambers of commerce; letters which heatedly demanded the immediate construction of motor speedways, supermarkets, tennis courts, drive-in theatres and drive-in restaurants and which complained of smog.

But it was not until a marked decrease in daily temperatures and an equally marked increase of unfathomable citrus tree growth began to imperil the corn and wheat crop that serious action was taken. Local farm groups organised spraying operations but to little or no avail. Orange, lemon and grapefruit trees continued to flourish in geometric proliferation and a nation, at long last, became alarmed.

A seminar of the country's top scientists met in Ragweed, Nebraska, the geographical centre of this multiplying plague, to discuss possibilities.

*'Dynamic tremors in the alluvial substrata,' said Doctor Kenneth Loam of the University of Denver.*

*'Mass chemical disorder in soil composition,' said Spencer Smith of the Dupont Laboratories.*

*'Momentous gene mutation in the corn seed,' said Professor Jeremy Brass of Kansas College.*

*'Violent contraction of the atmospheric dome,' said Professor Lawson Hinkson of M.I.T.*

*'Displacement of orbit,' said Roger Cosmos of the Hayden Planetarium.*

*'I'm scared,' said a little man from Turdue.*

What positive results emerged from this body of speculative genius is yet to be appraised. History records that a closer labelling of the cause of this unusual behaviour in nature and man occurred in early



October 1972 when Associate Professor David Silver, young research physicist at the University of Missouri, published in *The Scientific American* an article entitled, 'The Collecting of Evidences'.

In this brilliant essay, Professor Silver first voiced the opinion that all the apparently disconnected occurrences were, in actuality, superficial revelations of one underlying phenomenon. To the moment of this article, scant attention had been paid to the erratic behaviour of people in the affected areas. Mr Silver attributed this behaviour to the same cause which had effected the alien growth of citrus trees.

The final deductive link was forged, oddly enough, in a Sunday supplement to the now defunct Hearst newspaper syndicate.(6) The author of this piece, a professional article writer, in doing research for an article, stumbled across the paragraph recounting Doctor Grimsby's discovery. Seeing in this a most salable feature, he wrote an article combining the theses of Doctor Grimsby and Professor Silver and emerging with his own amateur concept which, strange to say, was absolutely correct. (This fact was later obscured in the severe litigation that arose when Professors Grimsby and Silver brought suit against the author for not consulting them before writing the article.)

Thus did it finally become known that Los Angeles, like some gigantic fungus, was overgrowing the land.

A period of gestation followed during which various publications in the country slowly built up the import of the Los Angeles Movement, until it became a national by-word. It was during this period that a fertile-minded columnist dubbed Los Angeles 'Ellie, the meandering metropolis',(7) a title later reduced merely to 'Ellie' - a term which became as common to the American mind as 'ham and eggs' or 'World War III'.

Now began a cycle of data collection and an attempt by various of the prominent sciences to analyse the Los Angeles Movement with a regard to arresting its strange pilgrimage which had now spread into parts of South Dakota, Missouri, Arkansas and as far as the sovereign state of Texas. (To the mass convulsion this caused in the Lone Star State a separate paper might be devoted.)

### ***REPUBLICANS DEMAND FULL INVESTIGATION Claim L.A. Movement Subversive Camouflage***

After a hasty dispatch of agents to all points in the infected area, the American Medical Association promulgated throughout the nation a list of symptoms by which all inhabitants might be forewarned of the approaching terror.

#### ***SYMPTOMS OF 'ELLIETIS' (7)***

1. An unnatural craving for any of the citrus fruits whether in solid or liquid form.
2. Partial or complete loss of geographical distinction. (i.e. A person in Kansas City might speak of driving down to San Diego for the week-end.)
3. An unnatural desire to possess a motor vehicle.
4. An unnatural appetite for motion pictures and motion picture previews. (Including a subsidiary symptom, not all-inclusive but nevertheless a distinct menace. This is the insatiable hunger of young girls to become movie stars.)
5. A taste for weird apparel. (Including fur jackets, shorts, halters, slacks, sandals, blue jeans and bathing suits - all usually of excessive colour.)

This list, unfortunately, proved most inadequate, for its avowed purpose. It did not mention, for one thing, the adverse effect of excess sunlight on residents of the northern states. With the expected approach to winter being forestalled indefinitely, numerous unfortunates, unable to adjust to this

alteration, became neurotic and, often, lost their senses completely.

The story of Matchbox, North Dakota, a small town in the northernmost part of that state, is typical of accounts which flourished throughout the late fall and winter of 1972.

The citizens of this ill-fated town went berserk to a man waiting for the snow and, eventually running amuck, burned their village to the ground.

The pamphlet also failed to mention the psychological phenomenon known later as 'Beach Seeking',<sup>(8)</sup> a delusion under which masses of people, wearing bathing suits and carrying towels and blankets, wandered helplessly across the plains and prairies searching for the Pacific Ocean.

In October, the Los Angeles Movement (the process was given this more staid title in late September by Professor Augustus Wrench in a paper sent to the National Council of American Scientists) picked up momentum and, in a space of ten days, had engulfed Arkansas, Missouri and Minnesota and was creeping rapidly into the borderlands of Illinois, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana. Smog drifted across the nation.

Up to this point, citizens on the east coast had been interested in the phenomenon but not overly perturbed since distance from the diseased territory had lent detachment. Now, however, as the Los Angeles city limits stalked closer and closer to them, the coastal region became alarmed.

Legislative activity in Washington was virtually terminated as Congressmen were inundated with letters of protest and demand. A special committee, heretofore burdened by general public apathy in the east, now became enlarged by the added membership of several distinguished Congressmen, and a costly probe into the problem ensued.

It was this committee that, during the course of its televised hearings, unearthed a secret group known as the L.A. Firsters.

This insidious organisation seemed to have sprung almost spontaneously from the general chaos of the Los Angeles envelopment. General credence was given for a short time that it was another symptom of 'Ellieitis'. Intense interrogation, however, revealed the existence of L.A. Firster cells<sup>(8)</sup> in east coast cities that could not possibly have been subject to the dread virus at that point.

This revelation struck terror into the heart of a nation. The presence of such calculated subversion in this moment of trial almost unnerved the national will. For it was not merely an organisation loosely joined by emotional binds. This faction possessed a carefully wrought hierarchy of men and women which was plotting the overthrow of the national government. Nationwide distribution of literature had begun almost with the advent of the Los Angeles Movement. This literature, with the cunning of insurgent, casuistry, painted a roseate picture of the future of - The United States of Los Angeles!

### ***PEOPLE ARISE! (9)***

People arise! Cast off the shackles of reaction! What sense is there in opposing the march of PROGRESS! It is inevitable! - and you the people of this glorious land - a land dearly bought with *your* blood and *your* tears -should realise that *Nature herself* supports the L.A. FIRSTERS!

How? - you ask. How does Nature support this glorious adventure? The question is simple enough to answer.

NATURE HAS SUPPORTED THE L.A. FIRSTER MOVEMENT FOR THE BETTERMENT OF YOU! AND *YOU!*

Here are a few facts:

In those states that have been blessed.

1. Rheumatism has dropped 52%
2. Pneumonia has dropped 61%
3. Frostbite has *vanished*;
4. Incidence of the COMMON COLD has dropped 73%!

Is this bad news? Are these the changes brought about by anti-PROGRESS? NO!!!

Wherever Los Angeles has gone, the deserts have fled, adding millions of new fertile acres to our beloved land. Where once there was only sand and cactus and are now plants and trees and FLOWERS!

This pamphlet closes with a couplet which aroused a nation to fury:

*Sing out O land, with flag unfurled! Los Angeles! Tomorrow's World!*

The exposure of the L.A. Firsters caused a tide of reaction to sweep the country. Rage became the keynote of this counterrevolution; rage at the subtlety with which the L.A. Firsters had distorted truth in their literature; rage at their arrogant assumption that the country would inevitably fall to Los Angeles.

Slogans of 'Down with the L.A. Lovers!' and 'Send Them Back Where They Came From!' rang throughout the land. A measure was forced through Congress and presidential signature outlawing the group and making membership in it an offence of treason. Rabid groups attached a rider to this measure which would have enforced the outlawry, seizure and destruction of all tennis and beach supply manufacturing. Here, however, the N.A.M. stepped into the scene and, through the judicious use of various pressure means, defeated the attempt.

Despite this quick retaliation, the L.A. Firsters continued underground and at least one fatality of its persistent agitation was the state of Missouri.

In some manner, as yet undisclosed, the L.A. Firsters gained control of the state legislature and jockeyed through an amendment to the constitution of Missouri which was hastily ratified and made the Show-Me State the first area in the country to legally make itself a part of Los Angeles County.

### ***UTTER McKINLEY OVENS FIVE NEW PARWURS IN THE SOUTHWEST***

In the succeeding months there emerged a notable upsurge in the productions of automobiles, particularly those of the convertible variety. In those states affected by the Los Angeles Movement, every citizen, apparently, had acquired that symptom of 'Ellieitis' known as *automania*. The car industry entered accordingly upon a period of peak production, its factories turning out automobiles twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

In conjunction with this increase in automotive fabrication, there began a near maniacal splurge in the building of drive-in restaurants and theatres. These sprang up with mushroom-like celerity through western and midwestern United States, their planning going beyond all feasibility. Typical of these thoughtless projects was the endeavour to hollow out a mountain and convert it into a drive-in theatre.(10)

As the month of December approached, the Los Angeles Movement engulfed Illinois, Wisconsin, Mississippi, half of Tennessee and was lapping at the shores of Indiana, Kentucky and Alabama. (No mention will be made of the profound effect this movement had on racial segregation in the South, this subject demanding a complete investigation in itself.)

It was about this time that a wave of religious passion obsessed the nation. As is the nature of the human mind suffering catastrophe, millions turned to religion. Various cults had in this calamity grist for their metaphysical mills.

Typical of these were the San Bernadino Vine Worshipers who claimed Los Angeles to be the reincarnation of their deity Ochsalia - The Vine Divine. The San Diego Sons of the Weed claimed in turn that Los Angeles was a sister embodiment to their deity which they claimed had been creeping for three decades prior to the Los Angeles Movement.

Unfortunately for all concerned, a small fascistic clique began to usurp control of many of these otherwise harmless cults, emphasising dominance through 'power and energy'. As a result, these religious bodies too often degenerated into mere fronts for political cells which plotted the overthrow of the government for purposes of self-aggrandisement (Secret documents discovered in later years revealed the intention of one perfidious brotherhood of converting the Pentagon Building into an indoor race track.)

During a period beginning in September and extending for years, there also ensued a studied expansion of the motion picture industry. Various of the major producers opened branch studios throughout the country (for example M.G.M. built one in Terre Haute, Paramount in Cincinnati and Twentieth Century Fox in Tulsa). The Screen Writer's Guild initiated branch offices in every large city and the term 'Hollywood' became even more of a misnomer than it had previously been.

Motion-picture output more than quadrupled as theatres of all description were hastily erected everywhere west of the Mississippi, sometimes wall to wall for blocks.<sup>(11)</sup> These buildings were rarely well constructed and often collapsed within weeks of their 'grand openings'.

Yet, in spite of the incredible number of theatres, motion pictures exceeded them in quantity (if not quality). It was in compensation for this economically dangerous situation that the studios inaugurated the expedient practice of burning films in order to maintain the stability of the price floor. This aroused great antipathy among the smaller studios who did not produce enough films to burn any.'

Another liability involved in the production of motion pictures was the geometric increase in difficulties raised by small but voluble pressure groups.

One typical coterie was the Anti-Horse League of Dallas which put up strenuous opposition to the utilisation of horses in films. This, plus the increasing incidence of car owning which had made horse breeding unprofitable, made the production of Western films (as they had been known) an impossible chore. Thus was it that the so-called 'Western' gravitated rapidly towards the 'drawing room' drama.

### ***SECTION OF A TYPICAL SCREENPLAY (12)***

*Tex D'Urberville comes riding into Doomtowntown on the Colorado, his Jaguar raising a cloud of dust in the sleepy western town. He parks in front of the Golden Sovereign Saloon and steps out. He is a tall, rangy cowhand, impeccably attired in waistcoat and fawnskin trousers with a ten-gallon hat, boots and pearl-grey spats. A heavy six-gun is belted at his waist. He carries a gold-topped Malacca cane.*

*He enters the saloon and every man there scatters from the room, leaving only Tex and a scowling hulk of a man at the other end of the bar. This is Dirty Ned Updyke, local ruffian and gunman.*

TEX: (Removing his white gloves and, pretending he does not see Dirty Ned, addressing the bartender): *Tour me a whisky and seltzer will you, Roger, there's a good fellow.*

ROGER: *Yes, sir.*

*Dirty Ned scowls over his apSritif but does not dare to reach for his Webley Automatic pistol which is concealed in a holster beneath his tweed jacket.*

*Now Tex D'Urberville allows his icy blue eyes to move slowly about the room until they rest on the craven features of Dirty Ned.*

TEX: *So ... you're the beastly cad what shot my brother.*

*Instantly they draw their cane swords and, approaching, salute each other grimly.*

An additional result not to be overlooked was the effect of increased film production on politics. The need for high-salaried workers such as writers, actors, directors and plumbers was intense and this mass of *nouveau riche*, having come upon good times so relatively abruptly, acquired a definite guilt neurosis which resulted in their intensive participation in the so-called 'liberal' and 'progressive' groups. This swelling of radical activity did much to alter the course of American political history. (This subject being another which requires separate inquiry for a proper evaluation of its many and varied ramifications.)

Two other factors of this period which may be mentioned briefly are the increase in divorce due to the relaxation of divorce laws in every state affected by the Los Angeles Movement and the slow but

eventually complete bans placed upon tennis and beach supplies by a rabid but powerful group within the N.A.M. This ban led inexorably to a brief span of time which paralleled the so-called 'Prohibition' period of the 1920s. During this infamous period, thrill seekers attended the many bootleg tennis courts throughout the country, which sprang up wherever perverse public demand made them profitable ventures for unscrupulous men.

In the first days of January of 1973 the Los Angeles Movement reached almost to the Atlantic shoreline. Panic spread through New England and the southern coastal region. The country and, ultimately, Washington reverberated with cries of '*Stop Los Angeles!*' and all processes of government ground to a virtual halt in the ensuing chaos. Law enforcement atrophied, crime waves spilled across the nation and conditions became so grave that even the outlawed L.A. Firsters held revival meetings in the streets.

On February 11, 1973, the Los Angeles Movement forded the Hudson River and invaded Manhattan Island. Flame-throwing tanks proved futile against the invincible flux. Within a week the subways were closed and car purchases had trebled.

By March 1973 the only unaltered states in the union were Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. This was later explained by the lethargic adaptation of the fungi to the rocky New England soil and to the immediate inclement weather.

These northern states, cornered and helpless, resorted to extraordinary measures in a hopeless bid to ward off the awful incrustation. Several of them legalised the mercy killing of any person discovered to have acquired the taint of 'Ellieitis'. Newspaper reports of shootings, stabbings, poisonings and strangulations became so common in those days of 'The Last-Ditch Defence' that newspapers inaugurated a daily section of their contents to such reports.

*Boston, Mass, April 13, AP - Last rites were held today for Mr Abner Scrounge who was shot after being found in his garage attempting to remove the top of his Rolls Royce with a can opener.*

The history of the gallant battle of Boston to retain its essential dignity would, alone, make up a large work. The story of how the intrepid citizens of this venerable city refused to surrender their rights, choosing mass suicide rather than submission is a tale of enduring courage and majestic struggle against insurmountable odds.

What happened after the movement was contained within the boundaries of the United States (a name soon discarded) is data for another paper. A brief mention, however, may be made of the immense social endeavour which became known as the 'Bacon and Waffles' movement, which sought to guarantee \$250 per month for every person in Los Angeles over forty years of age.

With this incentive before the people, state legislatures were helpless before an avalanche of public demand and, within three years, the entire nation was a part of Los Angeles. The government seat was in Beverly Hills and ambassadors had been hastened to all foreign countries within a short period of time.

Ten years later the North American continent fell and Los Angeles was creeping rapidly down the Isthmus of Panama.

Then came that ill-fated day in 1984.

*On the island of Vingo Vongo, Maona, daughter of Chief Luana, approached her father,  
'Omu la golu si mongo,' she said.  
(Anyone for tennis?)*

*Whereupon her father, having read the papers, speared her on the spot and ran screaming from the hut.*

1/ John Gunther, *Inside USA.*, p. 44.

2/ Henry G. Alsberg (ed.), *The American Guide*, p. 1200.

3/ Symmes Chadwick, 'Will We Drown the World?' *Southwestern Review IV* (Summer 1972), p.

698 ff.

4/ Guillaume Gaule, 'Les Theories de l'Eau de Ciel Sont Cuckoo,' *Juane Journale*, August 1972.

5/ Harry L. Schuler, 'Not Long for This World,' *South Orange Literary Review*, XL (Sept. 1972), p. 214.

6/ H. Braham, 'Is Los Angeles Alive?' *Los Angeles Sunday Examiner*, October 29, 1972.

7/ Elliotis: Its Symptoms,' *A.M.A. pamphlet*, fall 1972.

8 / Fritz Felix DerKatt, 'Das Beachen Seeken,' *Einzweidrei*, Nov., 1972.

9/ The Los Angeles Manifesto, *L.A. Firster Press*, winter, 1972, bleached bones,

10/ L. Savage, 'A Report on the Grand Teton Drive-In,' *Fortune*, January, 1973.

11/ 'Gulls Creek Gets Its Forty-Eighth Theater,' *The Arkansas Tost- Journal*, March 12, 1973.

12/ Maxwell Brande, 'Altercation at Deadwood Spa,' *Epigram Studios*, April, 1973.

## 56 - Dance Of The Dead

*I wanna RIDE!*

*with my Rota-Mota honey*

*by my SIDE!*

*As we whiz along the highway*

"We will HUG and SNUGGLE and we'll have a little STRUGGLE!"

### Struggle (strug'l)

*Act of promiscuous loveplay; usage evolved during W.W.III.*

Double beams spread buttery lamplight on the highway. Rotor-Motors Convertible, Model C, 1987, rushed after it. Light spurted ahead, yellow glowing. The car pursued with a twelve-cylindere snarling pursuit. Night blotted in behind, jet and still. The car sped on. ST. LOUIS-10.

"I wanna FLY!" they sang, "with the Rota-Mota apple of my EYE!" they sang. "It's the only way of living..."

### The quartet singing

Len, 23.

Bud, 24.

Barbara, 20.

Peggy, 18.

Len with Barbara, Bud with Peggy.

Bud at the wheel, snapping around tilted curves, roaring up black-shouldered hills, shooting the car across silent flatlands. At the top of the three lungs (the fourth gentler), competing with wind that buffeted their heads, that whipped their hair to lashing threads-singing:

"You can have your walkin' under MOONLIGHT BEAMS!"

At a hundred miles an hour let me DREAM my DREAMS!"

Needle quivering at 130, two 5-m.p.h. notches from gauge's end. A sudden dip! Their young frames jolted and the thrown-up laughter of three was wind-swept into night. Around a curve, darting up and down a hill, flashing across a leveled plain-an ebony bullet skimming earth.



"In my *ROTORY, MOTORY, FLOATERY*, drivin' machi-i-i-i-ine!"

YOU'LL BE A FLOATER IN YOUR ROTOR-MOTOR.

### In the back seat

"Have a jab, Bab."

"Thanks, I had one after supper" (pushing away needle fixed to eye-dropper).

### In the front seat

"You meana tell me this is the first time you ever been t' Saint Loo!"

"But I just started school in September."

"Hey, you're a *frosh*!"

### Back seat joining front seat

"Hey, *frosh*, have a mussle-tussle."

(Needle passed forward, eye bulb quivering amber juice.)

"Live it, girl!"

### Mussle-Tussle (mus'l-tus'l)

*Slang for the result of injecting a drug into a muscle; usage evolved during W.W.III.*

Peggy's lips failed at smiling. Her fingers twitched.

"No, thanks, I'm not..."

"Come *on*, frosh!" Len leaning hard over the seat, white-browed under black blowing hair. Pushing the needle at her face. "Live it, girl! Grab a li'l mussle-tussle!"

"I'd rather not," said Peggy. "If you don't-"

"What's *'at*, frosh?" yelled Len and pressed his leg against the pressing leg of Barbara.

Peggy shook her head and golden hair flew across her cheeks and eyes. Underneath her yellow dress, underneath her white brassière, underneath her young breast-a heart throbbed heavily. *Watch your step, darling, that's all we ask. Remember, you're all we have in the world now.* Mother words drumming at her; the needle making her draw back into the seat.

"Come on, frosh!"

The car groaned its shifting weight around a curve and centrifugal force pressed Peggy into Bud's lean hip. His hand dropped down and fingered at her leg. Underneath her yellow dress, underneath her sheer stocking-flesh crawled. Lips failed again; the smile was a twitch of red.

"Frosh, live it up!"

"Lay off, Len, jab your own dates."

"But we gotta teach frosh how to mussle-tussle!"

"Lay off, I said! She's my date!"

The black car roaring, chasing its own light. Peggy anchored down the feeling hand with hers. The wind whistled over them and grabbed down chilly fingers at their hair. She didn't want his hand there but she felt grateful to him.

Her vaguely frightened eyes watched the road lurch beneath the wheels. In back, a silent struggle began, taut hands rubbing, parted mouths clinging. Search for the sweet elusive at 120 miles-per-hour.

"*Rota-Mota honey*," Len moaned the moan between salivary kisses. In the front seat a young girl's heart beat unsteadily. ST. LOUIS-6.

"No kiddin', you never been to Saint Loo?"

"No, I..."

"Then you never saw the loopy's dance?"

Throat contracting suddenly. "No, I... Is that what... we're going to-"

"Hey, frosh never saw the loopy's dance!" Bud yelled back.

Lips parted, slurping; skirt was adjusted with blasé aplomb. "No kiddin'!" Len fired up the words.

"Girl, you haven't *lived!*"

"Oh, she's *got* to see *that*," said Barbara, buttoning a button.

"Let's go there then!" yelled Len. "Let's give frosh a thrill!"

"Good enough," said Bud and squeezed her leg. "Good enough up here, right, Peg?"

Peggy's throat moved in the dark and the wind clutched harshly at her hair. She'd heard of it, she'd read of it but never had she thought she'd-

*Choose your school friends carefully darling. Be very careful.*

But when no one spoke to you for two whole months? When you were lonely and wanted to talk and laugh and be alive? And someone spoke to you finally and asked you to go out with them?

"I yam Popeye, the sailor man!" Bud sang.

In back, they crowed artificial delight. Bud was taking a course in Pre-War Comics and Cartoons-2. This week the class was studying Popeye. Bud had fallen in love with the one-eyed seaman and told Len and Barbara all about him; taught them dialogue and song.

"I yam Popeye, the sailor man! I like to go swimmin' with bow-legged women! I yam Popeye, the sailor man!"

Laughter. Peggy smiled falteringly. The hand left her leg as the car screeched around a curve and she was thrown against the door. Wind dashed blunt coldness in her eyes and forced her back, blinking.

110-115-120 miles-per-hour. ST. LOUIS-3. *Be very careful, dear.*

Popeye cocked wicked eye.

"O, Olive Oyl, you is my sweet patootie."

Elbow nudging Peggy. "You be Olive Oyl-you."

Peggy smiled nervously. "I can't."

"*Sure!*"

In the back seat, Wimpy came up for air to announce, "I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today."

Three fierce voices and a faint fourth raged against the howl of wind. "I fights to the *fin*-ish 'cause I eats my *spin*-ach! I yam Popeye, the sailor man! *Toot! Toot!*"

"I yam what I yam," reiterated Popeye gravely and put his hand on the yellow-skirted leg of Olive Oyl. In the back, two members of the quartet returned to feeling struggle.

ST. LOUIS-1. The black car roared through the darkened suburbs. "On with the nosies!" Bud sang out. They all took out their plasticate nose-and-mouth pieces and adjusted them.

*ANCE IN YOUR PANTS WOULD BE A PITY!*

*WEAR YOUR NOSIES IN THE CITY!!*

### Ance (anse)

*Slang for anticivilian germs; usage evolved during W.W.III.*

"You'll like the loopy's dance!" Bud shouted to her over the shriek of wind. "It's *sensaysh!*"

Peggy felt a cold that wasn't of the night or of the wind. *Remember, darling, there are terrible things in the world today. Things you must avoid.*

"Couldn't we go somewhere else?" Peggy said but her voice was inaudible. She heard Bud singing, "I like to go swimmin' with bow-legged women!" She felt his hand on her leg again while, in the back, was the silence of grinding passion without kisses.

*Dance of the dead.* The words trickled ice across Peggy's brain.



ST. LOUIS.

The black car sped into the ruins.

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It was a place of smoke and blatant joys. Air resounded with the bleating of revelers and there was a noise of sounding brass spinning out a cloud of music-1987 music, a frenzy of twisted dissonances. Dancers, shoe-horned into the tiny square of open floor, ground pulsing bodies together. A network of bursting sounds lanced through the mass of them; dancers singing:

"Hurt me! Bruise me! Squeeze me TIGHT!  
Scorch my blood with hot DELIGHT!  
Please abuse me every NIGHT!  
LOVER, LOVER, LOVER, be a *beast-to-me!*"

Elements of explosion restrained within the dancing bounds-instead of fragmenting, quivering. "Oh, be a beast, beast, beast, *Beast*, BEAST to me!"

"How is *this*, Olive old goil?" Popeye inquired of the light of his eye as they struggled after the waiter. "Nothin' like this in Sykesville, eh?"

Peggy smiled but her hand in Bud's felt numb. As they passed by a murky lighted table, a hand she didn't see felt at her leg. She twitched and bumped against a hard knee across the narrow aisle. As she stumbled and lurched through the hot and smoky, thick-aired room, she felt a dozen eyes disrobing her, abusing her. Bud jerked her along and she felt her lips trembling.

"Hey, how about that!" Bud exulted as they sat. "Right by the stage!"

From cigarette mists, the waiter plunged and hovered, pencil poised, beside their table.

"What'll it be!" His questioning shout cut through cacophony.

"Whiskey-water!" Bud and Len paralleled orders, then turned to their dates. "What'll it be!" the waiter's request echoed from their lips.

"*Green Swamp!*" Barbara said and, "*Green Swamp* here!" Len passed it along. Gin, Invasion Blood (1987 Rum), lime juice, sugar, mint spray, splintered ice-a popular college girl drink.

"What about you, honey?" Bud asked his date.

Peggy smiled. "Just some ginger ale," she said, her voice a fluttering frailty in the massive clash and fog of smoke.

"What?" asked Bud and, "What's that, didn't hear!" the waiter shouted.

"Ginger ale."

"What?"

"Ginger ale!"

"*GINGER ALE!*" Len screamed it out and the drummer, behind the raging curtain of noise that was the band's music, almost heard it. Len banged down his fist. *One-Two-Three!*

CHORUS: *Ginger Ale was only twelve years old! Went to church and was as good as gold. Till that day when-*

"Come *on*, come *on!*" the waiter squalled. "Let's have that order, kids! I'm busy!"

"Two whisky-waters and two Green Swamps!" Len sang out and the waiter was gone into the swirling maniac mist.

Peggy felt her young heart flutter helplessly. *Above all, don't drink when you're out on a date. Promise us that, darling, you must promise us that.* She tried to push away instructions etched in brain.

"How you like this place, honey? *Loopy*, ain't it?" Bud fired the question at her; a red-faced, happy-faced Bud.

### Loopy (loo pi)

*Common alter. of L.U.P. (Lifeless Undeath Phenomenon).*

She smiled at Bud, a smile of nervous politeness. Her eyes moved around, her face inclined and she was looking up at the stage. *Loopy*. The word scalpeled at her mind. *Loopy, loopy*.

The stage was five yards deep at the radius of its wooden semicircle. A waist-high rail girdled the circumference, two pale purple spotlights, unlit, hung at each rail end. Purple on white-the thought came. *Darling, isn't Sykesville Business College good enough? No! I don't want to take a business course, I want to major in art at the University!*

The drinks were brought and Peggy watched the disembodied waiter's arm thud down a high, green-looking glass before her. *Presto!*-the arm was gone. She looked into the murky Green Swamp depths and saw chipped ice bobbing.

"A toast! Pick up your glass, Peg!" Bud clarified.

They all clinked glasses:

"To lust primordial!" Bud toasted.

"To beds inviolate!" Len added.

"To flesh insensate!" Barbara added a third link.

Their eyes zeroed in on Peggy's face, demanding. She didn't understand.

"*Finish* it!" Bud told her, plagued by freshman sluggishness.

"To... u-us," she faltered.

"How o-rig-inal," stabbed Barbara and Peggy felt heat licking up her smooth cheeks. It passed unnoticed as three Youths of America with Whom the Future Rested gurgled down their liquor thirstily. Peggy fingered at her glass, a smile printed to lips that would not smile unaided.

"Come on, *drink*, girl!" Bud shouted to her across the vast distance of one foot. "Chuggalug!"

"Live it, girl," Len suggested abstractedly, fingers searching once more for soft leg. And finding, under table, soft leg waiting.

Peggy didn't want to drink, she was afraid to drink. Mother words kept pounding-*never on a date, honey, never*. She raised the glass a little.

"Uncle Buddy will help, will help!"

Uncle Buddy leaning close, vapor of whisky haloing his head. Uncle Buddy pushing cold glass to shaking young lips. "Come on, Olive Oyl, old goil! Down the hatch!"

Choking sprayed the bosom of her dress with Green Swamp droplets. Flaming liquid trickled into her stomach, sending offshoots of fire into her veins.

*Bangity boom crash smash POW!!* The drummer applied the coup de grace to what had been, in ancient times, a lover's waltz. Lights dropped and Peggy sat coughing and tear-eyed in the smoky cellar club.

She felt Bud's hand clamp strongly on her shoulder and, in the murk, she felt herself pulled off balance and felt Bud's hot wet mouth pressing at her lips. She jerked away and then the purple spots went on and a mottle-faced Bud drew back, gurgling, "I fights to the finish," and reaching for his drink.

"Hey, the loopy now, the loopy!" Len said eagerly, releasing exploratory hands.

Peggy's heart jolted and she thought she was going to cry out and run thrashing through the dark, smoke-filled room. But a sophomore hand anchored her to the chair and she looked up in white-faced dread at the man who came out on the stage and faced the microphone which, like a metal spider, had swung down to meet him.

"May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen," he said, a grim-faced, sepulchral-voiced man whose eyes moved out over them like flicks of doom. Peggy's breath was labored, she felt thin lines of Green Swamp water filtering hotly through her chest and stomach. It made her blink dizzily. *Mother*. The

word escaped cells of the mind and trembled into conscious freedom. *Mother, take me home.*

"As you know, the act you are about to see is not for the faint of heart, the weak of will." The man plodded through the words like a cow enmired. "Let me caution those of you whose nerves are not what they ought to be-*leave now*. We make no guarantees of responsibility. We can't even afford to maintain a house doctor."

No laughter appreciative. "Cut the crap and get off stage," Len grumbled to himself. Peggy felt her fingers twitching.

"As you know," the man went on, his voice gilded with learned sonority, "this is not an offering of mere sensation but an honest scientific demonstration."

"*Loophole for Loopy's!*" Bud and Len heaved up the words with the thoughtless reaction of hungry dogs salivating at a bell.

It was, in 1987, a comeback so rigidly standard it had assumed the status of a catechism answer. A crenel in the postwar law allowed the L.U.P. performance if it was orally prefaced as an exposition of science. Through this legal chink had poured so much abusing of the law that few cared any longer. A feeble government was grateful to contain infractions of the law at all.

When hoots and shoutings had evaporated in the smoke-clogged air, the man, his arms upraised in patient benediction, spoke again.

Peggy watched the studied movement of his lips, her heart swelling, then contracting in slow, spasmodic beats. An iciness was creeping up her legs. She felt it rising toward the threadlike fires in her body and her fingers twitched around the chilly moisture of the glass. *I want to go, please take me home*-Will-spent words were in her mind again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the man concluded, "brace yourselves."

A gong sounded its hollow, shivering resonance, the man's voice thickened and slowed.

"*The L.U. Phenomenon!*"

The man was gone; the microphone had risen and was gone. Music began; a moaning brassiness, all muted. A jazzman's conception of *the palpable obscure* mounted on a pulse of thumping drum. A dolor of saxophone, a menace of trombone, a harnessed bleating of trumpet-they raped the air with stridor.

Peggy felt a shudder plaiting down her back and her gaze dropped quickly to the murky whiteness of the table. Smoke and darkness, dissonance and heat surrounded her.

Without meaning to, but driven by an impulse of nervous fear, she raised the glass and drank. The glacial trickle in her throat sent another shudder rippling through her. Then further shoots of liquored heat budded in her veins and a numbness settled in her temples. Through parted lips, she forced out a shaking breath.

Now a restless, murmuring movement started through the room, the sound of it like willows in a sloughing wind. Peggy dared not lift her gaze to the purpled silence of the stage. She stared down at the shifting glimmer of her drink, feeling muscle strands draw tightly in her stomach, feeling the hollow thumping of her heart. *I'd like to leave, please let's leave.*

The music labored toward a rasping dissonant climax, its brass components struggling, in vain, for unity.

A hand stroked once at Peggy's leg and it was the hand of Popeye, the sailor man, who muttered rounpily, "Olive Oyl, you is my goil." She barely felt or heard. Automatonlike, she raised the cold and sweating glass again and felt the chilling in her throat and then the flaring network of warmth inside her.

*SWISH!*

The curtain swept open with such a rush, she almost dropped her glass. It thumped down heavily on the table, swamp water cascading up its sides and raining on her hand. The music exploded shrapnel of ear-cutting cacophony and her body jerked. On the tablecloth, her hands twitched white on white while claws on uncontrollable demand pulled up her frightened eyes.

The music fled, frothing behind a wake of swelling drum rolls.

The nightclub was a wordless crypt, all breathing checked.

Cobwebs of smoke drifted in the purple light across the stage.

No sound except the muffled, rolling drum.

Peggy's body was a petrification in its chair, smitten to rock around her leaping heart, while, through the wavering haze of smoke and liquored dizziness, she looked up in horror to where it stood.

It had been a woman.

Her hair was black, a framing of snarled ebony for the tallow mask that was her face. Her shadow-rimmed eyes were closed behind lids as smooth and white as ivory. Her mouth, a lipless and unmoving line, stood like a clotted sword wound beneath her nose. Her throat, her shoulders and her arms were white, were motionless. At her sides, protruding from the sleeve ends of the green transparency she wore, hung alabaster hands.

Across this marble statue, the spotlights coated purple shimmer.

Still paralyzed, Peggy stared up at its motionless features, her fingers knitted in a bloodless tangle on her lap. The pulse of drumbeats in the air seemed to fill her body, its rhythm altering her heartbeat.

In the black emptiness behind her, she heard Len muttering, "I love my wife but, oh, you corpse," and heard the wheeze of helpless snickers that escaped from Bud and Barbara. The cold still rose in her, a silent tidal dread.

Somewhere in the smoke-fogged darkness, a man cleared viscid nervousness from his throat and a murmur of appreciative relief strained through the audience.

Still no motion on the stage, no sound but the sluggish cadence of the drum, thumping at the silence like someone seeking entrance at a far-off door. The thing that was a nameless victim of the plague stood palely rigid while the distillation sluiced through its blood-clogged veins.

Now the drum throbs hastened like the pulsebeat of a rising panic. Peggy felt the chill begin to swallow her. Her throat started tightening, her breathing was a string of lip-parted gasps.

The loopy's eyelid twitched.

Abrupt, black, straining silence webbed the room. Even the breath choked off in Peggy's throat when she saw the pale eyes flutter open. Something creaked in the stillness; her body pressed back unconsciously against the chair. Her eyes were wide, unblinking circles that sucked into her brain the sight of the thing that had been a woman.

Music again; a brass-throated moaning from the dark, like some animal made of welded horns mewling its derangement in a midnight alley.

Suddenly, the right arm of the loopy jerked at its side, the tendons suddenly contracted. The left arm twitched alike, snapped out, then fell back and thudded in purple-white limpness against the thigh. The right arm out, the left arm out, the right, the left-right-left-right-like marionette arms twitching from an amateur's dangling strings.

The music caught the time, drum brushes scratching out a rhythm for the convulsions of the loopy's muscles. Peggy pressed back further, her body numbed and cold, her face a livid, staring mask in the fringes of the stage light.

The loopy's right foot moved now, jerking up inflexibly as the distillation constricted muscles in its leg. A second and a third contraction caused the leg to twitch, the left leg flung out in a violent spasm and then the woman's body lurched stiffly forward, filming the transparent silk to its light and shadow.

Peggy heard the sudden hiss of breath that passed the clenching teeth of Bud and Len and a wave of nausea sprayed foaming sickness up her stomach walls. Before her eyes, the stage abruptly undulated with a watery glitter and it seemed as if the flailing loopy was headed straight for her.

Gasping dizzily, she pressed back in horror, unable to take her eyes from its now agitated face.

She watched the mouth jerk to a gaping cavity, then a twisted scar that split into a wound again. She saw the dark nostrils twitching, saw writhing flesh beneath the ivory cheeks, saw furrows dug and undug in the purple whiteness of the forehead. She saw one lifeless eye wink monstrosously and heard the gasp of startled laughter in the room.

While music blared into a fit of grating noise, the woman's arms and legs kept jerking with convulsive cramps that threw her body around the purpled stage like a full-sized rag doll given spastic life.

It was nightmare in an endless sleep. Peggy shivered in helpless terror as she watched the loopy's

twisting, leaping dance. The blood in her had turned to ice; there was no life in her but the endless, pounding stagger of her heart. Her eyes were frozen spheres staring at the woman's body writhing white and flaccid underneath the clinging silk.

Then, something went wrong.

Up till then, its muscular seizures had bound the loopy to an area of several yards before the amber flat which was the background for its paroxysmal dance. Now its erratic surging drove the loopy toward the stage-encircling rail.

Peggy heard the thump and creaking stain of wood as the loopy's hip collided with the rail. She cringed into a shuddering knot, her eyes still raised fixedly to the purple-splashed face whose every feature was deformed by throes of warping convulsion.

The loopy staggered back and Peggy saw and heard its leprous hands slapping with a fitful rhythm at its silk-scaled thighs.

Again it sprang forward like a maniac marionette and the woman's stomach thudded sickeningly into the railing wood. The dark mouth gaped, clamped shut and then the loopy twisted through a jerking revolution and crashed back against the rail again, almost above the table where Peggy sat.

Peggy couldn't breathe. She sat rooted to the chair, her lips a trembling circle of stricken dread, a pounding of blood at her temples as she watched the loopy spin again, its arms a blur of flailing white.

The lurid bleaching of its face dropped toward Peggy as the loopy crashed into the waist-high rail again and bent across its top. The mask of lavender-rained whiteness hung above her, dark eyes twitching open into a hideous stare.

Peggy felt the floor begin to move and the livid face was blurred with darkness, then reappeared in a burst of luminosity. Sound fled on brass-shoed feet, then plunged into her brain again-a smearing discord.

The loopy kept on jerking forward, driving itself against the rail as though it meant to scale it. With every spastic lurch, the diaphanous silk fluttered like a film about its body and every savage collision with the railing tautened the green transparency across its swollen flesh. Peggy looked up in rigid muteness at the loopy's fierce attack on the railing, her eyes unable to escape the wild distortion of the woman's face with its black frame of tangled, snapping hair.

What happened then happened in a blurring passage of seconds.

The grim-faced man came rushing across the purple-lighted stage; the thing that had been a woman went crashing, twitching, flailing at the rail, doubling over it, the spasmodic hitching flinging up its muscle-knotted legs.

*A clawing fall.*

Peggy lurched back in her chair and the scream that started in her throat was forced back into a strangled gag as the loopy came crashing down onto the table, its limbs a thrash of naked whiteness.

Barbara screamed, the audience gasped and Peggy saw, on the fringe of vision, Bud jumping up, his face a twist of stunned surprise.

The loopy flopped and twisted on the table like a new-caught fish. The music stopped, grinding into silence; a rush of agitated murmur filled the room and blackness swept in brain-submerging waves across Peggy's mind.

Then the cold white hand slapped across her mouth, the dark eyes stared at her in purple light and Peggy felt the darkness flooding.

The horror-smoked room went turning on its side.

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Consciousness. It flickered in her brain like gauze-veiled candlelight. A murmuring of sound, a blur of shadow before her eyes.

Breath dripped like syrup from her mouth.

"Here, Peg."

She heard Bud's voice and felt the chilly metal of a flask neck pressed against her lips. She swallowed, twisting slightly at the trickle of fire in her throat and stomach, then coughed and pushed away the flask

with deadened fingers.

Behind her, a rustling movement. "Hey, she's *back*," Len said. "Ol' Olive Oyl is back."

"You feel all right?" asked Barbara.

She felt all right. Her heart was like a drum hanging from piano wire in her chest, slowly, slowly beaten. Her hands and feet were numb, not with cold but with a sultry torpor. Thoughts moved with a tranquil lethargy, her brain a leisurely machine imbedded in swaths of woolly packing.

She felt all right.

Peggy looked across the night with sleepy eyes. They were on a hilltop, the braked convertible crouching on a jutting edge. Far below, the country slept, a carpet of light and shadow beneath the chalky moon.

An arm snake moved around her waist. "Where are we?" she asked him in a languid voice.

"Few miles outside school," Bud said. "How d'ya feel, honey?"

She stretched, her body a delicious strain of muscles. She sagged back, limp, against his arm.

"*Wonderful*," she murmured with a dizzy smile and scratched the tiny itching bump on her left shoulder. Warmth radiated through her flesh; the night was a sabled glow. There seemed *somewhere* to be a memory, but it crouched in secret behind folds of thick content.

"Woman, you were *out*," laughed Bud; and Barbara added and Len added, "Were you!" and "Olive Oyl went *plunko*!"

"Out?" Her casual murmur went unheard.

The flask went around and Peggy drank again, relaxing further as the liquor needled fire through her veins.

"Man, I never saw a loopy dance like that!" Len said.

A momentary chill across her back, then warmth again. "Oh," said Peggy, "that's right. I forgot."

She smiled

"That was what I calls a grand finale!" Len said, dragging back his willing date, who murmured, "*Lenny* boy."

"L.U.P.," Bud muttered, nuzzling at Peggy's hair. "Son of a gun." He reached out idly for the radio knob.

### **L.U.P. (Lifeless Undead Phenomenon)**

This freak of physiological abnormality was discovered during the war when, following certain germ-gas attacks, many of the dead troops were found erect and performing the spasmodic gyrations which, later, became known as the "loopy's" (L.U.P.'s) dance. The particular germ spray responsible was later distilled and is now used in carefully controlled experiments which are conducted only under the strictest of legal license and supervision.

Music surrounded them, its melancholy fingers touching at their hearts. Peggy leaned against her date and felt no need to curb exploring hands. Somewhere, deep within the jellied layers of her mind, there was something trying to escape. It fluttered like a frantic moth imprisoned in congealing wax, struggling wildly but only growing weaker in attempt as the chrysalis hardened.

Four voices sang softly in the night.

*"If the world is here tomorrow  
I'll be waiting, dear, for you  
If the stars are there tomorrow  
I'll be wishing on them too."*

Four young voices singing, a murmur in immensity. Four bodies, two by two, slackly warm and drugged. A singing, an embracing—a wordless accepting.

*"Star light, star bright  
Let there be another night."*

The singing ended but the song went on.  
A young girl sighed.  
"Isn't it romantic?" said Olive Oyl.

**THE END**