

Fiction

# Scartaris, June 28th

By Harlan Ellison



fictionwise *contemporary*

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## Fictionwise Publications

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They chased him through the woods and brought him back and lynched him. Their sheets making it awkward to kick him, they used the sawed-off ball bats and a tire iron to bust him up pretty good before they threw the chain over the sweet gum.

They secured the chain around his neck with the tow hook and pulled it so tight the links broke flesh. Then six of them got on the other end of the chain and, calling him a fuckin' nigger-fucker, they gave the chain a sharp, mean yank that sent him jerking so high his head hit the thick branch overhead. They slung the chain around the bole of the sweet gum and looped it fast. Then they stood back and watched.

His pale white face went almost black with mottled patches of trapped blood. His mouth opened and his tongue bulged past his

lips. Rafe offered a pack of Marlboros around the group. They all lit up, and Wes Kurlan puffed on his pipe, his hood held loosely in his left hand. Above them there was prolonged jerking and trembling, and they commented on that. Several of them, exhausted from the crashing run through thickets, sat down and breathed deeply. Wes Kurlan inquired with concern about John Porter's condition. John had had a mild stroke only four months ago. John said he felt okay; a little winded; but okay.

They hung around for half an hour.

Then they retraced their steps, back out to the road, stopped to pick up the body of Ansel Lomax, put it gently into the bed of the lead truck, and drove back to town. The wind caught the pants legs of the man on the sweet gum, and he swayed gently, as if from a heavenly breath.

He had been shooting Klansmen with a 30.06 hunting rifle, from the concealment of the woods that ran deep from the edge of the road to the river. He had been working with the Deacons, a militant black group in Alabama, for about three years. He had been sending

money for longer than that, but had finally decided he wanted to be involved in a little hands-on activity in aid of equaling the odds.

The Deacons—sharecroppers, furniture factory hands, two postmen, a dentist, and three Viet Nam vets—had discovered, more than twenty years earlier, that the nicest target on a bright night with a full moon was the long, white, stupid sheet worn by a moron standing high on the flat-bed of a truck, whooping like a demented night owl and waving a Louisville Slugger over his head. Nice target, perfect target: pale white and clear as a light against the woods.

He had put the crosshairs of the Bushnell scope flat on the center of that peaked white hood, tracked the truck as it passed on the road, and squeezed the trigger of the big game rifle slowly, sending the pencil-thick, three inch long expanding slug on its way. It hit Ansel Lomax in the left cheek with a muzzle energy of 2930 foot pounds and blew his head apart. His body lofted and went over the side of the truck. Now the hood was black, and filled with bloody soup. He slid eleven feet.

The three Deacons with him had escaped, but he was from Chicago and didn't know his way around scrub growth and mud pits. They chased him through the woods and brought him back and lynched him. Then they drove back to town with what was left of Ansel Lomax.

The white man from Chicago hung in the darkness for two hours, swaying gently in the pleasant northern Alabama breeze.

Then he reached up, grabbed the chain and pulled himself to a point where he could unclip the tow hook. He hung onto the chain for a moment, then dropped the fifteen feet to the muddy ground.

He leaned against the tree for a while, massaging his throat, and then, spitting blood, he turned to look toward the road. After a few minutes he scuffled his way back to the road and walked in the opposite direction the trucks had taken.

In the breeze, the chain clinked against itself, making a small sweet sound in the night.

\* \* \* \*

He was not in Chicago; he was not in northern Alabama. He was in Beloit, Wisconsin. He stared down the dingy, ratty length of Fourth Street, at the bars and men's rooming houses encrusted with the soot and pulp refuse from the Beloit Corporation factory on the other side of the street. The Beloit Corporation was famous: it manufactured paper-making machinery for the world.

The man from northern Alabama had come into town on Highway 57. He had stopped at several bars on the way. In Beloit, they were usually called "lounges," not bars or taps or pubs.

He wandered down Fourth, stopping for a tequila, lime and salt at La Tropicana; a shot of J.D. with a Bud back at the Coconut Grove; an Arrow schnapps at Granny's; and finally came to The Werks. As he came through the door into the blue smoke, he took note that it was a workingman's oasis, and made sure he was wearing a blue

chambray shirt, twill pants, and an old, cracked leather bomber jacket with a fur collar against the cold.

He picked out a man in his middle forties sitting alone at the bar working on a bottle of Ten High. As he poured his shot glass to the line from the bottle, the man from northern Alabama saw that the drinker was missing the thumb and little finger of his right hand. He walked to the bar and took the stool beside the drinker. The man looked up only momentarily.

"Hi," the man from northern Alabama said.

The drinker looked up from under thick eyebrows, nodded to the stranger, and mumbled, "Right."

They sat silently for a few minutes till the bartender wiped the mahogany into their area. "What can I get you?" he asked.

"I'll bet you've got a secret bottle of George Dickel down there someplace," the man from northern Alabama said, firing off a



winning grin. "Why don't you just bring the bottle and a couple of water glasses for me and my kid brother here. I figure he must have some kinda death wish sittin' here going at that Ten High straight. If you can't put a little good Tennessee sour mash sippin' whiskey into your kid brother, what the hell's it all about, right?"

The stranger beside him had looked up as the words *kid brother* were spoken. And he realized he was, in fact, sitting beside his older brother Vernon, whom he hadn't seen all week because Vern had been on the road with the cartage company van. Now he smiled, and allowed the bartender to remove the bottle and empty shot glass. "You must of got paid."

"Couple of Sonys fell off the loading dock. Carson told me to take 'em, he'd line 'em out as smashed on the invoice. Gave one to Ma and sold th'other one over to Janesville."

Then he made that goofy face that had always made his kid brother laugh when they were growing up.

"So. How's it goin'?"

Vernon shrugged, said, "Ah, you know, the usual. Gettin' tired of driving interstate, though; I'll tell you that, Bobby. Sometimes I just get cranky as hell and begin to think it's never gonna end. You know, workin', driving, tryin' to forget Bea and the kid."

Bobby nodded. They sat silently. Then, after a while, when the George Dickel had come, and they'd poured generous amounts into the tall water glasses, and were sipping like bluegrass Colonels, Bobby said, "You remember when Pa was workin' in the wet end?" He inclined his head to indicate the big Beloit Corporation factory across the street. "Remember he used to come home some nights and go straight upstairs and lay on down..."

Vern said, "...and put his arm over across his eyes..."

"Yeah, and he'd stay up there till supper, and when he come down he always looked pulled up tight, and he'd say..."

"...did you ever get the feelin' you'd lived too long, past your time, and just wanted to sleep forever?"

Bobby sighed. "That was it."

"Yeah, well, I'm gettin' to feel like that, too," Vern said. They sat silently, working at the secret bottle.

"I got a headache," Bobby said.

"You drink too much."

"Horseshit."

"You do. You drink too much. You're gonna die young, like Pa. They'll take out your liver and send it over to the college for the medical department. Famous example of an organ that ate a man."

Bobby grinned his brother's grin. They looked a lot alike. "Fry it up with onions, real crisp."

"I think," Vern said, slapping his hands together, "that what you need is some adventure! Somethin' to sober you up and put a spring in your step, m'boy."

"Hold it, Vern. I'm not goin' on one of your redneck trips. No Alpo contests, no wet-T-shirt bars, no pool cue brawls. Not again. Denise says she'll divorce me I come in torched like that again." He was serious. His hands were out flat in the air between them, a barrier to mischief.

His big brother (and he had no big brother, had been one of four children, the other three girls) laughed and leaned in to hug him. "No, absolutely not! I agree. Nothin' like that. But I got somethin' special. Somethin' I heard over to Janesville."

"Like what?"

"Like, that Nicky Pederakis messed himself up good and finally died. Of diverticulitis."

"Of *what*? What the hell's that?"

"Don't matter. But he didn't go the doctor for a while, and his bowels got obstructed and a fistula formed, and they operated on his colon, and he died on the table."

"Where the hell did you learn that kind of stuff?" Then he paused and a grim smile froze his lips. "Good. The lousy motherfucker. He used to beat the shit out of me every day back in school."

Vern said softly, "I know."

"So that's good. Goddam it, I outlived the sonofabitch."

Vern laid a hand on Bobby's shoulder. "Come on, we're goin' over to the funeral."

His brother stared at him. After a few seconds he let the lupine smile fade, and his face grew serious. "Yeah."

And they went outside after Vernon had paid for the fine, rare George Dickel, and there was a 1980 Mustang at the curb that

hadn't been at the curb when the man from northern Alabama had entered The Werks.

And they got in; and Vernon drove; and they went the twelve miles to Janesville; and Vern turned into the parking lot at a funeral home Bobby didn't know, because it wasn't the one that had handled Pa's service; and they got out and went inside.

There was a ribbed black velvet directory board on a slim tubular steel stand in the foyer. Small, tasteful plastic letters and arrows had been pressed into the ribbing indicating that the Kessler service was in Parlor A and the Pederakis service was in Parlor C, the former to the left, the latter to the right.

Vernon and Bobby walked slowly toward Parlor C. There was a line of people entering the room, a dark-suited employee of the funeral home, wearing a pink carnation in his lapel, holding the door open so visitors would not get hit by the door. He smiled bravely at Bobby

and Vernon, who smiled back as bravely. They got in at the end of the line, and moved slowly forward.

When they had paced the length of the aisle, after twenty minutes, they came at last to the front of the parlor and found themselves looking down into the placid face of Nicky Pederakis, a dead man no longer in his middle forties, but rather his final forties. Life had not dealt sweetly with Nicky Pederakis. Despite the refurbishment of funerary cosmeticians, or perhaps in part *because* of their attentions, he looked like a cross between someone who had had his kisser regularly bashed in barroom encounters, and one of a thousand clowns exploding from a tiny car in a center ring.

Bobby stood looking.

Vern watched the family. Two men in cheap black suits, their faces younger stampings of the death mask now worn by Nicky Pederakis, were pointing at Bobby and whispering agitatedly. They separated

and turned to the people on either side. They whispered much louder now, jerking their thumbs over their shoulders to indicate Bobby, still staring raptly into the open casket, leaning over with his hands on the anodized pastel blue metal lid panel. He seemed unable to get close enough.

"Hey!" One of the younger Pederakis boys was pointing at Bobby.  
"Who the hell are you?"

The room went silent. The knots of visitors humming condolences opened, everyone stopped talking, and they stared first at the pointing finger, then at Bobby.

It took a moment for the silence to register on Bobby, and when he looked up, still leaning over the open section at Nicky's face, he saw the room's attention on him. He stood up. Vern moved closer.  
"You know me," he said to the family.



"Yeah, I know you," the other brother said, almost snarling.

"You're that creep Nicky used to kick ass alla time. What the hell you doing here? Nicky hated your guts."

"Just wanted to make sure the cocksucker was really dead," Bobby said, moving fast toward the side door exit. Vern was right behind him.

They got halfway through the first open row of chairs before the brothers and their friends exploded across the neat rows, knocking chairs in all directions. The one who had done the pointing caught up with Vern, reached out and snagged the collar of the bomber jacket. Vern pivoted and hit him in the throat. The brother fell back gasping, into the crowd, and Vern picked up a folding chair and smashed him in the head with it. Bobby grabbed Vern by the arm and pulled him through the exit door he'd pushed open. He was screaming, "The

lousy bully got what was comin' to him! I hope he suffered like a dyin' shit, an' he's goin' straight to Hell!"

Then they were in the side-hall and Vernon grabbed a plush chair and wedged it under the doorknob and they ran like crazy men out the back entrance of the funeral home, got to the Mustang, and left skid marks exiting the parking lot.

When Vern dropped his kid brother off at the house, he leaned out the window and said to Bobby, "Maybe there's still some good stuff to get, bein' alive! Whaddaya think, Bobby?"

His brother leaned in and kissed the man from northern Alabama on the lips, grinned hugely, and whooped. "Better high off that goddam minute starin' at that sonofabitch croaked in his fuckin' baby-blue coffin than all the whiskey in the world!"

"Remember that," the man from northern Alabama said, and drove away into the night, knowing that if there was a memory that would

last, it would be of the lesson in the moment; not of an older brother who had never existed.

\* \* \* \*

Across the aisle an elderly black couple, deep into their fifties, were trying to spoon-feed their mentally impaired daughter. To the man from Beloit she appeared to be in her middle thirties. He tried to ignore the General Six Principle Baptist minister in the middle seat beside him, apparently a vegetarian or simply finicky beyond belief, who kept trying to give him foodstuffs off his flight tray. "Are you sure you wouldn't like this nice bit of roast beef?" the Reverend Carl Schrag said. "I haven't touched it. Here, you can take it with your own fork if you're concerned."

The man from Beloit turned away from the sight of creamed asparagus drooling from the side of the girl's mouth, to smile at the

minister. "No, thank you very much. I have the fish. I don't eat meat."

The minister's face lit with camaraderie. "I agree absolutely completely! Flesh of the beast. Poor things. Stand all day and all night in tiny cubicles, in the dark, just fattened and fattened, all their color leached out, till they're slaughtered."

"Just like the women in the whorehouses in Kuwait," the man from Beloit said, noticing with impish pleasure the look of the affronted, the look of the doltish, the look of the utterly appalled that blasted the minister's composure.

"*What did you say?!*" he demanded, fork trembling an inch from his mouth, speared baby carrots now forgotten.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry," the man from Beloit said, "I *certainly* didn't mean to offend. It's just that the hideous parallel you drew ... but perhaps you're unaware of the slave trade in white women that

continues to this very day in many of the southeast Arabian sultanates..."

The minister's eyes rolled in his head. He had lost control of his motor functions. The man from Beloit reached over and gently pressed Carl Schrag's wrist. The minister's hand, bearing fork, slowly lowered. Transfixed, he simply stared.

The man from Beloit continued eating, and continued talking. "Yes, you see, slave-holding is still practiced in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Muscat, Buraimi, Kuwait, even Ethiopia. Oh, of course, in some of those places the practice has been legally and publicly abolished, yet in most of them the slaves have never been freed. In most of them, slave-buying, selling, holding, whipping, violating—perfectly acceptable by local law. Your food is getting cold."

The minister took a mouthful, continued to stare disbelievingly, like a bumblebee at the end of an entomologist's straight pin. What was this man *saying* to him!

Across the aisle, the young woman was trying to wrest the spoon from her father's hand. The elderly black mother wore an expression of stunned acceptance. They had been at this chore for at least half of their lives. The man from Beloit recognized the slope of shoulders, the caring and determination and futility in eyes and expressions, the practiced maneuverings of hands and implements around flailing body.

"But for the harems and brothels of these countries," he said to the minister, though still watching the people across the aisle, "Western women are highly prized. Blondes, redheads, Nordic types with incredibly long legs and blue eyes like cool fjords. Some of them are lured to the Middle East through ads in newspapers,

*Variety*, that sort of thing. You know, 'Wanted: Dancers and Showgirls for chorus lines in Road Shows. See far places, high pay, exotic companions,' that sort of thing. And they just vanish. Or they're kidnapped right off the streets in European cities, often Marseilles. Next time you see them they're at a slave auction in Yemen."

The minister was gasping. "Why, I've never heard of such—"

"Oh, yes, absolutely," the man from Beloit said. "*Very* common. And many of them are sold into these harems, or dens of sexual fleshliness, where they're kept in pitch-black cells on soft mattresses, and they're fed a lot of carbohydrates to fatten them up—apparently these Arab potentates lust after pale pale suety vessels for their disgusting pleasures."

Rev. Schrag had gone the color of his glass of milk.

"And once they're kidnapped, well, that's it," the man from Beloit said, as he finished his fish in sauce. "We have almost no extradition recourse in such places; and the United States government, well, you can forget it; they can't chance offending one of those oil barons. You can imagine what value they place on some nameless eighteen-year-old farm girl from Iowa, stolen while visiting Berlin, as against the cost at the pump of higher gas tariffs."

He wiped his mouth, took the last sip of coffee light, and smiled sadly at the minister. "So you see, it was the awful parallel you drew with the roast beef." Rev. Schrag was bereft of response. "And what takes you so far from home, I presume you're going on somewhere after Paris?"

They were on a jet liner out of New York, bound for Paris, with connections to Jeddah, Riyadh, Cairo and Dubai.



Across the aisle, the girl in her middle thirties was mumbling to herself, playing with her hair and trying to figure out the swing latch that lowered the tray table. Her mother was looking out the port; her father was trying to mop up baby food from the seat and the girl's dress.

The minister was having difficulty righting himself. This man in the aisle seat beside him *seemed* to be spiritually kin, but in the name of Jesus what horrible obscenities! He tried to convince himself that it had been innocently spoken; he was always willing to give the benefit of the doubt. The man was very likely unsaved, but if we were to cut off all social congress with the less-than-righteous, why, we'd never be able to snag *anyone* from Satan's claws. He mustered a smile and replied, "I'm going to the Holy Land. I had several weeks I could have taken anywhere and, well, I've been meaning to do this journey for so long..."

"I understand perfectly," the man from Beloit said. "And where are you from? Where is your parish?"

"Senatobia, Mississippi," the minister said.

"Ah!" the man from Beloit said, with familiarity.

"Do you know it?" the minister asked, pleased now that he had given him the benefit of the doubt.

"Northwestern part of the state? Between Memphis and Oxford? Near Lake Arkabutla, isn't it?"

"Why, yes! You *do* know our little place!"

"No, sorry," the man from Beloit said, unbuckling his lap belt and standing. "Senatobia. Must be very small." He turned and went aft to the lavatory.

When he came back, ten minutes later, he walked past his row, noticing that Rev. Schrag was trying to work the crossword puzzle in the airline giveaway magazine, and he stood in the service alcove as

the stewardesses racked and sent below the used dinner trays. He stood there and pretended to be selecting a magazine from the rack, but he studied the elderly couple and their child.

They had hooked her up with a Walkman, the earphones tied with a ribbon under her chin so she could not inadvertently knock the little gray foam earpieces loose. She was rocking back and forth, licking her lips, her eyes closed. Her mother and father were trying to complete their own meals, the food long since grown cold. He watched them and felt a great sadness take him. After a while, he returned to his seat.

Carl Schrag looked up as the man from Beloit buckled in. "That was in very poor taste, sir," he said. Stiffly.

"I agree," was the reply. "But let me ask you something. Just as a matter of theoretical surmise."

The minister closed the inflight magazine on his prolapsed tray-table, marking the crossword's location with his ballpoint pen. He sighed with resignation, turned halfway in his seat, and fixed his traveling companion with a look that had often commended rectitude to his parishioners. "Yes, and what would that be?"

"You believe in God, no doubt," he said.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I ask that only as a point of departure. I can see you're a man of the cloth, and so I know the answer is yes. But what I want to ask you is about gods, other gods, not God as we know Him."

"There is but *one* God, and His Son."

"Yes, I understand; and I agree absolutely. But let us for a moment consider those poor, benighted helots of heathen beliefs. Egyptians who believed in Ptah and Thoth and Amon; Mayas who

worshipped Pepeu and Raxa Caculhá, the Thunderbolt; Vikings with their Odin and Loki and the rest; the Yellow River peoples and Kuan Ti, the god of war, and Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy; Altijira and Legba and Kwatee and Kronos. Gods, all of them. Strong gods, personable gods, effective gods. What about them? What do we do with them, now that their times are gone?"

Rev. Schrag stared at him evenly. He was on firm footing now. "I have no idea what you're talking about, sir. As I said: there is but one God, and Jehovah is His name; and His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. All the rest of this is primitive demonology, cheap superstition. Pagan idolatry."

"Yes, of course," he said, reaching into the aisle to retrieve and hand back to the elderly black man the soft, frayed "blankie" his daughter had thrown to the industrial-strength carpet. "But let me have the benefit of your thinking on this, as a theologian, as a man

of God who's pondered about such things. I need, well, some guidance here; some clear thinking, if you get my meaning.

“Take, for instance, the transition from Græco-Roman polytheism to medieval Christianity. When we read of this momentous watershed in the history of the Western World, there is such a smug sense of *triumph*, whether we encounter it in Christian historians like Eusebius of Cæsarea or Christian apologists such as Augustine, who got sainted for being a flack for Jesus—”

Rev. Schrag's eyes popped open, he tried to speak, coughed; he made inarticulate sounds; he foundered on a sound that was the fuh-fuh-fuh beginning of *flack*; and the man from Beloit made small of his abashed behavior, dismissing it with an impatient flutter of his hand and by continuing in the same tone: “We're men of the world here; we needn't pussyfoot around it. Augustine was nothing more nor less than a p.r. man for the politics of orthodoxy. These days,

the belief that the elevation of Christianity to the position of an official state religion, instantly embraced, brooking no competition, was total, complete, immediate ... well, it's monolithic. But it wasn't, as I understand it. I mean, even as late as 385, the emperor Theodosius was having a rough time interdicting belief in the pantheon of gods—"

His words had been coming so fast, so smoothly, that only now was the Rev. Schrag able to *interdict* the rococo syntax.

"Paganism! That's all it was! Ignorant savages sloughing through darkness toward the light of Jesus Christ!"

"Ah, yes certainly, no question about it, I agree absolutely wholeheartedly," the man from Beloit said, slicing through the minister's fustian so coolly it was as if Schrag had taken a breath mint rather than having popped his eyeballs. "But you see how driven you are to use the word 'paganism'? Which was not, at least

in the first instance, a concept that the 'pagans' applied to themselves, but one that evolved as a way of distinguishing the non-Christian survivals after the gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine and subsequent..."

"These were *barbarians* ... barely able to tie their shoelaces ... they painted their fundamentals blue and ripped out each other's hearts and danced around campfires naked and ate each other's entrails ... pagans ... bar-*bare*-ians!" His voice had spiraled to a level that was drawing attention from other passengers. The man from Beloit smiled awkwardly at the elderly black man across the aisle, but his attention could be held only an instant: his daughter was singsonging, over and over, "Ma'y tinkle, ma'y tinkle, ma'y tinkle."

He turned back to Rev. Schrag and said, "Well, there is *certainly* no condoning such behavior, particularly the part about painting



their asses blue, but when you call them barbarians, I'm not sure you're aware of all the facts."

"Whuh-*what* facts?"

"Well, for instance, archaeologists working in Peru at sites such as Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke and Sechin Alto, ten thousand freezing feet above sea level in the Andes, have found a culture that predates the Mayas by 2000 years and the Aztecs by 3000 years.

"Huge U-shaped temples ten storeys high; an enormous warehouse, bigger than a baseball field, it served as a food storage complex; the buildings gorgeously decorated with painted friezes of jaguars, spiders, serpents." He leaned in and whispered, "Their vivid colors preserved intact by the dry cold of the Andean atmosphere. Why do you think they would settle at that altitude, build a sophisticated civilization at the same time the Egyptians were

building pyramids and the Sumerian city-states were flourishing, in such a grossly hostile region?

"Perhaps to get closer to the gods they deified? Do you think that's possible? What do you think about that, dropping the 'paganism' business, ass-painting notwithstanding? What do you think?"

"Will you *kindly* stop saying that!"

"Which part of it, the *paganism*?"

"No, the other."

"Oh, you mean the part about how they painted—"

"Yes! Yes, that's the part."

"Well, I don't mean to be contumacious, Reverend, but *I* was discussing alternative deities; it was you who brought up how they..."

Rev. Schrag crashed back into the conversation. "There never were any such deities," he said quickly. "Until the True Word was

revealed, pag—uh, heathens believed many strange and impossible things.”

“Mmm, I see. So we can assume that such ‘heathen’ martyrs as Hypatia of Alexandria died for nothing. But let me ask you this—” and he sneaked a glance across the aisle where preparations to ma'y tinkle were proceeding apace, “—what if you were one such as these, one of these obsolete gods. And all your believers were gone, all the Hypatias had been properly stoned to death by good Christians, no more worshippers, except perhaps a random diabolist here and there, corrupt individuals trying to bring you back so you could pick winning lottery tickets for them. What do you do then?”

Stiffly, Schrag said, “I have no conjecture on that, sir.”

“No idea at all?”

“None.”

"You don't think maybe Hera went off in a snit and took to drinking too much mead and became a bitchy alcoholic?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Maybe Jizo sank into a funk and contemplated hara-kiri?"

"Who did what?"

"So let me get this straight. What you're saying is that you don't think maybe possibly Jupiter just kept right on existing after Constantine bullied all the Romans into converting, and after a while with nobody praying to him, not even one daub of blue paint on a backside, he just got bored with it all and, say, just put a pistol up to his Olympian forehead and blew his beatific brains out?"

The minister stared at him, growing angrier by the moment. Then he settled himself facing stiffly forward, took up the magazine, opened it, and went back to the crossword puzzle.

"Sixteen down," the man from Beloit said idly, "an eight-letter word for 'neutral': *middling*."

The minister said nothing; and he did not look up as the man from Beloit unbuckled and rose, following the elderly black man as he aided his daughter toward the rear of the plane, and the lavatories.

He waited as the father spoke softly to the girl, saying, "Now you go on in an' make tinkle, Evelyn. You know. The way you do. That's a sweet child." And he opened the door for her, saying, "Now don't touch the door, don't mess with the lock, just go in an' make tinkle, all right? I'll be right here."

She went in, and he closed the door, turning to smile awkwardly at the man waiting behind him for the cubicle next in the row.

The man from Beloit sidled past, entered the lavatory that shared a bulkhead with the cubicle in which Evelyn was slowly and carefully pulling down her panties, then the absorbent cotton incontinence

liner. He closed his eyes for a moment, made a small sound, and then reached through the bulkhead to touch Evelyn's head. She closed her eyes.

"Sleep, good child. They love you so. Their time is so short. Let them live." And he formed the aneurism, and he made it explode, and she made a gentle sound, and fell.

He flushed the toilet, left the cubicle, and edged past the open door of the next stall, where the elderly black man was kneeling half in the aisle, calling to his daughter.

He returned to his seat. The mother gave a start as one of the stewardesses from the rear leaned in to speak quietly to her. In a panic, she tried to get out of her seat, found herself still buckled, pulled and pulled at the device till the stewardess helped her, and then they rushed back up the aisle.

The man from Beloit closed his eyes and feigned sleep. He didn't think there would be conversation with the Reverend Carl Schrag before they landed at De Gaulle, but he wanted to repose in privacy and darkness for a time. Repose and think clearly of the moment of relief that would come to the old people before they began to deal with their grief.

The sky was very clear, and far below the clouds went on their way.

\* \* \* \*

The man from the jet liner stood on the edge of the cliffs, staring out past Thásos, across the Aegean. "Levendis," he murmured. "Levendis." He sighed deeply, plucked three pebbles from the ground, and hurled them into the sky. They flew up toward the sun, spreading their wings for a moment, white herons that formed an

ancient design with their flying forms; then in an instant they rolled and dove, feathered shafts that struck the water, pierced the sea and vanished, plummeting toward the distant floor littered with broken stones. Enormous broken stones. Cyclopean blocks bearing praises to a god whose name had not been spoken on this earth since the long night of hungry waters that had wiped an entire civilization from the land, and from memory. Intricately-carved broken stones now merely accretions of limestone, barnacles and anemones, acrawl with crustaceans and small, blind fish. Softened shapes of fractured statues hundreds of meters in height when they had stood against the sky, before the night of ash and flame. The pulverized Great Temple in which the sacred ethmoid crystals had been kept. Down and down the heron shafts went, into a darkness never suspected, much less penetrated. They went to wreckage.



In anguish, he called out across the water; but the wind died and the day was silent; and all who might have heard would not understand the tongue in which he spoke, for it had not been spoken in thousands of years.

"Stranger, can I soften your pain?"

The man from the jet liner turned at the sound of the voice behind him. It was an old man, as blind as the fish that swam among a million mosaic tiles.

"Did you see that?" the man from the jet liner asked.

"Did I see you throw pebbles into the air?"

"You did see, then."

"No. I see nothing. I heard them click in your hands. I heard them as you threw them. You aren't Greek, are you?"

"No. Not Greek."

"Where are you from, stranger?"

"From a land that no longer exists."

"You sound lonely."

"I was lonely, for a long time."

"For your people?"

"Yes. But they're gone, and I haven't heard my name spoken for much too long. And why are *you* here, sir? What brings you to this empty place?"

"I come here to worship."

The man from the jet liner drew a deep breath. "What god do you worship here? Nothing ever stood here."

"Not here. Out there." He waved a hand toward the sea, and beyond to the greater ocean. "I hear the voices of the children of Poseidon."

"They were not Poseidon's disciples. You hear the lamentations of an older race. Nobler and more accomplished than any other. They never had the time to claim their inheritance."

The old man laughed lightly. "So you say."

"There were worlds and lands and peoples..."

"I think you are dreaming dreams that make you an empty man," he said. "Perhaps you should return to your homeland, no matter what name it now bears. Home is where you go when there is no place else to go. You can know it again through the words of your poets."

"No poets wrote of my land. Plato had a few words ... but I gave him those words. If I go home, it will only be to sleep." He paused, and added, "To rest."

The old man spoke softly. "Too much rest is rust."

"Why did you think I might be Greek?"

"Because you knew our word, *levendis*. But I was wrong."

\* \* \* \*

On the Bahnhofstrasse, amid crowds entering and exiting the five-level "everything store" called Jelmoli's, Zürich's answer to an American department store with a basement storey of drugs and groceries, the man from Greece, hurrying to the Icelandic Airlines ticket office, bumped into Gwen Fritcher, a Californian on detached duty with IBM's Swiss affiliate.

She had gone to Jelmoli's to get a few cans of American product—Dennison's chili, Campbell's tomato soup, Durkee's french fried onion rings, Pringles—because she was certain that one more meal of schnitzel, spaetzle and cabbage, submersed in sauce as appetizing as Elmer's Glue, would send her over the brink. She had begun having fever dreams, as sultry as sexual fantasies, herself

entwined with packages of Nabisco ginger snaps and (shamefully) Spaghetti-Os.

She was also having terrible menstrual cramps, and there had been literally a crying need for Panadol.

When he blindsided her, and the bag of groceries rocketed from her grasp, she gave a small croak of despair. "Hey, I'm awfully sorry," the man from Greece said, stooping to retrieve the still-rolling cans. "Oh, really, I'm sorry ... I wasn't watching where I was going ... the crowd, you know..."

They gathered everything, repacked it, and stood. He smiled his best smile, and she looked embarrassed at even having thought the things she'd thought. "American?" she asked.

"Once upon a time," he said. And added, "I really am sorry I'm such a klutz." And he touched her forearm, and smiled again, and said, "I'll be more careful." And he strode away into the crowd.

Gwen returned to the tiny apartment IBM had secured for her. The company suites were all filled, and they had taken a three month lease on this little flat, in hopes she would have completed her transference survey by that time or, failing that recourse, would be able to move her into a company-owned residence.

She set the bag of groceries on the kitchen counter, fished around till she found the small plastic-wrapped box of Panadol, and carried it into the bathroom.

With a fingernail, she slit the price tag and bar code sealing the Panadol box, and tore off the protective plastic wrap with some difficulty, fumbling interminably and cursing the mythical children who were thus guaranteed all protection against taking too much menses medicine. She finally got the box open and dumped out the two sheets of caps, each shrouded in a plastic bubble.

There was a folded slip of paper between the sheets. She laid it aside, pressed the back of one of the plastic bubbles, and popped out a capsule, then repeated the maneuver. She took her toothbrush from the water glass, ran it half full, swished the water, poured it out, refilled the glass halfway, and took the two Panadol.

She sat on the closed toilet, letting the analgesic start to do its work, smoothing the waves of pain. She thought for just an instant of the attractive man who had bumped into her on the Bahnhofstrasse. Idly, she picked up the piece of paper that had been folded inside the plastic-wrapped box. She opened it and looked at it, expecting an advertisement in at least three languages. Hand-printed in pencil on the slip of white paper were the words

YOU'LL BE DEAD BY MORNING, GWEN.

For no good reason, because this was clearly some kind of stupid thing that might have to do with an idiotic advertising campaign, she felt her heart thump heavily. She was, in an instant, and inexplicably, terribly frightened.

She dropped the note as if it had come from enemies.

There was a knock on the apartment door, and then the doorbell rang twice. She sat where she was. Thinking through the fear.

She was an employee of a multinational corporation. Could this have something to do with international terrorism? Had they somehow tapped into the computer, run the personnel records and selected her at random? She knew it couldn't be personal. She had been in Zürich only three weeks. She knew almost no one. Was there, on the other side of that door, a pair of ski-masked and black-suited kneecappers from the Red Army Faction or the IRA? Beneath their masks a young man and woman, pockmarked skin, anthracite



eyes, teeth in need of polishing, sworn angels of death sent by Carlos or Abu Nidal?

The doorbell chimed.

A spurned lover. Someone she'd known in New York, during that crazy summer before AIDS came to the world, when she was answering personals in *New York Magazine*? One of the more than a few men she had seen in the nude? The one she had laughed at, had been forced to use a kitchen knife to hold off till she could gather up her clothes and flee? Traced her, followed her, come to quench some psychopathic thirst for revenge?

A voice called from the other side of the door.

*"Fraülein, Miss, Lady..."*

She went to the door, put her ear against it. No sound. Finally, she said, "Yes, who is it?" And then she quickly stepped to the side, in

case the serial killer fired through the door, or cleaved the center panel with a fire ax.

*"Ah! Guten Morgen, Fraülein Fritcher ... ich bin der..."*

"I don't speak German! Who are you? Speak English, please; I speak only English!" She heard the panic in her own voice.

*"Ah! Ja. Ich, uh, that isz, I ... yes, I am the taking-care-of man. Nein ... vhat isz that I mean ... I am der superviszer ... der superintendent, ja, das ist ... yes, I am der janitor!"* There was a note of almost desperate relief in his voice as he found the correct word.

And she listened as the crazed silk-stocking strangler advised her that the incinerator in the hall had gone *geflunkt* or some similar word, and that it would not be available for trash and paper dumping till after six that evening. Then he went away.

Gwen wandered back to the kitchen, certain now that there could have been no way in which such a message could have found its way into that sealed box. Not at the factory, not in the grocery, not any way at all. There had been no signs of tampering, no pinholes, inviolate, untouched.

Yet the message had been there, and she knew, now, that it had been supernatural creatures. Beings from the other side, the souls of those she had done harm in her previous lives. They were warning her, and there was no escape. By morning, she would be dead.

She sat at the kitchen table and began to cry.

*I haven't lived nearly long enough, she thought. And I'm on the management track.*

She reached across to the counter and pulled down the thick cylinder of Pringles, husking breath so deeply that her chest hurt; and she pulled the plastic strip from the container, popped off the

metal lid, and took out a potato chip. It didn't help at all, not even the taste of the world and the life she had left behind. She thought hopelessly that she didn't want to die in a foreign land. She ate another Pringle.

Lying atop the third chip, nested perfectly with the other slim forms, was a slip of folded paper. She opened it with utter terror consuming her, and read

### IGNORE PREVIOUS MESSAGE.

She received only two pieces of mail that day in the IBM courier pouch from New York. One was an announcement of Nancy Kimmler's shower two weeks hence. The other was contained in a plain white envelope with no return address, and the single sheet of neatly-typed message was this: "The life which is unexamined is not worth living." Beneath, were two words in pencil: *Plato* and *bang*.

\* \* \* \*

He stood now, the man from Zürich, where he had never set foot before. He had rented a car in Reykjavik two days earlier, the 26th, and driven to Búðhir where he had taken a room and given sight to a man blind from birth. In truth, he hadn't needed a car; no more than he had needed a castle, a brigantine, an arbalest, a flat-bed truck, a 451-barrel Vandenberg Volley Gun, an ethmoid crystal, a 1980 Mustang, or an Icelandic Airlines DC-8 Zürich-Reykjavik. No more than he had needed special equipment to breathe the water of the Aegean, centuries before it had borne that name.

But he had wanted to see the riot of colors, the ecstasy of moss growing in volcanic cinders deposited by the eruption of Mount Hekla in 1970 along a rivulet on the edge of Thjórsádalur; he had wanted to go *as a man*, to stand before the black ash cliff at Langahlidh and

marvel at the tenacity of the exquisite, delicate white flowers that grew toward the light from inhospitable fissures. He wanted to have the time before the kalends of July to contemplate how long, how far he had wandered; to think back to what had been and what was now; to reconcile himself to the end of the journey.

He had come much farther than from Chicago or northern Alabama, Quito or Sydney, Damascus or Lioazhong or Lagos on the Slave Coast. He had been far afield, traveling through immense lightless distances; pausing to pass the time with a telepathically garrulous plant-creature; spending time unmeasurable observing hive-arachnids as they slowly mutated and grew toward sentience and the use of tools; taking a hand in the development of a complex henotic social system that united water and fish and the aquicludes that had ruled as autarchs since the silver moon had fractured to form Murus, Phurus and Veing. He had returned, weary beyond the

telling, having seen it all, having done it all, come full circle through miracles, wandering, loneliness and loss.

There had been centuries of despair, followed by centuries of acrimony and deeds too awful to recall without unbearable pain and guilt; centuries of sybaritic indulgence, followed by centuries of cataclysmic ennui; and finally, centuries and years and days reduced to odd moments now and then, of wonderful, random, unpredictable kindness. That were no more satisfying or lasting than all the acts of all the centuries that had preceded them.

He was alone. Since the long, terrible night of ashes and screams, and the closing over of the waters, he had been alone. There were, of course, diabolists and fools who believed; but their belief was the product of insanity or delusion. No descendant of those who had come to the Great Temple walked this world.

Nowhere was there to be found a true believer.

And at last he had come to know that he must return, to the place that had brought him to existence, and there he must go down alone to find eternal rest. He could wander no longer. He simply didn't have it in him to continue.

So he had come by way of Reykjavik and Næfurholt and Brún, in a great circle across the island of volcanoes, as June came to an end, the last June he would ever see. Came, at last, to stand here on Sunday the 28th, the last day but two of the month, with a sudden change of wind and a new moon that had brought salutary weather, the sun pouring its beaming rays to the very bottom of the crater.

Snæfellsjökull.

In Icelandic, all volcanoes bear the name of Yocul, and it means glacier, for in the lofty mountains of that region the volcanic eruptions come forth from icebound caverns. Snæffels means snow mountain. There it towers on the western peninsula, and can be



seen from Reykjavik, a great urban capital of the sophisticated modern world. Even in Reykjavik the mountain is known to possess great power, some say psychic power.

He stood on the edge of the crater and smiled. Not even in Reykjavik, where they could feel the power, could they guess the enormity of Snæfellsjökull's secret. To a height of five thousand feet.

*In Sneffels Yoculis craterem, he thought, in dog Latin, kem delibat umbra Scartaris Julii intra calendas descende, audus viator, et terrestre centrum attinges.*

He laughed lightly, and the metallic wind picked at his clothing, ruffled his ash-gray hair. Would anyone recognize those words without the fictional lines the writer had added for the story's benefit? *Kod feci. Arne Saknussem.*

Above him the blind spire of Mount Scartaris, black as the eclipse on that night of screaming stones and hungry water, rose in

expectation of the movement of the sun. Waiting. Poised to aim its finger of shadow across the thighbone peninsula, passing across the fjord, swinging fast to cancel the flood of sunlight pouring into the center of the crater.

Snæffels had been quiet since 1219. He remembered now, with another small smile, how it had been that the writer had come to expose the secret—while concealing it the more in tall tale—and he could see, even now, the face of the Franciscan monk as the words burned themselves into the illuminated manuscript as he sat with quill poised. That had been during one of the centuries of antic foolishness for him.

Each hillock, every rock, every stone, every asperity of the soil had its share of the luminous effulgence, and the shadow of Scartaris fell heavily on the soil. The shadow of the spike that

penetrated the sky was marked and clear, and moved rapidly as high noon approached.

He watched with the first genuine tickle of anticipation he had felt in a dozen millennia. The shadow slid, roiled, faster and faster, and the sun came to rest with a gasp at its highest point, and the shadow fell upon the edge of the central pit in the heart of the crater. It rushed down the wall, across the caldera, and ink poured over the edge of the central pit in the heart of Snæffels. Forsaking all others, the shadow of Scartaris formed the road sign he had come across eternities to read.

*Descend into the crater of Yocul of Snæffels, which the shade of Scartaris caresses, before the kalends of July, audacious traveler, and you will reach the center of the earth. I did it. Arne Saknussemm.*

He went down into the crater and stood at the lip of the central pit. It measured about a hundred feet in diameter, three hundred in circumference. This tremendous, wondrous shaft, its sides almost as perpendicular as those of a well, a terrifying abyss more than eight hundred and fifty meters deep, which had come to be called Saknussem's Chimney by those who had been fooled through the writer's misunderstanding of words in an ancient manuscript that had been manipulated under his gaze.

The time was ended for tricks and make-work.

Even gods can learn. Given enough time.

Even gods forgotten, gods without disciples, gods whose times and lands had vanished before memory had formed in those who had come to claim the world.

He stepped into the shadow, leaving sunlight for the last time, and began his descent. There was only one answer to what a god can do

when everything has been taken from him; and he knew at last what that answer was. Not sleep, not immolation, not descent into final darkness, never to emerge. No, the answer lay beneath him: to *recreate*. To *reify*. To cause it all to come again, stronger and mightier and more golden than it had been when chance and disaster had wiped it away.

And one day not that far off, perhaps only a few centuries hence, *his* people would arise, bringing with them a certain inheritance all others had debased. As they had long ago created him, now he would *re-create* them.

And on that day they would go once more to the Great Temple, to sing his name, and to thank him for growing bored and foolish and for trivializing himself with the lives of those now vanished and themselves turned to myth.

Scartaris, June 28th  
*by Harlan Ellison*

But he would keep the name of the place, and the moment in which he had learned. Scartaris, June 28th.

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