# SHIVA

## AND OTHER STORIES

BARRY N. MALZBERG

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Anderson

He is elected President of the United States by an overwhelming margin. A mandate. Fifty-eight percent of the popular vote, five hundred and twelve votes in the Electoral College. Inexplicably, his opponent wins Nebraska. On the day after the election, Bitters whooping in the huge suite says that the first action of the administration will be to settle with those hayseeds. Anderson looks at him quizzically. “I don't want to punish anyone.”

“What the hell,” Bitters says, “don't you have any sense of humor?”

* * * *

“I have a gloomy premonition that we will soon look back on this troubled moment as a golden time of freedom and license to act and speculate. One feels the steely sinews of the tiger, an ascetic ‘moral’ and authoritarian reign of piety and iron.”

—Robert Lowell, 1967

* * * *

Winding down. Everyone knows that it is on the line now; this is the time when men and boys get separated. It is a time for greatness. Fourth and one on the ten-yard line, thirty-six seconds left on the stadium clock, no time-outs, game hanging in the balance. Anderson perches over the center, his eyes filled with alertness, his chest heaving with

the excitement of it all, the lacerating cold turning warm inside, each exhalation truly a burst of fire. He has never felt so alive as at this moment when truly he is dead, the ball coming into his hand, he scurries and sees the middle linebacker shooting through unblocked, coming upon him, eyes huge. Anderson gives an *eh!* of woe and cocks the ball for a desperation pass, try and get it into the end zone anyway but his foot slips and even before the linebacker hits him he feels himself falling to the hard Astroturf and then the man is upon him, grunting.

Even as the horn sounds, Anderson hears not only the game but all circumstance spilling from him. He knew that it was going to be very difficult but could not surmise that it was going to be like this. Not quite. Sounds are all around him as he spirals out. Down and out. Game to go on the two. In coma, he hears the sound of engines.

* * * *

Anderson, awakening from an unrecollected dream of loss, plots his moves, considers his fortune, then opens his eyes to look at the lustrous plaster of the bedroom as his wife tumbles all over him. This is not characteristic of Sylvia. Petulant, demanding, she seizes him. Wearily, he commits himself. Foreign policy, ceremonial pens, the medal of freedom, state banquets, it is just another of the obligations of office.

Sylvia is inflamed by the idea of touching a President: she has never shown so much interest in the act as in this last year. Anderson does as he can, serves as he will, utters oaths

of office, does as he must, holds to the center. He is a moderate. Sylvia capsizes upon him mumbling. Anderson charts his own release, thinking of ICBMs as convulsively, absently, he climaxes.

* * * *

Anderson lights a cigarette calmly and blows out the match, tosses it, inhales, then in a single graceful motion pushes in the swinging doors of the Circle Bar and walks through. In the poisoned darkness the two Lump brothers stand glaring at him, hands on their holsters. Half-consumed whiskey bottles stand behind them over the deserted bar. The bartender has dived for cover, the customers, no fools they, have filched out a side door. “All right,” Anderson says, “this is it. One at a time or both of you, I don't care.”

“Taste lead,” Tom, the older one, says. His gun is in his hand and poised to fire when Anderson shoots him in the wrist. Tom Lump shrieks and falls. His point thirty-eight clatters to the crude surface of the bar.

“Next,” Anderson says, the gun cocked, drawing down on Charles. The tall Lump stares at him; his eyes shift, his expression weakens. Slowly he raises his hands.

“I'll take you on with fists,” Anderson offers, “right outside. Let's go.”

On the floor Tom whimpers. “Listen,” Charles says carefully, “we don't want any trouble here. You got us wrong.”

“Not wrong, just drawn down,” Anderson says. He holsters his gun. “Okay,” he says. “Any arguments?”

Charles Lump says, “I got nothing to do with this. Tom brought me along for the ride, I ain't got nothing against this town and I'm the first to say so. Anything this town wants to do is okay with me, so there.”

“Oh shut up,” Tom says weakly, “you're in this with me up to the hilt. I'm going to bleed to death here you don't stop talking and get me a doctor.”

“You can get to a doctor out of town,” Anderson says. He throws down his cigarette, carefully stomps it out with a circular motion. No fires when the marshal is around. “Get up.”

Charles turns, shrugs elaborately. On the floor Tom begins to dry heave, then vomits brightly. “Pack him over a horse and get him out,” Anderson says, “there's a doctor over in Bluff City twenty miles west, you ought to be able to get him there before he passes out if you get going now.”

There is no spirit left in either of the Lumps. Charles nods, bends, yanks Tom to his feet and lurches him past Anderson, out the swinging doors. Anderson watches them carefully, joins them then as they saddle up their horses, Tom clumsily in an attitude of prayer. Charles unhitches.

“There will be another time, Anderson,” Tom says weakly. “This isn't the way it ends.”

“Shut up,” Charles says, helping him mount with a push. “Just get those reins and let's get outta here.”

“I had hoped for more from you than that,” Anderson says carefully. “Maybe a little more fight next time, eh?”

“Maybe,” Tom says. “Nothing ever ends. It replicates. It goes on and on.”

“For Christ's sake shut up,” Charles says. “Let's just get the hell going.”

“Got nowhere to go,” Tom says. He seems to be edging into delirium. “Anywhere we go, got to come back and face it. Unless we die out of it, Charlie. I think maybe I'll do that.”

“Ain't so easy,” Charles says. He glares at Anderson. “Ain't going to be so easy for you either; this is a tough country.” Anderson stares back flatly, showing the outlaw his inner strength and Charles Lump drops his eyes, coughs, shakes his head, mounts his horse and taking the tether of the other, moves slowly away. He does not look back.

Hands on hips, gun dangling from his index finger, Anderson watches them all the way out of Tombstone. Their figures and the horses diminish to small, concentrated blobs of darkness that blend at last with the landscape to leave him there eternally and as always, alone. Soon enough it will be time to turn and face the silent crowd who have massed behind him; he knows to pay them homage but for the moment Anderson does not need them, needs none of this at all, needs only the proud and terrible isolation which has been imposed on him in the role which he so humbly but gracefully has assumed:

The Avenger's front man.

* * * *

Some years ago Anderson had begun to feel it all slip away, not only his career which had been slowly drained from him for many years but his very sense of self. All of his life, through the great times and the years of sorrow, he had been

sustained as had most of those he knew by the belief that destiny was benign, that life was a sentence with a structure and that nothing so terrible could happen that would not yield salvation in the nick of time.

But the decade shook that faith. It shook faith but good, shock, implosion, the feeling of circumstance turning upon itself and there had been a period, it must have gone on for years, when Anderson had found himself questioning the sense of it all, when paralysis had settled like a cloak upon him; for a long time he had been unable to perform all but the simplest actions. Sex, sleep, panels, conventions. Never an introspective man—but not nearly as stupid as a lot of them took him to be; that was his secret and his strength—he had found it hard to handle, like an undiagnosed, dreadful virus hanging on at the lip of reason.

It was the riots, the war, the circling anguish and the bewilderment, the terrible settling anger in this country that he loved and to which he had dedicated his life and purpose. Anderson could not get a handle on it. Surely it would have to be the times and not himself, because this should have been the best period of his life. Sylvia and he had the understanding, he had the travel and the conventions, physically he might not be all that he had once been, a little shaky in crowds maybe, not as certain in bed as he had once taken for granted but the sense of decay which cut from the center had to do with politics.

They were making shit of everything decent, of everything for which he stood, and it was too easy to say that they were communist dupes. That wasn't it at all. Anderson knew the

truth by now; RED CHANNELS had sucked him in but he had outgrown that: there might be fifty practicing communists left. Underground there were fifty thousand or a million of them hiding but they were not coming out and they were not practicing their deceit. No, it was the kids themselves and the war and the outside agitators from the Congo running around to the ghettos on expense accounts inciting to riot. God *damn* it; he was a man of reasonable sensitivity but there was such a thing as going too far.

He went to the back lot to discuss it with the Lump brothers one morning. The Lumps hadn't been heard from in years and years: they had gone into the can along with Republic Studios but they were still there for pain and conversation, bored and lonely like most of the old characters, still hanging around the commissary and waiting for the big turnaround. Everyone was waiting for the big turnaround about then, Anderson too, but no one had looked up the Lumps for a long time and they were almost pathetic in their eagerness to talk. “Jesus *Christ*, Anderson,” Tom said, extending his damaged wrist, the one that had been shot and had never properly healed, “It's good to see you. We never thought we'd see you again.” Charles grabbed Anderson's free arm and rubbed it passionately. “Maybe you got some work?” he said.

“Yeah,” Tom said, “work, we're ready. Got out equipment and everything. Ready to go.”

“No work,” Anderson said. He shrugged. “Just some questions.”

“Hell,” Tom said. “We were hoping for work. Soon as we seen you, we said this is it. We're going into that town again. You can even shoot up the other hand if you want.”

“Afraid not,” Anderson said. “No town, no shooting.” He squatted on his haunches in the old easy posture, the Lumps leaned over him, their faces beckoning and doglike. “Where did it go wrong?” Anderson said. “We were at the height of our power, we controlled everything. Then we started to pull out piece by piece, and we lost our power, the President got shot, the kids went crazy on us, and the whole thing started to come apart.”

“Forget the President,” Charles Lump said, “that was a good one; it was a move in the right direction.”

“Maybe,” Anderson said. He thought about it. Images of the city in the sun, the fallen roses. “Maybe it was but it wasn't civilized.”

“Country ain't civilized unless things like that *do* happen,” Charles Lump said. He spat. “You think it's easy taking lead on the back lots for thirty years? Got to be some point or purpose.”

“But it's no answer.”

“Ain't no answer,” Tom said. “Bunch of tethered horses and old film that ain't been shown for years. Don't even show it in *television*.”

“We were kind of hoping *you* might have an answer,” Tom said painfully, flexing his wrist. “Least we could ask, you being the marshal who shot us up and threw us out of town and all that. If you don't have an answer, Anderson, who in hell does?”

"It's out there," Anderson said. "I know it is." A palpable sense of mystery seems to invade him; maybe it was for this that he went to see the Lumps. "I guess I'll go look for it."

"Well, you carry the news back when you get it," Charles said. "We'll be waiting. Maybe there'll be a little action in it for us, too."

Anderson stood. He waited politely for the Lumps to straighten but they remain crouched. Arthritis has caught their joints, sucked their motion. "Well," he said awkwardly, "guess I'll be seeing you."

"Sure thing," Charles Lump said. He extended a hand. Anderson touched it, then patted old Tom on his shoulder.

"Sure was good times back then," Tom said.

Anderson nodded. He strode from the back lot but when he was back in his rental car heading toward Pasadena he came to understand that he had no real destination. Open-mouthed he drove the freeway for hours. Fortunately circumstance took him one more time.

* * * *

At the cabinet the Soviets' latest ultimatum is discussed. Some suggest withdrawal while others counsel invasion or at least a fierce reply. Anderson shrugs, waves his hands. "Whatever you say, whatever you think." It is all too much for him, poised as he is on the edge of a new idea.

* * * *

Forbes, the White House doctor gives him an unscheduled and unexplained physical. Sylvia's instigation? Rumors he is

losing his grip? News reports that he seems to be tottering and losing the thread of his speeches? Anderson submits wearily. Bowels, digestion fine, he tells Forbes, mind focused and clear. In the sack? Forbes says shrewdly, his eyes glittering with interest. “No difference,” Anderson says. It is an answer to cover everything. Forbes squeezes the sphygmomanometer bulb furiously until the constriction forces metal and then releases: in the expiring hiss Anderson hears the sound of a crowd. State has fumbled. He will get a chalice with the ball again.

* * * *

At three in the morning he gets the call from Bitters, acting for the Joint Chiefs, he says. Tracers in Alaska have found activity, radar had subsequently picked up a convoy of jets of undetermined origin streaking over the Pacific toward the Golden Gate Bridge.

“It doesn't look good,” Bitters says.

“What the hell does that mean?” Anderson says. He has slept badly, moving from one convolute dream to the next, sound stages of memory inhabited by goblins and archetypes and for a moment he thinks that this is yet another dream but the speaker phone glints, Bitters’ whining, melodramatic voice is not the voice of recollection. “Are they aggressive forces or not?”

“Well we don't know. They're *moving* aggressively.”

“Is it possible the radar is wrong?” These things have happened, Anderson knows.

“No. We've ordered a retaliatory strike force into the air as a matter of fact.”

“You did all this without clearing?”

“It's in the statutes,” Bitters says nervously. He has been with Anderson for a long time. Since the Senate campaign as a matter of fact. Anderson has never been able to figure out exactly how Bitters has insinuated himself so deeply into his political life and the administration but it was never worth the trouble of confrontation. Get along, go along. He had been a good appointments secretary anyway.

“Then why are you clearing it with me now? Why don't you just go ahead and deliver the payload? Isn't that what you want?”

Bitters says nothing. That is the key to his power; he responds only to those questions which he can answer, ignores the rest. Anderson has come to admire the quality; he has learned a bit of it himself. “Well,” he says, “what am I supposed to do? Wake the Premier and tell him what's going on here? Is it an international crisis or not?”

“I'm just advising you of the situation,” Bitters says.

Anderson reaches out and cuts the connection. For an instant he is insanely attracted by the idea of going back to sleep. The bombers will meet on their suicide collision or they will not; the retaliatory strikes will begin or they will not ... but in a few hours it will all be over anyway and either way it goes there will be no penalty for him. None whatsoever.

The idea lunges at him like a lover, casts tentacles heavy with desire over him; it is with an effort that Anderson drags himself from the iron compulsion and stumbles from the bed.

He hits switch after switch, floods the room with light. The entire mechanism of this government is his to command, the awesome technology that can spirit his voice to the Premier or a hundred thousand missiles to deadly target is waiting to serve, but at this moment, in this room, it is to Anderson as if none of it exists, as if all of it, the situation, the Presidency itself, is hallucinatory and that if he were to fully concentrate he would be fourteen years old and back in his Omaha bedroom, peeping at the more benign shapes of the night. Shakily he pours himself a drink from the bottle by his bedside, thinking of the sounds of the flatlands as they poured through his bedroom. There were no planes in the sky then, no missiles, no bombers, no retaliatory strike forces or warheads or Joint Chiefs. No Bitters. There were only he and hope in the darkness but that was a long time ago to be sure and of no moment. What is happening now is that he is in the grip of some kind of international crisis and he cannot find a position.

What would a President do? Anderson thinks about it. There was that Henry Fonda film which dealt with something similar but he had never seen it, just heard about it. Actually he was pretty weak on movies in which he had not acted, he was too busy making films in that time to watch them, and there are serious gaps in his background, important matters hence which he will never come to understand. The phone lights and he thinks about ignoring it, then sighs and activates. “All right,” Bitters says, “this has been discussed and the decision is that there's no alternative but a full retaliatory strike.”

“What if it's a mistake?”

“Everyone knows the rules of this. There's no mistake anyway; we've checked it visually. Those jets are a thousand miles outside circumference in a target zone.”

*Circumference. Target zone.* Anderson has always admired the cool language of the military; they seem to have a handle on things. “So you want the bombers ordered up.”

“That's already done.”

“What if I countermand?”

“That would he unwise.”

“For God's sake,” Anderson says, “you're talking about the end of the world, don't you know that?”

“You're talking about the end of San Francisco regardless.”

“So does attacking them bring it back?”

“Does not attacking them save the rest of the country? This is just the first step. They're testing our will.”

“What if it's just a bluff?”

“They're over the perimeter. You don't understand that this is very serious business.”

“The fate of the world is my concern.”

“Unless you countermand, then,” Bitters says and cuts the connection. Anderson looks at the speaker in amazement. The dull sound of transmission warns him that he must cut his own end. *What the hell do I do now?* he thinks. He cuts the connection. *What have I gotten myself into here? I didn't want any of this. I was just doing a favor for some friends. What the hell kind of ambitions did I have anyway? I wanted to save the world, not to end it. This is craziness. I'm an old man, I need my rest. I should be asleep now.*

* * * *

“Take them out,” Tom Lump says wisely, clutching his withered hands. Tom and he have become more intimate in recent days; unlike his brother he feels free to come into the Presidential bedroom and engage in reminiscence, now offer advice. “What the hell else can you do? They've strayed.”

“This could be the end of the world, Tom.”

“Oh come on,” Tom says calmly. “Shoot. The world isn't going to end. All that we've heard since 1946 is that if we did this, if we did that, the world would end and nothing much has happened except that every time we didn't take that stand they'd nibble another piece off. If we'd just gone ahead and acted like men from the start they wouldn't be putting bombers over us now but that doesn't mean we have to back off.”

Tom spits, rubs his heel over the spot. “Awful sorry to do that in your bedroom,” he says. “The White House and all. I mean this is the President I'm talking to, I mean to show a little respect.”

“It isn't that simple you know,” Anderson says, “I used to think it was but it's different once you get into this office; you see all kinds of problems—”

“Shoot again,” Tom says wisely, “we've heard that kind of crap from anyone who ever came into the government; they campaign that they're going to clean things up, change them, stop putting up with what got us here and the next thing you know they're talking about the powers and problems of office and the humility of leadership and the complexity of the times

and the *next* thing you hear it's the same crap all over again until someone else shoots them or blows them out." Tom clutches his emaciated wrist. "Long time ago when something had to be done you just went ahead and *did* it," he reminds Anderson. "Wasn't kind and hurt like hell but I'm still walking around and it sure cleaned up the problem, didn't it? You were right to do it and I'm the first one to say it. You had no choice. It was a lucky thing you spared my life but you could have cut me down and my brother too in that street and it would have served us right.

"That was the movies," Anderson said. "That wasn't really happening, that was film. Wasn't it? You can't take that kind of stuff all that seriously, Tom."

"Really?" Tom says. "Seemed real enough to me. Seems real enough right now. Can't pick up a coffee cup in this hand, hurts all night and real bad when I get up in the morning. I reckon it was real."

"It wasn't," Anderson says. But maybe it was, he thought. It was certainly as real as this. He had lines which made more sense than anything going on here and the heat under the camera had been terrific. The pain was real, later, in the daily rushes it carried. "I've got to make a decision here," he says. "I've got to face up to it."

"Seems to me the decision is made. All you got to do now is let events take their course."

"I'm the President. I'm supposed to control events."

"That's just stuff you heard on television," Tom says. "That's just stuff you seen in the movies."

"What does that mean?"

"You start to talk about what's real, what's *not* real," Tom says, "you ought to think about that Bitters."

"What?"

"He don't seem so real to me," Tom says. "Seems to me that he's carrying on like something out of the movies. Where the hell did he come from, huh?"

Anderson stares at him.

"Just think about that," Tom Lump says, "just think about that."

He winks and vanishes.

* * * *

Anderson can't think about it. Not now. If Bitters isn't real what is he then, a figment of his imagination that he has dragged from the Nebraska Senate campaign clear on, a dozen years later, to the White House and nuclear crisis? What is he, a hallucination, someone be has invented to blame for the acts which he cannot accept himself? No, he will not even think about it; what he has to decide now is if this is all some kind of psychological test. Maybe that is the answer.

Forbes and Sylvia and Bitters are in on it; probably the Lump brothers too. They are testing his will and resolve. Anderson knows all about the rumors from the press digests Bitters puts in front of him: that he has gone senile, retreated behind a wall in the White House, lost his grip, allowed matters to be taken out of his hand. The cut down in public appearances suggests that he might be a babbling fool. There are those who say that he has become a drooling oldster; that a stroke or irreversible kidney damage has done him in.

Now, it is possible that he *has* been showing symptoms and that they have banded together to test him. That is a possibility: under the 25th Amendment the determination of a President's capacity to govern can be made outside of him and they have grouped to see if he really has lost his marbles. That would explain everything: the way that Sylvia is making insatiable sexual demands and the Lump brothers checking into the Presidential quarters and now this damned nuclear strike which was made up to see if he could control himself in a crisis. He had no evidence after all that any of this was happening, just a couple of calls from Bitters (who according to Tom might be imaginary, in which case *none* of this was really going on except inside his own head but he could not tangle with the meaning of that; better to say that Bitters was real. Sure he was real; no one could invent someone like that hard, ungiving man).

They were trying to find how he would react. Forbes and a team of shrinks were probably monitoring everything to get a sense of the situation. And in that case, Anderson thinks sullenly, the hell with all of them. He kicks off his shoes, sits on the bed. It would serve them right if he *failed* their goddamned test. It would serve them exactly right if he were to collapse under all of these pressures deliberately heaped on him: the sex, the crisis, the suspicions and the complaint and they had to invoke the 25th and put the vice president whoever the hell that was in. Maybe they would get a good dose of the situation and see exactly what he'd been dealing with all of this time. They'd have to have someone else play President for them and let's see if *he* would do any better,

Anderson thinks bitterly. He stares at the telephone for a long time, pondering his next move.

His next move is going to be a big one and he wants to make sure that it will be exactly right for the situation. No margin for error now.

*Could* he have invented Bitters and dragged him through a dozen years? Why, that would make him crazy.

It surely would.

* * * *

After the holocaust, Anderson thinks, it will be wonderful. No more problems, questions, conflicts. Simple resolution. Plans have been made in a top-secret fashion for decades to spirit the leaders of government and industry underground at the first indication of nuclear strike and so he will be sped to an enormous shelter just south of Roanoke, Virginia, where luxurious quarters have been hollowed out miles under the surface for a luxurious existence while waiting for the fallout to clear. Several hundred of them will be in this most ornate and homelike of all the shelters; a small city underground with the appurtenances of modern living and he will still very much be the President. Anderson knows how it will be there. They will leave him alone and he will have miles of glistening underground corridor to explore should he ever become bored. Millions of dollars have been spent over the years on this shelter; it is packed with devices to amuse. His old films are there, a screening room, light and speed and sound.

It may be possible, he thinks, to come to terms with the key questions of his life underground. In these dozens of

years he has not had much time for contemplation, the kind of pondering in which a man must engage as he nears the end of his days. It had been his hope before politics intervened to use time to read and think but neither the Senate nor the White House were places where a man could come to terms with philosophy. Among the questions that he would consider in the deeps, Anderson supposed, were: the true weight of his marriage, the sense of his career, the influence of having been a fantasy figure upon his own inner life (could fantasy figures have fantasies themselves?) and the question as to whether being a wish fulfillment figure had made him capable of wishes. A lot had to do with the acting, of course: you took direction, first from your agent, then the scriptwriter and producer, then the director himself; you were always following someone's conception of what you should be and why and you tend to be measured as an actor in how well you came up to others' expectations. But that could be dangerous because all of his life he had been working for the others.

Could that be the reason for Bitters? So that even here, at the pinnacle, he would have someone to work for?

Well, goddamn it, maybe it was time that he did something for himself, looked for his own goals and desires. Struck out. But that left another hard question: if you played it their way for almost three quarters of your life, doing what they wanted you to do to their satisfaction, could it be said at the end of this that you had anything inside independent of them? Did he *have* any goals and desires? Or was it just a matter of being a people pleaser, a box office winner? He would give

this some thought too while he prowled the corridors and networks of the gleaming underground city. He would not let possibilities of the slightest substance whisk by.

* * * *

Anderson sees himself on the rim of the underground city. He has left quarters early, before the full fluorescence that in the controlled, timeless environment would be “day"; in the controlled seventy-six-degree temperature pouring from the canisters he walks in golfer's clothing past the tightly closed cubicles of his sleeping brethren, past the darkened cafeteria and recreation quarters, the closed library, past the exercise courts and into the deeper network. The tunnels fan here like flowers, open up like tumors, the lighting spurts uncontrolled reds and purple. Determinedly, Anderson walks through this, wallowing in the silence, fixated on his goal, which is the great, gray space into which the tunnels feed and where the network ends. The space is framed by a high wall which dwindles into the fading light; in the wall are carved the letters and numerals which cryptographically instruct the engineers on how to maintain. Anderson has access to the codes but will never study them. Senseless. Technology has always mystified although he has enjoyed its benefits no less than any other American. It made him a fortune, put him in power.

Now, on the stone floor into which the tunnels empty, Anderson stands, faces the wall and in the gray light deduces the sense of this greatest adventure of his life. Not two weeks ago he was the President in the country at the height of

power; now he may be President but he lives with two hundred others underground and for all he knows the rest of his constituency is dead. Communications with the outside do not exist. Communication links with other shelters were planned but do not work. For all Anderson knows he may be with the last on earth but he does not want to deal with this complexity. The reality, the sheer weight of his present environment involves and amazes; for now they are all he needs to know of circumstance. He stands looking at the wall.

"Position," Bitters says. He has followed him all the way out here. "You know what to do."

Anderson knows what to do. He has always known; that is his strength and curse. "Only one more chance," Bitters says.

"And Tom?"

"Right," Bitters says. "For Tom."

For Tom, then. He always knew that it would be this way, didn't he? It would come to this. Anderson crouches. Position.

"Now," Bitters says. His face is obdurate, magnificent in the stricken light. "Now."

Now. Fourth and one on the ten-yard line, thirty-six seconds left on the stadium clock, no time-outs, game hanging in the balance. Anderson perches over the center, his eyes filled with alertness, his chest heaving with the excitement of it all, the lacerating cold turning warm inside, each exhalation truly a burst of fire.

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## Reason Seven

I prepare “captured secret documents.” A smattering of Russian, hints of Spanish, *un peu* French, some Chinese; it is not important that I be fluent in these languages as long as I can provide what might be called their *flavor*. The “documents” are intended to read as translations anyway, which excuses many limitations in style. They contain polemics about the need for world conquest, interspersed with statistics so dull that they must chill: feed grains, diseased chickens, pastures, coal mines, resources. The style is horrifying, but that is the agency's problem, not my own. I merely conform to established rules. I follow format.

This job—and I regard it solely as a job; I have no delusions of grandeur here—cost me a promising relationship recently. It is of this that I wish to speak—however hesitantly—for the files. I have been instructed to do this. Otherwise it is not to be discussed outside of context. Francine, however, was disingenuous, and me—I knew less then—I was also a little bit of a patriot and proponent (fool!) of relative openness in affairs. So I told her, more or less, what I did. It took Francine a while to grasp the context, but when she did, her reaction was one of disgust. “You're a functionary,” she said, “a *clerk.* Don't all of the lies sicken you?”

“They are not lies. I choose to believe they reflect a higher truth in the endless battle between the Soviet bloc and the Western forces of light.”

"We've heard that rationalization for half a century," Francine said. She was really quite angry. I am doing a poor job, I sense, of conveying her outrage. (My prose is more keyed toward the smoothly bureaucratic. It is all a matter of training.) "This is crazy," she said. "You mean you write this stuff so that when the troops come in they plant the documents and then those documents disappear from somebody's files?"

"*Secret* documents," I pointed out. "Transcripts and writings that were supposed to have been destroyed or taken away and were instead left behind by the enemy in their headlong flight. Captured *public* documents would be another division."

"Are you trying to tell me you just sit in front of a typewriter and make up this stuff? That's horrifying."

Well, perhaps it is, considered in that way; I had never done so before. I gather that I am being rather light on characterization. Characterization and her handmaiden, description, are not to be neglected in certain prose documents.

Francine was five feet four, with a certain severity of mouth and cheekbones, perhaps a consequence of her upbringing in the mine country of Pennsylvania but more likely associated with the fact that she was a master of arts in nursing administration and had seen a good deal in her time, not the least of which was the interior of my apartment, if not my unrevealed psyche. (Me, I had seen little and had been nowhere; travel, in the viewpoint of my mentors, not being conducive to that free flow of the imagination needed to

produce fine secret documents.) Breasts two, eyes blue, ass nicely formed, and so on, and I would go into further particulars of appearance and physical relationship if they were relevant under any circumstance. They are not relevant.

“This is bizarre,” Francine said. “I've never heard of anything like it. Why are you telling me all this?”

“You said you wanted a sharing relationship, Francine.”

“But this is crazy.”

“Crazy?” I said, and added an agency dictum. “In war nothing is crazy, and we are in deadly combat. We make up everything, yes, but only in a tight format. There's a style sheet, there's rigid schematization of the voicing, and there are lists of facts, all of which must be included in a certain fashion. Actually,” I emphasized, “it's a very demanding job, fully deserving of its GS-eighteen rank, and we're thinking about making a formal appeal for reclassification.”

“Who are ‘we'?”

“All of us in the branch, of course.”

“You mean, there's a whole little disgusting army of clerks. Of captured secret document preparers.”

“Our official classification is *informational writer*,” I said, “but I wouldn't really object to your label.”

“Well, I object to every aspect of it,” Francine said.

And so on and so forth. It was a difficult argument in a difficult time, and it is not, perhaps, worthwhile to extend this transcript. I have included this much only to indicate that I am well aware (so are all of us on this level) of the contempt that my occupation incites in some quarters. I am not unaware of pain, nor unacquainted with grief. Looking at this

objectively (and objectivity is the grand, sad curse of the century), there is something futile in this flailing about, in this rendering crude drafts, in uncertain language, of materials that will never be read other than by a skeptical smattering of the public. There is something awful about justifying troop actions that are, perhaps, unjustifiable, led by interests who are, to some, unspeakable. But I am no politician.

Politics and the civil service are kept separate by fiat. Insulated by the Career & Salary Plan, I minimize implication.

Someone, after all, has to prepare the captured secret documents; reporters are persistent, the times insist upon evidence for everything, and I have learned to do my work as well as anyone could under the circumstances. Me and my army of clerks. (Army? There is none such; Francine had it wrong. There are only a dozen of us, and we are, of course, kept separate not only by area of expertise but by anonymity. My colleagues have never been identified to me. I learned we were a dozen only through captured secret documents.)

A note on human vanity and folly: In the adjoining room of this apartment—I work and sleep in the windowed partition, do my wooing there as well—lies the library of my collected works. As every writer must have his pride and bibliography, so must I have mine. Lined up in uniform binders are the output of all my years at the agency: original drafts of documents captured in Beirut, the Antilles, Cairo, San Miguel de Allende, and other places. Most of these bear the mark of the haste and pressure under which they were written (deadlines are pressing in this business), but in every one of them will be at least a page and sometimes two of prose that

I consider to bear my own personal impress, prose that sings or at least moves to a certain inner rhythm. *Eighty-six knives to the oppressors, an arcing bullet for the American swine, hold the temple inviolate*—this is one of my favorite phrases (unearthed by the liberating troops in Port-au-Prince). *A four-year plan past folly, a hole in the tent of American domain*—there is another. Most of these documents, of course, are written in a prose of the most stale and ponderously bureaucratic sort, this to grant the counsel of realism, but every now and then—as I intrude, personal voice must extrude. A man must have his pride. A man must, after all, have his individuality.

They understand this in the agency, and as long as it does not interfere with the essentials, they have even been known to encourage this approach. There is more compassion, greater understanding within those corridors than outsiders could ever understand. This is not a dehumanizing business; it breeds great feeling.

So that other room—my library, the collected works—is inviolate, stark but for the shelves and the thin fluorescence with which the carefully stacked binders are illuminated. It is that place (I like to feel) in which all purpose resides, a repository, I think, and an *homage* to larger purposes. For there are not, I have come to know, merely the six reasons cited in the Career & Salary brochure for the advantages of this employment, but a seventh reason, too. And it's the most important of all: giving testimony, to change the face of the earth a little. All of us who would be artists, who would use the medium of words or paint or song, are driven by this need

to alter, however slightly, that terrain upon which we have found ourselves. And my alteration, stacked floor to ceiling in the spackled, glowing binders that contain not only statistics but a kind of poetry ... my alteration, it has to be understood, *is very important to me*; it matters, it is not trivial. I must make this clear, this is not insignificant material, not hackwork but testimony. That seventh reason portends: *to make a difference.*

And a difference has been made; my captured documents have given justification where such did not before exist. I have shifted the balance of popular opinion away from loathing, and I have the evidence to cite. But this is not a document of sheer exposition, as we would call it at the agency; this is a narrative of some dimension and dramatic weight. I come before you not only with a position to cite but a story to tell. And I come to explain not only Francine (although she has a part in this) but to explain much that goes past her, Francine being ultimately only a symbol. “I'm going to write to all of the newspapers,” she said toward the conclusion of the discussions to which I have already alluded. “Do you understand that? I'll publish in the letters-to-the-editor columns, and I won't stop there. I'll write my congressman, I'll send communications to action-news-drama centers. Someone will believe me. Someone will at last accept this bizarre truth: that there are roomfuls of little clerks like yourself making up captured documents to justify our disgusting adventures and equations, our rotten entrepreneuring. I'll make them believe it, I swear I will, and

it will never be the same for you again. Just you wait and see."

"Francine," I said, "you are overreacting. It's merely a *job,* Francine. It's employment like any other, it can become as routine as those facets of anguish—melanoma, termination, helplessness, suffering—to which you are exposed every day in your own work. It is necessarily impersonal. You can get used to it, believe me."

"I'll never become numb to it," she said. "*I'm* not a clerk, not a functionary. That's why I got the master's; I had to get off the floor. I couldn't look at their eyes anymore, lie to the relatives, watch them as they stared out the windows at the sun in the late autumn. I had to indulge some separation, open up distance, stop lying, find a way to get away from it. But not you, you would be there at this moment, holding their hands and telling them that remissions were common in their situation."

I should explain—lest Francine seem unduly unsympathetic at this point, so reprehensible that a sensible reader might ask, "Why is a person like you even involved with her anymore?"—that it was not necessarily always this way.

On our very first date, arranged by a video-computer service, Francine and I had sexual relations and enjoyed one another enormously, and it was only after some time (and after the initiation of conversation) that matters moved to this state of relative collapse. Francine, I learned, is one of those who rejects *anonymous, sustaining relationships* and wants *real human contact.* This is terrific for arguments but not so good for sex. Agency employee or not, I am a normal

American male, heterosexual to the core, thirty-four years old, driven and necessitous, and I'd rather get laid *(especially* anonymously) than become involved in discussions like this. I feel justified, powerfully so.

“This is unbelievable,” she said, pointing to the binders. This argument was taking place in the library. I had made the mistake of taking her into the library. “You *save* all of this stuff? You're proud of it?”

She reached up, took a binder, opened it, and stared at it. “This is full of *French,"* she said, “and strange-looking letters. You know these languages?”

“Cyrillic,” I said, “for the Russian language. This gives it authenticity. Keep on going though, you'll find something that you can read if you just give it time.” I maintained a sense pride in my work. Even then, I only wanted a reading.

She turned some pages. “Running dog,” she read, “imperialist swine will fall within the mark and the penitentiary of the century will not, cannot, wholly enclose them.”

“Dominican Republic. 1988,” I said rather pompously.

“Praise the keepers, for the keepers will set us free: know the truth, and the truth will cut our shackles.”

“Yes.” I said. “Isn't that good?”

“You wrote that?”

“Every word of it.”

“And you're proud of this?”

“I'm not ashamed, Francine, if that's what you're asking me to say. I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

She hurled the binder on the floor. “I can't tell you how angry this makes me,” she said. “This then, *this* is the face of the enemy, the liars who have turned this country into the nightmare of the century. You serve the forces of this lie, and yet you're a *clerk,* just a functionary!” She reached, took another binder from the shelf, threw this down unopened. “This is terrifying,” she said. “It's absolutely terrifying. I can't believe that you've told me all this.”

“You're causing disorder.”

“I'm what?”

“You're causing disorder, Francine, and I won't have it. So please, I'm asking you to stop.”

“*I'm* causing disorder,” she said fiercely. “Oh my—”

“This is my library. I'm proud of it. I worked hard to put it together. My *writings* are here. I don't want them disturbed, and I don't want to argue over them anymore.”

She opened the binder, clawed out a sheet. “This says something about steel quotas,” she said, rolled it into a ball, threw it at me. She ripped out another sheet, scanning it hurriedly.

“I mean it. I said stop it, Francine,” I said. I felt myself beginning to flush. I knew arrhythmia would shortly follow. I am quite serious about my collected works. Some aspect of permanence and history is important to me. This is testimony. Call it evidence if you like. Call it the evidence of the century. “Please don't do this.”

“I'm going to dismantle your library piece by piece, you disgusting little clerk. Then I'll call everyone I know and expose you. See if I'm afraid of the CIA.”

"It's not the CIA."

"I'm not afraid of anything!" Francine said. "You people hide in the dark, you make your little threats. But when you're exposed, you're nothing—"

Who would have thought there to be so much passion in her? Three dates, three casual fucks, some dinners, a walk on the piers, one concert, an unfortunate confession, and then all of this. She had reacted as if I were an assassin.

"It must be being surrounded by all of the dying," I said to her, trying to be reasonable. "Yes, that would explain it, that would explain the rage. But I'm just a victim, too, Francine. I do what they tell me."

"That's the great line of our age: 'Don't bother me, I just work here.'"

She seized *two* binders this time and kicked one across the room. The heavy impact of her little shoe caused the reinforcement to break. Pages spewed from a height, settled unevenly on the floor like nesting birds. I endeavored up to this point—as must be clear—to be reasonable. I am a reasonable man.

But I am afraid that at this moment I lost control of myself.

A description of the events of the next hour or so is not necessary. That description would be too painful, albeit truly humbling, but I can say that I was brought to realize the inner, substantial truth of that which I had written in a group of documents to be found in a warehouse in Amman during the invasion of 1991: "One truly does not know the measure of the man until one has been tested by the invader. One

truly does not know the running of the beast, the stalking of all the steps, until one has heard the heartbeat of the self. One never truly knows, then, until one *knows*, and not an instant before."

It was a formative experience, let me say that, also quite painful. At length I found myself at the desk of my supervisor. It was an emergency appointment, but the agency makes it clear in the Career & Salary Plan manual: Normal procedures may be overridden in case of serious difficulty. I was in serious difficulty. One must never operate conventionally in our terrain, not after what I had done. *What I had done.* I am afraid that I was rather out of control. I sobbed. I wrung my hands. The supervisor listened quietly to the recapitulation and coda, then made a call. "We will have operatives there immediately," he said. "Are you sure the scene was absolutely secure?"

"It was when I left."

"Stop your sniveling. You know that won't get you anywhere. You are positive that there were no witnesses? No one around?"

"Yes," I said, sighing deeply, heaving. "Yes, I am quite sure."

"And it was accomplished just as quietly as you say? There were no undue sounds?"

"No, there were not." I tried to hold back the sobbing but could not. "I did care for her," I said. "She was very nice at the beginning. I thought we had a real relationship. I felt that I could tell her things. Maybe it was because she worked with

dying people. It was only later that it got dreadful. I made a mistake."

"Oh, yes, you did," the supervisor said. "Oh, yes indeed, you did." I would engage in characterological description here, but like all of them, like me on the job, he was masked. His voice was without affect. It is important to remember that there is nothing personal in all of this. "You made a terrible, a stupid mistake," he said, "but now you'll know better, won't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"You understand why these jobs must be confidential?"

"Oh, yes," I said, "I know that now."

His eyes were kindly but nonetheless cold. Impenetrable even. Something like the agency prose itself. "Yes," I said, "I understand that now and much else."

"You were really quite stupid, and you will have to pay the price for that stupidity."

"My job?"

The supervisor stared at me. "The *job*?" he said. "That's the last thing. We wouldn't even ask your life."

"I want my job."

"The situation, however, is manageable. It's a little tricky, but we've had worse. You knew her fairly well, of course?"

"Of course. Except that I misjudged her terribly at the end."

"It's too late to think of that. Draft a statement, then."

"A statement?"

"Right here and now. A credible suicide note that can be found with the corpse. Don't worry about the strangulation;

cyanosis can occur for lots of reasons, and there are ways around it. But then there's the note. It has to be *right.* I assume you can take care of it. There isn't much time."

"I can take care of it," I said gratefully, seeing for the first time (but I could have deduced it earlier!) a way out. "Yes, that shouldn't be too hard."

"It's Sunday," the supervisor said, "and also I would prefer to play this very close. I would prefer to keep it in the family. I would prefer *not* to call in the domestic division."

* * * *

There are seven reasons, and of them all only the seventh counts: to take testimony, to leave testimony, to make a difference. Hence the library and hence the note to be left beside you, my love.

*I am sorry, Francine. Had you but understood, it could have been different. Had I but understood, you might have been with me yet. We do what we must do, and we know none other. The secret, the document itself, is my life.*

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## Kingfish

Every man a king, every king a saint, each and every one of us on our own piece of holy ground. That's what he said. That's what he said to the little guy in Berlin. I was there at the picture-taking after the private conferences, I could hear what Huey said to him over the sounds of the reporters, the hammer of the flashbulbs. Just look this way, boss. You and me and cousin Henry, Aunt Anna and Moses down the lane, there's a glory for each of us and it can be yours too. The little guy kind of jumped and twitched when Huey squeezed him on the shoulder. The interpreter was yammering away in that German of his, but somehow I think the little guy got the message already. He knew more English than he let on. He knew a lot more stuff than he let on about everything.

What do you say there, Adolf? Huey said, and gave an enormous wink. I could have dropped my teeth on the floor. You think we can get this rolling, just the two of us? Hey John, Huey said, motioning to me, don't stand there like a stupe on the sidelines, join the photo session. This here is my vice president, Huey said to the little guy.

The little guy said something in Huey's ear, up close. That's right, Huey said. That, too. He's everybody's vice president. He is the second in command, isn't that right? He gave me a Louisiana-sized wave, clasped my hand. Holding his hand that way, backing into the Führer, I had the little guy boxed against Huey. We had him in perfect position, trapped. We could have stood and tossed him over the

Reichstag. But we didn't, standing there frozen in the eye of the world, the press roaring, the sounds drifting around us and in that small abyss Huey squeezed my hand for attention and gave one perfect, focused wink. *Got him,* the wink said. *Got him, didn't I tell you?*

Got you too.

* * * *

This was the meeting in the Bayou in November of 1935, the famous secret meeting. Never mind where. Huey's boys got to me and said be in Amarillo at midnight and leave the rest to us. We'll get you past the border and leave the delegation at home. It was easy to get away; I was back home for Christmas then. The President wouldn't even have known I had blown town. It had gotten harder and harder to get Roosevelt's attention; it wasn't even worth trying anymore. Now and then I had fantasies of sneaking behind his wheelchair during the State of the Union and pulling the podium away, showing his shrunken parts to the world. But I never would have done that. Damn near would never have done anything if Huey hadn't gotten in touch. Came into the parish humping my way in a big black car; it could have been Capone's chauffeur up there in front, the guys with me in the back, Capone's party boys. But I wasn't scared. Who shoots the vice president? Easier to park him under a rug and let him die. I'm going to go for it, Huey said to me. This isn't to bullshit you, I'm coming straight out. I'm running for president.

That's no surprise, I said. It wasn't. The word had been out for years, this Senator wasn't running around Washington for the graft, filibustering for the sake of opening his yap. *Every man a king.* He wanted to be president, all right. If not Roosevelt, then why not him? But Roosevelt seemed to have the banged-out vote pretty well sewed up. I told Huey that. You can't run as the man of the people against this guy, I said. He knows the people too well. He's a sitting president. You'll just have to wait your turn.

I'm not waiting my turn, Huey said. Up close he was intense, even more so than on the radio. There was something in his eyes, something in the set of his body that made you not want to explore his depths. All of this was in a room one-on-one; he wanted no one in there with us. After I got shot at, Huey said, grabbing his arm, I got this insight. There's no sense waiting. You wait, you're just as likely to die. Two inches either way on the gun hand and the guy wouldn't have gotten me in the shoulder, he would have had me in the heart. I would have died there on the Capitol floor.

I know all about it, I said. I read the papers too.

You read a hell of a lot more than the papers, Huey said. You don't pull that dumb cowboy shit on me, John Nance Garner. You're the Vice President of the United States and no goddamned fool. I was calculating, let him have the two terms and run in 1940. But when I saw the blood spouting out of my arm, heard the screaming, saw that cocksucker lying dead on the floor instead of me, I said what the fuck is this? This is all bullshit. I'm making plans, biding my time,

while the man on the plow is dying and I could have been dead. I'm going for it now.

That's your prerogative, I said. You've got a tough one ahead of you. But I can wish you well. I got no quarrel with you.

Maybe you should, Huey said. You Texans, you think we're all a bunch of savages and Cajun voodoo lovers here. Or grave robbers. But if you can take it, I can. I want you to run with me, he said. That's the only way. You run with me, we can split him away.

Run with you? I said. You're crazy. Bolt the party, give up the office?

Who said to give up? Huey said. You're Vice President. You're a constitutionally elected official, you're in as solid as him. He can't impeach you and it's only eleven months until the election anyway. Instead of running as a Democrat you run with me as an Independent. I don't want to go in the party anyway.

Never heard of anything like it, I said. I have to tell you, I was astounded. Ever since that thirty-hour stemwinder in the Senate when Huey had worked with applejack and a tin can strapped to his leg to stop the government cold while he argued the budget and the Book of Genesis and a hundred other things, I had known he was a man to reckon with, no one to underplay, but this was something entirely new. This went outside my experience. Shit, I said, you're crazy.

So I'm crazy, Huey said. You think I'm out of place here? It's all crazy. We got ourselves a country in collapse; we got ourselves a situation that won't quit. Got thirty million men

wandering the roads of America, ready to kill for a slice of bread; got thirty million women who would hump for the price of an apple or some clothes for the baby. Think it's going to turn around? Think again. We're in critical times, boy. It's all falling apart on us. It's time for someone to take over who cares for the people.

Frank cares for the people, I said. In his way.

His way, Huey said. He gave me that smile, opened his mouth, showed me all the lovely white and open spaces. Just two guys on the Bayou talking sense, he said. Got all the doors closed. Want some whiskey? I got me a bottle of the finest here. He busted Prohibition, I'll give your guy that.

I don't care, I said. I never turned down any whiskey. Huey took a bottle from inside his coat, opened it, passed it to me. Here, he said. Got compunction? Want a glass?

Never heard of that, I said. I took a swig deep down—not bad stuff—and handed it over. You serious? I said. You really mean it?

Sure I mean it, he said. If you come over, I figure we got this election. It all falls into place. You've made a considered judgment, that's it. You're going with the real man of the people. Franklin will have a fit but what can he do? Maybe he can get Lehman to run with him. Two New York kikes, Huey said, and took a swig and giggled. Not that I got anything against kikes, he said. Kikes and shines and Micks and Polacks, hunkies and Cajuns and Injuns and all the rest of them, they're all the soul of the country. But I want this to be a done deal, I don't want to fool around. I want your commitment *now*, and then we'll go on from there.

And then what? I said. How do I go back to Washington and face the man?

You don't have to face him. You can stay on the ranch. You're constitutionally elected, remember? There's nothing he can do to you. We'll wait a couple of months, then we'll hold a joint press conference and announce.

Not Democrat, I said. You want to go third party.

Right, Huey said. He looked at the bottle, shrugged, took another sip. We could probably beat him in the party if we went all out for it but we'd bust it wide open and then he'd probably go third party on *me* and split the thing. No, we'll do it ourselves. The money is there. Don't worry about the money.

Just have my ass there, I said. That's what you're telling me?

That's what I'm telling you, he said. Listen, you don't like this guy anyway. That's no secret. And I'll tell you something, all right? He held the bottle out to me. I shook my head. (They have me down for a drunk but it is all part of their misunderstanding. No one goes as far as John Nance Garner has by being a simple drunk. Of course there are other factors.) Here it is, Huey said. I want to be a one-term president, that's all. I'll step aside in ‘40. You can have it then.

You got it all figured out, I said. What a generous offer.

I'm serious, he said. If I can't make this thing work in one term, I can't do anything in two. Besides, I don't want to be president all my life. I want to lie down here in the sun, run

the dogs, know me another woman or two. But I got a few plans. In ‘40 I can put you over the top.

I didn't believe a word of it. Up to this point I had pretty well taken what Huey had said as he had presented it, but this part was not to be believed. It didn't bother me, of course. Long view or short, you cultivate the situation more or less as it is found and don't push for explanations. I'll think about it, I said. It's going to be ugly stuff. The Republicans want to be heard from.

Republicans! Huey said. Who they got? Hoover again? Charles Evans Hughes? Maybe Styles Bridges? I say the word *Hoover* three times a day until November, I don't have to say anything else. So much for the Republicans. Franklin will be tough but with his vice president jumping ship and every man a king, I think I got a chance. You think I have a chance, Big John?

Yes, I said, I think so. I want to think on this some.

Don't think on it too long, he said. You're getting first offer and best offer but you aren't the only one, you understand. There are a lot of people outside the parishes who see things the way I do, who would be happy to come along. The next person I ask is Rayburn. You think he'll turn it down?

I don't know, I said.

Well I do, Huey said. He turned it down. Conditional. He said I should ask you first, courtesy of the line of succession and all that. But if you don't want it, he said, I should ask him again. That good enough for you?

I'll have another sip of that whiskey, I said. I do declare that ain't bad whiskey, considering.

Yeah, Huey said. You know, I looked down at the blood on the floor of the Capitol and I said, it could have been *my* blood and no one would ever have known what I could have been. There are moments that change you, Big John. Maybe you've had a few.

I think I've had one just now, I said. I took the whiskey bottle from him and palmed it. It felt like a grenade in my hand. I ran my palm over it, up and down, down and up, then drank deep. I'm tired of this job, I said finally, this is a shitty job. Maybe you can give me something to do besides hold a gavel and wait around for you to drop dead.

We'll have plenty for you to do, Huey said. We're gonna be a goddamned *team,* Big John. And in 1940, things work out the way I hope they will, you can have the whole goddamned thing. We'll probably be in a war by then anyway, ain't doing you no favors.

* * * *

Landon was a clown. Huey was right, the Republicans had nothing, there was no way that they could campaign, nothing that they could say. That was the summer of the dust bowls, the failed crops, the riots in the Capitol. Roosevelt wanted me to step down when he got the word, and then he threatened to impeach me, and then he said he'd send me out to inspect the goddamned Navy in California for six months if I didn't shut up and get in line, but I just laughed at him. There was absolutely nothing that he could do. He was licked and he knew it. He had a sitting vice president who had shifted to an Independent ticket headed by a better man and there was no

provision in the Constitution or in the articles of state that could touch me. He couldn't even say too loud that I was a piece of shit because, after all, he had picked me the first time around and I had enough friends in the party to embarrass him on the renomination. Anyway, the Governor of New Jersey ended up as the fool's candidate for vice president and Huey and I took to the road.

We stirred the pots in Metairie and prayed with the ministers in Dallas; we lit fires on a reservation in Albuquerque and then we went to a meeting with Father Divine in Brooklyn. The Father Divine stunt was a ripper, it looked for a couple of days that it would cost us everything, that we would blow the election on that, but then the East came roaring in with the editorials and Rayburn was able to hold Texas and the rest of the South in line just as I knew he would. Father Coughlin went crazy and the Klan had some mighty doings in Florida and outside Atlanta, but Father Divine stood up in Times Square and on 125th Street and then Independence Square and said, these are good men, these are men who understand, I take the curse of racism and hatred from these men because having come from the fires of Satan, the hardest place in the country, they know the truth that will set us free. The Governor of the State of New York—Franklin's state—met Huey in Grand Central Station and shook his hand. Out in the Midwest, crawling from stop to stop, we saw crowds like I had never seen in a hundred years in politics, and in California the farmers and the soldiers and the old soldiers came in a long line to Huey and shook his hand and wept. We know you got something for us, they said.

We think you understand. Grandmas wiped his face with their handkerchiefs and now and then, seeing a hungry baby, Huey cried. Landon was flabbergasted, he gave it up in early October and went back to Kansas and just about sat on the front porch. Roosevelt fought and fought—no legs but enough courage, I had never denied that—but it all slipped away from him. As Vice President I slipped off to Washington now and then to preside over the Senate, get my face in the papers and pound the gavel and cloakroom a little.

We got 341 electoral votes. We got New York and Pennsylvania. We got California. We lost Ohio and Illinois and we almost lost Texas too, and we sure as hell lost Georgia and Florida, but we didn't lose too much else and in the early morning Wednesday when it was at last over, Huey turned to me and handed me a bottle, that same bottle I swear, and said, We did it, John. *You* did it and I swear I'll never forget. I want to do good, John, he said. You got to believe that, I've only wanted all my life for the working man to have a break—and the working man in this country, he's been screwed right out of his inheritance and his heart. We're going to set this country aright, John, you hear that? For the first time we're going to do it *his* way. I owe it all to you, John. Rayburn snuck in when it was all over; of course he couldn't do anything officially then or later, but he made his position clear. Huey went out the next day and had the press conference.

It was the goddamnedest thing I had ever seen. I had been Vice President of the United States and now I was going to be Vice President again and it was *still* the goddamnedest

thing that I had ever seen. I guess I knew at the time that nothing could ever touch it again like that but I didn't care. There are only a few moments in life, as Huey himself said, and if you are lucky you know when they are there and you use them and you try to run with them all the way to—and maybe, if you are very smart and lucky, past—the grave.

* * * *

But it started to go badly, early on. By the time of the Olympics, even before the election, we knew that Adolf was no temporary phenomenon, that he was the real thing and that it was a bad situation. The worst. Adolf did things with crowds that even Huey couldn't do. We could see that in the clips. And the news drifting out was worse and worse.

We're in trouble, Huey said. This was in spring of ‘37, only the third time I had gotten in to see him since he had been triumphantly inaugurated. It hadn't taken long for him to turn me back into a vice president. This guy is murder, he said. I don't worry about Mussolini so much, he's an Eye-talian and he goes whichever way the wind goes, but Adolf is a killer. He's a killer boy, do you hear that? He is taking us to war.

So what can we do? I said. I fell into the role easily enough, feeding Huey lines, taking his whiskey—he always had a bottle now—and trying not to think about the times past. What the hell, it wasn't worth a pitcher of warm spit anyway, I had known that before. So I had just switched wives, that was all. It was the same bunch of crap and John Nance Garner knew it. Besides, the only real populist is a

dead man, I was smart enough to know that. What are we going to do, take Adolf out?

He's killing Jews and Gypsies, Huey said, and ugly-looking types and enemies and a lot of good Germans too. He's killing everything that takes his fancy and he's dead serious about this. He is one out-of-control loon and he is putting us on a war footing, do you understand that?

I understand a lot of things.

I can't go nowhere, I can't do the kind of things that got to be done with one eye on that guy. We're going to go over there and try to reason with him. We're going to set up a run to Berlin.

I think not, I said. I think I'll preside over the Senate.

You too, Huey said. We'll take a slow boat, bring along some good whiskey and maybe a few friends. We'll have a nice cruise and we will try to reason with this gent. Maybe he can be persuaded to try reason. If not, we'll still get some good pictures out of it and they'll see that the President was willing to go a ways trying for peace.

I think this is a big mistake, I said. I think we ought to hunker down and wait this out.

Wait what out? Think he's going to stop? His country is leaking Jews. Soon as he's killed everyone he can there he's going to turn outward, want to go other places. This guy likes killing, you understand? We wait him out, he'll be in California.

What can I say? I said. I had another swallow of whiskey. I was always swallowing whiskey in those days. It's your play, I said. You always wanted it your way, Kingfish, so I'm not

going to stop you. You want me to go over on an ocean liner with you, I'll go; I just hope it's not the *Titanic.* What the hell, I said, why don't we go all the way? Smuggle a thirty-eight caliber into a state meeting and shoot the fucker in the throat. You think that would solve the problem?

Huey gave me a long odd look. You think I haven't considered that? he said. I am ahead of all you Democrats. But it is not a wise plan. Not at this time.

You think he's a faster draw?

I think that we're at the Reichstag when we try it, that isn't too smart, Huey said. That's all I think. But it is something to be tabled for future reference.

I should have said something then. But vice presidents are not paid to say things other than *in accordance with the Constitution I cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of this resolution*. Or, *I support our great President*. Or, *It ain't worth a pitcher of warm spit.* Trust a vice president to know protocol.

* * * *

After Berlin, Huey put the invitation right out. Come to Washington and we'll try to settle this thing. But Adolf had other plans, other stuff on his mind about then, and so for that matter did the Kingfish, things were getting cudgeled about in the provinces and Franklin, no quitter, was rallying the Democrats and talking about a people's coalition in 1940. The basic question, Franklin was saying, had to do with what Huey had *done* since the Inauguration and aside from going to Berlin to have his picture taken and making some good

speeches against the Wall Street capitalists, Huey hadn't done much at all. These were powerful points and gave the Kingfish pause, or at least kept him preoccupied. So there were some lively times here and about when the food riots started to occur on a regular basis. Business was reviving a little and Hollywood was telling us that things were great but down on the Great White Way or the places where the Commies dwelt, there was a different cast to the situation. And the Commies were getting stronger; anyone, even the Vice President, could see how much real appeal they were finding in the cities.

But by that time it just didn't matter that much. There comes a time when your destiny confronts you and if you don't accept it, you don't begin to work in accord with that destiny, well then you're just a fool. I wasn't going to be president in 1940. I wasn't even going to be vice president by the end of that year; I had been sucked in and served my little purposes and now I was going to be frozen out. The Kingfish had gobbled me up, just a medium-sized fish in the tank. I would be dumped and Huey would run again, maybe win, maybe lose to Franklin this time, but that was going to be the end of it. And by 1940, it was going to be a changed situation anyway. I just didn't give a damn; I wanted to get back on the ranch, I wanted to see the old times out with as much dignity and as little whiskey as I could manage and the hell with the rest of it. So my accommodation was to simply hang on and go on my way. Huey was going to stay out of local statehouses and he had some pretty good protection. Even Capone or Legs Diamond would have had a hell of a time nailing the Kingfish by that time. No fortunate accidents

were going to catapult me to any place that I hadn't already been.

* * * *

But then, just when it seemed settled, it wasn't settled. After Munich, after he gobbled up the rest of Czechoslovakia, Adolf had Göring pass the word direct to Harry Hopkins. He wanted to take up Huey's invitation. He wanted to come over, explore a few things, do a little business.

Peace in our time, Huey said. He's looking for that now, right? Why should the son of a bitch take us up on this now? He's cleaning out the country, he's ready for war. What the hell does he have in mind?

Why are you asking me? I said. I haven't been in here twice in nine months, Huey, I got nothing to tell you.

Don't sulk, Big John, Huey said. I got you in mind all the time, it's just that I've been preoccupied. This is a big country, you know, and there are lots of problems. Maybe we'll get that redistribution working, maybe all of this stuff will come out in the long run, but it isn't going to be nearly as fast as I thought when I was a young man. Got to cultivate patience, that's all.

I have lots of patience, I said; I had it a long time ago. You were the one who was going to turn things around, make it all different by 1940, remember? I didn't say that it was going to happen.

Huey said, you're taking this too hard, John. You're taking it personally. Sit back and help me through this. I want you to meet the guy when he comes off the boat in New York, I want

you to escort him around. The Statue of Liberty, maybe Liberty Square in Philadelphia on a day trip. Then you can bring him here and I'll meet him at the White House and we'll talk over things. But I need your support here, I don't want to go trotting out for him, it doesn't suit my purposes.

I'm not a messenger boy, I said. I'm the Vice President. You got to take the office seriously even if you got no use for me.

Ah, nonsense, John, the Kingfish said. You've said yourself what you think of this job and you were right all the time. I got a crazy plan, John. I think we're going to save the world twenty years of agony and maybe a few million lives. I think we're going to arrange to plug this guy, if not at the dock then maybe when he's walking down Pennsylvania Avenue. We'll have an accident arranged for him.

That's crazy, I said. Our own lives won't be worth shit. A head of state killed in our protection? They'll go to war the next day.

Göring and Himmler? Goebbels? You think these guys want war? They just want what we have, John, they just want their part of it, that's all. They won't do a goddamned thing. They'll be relieved, they think this guy is crazy too. Every synagogue in the country will have the lights on all night the day he dies. Even Chamberlain will thank us. We'll be treated like heroes. I think the world will fall down and give us everything we want, we get the deed done. That's what I think and your own part is clear. You're going to help me, John, and that's the end of it.

And then what? I said. It's a crazy plan, Huey. And even if it works, can we deal with the consequences?

Well sure, Huey said. I've been dealing with consequences all my life. I *love* consequences, they're all we got. We don't know what *causes*, we only know what *happens*, you understand? I love these talks, I want you to know that. Just the two of us in a room with a bottle, beautiful, I don't know what I would have done if we hadn't had that. Have a drink, John, it's too late.

Too late for what?

Too late not to have a drink, the Kingfish said. So set them up.

* * * *

So what was there to say? The rest seems very fast in memory although of course it was agonizingly slow in the development, waiting all through it in a suspended anguish, waiting for that heavy thud that would ejaculate us into the latter part of the century. Meeting the prancing, dancing little dictator and his company right off the boat, doing the ceremonial thing, then whirling them through Jimmy Walker's glittering, poisonous city. The Staten Island Ferry, Radio City Music Hall. Two Rockettes flanked Hitler, put their arms around him at my direction, mimed kissing his cheekbones. He glowed, seemed to expand. There was supposed to be a mistress but there was no woman in the party, no woman close to him. Just Himmler, Göring, and the impossibly fat Streicher who always seemed to be confiding something to the Führer. We had a private dinner at the Waldorf, talked

through the interpreters of cattle and of conditions in Austria during the World War and of the shadows in Europe. Grover Whalen poured wine. I mentioned the Sudetenland, just to have it on record, but the interpreter frowned and I could see that there was no translation. Later, the dictator wanted to see Harlem at midnight. We drove there quickly in covered cars, then back to the Waldorf. At the corner where Father Divine had embraced the Kingfish, women looked at us indolently, poking knees through their skirts. The Führer rumbled in the car but said nothing. We wheeled down Fifth Avenue until the lights glowed softly again, then back into the underground garage. I felt something like a blow at the back of my neck and the thought *Like the Statehouse.* These were the conditions. If it was going to happen, the place would be here. It would be now.

Seated next to the dictator I leaned over to whisper—what? What would he have understood? I had no German. Nor did I know what I would have said. Dead Jews, Gypsies, burning bodies in their graves, the awful aspects of war. I thought of this and leaned back. There was nothing to say. We stopped, the door came open. I got out first and then the guard in the jump seat and then Streicher from the front, panting in sweat, and then Hitler. Hitler came last of all, straightened, looked at me with those strange, focused eyes, that face like a claw. *Raus,* he said in a high voice, *raus*—

His head exploded. One eye seemed to expectorate, fall to the stones of the garage, then fragments of him were cast upward. In the heavy embrace of someone I could not see, I stumbled back. The grasp was enormous, absolutely

enfolding, it felt like swaddling, like death, like ascension. The dictator was floating. The dictator, in pieces, was floating in the air.

Now we can begin the business of living, I thought I heard Huey say, his voice enormous in my head. Except of course, that there was no Huey there, only that stricken embrace, and then the broken screams in the garage, the sound of gabbled German, hysteria—

Hitler sifted over me in the sudden darkness.

Under the silt of Hitler, I fell.

* * * *

The Kingfish sent shocked condolences and offered to accompany the body back to Berlin. But the party and their coffin were already on their way before the announcement at the press conference and then in the dawn, the first reports came of the attacks upon the Embassy. The declaration of war followed by noon.

Chamberlain was furious with us.

But the Kingfish was at the top of his mood, the happiest I had ever seen him.

I always wanted to be a war president, he said. I guess that this was what I was aiming for from the start. We're going to save them, John, he said excitedly, we're going to get them out, we're going to stop the machine. We're going to save them all, Huey said. We're going to save *them all*.

Salvation from the parish.

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## Playback

Did you ever read what they call Science Fiction? It's a scream. It is written like this: “I checked out with K 19 on Alabaran III, and stepped out through the crummalite hatch on my 22 Model Sirius Hardtop. I cocked the timejector in secondary and waded through the bright blue manda grass. My breath froze into pink pretzels. I flicked on the heat bars and the Brylls ran swiftly on five legs using their other two to send out crylon vibrations. The pressure was almost unbearable, but I caught the range on my wrist computer through the transparent cysicites. I pressed the trigger. The thin violet glow was ice-cold against the rust-colored mountains. The Brylls shrank to half an inch long and I worked fast stepping on them with the poltext. But it wasn't enough. The sudden brightness swung me around and the Fourth Moon had already risen. I had exactly four seconds to hot up the disintegrator and Google had told me it wasn't enough. He was right.” They pay brisk money for this crap!
—Raymond Chandler,
letter to H. N. Swanson,

*Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler,*
edited by Frank McShane

*I checked out with K 19 on Alabaran III.* On the portico, moving slowly against the cracked and ruined spaces of the enclosure, watching the slow, dangerously signatory implosions from the outer ring, I could feel not only the collapse of the project, but my own, more imminent ruin. Ruin will not be enough, Google had warned me. If it were only a matter of ruin, it would have been accomplished a long time ago. They want to smear us, they want us utterly defaced.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I said. "What do I do now?"

She said nothing looking back at me, the high panels of her face drawn tightly as if to prohibit speech, block it at the source. They will respond to direct questions but are no good on abstractions, on open-ended cries of despair. As I well know. That should have been all right; all my life the abstract has been well dismissed. "How much longer?" I said, trying again. "Enough time to get clear?"

K 19 shrugged. In this guise she was a tall and intense young woman, her brain packed with deadly secrets which one by one her mouth would promise to impart ... but no such knowledge would issue, that was not the program and I would hammer again on those panels to no outcome. "I do not understand the concept," she said. "What is time? What is your conception of that?" A horrid precision now in her step,

she moved toward an unshrouded viewplate. “Out there, in here,” she said, pointing. “No difference.”

She froze in that position. I could see the slow enclave of psychic ice glazing her and then she was silent. In my side pocket the heat bar ticked faintly, sent slivers of warmth through the thin fabric, but I was still fixated on K 19, still touched by the possibility that somewhere in her closed and deadly face there would lurk the answer, an answer to take me from the portion, silence the Brylls. Not the heat bar or the poltext, then. A true answer.

“Do you remember?” I said. “You made a promise—”

“I remember nothing. There is no memory, there is only this.”

Looking at her so, locked to that lesser desire which still intimated possibility, I could see that this was truth, came to understand in that concentrated moment that all along there had been nothing else, no imminence, grandeur, possibility, or disclosure, only this denial. And knowing that at last, I felt the beginnings of release, the snap of that fine and tensile emotional rope that bound us. Testing the force of that insight, I moved away from her, ducked under the refractory bands cast by the high binding rings*, and stepped out through the crummalite hatch,* seized instantly by the vacuum that snapped and skulked at the perilous enclosure.

Now, against the blurred firmament itself, undefended by the thin expanse of the dome. I could feel the half-forgotten swaddled in those caverns we make, I could feel the awful power of the heavens, understand that what stood between us and retrieval was little more than a set of assumptions,

assumptions which at any time could be blotted as thoroughly as K 19 had destroyed whatever compact we had. Knowing this did not strengthen nor change a thing but the acceptance was in itself a kind of control. The Brylls have come a long way, worked hard, dedicated themselves, applied all of their awful technology, but that cunning of effort has not yet succeeded in taking from us all recollection. So we are sport for the trajectory of the Brylls' conquest.

Now and then there are these pure moments of recovery, and outside the enclosure, K 19 still behind, I had another, turned the power *on my 22 Model Sirius Hardtop*, watching the sheaves of light curl from the element, now drawing pure solar heat at reversed amperage, seeking the internal source that we had dragged from the vacuum.

What joys we had from the cosmos before the Brylls! Our Sirian hardtops, galactic entertainments, bustling travel, our dolefully comic cries: oh, cascades of stars, nebulae of grandeur thus informing our spirit and possibilities until those Brylls came to show us the real force of universal law and to illustrate the limitations of our own condition. Crammed in the vehicle, feeling the tremors of the engine, I thought too of the easy, gliding weight of the hardtop when it had made fast passage from Peking Festival to the port of Macon, the wharfs of Brooklyn to the Empyrean Tower. Times when I had chanted mantras of speed to the hardtop, before the change, the emergence, the debarkation of the Brylls ... and these shards of memory were knives, slaughterhouse of memory. *I cocked the timejector in secondary and* felt the rush, the sense of distances opening and then as the hardtop lifted—

* * * *

I *waded through the bright blue manda grass* toward the beckoning Bryll, feeling the pull of the mud as I tried to clamber away, retain balance. This more than anything else they enjoy, taking our dignity, making us cartoons, yanking from us the solemnity of our distress and placing us on a flat and colorful map where we deal with pale, exploded forms who may or may not be representative of the Brylls themselves. We do not know if it is submission or some parody of conquest. *My breath froze into pink pretzels* as I squeaked.

Beyond the rise, the ape snickered and pointed; the Sirius fell with a whoop and I could hear the ape's chuckling. “So little,” it said in that mechanical voice, as refractory in its burning as the fire beyond the portico. “So little and so strong, so ugly and so nice, so nice and so distressed. What do you want?” They toy with us; if this is our vision of purgatory I think that it must be theirs of transcendence. Here is where they want to go when they die, one might have said, and now all of them through the eons are dead. “Nice!” the ape said and I bounced, then fell to ooze. Stumbling for balance, *I flicked on the heat bars.* They had not plundered before the transfer; in their eagerness to bring me to the pink pretzels they had left weaponry behind and suddenly it was in my hand, the feel of it steady and reassuring.

Yes, I thought. I can at least take the ape. If this is my purgatory, then perhaps I can block their transcendence. We live in small snatches, now and then we are granted a

glimpse of recovery. The ape waved with a scanty claw, winking, *and* then there were others, jolting presences. No longer alone. *The Brylls ran swiftly on five legs* from all directions.

It was as if in my focusing of the weapon I had panicked them, made them show their true aspect. Ringing me on all sides, almost offhandedly, they attacked. I could feel the imminence of their horror and then, once again, the darkness.

“They are treacherous,” one said.

“No,” I offered. “Listen to this. We are not treacherous. We are driven. You gave us no choice, you gave us at the end no dignity.” But having spoken, knew it was unheard, knew that there was no way in which connection could be made, was locked once again in that place so well known to K 19 from which there was no emergence.

* * * *

*"Using their other two to send out crylon vibrations,"* the ape said, and this time I could see, in the flooding light I could see the bowl of roof, beyond that transparency the stricken and venomous sun, and I tried to move but found myself locked into place. At the edge of vision the ape was talking to something else, oblivious. “They die,” one said, “they die and they die and it is not enough.”

“Of course it's enough,” I said, as if they could hear me. “It's always enough, it was a sufficiency when we began,” and tried to wave, tried to show them through the intensity of movement the thorough nature of my distress, but they wouldn't acknowledge me, I might have indeed been dead

and they large solemn demons, blank devil and primate, assessing larger goals. “It wasn't enough for Google,” it said again, “and it's not enough for you.”

The strangulation, as if an arm were laid across my throat. *The pressure was almost unbearable* but the heat bar was there, they still had not taken it through all their insistence. Somehow, yanked to a seated position, I felt the pain seize me like a fist *but I caught the range on my wrist computer* and said, “Listen here! Listen to me! You must not turn away from this, we suspire, we are creatures, we live and suffer.” *Through the transparent cysicites* of the atmosphere I felt as if I had caught their attention, told myself that I had their attention at last, could somehow break through.

“You've broken us,” I said. “You've done it now.”

“It's never enough—” The gorilla moved deliberately, its companion turning now.

The Brylls were coming.

*I pressed the trigger.*

* * * *

“Now what?” K 19 said.

She lay against me in terrain like knives, ice and slice sending tender, necessary slivers of pain, the two of us stretched one by one on heavy mesh like metal. We were in an enclosure, the air stale and heavy, and *the thin violet glow was ice-cold against the rust-colored mountains* in the distance.

"I don't know," I said. Her skin lay damp and open under my fingers, rising in small response as I clutched. "We're somewhere else now. We've been taken away."

"What did we do?"

"We were taken. They turned our breath into pink pretzels."

"Yes, but what did we *do*?" Once we had lain together in transaction, hovering, mild connection, but now, even as I felt her stillness, it was as if this had not happened. Far from me, distilling loss with every breath, K 19 said, "You have destroyed us."

"We were already destroyed."

"My name is Linda. Call me that, give me my name."

"It was over, Linda. Wherever we are, whatever has been done, it was over."

I could feel the stirring and then there were many sounds, perspective cleared, breath again began to pretzel. Looking toward the sounds, I could see the little forms, could see them scuttle, could see *the Brylls shrank to half an inch long*, hopping, scuttling. They ringed us with the eagerness of their necessity, showed us their incessancy.

"What is it?" Linda said. "Where are they?"

I pointed, drew the line of her attention, and then with her breath, her first frozen and intense knowledge, I reacted instinctively, did what some of us had tried at the beginning, *and I worked fast stepping on them*, lunging somehow to a standing position. Linda screamed as she saw what I was doing, pointed at the rust-colored sky, and I ignored the heat bars, consigned them to darkness along with the rest of my

life, no transaction left now, and began to fight *with the poltex*; the small rubber flange opening like a petal as I beat at them. If this was to be the final battle (and it was, my time was over, I knew that now), it would be as deprived of dignity as the rest but at least I could right the balance, struggle on. Even as Linda tried pathetically to crawl away, I found myself pitched against them, grunting, heaving with that sole weapon left, seeing them pulp, listening to their brisk and intermittent cries as some—but not too many—of them died.

*But it wasn't enough.*

*The sudden brightness swung me around* and Linda, the mask clamped tightly, was holding the heat bar, aiming at me, maniacal and concentrated laughter pouring through.

Pouring through as fuel of my destruction.

And it was at that moment, then, and not an instant earlier nor a flash later, that I came to understand what had happened, the true nature of the Brylls, the deadly and insistent nature of their circumstance and plans.

"*And the Fourth Moon had already risen*," the thing in the mask said, "and it was time then, time for us if not for you and it would always in that extreme be enough."

If I had understood what was happening, *I* might have *had exactly four seconds to hot up the disintegrator* of the heat bar.

But even then—

"*And Google had told me it wasn't enough*," I said. I believe I had lost control. I believe I had really lost control. That flush of abandonment, the surge of separation, the conviction of utter disaster—

"Not for you," the thing that had been Linda K 19 said. "Not for you, perhaps. But it is for us."

*He was right.*

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## Coursing

There was this woman and her name was Maria. She lived in a console of the great ship *Broadway* and whispered to Hawkins in the night, promises of love and fealty, warmth and connection. Hawkins could not touch her, could not consummate the promise because she was a simulacrum, a collection of electrons and impulses in the bottle but she made dark periods lively indeed and they had promised that at the end of the voyage, if Hawkins were to do what he meant to, she would be waiting for him, the real Maria; and she would make all these things true. Hawkins did not really believe this, did not believe any of it but the light years were vast, the ship was vacant and full of the stink of antiseptic, and if he were not able to converse with Maria there would have been nothing at all. So he thanked them in his heart for their time and trouble, their cruelty and their manipulativeness, and let it go by. He let everything go by. The twenty-fourth century was all accommodation.

Hawkins, a felon interred on Titan, had been given a conditional release to go to the Pleiades System and negotiate with the King of the Universe. The King of the Universe, through pulsar, had advised the inner clusters that he would destroy them greatly unless every knee bent and every tongue did give homage. The King of the Universe might have been insane, but very little was known of the Pleiades Cluster and it was assumed that any culture with technology advanced enough to make possible this kind of

communication could not be dismissed out of hand. *Half* a hand yes—send them a felon to do the negotiating—but the last time an alien threat had been entirely ignored brought about the Slaughtering Hutch of a hundred years. The King might have been a child given access to powerful communications *matériel* or a lunatic acting out for therapy; on the other hand he might be exactly what he said, in which case the inner clusters had a problem. Hawkins, a failure, was half a hedge against riot. Keep a civil tongue, the Advisors had said, evaluate the situation, and try to buy him off; if he refuses to negotiate or turns out to be what he seems then you know where the self-destructs are. Try to get near enough to take the King down. There's enough armament on the *Broadway* to take down the Pleiades themselves. And have a good time; after all, the Advisors concluded, that's what it's all about, isn't it? Thirty-three Earth days is nothing for a man who has done half a lifetime; think of it as front-loading.

Hawkins lay in the ship's abscess, just inside the probes, and said to Maria, “This isn't going to work. They'll wipe me out as errata; we're an unidentified flying object.”

“I love you,” Maria said softly; “I want to hold you against me. You are the gentlest and most wonderful man that I have ever known and I want you to be mine, all mine.”

“I have to get serious,” Hawkins said; “there's no time for passion here.”

“Don't put me off, you dark fool,” Maria said. “Closer and closer. Touching in the night. You will pacify the King and return; we will meet on Ganymede and in the silence and the

density we will hold one another. Oh, if we had only met earlier; none of this would ever have happened to you."

Hawkins said, "I don't want to think about what it would have been like if we had met earlier. I don't want to talk about that now." He reached for the volume switch and lowered Maria's voice to a soothing burble. For reasons which were quite sufficient the technicians had made it impossible for him to cut off Maria completely, but he was able at least to modulate; this made it possible for him to find some periods of sleep. In the intricate alleys of metal and wire he could still hear her voice, extract the shape of words. *Lover. Apposite. Breasts.* Hawkins felt a regret which verged on pity, but he urged himself to be strong. He could not listen to her now. He was scheduled for a confrontation with the King of the Universe shortly. The King had scheduled it all. Hawkins would be brought before him in the dock of an artificial satellite and explain his condition, offer his terms. The King had stated that he had not been surprised; he knew that it would only be a matter of time until the Inner Cluster sued for mercy. The *Broadway* had been tracked all the way with farsighted devices, had been under the King's mighty surveillance since it had torn free of the sun outside the orbit of Jupiter.

Hawkins huddled in the ship and awaited judgment. He thought of all the alleys and corridors of his life which, like the alleys and corridors of the ship, seemed to work endlessly and musically against one another, bringing him to this tight and difficult center. If he had done this then he might not, instead, have done that; if he had served his time

penitentially rather than with defiance they might have sought someone else to deal with the King. But then again defiance was good because they needed a man who would take a position and most felons got broken within the early months of their confinement. Then too there was Maria who had been given to inflame and console but with whom, instead, he had fallen into a difficult kind of love. It was not her corporeality but the electron impulses themselves, the cleverness and sophistication of the device, which had hooked him in. Someday, if he lived through this, he would try to explain it all to the technicians. He doubted if they would listen; creating their wonderful devices they had come only to hate themselves because they could not be part of them. If the twenty-fourth century was for accommodation, then it was also for paradox. It was a paradoxical age. The *Broadway* veered and the gray abscesses colored to flame; the King of the Universe materialized before him in holographic outline. “I thought this would be easier,” the King said. “Of course I am at a good distance from this image so don't think of anything foolish.”

Hawkins was thinking of nothing foolish, concentrating instead upon the holograph. The King was a wondrous creature; the form was avian but like no bird that Hawkins had ever seen, and the beak was set of fierce design. The King half-turned, seemed to preen, displayed feathers. “Do you like this?” he said. “I wanted an imposing design in which to appear.”

“Then this isn't how you look?”

“This is *exactly* how I look,” the King said, “and this is no time for conundrums. Can you give me any reason why I should not sack and destroy the Inner Cluster?”

“I have brought priceless gems,” Hawkins said; “if you sack and destroy there will be none of them left. Also, as a creature of some sensitivity you would not want to destroy ten trillion sentient and vulnerable souls, would you?”

The King winked. “You don't believe me,” he said. “You think that only a lunatic would address you over the light years, threaten destruction, call himself the King of the Universe.”

“On the contrary,” Hawkins said, “we take you very seriously or why would I be here?”

“I can't answer that,” the King said. “I merely run things, not try to account for them; and I must tell you that I am sore displeased. I think I'll appropriate your gems and dematerialize you.”

“Don't do it so quickly,” Hawkins said. It was impossible for him to tell whether the King was serious or capable of such action, but the entire mission had been predicated on the fact that he might be, and his own condition was humbling. “Don't do it,” he said again, pleadingly. “We're not without a history. There are elements of our tradition which are honorable. If not science, art; if not art a certain damaged religiosity.” *Why am I defending us?* he thought; this was the civilization, those were the technicians who first imprisoned me and then sent me out with the simulacrum of a woman to tantalize and to die. Truly, the situation is indefensible. Perceiving this, knowing that his thoughts were

moving toward hopelessness and failure, Hawkins reached out and moved the volume switch. “Tell him,” he said. “Tell him the things that you tell me, Maria.”

“He is a good man,” Maria said. “I love him desperately. We talk in the night; he tells me many things. When he returns to Titan I will dwell with him in holiness and fealty forever.”

The King fluttered. “Who are you?” he said.

“My name is Maria and I am the lover of this man, Hawkins. He is a good man.”

“Where are you?”

“I walk on this ship and to and fro upon it. Where are you?”

The King said, “That is not the issue.” His speech had slurred; he seemed to have lost that edge of high confidence with which he had threatened destruction. “Show me yourself.”

“That is not necessary,” Maria said. “I am faithful to this one man.”

“Abandon him,” the King said, “and come to me instead. Perhaps we can work out something.”

“I won't do that.”

“Maybe something can be worked out,” Hawkins said carefully. “It isn't absolutely necessary—”

“Offer him the diamonds, but don't offer him me.”

“I don't want the diamonds,” the King said. He sounded petulant. “I can have the diamonds *anyway*.”

She is a simulacrum, Hawkins thought, a memory, an instance, unpurchasable. But instead he said, “If you return with me to the Inner Cluster you can have her.”

“Why return? I want her *here*.”

“Love is impossible in space,” Hawkins said quietly. “The eternal vacuum, the interposition of organism upon the void makes love impossible. Accept my assurances on that.”

“I cannot return with you,” the King said after some silence. “I would burn in the vastnesses of space. I am unprepared for a journey of any sort, confined to my castle. Leave her here.”

“I'm afraid not,” Hawkins said. “She would perish.”

“Yes, I would perish,” Maria said coldly. “I would most surely perish, Hawkins, if I could not have you. I am not property; I am your lover, I cannot be treated in this fashion.”

“You can be treated in any way I want,” Hawkins said. “Remember the conditions. You were delivered to give me solace, not argument.

“Nonetheless,” he said to the King, “as you see, it is quite impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible,” the bird said, “not to the King of the Universe,” and the bird turned, opened both impenetrable eyes and clawed at the floor. “That is my demand,” he said, “leave her here and the diamonds and you may go. The Inner Cluster will be spared. Take the diamonds, in fact. I don't need them.”

Hawkins said, “For the greater good, Maria, for all circumstances, I ask you—”

“I love you,” the simulacrum said. “I know that I was made part of the equipment merely to convenience, to give you solace, but I am quite out of control and it's you I love. I don't want to deal with any bird.”

“I'm not really a bird,” the King said, “this is merely a form which I project. Actually, I can be anything at all. You would be most pleasantly surprised.”

“Appearances mean nothing to me,” Maria said. “I'm sorry but it's quite impossible. This wasn't how the situation was supposed to be but it's how matters have turned out, I'm afraid. No, Hawkins, I will not yield.”

“Then neither will I,” the King said. “I am not a paranoid Pleiadan but the true and invincible King of the Universe, and I will make good on my threats. I tracked you from Jovian orbit, Hawkins; I had hoped that it would be for better outcome.”

Hawkins looked at the figure of the bird, the eyes and figures glinting in the tight spaces of the cabin; he listened to the continued murmuring of Maria, now plaintive as she explained why she could not leave him. Hawkins looked at one simulacra and listened to the other as the *Broadway* ebbed and dipped in station, thinking I am man, I am twenty-fourth-century man, era of accommodation and paradox, felon of the twelfth order; you are in a Hell of a spot now. A Hell of a spot, for she cares.

But he wasn't. He really wasn't, after all. As he heard Maria begin to shriek in passion, as he heard her say *Oh, King o King o King* he came to understand that for some dilemmas there is, after all, resolution; if not flesh, then steel is all. *Oh*

*Kingokingoking* Maria cried, and as the *Broadway* grandly broke stasis he began to see the light of eternity open up to him. *He's wonderful!* Maria cried, *O King!*

There was this woman and her name was Maria; she loved Hawkins, she said, and first refused the impossible embraces of a mad Pleiadan but there was a grander design and she saw it saw it saw it *okingoking.*

Hawkins felt the tumble of paradox.

Just before the blankness, he mumbled, *faithless bitch*.

O flawless faithless one.

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## Folly for Three

Good, he said again, this is very good. Just turn a little, let the light catch you. I want to see you in profile, against the light. There, he said, that's good. That's what I want. His voice had thickened, whether with passion or contempt she had no idea. They were still at that tentative state of connection where all moves were suspect, all signals indeterminate.

Ah, he said, you're a piece all right. That's what you are.

I've never done this before, she said. I've never done anything like this before. I want you to know that. She looked out the window, the gray clouds on the high floor hammering at the panes. Way, way up now. For everything there's a first time, she said.

Right, he said, humoring her. Whatever you say. I'm your first. Best in the world. Anything for a hump. He backed against a chair, crouched, fell into the cushions, stared at her from that angle, looking upward intently, checking out her crotch, then the high angle of her breasts, pulled upward within the brassiere, arching. He muttered something she could not hear and raised a hand.

What is it? she said. What do you want?

Come here. I want you to come here right now.

Tell me why.

I don't want games, he said. We'll have time for that later. You want to fool around, play with yourself. Come over here. Move it.

Can't you be a little kinder? I told you, I've never done anything like this before.

You want a commendation? he said. A Congressional Medal of Honor? He cleared his throat, looked at her with an odd and exacting impatience. Everybody has to have a first time, he said. Even I did once. I got through it. You'll get through it too. But you have to close your eyes and jump. Move it over here now.

This isn't the way I thought it would be, she said.

How did you think it would be? Flowers and wine? Tchaikovsky on the turntable? White Russians with straws? This is the setup, he said, this is what a nooner feels like. You don't hang out in bars midday if you're not looking for a nooner.

She looked at him, almost as if for the first time, noting the age spots on his arms, the fine, dense wrinkling around the eyes, which she had not noticed in the bar. Could she back out now? No, she thought, she couldn't. This was not the way it was done. That was all behind her now. I'm on the forty-eighth floor and that's all there is to it and no one in the world except this man knows I'm here. Not the kids, not Harry, not the cops. Okay, she said, I'm coming. She went toward him, trying to make her stockings glide, trying to move the way they moved in this kind of scene on *Dallas.* Maybe she could break him on the anvil of desire. Maybe she could quit him. Maybe—

There was a pounding on the door. Open up, someone in the hall said, open it! Open it now! The voice was huge, insistent.

For God's sake, she said, who is that?

He was trembling. I don't know, he said. What have you put us into? Detectives? Photographers? You got me into this, bitch. He backed away from her. His lips moved but there was no sound.

The noises in the hall were enormous, like nothing she had ever heard. The hammering was regular, once every three or four seconds now, an avid panting just beyond earshot. Like fucking, that's how it sounded. Last chance, the voice said. You open the goddamned door or we break it down.

What have you done? she said to the man. Stunned, absolutely without response, he ran his hands over his clothing, looked stupidly at the belt. This wasn't supposed to happen, she said. This wasn't part of it. *Who is out there?*

Nothing. He had nothing to say. He brought his clothing against him helplessly in the thin off-light in which she had so recently posed. She heard the sound of keys in the hallway. They were going to open the door.

* * * *

An hour earlier in the bar she had said, Let's go now. I have a room in the Lenox around the corner.

Fast mover, he had said. His briefcase was on his lap, concealing an erection she supposed, one elbow draped over it awkwardly, clutching the briefcase there, the other hand running up and down her bare arm. She could feel the tremor in his fingers. He wanted her. Well, that was *his* problem.

I can be fast when I want, she said. Other times I can be slow. Whatever you say, big boy, I'm on your side. Who can

believe these lines? she thought. This is what it's come to now.

Okay, he said. Just let me finish this drink. He raised the cocktail glass. I paid for it, he said, it's mine, I ought to have it.

She pressed his arm. You only think you're paying, she said. *I'm* paying. All the way, up and down the line. In his face she could see the pallor of acknowledgment, a blush of realization. *I've got a hot one here*, that face was saying. Well, that's the idea all right.

Let's go, friend, she said. She pushed away her own glass, clung to him for an instant, then pulled him upright. Let's see how fast you are where it counts. Out in the clean fresh air and then forty-eight stories *up,* that's the right place to put it.

He released her, yanked upright from the stool, took out a twenty, and put it on the bar. We'll see how fast I am, he said. He took the briefcase against his side, gripped the handle. Now, he said. The lust on his face seemed to struggle for just a moment with doubt, then faded to a kind of bleakness as she reached out again and stroked him. Now and now. He rose gravely to her touch. For God's sake, he said. For God's sake—

Now, she said.

They struggled toward the door. The man on the stool nearest the entrance looked up at them, his glasses dazzling in the strobe and said, You too? Every one of you?

She stared. She had never seen this man in her life. Of course, she reminded herself, the salesman with the briefcase was new also. Two strangers, one maybe as good as the

other when she had walked in but the salesman was the one she had picked and in whom the time had been invested. No looking back. She said nothing, started toward the door.

Fornicators, the seated man said, infidels. Desolate lost angels of the Lord. Have you no shame? No hope?

Out on the street, the salesman said, Another bar, another crazy. They're all over the place. This city—

I don't want to hear about the city, she said. Please. Just take me to the hotel. Right now. She was appalled by the thought that the man at the bar would come after them. The thought was crazy but there it was. To the hotel, she said. I'm burning up, can't you tell. She yanked at his wrist. Now, she said, let's go.

She began to tug at him, he broke into a small trot. Hey, he said, hey look, it's all right. We've got all afternoon. I'm not going anywhere, we have hours. We have—

I'm afraid he's following us, she said. There, it was out, be done with it. I'm afraid he's going to come after us.

Who? The guy from the bar?

His footsteps, she said, I know them. He's coming up behind us. She turned and pointed, ready for a confrontation right there but of course there was nothing. A couple of secretaries giggling, a man with a dog, a beggar with a sign saying I AM BLIND, that was all. Quickly, she said, before he finds us. I know he's on the way.

She moved rapidly then, dropping her grip, striding out, making the salesman race. Let him struggle, she thought. Let him chase her a little. She was afraid of the man in the bar whether or not he was coming. Desolate lost angels of the

Lord. Fornicators, she thought. We're all fornicators but some of us know more than others. There was something to come to terms with in this but she simply could not. All she wanted to do was get to the forty-eighth floor of the Hotel Lenox, take him into that room, get it over with, take him as deep as her brains. Make it happen, make it done. Get it into her. She was burning. Burning.

* * * *

That morning in the kitchen he had said, I don't know how late I'll be. There's a conference midday and then I have to go out with the accounts exec again. I could be tied up till midnight with this guy, he's a professional drunk. If that's it I'll just get a room in the city and sleep in.

That's nice, she said. That's the third time I've heard that this month. Why bother coming home at all?

Hey, he said, his head tilting to attention, you think I'm lying? You think this is some kind of crap here, that I'm making up a story? Then just say it.

I didn't say a thing.

You think I'm running around? he said. I'm knocking my brains out to keep us in this $250,000 house we can't afford and can't sell and you're running tabs on me? Maybe we ought to have a discussion about that.

We're not going to have a discussion about anything, she said. He looks forty, she thought, and his gut is starting to swell. The sideburns are ragged and at night, the nights that he's next to me, he breathes like an old man, a sob in his throat. He's not going to last but who lasts? What stays? Ten

years ago we made plans and every one of them worked out. I'm having trouble getting wet. AIDS is crossing the Huguenot line. The kids are no longer an excuse. We moved here expecting the usual, who was to know the joke was on us? I'm entitled to something too, she said, just think of that.

What does that mean? he said indifferently. He stood, gathered papers, stacked them, and leaned to open his briefcase. You trying to tell me something?

Nothing, she said, nothing at all. Make of it what you will.

Because if that's the deal, two can play, you know. I don't have to get a heart attack at forty-two to keep you in a place like this. I can just let it go.

Forget it, she said. I didn't mean anything. It was just an expression. Pushing it, she thought. We're starting to push it now. It used to be easier; now we've got to get closer and closer to the bull.

Everything's an expression, he said. He opened the briefcase, inserted the papers, closed it with a snap. There's no time to discuss this now, he said. Maybe later we ought to settle a few goddamned things. Maybe we'll sit down this weekend and talk.

I'll make an appointment, she said.

Enough, he said, enough of this. I'm out the door. You got something to say, maybe you write it down in words of one syllable, we fix it so a simple guy like me can see this. We're practical in the sales department, we only know what's in front of us. You got to spell it out.

Me and my imaginary friend, she said.

Imaginary friend? Is that what you call him now?

You'll be late for the bus, she said. You'll miss your connections and what will happen midday? He stared at her. You've got a schedule to meet, I mean, she said. In four years he won't be able to come, she thought. He'll be a heavy, barking lump next to me and I'll be counting the heartbeats, waiting for the hammer. That's what's going to happen. You bet it would have to be imaginary, she said.

He laughed, a strangulated groan. Too much, he said, you're too much for me. Always were. Always ahead of me. He leaned forward, kissed her cheek, his eyes flicking down indifferently, taking in her body, then moving away, all of him moving away, arching toward the wall and then the door. Keep it going, he said, just take a tip from me and keep it going. He reached toward the door.

Just like I do, he said and with a wink was gone.

She followed him, closed the heavy service door, sat on the stool, ran her feet in and around her slippers, looking at the clock. In her mind she ran the day forward, spun the hours, turned it until it was one in the afternoon and she would be in the Lenox waiting to be taken. She had worked it all out. But that still left hours, even figuring in the time at the bar and the arrangements to be made there. Too much time altogether. She thought of that.

She thought of it for a long time and of other things, the kids off at school, the difficult arc of the morning already getting passed. What do you think? she said to herself, what do you really think of this? Does it make any sense at all? Is this what we wanted?

Desolation, a voice said. That isn't what you wanted, that's what you've got. So you do the best you can. You make it up as you go along. That's the suburban way of life.

Well, there was nothing to say to that. There almost never was. What she could say would destroy the game. She kicked off her slippers and moved toward the stairs, ready to get dressed, ready to pull herself together. Again. Playing it out.

* * * *

Two years before that, a Thursday in summer she had said, I can't go on this way anymore, Harry. Can you understand that? It's too much for me, it's not enough for me, it's a greyness, a vastness, I can't take it. I need something else. I can't die this way. She had run her hand on his thigh, felt the cooling, deadly torment of his inanition.

It's not just you, she said. It's everything. It's everybody.

We can work it out, he said. There are things we can do.

We can't do anything. I've thought it through. It's just the situation and it's too much. It's not enough, it's—

It's not just the two of us, he said. There are things to be done.

No shrinks, she said. No counselors. We've had enough of them. We're not getting anywhere.

I don't mean that, he said. There are other things. Things we can do on our own, things that will change.

Oh, Harry, she said, Harry, you have answers, but there are no answers, there are only plagues out there and darkness.

So we'll do something, he said, practically. He was a practical man. Because of the plagues, the risks. No one goes out there now if they can help it. I don't want to go out there and neither do you. So we have to work something out.

What? she said. What do you want? What's the answer?

He clutched her hand. We know all about it in the sales game, he said, and I can teach you.

Teach me what?

Masks, he said.

Masks? Halloween?

Repertory theater, he said. That's what we're going to have here. A little repertory theater. So get ready for the roles of your life.

Once she had loved him, she supposed. She must have loved him a lot. In deference to that, then, she laid back in the bed wide-eyed, listened to the tempo of his breathing as it picked up, touched him.

Okay, she said. Tell me more, I'm listening.

Yes, he said. Yes.

In the darkness, as he spoke, it was as if there were now another presence heaped under the bedclothes, an imaginary friend maybe, *her* imaginary friend listening.

He told her what he had in mind.

He sold her on it.

* * * *

On the forty-eighth floor, she backed against the high window in the hotel room, her eyes fixed on the door, listening to the sound of the key turning. No, she said, no.

The man hobbling toward the door, half-dressed, turned, stared. No what? he said.

No more of this, she said. There's someone out there, she said. There's someone really out there with the key in the lock. We're in over our heads.

She could hear the key turning, turning. It encountered an obstruction, then suddenly it didn't and it was through. The door was moving.

The terror was clambering within her like an animal. He looks forty, she thought, and his gut is starting to swell. He's breathing like an old man. *Over our heads*, she said. I don't know what to do.

He looked at her, speechless. Wait a minute, he said. Now just wait—

The door was open. The man from the bar was there smiling, holding a gun now, pointing it. Fornicators, he said, I knew what you were up to. I have the key and I followed you here. Now you're going to pay. You disgust me.

She moved toward the window. Harry was rooted in place.

She looked at the priestly little man with the gun and sadly she looked at her husband, waiting now for whatever would happen.

Curtain, Harry, she said.

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## Posar: With the Aliens

Much later, then, an incalculable time past those years in the iron clamp of the city, Posar could still remember the dank of the hallways, the hush of the fires in the distance, the fires tearing the sky and beyond it all, the cries and response of both women. Earlier there had been the luminescent smile of the tantalizing “actress” as he had called her, as she submitted to his touches and grope in the fire and dank. This actress was what he remembered most poignantly but there was also Constance whom he had been trained to desire. Two women and yet somehow mingled, they were of equal importance if different creation. Yet during those times when he looked back upon all of this, when he remembered standing alone outside that bankless river of time, it was she who clung more insistently in memory.

Enameled against the false, the shuddering sky which he knew the aliens had donated for their trysts, the actress was enormous, she was fierce and stern in ways which took him back to childhood, and then, when she broke from that frieze into grinding contact, she became both less threatening and more moving to him. Dusk leapt as she leaned toward him, touched his forehead, whispered the few sentences which they had given her to speak, and the yearning Posar managed to join with her, to become fluid within her dense embrace.

The planes of her face, the extraordinary tilt of her features had touched him in ways he could barely articulate

as she had held him there and he had whispered to her of his necessity. I know this isn't real, Posar had said to her, but it matters none the less for that. Prayers are real, the actress had said, prayers and demonstration. So does that make this meaningful? he had said. I am not sure, the actress had said, I cannot answer your question. I am placed here for particular purposes, I cannot judge the extent of my feelings for you. Can a ghost lift you from the darkness? What darkness could not survive a ghost?

The questions had haunted him, had tantalized Posar, had filled his blood and breath with some sense of the incalculable. He could remember the feel of her against him, the metal of her shoulders, metal of her breath as he held her on the parapet they had constructed above the city. Looking down with her upon the impossible crevices and burning temper of this place, Posar had felt over and again the way that he had when they had torn him back to consciousness, had exposed him to the wires and business of that recovery. Since that time of upheaval, even after the restoration of his memory, he had been unable to trust himself, there was no particle of his experience which did not seem to have been open to them, and clasping the actress at that high place, trying to turn the steel of her body to something approaching heat, he had restored to him that sense which had emerged along with restored consciousness: almost anything could break him open.

Looking back upon that strange and tormented time, Posar had tried to make some sense of his own yearning, his need for an actress he had never known other than as a process or

a machine, a yearning so palpable that even in the later years, after the new quickening, after his restoration, he had been unable to understand quite what had driven him there or how he had been able to desire her so much. This was after he had lost any true recollection of her features, was unable to bring her face to his mind, was unable to populate his memory with anything but the blunt outlines of her body and his own disaster. In this later stage, Posar was once more and as promised nothing other than himself, but still, pointlessly, he tried to clamber back into the past, a circumstance which he could neither apprehend nor truly shape.

That was the way in which the aliens had prepared him. It was before this restoration or that, before the flawed knowledge which had become his custom and his comfort. Lying with her in the false space, her body enormous when glimpsed from this angle, Posar had felt a kind of peace to work in concord with the strands of his desire and somehow he had merged with the future, feeling some apprehension of that later time as he had impaled himself against her and slowly worked toward a kind of equivocal peak. Stunned by the span of his own need, the glare of the city refracted to small splinters and knives of dusk against his consciousness, Posar must have had some clearer understanding of what was to occur than anything he was able to find later. Or then again, perhaps he had understood nothing at all. He had always, no less than the botanic technicians who had placed him in this condition, been uncertain of his circumstance.

But that woman, the actress, had been rehearsal for Posar, that was why he had thought of her as the actress: she was a means of exploring the device the aliens had made him, the device which, they said, was very much like the woman they had painted to his memory, but even more compliant. Lying with Constance in the wake of his return, he had felt himself in a position of conquest, not demonstration as the aliens had said, not an observed procedure. He was for those moments the man he had always wanted to be. The specifics of this collision he otherwise edited, no need with the assistance the drugs gave him, to bring the details to mind: all that he knew was that he had served necessity. Now memory colluded with circumstance and he found himself able, again and again, to engage in long, intense conversations with this real woman, Constance. Do you believe that this is happening? he asked, or is this another of the dreams they have settled upon me?

How would I know? she said. I feel real to me. I can't go any further than that. If this isn't real, what is?

They wouldn't tell me, he said.

Well, they wouldn't tell me anything either. I don't know anything more than you.

But they said that I had to be prepared for you. They made me an actress and told me to rehearse. So you must have known things which I did not.

You were wrong, she said. You are wrong now. I could be the actress herself. How do you know?

Well, how did he? In the ferocity of her gaze, Posar felt himself exposed, felt the heat of his mortality, the dry bones of succession lying under the sun on an abandoned planet. I

don't know, he said. First this, then that. Why is one any more real than the other? She seemed real to me as well. Everything does, one way or the other.

What does it matter? Constance said incuriously. Why try to make sense of it? It isn't our world anymore.

Posar tried to remember the name of the actress but could not. He could remember less of what had happened to him all the time, now he could not tell whether the aliens had dazzled him with implanted memory or whether it had only been consciousness itself which had been a burden. I don't know, he said. I don't know who she is or anyone.

Stretched beside Constance on some enormous plane of consequence, he felt that she must have been important to him at some time, that the aliens must have had some scheme beyond taunting, but Posar could not for the life of him imagine what that might have been. He knew nothing; he had fallen from time, he had been placed in this darkness under the city, a lump of pure outcome, disconnected from motive and possibility.

* * * *

Constance, thought earlier by Posar (who was not truly in control of his consciousness, even though it might have been the last on Earth) to have been a robot actress, but only human then as now, waited for the damaged Posar to return. She hoped for better or at least different transaction. Mislead by the aliens, lied to from the start, he had taken her to be metal and wire that first time around, given ambiance through processes only conquering aliens could understand.

She had accepted that lie for his sake, hoping for a better or at least different connection. When she had known him in that earlier time, in the wake of cataclysm he had been first hopeful, then distant, finally doomed in ways which went to the center of his countenance and all of the secrets which had lain between.

Do not question my effectiveness, he had whispered in what had turned out to be their practice sessions. Do not hurry me with questions. This Posar who had known her robot self had insisted that all of this would change, that they would learn the better lessons of their humanity and later resettle civilization. He had had all kinds of plans before he had become the distraught and aging man of her later incarnation.

In that later time, he had taken her to that wilderness downrange, the forest just beyond that curve which cut all perspective and he had lost all certainty then, had sobbed with fever and helplessness. It wasn't supposed to be that way, he had said, we were supposed to do it this way, then that. After long absence he had come back to her in this glacial condition, his soul bent against all reshaping and in that posture he had talked to Constance, had made love to her as if he were taking instruction, as if some external force was guiding him through the random motions of connection.

It had not shaken Constance. There was little left within to be shaken. She had, like Posar, moved far beyond response to some stage of disenlightenment where nothing had mattered. Destroy the world, take away the world, take away her lover, her sanity, her fixtures and condition, all of that

had been the same to her now, it no longer affected her. She was incapable, seemingly, of emotion.

She could not be broken, she had thought. But when Posar had mumbled to her of the actress, of rehearsal, of hard, metal surfaces and postures which had taught him how to come to terms with her in this place, never realizing that the actress had been her, his thin confession had taken Constance beyond accommodation. She wondered if either of them was at all to be trusted, whether they had been able to withstand the battery of aliens, whether there was any verification possible.

Or had it all been some rupture of sanity?

Who knew? Who could tell? Her reluctant lover ambled toward her, his countenance shining an apocalyptic sheen, reached toward her in a gesture which mingled desire and departure, and she drifted toward him with equal casualness, anticipating once again that collision which he had rehearsed. A satisfactory enough stunt, then, this reworking of the world.

And much later, then, Constance could still remember how he looked, how she dreamed as he came through the dusk, emerging in a sudden flare of color from the surrounding haze, reaching toward her, his arms lean and needful in the sudden influx of stunted light.

And finally, she could remember how he had clutched her, his body an arc of yearning. Remembered as well the way in which she caved against him, her hollows filled with the insistence of his being. She remembered that clutch in the sun and shallow thunder of his breath, thinking: the aliens

must have had their reasons, they must have had this worked out, it must have been purposeful.

She should have told him: I am the actress. How could you not know this? Touch alone should tell you, if not reason. For whatever had been done to them, Posar and Constance still dwelt within a range of causality. A world where acts could not exist without antecedent. Stimulus-response: Posar's hands always there.

She could have said: but reason and reason's counselor, memory, have been taken, leaving only that damaged, mechanical lover. And later than that, after he had had her one last time, she could have said: What poor versions of ourselves time or the aliens have made!

But why blame the aliens? Constance remembered thinking: For how could it not have come to this? Even in Lydian scale: the music of the spheres. Even so damaged, she could have said, our touch was always music.

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## Demystification of Circumstance

Hawkins lay under a rock. The rock was ten feet tall and twenty across, perhaps three feet through, although depth was of no interest to him at this time. The façade was what concerned him. The rock, as all mineral formations on this minor asteroid, ate and drank the atmosphere, conversed endlessly, seemed to have no need whatsoever of sleep. Perhaps at a later stage. It was apparently a very *young* rock. “You won't be able to keep this up much longer,” it pointed out to Hawkins in its high flutelike voice. “Sooner or later you'll have to fall asleep and I'll gobble you up for a meal just like everything else. It's been twenty-two hours now and you're approaching your fatigue limits. Why don't you just tell me the attack plans and we can bring an end to all of this?”

“No,” Hawkins said. He shook his head. His only hope was that his wrecked craft would be visually sighted and the rescue fleet would come but the administrators had, as the rock had pointed out, a major attack to worry about and would hardly be looking for an isolated scout at the present time. Nevertheless, pride held him back and an admiration for consistency: he would not be a traitor and reveal to the rock the exact time and nature of the attack, facts which were desperately needed, of course, so that the sentient minerals of this place, all in constant contact, could protect themselves. It would cost him his life, he knew; if he was not eventually eaten by the rock, which had pinioned him by his right ankle since he had crawled from the downed craft, he

would perish in the attack itself ... but one had limits. You were what you were or nothing. “I won't tell you,” he said, “and I really wish you'd stop with this incessant chatter. It won't get you anywhere, you know.”

“Oh, it passes the time,” the rock said cheerfully, “and besides it's keeping you awake. If you fall asleep for an instant, that's the end of you, you know. It isn't often that I get a chance to talk to a different life form, you understand, although I must say that I find you quite dull and so xenophobic about everything. Don't your kind do anything besides hate?”

“We hate the likes of you,” Hawkins muttered. This was quite true; the sentient minerals of the Sirius asteroids had, for the last several decades, exerted powerful influence upon plans to profitably settle the terrain; they had eaten twenty or thirty explorers and had driven several hundred more, unprepared for singing stones and chattering boulders, quite mad; and they had then begun to transmit a series of ultimatums demanding that the Sirius system be abandoned. The circumstances left no alternative: a pulverizing attack had been planned and at this very moment several hundred ships were massing behind invisible screens to deliver the long-delayed blow which would destroy all of the asteroids; but Hawkins, unfortunately, sweeping the terrain to see if the sentient minerals had devised any counterforce of their own, had had the misfortune to crash and to fall into the interrogative arms or, putting it another way, the interrogative ledge of the rock. The rock appeared to know that an attack was in the offing but, unless it could deduce

the actual timing, could not mass defense, which meant that Hawkins's task was quite clear ... still, he was in an awkward position, quite tired and beginning to fear death more than he had thought was possible through his training. Perhaps it was because he did not think that he would end his life in early middle age bantering with a rock.

“You are so silly,” the rock said, “you say that you understand everything but you understand nothing at all. Do you really think that we posed any danger to you? We merely did not like our own terrain being invaded, and you were conveying many of us to museums and laboratories for study. We have feelings, you know; we are just as viable as are you. Come on,” the rock said innocently, “tell us the time and the nature of the attack. I'll release you and you can even call for help. There's no reason why you have to take such a strong position.”

“No,” Hawkins said again. For the hundredth time he put his hands around his ankle and squeezed, trying to free it from the obstruction formed at the interception of the ledge and surface, but it remained firmly in place. The surface, also sentient, grumbled in reproof, and Hawkins disgustedly gave up and tried to assume a more comfortable position. Circulation had been cut off for a long time, and he assumed that the foot was gangrenous and would probably have to be replaced, but this seemed to be the least of his problems at the present time. “You can't make me,” he said; “at least I can hold onto that. I won't be a traitor.”

“You're all so *stuffy*,” the rock said after a pause. “You're so involved with abstractions, when what you should realize,

as we have, is that your existence is the hub from which the spokes of all being radiate. But I guess you don't want to become philosophical."

"Definitely not," Hawkins said, "and I'm not a theoretical person, anyway."

"Which makes you dull for conversation," the rock said. It paused again, as it was wont to do; long periods would go by and then the dialogue would begin as if no time had elapsed at all. Perhaps the sentient minerals worked within a different frame or, then again, had to restock themselves. How they spoke, let alone in comprehensible language, was a mystery to Hawkins; he was not a technological sort, either, but more or less a simple man of action. "Anyway," the rock said after some time, "there is no need for any of this. Actually, we deduced the attack time and method some time ago. We simply put you into a semiconscious state and extracted the information under hypnosis, then removed the memory of that confession from your conscious mind so that when you awoke you thought of time as continuous and the information as secret. I've merely been going on in this fashion to amuse myself. As you can imagine, there isn't much to occupy the time here; we can't move around much, and very rarely is there anyone to talk to other than minerals who are all parts of the same intelligence."

"I don't believe you," Hawkins said.

"You wouldn't," said the rock, "and there's no reason why you should. But, really, does it make any difference whether you do or not? Whatever will happen has already happened; we believe in the inalterability of time and the absence of

chaos, here. Note the firmament, for instance. Go on, your ankle has nothing to do with your line of sight. Look up there."

Hawkins did so, craning his neck at an uncomfortable angle. The bowl of the sky appeared to be lit with many small fires which alternately flared and sputtered, and beyond the fires he could see a deep golden haze. The haze shimmered toward transparency, and he thought he could see dimly the outlines of many ships.

"Our force screens," the rock said rather proudly. "They are being maintained in place by collective energy. At such time as detonating devices hit them, they will self-destruct and explode anything above them to a distance of five hundred miles. So much for your fleet."

"I don't believe you," Hawkins said weakly. "This is a hallucination. You're lying to me. You don't have the means to do this, and even if you did, I'd never under any kind of hypnosis betray the whereabouts of the fleet or the time of the attack. My conditioning forbids it."

The rock seemed to shrug, a difficult gesture without hands or shoulders, accomplished through shadow play, perhaps. "That may well be," it said. "All of this may be hallucinatory, conjured to impress you; but if we have the power to so hallucinate, we certainly have the power to extract secret material from your mind, wouldn't you think? You'd better face the realities of the matter," it said rather bitterly. "You're dealing with a superior form of life here and you always were. If you had shown us a little consideration, it wouldn't have come to this, but you regarded us as mere

stones and rubble, curiosa for your technicians. But there are ultimate equalizing forces, and you had better face up to it; you weren't going to get away with this forever."

"I'm going to be in a great deal of trouble," Hawkins said. "They'll never forgive me for this." He wrenched his ankle free and stood, tottering. "What is this?" he said, only then the significance of this act reaching him. "What is going on here?"

"Oh, you were never really trapped," the rock said. "That was all in your imagination. You hallucinated imprisonment out of your subconscious guilt. You could have gone at any time, but you were driven by your own uncertainty to construct a situation where you would confess. As a matter of fact," the rock confided after another of its characteristic pauses, "your craft was never wrecked either. You landed here voluntarily and wandered over seeking to *betray* the time and nature of the attack. Of course your conscious mind couldn't handle that, and so you constructed a fantasy of wrecked craft, boulders, and so on. Your defense mechanisms are amazing."

The flames sputtered above. Hawkins heard the dull boom of artillery. That was dumb, he thought at least in light of the repelling devices. If there *were* repelling devices. It all might be a lie, of course.

"In fact," the rock said with alarming casualness, "you hallucinated sentience itself. We're perfectly inert and senseless; you've just projected upon us your own ambivalence about your course of conquest. Sorry to hit you with all this," the rock apologized as Hawkins scuttled

desperately for cover. “I did want you to understand the truth before you destroy yourself.”

Hawkins, thoroughly humiliated, clawed at the restored circulation in his ankle.

Meanwhile, the asteroid exploded.

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## I'm Going Through the Door

*Dear Mr. Baen:*

*While making sentimental pilgrimage to apartment-25 in premises 102 West 75th Street (now located above a solemn and mysterious establishment called* THE MONASTERY RESTAURANT *whose dungeon-like exterior belies some of the happier moments of memory in which time was spent feverishly ordering antibiotics in the Bailey's drugstore which used to be there) I found the enclosed strange document addressed to me in psychotic hand and wedged between the top and bottom panels of the flush mechanism in the bathroom of said premises. I cannot imagine how long its length of stay nor how the author of this correspondence expected it to reach my hands. Perhaps he was an optimist. Perhaps he had anticipated my* nostalgie de bue. *Perhaps I dreamed all of this and wrote the letter to myself in amnesiac fugue, then cunningly secreted it in buried pockets until at this proper moment of opportunity. I am simply unprepared to make judgments of this sort.*

*Since the letter itself (as opposed to the envelope in which it was wedged which was incidentally quite filthy) is addressed to you I hasten to forward, although with a great sense of bemusement. I do not know what the author, one W. Coyne, is talking about. Do you know what he is talking about? As always this is sent with every best wish: I have always been a great admirer of the science-fiction market even though I am incapable of writing for it.*
*Helpfully,*
BARRY N. MALZBERG

* * * *

*Dear Barry,*

*This is such an interesting letter that I have decided to publish it in the form of a short story! As you have long been aware the ingenuity of editors knows no bounds.... You don't suppose Mr. Coyne will mind, do you?*
Best regards,
Jim Baen

* * * *

Dear Mr. Baen:

Perhaps you have heard of me. My name is William Coyne. Eight years ago or perhaps it was nine (it is increasingly difficult to keep events straight in this disordered tangle which I call my mind) I wrote a letter to Frederik Pohl, who was the editor of your magazine for many years. In this letter I described to Mr. Pohl (whom I have always respected) the true and terrible plight in which I had been placed because of an endlessly-multiplying time machine and asked him to write up my story in such a way that a large sum of money could be made from narrating my experiences and this sum of money could be used to keep me and my various selves afloat.

Well sir now, Mr. Pohl never answered my letter. Instead he published it in *Galaxy* with some kind of a house name on it. He published it as a *short story.* I came to understand, finally, that he was not trying to be nasty and that when a science-fiction editor received a rather bizarre narration in the mail he is not to be blamed for thinking of it as yet another work of fiction and publishing it. Besides, it is no small honor to think that one writes well enough to impress a top professional editor

and so, after I got over my hurt and shame, I came to think very well of Mr. Pohl, who I understand is no longer editing. The thirty-six dollars, although not a highly significant sum, came in handy at a difficult and terrible time of my life and although it has all long since been spent, I remember it with affection. You see, my situation straightened itself out.

As you recall, the time-machine I invented, the machine of William Coyne, did not synchronize exactly on the present, so that every time I or one of my various selves attempted to use the machine we would by not coming back to the exact and proper time from which we left create yet another identity. The three hundred and eight of us who were all in occupancy of my very cramped quarters at the time I wrote the letter did not get along very well and it was, all in all, only an unusual stroke of fortune that one of them, in a fit of despair, twisted all the dials on his portable machine to zero and vanished. Shortly after this, one by one, all the other selves began to vanish as well until there was only me, the original William Coyne left, who did not vanish. I have never been able to figure out exactly what the nature of this solution was but concluded after a while that what one self did eventually would happen to all since we were co-existent. This

excluded the fact that I, the original William Coyne, did not vanish as well but since I know in my heart that I am indeed the one and only person of this name and gender it is only reasonable that I should remain. In any event, it has been a quiet four years since then.

It has been a quiet eight or nine years: I have abandoned my experimentation for a more social existence and have, indeed, even been working at various menial jobs within the "military-industrial complex" over these times, finding that my minor engineering or mechanical skills are applicable at the fringes of this very interesting, if dangerous, bureaucracy. I have grown a beard, added something of a wardrobe, even begun to casually date now and then, mostly girls in this very building, dislocated West Side types such as I, who find my nervous twitches sympathetic and who understand that science-fiction, as the only true literature dealing with the effects of technology on man, must be the wave of the future. In normal circumstances, to be sure, my life would be so unremarkable as to deny this very letter: the fact is that for the most part I have been getting along very well over these recent years and indeed seem close to that centrality of the simple life simply lived whose lack drove me to such madness at

a different stage of life. But I have one problem which indeed spurs this letter. Otherwise, you understand, I would never bother a professional science-fiction editor again, having learned in one way or the other that they tend to misinterpret.

Nevertheless, I have this problem. The problem has to do with sleep or perhaps it is only energy of which I am thinking: in any event, when I take to my bed recently, over the past two months say, I find myself being assaulted by the impression of other selves, multiplied identities, hidden doppelgangers, all of them aspects of myself and all of them coming on in waves of impulse and repudiation in those strange sliding moments just before or after true sleep. The selves, who all bear a physical and rhetorical resemblance to the undersigned W. Coyne, address me, first reproachfully and then in fullest accusation; what they seem to be saying—I am not quite sure yet that I understand their language—but what they seem to be saying is that I am somehow to blame for the fact that they are entrapped and able only to address me in moments of the subconscious. Their point seems to be that all of them would be living and flourishing on the Earth still had it not been for my original foolishment of

broadcasting our predicament to the whole world.

Time and again, I have tried to point out to them that this is unreasonable and insane, that it was their own stupidity (well, a singular stupidity of one of them) which resulted in their cancellation and it was not I but one of the others who by fumbling with the devices of the machine (did I tell you that I destroyed my original model of the machine last year, finally?) resulted in his repudiation. But if I do not quite understand their language they most definitely do not understand mine; our dialogues are invariably unsatisfactory and they do not seem to comprehend or enjoy what I have to say. They seem to feel that I am personally responsible for the repudiation of the multiplicity of W. Coyne, that were it not for me, my impulse, my letter-writing, my haste, a million or two W. Coynes might be on the planet at this very moment and they of course would have long since put an end to war, famine, strife, etc., by a mutuality of understanding.

It is impossible for me to make them understand that my writing of the letter had nothing to do with the cancellation. All that they can suggest, time and again, in their raving, inarticulate way, is that if I had kept

my mouth and typewriter keys inert, things on the globe would have taken a far different turn during the last three, disastrous years. And finally, I am willing to admit this, finally they have gotten past easy repudiation, easy mockery, easy rationalization and have begun to afflict me with this horrid kind of *guilt,* guilt because more and more I feel myself, the modest and unassuming W. Coyne, sitting on more suppressed energy, more possibility, more sheer *grace* than ever you or for that matter I could ever conceive.

And all because of my letter to Mr. Pohl. I meant that to be a start you see but it has just about been my finish.

My question, Mr. Baen, is this. You are a modern power in science-fiction and can be assumed to deal with moral questions as well as the other kinds and what I want to know is this: would I have been better off returning the check to Galaxy Publishing Corporation and refusing first World Serial Rights or would it have been all the same, this annihilation of my brothers that is, and I at least thirty-six dollars ahead?

That is my basic question, Mr. Baen, and I would appreciate hearing from you. My other question, not so basic, not really important, just nagging me is this: whatever happened to

K. M. O'Donnell?
Who *was* K. M. O'Donnell?
In equivocation and doubt,
WILLIAM COYNE

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## Reparations

Brown tells me that he is sick of it: sick of it, sick of it, do you understand? “Vengeance is mine, saith the *Lord*,” he points out. “Here is a distinct admonition mistaken as a threat. The task of recense, *He* is saying, is *His,* not ours. You cannot repair the sin by slaying the sinner.” Nonetheless the famous Gerald P_ sighs. He does his work sadly but well. Here a dead racketeer, over there, beneath the riverbed, a drowned chieftain; in the Secaucus flatland the dismembered torso of he who had been chief procurer of the east—it is said. Do not ask what lies in Manwah, near the state line. At a rally in Pennsylvania just the other day, friends, M- had the top of his head rise from his skull like the lid of a hot pot; his brains subsequently appeared; in due course he toppled over. Gerald P__'s signature to be sure. The assailant has not been found. Warnings have been issued. Massive funeral services were held for M- in which the assassin was mentioned in hushed and respectful tones. Although Brown will not admit to this, or anything else—he is sly on the specifics as befits a man of circumstance—he must take a certain pride in his work.

Gerald P_, Gerald P_, an honorable working name. “You *should* be proud,” I say to him. I am, after all, not only his confidant but his oldest and closest friend. “If you did not assume the dreadful burden of these reparations, who would? Truly it can be said that you order and adjust the world; without your acts of fiery balance it would be overcome by

evil. Take pleasure in your work; all of us find parts of our duty distasteful but in the end your job offers more satisfactions than are found by many of us. You should be happy: such beautiful work on M-. One hundred thousand at an outdoor rally and you did it so cleanly, faded away so abruptly that if he hadn't died on the spot no one would have even noticed."

Gerald shakes his head, blushes, looks away. Small dimples of embarrassment appear in his cheeks. It may be true that he despises his work but on the other hand, without praise where would he be? How can he *not* take pride in what they call a job well done? He has struggled too richly to walk away from this easily.

* * * *

Disguised as Gerald P_ once more, Brown considers his next move. He receives assignments in code in a post office box on the far side of town; as far as he knows he has never had contact with the ultimate employer. Cash arrives once a month rain or shine. As P_, in full assassin's gear, Brown sits in the passenger seat of his old Skylark parked outside a warehouse waiting for the target to emerge. Rain comes down heavily, obscuring his view; the subject is already two hours overdue. Gerald should stow his gear and wait for another day but seizures of reluctance have already cost him two good possibilities: today is the terminal date of his assignment. He knows that there will be angry chatter in that post office box if he does not take care of this. Cowardice, no less than a sense of honor, will, however, drive him. His

employer is obviously an angry man; he does not want to plumb the depths of unspoken rage. Never has Brown—or at least has Gerald—failed to carry through an assignment even though there have been recent close calls. Years of sad and dedicated work could go up in smoke if he does not take care of this baby smuggler and he does not want to fail on assignment. A dignified resignation is one thing, all right, but to quit in the field would definitely be another. Gerald P_ shrugs and strokes the carbine. Unnoticed by all, I whisper encouragement; the words penetrating his heart, penetrate mine.

* * * *

The baby smuggler is no fool. Working on the fringes of legality for years makes paranoia as much a part of the working equipment as unmarked bills. Furthermore, certain informants, who cannot be named, so confidential are they, have alerted him to the fact. Gerald P_ is on the stalk. The baby smuggler has heard of him. Many people have heard of Gerald; an assassin of such efficacy acquires, whether necessarily or not, a subterranean reputation. On a night of such inclemency, with light and shadows prowling ominously in the glitter, our victim would be a fool to go to his car. He has decided to stay until dawn in his offices, drinking black coffee from a thermos and making big plans for the future. As a treat he will browse through photo albums containing pictures of women he has wronged, men he has cheated, children whose lives he has destroyed. The baby smuggler is one of those who obtains physical pleasure and release from

the contemplation and performance of evil. He is not to be condemned for that: Brown once achieved similar pleasure and release from the practice of good until he came to understand that flesh was all; motive, circumstance, and that all dialectic was rationalization. This insight, Brown later concluded, destroyed his life. Similar affliction has not beset the baby smuggler who is not so highly internalized. He sits eating a sandwich and glancing through the photo album balanced on his knee. Even though P_ may be outside he is at relative peace. This is more than can be said for Brown, even though he performs good and the baby smuggler evil.

Peace for the peaceful is always there.

* * * *

Brown got into the business of reparations on a fluke. Originally he had been a philosophy major only half a thesis short of his doctorate when he had quit suddenly to become a trumpeter in a local band. A series of strange and unintimated coincidences had led him to Hollywood and New York, a profitable career as a studio musician until, in his mid thirties, intonation fled and he was left with awesome techniques that could produce music of only the foulest kind. Despairing, Brown sought counseling, psychiatry, the love of many others but, although he had interesting experiences, none of them returned his ear and soon enough the money ran out. At about this time the Network was seeking a replacement in northeastern sector for Michael B*, whose trigger finger had become spavined with age, and because Brown seemed to be the kind of man who might make a worthy successor—high

intelligence, broken spirit, generalized rage, angst and the like—he had been scouted carefully for months before the approach was made in a cafeteria. At the time Brown had been reduced to life in a furnished room and evenings out alone in cafeterias, his latest (and penultimate) mistress having thrown him to the winds. Brown was amenable to recruitment which was carried through with all of the Network's characteristic finesse. Soon enough he was given his post office box and a statement of principles. He had been in the business for almost four years before he felt the first faint whisper of scruple.

* * * *

That scruple had joined him when Brown had been obliged to kill a concrete manufacturer who loved his family warmly and well but who had adultered his products deliberately and had caused a pedestrian bridge to collapse, bearing several innocents to their death. This, however, is not part of our narrative and cannot be further discussed. The origin of scruple, Brown has come to understand, is as irrelevant as is philosophy to motive: *when it is time it is time* is his aphorism and for Brown and Gerald P_ it has been time for a while now. It is merely an issue of whether he can be propped up through a few last assignments until a suitable replacement is found. (The Network is still scouting; needless to say possibilities are screened very carefully. A mistake would be fatal.) In this dull and dangerous period it has become my duty as his oldest and closest friend to jolly him through the depressions, keep his carbine up, keep him on the stalk and,

although I am well paid for this, I like to think that I would work for free, not only because I love Brown but because I have come to love Gerald, the assumed identity, the specter of revenge of my dreams and western civilization, who has done—let us face this squarely—a brutal and splendid job of righting wrongs. “Come now,” I say to him therefore in the Skylark, “be of good cheer. This rain will not last forever. Soon enough he will come ricky-racketing down those splendidly dangerous stairs and a single shot will do the trick. If you miss the shock would topple him.”

“I don't know,” Brown says. He *is* Brown at this moment; more and more he lapses into the shabby persona of a tone-deaf trumpeter. They will have to replace him; I can no longer deny his collapse. “What right do I have to make that judgment? Who am I to say that this deserves death, that that is permitted to live? Vengeance is *mine*, saith—”

“Ah, yes,” I say hurriedly. I do not want to go through *that* once more. “But you were never religious and besides these decisions have been made for you. They are out of your hands, having been given by excellent superiors who are surely in a position to know this as they know everything, Gerald.”

“My name is Brown, not Gerald,” he says, looking indifferently at the carbine. “I wish that you at least would call me by my name. I can't deal with this double-life nonsense anymore. It's childish.”

I sigh. And sigh again. “Whatever you say, Brown. At least admit that this new religiosity is mere cover, cheap posturing. The truth is that you've lost your nerve.”

If I expect this to hit him to the bone I am quite disappointed. “Of *course* I've lost my nerve,” Gerald says, looking at me disarmingly. “Any feeling man would. Just how much self-confrontation do you think *any* of us can take? I've learned to love to kill.”

* * * *

Events muddle, accelerate. It is perhaps best to handle this difficult material through transition, whisk, whisk. Sequentiality is too painful. Also predictable. After a suitable lapse of time the baby smuggler does indeed emerge from his offices. Perhaps it is on the next evening, perhaps it is several weeks later (when his informants have wrongly advised the dogs have been called off). He sways on stairs, adjusts lapels, breathes deeply and begins his descent. The first shot goes wide of the left temple by many feet and the baby smuggler sways in astonishment, saves himself from toppling by gripping a pole and then begins to shriek. The next shot is even more embarrassing, slashing into brick a yard from his head. He shrieks, gathers himself into an urgent fetal ball, propels himself in the direction from which he has come and the third shot can be seen only as obeisance to form—it is below the fleeing target by a man's height. The baby smuggler forces the door open, staggers inside. In the dreadful quiet I say to Gerald, “That was quite unnecessary. Quite shocking really to be so deliberately inept. Whatever your feelings, you do have a job. You have responsibilities.”

“I tried,” says Gerald P_. Sullenly, I would say. “He was agile. These things happen.”

“They are not supposed to happen.”

“You are dooming me by my competence, by my unusual luck.”

“You had no luck trying to stay in E-flat,” I remind him. I am chilled and disgusted. I will have to report failure and the baby smuggler deserved death as much as any victim. A case can be made for the concrete manufacturer, even the politician is known to have had a generous thought, a loving mistress, but for the baby smuggler a clean death was the only epitaph. “You will pay for this,” I say. “I am simply warning you as your oldest and closest friend: *I* wouldn't exact the penalty but someone will. I am sorry for you, Gerald.”

“My name is Brown,” Gerald P_ says determinedly and breaks down the carbine, turns it to litter on the floor of the Skylark. I look at him with disgust. A fallen saint is no saint at all: a fallen saint is a clown.

* * * *

Brown (no longer Gerald P_; the epaulet of his pseudonym has been stripped from him with the key to his post office box) is brought before the delegate committee for a hearing. It is my duty, per custom, to defend him but I have little enough to say. “Thirteen successful assignments,” I say, “should mitigate one abysmal failure.” It is the best I can do. “Consider who freed us from B-. Consider the hero who exploded W- from the planet. Have some compassion for the mighty rifle that sprang loose X-, who as we only know should have died in his cradle or at his mother's bosom. Remember

the great shot that tore off M-'s skull in the stadium, that was no small accomplishment and what a shot!" No use, of course. These cases all have precedent; the hearings are *pro forma.* "Perhaps you would like to say a few words," I advise Brown. "I can do nothing more."

He shakes his head, picks up his trumpet and plays the opening notes of the bass-baritone aria of the last part of Handel's *Messiah.* The trumpet shall sound and so forth. Somehow in this difficult time he has recovered his ear. The notes are purifying, exalting, even the committee sheds a tear. "Consider that," I say, hard put to make a point. "Shall I essay a shaky metaphor and say that our Angel Gabriel has returned to his instrument of choice?" The committee squints. "I didn't think so," I agree. Brown laughs, plays a high D. The eaves shake.

"I can do nothing more," I say. "Defense is a hard business."

The committee nods sympathetically and pronounces sentence. It is the usual, of course. "I must say in closing," it offers, "that thirteen successes only make failure more dreadful. The first crime may be the most heinous. It usually is."

"It is not my first crime," Brown says mildly. "It would have been my fourteenth." He fingers a valve and begins the *Gloria* from the Bach B Minor Mass. The committee and I listen with pleasure. If nothing else, Brown's recovered gifts must give humility. Anything, then, should be possible. "A single person cannot clean up the world," Brown says, behind the trumpet. "No one can clean up the world. One can only

enact one's desires.” He stands, looking quite impressive for all his new seediness: Brown is trying a martyr's persona. “If you are *quite* ready,” he says.

Dolefully, committee and I watch as he is led away. He had all the makings and was great in his time. But the makings and the moment are never enough. Life teaches us plenty.

* * * *

The baby smuggler, having been approached and primed, is ready for his first assignment. He has accepted it with eagerness; even as he wipes damp palms on denim waiting for the party to appear, he knows he will not fail. The carbine is comforting. When they come into view he will lead the shot and so on. Having taken the honored name of P_ to continue his work, he feels he has paid sufficient homage to form and there is nothing else he need do. He owes them nothing.

* * * *

In due course, if the new Gerald shows signs of wilting I must, as his oldest and closest friend, perform once again the ritual of encouragement and succor but now, as is usual at the outset, I am given time to rest and I look forward to a brief vacation. Reparations are a hard business. They take their toll. They sure do take their toll.

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## The Trials of Rollo

Oh, you fool, Rollo, oh you fool: and yet you have a decent heart, old onions. Your sins can be said to come from an excess of feeling and perhaps this will save you in the end, good luck chum pawn of darkness. Oh Rollo it is a big story: you create at enormous expense and psychic debt an illegal time machine, travel back to that evening when you lost your own true love. She married the calibrator seven months later, it didn't work, she drowned in Miami Division a decade after that but it could have all been different. If you had but touched her. If you had had the grace to admit fault. Right? Right, Rollo? Right old suspirer, old dribble-face. You heave yourself into that enormously lawbreaking time machine, your belly trembling, small droplets of remorse condensing on your chin. You incantate. This time it will be different. All different; all different.

Ah, Rollo. You travel back in time and space to Dance VI, stumble from the machine, leave it in the corridors disguised as trash for the bearers, take the lift to communications shack and seize the talker. “Helen,” you say when you hear her mother's voice. You pant. Pant pant. “I want to talk to Helen, is she there?” Oh let her be there, eh, Prince of Skedaddles?

“Who is this?”

She does not recognize your voice. Ah, *mon frere,* but you and the lady never got along. Was that the problem? Blame it on the *mother,* of course, the woodwork, the climate, the

winter wind. “A friend,” you say. You dare not introduce yourself. Later, perhaps, amends might be made. Now it is best to conceal identity, you surmise. You were always a terrific surmiser, Rollo. “A friend of Helen's.”

“From the school?”

“What school?” you blunder. Helen was a Freestyle at the time you knew her, she had bypassed tutoring. “This is just a friend.”

“I'm afraid I don't know who you are or what this is all about. You can't talk to Helen; she's sleeping. She went to bed an hour ago.”

“An hour ago?” But of course you have not checked the time: for all you know you have coincided at three in the morning and this would be the night call of a lunatic. “What time is it anyway?”

“It's two thousand hours. Past Helen's bedtime.”

Two thousand hours? But only a child or a very old or sick person would retire so early! And then the truth begins, dimly and unspeakably to break over you, my quiver, my *danseur,* it is all too painful, Rollo, let me intercede. I will make an elision for you so that you can deal with this privately; you may retire to the corridors, thank you. Very well now: technically incompetent you have failed to properly calibrate your clumsy time machine, the obsession of love and departures of age have snatched from you the ability to fathom charts and have left an absurd figure out of joint. *Helen is two, not twenty-two,* you have missed intersection by a full score and your own true love, your perishing, your

destiny lies in her snuggle bed surrounded by stuffed animals and suspiring in the huge dreams of childhood.

She is a little girl, your Helen, a little girl and the machine in your haste to get it working was not geared for return. You saw no need to ever return to your hideous cubicle, your awful chronology, you would make it right with Helen—you, Rollo, you forty-seven-year-old fool!—and live your lives as they should have been. Now you are trapped and the only introduction to Helen you could properly obtain would be to find a tutor's credential.

And then, crumpled cookie of fate, what would you say?

Ah, Rollo, this is a sad time, a mad time, narrative poise fails, control is lacking, considerations of transition quite evade: I have made your elision but there is little else to offer. Dry your eyes, Rollo, stop whimpering, this must be faced. You could try to deal with the mother, not unreminiscent of Helen, you think, who would be in her late twenties at this time, but you know the circumstances of the mother. Helen told you everything. Isn't that one of the reasons you fled? The mother is crazy, Rollo, as crazy—how it hurts to say this but truth must be faced even at forty-seven—as Helen herself. (Helen is crazy. A thirty-six-year-old woman traveling to Miami Division on a recreational to deliberately drown? It *was* deliberate, you know; and you think of love of you? For unrequited hopeless longing? Don't, even by your standards, be an ass.)

So what are you going to do? Here you be in the aseptic corridors of Dance VI, 14b Complex, hunched in the communications shack and you are going to have to face this

and it might as well be now. Let us think, Rollo, what are you going to do? You cannot return to the burdens of your life, you must remain here in 2122, you will have to manage in a time two decades earlier than the one you planned. You were just a kid in 2122 yourself, it is not familiar. What next?

And what are you going to say? If you could approach her, your pure and gentle love, her dark hair glinting red in the fluorescence, shading to gold through your tears; if you could approach that little girl, touch her, take her hand, hold her, what would you say? That she will love you in eighteen years, be damaged in twenty, be long gone in forty? “You will drown, Helen, you will drown for love of me.” Is that what you would say? She will be holding a doll, her eyes will be full, her cheeks glinting. “I'm scared of you. You scare me. I want to go home, scary man, bad man.”

Scary man, bad man, out-of-time fool. Ah Rollo, none of this is my fault: I could have warned had you but asked. Scary man, bad man, out-of-time fool. “Goodbye,” you say into the unit. “Goodbye, goodbye.” You break the passage and stand there.

There should be a way, you think, that I can find this two-year-old, let her know I love her; the genes are timeless, in the genes she will know and I will wait, I will be a menial, I will pace twenty years for her to come to me. Maybe fifteen. Fifteen years, yes. She will be seventeen. And I?

I will be sixty-two and you, Helen, twenty-five years dead for me, your atoms consumed by the ocean, the memory of you hideous because lost. I am a fool, Rollo says aloud. I am a fool. He weeps. How touching.

Me too, Rollo. Watch me cry with you. We weep.

And Helen's asleep.

In the moist and darkness: we'll figure it out. Right? We'd better, dondolier of doom. We'd just better.

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## Tap-Dancing Down the Highways and Byways of Life, etc.

He came out of the hedges with an angrily uncertain expression, a hesitancy in his gestures. The gun, however, looked quite positive as he shoved it in my ribs. “Give me all your money,” he said, “right now.”

“This isn't very nurturing of you, Cecil,” I said. “It also isn't legal.”

“Don't give me ‘nurturing,'” he said in a tortured whine. “Just give me the money.”

Carefully I put my hand in my pocket, fumbled for my wallet. “You'll regret this, Cecil,” I said. “I know your parents. They'll be ashamed of you—”

He reversed the gun and slammed me across the face with the butt. I do not mind saying that it hurt, but I took it with frozen expression, resolved not to show emotion. As he shifted the gun back to firing position, I could feel the blood crawling down a cheekbone. How humiliating, I thought. But of course, humiliation is part of the package here.

“Just shut up and hand it over now,” he said. The gun shook in his hand. Overhead a helicopter prowled, rattling the sky. I could smell the gasoline fumes, leaching onto the pastoral, deserted suburban street. This civilization guards at all times against the illusion of beauty.

I opened the wallet and stroked the bills, took out the clumped hundreds. “Now,” I said, “you should understand remorse—”

“Fool!” he said, snatching the wallet from my hand. “The whole thing!” He backed away two paces, clawed through it. “Three thousand dollars,” he said at length. “You're holding out on me. Where's the rest of it?”

“I gave you all I had, Cecil—”

“You're a liar!” he said. His face clutched in petulance, he looked as if he were going to cry, a most embarrassing posture for a man of his age and history. “I want it all!” He seized me by the throat, squeezed. The impact made me groan, and I could feel a fresh wave of blood cascading. “Give it to me!” he said.

I struggled in my pocket, removed the ten hundreds I had folded away separately. “Here,” I said, suffocating in his grasp, barely able to articulate. “As if it will do you any good.” He released me, pushed me away, counted the money frantically. “There's *still* another hundred,” he said. “You're holding out on me.”

“That's all of it,” I said. I stood shaking by the fence, the helicopter clattering overhead, feeling the pain now. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Cecil. A man of your background, your opportunities. Your parents will be horrified when I tell them—”

He looked at me with fury, and then, suddenly, centered the gun. “I told you to shut up!” he said. “You mention my name or my parents again, and I'll blow you away!”

“It's the truth, Cecil!” I said angrily, touched, felt the pain in my injured throat. “You're a disgrace to your heritage, and everyone should know about it. I'll tell—”

He fired the gun.

The bullet caught me squarely in the forehead, and I fell. His receding footsteps mingled with the sound overhead.

I lay near the tangled bushes for a good fifteen or twenty minutes this time. I must have been dead when they finally pulled me up with the ropes, took me inside, returned me to the all-purpose institute, and performed the standard procedures. At length, cleaned up and given fresh clothing—the cuts on the face were superficial, but they had to do painstaking work on a bruised larynx—I was hauled in front of them and roundly chastised. “I know,” I said, hoping to forestall more of it after the initial onslaught. “I shouldn't have done it.”

“You're a fool,” the examiner said. “You did *everything* wrong. You were even worse than the first time.”

“Sometimes I have to be given a little more time,” I said—rather sullenly, I suppose. “I may not be the quickest learner, but once I know, I really know—”

“You mentioned his name, you invoked a personal relationship, you mentioned his *parents*. You held out on him, not once but twice. That's really stupid—”

“I got angry,” I said.

“You *can't* get angry if you want to survive, you fool. How many times must you be told that?”

“I'll be better,” I said. The cut still stung. I ran a finger over it lightly. “I don't want to go through much more of this.”

“Then get it *right*,” the examiner said. “We have only so much time for each of you, you understand.”

“All right,” I said. I knew that I should be submissive, cooperative, but a tiny core of revulsion still persisted. “These are our streets, you know. It was my neighborhood.”

“You *cannot* get ideological. That is the last thing—”

“All right,” I said. “I know.” I sat there quietly, nodded with agreement to everything that was subsequently said to me, and at length they let me go. It was agreed to run the circumstance immediately: the best lessons are not assimilated to be reenacted in the morning.

* * * *

As soon as he came from the hedges, I knew I was in trouble. His eyes looked desperate, and the gun was shaking in his hand—probably because this was his first robbery. “Oh my God,” I said, “please don't shoot! I'll give you everything.”

“Give me the money,” he said. With the cap pulled over much of his head and with the huge gun, he was a menacing figure, if one could look past the facts that I knew all so well. I allowed the terror to fill me. “Here,” I said, handing him my wallet. “Oh, here it is, just don't shoot me.”

He clawed rapidly through the contents. “They told me you were carrying five thousand,” he said. “Where is it?”

“It's all there,” I said, “just count it again.”

The clatter of the helicopter rattled the street; a shadow passed across us. I was careful not to look up, not to acknowledge the observation in any way.

He jammed the wallet into his pocket. “All right,” he said, “turn around and start walking. Don't look back.”

“Can't I just stay here?” I said. “You'll shoot me in the back—”

“Stop complaining! Just turn around and start walking.”

“Oh Cecil,” I said, “these cheap theatrics, these little scenarios of intimidation—”

He stared at me. “Don't use my name!” he said. “I hate my name!”

“Maybe if you stopped hating yourself, Cecil, you wouldn't do things like this—”

The gun began to waver in his hand. “Goddamn you!” he said. “Start walking. Get away.”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself,” I said. “What your parents will say when I tell them—”

I never saw him aim and fire this time. But I do remember the impact of the stones as, most heavily, I went down.

* * * *

They must have been furious this time. It was hours later before I found myself restored, and then they had left both bruises I had taken on the knees when I went down so rapidly. The examiner stared at me with loathing. “You'll never learn,” he said. “You just never learn!”

“I'm trying,” I said. “He got me angry. The business of turning my back to him and walking, it was humiliating—”

“Don't tell me about humiliation!” the examiner yelled. He stood, only five and a half feet but intimidating on the podium, his mustaches flaring, his face diffused. “You people infuriate me. You don't understand, you'll never learn. But I'm

going to make you learn because that's our responsibility here."

"All right," I said, "I'll say nothing. Whatever he says, I'll accept. Whatever he orders, I'll do." I felt a sudden twist of pain coming from my legs. "I'm sick of being killed and killed, pistol-whipped and beaten up, you know."

"Not sick enough," the examiner said firmly. "We're running out of chances, you know. One more failure and you're going to fail altogether, we'll have to send you back."

"No," I said. "No, I don't want that."

"Think of what your parents will say."

"All right," I said. I meant it, I could feel my own features flushing. "I'll shut up. I won't say anything."

"It's in your hands," the examiner said. He was breathing hard, almost as hard as Cecil when he fired the gun. "Ultimately you have to accept the responsibility, don't you see that?"

* * * *

Stumbling down the street, I thought I did. I thought that I saw his point. His point was well taken, urban existence is impossible, one must learn at all costs how to survive. The sound of the observing helicopter, tracking me, made me ill; the fumes started me gagging. I was sick of it. The examiner was right: there was a time for student folly, but there was also a time to grow up. I had to grow up. He came from the hedges, extending the gun. "Give me all the money," he said. He was nervous and uncertain, but the gun was convincing. Enormously convincing. I knew what it could do now. I

handed him the wallet, the money protruding from it. He snatched it from me, backed away, clawed through it in both hands. “All right,” he said, “it's all there. Now lie down and close your eyes and count to 250. *Slow.* Don't move.”

I pointed to the sidewalk. “Right here?”

“No dummy. In the goddamned *mud*. Over there.”

I looked to the right, at the slimy substance, still drenched from the recent rain. “There?” I said. “It's dirty—”

He waved the gun at me, his control breaking. “Down!” he said. “Down, down, down in the mud!”

The helicopter's sound seemed to overwhelm us as it approached. We were completely in its shadow. Of course he never acknowledged its presence; he is programmed not to. *"Down!"* he screamed.

I looked at the filth, at the gun, toward the invisible, implacable observing eyes in the copter. “Oh, the hell with it,” I said. “Screw you, Cecil,” I said. “I won't do it! I won't cooperate.” I spat in his face. Even at distance, it landed solidly. He stared at me with fury, wiped at it, then raised the gun. *You fool,* I thought to myself. “Your parents will cry at your execution, Cecil!” I hurled at him.

He fired the gun. Flame from the muzzle, et cetera. Quite accustomed to the consequences by this time, I died quite neatly.

I wondered if they'd even bother to revive me this time. It seemed unlikely; I was hardly worth it to them. I'd never be able to live in their cities.

I just couldn't be a victim.

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## What We Do on Io

So I hobble discouragedly to the agency and ask that the mode be removed. “Invisibility is not what I thought it would be,” I say. “In fact it is a terrible disappointment. I was misled.” This is, not strictly speaking, true, but characteristically we kinglies affix blame outside; this is one of the necessary effects of office. “Skulking, voyeurism, immoderate observation but no participation: this is not for me. I am a social person, an administrator; the limits of invisibility offend. Something else. I want something else!”

They sigh and shake their heads. Confer. I have not made it easy for them at the agency, none of us do; but considering the exorbitant fees we pay, there is no reason we should. “Teleportation, telekinesis, telepathy,” they say, “what do you want?”

“Pyrokinesis?”

“That is a bad idea,” they point out and remind me of the uncontrollable flames on Callisto not three cycles ago; an entire Jovian detachment was called in to quell, and the kingly himself died. “Pyrokinesis is temporarily withdrawn,” they say. “We are working on some kind of automatic limitation. You people do tend to become overexcited.”

I shrug and nod; they are right, we kinglies do. It is our megalomania, of course. Only kinglies can afford the agency services, and we can lose control: inordinate wealth, boredom, and resentment at the isolation imposed by these can make one extremely restless. “I will try teleportation

again," I say. "It didn't work out too well before, but several cycles have passed; perhaps there are satisfactions I was too immature to recognize the first time. I am always willing to replicate. What alternative do we kinglies have?"

"Indeed," they say, "indeed," and pass through my folder, discreetly prepare a voucher which I sign. In the treatment center, the invisibility modes are deftly removed under local anesthetic, the teleportative modes implanted. "Give it a little time," the technicians warn. "Do not try too much at once." Standard agency talk. At every level they are self-protective, as would stand to reason; they are on the bare margins of legality. But one of the prerogatives of the kinglies is to transcend caution. The worst that can happen, after all, is permanent, irreversible brain damage. That would give me a new kind of pain. I am terribly jaded, as you have already observed.

The instant I leave the center, accordingly, I inhale deeply, transport myself to Titan. Titan is dull, the same old place; parties and corruption have not changed since I was last there. Anomie and perversity are rife. The sea beasts continue to die under the terraforming; they are washed up on all the shores of Titan, decomposing. Enough of this. On Ganymede there are hints of joviality under the cruel administration of the robot kinglies, but decadence and destruction are still the mode; I essay an affair but we come to nothing under the giant dome. Nada, nada, there is no control. Jupiter roams hugely above us as once more I confess my inner freezing, my emotional death. *Pardonne*? she says. I laugh.

Venus is somewhat livelier for just a while, and under the heavy influence of *spican* I think that I have perceived some manner by which I can control my uncontrollable life, but this passes through the blood almost as rapidly as the terrible drug itself, and I am on to further incitements. New York and Salama City are inert, as usual, and the castles of my parents are filled with their friends who, quite unlike me, have already given up. Accordingly, I return to the agency. “Telekinesis,” I say loudly, pounding on the glistening surfaces of a desk to accentuate the point, “I want telekinesis at once!”

They shrug, mumble, lead me self-indulgently to chambers, perform the usual ablutions and enchantments, send me to an anteroom where I practice with pots and knives, circle them for their observation. Released to try more complex game, I whimsically bring the mad King of Io to my chambers.

The mad King, dressed only in his ceremonials, shakes and murmurs imprecations, terrible threats of Ionian vengeance until I hurl him at a wall, then dispatch him stunned to the palace. I hate the mad King. Doesn't everyone? He is so terribly jaded; he obtains pleasure from nothing but aspects of self-hatred. When I come to the agency to report proudly on what I have done, they look at me with horror. “You cannot do this,” they say. “There are limitations imposed; now consider what can happen. We'll hear from Io on this.”

I point out that Io is a minor colony filled with lunatics. The agency and its clientele can do anything they wish, but they do not, somehow, accept my argument; instead they hustle me into chambers to remove the telekinetic power, and even

though I bring dangerous, gleaming weapons from Phobos to fight them off, they overcome me, stun me with *spican* and remove the mode. When I awaken it is in a somewhat chastened state.

"All right," I say then in a humbler fashion, "telepathy, that's something you can control, right? Give me that; I'm bored with stones and travel, anyhow."

"Telepathy it will be," they say but cautiously keep me under restraints while the new mode is implanted: when I emerge from the wraps, their thoughts, of course, are as open to me as wounds, and I know their fear and contempt. They perceive me as uncontrollable: some monstrously indulgent force, when the fact is—how can I make them see this?—that I am undone by aspects of omnipotence and look only for a means to assess my humanity. With fear and contempt they release me and I mingle with the crowds and purpose of Philadelphia. In the Philadelphia streets the stupor and resentment appalls: waves of impotence and clangorous hatred overcome; inside the palaces I find them somewhat calmer but no less pained.

*Understanding he no understanding* the woman with whom I lie thinks, *he no understanding these kinglies no no* as I take her; in the small abyss of our coupling the certainty of her little thoughts push open no mystery, and I feel the despair of the telepath: all that is given back to us are large or smaller versions of ourselves. I *could* be the mad King of Io. Are we any different?

The mad King of Io would, like me, use telepathy and *spican* to dream away the time. I return, preoccupied, to the

agency. They seem bewildered. “Again?” they say. *Again,* they think.

“Again,” I say, “I want something entirely different.”

“Pyrokinesis is unavailable. We have explained that.”

“Something different,” I say, “not any of your feeble enchantments.” *He is crazy, all those kinglies are,* they think. I claw at the modes. “Get these out,” I say. “I can't take it anymore.”

“What can't you take?” they say; *he's crazy,* they think as they lead me to chambers and remove the modes. “We will give you something special,” they finally say, “something unlike anything you have had before.”

“Please,” I say, “do that; nothing works for me: teleportation, telepathy, telekinesis, it's all the same.”

“This is different,” they assure, “all different,” and overload me with *spican,* and when I awaken I am in a truly glacial place, the plume of my breath surrounding and unable to move, although I struggle. Oh my, I struggle! The autonomic nervous system has, however, broken; it must be the drug ... and then the mad King of Io himself seems to be standing over me. “*You* again,” he says, “come here,” and reaches towards me.

Of what happens then I have little recollection, but one thing is sure: when I emerge from that expected collision, I am convinced that I will find invisibility just fine. “Make me invisible,” I say to the technicians, “make them unable to see me!” I scream and they hasten to comply. Oh, invisibility for we kinglies (here is the moral and not a moment too soon) is what we must have to remain alive in this world that gives us

everything, allows us nothing, nothing, nothing, and forces that mad King of self to such awful and necessitous contest.

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## O Thou Last and Greatest!

In the corner a strange and preoccupied man with acromegaly, over by the swinging doors a nervous and pontificating Thomas Wolfe; within easy reach of the crucifix that hangs (for easy observance) over the bar is Mary Flannery O'Connor herself—but my attention for the moment does not devolve upon these oft-regarded and revered figures, being focused instead somewhat closer in. Upon my own astonished reflection, that is to say, which is cast back through all the shadows of the strange and interior light. You're doing all right, I encourage myself, giving a speculative wink, doing fine, holding your own; no one will ever know the truth.

Which is flummery, of course, just a means of cajoling myself, encouraging myself, trying to force courage; I am still the only science fiction writer at this steaming and clamorously eternal reception, and I fear that at any moment large hands will grasp my elbow, mild and efficient custody will be taken of lapels, and I will be taken in disgrace from this grand establishment and without possibility of return. I shudder at the thought of this humiliation, thinking how much at this moment I must look like an imposter at this reception ... but the fear may very well be self-imposed. Certainly very little attention is being paid to me in these chaotic premises, and my secret may well be safe. Besides, I have published mysteries, a mainstream story or three, some mainstream novels, once had a story reprinted in *Short Story*

*International* and the Italian *Playboy*, have been the modest, tentative beneficiary of some modern academic perspective of science fiction. Perhaps it will be all right. If matters threaten, I could define myself as a conceptualist, a fabulist—a magical realist, if you will.

"Oh wandering," Thomas Wolfe says, catching my eye and raising a twinkling glass, "oh wandering and the earth again, the flowers, the scents, the tropes, the buzz of dying insects in the humid air, the sounds and smells of America itself, the vastness of this continent spread out under us like a decayed and bracing dream, not under the tent of the heavens this America, but instead tented cities, exiled to the bare and bone spaces of the deserts of the soul—" And so on and so forth; it would be possible to quote Tom at distinguished and sprawling length; well launched as he seems now, he is a fit candidate for stenography—but my attention has already shifted, has moved down the line of the bar, past my companions and compatriots to that small, half-concealed door through which in due course the Great Redeemer will emerge with judgments and blessings, confidences and assessments for all of us: it is important for me, I think, to maintain a position of poised and committed alertness at all times, because I, more than anyone else in this place at the present time, am aware of the consequences of judgment, and it would behoove me to exist in a state of preparation. Or so, in any event, my stream of consciousness threads, like a Wolfe monologue, as I grip the panels of the bar, looking at the empty glass before me, and try to assess my position in relation to this difficult situation.

"Is this seat taken, son? my cadaverous fellow of acromegalic tint says to me, nodding at the suddenly vacant stool on my left. Here a space; on the wall now, a prating Wolfe slowly, slowly subsiding under the insistent and rigorous gaze of Mary Flannery O'Connor; over in the corner, a belligerent Hemingway is being tamed again. Spaces open and spaces close; perspective changes most rapidly and dangerously in these last of days—let your attention shift for a moment, and you are apt to be on the street, as James T. Farrell has found to his dismay more than a few times. My purchase on this situation is not assured. "Sure looks unoccupied, fella," the acromegalic gent says, and sidles next to me. A glass of wine appears before him in peremptory fashion; it is one of the characteristics of this place to skimp on service. Prestidigitation and the infusion of magic certainly solves the labor problem, and parakinetics will take the place of bouncers. "You look familiar," my new companion says. "But then, everyone in this place looks familiar, sort of, even the strangers. Name is Howard, by the way. Used to live in Providence before the change."

*Providence,* I think, and then the identity of the acromegalic wine drinker becomes clear to me. "Nice town, that; I think I stopped by there once." This is a lie, but lies are our most serviceable version of truth in these places. "Admire your work," I say untruthfully. "Read most of it," I say, expanding the lie. There is no harm in this; one must live ungratefully, sponsor untruth in order to survive. A chastened Tom Wolfe is saying something like this in a desperate whisper to Mary Flannery, the intense details of which I can

pick up, along with Hemingway's bellowing and the rattling of the greater constituency in the kitchen—because all of our senses are preternaturally alert here, nothing (as in life) escapes us, everything may be inferred. *"Colour Out of Space,"* I say wisely. “Good one. Real good one. Swear by it, reread it at least three times a year.” A jigger of gin, as if in compensation for this intelligence, materializes before me, and I lift it, drink it at one swoop, allow the gasp to overtake me. When I have recovered—that is to say, when the blade of Mary Flannery's contempt has once again cut through Tom's rhetoric and my own consciousness—my companion is asking me my name. “I know I've read you,” he says, “read you a *lot.* I read everyone, here and now. Before and after. But the name, the name doesn't quite come through; if you could just give me a clue—”

I shrug. We all lie to one another—I to him, he to me, all of us to everyone—it is our only means of accommodation. Raised in lies, exhausted by their necessity, we could really know nothing else—or so our keepers point out to us during our occasional reorientation sessions. “Name's so-and-so,” I say, and give it to him; for one flat instant, there is a desperate bewilderment, even panic, in his eyes, but then the mask of his own self-involvement clanks shut, and he says, “Of course, of course. And so many times. This and that and all the times of our perpetuation, knowing then that the unspeakable that lingers, that quakes and wails at the coffin of our lives can be revealed in an instant, an instant of light behind which the ravening jaws of that beast, circumstance—”

And so on and so forth. It must be pointed out that we all do this, every one of us; even Emily Dickinson under the stroke of midnight or judgment will occasionally bellow effusive quatrains. It is the sound not of our companions but of our own voices that we seek, the thread of our voices carrying us ever back farther and farther to the origin of our own circumstance.... If we did not have our own voices (and really, what else was there for us, ever?), we would be locked into individual cubicles, and all of this, the colors out of space, the noise and light surrounding us—would be gone. It is not community but id that we bring to this place—or so I have heard Emily and Tom theorize at those exhausted points of our timelessness where the service has, temporarily, given out and sleep has not yet taken hold.

"—and so to the ravening beast," my companion concludes, "and to the last spaces under the earth."

"I heard that!" Tom says. He pushes away from Mary Flannery (who has gripped the crucifix) and lumbers toward us, hand extended. "That's my kind of talk; that's my earth you see, its lost and gleaming colors, intermingled—" And he continues on in this vein for an active and considerable period while I put my hands carefully on the gleaming shelf, haul myself upright, finish off the new jigger that has been placed before me, and look in the corners and crevices, abscissas and junctions of light for some new companionship, some new conversation. There is this utter sameness, of course, but there is also the illusion of difference; between these possibilities, of course, we must exist as best we can. "If you'll excuse me," I say, "I'll be back in a little while—"

“Wait,” Tom says, “I haven't clarified—” But of course he has; he has clarified everything. We exist in terms of unsparing, if only partial, clarification, as I would like to point out to him if it were not all too much trouble; and I lurch away from the handle, cutting a small swath for myself through the anomalous and seeking crowd. There are more, more of them than one could possibly imagine at an easy glance, and still coming in all the time—but still, with the debatable exception of the author of *Colour Out of Space*, whom I had hardly expected to see here, there is not a science fiction writer. Perhaps not even a magical realist. I think at times that this may be part of my punishment, may be the seal to my peculiar and diffident fate; but then again, this may not be the case, and I have misapprehended its totality. One wavers; one always wavers—there are poles of possibility here, and somewhere in that center, we must live.

It is worth retiring to think about; it is worth long and solitary walks along the back rim of this sullen and clangorous enclosure where questions give way only to the sound of those voices—but before I can reach the swinging doors that will carry me past Ernest and to that roadway which I (the perceptive, the far-ranging, the outward-seeking science fiction writer) may have been the only one to find, I am straightened by the imprint of Mary Flannery's small and determined fist in my chest; and then I find myself scrambling against a wall, held by the rigorous, unblinking purchase of her gaze. I know that this must not be the first time she has so accosted me—we have all been here for much longer than we would like to admit; memory carries

through only imperfectly; each cycle is partially a new cycle—but surely I have never felt such determination in her grasp before. Rigor glints from her eye, rigorousness from the set of her jaw, Catholic grandeur and reparation from her spavined fingers. “It's not a myth,” she says.

“I know that.”

“It's not a metaphor; it's not an example; it's not a way of explaining things that is a simpler way of explaining other things. It's none of that at all. It is full and final; it is absolute.”

“I know that, too.” Really, what else is there to say? We must humor one another; if we do not admit one another's obsessions or selective agenda, we will have—well, what will we have? It is nothing to consider. “I accept that.”

“You have to accept *everything*,” Mary Flannery says dangerously. Her hand, holding me against the wall, has enormous strength and confidence; it is not lupus but the Holy Ghost that must accomplish this passage. “That's their mistake,” she says, pointing with the other hand toward the enclosure where dimly now I can see Tom Wolfe and the acromegalic gent embracing one another with one arm, pouring drinks over each other's heads with their free hands. “They're trying to make it *real*, trying to call it grace. But it isn't even a prayer.”

“All right,” I say. “I understand that.” I write science fiction, or at least I think I used to before I came to this condition. If I don't know about the absence of prayer, the absence of conversion, then who does? But this is not a point

that I dare make in these circumstances. “It's just a condition.”

“Exactly,” she says. “Working there in a shed, watching the peafowl, feeling the lupus move inside, turn me into a cross, make me the very nails that put me there, I thought of that. You can learn a lot being sick, you know. Nothing will teach you better than being sick, if you're a smart person.”

“Or old,” I say. “You can learn from being old.”

“Not like being sick. Of course, sick *and* old is best for learning. *If* you're still smart. If you have your brain. Otherwise, it's just purgatory and purgatory and never knowledge. But you're not listening, are you? You're already gone from here. Your eyes are lit for a higher path; you are on your way out. I am an interruption, a distraction.” Indeed, it is Flannery's eyes that seem alight with some grievous and perceptive demon; caught in that glance, I can feel myself slowly impaled by my own resistance. “It isn't that—”

“It's everything,” she says. “That and the drinking, too—” And there is a thundering in the distance, a series of squawks and cries, as if not archangels but peafowl were massing; and then, in the sudden rolling and flickering light, I feel myself fall from Flannery's grasp. “Again,” she says. “They're coming again.” Ernest screams curses; there is a battery of curses coming from the enclosure. But I seem to be very much alone.

“Theatrics,” Flannery says. “They don't trust us to find grace on our own; they have to give us flowers and trumpets.” And indeed, there seems to be much more to say; that seems to be the point, flowers and trumpets—but before

I can exchange assent with Flannery or be reminded that this, too, is not a symbol but merely evidence, the very roof of the establishment seems to depart, and I find myself along with the others, always the others, to be overcome by breezes and the cooler scents of night. Their enormous figures begin to materialize.

"Courage," Tom says. He has come by me most unostentatiously, no sense of passage; he is simply standing there. "Some of us will be lost, and others will be found, but in that final and everlasting morning, we will stand together—" He continues in this incantatory vein for a while as the figures, ever more substantial, mass before us—their huge arms and shoulders becoming definite in the mist, then their hats, their cloaks, their staffs, only their features indistinct, merely to be inferred from the hollows of their posture. "Forever in the light that arcs," Tom says. He throws a companionable hand around my shoulders. "If we are of good courage, we have nothing to fear," he says. "For here we stand."

And so we do. Here we stand. But waiting then, waiting in the difficult and faintly malodorous mist for their latest and most statutory judgment, the sense of their earlier judgments now coming over me through the chinks and crevices of partially recovered memory, I find myself trembling. "Are we standing firm?" Tom says. "Or did we lose the morning?"

"I have to tell the truth," I say hesitantly. "I must face them in truth."

"Yes," Tom says, "there is a certain purity in that." And I look at him, at his angular and honest features, seeing at last

the honesty that must have always been there. I think of Mary Flannery's own advisement and the simpler declarations of the man from Providence, and it is in my throat, it is on my lips, it is to be spoken—"I am a science fiction writer! I am a science fiction writer!" I am about to shout, "I wrote it all my life, and even when I didn't write it, I was thinking about it; it's the only thing I ever did well, even though I did plenty of it badly!" I want to add, And so on and so forth, but before the words can burst forth, before this last and greatest of true confessions pours through, it is already too late; it is beyond me, for the cloaked figures have begun to speak, pound their staffs, render their undramatic and final judgment; and as their word goes forth, as their word pours from this time and place to any other time and place that may come, I can only quail against Tom and submit. And resubmit. Will there be release, or is it indeed of wandering and the earth again? "In the corner," I hear it said. "*In the corner—"*

In the corner—

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## On the Heath

In a small clearing, Aladdin stumbles to a halt, then stops, squatting on the sand. Around him the wind stirs, silt coming into his face, but it is at least bearable here, the storm is not as fierce, he seems to have found a little haven, although, of course, one cannot be sure of this. Everything is treacherous: the weather, his abominable daughters, the exile, the footing on the sand. “Hand me the lamp now,” he says to his Fool.

His Fool—the only member of Aladdin's court who has stayed with him through all of this exile, who has continued on with him against all reason—shrugs and produces the magic ornament which Kent had passed on to them before he had deserted. “I can't take any more of this, Aladdin,” Kent had said. “But I can at least give you a magic lamp. Call on it when you have nowhere else to turn.” Well, that was Kent, never reliable but full of promises. The Fool had taken the lamp when Aladdin had refused, putting it under his cloak. “You never know,” the Fool had said. “It might just come in useful.” Now was the time to find out. Aladdin had run out of ideas, not a new condition for him in this period of exile, but at last he was willing to admit it.

“The lamp,” he says to the Fool. “Give it here.”

The little man shrugs, holding out the contrivance to him. It glows mysteriously in the moonlight, although this may merely be a condition of Aladdin's failing vision. First, the humiliation. Then, the exile. Then, too, the rationalizations with which the harpies had sent him out into this miserable

storm. “You're unreasonable,” Regan had said. “You're a sad, cruel old man,” Goneril had added. “Be gone from our sight,” Goneril had said. “That goes for me, too,” Regan had said. Who would have judged such an outcome? It came from first giving your kingdom away, then putting yourself at the mercy of faithless daughters. He had certainly never envisioned such a situation in old Arabia. Well, that was a long time ago and before he had accumulated all of that corrupting wealth. Which he had shortsightedly given away.

“I warned you about that, sire,” the Fool says. “I told you you should have held onto it, at least some. For a disbursement, that is to say. You should never have given it to all of them and those ungrateful sons-in-law.”

Aladdin realizes that he has once again been muttering his thoughts. Privacy and dignity seem to be going although continence, at least so far, has remained. It is truly abominable, all of this, and yet who is to blame for the situation? “Give it here,” he says. He takes the lamp roughly from the Fool's embrace, stares at its ruddy surfaces, the smooth wick, the little island of wax in which the wick has been embedded. The wind kicks and tosses a little sand into his face. “Now what?” Aladdin grumbles. “I mean, do I light it or what?”

“You don't light it, sire,” the Fool says. “Remember what the Lord told you? You *rub* it, back and forth on the bottom, several times. I remember that the touch is very important. It must be light yet firm.”

“And then what?” Aladdin says. He had never trusted that Goneril. He had had a bad feeling about that one from the

earliest years. But Regan, Regan had *his* hair, his eyes, his talent for a bargain, and a merchant's shrewdness. Who would have thought that she would have proven as cruel as her sister? Well, there was nothing to be done about any of this now; it was too late to withdraw that foolish, grandiose moment when he had with a flourish given them his riches. “All right,” Aladdin says, “I'm rubbing. I'm rubbing the thing.” The surfaces feel peculiarly warm under his fingers but then again what can you expect in this desert country? Perhaps Aladdin himself has a fever. “Now what?” Aladdin says.

“Well, I don't know,” the Fool says. “I guess we wait a bit.”

They wait a bit, barely shielded by the small wall of stones behind which they have clambered. A thin golden haze steams from the lamp, shimmers before them; from the haze Aladdin then thinks that he sees a shape become manifest. It is difficult to tell in the moonlight and his eyes, along with the rest of him, are rapidly going bad. But the shape resolves itself and stands before him, looking very much like Gloucester, reminding Aladdin of that wretched old Earl just before he was taken away in chains. “Yes?” the shape says, in an inquisitive tone. “I was summoned? I am desired?”

“I don't know,” Aladdin says. Truly, the situation seems to be overtaking him rapidly. Kent had given no instructions beyond rubbing. Still, there is no question but that Aladdin is in extremity and having gone this far, he can only go ahead. “Yes,” he says, “I summoned you.”

“And he, too?” the shape says, pointing toward the Fool. “What is his mission?”

“He is my Fool,” Aladdin says.

“Your Fool? What does he do?”

“Well, sire,” the Fool says, after a pause. “I am here to amuse him and make him laugh. As much as the situation will permit, that is.”

“Oh,” says the shape. “I don't see much laughter.”

“There is nothing to laugh about,” Aladdin says. The dialogue seems baroque, pointless, as elaborate and yet meaningless as the fine curvature of the shape in the mist which has now congealed into something very much like the appearance of boy slaves in old Arabia, long before he had met the mother of Regan and Goneril and eased himself toward this terrible situation. “There is only pain and darkness.”

“That is surely distressing,” the now-Arabian shape says. “But you are not being specific. My instructions, according to the old agreement, are to grant you three wishes upon the emergence of the charm. I suggest that you make those wishes rapidly; I can remain only for a little while in this state. Then I will evanesce.”

“You will what?”

“He said ‘evanesce,'” the Fool says, “Evanesce we talk, he will in the wind and the rain.”

Aladdin says nothing. Really, what is there to say? “*Three* wishes,” he says, “and quickly?”

“I hate puns,” the Arabian boy says. He has now assumed a credible shape and posture and Aladdin can see old memories cast in that fiery mist. “I don't magic either, or troth. I suggest that you make these wishes very quickly. I

cannot be held much longer, nor do I appreciate this discussion."

"Very well," Aladdin says. He realizes that he must think quickly, three wishes at once or nothing at all, but it has been so long since he has felt fully in control of himself or free of the storm that his internal logic seems to be blocked, as thick and congealed as the mist which had sprung from the lamp. "I wish for the restoration of my riches. I wish for a daughter who was not an ungrateful harpie, who loved me as I deserve to be loved. I wish pain upon Regan and Goneril who have done this terrible thing to me. I wish comfort for the Fool, my Fool who has so loyally stayed—"

"Sorry," the Arabian boy says, "Only three wishes, not four. The daughter who loves you I can take care of. The restoration of the riches is a little bit of a problem but might be managed. The pain on Regan and Goneril is a state of mind and that is notoriously difficult."

"All right," Aladdin says, "Forget that part. Give my Fool comfort."

"Sorry," the Arabian says. "The first three are what count. I will do what I can." The boy shakes a remonstrative finger at Aladdin. "I do want to tell you, however, that you are a vain, foolish old man and you have brought this trouble upon yourself. Nor are you likely to avoid repeating it. Wishes to the contrary, we make our own fate."

"That is true," the Fool says. "That is spoken very truly."

"Nonetheless," the boy says, "I will spring beyond judgment; I will do what I can." The form trembles, then begins to decompose. "You will sleep," he says to Aladdin,

“and then you will awaken. Unconsciousness is part of the passage here.”

“But wait!” says Aladdin, already seeing the boy begin to slide from his sight. “How will I know? I mean, how will I know that this is real, that it is indeed something which has happened, that it is a real thing which you have done?”

“You will know that,” a voice says faintly from the now unidentifiable mist, “because you will carry the word ‘real’ within you, as part of you, as a badge and emblem of shame and reminiscence forever. Your *name* will be real—” the mist says faintly and departs, leaving Aladdin and the Fool alone again on the heath, with the bare and broken lamp lying by Aladdin's foot. In the air is incense and then nothing at all.

“Real,” Aladdin says. “It cannot be real.” He stares at the Fool for a while.

“And I,” the Fool says at length, “I will go to bed then at noon.”

And the darkness closes upon them. For a while and as if spewed from the lamp.

* * * *

Later, much later, understanding all of it at last but too late and with the Fool departed, Lear clutches Cordelia in her despair, lifts her dead light swaying toward the Moon, cries, “Break, heart, break!"—but all the curses and powers of Araby itself will not permit this. Cordelia lies spent in his embrace. He has done such things, has the old King now, as would be the terror of the earth.

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## Grand Tour

***First slide, please***

Here's Stanford. Forty-five, forty-six, definitely past his prime but still in the game, still pitching. In the depths of the night, touching the abyss of sleep, he thinks or dreams: I'd like to give this up, it's all too much, there's too little left for me to justify this endless, shriveled *hoping* ... but daylight casts such thoughts to the west wind. Stanford hobbles to the shower, his head full of plans, possibilities, detached from all of this post-adolescent *tritesse*, or so he calls it. Five foot eleven, two hundred and seven pounds (this bothers him quite a bit, but he tells himself that it is not grossly excess, most of it is in his upper body and he will begin an exercise program very soon anyway), light beard, haunted eyes, fifty-seven thousand dollars in a money market account, eighty-six thousand in stocks and treasury accounts and (his ex-wife Irene knows nothing of this) four thousand dollars in silver quarters and dimes, smuggled away during that period when the pre-1965 coins were soaring on the collector's or meltdown market. The separation agreement provided considerable alimony and child support, making such a joke of his income that it seemed ridiculous not to just keep the hundred and a half in easy reach since it was going out to Irene anyway almost as fast as he could shovel it in, but the four thousand dollars was his, his little sinking fund, Stanford liked to think, to hold out against eternity. Stunned eyes, sardonic face, hollow, interesting features, the face of a

twentieth century man (*late* century, late millennium, on the cusp of grand and inexpressible change, except he could not quite say what) possessed of the paradigmatic American middle class plight but still trying to come to grips with it, that is Stanford's self-conception. Middle age, isolation, divorce, alimony, disengaged cautious relations with a late-adolescent son and daughter who in those strange moments on the cusp of sleep Stanford cannot quite apprehend, cannot *see,* is not even sure of their names.

Observe Stanford then, doing the best that he can (or so he insists) in this difficult and perilous city on the trembling verge of great changes in the chronology and the millennium, all of the Biblical changes, the signs and portents with which to contend, and Irene's rages when now and then the grief and sheer inequity of her condition overwhelms his forty-three-year-old ex-wife and she will call him (usually after another staggeringly absurd relationship has ended or has just barely begun) to berate him for the attrition of her own possibility and the extent of her philosophy. Stanford does something vague and (he himself calls it this) subterranean in the advertising business, not quite copywriting, not quite supervision, used to be copy chief, now is in charge of account relations, trying to salvage the state of collapsing relationships, keep the copy chief and subordinates happy in the face of collapsing client confidence, heavy contact work with the external departments of automobile or electronics companies, many expense account lunches, too many expense account dinners, troubles. Troubles of all kinds are not foreign to Stanford, who only wants to try to hold things

together yet has begun to understand as he paces the spaces of his divorced man's apartment, a three-room enjambed set of boxes on the riverfront on a high floor, that he had better moderate his posture and ambitions, just trust that it does not collapse spontaneously and wholly atop him. He dates women from the corporate offices, usually secretaries, promises them little, makes assertions that he will not fall in love with these glistening, nervous, preoccupied women of the telephone, yet often enough does, finds himself crying out in vague and desperate phrases at the peak or depths of his necessity. All of these relationships end badly, some quite early, some in the middle; very few have a decent and protracted end. Stanford could sue for marriage, could look for something more permanent. In this age of plague the concept of a bachelor's existence seems as pitiable and archaic as the expeditions he used to take with the children, fifteen years ago, to the last of the amusement parks in this area: spin the wheels, eat the plaster of cotton candy, stumble through the funhouse, listening to the wind machine and attending to the rattle of tape-recorded chains in the background, but Stanford sees no alternative, sees no real prospects. Women over forty bore or terrify him with their refraction of his own coming collapse; younger women want to nest and procreate, Stanford is convinced, regardless of what lies of adventure they utter. One hundred and forty thousand dollars is not enough between him and the abyss, not when he has to cough up six hundred and ten to Irene every blasted week, regardless of his opinions on the matter, not when he takes home fourteen hundred and change out of

which he has to finance his declining health, his declining years, diminished sense of possibility.

Stanford does not feel pity for himself, not even pathos, nor any grandiose sense as well; Stanford has been (he feels) in and out of too much trouble and limitation since the mid-nineteen forties to take anything except the end of the millennium seriously, but surging in or out of sleep, caught at that part of his life where he can neither construct defenses nor strip them but must simply confront (without the intervening walls of consciousness, of judgment), Stanford screams with regret, shrivels with fury, comes to shuddering and tendentious interface with the gasp and clutter of his life, the fullness of its insufficiency, the slivers which its furious power drill of decline sends straight to his foolish and shuddering heart. “Oh, love me!” he will cry to the secretaries or (occasional) junior account executives, caught in their random clutch, history battering at the door he has tried so determinedly to close, “Love me, love me true!” and so in and out to that source of all nakedness while he tries to avoid that more desperate knowledge conveyed by sleep.

***The Album, page by page***

Thus Stanford's djinn, his familiar, his ornament of all desire. This intrusion of fantasy into Stanford's life is neither calculated nor surreal; it simply occurs, as most of his life (he can now see in retrospect) has arrived without portent, as a juxtaposition that flowered into consequences.

“You have three wishes,” the djinn says to Stanford. “You may take them in the usual way, or you may combine them for a grand sequence of events; you may try small changes or

you may try one great, transmogrifying lunge. The choice is yours," the djinn says casually, glad at last to have someone sensible with whom to share his magic. It has, after all, been a long time since the djinn has been able to engage in conversation; there are whole annals of buried time here, and they are hardly to be annealed by Stanford's fortuitous discovery of the bottle. Of which more may never be said, all of this being part of the jumbled artifact and casual detritus which Stanford thinks of as the sum of his life.

"That's astonishing," Stanford says. "I've never imagined anything like this. I can't believe that this is happening. It must *not* be happening, I've gone over the edge. I didn't think the partitions would stand for the rest of my life. I saw this all coming," Stanford adds. "I knew I was heading for a total, a real crack-up. That Irene, she warned me. She wasn't wrong—"

"Enough of this," the djinn says. "You can go on this disbelieving way or you can come to grasp your opportunities. You were always sincerely interested in opportunities, Stanford; it led you straight to the ad racket instead of graduate study in Chaucer, which you felt was an alternative back there in 1971 when alternatives seemed to count. I advise you not to delay too much of this, however; the situation is fluid and I am apt to pass on or to decompose now into thin, thin air. So you had best assume your choices, seize the possibility so to speak." The djinn, who has been sealed away too long to really be effective in social situations, fixes Stanford with intense, Middle Eastern eyes and says, "Disbelief of itself is not going to resolve the situation here."

I should point out—evoking without further delay the first person which is crucial to any understanding of my functions—that *I* am the djinn at issue, that the events of this narrative, from the start, and will throughout, have been refracted through my own perspective. I cannot claim full access to Stanford's consciousness, much of what I infer or state has come from his own confessions, my imperfect knowledge, and yet I can assume for the sake of this recollection a kind of omnipotence which, no less than Stanford's reiterated hopes and platitudes, can be seen as central. Of my background, of my presence in the bottle, the difficult, riotous journey from the refinery to Stanford's possession, and of the unstoppering of the bottle resulting in this collision ... of all of this, perhaps, the less given, the better it will be, although Stanford himself has expressed at times a great interest in my background. Like any devoted member of the middle class, Stanford is fascinated by mysticism, seeks signs and wonders, is enthralled by portents; it is this and only this (he has felt) which could possibly change his life, his life otherwise being wholly and ruinously carved out by circumstance. But I am not interested in exploring a personal history here; I come to the situation with a good deal more chronology and experience than Stanford or anyone presently in his circle of experience and what good has it done me? What good has any of this done me? My circumstances have been pitiably limited for centuries and now, as the outcome of my own curse, my own assignation, I have been given the idiot task of proffering and executing wishes for a man too stunned or disbelieving to

utter them. It is idiot's work, after all, it is work as mindless as Stanford's own duties which are to quell the apprehension of one client after the next that the work done by Stanford's firm is utterly specious. The fulfillment of wishes! But what, after all, is left for Stanford and djinn alike as circumstances crawl to their unmerited but long-foreshadowed apocalypse, an apocalypse so soon to come, so needlessly spectacular in its essence. In that thunderous set of moments so long ago when I was created and sent out on the first of these silly and florid errands, I was given no more understanding of the situation than I have at present; the important thing is to entice Stanford into living out his fate so that I may move on. Or not move on as the case may be. It is difficult to apprehend or find some final posture for any of this, as one might well have inferred by this time. Inch by inch, episode by episode, I have crawled my way through the centuries and what, for all of these florid gifts so extravagantly given, have I been able to gain? Most of those centuries a neonate clutched in a bottle and then dialogues or disasters visited upon the Stanfords of their time. It would all be too much to grasp if I had a visionary intellect, but I do not. Djinns have no taste for metaphor, djinns merely execute as I have pointed out to Stanford already, without particular success or communion.

“Or so it might be said,” I offer.

“I don't know,” Stanford says. “I have to think about all of this. I have to give it some thought. I mean, it is too much for me, being faced with decisions like this, and I a man not given to wishes, fantasies, or fairy tales of any sort. Do I have

some time to decide? Or do I have to decide right now? This is very difficult for me," Stanford says. "It is all I can do to handle the realistic details, and then you confront me with stuff like this. Well, I didn't ask to be a loss leader," he says pointlessly, and looks at the bare walls of his apartment. Maybe there is some clue flickering on those walls, handwriting or something like that. But there does not seem to be.

"A little time," the djinn says. "We can understand that. My Masters and those who convey me, I mean. You can have a little time to work this out. But not much. Events pass on, there are priorities and mysteries beyond your own divining and if you do not express a wish, I'm going to be forced to express one *for you* ... there is very little slippage or leakage in this practice, and we cannot allow the circumstances to pass."

"I understand that," Stanford says, with what he takes to be a hollow laugh but which—to the djinn whose experience with inference is far greater than Stanford's, and who knows every crevice of the man's despair and regret, pinned by this grim, unwanted apprehension—is allied to a sob. "I think I am coming to some profound understanding." But of course he is not. What must be understood about Stanford and all his companions and compatriots in this time of diminution and loss, is that he understands nothing, he proceeds through his life and toward his end with the stunned and incipient dismay of a farm animal; he has the illusion of understanding, but the farm animal has the illusion of the farm. When, of course, it is

only the plow, the barn, the whisk of the slaughterhouse ax which that animal can properly assess.

***The first wish***

Stanford's first wish, as is so common among those of his age and condition, is for immortality, for the contemplation of an unending lifespan through which, he feels, he can pick the best, the finest and most apt of possibilities for his second and third wishes. Why someone in Stanford's circumstances would opt for eternal life is beyond me, beyond the djinn, beyond the prophets, sages, visionaries or martyrs who look dimly upon this adventure from a grave and mourning distance, but that is of course irrelevant. The djinn nods assent, lifts a taloned hand, emits a theatrical puff of blue smoke, divided into the horns of Satan which is a bit of stage business which is always effective, never ignored. “You are now, for all intents and purposes, immortal,” the djinn says. “I would not recommend leaping from your patio here or going through the cities deliberately seeking deadly diseases, but within the expected limits of a life conventionally lived, you will stay in this condition forever or at least a reasonable simulacrum of forever. Stanford transmogrified! Stanford triumphant! Stanford eternal! as you might say. The usual conditions apply, of course, but they would have applied in any case, and there is no need whatsoever to discuss them.”

“How do I know that?” Stanford says. The djinn and Stanford are no longer in his apartment; they have adjourned to the riverfront walk, where for the past quarter of an hour they have been pacing in the odors of the late evening, the trash and oil slick of the harbor coming over them, and have

been discussing issues such as this toward, at last, a definite outcome. The djinn has assumed for the purpose of this public appearance, the form of an adolescent girl, about five feet two, punk jewelry, punk hairdo and a slight nasality of address which reminds Stanford of his own daughter some years ago but in no pleasantly nostalgic fashion. The djinn can, of course, assume many forms or postures (not an unlimited number, however) in addition to the normal green dwarfism, but Stanford and he have both decided that a punk hairdo and tiny, suggested breasts under a T-shirt saying GRATEFUL DEAD TOUR 1992 is best. “I mean, I don't feel any different than I did two minutes or twenty days ago. The whole thing could be some kind of cosmic joke, some cheap scam worked out by the fates, not that I doubt that there is something substantial going on here because the shapechanging is very convincing. Also the effects with the smoke.”

“You'll have to take it on faith,” the djinn says. “What otherwise could I tell you? Your era is an expression of faith: turn on the switch for the electricity, eat the frozen food trusting that it is not poisonous, accept the pledges of politicians that they will not kill you or level your possessions for the sheer sport of it. Go with strange women to their place or yours in the faith that they will not kill you or communicate a dreadful disease, act with the clients downtown as if their work and yours were not absurd and pointless. Accept the irrelevance of all Biblical prophecy to the coming closure of the millennium. Why should this be any different, then, why this expression of faith any more dramatic—or less dramatic—

than the others? There comes a time when you must come free of all history, make that sheer leap into possibility. Or is this too complex for you, Dads; is this as evasive as acid rock or like what your middle-aged jollies are?" The djinn, noting fellow strollers and passersby taking some interest in this couple, has deliberately broadened and extended his speech patterns, has become more purely punk and filial in his appearance as he and Stanford have come close to those sightseers, then relaxes his grip and modifies his rhetoric as they pass on. "Anyway, that's what the situation is."

"I suppose so," Stanford says. His cells do not seem to be bubbling and expanding with changed or charged health but then again, as has been pointed out, how would he know? Immortality cannot be proven other than by the absence of death *ever* and Stanford does not seem to be dying now. Except internally, but that is the same old story. "All right," he says. "I'll accept that I'm immortal, at least until I turn seventy and inch by inch feel it all sliding away. There's no way to prove a negative, right? Now, how long do I have for the other two wishes?"

"Not too long, Dads," the djinn says, squeezing Stanford's arm again as two youths in motorcycle dress squeeze by on the narrow walkway, look at the couple with vagrant interest modulated only by their own abstract and imponderable concerns. "Maybe an afternoon and an evening. You wait and wait and wait in a bottle but eventually, when it comes, commission has to be real fast, like you understand? Sort of like sex where you can spend a week or a lifetime plotting, but when you pound toward the ultimate it takes maybe three

or four seconds. But *what* a three or four seconds, right, Pops?" the punk-haired djinn says enthusiastically, making quite a convincing case of their huddled companionship although after all these centuries in old Persia or the dank spaces of the bottle, you wouldn't put it past the djinn to be hopelessly out of date. It is one of the small surprises—oh, there have been many for Stanford in this voluble and disconcerting thirty-six hours—with which this relationship, this strange collision, have been filled.

***Next slide, please***

Here is Stanford entering the actress Lilly von Nabokov in her elegant, great bed in the elegant, grand house in Bel Aire where she has lived for these seven years, just about the same span since she legally changed her name to this expressive and resonant pseudonym and assumed full responsibility for her career. Stanford is ecstatic, he is incoherent, he cannot believe that this is happening while at the same time—at the precise and simultaneous moment of his connection—he *knows* that this is going on and that it is happening at a level of conviction and force which has characterized no other part of his life.

Here is Stanford expending his second wish, the frivolous wish, the wish that he knows is for pointless pleasure and with which he will indulge himself before embarking upon the serious and irrevocable business of the third wish. He has always wanted to have congress with a famous actress, to be actually entering the woman on the screen in ways which will enable him to feel, as he has never before been able to feel, that he is living his life.

Observe Stanford moan and dive! Observe—without erotic or prurient entanglement of any kind because this is research and anatomization, not pornography, not the recycling of helpless and self-limited fantasy—the true and solemn nature of his performance as again and again with closed eyes and open, torment and release, possibility and impossibility, he pays homage and adoration to Lilly von Nabokov in the only way he could have imagined at fourteen, in the only way he can imagine now. Dispense with the details which in any case would be predictable and unflattering to any sense of the true religiosity of this occasion, dispense with those graphics of form or motion which could only congeal the pure and terrible flight of sensibility in which Stanford, now coupled, would like to feel himself engaged. Upon the copious and accepting form of Lilly von Nabokov, Stanford pays what tribute he can, the full extent of his expenditure seemingly inadequate to the opportunity and surface presented, but still, considering his age and the endless disappointment which he feels has up to this point been his lot, a praiseworthy exercise of the flesh and spirit. Moving in and out of conjunction with the lovers, just as Stanford himself moves in and out of his own busy necessity, we can catch odd angles and strange perspectives, can perhaps understand the nature of life in the movies as nonobservers never could. The movies are both more and less than Stanford's own experience over these years, his own perceptions of Lilly von Nabokov both greater and smaller than those with which he has indulged himself during those occasions of his maturity when for the most part he has liked to think of himself as a responsible adult.

The wish does not in any way blanket Lilly von Nabokov's response, her own feelings on the situation. In his haste and desire Stanford did not specify other than to make sure that in no way could the act be regarded as rape ... but I am pleased to say that the actress responds with some enthusiasm and utter concentration to Stanford's not entirely clumsy flounderings, and is able in her own engaged fashion to approximate a climax no less satisfactory (in fact, truthfully, *more* satisfactory) than that which has already seized the enthralled Stanford and cast him away. Actresses are, after all, capable of this, their very happiness and occupation is concerned with the conversion of the imagined to the real. Also, they are easily persuaded and amenable in the way actors must be, in order to enact their ancient and honorable craft.

See Stanford sprawled upon her now, note the tangle or disentanglement of limbs! Stanford sings and mumbles into Lilly von Nabokov's shell-pink and tenderly accommodating ear. The actress, reciprocally, suggests that they move apart because his weight, so pleasant in the moment, is oppressive in the aftermath. Stanford cooperates, turning slowly to one side, then when the actress gasps, to the other, rescuing his weight with an elbow and then dropping fully into the sheets. It is a splendid, grandiose bed, a dappled and accommodating room of which Stanford has seen all too little, so hasty was his departure to these quarters, so rapid was his entrance into Lilly von Nabokov's diamond mine. Omitting specifics, the wish left the devices of fulfillment more or less to the djinn, and djinns are accommodating but unimaginative creatures,

sometimes all too direct as a result of their lack of imagination. Stanford, however, can have few complaints; he surely cannot regret this second wish, the directness and force of his accommodation serving for him as refreshing contrast to the unknowable and imperceivable first wish, the results of which he will not be able to judge for a long time.

We leave Stanford to his post-coital mutterings and his discussions with Lilly von Nabokov. Perhaps they will couple again and perhaps they will not. Perhaps this momentary assignation will lead to further relationship and then again it may be otherwise. Stanford is strictly on his own here and although all of the usual limitations apply, the djinn has, in the most gentlemanly fashion, given him some options, some open space. Nothing less would show the proper consideration.

***Life in a bottle***

Life in a bottle—since the djinn is asked, he would be discourteous not to respond—is very much like death in a bottle; there is this limitless grayness, this oblivious press of time, the centuries grind by like moments, the moments are centuries, all is strange and inseparable as a kind of imagic association for an imponderable period. It is compressed and encroaching, but it is not humiliating; humiliation is—as Stanford himself has learned through Irene and his children—more a state of mind than an absolute. At last the decanting, the infusion of air, the sudden and vaulting rush toward the light! And then in the midst of various astounding effects which are attention-getting in the extreme, the djinn stands revealed to the fortunate agent of decanting, ready to do

service for the usual price and conditions which, like so much else, need not be discussed here.

Life in a bottle is neither pleasant nor unpleasant; it is pointless and absurd in the way that twentieth century life for Stanford and so many of his tribesmen must be seen as pointless and absurd ... but it is not more so. There are ancient and terrible oaths, huge, layered slabs of conviction, comparison, and mystery which overlay the occupant, that tend to reduce complaint to the level of acceptance. A djinn does not ask to be a djinn, this is so ... but he does not ask for the reverse, either; this is all part of the levels of accommodation imposed. Did Stanford ask to be Stanford? But woke up once, undeterminable years ago to find that he *was* and the bottle of his containment no less real than that which entrapped the djinn. As has been noted before, we have no taste for metaphor; we are a concrete and settled race.

***The excursion fare covers all charges***

On the banks of the Seine, having for his third wish elected unlimited travel and displacement, Stanford allows himself small, greedy peeks at the river, so much the focus of artists in the last three centuries, looks covertly at women with parasols he would love to know but whose absence from his life he can now accept. Lilly von Nabokov may work out for him, then again she may not, it is all unsure. She has asked him to call her up when she has finished shooting her present project; a romantic adventure comedy, it is meant to wrap in three weeks. In Poland, Stanford has looked upon the rolling landscape, has admired the hearty Polish workers so earnest

in their efforts and hopeful in their possibilities, he has mourned at the concentration camp memorials and has sought the comfort of simple Polish secretaries who in this country seem less technologized and not susceptible to his blandishments. In Seville, Stanford had gasped at the advent of machinery into that once-gentle landscape. In Peking, astonished by the sheer density of the bicycle and pedestrian traffic, he had tried to fathom the nature of cultural revolution. But now, in France, enacting as per the terms of his wish the instantaneous satisfactions and blurred transfers of a perpetual excursion rate, Stanford allows himself to settle against the high parapet, glances upon the river with longing and remorse, thinks of Seurat and Monet busily converting their own impressions so long ago. It is an experience both astonishing and humbling to Stanford, who in all these years until the decanting had traveled very little, had had little concourse with the world, had been compelled—as in the bed with the actress—to enact the most splendid or treacherous of his desires within a compass narrower than that of any seventh century saint.

Stanford closes his eyes, dreams of the compression and flurry of events in these few weeks since the miraculous shift of his life, opens his eyes as if expecting to see all of it taken from him: no Seine here, but his own riverfront in front of him, no memories of Lilly von Nabokov but only Irene's shrieking and tumultuous telephoned complaints, no immortal life but only the first intimations of metastases in his lungs which will slowly strangle all memory, all possibility. But no, none of this happens: as he stares into the panorama before

him it is still the Seine which he sees and the memories of his connection are full and rich within him, entirely too convincing to be other than real. He feels himself inflated with potential, remembers a sunrise in Acapulco two days ago which struck him as an experience close to metaphysical, remembers riotous events in a Tijuana cantina which fortunately he had been able to disengage from before the girl on the bartop had seen him or the active and curious donkey had poked a nose into Stanford's gin. It has been very different, very different indeed for Stanford over these recent weeks and yet—the glassy and implacable sheen of the river would drive this insight into him most convincingly—he is still the man he has always known. Immortal, perhaps, consort of the world's most famous and beautiful actress for certain, a perpetual wishful tourist now with his own travel agent and instant transfer ... with all of this, he is the same old Stanford, the wistful and regretful guy he has come to know so well over these decades and he suspects that he always will be. Perhaps this is part of the paradigm of knowledge which these conditions have been created to place upon him: that three wishes or ten, that all fates or no fates will nonetheless cast Stanford always back upon himself. As if all signs and wonders, all meaning and portents, must eventually lead to this simple acceptance of the irretrievability of his life, the enormity of his regret. Stanford shrugs and turns from the river, trudges toward the hotel. Such thoughts are too weighty to have carried all this distance, although he was afflicted in Peking and Seville by epiphanies no less predictable and humiliating. He tries to think of this as little

as possible, tries to ignore the women with parasols whom he dare not desire, since his three wishes thoughtlessly have included none of this.

Perhaps in some other way, some other simulacrum of Stanford might have worked out a different situation, he thinks, but that is beyond him. Most things are beyond him. He trudges onward, this traveler of the late millennium, seized not by limitation but by purpose as he considers the many advancing millennia through which he may be able to consider this condition.

***Last slide, please***

Here is Stanford, confronting the bleak and illimitable landscape of imponderable millennia, not trudging, holding fast now, trying to establish some final understanding of his condition. “This was the price, wasn't it?” he says to the djinn. “But what if I hadn't asked for immortality? Would I still have been condemned to this wasteland?” Stanford chooses not to discuss the apocalypse which—like everything else—is many millennia behind him. He is thinking not now of the Biblical but the practical. “That was the plan all along, right?” he says.

The djinn—still in punk guise, he is kind of fond of it, he has decided, and finds it the most amenable of all the guises he had adopted through his own imponderable progression of time seized—says, “I don't know. I don't think of this as punishment. I don't think of this as anything at all. I told you, djinns have no understanding of metaphor. One thing doesn't stand for another thing; it simply *is*. That's the best way to carry on our condition.”

“It's monstrous,” Stanford says. Millions of years have thickened his lungs, stuck in his throat, made his speech guttural, although otherwise he is more or less the same guy, only burdened by the sheer dimensions of his knowledge. “I wouldn't have done it if I had known. Who wants to hang around like this? And it's all turned out the same.”

“Well,” the djinn says, snapping gum and adopting a more convincing guise although it has not been necessary for a very long time to masquerade, to adopt a convincing persona, “that's like the total unit of it, you know? The sameness of everything? But you had to find that out on your own.”

“It's crazy,” Stanford says. Here is Stanford, still trying to be sane at the edge of the world, but admitting to craziness as a cunning way of deferring, he thinks, an inevitability. He is wrong. He has always been wrong, although less than ever is this a proper concern. “The wishes had nothing to do with it, did they? This was all set out from the beginning.”

“I don't know” the djinn says. For sport, he turns into an Arabian potentate of frightening mien, *whisk!* one exercise of transmogrification, and he fixes Stanford with unblinking and terrifying eyes. “It is all in the cause of prophecy, of course. The prophetic is the absolute,” the djinn says mysteriously and then strides off (as the djinn has been so apt to do over these millennia), leaving Stanford once again alone, amidst the dusk and dirt of exhausted possibility, looking at the gray band of sky against the gray ribbon of river, trying to find some conjunction that cannot exist.

“Three wishes,” Stanford says, “*three* wishes.” He seems to want to say more and if there were an observer to consider

the situation, there might from Stanford be some outpouring of final revelation. But there is no observer, all observation ceased long ago, and so it is not possible to judge what has been said. Second millennial man confronts the fullness of his destiny against that gray and diminished ribbon of sky and for the meaning of all this, for its implication and portent, one must as always turn elsewhere. The situation is not inconsiderable, but it is far beyond Stanford's means to apprehend.

***The unbottling***

Stanford twists the stopper, yanks at it, feels it leap within his hand, and then the steam begins its arc through the spaces of his riverfront digs, his hand clutched with the arthritic imprint of something at last beyond his control. Swirls and steam convulse in the ceiling, and from their outline congeals a figure which Stanford feels he may recognize from old books, half-glimpsed in childhood. Perhaps not. It is very difficult to keep a steady eye on all of this. At length, something which might be human streams from the ceiling, settles before him, grants him a wink from a glazed eye under a turbaned cap. “That is a pleasure and a portent,” the figure says, “and in return I am prepared for the most minimal arrangements to offer you three wishes. Three wishes which will change your life. You must, however, embark upon them quickly; otherwise my power and obligation will disappear and nothing, nothing at all will happen.” The eye is watery but filled with conviction. “It will be for your best interest to choose quickly,” the figure says.

Stanford, who had only wanted a wine cooler and a light, easily absorbed drunk before dinner, stares in fixity and fascination. From the depths he feels an obscene necessity, a certain pornographic recognition and even as he tries to deny those emotions they seem to flood him as the steam has flooded his upscale but distinctly underfurnished condominium.

“I can't name my wants so easily,” Stanford says. “Nothing like this has happened before.”

“Everyone,” the figure says, “can codify his wants. It goes with being human.” It stares at him solemnly and this time winks. “You may call me Djinn,” he says. “That is not my name, I *have* no name, but that is my condition and the condition is as close to naming as you may become. All power, possibility, all riches lie within your means if you choose correctly,” the djinn says. “If you do not, of course, the opportunity has vanished. It is almost time,” the djinn says. “It is almost time, it is nearly time, it *is* time as my power already crumbles.”

Stanford, dismayed, twists his thumb in the bottle; there is, of course, nothing else. Contemplating, formed to full attention, he considers the djinn while the djinn considers him and it is as if the full weight of his futile meanderings and convolutions has come upon him and with it the desire to change, to shift the focus of his being toward some kind of adjustment and possibility.

“I'm thinking about it,” Stanford says. “Let me think about it. I'm thinking about it as fast as I can.”

***The lights, please***

“The lights, please,” Stanford says, staring out at the impossible and ravaged deadlands, but of course there are no lights. There are no lights and no djinn to rekindle them. There is, however, a profusion of memory and for all I know, Stanford is recycling it at this very recollected moment while the rest of you are, I am empowered to say, dismissed. Please do not crowd the aisles and leave the visual aids you have been given on the front desk.

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## Ready When You Are

The world in his works—

* * * *

Finzie, the big producer, biggest guy in the industry now, hovered over the lush blonde, his limbs poised for long, cool, detached entrance but—knowing better the insistent demands of collusion—gave into it with a sigh, sighed and gave into it, penetrated his partner, the most desirable and successful romantic star in the Western world, an absolute top star, feeling the shock of uncoiling, the gathering as if from his most distant places of a soft and baleful scream. What a deal this whole thing was, what a wonder!—and in his mind the film unreeled, slow dissolve to close-in shot, the heaving and thrashing of the bodies. Soft-core only, no detail shots, the genitalia discreetly covered. From the corner of one eye, in diminished perspective, Finzie caught a slash of Mediterranean, a slash of sun passing through clouds in this beaming and pleasant landscape. Oh boy, oh boy the big producer, a real hero thought, if only I could send a memo back to Flatbush Avenue, to that thirteen-year-old pounding himself in the familial bed, trying to put his strokes where they would make the least noise and do the most good. Made it, made it, made it! Finzie advised his thirteen-year-old self and pan shot into the blonde, Dorothea Harkins from Easton, Pennsylvania, transmogrified by the star system and clever

agents to Eve Harlow and all his, his, his property now in this equipment room of the most exquisite furniture and design.

And later, later then: Eve Harlow was sent to her room to lie in diaphanous, dreaming splendor and Finzie took a stroll through the garden of Cannes, surrounded by cameras and reporters, sycophants and jury, the troops trembling with their divergent and physical needs as he strode to the judging panel where he would make the long-anticipated announcement: Finzie was going global. Astonishing Productions would link with Italian financiers, Japanese bankers, ancient French money, British quick-hit money, the substance of the secret governments worldwide for a long-term contract which would carry the Finzie vision in eighteen languages and thirty-seven separate versions to all of the corridors and pockets of the world. In Zaire, voices dubbed in Swahili would articulate the political subtext; in Sweden, actors with heavy American accents would put dour Scandinavian words to the Finzie vision of compassion transcendent. Premier filmmaker to the world, orphan king of the 21st century, he feels the spectacular glow of close-in lights heating his features to ruddy and tumescent glory.

* * * *

So Finzie, superhero, once tormented film-struck kid in the Flatlands of Brooklyn but now creator, producer, and director of a dozen increasingly important films limning the alienation and splendor of post-industrial circumstance, modestly accepts the laurel of the Leaf of Gold from the chairman of the jury, bows to the convulsion of applause which storms

through the auditorium, then holds the microphone to make a brief speech which will be translated simultaneously into twenty languages and broadcast throughout the world. Hot stuff for the kid from Brooklyn. Eve Harlow stares adoringly from the audience, doubtless recalling their afternoon of love and the role which he had promised her in the new trilogy, and Finzie nods at her wisely, distantly, seeking to keep their relationship private even at this moment of such public triumph.

"Those visions," he says, "those visions which we hold to ourselves in the clutch of night, those dreams of childhood splendor, it is my earnest hope that I will bring these dreams, that child to splendor, to the world. I think the true filmmaker is not only a visionary but a seer, a reconstructionist who can make the crooked places straight and the rough places plain. For that and in that spirit I accept your award." And so he does. The applause is tumultuous; it beats at him like the wings of a covey of birds, flushed from the auditorium, flushed from memory. Finzie can see the camera coming in on dolly, the close-up of his graceful yet subtly tormented face slowly dissolving then, cracking open in the heat and light to the face of the kid who might have been. Might not have been. It is difficult to tell, the past is as fluid, as shapeless as the present, it seems to shift under his attention just as sometimes during the conjoinment of love it all slips into the liquefied dark and he must begin again and again. Finzie, filmmaker to the world, splendid issue and prince of light, addresses the audience at Cannes clutching his Leaf of Gold,

his sprig of astonishment, attending to the ghostly shrieks and stammer which lurk at the border of memory.

* * * *

And still great hours later, still feeling the thrust and urgency of that applause, a vast and gaping need, an emptiness in the continuum which pleaded for him alone, the superhero and top director lies in his palatial bedroom clutching Eve Harlow or Dorothea Harkins (call her what you will, she remains adoring), watching a tape of his award-winning film on the videocassette recorder he takes with him everywhere. This film, *Thrills and Wonder in America,* traces the odyssey of a young man from Flatbush who comes to rule the world, first by film and then by American salute: he ventures into politics, becomes President and the leader of the new world government. *Thrills and Wonder* is a metaphor for his own desire, a subsumed autobiography: Finzie knows the real meaning of all this stuff. As in Reifenstahl's *Triumph of the Will,* huge crowds chant, there are posed friezes of splendid, beseeching athletes and supporters who usher the actor to ever greater power while Finzie, superheroic filmmaker and highly experienced lover of women who in the old days would have passed him in contempt, looks at his accomplishment in awe. He appears to be playing the lead role too, and making a splendid job of this. What he has done is truly remarkable, he thinks: he has through the medium of his art made the world an adjunct to his obsession. All these actors screaming, those thousands of extras posturing and saluting and he in control of every gesture. It goes beyond

gesture, beyond metaphor: he has made the world the paradigm of his desire, his need. Griffith, Reifenstahl, Huston, Capra: these predecessors tried that as well but he, Finzie, has taken the obsession to consummation. Here in the splendor of Cannes he has made his film not an accessory but an empire. Shattered, almost humbled by the power of his vision, the magnificent and heroic director of the year reaches for Eve Harlow.

"What do you think?" he says, "Is this as good as it gets or what? How could it be any better?"

The splendid Eve grinds a hip, brushes a breast to his side, touches his back. "Who is to know?" she says. "If you say it's so, then it is so." An actress, not introspective like most of them, Eve Harlow seems to have exhausted most of her capacity for invention by accepting her change of name. Twice married and twice divorced with many feature films beside her and one Academy Award for best supporting, she lives in an eternal, glistening present and tries not to think of metaphor. Or so she had once told Finzie in one of their serious conversations. "You can make it better if you want," she says. "You can make it even better than that."

Her hand pleads exactingly for a more convincing gesture. Finzie gives it to her. Unheeded now, the film clatters on in the clutch of the player, the scenes of the great dictator's magnanimity and sexual skills not to be noticed by the pair tangled on the bed. It is splendor, splendor Finzie thinks, but now and again that perilous insertion fails and he must start all over again. Take five, take six. Climb the slippery and

elusive Pyrenees. Groan the expiring sigh of the damned and the doomed into the solid panels of his lady's neck.

And that groan then the true encapsulation of an admission which Finzie could not have otherwise made: somewhere back there in Flatbush the kid, not yet a superhero, not even a top student in his audiovisual course, tugs for a firmer grip upon himself, trying to overturn that sense of fragility and despair which utterly encapsulates; but the mature Finzie, this sliding and groaning Finzie as it were, cannot help the kid, cannot communicate in any way. Finzie has his own and fraught concerns, not only sexual climax but enlightenment seems to spill as he allows the calming and soothing gestures of that appendage, Eve Harlow, to carry him his anguished way home. In the spaces of his own theatre, on the internal screen, an ever-greater and wondrous film of another kind seems to be unreeling but Finzie is not able to see it now, so narrow is his funnel of attention, so elongate the tube of concentration. Oh Eve, oh Eve this famous filmmaker grunts, oh Eve, hold me, how he cries and softly, insistently, in search of a plum role, Eve Harlow gathers him in.

* * * *

Later, sometime after the press has disbanded and the juries have returned to their individual countries of origin, after the starlets have replaced their upper garments and the last cajoling interviewer has packed away recorder and headed for the Concorde, Finzie walks out and along the waters by himself, the fine grains of beach glinting at him

with small and confidential messages. Gone too is Eve Harlow, returning to loop dialogue on a romantic comedy, then an Arthur Miller revival in London for a few months for the prestige before she returns to Finzie's palatial, guarded, hidden estate in Glendale where she has promised to live with him and embark upon pre-production. All alone now except for his memories, his conscience, and his agent is this Finzie who walks slowly along the beach, pondering many possibilities and the nature of his destiny. Superguy Finzie, his Leaf of Gold-winning autobiographical odyssey already booked into a thousand theatres worldwide, more thousands to follow: Finzie sending unanswered and unanswerable messages to the kid in Flatbush who perished in an apartment building fire in 1963 and whose ashes were interred with those of his parents in a small mausoleum in the borough of Queens. Vanity, Finzie thinks, all is vanity and watches three young women, glorious in their youth and necessity, gambol on the sands before him. None can be older than fourteen and each in her special way has destroyed him. He is the remnant, he thinks, of their design. “Have you need of anything?” the bodyguard, detailed by his agent and studio to keep him company in these final days asks. “Can I service you anything, sir?” Finzie in whose right hand half of our possibilities and all of our dreams will soon enough dwell looks at the man absently, his face for the moment stripped of pain and pleasure as well, a perfect and inscrutably vacant frame upon which anything at all could have been inscribed. “Only my history,” Finzie says. “It is a superhero who can

survive a fatal fire, don't you think? How remarkable but I seem to have left my history behind."

"Ah sir," the bodyguard says with exquisite and poised understanding, "Ah sir, it is this lack of history which has given you this power," and reacting to the sheer and mortifying truth of this observation, Finzie—

* * * *

Puts aside the necessary equipment of the auteur, the cape, the mask, the special wire, the equations of history and thrall which have given him such awful if inconsequent power, puts these toys away now as so long ago the fire had put away that necessitous part of himself. Finzie puts aside the clutter of the superhero because, having transcended fire and destiny, he no longer needs to be one, needs the costume no more and leaving a warning for Eve Harlow and the others that they will have to make do with crumpled mask, hidden cloak, the all-encompassing, serious and now latter-period Finzie whose distraught and distressing visions will define what if anything will be remembered of the shining city on the hill, Finzie the auteur without mask or cape breaks into groans much like those he had groaned against the neck of Eve Harlow and then sinks to the ground, weeping. Here comes the fire. The fire is coming. Dolly in on camera, superhero no more but only a pietà of Finzie unmasked in Eve's rambunctious embrace. Freeze frame. Freeze it until—

—Until the end of everlasting fire.

* * * *

And his works the world to come.

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## The Twentieth Century Murder Case

I take the investigation to the streets. Footwork is laborious, mindless, dull, but there is no other approach which in the long run pays equal dividends. Particularly in stubborn, intractable cases of this nature. The twentieth century lies gasping in the intensive-care ward, four-fifths slain and in very poor condition. Cheyne-Stokes syndrome has set in. Flayed to within an inch of its poor life, then shot in the temple, the century twitches under resuscitative devices, inattentive to the solicitous concern of attending personnel. It does not look like the twentieth century is going to pull through, and who did it? Who brought this innocent victim to such a terrible condition? The case has been handed to me. My credentials are splendid; my record among the best. Still, here is a case to make even such as me quail. There is hardly a shortage of suspects, a dearth of motive, and yet the unusual *cruelty* of the assault—

I cancel such speculations. I am of a mordant and introspective turn of mind which is not bad for my profession but deadly to straight-forward investigation. At the offices of Cambridge, Hawley & Smoot, advertising agents, I show my identification to a hierarchy of secretaries and assistants, refuse to take no for an answer, refuse to take yes for an answer, refuse any answers at all until I am finally in the presence of Hawley himself, senior partner and sole survivor of the original trio who with little but faith and an insight started this agency from a ground-floor cubbyhole in 1946.

He is an enormously fat man, pulverized by decades of business lunches and success, expensively hopeless affairs and terror of coronary bypass. “I didn't do it,” he says, when I present myself. The twentieth century assault case is very big news, as would have been expected, and is on the front pages of all the newspapers; he does not have to ask my business. “I had no reason. It's the only century I ever knew; I was born in 1909; I'll never get out of it alive. Why would I want to kill the twentieth century?”

“If it dies you'll get out of it alive,” I point out shrewdly.

He turns his palms up. “I tell you, I have no reason,” he says. “I always had the kindest thoughts. Television, intercontinental flight, the double dry martini, the Cadillac, the sun visor. The telephone, the turbo-hydramatic transmission. Cheap contraception. What would I have against the century that gave me these blessings?”

“You leached the heart out of it,” I point out mildly; “for decades you infested it with lies, institutionalized lying, misdirection, used the technology granted to dehumanize, to sell people goods they did not need at prices they could not afford for purposes they could not fathom. Having scraped away at its soul, mad with power, you went for its heart. Overcome with guilt, inflamed by megalomania, you cornered it in an alley and put the knife in.”

His jaw drops but his eye is steady. “I'm afraid that's not so, lieutenant. That's simply not so. Even though you might disagree with our methods or market practices—and I point out to you the theory of the greatest good for the greatest number—I am not a murderer nor are any of my associates.

We are businessmen. Besides," he concludes, "the century may pull through. Latest reports indicate that it has survived the initial crisis."

"Even if it lives," I say, "brain damage is irreversible. It will never walk or talk or laugh or cry again; all but clinically it will be dead." I push back my chair, stand. "You are to keep me apprised of your whereabouts at all times," I say, handing him my card. "You are not to leave the city without permission."

"I will not be intimidated," Hawley says. "My attorney will be in touch with you."

"It would be a very good idea to contact your attorney," I say and leave the office quickly. It is always best to terminate interviews rapidly, to leave them off balance, to leave an ambiguous threat hanging. This is one of the first principles of investigation. Truly, I am the very best at what I do, and yet I have never had a case like this. No one in the division has any experience with an atrocity of this dimension. I whisk down in the elevator fifty flights, come out on the gray streets filled with those who keep vigil, and get into my illegally parked car. A pretzel vendor recognizes me, nods. "I'm glad you're on the case, lieutenant," he says; "you're the best. You'll get him, won't you?

"We all loved the century very much," the vendor says, wiping away a tear from an ashen cheek. "Even though he treated most of us so inequitably, we knew that he had a good heart. We felt that he was on our side. Secretly, if you know what I mean. Most of us plain folk loved him."

Touched I say, "I know what you mean."

"Any chance he may live?"

I shrug. A small crowd which has gathered stares at me quietly. "It may," I say, "but it will never be the same."

"You get the dirty swine who did this to my century, lieutenant," the vendor says. He gestures. The crowd applauds thinly. I start the engine of the specially equipped, heavy-duty Plymouth and spin off into traffic. Truly, the mourning of the plain folk has moved me and made me even more determined to solve the case, and yet one hardly knows where to begin. Everywhere there are suspects, of motive there is a plethora.

Impulsively, I take the car north on the Harlem River Drive, merging at last with the Cross County Expressway; into the wealthy northern suburbs I speed. At Scarsdale I cut east, turn into a town even more shielded and exclusive, pull up to the gates of an enormous estate, show my credentials to the armed guard. The process is slow and rife with bureaucracy and threats, but eventually I am led into the presence of Howard Waffles, Senior, chairman of the board of Wonder Waffles. "You poisoned the century slowly," I say after the brief preliminaries, moving directly to the assault. "Foul synthetics, deadly additives, tenderizers, pollutants, cancer-causing particles, diseased meat, franchised out at a million intersections through the nation. You filled the bloodstream of the century with evil, and then you would want to destroy the evidence. The *corpus delicti*; the century itself."

"Nonsense," says Howard Waffles, Senior, a sprightly old man with the company insignia jutting through his lapel. "I'm in business to feed, not to slaughter."

“You never told the truth. You sold poison and called it enriched, budget-minded health.”

“You'll have to talk to my advertising agents, Cambridge, Hawley, and that young fella Smoot, about that,” Howard Waffles, Senior, says. “I was just a man with a plan; I left the specifics of merchandising up to them. But, uh-uh, sonny, uh-uh, lieutenant. Murder wasn't my attitude. The century's been too good to me. It gave me four hundred million dollars; why would I want to lead it into a dark alley and hit it over the head? Or shoot it in the temple, as I've read.”

“Maybe because you're an old man and you knew the century would out-live you. It was jealousy; a crime of passion. Passionate rage.”

Howard Waffles, Senior, belches and laughs thinly; a ripe odor of franchised Wonder Waffles onion rings drifts toward me. “Sorry, lieutenant,” he says, “I'm an old man; I can't be bullied. I didn't do anything to the century and you know it.”

“You poisoned it—”

“I gave cheap food to the mobile millions.” Howard Waffles, Senior, takes up my card, which has been lying on the desk before him, and puts it in a pocket. “I'll thank you to leave now, lieutenant,” he says. “I find your methods crude and insulting. And you can't scare an old man; the nights are all the fear he can handle.”

There is nothing to do but leave. Although it is very hard for me to admit this, I know when I have been bested. If I had the unusual force, the dynamism and certitude of a Howard Waffles, Senior, or of a Hawley for that matter, I would probably not be attached to homicide or to any part of

civil service, for that matter. I would be in business for myself. As it is, I have to get along as best I can.

I am ushered out of the estate. Half-way down the cross-county parkway my radio beeps for my attention and I learn the worst. The century has expired. It is definitely, then, a murder case. Emotion overwhelms me briefly and I am forced to pull the car over to the side of the road. It is for me, truly as it is for Hawley, the only century I will ever know. It was four-fifths dead and poisoned past endurance, but it was still around for all of us; it was something that we could take as much for granted as the air we breathe, and now it is gone, and what is there for us to say? How will we live? Where will we go? My tears come spontaneously, mingled with an awesome determination: I will find the assailant. I cannot bring back the century but I can avenge him.

I drive directly to the huge offices of the International Communications Network, ICN as it is called, park defiantly in the executive parking lot, and bully my way past three vice-presidents and the chairman of the board into the office of the Vice-President for Programming who is, of course, the real power. There is very little difficulty for once in getting through; news of the tragedy, as such things have a way of doing in this era, has spread throughout the city and vigil has turned into mourning. In corners I see younger personnel weeping; middle-echelon executives with more ambivalent attitudes sit in their offices staring emptily through the open doors and shredding little bits of paper in their fists. The board, in the nature of such things, is probably celebrating the death of this guilt-provoking century and already planning

massive, once-in-a-lifetime coverage of the funeral ceremonies. But the Vice-President for Programming is otherwise occupied; he stares at me across the massive bulwark of his desk. “I don't know why you came to see me,” he said. “I have nothing to do with this. I send my sympathies, of course. Perhaps he'll recover.”

“The century is dead,” I say flatly. “Everyone in the city knows that by now and so do you.”

He twitches back in his chair. “I've been busy,” he said. “I've been working all this time. No, I hadn't heard. I'm very sorry.”

“Are you?”

“Of course I am.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“The century ... you're talking about a great public figure. And of course we owed him everything. What do you want, lieutenant?”

“I want to know why you murdered him.”

The vice-president's mouth opens, not unlike Hawley's in an interview that is already a long time ago. Of course it would be. It occurred in a previous millennium. “I'm afraid you're being ridiculous, lieutenant.”

“Am I? You had the motive, you had the opportunity. Nobody thinks of the century anymore in this city; everything was twenty-first this or twenty-first that. And once you did away with the century, all recent history was obliterated. You could lie at will, misrepresent the past, misrepresent heritage, sentimentalize and falsify passion, clean up the cruelties ...

once the century was gone, there was nothing to sit in judgment of you."

"That's ridiculous," the Vice-President for Programming says. "I haven't been in this job for two years. I inherited the situation."

"But once the century was dead," I say, "no one would know how long you'd been here, would they? Everything would be a fresh start. There would be no history."

"You're being a fool," the vice-president says but his voice quavers. "This proves nothing."

"It proves everything," I say. "Confess. It will go easier for you."

"You're bluffing me. I want an attorney. I won't proceed any further until I get an attorney."

"No one will be your friend," I say. "The simple people will turn against you. But there is a way. I don't think you were in this alone. Nothing like a murder of the century can be accomplished without conspiracy. I want to propose that you were merely a member of a group, that you had associates. If you name names, describe the modus operandi, throw yourself on the mercy of the court, it might go easier for you. You might be able to settle for a plea of conspiracy."

The vice-president's eyes are wide and lustrous. "You're bluffing," he says again. "You don't have a shred of evidence."

"I can get it," I say relentlessly. At the end, when I feel a case coming to completion, the instincts take over and I roll toward the conclusion without ambivalence; this is why I am the best in the world at what I do. Or did. A new millennium

is a fresh start. “I can talk to Hawley. Or to Harold Waffles, Senior. They're both clever men, entrepreneurs as you are not, self-sufficient types. They'll see the wisdom of going over to the state even if you do not. They'll hang you out to dry. They'll leave you alone with all the guilt.”

He holds himself rigid and then his control breaks. He lunges toward the desk, his face disfigured. “It wasn't my idea!” he screams. “It was theirs! The liars! They would take care of all the details; all I was supposed to do was to take care of the media, the public relations, the cosmetics. I had nothing to do with it at all, do you hear me? They came to me! I wanted no part of it! It was that Waffles, he's crazy, he wants to kill everyone!”

I take the handcuffs from my pocket, lean forward, snap them on his unresisting, clasped wrists. “We'll hear all of it at headquarters,” I say. “We'll take your full statement.”

“I didn't want to do it!” the vice-president shrieks. “They had been planning it for years, they said, had to get it done now before the century died a natural death; they said they were going to do it whether I came in or not but if I did I would get a piece of it, a new ranking, a large promotion, a fresh start—”

I haul him to his feet by the cuffs. “We'll all get a fresh start now,” I say. I propel him toward the door. “That's for sure.”

“I *loved* the century—”

“Every man kills the things he loves,” I point out philosophically.

* * * *

Which may even be true, but after this is wrapped up, I'm quitting. There have already been five attempts on the twenty-first, three of them sniper fire, one a bear trap, one poison, all of them near-misses. A successful crime always leads to imitators. I am too old, the century too young.

It's going to be a rotten millennium.

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## Celebrating

At the Institute, Jessica's latent ability, her remarkable raw talent, had blossomed. Anyone could see this. From simple loops and twirls, rigid suspensions and perilous dips, she had grown to intricate convolutions, somersaults, even figure eights. She had come home at the first break with an entirely new repertoire, and, seeing what she could do, the nonchalant skill of the child as it was expressed in a truly artistic, even *subtle* fashion, Thompson had found himself filled with pride and anger together: they had gotten her too cheap. Talked him into a wretched contract, down-played the child's potential, haggled him into subservience. “A *natural* talent,” he whispered, watching Jessica demonstrate upside-down walking and those beautiful, almost mysterious figure eights. “Strange and wonderful. Once a generation.” He did not even consider complaining directly to the Institute. They would wave the contract in his face, remind him that a deal was a deal, contact his employer, make his life miserable. Thompson knew how such things had to be managed; he had read up on them.

You went directly to the government. The best way to the government, though, was not through the Department of Psionic Control; the regulators (like regulators everywhere) were in the pocket of the Institute. All of the staff would end up on the payroll after a change of administration. So you had to go to the General Ombudsman on matters like this. They didn't like you doing that; they wanted the Ombudsman as a

last resort or no resort at all—but Thompson was no fool, and he knew how these things worked. “Look at that,” he said to the government man whose name plate said *Wilbur Stone* after Jessica had completed her ceiling walk. “Look at that work. They told me she had barely any ability at all, so little that it was hardly worth developing—and this is what she can do after just three months there.”

“Two months and two weeks,” Jessica said, “and most of the time we were studying physics, not really working at all.”

“Exactly,” Thompson said. “They didn't even begin serious training until a few weeks ago.”

The government man shrugged. He did not appear very experienced, but his eyes were knowledgeable in an unpleasant way. “I'm sorry, you know,” he said, “but a contract is a contract, and if you state that you signed, then you accepted the conditions—”

“It isn't a contract if they lie to you, mister,” Thompson said. He opened his briefcase, removed the papers, and laid them on the government man's desk. “If you look these over, you'll see she was taken as a 1-D-1, they call it—a beginner, what they call a naked talent. Naked talents don't ceiling-walk or figure-eight after two months.”

“Figure eights are *fun,"* Jessica said, “and they're easy, no matter what they tell you.” She was an endearing child, albeit defiant now and then, and Thompson had conferred with her earlier, making sure to enlist her cooperation, to make sure that she had no smart remarks to make about the nature of her upbringing or a father who would take money to sell her to a circus—which were points that she made earlier and

unnecessarily before she had gone off to the Institute. Thompson shuddered thinking of what her mother had had to say in letters.

Fortunately, though, that woman was on the other side of the country, he had sole custody, and there was only minimum contact. If her mother had known that Jessica had entered the Institute under the miserable agreement that Thompson had signed, there would have been difficult times indeed. He cringed just thinking about how awful it all would have been.

Wilbur Stone, the government man, stared at him. “It just gets me *so* mad,” Thompson said, “to have been cheated like this. Can't you understand that? That's why you people in the department are here, right, to protect us from those kind of practices. Aren't you?”

Wilbur Stone said nothing; he was examining the contracts. He squinted as if in deep concentration, leaned forward, and rubbed his nose against the paper like an animal. Thompson cringed again. Jessica kicked at the leg of her chair and then floated slowly, drifting through a lazy, elegant figure eight.

“Could you please *stop* that?” the government man said. “I mean, it makes me very nervous; could you get her to stop doing that, please?”

One could not make Jessica do or stop doing anything, Thompson wanted to say but did not. “Jessica—”

“I mean, it just gets me very nervous. It's all routine for you, maybe, but to see something like this—”

“But you must see it all the time,” Thompson said. “You work with these people, don't you? Come on, Jessica, get off the ceiling.”

“Oh, I *see* it,” Wilbur Stone said. “That isn't the same thing, you know.”

Jessica, back in her chair, had the knuckle of her left thumb in her mouth as she gave Wilbur Stone a long, unpleasant, searching stare. “Don't yell at me,” she said.

“I don't mean to yell at you, Jessica, but it just gets me upset; don't you understand that? It could appall someone.”

“Well, I think it's neat.”

“Well, for you it's neat,” Wilbur Stone said, “but it's hard to take levitation for granted.”

“Well, you ought. It's your job, isn't it?”

The government man gave a despairing sigh, put his hands in his hair uncomfortably, and stared at the contracts. “I see that they refer to her ability as inherited,” he said. “I deduce from that, Mr. Thompson, that you also can—”

“Not really,” Thompson said firmly. “I mean, not anymore. I don't keep up with it, so to speak, never have, not for a long time. One flier in the family is quite enough. You've got to practice all the time, you know, to be any good at all, and have training when you're young right through your teens. I never kept up with it. I never had the advantages early, and my parents didn't want me to develop—”

He stopped abruptly. Now he actually sounded resentful, as if he envied Jessica her opportunity, when the truth was that it had been the happiest day of his life when he had stopped believing that his awkward, embarrassing flight was

worth anything at all. He had been overjoyed to stop. “They told me that her ability was common, that almost anyone could do it,” Thompson said bitterly. “That's how they got me to sign that paper for next to nothing.”

“Well, I wouldn't call it next to nothing,” the government man said judiciously. “It's not that bad an agreement, you know, even though there are no renegotiation clauses, which appears to be your principal complaint. I mean, they didn't mislead you, after all; more than half the population has the latent ability, and it's been coming out increasingly through the generations, what with the evolution of good training techniques—”

“You sound like *them*,” Thompson said suspiciously. “That's exactly the line they were handing me, about half the population. You're on their side aren't you?”

“I'm objective.”

“Are you? A lot of kids can fly a little, but not ceiling-walk or figure-eight like that. She could be a professional; I know it. She can make the Olympics and then the leagues.”

“Daddy,” Jessica said gently, “you shouldn't yell at Mr. Stone. It just makes you madder, and it doesn't do any good.”

Thompson subsided and leaned back. “I wasn't yelling,” he said. “I was just trying to make a point, Jessica; sometimes to make a point, grown-ups raise their voices a little, but that isn't actual *yelling*, only—”

“You see, Mr. Thompson,” the government man said, “the point is this: The problem with these contracts as far as I can see is that you feel the Institute got your daughter cheap,

and I agree that her progress has been remarkable; but the fee is not inequitable, and a contract, well, a contract is definitive unless it can be proved that it was signed under duress. Now, there's no such allegation here—"

"I didn't say duress, you government man. I said they lied."

"My name is Stone. Wilbur Stone. I'd prefer it."

"Those were *lies,* Wilbur Stone; that's what I'm saying. I see your nameplate right on that desk, but by me, you're just the government man, giving me government talk."

"I can understand your outrage," Stone said, "but it doesn't look like any kind of a case to me. The facts are clear, and although there are varying interpretations...." He paused. "You can always file an appeal."

"*This* is an appeal," Thompson said angrily. "It says right on your door, 'Complaints and Appeals.' I checked all that before I filed here to see you, and then I had to wait for weeks to get through."

Stone stood reluctantly, as if the various limbs and extensions of his frame were being slowly tugged into this new position by strong but invisible forces of pain. "There's nothing more I can do," he said. "This is a denial, that's all." Solemnly, he extended his hand toward Jessica. "It was very nice to meet you, young lady. You fly very nicely—beautifully, in fact—and I'm sorry that it made me nervous. It's good, though."

"This isn't fair," Thompson said. "I know all about the government, but really, this isn't fair at all. You shouldn't be allowed to do this to ordinary people. We're—"

Jessica stood. “It was nice to meet you, too,” she said. “Let's go now.”

“Oh, we're going,” Thompson said. “We're going, all right.”

“It's not his fault. He's nice. I think he wants to help us.”

“Isn't anyone trying to help us,” Thompson said grimly. “That's the whole point of being underclass: there's no one there at all. But we live and learn, government man; we bide our time—”

Stone said nothing, only stared; and after a while, Thompson could see that it was pointless: nothing could be done. They had their methodology—that was all there was to it—and it was on their property, too. He motioned to Jessica and led her from the office, leaving the door open behind them. Make *him* close it. That was all there was left you, those little gestures of contempt. But they meant nothing.

In the corridor, holding his daughter's hand, walking her through the wide hall under the great, distant ceiling, Thompson felt the assurance that he had simulated in the government office begin to slip like an ill-tied cloak. He had forced himself to a kind of dominance there, but now the interview over, his position said to be of no merit, he felt himself beginning to slip into the same Randall Thompson that he had known for all these decades—that sniveling, easily broken Randall Thompson who had been victimized by his childhood, victimized by that woman, victimized finally by the Institute and the government man. They knew just what to do with him. Everything worked for people like that because they knew secrets.

He felt the humiliation—it was difficult to handle, not easy to take all of this—and if it had not been for the little girl beside him, he might have given in to it. But there was no way that they would break him; he was going to remain strong in front of her. After all, he *was* the father; he had fought for that, and he had a position to maintain. It was an honorable thing to be the father, and it did not come casually; if it had, he would have let all of that go sometime in the past and been out of this. No way, no more.

He squeezed her little hand. She was his daughter, and that meant something. Two young secretaries clutching papers floated by him conversing intently. A youngish bureaucrat with a bright red bald spot arced past head first at a distance of inches. “Watch it, you,” the bureaucrat said. The secretaries giggled. Even government men could fly.

“Come on,” Jessica said. “Let's do it, too. They're staring at us because we're the only ones walking.”

“But I don't want to fly. We walked in and we should walk out.”

“Oh Daddy,” Jessica said, “just stop it now; don't be like the rest of them, always thinking about what you should or shouldn't do. They tell us at the Institute just to be ourselves; that's the best way. Let's fly now.”

“Jessica—”

“Flying isn't so bad,” Jessica said intensely. “It's just that you make it that way because you're so mad at the school and everything. But it's kind of fun. I don't want to forget that.” She dropped his hand, rose against him, then was

suddenly above his head, giggling. “Come on,” she said. “This is nice.”

Thompson hesitated. Jessica reached out a hand and tugged at his elbow. To his mingled disgust and excitement, Thompson felt his feet leaving the floor.

“See?” Jessica said, “It's easy. Come on, more now.”

Thompson reached for her hand and flapped his elbow. Oh my, oh my: it had been years. He felt himself rising gently. Was it that you couldn't forget? Was that the point? His head was close to the ceiling. Jessica pressed hard on his shoulder, averting collision. “Figure eight now,” she said, then dropped his hand and went into slow descent. It was a long, long way down. Two clerks, braced against a wall to give room, watched the intricacy of her slow fall. It was beautiful. Thompson inhaled deeply and followed. Breathe, drop, revolve. Kick, straighten, drop, revolve—

“When you hit the floor now,” Jessica said, “you bounce.”

“I remember,” he said. “I remember.”

Yes, when you hit the floor, you bounce. Falling slowly, gracefully in the thick air exhaled by all of the government people, Thompson felt the first thrust of an emotion he had not known for many years; and reaching for the floor, pushing off the floor, *bouncing*, he gave a cry of release.

“You see, Daddy?” Jessica said, springing above him, her arms extended, paddling. “It's supposed to be fun.”

“Yes,” Thompson said, positioning himself awkwardly to follow her. “Yes, I forgot that. I really did.”

Oblivious of their newly entranced audience, the two swimmers swept on.

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## Rocket City

Marge and me, we took Dink and went down to Rocket City. Dink, he got into one of those retrograde simulators, and we didn't see him for o-three-hundred hours. He be flying to Phobos oldstyle, I guess, with the field monitor pouring in his head and all the music of the spheres; but Marge and me, we did walking. We walked through the turbofire and the second-stage exhibits. We walked by old three-level jobs and the actual pieces of craft that blew up on Ceres. It was a slow time in Rocket City, and I was able to get into conversation with one of the guides. “Listen to this, Marge,” I said. “He be telling you things about this you never knew. How we flew the planets and dropped on Pluto; how we perched on the edge of the stars and now no more. He primed and full of tapes and stuff: he give the true story of the human destiny and condition and why we no turn outward but inward instead.”

“I got no interest in that,” Marge said. “What he be telling I be not wanting.” But when the tour guide began to speak, she stood in place anyway, partnership being a matter of bearing up. Or under.

“The program was abandoned in the early twenty-fours,” the tour guide said. He be a young fellow who know nothing about history, but those mnemonic devices mean they can tell you everything, just like the simulators can take Dink to Phobos. “The utter inhospitability of the environment to stellar exploration was confirmed by the findings of Vieter and Loeb, whose bio-mechanical researches did confirm that the

organism could not stand the period of time necessary to reach even the Centauris. Faced with the prospect of becoming a race of planet-hoppers and dilettantes eternally confined to our solar system, authorities made the decision instead to dismantle the program except for the transfer voyages among the settlements. Hence the establishment of Rocket City so that replications and originals of the real devices of travel could be preserved for all time."

"It all sounds very sad to me," Marge said. "Why give up planet-hopping?"

"The stars they be a suicide mission," I said. "This very discouraging in terms of high expectations; continued flight within the solar system then be perceived as decadent, am I right?"

"Right," the guide said. "Psychotronic control's perception was that the non-abandonment of rocketry in the context of limitation to the solar system would have led to deadly warfare by the middle of the twenty-fours. Hence the devices were dismantled except for Rocket City, which was established in San Diego in 2453 so that our heritage should not be forgotten." The guide stared past us. "I got that right," he said.

"You," Marge said to me, "let us be looking for Dink. O-two-hundred hours in that simulator be addling his brain; he come out and not know he be Dink himself."

"In just a moment," I say. "This is very interesting." We only go down to Rocket City once a year, and Marge, she be hurrying to leave from the moment we hit the gate; but I think these visits an important part of preserving our human

history and try to get as much from them as possible. With Dink scrambling off to the simulators since he be ten years old already, it be difficult for him to learn anything, and Marge has no interest in rocketry. “Talk about the stars as a suicide mission,” I said.

“That's what they were. Certain aspects of the radiation that could not be kept out of the craft, no system being utterly self-enclosed, would have driven the crews insane and have caused them to destroy the mission. Vieter and Loeb proved this, and it was decided that it would be the most humane decision not to subject their theories to proof.”

“I think that's a pretty good thing,” Marge said. “It would have been cruel. They were pioneers and heroes.”

“That is true,” the guide said and went into a long speech on the background, but I be thinking of Dink again. Pioneer and hero, that what he wanted to be; that is why he crawls off to the simulators and dreams of stars every time in Rocket City. He would have been very good if it had not been for Vieter and Loeb. But then I can be telling from the look on Marge's face that she not want to listen anymore, and I cannot say that I blame her. Maybe she be thinking of Dink too. I nod at the guide, and we walk away. There is not to worry about hurting feelings, because the guides be close to simulators themselves, filled with penalyazyne and other concoctions from an early age to make good passageway for the mnemonics: obliteration and suppression of the personality from an early age, in other words. When they off duty, they swim in the tanks or lie in the barrows.

Marge and me, we walk through the gate and into the section where the thrust chambers and multi-leveled rockets be poised in rows against the dome. The arena be almost empty on this slow afternoon, and I look at the steel and circuitry and think how sad it is that most of us, we are now so uninterested in our heritage that this place be almost empty. Year by year there are fewer at Rocket City, and I am pretty sure that by the end of the twenty-fives it will be closed, leveled for more occupation. But while it be still around, it is important to pay our heritage respect.

I stare at the multi-levels and think of the men who centuries ago locked themselves into steel, surrounded themselves with filters, and hurled themselves toward Ganymede. They must have been strange and courageous, informed by the knowledge that they were going to the stars; even though that did not quite work, one can respect their dedication. Dink be the same way.

Marge had had enough. “We be getting that boy and out of here,” she said. “O-three-hundred hours now in the simulators, and you know what it was like the last time.”

I know what it was like. We begin to walk that way. “This an impressive place, though, Marge,” I said. “This a memorial to the time when we be spacebound.”

“We not spacebound,” Marge said. “That be put away.”

I do not argue. What is there to argue? She is right, and I have had enough of Rocket City myself; every time the crowds be less and the space between the ships greater. We stroll in our usual way to the simulator barn and pipe in the message for Dink. We wait and we wait. Finally he be coming

out in that stunned way they emerge from the simulators, his eyes looking like the guide's. “Who be you?” he said. Disorientation on release be common. “The engines be shutting down; we ready for Ganymede contact.”

“Come along,” Marge said, taking his hand. “Ganymede takedown come next time.” He stumbled along with her, still weak and confused. The simulators, they do one good job.

“Ganymede touchdown,” Dink say. “Big Jovian landscape. Moons as big as worlds. Oh, the darkness.” They talk like that for some hundred hours after release, even longer before they throttle down. “Oh, the darkness,” Dink, he say again, and Marge look at me over his little round head. I shrug, I be taking his other hand. We walk quick and fast out of Rocket City then, the night hard over San Diego outside the dome and the lights winking on the tastehouses and the slaughtering bins as clutching his strong spaceman's hands.

Marge and me, we take our twenty-eight-year-old son all the way, all the way, all the way home. His round head a spacer's. His cold eyes the stars.

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## The Shores of Suitability

*Common exegesis of* Killers of the Rulers *portends the interrelationship of post-Joycean rhetoric with post-Shavian political pluralism. Relate this confluence. Elaborate and discuss. Exemplify.*

The Old Hack is having a nightmare. In it, he has returned to academia and is seeking a master's degree at Extension U., which, he hopes, will enable him to find work as an assistant instructor of English. All right, it is a long shot, but he is almost out of ideas. The markets are really hell, and foreign sales have dried up. And he is having big trouble delivering on the one outline he has sold. So the Old Hack has enrolled in English 353A: *Science Fiction and the Archetype*, because in the catalog it seemed to be an easy three points (no paper required). If he knows anything, he knows science fiction. Right? Well, doesn't he? Now he is taking the final examination in this graduate-level course, which appears to focus on an old Ace Double, *Killers of the Rulers*. He is especially qualified to deal with this book. He wrote it back in 1957 between wives at the old place on West 89th Street. Even so, the exam is giving him trouble. Big trouble.

* * * *

*The subtheme of colonic usurpation in its Jungian relevance creates a multileveled tension in* Killers of the Rulers*, which points toward the induction of three distinct archetypes. Name these archetypes. Elaborate and discuss.*

*Discuss further how a Freudian approach would defeat consummation of the Blue Alien Incursion.*

The Old Hack is not sure exactly how he got into this. It all seemed so simple when he enrolled. The reading list, which included many of his old favorites, indicated this would be a snap, to say nothing of the pleasant surprise of finding *Killers of the Rulers* right in there between *More than Human* and *The Forever Machine.* But he suspected that things had begun to go wrong from the start. In the first session the young instructor had begun by speaking of a Manichean influence in the birth of American science fiction, and how the great Fifties novels were an extension of the Fabian theory of Socialism as propounded by the works of G. B. Shaw. The Old Hack had briefly thought of identifying himself when his book came up in November. “I wrote that one,” he could have said (it had been written, as had all of the Ace Doubles, and too much of his other stuff, under a pseudonym), but by then he was totally confused. It did not seem wise to admit writing *Killers of the Rulers*, particularly if he could not understand a word the young instructor was saying about it.

* * * *

*Produce a 1,000-word monograph interrelating the empire building of* Killers of the Rulers *with the more pacific vision of* More Than Human. *Be specific. In what way does Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener” inform and influence both works as controlling response? Why does* Heartbreak House *not apply here?*

*Heartbreak House.* That's what West 89th Street had been. It was there, drunk and up against a deadline, that he wrote *Killers of the Rulers* on the kitchen table. The Old Hack hadn't even started it until the weekend before it was due. There had been all that excitement about him and Mabel Sue, and, besides, for a $750 advance (payable in halves) why should he get all upset about churning out this stuff to their convenience rather than his? Even then the book kind of lurched along, what with Betty (wife number one) crying and coming out of the bedroom now and then only to throw another of his paperbacks at him while he sat there typing. Finally he gave up, turned to the Cutty Sark, and took down that 1952 issue of *Worlds of If*, which he used to bloat up his novelette.

In the end the book was not what he had promised in the outline, but what the hell? Everyone lied and cheated in the small things (he had tried desperately to explain this to Betty); the important commitment was to getting the work done, and to holding on to enough of the advance money to have a good blowout. Despite all the screaming, he had been only three days late, thanks to the Cutty Sark, but then the bastards took a month to deliver the check, by which time he was well embarked on that disastrous series of events that ended with Mabel Sue's calling him a drunken liar and throwing his typewriter *and* the carbon of *Killers of the Rulers* out the third-story window.

* * * *

*Neologic devices in* Killers of the Rulers *account for, as in* Finnegans Wake, *much of its subnarrative power. Present and discuss five such devices. Analyze two of them. Describe how they function as a metaphoric combine of the Blue Aliens.*

In his dream, the Old Hack brings his blank essay booklet up to the proctor midway through the three hours. “I can't stand it,” he says shakily. “I can't stand it anymore. Just take me away. I'll be good.” The proctor stares at him mercilessly through goggles of glittering glass. “Help. Help,” the Old Hack whimpers as he tumbles like a stone through various levels of his dream world.

He finds himself awake and fifty-seven in his own bleak room at dawn, his hopes for an assistant instructorship at the college destroyed, the empty pages of *Grandsons of the Killers of the Rulers* littering the floor beside him, and this novel—his masterpiece, he had told the editor to clinch the contract, the crown of his career—three months overdue today. And counting.

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## Shiva

"We'll try Paris," someone says. "Remember Paris."

Sperber, trusted only for an apprentice assignment but still determined to be hopeful, huddles in the deep spaces of the extradimensional calculator, figuring out his further moves. Sperber has always been a thoughtful type, not impulsive, only reactive. That is one of the primary reasons for his participation in the program. Know your course, pull down vanity, move deliberately toward a kind of fruition. Still he thinks: How long can I remain hopeful doing stuff like this?

Still, he has. Remained hopeful, that is. Choice gleams like knives from the enclosure; shrugging, his life a cosmic shrug he thinks, Sperber is catapulted to Paris, 1923, finds himself with no real transition in a small café on the fringes of the Champs Élysées where he seems to be already engaged in profound conversation with the young Pol Pot and Charles de Gaulle, nationalists both, their expressions set intently toward a future that glows for them, even though Sperber knows better than they how problematic the situation.

*"Excusez-moi,"* Sperber Says in his miserable, poorly accented French, tugging on the sleeve of de Gaulle's brown jacket.

Even at this early stage of his life, de Gaulle seems to have taken on a military righteousness. "*Je* can stay only a moment. I am here to give you a glimpse of your future *s'il vous plait. Comment allez vous?* Would you like that portrait of your future?"

He hopes that the translator has done its wondrous work. There is no way that he can express to De Gaulle in this perilous situation without the help of that device. Still, it seems—like so much else in post-technological 2218—something of a cheat. Form has taken function all the way to the grave; the extradimensional calculator has, for instance, subsumed the causes of research or serious speculation.

De Gaulle is unresponsive to Sperber's question. Perhaps premonitory apprehensions of the Fourth Republic have overtaken him; he seems distant, affixed to some calculation of a future that Sperber himself knows all too well. Saleth Sar (Pol Pot's birth name or at least the name he employed in his student days) brandishes a teacup, looks at Sperber with a kind of loathing.

“And me?” he says. “What about me? What *s'il vous plait* are you undertaking to give me? My French is not perfect but I am worthy of your attention, no?

This certainly is true. Saleth Sar is worthy of his attention. In his excitement at finally meeting de Gaulle, Sperber has almost ignored the general's old companion and rival in student debates.

“Pardon me,” he says. “I meant to give no offense. I am a student, I am in this place to study and to learn. It is not possible for me to know everything.”

“You do not have to know everything,” Pol Pot says reprovingly, “but it is not correct to know nothing at all.” He stares at de Gaulle sourly, takes the teacup from the general's hand, and places it with a thump on the table. “I

think I will ask you to leave this table," he says. "You were after all not invited."

"I have to tell you that the Algerian intervention will come to a very bad end," Sperber says hastily. "Both of you must know this, also that the decision to leave Indo-China will lead in no way toward peace. Your intervention will be supplanted by ignorant Americans, the Americans will get in deeper and deeper, eventually the Americans will ignore the borders of Kampuchea and will commit severe destruction. No good will come of this, none at all. One country will be shamed, another sacrificed. You must begin to make plans now."

"Plans?" Pol Pot says. "What kind of plans are we supposed to make? You babble of destiny, of destruction. But it is this kind of destruction which must precede the revolution itself. It is vital that the revolution prevail, that is why I have been sent to Paris. To study texts of successful revolutions, to know the Constitution of the United States among other things."

Pol Pot, the admirer of democratic principles. Sperber had forgotten that.

Paris at this time was filled with future Communists who loved democracy, the United States, American music and sexual habits. It was betrayal, Americans not taking to Asian desires, which had tamed them into revolutionaries, anti-Bolsheviks. But Sperber had, of course, forgotten much else in his various missions; the lapse here was not uncharacteristic; lapses had carried him through all of these expeditions, making matters even more difficult.

De Gaulle shrugs much as Sperber had shrugged just subjective instants ago in the extradimensional calculator. The Frenchman's face shines with confusion, the same confusion, doubtless, that exists in Sperber's own. “There is nothing I can do about this,” he says. “Or about anything else for that matter.”

Sperber knows then with sudden and sinking acuity that he has done all that is possible under these circumstances. There is nothing else that he can do. He has used the extradimensional calculator to detour to this crucial place, has warned the future leaders of consequence, has delivered the message as best as he can; now consequence—an extradimensional consequence, of course, one which has been imposed upon the situation rather than developed—will have to engage its own direction. It is a pity that he cannot bring documents, wave them in front of Pol Pot and de Gaulle, but the laws of paradox are implacable and no one may test them by bringing confirmation to the past. The speaker must make his point through fervor, through credibility. There is no supporting data.

“What are we supposed to do?” Saleth Sar says. “You surely cannot think to give us such an evaluation and simply disappear. We are not fools here, we are serious people. Even he is a serious person,” he says pointing to de Gaulle, “even though like all of his countrymen he is full of grand designs and stupid dreams. Serious stupid dreams, however. You must take responsibility for that as well as much else.”

Well, that seems fair enough. Perhaps that is so. “*Regrette*,” Sperber says. What else is there to say? In just a

moment he will take the extradimensional calculator out of his briefcase, calculate the dials, and make his departure. He hopes that the café personnel will not take the calculator for a grenade or plastique; that they will not interpret his intentions as violent. His intentions are not violent, they are simply pedagogical in all of the better senses of that word.

* * * *

Next assignment: This one the standard interview (in all of its hopelessness) which no one in training can avoid. “Don't do this,” Sperber therefore says to JFK, appearing in the President's private quarters at Hyannisport with the help of his speedy and selective instrument. “Don't go to Dallas to resolve a factional dispute, the factions are hopelessly riven, there is nothing that you can do but interfere and otherwise, if you go there, horrendous personal consequences may follow. I am not even talking about the future of the country.”

Kennedy looks at him kindly, helps himself to another breadstick from the stack next to the table, seems to regard Sperber in a unique and favorable light. Jacqueline is ensconced upstairs, Dave Powers is pacing the corridors outside: This is a quiet night in the fall of 1963, quieter than most of them and therefore good for sitting by the calculator. Sperber has come to Kennedy noiselessly, with no disturbance whatsoever.

“You're not the first from whom I've heard this, you know,” Kennedy says. “There has been a whole group of you who have come in mysteriously with a similar plea over the past few weeks. It's a good thing I know I'm only hallucinating. Or

are you really all emissaries from the future on some kind of training plan? That's what I'm beginning to believe but I can't get a straight answer out of any of you. It strikes me as the most reasonable guess; either that or you're all really extraordinary actors and Lyndon is even more demonic than I think, trying to make me crazy here. But I don't think I'm crazy; I have a rigorous, robust intelligence and know a hawk from a handsaw."

Sperber knew of course about all the others. Kennedy in the fall of 1963 was one of the most popular destinations: unlike de Gaulle and Saleth Sar in the café, who were really unusual and almost secret. Certainly, Sperber would never make his knowledge of that site public. Still, you could not use only the most popular destinies; you had to do some original warning and rebutting or risk falling into imitation, the inattentiveness of the assessors. Alternate history was not merely an odyssey; it was a work of art, it had to be particularly shaped.

"What can I do to convince you that I'm different from the others?" he said. "I'm a specialist, I work on historical causation, on first cause, on original motivation, it's been my field of study for years and if I didn't have this opportunity, I would be abandoning the future to mindless consequence. It's got to mean more than that."

"I can't get into arguments of this sort," Kennedy says. He rocks back in his chair, sighing a little as his weak back is momentarily shifted from axis, then recovers his purchase. "All of you are so insistent, all of you seem so convinced that you carry the real answers." He smiles at Sperber, his

fetching smile, the smile that has been preserved in all of the living and dead histories through the hundreds of years between them, then pats Sperber on the hand. “It's a fated business anyway,” Kennedy says. “And if I'm not mistaken, if I understand this correctly, it's all happened anyway from your perspective.”

“It's happened,” Sperber says, wishing that he had managed a university education so that he could put this in more sophisticated terms. The trades were not a good place to be; this work was really too delicate for someone training fundamentally as a technician and yet that was the only way it could be financed. “It's happening and happening but there's a chance, just a chance, that if you avoid in the future the events which I know so well, that it can happen in a different way. I'm not doing this for recompense,” Sperber says unnecessarily. “I have a genuine interest in improving the quality of our lives in the present.”

“Well,” Kennedy says. “Well, well, there's no answer to that then, is there? There's no canceling travel and political commitments at such a late time unless there's a proven disaster lying there and we know that that's not the case. Sorry, pal,” Kennedy says, patting Sperber's arm almost lovingly, “there's just no way around this. Besides, I'm getting a little tired of all these visits anyway. They're distracting and there's nothing that I can do to change the situation anyway.”

*"Je regrette,"* Sperber says in poorly stressed French, carrying over his response from an earlier interview, *"Je*

*regrette* all of this, Mr. President, but it's important for you to understand the consequence—"

"There is no consequence," Kennedy says; "there is only outcome," and Sperber in a sudden and audacious wedge of light, an extrusion that seems to come from Kennedy's very intellect, which fires and concentrates his features, bathing them in a wondrous and terrible life, understands that Kennedy is right, that Sperber has been wrong, that he has been pursuing consequence at a distance in the way that a platoon of guards with rakes might trail the line of a parade, clearing the landscape. Sperber was no more consequential to Kennedy than such a crew would be to the parade.

"Don't do it!" he says nevertheless, seizing the opportunity as best he can. "You still shouldn't do it, no matter how right you feel; you will be surrounded by enemies, taunted by a resisting crowd, then you will perish among roses. You have got to heed me," Sperber says, and jiggles the extradimensional calculator into some kind of response, already too late, but he is willing to try to get Kennedy to listen to reason even as the storm begins in his viscera and he feels himself departed through yet another wedge of history, spilled toward a ceaseless and futile present.

* * * *

Sperber takes himself to be addressing Albert Einstein in a hideous cafeteria in Einstein's student days, the unformed Alfred nibbling an odorous salami, calculations and obliterated equations on the table between them. "Don't do this," Sperber says in what he takes to be a final, desperate appeal,

“don't do it, don't complete the equations, don't draw the conclusions: This will lead to the uniform field theory, it will lead to one devastating anomaly after the next, it will unleash the forces of atomic destruction upon a hapless and penitential humanity surrounded by consequence. Don't you understand this? Put it away, put it away!”

Einstein, another infrequent site, stares at Sperber with a kind of terror, not for him the cool insouciance of Kennedy, the political fanaticism of Saleth Sar and de Gaulle. Einstein is as fully, as hopelessly, astonished as Sperber was when informed, five or six subjective hours ago, of his mission.

“Change history?” Sperber had said. “I can't even spell history,” and similarly Einstein shudders over his equation, stares at Sperber in a fusion of shyness and loathing. “I can't shape history, I don't even know myself,” Sperber, the student, had shouted when informed of his mission, and the implacable sheen of their faces when they had responsively shoved the extradimensional calculator into his hands was like the sheen of the salami that Einstein held in one hopeless, hungry hand.

“I don't know of what you are speaking,” Einstein said. “Physics is too difficult a subject for me to understand; I can do nothing, don't you know this? I can do nothing at all.” In Einstein's despair, Sperber can glimpse the older Einstein, the saintly and raddled figure whose portrait adorns the site, a musty extrusion from the journals, who played the violin badly at Princeton and blamed everyone else for the bomb.

“Yes you can,” Sperber says, and resists the impulse to spout French again: the language of diplomacy, he had been

told, but that was just another cracked idea of the assessors. “You can do something, all of you could have done something, you have to take responsibility, don't you see? You must take responsibility for what you have given us.”

Sperber would have a great deal more to say but the sound of the assessors is suddenly enormous in the land and Sperber finds himself, however unwillingly, ground to recombinant dust in the coils of the calculator.

He is taken back.

He ponders the landscape, the faces of the assessors, neither unsurprisingly changed at all. The program is sustained, after all, by failure. What point in resisting?

“Oppenheimer is next,” someone says to him. “Are you prepared for Oppenheimer?”

Well, no, in fact he is not, but Sperber tries as ever to be hopeful. He is Shiva after all, destroyer of worlds.

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