



Approaching Oblivion

Road Signs On the Treadmill Toward Tomorrow

Eleven Uncollected Stories by HARLAN ELLISON

Foreword by Michael Crichton

Roc

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To the memory of

WALTER FULTZ,

the first editor to buy a book from me; a good man, a fine editor, a friend...
Who approached oblivion, passed through it, and is gone, for what reasons I do not know... Though I saw him seldom, I miss him greatly...

With luck, he's found peace at last.

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Foreword by MICHAEL CRICHTON

APPROACHING ELLISON

Soon after I came to Los Angeles in 1970, I was called by a producer who offered me a job writing a science fiction screenplay. I was tied up with a book at the time; the producer asked me if I could suggest another writer for the project. I suggested Harlan Ellison.

There was a long, chilly silence at the other end of the phone. Finally the producer cleared his throat and said, "Do you, ah, know Harlan Ellison?"

No, I said, I didn't. I knew him only through his work. I had read some of his stories, and seen some of his television scripts.

"Umm," the producer said. "Well, let me tell you something-" and he launched into a short, energetic, and wholly unprintable description of his feelings on the subject of Harlan Ellison. The outburst ended as abruptly as it began, and he got off the phone leaving me completely mystified. I could only assume that Ellison and this producer had had some acrimonious dealings in the past. But that is hardly a rare event in Hollywood, and I thought no more about it.

As time went on, I ran into many people who had had acrimonious dealings with Harlan Ellison. There was an odd sameness about the way all these people talked. "He's very inventive, very enthusiastic, very talented," they would begin, "but-" and then they'd launch into a long and heated harangue, cataloging what they regarded as the innumerable abuses they had suffered at his hands. I was told that Ellison was a perfectionist; that he cared too much about his work; that he fought for his ideas; that he was demanding and quick to pull his name from any project which did not go as he intended-always substituting the sarcastic pseudonym, "Cordwainer Bird."

None of this elicited much sympathy from me. I saw nothing wrong with caring about your work and fighting for your ideas. I had been doing the same thing, and for my trouble I had been fired by Universal and then sued by that company. So I was in the position of admiring Ellison more with every new complaint I heard about him.

The people who spoke so bitterly about Harlan Ellison all mentioned something else, too. At the end of their diatribes, they would pause to catch their breath and then conclude with. "And besides, did you see what Gay Talese said about him?"

Gay Talese had written an Esquire piece called "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" which reported an encounter between Ellison and the singer. Ellison comes off as disrespectful,

witty, and refusing to be bullied. It is hardly the portrait of a blackguard and cur. which his critics felt it to be.

In the end, I suppose what impressed me most about these Ellison stories was the strength of feeling with which they were told. The facts-so far as they could be determined-were never very remarkable, but the emotional content was always fierce and highly charged. Somehow. Ellison had really gotten to them, and they would never forget it.

Some time later, this same Harlan Ellison began to attack me in print. His argument was that I wasn't writing good science fiction. which was fine by me-I didn't think I was writing science fiction at all-but it was irritating to be placed in an unwanted category and then told I didn't fit it well. I was back at Universal by then, and one day I was complaining about his attacks on me when a secretary looked up and said, "Do you, ah, know Harlan Ellison?"

No, I said, I didn't.

"Well," she said, "I used to be his secretary and I know him very well. Would you like to meet him?"

Harlan Ellison lives in the Los Angeles foothills, in a perfectly ordinary-appearing house, in a quiet suburban neighborhood. The inside of the house is as remarkable as the exterior is mundane; Ellison himself seems to take a certain pleasure in the unobtrusive outward appearance he presents to the community.

Inside, the feeling is sensual, almost sybaritic, with a quality of tension that comes from a barely controlled chaos. There are books everywhere, thousands of books, lining walls, tucked above doorways, filling closets, threatening to spill out and consume the living space. There are bizarre juxtapositions at every turn: signed Wunderlich prints, Soleri notebooks, sculpture from Mozambique, psychedelic book art set side by side in confusing profusion. It takes enormous energy to hold all this together, and Ellison himself appears to have boundless energy. He moves restlessly, talks non-stop, jumping from books to television to politics to sex to movies, taking up each new subject with considerable humor and aggressive enthusiasm.

He is not an easy man. His opinions are strongly held and his feelings strongly felt; he is not tolerant of compromise where it affects his life and his work. In someone else, this obstinacy might appear petty or fanatical, but in Harlan it is natural and attractive. It is

simply the way he is.

Most strikingly, he is a genuine original, one-of-a-kind, difficult to categorize and unwilling to make it any easier. He demands to be taken on his own terms, and that aspect of his personality and his work is, I suspect, what has engaged both his critics and his large and passionately loyal following. He seems to be a kind of energy focus and no one who brushes against him comes away with an indifferent response. His advocates are every bit as vehement as his critics. Other writers have readers; Ellison has fans who will get into fistfights with anyone who says a word against him.

He doesn't write like anybody else. The same paradoxes and odd juxtapositions which appear in his house and in his casual speech, are present in all of his writing. What emerges is a surprising, eclectic, almost protean series of visions, often disturbing, always strongly felt.

In the end, these strong feelings drive Hollywood producers crazy but make extraordinary stories. After a long hiatus, there are eleven here, in top Ellison form-uncompromising, individual, and exactly as he wants them to be.

Hollywood
29 January 74

Introduction by HARLAN ELLISON

REAPING THE WHIRL WIND

If it hadn't been for my getting beaten up daily on the playground of Lathrop Grade School in Painesville, Ohio-this book would not be what it is. It might be a book with my stories in it, but it wouldn't be this book, and it wouldn't be as painful a book for me as it is.

You've noticed, of course. Everyone finally realizes it as an inescapable truth. Nothing we do as adults is wholly based on our adult reactions; it's always-to greater or lesser

degree depending on how deep go our roots to the past-an echo of our childhoods. Your politics are either mirror images of your parents' politics when you were a kid, or they're rebellions against those politics. Somewhere in the physical makeup of the love-partners who turn you on are vague shadows of the high school cheerleader or basketball center who made your little heart go pitty-pat when you were dashing past puberty. If you were accepted and admired by your teenage peer group, you don't have the same gut-wrenching fears about going to parties where you don't know anyone as someone who was an outsider. If you had religion pounded into your head when you were young, chances are pretty good even if you've renounced formal church ties, you still carry the guilts and fears around in your gut. Or maybe you've come full-circle and have become a Jesus Person, if you've been disillusioned enough by the world.

No one escapes.

Our childhoods are sowing the wind, our adulthoods are reaping the whirlwind.

As true of me as you. No better, no nobler, no stronger, no freer of the past. Just like you.

In Painesville, I was a card-carrying outcast. "Come on, Harlan!" the kids would yell across Harmon Drive. "Come on, let's play at Leon's!" And like a sap, I'd clamber up from between the huge roots of the maple tree in our front yard, drop my copy of Lorna Doone or Lord Jim (or whatever other alternate universe I'd fled to because I hated the one I was in) and run after the gang of kids streaking for Leon Miller's house. I was a little kid, smaller than any other kid my age, and I couldn't run nearly as fast. That was always part of their equation, of course. And just as I'd reach the front steps, they'd all dash inside Leon's house, slam and latch the screen door, bang shut the front door with its big glass panes and crowd behind the front window, sticking their tongues out at me and laughing. How I longed to enter that cool and dim front room where they would soon be playing Chinese Checkers and Pick-Up-Sticks.

Instead, their rejection always drove me to fury. I would slam my hands against the wooden frames of the screen windows and kick the glider on the front porch, always being careful not to tear the screens or damage the glider for fear of the wrath of Leon's grandmother. Then, when they tired of baiting me, and retreated into the dimness beyond to play, I would return to my book, where I could be brave and loved and capable of dueling Athos, Porthos and Aramis all in one afternoon.

On the schoolyard at Lathrop, I fared considerably worse than D' Artagnan. There I was the accepted punching bag of bullies-in-training, whose names appear every now and

then in my stories as characters who come to ugly ends.

I won't go into the reasons; they're all thirty years out-of-date and relevance. Suffice it that a gang of them would pound me into the dirt. And with a pre-Cool Hand Luke persistence, I would pull myself up and jump one of them, bury my teeth in his wrist and wrestle him to the ground. The others would kick me till I let loose. Up again, more slowly a second time, with a wild roundhouse at a thick, stupid face. Sometimes I'd connect and savor the eloquent vocabulary of a bloody nose. But they'd converge and plant me again. And it would go that way till I was unconscious or until Miss O'Hara from the third grade would dash out to scatter them.

But it wasn't the beatings that most dismayed me. It was having to go home after school with my clothes ripped and bloodied beyond repair. You see, I was grade school age only a few years after the Depression, and my family was anything but wealthy. We weren't destitute, far from it; but things were as tight for us as for most families in the Midwest at that time, and my parents could not afford new clothes all the time.

When I walked home from school, I would take the longest way around, often going to sit in the woods on the corner of Mentor Avenue and Lincoln Drive till it grew dark. I was ashamed and filled with guilt. And when, at last, I could stay away no longer, I'd go home and my Mother—who was a kind woman suffering with a troublesome child—would see me, she would cry and clean me up with mercurochrome and Band-Aids, and she would say (not every time, but even once was enough to make an indelible impression), “What did you say to get them mad?”

How could I tell her it was not only that I was a smart aleck? How could I tell her it was because I was a Jew and they had been taught Jews were something loathsome? How could I tell her it was easier for me to carry a broken nose and bruises than for me to act cowardly and deny that I was a Jew? The few times she had heard their anti-Semitic remarks, she had gone to school, and that had only made it worse. So I let her think I had started it. And swallowed the guilt. And built a reaction to bearing the blame that grew as I grew.

Now, as an adult, my reaction to being blamed for something I did not do is almost pathological.

Now, as an adult, I don't give a damn if I do tear the screens or damage the glider. I can think of nothing more horrible than what is done to Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*.

Which brings me to why this book exists, and why it is the book it is. Preceding was preamble.

In 1971 the publishers of this book, Walker & Company, published my collection of collaborations with other sf writers, *Partners in Wonder*. It was a lovely book but because of the ineptitude of Walker's then-art director, it was a book hideously overpriced. It seemed certain Walker & Company would lose a potload.

On the day the first copies came back from the bindery, I happened to be on a business trip to New York. My editor at Walker at that time was Helen D' Alessandro, a charming and talented woman who had tried to watchdog the *Partners in Wonder* project, who had been hamstrung by excesses and inefficiencies during the production stages. Helen called me first in Los Angeles, to advise me the books were in, and

finding out I was in New York, tracked me down and invited me to come in to the Walker offices. She knew all too well the horrors that had served as midwives to the birth of that book: galleys set by computer so badly that I had had to spend nine full days correcting them...insane typography that had jumped the cost of the book from a reasonable \$5.95 to an impossible \$8.95...layout so berserk that it killed a certain reprint sale to the SF Book Club. She wanted me to see the book first.

I arrived at the offices of Walker & Company and Helen came out to the reception area to take me back to her office. When she came into the reception foyer, I was standing with a copy of *Partners in Wonder* in my hands. The woman on the switchboard had removed a copy from the carton when it had been delivered and had put it out on one of the display shelves as a gesture of kindness to an author she knew was soon to arrive. Helen's smile faded as she saw me standing there forlornly, leafing through a book twice the size and twice the price it might have been.

I looked up and saw her. She tried to smile again, but it wouldn't come. "Oh," was all she said.

In silence, we walked back to her office.

At that time, Helen shared editorial space with Lois Cole.

Lois Cole is one of the finest editors, one of the kindest persons, one of the most intelligent and charming people I have ever known. She was Margaret Mitchell's editor on *Gone With the Wind* and it was she, in part, who convinced Margaret Mitchell to change the title of that book from *Mules in Horses' Harness* to *Gone With the Wind*. She is a woman of uncommon perception and empathy.

She smiled up at me as I entered the tiny office, cleared a stack of manuscripts from a chair, and said, "I'm sorry, Harlan."

It was not the happiest day of my life.

We commiserated for a while, and I hung around the office doing some publicity work for the book with Henry Durkin. As five o'clock approached, I walked through the crowded passageway of the editorial offices to gather my coat and attaché case, when I heard someone call my name. I looked up and saw Sam Walker.

The president of Walker & Company is Samuel S. Walker, Jr. He is a tall, elegant man with fine manners, soft voice and too much gentlemanliness to ever permit him to become the sort of rapacious publisher who winds up with a corporate octopus like, for instance, Doubleday. We had never exchanged many words.

He motioned me to join him in his office, and when I'd entered, he closed the door and turned to me. His expression was sober and concerned. "I want you to know," he said, very gently, "that I know you aren't responsible for what has happened on this book. It's too common a practice in this business to blame a writer for what's gone wrong on the production end of a project. I want you to know that I'm aware we'll lose money on this book, but the fault does not lie with you. And I'd consider it a privilege to publish you again, if you'll trust us a second time."

He did not say: What did you do to get them mad?

He did not ask me why my clothes were ripped and my nose bloody and one shoe gone. He said he knew I was innocent of all wrongdoing.

It was a ten year old child getting an apology from an adult; the state bringing in "no true bill" and dismissing all charges; the hospital calling to say they'd mixed up the biopsy reports and someone else was dying of cancer; a page one retraction. It was one of the kindest, most sensitive things anyone had ever done for me, and it had occurred in an industry not overly burdened with thoughtfulness and kindness.

Sam Walker could not possibly have known what his words meant to me, nor with what echoes of my childhood they reverberated.

But because of those three minutes of concern, I wrote this book, and Sam Walker has published it. So if it pleases you... the thanks go as much to Sam as to me.

Originally, this was to have been a collection of already-published stories from several out-of-print books I'd written years ago. Larded in with the reprints were to have been

three or four new stories. But as time progressed, I grew more and more disquieted with the idea of such a collection. In 1971, Macmillan published *Alone Against Tomorrow*, a collection of my stories that spanned the years from 1956 to 1969; though the pivot of all the stories in that collection was the theme of alienation, the book was also intended as a small, narrow retrospective of my work.

But a peculiar thing happened. It was one of the rare occasions on which I did not overblow my reputation, one of the few times my ego did not swell out of proportion to my worth. I had not gauged the popularity my stories had achieved in the three years preceding the publication of *Alone Against*

Tomorrow, and was alternately delighted and dismayed by the letters I received praising the book but denouncing me for gathering together under a fresh title a group of much-reprinted stories.

It decided me without doubt that never again could I permit a supposed “new” collection to contain stories available in my other collections.

Approaching Oblivion was originally intended to gather together stories from out-of-print collections like *A Touch of Infinity*, *Ellison Wonderland* and *Gentleman Junkie*, with one or two stories available only in anthologies done by other editors.

The contracts were signed in November of 1970 and the book—which should have been no trouble to assemble—was supposed to be in Helen D' Alessandro's hands no later than six months thereafter. But the letters were starting to come in on *Alone Against Tomorrow*, and I began to procrastinate. Months, then years, went by, with polite notes of inquiry from Walker & Company. First, from Helen and then, when she departed the playing fields of literature to marry the brilliant poet, teacher and writer Anthony Hecht, from Lois, from the ineffable and indefatigable Hans Stefan Santesson, from Tim Seldes, from Henry Durkin, from Dedna Bryfonski who was my editor after Lois became swamped with other projects, and finally (though I may have missed a baton-passer or two in the whirl of personnel at Walker), from Ms. Evy Herr, my current shoulderer of anguish.

It is now four years after the original contracting for *Approaching Oblivion*. And the book is finished. It contains no stories ever included in my collections...though some of them have appeared in anthologies elsewhere. But that doesn't count. This book has my name on it. It is the product of my labors since 1970, with few exceptions. (If you're curious as to when a particular story was written, I've included the date of original emergence and the location[s] in which I wrote it, at the end of each piece.) So if I get letters complaining that these new stories are familiar, it's got to be from righteous

Ellison buffs who buy every obscure magazine published, because these stories come from sources as diversified as Penthouse magazine, Crawdaddy, Galaxy and the August 1962 issue of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. One of the stories has never been published, though it's supposed to be included in a massive art/text history of the Sixties as interpreted through comics, to be edited by The National Lampoon's Michel Choquette. (If Michel ever gets the book finished, don't miss the splendiferous drawings done by Leo & Diane Dillon -who did the cover of the book you now hold-to accompany the text. I'm talking about "Ecawareness," incidentally.)

I'm glad I waited and let the contents of the book change. For several reasons. First, because most of the collections from which I'd have cannibalized stories are now coming back into print. Several paperback houses will be releasing almost all of my older titles in the next few years, thus hopefully ending the plaintive cries I hear at college lecture appearances, from my readers (each one with impeccable taste) who wail they cannot find my books on the newsstands.

Second, because now Sam and Evy (and Lois and Helen and all the other good people who were so incredibly patient) have a new book, instead of a Frankenstein creation cobbled-up from spare parts and dusty remnants.

And third, because the Harlan Ellison who signed those contracts in 1970 is not the same Harlan Ellison who writes these words today, in September of 1974.

Which brings me full circle to the schoolyard of Lathrop, and reaping the whirlwind.

In 1970, when I conceived the theme of this book-cautionary tales that would warn "this is what may happen if we keep going the way we're going"-I had just emerged from a decade of civil unrest and revolution. I was far from alone in passing through that terrible time. My friends, my country, my world had also gone through it. I believed in certain things, and I had gut-hatreds I thought would never cool. I had been in riots against the Viet Nam war that had netted me time in jail and broken bones; I had been on civil rights marches and demonstrations that showed me the depths of inhumanity and craziness to which normal human beings could sink; I had lost many friends to dope and death; I had gone through an intellectual inferno that burned me out so I could not write for nearly a year and a half...and I was tired.

In *Alone Against Tomorrow*, I had included as a dedication for a book of stories about alienation, these words:

This book is dedicated to the memory of

EVELYN DEL REY,

a dear friend, for laughter and for caring...

And to the memories of:

ALLISON KRAUSE

JEFFREY GLEN MILLER

WILLIAM K. SCHROEDER

SANDRA LEE SHEUER

four Kent State University students senselessly murdered in their society's final act of alienation.

The list is incomplete.
There are many others.
There will be more.

And among the letters I received on that book, was this one, reproduced exactly as I received it:

[June 10, 1971; 1554 Columbia Drive; Decatur, Georgia 30032. Dear Mr. Ellison, In your dedication of *Alone Against Tomorrow*, you mention the “four Kent State University students senselessly murdered...”. Please be informed that these hooligans were Communist-led radical revolutionaries and

anarchists, and deserved to be shot, whether by a firing squad or by the National Guard. Your remarks ruined an otherwise good book. Nevertheless, I am happy for the opportunity to correct your thinking. Sincerely yours,

James R. Chambers.]

I receive a lot of mail these days. Time prevents my answering very much of it-if I did, I'd have no time for writing the stories that prompt the mail in the first place. Some of the mail is pure, hardcore nutso. I roundfile it and forget it. More of it is reasoned, entertaining, supportive or chiding in a rational tone, and I read it and consider what's been said and usually reply with a form letter I've had to devise simply as a matter of survival.

Occasionally I get a letter that gives me pause. Mr. Chambers's letter was one of those. If I didn't know purely on instinct that he was running off jingo phrases that he'd swallowed whole, if I didn't know he was wrong purely on gut instinct or by my association with student movements for ten and more years, the reopening of the Kent State Massacre case by the Attorney General would convince me. So it's too easy merely to disregard a letter like that, and say, "What an asshole." But consider the letter. It isn't illiterate, it isn't rancorous, it isn't redneck or written on toilet paper. It is a simple, polite, straightforward attempt to straighten out what the correspondent takes to be incorrect thinking on my part. One cannot dismiss this kind of letter. It is from an ordinary human being, speaking about extraordinary events, and genuinely believing what he writes. Chambers really does believe those poor, innocent kids were Communist tools who deserved to die.

Now that scares the piss out of me.

That is approaching oblivion. It is reaping the whirlwind of half a decade of Nixon/Agnew brainwashing and paranoia. It is a perfectly apocryphal example of the reconditeness to which The Common Man in our time clings with suicidal ferocity. I won't go into my little dance

about the
loathsomeness of The Common Man, nor even flay again the body of stupidity to which
“commonness”
speaks. I'll merely point out that the Ellison who believed in the revolutionary
Movement of the young and
the frustrated and the angry in the Sixties, is not the Ellison of the Seventies who has
seen students sink
back into a charming Fifties apathy (with a simultaneous totemization of the banalities
and mannerisms of
those McCarthy Witch-Hunt Fifties), who has listened long and hard to the Chambers
letter and hears in it a
tone wholly in tune with the voice of the turtle heard in the land, who-when the defenses
are down in the
tiny hours after The Late Late Show--laments for all the martyrs who packed it in, in the
name of “change,”
only to turn around a mere five years later and see the status returned to quo.

No, it is an Ellison closer to that scabby kid in Lathrop's dust who confronts you now.
When I
signed the contract for this book, I was prepared to ring out clarion calls about keeping
the heat on The
Establishment, making a better condition of life for everyone. But it's four years later
and Vacca's The
Coming Dark Age has been published which, if you haven't read it, you should go out at
once and get it,
and it plays the final notes of the death rigadon for Society As We Know It...so why
should I bother.

We are clearly on a slide-trough to destruction.

Watergate, the energy crisis, apartheid, holy wars, venality, vigilantism, apathy,
corruption,
fanaticism, racism, the deification of stupidity...none of these would be so terrifyingly
prophetic of our rush
to the grave were it not for the capabilities we possess to do ourselves in so efficiently
and swiftly. The
great lizards owned the planet for something like 130,000,000 years, but they didn't have
slant-well drilling,
pesticides, pollution, fast breeders, defoliants, demagogues, thermonuclear warheads,
nonbiodegradable
plastics, The Pentagon, The Kremlin, The General Staff of the Peoples' Army, Ronald
Reagan, Richard

Nixon and the FBI.

Poor lizards. What joys they missed. Had they not been so culturally deprived, they might have sunk into the swamps in a mere three thousand years.

If it sounds as though I still care, disabuse yourself of the idea. I've done too many college lectures. I've seen too many classrooms filled with the no-neck children of parents whose motivation in life was, "My kid's gonna have the education I dint have." I've seen too many of those kids nodding off between Chaucer and Suckling, and I have grown disenchanted. You've let it ride too long, troops. You've frittered and fiddled and enshrined the hypocrites and slaughtered the dreamers, and now you can only get five gallons in your gas tank.

And if I've learned a lesson from that terrible time of fire and blood, it is that most reformers in the pure sense are clowns, shouting into the wind, blaming their own guilts and making no ripple whatever. For every Gandhi or Nader or Bertrand Russell or Thoreau, there are a hundred thousand Nixons to stifle freedom of expression, joy of living and preservation of the past. (My self-disillusionment in this area shows itself in the story "Silent in Gehenna," included in this collection.)

As for the future, well, I'm brought in mind of a quote by Albert Camus:

"Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present."

And the present is being ripped-off and screwed-over by the omnipresent philosophy of I'm all right, Jack, which is a working-class Englishman's term for screw you, baby, I've got mine. It's your future,

and you don't seem to give a royal damn what happens to it.

So the Ellison who writes this is a little more calloused and tougher than the one who went to

Selma with King in March of 1965, less hopeful and prone to sweeping gurdyloos. The Ellison sitting here now is an older version of the kid from Painesville who stopped trying to buck the tide of bigotry and stupidity and merely cut out to find the rest of the world.

Had I done this book in 1970, as originally planned, you'd find in this space a clarion call to revolution, a resounding challenge to the future. But it's four years later, Nixon time, and I've seen you sitting on your asses mumbling about impeachment. I've gone through ten years waiting for you to recognize how evil the war in the Nam was. I've watched you loaf and lumber through college and business and middle-class complacency, pursuing the twin goals of "happiness" and "security."

What fools you are. Happy, secure corpses you 'll be.

You're approaching oblivion, and you know it, and you won't do a thing to save yourselves.

As for me and you in this literary liaison, well, I've paid my dues. Now I'm going to merely sit here on the side and laugh my ass off at how you sink into the quagmire like the triceratops. I'm going to laugh and jeer and wiggle my ears at your death throes. And how will I do that? By writing my stories. That's how I get my fix. You can OD on religion or dope or war or toadburgers, for all I care. I'm over here, watching you, and giggling, and saying, "This is what tomorrow looks like, dummy."

And if you hear me sobbing once in a while, it's only because you've killed me, too, you fuckers.

I'm stuck on this spinning place with you, and I don't want to go, and you've killed me, and I resent it, and the best I can do is tell my little tomorrow stories and keep laughing as the whirlwind whips the dirt in the playground at Lathrop grade school into an ominous dust-devil.

Harlan Ellison

Los Angeles

September 1974

1 KNOX

In Germany they first came for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me-and by that time no one was left to speak up.

-PASTOR MARTIN NIEMÖLLER

They flushed the niggers from underground bunkers, out near the perimeter, and Charlie Knox killed his because he thought the boogie was going for a gun. As it turned out, he wasn't: but Knox didn't know that when he let fly.

Earlier that day Knox had gone to a fitness session and the ward Captain had reprimanded him for haste in firing. "These aren't shootouts, Knox. The idea is to level the weapon and point it in the right direction, not blow off your own leg. Now take it again. Another hour on the range, Saturday."

Even earlier that day, Knox had had lunch with his wife; he had done the cooking himself, and they had discussed how difficult it had become to get fresh vegetables, particularly carrots, since the new emergency measures had been put into effect. "But it's necessary," Brenda had said. "At least until the President can get things under control again." Knox had said something about radicals and Brenda had said, you can say that again.

And at the start of that day, Knox had found sealed instructions from the Patriotism Party in his readout tray at work. He slit open the red, white and blue plastic packet and saw he was scheduled for an operation that night.

Now they came up out of the ground like potato bugs, black and fat from living off starches, and clouds of infiltration gas billowed out after them. Knox's flushing team waited with truncheons raised, catching the first two across the skulls with beautiful back swings. They dropped, half in and half out of the hole, and the flushers grabbed them by their collars. They pulled them out fast and slung them across the

grass so those who followed wouldn't find the passage blocked.

They hadn't counted on more than a couple of exit holes. Suddenly the ground started to erupt spooks and they were jumping up and out all around the team. The flushers let their truncheons hang by the lanyards and went to more effective weaponry. Knox saw Ernie Buscher unship his scattergun and blow two of the jigs to pieces as they scrambled out of the ground. Pieces of nigger meat went east in a spray.

That was the moment when an owl hooted in a tree off to Knox's right, and he turned his head to look. "Behind you, Charlie!" Knox heard Ted Beckwith's warning. He turned back from the owl sound and right behind him the turf had popped open and there was a dinge crawling out like an

earthworm. There wasn't enough moon to see what he looked like, but Knox took a swing with his truncheon and missed.

“Stop!” he yelled, but the jig went right on getting to his feet and blundering away. “I said: stop, nigguh!”

And the boogie half-turned, and in the dim light Knox thought he was reaching inside his jumper jacket for a gun. Knox reacted with twice his best drill speed, had the banger off its Velcro pad and working before the shine could pull his hand out of his clothes. The spook's head opened up like a piece of overripe fruit and Knox was startled to see the stuff inside sparkled in the night. Then it went all over the place.

“Oh my God,” Knox said. He heard his voice as though it had come from someone standing very close beside him; but it had been himself.

He heard the words repeating themselves, fading away, dimmer and dimmer, a canyon echo disappearing in his mind.

There was firing going on all around him now. The bright golden flashes of scatterguns and bangers lighting up the clearing and reflecting off the perimeter. Then suddenly there was the shrill whistle of the ward Captain's warning, three shorts and a long, and the blasting became more sporadic, then finally stopped.

“All right, you men! That's enough! No one authorized--this! Now knock it off, right this minute. We'll take these people in.”

Knox realized he was standing where he had been standing for a long time. Ted Beckwith came to him and said, “You okay, Charlie?”

After a few moments Knox turned his head to stare into Beckwith's really handsome face, and he

heard that self that was himself saying, “My God, he just split open...”

Charlie Knox is. A man.

Who.

Stands 1.9 meters, weighs 191 pounds, has brown wavy hair cut short, squints slightly out of brown eyes, wears a mustache that is thick and brown and is kept neatly trimmed but not obsessively so, works out with 50 lb. barbells twice a day for ten minutes each session, drinks milk when he can get it and nothing but water when he can't, has had whooping cough, measles, mumps, chicken pox and twice broken his left forearm but otherwise is healthy.

He is thirty years old, does not like rings or other jewelry, has been married to Brenda for nine years, has two children (Rebecca, 8 and Ben, 7), never wears a hat, likes cold weather, shuffles his feet through the fallen leaves when he walks, has perfect pitch when he sings, likes to whistle, has never read a book all the way through, joined the Party two years ago at the compulsory outside age limit, has a diamond-shaped birthmark on his right thigh, and never learned to swim.

There are many things about the past Knox cannot remember. If. He ever knew them.

“Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you love me as much today as you did when we were married?”

“Sure.”

“As much as, or more than?”

“Same.”

“Not even a little less or more?”

“Nope. Exactly the same.”

“How can that be?”

“I don't like changing a good thing.”

“Oh, you.”

Then there was silence for a few minutes.

Then:

“You've started having bad dreams.”

“How do you know?”

“You talk in your sleep.”

“What do I say?”

“I can't make it out, a lot of it. But you whimper.”

“I don't whimper.”

“It sure sounds that way, Charlie.”

Silence.

“Brenda, you ever wonder where the materiel comes from?”

“What?”

“The materiel. The stuff we make on the line?”

“I don't know, Charlie; it's your job.”

Silence.

“You going over to the ward tonight?”

“For a while.”

“What are you reading?”

“Names. I'm memorizing.”

Silence, as Knox memorizes. He almost has it down perfect now. He's been memorizing for weeks. Nigger, spook, jig, coon, shade, dinge, spade, shine, boogie, darkie, burrhead; sheenie, mockie, hebe, yid, shonicker, kike; greaser, beaner, chili-belly, pocho, spic, wetback, meskin, halapecker; wop, guinea, dago, mackerel-snapper, bead-counter, poper, ring-kisser, vattik; kraut, dog-eater, redskin, gut-eater, polack, bohunk, mick, frog, limey, canuck, nip, chink, slanteye, gook, slope, creamer, dink, splib, shater, jungle bunny, christ-killer.

“What's all that you're memorizing?”

“Just some stuff.”

Silence.

“I don't think you love me.”

“I love you.”

“Then why don't you pay some attention to me?”

“I want to get ahead in the Party.”

Silence.

“I love you. I really do.”

“I know. It's just sometimes you ignore me.”

“I want to get ahead in the Party.”

Silence.

“What do I say?”

“When?”

“When I'm dreaming?”

“I don't know. I wake up and say something and you go back to sleep.”

“Do I ever talk about anything in particular?”

“That man you killed.”

“I don't talk about that.”

“I wouldn't lie about that to you, Charlie. You do.”

“No.”

Silence.

“I wonder where it all comes from.”

Silence.

“Are you unhappy, Charlie?”

“No, I'm okay.”

“Why don't you stay home tonight?”

“I can't. I want to get ahead in the Party.”

Silence.

“But I love you, Brenda. Honest to God, I do.”

“Sometimes I think you're chasing something.”

“I'll see you later. I'll wake you when I come in.”

On the assembly line, two weeks later, Knox was fitting rectangular green blocks into the appropriate rectangular holes in yellow bases, when the Line Supervisor stopped to congratulate him.

“Heard you had your first kill a couple of weeks ago, Knox,” he said. He waved to the next man on the line to pick up the beat while Knox talked. “Heard you really comported yourself like a champ. Top stuff, Knox.”

Knox smiled shyly. He had never really learned to accept compliments graciously. “Thanks, Mr. Hale.”

The music playing in the background was Sousa's Washington Post March, interpreted by the Oval Office Strings. It swirled softly through the air above the assembly line, and Knox found his speech-patterns keeping time.

“Knox,” Hale said, “come on over here where we can talk. I want to talk to you about something.”

Knox unbuckled his harness and slid out of the formfit. He followed the Line Supervisor to a corner of the manufactory. near the towering stacks of assembled block/bases, ready for disassembling and re-feed input at the other end of the line.

“You know that guy, works two down on your right?”

Hale asked. He was looking at Knox closely; very closely. Knox sensed his answer had to contain just the right tone.

“Quint?”

“Quintana, you mean.”

Hale had snapped the response in so quickly, Knox did not have a chance to say yeah, I know him, I've talked to him a few times, seems a nice enough guy. Now, he did not say it, though Hale was clearly waiting for him to say something.

“Changed his name?”

Hale nodded, with meaning.

“Oh,” Knox said, softly. He looked around as if trying to orient himself.

“Have you, uh, ever heard him say anything...?” Hale let the sentence trail off, but its directional indicator was blinking.

“Anything...what...?”

“Well, anything...peculiar. Troublesome, you know what I mean?”

Quite suddenly, Knox knew precisely what Hale meant. “I don't talk to him much. I keep to myself a lot.”

Hale pursued it. “But you have talked to him? You have heard him say things, is that it?”

Knox's mind was racing. “Nothing very much, just...”

“Just what?”

“Just about the line's speed, that's all.”

“When was that?”

“Oh, hell, Mr. Hale, I don't remem-”

“Could that have been a month ago, when we had that pile-up and the line had to be stopped for an hour?”

“Well, I don't know, exactly, it could have been.”

“Be sure, Knox. We don't want you indicting a man on a guess.” He was watching Knox like a shrike.

Indicting. The word burned in Knox's mind. But if Hale was asking these questions-and Hale was a ward lieutenant in the Party-there must be a good reason. Knox let his thoughts roll back quickly. Quint. Correction: Quintana. Man doesn't change his name unless he has something to hide. “Quintana.” That was a foreign name if ever he'd heard one. Probably a chili-belly. And, yes, Quint...ana had been saying all that about how fast the line moved, and how it didn't seem to serve any real purpose, fitting the block/bases together just to take them apart and put them together again...and that had been the same week of the pile-up, Knox was now sure of it. And the more thought he gave it, the clearer it became to him that Quintana was not what he seemed to be. Those little eyes, that way he moved his hands when he slipped the blocks into the holes.

“I'm sure.”

“Knox,” said Hale, and he was smiling tightly now, “you aren't just another average Party hanger-on. You've got spunk. Come see me over at the ward office one evening.”

And he walked away.

Knox returned to his formfit, buckled in, and took up the beat. But he kept half a watch on Quintana, down there on the right.

And when the conveyor belt began to jerk and stutter, Knox looked immediately: at Quintana: at the overflow of blocks piling up in front of him: at the base with the defective holes into which Quintana

was trying to hand-hammer a green block. So it was true. Quintana was a disrupter.

Someone yelled, "Get him!"

Knox was unbuckled and out of his formfit in a moment. Perhaps because he had been already alerted by his talk with Hale. Others were stumbling out of their assembly line trance, beginning to mill around looking for who the "get him" might be. But Knox knew!

He found a loading dock truck behind his station--it hadn't been there earlier-but it was there now- someone must have left it, contrary to regulations-and he wrenched loose the long iron rod that served as control handle for the truck. It was only three steps, three long steps, and he was standing over Quintana, who was desperately trying to clear away the pile-up.

Knox swung from the hips. The rod caught Quintana across the shoulders and he was jacked forward over the line. He half-twisted, throwing up his hands to protect his head, as Knox came around on the back swing.

The rod smashed across Quintana's throat, and his head skewed around till Knox heard cartilage snap. Then the others were there, dragging Quintana from his form/it.

They beat him, the ones in the back forcing away the ones in the front so everyone could have a chance, but in the end, it was Knox himself, Knox with the iron rod, who stood spraddle-legged over the disrupter, that greaser, and arched back till his stomach muscles were drumhead tight, the rod gripped perfectly with both hands, right thumb tucked inside left palm, and brought it straight back up and over and down, and crushed Quintana's skull with an impact sound like a dead fish hitting a plastic countertop.

Then Knox flipped the rod into a comer, stood over the dead beaner and looked around with a tight expression. "He won't fuck us up again. Let's get back to work."

As he buckled in, he looked across the manufactory, and Mr. Hale was staring at him.
He smiled,
proud.

Mr. Hale winked and gave him a “V.”

Charlie Knox. Is a man. Who.

Is lying in bed dreaming.

He is dreaming about men in black garments coming for him. Hold that. They aren't
men. Yes,
they are. No.

Charlie Knox cannot tell if they are men or not.

He thinks (in the dream) that they are men, but they don't walk like men. There is some
small alien
movement--the way a lizard scurries, stops, scurries is alien; the way a chicken bobs,
catches up, bobs is
alien--the way their limbs are hinged. But they are men. No. They must be men.

No. Definitely.

“Charlie!”

Silence.

“Charlie, wake up, you're crying, Charlie!”

“I'm not, I'm okay, what, what's that...uh?”

“You were crying in your sleep.”

“It was the coffee.”

“Who is Quintana, Charlie?”

“Nobody. A guy. Nobody.”

“Charlie, something awful is happening to you.”

“Shut up, Brenda. Let me sleep.”

Silence.

“Oh God.”

“Come, Charlie. Lie over here.”

“Hold me.”

“Don’t cry.”

Silence.

They stood outside the little kike’s store, waiting till the woman had looked at all the rotisseries and decided against any of them. They waited until she left, then Knox and Ernie Buscher went in.

“Mr. Kapp,” Ernie said, “I’ve come for my sofa and easy chair suite. My friend and I got a truck outside.”

Kapp was in his sixties. When he looked confused, his face became a cartographer’s delight.

“Suite, you say? What was the name, do you mind?”

“Buscher,” said Ernie. Then he spelled it. “You said you’d have it ready today.”

“Today? Saturday? I got no deliveries on Saturday. Are you sure it was a Saturday, you’re sure?”

“C’mon, Kapp,” Ernie said, his voice getting deeper, “don’t play jewdown with me. I

paid you,
you said today, now gimme my furniture.” Ernie’s eyes narrowed down, his jaw muscles tensed, he made a fist, let it relax, made it again. Ernie was unreliable, moved too fast.

The sheenie was nervous. “If you’ll wait just a minute, I’ll check my order book. When was it you said you bought this merchandise?”

“Don’t give me any shit, kike, get my stuff out here on the double before I kick your guts out!”

Kapp started to say something about the language being used, but Ernie needed no further provocation. He had enough for the investigation by the Party, right there on his recorder-tip. As Kapp raised his right hand to wave a finger in Ernie’s face, Ernie grabbed the hand and broke it. It was too fast for Knox, but it was on, so he went with it.

“Try to slug my friend, you kike sonofabitch,” he said, very loud and very clear so the tip would pick it up, “how about this!” He whipped the link-chain belt off his waist with a smooth movement and brought it down across Kapp's thin shoulders with a crack. The sharpened links ripped cloth and broke skin. Kapp screamed, and Ernie fell back to let Knox work.

Knox felt a sudden, blossoming joy in his mission, and using a chain was too impersonal, too removed. He went at the little mockie with his fists.

Ernie Buscher threw a table through the front window, into the street. Knox held Kapp with his left hand around the sheenie's throat, the drumming heels an inch off the floor, the trembling body against the wall. Steadily and smoothly, as though gauging the rebound of the big bag down in the gym, Knox jacked one punch after another into Kapp's face; right cheekbone, nose, left cheekbone, nose, jaw, nose-and it broke-left cheek, right cheek, nose, nose, nose. The sound of the table shattering the front window, and

its impact in the street, brought the others on the run.

They poured the kerosene over the breakfronts and dinette sets and ottomans and recliners. They tossed chairs into a pile in the center of the store, and yelled for Watson to bring the jellybomb.

“C'mon, Knox!” Ernie yelled. Knox put two final blows into Kapp's ruined face, then slung the little kike over his shoulder and carried him to the mound of shattered furniture in the center of the store. He flipped him over, and Kapp fell across the edge of a broken table. His spine cracked with a sound like borax furniture.

Then Knox followed the others outside, Watson handed him the jellybomb, because it was Knox's mission, and Knox pulled the tab, and slung the pill underhand, through the broken window.

They stood on the opposite side of the street, and when the first rush of heat came at them, they turned away to avoid getting their eyeballs singed. It was like a sirocco, then a whump of pressure and bits of what was inside the store, including Kapp, came slicing out through the broken front window. Flames slashed after the shrapnel, and erupted into the street. Then the entire building went up.

“Damn!” Knox said. A piece of glass had cut him across the back of his left hand. “Damn!”

Charlie Knox is a man who.

Refuses to ask the necessary questions.

And even if he could, he wouldn't. But he can't. That's been made sure of. He can't. Doesn't even know. They exist.

Those questions. And other things.

Training is very important for Charlie Knox. For Knox, training is important. To stay fit. To stay tough. Because.

That means.

Survival. And survival sometimes means getting a little cruel. Weakness kills.

And then the persons in black garments come and.

No.

There are no such things. Those are dreams. Those are delusions. Those are guilt. Those are fantasies. Those don't happen. Those persons in black garments, when the sky opens and they come in.

No.

Think about it. No.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“You know like what!”

“It's your imagination.”

“You keep doing that to me now, all the time.”

“I'm not doing anything, shut up.”

“You never talked to me like that.”

“I always talk the same.”

“You don't. You're different. You've changed, you're changing.”

“Shut up.”

“You're like an animal now, Charlie. You scare me.”

“Maybe that's what you need. To be scared. Maybe that'd shape you up.”

“What are you talking about!?!?”

“Don't yell at me, I'll clip you one.”

“Charlie, honey, what're you doing? You scare me.”

“Stop crying...I'm sorry. Honest to God, I'm sorry. It's just, oh, you know. There's another purge coming on at the ward.”

“But what's that got to do with me?”

Silence.

“Charlie?”

“Nothing. Stop crying.”

“Do you love me?”

Ted Beckwith was Knox's best friend. They joined the Party together, their wives exchanged secrets regularly, their kids went on camping trips out near the perimeter. Beckwith hated this life of endless and senseless assembly line drudgery, mindless holovision game shows, patch-on-the-sleeve heroism and provincial hatred. Ted Beckwith was a member of the underground. Beckwith tried not to let it show: that he despised everything Knox had become. He thought, at one time, that Knox might come in with him and the others. That he would take a walk out near the perimeter, and he would reveal all of it to Knox.

“There has to be more to life than this,” he thought he would say, on that day. “There has to be more than the rallies and the fitness sessions and the prayer meetings for the President's health. There has to be. The world has to be wider than what we have here, Charlie.” That was what he would say to Knox, on that day. But Knox had begun to change. It had started long before the night Knox killed his poor black nobody. It had been long before that. But on the night of the raid, the change had begun to accelerate. And then that business with Quint. Poor devil: he hadn't been involved with anyone. Just too inept to keep up his beat on the line. But Knox was forming anew, even then. And it had gone on.

Now Ted Beckwith knew Knox was one of them, one of the heroes with a patch on his sleeve. Now he could never tell him. Ted Beckwith had to go on being Knox's best friend, and he despised him.

Ted Beckwith did not think Knox knew about his secret involvement with the underground.

Beckwith was wrong.

Ted Beckwith came home. Knox watched from cover. As he walked up the front steps of his little house, Beckwith saw a terrible thing, a thing he could not believe. He had a dog, a beautiful dog, a golden retriever. As he walked up the steps of his house, he stopped and stared, because he could not believe what he saw. Tears came into his eyes and filled them; he slumped down on the top step, crying without being able to stop. Someone had held his beautiful dog by the throat, up against the wooden wall of the house, and had driven a long, thick nail through the throat and into the wood. The nail had been driven in, hammered in, all the way to the head. The nail head gleamed brightly through the fur, reflecting in the porch light. Knox could see it all the way across the street. The dog's four paws had been nailed to the wall. The dog had voided itself as it died, and the wall was smeared.

Beckwith sat there, refusing to look at the terrible thing nailed to his front porch wall.

After a long time, he got up and went inside. The house was dark. Knox saw the living room light go on; through the front window he saw Beckwith staring at the living room wall, at a thing more terrible than the dead animal outside.

Nailed to the wall, the same way his dog had been nailed, Beckwith saw, all in a row, his wife's best dress, his daughter's playsuit, and his son's T -shirt and jeans. All nailed to the wall at eye-level. The implications of the message were clear. Knox had intended it to be clear; Beckwith understood.

His family was having dinner down the street at Knox's house. He was supposed to join them as soon as he had cleaned up after work. He knew who was responsible for this.

Knox was responsible for it.

The Party would simply have killed him. But Knox must have said, let me take care of it, Ted Beckwith is my best friend, I will deactivate him.

Knox has said, with nails : Stop what you are doing. Stop right now. This minute. Or I will do what the Party wants me to do. I am giving you this humane and merciful break because I am your best friend. Now wash up and come to my house for dinner.

Turn off the porch light.

Knox was in on the raid at the high school. He was a squad leader, with three patches and a service commendation. He took the leader of the rebellion, a sixteen year old girl, to the bell tower of the high school, and raped her three times, and then threw her off.

Knox was made a Party Lieutenant and gathered the proof of revisionism that removed Hale from the ward. Knox took the contract on him. He also delivered the eulogy at the grinder ceremony.

Knox headed up the assault team on the Western Quadrant. He wore leather protective garments, moved through a cloud of infiltration gas, used a scattergun exclusively, and joyed in moving meticulously from sector to sector, street to street, house to house, room to room, slaughtering anything that moved or crawled or whimpered or pleaded or twitched. His promotion to Captain and ward selectman followed soon after.

Knox spent his recreation hours in the ward temple's interrogation chambers, quizzing malcontents. He began to collect fingers. They retained their look much longer than ears or cocks.

Knox spent three years getting ahead, but he hardly noticed the passage of time, it flew so fast.

Charlie Knox. Is. A man who.

Had been trained.

“Not me, Charlie...please, Charlie, what are you doing, not me!”

“Stop backing away. I'll make it quick.”

Across the bedroom. She picked up a pink mule with a pompon pouf on the toe. He followed.

With the knife. She raised the bedroom slipper over her head, heel turned toward Knox threateningly.

“There's a mistake, Charlie!”

“No mistake.”

“It wasn't my name on the list, honey, please!”

“They don't make mistakes.”

A shoe is no damned defense.

“Charlie, not me, I love you, honey. “

He. Stops.

He. Sees movement out of the. Corner. Of his eye.

He looks for the first time.

“Not me, Charlie!”

His conditioning. Breaks.

Persons in black garments. There.

They have always been there. Now he sees. Them.

They stood watching Knox as he backed his wife into the corner at knife point.

“Oh, my God...Brenda! Do you see them?”

“Please, Charlie...”

“No, it's okay, I won't hurt you...do you see them?”

“See who, Charlie?”

Silence from them. Knox stared at them, fully, openly. And he realized they had been there often, watching him, on the raid, in the manufactory, in the furniture store, as he drove nails, in the bell tower, as

he got ahead in the Party. They had always been there.

“I'm starting to remember, a lot of it is coming back.”

“Charlie, what're you talking about...don't hurt me, honey.”

“Brenda, listen: right there, standing right there, don't you see them?”

“I don't see anything, Charlie; are you all right? You wanna lay down a while, Charlie?
The kids
won't be home for a couple hours.”

“I don't know where they came from, another world I guess, but that doesn't matter.
They're
training us, to go out there for them, out there somewhere. But we weren't cruel enough.
They took up
where we left ourselves off.”

She lowered the slipper. He was rambling on now, saying things. The persons in black
garments
stood watching him, and there was almost a sadness on their faces, as though they had
spent a great deal of
time building something intricate and lovely and efficient, and now it had broken down.
Their expressions
did not speak of repair.

“They gave us the work on the line, and the words, and the missions, and the President's
health.
When did they come? How long ago? What do they want from-”

And he stopped.

He. Knew.

Charlie Knox is. A man who:

Had been a man.

Had been trained.

To go out there where he would not have been able to survive without their training.

Charlie Knox is a man who understood what he had been.

What he had become.

What he would have to be.

To be. Out there.

“Oh, God...”

Pain. And silence. Knox looked at his wife with eyes that might have belonged to the final moments of a golden retriever.

“I won't do it.”

“Won't do what, Charlie? Please, Charlie, talk sense, lie down a little.”

“You know I love you, honest to God I do.”

He turned the knife and gripped it with both hands and drove it deep into his own stomach.

For Knox, the porch light had been turned off.

She sits on the edge of the bed and cannot take her eyes from the memory of the man she lived with for nine years. The memory remains, the form on the floor is someone vaguely familiar but undeniably a stranger.

Finally, she rises, and begins to dust the room. She cleans thoroughly, mechanically, despite the dim black shapes she sees from the corner of her eye, shapes she takes to be dust. And so she cleans. Thoroughly. Mechanically.

Brenda Knox. Is. A woman who.

“The only thing we have to fear on this planet is man.”

CARL GUSTAV JUNG

Los Angeles, Shell Beach, Big Sur, Oakland.

California/1973

2 COLD FRIEND

Because I had died of cancer of the lymph glands, I was the only one saved when the world disappeared. The name for it was “spontaneous remission,” and as I understand it, it is not uncommon in the world of medicine. There is no explanation for it that any two physicians will agree upon, but it happens every so often. Your first question will be: why are you writing this if everyone else in the world is gone?

And my answer is: should I disappear, and should things ever change, there should be some small record available to whomever or whatever comes along.

That is hypocrisy. I write this because I am a thinking creature with an enormous ego, and I cannot bear to consider having been here, being gone, and leaving nothing behind. Since I will never have children to carry on my line, to preserve some tiny bit of my existence...since I will never make a mark in the world, because there is no world left... since I will never write a novel, or paste up a billboard, or have my face carved on Mt. Rushmore...I am writing this. Additionally, it keeps me busy. I have explored all three square blocks of what's left of the world, and quite frankly, there isn't much else to do to amuse myself. So I write this.

I have always had the detestable habit of having to justify myself.

Let me hear some vague rumor or snippet of gossip about myself, and I spend weeks tracking it down, refuting it, bringing to justice the one who passed the remark. Now that's just ridiculous. And here I am justifying myself again. This record is here, read it if you please, or don't. That's that.

I was in the hospital. I was terminal. Oxygen tent, tubes plugged into me everywhere, constantly sedated, the pain was the worst thing I've ever known, it never stopped. Then...I just started to get well. First I died, I know I died, don't ask me how I can say such a thing with complete assurance that I'm telling the truth, because if you've ever died, you'll know. Even under the knockout stuff they'd pumped into me, I still had some awareness. But when I died, it was as if I was strapped flat to the front of a subway car, spreadeagled to the wall, facing down the tunnel, into the blackness, and the subway car was hurtling along at a million miles an hour. I was utterly helpless. The air was being sucked out of my lungs and the train just slammed down that tunnel toward a little point of light. And in receding waves of sound I heard a whispering voice calling my name, over and over and over: Eu-gene, Eu-gene, Eu-gene, Eu-gene...

I went screaming down at that tiny square of light at the end of the tunnel, and I closed my eyes and could see it even with them closed. And then I crashed forward even faster, and went into the spot of light and everything was blinding, and I knew I was dead.

A long time later-I think it was two hundred years...on the other hand it may only have been a day or two--I opened my eyes and there I was in the hospital bed with a sheet up over my face.

I lay like that for almost a day. I could see the light of the ceiling fixture through the sheet. No one came to help me, and I felt weak and hungry.

Finally, I got angry, and I was so hungry I couldn't stand it any longer, so I whipped the sheet down off my face, and pulled the remaining tube out of my arm-I presumed it to be an intravenous feeding tube and whatever had been left in the bottle was what had sustained me-and got out of bed and slid my feet into my slippers-the heels of my feet were red and dry like the heels of old women in nursing homes--and in that ridiculous hospital gown I went looking for something to eat. I couldn't find the kitchen of the hospital at first, but I found a candy machine. I didn't have any dimes for it, but there was a nurse's station right there, and I was so angry at being ignored, I rummaged through some drawers and a purse under the counter till I found a handful of change.

I ate four Power House bars, two almond Hershey's and a box of those pink Canada mints.

Then, sucking on tropical fruit Life Savers, I went looking for the hospital staff.

Did I mention the hospital was empty?

The hospital was empty.

Everyone was gone, of course. I told you that at the outset. But it took me a few hours to establish the fact. So I got dressed and went outside. Everything looked the same. The name of this town is Hanover, New Hampshire, if you need to know. I won't bother with what the names of streets and things were when it was in the world, because I've given them all new names. It's my town now, all mine, so I decided I'd call it what I felt like calling it. But when this town was in the world, Dartmouth College was here, and there was good skiing, and it was desperately cold in the winter. Now the mountains are gone, and it hasn't been winter in a year or so. Dartmouth is also gone. It lay outside the three block area of what was saved when

the world vanished. There's a pizza place here, though. I don't know how to make pizza, though I've tried. I think I miss that most of all. Isn't that mundane! My God.

The world is gone, and all I seem to be able to dwell on is pizza. What hapless little creatures we humans were. Are. Am. I am.

So. I was alive again, and I suppose the only reason I didn't poof away with all the rest of them was that everyone thought I was dead. I suppose that's the reason. I don't really know. I'm guessing, of course; but since none of this made any sense at the time, that was my only conclusion.

If you think I'm terribly calm and rational about something as berserk as this, you can believe that I was frantic when I wandered out into the street in front of the hospital and saw the street was empty. I started walking, sticking my head into one store after another, looking for anybody. And every once in a while I'd stop and cup my hands around my mouth and yell, "Hey! Anybody! Eugene Harrison! Hey! Anybody there?" But there wasn't a soul.

When the world was here, I was a postal clerk. I'm not from Hanover. I lived in White Sulphur Springs. I was brought to Hanover, to the hospital, to die.

When I got to the end of the world, at the foot of the street where the hospital stood, I just stared. I sat down and dangled my feet over, and just stared.

Then I scrunched around and lay on my stomach and looked over the edge. The ground sloped back, under there, and beneath the sidewalk there was dirt, and I could see roots hanging out, and it was a wedge-shape to the chunk of world floating with me on it, and underneath the chunk there wasn't anything. I guess it's not anything. I tried lowering myself on a mountain-climber's rope once, about a month later, but even when I threw the rope over, it just lay there in the emptiness and wouldn't fall

straight down.

I think perhaps gravity is gone out there, too.

So. I got up and decided to circumnavigate the chunk. It was three blocks square, just the buildings and the bit of park and the hospital and some small houses. The U.S. Post Office is also there. I spent one day, a while later, a whole day, sorting the mail that had been left behind when the world vanished, stocking one of the clerks' windows, oiling the wheels of the carts, sewing up the storage bags with the heavy thread and monster needle every sub-station keeps in its larder. It was one of the dullest days of my life.

I don't want to say too much about myself-hypocrisy again -just enough to pass me on down to you so I won't be forgotten or faceless. I've already said my name is Eugene Harrison, from White Sulphur Springs, and I was a postal clerk. I was never married, but I've had relationships with at least four women. None of them lasted very long; I think they got tired of me, but I don't know for sure. I'm moderately educated, I went two years at Dartmouth before I dropped out and went to work in the Post Office. I was majoring in Arts and Letters, which means I thought perhaps I would go into advertising or television or journalism or something. That was certainly a waste of time. I can write things down in order, and even with a little grace, but I'm no writer, that's for certain. I can't keep myself at the writing for very long; I get very antsy. And I think I use the word "very" too much.

I wish I could tell you there was something particularly heroic or remarkable about me, beside the dying, that is, but I am just like all other people I've ever known. Or, like they were. They aren't any more. That's the truth, and I think it takes a big person to admit that he's very ordinary. My socks always matched. I forgot to fill the gas tank sometimes and ran out and had to carry a can up the road to the station. I shirked

some of my responsibilities. I made gallant gestures occasionally. I hate vegetables.

My interests were in travel and history. I never did much about either. I went to Yucatan one summer, and I read a lot of history books. Neither of those is very interesting.

It would be great to be able to say I was special, but I wasn't. I'm thirty-one years old, and I'm just plain damned average, damn it, I'm average, so stop it, stop your damned badgering! I'm a nothing, a nobody, you never even saw my face through the wicket when I gave you your stamps, you arrogant swine! You never paid me the least attention and you never asked me if I'd had a good day and you never noticed that I trimmed the borders of the stamps I sold you, if they weren't full sheets, because many people collect full sheets, but you never even noticed that little service!

That's how I was special. I cared about the little things. And you never paid any attention...

I don't care to tell you any more about myself. Listen, this is about what happened, not about me, and you don't care about me anyhow, so there's no need to carry on like that about myself.

Please excuse what I wrote just now. It was an outburst. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I cursed. I didn't mean to do that. I am a Lutheran. I attended Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in White Sulphur Springs. I was raised not to curse.

I'm going on now to what happened.

I walked all around the edge of the chunk of the world. It wasn't chopped off neatly. Whatever had done it, made the world vanish, had done it sloppily. The streets came to ragged ends, telephone lines trailed off where they'd dropped and some of them hung off into the emptiness, just floating like fishlines in water.

I should tell you what it looked like out there beyond the edge. It looked like a Winter snowfall,
murky and with falling motes of light like snowflakes, but it was dark, too. I could see through the dark.

That was what made it frightening: one shouldn't be able to see through the darkness. There was a wind out there, but it didn't blow. I can't describe that any better. You'll have to imagine it. And it wasn't cold or hot. It was just pleasant.

So I spent my days in what had been Hanover; I spent them all alone. And there was nothing heroic about me. Except that during the first week I saved my town from invasion about fifty times.

That will sound remarkable, but I assure you it wasn't. The first time it happened I was coming out of the Dartmouth Co-Op on the main street, carrying several paperbacks I had taken to read, when this Viking came screaming down the street. He was enormous, well over six feet tall, with a double-bitted axe in his hand, and a helmet with two horns, and a fierce orange beard, wearing furs and thongs and a bear skin cape, and he came right at me, shrieking in some barbarian language, with blood in his eyes and certain as God determined to hack me to bits.

I was terrified. I threw the paperbacks at him and would have run if I had been able to run, but I knew he'd catch me.

Except, what he did was: he threw up his free hand to ward off the paperbacks, and swerved around me and started running away from me down a side street. I couldn't understand what was happening, but I picked up the paperbacks and took off after him. I ran as fast as I could, which was pretty fast, and I started to catch up to him. When he looked over his shoulder and saw me coming, he screamed and ran like a madman.

I chased him right off the edge of the world.

He kept on running, right out into that darkness with the snowstorm in it, and he disappeared after a while, but I saw him still running at top speed till he was out of sight. I was afraid to go after him.

Later that day I turned back an attack by a German Stuka that strafed the main street, an attack by a Samurai warrior, an attack by a Moro with a huge batangas knife, an attack by a knight on a black horse- he carried a couched lance- and attacks by a Hun, a Visigoth, a Vandal, a Viet Cong with a machine gun, an Amazon with a mace, a Puerto Rican street mugger, a Teddy Boy with a cosh, a deranged and drugged disciple of Kali with a knotted silk rope, a Venetian swordsman with a left-hand dagger, and I forget which all that first day.

It went on that way all that week. It was all I could do to get any reading done.

Then they stopped, and I went about my business. But none of that was heroic. It was just part of the new order of things. At first I thought I was being tested, then I decided that was wrong. Actually, it got annoying, and I stood on the steps of the hospital and yelled at whoever it was responsible, "Look, I don't want to know about any more of this. It's just nonsense, so knock it off!"

And it stopped just like that. I was relieved.

I had no television or movies (the movie house was gone) or radio, but the electricity worked fine and I had music and some talking records. I listened to Dylan Thomas reading Under Milk Wood and Erroll Flynn telling the story of Robin Hood and Basil Rathbone telling the story of The Three Musketeers. That was very entertaining.

The water worked, and the gas, and the telephones didn't work. I was comfortable. There was no

sun in the sky, or moon at night, but I could always see as if it were daylight in the daytime, and clear enough to get around by night.

I saw her sitting on the front steps of the Post Office, I guess it was about a year after I'd died, and I hadn't seen anyone else after the invaders stopped doing their crazy screaming thing in the streets. She was just sitting there with her elbow propped on her knee and her chin resting in her palm.

I walked down the street to her, and stopped right in front of the Post Office. I was waiting for her to leap up and scream, "Amok! Amok!" or something, but she didn't. She just stared at me for a while.

She was awfully pretty. I'm not good at describing what people look like, but you can take it from me, she was very pretty. She was wearing a thin white gown that I could see through, and she was pretty all over. Her hair was long and gray, but not old gray; it was gray as if she liked it that way, the fashionable young person kind of gray. If you know what I'm getting at.

"How do you feel?" she asked, finally.

"I'm all right, thank you."

"Have you healed up nicely?"

"I knitted real well. Who are you? Where did you come from?"

She waved toward the end of the world, and around the street, and shrugged. "I don't know. I just sort of woke up here. Everybody else's gone, is that right?"

"That's right. They've been gone for about a year. Well, uh, where did you wake up?"

"Right here. I've been sitting here for about an hour. I was just starting to get my bearings. I thought I might be all alone here."

“Do you remember your name?”

She seemed annoyed at that. “Yes, of course, I remember my name. It's Opal Sellers. I'm from Boston.”

“This was Hanover, New Hampshire.”

“Who are you?”

“Eugene Harrison. From White Sulphur Springs.”

She looked very pale. I didn't say it, but that was the first thing about her I noticed. It wasn't the dress I could see through, really; it was the paleness. Just very white, as if she had been left out too long in the snow. I thought I could see the blood rushing along under the skin, but that was probably my imagination.

Now I know someone is going to think she was a ghost, or a vampire, or some alien creature dressed up to look like a human being, but as Nero Wolfe says in the mysteries, that is just flummery. She was a person, nothing more than that, and you can forget that sort of stuff, even with what comes next. She was as real as I was.

“How did you know I'd been sick?” I asked.

She shrugged again. “I don't know, I suppose I just knew, that's all. But I saw you coming out of the hospital up the street.”

“I live there. But how could you know I was sick? Actually, I almost died. Well, that's not accurate: I did die, but I'm all right now.”

“What do we do here?”

“Nothing much, just take it easy. The rest of the world is gone, and I don't know where,

so we just
sort of take it easy, I guess. There used to be a lot of crazy invasions, about a year ago,
but they stopped
pretty suddenly.”

“I'll need a place to live,” she said. “How about the hospital?”

“Well, that's fine with me,” I said, “but actually, I was going to take over one of those
little houses
over there. If you like, you can move into the one next door.”

So she did, and I did, and it was nice for a few weeks. I always went very slowly with
women. Or
maybe it's that they went slow with me. I'm a big believer that women give off radiation
or something, that
keeps a man from moving in on them if they don't want him to. I don't know much about
it, if you want the
truth.

We had a cordial relationship, Opal and I. She kept up her yard and I kept up mine. We
ate dinner
together a lot, and we saw each other frequently through the day. Once-when she
realized I was spending
time at the Post Office-she came in with a letter and came up to my window and asked
me for an air mail
stamp. She had money. I sold it to her. She took it and said, “Thank you for removing
those little white
borders; I always have trouble with them and usually rip the stamp or leave some on the
edge. That was
very nice of you, sir.” And she left.

I was too stunned and pleased to even consider where she was mailing the letter to.

Or to whom she was writing.

One night we had dinner together and she made fried chicken. The grocery store had a
large
supply of food, more than enough for us for a long time. It did bother me, of course, why
the milk was
always fresh, and the meat was always freshly cut, but I assumed it was part of the
scheme of things that
kept the lights and water working, that took away the garbage and kept the streets clean.

I never saw
anyone who did it, but it got done, so I didn't worry about it.

Look: before I died, when the world was here, I drove a mail truck and I rode a Ronda. I didn't know how either of those things worked, I mean aside from cleaning the spark plugs once in a while or filling the gas tanks, or superficial repairs like that. I never worried about it, because it got done, and that was the long and short of it. No one was any different. It was the same after everything vanished. As long as it worked, I didn't have to think about the logic of it, and if it had started going sour I would have; but it didn't, and that's all I want to say about that. You'd have done the same.

Anyhow. We had this fried chicken dinner, which I liked a lot because she made it just the way I like it, very dark and golden and crunchy on the surface and dry underneath, without that thin oily film that makes your teeth feel greasy. And we had some wine.

Now I don't drink much. I won't apologize. I can't hold it. But we had wine.

And I got, well, a little drunk, just a little. And I tried to touch her. And she was cold. Very cold.

Very very cold. And she yelled at me, "Don't ever touch me!"

Now that was just two weeks before she told me she loved me and wanted to be mine. I asked her what she meant by that, "be mine." I never wanted to own anybody. And I certainly had the idea she didn't want to be anybody's possession, but there it was.

"I love you, and I want to stay with you."

"There's no place to go."

"That isn't what I meant. We could still live here together and not see each other. I mean, I love you and want to share the world with you."

“I don't know if that's a good idea,” I said. I really wanted what she wanted, but I was afraid she'd get tired of me, and then what? Our situation wasn't too normal, at least by the usual standards I'd grown up with, if you catch my meaning.

So. She got angry, and went stalking out the door. I waited a few minutes to let her cool off, and then I went looking for her.

She had walked straight out to the edge of the world, and kept right on going. I don't think she knew I was following her.

I went back to my house and laid down.

When she came back, about two hours later I guess, I sat up and said, “Just who the dickens are you?”

She was furious, still furious. “Who the dickens are you?”

“I know who I am,” I said, getting angry too, “and I want to know who you are. I saw you walking out there off the edge. I can't do that!”

“Some of us are talented, some aren't. Learn to live with it.” Really a snotty answer, boy!

“I was here first! “

“That's what the Indians said and look what happened to them!”

“Dammit, are you responsible for all of this, for every crazy thing that happened?”

Then she really blew her stack and shouted at me. “Yes, you silly, irresponsible clown, I'm responsible. I did it all. I destroyed the world. Now what the hell are you going to do about it?”

I was too stunned to do anything. I hadn't really thought she was responsible, but when

she

admitted it, I didn't know what to say. I went over and tried to grab her by the shoulders, and I could feel that cold coming right off her. "You're not human," I said.

"Oh, go to hell, you idiot. I'm as human as you are. Humaner."

"You'd better tell me," I said, with a threatening tone, "or else"

"Or else what, you nerd? Or else I'll wipe out this last little chunk and you and everything else and I'll be all alone the way I was before I did it!"

"Did it?"

"Yes, did it. Blew it all away. Just sat back and put my thumb in my mouth and said, 'Vanish everything but Eugene Harrison, wherever he is, and me, and a little town where I can be with him.' And when I took my thumb out of my mouth, everything was gone. Boston was gone, and the sky and the earth and every other thing, and I had to go walking through that glop out there till I found you."

"Why?!"

"You don't even recognize me, do you, you idiot? You don't even remember Opal Sellers, do you?"

I stared at her.

"Dope!"

I continued staring.

"I was in your graduating class in high school. You were right behind me when we went up for our diplomas. I was wearing a white gown, and you were standing behind me during the invocation, and I was having my period, and I was spotting, and it had gone through the white gown, and you leaned over

and told me and I was embarrassed to death, but you gave me your mortarboard and I held it across my backside and I thought it was the kindest, nicest thing anyone had ever done. And I loved you, you simple stupid insensitive sonofabitch!”

And she let down the screen or the image or the mask or whatever it was that she'd put up over herself, which was why she was cold to the touch, and inside there was Opal Sellers, who was one of the ugliest girls I'd ever seen, and she knew that was what I thought, and she didn't wait a minute, but put her thumb in her mouth and started mumbling around it... but nothing happened.

Then she went completely out of her head and started screaming that she'd passed on the power to

me, and she couldn't do a thing about me, and she ran out the door.

I took off after her, and she went off the edge and kept going straight away like the Viking and the Stuka and the Hun and all the rest of them, which I guess she'd sent to liven things up for me so I'd feel heroic.

And that's it.

Gone. Just went. Where, I have no idea. I'm not leaving here, that's for sure, but I don't know what to do about it. Somebody ought to say I'm sorry to her, I mean she's a nice girl and all.

It's just I'm here and I'm comfortable, and who can ask for more than that. She was always talking about love. Well, damn, that wasn't love.

I don't think.

But what do I know? Girls always got tired of me very quickly.

I'm going to teach myself how to make pizza.

Gull Lake, Hickory Corners, Michigan/1973

3 KISS OF FIRE

He drank ice crystals laced with midnight and watched their world burn. A greenperson floated up beside him, and touched his sleeve. There was static electricity in the compartment; a tiny spark. "Mister Redditch, when you have a moment, the Designer would like to disturb air with you."

Redditch looked down. The greenperson's eye was watering. "Tell him I'll be along." The greenperson's flaccid skin went to an ivory-gray hue, capturing the disquiet and weariness in Redditch's voice. He floated away, adjusting his hue exactly, so the message could be transmitted without the slightest semantic misinterpretation.

Redditch turned back to the teleidoscope, the tanger, the sensu, the catcheye and the straight black tunnel that showed him their world burning. The solar prominences had died away to self-satisfied blandness; unctuous. There was little out there now but smoldering ash, but the sensu was still getting a reading high into the nines and the teleidoscope was turning it, turning it, combining colors and sending them back in some new spectral spectrum. He raised the drink to his lips, but he could not taste it. The tanger overrode, even in the control compartment. It was the smack of salt-rising bread and salamanders.

A rolling checker came out of its bay and made its way through the coils of readout sheets littering the deck. Redditch had designed and combined and set up the nova with great care, and

the sheets had
endlessly tongued out of the aesthetikon and he had let them lie. The checker got
through the tangle and
palmed open the hookup compartment and re-attached the feed to stateroom 611. But it
hardly mattered:
the clients in 611 had played gin rummy straight through the program. The checker
returned to its bay.

Redditch downed the last of his drink, ran his tongue around the rim of the hollow
crystal, and set
it down on the console. He sighed and rubbed his weary, itching eyes. He was tired from
the inside-out to
the very tips of his fingers. And now, the Designer...

When he emerged from the dropshaft and walked through the theater lounge, a blustery
purple-
class voyager and a fat duchess with sausage fingers and noisy rings greeted him,
congratulated him on the
performance, offered him social congress. The man was probably a salesman of myth-
sticks, and the
woman was clearly a remittance relative. He smiled and thanked them and hurried on
through the theater. A
clique still plugged into their tunnel applauded him, and he acknowledged their
appreciation with a vague
gesture of his sensor hand. It sparkled with reflected light from the overhead inkys.

Whores were busily trying to drum up some business, trying to catch a few voyagers
who had
absorbed the empathy of the programmed death and who were, at least for the moment,
“alive.”

They were having a rough time of it. One lithe creature with a charged ring through the
lips of her
vagina, was trying with all the powers at her command to get a thin, salivating
messenger to buy her favors.
She was bent over him, her hand inside his chiton, massaging his privates. But his eyes
were rolled up in
their sockets and Redditch would have taken odds her till and her ring would go empty.

A tag-team, two black-and-ochre Sedalians, had a suety emissary trapped deep in his
formfit. One
of them had pulled off his embassy pouch and sash, and had lowered herself onto his

body. It seemed unlikely she would be able to get him erect enough for insertion, and her sister was tonguing one of the several underarm vaginas the man had had surgically added to his grotesque bulk. While they worked over

him, Redditch passed and heard the man mumbling, "Don't be ridiculous, this is ridiculous, my sperm brings a thousand a decaliter, I'm certainly not going to give it away and pay you for the privilege." Redditch quite agreed. He wondered why the ship's comptrollers continued to hire on whores; they were virtually an anachronism, holdover from centuries before. They certainly couldn't be doing enough business to warrant their continued employment.

He kept walking. Once, after a long programming, he had passed through the theater and one of the new whores, a lanky young man with pustules, had propositioned him. Redditch had laughed and there'd been some repercussions with the Guild, until the Designer had straightened out the matter.

He saw her sitting alone, and when she looked up at him as he approached, the singular beauty contained in her face, particularly her slanted eyes, made him slow his pace. Her right arm was lying along the rest, and she bent it at the elbow, raising the slim-fingered hand. It was enough to stop him.

"You programmed the death?" she said, with no rising inflection. He nodded, smiling in a sudden rush of anticipation of her congratulations. She looked away.

He felt as though something had been stolen from him.

The Designer was lying out in a leaf chair that moved idly in its free-fall nimbus. Every eye in his forehead row was closed, but Redditch could tell he was perceiving his surroundings by

the fibrillation of
root threads that spiked his cheek-pouches. Crystals of ergonovine sparkled amid the
threads. The
Designer's backers were seated around the observatory suite.

“Come in,” the Designer said. The leaf chair moved.

“I'm in.” He slumped into a composeat and punched out tranquilizers and an antacid. He
wanted to
stay calm through it all. Outside the observatory cycle ports the nova phased through
from yellow ochre to
gold as he watched. ‘Something on your mind, Keltin?’”

The Designer opened three yes eyes.

“Where must your mind be?” He said it with carefully chilled contempt. A greenperson
hovered
just beyond the nimbus, unnecessarily translating the tone in colors.

Redditch yawned. “Madison Square Garden, a 1932 Paramount Pictures release starring
Jack
Oakie, Marian Nixon, Zasu Pitts, William Boyd and Lew Cody. ‘A romantic, dramatic
story of three men
and two girls fighting desperately to rout the mechanism of unseen forces.’ Running
time, seventy-six
minutes.”

One of the backers threw his drink at the bulkhead. He started to shout something, but a
checker
emerged from its bay and caught the crystal before it hit, sucking up every drop of fluid
before it could
stain the grass. The backer turned away in frustration.

The Designer opened a no eye. “There are clauses in your contract, Redditch.”

Redditch nodded. “But you won't use them.”

He only wished Keltin would relieve him. Far chance.

Another of the backers, a florid man with a thrilled and dyed topknot, hunched forward.
“You
can't possibly call that death viable? Sparks, man, there were actually paying guests

sleeping through it. I
saw a monitor estimate that had thirty-two per cent, that's thirty-two per cent of the
audience into the sevens
with boredom! How the hell do you expect us to drain off enough empathy to syndicate
this...this about you
call a death?"

Redditch sighed. "Stop inviting your relatives to the premieres and perhaps we'll get a
few guests
onboard who can still feel something."

"I don't have to take this!" the backer shouted.

"That's true," Redditch said. The tranquilizers were holding.

"That's true," said the Designer, meaning something else entirely. "Let me handle this,
Mr. Nym.
If you please."

"Stars!" Mr. Nym said. He turned away. Now there were two looking out the cycle
ports.

"Redditch, this isn't the first inadequate job you've programmed. The Faraway Forever
program.
The Rightful Loss program. Others."

"Maybe I'm bored."

"We're all bored, dammit," said a third backer. He had his hands clasped in his lap.

"I spend considerable time designing these deaths," the Designer continued, "and I
cannot permit
my work to be underdone this way. These gentlemen have very legitimate complaints.
Their audiences are
waiting for the syndication of what we mount out here; their business is providing their
audiences with top-
grade empathy material. When it goes to you from my workshop, it's right. When it's
actualized it lacks

verve, pace, timing. There are clauses in your contract. I won't tell you again."

Redditch rose. "Don't. Refer it to my Guild." He turned and left.

Behind him, all three backers were staring out the cycle ports as the nova phased to deep purple.

His soul was quiet.

He strode through the theater lounge quickly, no glance left, no glance right. If he was going to sedate and blot, he would do it alone.

She wasn't in her seat. The formfit still held the shape of her body. Glance right.

He floated lazily in the nimbus, his spine like water, his thoughts relaxed. He was talking to the memory box that contained his wife, dead these last sixty-three years-since his most recent anti-agapic rejuvenation.

"It's the end of summer, Annie."

"How did the children take it, Rai?"

They had had no children. It was an old memory box, the synthesizing channels were worn; the responses were frequently imprecise or non sequitur. The bead in which her voice had been cored, had become microscopically crusted; Annie now spoke with a slur and sometimes-drawl.

"I look about thirty now. They even fixed the prostate. I'm taller, and they lengthened the fingers on my sensor hand. I'm much faster at the console now, wider reach. But the work isn't any better."

"Why don't you speak to the Designer about it, darling?"

"That sententious lemming. I may be undertalented,

but at least I don't try to sustain a miserable existence by deluding myself I'm creating

great works
of art.”

He turned onto his stomach, staring out the port. It was dark out there. “ And while we float here talking, outside this great space-going vessel cut in the shape of a moonstone, the universe whirls past at millions of light-years an hour, doo-wah-diddy mop-mop.”

“Isn't that parsecs, dear?”

“How should I know. I'm a sensu programmer, not an astrophysicist.”

“Is it chilly in here, Rai?”

“Oh, Annie, forget it. Say something I haven't heard. I'm dying, Annie, dying of ennui and the stupids. I don't want, I don't need, I haven't anything, don't care!”

“What do you want me to say, dear? I miss you, I'm sorry you're lonely-”

“It's not even that I'm lonely. Annie, you went through three rejuvenations with me. You were the lucky one.”

“Lucky? Lucky that I died during the fourth? How do you get lucky out of that, Rai?”

“Because I've had to live sixty-three more years, and in another ten or fifteen I'm scheduled for a fifth, long-dead baby wife of mine, and I tell you three times-one two three -it's the end of summer, love. Gone. Done. All the birds has flowed south for the final flutter. I'm going to give it a pass when rejuve comes around. I'm going to settle into dust. Summer ends, goodbye. Mother of God, is this how Rico dies?”

“What sensu is that from, Rai?”

“Not sensu, Annie. Movie. Movie film. All-singing, all-dancing, all-talking. I've told you a million times, by direct count. Movie. Little Caesar, Edward G. Robinson, Warner Bros. Oh to hell with it, there

was a woman in the lounge tonight, Annie.”

“That's nice, sweetheart...was she attractive?”

“God help me, Annie, I wanted her! Do you know what that means to me? To want a woman again? I don't know what it was about her...I think she hated me...I could feel it, something deep and ugly when she stopped me...”

“That's nice, sweetheart...was she attractive?”

“She was bloody gorgeous, you ghost of Christmas Past. She was so unbelievably unreal I wanted to crawl inside her and live there. Annie...Annie...I'm going crazy with it all, with what I do, with the novae, with programming death for indolent swine who need their cheap death thrills to make it through the day just to make it through a day...God, Annie, speak to me, come out of that awful square coffin and save me, Annie! I want night, my baby, I want night and sleep and end to summer...”

The suite door hummed and a holograph of the one seeking entrance appeared in the tank. It was the woman from the theater lounge.

“That's nice, sweetheart...was she attractive?”

He swam out of the nimbus and whistled the door open. She came in and smiled at him.

“You were always like that when I was alive, Rai; you simply never talked to me; you never listened...”

He lurched sidewise and palmed the memory box to stillness.

“Yes?” She stared at him with curiosity and he said it again, “Yes?”

“A little conversation, Mr. Redditch.”

“I was just talking about you.”

“To your little black box?”

“To what's left of my wife.”

“I didn't mean to be flippant. It's very personal and dear to many people, I know.”

“Not to me. Annie's gone. I'm still here...and it's getting to be the end of summer.”

He motioned to the nimbus, and she walked to it with her eyes still on his face. “You're a very attractive human,” she said, removing her clothes and sliding into the free-fall glow.

“Can I get you something? A crystal? Something to eat?”

“Perhaps some water.”

He whistled up the dispenser. It rose from the grass-rugged deck, and revolved. “Fresh water, three sparkles of (seed) in it,” he said. The checker in the dispenser mixed up the drink and set it out for him to remove.

He carried it to her and she took it, giving him a faint look of amusement. “I seem to entertain you.”

She drank from the crystal, barely moving her lips. “You do.”

“You aren't from the Near Colony.”

“I'm not a Terrestrial.”

“I didn't want to say that; I thought it might offend.”

“We needn't circle each other, Mr. Redditch. Clearly, I sought you out, I want something from you, we can be straightline with one another.”

“Apart from sex, what do you want from me?”

“My, you're taking the initiative.”

“If you don't care for me, you can move out now. I'm frankly not up to badinage.” He turned sharply and went back to the dispenser. “It's the end of summer,” he said, softly.

She sipped at the cool water in the crystal. He turned back to her, a melt in its helical container warm against his hand, and caught her unguarded expression: there was so much amusement in her face, in every line of her languid body, he felt like an adolescent again. “Oh, Mr. Redditch!” Her chiding was as deep and meaningful as that of a mommy's suitor, feigning concern for the offspring of the ex-husband. He turned back a second time, feeling violence in him for the first time in years; furious at her for playing him like a puppet; furious at himself for being furious.

“That's all...get out.”

“The end of summer, Mr. Redditch?” She made no move to go. “What do you mean by the end of summer?”

“I said out. I mean out.”

“You're going to ignore the rejuvenation next time? You must want something on the other side very badly.”

“Who the hell are you? What do you want from me? It's been a bad day, a bad week, a rotten year and a stinking cycle, so why don't you just put an egg in your shoe and beat it.”

“My name is Jeen.”

He shook his head, totally bewildered. “What?”

“If we're going to touch, you should at least know my name,” she said, and held out the crystal for him to take it away. But when he reached out, she laid her other hand on his wrist and drew him into the nimbus. It had been a very long time since he had wanted a woman this way, but his

body betrayed him the
moment her lips touched his naked chest. He lay back and closed his eyes and she made
it all silk.

“Talk to me,” she said.

The things he said were not love matters.

He spoke of what it was to live as something like a man for over two hundred years, and
to grow
weary of it because its infinite variety did grow stale. He spoke of what he did to send
emotion and dreams
of conflict to a race that ruled whole galaxies, entire nations of planets, great sectors of
space. He was a
programmer of death. A practitioner of one of the last occupations left to humans. And
he spoke of ennui,

of jaded appetites, of nights and days aboard a moonstone vessel as large as a city.
Roaming through
emptiness till worlds were pinpointed. And then they were surveyed with sophisticated
equipment that told
them the peoples who had lived there were gone, but their racial memories were still
preserved in the stones
and soil and silted river bottoms of the planet. Like ghosts of alien dreams, the
remembrances of all times
past were still there, contained forever, immolated in the soulskins of worlds, like
haunted houses that had
soaked up the terrible events that had transpired within and retained them as ambience.
He spoke of
Designers and their special talents-those peculiar alien empaths-and how they designed
the demise of
whole solar systems.

How the endless sleeping memories of the peoples who had lived there were gathered
up as the
sun went nova; how they streamed into the sensu and the tanger and the other empathy
machines, to be
codified and stored and then taken back to the human worlds, to the New Colony, to
sustain the weary
existences of those who had no fresh dreams of their own.

And he closed with words about how he hated it.

“But the worlds are empty, aren't they?” she asked, and then put her face once more to his tensing flesh.

He could not speak. Not then.

But later he said, yes, they were empty.

Always empty, she asked.

Yes, always empty.

You're a very humane race.

I don't think there's anything left of humanity to us. We do it because it's for a greater good. And he laughed at the words, greater good. His fingers roamed over her body. He grew excited once more. It had been so long ago.

“On my world,” she said, “we live much warmer than you. In times past, my race had the power of flight. We have a heritage of sky. Closed in like this makes me uneasy.” He held her in the circle of his arms, his thigh between her long legs, and he drew his fingers down through her thick, deep blue hair.

“I know words and songs from four hundred years of myself and my race,” he said, “and I wish to God I could think of something more potent to use, but 'I love you' and 'Thank you' are the only ones that come to mind...those, and 'The Earth moved,' but I'd better not use it, or I'll start to laugh, and I don't want to laugh.”

He slid his hand down to her stomach. She had no navel. Very small breasts. Extra ribs. She was very beautiful.

“I'm happy.”

“When we care, we have a way of making it last much longer. Would you?”

He nodded and her head lay at his shoulder and she felt him move. She sat up, kneeling before him in the nimbus. Her earring was hollow, and from it she took a tiny jewel that pulsed with pale light. She crushed it under his nose and leaned forward so she could inhale the pale light mist that sprang up from the dead jewel. Then she lay down again, precisely fitting in to the waiting space.

And in a moment they began again...

...as she took him with her to her world.

A warm world, all sky, with a single sun that held the same pale light as the jewel she had used to drug him. They flew, and he saw her people as they had been ten thousand years before. Lovely with wings, bright with the expectation of a thousand years of life.

Then she let him see how they died. In the night.

They fell from the sky like tracers of light, brilliant, burning. Onto the great dust deserts already filled with the ashes of their ancestors.

Her voice was warm and soft in his mind. “My people live with the sky for a thousand years; when their time comes, they go to rest with all those who came before them.

“The deserts of dust are the resting places of my race, generation upon generation, returned to their primal dust... waiting for the ten thousand years to pass until they are reborn.”

The world of sky and dust swam in his mind and as though it were captured in the catch eye it faded back and back; he was looking down on the world of the phoenix creatures from deep space, and he knew why she had drugged him, why she had taken him into her mind's memory, why

she had come to
him.

The death he had programmed had been the death of her sun, her world. Her people.

They came back to the nimbus within the suite in the moonstone vessel. He could not move, but she turned him so he could stare out through the cycle port at the emptiness where her world had been. Only dust remained. And she let him hear one last trailing scream from that world, at the moment of its death; the wail of her race that would never rise from its own dust and ashes.

The ten thousand years might pass, but the phoenix people would never again soar through their skies.

“Can you hear me? Can you speak? I want you to know why.”

His mouth was thick and his speech was clumsy, but he heard her and he could speak and he said he understood. She bent to him and took his face in her cool hands. “Centuries ago, my ancestors were sent away. They were...” her hesitation was filled with pain and loneliness, “...imperfect.” She turned away for a moment and he saw high on her back two knots of atrophied muscle, and the vision of winged men and women came to him as it had in the vision she'd let him see, and he understood that, too. Then she turned back, stronger. “There were a few like them in every generation, and they gave birth to others who gave birth to us. But no more. Now we are so few, so very few. Now almost all the people are gone.”

“It was a mistake,” he said. She could not tell what he had said through the drug, and he repeated it. She looked at him and nodded gently; but she was stronger.

“You said there was very little left of humanity in your race. That is the truest thing you could have said. What I do is what will be done to all of you. There are a few more of my race,

and when they are
gone there will be others, of other races. And they will finish the job. You may not be the
first, but you will
certainly not be the last. Your time is past. You had your chance and turned it against
every race you ever
met. And now that your time is done, you think you'll take everyone with you.”

He could not regret dying, as he knew he would die. She was right. The time for men
had come
and gone, and what they did now was useless, but more than useless...it was senseless.

Unlike her people, men did not have the good grace to go off alone and die. They tried,
in their
deranged way, to drag the universe into the grave with them. Not just the leaching off of
preserved
memories for the momentary amusement of the jaded and corrupt, but everything men
did, now that they
owned the universe. It was better that the human race be aided in its slovenly demise
than to be allowed to
leave nothing but ashes when it vanished at last.

He had killed her race, lying sleeping, waiting to be reborn in flames. So he could not
hate her.
Nor did she need to know that she brought him the dearest gift he had ever received. It
was the end of
summer and he was content knowing he would not have to wait for the chill of winter to
descend on his
race.

“I'm happy,” he said.

She may have known what he meant. He thought she knew: her eyes were moist as she
bent to
him for the final time, and kissed him.

There were flames and heat as great as a nova and then there was nothing but ash that
floated
freely in the nimbus.

When they came to the suite of the sensu programmer, none of them knew they were
looking at
the last days of men. Only Keltin, the Designer, seemed to understand, in some deep

racial way, and he said
nothing.

But he smiled in expectation as the moonstone ship sailed away into the eternal night.

Palatine, Illinois; Los Angeles, California/1972

4 PAULIE
CHARMED
THE SLEEPING
WOMAN

“She'll be listening, Paulie, you can bet on that,” I said to him, touching him lightly on the shoulder. “She ain't dead, Paulie, nobody like her could ever really die.” But he didn't care, Paulie didn't. All he knew was that one fine listener, that girl he'd dug and loved and spent so many notes on, she was gone. Some bad thing had happened and Ginny was dead, in her family's crypt out in the boneyard, and they wouldn't even

allow Paulie to come to the funeral. Rich parents, Ginny's parents, and they was bugged at her first for having left the family and the old escutcheon, and second for having taken up with what they called “a broken down wastrel jazz musician.”

Which was flat-out not true. Paulie was the best.

People like that have no idea what it's like, hearing a horn like Paulie. Bright as a penny, and soft and quick and full of tiny things being said close into your ear...that was Paulie. You can know Miles, and

you can remember Brownie, and you can talk it up that Diz uses a fine axe, and still not take it away from Paulie. He's what Chet Baker might have become, if he hadn't turned himself inside out and lost it all, or (and Hentoff called me a whack one night when I said this to him) if Bix had lived and gone through swing and bop and funk and cool and soul crap. But that's just my feeling, falling down on the way Paulie phrases, and his soft blue stuff, and the airy changes. That's just my bag, so forget it; has nothin' to do with Paulie and Ginny, except I wanted to make it clear that Paulie was good. Maybe great, even. No one can tag great, I'm hip, but Paulie was as close to it as I'll ever care to go.

So Ginny's folks had no truth in their put-down. He was not only the finest trumpet I've ever blown guitar with, but after that axe of his, he loved Ginny more than his eyes, even. So when she died, and they took her away-and her snotty sonofabitch brother Karl, or whatever the hell that fruit's name was, spit on Paulie-and put her in their creepy tomb, Paulie bust up pretty bad. And I said to him:

“Paulie, you got to listen, man, because Ginny'll always be with you. She loved to hear you play, Paulie, she really loved to hear you play, and wherever she is now, she's hearing you. So you got to get back with it, because if you let it lay there, then she won't hear a thing, ever.”

But it didn't take until later. Then Paulie got pretty smashed. He couldn't hold his liquor in the first place, and when he had to blow five sets a night, without her happy, loving round moony-face down there in front, it made him want to get plowed even more. So he got completely corked out of his nut, and he came to me while I was packing up the Gibson, and he said, “Johnnie, I gotta go play for her.”

Marshall, and Norman Skeets, both of them were halfway out the door of the club when Paulie laid it on me. They paused on the steps going up to the street, and they waited for me to talk him out of it and take him home to the sack, so they could go back to their respective broads and

wife. So I launched
into it and tried to calm him, but he was stuck on the idea.

“I'm goin' over to that thing they stuck her into, Johnnie, and I'm gonna charm her outta there. I'm gonna play so good she'll wake up and cry and come back to me, Johnnie.” He meant it. The kook really meant it. He wanted to go find that uppity creepy cemetery where Ginny's blue-blood parents had stuck her body, and blow trumpet for the dead. It was all at once laughable and pitiable and creepy. Like a double-talker giving you the business with the frammiss on the fortestan, and you standing there wondering what the hell is happening.

I tried to get him to sit down, but he had the horn in his mitt, and he was yanking away from me, walking a helluva lot straighter and truer than a drunk had any right to be walking. Right for the stairs and the outside.

Well. To make it short, we tried everything short of decking him, but he was set on it, so we came around to thinking maybe it would snap him out of it, that maybe he was acting nutty this way because he hadn't been allowed to attend the funeral and he felt guilty, though God knows Paulie hadn't had anything to do with the taxi that had run Ginny down in the street outside that Detroit club where Paulie and the rest of us had been booked.

So we figured it might straighten him out, like I say, and we got him to promise that if he blew for Ginny he'd come home and go to sleep.

So we piled into Marshall's Falcon and we drove out to the Island-and Long Island late at night is much creepier than Spanish Harlem-and finally found the cemetery. It was surrounded by a big iron fence, but Paulie made Marshall drive up close, and then we all got out, and with Marshall yelling that we'd dent his top, and Skeets telling him to shut up before we got pinched, we climbed on the car

and over the fence.

Into the tombstones. Dark and foggy and Christ it was just like a horror flick, except there went Paulie, like some kind of a nut, all through the tall grass where the graves hadn't been dug yet, past the piles of ready dirt, around a gang of tombs, and down this line of stones like he knew exactly where he was going.

As it turned out, he didn't have no more idea of where the hell he was going than we did. But we tagged along, and after we'd been circling and careening around there for ten or fifteen minutes, Marshall went hssst! and we dug him pointing to a big black shape with two dark angels hovering on one foot each, like gargoyles or something.

We called Paulie back (wondering where the caretaker was, if they had one, and why he hadn't heard us bumbling around in there). He came tottering over, and when he saw the legend on the bronze plate beside the door of that tomb, he sank down on his knees and we heard him making little talking noises to the ground, or to himself, maybe, but very sad and lonely and wanting.

It said:

VIRGINIA FORREST MADISON

Beloved Daughter

Born April 7, 1936

Died July 23, 1961 "She is always with us."

R.I.P.

And the other three of us just stood there quietly, remembering her, the way she had been before that stupid taxi had sent her through a florist's window. We remembered how she'd sit with one Scotch and two dozen cigarettes, a whole night, digging Paulie on the bandstand and just loving him with her eyes. We remembered it, and none of us felt it was wrong for Paulie to be here. I was glad I was with him. He was a good guy, and he didn't deserve all this pain.

Then Paulie got up, and he started to blow.

He put the horn to his mouth, and the little hard muscle-ridges of his upper lip stood out, and he started to blow something low and soft and new. It was a strange sound, all minor key and repetitive, with a wistful, searching thread in it. I'd never heard it before, and I knew damned well no one else had ever heard it, either.

It was like a million black birds with white wings sailing into the night sky. Like a sheet of coolness being drawn down over a fire. Like Paulie hungry and crying and asking her, charming her, calling her, out of that crypt, out into the night to hear him playing.

Then I got scared.

We was in a graveyard, for God's sake, and Paulie was just as clear as anything asking a dead girl to come on out of her casket with the gold handles and love him, need him, hold him and talk look see him.

It was the wrong thing to do. I knew that, and I'm not the least bit superstitious. There's just some things you know ain't proper. This was like that. A guy can be unhappy and want to get his girl back...but this was somethin' God might not like.

None of us could move. We was so scared I heard Skeets behind me and he was shivering so bad he had to put his hands in his pockets.

Then we heard the noise outta that crypt.

We heard her coming. I don't think anyone screamed, but we all knew Ginny was coming back;
and the way she had looked after that taxi ripped into her, none of us thought we could take it. But Paulie
just kept laying it on, so sweet and charming and compelling that we knew Ginny couldn't keep sleeping
with all that goodness coming at her.

Later, we got Paulie back over the fence, and into the car. We took him home, and I had three
straight ryes before I could make my eyes shut.

Paulie didn't play much after that, a gig now and then, but it doesn't matter. He has his ghosts.

There aren't no ghosts except the ones we buy with our guilty desires, you know that.
But with
Paulie, well, who knows which is better: a live emptiness or companionship with a dead memory that likes
soundless music?

I don't know, I'm not that good, that great a musician.

Chicago, Illinois/1961

5 I'M LOOKING
FOR KADAK

[A glossary of Yiddish words and their meanings follows on pp. 92-96. Please refer to same if you are farblondjet.]

You'll pardon me but my name is Evisse and I'm standing here in the middle of sand, talking to a butterfly,

and if I sound like I'm talking to myself, again you'll pardon but what can I tell you? A grown person standing talking to a butterfly. In sand.

So nu? What else can you expect? There are times you got to make adjustments, you got to let be a little. Just to get along. I'm not all that happy about this, if you want the specific truth. I've learned, God knows I've learned. I'm a Jew, and if there is a thing Jews have learned in over six thousand years, it's that you got to compromise if you want to make it to seven thousand. So, let be. I'll talk to this butterfly, hey you butterfly, and I'll pray for the best.

You don't understand. You got that look.

Listen: I read once in a book that they found a tribe of Jewish Indians, somewhere deep in the heart of South America. That was on the Earth. The Earth, shtumie! It's been in all the papers.

So. Jewish Indians. What a thing! And everyone wondered and yelled and made such a mishegoss that they had to send historians and sociologists and anthropologists and all manner of very learned types to establish if this was a true thing or maybe somebody was just lying.

And what they found was that maybe what had happened was that some galus from Spain, fleeing the Inquisition, got on board with Cortez and came to The New World, kayn-ahora, and when no one was looking, he ran away. So then he got farblondjet and wound up in some little place full

of very suggestible
native types, and being something of a tummeler he started teaching them about being
Jewish-just to keep
busy, you know what I mean? because Jews have never been missionaries, none of that
“converting” crap
other, I shouldn't name names, religions need to keep going, unlike Judaism which does
very cute thank
you on its own--and by the time all the smart-alecks found the tribe, they were keeping
kosher, and having
brises when the sons were born, and observing the High Holy Days, and not doing any
fishing on the
shabbes, and it was a very nice thing altogether.

So it shouldn't surprise anyone that there are Jews here on Zsouchmuhn. Zoochhhhhh-
mooohn.

With a chhhhh, not a kuh. You got a no-accent like a Litvak.

It shouldn't even surprise that I'm a Jew and I'm blue and I have eleven arms thereby
defying the
Law of Bilateral Symmetry and I am squat and round and move very close to the ground
by a series of
caterpillar feet set around the rim of ball joints and sockets on either side of my tuchis
which obeys the Law
of Bilateral Symmetry and when I've wound the feet tight I have to jump off the ground
so they can unwind
and then I move forward again which makes my movement very peculiar I'm told by
tourists without very
much class.

In the Universal Ephemeris I am referred to as a native of Theta 996:VI, Cluster
Messier 3 in
Canes Venatici. The VI is Zsouchmuhn. A baedeker from some publisher in the Crab
came here a few turns
ago and wrote a travel pamphlet on Zsouchmuhn; he kept calling me a Zsouchmoid; he
should grow in the
ground headfirst like a turnip. I am a Jew.

I don't know what a turnip is.

Now I'm raving. What it'll do to you, talking to a butterfly. I have a mission, and it's
making me
crazy, giving me shpilkess, you could die from a mission like this. I'm looking for

Kadak.

Hey you butterfly! A blink, a flutter, a movement it wouldn't hurt, you should make an indication
you can hear me, I shouldn't stand like a schlemiel telling you all this.

Nothing. You wouldn't give me a break.

Listen: if it wasn't for that oysvorf, that bum, Snodle, I wouldn't be here. I would be with my family and my lustnest concubines on Theta 996:111, what the Ephemeris calls Bromios, what we Jews call Kasrilevka. There is historical precedent for our naming Bromios another name, Kasrilevka. You'll read

Sholom Aleichem, you'll understand. A planet for schlimazels. I don't want to discuss it. That's where they're moving us. Everyone went. A few crazy ones stayed, there are always a few. But mostly, everyone went: who would want to stay? They're moving Zsouchmuhn. God knows where. Every time you look around they're dragging a place off and putting it somewhere else. I don't want to go into that. Terrible people, they got no hearts in them.

So we were sitting in the yeshiva, the last ten of us, a proper minyan, getting ready to sit shivah for the whole planet, for the last days we would be here, when that oysvor! Snodle had a seizure and up and died. Oh, a look: a question, maybe? Why were we sitting shivah in the rabbinical college when everybody else was running like a thief to get off the planet before those gonifs from the Relocation Center came with their skyhooks, a glitch if ever I saw one, shady, disreputable, to give a yank and drag a place out of orbit and give a shove and jam in big meshiginah magnets to float around where a nice, cute world was, just to keep the Cluster running smooth, when they pull out a world everything shouldn't go bump together...?
Why, you ask me. So, I'll tell you why.

Because, Mr. I-Won't-Talk-Or-Even-Flap-My-Wings Butterfly, shivah is the holiest of the holies.

Because the Talmud says when you mourn the dead you get ten Jewish men who come to the home of the deceased, not eight or seven or four, but ten men, and you sit and you pray, and you hold services, and you light the yorzeit candles, and you recite the kaddish which as every intelligent life-form in the Cluster except maybe a nut butterfly knows, is the prayer for the dead, in honor and praise of God and the deceased.

And why do we want to sit shivah for a world that was such a good home for us for so many turns? Because, and it strikes me foolishness to expect a farchachdah butterfly to grasp what I'm trying to say here, because God has been good to us here, and we've property (which now is gone) and we've got families (which now are gone) and we've got our health (which, if I continue talking to you I'll be losing shortly) and God's name can be hallowed by word of mouth only in the presence of others-the community of worshippers-the congregation-the minyan of ten, and that's why.

You know, even for a butterfly, you don't look Jewish.

So nu, now you understand a little maybe? Zsouchmuhn was the goldeneh medina for us, the golden country; it was good here, we were happy here, now we have to move to Kasrilevka, a world for schlimazels. Not even a Red Sea to be parted, it isn't slavery, it's just a world that's not enough, you know

what I mean? So we wanted to pay last respects. It's not so crazy. And everyone went, and only the ten of us left to sit the seven turns till we went away and Zsouchmuhn was goniffed out of the sky to go God-knows-where. It would have been fine, except for that Snodle, that crazy. Who seized up and died on us.

So where would we get a tenth man for the minyan?

There were only nine Jews on the whole planet.

Then Snodle said, "There's always Kadak."

"Shut up, you're dead," Reb Jashaia said, but it didn't do any good. Snodle kept suggesting Kadak.

You should understand, one of the drawbacks of my species, which maybe a butterfly wouldn't know, is that when we die, and pass on, there's still talking. Nuhdzhing. Oh. You want to know how that can be. How a dead Jew can talk, through the veil, from the other side. What am I, a science authority, I should know how that works? I wouldn't lie on you: I don't know. Always it's been the same. One of us seizes up and dies, and the body squats there and doesn't decay the way the tourists' do when they get shikker in a blind pig bar in downtown Houmitz and stagger out in the gutter and get knocked over by a tumbrel on the way to the casinos.

But the voice starts up. Nuhdzhing!

It probably has something to do with the soul, but I wouldn't put a bet on that; all I can say is thank God we don't worship ancestors here on Zsouchmuhn, because we'd have such a sky full of nuhdzHING old farts telling us how to run our lives, it wouldn't be worth it to keep on this side of the veil. Bless the name of Abraham, after a while they shut up and go off somewhere.

Probably to nuhdz each other, they should rest in peace already and stop talking.

But Snodle wasn't going away. He died, and now he was demanding we not only sit shiv ah out of courtesy for having lived here so prosperously, but we should also, you shouldn't take it as an imposition, sit shivah for him! An oysvorf, that Snodle.

"There's always Kadak," he said. His voice came from a nowhere spot in the air about a foot

above his body, which was dumped upside-down on a table in the yeshiva.

“Snodle, if you don't mind,” said Shmuel with the one good antenna, “would you kindly shut your

face and let us handle this?” Then seeing, I suppose for the first time, that Snodle was upside-down, he added, but softly he shouldn't speak ill of the dead, “I always said he talked through his tuchis.”

“I'll turn him over,” said Chaim with the defective unwind in his hop.

“Let be,” said Shmuel. “I like this end better than the other.”

“This is getting us nowhere,” said Yitzchak. “The gonifs come in a little while to take away the planet, we can't stay, we can't go, and I have lust-nest concubines lubricating and lactating on Bromios this very minute.”

“Kasrilevka,” said Avram.

“Kasrilevka,” Yitzchak agreed, his prop-arm, the one in the back, curling an ungrammatical apology.

“A planet of ten million Snodles,” said Yankel.

“There's always Kadak,” said Snodle.

“Who is this Kadak the oysvorf's babbling about?” asked Meyer Kahaha. The rest of us rolled our eyes at the remark. Ninety-six tsuris-filled eyes rolled. Meyer Kahaha was always the town schlemiel, if there was a bigger oysvorf than Snodle, it was Meyer Kahaha.

Yankel stuck the tip of his pointing arm in Meyer Kahaha's ninth eye, the one with the cataract.

“Quiet!”

We sat and stared at each other. Finally, Moishe said, “He's right. It's another tragedy we

can

mourn on Tisha Ba'b (if they have enough turns on Kasrilevka for Tisha Ba'b to fall in the right month), but the oysvor! and the schlemiel are right. Our only hope is Kadak, lightning shouldn't strike me for saying it."

"Someone will have to go find him," said Avram.

"Not me," said Yankel. "A mission for a fool."

Then Reb Jshaia, who was the wisest of all the blue Jews on Zsouchmuhn, even before the great exodus, one or two of them it wouldn't have hurt if they'd stayed behind to give a little help so we shouldn't find out too late we were in this miserable state of things because Snodle seized up and died, Reb Jshaia nodded that it was a mission for a fool and he said, "We'll send Evsise."

"Thanks a lot for that," I said.

He looked at me with the six eyes on the front, and he said, "Evsise. Should we send Shmuel with one good antenna? Should we send Chaim with a defective hop? Should we send Yitzchak who is so crippled with lust he gets cramps? Maybe we should send Yankel who is older than even Snodle and would die from the journey then we'd have to find two Jews? Moishe? Moishe argues with everyone. Some cooperation he'd get."

"What about Avram?" I asked. Avram looked away.

"You want I should talk about Avram's problem here in front of an open Talmud, here in front of the dead, right here in front of God and everyone?" Reb Jshaia looked stem.

"Forget it. I'm sorry I mentioned," I said.

"Maybe I should go myself, the Rabbi should go? Or maybe you'd prefer we sent Meyer Kahaha?"

"You made your point," I said. "I'll go. I'm far from a happy person about this, and you

should

know it before I go. But I'll do it. You'll never see me again, I'll die out there looking for that Kadak, but I'll go.”

I started for the burrow exit of the yeshiva. I passed Yitzchak, who looked sheepish. “Cramps,” I muttered. “It should only wither up and fall off like a dead leaf.”

Then I rolled, hopped and unwound my way up the tunnel to the street, and went looking for Kadak.

The last time I saw Kadak was seventeen years ago. He was squatting in the synagogue during Purim, and suddenly he rolled into the aisle, tore off his yarmulkah, his tallis and his t'fillin, all at once with his top three arms on each side, threw them into the aisle, yelled he had had it with Judaism, and was converting to the Church of the Apostates.

That was the last any of us saw of him. Good riddance to bad rubbish, you ask me. Kadak, to begin with, was never my favorite person, if you want the truth. He snuffled.

Oh, that isn't such an averah, I can see you think I'm making a big something out of a big nothing.

Listen, Mr. Terrific-I-Flap-My-Wings-And-You-Should-Notice-Me, I'm a person who says what's on his mind, I don't make no moofky-foofky with anyone. You want someone who beats around the bushes you should talk to that Avram. Me, I'll tell you I couldn't stand that Kadak's snuffling, all the time snuffling.

You sit in the shout and right in the middle of the Shema, right in the direct absolute center of “Hear O

Israel, the Lord, Our God, the Lord is One,” comes a snuffle that sounds like a double-snouted peggalomer in a mud-wallow.

He had a snuffle made you want to go take a bath.

A terrible snuffle, if you'll listen to me for a minute. He was the kind, that Kadak, he wouldn't care when he'd snuffle. When you were sleeping, eating, shtupping, making a ka-ka, he didn't care...would come a blast, a snort, a rotten snuffle could make you want to get rid of your last three or four meals. And forget talking to him: how can you talk to a person who punctuates with a snuffle?

So when he went off to convert to the Apostates, sure there was a scandal...there weren't that many Jews on Zsouchmuhn...anything was a scandal...but to be absolutely frank with you, I'll speak my mind no matter what, we were very relieved. To be free of that snuffle was already a naches, like getting one free. Or seven for five.

So now I had to go all over there and back, looking for that terrible snuffle. It was an ugliness I could live without, you should pardon my frankness.

But I went through downtown Houmitz and went over to the Holy Cathedral of the Church of the Apostates. The city was in a very bad way. When everyone had gone to Kasrilevka, they took everything that wasn't bolted down. They also took everything that was bolted down. They also took the bolts. Not to mention a lot of the soil it was all bolted down into. Big holes, everywhere. Zsouchmuhn was not, at this point in time I'm telling you about, such a cute little world anymore. It looked like an old man with a krenk. Like a pisher with acne. Very unpleasant, it wasn't a trip I care to talk about.

But there was a little left of that crazy farchachdah Cathedral still standing. Why shouldn't they let it stand: how much does it cost to make a new one? String. The dummies, they make a holy place from string and spit and bits of dried crap off the streets and their bodies, I don't even want to think about what a sacrilege.

I rolled inside. The smell, you could die from the smell. On Zsouchmuhn here, we got a groundworm, this filthy little segmented thing everyone calls a pincercrusher. Lumbricus rubellus

Venaticus my Uncle Beppo, the lunatic zoologist, calls it. It isn't at all peculiar why I remember a foreign name like that-Latin is what it is, I'm a bissel scholar, too, you know, not such a dummy as you might think, and it's no wonder Reb Jeshaiia sent me on this it-could-kill-a-lesser-Jew mission to find Kadak. I remember because once I had one of them bite me in the tuchis when I went swimming, and you learn these things, believe you me, you learn them. This rotten little worm it's got pinching things in the front and on the sides, and it lies in wait for a juicy tuchis and when you're just ready to relax in a swim, or maybe to take a nap on a picnic, chomp!, it goes right for the tuchis. And it hangs on with those triple-damned the entire species should go straight to Gehenna pinch-things, and it makes me sick to remember, but it sucks the blood right out of you, right through your tuchis. And you couldn't get one off, medical science as hootsy-tootsy as it is, you could varf from the size of a doctor's bill, even the hootsie-tootsies can't get one off you. The only thing that does it, is you get a musician and he bangs together a pair of cymbals, and it falls off. All bloated up with your blood, leaving a bunch of little pinch-marks on your tuchis you're ashamed to let your lust-mates see it. And don't ask why the doctors don't carry cymbals with them for such occasions. You wouldn't believe the union problems here on Zsouchmuhn, which includes musicians and doctors both, so you'd better be near a band and not a hospital when a pincercrusher bites you in the tuchis, otherwise forget it. And when the terrible thing falls off, it goes pop! and it bursts, and all the awful crap it had in it makes a stink you shouldn't even think about it, the eyes, all twelve of them could roll up in your head, with the smell of all that feh! and blood and crap.

Inside the Cathedral of the Church of the Apostates, the smell. Like a million popped pincercrushers. I almost went over on my face from that smell.

It took three hands to hold all of my nose, a little whiff shouldn't slip through.

I started reeling around, hitting the strings they called walls. Fortunately, I rolled around near the entrance, and I stretched my nose a couple of feet outside, and I took a very deep breath, and snapped my nose back, and held it, and looked around.

There were still half a dozen of them who hadn't run off to Kasrilevka, all down on their stomachs, their feet winding up and unwinding, very fast, their faces down in the mud and crap in front of the altar, doing what I suppose they call praying. To that idol of theirs, Seymour, or Simon, or Shtumie, whatever they call it. I should know the name of a heathen idol, you bet your life never, better I should know the Latin name of a miserable worm that stinks first, let me tell you.

So there they were, and let me assure you it pained me in several more than a couple of ways to have to go over to them, but...I'm looking for Kadak.

“Hey,” I said to one of them. A terrific look at his tuchis I got. Such a perfect tuchis, if ever there was one, for a pincercrusher to come and chomp!

Nothing. “Hey!” I yelled it a second time. No attention. Crazy with their faces down in the crap. “Listen, hey!” I yelled at the top of my voice, which isn't such a soft niceness when I'm suffocating holding my nose with three hands and I want to get out of that place already.

So I gave him a zetz in the tuchis. I wound up every foot on the left side, and I let it unwind right where a pincercrusher would have brunch.

Then the dummy looked up.

A sight you could become very ill with. A nose covered with crap from the floor, a bunch of eyes

filled with blue jelly, a mouth from out of which could only come heathen hosannahs to a dummy idol called Shaygets or something.

“You kicked me,” he said.

“All by yourself you figured that out, eh?”

He looked at me with six, and blinked, and started to fall over on his punim again, and I started to wind up I'd give him such a zetz I'd kick him into a better life.

“We don't accept violence,” he said.

“That's a terrific saying,” I told him. “Meanwhile, I don't accept an unobstructed view of your tuchis. So if you want I should go away and stop kicking you, so you can go root around in the dreck some more, what you'd better do is come up here a minute and talk to me.”

He kept looking. I wound up tighter. You could hear my sockets creaking. I'm not such a young one any more. He got up.

“What do you want? I'm worshipping to Seymool.”

Seymool. That's a name for a God. I wouldn't even hire something called a Seymool.

“You'll worship later. That buhbie isn't going anywhere.”

“But Zsouchmuhn is.”

“Very correct. Which is the same reason I got to talk to you now. Time is a thing I got very little of, if you catch my meaning here.”

“Well, what is it you want, precisely?”

Oy, a Talmudic scholar, no less. Precisely. “Well, Mr. Precisely, I'll tell you what it is precisely I want. You know where it is I can find a no-good snuffier called Kadak?”

He stared at me with six, then blinked rapidly, in sequence -two and four, three and five, one and six-then went back in reverse order. “you have a nauseating sense of humor. May Seymool forgive you.”

Then he fell back on his face, his legs up winding and unwinding, his nose deep in dreck. “I say Kadak, he says Seymool. I'll give you a Seymool!”

I started to wind up for a kick would put that momzer in the next time-zone, when a voice stopped me. From over the side of that stinking Cathedral-and you can bet I was turning yellow from not breathing-a woman said, “Come outside. I'll tell you about your friend Kadak.”

I turned to look, and there was this shikseh, all dolled up in such a pile of colored shmatehs and baubles and bangles and crap from the floor, I thought to myself, Gevalt! this turn I should never have crawled out of the burrow.

So anyhow I followed her outside, thank God, and let my nose extend to its full length and breathed such a deep one my cheek-sacs puffed up like I had a pair of bialies stuffed in. So now this bummerkeh, this floozie, this painted hussy says to me, “What do you want with Kadak?”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “I'll get upwind from you, meaning no offense, lady, but you smell like your Church.” I rolled around her and got a little away, and when it was possible to breathe like a person, I said, “What I want is to go join my lust-mates on Kas-, on Bromios, but what I got to do, is I got to find Kadak. We need him for a very sacred religious service, you'll excuse me for saying this, dear lady, but you being Gentile, you wouldn't understand what it is.”

She batted four eyelids and flapped phony eyelashes on three of them. Oy, a nafkeh, a lady of easy virtue, a courtesan of the byways, a bummerkeh. “Would you contribute to a worthy charity to find this

Kadak?”

I knew it. I knew somewhere on that damned looking for Kadak it would cost me a little something out of pocket. She was looking directly at my pouch. “You'll take a couple of coins, is that right?”

“It isn't exactly what I was thinking of,” she said, still looking at my pouch, and I suddenly realized with what I'll tell you honestly was a chill, that she was cross-eyed in four of her front six. She was

staring at my pupik. What? I'm trying to tell you, butterfly, that she wasn't staring at my pouch which was hanging to the left side of my stomach. She was staring with that cockeye four at my cute little pupik.

What? You'll forgive me, Mr. Silent-Butterfly-With-the-Very-Dumb-Expression, I should know that

butterflies don't have pupiks? A navel. A belly button. Now you understand what it is a pupik? What?

Maybe I should get gross and explain to a butterfly that shtups flowers, that we have sex through our

pupiks. The female puts her long middle finger of the bottom arm on the right side, straight into the pupik

and goes moofky-foofky, and that's how we shtup. You needed that, is that right? You needed to know how

we do it. A filth you are, butterfly; a very dirty mind.

But not as dirty as that nafkeh, that saucy baggage, that whore of Babylon. “Listen,” I said,

“meaning no offense, lady, but I'm not that kind of a person. I'm saving myself for my lust-mates. I'm sure

you'll understand. Besides, meaning no offense, I don't shtup with strangers. It wouldn't be such a good

thing for you, either, believe me. Everybody says Evsise is a rotten shtup. I got very little feeling in my

pupik, you wouldn't like it, not even a little. Why don't I give you a few nice coins, you could use them on

Kasri-on Bromios. You could maybe set yourself up in business there, a pretty lady such as yourself.” God

shouldn't strike me down with a bolt of lightning in the tuchis for telling this filthy-mind

cockeye heathen
nafkeh what a cutie she was.

“You want to find this Kadak?” she asked, staring straight at two things at the same time.

“Please, lady,” I said. My nose started running.

“Don't cry,” she said. “Seymool is my God, I trust in Seymool.”

“What the hell has that got to do with anything?”

“We are the last of the Faithful of the Church. We plan to stay on Zsouchmuhn when they Relocate it. Seymool has decreed it. I have no hope of living through it. I understand cataclysms are commonplace when they pull a planet out of orbit.”

“So run,” I said. “What kind of dummies are you?”

“We are the Faithful.”

It gave me pause. Even Gentiles, even nut cases like these worshippers of Shmoe-ool, whoever, even they got to believe. It was nice. In a very dumb way.

“So what has all that got to do in even the slightest way with me, lady?”

“I'm horny.”

“Well, why not go in your Cathedral there and shtup one of your playmates?”

“They're worshipping.”

“To that statue that looks like a big bug picking its nose, with the dreck and crap and mud all over it?”

“Don't speak disrespectfully of Seymool.”

“I'll cut out my tongue.”

“That isn't necessary, just stick out your navel.”

“Lady, you got a dirty mouth.”

“You want to know where Kadak is?”

I won't tell what nasty indignities came next. It makes me very ashamed to even think about it. She had a dirty fingernail.

So I'll tell you only that when she was done ravaging my pupik and left me lying there against a mud-wall of a building, the pink shmootz running down my stomach, I knew that Kadak had been as lousy an Apostate as he had been a Jew. One afternoon, just like in the synagogue years before, he ran amuck and started biting the statue of that bug-God they got. Before they could pry him off, he had bitten off the kneecap of Shmoogle. So they threw him out of the Church. This nafkeh knew what had happened to him, because he had used her services, you could brechh from such a thought, and he still owed her some coins. So she'd followed him around, trying to get him to pay, and she'd seen he'd bounced from religion to religion until they accepted him as a Slave of the Rock.

So I got up and went to a fountain and washed myself the best way I could, and said a couple of quick prayers that I wouldn't get knocked up from that dirty finger, and I went looking for the Slaves of the Rock, still looking for that damned Kadak. I walked with an uneven roll, hop, unwind. You would, too, if you' d been ravished, butterfly.

Just a second you'd think on it, how would you feel if a flower grabbed you by the tuchis and stuck a pistil and stamen in your pupik? What? Oh, terrific. Butterflies don't have pupiks.

Talking to you, standing here in sand, is not necessarily the most sensational thing I've ever done, you want to know.

The Slaves of the Rock were all gathered in a valley just outside the city limits of Houmitz. The Governors wouldn't let them inside the city. Who can blame them. If you think those Apostates were pukers, you should only see the Rocks. Such cuties. It is to varf!

Big rocks they turned themselves into. With tongues like string, six or seven feet long, all rolled up inside. And when a krendl or a znigh or a buck-fly goes whizzing past, slurp! out comes that ugly tongue like a shot and snags it and wraps around and comes whipping back and smashes the bug all over the rock, and then the rock gets soft and spongy like a piece rotten fruit and absorbs all the dreck and crap and awfulness squished there. Oh, such terrifics, those Rocks. Just the kind of thing I would expect a Kadak to be when he couldn't stand being himself no more. Thank you oh so very greatly, Reb Jshaia, for this looking mission.

So I found the head Rock and I stood there in that valley, all surrounded by Rocks going slurp! and squish! and sucking up bug food. This was not the best part of my life I'm telling you about.

“How do you do?”

I figured it was the most polite way to talk to a rock.

“How did you know I was the chief Slave?” the Rock said.

“You had the longest tongue.”

Slurp! A znigh on the wing, cruising by humming a tune, minding its own business, got it right in the punim, a tongue like a wet noodle, splat right in the punim and a quick overhead twist and squish! all over the Rock. It splattered on me, gooey and altogether puke-making. Definitely not the kind of individual

to have a terrific dinner out with. The guderim was all over me.

“Excuse the mess,” said the chief Slave. He really sounded sorry.

“Think nothing,” I said. “That was a very cute little overhand twist you gave it there at the last minute.”

He seemed flattered. “You noticed that, did you?”

“How could I help? Such a class move.”

“You know, you're the first one who's ever noticed that. There have been lots of studies made, by all kinds of foreigners, from other worlds, other galaxies, even, but never once did one of them notice that move. What did you say your name was?”

The bug ooze was dripping down my stomach. “My name is Evsise, and I'm looking for a person who used to be a person named Kadak. I was given to understand that he'd become a Rock a few years ago. I have a great need to find this Kadak rock, he should drop dead already such a rotten time he's been making for me.”

“Listen,” said the chief Slave (as the remains of the znych oozed down through the spongy surface), “I like you. Have you ever thought of converting?”

“Forget it.”

“No, really, I'm serious. To Worship The Rock is such an enriching experience, it really isn't smart to dismiss it without giving it a try. What do you say?”

I figured I had to be a little smartsy then, just a little. “Say, I wish I could. You got no idea what a nice proposition that is you're making to me. And in a quick second I'd take you up on it, but I got this one bissel tot of a problem.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

A psychiatrist rock, yet. I really needed this.

“I'm afraid from bugs,” I said.

He didn't say anything for a moment. Then, “I see your point. Bugs are a very big part of our religion.”

“I can see that.”

“Ah, well. I'm sorry for you. But let's see if I can help you. What did you say his name was?”

“Kadak.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember now. What a creep.”

“That's him.”

“Let me see now,” said the Rock. “If I recall correctly, we threw him out of the order for being a disruptive influence, oh, it must have been fifteen years ago. He used to make the ugliest noises I've ever heard out of a Rock.”

“Snuffling.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Snuffling is what he did. A terrible snort noise, all wet and cloggy, it could make you sick to be near it.”

“Yes, that was it.”

“So what happened to him, I'm afraid to ask.”

“He reconstituted his atoms and became just like you again.”

“Not like me, please.”

“Well, I mean the same species.”

“And he went off?”

“Yes. He said he was going to try the Fleshists.”

“I wish you hadn't told me that.”

“I'm sorry.”

I sat down. Settled my tuchis right down between my rims, drew up my legs, and dropped my head into a half dozen of my hands. I was very glum.

“Would you like to sit on me?” the Rock asked.

It was a nice offer. “Thanks,” I said politely, looking at the last slimy ooze of the znight on the Rock, “but I'm too miserable to be comfortable.”

“What do you need him for?” he asked.

So I explained the best I could-this was, after all, to a rock, a piece of stone, even if it could talk-about the minyan of ten. The chief Slave asked me why ten.

So I said, “On the Earth, a long time ago...you know about the Earth, right? Right. Well, on the Earth, a long time ago, God was going to give a terrific zetz to a place called Sodom. What it was, this Sodom, was a whole city full of Fleshists. Not a nice place.”

“I can't conceive of an entire city of Fleshists,” the rock Rock said. “That's rather an ugly thought.”

“That's the way God looked at it.”

We were both quiet for a while, thinking about that.

“So, anyhow,” I said, “Abraham, blessed be his name, who was this very holy Jew even

if he
wasn't blue, you shouldn't hold that against him-”

“I won't.”

“-uh. yes. Right. Well, Abraham pleaded with God to save Sodom.”

“Why did he do that...a city full of F1eshists. Yechh.”

“How do I know? He was holy, that's all. So God must have thought that was a little meshugge...a little crazy...also, you know God is no dummy...and he told Abraham he'd spare Sodom if Abraham could find fifty righteous men living there...”

“Just men? What about women?”

“There isn't scripture on that one.”

“Sounds like your God is a sexist.”

“At least, you'll pardon my frankness now, but at least he isn't a thing that lies in a valley for birds to make ka-ka on.”

“That's rather rude of you.”

“I'm terrible sorry, but it isn't nice to call the one true God a rotten name.”

“I was only asking.”

“Well, it isn't too classy for a rock to ask them kinds questions. Now do you want to hear this or don't you?”

“Yes, sure. But-”

“But what!”

“Why did this God haggle with this Abraham? Why didn't he just tell him he was going to do it, and then do it?”

I was getting pretty upset, you know what I mean? “It was because Abraham was a mensch, a real terrific persona snappy dresser, that's why, okay?”

The rock didn't answer. I guess he was sulking. So okay, let him sulk. “Then Abraham said, okay, what if I can only find forty righteous men? And God said, okay, let be forty. So Abraham said what if only thirty, and God said, nu, let be thirty already, and then Abraham said what if only twenty, and God started yelling all right stop nuhdzing me, let be twenty...”

“Let me guess,” the rock said, “Abraham said ten, and your God got really mad and said ten was it, and no further, and that's how you came up with ten men for the congregation.”

“You've heard it,” I said.

The rock was silent again.

Finally, he said, “Listen, I like your idea of religion.

I'm not altogether happy being a Slave of the Rock, even if I am the chief Rock. How about if I converted and came back with you, and made the tenth for the minyan?”

I thought about that for a while. “Well,” I said slowly, “the Talmud does say, 'Nine free men and a slave may be reckoned together for a quorum,' but against that is quoted that Rabbi Eliezer went into a Synagogue and didn't find ten there, so he freed his slave and with him completed the number, but if there had only been seven and he had freed two slaves, it wouldn't have been kosher. But with one freed slave and the Rabbi it made ten. So, clearly, as all agree, eight freemen and two slaves would not answer the purpose. But, if you just put yourself in my place for a moment, you're not, even remotely speaking, my slave. You're the Slave of the Rock. And besides, it takes a long time to convert. Can you speak Hebrew?”

Even a little?"

"What's Hebrew?"

"Forget it. How about keeping kosher?"

"What are they? I'll keep them if it's part of the program. After all, when you've been a Rock, eating bugs all your life, keeping some kind of pet doesn't sound too difficult."

It was hopeless. For a minute there I gave it a maybe, you know what I mean. But the more I thought about it, even if I could summon up the chutzpah to go back to Reb Jashaia with a rock, not with a Kadak, it wouldn't work. This Rock was a nice enough fellow, you know what I mean, but even as I sat there pondering, he shot out that ick tongue of his, and snared a buck-fly and whipped it in that move he thought was such a sensational thing, and splatted it all over the place, and started eating it. And clearly, very clearly, Genesis 9:4 forbade animal blood to all the seed of Noah, so how could I bring a Rock back and say, here, I freed this Slave of the Rock, and he'll be the tenth man, and then right in the middle of Adonai, out would come that crummy tongue and eat a bug off the wall. Forget it.

"Listen," I said, as gentle as I could, I didn't want to hurt his feelings, "it's a strictly great offer you've made, and under other circumstances I'd take you up on that, you know what I'm saying? But right now I'm really pressed for time and it would take too long for you to learn Hebrew, so let's let it sit for a while. I'll get back to you."

He wasn't happy about that, I could tell. But he was a real mensch. He told me he understood, and he wished me good luck with the Fleshists, and he let me roll away fast. I could see his point, though, and I was very sorry about his not being a possible. I mean, how would you like it to sit all day baking in the sun, with birds making pish in your face, and the best you got to look forward to is a juicy bug.

And if I'd known what I had coming, what tsuris, I'd have gladly only, happily yet, you can believe it, taken that Rock back with me, bug dreck and all. Believe me, there are worse things than a rock that eats bugs.

I'll make a long story short. I followed the trail of that putz Kadak from the pit of the Fleshists (where I lost the use of my pupik, all my coin, the sight of one eye in the back, the second arm on the left side, and my yarmulkah), to the embarkation dock at the spaceport where the sect called the Denigrators were getting on board ships for that Bromios (where I got beat up so bad I crawled away), to the lava beds where the True Believers of Suffering were doing their last rites before leaving (where I suffered first degree miserable and such a pain you wouldn't accept over half my poor body), to the Tabernacle of the Mouth (where some big deal prophet that was all teeth bit off the tip of one antenna. God knows why, maybe out of pique at being left behind), to the Caucus Race of the Malforms (where I fit right in, as crapped up and bloody as I was), to the Lair of the Blessed Profundity of the Unspeakable Trihll (which I could not, even if I had several mouths, pronounce...but they punched and kicked me anyhow, really sensational people), to the Archdruid of Nothingness, always following that miserable creep Kadak from religion to religion-and let me tell you, no one had a good word for that schmuck, not even the worst of those heathens-and it was there, kayn-ahora, that the Archdruid told me the last he'd seen of Kadak was ten years earlier, when he had changed him into a butterfly, and sent him out into the desert to hopefully drop dead in the heat.

Which is why, finally, I'm standing here talking to you, dumb creep butterfly. So now

I've told it
all, and you see what a puke condition I'm in, don't for a minute think that Avram or
those others will
respect me for what I did, they'll only nuhdz me about how long it took, and that's why
you got to come
back with me.

Not a word. Not a sound through all this. Not a flap or a flitter or a how are you Evsise.
Nothing.

Look. I'm not going to tummel with you, Mr. I-Can't-Make-Up-My-Mind-What-Kind-
Of-
Religion-I-Want-To-Be butterfly.

You think I stood here all this time, sinking in up to my rims in sand, just to tell you a
cute story? I
know you're Kadak! And how do I know?

Go ahead, snuffie like that again and ask me how I know!

Come on. You'll come either by yourself or I'll drag you by your wings, you know for a
butterfly
you're not even a nice looking butterfly? You're an ugly, is what you are. And as for
being a Jew, only that
by birth, such a disgrace to the entire blue Jews on Zsouchmuhn.

As you can see, I'm getting angry. You've gotten me raped, crapped on, burned, maimed,
crippled,
blinded, insulted, run around, exposed to heathens, robbed, sunburned, covered with bug
shmootz,
altogether miserable and unhappy, and I'll tell you, very frankly, you'll come with me,
Mr. Kadak, or I'll
choke you dead right here in this !arblondjet desert!

Now what do you say?

I thought that's what you'd say.

“Here he is.”

Yankel didn't believe it. Chaim laughed. Shmuel started to cry, his nose running green. Snodle coughed. And Reb Jeshaiia hung his head. "I should have sent Avram," he said.

Avram looked away. Like a dead leaf it should fall off.

"Here he is, is what I said, and here he is, is what it is," I said. "This is your Kadak, may he rot in his cocoon."

Then I told them the whole story.

At least they had the grace to be amazed.

"This is what makes the minyan?" Moishe said. "This?"

"Make him change back, and that's him," I said. "I wash my hands of it." I went over in a corner of the shoul and settled down. It was their problem now.

For hours they went at him. They tried everything. They threatened him, they begged him, they implored him, they intimidated him, they cajoled him, they shmacheled him, they insulted him, they slugged him, they chased his tuchis all over the shoul...

Sure. Of course. Wouldn't you know. That rotten Kadak wouldn't change back. At last, he found a thing he wanted to be. A dumb creep butterfly.

With a snuffle. Still with a rotten snuffle. Did you ever know how much worse a butterfly snuffles than a person?

You could plotz from it.

And finally, when they couldn't get him to change back and if you want to know the truth, I don't think he could change back after that weirdnik bubbie Archdruid changed him-they held him down and Reb Jeshaiia made the rabbinical decision that his presence was enough, in this great

emergency. So Meyer
Kahaha sat on him, and we started to sit shivah, finally, for Zsouchmuhn and for Snodle.

And then Reb J eshaia got a terrible look on his face and he said, “Oh my God!”

“What!?! What what!?” I yelled. “What now, what?”

Very softly, Reb J eshaia asked me, “Evsise, how long ago did the Archdruid say he
changed
Kadak into this thing?”

“Ten years ago,” I said, “but what-”

And I stopped. And I sat down again. And knew we had lost, and we would still be there
when the
goniffs came to rip the planet out of orbit, and we would die, along with the crazies in
the Apostate
Cathedral and the nafkeh, and the Rock and the Archdruid and everyone else who was
too nuts to get safely
away the way they were supposed to.

“What's the matter?” asked Meyer Kahaha, the oysvorf. “What's wrong? Why does it
matter he's
been a butterfly for ten years?”

“Only ten years,” said Shmuel.

“Not thirteen, schmuck, only ten,” said Yankel, sticking his pointing arm in Meyer
Kahaha's ninth
eye.

We looked at Meyer Kahaha till the light dawned, even for him. “Oh my God,” he said,
and rolled
over on his side. The butterfly, that miserable Kadak, fluttered up and flew around the
shoul. No one paid
any attention to him. It had all been in vain.

Scripture says, very clearly there should be no mistake, that all ten of the participants of
a minyan
have to be over thirteen years old. At thirteen, for a Jew, a boy becomes a man. “Today I
am a man,” it's an

old gag. Ha ha. Very funny. It's the reason for the Bar Mitzvah. Thirteen. Not ten.

Kadak wasn't old enough.

Still dead, still lying on his face, Snodle began weeping.

Reb Jeshaiia and the other seven, the last blue Jews on Zsouchmuhn, now doomed to die without ever again gumming their lust-nest concubines, they all slumped into seats and waited for destruction.

I felt worse than them. I hurt in more places.

Then I looked up, and began to smile. I smiled so wide and so loud, everyone turned to look at me.

“He's gone crazy,” said Chaim.

“It's better that way,” said Shmuel. “He won't feel the pain.”

“Poor Evsise,” said Yitzchak.

“Dummies!” I shouted, leaping up and rolling and hopping

and unwinding like a tummeler.” Dummies! Dummies! Even you, Reb Jeshaiia, you're a dummy, we're all dummies!”

“Is that a way to talk to a Rabbi?” said Reb Jeshaiia.

“Sure it is,” I yowled, reeling and rocking, “sure it is, sure it is, sure it is, sure it is...”

Meyer Kahaha came and sat on me.

“Get off me, you schlemiel! I know how to save us, it's been here all the time, we never needed that creep snuffle butterfly Kadak!”

So he got off me, and I looked at them with great pleasure because I was about to demonstrate that I was a folks-mensch of the first water, and I said, “Under a ruling in Tractate Berakhot, nine Jews and the

holy ark of the law containing the Torah may, together, hey nu, nu, do you get what I'm saying, may together be considered for congregational worship!"

And Reb Jeshaiia kissed me.

"Evsise, Evsise, how did you remember such a thing? You're not a Talmudic scholar, how did you remember such a wonderful thing?" Reb Jeshaiia hugged and kissed and babbled in my face at me.

"I didn't," I said, "Kadak did."

And they all looked up, as I'd looked up, and there was that not-such-an-altogether-worthless-after-all Kadak, sitting up on top of the Holy Ark, the Aronha-Kodesh, the sacred cabinet holding the sacred scrolls of the Lord. Sitting up there, a butterfly, always to remain a butterfly, sitting and beating his wings frantically, trying to let someone know what he knew, something even a Rabbi had forgotten.

And when he came down to perch on Reb Jeshaiia's shoulder, we all sat down and rested for a minute, and then Reb Jeshaiia said, "Now we will sit shivah. Nine men, the Holy Ark and one butterfly make a minyan."

And for the last time on Zsouchmuhn (which means look for me) we said the holy words, this last time for the home we had had, the home we would leave. And all through the prayers, there sat Kadak, flapping his dumb wings.

And you want to know a thing? Even that was a mechaieh (which means a terrific pleasure).

Los Angeles, California/1973

ELLISON'S GRAMMATICAL GUIDE AND GLOSSARY FOR THE GOYIM

There are two ways to write a story using words in a foreign tongue. The first is to explain every single word as it is used, by restating its meaning in English, or by hoping its use in context will clarify for the reader. The second is to attempt by syntactical manipulation an approximation of the dialect and tongue, eschewing the use of any foreign words. The third is to provide a glossary and hope the reader won't be such a dummy as to get annoyed at the author wanting to do it right.

Additionally, the author, a cute and terrific little person who wants you should enjoy this story to the utmost, has called on the good offices of his friend, Mr. Tim Kirk, a Gentile artist, but also a three-time Hugo award winner, to do a drawing of Evsise, the Zsouchmoid. It is appended herewith, for your pleasure.

-the Author (A Jew)

Adonai (ah-doe-noy') The sacred title of God.

averah (ah-vay'-reh) Loosely, an unethical or undesirable act.

Bar Mitzvah (bar mitz'-vah) The ceremony, as in many cultures, of the beginning of puberty; held in a temple, it is the ceremony in which a 13-year-old Jewish boy reaches the status and assumes the duties of a "man."

bialy(ies) (bee-oll'-lee) A flat breakfast roll, shaped like a round wading pool, sometimes sprinkled with onion.

bissel (biss'-el) A little bit

brechh A sound you make when varjing.

brisies (briss) The circumcision ceremony.

buhbie (booh'-bee) Usually an affectionate term of endearment, although occasionally it is used sardonically.

bummerkeh (bum'-er-keh) A female bum, a loose lady. A najkeh.

chutzpah (choootz'-puh) Gall, brazen nerve, audacity, presumption-plus-arrogance such as no other word, and no other language, can do justice to.

dreck (drek) Shit, dung, garbage, trash, excrement, crap.

Evsise (ev'-seese) A native of Theta 996:VI, Cluster Messier 3 in Canes Venatici. (See illustration.)

farblondjet (far-blawn'-jet) Lost (but really lost), mixed-up, wandering around with no idea where you are.

farchachdah (far-kachh'-dah) Dizzy, confused, dopey, punchy.

fehl (feh!) An exclamatory expression of disgust.

folks-mensch (fokes'-mentch) This has many meanings. In the story it is intended to convey the meaning of a person who is interested in Jewish life, values, experience, and wants to carry on the tradition.

galus (goll'-us) An exile.

Gentile (jenn'-tile) The goyim. Non-Jews.

Gevalt! (ghe-vollt'!) A cry of fear, astonishment, amazement.

glitch (glitch) A shady, not kosher or reputable affair.

goldeneh medinah (gold'-en-eh meh-dee'-nah) Literally, “golden country”; originally, it meant America to Jews fleeing the European pogroms; a land of freedom, justice and rare opportunity. Well, two out of three ain't bad.

goniff(s) (gon'-iff) A thief, a crook; sometimes said with affection to mean a clever person; a dishonest businessman.

goniffed (gon'-iffed) The act of stealing, as in swiping Zsouchmuhn out of its orbit.

guderim (guh-dare'-im) My Mother used to say, “That kid is eating out my guderim from aggravation,” which leads me to believe the word means, literally, heart, guts, liver-and-lights, stomach, everything in the middle of your body.

Kaddish (kahd'-ish) A prayer glorifying God's name. The most solemn and one of the most ancient of an Jewish prayers; the mourner's prayer.

kayn-ahora (kine'-a haw'-reh) The phrase uttered to show that one's praises are genuine and not contaminated by envy.

kike (kike) A word you won't find in this story.

kosher (ko'-sher) As a Hebrew-Yiddish word it means only one thing: fit to eat, because ritually clean

according to the dietary laws. As American slang it means authentic, the real McCoy, trustworthy, reliable, on the up-and-up, legal.

krenk (krenk) An illness. Also used to mean “nothing” in a sentence like, “He asked me for a loan of fifty bucks; a krenk I'll give him!”

mechaieh (meh-chhhhy'-eh) Pleasure, great enjoyment, a real joy. Roll the chhh like a Scotsman.

meshiginah (meh-shih'-ghin-ah), meshugge (meh-shu'-geh), mishegoss (meesh'-eh-goss) Crazy, nuts, wildly extravagant, absurd. There are spellings for male and female, but I've written it the way it sounded when my Mother called me it. Meshugge is to be a meshiginah and mishegoss is the crazy stuff a meshiginah is doing.

mensch (mench) Someone of consequence, someone to emulate and admire; a terrific human being; I always pictured a mensch as someone who knew exactly how much to tip.

minyan (min'-yun) Quorum. The ten male Jews required for a religious service. Solitary prayer is laudable, but a minyan possesses special merit, for God's Presence is said to dwell among them.

momzer (mom'-zer) A bastard, an untrustworthy person; a stubborn, difficult person, a detestable, impudent person.

naches (nahchhhh'-ess), nafkeh (noff'-keh) Also nafka. A prostitute.

nu(?) (!) (nu) A remarkably versatile interjection, interrogation, expletive; like, “So?”

nuhdz (nud'-jeh), nuhdzing (nud'-jing) To bore, to pester, to nag, to be bugged to eat your asparagus, to wake up and take her home, etc.

oysvorf (oyss'-voorf) A scoundrel, a bum, an outcast, an ingrate.

pisher (pish'-er) A young, inexperienced person, a “young squirt,” an inconsequential person, a “nobody.”

plotz (plots) To split, to burst, to explode; to be outraged; to be aggravated beyond

bearing.

pupik (pu'-pik) Navel. Belly-button.

punim (pu'-nim) Face.

putz (putts) Literally, vulgar slang for “penis” but in usage a term of contempt for an ass, a jerk, a fool, a simpleton or yokel. It is much stronger than schmuck and shouldn't be used unless you know some crippling Oriental martial art-form.

Reb (reb) Rabbi.

schlemiel (shleh'-meal) A foolish person, a simpleton; a consistently unlucky or unfortunate person; a clumsy, gauche, butterfingere person; a social misfit; this term is more pitying than schlimazel and more affectionate by far than schmuck.

schlimazel (shli'-moz-zl) Same as above, but different in tone. A schlimazel believes in luck, but never has any. The terms are often used interchangeably by people who don't perceive the subtle differences.

schmuck (shmuck) Literally, a penis, but in common usage, a dope, a jerk, a boob; or, a son of a bitch, a real prick.

Shabbes (shah'-biss) The Sabbath.

Shema (sheh'-ma) The first word of the most common of Hebrew prayers: “Shema Yisrael,” Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One!

shikker (shick'-er) A drunk or, as an adjective, drunkenness.

shikseh (shik'-seh) A non-Jewish woman, especially a young one.

shivah (shi'-vuh) The seven solemn days of mourning for the dead.

shmachel (shmah'-chhhl) To flatter, to fawn, to butter up, usually to outfox someone to

get them to do what
you want.

shmatehs (shmot'-tahs) A rag, literally. But in common usage to mean a cheap, shoddy,
junky dress.

shmootz (shmootz) Dirt.

shoul (shool) Synagogue.

shpilkess (shpill'-kess) As my Mother used it, to mean aggravation, an unsettlement of
self, jumping
stomach. But I've been advised it really means “ants in the pants.”

shtumie (shtoom'-ie) Another word like schlemiel, but more offhand, less significant; the
word you use to
bat away a gnat

shtup (shtooooopp) Puck.

shtupping (shtooooopp'-ing) Fucking.

tallis (tahll'-iss) Prayer shawl, used by males at prayer at religious services.

Talmud (tol'-mud) A massive and monumental compendium of sixty-three books: the
learned debates,
dialogues, conclusions, commentaries, etc., of the scholars who, for over a thousand
years interpreted
the Torah, the first five books in the Bible, also known as the Five Books of Moses. The
Talmud is

not the Bible, it is not the Old Testament. It is not meant to be read, but to be studied.

t'fillin (te-fill'-in) Phylacteries worn during morning prayers by orthodox males past the
age of Bar Mitzvah.

Tisha B'ab (tish'-a bawve) “The blackest day in the Jewish calendar.” Usually falls
during August,
climaxing nine days of mourning during which meat is not eaten and marriages are not
performed.
Commemorates both the First (586 D.C.) and Second (A.D. 70) destruction of the

Temple in
Jerusalem. A deadly day of sorrow.

tsuris (tsoo'-riss) Troubles.

tuchis (too'-chhhuss) The backside, the buttocks, your ass.

tummel (tu'-m l), tummeler (toohm'-eh-lure) Noise, commotion, noisy disorder. One who creates a lot of noise but accomplishes little; a funmaker, a live wire, a clown, the “life of the party.” You know when Jerry Lewis does a talk show and he starts eating the draperies and screaming and running so much you change the channel? He's tummeling.

varf (varff) To puke. Brechh.

yarmulkah (yahr'-ml-keh) The skullcap worn by observing Jewish males.

yeshiva (yeh-shee'-vah) A rabbinical college or seminary.

yorzeit (yawr'-tzite) The anniversary of someone's death, on which candles are lit and an annual prayer is said.

zetz (zets) A strong blow or punch.

Zsouchmoid (zoochhhh'-moid) A native of Theta 996 :VI, Cluster Messier 3 in Canes Venatici, like Evsise. (See illustration.)

(NOTE: the author wishes to give credit where due. The Yiddish words are mine, they come out of my childhood and my heritage, but some of the definitions have been adapted and based on those in Leo Rosten's marvelous and utterly indispensable sourcebook, *The Joys of Yiddish*, published by McGraw-Hill, which I urge you to rush out and buy, simply as good reading.)

6 SILENT IN GEHENNA

Joe Bob Hickey had no astrological sign. Or rather more precisely, he had twelve. Every year he celebrated his birthday under a different Pisces, Gemini or Scorpio. Joe Bob Hickey was an orphan. He was also a bastard. He had been found on the front porch of the Sedgwick County, Kansas, Foundling Home. Wrapped in a stained army blanket, he had been deserted on one of the Home's porch gliders. That was in 1992.

Years later, the matron who discovered him on the porch remarked, looking into his eyes was like staring down a hall with empty mirrors.

Joe Bob was an unruly child. In the Home he seemed to seek out trouble, in no matter what dark closet it hid, and sink his teeth into it; nor would he turn it loose, bloody and spent, till thunder crashed. Shunted from foster home to foster home, he finally took off at the age of thirteen, snarling. That was in 2005. Nobody even offered to pack him peanut butter sandwiches. But after a while he was fourteen, then sixteen, then eighteen, and by that time he had discovered what the world was really all about, he had built muscle, he had read books and tasted the rain, and on some road he had found his purpose in life, and that was all right, so he didn't have to worry about going back. And tuck their peanut butter sandwiches.

Joe Bob attached the jumper cable, making certain it was circled out far enough behind and around him to permit him sufficient crawl-space without snagging the bull. He pulled the heavy-

wire snippers from
his rucksack, cut the fence in the shape of a church window, returned the snips to the
rucksack, slung it
over one shoulder and shrugged into it-once again reminding himself to figure out a new
system of harness
so the bullhorn and the rucksack didn't tangle.

Then, down on his gut; he pulled himself on elbows tight to his sides, through the
electrified
fence, onto the grounds of the University of Southern California. The lights from the
guard towers never
quite connected at this far corner of the quad. An overlooked blind spot. But he could see
the State Trooper
in his tower, to the left, tracking the area with the mini-radar unit. Joe Bob grinned. His
bollixer was
feeding back pussycat shape.

Digging his hands into the ground, frogging his legs, fiatworm fellow, he did an
Australian Crawl
through the nomansland of the blind spot. Once, the Trooper held in his direction, but
the mini-radar picked
up only feline and as curiosity paled and vanished, he moved on. Joe Bob slicked along
smoothly. (Lignum
vitae, owing to the diagonal and oblique arrangement of the successive layers of its
fibres, cannot be split.
Not only is it an incredibly tough wood-with a specific gravity of 1.333 it sinks in water-
but, containing in
its pores 26% resin, it is lustrous and self-oiling. For this reason it was used as bearings
in the engines of
early ocean-going steamships.) Joe Bob as lignum vitae. Slicking along oilily through
the dark.

The Earth Sciences building-Esso Hall, intaglio'd on a lintel -loomed up out of the light
fog that
wisped through the quadrangle, close to the ground. Joe Bob worked toward it, idly
sucking at a cavity in a
molar where a bit of stolen/fried/enjoyed chicken meat had lodged. There were trip-
springs irregularly
spaced around the building. Belly down, he did an elaborate flat-out slalom through
them, performing a
delicate calligraphy of passage. Then he was at the building, and he sat up, back to the

wall, and un Velcro-
ing the flap of a bandolier pocket.

Plastique.

Outdated, in these times of sonic explosives and mist, but effective nonetheless. He
planted his
charges.

Then he moved on to the Tactics Building, the Bacteriophage Labs, the Central Records
Computer
block and the Armory. Charged, all.

Then he pullcrawled back to the fence, unshipped the bullhorn, settled himself low so
he made no
silhouette against the yawning dawn just tingeing itself lightly in the east, and tripped
the charges.

The Labs went up first, throwing walls and ceilings skyward in a series of explosions
that ranged
through the spectrum from blue to red and back again. Then the Computer Block
shrieked and died, fizzing
and sparking like a dust-circuit killing negative particles; then together the Earth
Sciences and Tactics
Buildings thundered like saurians and fell in on themselves, spuming dust and lath and
plaster and extruded
wall-dividers and shards of melting metal. And, at last, the Armory, in a series of moist
poundings that
locked one after the other in a stately, yet irregular rhythm. And one enormous Olympian
bang that blew
the Armory to pieces filling the night with the starburst trails of tracer lightning.

It was all burning, small explosions continuing to firecracker amid the rising sound of
students and
faculty and troops scurrying through the debacle. It was all burning as Joe Bob turned
the gain full on the
bull and put it to his mouth and began shouting his message.

“You call this academic freedom, you bunch of earthworms! You call electrified fences
and armed
guards in your classrooms the path to learning? Rise up, you toadstools! Strike a blow
for freedom!”

The bollixer was buzzing, reporting touches from radar probes. It was feeding back mass shape, indistinct lumps, ground swells, anything. Joe Bob kept shouting.

“Grab their guns away from them!” His voice boomed like the day of judgment. It climbed over the sounds of men trying to save other buildings and it thundered against the rising dawn. “Throw the troops off campus! Jefferson said, 'People get pretty much the kind of government they deserve!' Is this what you deserve?!”

The buzzing was getting louder, the pulses coming closer together. They were narrowing the field on him. Soon they would have him pinned; at least with high probability. Then the squirt squads would come looking for him.

“Off the troops!

“There's still time! As long as one of you isn't all the way brainwashed, there's a chance. You are not alone! We are a large, organized resistance movement...come join us...trash their barracks...bomb their armories...off the Fascist varks! Freedom is now, grab it, while they're chasing their tails! Off the varks...”

The squirters had been positioned in likely sectors. When the mini-radar units triangulated, found a potential lurking place and locked, they were ready. His bollixer gave out one solid buzzing pulse, and he knew they'd locked on him. He slipped the bull back on its harness and fumbled for the flap of his holster. It came away with a Velcro fabric-sound and he wrenched the squirt gun out. The wire-stock was folded across the body of the weapon and he snapped it open, locking it in place.

Get out of here, he told himself.

Shut up, he answered. Off the varks!

Hey, pass on that. I don't want to get killed.

Scared, mother chicken?

Yeah I'm scared. You want to get your ass shot up, that's your craziness, you silly wimp.
But don't
take me with you!

The interior monologue came to an abrupt end. Off to Joe Bob's right three squirters came sliding through the crabgrass, firing as they came. It wouldn't have mattered, anyhow. Where Joe Bob went, Joe Bob went with.

The squirt charges hit the fence and popped, snicking, spattering, everywhere but the space Joe Bob had cut out in the shape of a church window. He yanked loose the jumper cable and jammed it into the rucksack, sliding backward on his stomach and firing over their heads.

I thought you were the bigger killer?

Shut up, damn you! I missed, that's all.

You missed, my tail! You just don't want to see blood.

Sliding, sliding, sculling backward, all arms and legs; and the squirts kept on coming. We are a large, organized resistance movement, he had bullhorned. He had lied. He was alone. He was the last. After him, there might not be another for a hundred years. Squirt charges tore raw gashes in the earth around him.

Scared! I don't want to get killed.

The chopper rose from over his sight horizon, rose straight up and came on a dead line for his position. He heard a soft, whining sound and Scared! breezed through his mind again.

Gully. Down into it. Lying on his back, the angle of the grassy bank obscuring him from the

chopper, but putting him blindside to the squirt squad. He breathed deeply, washed his lips with his tongue, too dry to help and he waited.

The chopper came right over and quivered as it turned for a strafing run. He braced the squirt gun against the bank of the gully and pulled the trigger, held it back as a solid line of charges raced up the air. He tracked ahead of the chopper, leading it. The machine moved directly into the path of fire. The first charges washed over the nose of the chopper, smearing the surface like oxidized chrome plate. Electrical storms, tiny whirlpools of energy flickered over the chopper, crazing the ports, blotting out the scene below to the pilot and his gunner. The squirt charges drank from the electrical output of the ship and drilled through the hull, struck the power source and the chopper suddenly exploded. Gouts of twisted metal, still flickering with squirt life, rained down across the campus. The squirters went to ground, dug in, to escape the burning metal shrapnel.

With the sound of death still echoing, Joe Bob Hickey ran down the length of the gully, into the woods, and gone.

It has been said before, and will be said again, but never as simply or humanely as Thoreau said it:

"He serves the state best, who opposes the state most."

(Aluminum acetate, a chemical compound which, in the form of its natural salt, $\text{Al}(\text{C}_2\text{H}_3\text{O}_2)_3$, obtained as a white, water-soluble amorphous powder, is used chiefly in medicine as an astringent and as an antiseptic. In the form of its basic salt, obtained as a white, crystalline, water-insoluble powder, it is used chiefly in the textile industry as a waterproofing agent, as a fireproofing agent, and as a mordant. A mordant can be several things, two of the most important being an adhesive substance for binding gold or

silver leaf to a surface; and an acid or other corrosive substance used in etching to eat out the lines.)

Joe Bob Hickey as aluminum acetate. Mordant. Acid etching at a corroded surface.

Deep night found him in terrible pain, far from the burning ruin of the University.

Stumbling

beneath the gargantuan Soleri pylons of the continental tramway. Falling, striking, tumbling over and over

in his stumble. Down a gravel-bed into deep weeds and the smell of sour creek. Hands came to him in the

dark, and turned him face-up. Light flickered and a voice said, "He's bleeding," and another voice, cracked

and husky, said, "He's sideing a squirter," and a third voice said, "Don't touch him, come on," and the first

voice said again, "He's bleeding," and the light was applied to the end of a cigar stub just as it burned

down. And then there was deep darkness again.

Joe Bob began to hurt. How long he had been hurting he didn't know, but he realized it had been

going on for some time. Then he opened his eyes, and saw firelight dancing dimpling dimly in front of him.

He was propped up against the base of a sumac tree. A hand came out of the mist that surrounded him,

seemed to come right out of the fire, and a voice he had heard once before said, "Here. Take a suck on

this." A plastic bottle of something hot was held to his lips, and another hand he could not see lifted his

head slightly, and he drank. It was a kind of soupness that tasted of grass.

But it made him feel better.

"I used some of the shpritz from the can in your knapsack. Something got you pretty bad, fella.

Right across the back. You was bleeding pretty bad. Seems to be mending okay. That shpritz."

Joe Bob went back to sleep. Easier this time.

Later, in a softer, cooler time, he woke again. The campfire was out. He could see

clearly what
there was to see. Dawn was coming up. But how could that be...another dawn? Had he
run all through the
day, evading the varks sent to track him down? It had to be just that. Dawn, he had been
crouched outside
the fence, ready to trip the charges. He remembered that. And the explosions. And the
squirt team, and the
chopper, and

He didn't want to think about things falling out of the sky, burning, sparking.

Running, a full day and a night of running. There had been pain. Terrible pain. He
moved his body
slightly, and felt the raw throb across his back. A piece of the burning chopper must have
caught him as he
fled; but he had kept going. And now he was here, somewhere else. Where? Filtered
light, down through
cool waiting trees.

He looked around the clearing. Shapes under blankets. Half a dozen, no, seven. And the
campfire
just smoldering embers now. He lay there, unable to move, and waited for the day.

The first one to rise was an old man with a dirty stipple of beard, perhaps three days'
worth, and a
poached egg for an eye. He limped over to Joe Bob-who had closed his eyes to slits-and
stared at him. Then
he reached down, adjusted the unraveling blanket, and turned to the cooling campfire.

He was building up the fire for breakfast when two of the others rolled out of their
wrappings. One
was quite tall, wearing a hook for a hand, and the other was as old as the first man. He
was naked inside his
blankets, and hairless from head to foot. He was pink, very pink, and his skin was soft.
He looked
incongruous : the head of an old man, with the wrinkled, pink body of a week-old baby.

Of the other four, only one was normal, undamaged. Joe Bob thought that till he
realized the
normal one was incapable of speech. The remaining three were a hunchback with a
plastic dome on his
back that flickered and contained bands of color that shifted and changed hue with his

moods; a black man
with squirt burns down one entire side of his face, giving him the appearance of
someone standing forever
half in shadow; and a woman who might have been forty or seventy, it was impossible to
tell, with one inch
wide window strips in her wrists and ankles, whose joints seemed to bend in the
directions opposite normal.

As Joe Bob lay watching surreptitiously, they washed as best they could, using water
from a Lister
bag, avoiding the scum-coated and bubbling water of the foul creek that crawled like an
enormous gray
potato slug through the clearing. Then the old man with the odd eye came to him and
knelt down and
pressed his palm against Joe Bob's cheek. Joe Bob opened his eyes.

“No fever. Good morning.”

“Thanks,” Joe Bob said. His mouth was dry.

“How about a cup of pretty good coffee with chicory?” The old man smiled. There were
teeth
missing.

Joe Bob nodded with difficulty. “Could you prop me up a little?”

The old man called, “Walter...Marty...” and the one who could not speak came to him,
followed by
the black man with the half-ivory face. They gently lifted Joe Bob into a sitting position.
His back hurt
terribly and every muscle in his body was stiff from having slept on the cold ground.
The old man handed
Joe Bob a plastic milk bottle half-filled with coffee. “There's no cream or sugar, I'm
sorry,” he said. Joe
Bob smiled thanks and drank. It was very hot, but it was good. He felt it running down
inside him, thinning
into his capillaries.

“Where am I? What is this place?”

“N'vada,” said the woman, coming over and hunkering down. She was wearing
plowboy overalls

chopped short at the calves, held together at the shoulders by pressure clips.

“Where in Nevada?” Joe Bob asked.

“Oh, about ten miles from Tonopah.”

“Thanks for helping me.”

“I dint have nothin' to do with it at all. Had my way, we'd've moved on already. This close to the tramway makes me nervous.”

“Why?” He looked up; the aerial tramway, the least impressive of all Paolo Soleri's arcologies, and even by that comparison breathtaking, soared away to the horizon on the sweep-shaped arms of pylons that rose an eighth of a mile above them.

“Company bulls, is why. They ride cleanup, all up'n down this stretch. Lookin' for sabooters. Don't like the idea them thinkin' we's that kind.”

Joe Bob felt nervous. The biggest patriots were on death row. Rape a child, murder seven women, blow the brains out of an old shopkeeper, that was acceptable; but be anti-country and the worst criminals wanted to wreak revenge. He thought of Greg, who had been beaten to death on Q's death row, waiting on

appeal, by a vark-killer who'd sprayed a rush hour crowd with a squirter, attempting to escape a drugstore robbery that had gone sour. The vark-killer had beaten Greg's head in with a three-legged stool from his cell. Whoever these people were, they weren't what he was.

“Bulls?” Joe Bob asked.

“How long you been onna dodge, boy?” asked the incredibly tall one with the hook for a hand.

“Bulls. Troops. The Man.”

The old man chuckled and slapped the tall one on the thigh. “Paul, he's too young to know those words. Those were our words. Now they call them...”

Joe Bob linked in to the hesitation. “Varks?”

“Yes, varks. Do you know where that came from?” Joe Bob shook his head.

The old man settled down and started talking, and as if he were talking to children around a hearth, the others got comfortable and listened. “It comes from the Dutch Afrikaans for earth-pig, or aardvark. They just shortened it to vark, don't you see.”

He went on talking, telling stories of days when he had been younger, of things that had happened, of their country when it had been fresher. And Joe Bob listened. How the old man had gotten his poached egg in a government medical shop, the same place Paul had gotten his metal hook, the same place Walter had lost his tongue and Marty had been done with the acid that had turned him half-white in the face. The same sort of medical shop where they had each suffered. But they spoke of the turmoil that had ended in the land, and how it was better for everyone, even for roaming bands like theirs. And the old man called them bindlestiffs, but Joe Bob knew whatever that meant, it wasn't what he was. He knew one other thing: it was not better.

“Do you play Monopoly?” the old man asked.

The hunchback, his plastic dome flickering in pastels, scampered to a roll-up and undid thongs and pulled out a cardboard box that had been repaired many times. Then they showed Joe Bob how to play Monopoly. He lost quickly; gathering property seemed a stupid waste of time to him. He tried to speak to them about what was happening in America, about the abolition of the Pentagon Trust, about the abolishment of the Supreme Court, about the way colleges trained only for the corporations or the Trust,

about the central computer banks in Denver where everyone's identity and history were coded for instant arrest, if necessary. About all of it. But they knew that. They didn't think it was bad. They thought it kept the saboteurs in their place so the country could be as good as it had always been.

"I have to go," Joe Bob said, finally. "Thank you for helping me." It was a stand-off: hate against gratitude.

They didn't ask him to stay with them. He hadn't expected it.

He walked up the gravel bank; he stood under the long bird-shadow of the aerial tramway that hurtled from coast-to-coast, from Gulf to Great Lakes, and he looked up. It seemed free. But he knew it was anchored in the earth, deep in the earth, every tenth of a mile. It only seemed free, because Soleri had dreamed it that way. Art was not reality, it was only the appearance of reality.

He turned east. With no place to go but more of the same, he went anywhere. Till thunder crashed, in whatever dark closet.

Convocation, at the State University of New York at Buffalo, was a catered affair. Catered by varks, troops, squirters and (Joe Bob, looking down from a roof, added) bulls. The graduating class was eggboxed, divided into groups of no more than four, in cubicles with clear plastic walls. Unobstructed view of the screens on which the President Comptroller gave his address, but no trouble for the quellers if there was trouble. (There had been rumors of unrest, and even a one-page hectographed protest sheet tacked to the bulletin boards on campus.)

Joe Bob looked around with the opera glasses. He was checking the doggie guards.

Tenure and status among the faculty were indicated by the size, model and armament of the

doggie guard robots that hovered, humming softly, just above and to the right shoulder of every administrator and professor. Joe Bob was looking for a 2013 Dictograph model with mist sprayers and squirt nozzles. Latest model...President Comptroller.

The latest model down there in the crowd was a 2007. That meant it was all assistant profs and teaching guides.

And that meant they were addressing the commencement exercises from the studio in the Ad Building. He slid back across the roof and into the gun tower. The guard was still sleeping, cocooned with spin ex. He stared at the silver-webbed mummy. They would find him and spray him with dissolvent. Joe

Bob had left the nose unwebbed; the guard could breathe.

Bigger killer!

Shut up.

Effective commando.

I told you to shut the hell up!

He slipped into the guard's one-piece stretch suit, smoothed it down the arms to the wrists, stretching it to accommodate his broader shoulders. Then, carrying the harness and the rucksack, he descended the spiral staircase into the Ad Building proper. There were no varks in sight inside the building. They were an on perimeter detail, it was a high caution alert : commencement day.

He continued down through the levels to the central heating system. It was June. Hot outside. The furnaces had been damped, the air conditioners turned on to a pleasant 71° throughout the campus. He found the schematic for the ducts and traced the path to the studio with his finger. He slipped into the

harness and rucksack, pried open a grille and climbed into the system. It was a long, vertical climb through the ductwork. Climbing

20 do you remember the rule that was passed into law, that nothing could be discussed in open classes that did not pertain directly to the subject matter being taught that day 19 and do you remember that modern art class in which you began asking questions about the uses of high art as vehicles for dissent and revolution 18 and how you began questioning the professor about Picasso's Guernica and what fever it had taken to paint it as a statement about the horrors of war 17 and how the professor had forgotten the rule and had recounted the story of Diego Rivera's Rockefeller family 16 and how, when the fresco was completed, Rivera had painted in Lenin prominently, and Nelson Rockefeller had demanded another face be painted over it, and Rivera had refused 16 and how Rockefeller had had the fresco destroyed 14 and within 10 minutes of the discussion the Comptroller had the professor arrested 13 and do you remember the day the Pentagon Trust contributed the money to build the new stadium in exchange for the Games Theory department being converted to Tactics and they renamed the building Neumann Hall 12 and do you remember when you registered for classes and they ran you through Central and found all the affiliations and made you sign the loyalty oath for students 11 and the afternoon they raided the basement 10 and caught you and Greg and Terry and Katherine 9 and they wouldn't give you a chance to get out and they filled the basement with mist 8 and they shot Terry through the mouth and Katherine 7 and Katherine 6 and Katherine 5 and she died folded up like a child on the sofa 4 and they came in and shot holes in the door from the inside so it looked like you'd been firing back at them 3 and they took you and Greg into custody 2 and the boot and the manacles and the confessions and you escaped and ran 1

Climbing-

Looking out through the interstices of the grille. The studio. Wasn't it fine. Cameras, sets, all of them-fat and powdered and happy. The doggies turning turning above their shoulders in the air turning and turning.

Now we find out just how tough you really are.

Don't start with me!

You've got to actually kill someone now.

I know what I've got to do.

Let's see how your peace talk sits with butchering someone-

Damn you!

-in cold blood, isn't that what they call it?

I can do it.

Sure you can. You make me sick.

I can: I can do it. I have to do it.

So do.

The studio was crowded with administrative officials, with technicians, with guards and troops, with mufti-laden military personnel looking over the graduating class for likely impressed-men. And in the campus brig, seventy feet beneath the Armory, eleven students crouched in maximum security monkey cages: unable to stand, unable to sit, built so a man could only crouch, spines bowed like bushmen in an outback.

With the doggie scanning, turning and observing, ready to fire, it was impossible to grab the President Comptroller. But there was a way to confound the robot guards. Wendell had found the way at

Dartmouth, but he'd died for the knowledge. But there was a way.

If a man does the dying for you.

A vark. If a vark dies.

They die the same.

He ignored the conversation. It led nowhere; it never led anywhere but the same. The squirt gun was in his hands. He lay flat, spread his legs, feet turned out, and braced the wire stock against the hollow of his right shoulder. In the moment of light focused in the scope, he saw what would happen in the next seconds. He would squirt the guard standing beside the cameraman with the arriflex. The guard would fall and the doggies would be alerted. They would begin scanning, and in that moment he would squirt one of them. It would short, and begin spraying. The other doggies would home in, begin firing among themselves, and in the ensuing confusion he would kick out the grille, drop down and capture the Comptroller. If he was lucky. And if he was further lucky, he would get away with him. Further, and he would use him as ransom for the eleven.

Lucky! You'll die.

So I'll die. They die, I die. Both ways, I'm tired.

All your words, all your fine noble words.

He remembered all the things he had said through the bullhorn. They seemed far long lost and gone now. It was time for final moments. His finger tightened on the trigger.

The moment of light lengthened.

The light grew stronger.

He could not see the studio. The glare of the golden light blotted everything. He

blinked, came out
from behind the squirt gun and realized the golden light was there with him, inside the
duct, surrounding
him, heating him, glowing and growing. He tried to breathe and found he could not. His
head began to
throb, the pressure building in his temples. He had a fleeting thought--it was one of the
doggies: he'd been
sniffed out and this was some new kind of mist, or a heat-ray, or something new he
hadn't known about.
Then everything blurred out in a burst of golden brightness brighter than anything he
had ever seen. Even
lying on his back as a child, in a field of winter wheat, staring up with wide eyes at the
sun, seeing how
long he could endure. Why was it he had wanted to endure pain, to show whom? Even
brighter than that.

Who am I and where am I going?

Who he was : uncounted billions of atoms, pulled apart and whirled away from there,
down a
golden tunnel bored in saffron space and ochre time.

Where he was going:

Joe Bob Hickey awoke and the first sensation of many that cascaded in on him was one
of
swaying. On a tideless tide, in air, perhaps water, swinging, back and forth, a pendulum
movement that
made him feel nauseous. Golden light filtered in behind his closed lids. And sounds.
High musical sounds
that seemed to cut off before he had heard them fully to the last vibrating tremolo. He
opened his eyes and
he was lying on his back, on a soft surface that conformed to the shape of his body. He
turned his head and
saw the bullhorn and rucksack lying nearby. The squirt gun was gone. Then he turned
his head back, and
looked straight up. He had seen bars. Golden bars reaching in arcs toward a joining
overhead. A cathedral
effect, above him.

Slowly, he got to his knees, rolling tides of nausea moving in him. They were bars.

He stood up and felt the swaying more distinctly. He took three steps and found himself at the edge of the soft place. Set flush into the floor, it was a gray-toned surface, a huge circular shape. He stepped off, onto the solid floor of the...of the cage.

It was a cage.

He walked to the bars and looked out.

Fifty feet below was a street. A golden street on which great bulb-bodied creatures moved, driving before them smaller periwinkle blue humans, whipping them to push-and-pull the sitting carts on which the golden bulb creatures rode. He stood watching for a long time.

Then Joe Bob Hickey went back to the circular mattress and lay down. He closed his eyes, and tried to sleep.

In the days that followed, he was fed well, and learned that the weather was controlled. If it rained, an energy bubble-he didn't understand, but it was invisible-would cover his cage. The heat was never too great, nor was he ever cold in the night. His clothes were taken away and brought back very quickly... changed. After that, they were always fresh and clean.

He was someplace else. They let him know that much. The golden bulb-creatures were the ruling

class, and the smaller blue people-sorts were their workers. He was very someplace else.

Joe Bob Hickey watched the streets from his great swaying cage, suspended fifty feet above the moving streets. In his cage he could see it all. He could see the golden bulb rulers as they drove the pitiful

blue servants and he never saw the face of one of the smaller folk, for their eyes were constantly turned toward their feet.

He had no idea why he was there.

And he was certain he would stay there forever.

Whatever purpose they had borne in mind, to pluck him away from his time and place, they felt no need to impart to him. He was a thing in a cage, swinging free, in prison, high above a golden street.

Soon after he realized this was where he would spend the remainder of his life, he was bathed in a deep yellow light. It washed over him and warmed him, and he fell asleep for a while. When he awoke, he felt better than he had in years. The sharp pains the shrapnel wound had given him regularly, had ceased. The wound had healed over completely. Though he ate the strange, simple foods he found in his cage, he never felt the need to urinate or void his bowels. He lived quietly, wanting for nothing, because he wanted nothing.

Get up, for God's sake. Look at yourself.

I'm just fine. I'm tired, let me alone.

He stood and walked to the bars. Down in the street, a golden bulb-creature's rolling cart had stopped, almost directly under the cage. He watched as the blue people fell in the traces, and he watched as the golden bulb thing beat them. For the first time, somehow, he saw it as he had seen things before he had been brought to this place. He felt anger at the injustice of it; he felt the blood hammering in his neck; he began screaming. The golden creature did not stop. Joe Bob looked for something to hurl. He grabbed the bullhorn and turned it on and began screaming, cursing, threatening the monster with the whip. The creature looked up and its many silver eyes fastened on Joe Bob Hickey. Tyrant, killer,

filth! he screamed.

He could not stop. He screamed all the things he had screamed for years. And the creature stopped whipping the little blue people, and they slowly got to their feet and pulled the cart away, the creature following. When they were well away, the creature rolled once more onto the platform of the cart, and whipped them away.

“Rise up, you toadstools! Strike a blow for freedom!”

He screamed all that day, the bullhorn throwing his voice away to shatter against the sides of the windowless golden buildings.

“Grab their whips away from them! Is this what you deserve?! There's still time! As long as one of you isn't all the way beaten, there's a chance. You are not alone! We are a large, organized resistance movement...”

They aren't listening.

They'll hear.

Never. They don't care.

Yes! Yes, they do. Look! See?

And he was right. Down in the street, carts were pulling up and as they came within the sounds of his voice the golden bulb creatures began wailing in terrible strident bug voices, and they beat themselves with the whips...and the carts started up again, pulled away...and the creatures beat their blue servants out of sight.

In front of him, they wailed and beat themselves, trying to atone for their cruelty. Beyond him, they resumed their lives.

It did not take him long to understand.

I'm their conscience.

You were the last they could find, and they took you, and now you hang up here and pillory them
and they beat their breasts and wail mea culpa, mea maxima culpa, and they purge themselves; then they
go on as before.

Ineffectual.

Totem.

Clown, I'm a clown.

But they had selected well. He could do no other.

As he had always been a silent voice, screaming words that needed to be screamed, but never
heard, so he was still a silent voice. Day after day they came below him, and wailed their
guilt; and having
done it, were free to go on.

The deep yellow light, do you know what it did to you?

Yes.

Do you know how long you'll live, how long you'll tell them what filth they are, how
long you'll
sway here in this cage?

Yes.

But you'll still do it.

Yes.

Why? Do you like being pointless?

It isn't pointless.

Why not, you said it was. Why?

Because if I do it forever, maybe at the end of forever they'll let me die.

(The Black-headed Gonolek is the most predatory of the African bush shrikes. Ornithologically, the vanga-shrikes occupy somewhat the same position among the passerines that the hawks and owls do among the nonpasserines. Because they impale their prey on thorns, they have earned the ruthless name "butcherbird." Like many predators, shrikes often kill more than they can eat, and when opportunity presents itself seem to kill for the joy of killing.)

All was golden light and awareness.

(It is not uncommon to find a thorn tree or barbed-wire fence decorated with a dozen or more grasshoppers, locusts, mice or small birds. That the shrike establish such larders in times of plenty against future need has been questioned. They often fail to return, and the carcasses slowly shrivel or rot.)

Joe Bob Hickey, prey of his world, impaled on a thorn of light by the shrike, and brother to the shrike himself.

(Most bush shrikes have loud, melodious voices and reveal their presence by distinctive calls.)

He turned back to the street, putting the bullhorn to his mouth and, alone as always, he screamed,
"Jefferson said-"

From the golden street came the sounds of insect wailing.

Los Angeles, California/1971

7 EROTOPHOBIA

It began with my mother, Nate Kleiser said, hating every word of it. The ignominy of it, oh. Not only here in a psychiatrist's office, not only lying on a forest green Naugahyde chaise, not only suffering every literate man's embarrassment at speaking lines Roth had portnoyzed into the ground, but to be speaking those lines to a female shrink, to be speaking them with choked-up emotion, to have started with mother...

Do you play with yourself much? asked Herr Doktor Felicia Bremmer, graduate of the Spitzbergen Kopfschmerzenklinik, 38-21-35.

I don't have to, Doctor, that's the trouble, Nate said. His head was beginning to ache, just behind the right eye. He heard the fingers of his left hand, quite independent of the directions of his brain, scrabbling at the forest green Naugahyde.

Perhaps you'd better go over that part again, Mr. Kleiser, Dr. Bremmer urged him. I'm not entirely sure I have the problem.

Okay, look, it's like this, for instance. He tried to sit up and she placed a soft, but firm hand on his chest and he lay still. Your reputation for handling uh, well, sex-oriented problems like mine is widespread, right? Right. So I get on a plane in Toronto, and I fly down here to Chicago to see you. So on the plane there're these two stewardesses, nice girls, and first this one, Chrissy Something, she offers me pillows and little bootie-socks, and then her partner, Jora Lee, she brings me a big glass of champagne-before anybody else gets served anything-and when she leans down to put it on the tray-table, she bites me on the ear. So in about ten minutes the two of them are fighting over me in the galley, and everybody's

pushing those service
buttons to call the stewardesses, and they aren't coming out of there except every few
minutes to ask me do
I like my steak well-done or rare, or offering me little cocktail mints...it really gets
embarrassing.

And it goes on like that an through the damned flight, and they're just about on the
verge of using
those demonstration oxygen masks with the plastic air hoses to strangle one another, just
to see which one
will layover with me in Chicago, and I don't think I'm going to get off the goddam plane
in one piece, when

we come in to land and they still haven't served anybody, and the whole plane wants to
kill me except they
love me too much, and I know I'm going to have to fight my way down the ramp, and
the only thing that
saved me was a little black kid who was with his mother-who kept winking at me-puked
an over the seat
and the aisle and everything else, and I slipped past while they were trying to pour
coffee grounds on it to
kill the smell, and I got away.

Dr. Bremmer shook her head slowly. That's just terrible. Terrible.

Terrible? Hell, it's frightening. If you want to know the simple truth, Doctor, I'm scared
out of my
mind I'm going to be loved to death!

Well...Dr. Bremmer said. Isn't that a bit, just a bit overdramatic?

What are you doing, Doctor?

Nothing, Mr. Kleiser, not a thing. Just concentrate on the problem.

Concentrate? You've got to be kidding, Doctor; I can't think of anything else/ Thank
God I make
my living as a cartoonist. I can mail my work in; if I had to actually go out and mix with
people, it'd be an
over for me in ten minutes.

I think you may be overstating, Mr. Kleiser.

Sure, easy enough for you to say, you aren't me. But it's been like this since I was a kid. I was always the most popular one in the class, the first one picked at dances when it was ladies' choice, the one both teams wanted when we played choose-up baseball or red rover, most likely to succeed, straight A's the teachers all wanted my body...

In college, added Dr. Bremmer.

College, hell : in kindergarten/ I'm the only male I know who was forcibly raped in a girl's locker room before he was out of the fourth grade! You just don't understand, dammit! I'm going to be loved...to...death!

Dr. Bremmer tried to quiet him. Nate's voice had grown frantic, strident.

Fear of being watched, of people wanting to hurt you, even -in extreme cases of advanced paranoia-people plotting to kill you...yes, that problem I know quite well, Mr. Kleiser. Paranoia. It's terribly common, particularly these days. But what you're telling me, well, that's something different, something exactly opposite. I've never encountered it. I wouldn't even know what to call it.

Nate closed his eyes.

Neither do I, he said.

Perhaps Erotophobia, fear of being loved, she said.

Dynamite. Now we have a name for it. A lot of good that does me. Nomenclature isn't my problem, sex is!

Mr. Kleiser, she said softly, you can't expect results instantaneously. You'll have to cooperate with me.

Cooperate? Hell, I shouldn't even be lying on this sofa with you!

Now, please, take it easy, Mr. Kleiser.

What are you doing?

Nothing.

You're unbuttoning your blouse. I can hear the fabric. I know that sound!

Nate sat straight up on the sofa, throwing the psychiatrist's leg off his lower body. She was half undressed; had, in fact, cleverly managed to rid herself of miniskirt, half-slip, shoes, panty hose and bikini briefs without his knowing it. Nate knew instantly that he had met a master of the art. In a pitched panic he bolted from the forest green Naugahyde chaise, and lurched toward the door.

Dr. Bremmer hurled herself sidewise, hanging half off the chaise. Her arm swept the desk, knocked files of Psychology Today to the floor. She grabbed and connected.

Jeezus! screamed Nate, doubling over.

Oops, sorry, darling, Dr. Bremmer murmured, scrabbling for him. He was in flight. She crawled after him, got her arms locked around one ankle. Take me with you, please, please, do with me what you will, hurt me, use me, abuse me, I love you, I love you! Hopelessly, desperately, completely.

Oh my God oh my God...mumbled Nate, clinging to the doorknob in an effort to keep his balance.

Then the office door opened inward, catching Nate in the shoulder, knocking him off-balance so he stepped on the psychiatrist's back. Yes, yes, she said huskily, yes, dominate me, hurt me, I've denied myself all these years, I never knew what it was to love a man like you, take me, the Story of 0, yes...yes...

The open door now admitted Dr. Bremmer's nurse, a pimply woman of fifty who had watched

Nate when he had waited in the reception room for the psychiatrist to see him. Her eyes widened as she saw

the supine Dr. Bremmer and in a moment she was pulling the half-naked psychiatrist's arms from around Nate's ankle.

Before she could join in, before her astonishment could turn to lust, Nate hurtled through the door, caromed off two walls, hit the outer office door at a dead run and barely managed to get through before shattering the glass panel.

He was down the hall, into the self-service elevator, and safe before the two women could get to their feet. Nate Kleiser knew what fate befell those who were not fleet of foot.

As he ran down the street toward Michigan Avenue, he heard screaming and, looking up, saw Dr. Bremmer, her breasts now bare, hanging from the eighteenth story window. He could barely make out what she was yelling.

If you leave me I'll kill myself!

Some people have alternatives, Nate thought, and ran.

Having gone straight from O'Hare Airport to Dr. Bremmer's office, Nate had no hotel in which to hide. It was, in fact, the first time in six years he had been out of his isolated Toronto house for more than two hours. He needed a drink desperately. Imps of Hell prodded the soft optic chiasma with fondue forks.

A neon Budweiser sign and a dark-thick doorway presented themselves, and he slipped inside. He was lucky. It was eye-of-the-hurricane hour between the closet alcoholics who needed three swift ones straight up before they could face the crabgrass and waiting ladies in Wilmette, and the

bar vampires who
hung by their curled toes from the bar-rail till closing time. The bar was deserted, nearly
deserted.

He slid into a shadowed booth, blew out the candle in its metal shell, and waited for the
waiter,
hoping it would not be a waitress. It was a waitress. Pouf skirt, net-mesh opera hose,
spike heels, quiet
good taste.

He hid his face and ordered three doubles of McCormick bourbon, no water, no rocks,
no glass if
possible, just pour them in my hands. She stared at him for a long moment, started to say
Don't I know you
from some

And Nate croaked in a frog-like, hideous voice, You couldn't possibly, I just got out of
Dannemora, serving eighteen-to-life for raping, killing and eating a choir boy, not
necessarily in that order.

She fled, and the bartender brought the drinks, standing well back from the booth as
Nate slid the
bills across the table.

It went that way for the next three and a half hours, till Nate's buzz was sufficiently
nestled-in to
permit conversation with the odd little man whose yogurt-soft eyes preceded him into
the booth. Nate
found himself unburdening his woes, and the little man, who matched him drink for
drink, offered various
unworkable solutions.

Look, I like you, said the little man, so I'll try and help you out. See, I'm something of a
lay analyst
myself. I've done just a whole lot of reading. Fromm, Freud, Bettelheim, Kahlil Gibran,
that whole crowd.
Now what I'd say is this: see, everybody has both male and female in him, you know
what I mean? I think
the female part of you is trying to assert itself. Have you ever thought of having sloppy
sex with a man?
Nate felt a hand crawling up his thigh. It was impossible. Nobody had arms that long, to
reach across a

booth, under a table. He yelped and looked down. The waitress was crawling around down there on hands and knees.

Nate bolted from the bar and didn't stop till he'd reached a crowded intersection.

When the light changed, and Nate stopped on the curb, he knew he was in trouble. It was State Street, and the clubs were letting out.

They chased him fifteen blocks and he lost the last two women-a gorgeous black girl with an enormous natural and a fiftyish matron who kept trying to use her Emba Cerulean mink stole to lasso him-in a pitfall-riddled construction site. He heard their shrieks as they dropped from sight, but he didn't slow down.

There was a motor hotel on the corner of Ohio and the Shore Drive and he pulled the tattered remnants of his clothing about him, making sure his wallet with the credit cards had not been lost when the Girl Scouts-Girl Scouts!?!-had ripped the arms off his jacket.

Inside, safe for the moment, he registered. The desk clerk, a whispery young man with white-on-white shirt, white-on-white tie, white-on-white face, looked at him with undisguised affection and offered the key to the bridal suite.

A single, away from everything, Nate insisted, and went up in the elevator, leaving the desk clerk breathing heavily.

The room was quiet and small. Nate pulled the drapes, locked the door, wedged a chair under the doorknob, and slumped on the edge of the bed. After a while he felt moderately sober, moderately relaxed, and thoroughly sick to his stomach. He undressed slowly and took a hot shower.

Soaping himself, he thought. It was a good place to think, in the shower.

Life had been at least supportable in Toronto. He'd devised a way to live. It was a ghastly way to live, but it was at least, well, supportable. But after Lois and the three bottles of Dexamils, he knew he had to do something, to try and arrest this hideous condition that had been getting worse and worse as he'd grown older. Only twenty-seven years old, and my life is hopeless, he thought. He'd thought that every year since he had reached puberty.

Then he'd heard of Dr. Bremmer and he'd been dubious. She was a woman, after all. But desperation knows no rationalizing deterrents, and he'd long distanced an appointment. Now that had gone bananas, and he was thoroughly peeled. It was getting worse. The trip to Chicago had been a lousy idea. Now what will I do? How the hell will I get safely out of this enemy territory?

He turned and looked in the full-length mirror.

He saw himself naked.

He did have a good body.

And he did have a pleasant face, really quite a handsome and compelling face.

As he watched, his image began to shimmer and flow. His hair grew longer, more blond, even blonde, and breasts began to bulge as the hair vanished from his body. The image altered, as he stared, into the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The words of the little man in the bar skimmed across his mind and were gone in an instant, lost in the adoration he felt for the fantastic creature in the mirror.

I love you, he said, finding it difficult to speak coherently.

He reached for her, and she drew back. Don't you put a hand on me you lecher, she said.

But I love you...I really love you!

I'm not that kind of a girl, she said.

But I don't just want your body, Nate said. There was an imploring note in his voice. I want to love you, to have you with me all my life. I can make a good home for you. I've been waiting for you all my life.

Well...she said, maybe we can just talk a while. But keep your hands to yourself.

I will, Nate promised, I will. I'll keep my hands to myself.

And they lived happily ever after.

Los Angeles, California; New York City/1971

8 ONE LIFE,
FURNISHED
IN EARLY
POVERTY

And so it was-strangely, strangely-that I found myself standing in the backyard of the house I had lived in when I was seven years old. At thirteen minutes till midnight on no special magical winter's night, in a town that had held me only till I was physically able to run away. In Ohio, in winter, near midnight--certain I could go back.

Back to a time when what was now...was then.

Not truly knowing why I even wanted to go back. But certain that I could. Without magic, without science, without alchemy, without supernatural assistance; just go back. Because I had to, I needed to...go back.

Back; thirty-five years and more. To find myself at the age of seven, before any of it had begun;
before any of the directions had been taken; to find out what turning point in my life it had been that had
wrenched me from the course all little boys took to adulthood; that had set me on the road of loneliness and
success ending here, back where I'd begun, in a backyard at now-twelve minutes to midnight.

At forty-two I had come to that point in my life toward which I'd struggled since I'd been a child: a
place of security, importance, recognition. The only one from this town who had made it. The ones who
had had the most promise in school were now milkmen, used car salesmen, married to fat, stupid dead

women who had, themselves, been girls of exceeding promise in high school. They had been trapped in this
little Ohio town, never to break free. To die there, unknown. I had broken free, had done all the wonderful
things I'd said I would do.

Why should it all depress me now?

Perhaps it was because Christmas was nearing and I was alone, with bad marriages and lost
friendships behind me.

I walked out of the studio, away from the wet-ink-new fifty thousand dollar contract, got in my car
and drove to International Airport. It was a straight line made up of in-flight meals and jet airliners and
rental cars and hastily-purchased winter clothing. A straight line to a backyard I had not seen in over thirty
years.

I had to find the dragoon to go back.

Crossing the rime-frosted grass that crackled like cellophane, I walked under the shadow of the

lightning-blasted pear tree. I had climbed in that tree endlessly when I was seven years old.

In summer, its branches hung far over and scraped the roof of the garage. I could shinny out across the limb and drop onto the garage roof. I had once pushed Johnny Mummy off that garage roof...not out of meanness, but simply because I had jumped from it many times and I could not understand anyone's not finding it a wonderful thing to do. He had sprained his ankle, and his father, a fireman, had come looking for me. I'd hidden on the garage roof.

I walked around the side of the garage, and there was the barely-visible path. To one side of the path I had always buried my toy soldiers. For no other reason than to bury them, know I had a secret place, and later dig them up again, as if finding treasure.

(It came to me that even now, as an adult, I did the same thing. Dining in a Japanese restaurant, I would hide small pieces of pakkai or pineapple or teriyaki in my rice bowl, and pretend to be delighted when, later in the meal, my chopsticks encountered the tiny treasures down in among the rice grains.)

I knew the spot, of course. I got down on my hands and knees and began digging with the silver pen-knife on my watch chain. It had been my father's pen-knife-almost the only thing he had left me when he'd died.

The ground was hard, but I dug with enthusiasm, and the moon gave me more than enough light. Down and down I dug, knowing eventually I would come to the dragoon.

He was there. The bright paint rusted off his body, the saber corroded and reduced to a stub. Lying there in the grave I had dug for him thirty-five years before. I scooped the little metal soldier out of the

ground, and cleaned him off as best I could with my paisley dress handkerchief. He was faceless now and as sad as I felt.

I hunkered there, under the moon, and waited for midnight, only a minute away, knowing it was all going to come right for me. After so terribly long.

The house behind me was silent and dark. I had no idea who lived there now. It would have been unpleasant if the strangers who now lived here had been unable to sleep, and rising to get a glass of water, had idly looked into the backyard. Their backyard. I had played here, and built a world for myself here, from dreams and loneliness. Using talismans of comic books and radio programs and matinee movies, and potent charms like the sad little dragoon in my hand.

My wristwatch said midnight, one hand laid straight on top of the other.

The moon faded. Slowly, it went gray and shadowy, till the glow was gone, and then even the gray after-image was gone.

The wind rose. Slowly, it came from somewhere far away and built around me. I stood up, pulling the collar of my topcoat around my neck. The wind was neither warm nor cold, yet it rushed, without even ruffling my hair. I was not afraid.

The ground was settled. Slowly, it lowered me the tiniest fractions of inches. But steadily, as though the layers of tomorrows that had been built up, were vanishing.

My thoughts were of myself: I'm coming to save you. I'm coming, Gus. You won't hurt any more...you'll never have hurt.

The moon came back. It had been full; now it was new. The wind died. It had carried me where I'd needed to go. The ground settled. The years had been peeled off.

I was alone in the backyard of the house at 89 Harmon Drive. The snow was deeper. It was a different house, though it was the same. It was not recently painted. The Depression had not been long ago; money was still tight. It wasn't weather-beaten, but in a year or two my father would have it painted. Light

yellow.

There was a sumac tree growing below the window of the dinette. It was nourished by lima beans and soup and cabbage.

“You'll just sit there until you finish every drop of your dinner. We're not wasting food. There are children starving in Russia.”

I put the dragoon in my topcoat pocket. He had worked more than hard enough. I walked around the side of the house. I smiled as I saw again the wooden milk box by the side door. In the morning, very early, the milkman would put three quarts of milk there, but before anyone could bring them in, this very cold winter morning in December, the cream would push its way up and the little cardboard cap would be an inch above the mouth of the bottle.

The gravel talked beneath my feet. The street was quiet and cold. I stood in the front yard, beside the big oak tree, and looked up and down.

It was the same. It was as though I'd never been away. I started to cry. Hello.

Gus was on one of the swings in the playground. I stood outside the fence of Lathrop Grade School and watched him standing on the seat, gripping the ropes, pumping his little legs. He was smaller than I'd remembered him. He wasn't smiling as he tried to swing higher. It was serious to him.

Standing outside the hurricane fence, watching Gus, I was happy. I scratched at a rash on my right wrist, and smoked a cigarette, and was happy.

I didn't see them until they were out of the shadows of the bushes, almost upon him.

One of them rushed up and grabbed Gus's leg, and tried to pull him off the seat, just as he reached the bottom of his swing. Gus managed to hold on, but the chain-ropes twisted crazily and when it went back up it hit the metal leg of the framework.

Gus fell, rolled face-down in the dust of the playground, and tried to sit up. The boys pushed through between the swings, avoiding the one that clanged back and forth.

Gus managed to get up, and the boys formed a circle around him. Then Jack Wheeldon stepped out and faced him. I remembered Jack Wheeldon.

He was taller than Gus. They were all taller than Gus, but Wheeldon was beefier. I could see shadows surrounding him. Shadows of a boy who would grow into a man with a beer stomach and thick arms. But the eyes would always remain the same.

He shoved Gus in the face. Gus went back, dug in and charged him. Gus came at him low, head tucked under, fists tight at the end of arms braced close to the body, extended forward. He hit him in the stomach and wrestled him around. They struggled together like inept club fighters, raising dust.

One of the boys in the circle took a step forward and hit Gus hard in the back of the head. Gus turned his face out of Wheeldon's stomach, and Wheeldon punched him in the mouth. Gus started to cry.

I'd been frozen, watching it happen; but he was crying

I looked both ways down the fence and found the break far to my right. I threw the

cigarette away
as I dashed down the fence, trying to look behind me. Then through the break and I was
running toward
them the long distance from far right field of the baseball diamond, toward the swings
and see-saws. They
had Gus down now, and they were kicking him.

When they saw me coming, they started to run away. Jack Wheeldon paused to kick
Gus once
more in the side, then he, too, ran.

Gus was lying there, on his back, the dust smeared into mud on his face. I bent down
and picked
him up. He wasn't moving, but he wasn't really hurt. I held him very close and carried
him toward the
bushes that rose on a small incline at the side of the playground. The bushes were cool
overhead and they
canopied us, hid us; I laid him down and used my handkerchief to clean away the dirt.
His eyes were very
blue. I smoothed the straight brown hair off his forehead. He wore braces; one of the
rubber bands hooked
onto the pins of the braces, used to keep them tension-tight, had broken. I pulled it free.

He opened his eyes and started crying again.

Something hurt in my chest.

He started snuffling, unable to catch his breath. He tried to speak, but the words were
only
mangled sounds, huffed out with too much air and pain.

Then he forced himself to sit up and rubbed the back of his hand across his runny nose.

He stared at me. It was panic and fear and confusion and shame at being seen this way.
“Th-they
hit me from in back,” he said, snuffling.

“I know. I saw.”

“D'jou scare'm off?”

“Yes.”

He didn't say thank you. It wasn't necessary. The backs of my thighs hurt from squatting. I sat down.

“My name is Gus,” he said, trying to be polite.

I didn't know what name to give him. I was going to tell him the first name to come into my head, but I heard myself say, “My name is Mr. Rosenthal.”

He looked startled. “That's my name, too. Gus Rosenthal!”

“Isn't that peculiar,” I said. We grinned at each other, and he wiped his nose again.

I didn't want to see my mother or father. I had those memories. They were sufficient. It was little Gus I wanted to be with. But one night I crossed into the backyard at 89 Harmon Drive from the empty lots that would later be a housing development.

And I stood in the dark, watching them eat dinner. There was my father. I hadn't remembered him as being so handsome. My mother was saying something to him, and he nodded as he ate. They were in the dinette. Gus was playing with his food. Don't mush your food around like that, Gus. Eat, or you can't stay up to hear Lux Presents Hollywood.

But they're doing “Dawn Patrol.”

Then don't mush your food.

“Momma,” I murmured, standing in the cold, “Momma, there are children starving in Russia.” And I added, thirty-five years late, “Name two, Momma.”

I met Gus downtown at the newsstand.

“Hi.”

“Oh. Hullo.”

“Buying some comics?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You ever read Doll Man and Kid Eternity?”

“Yeah, they're great. But I got them.”

“Not the new issues.”

“Sure do.”

“Bet you've got last month's. He's just checking in the new comics right now.”

So we waited while the newsstand owner used the heavy wire snips on the bundles, and checked off the magazines against the distributor's long white mimeographed sheet. And I bought Gus Airboy and Jingle Jangle Comics and Blue Beetle and Whiz Comics and Doll Man and Kid Eternity.

Then I took him to Isaly's for a hot fudge sundae. They served it in a tall tulip glass with the hot fudge in a little pitcher. When the waitress had gone to get the sundaes, little Gus looked at me. “Hey, how'd you know I only liked crushed nuts, an' not whipped cream or a cherry?”

I leaned back in the high-walled booth and smiled at him. “What do you want to be when you grow up, Gus?”

He shrugged. “I don't know.”

Somebody put a nickel in the Wurlitzer in his booth, and Glenn Miller swung into “String of Pearls.”

“Well, did you ever think about it?”

“No, huh-uh. I like cartooning; maybe I could draw comic books.”

“That's pretty smart thinking, Gus. There's a lot of money to be made in art.” I stared around the dairy store, at the Coca-Cola posters of pretty girls with page boy hairdos, drawn by an artist named Harold W. McCauley whose style would be known throughout the world, whose name would never be known.

He stared at me. “It's fun, too, isn't it?”

I was embarrassed. I'd thought first of money, he'd thought first of happiness. I'd reached him before he'd chosen his path. There was still time to make him a man who would think first of joy, all through his life.

“Mr. Rosenthal?”

I looked down and across, just as the waitress brought the sundaes. She set them down and I paid her. When she'd gone, Gus asked me, “Why did they call me a dirty Jewish elephant?”

“Who called you that, Gus?”

“The guys.”

“The ones you were fighting that day?”

He nodded. “Why'd they say elephant?”

I spooned up some vanilla ice cream, thinking. My back ached, and the rash had spread up my right wrist onto my forearm. “Well, Jewish people are supposed to have big noses, Gus.” I poured the hot fudge out of the little pitcher. It bulged with surface tension for a second, then spilled through its own dark brown film, covering the three scoops of ice cream. “I mean, that's what some people believe. So I suppose

they thought it was smart to call you an elephant, because an elephant has a big nose...a trunk. Do you understand?"

"That's dumb. I don't have a big nose...do I?"

"I wouldn't say so, Gus. They most likely said it just to make you mad. Sometimes people do that."

"That's dumb."

We sat there for a while and talked. I went far down inside the tulip glass with the long-handled spoon, and finished the deep dark, almost black bittersweet hot fudge. They hadn't made hot fudge like that in many years. Gus got ice cream up the spoon handle, on his fingers, on his chin, on his T-shirt. We talked about a great many things.

We talked about how difficult arithmetic was. (How I would still have to use my fingers sometimes even as an adult.) How the guys never gave a short kid his "raps" when the sandlot ballgames were in progress. (How I overcompensate with women from doubts about stature.) How different kinds of food were pretty bad tasting. (How I still used ketchup on well-done steak.) How it was pretty lonely in the neighborhood with nobody for friends. (How I had erected a facade of charisma and glamour so no one could reach me deeply enough to hurt me.) How Leon always invited all the kids over to his house, but when Gus got there, they slammed the door and stood behind the screen laughing and jeering. (How even now, a slammed door raised the hair on my neck and a phone receiver slammed down, cutting me off, sent me into a senseless rage.) How comic books were great. (How my scripts sold so easily because I had never learned how to rein-in my imagination.)

We talked about a great many things.

"I'd better get you home now," I said.

“Okay.” We got up. “Hey, Mr. Rosenthal?”

“You'd better wipe the chocolate off your face.”

He wiped. “Mr. Rosenthal...how'd you know I like crushed nuts, an' not whipped cream or a cherry?”

We spent a great deal of time together. I bought him a copy of a pulp magazine called Startling Stories, and read him a story about a space pirate who captures a man and his wife and offers the man the choice of opening one of two large boxes—in one is the man's wife, with twelve hours of air to breathe, in the other is a terrible alien fungus that will eat him alive. Little Gus sat on the edge of the big hole he'd dug, out in the empty lots, dangling his feet, and listening. His forehead was furrowed as he listened to the marvels of Jack Williamson's “Twelve Hours To Live,” there on the edge of the “fort” he'd built.

We discussed the radio programs Gus heard every day: Tennessee Jed, Captain Midnight, Jack Armstrong, Superman, Don Winslow of the Navy. And the nighttime programs: I Love a Mystery, Suspense, The Adventures of Sam Spade. And the Sunday programs: The Shadow, Quiet, Please, The Molle Mystery Theater.

We became good friends. He had told his mother and father about “MI. Rosenthal,” who was his friend, but they'd spanked him for the Startling Stories, because they thought he'd stolen it. So he stopped telling them about me. That was all right; it made the bond between us stronger.

One afternoon we went down behind the Colony Lumber Company, through the woods and the weeds to the old condemned pond. Gus told me he used to go swimming there, and fishing sometimes, for a

black oily fish with whiskers. I told him it was a catfish. He liked that. Liked to know the names of things. I told him that was called nomenclature, and he laughed to know there was a name for knowing names.

We sat on the piled logs rotting beside the black mirror water, and Gus asked me to tell him what it was like where I lived, and where I'd been, and what I'd done, and everything.

“I ran away from home when I was thirteen, Gus.”

“Wasn't you happy there?”

“Well, yes and no. They loved me, my mother and father. They really did. They just didn't

understand what I was all about.”

There was a pain on my neck. I touched a fingertip to the place. It was a boil beginning to grow. I hadn't had a boil in years, many years, not since I was a...

“What's the matter, MI. Rosenthal?”

“Nothing, Gus. Well, anyhow, I ran away, and joined a carnny.”

“Huh?”

“A carnival. The Tri-State Shows. We moved through Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, even Kansas...”

“Boy! A carnival! Just like in Toby Tyler or Ten Weeks with the Circus? I really cried when Toby Tyler's monkey got killed, that was the worst part of it, did you do stuff like that when you were with the circus?”

“Carnival.”

“Yeah. Uh-huh. Did'ja?”

“Something like that. I carried water for the animals sometimes, although we only had a few of those, and mostly in the freak show. But usually what I did was clean up, and carry food to the performers in their tops-”

“What's that?”

“That's where they sleep, in rigged tarpaulins. You know, tarps.”

“Oh. Yeah, I know. Go on, huh.”

The rash was all the way up to my shoulder now. It itched like hell, and when I'd gone to the drug store to get an aerosol spray to relieve it, so it wouldn't spread, I had only to see those round wooden display tables with their glass centers, under which were bottles of Teel tooth liquid, Tangee Red-Red lipstick and nylons with a seam down the back, to know the druggist wouldn't even know what I meant by Bactine or Liquid Band-Aid.

“Well, along about K.C. the carny got busted because there were too many moll dips and cannons and paperhangers in the tip....” I waited, his eyes growing huge.

“What's all thaaat mean, Mr. Rosenthal?!?”

“Ah-ha! Fine carny stiff you'd make. You don't even know the lingo.”

“Please, Mr. Rosenthal, please tell me!”

“Well, K.C. is Kansas City, Missouri...when it isn't Kansas City, Kansas. Except, really, on the other side of the river is Weston. And busted means thrown in jail, and...”

“You were in jail?”

“Sure was, little Gus. But let me tell you now, Cannons are pickpockets and moll dips are lady pickpockets, and paper-hangers are fellows who write bad checks. And a tip is a group.”

“So what happened, what happened?”

“One of these bad guys, one of these cannons, you see, picked the pocket of an assistant district attorney, and we all got thrown in jail. And after a while everyone was released on bail, except me and the Greek. Me, because I wouldn't tell them who I was, because I didn't want to go home, and the Greek, because a carny can find a wetbrain in any town to play Greek.”

“What's a Greek, huh?”

The Greek was a sixty-year-old alcoholic. So sunk in his own endless drunkenness that he was almost a zombie... a wetbrain. He was billed as The Thing and he lived in a portable pit they carried around, and he bit the heads off snakes and ate live chickens and slept in his own dung. And all for a bottle of gin every day. They locked me in the drunk tank with him. The smell. The smell of sour liquor, oozing with sweat out of his pores, it made me sick, it was a smell I could never forget. And the third day, he went crazy. They wouldn't fix him with gin, and he went crazy. He climbed the bars of the big free-standing drunk tank in the middle of the lockup, and he banged his head against the bars and ceiling where they met, till he fell back and lay there, breathing raggedly, stinking of that terrible smell, his face like a pound of raw meat.

The pain in my stomach was worse now. I took Gus back to Harmon Drive, and let him go home.

My weight had dropped to just over a hundred and ten. My clothes didn't fit. The acne and boils were worse. I smelled of witch hazel. Gus was getting more anti-social.

I realized what was happening.

I was alien in my own past. If I stayed much longer, God only knew what would happen to little Gus...but certainly I would waste away. Perhaps just vanish. Then... would Gus's future cease to exist, too?

I had no way of knowing; but my choice was obvious. I had to return.

And couldn't! I was happier here than I'd ever been before. The bigotry and violence Gus had known before I came to him had ceased. They knew he was being watched over. But Gus was becoming more erratic. He was shoplifting toy soldiers and comic books from the Kresge's and constantly defying his parents. It was turning bad. I had to go back.

I told him on a Saturday. We had gone to see a Lash La Rue western and Val Lewton's "The Cat People" at the Lake Theater. When we came back I parked the car on Mentor Avenue, and we went walking in the big, cool, dark woods that fronted Mentor where it met Harmon Drive.

"Mr. Rosenthal," Gus said. He looked upset.

"Yes, Gus?"

"I gotta problem, sir."

"What's that, Gus?" My head ached. It was a steady needle of pressure above the right eye.

"My mother's gonna send me to a military school."

I remembered. Oh, God, I thought. It had been terrible. Precisely the thing not to do to a child like Gus.

"They said it was 'cause I was rambunctious. They said they were gonna send me there for a year or two. Mr. Rosenthal...don't let'm send me there. I din't mean to be bad. I just wanted to be around you."

My heart slammed inside me. Again. Then again. “Gus, I have to go away.”

He stared at me. I heard a soft whimper.

“Take me with you, Mr. Rosenthal. Please. I want to see Galveston. We can drive a dynamite truck in North Carolina. We can go to Matawatchan, Ontario, Canada and work topping trees, we can sail on boats, Mr. Rosenthal!”

“Gus...”

“We can work the carny, Mr. Rosenthal. We can pick peanuts and oranges all across the country. We can hitchhike to San Francisco and ride the cable cars. We can ride the boxcars, Mr. Rosenthal...I promise I'll keep my legs inside an' not dangle 'em. I remember what you said about the doors slamming when they hook'm up. I'll keep my legs inside, honest I will...”

He was crying. My head ached hideously. But he was crying!

“I'll have to go, Gus!”

“You don't care!” He was shouting. “You don't care about me, you don't care what happens to me! You don't care if I die...you don't...”

He didn't have to say it: you don't love me.

“I do, Gus. I swear to God, I do!”

I looked up at him; he was supposed to be my friend. But he wasn't. He was going to let them send me off to that military school.

“I hope you die!”

Oh, dear God, Gus, I am! I turned and ran out of the woods as I watched him run out of the woods.

I drove away. The green Plymouth with the running boards and the heavy body; it was

hard

steering. The world swam around me. My eyesight blurred. I could feel myself withering away.

I thought I'd left myself behind, but little Gus had followed me out of the woods. Having done it, I now remembered: why had I remembered none of it before? As I drove off down Mentor Avenue, I came out of the woods and saw the big green car starting up, and I ran wildly forward, crouching low, wanting only to go with him, my friend, me. I threw in the clutch and dropped the stick into first, and pulled away from the curb as I reached the car and climbed onto the rear fender, pulling my legs up, hanging onto the trunk latch. I drove weaving, my eyes watering and things going first blue then green, hanging on for dear life to the cold latch handle. Cars whipped around, honking madly, trying to tell me that I was on the rear of the car, but I didn't know what they were honking about, and scared their honking would tell me I was back there, hiding. After I'd gone almost a mile, a car pulled up alongside, and a woman sitting next to the driver looked down at me crouching there, and I made a please don't tell sign with my finger to my freezing lips, but the car pulled ahead and the woman rolled down her window and motioned to me. I rolled down my window and the woman yelled across through the rushing wind that I was back there on the rear fender. I pulled over and fear gripped me as the car stopped and I saw me getting out of the door, and I crawled off the car and started running away. But my legs were cramped and cold from having hung on back there, and I ran awkwardly; then coming out of the dark was a road sign, and I hit it, and it hit me in the side of the face, and I fell down, and I ran toward myself, lying there, crying, and I got to him just as I got up and ran off into the gravel yard surrounding the Colony Lumber Company.

Little Gus was bleeding from the forehead where he'd struck the metal sign. He ran into the darkness, and I knew where he was running...I had to catch him, to tell him, to make him

understand why I
had to go away.

I came to the hurricane fence, and ran and ran till I found the place where I'd dug out under it, and
I slipped down and pulled myself under and got my clothes all dirty, but I got up and ran back behind the
Colony Lumber Company, into the sumac and the weeds, till I came to the condemned pond back there.
Then I sat down and looked out over the black water. I was crying.

I followed the trail down to the pond. It took me longer to climb over the fence than it had taken
him to crawl under it. When I came down to the pond, he was sitting there with a long blade of saw-grass in
his mouth, crying softly.

I heard him coming, but I didn't turn around.

I came down to him, and crouched down behind him. "Hey," I said quietly. "Hey, little Gus."

I wouldn't turn around. I wouldn't.

I spoke his name again, and touched him on the shoulder, and in an instant he was turned to me,
hugging me around the chest, crying into my jacket, mumbling over and over, "Don't go, please don't go,
please take me with you, please don't leave me here alone..."

And I was crying, too. I hugged little Gus, and touched his hair, and felt him holding onto me with
an his might, stronger than a seven year old should be able to hold on, and I tried to tell him how it was,
how it would be: "Gus... hey, hey, little Gus, listen to me...I want to stay, you know I want to stay...but I
can't."

I looked up at him; he was crying, too. It seemed so strange for a grownup to be crying like that,
and I said, "If you leave me I'll die. I will!"

I knew it wouldn't do any good to try explaining. He was too young. He wouldn't be able to understand.

He pulled my arms from around him, and he folded my hands in my lap, and he stood up, and I looked at him. He was gonna leave me. I knew he was. I stopped crying. I wouldn't let him see me cry.

I looked down at him. The moonlight held his face in a pale photograph. I wasn't fooling myself. He'd understand. He'd know. I turned and started back up the path. Little Gus didn't follow. He sat there looking back at me. I only turned once to look at him. He was still sitting there like that.

He was watching me. Staring up at me from the pond side. And I knew what instant it had been that had formed me. It hadn't been all the people who'd called me a wild kid, or a strange kid, or any of it. It wasn't being poor, or being lonely.

I watched him go away. He was my friend. But he didn't have no guts. He didn't. But I'd show him! I'd really show him! I was gonna get out of here, go away, be a big person and do a lot of things, and some day I'd run into him someplace and see him and he'd come up and shake my hand and I'd spit on him. Then I'd beat him up.

He walked up the path and went away. I sat there for a long time, by the pond. Till it got real cold.

I got back in the car, and went to find the way back to the future; where I belonged. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. I would find it...I still had the dragoon...and there were many stops I'd made on the way to becoming me. Perhaps Kansas City; perhaps Matawatchan, Ontario, Canada; perhaps Galveston; perhaps Shelby, North Carolina.

And crying, I drove. Not for myself, but for myself, for little Gus, for what I'd done to him, forced

him to become. Gus...Gus!

But...oh, God...what if I came back again..., and again? Suddenly, the road did not look familiar.

Madeira Beach, Florida/1969

9 ECOWARENESS

Once upon a time-something between 1,800,000,000 and 3,000,000,000 years ago-after the Earth had partly liquefied through loss of heat by radiation from the outside and partly by adiabatic expansion, its Mommy said gaey schluffen, the Earth had a cookie, spit up, and went to bed. It slept soundly (save for a moment in 1755 when a Kraut named Kant made a whole lot of noise trying to figure out how the sun had been created) and didn't wake up till a Tuesday in 1963 at which time-about four in the morning, a shitty

hour of the night except for suicides-it realized it was having a hard time breathing.

“Kaff kaff,” it said, wiping out half the Trobriand Islands and whatever lay East of Java.

Casting about to discover what had wakened it, the Earth realized it was the All-Night Movie on Channel 11, snippets of a Maria Montez film (Cobra Woman, 1944) interrupting an aging cruiser king hustling '55 Mercs with pep pills in their gas tanks and lines of weariness in their grilles.

The Earth waited till dawn and began to look around. Everywhere it looked the rivers smelled like the grease traps in Army kitchens, the hills had been sheared away to provide clinging

space for American
Plywood cages with indoor plumbing, the watershed had been scorched flat, valleys had
been paved over
causing a most uncomfortable constriction of the Earth's breathing, the birds sang off-
key and the bullfrogs
sounded like Eddie Cantor, whom the Earth had never much cared for anyway. And
overhead, the light hurt
the Earth's eyes.

Everything looked gray and funky.

“Boy,” the Earth said, in its rustic way, “I don't like this a whole lot,” and so the Earth
began
taking counter-action.

The first was against a shaggy sophomore from Michigan State University who, while
parading
around a Texaco station, carrying a placard that read STOP POLLUTION, ate a Power
House bar and
threw the wrapper in the gutter.

The Earth opened and swallowed him.

The next step was taken against fifty-six thousand Green Bay Packers fans as they
crawled in
imitation of a thousand-wheeled worm toward Lambeau Field, where their CroMagnon
idols had waiting
for them a sound trouncing at the hands and feet of the New Orleans Saints. The Earth,
choking on the
exhaust fumes of the automobiles, caused a lava flow to erupt from a nearby hillside,
boiling down on the
lines of traffic, solidifying instantly into a marvelous freeform sculpture of thirty
thousand hot-rock-
encased autos containing fifty-six thousand fried fans.

The next step was taken against the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, gathered in the
Hollywood Bowl
before a single-throated horde of Jesus People. They were singing Laura Nyro's “Save
the Children” when
the Earth re-channeled seven underground rivers and turned the amphitheater into the
thirteenth largest
natural lake in the United States.

Then followed in madcap array, a series of forays against prominent individuals. Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, speeding along the Lake Shore Drive, was inundated by seventy thousand tons of garbage from the burning dumps lining the scenic route; Ralph Nader's office in Washington, D.C., was struck by bolts of lightning for twenty minutes. Barbra Streisand's town house in Manhattan suddenly vanished into a bottomless pit that yawned in the middle of the fashionable East Fifties. Her C above high C was heard for hours. Diminishing.

Volcanos destroyed the refineries, storage depots, administration buildings and Manhattan offices of Standard Oil of Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, California, Texas and Rhode Island. The Earth took along Rhode Island in its entirety, possibly out of pique.

Eventually, when the mene mene tekel was written across the Grand Tetons in letters of burning forest fire, people began to get the idea.

The automobile was banned. All assembly lines shut down. Preservatives were eliminated from foods. Seals were left alone. A family of auk were discovered in New Zealand, doing rather nicely, thank you. And in Loch Ness, the serpent finally came up and took a deep breath.

And from that day to this, there has never again been a blotch of climatic smegma on the horizon, the Earth has settled down knowing the human race has learned its lesson and would never again take a ka-ka in its own nest, and that is why today the National Emphysema Society declared itself out of business.

Now isn't that a nice story.

And fuck you, too.

Los Angeles, California/1972

10 CATMAN

The thief materialized in the shadow of a conversing waterfall. The air sparked like a dust circuit for a moment, and then he was there; back flat to the wall, a deeper black against the shadow, a stretch fabric suit

and hood covering every inch of his body from feet to fingertips. Only his eyes were naked to the night. He stood there, motionless, as the waterfall talked to itself. It had been programmed to deter suicides, and it was reciting reassurances.

“You don't really think you'll find peace in killing yourself, do you?” the waterfall bubbled. “Who knows what lies on the other side? Perhaps it'll be just the same, and you'll be aware of yourself as an entity, but you'll be dead, and helpless to save yourself, and you'll spend who-knows-how-long-perhaps an eternity-suffering the same anguish you knew when you were alive. But you'll be trapped in death, and unable to get out. Wouldn't that be awful? Instead, why don't we talk about what's troubling you-”

The thief dematerialized; the waterfall splashed on to itself.

He reappeared on the fiftieth level, in a frozen park. Standing beside a juniper encased in luminescent blue ice, he came into existence, checked the bag of electronic alarm-confounders, satisfied himself it was tied on securely, and started to wink-out again. He paused, half dematerialized, and stared across the park at the diorama of the Neanderthals driving a herd of ibex off a cliff.

The ice block was enormous, holding the cliff, the chasm, thirty of the graceful homed beasts, and half a hundred cavemen. It had been quarried from a site in Krapina, Yugoslavia, by a timelock team that had frozen the moment 110,000 years before. It was an excellent display, art-directed by someone prestigious, perhaps Boltillon under a grant from Therox.

For a moment longer he considered the great scene, thinking how trapped they were, thinking how free he was, not even walls of ice to contain him. Then he vanished.

He came back to existence, brute matter, on the three-quarter-inch ledge outside a dreamcell apartment on the ninetieth level. He was flattened against the force screen that served as wall. It was opaque, and he lay against it like a smear of rainbow oil. He could not be seen from inside, where the wealthy ones he intended to rob lay quietly, dreaming. But he could be seen by the scanning tower at the top of the Westminster Cathedral complex. Invisible beams blanketed London from the tower, watching. Registering intrusive action. He smiled and withdrew one of the confounders from the bag. It was a ladybug deranger; he palmed it onto the force screen wall and it tapped into the power source, and he felt the tension ease. Then he diffused himself, and reappeared inside the dreamcell.

The family lay in their pods, the gel rippling ever so slightly at every muscle spasm. The inner walls were a dripping golden lustrousness, molten metal running endlessly down into bottomless depths where the floor should have been. He had no idea what they were dreaming, but the women were lying moistly locked together in soixanteneuj and the men were wearing reflective metal headache bands over their eyes. The men were humming in soprano tones.

He vanished and appeared in the lock room. The force screens were up, protecting the valuables, and the thief went down on his haunches, the bag of confounders dangling between his

thighs. He whistled softly to himself, considering the proper tool, and finally withdrew a starfish pass by. It scuttled across the floor and touched a screen with its dorsal cirri. The screens sputtered, changing hue, then winked out. The thief dematerialized and reappeared inside the vault.

He ignored the jewelry and the credit cards, and selected three pressure-capped tubes of Antarean soul-radiant. On the black market, worth all the jewels in the lock room.

He disassembled himself and winked back into existence outside the force screen perimeter, retrieved the starfish, and vanished again, to appear on the ledge. The ladybug went into the bag, and he was gone once more.

When he materialized on the fifty-first level, in the Fuller Geodex, the Catman was waiting, and before the thief could vanish again, the policeman had thrown up a series of barriers that would have required everything in the bag to counteract, plus a few the thief had not considered necessary on this job.

The Catman had a panther, a peregrine falcon and two cheetahs with him. They were inside the barrier ring, and they were ready. The falcon sat on the Catman's forearm, and the cats began padding smoothly toward the thief.

“Don't make me work them,” the Catman said.

The thief smiled, though the policeman could not see it. The hood covered the thief's face. Only the eyes were naked. He stared at the Catman in his skin cape and sunburst eagle's helmet. They were old acquaintances.

The cheetahs circled, narrowing in toward him. He teleported himself to the other side of the enclosed space. The Catman hissed at the falcon and it soared aloft, dove at the thief, and flew through

empty space. The thief stood beside the Catman.

“Earn your pay,” the thief said. His voice was muffled. It would make a voice-print, but not an

accurate one; it would be insufficient in a court of law.

The Catman made no move to touch the thief. There was no point to it. “You can't avoid me much longer.”

“Perhaps not.” He vanished as the panther slid toward him on its belly, bunching itself to strike.

“But then, perhaps I don't want to,” he said.

The Catman hissed again, and the falcon flew to his armored wrist. “Then why not come quietly. Let's be civilized.”

The thief chuckled deep in his throat, but without humor. “That seems to be the problem right there.” The cheetahs passed through space he no longer occupied.

“You're simply all too bloody marvelous civilized; I crave a little crudeness.”

“We've had this conversation before,” said the Catman, and there was an odd note of weariness in his voice...for an officer of the law at last in a favorable position with an old adversary. “Please surrender quietly; the cats are nervous tonight; there was a glasscab accident on the thirty-sixth and they wafted a strong blood scent. It's difficult holding them in check.”

As he spoke, the pavane of strike and vanish, hold and go, pounce and invisibility continued, around and around the perimeter ring. Overhead, the Fuller Geodex absorbed energy from the satellite power stars DayDusk&DawnCo, Ltd., had thrown into the sky, converted the energy to the city's use, providing from its silver mesh latticework the juice to keep London alive. It was the

Geodex dome that held
sufficient backup force to keep the perimeter ring strong enough to thwart the thief. He
dodged in and out
of reach of the cats; the falcon tracked him, waiting.

“It's taking you longer to do it each time,” said the Catman.

The thief dematerialized five times rather quickly as the two cheetahs worked an
inwardly
spiraling pattern, pressing him toward a center where the panther waited patiently.
“Worry about yourself,”
he said, breathing hard.

The falcon dove from the Catman's shoulder in a shallow arc, its wingspread slicing a
fourth of the
ring at head-height. The thief materialized, laying on his back, at the inner edge of the
ring behind the
Catman.

The panther bunched and sprang, and the thief rolled away, the stretch suit suddenly
open down
one side as the great cat's claws ripped the air. Then the thief was gone...

...to reappear behind the panther.

The thief held the ladybug deranger in his palm. Even as the panther sensed the
presence behind
him, the thief slapped the deranger down across the side of the massive head. Then the
thief blinked out
again.

The panther bolted, rose up on its hind legs and, without a sound, exploded.

Gears and cogs and printed circuits and LSI chips splattered against the inside of the
perimeter
ring...bits of pseudoflesh and infra-red eyeballs and smears of lubricant sprayed across
the invisible bubble.

The empty husk of what had been the panther lay smoking in the center of the arena.
The thief
appeared beside the Catman. He said nothing.

The Catman looked away. He could not stare at the refuse that had been black swiftness moments before. The thief said, "I'm sorry I had to do that."

There was a piping, sweet note in the air and the cheetahs and the falcon froze. The falcon on the Catman's shoulder, the cheetahs sniffing at the pile of death with its stench of ozone. The tone came again. The Catman heaved a sigh, as though he had been released from some great oppression. A third time, the tone, followed by a woman's voice: "Shift end, Officer. Your jurisdiction ends now. Thank you for your evening's service. Goodspeed to you, and we'll see you nextshift, tomorrow at eleven-thirty P.M." The tone sounded once more-it was pink-and the perimeter ring dissolved.

The thief stood beside the Catman for a few more moments. "Will you be all right?"

The Catman nodded slowly, still looking away.

The thief watched him for a moment longer, then vanished. He reappeared at the far side of the Geodex, and looked back at the tiny figure of the Catman, standing unmoving. He continued to watch till the police officer walked to the heap of matted and empty blackness, bent and began gathering up the remnants of the panther. The thief watched silently, the weight of the Antarean soul-radiant somehow oppressively heavy in the bag of confounders.

The Catman took a very long time to gather up his dead stalker. The thief could not see it from where he stood, so far away, but he knew the Catman was crying.

The air sparked around him...as though he had not quite decided to teleport himself...and in fact he

had not been able to make the decision...and the air twinkled with infinitesimal scintillae...holes made in the fabric of normal space through which the displaced air was drawn, permitting the thief to teleport...the

sparkling points of light actually the deaths of muons as they were sucked through into that not-space...and still he could not decide.

Then he vanished and reappeared beside the Catman.

“Can I help you?”

The Catman looked away quickly. But the thief saw the tears that had run down the Catman's black cheeks. “No, thank you, I'll be all right. I'm almost finished here.” He held a paw.

The thief drew in a deep breath, “Will you be home for dinner tonight?”

The Catman nodded. “Tell your mother I'll be along in a little while.”

The thief went away from there, in twenty level leaps, quickly, trying not to see a black hand holding an even blacker paw.

They sit silently at the dinner table. Neil Leipzig cannot look at his father. He sits cross-legged on the thin pneumatic cushion, the low teak table before him; the EstouDade de Boeuf on his plate vanishes and reappears. It is wallaby, smothered in wine sauce and “cellar vegetables” from sub-level sixteen-North. It continues to appear and disappear.

“Stop playing with your food,” Neil Leipzig's mother says, sharply.

“Leave me alone; I'm not hungry,” he says.

They sit silently. His father addresses his food, and eats quickly but neatly.

“How was your shiftday?” Neil Leipzig's mother says.

Neither of the men look up. She repeats the question, adding, “Lew.” His father looks up, nods abstractedly, does not answer, returns to his plate.

“Why is it impossible to get a civil word out of you in the evening,” she says. There is an emerging tone in her voice, a tone of whitewater rapids just beyond the bend. “I ask: why is it impossible for you to speak to your family?”

Keep eating, don't let her do it to you again, Neil Leipzig thinks. He moves the cubes of soybean curd around in the sauce madere until they are all on the right side of the plate. Keep silent, tough up, he thinks.

“Lewis!”

His father looks up. “I think I'll go downstairs and take a nap, after dinner.” His eyes seem very strange; there is a film over them; something gelatinous; as though he is looking out from behind a thick, semi-opaque membrane; neither Neil nor his mother can read the father's thoughts from those eyes.

She shakes her head and snorts softly, as though she is infinitely weary of dealing with those who persist in their arrogance and stupidity; there was none of that in what the father had said. Let him alone, can't you? Neil Leipzig thinks.

“We're out of deeps,” the mother says.

“I won't need them,” the father says.

“You know you can't sleep without a deep, don't try and tell me you can. We're out, someone will have to order more.”

Neil Leipzig stands up. “I'll order them; finish your dinner.”

He goes into the main room and punches out the order on the board. He codes it to his mother's personal account. Let her pay, he thinks. The confirmation tones sound, and he returns to the table. From the delivery chute comes the sound of the spansules arriving. He stands there staring

down at his parents, at
the top of his father's head, black and hairless, faintly mottled; at his mother's face, pale
and pink, heavily
freckled from the treatment machine she persists in using though the phymech advises
her it is having a
deleterious effect on her skin: she wants a tan for her own reasons but is too fair and
redheaded for it to
take, and she merely freckles. She has had plasticwork done on her eyes, they slant in a
cartoon imitation of
the lovely Oriental curve.

He is brown.

“I have to go out for a while.”

His father looks up. Their eyes meet.

“No. Nothing like that,” he lies. His father looks away.

His mother catches the exchange. “Is there something new between you two?”

Neil turns away. She follows him with her eyes as he starts for the tunnel to his own
apartments.

“Neil! What is all this? Your father acts like a burnout, you won't eat, I've had just about
enough of this!

Why do you two continue to torment me, haven't I had enough heartache from the both
of you? Now you
come back here, right here, right now, I want us to have this out.” He stops.

He turns around. His expression is a disguise.

“Mother, do us both a favor,” he says, quite clearly, “kindly shut your mouth and leave
me alone.”

He goes into the tunnel, is reduced to a beam of light, is fired through the tunnel to his
apartments seven
miles away across the arcology called London, is retranslated, vanishes.

His mother turns to her husband. Alone now, freed of even the minor restraints imposed
on her by
the presence of her son, she assumes a familiar emotional configuration. “Lewis.”

He wants to go lie down. He wants that very much.

“I want to know! “

He shakes his head gently. He merely wants to be left alone. There is very little of the Catman now; there is almost too much of Lewis Leipzig. “Please, Karin...it was a miserable shiftday.”

She slips her blouse down off one perfect breast. The fine powder-white lines of the plasticwork radiate out from the meaty nipple, sweep down and around and disappear under the lunar curve. He watches, the film over his eyes growing darker, more opaque. “Don't,” he says.

She touches a blue-enameled fingernail to the nipple, indenting it slightly. “There'll be bed tonight, Lewis.”

He starts to rise.

“There'll be bed, and sex, and other things if you don't tell me, Lewis.”

He slumps back into his round-shouldered dining position. He can hear the whine of generators far back in his memory. And the odor of dead years. And oil slicks across stainless steel. And the rough sensuality of burlap.

“He was out tonight. Robbery on the ninetieth level. He got away with three tubes of the Antarean soul-radiant.”

She covers her breast, having won her battle with nasty weaponry, rotted memories. “And you couldn't stop him.”

“No. I couldn't stop him.”

“And what else?”

“I lost the panther.”

Her expression is a combination of amazement and disgust. “He destroyed it?” Her husband nods; he cannot look at her. “And it'll be charged against your account.” He does not nod; she knows the answer.

“That's it for the promotion, and that's it for the permutations. Oh, God, you're such a burnout...I can't stand you!”

“I'm going to lie down.”

“You just sit there. Now listen to me, damn you, Lewis Leipzig. Listen! I will not go another year without being rejuvenated. You'll get that promotion and you'll get it bringing him in. Or I'll make you wish I'd never filed for you.” He looks at her sharply. She knows what he's thinking, knows the reply; but he doesn't say it; he never does.

He gets up and walks toward the dropshaft in the main room. Her voice stops him. “You'll make up your mind, Lewis.”

He turns on her. The film is gone from his eyes. “It's our son, Karin. Our son!”

“He's a thief,” she says. The edge in her voice is a special viciousness. “A thief in a time when theft is unnecessary. We have everything. Almost everything. You know what he does with what he steals. You know what he's become. That's no son of mine. Yours, if you want that kind of filth around you, but no son of mine. God knows I have little enough to live for, and I'm not going to allow your spinelessness to take that from me. I want my permutation. You'll do it, Lewis, or so help me God-”

He turns away again. Hiding his face from her, he says, “I'm only permitted to stalk him during regulation hours, you know that.”

“Break the regs.”

He won't turn around. "I'm a Catman. I can't do that. I'm bound."

"If you don't, I'll see that someone else does."

"I'm beginning not to care."

"Have it your way."

"Your way."

"My way then. But my way whichever way."

He vanishes into the main room and a moment later she hears the dropshaft hiss. She sits at the

table staring into the mid-distance, remembering. Her face softens and flows and lines of weariness

superimpose themselves over her one hundred and sixty-five year old youthful face. She drops her face into

her hand, runs the fingers up through her thick coppery hair, the metal fingernails making tiny clicking

noises against the fibers and follicles. She makes a sound deep in her throat. Then she stiffens her back and

rises. She stands there for several moments, listening to the past; she shrugs the robe from her slim, pale

body and follows her husband's path to the dropshaft.

The dining salon is empty. From the main room comes the hiss of the dropshaft.

Menials purr

from the walls and clean up the dining area. Below, punishment and coercion reduce philosophies to

diamond dust and suet.

Seven miles away, the thief reappears in his cool apartments. The sights and sounds of what he has

overheard and seen between his parents, hidden in the main room till his father left his mother, tremble in

his mind. He finds himself rubbing the palm of his left hand up the wall, rubbing over and over without

control; his hand hurts from the friction but he doesn't stop.

He rubs and rubs till his palm is bloody. Then he vanishes, illegally.

Sub-level one:eleven-Central was converted to ocean. Skipboats sliced across from Oakwood on the eastern shore to Caliban on the western cliffs. In the coves and underwater caves sportsmen hunted loknesses, bringing home trophies that covered large walls. Music was bubblecast across the water. Plankton beaneries bobbed like buoys near the tourist shores. Full Fathom Five had gotten four stars in The Epicure and dropshafts carried diners to the bottom to dine in elegance while watching the electro stims put on their regularly scheduled shows among the kelp beds. Neil Leipzig emerged into the pulsing ochre throat of the reception area, and was greeted by the maitre d'.

“Good evening, Max. Would Lady Effim and her party be here yet?”

The maître d' smiled and his neck-slits opened and closed

to reveal a pink moistness. “Not yet, Mr. Leipzig. Would you care to wait at the bar? Or one of the rooms?”

“I'll be at the bar. Would you let them know I'm here when they arrive?”

The thief let the undulant carry him into the bar and he slid into a seat beside the great curved pressure window. The kelp beds were alive with light and motion.

“Sir?”

The thief turned from watching the light-play. A domo hovered at the edge of the starburst-shaped table. “Oh. A chinchin, please, a little heavier on the Cinzano.” The domo hummed a thankyou and swirled away. Neil Leipzig turned back to the phantasmagoria beyond the pressure window. A bubble of music struck the window and burst just beyond the thief's nose. He knew the tune.

“Neil.”

The thief saw her reflection, dimly, in the window. He did not turn around for a moment, gathering his feelings. “Joice,” he said, finally. “Nice to see you again.”

“Then why don't you turn around so you can.”

He let the seat turn him toward her.

She was still remarkable. He wanted to see dust marks on her loveliness, product of treachery and floating ethics, but he knew she had not really been treacherous, and if there had been an ethical failure, it had been his.

“May I sit?”

“I'm going to be joining a party in a few minutes, but please...” He waved her to the seat beside him. She settled into it, crossing her legs. The chiton opened and revealed smooth thigh vanishing up into ivory fabric. “How have you been?”

“I've been excellent, Neil. Breve sends his best.”

“That was unnecessary.”

“I'm trying to be reasonable, Neil. It's been a long time and I'm uncomfortable with it this way between us.”

“Be comfortable. I've got it all straight.”

“I'm trying to be friendly.”

“Just be reasonable, that'll be enough.”

The domo came bobbing through the room and hovered beside the table. It set the chin-chin down. The thief sipped and nodded acceptance. “Lady?” the domo hummed.

“Nothing for me, thanks.”

The domo shot straight up and went away just below ceiling height

“Are you still doing dust?” she asked.

He stiffened and his eyes came to her face with anger as he stopped watching the domo.
“Your manners haven't improved any with time.”

She started to say I'm sorry. But his anger continued to sheet: “If we run out on that topic, we can always discuss Breve's throat!”

“Oh, God, Neil, that's unfair...unfair and lousy!”

“I understand from one of the twinkle boys that Breve's using some new steroid vexing agent and a stim-sensitive synthetic that lets him vibrate it like mad. Must be terrific for you...when he's not with twinkles.”

Joice pressed a fingertip against the room-call plate set into the surface of the starburst-shaped table. Near the reception area Max heard the tone on his console, noted it was Neil Leipzig's table, punched up an empty, and made a mental note to let Lady Effim know the thief was in a room, when she and her party arrived. At the starburst-shaped table, the number 22 pulsed in the translucent face of the room-call plate.

“All right, Neil. Enough already. Overkill doesn't become you.”

She stood up.

“And mealy-mouth attempts at bonhomie don't become you.”

He stood up.

“It's simply I see no reason why we have to be on the outs. There are still some good memories.”

Side by side, they walked across the enormous dining room of the Full Fathom Five, toward the curving wall of glass-fronted private rooms.

“Look, Joice: I don't want to talk about it. You stopped to talk to me, remember? I didn't force myself on you.”

“Just now, or three years ago?”

He couldn't help laughing. “Point for you,” he said, opening the door to the private room. The magnifying glass of the room's front wall curved the diners beyond into a mere smear of moving color. From outside, the tableau in the room was cast large for anyone to watch.

“I'm sorry I said that about the dust,” Joice said, slipping the soft fabric of the chiton off her shoulders. It floated to the floor like fog.

“I'm not sorry about my comments where Breve is concerned,” Neil replied. Naked, he moved his shoulder blades in a loosening movement, realizing the scene with his parents had made him unbelievably tense. He slid into the free-fall cumulus fizz and lay on his back.

“Gardyloo!” she said, and dove into the mist beside him. Her long auburn hair floated wildly around her head.

“What the hell's all this in aid of, Joice?” the thief said. She rolled him under her, sitting astride his thighs, positioning herself above his erect penis.

“Peaceful coexistence,” she said, and settled down slowly till he was deep up inside her.

“Has he med for you?”

“No.”

“Does he intend to?”

“I have no idea.”

“You've gotten more laissez-faire since we were a pair. I can't recall a week when you weren't badgering me to file.”

“I loved you.”

“And you don't love Breve. “

She moved her hips in a circular pattern. He contracted and expanded his penis in a steady pulse.

She leaned back and rested her hands on his upper thighs, sliding up and down smoothly.

“I didn't say I don't love Breve. He just hasn't filed and it isn't a problem at the moment.”

“Why don't you file for him?”

“Don't be cruel; you know Breve isn't in the Pool.”

“So what is the problem? Twinkles?” “Don't be ridiculous.”

He freed one hand and, pressing her lower lips, very gently sought out and stroked the mercury heaviness of her clitoris. She shuddered and opened her eyes, then they slid closed once more.

“Then what is?”

“There's nothing wrong between us. He's doing very well, his work is going well, and I'm fulfilled.

It's a good merging.”

She spasmed, from deep in her stomach muscles, and he felt her contracting around him. When

she climaxed it was with a succession of small ignitions. He continued touching her, maintaining a rhythm, and she spiraled upward through a chain of multiple orgasms till she dropped her upper body onto him, reached under to grasp his buttocks, and thrust herself up and down rapidly. He thought of metal surfaces.

She forced air through her clenched teeth and groaned from low in her throat, and he felt her rising for the final ascent. When it came, Neil held his breath and could feel the sudden cessation of her heartbeat. They rolled and turned in the free-fall mist, and Joice spasmed for half a minute.

They lay locked together for a time, and then she raised her head and looked down at him.

“Nothing happened.”

“For me. You're fine.”

“Too much dust, Neil?”

“Too little interest.”

“I don't believe that.”

“Life is filled with little disappointments.”

“You make me feel sad.”

“Life is filled with little disappointments.”

She pulled off him and reached for a moist and scented serviette in a dispenser on the wall. She dried herself between her legs and swam out of the fizz. Neil Leipzig lay on his back, at a forty-five degree angle to the floor, hanging artfully in mid-air, and watched her. “I don't regret losing you, Joice. I have more to work with, now that your appetites are satisfied at other groaning boards.”

“Spare me the metaphors, Neil. Are you aware that in most circles you're considered ridiculous?”

“I seldom travel in those circles. It must get you dizzy.”

“Hurting each other won't make the past more liveable.”

“I don't live in the past.”

“That's right. I forgot. You live in tin cans.”

He felt his face getting hot. Too close, she'd come too close with that one. “Goodbye, Joice. Don't slam the door.”

She draped the chiton over her arm, opened the door and stepped partially into the dining room proper. “Don't get metal splinters in your cock.” She smiled a smile of victory and closed the door behind her. Softly.

He watched her striding across the Full Fathom Five to join a group of Twinkles, Dutchgirls, a Duenna...and Breve. As she moved, she was comically distorted by the magnifying window. It was like watching her stride through rainbows. She sat down with them and Breve helped her into the chiton. Neil smiled and with a shrug reached for a serviette.

The door opened and the maitre d' stuck his head in. “Mr. Leipzig, Lady Effim and her party have arrived. The coral room. Would you like your drink sent over?”

“Thank you, Max. No, a fresh one, please. Chin-chin, a little heavier on the Cinzano. And tell Lady Effim I'll be there in a moment.”

He lay in the fizz for a few minutes, thinking of metal surfaces, his eyes closed, fists clenched.

The thief had no real, concrete data on what Lady Effim's side-boys did to earn their

keep, but he
was gut certain it was at least partially sexual in nature; and Neil Leipzig did not dismiss
the possibility that
another substantial expenditure of their time in her behalf was legitimately connected
with the continent she
owned and exploited; and that other time was spent in illegitimate pursuits; and darker
times spent in
places, and doing things the thief did not wish to dwell on.

The side-boys numbered three this time. Sometimes Lady Effim had six, sometimes
eight,
sometimes a squad. Never less than three. This time there were three.

One was obviously a twinkle: fishtailed hair parted in the middle, tinted blue-black like
the barrel
of a weapon, giving off the warm odor of musk and jasmine. Very slim; hands delicate
and skin of the
hands so pale Neil could see the calligraphy of blue veins clearly outlined; large nostrils
that scooped air so
the twinkle's chest rose and fell noticeably; skintight weskit suit with metal conchos and
leather thongs
down both sides; heavy on the jewelry.

“Neil, I'd like you to meet Cuusadou...”

The second was some kind of professional student: his like were to be found in the
patiently

seated waiting lines of the career bureaus, always ready to file for some obscure and
pointless occupation-
numismatist, dressage instructor, Neurospora geneticist, epitaphologist, worm rancher.
His face was long
and horsy; his tongue was long and he could bend its tip back on itself; he wore the
current fashion, velvet
jodhpurs, boots rhodium manacles with jeweled locks, dark wraparound glasses. He had
bad skin and his
fingernails were long, but the quicks were bitten and bloody down around the moons.

“...and Fill...”

The third was a killer. He made no movement. His eyes stared straight ahead and Neil

perceived
the psychotic glaze. He did not look at the third man for more than a second. It was painful.

“...and Mr. Robert Mossman.”

She invited him to join them, and Neil took the empty formfit where the domo had set his chin-
chin. He settled into the chair and crossed his legs. “How've you been?”

Lady Effim smiled a long, thin smile of memories and expectations. “Warm. And you?”

“All right, I suppose.”

“How is your father?”

“Excellent. He sends his best.”

“That was unnecessary.”

Neil laughed. “Less than an hour ago I said the same thing to someone. Excuse me; I'm a little
cranky tonight.”

She waved away his apology with a friendly, imperious gesture. “Has the city changed much?”

“Since when?”

“Last time.” That had been six years earlier.

“Some. They turned the entire fourteenth level into crystal cultures. Beautiful. Peculiar. Waste of
space. Helluva controversy, lot of people making speeches, the screens were full of it. I went off to the
Hebrides.”

She laughed. The crepe texture of her facial skin made it an exercise in origami. Neil gave it a
moment's thought: having sex with this creature, this power, this force of nature. It was more than wealth
that kept three such as these with this woman. Neil began to understand the attraction.

The cheekbones, the
timbre of her voice, ice.

“Still vanishing, Neil?” She said it with amusement. “You're playing with me.”

“Only a little. I have a great affection for you, darling. You know that. You amuse me.”

“How are things in Australia?”

Lady Effim turned to Fill. For the answer.

“Cattle production is up two hundred percent, trawling acreage is yielding half a million barrels of lettuce a month, tithes are up point three three over last year at this time, and Standard & Poor's Index closed up eight points today.”

Neil smiled. “What about all the standard poor bastards who were wiped out when the tsunami hit two weeks ago?”

Everyone stopped smiling. Lady Effim sat straighter and her left hand-which had been dangling a gold-link chain and baited fish-hook in her jeroboam snifter of brandy in an attempt to snag the Antarean piranha before it bellied-up-the hand made a convulsive clenching movement. The killer's eyes came off dead center and snapped onto the thief with an almost audible click: the sound of armaments locked into firing position. Neil held his breath.

“Mr. Mossman,” Lady Effim said, slowly, “no.”

The air began to scintillate around Neil.

“Neil,” said Lady Effim.

He stopped. The air settled. Mr. Robert Mossman went back to rigidity.

Lady Effim smiled. It reminded the thief of an open wound. “You've grown suicidal in six years, Neil darling. Something unpleasant is happening to you; you're not the sweet, dashing

lad I used to know.
Death-wish?”

Neil smiled back, it seemed the thing to do. “Getting reckless in my declining years. I'm going to have to come visit your continent one of these days, m'Lady.”

She turned to the twinkle. “Cuusadou, what are we doing for the company peasants who were affected by the disaster?”

The twinkle leaned forward and, with relish, said, “ An absolutely splendid advertising campaign, Lady Effim: squawk, solids, car-cards, wandering evangelists, rumors, and in three days a major holo extravaganza. Our people have been on it since almost before the tide went out. Morale is very high. We've

established competition between the cities, the one that mounts the most memorable mass burial ceremony gets a new sports arena. Morale is very high.” He looked pleased.

“Thank you, darling,” she said. She turned back to Neil. “I am a kind and benevolent ruler.”

Neil smiled and spread his hands. “Your pardon.”

It went that way for the better part of an hour.

Finally, Lady Effim said to Fill, “Darling, would you secure the area, please.” The professional student fiddled with the jeweled lock on the right-wrist manacle, and a sliding panel in the manacle opened to reveal a row of tiny dials under a fingernail-sized meter readout window. He turned the dials and a needle in the meter window moved steadily from one side to the other. When it had snugged up against the far side, he nodded obsequiously to Lady Effim.

“Good. We're alone. I gather you've been up to some nasty tricks, Neil darling. You haven't been

teleporting illegally when you were off-shift, have you?" She wore a nasty smile that should have been on display in a museum.

"I have something you want," Neil said, ignoring the chop. She knew he was breaking the regs at this very moment:

"I have to go out for a while."

His father looks up. Their eyes meet.

"No. Nothing like that," he lies. His father looks away.

He rubs and rubs till his palm is bloody. Then he vanishes, illegally.

"I'm sure you do, Neil mon cher. You always do. But what could I possibly have that would interest you? If you want something you go to the cornucopia and you punch it up and those cunning little atoms are rearranged cunningly and there you have it. Isn't that the way it's done?"

"There are things one can't get..."

"But those are illegal, darling. So illegal. And it seems foolish to want one of the few things you can't have in a world that permits virtually everything."

"There are still taboos."

"I can't conceive of such a thing, Neil dear."

"Force yourself."

"I'm a woman of very simple tastes."

"The radiant."

It was only the most imperceptible of movements, but Neil Leipzig knew the blood had stopped pumping in Lady Effim's body. Beneath her chalky powder she went white. He saw the thinnest line of the

biting edges of her teeth.

“So you did it.”

Now the smile was Neil Leipzig's.

“A thief in a time of plenty. So you did it. You clever lad.”

Her eyes closed and she was thinking of the illegal Antarean drug. Here was a thrill she had never had. Farewell to ennui. She would, of course, have it, at any cost. Even a continent. It was a seller's market.

“What do you want?”

She would have it at any cost. Human lives: these three, his own. His father's.

His mother's.

“What do you want, Neil?”

His thoughts were a million miles away. A lie. They were only arcology levels above and across London.

“You! What do you want?”

So he told her.

He would have preferred the other three not be there. The look of revulsion on their faces-even the zombie Mr. Robert Mossman's-made him defensive.

Lady Effim sneered. It did not become her. “You shall have it, Neil. As often as you care to go, God help you.” She paused, looked at him in a new way. “Six years ago...when I knew you...were you...”

“No, not then.”

“I never would have thought-of all the people I know, and you may be assured, dear boy, I know

oddnesses beyond description-of all I know, I would have thought you were the last to..."

"I don't want to hear this."

"Of course not, how gauche of me. Of course, you shall have what you need. When I have. What. I. Need."

"I'll take you to it."

She seemed amused. "Take me there? Don't be silly, dear boy. I'm a very famous, very powerful, very influential person. I have no truck with stolen merchandise, not even any as exotic and lovely as soul-radiant." She turned to the killer. "Mr. Mossman. You will go with Neil and obtain three tubes from where he has them secreted. No, don't look suspicious, Neil will deliver precisely what he has said he would deliver. He understands we are both dealing in good faith."

The twinkle said, "But he's..."

"It is not our place to make value judgments, darling. Neil is a sweet boy, and what he needs, he shall have." To Mr. Robert Mossman: "When you have the three tubes, call me here." To the thief: "When I receive Mr. Mossman's call, Fill will make the arrangements and you'll receive very explicit instructions where to go, and when. Is that satisfactory!"

Neil nodded, his stomach tight, his head beginning to hurt. He did not like their knowing.

"Now," Lady Effim said, "goodbye, Neil."

"I don't think I would care to see you again. Ever. You understand this contains no value judgment, merely a preference on my part."

She did not offer her hand to be kissed as he and Mr. Robert Mossman rose to leave the table.

The thief materialized on the empty plain far beyond the arcology of London. He was facing the gigantic structure and stared at it for minutes without really seeing it: eyes turned inward. It was near sunset and all light seemed to be gathered to the ivory pyramid that dominated the horizon. "Cradle of the sun," he said softly, and winked out of existence again. Behind him, the city of London rose into the clouds and was lost to sight. The apartments of the Prince of Wales were, at that moment, passing into darkness.

The next materialization was in the midst of a herd of zebra, grazing at tall stands of deep blue grass. They bolted at his appearance, shying sidewise and boiling away from him in a mass of flashing lines of black and white. He smiled, and started walking. The air vibrated with the smell of animal fur and clover. Walking would be a pleasure. And mint.

His first warning that he was not alone came with the sound of a flitterpak overhead. It was a defective: he should not have been able to hear its power-source. He looked up and a woman in torn leathers was tracking his passage across the veldt. She had a norden strapped to her front and he had no doubt the sights were trained on him. He waved to her, and she made no sign of recognition. He kept walking, into the darkness, attempting to ignore her; but his neck itched.

He vanished; to hell with her; he couldn't be bothered.

When he reappeared, he was in the trough of a dry wash that ran for several miles and came to an end, when he had vanished and reappeared again, at the mouth of a cave that angled downward sharply into the ground. He looked back along the channel of the arroyo. He was in the foothills. The mountains bulked purple and distant in the last fading colors of dusk. The horizon was close. The air was very clear, the wind

was rising; there were no sounds but those of insects foretelling the future.

He approached the cave mouth and stopped. He sat down on the ground and leaned back on his elbows. He closed his eyes. They would come soon enough, he was certain.

He waited, thinking of nothing but metal surfaces.

In the night, they came for him.

He was half-asleep. Lying up against the incline of the arroyo, his thoughts fading in and out of focus like a radio signal from a transmitter beyond the hills. Oh, bad dreams. Not even subtle, not even artful metaphors. The spider was clearly his mother, the head pink and heavily freckled, redheaded, and slanting Oriental cartoon eyes. The Mameluke chained between the pillars was bald and old and the face held an infinite weariness in its expression. The Praetorian with the flame thrower was himself, the searing wash of jellied death appearing and vanishing, being and being gone. He understood. Only a fool would not understand; he was weary, as his father was weary, but he was no fool. He burned the webbing. Again and again. Only to have it spring into existence each time. He came fully awake before the cone-muzzle of the weapon touched his shoulder.

Came awake with the web untouched, covering the world from horizon to horizon, the spider crawling down the sky toward the weary black man hanging between the pillars.

“You were told I’d be coming,” he said. It was only darkness in front of him, but darkness within a darkness, and he knew someone stood there, very close to him, the weapon pointed at his head.

He knew it. Only a fool would not have known. Now he was awake, and he was no fool.

The voice that answered from the deeper darkness was neither male nor female, neither young nor old, neither deep nor high. It sounded like a voice coming from a tin cup. Neil knew he had been honorably directed; this was the place, without doubt. He saluted Lady Effim's word of honor with a smile. The voice from the tin cup said, "you 're supposed to giving me a word, isn't it?"

"The word you want is Twinkle."

"Yeah, that was to being the word. I'm to your being took downstairs now. C'mon."

The thief rose and brushed himself off.

He saw movement from the corner of his eye. But when he turned to look, there was nothing.

He followed the shadow as it moved toward the cave mouth. There was no Moon, and the faraway ice-chips of the stars gave no heat, gave no light. It was merely a shadow he followed: a shadow with its weapon carried at port arms.

They passed into the mouth of the cave, and the dirt passage under their feet began to slope down sharply almost at once. There were two more shadows inside the mouth of the cave, hunkered down, looking like piles of rags, features indistinct, weapon barrels protruding from the shapeless masses like night-blooming flowers of death.

One of them made a metallic sound when it brushed against the wall. It. Neither he nor she. It.

Neil Leipzig followed the shadow down the steep slope, holding on to the rock wall for support as his feet sought purchase. Ahead of him, his guide seemed to be talking to himself very, very softly. It sounded like a mechanical whirring. The guide was not a domo.

"Here you'll stop it," the guide said, when they had descended so deep into the cave

passage that
the temperature was cool and pleasant. He moved in the darkness and the thief saw a
heat-sensitive plate in
the rock wall suddenly come to life with light as the guide touched it. Then a door irised
open in the rock
wall, and light flooded out, blinding him for a moment. He covered his eyes. The guide
gave him a shove
through the iris. It was neither polite help nor surly indignity. He merely shoved Neil
through to get him
inside. It was an old-style elevator, not a dropshaft and not a light-ray tunnel. He had no
idea how long it
had been here, but probably before the arcology of London.

He looked at his guide in the full light.

He felt, for the first time since...he felt for the first time that he wanted to go home, to
stop, to go
back, to return to himself before...to return to the past...

The guide was a gnome of spare human parts and rusting machinery. He was barely four
feet tall,
the legs bowed with the enormous weight of a metal chest like the belly of an old-time
wood-burning stove.
The head was hairless and the left half was a metal plate devoid of eyes, or nose, or
mouth, or skin, or
sweat, or pore. It was pocked and flaking metal, riveted through in uneven lines to the
bone of the half of
the head that was still flesh-covered. His left arm was fastened at the shoulder by a pot-
metal socket
covered with brazing marks. Depending from the socket were long, curved, presumably
hollow levers
containing solenoids; another ball socket for elbow, another matched pair of hollow
levers, ball socket
wrist, solenoid fingers. His right arm was human. It held the cone-muzzled weapon: an
archaic but
nonetheless effective disruptor. Input sockets-some of them the ancient and corroded
models housewives
had found in the walls of their homes, into which they had plugged vacuum cleaners and
toasters-studded
both thighs, inside and out. His penis was banded with expansible mesh copper. He was
barefoot; the big
toe was gone on the right foot; it had been replaced with a metal stud.

Neil Leipzig felt sick. Was this-?

He stopped the thought. It had never been like this before, no reason to think it would be like this here. It couldn't be. But he felt sick. And filthy.

He was certain he had seen movement out of the corner of his eye, up there in the arroyo.

The elevator grounded, and the door irised open. He stepped out ahead of the gnome. They were in an underground tunnel, higher and wider than the one above, well-lit by eterna lamps set into the tunnel's arched roof. The guide set off at a slow lope, and the thief followed him; illegal, yes...but how did they live down here, like troglodytes; was this the look of his future...he erased the thought...and could not stop thinking it.

They rounded a bend and kept going. The tunnel seemed to stretch on indefinitely. Behind him, around the bend, he thought he heard the elevator door close and the cage going back up. But he could not be certain.

They kept on in a straight line for what seemed an eighth of a mile, and when it became clear to Neil that they were going to keep going for many miles in this endless rabbit run, the guide took a sudden right turn into a niche in the right-hand wall the thief had not even suspected was there.

The niche opened into a gigantic cavern. Hewn from solid rock for a purpose long forgotten, decades before, it stretched across for several miles and arched above them in shadows the thief's eyes could not penetrate. Like the pueblo Amerinds of old, whoever lived here had carved dwellings from the rock faces and ledges. From the floor of the cavern below them, all the way up into the shadows, Neil could see men and women moving along the ledges, busy at tasks he could not name. Nor

would he have
bothered :

All he could see, all he could believe, was the machine that dominated the cavern floor, the computer that rose up and up past the ledge on which they stood, two hundred feet high and a quarter mile in diameter.

“Mekcoucher,” the half-human gnome said, his voice filled with--

Neil looked down at him. The expression was beatific. Love. Awe, love, desire, respect, allegiance, love. The blasted little face twisted in what was supposed to be a sigh of adoration. Love. Mek-coo-shay. The French had invented the word, but the dregs of the Barcelona arcology had conceived the deed. Mekcoucher.

The thief touched the gnome's head. The guide looked up without surliness or animosity. His eye was wet. His nose, what there was of his nose, was running. He sobbed, and it came from deep in his stove chest, and he said again, a litany, “Mekcoucher. This am all I be here about, dearest shine bright. Fursday, this Fursday, I me I get turn.” Neil felt a terrible kinship and pity and recycling of terror. This little thing, here beside him on this ledge, this remnant of what had once been a man, before it had begun dreaming of metal surfaces, of electric currents, of shining thighs, this thing had been no better than Neil Leipzig. Was this the future?

Neil could understand the gnome's orison to the machine. It was an installation to inspire homage, to lift up the heart; it was so large and so complex, it inspired deification, idolatry; it was a machine to engender devotion.

It was a sex-partner to consume one such as Neil Leipzig with trembling lust.

They started down the ledge toward the floor of the cavern, the thief with his arm around the

gnome's shoulders, both of them moist-eyed and finding it difficult to breathe. At one point, Neil asked the gnome if they could stop, if they could sit down with their backs to the rock wall and just look at the incredible bulk and shapes and shining metal surfaces of the machine in the center of their world.

And they sat, and they watched.

“This is where my place I been stay long time,” said the gnome, staring across at the machine.

They were now only a hundred feet above the floor of the cavern, and the computer rose up before them, filling their eyes.

Neil asked the gnome his name. “Fursday,” he said. “This Fursday, I me I get turn to joy.”

A life centralized around his love-partner. No name other than the name that told everyone he would go to Heaven on Thursday. Neil shuddered, but it was a trembling of expectation and desire. And it was there, sitting and remembering the first time, three years earlier...remembering the times since... inadequate, searching, fulfilling but not fulfilling the way this installation, this carnal machine could fulfill...he knew it... he felt it...his bones vibrated like tuning forks, his heart was pudding.

And it was there, sitting beside the gnome, that Mr. Robert Mossman found him.

He came down the ledge behind them, walking lightly, never dislodging a shard of limestone, hardly breathing, the pounder in his right hand. The pounder hit the brain with a laser beam that had the impact of a cannonball dropped from a great height. It could turn the inside of the victim's skull to gruel without marring the outside surface. It made for neat corpses. It was final. It was utterly illegal.

The thief knew there had been noise behind them in the tunnel; there had been movement in the

arroyo.

He cursed Lady Effim's word of honor.

He said nothing as the killer came down on them. Mr. Robert Mossman stopped and aimed the weapon at Neil Leipzig's left eye.

“Hey!” Fursday said, seeing the silent killer for the first time. “You aren't being to come down here! I'm me I told to bring him, this one down. Stop!”

Mr. Robert Mossman tracked the pen-point muzzle of the pounder through mere seconds of arc and squeezed the butt of the weapon. Light slashed across the space between them and hit the gnome with the impact of a slammed door. The recoil shuddered the killer; the little metal man was lifted and slung along the ledge. He fell flat onto his back, his human arm hanging over the edge. Neil froze for only a moment, then made a movement toward the gnome's weapon. He knew he would never make it. He could

feel the pressure of Mr. Robert Mossman's palm squeezing the pounder. He anticipated the slam of nova heat in his brain and his eyes filled with light.

But it didn't come. He could not turn around. He knew the killer was savoring the moment. And in that moment, Neil Leipzig heard the rush of displaced air, the most terrible scream in the world, and the sounds of a struggle.

He turned in time to see the falcon tear away half the killer's face and, pinions beating a blurred breaststroke against the air, the falcon bore Mr. Robert Mossman over backward.

The killer fell screaming to the rocks below. The falcon skimmed above him, observing, making note of finality, and when it was satisfied that its prey was dead, it dove, ripped loose a piece of meat, and

arced back up into the air, banking and turning on a wingtip, and flew to rest on the Catman's shoulder.

The smoldering ember eyes of the two cheetahs stared back at the thief.

The Catman came down the sloping ledge and helped his son to his feet. "Come home now," he said.

Neil Leipzig looked at his father, the lines of tension and sadness and weariness imprinted like circuits across the face. He moved a step closer and then he had his arms around the black man. They stood that way for seconds, and then the Catman's arms came up and circled the thief's back. They stood silently, holding each other.

When they separated, Neil was able to speak. "You didn't stay home, you followed me; all the way from the Five?"

The Catman nodded.

"But how?"

"You to the meeting, then him after you. Come home."

"Dad, it isn't your onshift, you can get yourself in a bad way. Go now, before anyone sees you."

The single dead eye of the gnome stared up at the hidden roof of the cavern. Neil thought of metal surfaces.

His palms were wet. The air sparkled with scintillance; he stopped it.

"You won't come back with me?"

"I can't. Please, Dad."

"You've seen what this is like. You're my son. I can't let you do it."

"Dad, go away. Please! I know what I'm doing."

"Neil."

“Please, Dad! I'm begging you. Go away.”

“And nothing up there matters more than this?”

“You're not turned away? It doesn't make you sick? Not even here, not even seeing this, not even here will you make a stand? My God, Dad, can't you see you're more destroyed than I'll ever be, no matter what I do?”

“Make a stand? I'm here, aren't I?”

“Go away!” Then, trying to hurt him because he did not want him hurt, he said, “Your wife is waiting for you.”

“Stop it, Neil. She was your mother once.”

“The once and never mother to the pervert thief. And you, her consort. Lovely. You want me to come back to that? I won't let my eyes see it again. Not ever.”

“How long have you been-”

“How long have I been like this?” He waved an arm at the great machine. “Three years.”

“But there was Joice, we thought, your mother and I thought.”

“It didn't work. It wasn't enough.”

“Neil, please, it's not for you. It's-”

“It's what, Dad, it's what? Perverted? Nauseating? Destructive? Pointless? I could apply them all to the way you live with her?”

“Will they come up here after us?” He nodded toward the ledges of cave dwellings and the people moving about them.

“I don't think so, I don't know, but I don't think so. Everything was arranged. I don't know why that one-” and he indicated the body of Mr. Robert Mossman below, “-I don't know why he came after me. But that doesn't matter. Go back. Get out of here. Your promotion, your job, it's almost time for the permutations, God knows that bitch won't give you a moment's peace if she doesn't get rejuvenated. You're offshift, Dad! You've never even bent a reg before...please get the hell out of here and leave me alone.”

“You don't understand her.”

“I don't want to understand her. I've lived with her for twenty-eight years.”

“You won't come back with me?”

“No.”

“Then let me stay.”

The cheetahs closed their eyes and dropped their heads onto their paws. The falcon shrugged and ruffled itself.

“You're out of your mind. Do you know what I'm here for...of course you know...go home!”

So they walked down past the still body of the little metal and flesh gnome, down the ledge, down to the floor of the great cavern, the thief, the policeman and the animals padding along behind. They paused at the body of Mr. Robert Mossman and Neil Leipzig, to make certain he knew what he was walking into, took the killer's communication phone from his ring finger, called Lady Effim, and told her what had happened. She said, “I apologize, Neil. My companions are, how can I put it meaningfully, devoted to me. Mr. Mossman was very much on his own. I regret his death, but I regret even more that this has caused you to doubt my word. You have my assurance everything was ordered correctly for your

arrival. You won't be troubled again. And again, I ask your pardon.” He turned her off and he went with his father to the village of the computer.

“For the last time: will you leave now? I don't want you to see this.”

“I'll stay. I'll be right over here. Perhaps later...”

“No. Even if I go back, I'll only come here again. I know what I need.”

“I'll have to keep tracking you.”

“That's your job.”

The thief held a tiny inhalation tube filled with soft, feathery yellow dust. He had received it from the hand of the cyborg woman who ran the computer's village. It was called The Dust, and spoken of reverently. It was much finer and looked more potent than any Dust Neil Leipzig had ever used. He knew what was going to happen, and could only guess at the intensity of the experience.

The world aboveground was free, totally and utterly free. There were no boundaries, no taboos beyond causing other's harm. And even in such a world, this was forbidden. The last, the final, the ultimate sexual experience.

“I'll wait.”

He didn't answer. He removed his clothes, walked to the towering bulk of the computer and touched it.

The crackle-finish surface of its north flank was smooth and cool to his touch. He felt sensuality pulsing in the machine. They had exposed the leads for him, and he paused for a moment to consider what obligations they must owe Lady Effim for them to give him The Dust, to permit him

Mekcoucher time with
their love-partner. The dwellers in this subterranean hideaway. They were all like
Fursday. Advanced
stages of love commitment to this machine. Part metal, part human, totally the
computer's property.
Helpless to deny their passion. He grabbed the leads.

The blue lead went into the surgically implanted socket on the inside of his right thigh,
the red
input lead went into the socket on the inside of his left thigh. The “stim” electrodes
found their proper areas
through his hair and scalp. He merely placed the medusa cap on his head and they
wriggled to their proper
clips, sank their fangs, wire snakes. One lead hooked him into the plethysmograph and
the Lissajous
oscilloscope and the GSR galvanometer. The Velcro band containing a million black-dot
photocells was
ready and he wrapped it around his penis. Then he snorted The Dust, the yellow wonder
from Barcelona.

He lay up against the metal body of the machine, arms out cruciform, legs spread, cheek
flat to the
waiting surface. He could feel the expectancy in the computer, hungry lover.

He thought of the first time he had made love to Joice, the feel of her flesh. It was not
enough.

Then he contracted the muscles in his thighs and closed the circuits.

Instantly, the metal of the machine began to flow. He felt himself sinking into the north
flank of
the computer. His fingers penetrated the metal as easily as if it had been modeling clay.
He began to get
proprioceptive feedback from muscle activity...he could feel the whorls on his fingertips
as sucking
whirlpools, dark swirling waters that drew his blood and bones through the flesh and out
into the machine,
spinning the essence of his physical being away from its skin container...his chest began
to harden, to
vibrate with sound like a thunder sheet of aluminum...the soles of his feet melted and his
arches flattened
and his lower legs oozed into puddles of mercury...he sank into the machine, was

enclosed, its arms around
him, welcoming him...

The Dust blew in hurricane clouds through his body and puffed out through the great
smooth
apertures in his head and back and buttocks. The Dust mingled with lubricant and it was
altered, even as he
was altered.

He perceived with purest immediacy the sense of his positioning of arms and legs and
ferrite cores
and LSI circuits and bowels and conductors and limbs and body and plates and fissures
and counterweights
and glands and wiring in the immediate environment that he was the machine had begun
to be him.

Then the auditory and visual feedback began, delayed responses, an instant later than
they should
have been. He spoke: Oh, good and it repeated from another mouth a moment later, ood.
Echolalia.

He felt his penis engorging with blood and felt the density of light increasing in the
capillaries as
the plethysmograph measured his arousal in a new language the machine he was the
machine
interpreted...the density of light decreased... increased...decreased...increased...

He spiraled upward into the machine-Lissajous pattern oscilloscope sine and cosine
waves from
the x and y axes actually came together, pulsated in three dimensions and he teased
himself the machine he
the man with vernier knob stimulation-it came out green and the machine trembled,
began to secrete
testosterone, estrogen, progesterone...

She, the machine, he, the machine, she, the man, he, the machine...the man, he
becoming she
becoming machine...

His heart was pudding.

The Lissajous pulsations became hallucinations in the sex organs of the computer...galvanic skin
response on the galvanometer...aching in his spine...

Sinking slowly into a sea of oil. Great skyscraper bulk of metalflesh slowly warmly
moistly
sinking into a sea of blue-black oil. Pumping. Pumping. Wet closing over his head,
running in waves over
his naked body. Invisible mat of hair covering every plate and surface, a fine golden
down, soaking up oil,
engorging, coming to climax.

Her breasts were warm, the rivets sensitive to each feather caress of electric stim. Her
vagina filled
with soft, melting things that went up and up and roughened the oil-slick inner surfaces,
sliding to touch
and knead the vulva. So good. Ood.

His memory, he could see everything in his memory, stored in the banks, every moment
of his life
from the first dripping emergence from the vats, the running, the extruding, the rolling,
the flattening, the
cutting, the shaping, the forming, the welding. Every moment of his life: the instant he
was first engaged,
the circuits closing, the surge of power, the first inputs, the primary runs, every boring
clearing procedure,
every exercise, every erroneous output.

His mother, his father, great cats and the wet scent of their breath, like coolant on
overheated coils,
the soft taste of Joice in his mouth, her body moving beneath him, sinking into her,
tiniest folding of her
labia around his penis, the rising to orgasm, the overloading, the heat, the peace of
darkness.

Then he altered his stroke and felt the change to precognitive anticipatory feedback,
telling
himself how it would feel, fulfilling his own prophecies, the smell of flesh on metal,
metal on flesh, the
colors of whirling information, increments of semen and fused capacitors.

He was the teleport, additional human faculties, soft sponge pineal gland, polluted

adrenalin,
strange eyes, this was the best for me the very best I've ever hungry metal lover. They
began to
converge...everything began to converge. He, the machine called Neil Leipzig, was the x
axis; he, the
machine called love-partner, was the y axis; they began to converge; identical sine
waves, out of phase.

His pattern was a growing. The machine's was a throbbing. He passed the machine at a
higher
level every pulse. The machine grew frantic and drank more power. He tried to catch up,
chasing the
nymphomaniacal peaks as the machine beckoned him, teased him, taunted him, drew
him on, then flashed
away. He extended on metal limbs, the machine's soft flesh grew sunburned and dark
and leather tough.

Then he peaked out, it, she, peaked out, unable to draw more power from her source.
They
exchanged modes, as the point of destructive interference denied quantum mechanics
and was reached: a
millisecond of total sound and utter silence. Orgasm: metal became flesh, human
became machine.

The interference pattern was a grating whine that became more and more pure as they
came into
phase. The machine, in its human throat, began to vibrate in sympathy. She, who had
been Neil Leipzig at
the start, captured the exponential pattern that had been his, the machine, captured it as it
fell away.

They circled, and the image on the Lissajous screen became a circle as she captured the
machine
and held her in phase again. Prolate and oblate: two dimensional images slowing,
softening, dimming, the
message of release and surcease .986, 1.0014,.9999986, 1.0000000014...

The first thing he heard was the sound of the two cheetahs attacking something, agony
and fury.

The first thing he saw was the dying point of green light on the oscilloscope screen. The

first thing he felt
was the rough metal of his chest against the sweat-soaked north Bank of his love-
partner.

He was dry. As though he had given the machine a transfusion, as if it had sucked all
the juices
from him. He understood why Joice and all the others, as free as they had been, had been
unable to arouse
him in times past, how the first Mekcoucher with its promises of this, had led him
further and further into
the inevitability of what he had just experienced.

Now, for the first time in his life, he knew what passion could lead through, what it led
to
inexorably. And he knew he could never go back. He would stay here, in this terrible
place, with these
others who shared his lover, and this was all he wanted.

He fell away from the machine and lay on the rock Boor of the cavern. His breath had
to be drawn
in stages. His head reeled. His hand lay on his metal chest.

He wanted to sleep, but the sounds of conflict were louder now, insistent, crowding
through the
pain and satiation his body felt at one and the same time. He rolled over on his stomach,
his chest clanking
against the rock Boor. It was the best for you, too, he thought. The best you ever had,
love-partner. You will
never forget me. If I die today, you'll remember always, in every last memory cell.

At the base of the nearest ledge, the Catman's cheetahs were struggling with one of the
love-
partner's people. He was down and they were savaging him, but clearly trying to avoid
killing him. The
thief had seen the technique before. It was called putting, as in stay put. The rest of the
colony had no part
in the melee, and were, in fact, watching with some pleasure-if pleasure could be
discerned on faces that
were partially metal masks.

A tall, limping, old woman with copper legs came across from the crowd. She hobbled
to Neil as

the Catman commanded, "Heel!" and the cheetahs left their chewed and semi-conscious prey. The Catman joined the copper-legged old woman.

The falcon looked sleepy. It was an illusion.

"Will you can stay be here with love-partner?" the old woman said. There was a tone of pleading in her voice. "Tewsdlay," she said, indicating the pile of worked-over flesh and metal the cheetahs had put, "he was for crazy of you with the love-partner. But I'm the saying one for your give machine love never before that fire hot. If you'll be stay this place us can make you what my is being, first lover."

The Catman moved a step closer. "Neil!"

There was raw horror on his face. He had seen his son's body vanish into the machine, had seen the machine turn soft and swallow the thief, had seen the machine sweat and go mad with lust, had seen his son emerge with his parts altered. Neil Leipzig looked at his father, and at the old woman. "I'll stay. Now go and take Tewsdlay for repair."

The old woman hobbled away, and the crowd went back into their rock-wall dwellings. Neil Leipzig stood facing the Catman.

"You can't. My God, Neil, look at you, and this is only the first time. That thing eats what it loves. Do you want to end up like"

He waved a hand at the retreating mob of half-humans.

"This is where I belong. I haven't belonged up there for a long time."

"Neil, please, I'll do anything you want; resign my commission, we can go away to another city..."

"Dad," he said, "I have always loved you. More than I've ever been able to tell you. I always

wanted you to fight back. That's all I ever wanted.”

“You don't understand your mother. She's had bad times, too.”

“It's all in aid of nothing. Look at you. You haven't got a dream left in the world. We're killing you a little at a time. It's time I stopped contributing to it and did something final.”

“But not this, not down here, son...”

But the thief was gone. The air twittered with bright scintillas of fading light.

The first jump brought him back to the world imbedded in the earth a quarter of a mile beneath the arroyo. Had he made such a teleportational error earlier, he would have died. But mating with the machine had altered him. The love-partner had never known a teleport, and in the exchange of modes he had been made less than machine but more than mortal. He expanded his personal space and vanished again. The second jump took him to the surface, and he winked in, out in an instant—seen by no living thing, for even the guards were dead, having been pounded by Mr. Robert Mossman.

The night welcomed him, accepted his mote-outlined shadow, and took no further notice as he vanished again, reappeared, vanished, and in seconds materialized in his mother's bedroom high in London.

He leaned over and grasped her by the wrist, and wrenched her from the doze cocoon where she lay, supple and naked, the powder-white marks of the plasticwork making longitudinal lines on her breasts that glowed faintly in the night light. Her eyes snapped open as he dragged her free.

“Come along, Mom. We have to go now.”

Then, clutching her naked body to his naked body, he vanished.

Before merging with the machine, he could not have carried someone with him. But everything was changed now. Vastly changed.

The Catman was high on the ledge leading to the elevator when the thief reappeared with his mother. The cheetahs padded alongside and the falcon was on the wing. The climb was a difficult one for a man that age, even with unnumbered rejuvenations. The Catman was too far away to do anything to stop him.

“Neil!”

“You're free, Dad. You're free now. Don't waste it!”

The Catman was frozen for only a moment. And in that moment Neil Leipzig carried the semi-conscious body of his mother to the love-partner. The Catman screamed, a high and desolate scream because he knew what was happening. He began running down the ledge, screaming to his falcon to intercept, screaming to his cheetahs to get there before him, screaming because he could never make it in time.

The thief plugged himself in, his mother pressed flat between his naked metal flesh body and the fleshmetal north flank of his love-partner.

He flexed his thigh muscles, closed the contacts,..

...and offered himself and the suddenly howling woman as the ultimate troilism.

The machine flowed, the oscilloscope formed a design no living creature had ever seen in more than three dimensions, and then, in an instant, it was over. The machine absorbed what it could not refuse, and there was only the single point of green light on the screen, and endless silence once more beneath the

earth.

The Catman reached the machine, saw the beads of sweat mixed with blood that dotted the north flank, and heard fading moans of brutality that repeated soundlessly.

The Catman sits alone in a room, remembering.

The child never knew. It was not the mother. The mother always loved, but had no way of showing it. The father had never loved, and had every way of reinforcing it, day after day.

The Catman sits and mourns. Not for the child, gone and without sorrow, For the woman.

For the bond of circumstances that held them together through days and nights of a special kind of love forged in a cauldron of hate.

He will never forgive the child for having destroyed that love out of hate.

He will sit alone now. He has nothing left to live for. He hopes the child burns in a terrible Hell, even as he burns in his own. And after a while, there is always the conversing waterfall.

Los Angeles, California;

Hanover, New Hampshire;

New York City;

Gull Lake, Hickory Corners, Michigan/1972

11 HINDSIGHT:
480 SECONDS

Haddon Brooks, a poet, stood in the last city of the Earth, waiting for the word impact to come from space.

He was being recorded. What he saw, how he felt, all the sounds and smells and smallest touches of the

death of his world went up and out to the ships as they began the final journey to new homes somewhere in

the stars. His vital signs were being monitored, thalamic taps carried his thoughts and transmitted an the

colors of what lay around him, to be stored in memory cassettes aboard the ships.

Someone to report the

death of the Earth, had been the short of it, and from that can for a volunteer he had been winnowed from

the ten thousand applicants.

Ten thousand masochists, voyeurs, harbingers of destruction, possessors of the death-wish,

psychotics, chill analytical thinkers, fanatics, true believers and those who thought they were cameras.

From ten thousand he had been chosen, because he was a poet and on this occasion perhaps only the eyes

of a certain dreamer could be depended upon to relay the event with enough magic for the generations of

children who would be born in space or on distant worlds circling unknown suns. He had volunteered not

because he was a man bereft of sense or survivors but because he was a man with too much to live for. He

had a wife whom he loved, he had children who adored him, he had peace and genius and was content with

his gifts. Such a man could feel the anguish of losing the racial home. So he had volunteered, knowing he

was correct for the task, and they had chosen him from the ten thousand because it was clear that he could

sum up final moments with order and beauty.

The city was still alive. It had been kept so for him. All the others had been melted

down for their
fissionable materials. The cities had become the great Orion ships, three million tons
each, shaped like the
Great Pyramid of Gizeh, with slightly conical pusher-plates under them.

The cities, taken to the stars by hydrogen bomb explosions under the pusher-plates, one
per second
for seven minutes to achieve Earth orbit...and then the Orions sent to all points of the
astrolabe, to seed
Man through the dark. The cities were gone, and their going had contaminated the
Earth's atmosphere
beyond purification. But it did not matter: the Earth would die within the hour.

He stood in the center of the arts rotunda, the last works of Konstantin Xenakis forming
and re-
forming across the dome, silver and gold threads patterning a hundred times a minute,
and the small-but
very clear, very distinct-voice of the Orion fleet flagship spoke in his head.

“It's on the way. An hour, perhaps.”

Brooks found himself looking up when answering. “Have you been getting what I'm
sending?”

“Copying.”

“Yes, I'm sorry. That's what I meant. Copying.”

The voice from space grew milder. “No, I'm sorry. So used to techtalk...you just put it
any way
you want, Mr. Brooks.

“We're getting it all. Very clearly. It's fine, just fine. I didn't mean to interrupt you, just
wanted
you to know there was no change.”

“Thank you.”

The voice, and any whisper of its presence, vanished from his head, and he knew he
was alone
once more. Alone-with the entire population of the Earth listening, watching.

He strolled out of the rotunda and stood on the speakers' shelf overlooking the pastel gardens.

“The sky is very blue,” he said. “I've never seen it so blue. Water, all the way to Heaven. But there are no birds.” His eyes recorded everything: the swaying trees that picked up the breeze and passed it on. Their colors, merging one into another with delicate softness.

“Here is a poem for you, whomever.”

He composed swiftly, the lines falling into place in his mind an instant before he spoke them.

Vastator, the destroyer from the cold,
Eating time at fifty thousand kilometers per second,
I won't even see your approach.
Outer dark sent you, my Sun hides you,
And when your hunger takes you past
You will drop only eight minutes of leftovers
From your terrible table.

He shook his head. It was an inadequate piece of work. He tried to make amends : “The buildings are like metal grain in the sunlight. Pinpoints of light flickering like novae in crosstar filters. They are very lovely. But there are no sounds of people. The city seems to be waiting for your return. Poor dumb thing, a dog that doesn't know its master has died. It will wait until it dies, too. Did you ever understand that cities only live with people in them?”

He pressed the stud on his floater pack and rose slowly from the shelf. The central gardens of the city did not end abruptly, but diffused themselves into the main arterial passages leading away from the center. No street was empty of life, even now. He floated over the commercial center.

“The robots continue their work,” he said. “Little persons of metal and plastic. I’ve always had a

good feeling about them. Do you know why? They ask so little, and they do so much. They’re so kind no one would think of being cruel to them, so they lead the best of lives. They are content in their work. Even with all of us gone, they keep the wheels of commerce turning. How fortunate we were to have had them working with us.”

He floated lower, passing the news kiosk at the corner of Press Street and Hologram Avenue. It was recapping the final statements of the astronomers. Brooks hovered and listened to the kiosk’s pleasant voice: it was the voice of Tandra Mellowe, the holo personality.

“The planet-sized body moving in on our Sun from interstellar space is roughly three hundred and twenty-five times the mass of the Earth, making it somewhat greater than that of Jupiter, the largest planet in the Solar System. In diameter it is approximately 91,000 miles and, because of its collision course with the Sun, has been named Vastator, from the Latin meaning destroyer. Preliminary calculations indicated the asteroid would hit the Sun directly, boring in at a thirty degree angle. However, as the body nears, revised computations advise Vastator will only graze the Sun, tearing off a great piece of the corona. Unfortunately, this will not affect what will happen to the Earth. The spray of radiation—chiefly high-energy protons and helium nuclei—will strike the Earth as the Sun sprays the heavens. All life will be first sterilized and shortly thereafter vaporized by the solar storm. The soil will melt and fuse into a glaze, and the oceans

will begin to boil. It will be approximately eight minutes before the sight of what has happened to our Sun reaches the Earth, but no one will be here to see it. No one except Haddon Brooks, the well-known poet...”

Brooks rose and went away from there.

He sailed over the hundred lakes, joined by their floater locks. Small boats and catamarans drifted across their surfaces idly. “Sunday strolling,” he said, and went over unseen.

“I am above the ghettos now. They remind me of verses from Mother Goose. It must be fine to be a member of a minority, to know where you came from, and what certain words that cannot be translated completely mean. No one could have been happy here. Deathbeds of illusion. Invisible walls. These were the hollows where men and women gave themselves to yesterdays so their children might have tomorrows. But I cannot be sad about them. They knew a kind of love hidden from the rest of us. Where you go now, to whatever new places, make sure you leave room for those who need that specialness; we cannot all be the same, it isn't even right that we should be.”

He soared to the highest levels of the residence shelves, passing through byways and underpassing flying bridges, skimming over slideways and casting his long shadow over the pebbled surfaces of walls and other walls. Sloping outer surfaces and sudden apertures. Concavities and tunnels fit for the needs of those who liked cool, dark places where the scent of gardenias still lingered. He stopped in a tiny forest of bonsai and tried to compose another poem, this one for his wife.

“This may not be right, Calla, but it's the best I can do right now...I find my thoughts split. I want to say something special to you and the children, but time is growing short and it serves me right if I've left any love or respect for you unsaid after all this time. You were the best moments for me, the brightest colors, the deepest sighs, the sweetest sugar of life. You were always what I was afraid

I'd never be worthy
of. But I'm content now; I held your love. Oh, hell, my love, my best, I can't compose a
poem now. Forgive
me, but all that come to mind are another man's words. He was called Randall Jarrell
and he lived a
hundred years ago and never saw the stars from Mars or looked into the burning heart of
our poor Sun from
the quicksilver domes of the Moon, but he knew my love for you and he said,

'But be, as you have been, my happiness;

Let me sleep beside you, each night, like a spoon;

When, starting from my dreams, I groan to you,

May your I love you send me back to sleep.

At morning bring me, grayer for its mirroring,

The heavens' sun perfected in your eyes.' “

Then he heard the voice in his head that called the end.

“Mr. Brooks, impact.”

His breath froze in his nostrils.

The voice again, caught in a sob. “Oh my God, it's beautiful, so terrible...”

And he knew he had eight minutes.

A strange prickling assaulted his flesh and he cried out to Calla, far away aboard an
Orion, “I'm
done...there can be no other children...” And he stopped himself; he knew there were less
than four hundred

and eighty seconds and he had to tell it all, tell it so well the children of Earth would

always be able to draw
on his cassette with his visions and words and dreams on them.

He settled within himself, leaped from the shelf and went down to stand in the silver
street where
he would spend his last moments.

Haddon Brooks spoke then, of the living space that had finally come to hold the dearest
hopes of
humankind. He spoke of the caverns beneath the pulsing city where energy was
channeled into light and
heat and rain that would fall when the women called for rain. He spoke of the racetracks
where adventure
could still be found in trying to beat sound waves as they raced to targets. Of the oceans
that had been
calmed so men could sail across without fear. He spoke of the best of people and the
ways in which humans
had come to know themselves well enough to laugh at the thought wars were inevitable.

This had been the city in which he had been born, in which he had found the words to
make his
songs, where he had met and joined with Calla, where the children had grown from their
bodies; the city
where he would become vapor at the final moment. Some of it was even poetry, but not
much.

“I'm afraid, up there. I'm afraid of my vanity to be the last one here. It was foolish, oh
how I want
to go with you now. Please forgive me my fear, but I want so much to live!”

If there had only been time. He was chagrined for just a moment that he had let them
down, had
failed to do what he had been left behind to do. But that lasted only a moment and he
knew he had said as
much as anyone could say, and it would be right for the children of the dark places, even
if it took them a
thousand years to find another home.

Then he turned, as the seconds withered, knowing the solar storm had drenched him and
any
moment he would vaporize. He looked up into the water-blue sky, past the blinding sun
that suddenly

flared and consumed the heavens, and he shouted, "I'll always be with you-" but the last word was never completed; he was gone.

Soon after, the seas gently began to boil.

Los Angeles, California/1972