

PROTOTAPH

I was already sweating BB's when I got to the Manhattan Life Concourse; then I had to get behind an old dame that spent a good half hour in the Policy Vending Booth, looking at little pieces of paper and punching the keys like they were fifty-credit bet levers at the National Lottery.

When I got in, I was almost scared to code my order into the Vendor; but I was scarer not to. I still thought maybe what happened over at Prudential and Gibraltar was some kind of fluke, even though I knew all the companies worked out of the Federal Actuarial Table Extrapolator; and FATE never makes a mistake.

But this had to be a mistake.

I punched the keys for a hundred thousand C's of Straight Life; nothing fancy, just a normal workingman's coverage. Then I shoved my ID in the slot and waited. I could feel sweat come out on my scalp and run down by my ear while I waited. I could hear the humming sound all around me like some kind of bees bottled up back of the big gray panel; then the strip popped out of the slot, and I knew what it said before I looked at it:

UNINSURABLE.

I got the door open and shoved some guy out of my way and it was like I couldn't breathe; I mean, think about it: Twenty-one years old, out in the city to take my chances all alone, with no policy behind me. It was like the sidewalk under your feet turned to cracked ice, and no shore in sight.

A big expensive-looking bird in executive coveralls came out of a door across the lobby; I guess I yelled. Everybody was looking at me. When I grabbed his arm, he got that mad look and started to reach for his lapel button-the kind that goes with a Million Cee Top Crust policy.

"You got to listen," I told him. "I tried to buy my insurance-and all I got was this!" I shoved the paper in his face. "Look at me," I told him. "I'm healthy, I'm single, I finished Class Five Subtek school yesterday, I'm employed! What do you mean, uninsurable?"

"Take your hands off me," he said, in a kind of choky voice. He was looking at the paper, though. He took it and gave me a look like he was memorizing my face for picking out of a line-up later.

"Your ID." He held out his hand and I gave it to him. He looked at it and frowned an important-looking frown.

He pushed his mouth in and out and changed his mind about what he was going to say; he knew as well as I did that the big actuarial computer doesn't make mistakes. "Come along." He turned his back and headed for the lift bank.

"What have I got, some kind of incurable disease or something?" I was asking them; they just looked at me and goggled their eyes. More of them kept coming in, whispering together; then they'd hurry away and here would come a new bunch. And none of them told me anything.

"The old crock in front of me, she was ninety if she was a day!" I told them. "She got her policy! Why not me?"

They didn't pay attention. Nobody cared about me, how I felt. I got up and went over to the first guy that had brought me up here.

"Look," I said. I was trying to sound reasonable. "What I mean is, even a guy dying in the hospital can get a policy for some premium. It's the law; everybody's got a right to be insured. And-"

"I know the laws governing the issuance of policies by this company," the man barked at me. He was sweating, too. He got out a big tissue and patted himself with it. He looked at a short fat man with a stack of papers in his hand.

"I don't care what kind of analysis you ran," he told him. "Run another one. Go all the way back to Primary if you have to, but get to the bottom of this! I want to know why this"-he gave me a look-"this individual is unique in the annals of actuarial history!"

"But, Mr. Tablish-I even coded in a trial run based on a one hundred percent premium, with the same result: No settlement of such a claim is possible-"

"I'm not interested in details; just get me results! The computer has available to it every fact in the known universe; see that it divulges the reasoning behind this-this anomaly!"

The fat man went away. They took me to another room and a doctor ran me through the biggest med machine I ever saw. When he finished I heard him tell the big man I was as sound as a Manhattan Term Policy.

That made me feel a little better-but not much.

Then the fat man came back, and his face was a funny white color-like some raw bread I saw once on a field trip through Westside Rationing. He said something to the others, and they all started to talk at once, and some of them were yelling now. But do you think any of them told me anything? I had to wait another hour, and then a tall man with white hair came in and everybody got quiet and he looked at papers and they all got their heads together and muttered; and then they looked at me, and I felt my heart pounding up under my ribs and I was feeling sick then, med machine or no med machine.

Then they told me.

That was two days ago. They got me in a room now, a fancy room up high in some building. There's guys around to do whatever I want-servants, I guess you'd call 'em. They gave me new clothes, and the food-WestRat never put out anything like this. No liquor, though-and no smokes. And when I said I wanted to go out, all I got was a lot of talk. They treat me-careful. Not like they like me, you know, but like I was a bomb about to go off. It's a funny feeling. I guess I got more power than anybody that ever lived-more power than you can even get your mind around the thought of. But a lot of good it does me. There's only the one way I can use it-and when I think about that, I get that sick feeling again.

And meanwhile, I can't even go for a walk in the park.

The President was here just now. He came in, looking just like the Tri-D, only older, and he came over and looked at me kind of like I looked at him. I guess it figures: There's only one of each of us.

"Are you certain there's not some-some error, George?" he said to the wrinkly-faced man who walked just behind him.

"The Actuarial Computer is the highest achievement of a thousand years of science, Mr. President," he said, in a deep voice like the mud on the bottom of the ocean. "Our society is based on the concept of its infallibility within the physical laws of the Universe. Its circuits are capable of analyses and perceptions that range into realms of knowledge as far beyond human awareness as is ours beyond that of a protozoan. An error? No, Mr. President."

He nodded. "I see." That's all he said. Then he left.

Now I'm just sitting here. I don't know what to do next-what to say. There's a lot to this-and in a way, there's nothing. I got to think about it, dope it out. There's got to be something I can do-but what?

The machine didn't say much; they took me down to the sub-vault where the big voice panel is, where the primary data's fed in, and let me hear for myself. It didn't give any explanations; it just told me.

Funny; in a way it was like something I've always known, but when you hear FATE come right out and say it, it's different:

When I die, the world ends.