

The Fugitives

—and God said unto them, *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.*

—Genesis 1:28

All the while he was waiting in line to be checked out Warren felt eyes upon him, but he postponed glancing over his shoulder till after he reached the check-out counter and turned his groceries and his ration card over to the electronic cashier. But none of the people lined up behind him seemed to be aware of his existence; neither did the people waiting in the other check-out lines. He guessed the truth then, and, raising his gaze, saw that the eyes belonged to the automart manager, who was peering down at him through the little window of the gondola-like automart office.

His fears were allayed. It was part of the manager's job to keep an eye on the customers while they were checking out. Electronic cashiers weren't easily duped and it was next to impossible to hold one up; but such things had been done before and unquestionably would be attempted again. It only *seemed* to Warren that the manager was watching him. Actually, the man was watching everyone.

By the time he stepped into the parking lot he'd succeeded in laying his fears to rest. The parking lot covered two acres and even at this early hour was nearly filled with Frolics, Skylarks, Schlottisches, Jubilees, and Zests. There were no big jobs in evidence. Even in the country, where he and Dianne had recently come to live, it was impracticable to drive anything larger than a carette.

His own carette was a Schlott—low and sleek and bucket-seated. It was an extravagance, yes—but what quicker way was there to attract attention to yourself than by going carless? After walking the three hundred yards to where he'd parked it, he set the groceries in one of the bucket seats, climbed into the other, and joined the line of carettes waiting to leave the lot. Some five minutes later, he drove onto the intermegalopolitan highway and headed for the apartmotel where he and Dianne had set up housekeeping.

He was deliciously tired after working all night. He hadn't thought he'd like working nights, but when he'd been offered the position of Nocturnal Maintenance Engineer at the Bomar Bowling Academy, he'd taken it without hesitation, knowing from experience that the fewer people he came into contact with, the less likelihood there would be of his being recognized. He'd dyed his hair long ago, of course, and he'd long ago said good-bye to the little mustache he'd once been so proud of; but being on TV had made his face public property, and the tape of the little interview the newscasters had tricked him and Dianne into giving in the hospital hallway might be re-aired at any time. It had already resulted in their being spotted twice, despite their precautions, and both times only the availability of the police had made it possible for them to escape with their lives and to move on to a different locale.

But in a way, perhaps, their having been forced at last to leave Megalopolis Nine behind them had been a good thing. He liked it here in Intramegalopolia. So did Dianne. Sometimes he wondered why he hadn't made plans to live in the country while still at MIT-IV. There was so much more space here. Why, sometimes you could drive for a whole hundred feet without passing a single building! Not very often, but often enough to give you a sense of freedom you never got to know in a megalopolis. He thought of Wordsworth's lines

*Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn, --
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn*

Yes, that was the way it was. Exactly the way it was. It was as though the lines had been written today instead of nearly three centuries ago.

Dianne had breakfast ready for him when, an hour and fifteen miles after leaving the automart, he parked the Schlott in the car-tree and entered their apartmotel. She put away the groceries while he ate. She was a brunette now. Once, she had been a striking blonde. And once, her name had been Evelyn,

and once Gloria, and once Yvonne. Just as his name had been successively Wayne, Everett, and Theodore. "I met our next-door neighbor this morning, darling," she said, pouring the eighth-of-a-pound packet of sugar that constituted their week's ration into the sugar cannister. "She's coming over later on to show me a new way to fix spork that she heard on TV."

A cold finger of dear touched him. "Darling, do you think—"

She anticipated his objection. "But Warren, we can't go on living like a pair of hermits forever. Especially here in the country. People will wonder. People will suspect. And Mabel's so full of fun—so friendly and likable."

"So was the last frustrated housewife that sicked the crowd on us."

Dianne went rigid; her face paled. "I don't want to talk about it!"

"I know you don't, Dianne." (Even after all this time, it was hard not to call her Yvonne.) "But you should think about it. We're still too fresh on people's minds. Maybe Mabel doesn't know you from Eve now, but the more she sees of you, the more she's apt to be reminded that she's seen you before, somewhere, some place—you know how the process works. And once she remembers where and when—and why—we're going to have to run for our lives again."

"But Mabel's husband is a plainclothesman. Even if she *did* recognize us, she wouldn't give us away. She couldn't, out of loyalty to Bill."

Warren was still dubious. "You never know what a frustrated housewife will do. She *is* a frustrated one, isn't she? I don't recall seeing any children in the neighborhood."

"Y—yes. She and Bill are in the pool, but you know the odds against their names being drawn."

Tears had come into Dianne's eyes. They always did when the subject of children came up. Tears and terror, and a tinge of guilt. Warren suffered similarly, but his suffering didn't show. He wouldn't have brought up the subject of children at all if necessity hadn't demanded it. He said, "Those are the kind we have to watch out for the most."

"I know," Dianne said miserably. "But the days are so long and the nights are even longer, and she *is* friendly, Way—Warren, and her husband *is* a plainclothesman. It may even be to our benefit *to* be friends with them."

Warren relented then. She was probably right, and he was probably getting to be a misanthrope, which, however much he might be justified, wasn't a good thing for either of them. "All right," he said, "so now you've got a girl friend. So what else is new?"

He slept most of the day, awakening at five o'clock. The coolness of the August morning had long since departed, and the humid heat of afternoon was in full sway. As he slipped into his lay-around robe the lazy crescendo of a locust climbed above the ceaseless murmur of cassettes passing on the highway. Through the open window he saw the heat rising in wave after shimmering wave from the apartmotel courtyard.

Mabel was in the kitchen with Dianne when he came in. She *was* full of fun, just as Dianne had said. Small, pert, with ringlets of black hair scalloping her forehead, she could have passed for a little girl—if the fullness of her breasts and hips hadn't attested that nothing could be farther from the truth. "You're just like my Bill," she said to him after Dianne performed the amenities. "Eight hours sleep, and you look like a bear."

Warren fingered the stubble on his cheeks and chin. He grinned. "Guess I'd better make myself civilized."

"No, don't do that," Mabel said. "I like men who look like bears. It's a sign of virility. *Is* he virile, Dianne?"

The feigned naivete with which she asked the question clearly indicated she meant it solely as a joke. Nevertheless, it was just about the worst thing she could have said. Dianne's face turned pink, then white; her lips quivered. How she managed to carry off the moment, Warren never knew, but carry it off she did. "And how!" she said. "If we lived in the days of yore, we'd probably have more kids than a barrel of monkeys!"

"I still think I'd better make myself civilized," Warren said, and left the kitchen before the blush that had begun infiltrating his cheeks became perceptible.

Returning some twenty minutes later after a shower and a shave and a change into a cool slacks-shirt-clax ensemble, he found Dianne setting the table and carrying on a conversation with Mabel re the relative merits of nearbeef and spork. The two of them talking back and forth lent the little room a quality that had previously been wanting—a quality compounded of homeliness, matter-of-factness, and camaraderie. Maybe having someone else to talk to *would* be good for Dianne—and, by extension, good for him too. Associating with him exclusively could only make her remember, just as associating with her exclusively made him remember. And God knew, it was time they forgot. Six months was more than long enough to torture yourself for a misdeed that, in the strict sense of the word, hadn't been a misdeed at all, but a mistake—and not even your own.

Just the same though, he reflected as he drove to work some five hours later through the heavy Tuesday-night traffic, becoming intimate with other people, no matter how nice they might be, was a risky business at best. There was the omni-present danger of a slip of the tongue, for one thing, and the possibility that you might forget yourself to the extent of making a sudden confidence for another. You had to watch yourself every second.

But Dianne knew enough to be careful. She ought to know by this time.

Was the Frolic behind him deliberately following too close, or was its driver dozing off? He'd passed the carette a few minutes ago, and it had seemed to him that the man's eyes had held a spark of recognition. But even as the thought crossed his mind, the Frolic pulled into a different lane, and a moment later turned down a side road.

That was the hell of having had your face aired over TV—of having been found innocent in the eyes of the law but guilty in the eyes of the people. Everywhere you went, you kept imagining someone was staring at you, and you could never wholly be sure they really weren't.

In a way, fleeing from the people was far worse than fleeing from the police. There were people, people everywhere, everywhere you went; you could never leave them behind. All you could do was hide in their midst—lose yourself in sameness—and hope and pray that your neighbor's memory was short.

And hope and pray, too, that someday it would all blow over and that your personal safety would no longer be in such jeopardy that the law could not award you that which was rightfully yours.

The following morning, he met Mabel's husband Bill. It was Bill's day off, and the two of them were going into outer Megalopolis Nine to take in a six-hour senshow and wanted Warren and Dianne to go along. Bill was a big strapping man with a genial Irish face and a pair of sharp blue eyes, but who nevertheless didn't look like a cop. Warren took a liking to him right away.

Just the same, he was worried. "Gosh, I can't go," he said. "It would mean I'd have to go to work tonight without any sleep." He looked at Dianne, hoping she'd say no, she couldn't go either—that her place was at her husband's side. But Dianne didn't say anything. She just stood there looking back at him, beseeching him with her eyes.

He sighed. "But there's no reason why Dianne can't go," he said.

She was radiant when she got back that night. "Darling, such sights and scenes you never dreamed of!" she cried. "For six hours I lived another life, and now it's like being born all over again. Oh, how I wish you could have come!"

Rebirth had heightened the color of her cheeks, brought back the sparkle that used to live in her eyes. All at once, he wished he didn't have to go to work, that he could sleep the whole night through beside her and know the warm smoothness of her thighs, the thrilling softness of her breasts. And he realized with a start that this was the first time he had truly desired his wife since, since— Well, no matter when. It was enough that he did desire her, that she desired him. Perhaps now they could begin living again.

A knock sounded on the door, and a second later Mabel stepped into the room. "Dianne, I forgot to tell you—tomorrow's our shopping day and I'm going to the automart. You'll come along, won't you? I *hate* shopping alone."

Dianne looked at Warren. "Do you think I should?" her eyes asked. It was her radiance that decided him. If going out did that much for her, then risk or no risk she should go out more often. In the final

analysis, the essence of life was danger; and when you tried to live without exposing yourself to it, you ended up not living at all. So he said, "Why don't you go, darling? You've never been to a country store, and you may get a kick out of it."

She laughed. "I'll window-shop while Mabel's doing the real thing."

"Be ready about nine-thirty," Mabel said. Then, "Well, I'd best be getting back to Bill." She winked. "After a senshow, he gets notions sometimes. See you in the morning, Dianne."

She left. "I'd better be going too," Warren said, glancing at his watch. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself so much today, darling."

She pretended to pout. "I'd have enjoyed myself a lot more if you'd been with me. Senshows are ten times more fun when you share them with your husband."

"I'm off tomorrow night," he said. "Maybe Saturday we—"

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "We'll go to the same show! I won't mind living it again. With you with me, it'll be like living it for the first time. We'll hold hands like a pair of—of—"

"A pair of lovers."

"Yes, like a pair of lovers! And everything will be the way it used to be, and we'll climb mountains, sleep in quaint chalets; float down lovely rivers to the sea. We'll visit the craters of the moon and drink red wine in the little cafes of Mars. Good-bye, Earth, we'll say, and fly away to the stars!"

They kissed again, and said good night. Then he went outside to the car-tree, lowered his Schlott, and set out for work.

He thought about her all through the night as he rode the polishing machine up and down the bowling lanes. She was still radiant when he arrived home the next morning. For her shopping date with Mabel she'd donned a pink gadabout. It swirled like mist around her legs as she set the table, and through its diaphanous bodice he could faintly see her breasts. He pulled her down and kissed her just as Mabel came in the door. "What, so early in the morning?" Mabel asked. "Wow!"

Deliberately Dianne sat down on Warren's lap. "Why not?"

"Good thing you didn't live in the old days," Mabel said. "You really would have had more kids than a barrel of monkeys. Guess I'd better wait for you out in the carette."

"I'll be right with you," Dianne said.

After serving his breakfast, she kissed him and left. "We're invited out for supper tonight," she announced when he got up that afternoon. "Mabel got extra rations—she and the automart manager are old friends."

Warren remembered the eyes that had peered down at him from the gondola-like office when he was checking out Monday. An ice cube of fear coalesced in his stomach. "Did you meet the manager?" he asked.

"Oh yes. He's awfully nice. He said maybe he could arrange to let us have a little something extra now and then. Surpluses accumulate, he said, no matter how generous he tries to be, and he saves them for his friends."

The cube melted, drained away. He showered, shaved, and got into cool clothes, and at five-thirty he and Dianne went next door. It was the hottest it had been all week, and if anything, the sultry wind blowing up from the south aggravated matters. But Mabel had all her windows open, and her living room was relatively cool. It was a duplicate of Warren's and Dianne's. So was her apartmotel. So were all the other apartmotels.

"Bill got called out on a job and won't be here till later," Mabel said. "So sit down, you two, and I'll mix us some drinks."

Warren and Dianne complied. The television set was on, but he couldn't get interested in the program in progress. He stared out the window at the heat waves rising from the courtyard. Despite the temperature, quite a number of their neighbors, both men and women, had come out of their apartmotels and were standing in the afternoon sunlight. They had collected into a group and were talking about something, but the murmur of the highway traffic drowned out their words.

From the kitchen came the sound of ice cubes tinkling. It was a cool pleasant sound. Presently Mabel re-entered the living room carrying a tray. Her face had changed somehow. Warren spotted the

difference right away, and even though he couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was, a chill went through him.

She handed him and Dianne tall cool glasses. "Cheers," she said. Everyone drank. Ice cubes tinkled like Chinese wind chimes. Warren looked out the window again. A number of carettes had pulled into the courtyard and their occupants had added themselves to the group of neighbors. Only it could no longer properly be called a group. It had turned into a crowd.

Soon, it would become a mob ...

Warren felt sick. He glanced at Mabel's phone. How many calls had she made? he wondered. Not many, probably. It would only have taken two or three to start the ball rolling. "Bill's not coming home at all tonight, is he, Mabel?" he said.

Her eyes didn't even flicker. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"Because if he did, he'd have to stop it."

"Stop what, darling?"

Warren got to his feet, pulled Dianne to hers. There might still be time to make it to the car-tree and lower the Schlott, and once they were on the highway, it would be no trick at all to lose themselves. "Come on, Dianne—we'll have to run for it."

Abruptly Mabel dropped all pretense, pulled a gun from an end-table, and pointed it. It was an old Burchardt-Luger, but it appeared to be in good condition, and it was unquestionably loaded. "Sit down rabbitman," she said. "You too, rabbitgirl."

Warren complied. So did Dianne. The old sickness had returned to her eyes. It was a sickness born of the knowledge that you were the most despised creature in the world. Warren knew it well. But this time it wasn't so bad. This time, he was almost glad—would have been glad if it hadn't been for Dianne. He was tired of running, tired of pretending that tomorrow things would be different; tired of the human race.

He wasn't even afraid any longer. "It was the automart-manager, wasn't it, Mabel?" he said. "He thought he recognized me Monday morning, got my address from the cashier, and called you when he found out you lived next door to us. He was pretty sure he was right about me, but he wanted to get a good look at Dianne before pointing his finger. So you ingratiated yourself with her and got her to go shopping with you without arousing our suspicions. Then *you* pointed the finger."

"My, but you're clever, rabbitman."

"You don't realize what you're doing," Dianne said. "We weren't to blame. There wasn't any hereditary precedence and the pre-peds didn't make a thorough enough examination. They were the ones who were found guilty—not us. We were completely exonerated."

"By the law, maybe—but not by the people. *We* didn't exonerate you and we never will!" Mabel had momentarily forgotten Warren and was addressing Dianne. Her face was horrid to behold. Its thin coating of civilization had dissolved, and the naked flesh beneath stood out stark and clear. "I'd kill you now," she said, "but it wouldn't be fair. You robbed the others too, and some of them at least should see you suffer. You and your rabbitman-lover!"

Dianne began to cry.

Warren looked out the window again. More carettes were pulling off the highway and the ranks of the mob were swelling visibly. It had a voice now—low, vicious, murmuring.

He had heard the sound before. As he watched, one of the men uncoiled a rope and threw it over one of the empty booms of the car-tree. It hung there darkly against the glaring August sky.

Still another carette pulled into the courtyard. A familiar figure got out and began running toward the apartmotel. It was Bill. A moment later, he burst into the room. His face was white as he confronted Mabel. "I knew you were up to something when you sent me on that phony errand," he said, "and I played along to find out what. My God, Mabel, doesn't my job mean anything to you?"

He jerked the Burchardt-Luger out of her hand. "But they're The Rabbits!" she screamed.

"I guessed as much when I saw the crowd. You fool! Now I've got to get them out of here."

She made a grab for the gun, bit his hand when he shoved her away. He slapped her face. Hard. She sank limply down into a chair. He shoved Warren and Dianne toward the door. "They're not worked up

enough yet. I may be able to get you through."

He led the way, displaying his badge and carrying the Luger in plain sight. Warren and Dianne kept close behind him. People began pressing in on all sides. The murmuring of their many voices took on a more vicious note. Bill raised the Luger. "This man and woman are in my custody!" he shouted. "If you interfere, I've every right to kill you!" Sullenly the people drew back.

At length the trio reached the car-tree. Bill lowered Warren's Schlott. "Get in, both of you," he said, "and get the hell out of here!"

"Litterbitch!" someone shouted.

"Dirty Dionnes!"

"Kill them! Kill them!"

"Get going for God's sake!" Bill said.

Dianne was sobbing now. Warren helped her into the Schlott, climbed in himself. He looked up into Bill's face, wanting to commend the man for his bravery, to thank him for saving their lives. But the hatred in Bill's eyes chilled him to the bone. He gunned the Schlott and shot onto the highway. Soon, the river of cassettes and trucks absorbed them.

Night found them still on the road. Dianne's eyes were dry by then, and she was staring at the lights of the service stations and the cafes and the apartmotel courts. "My babies," she kept saying, "I want my babies." They would go on to a new place and try again. They would apply for new names and new social security numbers, and the law would grant them. Secretly, so that no one would know. They would find a new apartmotel and he would find a new job. And they would settle down once more to wait for time to pass and hate to abate, praying that the day would come when their lives would no longer be in danger and they could be awarded custody of the twins. Yes, they would hide again, in the only place there was for them to hide. Among the people. The people, the people, the people.