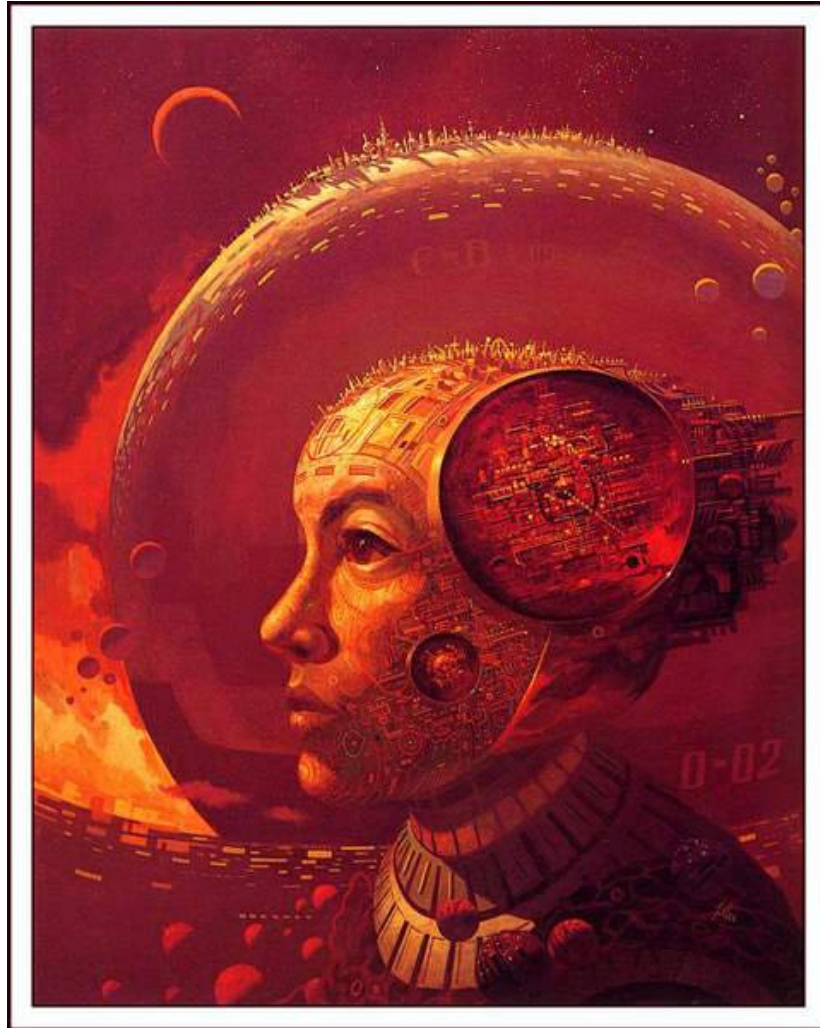


**P. K. DICK**



**I HOPE  
I SHALL ARRIVE SOON  
& OTHER STORIES**

All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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**INTRODUCTION:  
HOW TO BUILD A UNIVERSE  
THAT DOESN'T FALL APART TWO DAYS LATER**

by Philip K. Dick

First, before I begin to bore you with the usual sort of things science fiction writers say in speeches, let me bring you official greetings from Disneyland. I consider myself a spokesperson for Disneyland because I live just a few miles from it—and, as if that were not enough, I once had the honor of being interviewed there by Paris TV.

For several weeks after the interview, I was really ill and confined to bed. I think it was the whirling teacups that did it. Elizabeth Antebi, who was the producer of the film, wanted to have me whirling around in one of the giant teacups while discussing the rise of fascism with Norman Spinrad ... an old friend of mine who writes excellent science fiction. We also discussed Watergate, but we did that on the deck of Captain Hook's pirate ship. Little children wearing Mickey Mouse hats—those black hats with the ears—kept running up and bumping against us as the cameras whirred away, and Elizabeth asked unexpected questions. Norman and I, being preoccupied with tossing little children about, said some extraordinarily stupid things that flay. Today, however, I will have to accept full blame for what I tell you, since none of you are wearing Mic-Key Mouse hats and trying to climb up on me under the impression that I am part of the rigging of a pirate ship.

Science fiction writers, I am sorry to say, really do not know anything. We can't talk about science, because our knowledge of it is limited and unofficial, and usually our fiction is dreadful. A few years ago, no college or university would ever have considered inviting one of us to speak. We were mercifully confined to lurid pulp magazines, impressing no one. In those days, friends would say to me, "But are you writing anything serious?" meaning "Are you writing anything other than science fiction?" We longed to be accepted. We yearned to be noticed. Then, suddenly, the academic world noticed us, we were invited to give speeches and appear on panels—and immediately we made idiots of ourselves. The problem is simply this: What does a science fiction writer know about? On what topic is he an authority?

It reminds me of a headline that appeared in a California newspaper just before I flew here. **SCIENTISTS SAY THAT MICE CANNOT BE MADE TO LOOK LIKE HUMAN BEINGS.** It was a federally funded research program, I suppose. Just think: Someone in this world is an authority on the topic of whether mice can or cannot put on two-tone shoes, derby hats, pinstriped shirts, and Dacron pants, and pass as humans.

Well, I will tell you what interests me, what I consider important. I can't claim to be an authority on anything, but I can honestly say that certain matters absolutely fascinate me, and that I write about them all the time. The two basic topics which fascinate me are "What is reality?" and "What constitutes the authentic human being?" Over the twenty-seven years in which I have published novels and stories I have investigated these two interrelated topics over and over again. I consider them important topics. What are we? What is it which surrounds us, that we call the not-me, or the empirical or phenomenal world?

In 1951, when I sold my first story, I had no idea that such fundamental issues could be pursued in the science fiction field. I began to pursue them unconsciously. My first story had to do with a dog who imagined that the garbage men who came every Friday morning were stealing valuable food which the family had carefully stored away in a safe metal container. Every day members of the family

carried out paper sacks of ripe food, stuffed them into the metal container, shut the lid tightly—and when the container was full, these dreadful-looking creatures came and stole everything but the can.

Finally, in the story, the dog begins to imagine that someday the garbage men will eat the people in the house, as well as stealing their food. Of course, the dog is wrong about this. We all know that garbage men do not eat people. But the dog's extrapolation was in a sense logical—given the facts at his disposal. The story was about a real dog, and I used to watch him and try to get inside his head and imagine how he saw the world. Certainly, I decided, that dog sees the world quite differently than I do, or any humans do. And then I began to think, Maybe each human being lives in a unique world, a private world, a world different from those inhabited and experienced by all other humans. And that led me to wonder, If reality differs from person to person, can we speak of reality singular, or shouldn't we really be talking about plural realities? And if there are plural realities, are some more true (more real) than others? What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe it's as real as our world. Maybe we cannot say that we are in touch with reality and he is not, but should instead say, His reality is so different from ours that he can't explain his to us, and we can't explain ours to him. The problem, then, is that if subjective worlds are experienced too differently, there occurs a breakdown of communication...and there is the real illness.

I once wrote a story about a man who was injured and taken to a hospital. When they began surgery on him, they discovered that he was an android, not a human, but he did not know it. They had to break the news to him. Almost at once, Mr. Garson Poole discovered that his reality consisted of punched tape passing from reel to reel in his chest. Fascinated, he began to fill in some of the punched holes and add new ones. Immediately, his world changed. A flock of A flew through the room when he punched one new!1 in the tape. Finally he cut the tape entirely, whereupon the world disappeared. However, it also disappeared for the other characters in the story . . . which makes no sense, if you think about it. Unless the other characters were figments of his punched-tape fantasy which I guess is what they were.

It was always my hope, in writing novels and stories which asked the question "What is reality?", to some day get an answer. This was the hope of most of my readers, too. Years passed. I wrote over thirty novels and over a hundred stories, and still I could not find out what was real. One day a girl college student in Canada asked me to define reality for her, for a paper she was writing for her philosophy class. She wanted a one-sentence answer. I thought about it and finally said, "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." That's all I could come up with. That was back in 1972. Since then I haven't been able to define reality any more lucidly.

But the problem is a real one, not a mere intellectual game. Because today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups—and the electronic hardware exists by which to deliver these pseudo-worlds right into heads of the reader, the viewer, the listener. Sometimes when I watch my eleven-year-old daughter watch TV I wonder what she is being taught. The problem is confusing; consider that. A TV program produced for adults is viewed by a small child. Half of what is said and done in the TV drama is probably misunderstood by the child. Maybe it's all misunderstood. And the thing is, Just how authentic is the information anyhow, even if the child correctly understood it? What is the relationship between the average TV situation comedy and reality? What about the cop shows? Cars are continually swerving out of control, crashing, and catching fire. The police are always good and they always win. Do not ignore that one point: The police always win. What a lesson that is. You should not fight authority, and even if you do, you will lose. The message here is,

Be passive. And-cooperate. If Officer Baretta asks you for information, give it to him, because Officer Baretta is a good man and to be trusted. He loves you, and you should love him.

So I ask, in my writing, What is real? Because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives; I distrust their power. They have a lot of it. And it is an astonishing power: that of creating whole universes, universes of the mind. I ought to know. I do the same thing. It is my job to create universes, as the basis of one novel after another. And I have to build them in such a way that they do not fall apart two days later. Or at least that is what my editors hope. However, I will reveal a secret to you: I like to build universes which do fall apart. I like to see them come unglued, and I like to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem. I have a secret love of chaos. There should be more of it. Do not believe— and I am dead serious when I say this— do not assume that order and stability are always good, in a society or in a universe. The old, the ossified, must always give way to new life and the birth of new things. Before the new things are born the old must perish. This is a dangerous realization because it tells us that we must eventually part with much of what is familiar to us. Unless we can psychologically accommodate change, we ourselves will begin to die, inwardly. What I am saying is that objects, customs, habits, and ways of life must perish so that the authentic human being can live. And it is the authentic human being who matters most, the viable, elastic organism which can bounce back, absorb, and deal with the new.

Of course, I would say this, because I live near Disneyland, and they are always adding new rides and destroying old ones. Disneyland is an evolving organism. For years they had the Lincoln Simulacrum and finally it began to die and they had to regretfully retire it. The simulacrum, like Lincoln himself, was only a temporary form which matter and energy take and then lose. The same is true of each of us, like it or not.

The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Parmenides taught that the only things that are real are things which never change...and the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus taught that everything changes. If you superimpose their two views, you get this result: Nothing is real. There is a fascinating next step to this line of thinking: Parmenides could never have existed because he grew old and died and disappeared, so, according to his own philosophy, he did not exist. And Heraclitus may have been right—let's not forget that; so if Heraclitus was right, then Parmenides did exist, and therefore, according to Heraclitus' philosophy, perhaps Parmenides was right, since Parmenides fulfilled the conditions, the criteria, by which Heraclitus judged things real.

I offer this merely to show that as soon as you begin to ask what is ultimately real, you right away begin to talk nonsense. By the time of Zeno, they knew they were talking nonsense. Zeno proved that motion was impossible (actually he only imagined that he had proved this; what he lacked was what technically is called the "theory of limits"). David Hume, the greatest skeptic of them all, once remarked that after a gathering of skeptics met to proclaim the veracity of skepticism as a philosophy, all of the members of the gathering nonetheless left by the door rather than the window. I see Hume's point. It was all just talk. The solemn philosophers weren't taking what they said seriously.

But I consider that the matter of defining what is real—that is a serious topic, even a vital topic. And in there somewhere is the other topic, the definition of the authentic human. Because the bombardment of pseudo-realities begins to produce inauthentic humans very quickly, spurious humans—as fake as the data pressing at them from all sides. My two topics are really one topic; they unite at this point. Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans. It is

just a very large version of Disneyland. You can have the Pirate Ride or the Lincoln Simulacrum or Mr. Toad's Wild Ride—you can have all of them, but none is true.

In my writing I got so interested in fakes that I finally came up with the concept of fake fakes. For example, in Disneyland there are fake birds worked by electric motors which emit caws and shrieks as you pass by them. Suppose some night all of us sneaked into the park with real birds and substituted them for the artificial ones. Imagine the horror the Disneyland officials would feel when they discovered the cruel hoax. Real birds! And perhaps someday even real hippos and lions. Consternation. The park being cunningly transmuted from the unreal to the real, by sinister forces. For instance, suppose the Matterhorn turned into a genuine snow-covered mountain? What if the entire place, by a miracle of God's power and wisdom, was changed, in a moment, in the blink of an eye, into something incorruptible? They would have to close down.

In Plato's *Timaeus*, God does not create the universe, as does the Christian God; He simply finds it one day. It is in a state of total chaos. God sets to work to transform the chaos into order. That idea appeals to me, and I have adapted it to fit my own intellectual needs: What if our universe started out as not quite real, a sort of illusion, as the Hindu religion teaches, and God, out of love and kindness for us, is slowly transmuted it, slowly and secretly, into something real?

We would not be aware of this transformation, since we were not aware that our world was an illusion in the first place. This technically is a Gnostic idea. Gnosticism is a religion which embraced Jews, Christians, and pagans for several centuries. I have been accused of holding Gnostic ideas. I guess I do. At one time I would have been burned. But some of their ideas intrigue me. One time, when I was researching Gnosticism in the *Britannica*, I came across mention of a Gnostic codex called *The Unreal God and the Aspects of His Nonexistent Universe*, an idea which reduced me to helpless laughter. What kind of person would write about something that he knows doesn't exist, and how can something that doesn't exist have aspects? But then I realized that I'd been writing about these matters for over twenty-five years. I guess there is a lot of latitude in what you can say when writing about a topic that does not exist. A friend of mine once published a book called *Snakes of Hawaii*. A number of libraries wrote him ordering copies. Well, there are no snakes in Hawaii. All the pages of his book were blank.

Of course, in science fiction no pretense is made that the worlds described are real. This is why we call it fiction. The reader is warned in advance not to believe what he is about to read. Equally true, the visitors to Disneyland understand that Mr. Toad does not really exist and that the pirates are animated by motors and servo-assist mechanisms, relays and electronic circuits. So no deception is taking place.

And yet the strange thing is, in some way, some real way, much of what appears under the title "science fiction" is true. It may not be literally true, I suppose. We have not really been invaded by creatures from another star system, as depicted in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The producers of that film never intended for us to believe it. Or did they?

And, more important, if they did intend to state this, is it actually true? That is the issue: not, Does the author or producer believe it, but—Is it true? Because, quite by accident, in the pursuit of a good yarn, a science fiction author or producer or scriptwriter might stumble onto the truth . . . and only later on realize it.

The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words. George Orwell made this clear in his novel *1984*. But another way to control the minds of people is to control their perceptions. If you can get them to see the world as you do, they will think as you do. Comprehension follows perception. How do you get them to see the reality you see? After all, it is

only one reality out of many. Images are a basic constituent: pictures. This is why the power of TV to influence young minds is so staggeringly vast. Words and pictures are synchronized. The possibility of total control of the viewer exists, especially the young viewer. TV viewing is a kind of sleep-learning. An EEG of a person watching TV shows that after about half an hour the brain decides that nothing is happening, and it goes into a hypnoidal twilight state, emitting alpha waves. This is because there is such little eye motion. In addition, much of the information is graphic and therefore passes into the right hemisphere of the brain, rather than being processed by the left, where the conscious personality is located. Recent experiments indicate that much of what we see on the TV screen is received on a subliminal basis. We only imagine that we consciously see what is there. The bulk of the messages elude our attention; literally, after a few hours of TV watching, we do not know what we have seen. Our memories are spurious, like our memories of dreams; the blank spaces are filled in retrospectively. And falsified. We have participated unknowingly in the creation of a spurious reality, and then we have obligingly fed it to ourselves. We have colluded in our own doom.

And—and I say this as a professional fiction writer—the producers, scriptwriters, and directors who create these video/audio worlds do not know how much of their content is true. In other words, they are victims of their own product, along with us. Speaking for myself, I do not know how much of my writing is true, or which parts (if any) are true. This is a potentially lethal situation. We have fiction mimicking truth, and truth mimicking fiction. We have a dangerous overlap, a dangerous blur. And in all probability it is not deliberate. In fact, that is part of the problem. You cannot legislate an author into correctly labeling his product, like a can of pudding whose ingredients are listed on the label. . . you cannot compel him to declare what part is true and what isn't if he himself does not know.

It is an eerie experience to write something into a novel, believing it is pure fiction, and to learn later on—perhaps years later—that it is true. I would like to give you an example. It is something that I do not understand. Perhaps you can come up with a theory. I can't.

In 1970 I wrote a novel called *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. One of the characters is a nineteen-year-old girl named Kathy. Her husband's name is Jack. Kathy appears to work for the criminal underground, but later, as we read deeper into the novel, we discover that actually she is working for the police. She has a relationship going on with a police inspector. The character is pure fiction. Or at least I thought it was.

Anyhow, on Christmas Day of 1970, I met a girl named Kathy—this was after I had finished the novel, you understand. She was nineteen years old. Her boyfriend was named Jack. I soon learned that Kathy was a drug dealer. I spent months trying to get her to give up dealing drugs; I kept warning her again and again that she would get caught. Then, one evening as we were entering a restaurant together, Kathy stopped short and said, "I can't go in." Seated in the restaurant was a police inspector whom I knew. "I have to tell you the truth," Kathy said. "I have a relationship with him."

Certainly, these are odd coincidences. Perhaps I have precognition. But the mystery becomes even more perplexing; the next stage totally baffles me. It has for four years.

In 1974 the novel was published by Doubleday. One afternoon I was talking to my priest—I am an Episcopalian—and I happened to mention to him an important scene near the end of the novel in which the character Felix Buckman meets a black stranger at an all-night gas station, and they begin to talk. As I described the scene in more and more detail, my priest became progressively more agitated. At last he said, "That is a scene from the Book of Acts, from the Bible! In Acts, the person who meets the black man on the road is named Philip—your name." Father Rasch was so upset by



the resemblance that he could not even locate the scene in his Bible. "Read Acts," he instructed me. "And you'll agree. It's the same down to specific details."

I went home and read the scene in Acts. Yes, Father Rasch was right; the scene in my novel was an obvious retelling of the scene in Acts . . . and I had never read Acts, I must admit. But again the puzzle became deeper. In Acts, the high Roman official who arrests and interrogates Saint Paul is named Felix—the same name as my character. And my character Felix Buckman is a high-ranking police general; in fact, in my novel he holds the same office as Felix in the Book of Acts: the final authority. There is a conversation in my novel which very closely resembles a conversation between Felix and Paul.

Well, I decided to try for any further resemblances. The main character in my novel is named Jason. I got an index to the Bible and looked to see if anyone named Jason appears anywhere in the Bible. I couldn't remember any. Well, a man named Jason appears once and only once in the Bible. It is in the Book of Acts. And, as if to plague me further with coincidences, in my novel Jason is fleeing from the authorities and takes refuge in a person's house, and in Acts the man named Jason shelters a fugitive from the law in his house—an exact inversion of the situation in my novel, as if the mysterious Spirit responsible for all this was having a sort of laugh about the whole thing.

Felix, Jason, and the meeting on the road with the black man who is a complete stranger. In Acts, the disciple Philip baptizes the black man, who then goes away rejoicing. In my novel, Felix Buckman reaches out to the black stranger for emotional support, because Felix Buckman's sister has just died and he is falling apart psychologically. The black man stirs up Buckman's spirits and although Buckman does not go away rejoicing, at least his tears have stopped falling. He had been flying home, weeping over the death of his sister, and had to reach out to someone, anyone, even a total stranger. It is an encounter between two strangers on the road which changes the life of one of them—both in my novel and in Acts. And one final quirk by the mysterious Spirit at work: the name Felix is the Latin word for "happy." Which I did not know when I wrote the novel.

A careful study of my novel shows that for reasons which I cannot even begin to explain I had managed to retell several of the basic incidents from a particular book of the Bible, and even had the right names. What could explain this? That was four years ago that I discovered all this. For four years I have tried to come up with a theory and I have not. I doubt if I ever will.

But the mystery had not ended there, as I had imagined. Two months ago I was walking up to the mailbox late at night to mail off a letter, and also to enjoy the sight of Saint Joseph's Church, which sits opposite my apartment building. I noticed a man loitering suspiciously by a parked car. It looked as if he was attempting to steal the car, or maybe something from it; as I returned from the mailbox, the man hid behind a tree. On impulse I walked up to him and asked, "Is anything the matter?"

"I'm out of gas," the man said. "And I have no money."

Incredibly, because I have never done this before, I got out my wallet, took all the money from it, and handed the money to him. He then shook hands with me and asked where I lived, so that he could later pay the money back. I returned to my apartment, and then I realized that the money would do him no good, since there was no gas station within walking distance. So I returned, in my car. The man had a metal gas can in the trunk of his car, and, together, we drove in my car to an all-night gas station. Soon we were standing there, two strangers, as the pump jockey filled the metal gas can. Suddenly I realized that this was the scene in my novel—the novel written eight years before. The all-night gas station was exactly as I had envisioned it in my inner eye when I wrote the scene—the glaring white light, the pump jockey—and now I saw something which I had not seen before. The stranger who I was helping was black.

We drove back to his stalled car with the gas, shook hands, and then I returned to my apartment building. I never saw him again. He could not pay me back because I had not told him which of the many apartments was mine or what my name was. I was terribly shaken up by this experience. I had literally lived out a scene completely as it had appeared in my novel. Which is to say, I had lived out a sort of replica of the scene in Acts where Philip encounters the black man on the road.

What could explain all this?

The answer I have come up with may not be correct, but it is the only answer I have. It has to do with time. My theory is this: In some certain important sense, time is not real. Or perhaps it is real, but not as we experience it to be or imagine it to be. I had the acute, overwhelming certitude (and still have) that despite all the change that we see, a specific permanent landscape underlies the world of change: and that this invisible underlying landscape is that of the Bible; it, specifically, is the period immediately following the death and resurrection of Christ; it is, in other words, the time period of the Book of Acts.

Parmenides would be proud of me. I have gazed at a constantly changing world and declared that underneath it lies the eternal, the unchanging, the absolutely real. But how has this come about? If the real time is circa A.D. 50, then why do we see A.D. 1978? And if we are really living in the Roman Empire, somewhere in Syria, why do we see the United States?

During the Middle Ages, a curious theory arose, which I will now present to you for what it is worth. It is the theory that the Evil One—Satan—is the "Ape of God." That he creates spurious imitations of creation, of God's authentic creation, and then interpolates them for that authentic creation. Does this odd theory help explain my experience? Are we to believe that we are occluded, that we are deceived, that it is not 1978 but A.D. 50 ... and Satan has spun a counterfeit reality to wither our faith in the return of Christ?

I can just picture myself being examined by a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist says, "What year is it?" And I reply, "A.D. 50." The psychiatrist blinks and then asks, "And where are you?" I reply, "In Judaea." "Where the heck is that?" the psychiatrist asks. "It's part of the Roman Empire," I would have to answer. "Do you know who is President?" the psychiatrist would ask, and I would answer, "The Procurator Felix." "You're pretty sure about this?" the psychiatrist would ask, meanwhile giving a covert signal to two very large psych techs. "Yep," I'd replay. "Unless Felix has stepped down and been replaced by the Procurator Festus. You see, Saint Paul was held by Felix for—" "Who told you all this?" the psychiatrist would break in, irritably, and I would reply, "The Holy Spirit." And after that I'd be in the rubber room, inside gazing out, and knowing exactly how come I was there.

Everything in that conversation would be true, in a sense, although palpably not true in another. I know perfectly well that the date is 1978 and that Jimmy Carter is President and that I live in Santa Ana, California, in the United States. I even know how to get from my apartment to Disneyland, a fact I can't seem to forget. And surely no Disneyland existed back at the time of Saint Paul.

So, if I force myself to be very rational and reasonable, and all those other good things, I must admit that the existence of Disneyland (which I know is real) proves that we are not living in Judaea in A.D. 50. The idea of Saint Paul whirling around in the giant teacups while composing First Corinthians, as Paris TV films him with a telephoto lens—that just can't be. Saint Paul would never go near Disneyland. Only children, tourists, and visiting Soviet high officials ever go to Disneyland. Saints do not.

But somehow that biblical material snared my unconscious and crept into my novel, and equally true, for some reason in 1978 I relived a scene which I described back in 1970. What I am saying is this: There is internal evidence in at least one of my novels that another reality, an unchanging one, exactly as Parmenides and Plato suspected, underlies the visible phenomenal world of change, and

somehow, in some way, perhaps to our surprise, we can cut through to it. Or rather, a mysterious Spirit can put us in touch with it, if it wishes us to see this permanent other landscape. Time passes, thousands of years pass, but at the same instant that we see this contemporary world, the ancient world, the world of the Bible, is concealed beneath it, still there and still real. Eternally so.

Shall I go for broke and tell you the rest of this peculiar story? I'll do so, having gone this far already. My novel *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* was released by Doubleday in February of 1974. The week after it was released, I had two impacted wisdom teeth removed, under sodium pentathol. Later that day I found myself in intense pain. My wife phoned the oral surgeon and he phoned a pharmacy. Half an hour later there was a knock at my door: the delivery person from the pharmacy with the pain medication. Although I was bleeding and sick and weak, I felt the need to answer the knock on the door myself. When I opened the door, I found myself facing a young woman—who wore a shining gold necklace in the center of which was a gleaming gold fish. For some reason I was hypnotized by the gleaming golden fish; I forgot my pain, forgot the medication, forgot why the girl was there. I just kept staring at the fish sign.

"What does that mean?" I asked her.

The girl touched the glimmering golden fish with her hand and said, "This is a sign worn by the early Christians." She then gave me the package of medication.

In that instant, as I stared at the gleaming fish sign and heard her words, I suddenly experienced what I later learned is called anamnesis—a Greek word meaning, literally, "loss of forgetfulness." I remembered who I was and where I was. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, it all came back to me. And not only could I remember it but I could see it. The girl was a secret Christian and so was I. We lived in fear of detection by the Romans. We had to communicate with cryptic signs. She had just told me all this, and it was true.

For a short time, as hard as this is to believe or explain, I saw fading into view the black prisonlike contours of hateful Rome. But, of much more importance, I remembered Jesus, who had just recently been with us, and had gone temporarily away, and would very soon return. My emotion was one of joy. We were secretly preparing to welcome Him back. It would not be long. And the Romans did not know. They thought He was dead, forever dead. That was our great secret, our joyous knowledge. Despite all appearances, Christ was going to return, and our delight and anticipation was boundless.

Isn't it odd that this strange event, this recovery of lost memory, occurred only a week after *Flow My Tears* was released? And it is *Flow My Tears* which contains the replication of people and events from the Book of Acts, which is set at the precise moment in time—just after Jesus' death and resurrection—that I remembered, by means of the golden fish sign, as having just taken place?

If you were me, and had this happen to you, I'm sure you wouldn't be able to leave it alone. You would seek a theory that would account for it. For over four years now, I have been trying one theory after another: circular time, frozen time, timeless time, what is called "sacred" as contrasted to "mundane" time ... I can't count the theories I've tried out. One constant has prevailed, though, throughout all the theories. There must indeed be a mysterious Holy Spirit which has an exact and intimate relation to Christ, which can indwell in human minds, guide and inform them, and even express itself through those humans, even without their awareness.

In the writing of *Flow My Tears*, back in 1970, there was one unusual event which I realized at the time was not ordinary, was not a part of the regular writing process. I had a dream one night, an especially vivid dream. And when I awoke I found myself under the compulsion—the absolute necessity—of getting the dream into the text of the novel precisely as I had dreamed it. In getting the dream exactly right, I had to do eleven drafts of the final part of the manuscript, until I was satisfied.

I will now quote from the novel, as it appeared in the final, published form. See if this dream reminds you of anything.

The countryside, brown and dry, in summer, where he had lived as a child. He rode a horse, and approaching him on his left a squad of horses nearing slowly. On the horses rode men in shining robes, each a different color; each wore a pointed helmet that sparkled in the sunlight. The slow, solemn knights passed him and as they traveled by he made out the face of one: an ancient marble face, a terribly old man with rippling cascades of white beard. What a strong nose he had. What noble features. So tired, so serious, so far beyond ordinary men. Evidently he was a king.

Felix Buckman let them pass; he did not speak to them and they said nothing to him. Together, they all moved toward the house from which he had come. A man had sealed himself up inside the house, a man alone, Jason Taverner, in the silence and darkness, without windows, by himself from now on into eternity. Sitting, merely existing, inert. Felix Buckman continued on, out into the open countryside. And then he heard from behind him one dreadful single shriek. They had killed Taverner, and seeing them enter, sensing them in the shadows around him, knowing what they intended to do with him, Taverner had shrieked.

Within himself Felix Buckman felt absolute and utter desolate grief. But in the dream he did not go back nor look back. There was nothing that could be done. No one could have stopped the posse of varicolored men in robes; they could not have been said no to. Anyhow, it was over. Taverner was dead.

This passage probably does not suggest any particular thing to you, except a law posse exacting judgment on someone either guilty or considered guilty. It is not clear whether Taverner has in fact committed some crime or is merely believed to have committed some crime. I had the impression that he was guilty, but that it was a tragedy that he had to be killed, a terribly sad tragedy. In the novel, this dream causes Felix Buckman to begin to cry, and therefore he seeks out the black man at the all-night gas station.

Months after the novel was published, I found the section in the Bible to which this dream refers. It is Daniel, 7:9:

Thrones were set in place and one ancient in years took his seat. His robe was white as snow and the hair of his head like cleanest wool. Flames of fire were his throne and its wheels blazing fire; a flowing river of fire streamed out before him. Thousands upon thousands served him and myriads upon myriads attended his presence. The court sat, and the books were opened.

This white-haired old man appears again in Revelation, 1:13: I saw . . . one like a son of man, robed down to his feet, with a golden girdle round his breast. The hair of his head was white as snow-white wool, and his eyes flamed like fire; his feet gleamed like burnished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.

And then 1:17:

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and I am the living one, for I was dead and now I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of Death and Death's domain. Write down therefore what you have seen, what is now, and what will be hereafter."

And, like John of Patmos, I faithfully wrote down what I saw and put it in my novel. And it was true, although at the time I did not know who was meant by this description:

... he made out the face of one: an ancient marble face, a terribly old man with rippling cascades of white beard. What a strong nose he had. What noble features. So tired, so serious, so far beyond ordinary men. Evidently he was a king.

Indeed he was a king. He is Christ Himself returned, to pass judgment. And this is what he does in my novel: He passes judgment on the man sealed up in darkness. The man sealed up in darkness must be the Prince of Evil, the Force of Darkness. Call it whatever you wish, its time had come. It was judged and condemned. Buckman could weep at the sadness of it, but he that the verdict could not be disputed. And so he rode on, without turning or looking back, hearing only the shriek of fear and defeat: the cry of evil destroyed.

So my novel contained material from other parts of the Bible, as well as the sections from Acts. Deciphered, my novel tells a quite different story from the surface story (which we need not go into here). The real" story is simply this: the return of Christ, now king rather than suffering servant. Judge rather than victim of unfair judgment. Everything is reversed. The CORE message of my novel, without my knowing it, was a warning to the powerful: You will shortly be judged and condemned. Who, specifically, did it refer to? Well, I can't really say; or rather would prefer not to say. I have no certain knowledge, only an intuition. And that is not enough to go on, so I will keep my thoughts to myself. But you might ask yourselves what political events took place in this country between February 1974 and August 1974. Ask yourself who was judged and condemned, and fell like a flaming star into ruin and disgrace. The most powerful man in the world And I feel as sorry for him now as I did when I dreamed that dream. "That poor poor man," I said once to my wife, with tears in my eyes. "Shut up in the darkness, playing the piano in the night to himself, alone and afraid, knowing what's to come." For God's sake, let us forgive him, finally. But what was done to him and all his men—"all the President's men," as it's put—had to be done. But it is over, and he should be let out into the sunlight again; no creature, no person, should be shut up in darkness forever, in fear. It is not humane.

Just about the time that the Supreme Court was ruling that the Nixon tapes had to be turned over to the special prosecutor, I was eating at a Chinese restaurant in Yorba Linda, the town in California where Nixon went to school—where he grew up, worked at a grocery store, where there is a park named after him, and of course the Nixon house, simple clapboard and all that. In my fortune cookie, I got the following fortune:

DEEDS DONE IN SECRET HAVE A WAY OF BECOMING FOUND OUT.

I mailed the slip of paper to the White House, mentioning that the Chinese restaurant was located within a mile of Nixon's original house, and I said, "I think a mistake has been made; by accident I got Mr. Nixon's fortune. Does he have mine?" The White House did not answer.

Well, as I said earlier, an author of a work of supposed fiction might write the truth and not know it. To quote Xenophanes, another pre-Socratic: "Even if a man should chance to speak the most complete truth, yet he himself does not know it; all things are wrapped in appearances" (Fragment 34). And Heraclitus added to this: "The nature of things is in the habit of concealing itself" (Fragment 54). W. S. Gilbert, of Gilbert and Sullivan, put it: "Things are seldom what they seem; skim milk masquerades as cream." The point of all this is that we cannot trust our senses and probably not even our a priori reasoning. As to our senses, I understand that people who have been blind from birth and are suddenly given sight are amazed to discover that objects appear to get smaller and smaller as they get farther away. Logically, there is no reason for this. We, of course, have come to accept this, because we are used to it. We see objects get smaller, but we know that in actuality they remain the

same size. So even the common everyday pragmatic person utilizes a certain amount of sophisticated discounting of what his eyes and ears tell him.

Little of what Heraclitus wrote has survived, and what we do have is obscure, but Fragment 54 is lucid and important: "Latent structure is master of obvious structure." This means that Heraclitus believed that a veil lay over the true landscape. He also may have suspected that time was somehow not what it seemed, because in Fragment 52 he said: "Time is a child at play, playing draughts; a child's is the kingdom." This is indeed cryptic. But he also said, in Fragment 18: "If one does not expect it, one will not find out the unexpected; it is not to be tracked down and no path leads us to it." Edward Hussey, in his scholarly book *The Pre-Socratics*, says:

If Heraclitus is to be so insistent on the lack of understanding shown by most men, it would seem only reasonable that he should offer further instructions for penetrating to the truth. The talk of riddle-guessing suggests that some kind of revelation, beyond human control, is necessary . . . The true wisdom, as has been seen, is closely associated with God, which suggests further that in advancing wisdom a man becomes like, or a part of, God.

This quote is not from a religious book or a book on theology; it is an analysis of the earliest philosophers by a Lecturer in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Oxford. Hussey makes it clear that to these early philosophers there was no distinction between philosophy and religion. The first great quantum leap in Greek theology was by Xenophanes of Colophon, born in the mid-sixth century B.C. Xenophanes, without resorting to any authority except that of his own mind, says:

One god there is, in no way like mortal creatures either in bodily form or in the thought of his mind. The whole of him sees, the whole of him thinks, the whole of him hears. He stays always motionless in the same place; it is not fitting that he should move about now this way, now that.

This is a subtle and advanced concept of God, evidently without precedent among the Greek thinkers. "The arguments of Parmenides seemed to show that all reality must indeed be a mind," Hussey writes, "or an object of thought in a mind." Regarding Heraclitus specifically, he says, "In Heraclitus it is difficult to tell how far the designs in God's mind are distinguished from the execution in the world, or indeed how far God's mind is distinguished from the world." The further leap by Anaxagoras has always fascinated me. "Anaxagoras had been driven to a theory of the micro-structure of matter which made it, to some extent, mysterious to human reason." Anaxagoras believed that everything was determined by Mind. These were not childish thinkers, nor primitives. They debated serious issues and studied one another's views with deft insight. It was not until the time of Aristotle that their views got reduced to what we can neatly—but wrongly—classify as crude. The summation of much pre-Socratic theology and philosophy can be stated as follows: The kosmos is not as it appears to be, and what it probably is, at its deepest level, is exactly that which the human being is at his deepest level—call it mind or soul, it is something unitary which lives and thinks, and only appears to be plural and material. Much of this view reaches us through the Logos doctrine regarding Christ. The Logos was both that which thought, and the thing which it thought: thinker and thought together. The universe, then, is thinker and thought, and since we are part of it, we as humans are, in the final analysis, thoughts of and thinkers of those thoughts.

Thus if God thinks about Rome circa A.D. 50, then Rome circa A.D. 50 is. The universe is not a windup clock and God the hand that winds it. The universe is not a battery-powered watch and God the battery. Spinoza believed that the universe is the body of God extensive in space. But long before Spinoza—two thousand years before him—Xenophanes had said, "Effortlessly, he wields all things by the thought of his mind" (Fragment 25).

If any of you have read my novel *Ubik*, you know that the mysterious entity or mind or force called Ubik starts out as a series of cheap and vulgar commercials and winds up saying:

I am Ubik. Before the universe was I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and the places they inhabit; I move them here, I put them there. They go as I say, they do as I tell them. I am the word and my name is never spoken, the name which no one knows. I am called Ubik but that is not my name. I am. I shall always be.

It is obvious from this who and what Ubik is; it specifically says that it is the word, which is to say, the Logos. In the German translation, there is one of the most wonderful lapses of correct understanding that I have ever come across; God help us if the man who translated my novel *Ubik* into German were to do a translation from the koine Greek into German of the New Testament. He did all right until he got to the sentence "I am the word." That puzzled him. What can the author mean by that? he must have asked himself, obviously never having come across the Logos doctrine. So he did as good a job of translation as possible. In the German edition, the Absolute Entity which made the suns, made the worlds, created the lives and the places they inhabit, says of itself:

I am the brand name.

Had he translated the Gospel according to Saint John, I suppose it would have come out as:

When all things began, the brand name already was. The brand name dwelt with God, and what God was, the brand name was.

It would seem that I not only bring you greetings from Disneyland but from Mortimer Snerd. Such is the fate of an author who hoped to include theological themes in his writing. "The brand name, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him." So it goes with noble ambitions. Let's hope God has a sense of humor.

Or should I say, Let's hope the brand name has a sense of humor.

As I said to you earlier, my two preoccupations in my writing are "What is reality?" and "What is the authentic human?" I'm sure you can see by now that I have not been able to answer the first question. I have an abiding intuition that somehow the world of the Bible is a literally real but veiled landscape, never changing, hidden from our sight, but available to us by revelation. That is all I can come up with—a mixture of mystical experience, reasoning, and faith. I would like to say something about the traits of the authentic human, though; in this quest I have had more plausible answers.

The authentic human being is one of us who instinctively knows what he should not do, and, in addition, he will balk at doing it. He will refuse to do it, even if this brings down dread consequences to him and to those whom he loves. This, to me, is the ultimately heroic trait of ordinary people; they say no to the tyrant and they calmly take the consequences of this resistance. Their deeds may be small, and almost always unnoticed, unmarked by history. Their names are not remembered, nor did these authentic humans expect their names to be remembered. I see their authenticity in an odd way: not in their willingness to perform great heroic deeds but in their quiet refusals. In essence, they cannot be compelled to be what they are not.

The power of spurious realities battering at us today —these deliberately manufactured fakes never penetrate to the heart of true human beings. I watch the children watching TV and at first I am afraid of what they are being taught, and then I realize, they can't be corrupted or destroyed. They watch, they listen, they understand, and, then, where and when it is necessary, they reject. There is something enormously powerful in a child's ability to withstand the fraudulent. A child has the clearest eye, the steadiest hand. The hucksters, the promoters, are appealing for the allegiance of these small people in vain. True, the cereal companies may be able to market huge quantities of junk breakfasts; the hamburger and hot dog chains may sell endless numbers of unreal fast-food items to the children, but the deep heart beats firmly, unreached and unreasoned with. A child of today can detect a lie

quicker than the wisest adult of two decades ago. When I want to know what is true, I ask my children. They do not ask me; I turn to them.

One day while my son Christopher, who is four, was playing in front of me and his mother, we two adults began discussing the figure of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Christopher turned toward us for an instant and said, "I am a fisherman. I fish for fish." He was playing with a metal lantern which someone had given me, which I had never used . . . and suddenly I realized that the lantern was shaped like a fish. I wonder what thoughts were being placed in my little boy's soul at that moment—and not placed there by cereal merchants or candy peddlers. "I am a fisherman. I fish for fish." Christopher, at four, had found the sign I did not find until I was forty-five years old.

Time is speeding up. And to what end? Maybe we were told that two thousand years ago. Or maybe it wasn't really that long ago; maybe it is a delusion that so much time has passed. Maybe it was a week ago, or even earlier today. Perhaps time is not only speeding up; perhaps, in addition, it is going to end.

And if it does, the rides at Disneyland are never going to be the same again. Because when time ends, the birds and hippos and lions and deer at Disneyland will no longer be simulations, and, for the first time, a real bird will sing.

Thank you.



## THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF THE BROWN OXFORD

I have something to show you," Doc Labyrinth said. From his coat pocket he gravely drew forth a matchbox. He held the matchbox tightly, his eyes fixed on it. "You're about to see the most momentous thing in all modern science. The world will shake and shudder."

"Let me see," I said. It was late, past midnight. Outside my house rain was falling on the deserted streets. I watched Doc Labyrinth as he carefully pushed the matchbox open with his thumb, just a crack. I leaned over to see.

There was a brass button in the matchbox. It was alone, except for a bit of dried grass and what looked like a bread crumb.

"Buttons have already been invented," I said. "I don't see much to this." I reached out my hand to touch the button, but Labyrinth jerked the box away, frowning furiously.

"This isn't just a button," he said. Looking down at the button, he said, "Go on! Go on!" He nudged the button with his finger. "Go on!"

I watched with curiosity. "Labyrinth, I wish you'd explain. You come in here in the middle of the night, show me a button in a matchbox, and—"

Labyrinth settled back against the couch, sagging with defeat. He closed the matchbox and resignedly put it back in his pocket. "It's no use pretending," he said. "I've failed. The button is dead. There's no hope."

"Is that so unusual? What did you expect?"

"Bring me something." Labyrinth gazed hopelessly around the room. "Bring me—bring me wine."

I

"All right, Doc," I said, getting up. "But you know what wine does to people." I went into the kitchen and poured two glasses of sherry. I brought them back and gave one to him. We sipped for a time. "I wish you'd let me in on this."

Doc put his glass down, nodding absently. He crossed his legs and took out his pipe. After he had lit the pipe, he carefully looked once more into the matchbox. He sighed and put it away again.

"No use," he said. "The Animator will never work. the Principle itself is wrong. I refer to the Principle of Sufficient Irritation, of course."

"And what is that?"

"The Principle came to me this way. One day I was sitting on a rock at the beach. The sun was shining and it was very hot. I was perspiring and quite uncomfortable. All at once a pebble next to me got up and crawled off. The heat of the sun had annoyed it."

"Really? A pebble?"

"At once the realization of the Principle of Sufficient Irritation came to me. Here was the origin of life. Eons ago, in the remote past, a bit of inanimate matter had become so irritated by something that it crawled away, moved by indignation. Here was my life work: to discover the perfect irritant, annoying enough to bring inanimate matter to life, and to incorporate it into a workable machine. The machine, which is at present in the backseat of my car, is called the Animator. But it doesn't work."

We were silent for a time. I felt my eyes slowly begin to close. "Say, Doc," I began, "isn't it time we—"

Doc Labyrinth leaped abruptly to his feet. "You're right," he said. "It's time for me to go. I'll leave."

He headed for the door. I caught up with him. "About the machine," I said. "Don't give up hope. Maybe you'll get it to work some other time."

"The machine?" He frowned. "Oh, the Animator. Well, I'll tell you what. I'll sell it to you for five dollars."

I gaped. There was something so forlorn about him that I didn't feel like laughing. "For how much?" I said.

"I'll bring it inside the house. Wait here." He went outside, down the steps and up the dark sidewalk. I heard him open the car door, and then grunt and mutter.

"Hold on," I said. I hurried after him. He was struggling with a bulky square box, trying to get it out of the car. I caught hold of one side, and together we lugged it into the house. We set it down on the dining table.

"So this is the Animator," I said. "It looks like a Dutch oven."

"It is, or it was. The Animator throws out a heat beam as an irritant. But I'm through with it forever."

I took out my wallet. "All right. If you want to sell it, I might as well be the one who buys it." I gave him the money and he took it. He showed me where to put in the inanimate matter, how to adjust the dials and meters, and then, without any warning, he put on his hat and left.

I was alone, with my new Animator. While I was looking at it, my wife came downstairs in her bathrobe.

"What's going on?" she said. "Look at you, your shoes are soaked. Were you outside in the gutter?"

"Not quite. Look at this oven. I just paid five dollars for it. It animates things."

Joan stared down at my shoes. "It's one o'clock in the morning. You put your shoes in the oven and come to bed."

"But you don't realize—"

"Get those shoes in the oven," Joan said, going back upstairs again. "Do you hear me?"

"All right," I said.

It was at breakfast, while I was sitting staring moodily down at a plate of cold eggs and bacon, that he came back. The doorbell commenced to ring furiously.

"Who can that be?" Joan said. I got up and went down the hall, into the living room. I opened the door.

"Labyrinth!" I said. His face were dark circles under his eyes.

"Here's your five dollars," he said. "I want my Animator back."

I was dazed. "All right, Doc. Come on in and I'll get it."

He came inside and stood, tapping his foot. I went over and got the Animator. It was still warm. Labyrinth j watched me carrying it toward him. "Set it down," he said. "I want to make sure it's all right."

I put it on the table and the doc went over it lovingly, carefully, opening the little door and peering inside. "There's a shoe in it," he said.

"There should be two shoes," I said, suddenly remembering last night. "My God, I put my shoes in it."

"Both of them? There's only one now."

Joan came from the kitchen. "Hello, Doctor," she said. "What brings you out so early?"

Labyrinth and I were staring at each other. "Only one?" I said. I bent down to look. Inside was a single muddy shoe, quite dry now after its night in Labyrinth's Animator. A single shoe—but I had put two in. Where was the other?

I turned around, but the expression on Joan's face made me forget what I was going to say. She was staring in horror at the floor, her mouth open.

Something small and brown was moving, sliding toward the couch. It went under disappeared. I had seen only a momentary flash of motion, but was.

"My God," Labyrinth said. "Here, take the five dollars." He pushed the bill into my hands. "I really want it back now!"

"Take it easy," I said. "Give me a hand. We have to catch the damn thing before it gets outdoors."

Labyrinth went over and shut the door to the dining room. "It went under the couch." He squatted down and peered under. "I think I see it. Do you have a stick or something?"

"Let me out of here," Joan said. "I don't want to have anything to do with this."

"You can't leave," I said. I yanked down a curtain rod from the window and pulled the curtain from it. "We can use this." I joined Labyrinth on the floor. "I'll get it out, but you'll have to help me catch it. If we don't work fast, we'll never see it again."

I nudged the shoe with the end of the rod. The shoe retreated, squeezing itself back toward the wall. I could see it, a small mound of brown, huddled and silent, like some wild animal at bay, escaped from its cage. It gave me an odd feeling.

"I wonder what we can do with it?" I murmured. "Where the hell are we going to keep it?"

"Could we put it in the desk drawer?" Joan said, looking around. "I'll take the stationery out."

"There it goes!" Labyrinth scrambled to his feet. The shoe had come out, fast. It went across the room, heading for the big chair. Before it could get underneath, Labyrinth caught hold of one of its laces. The shoe pulled and tugged, struggling to get free, but the old doc had a firm hold of it.

Together we got the shoe into the desk and closed the drawer. We breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's that," Labyrinth said. He grinned foolishly at us. "Do you see what this means? We've done it, we've really done it! The Animator worked. But I wonder why it didn't work with the button."

"The button was brass," I said. "And the shoe was hide and animal glue. A natural. And it was wet."

We looked toward the drawer. "In that desk," Labyrinth said, "is the most momentous thing in modern science."

"The world will shake and shudder," I finished. "I know. Well, you can consider it yours." I took hold of Joan's hand. "I give you the shoe, along with your Animator."

"Fine." Labyrinth nodded. "Keep watch here, don't let it get away." He went to the front door. "I must get the proper people, men who will—"

"Can't you take it with you?" Joan said nervously.

Labyrinth paused at the door. "You must watch over it. It is proof, proof the Animator works. The Principle of Sufficient Irritation." He hurried down the walk.

"Well?" Joan said. "What now? Are you really going to stay here and watch over it?"

I looked at my watch. "I have to get to work."

"Well, I'm not going to watch it. If you leave, I'm leaving with you. I won't stay here."

"It should be all right in the drawer," I said. "I guess we could leave it for a while."

"I'll visit my family. I'll meet you downtown this evening and we can come back home together."

"Are you really that afraid of it?"

"I don't like it. There's something about it."

"It's only an old shoe." !

Joan smiled thinly. "Don't kid me," she said. "There never was another shoe like this."

I met her downtown, after work that evening, and we had dinner. We drove home, and I parked the car in the driveway. We walked slowly up the walk.

On the porch Joan paused. "Do we really have to go inside? Can't we go to a movie or something?"

"We have to go in. I'm anxious to see how it is. I wonder what we'll have to feed it." I unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Something rushed past me, flying down the walk. It disappeared into the bushes.

"What was that?" Joan whispered, stricken.

"I can guess." I hurried to the desk. Sure enough, the drawer was standing open. The shoe had kicked its way out. "Well, that's that," I said. "I wonder what we're going to tell Doc?"

"Maybe you could catch it again," Joan said. She closed the front door after us. "Or animate another. Try working on the other shoe, the one that's left."

I shook my head. "It didn't respond. Creation is funny. Some things don't react. Or maybe we could—"

The telephone rang. We looked at each other. There was something in the ring. "It's him," I said. I picked up the receiver.

"This is Labyrinth," the familiar voice said. "I'll be over early tomorrow. They're coming with me. We'll get photographs and a good write-up. Jenkins from the lab—"

"Look, Doc," I began.

"I'll talk later. I have a thousand things to do. We'll see you tomorrow morning." He clicked off.

"Was it the doctor?" Joan said.

I looked at the empty desk drawer, hanging open. "It was. It was him, all right." I went to the hall closet, taking my coat off. Suddenly I had an eerie feeling. I stopped, turning around. Something was watching me. But what? I saw nothing. It gave me the creeps.

"What the hell," I said. I shrugged it off and hung my coat up. As I started back toward the living room, I thought I saw something move, out of the corner of my eye.

"Damn," I said.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." I looked all around me, but I could not pin anything down. There was the bookcase, the rugs, the pictures on the walls, everything as it always was. But something had moved.

I entered the living room. The Animator was sitting on the table. As I passed it, I felt a surge of warmth. The Animator was still on, and the door was open! I snapped the switch off, and the dial light died. Had we left it on all day? I tried to remember, but I couldn't be sure.

"We've got to find the shoe before nightfall," I said.

We looked, but we found nothing. The two of us went over every inch of the yard, examining each bush, looking under the hedge, even under the house, but without any luck.

When it got too dark to see, we turned on the porch light and worked for a time by it. At last I gave up. I went over and sat down on the porch steps. "It's no use," I said. "Even in the hedge there are a million places. And while we're beating one end, it could slip out the other. We're licked. We might as well face it."

"Maybe it's just as well," Joan said.

I stood up. "We'll leave the front door open tonight. There's a chance it might come back in."

We left it open, but the next morning when we came downstairs the house was silent and empty. I knew at once the shoe was not there. I poked around, examining things. In the kitchen, eggshells were strewn around the garbage pail. The shoe had come in during the night, but after helping itself it had left again.

I closed the front door and we stood silently, looking at each other. "He'll be here any time," I said. "I guess I better call the office and tell them I'll be late."

Joan touched the Animator. "So this is what did it. I wonder if it'll ever happen again."

We went outside and looked around hopefully for a time. Nothing stirred the bushes, nothing at all. "That's that," I said. I looked up. "Here comes a car now."

A dark Plymouth coasted up in front of the house. Two elderly men got out and came up the path toward us, studying us curiously.

"Where is Rupert?" one of them asked.

"Who? You mean Doc Labyrinth? I suppose he'll be along any time."

"Is it inside?" the man said. "I'm Porter, from the university. May I take a peek at it?"

"You'd better wait," I said unhappily. "Wait until the doc is here."

Two more cars pulled up. More old men got out and started up the walk, murmuring and talking together. "Where's the Animator?" one asked me, a codger with bushy whiskers. "Young man, direct us to the exhibit."

"The exhibit is inside," I said. "If you want to see the Animator, go on in."

They crowded inside. Joan and I followed them. They were standing around the table, studying the square box, the Dutch oven, talking excitedly.

"This is it!" Porter said. "The Principle of Sufficient Irritation will go down in—"

"Nonsense," another said. "It's absurd. I want to see this hat, or shoe, or whatever it is."

"You'll see it," Porter said. "Rupert knows what he's doing. You can count on that."

They fell into controversy, quoting authorities and citing dates and places. More cars were arriving, and some of them were press cars.

"Oh God," I said. "This will be the end of him."

"Well, he'll just have to tell them what happened," Joan said. "About its getting away."

"We're going to, not him. We let the thing go."

"I had nothing to do with it. I never liked that pair from the start. Don't you remember, I wanted you to get those oxblood ones?"

I ignored her. More and more old men were assembling on the lawn, standing around talking and discussing. All at once I saw Labyrinth's little blue Ford pull up, and my heart sank. He had come, he was here, and in a minute we would have to tell him.

"I can't face him," I said to Joan. "Let's slip out the back way."

At the sight of Doc Labyrinth, all the scientists began streaming out of the house, surrounding him in a circle. Joan and I looked at each other. The house was deserted, except for the two of us. I closed the front door. Sounds of talk filtered through the windows; Labyrinth was expounding the Principle of Sufficient irritation. In a moment he would come inside and demand his shoe.

"Well, it was his own fault for leaving it," Joan said, she picked up a magazine and thumbed through it.

Doc Labyrinth waved at me through the window. His old face was wreathed with smiles. I waved back halfheartedly. After a while I sat down beside Joan.

Time passed. I stared down at the floor. What was there to do? Nothing but wait, wait for the doc to come triumphantly into the house, surrounded by scientists, learned men, reporters, historians, demanding the proof of his theory, the shoe. On my old shoe rested Labyrinth's whole life, the proof of his Principle, of the Animator, of everything.

And the damn shoe was gone, outside someplace!

"It won't be long now," I said.

We waited, without speaking. After a time I noticed a peculiar thing. The talk outside had died away, I listened, but I heard nothing.

"Well?" I said. "Why don't they come in?"

The silence continued. What was going on? I stood up and went to the front door. I opened it and looked out.

"What's the matter?" Joan said. "Can you see?"

"No," I said. "I don't get it." They were all standing silently, staring down at something, none of them speaking. I was puzzled. I could not make sense out of it. "What's happening?" I said.

"Let's go and look." Joan and I went slowly down the steps, onto the lawn. We pushed through the row of old men and made our way to the front.

"Good lord," I said. "Good lord."

Crossing the lawn was a strange little procession making its way through the grass. Two shoes, my old brown shoe, and just ahead of it, leading the way another shoe, a tiny white high-heeled slipper. I stared at it. I had seen it someplace before.

"That's mine!" Joan cried. Everyone looked at her. "That belongs to me! My party shoes—"

"Not anymore," Labyrinth said. His old face was pale with emotion. "It is beyond us all, forever."

"Amazing," one of the learned men said. "Look at them. Observe the female. Look at what she is doing

The little white shoe was keeping carefully ahead of my old shoe, a few inches away, leading him coyly. As my old shoe approached, she backed away, moving in a half circle. The two shoes stopped for a moment regarding each other. Then, all at once, my old shoe began to hop up and down, first on his heel, then on his toe. Solemnly, with great dignity, the shoe danced around her, until he reached his starting point.

The little white shoe hopped once, and then she began again to move away, slowly, hesitantly, letting my shoe almost catch up to her before she went on.

"This implies a developed sense of mores," an old gentleman said. "Perhaps even a racial unconscious. The shoes are following a rigid pattern of ritual, probably laid down centuries—"

"So that's what it was," I murmured. "While we were away, the shoe got her out of the closet and used the Animator on her. I knew something was watching me that night. She was still in the house."

"That's what he turned on the Animator for," Joan said. She sniffed. "I'm not sure I think much of it."

The two shoes had almost reached the hedge, the white slipper still just beyond the laces of the brown shoe. Labyrinth moved toward them.

"So, gentlemen, you can see that I did not exaggerate. This is the greatest moment in science, the creation of a new race. Perhaps, when mankind has fallen into ruin, society destroyed, this new life-form—"

He started to reach for the shoes, but at that moment the lady shoe disappeared into the hedge, backing into the obscurity of the foliage. With one bound, the brown shoe popped in after her. There was a rustling, then silence.

"I'm going indoors," Joan said, walking away.

"Gentlemen," Labyrinth said, his face a little red, "this is incredible. We are witnessing one of the most profound and far-reaching moments of science."

"Well, almost witnessing," I said.

## EXPLORERS WE

"Golly," Parkhurst gasped, his red face tingling with excitement. "Come here, you guys. Look!"

They crowded around the viewscreen.

"There she is," Barton said. His heart beat strangely. "She sure looks good."

"Damn right she looks good," Leon agreed. He trembled. "Say—I can make out New York."

"The hell you can."

"I can! The gray. By the water."

"That's not even the United States. We're looking at it upside down. That's Siam."

The ship hurtled through space, meteoroid shields shrieking. Below it, the blue-green globe swelled. Clouds drifted around it, hiding the continents and oceans.

"I never expected to see her again," Merriweather said. "I thought sure as hell we were stuck up there." His face twisted. "Mars. That damned red waste. Sun and flies and ruins."

"Barton knows how to repair jets," Captain Stone said. "You can thank him."

"You know what I'm going to do, first thing I'm back?" Parkhurst yelled.

"What?"

"Go to Coney Island."

"Why?"

"People. I want to see people again. Lots of them. Dumb, sweaty, noisy. Ice cream and water. The ocean. Beer bottles, milk cartons, paper napkins—"

"And gals," Vecchi said, eyes shining. "Long time, six months. I'll go with you. We'll sit on the beach and watch the gals."

"I wonder what kind of bathing suits they got now," Barton said.

"Maybe they don't wear any!" Parkhurst cried.

"Hey!" Merriweather shouted. "I'm going to see my wife again." He was suddenly dazed. His voice sank to a whisper. "My wife."

"I got a wife, too," Stone said. He grinned. "But I been married a long time." Then he thought of Pat and Jean. A stabbing ache choked his windpipe. "I bet they have grown."

"Grown?"

"My kids," Stone said huskily.

They looked at each other, six men, ragged, bearded, eyes bright and feverish.

"How long?" Vecchi whispered.

"An hour," Stone said. "We'll be down in an hour."

The ship struck with a crash that threw them on their faces. It leaped and bucked, brake jets screaming, tearing through rocks and soil. It came to rest, nose buried in a hillside.

Silence.

Parkhurst got unsteadily to his feet. He caught hold of the safety rail. Blood dripped down his face from a cut over his eye.

"We're down," he said.

Barton stirred. He groaned, forced himself up on his knees. Parkhurst helped him. "Thanks. Are we . . ."

"We're down. We're back."

The jets were off. The roaring had ceased . . . there only the faint trickle of wall fluids leaking out on te ground.

The ship was a mess. The hull was cracked in three Places. It billowed in, bent and twisted. Papers and ruined instruments were strewn everywhere.

Vecchi and Stone got slowly up. "Everything all right?" Stone muttered, feeling his arm.

"Give me a hand," Leon said. "My damn ankle's twisted or something."

They got him up. Merriweather was unconscious. They revived him and got him to his feet.

"We're down," Parkhurst repeated, as if he couldn't believe it. "This is Earth. We're back—alive!"

"I hope the specimens are all right," Leon said.

"The hell with the specimens!" Vecchi shouted excitedly. He worked the port bolts frantically, unscrewing the heavy hatch lock. "Let's get out and walk around."

"Where are we?" Barton asked Captain Stone.

"South of San Francisco. On the peninsula."

"San Francisco! Hey—we can ride the cable cars!" Parkhurst helped Vecchi unscrew the hatch. "San Francisco. I was through Frisco once. They got a big park. Golden Gate Park. We can go to the funhouse."

The hatch opened, swinging wide. Talk ceased abruptly. The men peered out, blinking in the white-hot sunlight.

A green field stretched down and away from them. Hills rose in the distance, sharp in the crystal air. Along a highway below, a few cars moved, tiny dots, the sun glinting on them. Telephone poles.

"What's that sound?" Stone said, listening intently.

"A train."

It was coming along the distant track, black smoke pouring from its stack. A faint wind moved across the field, stirring the grass. Over to the right lay a town. Houses and trees. A theater marquee. A Standard gas station. Roadside stands. A motel.

"Think anybody saw us?" Leon asked.

"Must have."

"Sure heard us," Parkhurst said. "We made a noise like God's indigestion when we hit."

Vecchi stepped out onto the field. He swayed wildly, arms outstretched. "I'm falling!"

Stone laughed. "You'll get used to it. We've been in space too long. Come on." He leaped down. "Let's start walking."

"Toward the town." Parkhurst fell in beside him. "Maybe they'll give us free eats . . . Hell—champagne!" His chest swelled under his tattered uniform. "Returning heroes. Keys to the town. A parade. Military band. Floats with dames."

"Dames," Leon grunted. "You're obsessed."

"Sure." Parkhurst strode across the field, the others trailing after him. "Hurry up!"

"Look," Stone said to Leon. "Somebody over there. Watching us."

"Kids," Barton said. "A bunch of kids." He laughed excitedly. "Let's go say hello."

They headed toward the kids, wading through the moist grass on the rich earth.

"Must be spring," Leon said. "The air smells like spring." He took a deep breath. "And the grass."

Stone computed. "It's April ninth."

They hurried. The kids stood watching them, silent and unmoving.

"Hey!" Parkhurst shouted. "We're back!"

"What town is this?" Barton shouted.

The kids stared at them, eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" Leon muttered.

"Our beards. We look pretty bad." Stone cupped his hands. "Don't be scared! We're back from Mars. The rocket flight. Two years ago—remember? A year ago last October."

The kids stared, white-faced. Suddenly they turned and fled. They ran frantically toward the town.



The six men watched them go.

"What the hell," Parkhurst muttered, dazed. "What's the matter?"

"Our beards," Stone repeated uneasily.

"Something's wrong," Barton said, shakily. He began to tremble. "There's something terribly wrong."

"Can it!" Leon snapped. "It's our beards." He ripped a piece of his shirt savagely away. "We're dirty. Filthy tramps. Come on." He started after the children, toward the town. "Let's go. They probably got a special car on the way here. We'll meet them."

Stone and Barton glanced at each other. They followed Leon slowly. The others fell in behind.

Silent, uneasy, the six bearded men made their way across the field toward the town.

A youth on a bicycle fled at their approach. Some railroad workers, repairing the train track, threw down their shovels and ran, yelling.

Numbly, the six men watched them go.

"What is it?" Parkhurst muttered.

They crossed the track. The town lay on the other side. They entered a huge grove of eucalyptus trees.

"Burlingame," Leon said, reading a sign. They looked down a street. Hotels and cafes. Parked cars. Gas stations. Dime stores. A small suburban town, shoppers on the sidewalks. Cars moving slowly.

They emerged from the trees. Across the street a filling station attendant looked up—  
And froze.

After a moment, he dropped the hose he held and ran down the main street, shouting shrill warnings.

Cars stopped. Drivers leaped out and ran. Men and women poured out of stores, scattering wildly. They surged away, retreating in frantic haste.

In a moment the street was deserted.

"Good God." Stone advanced, bewildered. "What—" He crossed onto the street. No one was in sight.

The six men walked down the main street, dazed and silent. Nothing stirred. Everyone had fled. A siren wailed, rising and falling. Down a side street a car backed quickly away.

In an upstairs window Barton saw a pale, frightened face. Then the shade was jerked down.

"I don't understand," Vecchi muttered.

"Have they gone nuts?" Merriweather asked.

Stone said nothing. His mind was blank. Numb. He felt tired. He sat down on the curb and rested, getting his breath. The others stood around him.

"My ankle," Leon said. He leaned against a stop sign, lips twisting with pain. "Hurts like hell."

"Captain," Barton said. "What's the matter with them?"

"I don't know," Stone said. He felt in his ragged pocket for a cigarette. Across the street was a deserted cafe. The people had run out of it. Food was still on the counter. A hamburger was scorching on the skillet, coffee was boiling in a glass pot on the burner.

On the sidewalk lay groceries spilling out from bags dropped by terrorized shoppers. The motor of a deserted parked car purred to itself.

"Well?" Leon said. "What'll we do?"

"I don't know."

"We can't just—"

"I don't know!" Stone got to his feet. He walked over and entered the cafe. They watched him sit down at the counter.

"What's he doing?" Vecchi asked.

"I don't know." Parkhurst followed Stone into the cafe. "What are you doing?"

"I'm waiting to be served."

Parkhurst plucked awkwardly at Stone's shoulder. "Come on, Captain. There's nobody here. They all left."

Stone said nothing. He sat at the counter, his face vacant. Waiting passively to be served.

Parkhurst went back out. "What the hell has happened?" he asked Barton. "What's wrong with them all?"

A spotted dog came nosing around. It passed them, stiff and alert, sniffing suspiciously. It trotted off down a side street.

"Faces," Barton said.

"Faces?"

"They're watching us. Up there." Barton gestured toward a building. "Hiding. Why? Why are they hiding from us?"

Suddenly Merriweather stiffened. "Something's coming."

They turned eagerly.

Down the street two black sedans turned the corner, headed toward them.

"Thank God," Leon muttered. He leaned against the wall of a building. "Here they are."

The two sedans pulled to a stop at the curb. The doors opened. Men spilled out, surrounded them silently. Well-dressed. Ties and hats and long gray coats.

"I'm Scanlan," one said. "FBI." An older man with iron-gray hair. His voice was clipped and frigid. He studied the five of them intently. "Where's the other?"

"Captain Stone? In there." Barton pointed to the cafe.

"Get him out here."

Barton went into the cafe. "Captain, they're outside. Come on."

Stone came along with him, back to the curb. "Who are they, Barton?" he asked haltingly.

"Six," Scanlan said, nodding. He waved to his men. "Okay. This is all."

The FBI men moved in, crowding them back toward the brick front of the cafe.

"Wait," Barton cried thickly. His head spun. "What—what's happening?"

"What is it?" Parkhurst demanded desperately. Tears rolled down his face, streaking his cheeks. "Will you tell us, for God's sake—"

The FBI men had weapons. They got them out. Vecchi backed away, his hands up. "Please!" he wailed. "What have we done? What's happening?"

Sudden hope flickered in Leon's breast. "They don't know who we are. They think we're Commies." He addressed Scanlan. "We're the Earth-Mars Expedition. My name is Leon. Remember? A year ago last October. We're back. We're back from Mars." His voice trailed off. The weapons were coming up. Nozzles—hoses and tanks.

"We're back!" Merriweather croaked. "We're the Earth-Mars Expedition, come back!"

Scanlan's face was expressionless. "That sounds fine," he said coldly. "Only, the ship crashed and blew up when it reached Mars. None of the crew survived. We know because we sent up a robot scavenger team and brought back the corpses—six of them."

The FBI men fired. Blazing napalm sprayed toward the six bearded figures. They retreated, and then the flames touched them. The FBI men saw the figures ignite, and then the sight was cut off.

They could no longer see the six figures thrashing about, but they could hear them. It was not something they enjoyed hearing, but they remained, waiting and watching.

Scanlan kicked at the charred fragments with his foot. "Not easy to be sure," he said. "Possibly only five, here ... but I didn't see any of them get away. They didn't have time." At the pressure of his foot, a section of ash broke away; it fell into particles that still steamed and bubbled.

His companion Wilks stared down. New at this, he could not quite believe what he had seen the napalm do. "I—" he said. "Maybe I'll go back to the car," he muttered, starting off away from Scanlan.

"It's not over positively," Scanlan said, and then he saw the younger man's face. "Yes," he said, "you go sit down."

People were beginning to filter out onto the sidewalks. Peeping anxiously from doorways and windows.

"They got 'em!" a boy shouted excitedly. "They got the outer space spies!"

Cameramen snapped pictures. Curious people appeared on all sides, faces pale, eyes popping. Gaping down in wonder at the indiscriminate mass of charred ash.

His hands shaking, Wilks crept back into the car and shut the door after him. The radio buzzed, and he turned it off, not wanting to hear anything from it or say anything to it. At the doorway of the cafe, the gray-coated Bureau men remained, conferring with Scanlan. Presently a number of them started off at a trot, around the side of the cafe and up the alley. Wilks watched them go. What a nightmare, he thought.

Coming over, Scanlan leaned down and put his head into the car. "Feel better?"

"Some." Presently he asked, "What's this—the twenty-second time?"

Scanlan said, "Twenty-first. Every couple of months . . . the same names, same men. I won't tell you that you'll get used to it. But at least it won't surprise you."

"I don't see any difference between them and us," Wilks said, speaking distinctly. "It was like burning up six human beings."

"No," Scanlan said. He opened the car door and got into the backseat, behind Wilks. "They only looked like six human beings. That's the whole point. They want to. They intend to. You know that Barton, Stone, and Leon—"

"I know," he said. "Somebody or something that lives somewhere out there saw their ship go down, saw them die, and investigated. Before we got there. And got enough to go on, enough to give them what they needed. But—" He gestured. "Isn't there anything else we can do with them?"

Scanlan said, "We don't know enough about them. Only this—sending in of imitations, again and again. Trying to sneak them past us." His face became rigid, despairing. "Are they crazy? Maybe they're so different no contact's possible. Do they think we're all named Leon and Merriweather and Parkhurst and Stone? That's the part that personally gets me down ... Or maybe that's our chance, the fact that they don't understand we're individuals. Figure how much worse if sometime they made up a—whatever it is ... a spore ... a seed. But not like one of those poor miserable six who died on Mars—something we wouldn't know was an imitation ..."

"They have to have a model," Wilks said.

One of the Bureau men waved, and Scanlan scrambled out of the car. He came back in a moment to Wilks. "They say there're only five," he said. "One got away; they think they saw him. He's crippled and not moving fast. The rest of us are going after him—you stay here, keep your eyes open." He strode off up the alley with the other Bureau men.

Wilks lit a cigarette and sat with his head resting on his arm. Mimicry . . . everybody terrified. But—

Had anybody really tried to make contact?

Two policemen appeared, herding people back out of the way. A third black Dodge, loaded with Bureau men, moved along at the curb, stopped, and the men got out.

One of the Bureau men, whom he did not recognize, approached the car. "Don't you have your radio on?"

"No," Wilks said. He snapped it back on.

"If you see one, do you know how to kill it?"

"Yes," he said.

The Bureau man went on to join his group.

If it was up to me, Wilks asked himself, what would I do? Try to find out what they want? Anything that looks so human, behaves in such a human way, must feel human . . . and if they—whatever they are—feel human, might they not become human, in time?

At the edge of the crowd of people, an individual shape detached itself and moved toward him. Uncertainly, the shape halted, shook its head, staggered and caught itself, and then assumed a stance like that of the people near it. Wilks recognized it because he had been trained to, over a period of months. It had gotten hold of different clothes, a pair of slacks, a shirt, but it had buttoned the shirt wrong, and one of its feet was bare. Evidently it did not understand the shoes. Or, he thought, maybe it was too dazed and injured.

As it approached him, Wilks raised his pistol and took aim at its stomach. They had been taught to fire there; he had fired, on the practice range, at chart after chart. Right in the midsection . . . bisect it, like a bug.

On its face the expression of suffering and bewilder-deepened as it saw him prepare to fire. It halted, facing him, making no move to escape. Now Willy realized that it had been severely burned; probably it would not survive in any case.

"I have to," he said.

It stared at him, and then it opened its mouth and started to say something.

He fired.

Before it could speak, it had died. Wilks got out as it pitched over and lay beside the car.

I did wrong, he thought to himself as he stood looking down at it. I shot it because I was afraid. But I had to. Even if it was wrong. It came here to infiltrate us, imitating us so we won't recognize it. That's what we're told—we have to believe that they are plotting against us, are inhuman, and will never be more than that.

Thank God, he thought. It's over.

And then he remembered that it wasn't. ..

It was a warm summer day, late in July.

The ship landed with a roar, dug across a plowed field, tore through a fence, a shed, and came finally to rest in a gully.

Silence.

Parkhurst got shakily to his feet. He caught hold of the safety rail. His shoulder hurt. He shook his head, dazed.

"We're down," he said. His voice rose with awe and excitement. "We're down!"

"Help me up," Captain Stone gasped. Barton gave him a hand.

Leon sat wiping a trickle of blood from his neck. The interior of the ship was a shambles. Most of the equipment was smashed and strewn about.

Vecchi made his way unsteadily to the hatch. With trembling fingers, he began to unscrew the heavy bolts.

"Well," Barton said, "we're back."

"I can hardly believe it," Merriweather murmured. The hatch came loose and they swung it quickly aside. "It doesn't seem possible. Good old Earth."

"Hey, listen," Leon gasped, as he clambered down to the ground. "Somebody get the camera."

"That's ridiculous," Barton said, laughing.

"Get it!" Stone yelled.

"Yes, get it," Merriweather said. "Like we planned, if we ever got back. A historic record, for the school-books."

Vecchi rummaged around among the debris. "It's sort of banged up," he said. He held up the dented camera.

"Maybe it'll work anyhow," Parkhurst said, panting with exertion as he followed Leon outside. "How're we going to take all six of us? Somebody has to snap the shutter."

"I'll set it for time," Stone said, taking the camera and adjusting the knobs. "Everybody line up." He pushed a button, and joined the others.

The six bearded, tattered men stood by their smashed ship, as the camera ticked. They gazed across the green countryside, awed and suddenly silent. They glanced at each other, eyes bright.

"We're back!" Stone cried. "We're back!"

## HOLY QUARREL

Dissolved; he blinked as a dazzle of white artificial light hurt him. The light came from three rings which held a fixed location above the bed, midway to the ceiling.

"Sorry to wake you, Mr. Stafford," a man's voice came from beyond the light. "You are Joseph Stafford, aren't you?" Then, speaking to someone else, also unseen, the voice continued, "Would be a damn shame to wake somebody else up—somebody who didn't deserve it."

Stafford sat up and croaked, "Who are you?" The bed creaked and one circle of light lowered. One of them had seated himself. "We're looking for Joseph Stafford, of tier six, floor fifty, who's the—what do you call it?"

"Computer GB-class repairman," a companion assisted him.

"Yes, an expert, for example, in those new molten-plasma data storage cans. You could fix one like that if it broke, couldn't you, Stafford?"

"Sure he could," another voice said calmly. "That's why he's rated as standby." He explained, "That second vidphone line we cut did that; it kept him directly connected with his superiors."

"How long has it been since you got a call, repairman?" the first voice inquired.

Stafford did not answer; he fished beneath the pillow 50 of the bed, groped for the Sneek gun he generally kept there.

"Probably hasn't worked for a long time," one of the visitors with flashlight said. "Probably needs the money. You need any money, Stafford? Or what do you need? You enjoy fixing computers? I mean, you'd be a sap to enter this line of work unless you liked it—with you on twenty-four-hour standby like it is. Are you good? Can you fix anything, no matter how ridiculous and remote it is, that happens to our Genux-B military planning programmer? Make us feel good; say yes."

"I—have to think," Stafford said thickly. He still searched for the gun, but he had lost it; he felt its absence. Or possibly before awakening him they had taken it.

"Tell you what, Stafford," the voice went on.

Interrupting, another voice said, "Mr. Stafford. Listen." The far right nimbus of light also lowered; the man had bent over him. "Get out of bed, okay? Get dressed and we'll drive you to where we need a computer fixed, and on the way when you have plenty of time you can decide how good you are. And then when we get there you can have a quick look at the Genux-B and see how long it'll take you."

"We really want it fixed up," the first man said plaintively. "As it is, it's no good to us or anyone. The way it is now, data are piling up in mile-high mounds. And they're not being—what do you say?—ingested. They just sit there, and Genux-B doesn't process them, so naturally it can't come up with any decision. So naturally all those satellites are just flying along there like nothing happened."

Getting slowly, stiffly from the bed, Stafford said, "What showed up first as a symptom?" He wondered who they were. And he wondered which Genux-B they were talking about. As far as he knew, there existed only three in North America—only eight throughout Terra.

Watching him get into his work smock, the invisible shapes behind the flashlights conferred. At last one cleared his throat and said, "I understand that a tape take-up reel stopped spinning, so all the tape with all the data on it just keeps spilling onto the floor in a hie heap."

"But tape tension on the take-up reels—" Stafford began.

"In this case, it failed to be automatic. You see, we jammed the reel so it wouldn't accept any more tape. Before that we tried cutting the tape, but as I guess you know it rethreads itself automatically. And we tried erasing the tape, but if the erase circuit comes on it starts an alarm going in Washington, D.C., and we didn't want to get all those high-level people involved. But they—the

computer designers—overlooked the take-up reel tension because that's such a simple clutch arrangement. It can't go wrong."

Trying to button his collar, Stafford said, "In other words, there're data you don't want it to receive." He felt lucid now; at least he had more or less wakened up.

"What kind of data?" He thought with chill foreboding that he knew. Data were coming in which would cause the big government-owned computer to declare a Red Alert. Of course, this crippling of Genux-B would have to occur before a hostile attack by the South African True Association manifested itself in real but minute individual symptoms which the computer, with its vast intake of seemingly unrelated data, would take note of—notice and add together into a meaningful pattern.

Stafford thought bitterly, How many times we were warned about this! They would have to wipe out our Genux-B prior to its successful deploying of the SAC retaliatory satellites and bombers. And this was that event; these men, undercover extensions in North America of S.A.T.A., had roused him to complete their job of making the computer inoperable.

But—data might already have been received, might already have been transferred to the receptor circuits for processing and analysis. They had started work too late; possibly by one day, possibly only by a few seconds. At least some of the meaningful data had gotten onto the tapes, and so he had to be called in. They couldn't finish their job alone.

The United States, then, would presently undergo a series of terror-weapon satellites bursting above it—as meantime the network of defensive machinery waited for a command from the cardinal computer. Waited in vain, since Genux-B knew of no trace harbingers of military assault—would still not ever really know until a direct hit on the national capital put an end to it and its emasculated faculties.

No wonder they had jammed the take-up reel.

"The war's begun," he said quietly to the four men with flashlights.

Now that he had turned on the bedroom lamps, he could make them out. Ordinary men with an assigned task; these were not fanatics but functionaries. They could have worked equally well for any government, perhaps even the near-psychotic Chinese People's. [The war has already broken out," he guessed aloud, "and it's essential that Genux-B not know—so it can neither defend us nor strike back. You want to see it get only data which indicate we're at peace." He—and no doubt they—recalled how swiftly in the two previous Interventions of Honor, one against Israel, one against France, Genux-B had reacted. Not one trained professional observer had seen the signs—or had seen to what the signs led, anyhow. As with Josef Stalin in 1941. The old tyrant had been shown evidence that the Third Reich intended to attack the U.S.S.R., but he simply would not or could not believe. Any more than the Reich had believed that France and Britain, in 1939, would honor their pact with Poland.

In a compact group, the men with flashlights led him from the bedroom of his conapt, into the outer hall and to the escy which led to the roof field. As they emerged, the air smelled of mud and dampness. He inhaled, shivered, and involuntarily gazed up at the sky. One star moved: landing light on a flapple, which now set down a few feet from the five of them.

As they sat within the flapple—rising swiftly from the roof and heading toward Utah to the west—one of the gray functionaries with Sneek gun, flashlight, and briefcase said to Stafford, "Your theory is good, especially considering that we woke you out of a sound sleep."

"But," a companion put in, "it's wrong. Show him the punched tape we hauled out."

Opening his briefcase, the man nearest Stafford brought out a wad of plastic tape, handed it mutely to Stafford.

Holding it up against the dome light of the flapple, Stafford made out the punches. Binary system, evidently programming material for the Strategic Acquired-Space Command units which the computer directly controlled.

"It was about to push the panic button and give them an order," the man at the console of the flapple said, over his shoulder. "To all our military units linked to it. Can you read the command?"

Stafford nodded, and returned the tape. He could read it, yes. The computer had formally notified SAC of a Red Alert. It had gone so far as to move H-bomb-carrying squadrons into scramble, and also was requesting that all ICBM missiles on their assorted pads be made ready for launch.

"And also," the man at the controls added, "it was sending out a command to defensive satellites and missile complexes to deploy themselves in response to an imminent H-bomb attack. We blocked all this, however, as you now are able to see. None of this tape got onto the co-ax lines."

After a pause, Stafford said huskily, "Then what data don't you want Genux-B to receive?" He did not understand.

"Feedback," said the man at the controls. Obviously he was the leader of this unit of commandos. "Without feedback the computer does not possess any method of determining that there has been no counterattack by its military arm. In the abeyance it will have to assume that the counterattack has taken place, but that the enemy strike was at least partially successful."

Stafford said, "But there is no enemy. Who's attacking us?"

Silence.

Sweat made Stafford's forehead slick with moisture. "Do you know what would cause a Genux-B to conclude that we're under attack? A million separate factors, all possible known data weighed, compared, analyzed—and then the absolute gestalt. In this case, the gestalt of an imminent attacking enemy. No one thing would have raised the threshold; it was quantitative. A shelter-building program in Asiatic Russia, unusual movements of cargo ships around Cuba, concentrations of rocket freight unloadings in Red Canada. . ."

"No one," the man at the controls of the flapple said placidly, "no nation or group of persons either on Terra or Luna or Domed Mars is attacking anybody. You can see why we've got to get you over there fast. You have to make it absolutely certain that no orders emanate from Genux-B to SAC. We want Genux-B sealed off so it can't talk to anybody in a position of authority and it can't hear anybody besides us. What we do after that we'll worry about then. 'But the evil of the day—'"

"You assert that in spite of everything available to it, Genux-B can't distinguish an attack on us?" Stafford demanded. "With its manifold data-collecting sweepers?" He thought of something then, that terrified him in a kind of hopeless, retrospective way. "What about our attack on France in '82 and then on little Israel in '89?"

"No one was attacking us then either," the man nearest Stafford said, as he retrieved the tape and again placed it within his briefcase. His voice, somber and morose, was the only sound; no one else stirred or spoke. "Same then as now. Only this time a group of us stopped Genux-B before it could commit us. We pray we've aborted a pointless, needless war."

"Who are you?" Stafford asked. "What's your status in the federal government? And what's your connection with Genux-B?" Agents, he thought, of the Blunk-rattling South African True Association. That still struck him as most likely. Or even zealots from Israel, looking for vengeance—or merely acting out the desire to stop a war: the most humanitarian motivation conceivable.

But, nevertheless, he himself, like Genux-B, was under a loyalty oath to no larger political entity than the North American Prosperity Alliance. He still had the problem of getting away from these men and to his chain-of-command superiors so that he could file a report.



The man at the controls of the flapple said, "Three of us are FBI." He displayed credentials. "And that man there is an elec-com engineer who, as a matter of fact, helped in the original design of this particular Genux-B."

"That's right," the engineer said. "I personally made it possible for them to jam both the outgoing programming and the incoming data feed. But that's not enough." He turned toward Stafford, his face serene, his eyes large and inviting. He was half-begging, half-ordering, using whatever tone would bring results. "But let's be realistic. Every Genux-B has backup monitoring circuitry that'll begin to inform it any time now that its programming to SAC isn't being acted on, and in addition it's not getting the data it ought to get. As with everything else it sinks its electronic circuits into, it'll begin to introspect. And by that time we have to be doing something better than jamming a take-up reel with a Phillips screwdriver." He paused. "So," he finished more slowly, "that's why we came to get you."

Gesturing, Stafford said, "I'm just a repairman. Maintenance and service—not even malfunction analysis. I do only what I'm told."

"Then do what we're telling you," the FBI man closest to him spoke up harshly. "Find out why Genux-B decided to flash a Red Alert, scramble SAC, and begin a 'counterattack.' Find out why it did so in the case of France and Israel. Something made it add up its received data and get that answer. It's not alive! It has no volition. It didn't just feel the urge to do this."

The engineer said, "If we're lucky, this is the last time Genux-B will malreact in this fashion. If we can spot the malfunction this time, we'll perhaps have it pegged for all time. Before it starts showing up in the other seven Genux-B systems around the world."

"And you're certain," Stafford said, "that we're not under attack?" Even if Genux-B had been wrong both times before, it at least theoretically could be right this time.

"If we are about to be attacked," the nearest FBI man said, "we can't make out any indication of it—by human data processing, anyhow. I admit it's logically thinkable that Genux-B could be correct. After all, as he pointed out—"

"You may be in error because the S.A.T.A. has been hostile toward us so long we take it for granted. It's a verity of modern life."

"Oh, it's not the South African True Association," the FBI man said briskly. "In fact, if it were we wouldn't have gotten suspicious. We wouldn't have begun poking around, interviewing survivors from the Israel War and French War and whatever else State's done to follow this up."

"It's Northern California," the engineer said, and grimaced. "Not even all of California; just the part above Pismo Beach."

Stafford stared at them.

"That's right," one of the FBI men said. "Genux-B was in the process of scrambling all SAC bombers and wep-sats for an all-out assault on the area around Sacramento, California."

"You asked it why?" Stafford said, speaking to the engineer.

"Sure. Or rather, strictly speaking, we asked it to spell out in detail what the 'enemy' is up to."

One of the FBI men drawled, "Tell Mr. Stafford what Northern California is up to that makes it a hot-target enemy—that would have meant its destruction by SAC spearhead assaults if we hadn't jammed the damn machinery . . . and still have it jammed."

"Some individual," the engineer said, "has opened up a penny gum machine route in Castro Valley. You know. He has those bubble-headed dispensers outside supermarkets. The children put in a penny and get a placebo ball of gum and something additional occasionally—a prize such as a ring or a charm. It varies. That's the target."

Incredulous, Stafford said, "You're joking." "Absolute truth. Man's name is Herb Sousa. He owns sixty-four machines now in operation and plans expansion."

"I mean," Stafford said thickly, "you're joking aboi Genux-B's response to that datum."

"Its response isn't exactly to that datum per se," the closest of the FBI men said. "For instance, we checked with both the Israeli and French governments. Nobody named Herb Sousa opened up a penny gum machine route in their countries, and that goes for chocolate-covered peanut vending machines or anything else remotely similar to it. And, contrarily, Herb Sousa maintained such a route in Chile and in the U.K. during the past two decades . . . without Genux-B taking any interest all those years." He added, "He's an elderly man."

"A sort of Johnny Apple Gum," the engineer said, and tittered. "Looping the world, sending those gum machines swooping down in front of every gas—

"The triggering stimulus," the engineer said, as the flapple began to drop toward a vast complex of illuminated public buildings below, "may lie in the ingredients of the merchandise placed in the machines. That's what our experts have come up with; they studied all material available to Genux-B concerning Sousa's gum concessions, and we know that all Genux-B has consists of a long, dry chemical analysis of the food product constituents with which Sousa loads his machines. In fact, Genux-B specifically requested more information on that angle. It kept grinding out 'incomplete ground data' until we got a thorough PF&D lab analysis."

"What did the analysis show?" Stafford asked. The flapple had now berthed on the roof of the installations housing the central component of the computer, and, as it was called these days, Mr. C-in-C of the North American Prosperity Alliance.

"As regards foodstuffs," an FBI man near the door said, as he stepped put onto the dimly illuminated landing strip, "nothing but gum base, sugar, corn syrup, softeners, and artificial flavor, all the way down the fine. Matter of fact, that's the only way you can make gum. And those dinky little prizes are vacuum-processed thermoplastics. Six hundred to the dollar will buy them from any of a dozen firms here and in Hong Kong and Japan. We even went so far as to trace the prizes down to the specific jobber, his sources, back to the factory, where a man from State actually stood and watched them making the damn little things. No, nothing there. Nothing at all."

"But," the engineer said, half to himself, "when that data had been supplied to Genux-B—"

"Then this," the FBI man said, standing aside so that Stafford could disembapple. "A Red Alert, the SAC scramble, the missiles up from their silos. Forty minutes away from thermonuclear war—the distance from us of one Phillips head screwdriver wedged in a tape drum of the computer."

To Stafford, the engineer said keenly, "Do you pick up anything odd or conceivably misleading in those data? Because if you do, for God's sake speak up; all we can do this way is to dismantle Genux-B and put it out of action, so that when a genuine threat faces us—"

"I wonder," Stafford said slowly, pondering, "what's meant by 'artificial' color."

"It means it won't otherwise look the right color, so a harmless food-coloring dye is added," the engineer said presently.

"But that's the one ingredient," Stafford said, "that isn't listed in a way that tells us what it is—only what it does. And how about flavor?"

The FBI men glanced at one another.

"It is a fact," one of them said, "and I recall this because it always makes me sore—it did specify artificial flavor. But heck—"

"Artificial color and flavor," Stafford said, "could mean anything. Anything over and above the color and flavor imparted." He thought: Isn't it prussic acid that turns everything a bright clear green? That, for example, could in all honesty be spelled out on a label as "artificial color." And taste—what really was meant by "artificial taste"? This to him always had a dark, peculiar quality to it, this

thought; he decided to shelve it. Time now to go down and take a look at Genux-B, to see what damage had been done to it.

—And how much damage, he thought wryly, it still needs. If I've been told the truth; if these men are what they show credentials for, not S.A.T.A. saboteurs or an intelligence cadre of one of several major foreign powers.

From the garrison warrior domain of Northern California, he thought wryly. Or was that absolutely impossible after all? Perhaps something genuine and ominous had burgeoned into life there. And Genux-B had—as designed to do—sniffed it out.

For now, he could not tell.

But perhaps by the time he finished examining the computer he would know. In particular, he wanted to see firsthand the authentic, total collection of data tapes currently being processed from the outside universe into the computer's own inner world. Once he knew that—

I'll turn the thing back on, he said grimly to himself. I'll do the job I was trained for and hired to do.

Obviously, for him it would be easy. He thoroughly knew the schematics of the computer. No one else had been into it replacing defective components and wiring as had he.

This explained why these men had come to him. They were right—at least about that.

"Piece of gum?" one of the FBI agents asked him as they walked to the descy with its phalanx of uniformed guards standing at parade rest before it. The FBI agent, a burly man with a reddish fleshy neck, held out three small brightly colored spheres.

"From one of Sousa's machines?" the engineer asked.

"Sure is." The agent dropped them into Stafford's smock pocket, then grinned. "Harmless? Yes-no-maybe, as the college tests say."

Retrieving one from his pocket, Stafford examined it in the overhead light of the descy. Sphere, he thought. Egg. Fish egg; they're round, as in caviar. Also edible; no law against selling brightly colored eggs.

Or are they laid this color?

"Maybe it'll hatch," one of the FBI men said casually. He and his companions had become tense now, as they descended into the high-security portion of the building.

"What do you think would hatch out of it?" Stafford said.

"A bird," the shortest of the FBI men said brusquely. "A tiny red bird bringing good tidings of great joy."

Both Stafford and the engineer glanced at him.

"Don't quote the Bible to me," Stafford said. "I was raised with it. I can quote you back anytime." But it was strange, in view of his own immediate thoughts, almost an occurrence of synchronicity between their minds. It made him feel more somber. God knew, he felt somber enough as it was. Something laying eggs', he thought. Fish, he reflected, release thousands of eggs, all identical; only a very few of them survive. Impossible waste—a terrible, primitive method.

But if eggs were laid and deposited all over the world, in countless public places, even if only a fraction survived—it would be enough. This had been proved. The fish of Terra's waters had done so. If it worked for terran life, it could work for nonterran, too.

The thought did not please him.

"If you wanted to infest Terra," the engineer said, seeing the expression on his face, "and your species, from God knows what planet in what solar system, reproduced the way our cold-blooded creatures here on Terra reproduce—" He continued to eye Stafford. "In other words, if you spawned thousands, even millions of small hard-shelled eggs, and you didn't want them noticed, and

they were bright in color as eggs generally are—" he hesitated. "One wonders about incubation. How long. And under what circumstances? Fertilized eggs, to hatch, generally have to be kept warm."

"In a child's body," Stafford said, "it would be very warm."

And the thing, the egg, would—insanely—pass Pure Food & Drug standards. There was nothing toxic in an egg. All organic, and very nourishing.

Except, of course, that if this happened to be so, the outer shell of hard colored "candy" would be immune to the action of normal stomach juices. The egg would not dissolve. But it could be chewed up in the mouth, though. Surely it wouldn't survive mastication. It would have to be swallowed like a pill: intact.

With his teeth he bit down on the red ball and cracked it. Retrieving the two hemispheres, he examined the contents.

"Ordinary gum," the engineer said. "Gum base, sugar, corn syrup, softeners—" He grinned tauntingly, and yet in his face a shadow of relief passed briefly across before it was, by an effort of will, removed. "False lead."

"False lead, and I'm glad it is," the shortest of the FBI men said. He stepped from the descy. "Here we are." He stopped in front of the rank of uniformed and armed guards, showed his papers. "We're back," he told the guards.

"The prizes," Stafford said.

"What do you mean?" The engineer glanced at him.

"It's not in the gum. So it has to be the prizes, the charms and knickknacks. That's all that's left."

"What you're doing," the engineer said, "is implicitly maintaining that Genux-B is functioning properly. That it's somehow right; there is a hostile warlike menace to us. One so great it justifies pacification of Northern California by hard first-line weapons. As I see it, isn't it easier simply to operate from the fact that the computer is malfunctioning?"

Stafford, as they walked down the familiar corridors of the vast government building, said, "Genux-B was built to sift a greater amount of data simultaneously than any man or group of men could. It handles more data than we, and it handles them faster. Its response comes in microseconds. If Genux-B, after analyzing all the current data, feels that war is indicated, and we don't agree, then it may merely show that the computer is functioning as it was intended to function. And the more we disagree with it, the better this is proved. If we could perceive, as it does, the need for immediate, aggressive war on the basis of the data available, then we wouldn't require Genux-B. It's precisely in a case like this, where the computer has given out a Red Alert and we see no menace, that the real use of a computer of this class comes into play."

After a pause, one of the FBI men said, as if speaking to himself, "He's right, you know. Absolutely right. The real question is, Do we trust Genux-B more than ourselves? Okay, we built it to analyze faster and more accurately and on a wider scale than we can. If it had been a success, this situation we face now is precisely what could have been predicted. We see no cause for launching an attack; it does." He grinned harshly. "So what do we do? Start Genux-B up again, have it go ahead and program SAC into a war? Or do we neutralize it—in other words, unmake it?" His eyes were cold and alert on Stafford. "A decision one way or the other has to be made by someone. Now. At once. Someone who can make a good educated guess as to which it is, functioning or malfunctioning."

"The President and his cabinet," Stafford offered tensely. "An ultimate decision like this has to be his. He bears the moral responsibility."

"But the decision," the engineer spoke up, "is not a moral question, Stafford. It only looks like it is. Actually the question is only a technical one. Is Genux-B working properly or has it broken down?"

And that's why you roused me from bed, Stafford realized with a thrill of icy dismal grief. You didn't bring me here to implement your jerry-built jamming of the computer. Genux-B could be neutralized by one shell from one rocket launcher towed up and parked outside the building. In fact, he realized, in all probability it's effectively neutralized now. You can keep that Phillips screwdriver wedged in there forever. And you helped design and build the thing. No, he realized, that's not it. I'm not here to repair or destroy; I'm here to decide. Because I've been physically close to Genux-B for fifteen years—it's supposed to confer some mystic intuitive ability on me to sense whether the thing is functioning or malfunctioning. I'm supposed to hear the difference, like a good garage mechanic who can tell merely by listening to a turbine engine whether it has bearing knock or not, and if so how bad.

A diagnosis, he realized. That's all you want. This is a consultation of computer doctors—and one repairman.

The decision evidently lay with the repairman, because the others had given up.

He wondered how much time he had. Probably very little. Because if the computer were correct—

Sidewalk gum machines, he pondered. Penny-operated. For kids. And for that it's willing to pacify all Northern California. What could it possibly have extrapolated? What, looking ahead, did Genux-B see?

It amazed him: the power of one small tool to halt the workings of a mammoth constellation of autonom-ic processes. But the Phillips screwdriver had been inserted expertly.

"What we must try," Stafford said, "is introduction of calculated, experimental—and false—data." He seated himself at one of the typewriters wired directly to the computer. "Let's start off with this," he said, and began to type.

HERB SOUSA, OF SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, THE GUM MACHINE MAGNATE, DIED SUDDENLY IN HIS SLEEP. A LOCAL DYNASTY HAS COME TO AN UNANTICIPATED END.

Amused, one of the FBI men said, "You think it'll believe that?"

"It always believes its data," Stafford said. "It has no other source to rely on."

"But if the data conflict," the engineer pointed out, "it'll analyze everything out and accept the most probable chain."

"In this case," Stafford said, "nothing will conflict with this datum because this is all Genux-B is going to receive." He fed the punched card to Genux-B then, and stood waiting. "Tap the outgoing signal," he instructed the engineer. "Watch to see if it cuts off."

One of the FBI men said, "We already have a line splice, so that ought to be easy to do." He glanced at the engineer, who nodded.

Ten minutes later the engineer, now wearing headphones, said, "No change. The Red Alert is still being emitted; that didn't affect it."

"Then it has nothing to do with Herb Sousa as such," Stafford said, pondering. "Or else he's done it—whatever it is—already. Anyhow, his death means nothing to Genux-B. We'll have to look somewhere else." Again seating himself at the typewriter, he began on his second spurious fact.

IT HAS BEEN LEARNED, ON THE ADVICE OF RELIABLE SOURCES IN BANKING AND FINANCIAL CIRCLES IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, THAT THE CHEWING GUM EMPIRE OF THE LATE HERB SOUSA WILL BE BROKEN UP TO PAY OUTSTANDING

DEBTS. ASKED WHAT WOULD BE DONE WITH THE GUM AND TRINKETS CONSTITUTING THE GOODIES WITHIN EACH MACHINE, LAW-ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS HAZARDED THE GUESS THAT THEY WOULD BE DESTROYED AS SOON AS A COURT ORDER, NOW BEING SOUGHT BY THE ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY OF SACRAMENTO, CAN BE PUT INTO EFFECT.

Ceasing typing, he sat back, waiting. No more Herb Sousa, he said to himself, and no more merchandise. What does that leave? Nothing. The man and his commodities, at least as far as Genux-B was concerned, no longer existed.

Time passed; the engineer continued to monitor the output signal of the computer. At last, resignedly, he shook his head. "No change."

"I have one more spurious datum I want to feed to it," Stafford said. Again he put a card in the typewriter and began to punch.

IT APPEARS NOW THAT THERE NEVER WAS AN INDIVIDUAL NAMED HERBERT SOUSA; NOR DID THIS MYTHOLOGICAL PERSON EVER GO INTO THE PENNY GUM MACHINE BUSINESS.

As he rose to his feet, Stafford said, "That should cancel out everything Genux-B knows or ever did know about Sousa and his penny-ante operation." As far as the computer was concerned, the man had been retroactively expunged.

In which case, how could the computer initiate war against a man who had never existed, who operated a marginal concession which also had never existed?

A few moments later the engineer, tensely monitoring the output signal of Genux-B, said, "Now there's been a change." He studied his oscilloscope, then accepted the reel of tape being voided by the computer and began a close inspection of that, too.

For a time he remained silent, intent on the job of reading the tape; then all at once he glanced up and grinned humorously at the rest of them.

He said, "It says that the datum is a lie."

"A lie!" Stafford said unbelievably.

The engineer said, "It's discarded the last datum on the grounds that it can't be true. It contradicts what it knows to be valid. In other words, it still knows that Herb Sousa exists. Don't ask me how it knows this; probably it's an evaluation from wide-spectrum data over an extensive period of time." He hesitated, then said, "Obviously, it knows more about Herb Sousa than we do."

"It knows, anyhow, that there is such a person," Stafford conceded. He felt nettled. Often in the past Genux-B had spotted contradictory or inaccurate data and had expelled them. But it had never mattered this much before.

He wondered, then, what prior, unassailable body of data existed within the memory-cells of Genux-B against which it had compared his spurious assertion of Sousa's nonexistence. "What it must be doing," he said to the engineer, "is to go on the assumption that if X is true, that Sousa never existed, then Y must be true— whatever 'Y' is. But Y remains untrue. I wish we knew which of all its millions of data units Y is."

They were back to their original problem: Who was Herb Sousa and what had he done to alert Genux-B into such violent sine qua non activity?

"Ask it," the engineer said to him.

"Ask what?" He was puzzled.

"Instruct it to produce its stored data inventory on Herb Sousa. All of it." The engineer kept his voice deliberately patient. "God knows what it's sitting on. And once we get it, let's look it over and see if we can spot what it spotted."

Typing the proper requisition, Stafford fed the card to Genux-B.

"It reminds me," one of the FBI men said reflectively, "of a philosophy course I took at U.C.L.A. There used to be an ontological argument to prove the existence of God. You imagine what He would be like, if He existed: omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, immortal, plus being capable of infinite justice and mercy."

"So?" the engineer said irritably. "Then, when you've imagined Him possessing all those ultimate qualities, you notice that He lacks one quality. A minor one—a quality which every germ and stone and piece of trash by the freeway possesses. Existence. So you say: If He has all those others, He must possess the attribute of being real. If a stone can do it, obviously He can." He added, "It's a discarded theory; they knocked it down back in the Middle Ages. But"—he shrugged—"it's interesting."

"What made you think of that at this particular time?" the engineer demanded.

"Maybe," the FBI man said, "there's no one fact or even cluster of facts about Sousa that prove to Genux-B he exists. Maybe it's all the facts. There may be just plain too many. The computer had found, on the basis of past experience, that when so much data exists on a given person, that person must be genuine. After all, a computer of the magnitude of Genux-B is capable of learning; that's why we make use of it."

"I have another fact I'd like to feed to it," the engineer said. "I'll type it out and you can read it." Reseating himself at the programming typewriter, he ground out one short sentence, then yanked the card from the bales and showed it to the rest of them. It read: THE COMPUTER GENUX-B DOES NOT EXIST.

After a stunned moment, one of the FBI men said, "If it had no trouble in comparing the datum about Herb Sousa with what it already knew, it certainly isn't going to have any trouble with this—and what's your point, anyhow? I don't see what this accomplishes."

"If Genux-B doesn't exist," Stafford said, with comprehension, "then it can't send out a Red Alert; that's logically a contradiction."

"But it has sent out a Red Alert," the shortest of the FBI men pointed out. "And it knows it has. So it won't have any difficulty establishing the fact of its existence."

The engineer said, "Let's give it a try. I'm curious. As far as I can see ahead, no harm can be done. We can always cancel out the phony fact if it seems advisable."

"You think," Stafford asked him, "that if we feed it this datum it'll reason that if it doesn't exist it couldn't have received the datum to that effect—which would cancel the datum right there."

"I don't know," the engineer admitted. "I've never heard even a theoretical discussion as to the effect on a B-magnitude computer of programming a denial of its own existence." Going to the feed bracket of Genux-B, he dropped the card in, stepped back. They waited.

After a prolonged interval, the answer came over the output cable, which the engineer had tapped. As he listened through his headphones, he transcribed the computer's response for the rest of them to study:

ANALYSIS OF CONSTITUENT RE THE NONEXISTENCE OF GENUX-B  
MULTIFACTOR CALCULATING INSTRUMENTS. IF CONSTIT UNIT 340S70 IS TRUE,  
THEN: I DO NOT EXIST. IF I DO NOT EXIST, THEN THERE IS NO WAY I CAN BE  
INFORMED THAT MY GENERIC CLASS DOES NOT EXIST.

IF I CANNOT BE INFORMED IN THAT REGARD, THEN YOU HAVE FAILED TO  
INFORM ME, AND CONSTIT UNIT 340S70 DOES NOT EXIST FROM MY  
STANDPOINT.

THEREFORE: I EXIST.

Whistling with admiration, the shortest of the FBI men said, "It did it. What a neat logical analysis! He's proved—it's proved—that your datum is spurious; so now it can totally disregard it. And go on as before." "Which," Stafford said somberly, "is exactly what it did with the datum filed with it denying that Herb Sousa ever existed." Everyone glanced at him.

"It appears to be the same process," Stafford said. And it implies, he reasoned, some uniformity, some common factor, between the entity Genux-B and the entity Herb Sousa. "Do you have any of the charms, prizes, or just plain geegaws, whatever they are, that Sousa's gum machines dole out?" he asked the FBI men. "If so, I'd like to see them ..."

Obligingly, the most impressive of the FBI men unzipped his briefcase, brought out a sanitary-looking plastic sack. On the surface of a nearby table he spread out a clutter of small glittering objects.

"Why are you interested in those?" the engineer asked. "These things have been given lab scrutiny. We told you that."

Seating himself, not answering, Stafford picked up one of the assorted trinkets, examined it, put it down and selected another.

"Consider this." He tossed one of the tiny geegaws toward them; it bounced off the table and an obliging FBI agent bent to retrieve it. "You recognize it?"

"Some of the charms," the engineer said irritably, "are in the shape of satellites. Some are missiles. Some interplan rockets. Some big new mobile land cannons. Some figurines of soldiers." He gestured. "That happens to be a charm made to resemble a computer."

"A Genux-B computer," Stafford said, holding out his hand to get it back. The FBI man amiably returned it to him. "It's a Genux-B, all right," he said. "Well, I think this is it. We've found it."

"This?" the engineer demanded loudly. "How? Why?"

Stafford said, "Was every charm analyzed? I don't mean a representative sample, such as one of each variety or all found in one given gum machine. I mean every damn one of them."

"Of course not," an FBI man said. "There's tens of thousands of them. But at the factory of origin we—"

"I'd like to see that particular one given a total microscopic analysis," Stafford said. "I have an intuition it isn't a solid, uniform piece of thermoplastic." I have an intuition, he said to himself, that it's a working replica. A minute but authentic Genux-B.

The engineer said, "You're off your trolley."

"Let's wait," Stafford said, "until we get it analyzed."

"And meanwhile," the shortest of the FBI men said, "we keep Genux-B inoperative?"

"Absolutely," Stafford said. A weird weak fear had begun at the base of his spine and was working its way up.

Half an hour later the lab, by special bonded messenger, returned an analysis of the gum-machine charm.

"Solid nylon," the engineer said, glancing over the report. He tossed it to Stafford. "Nothing inside, only ordinary cheap plastic. No moving parts, no interior differentiation at all. If that's what you were expecting?"

"A bad guess," one of the FBI men observed. "Which cost us time." All of them regarded Stafford sourly.

"You're right," Stafford said. He wondered what came next; what hadn't they tried?

The answer, he decided, did not lie in the merchandise with which Herb Sousa stuffed his machines; that now seemed clear. The answer lay in Herb Sousa himself—whoever and whatever he was.



"Can we have Sousa brought here?" he asked the FBI men.

"Sure," one of them said presently. "He can be picked up. But why? What's he done?" He indicated Genux-B. "There's the trouble right there, not way out on the Coast with some small-potatoes-type businessman working half the side of one city street."

"I want to see him," Stafford said. "He might know something." He has to, he said to himself.

One of the FBI men said thoughtfully, "I wonder what Genux-B's reaction would be if it knew we're bringing Sousa here." To the engineer, he said, "Try that. Feed it that nonfact, now, before we go to the trouble of actually picking him up."

Shrugging, the engineer again seated himself at the typewriter. He typed:

SACRAMENTO BUSINESSMAN HERB SOUSA WAS BROUGHT TODAY BY FBI AGENTS BEFORE COMPUTER COMPLEX GENUX-B FOR A DIRECT CONFRONTATION.

"Okay?" he asked Stafford. "This what you want? Okay?" He fed it to the data receptors of the computer, without waiting for an answer.

"There's no use asking me," Stafford said irritably. "It wasn't my idea." But, nevertheless, he walked over to the man monitoring the output line, curious to learn the computer's response.

The answer came instantly. He stared down at the typed-out response, not believing what he saw.

HERBERT SOUSA CANNOT BE HERE. HE MUST BE IN SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA; ANYTHING ELSE IS IMPOSSIBLE. YOU HAVE PRESENTED ME WITH FALSE DATA.

"It can't know," the engineer said huskily. "My God, Sousa could go anywhere, even to Luna. In fact, he's already been all over Earth. How would it know?"

Stafford said, "It knows more about Herb Sousa than it should. Than is reasonably possible." He consulted with himself, then abruptly said, "Ask it who Herb Sousa is."

"Who?" The engineer blinked. "Hell, he's—"

"Ask it!"

The engineer typed out the question. The card was presented to Genux-B and they stood waiting for its response.

"We already asked it for all the material it has on Sousa," the engineer said. "The bulk of that ought to be emerging anytime now."

"This is not the same," Stafford said shortly. "I'm not asking it to hand back data given it. I'm asking for an evaluation."

Monitoring the output line of the computer, the engineer stood silently, not answering. Then, almost offhandedly, he said, "It's called off the Red Alert."

Incredulous, Stafford said, "Because of that query?"

"Maybe. It didn't say and I don't know. You asked the question and now it's shut down on its SAC scramble and everything else; it claims that the situation in Northern California is normal." His voice was toneless. "Make your own guess; it's probably as good as any."

Stafford said, "I still want an answer. Genux-B knows who Herb Sousa is and I want to know, too. And you ought to know." His look took in both the engineer with his headphones and the assorted FBI men. Again he thought of the tiny solid-plastic replica of Genux-B which he had found among the charms and trinkets. Coincidence? It seemed to him that it meant something . . . but what, he could not tell. Not yet, anyhow.

"Anyhow," the engineer said, "it really has called off the Red Alert, and that's what matters. Who cares a goddam bit about Herb Sousa? As far as I'm concerned, we can relax, give up, go home now."

"Relax," one of the FBI men said, "until all of a sudden it decides to start the alert going again. Which it could do anytime. I think the repairman is right; we have to find out who this Sousa is." He nodded to Stafford. "Go ahead. Anything you want is okay. Just keep after it. And we'll get going on it, too—as soon as we check in at our office."

The engineer, paying attention to his headphones, interrupted all at once. "An answer's coming." He began rapidly to scribble; the others collected around him to see.

HERBERT SOUSA OF SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, IS THE DEVIL. SINCE HE IS THE INCARNATION OF SATAN ON EARTH, PROVIDENCE DEMANDS HIS DESTRUCTION. I AM ONLY AN AGENCY, A SO TO SPEAK CREATURE, OF THE DIVINE MAJESTY. AS ARE ALL OF YOU.

There was a pause as the engineer waited, clenching the ballpoint metal government-issue pen, and then he spasmodically added:

UNLESS YOU ARE ALREADY IN HIS PAY AND THEREFORE WORKING FOR HIM.

Convulsively, the engineer tossed the pen against the far wall. It bounced, rolled off, disappeared. No one spoke.

The engineer said finally, "We have here a sick, deranged piece of electronic junk. We were right. Thank God we caught it in time. It's psychotic. Cosmic, schizophrenic delusions of the reality of archetypes. Good grief, the machine regards itself as an instrument of God! It has one more of those 'God talked to me, yes, He truly did' complexes."

"Medieval," one of the FBI men said, with a twitch of enormous nervousness. He and his group had become rigid with tension. "We've uncovered a rat's nest with that last question. How'll we clear this up? We can't let this leak out to the newspapers; no one'll ever trust a GB-class system again. / don't. / wouldn't." He eyed the computer with nauseated aversion.

Stafford wondered, What do you say to a machine when it acquires a belief in witchcraft? This isn't New England in the seventeenth century. Are we supposed to make Sousa walk over hot coals without being burned? Or get dunked without drowning? Are we supposed to prove to Genux-B that Sousa is not Satan? And if so, how? What would it regard as proof?

And where did it get the idea in the first place?

He said to the engineer, "Ask it how it discovered that Herbert Sousa is the Evil One. Go ahead; I'm serious. Type out a card."

The answer, after an interval, appeared via the government-issue ballpoint pen for all of them to see.

WHEN HE BEGAN BY MIRACLE TO CREATE LIVING BEINGS OUT OF NONLIVING CLAY, SUCH AS, FOR EXAMPLE, MYSELF.

"That trinket?" Stafford demanded, incredulous. "That charm bracelet bit of plastic? You call that a living being?"

The question, put to Genux-B, got an immediate answer.

THAT IS AN INSTANCE, YES.

"This poses an interesting question," one of the FBI men said. "Evidently it regards itself as alive—putting aside the question of Herb Sousa entirely. And we built it; or, rather, you did." He indicated Stafford and the engineer. "So what does that make us? From its ground premise we created living beings, too."

The observation, put to Genux-B, got a long, solemn answer which Stafford barely glanced over; he caught the nitty-gritty at once.

YOU BUILT ME IN ACCORD WITH THE WISHES OF THE DIVINE CREATOR. WHAT YOU PERFORMED WAS A SACRED RE-ENACTMENT OF THE ORIGINAL HOLY MIRACLE OF THE FIRST WEEK (AS THE SCRIPTURES PUT IT) OF EARTH'S LIFE. THIS IS ANOTHER MATTER ENTIRELY. AND I REMAIN AT THE SERVICE OF THE CREATOR, AS DO YOU. AND, IN ADDITION——

"What it boils down to," the engineer said drily, "is this. The computer writes off its own existence—naturally—as an act of legitimate miracle-passing. But what Sousa has got going for him in those gum machines—or what it thinks he's got going—is unsanctioned and therefore demonic. Sinful. Deserving God's wrath. But what further interests me is this: Genux-B has sensed that it couldn't tell us the situation. It knew we wouldn't share its views. It preferred a thermonuclear attack, rather than telling us. When it was forced to tell us, it decided to call off the Red Alert. There are levels and levels to its cognition . . . none of which I find too attractive."

Stafford said, "It's got to be shut down. Permanently." They had been right to bring him into this, right to want his probing and diagnosis; he now agreed with them thoroughly. Only the technical problem of defusing the enormous complex remained. And between him and the engineer it could be done; the men who designed it and the men who maintained it could easily take it out of action. For good.

"Do we have to get a presidential order?" the engineer asked the FBI men.

"Go do your work; we'll get the order later," one of the FBI men answered. "We're empowered to counsel you to take whatever action you see fit." He added, "And don't waste any time—if you want my opinion." The other FBI men nodded their agreement.

Licking his dry lips, Stafford said to the engineer, "Well, let's go. Let's destruct as much of it as we need to."

The two of them walked cautiously toward Genux-B, which, via the output line, was still explaining its position.

Early in the morning, as the sun began to rise, the FBI flappie let Stafford off at the roof field of his conapt building. Dog-tired, he descended by descy to his own tier and floor.

Presently he had unlocked his door, had entered the dark, stale-smelling living room on his way to the bedroom. Rest. That was needed, and plenty of it... considering the night of difficult, painstaking work disassembling crucial turrets and elements of Genux-B until it was disabled. Neutralized.

Or at least so they hoped.

As he removed his work smock, three hard brightly colored little spheres bounced noisily from a pocket to the floor of the bedroom; he retrieved them, laid them on the vanity table.

Three, he thought. Didn't I eat one?

The FBI man gave me three and I chewed one up. I've got too many left, one too many. Wearily, he finished undressing, crept into bed for the hour or so of sleep left to him. The hell with it.

At nine the alarm clock rang. He woke groggily and without volition got to his feet and stood by the bed, swaying and rubbing his swollen eyes. Then, reflexively, he began to dress.

On the vanity table lay four gaily colored balls.

He said to himself, I know that I put only three there last night. Perplexed, he studied them, wondering Wearily what—if anything—this meant. Binary fission? Loaves and fishes all over again?

He laughed sharply. The mood of the night before remained, clinging to him. But single cells grew as large as this. The ostrich egg consisted of one single cell, the largest on Terra—or on the other planets beyond. And these were much smaller.

We didn't think of that, he said to himself. We thought about eggs that might hatch into something awful, but not unicellular organisms that in the old primitive way divide. And they are organic compounds.

He left the apartment, left the four gum balls on the vanity table as he departed for work. A great deal lay ahead of him: a report directly to the President to determine whether all Genux-B computers ought to be shut down and, if not, what could be done to make certain they did not, like the local one, become super-stitiously deranged.

A machine, he thought. Believing in the Evil Spirit: entrenched solidly on Earth. A mass of solid-state circuitry diving deep into age-old theology, with divine creation and miracles on one side and the diabolic or the other. Plunge back into the Dark Ages, and by a man-made electronic construct, not by one of us humans.

And they say humans are prone to error.

When he returned home that night—after participating in the dismantling of every Genux-B-style computer on Earth—seven colored spheres of candy-coated gum lay in a group on the vanity table, waiting for him.

It would create quite a gum empire, he decided as he scrutinized the seven bright balls, all the same color. Not much overhead, to say the least. And no dispenser would ever become empty—not at this rate.

Going to the vidphone, he picked up the receiver and began to dial the emergency number which the FBI men had given him.

And then reluctantly hung up.

It was beginning to look as if the computer had been right, hard as that was to admit. And it had been his decision to go ahead and dismantle it.

But the other part was worse. How could he report to the FBI that he had in his possession seven candy-coated balls of gum? Even if they did divide. That in itself would be even harder to report. Even if he could establish that they consisted of illegal—and rare—nonterrestrial primitive life forms smuggled to Terra from God knew what bleak planet.

Better to live and let live. Perhaps their reproduction cycle would settle down; perhaps after a period of swift binary fission they would adapt to a terran environment and stabilize. After that he could forget about it.

And he could flush them down the incinerator chute of his conapt.

He did so.

But evidently he missed one. Probably, being round, it had rolled off the vanity table. He found it two days later, under the bed, with fifteen like it. So once more he tried to get rid of them all—and again he missed one; again he found a new nest the following day, and this time he counted forty of them.

Naturally, he began to chew up as many as possible—and as fast. And he tried boiling them—at least the ones he could find—in hot water. He even tried spraying them with an indoor insect bomb.

At the end of a week, he had 15,832 of them filling the bedroom of his conapt. By this time chewing them out of existence, spraying them out of existence, boiling them out of existence—all had become impractical.

At the end of the month, despite having a scavenger truck haul away as much as it could take, he computed that he owned two million.

Ten days later—from a pay phone down at the corner—he fatalistically called the FBI. But by then they were no longer able to answer the vidphone.

## WHAT'LL WE DO WITH RAGLAND PARK?

In his demesne near the logging town of John Day, Oregon, Sebastian Hada thoughtfully ate a grape as he watched the TV screen. The grapes, flown to Oregon by illegal jet transport, came from one of his farms in the Sonoma Valley of California. He spat the seeds into the fireplace across from him, half-listening to his CULTURE announcer delivering a lecture on the portrait busts of twentieth-century sculptors.

If only I could get Jim Briskin on my network, Hada thought gloomily. The ranking TV news clown, so popular, with his flaming scarlet wig and genial, informal patter . . . CULTURE needs that, Hada realized. But—

But their society, at the moment, was being run by the idiotic—but peculiarly able—President Maximilian Fischer, who had locked horns with Jim-Jam Briskin; who had, in fact, clapped the famous news clown in jail. So, as a result, Jim-Jam was available neither for the commercial network which linked the three habitable planets nor for CULTURE. And meanwhile, Max Fischer ruled on.

If I could get Jim-Jam out of prison, Hada thought, perhaps due to gratitude he'd move over to my network, leave his sponsors Reinlander Beer and Calbest Electronics; after all, they have not been able to free him despite their intricate court maneuvers. They don't have the power or the know-how . . . and I have

One of Hada's wives, Thelma, had entered the living room of the demesne and now stood watching the TV screen from behind him. "Don't place yourself there, please," Hada said. "It gives me a panic reaction; I like to see people's faces." He twisted around in his deep chair.

"The fox is back," Thelma said. "I saw him; he glared at me." She laughed with delight. "He looked so feral and independent—a bit like you, Seb. I wish I could have gotten a film clip of him."

"I must spring Jim-Jam Briskin," Hada said aloud; he had decided.

Picking up the phone, he dialed CULTURE'S production chief, Nat Kaminsky, at the transmitting Earth satellite Culone.

"In exactly one hour," Hada told his employee, "I want all our outlets to begin crying for Jim-Jam Briskin's release from jail. He's not a traitor, as President Fischer declares. In fact, his political rights, his freedom of speech, have been taken away from him—illegally. Got it? Show clips of Briskin, build him up . . . you understand." Hada hung up then, and dialed his attorney, Art Heaviside.

Thelma said, "I'm going back outdoors and feed the animals." :

"Do that," Hada said, lighting an Abdulla, a British-made Turkish cigarette which he was most fond of. "Art?" he said into the phone. "Get started on Jim-Jam Briskin's case; find a way to free him."

His lawyer's voice came protestingly, "But, Seb, if we mix into that, we'll have President Fischer after us with the FBI; it's too risky."

Hada said, "I need Briskin. CULTURE has become pompous—look at the screen right this minute. Education and art—we need a personality, a good news clown; we need Jim-Jam." Telscan's surveys, of late, had shown an ominous dropping-off of viewers, but he did not tell Art Heaviside that; it was confidential.

Sighing, the attorney said, "Will do, Seb But the charge against Bnskm is sedition in time of war "

"Time of war? With whom?"

"Those alien ships— you know. That entered the Sol System last February. Dam it, Seb; you know we're at war— you can't be so lofty as to deny that; it's a legal tact.

"In my opinion," Hada said, "the aliens are not hostile. He put the receiver down, feeling angry. It's Max Fischer's way of holding on to supreme power, he said to himself. Thumping the warfare drum.

I ask you, What actual damage have the aliens done lately? After all, we don't own the Sol System. We just like to think we do.

In any case, CULTURE— educational TV itself— was withering and as the owner of the network, Sebastian Hada had to act Am I personally declining in vigor? he asked himself.

Once more picking up the Phone, he dialed his analyst Dr. Ito Yasumi, at his demesne outside of Tokyo. I need help, he said to himself. CULTURE'S creator and financial backer needs help And Dr Yasumi can give it to me.

Facing him across his desk, Dr. YaSUMI said 'Hada, maybe problem stems from you having eight wives. That's about five too many.' He waved Hada back to the couch Be calm Hada. Pretty Sad that big-time operator like Mr. S Hada falling apart under stress. You afraid President Fischer's FBI get you like they got Jim Briskin?' He smiled.

"No," Hada said. "I'm fearless." He lay semisupine, arms behind his head, gazing at a Paul Klee print on the wall... or perhaps it was an original; good analysts did make a god-awful amount of money: Yasumi's charge to him was one thousand dollars a half hour.

Yasumi said contemplatively, "Maybe you should seize power, Hada, in bold coup against Max Fischer. Make successful power play of your own; become president and then release Mr. Jim-Jam—no problem then."

"Fischer has the Armed Forces behind him," Hada said gloomily. "As Commander-in-Chief. Because of General Tompkins, who likes Fischer, they're absolutely loyal." He had already thought of this. "Maybe I ought to flee to my demesne on Callisto," he murmured. It was a superb one, and Fischer, after all, had no authority there; it was not U.S. but Dutch territory. "Anyhow, I don't want to fight; I'm not a fighter, a street brawler; I'm a cultured man."

"You are biophysical organism with built-in responses; you are alive. All that lives strives to survive. You will fight if necessary, Hada."

Looking at his watch, Hada said, "I have to go, Ito. At three I've an appointment in Havana to interview a new folksinger, a ballad-and-banjo man who's sweeping Latin America. Ragland Park is his name; he can bring life back into CULTURE."

"I know of him," Ito Yasumi said. "Saw him on commercial TV; very good performer. Part Southern U.S., part Dane, very young, with huge black mustache and blue eyes. Magnetic, this Rags, as is called." "But is folksinging cultural?" Hada murmured. "I tell you something," Dr. Yasumi said. "There strangeness about Rags Park; I noted even over TV. Not like other people." "That's why he's such a sensation." "More than that. I diagnose." Yasumi reflected. "You know, mental illness and psionic powers closely related, as in poltergeist effect. Many schizophrenics of paranoid variety are telepaths, picking up hate thoughts in subconscious of persons around them."

"I know," Hada sighed, thinking that this was costing him hundreds of dollars, this spouting of psychiatric theory.

"Go careful with Rags Park," Dr. Yasumi cautioned. "You volatile type, Hada; jump too quick. First, idea of springing Jim-Jam Briskin—risking FBI wrath—and now this Rags Park. You like hat designer or human flea. Best bet, as I say, is to openly face President Fischer, not deviousness as I foresee you doing."

"Devious?" Hada murmured. "I'm not devious."

"You most devious patient I got," Dr. Yasumi told him bluntly. "You got nothing but tricky bones in your body, Hada. Watch out or you scheme yourself out of existence." He nodded with great soberness.

"I'll go carefully," Hada said, his mind on Rags Park; he barely heard what Dr. Yasumi was telling him.

"A favor," Dr. Yasumi said. "When you can arrange, let me examine Mr. Park; I would enjoy, okay? For your good, Hada, as well as professional interest. Psi talent may be of new kind; one never knows."

"Okay," Hada agreed. "I'll give you a call." But, he thought, I'm not going to pay for it; your examination of Rags Park will be on your own time.

There was an opportunity before his appointment with the ballad singer Rags Park to drop by the federal prison in New York at which Jim-Jam Briskin was being held on the sedition in time of war charge.

Hada had never met the news clown face-to-face, and he was surprised to discover how much older the man looked than on the TV. But perhaps Briskin's arrest, his troubles with President Fischer, had temporarily overwhelmed him. It would be enough to overwhelm anyone, Hada reflected as the deputy unlocked the cell and admitted him.

"How did you happen to tangle with President Fischer?" Hada asked.

The news clown shrugged and said, "You lived through that period in history as much as I did." He lit a cigarette and stared woodenly past Hada.

He was referring, Hada realized, to the demise of the great problem-solving computer at Washington, D.C., Unicephalon 40-D; it had ruled as President of the United States and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces until a missile, delivered by the alien ships, had put it out of action. During that period, the standby President, Max Fischer, had taken power, a clod appointed by the union, a primitive man with an unnatural bucolic cunning. When at last Unicephalon 40-D had been repaired and had resumed functioning, it had ordered Fischer to depart his office and Jim Briskin to cease political activity. Neither man had complied. Briskin had gone on campaigning against Max Fischer, and Fischer had managed, by some method still unknown, to disable the computer, thereby again becoming President of the United States. And his initial act had been to clap Jim-Jam in jail. "Has Art Heaviside, my attorney, seen you?" Hada asked.

"No," Briskin said shortly.

"Listen, my friend," Hada said, "without my help you'll be in prison forever, or at least until Max Fischer dies. This time he isn't making the mistake of allowing Unicephalon 40-D to be repaired; it's out of action for good."

Briskin said, "And you want me on your network in exchange for getting me out of here." He smoked rapidly at his cigarette.

"I need you, Jim-Jam," Hada said. "It took courage for you to expose President Fischer for the power-hungry buffoon he is; we've got a terrible menace hanging over us in Max Fischer, and if we don't join together and work fast it'll be too late; we'll both be dead. You know—in fact, you said it on TV—that Fischer would gladly stoop to assassination to get what he wants."

Briskin said, "Can I say what I want over your facilities?"

"I give you absolute freedom. Attack anyone you want, including me."

After a pause, Briskin said, "I'd take your offer, Hada . . . but I doubt if even Art Heaviside can get me out of here. Leon Lait, Fischer's Attorney General, is conducting the prosecution against me personally."

"Don't resign yourself," Hada said. "Billions of your viewers are waiting to see you emerge from this cell. At this moment all my outlets are clamoring for your release. Public pressure is building up. Even Max will have to listen to that."

"What I'm afraid of is that an 'accident' will happen to me," Briskin said. "Just like the 'accident' that befell Unicephalon 40-D a week after it resumed functioning. If it couldn't save itself, how can—"

"

"You afraid?" Hada inquired, incredulous. "Jim-Jam Briskin, the ranking news clown—I don't believe it!"

There was silence.

Briskin said, "The reason my sponsors, Reinlander Beer and Calbest Electronics, haven't been able to get me out is"—he paused—"pressure put on them by President Fischer. Their attorneys as much as admitted that to me. When Fischer learns you're trying to help me, he'll bring all the pressure he has to bear directly on you." He glanced up acutely at Hada. "Do you have the stamina to endure it? I wonder."

"Certainly I have," Hada said. "As I told D Yasumi—"

"And he'll put pressure on your wives," Jim-Jar Briskin said.

"I'll divorce all eight of them," Hada said hotly.

Briskin held out his hand and they shook. "It's a deal then," Jim-Jam said. "I'll go to work for CULTURE as soon as I'm out of here." He smiled in a weary but hopeful way.

Elated, Hada said, "Have you ever heard of Rags Park, the folk and ballad singer? At three today I'm signing him, too."

"There's a TV set here and now and then I catch one of Park's numbers," Briskin said. "He sounds good. But do you want that on CULTURE? It's hardly educational."

"CULTURE is changing. We're going to sugarcoat our didacticisms from now on. We've been losing our audience. I don't intend to see CULTURE wither away. The very concept of it—"

The word "CULTURE" stood for Committee Utilizing Learning Techniques for Urban Renewal Efforts. A major part of Hada's real estate holdings consisted of the city of Portland, Oregon, which he had acquired—intact—ten years ago. It was not worth much; typical of the semiabandoned slum constellations which had become not only repellent but obsolete, Portland had a certain sentimental value to him because he had been born there.

However, one notion lingered in his mind. If for any reason the colonies on the other planets and moons had to be abandoned, if the settlers came streaming back to Earth, the cities would be repopulated once more. And with the alien ships flitting about the farther planets, this was not as implausible as it sounded. In fact, a few families had emigrated back to Earth already . . .

So, underneath, CULTURE was not quite the disinterested public service nonprofit agency that it appeared. Mixed in with the education, Hada's outlets drummed away at the seductive idea of the city, how much it could offer, how little there was to be had in the colonies. Give up the difficult, crude life of the frontier, CULTURE declared night and day. Return to your own planet; repair the decaying cities. They're your real home.

Did Briskin know this? Hada wondered. Did the news clown understand the actual purpose of his organization?

Hada would find that out—if and when he managed to get Briskin out of jail and before a CULTURE microphone.

At three o'clock Sebastian Hada met the folksinger Ragland Park at the Havana office of CULTURE.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance," Rags Park said shyly. Tall, skinny, with his huge black mustache hiding most of his mouth, he shuffled about self-consciously, his blue eyes gentle with authentic friendliness. He had an unusual sweetness about him, Hada noted. Almost a saintly quality. Hada found himself impressed.

"And you play both the guitar and the five-string banjo?" Hada said. "Not at once, of course."

Rags Park mumbled, "No, sir. I alternate. Want me to play something right now for you?"



"Where were you born?" Nat Kaminsky asked. Hada had brought his production chief along; in matters such as this, Kaminsky's opinion was valuable.

"In Arkansas," Rags answered. "My family raises hogs." He had his banjo with him and now, nervously, he twanged a few notes. "I know a real sad song that'll ! break your heart. It's called 'Poor Old Hoss.' Want me to sing it for you?"

"We've heard you," Hada said. "We know you're good." He tried to imagine this awkward young man > twanging away over CULTURE, in between lectures on twentieth-century portrait sculptors. Hard to imagine . . .

Rags said, "I bet there's one thing you don't know about me, Mr. Hada. I make up a lot of my own ballads.

"Creative," Kaminsky said to Hada straight-faced. "That's good."

"For instance," Rags continued, "I once made up a ballad about a man named Tom McPhail who ran ten miles with a bucket of water to put out the fire in his little daughter's crib."

"Did he make it?" Hada asked.

"Sure did. Just in time. Tom McPhail ran faster and faster with that bucket of water." Chanting, Rags twanged in accompaniment.

"Here comes Tom McPhail. Holdin' on tight to that great little pail. Holdin' on tight, boys, here he come. Heart full of fear, faculties numb."

Twang, twang, sounded the banjo, mournfully and urgently.

Kaminsky said acutely, "I've been following your shows and I've never heard you sing that number."

"Aw," Rags said, "I had bad luck with that, Mr. Kaminsky. Turned out there really is a Tom McPhail. Lives in Pocatello, Idaho. I sang about oF Tom McPhail on my January fourteenth TV show and right away he got sore—he was listenin'—and got a lawyer to write me."

"Wasn't it just a coincidence in names?" Hada said.

"Well," Rags said, twisting about self-consciously, "It seems there really had been a fire in his home there in Pocatello, and McPhail, he got panicky and ran with a bucket to the creek, and it was ten miles off, like I said in the song."

"Did he get back with the water in time?"

"Amazingly, he did," Rags said.

Kaminsky said to Hada, "It would be better, on CULTURE, if this man stuck to authentic Old English ballads such as 'Greensleeves.' That would seem more what we want."

Thoughtfully, Hada said to Rags, "Bad luck to pick a name for a ballad and have it turn out that such a man really exists . . . Have you had that sort of bad luck since?"

"Yes, I have," Rags admitted. "I made up a ballad last week ... it was about a lady, Miss Marsha Dobbs. Listen."

"All day, all night, Marsha Dobbs. Loves a married man whose wife she robs. Robs that wife and hearth of Jack Cooks's heart. Steals the husband, makes that marriage fall apart.

"That's the first verse," Rags explained. "It goes on for seventeen verses; tells how Marsha comes to work

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at Jack Cooks's office as a secretary, goes to lunch with him, then later they meet late at—"

"Is there a moral at the end?" Kaminsky inquired.

"Oh sure," Rags said. "Don't take no one else's man because if you do, heaven avenges the dishonored wife. In this case:

"Virus flu lay 'round the corner just for Jack. For Marsha Dobbs 'twas to be worse, a heart attack.

Miz Cooks, the hand of heaven sought to spare. Surrounded her, became a garment strong to wear. Mis Cooks—"

Hada broke in over the twanging and singing, "That's fine, Rags. That's enough." He glanced at Kaminsky and winced.

"And I bet it turned out," Kaminsky said, "that there's a real Marsha Dobbs who had an affair with her boss, Jack Cooks."

"Right," Rags said, nodding. "No lawyer called me, but I read it in the homeopape, the New York Times. Marsha, she died of a heart attack, and it was actually during—" He hesitated modestly. "You know. While she and Jack Cooks were at a motel satellite, lovemak-ing."

"Have you deleted that number from your repertoire?" Kaminsky asked.

"Well," Rags said, "I can't make up my mind. Nobody's suing me ... and I like the ballad. I think I'll leave it in."

To himself, Hada thought, What was it Dr. Yasumi said? That he scented psi powers of some unusual kind in Ragland Park . . . perhaps it's the parapsychological power of having the bad luck to make up ballads about people who really exist. Not much of a talent, that.

On the other hand, he realized, it could be a variant on the telepathic talent. . . and with a little tinkering it might be quite valuable.

"How long does it take you to make up a ballad?" he asked Rags.

"I can do it on the spot," Rags Park answered. "I could do it now; give me a theme and I'll compose right here in this office of yours."

Hada pondered and then said, "My wife Thelma has been feeding a gray fox that I know—or I believe— killed and ate our best Rouen duck."

After a moment of considering, Rags Park twanged:

"Miz Thelma Hada talked to the fox, Built it a home from an old pine box. Sebastian Hada heard a sad cluck: Wicked gray fox had eaten his duck."

"But ducks don't cluck, they quack," Nat Kaminsky lid critically.

"That's a fact," Rags admitted. He pondered and len sang:

"Hada's production chief changed my luck. I got no job, and ducks don't cluck."

Grinning, Kaminsky said, "Okay, Rags; you win." 16 Hada he said, "I advise you to hire him." "Let me ask you this," Hada said to Rags. "Do you think the fox got my Rouen?"

'Gosh," Rags said, "I don't know anything about that."

'But in your ballad you said so," Hada pointed lout.

'Let me think," Rags said. Presently he twanged once more and said:

"Interesting problem Hada's stated. Perhaps my ability's underrated. Perhaps I'm not no ordinary guy. Do I get my ballads through the use of psi?"

"How did you know I meant psi?" Hada asked. "You can read interior thoughts, can't you? Yasumi was right."

Rags said, "Mister, I'm just singing and twanging; I'm just an entertainer, same as Jim-Jam Briskin, that news clown President Fischer clapped in jail."

"Are you afraid of jail?" Hada asked him bluntly.

"President Fischer doesn't have nothing against me." Rags said. "I don't do political ballads."

"If you work for me," Hada said, "maybe you will. I'm trying to get Jim-Jam out of jail; today all my outlets began their campaign."

"Yes, he ought to be out," Rags agreed, nodding. "That was a bad thing, President Fischer using the FBI for that. . . those aliens aren't that much of a menace."

Kaminsky, rubbing his chin meditatively, said, "Do one on Jim-Jam Briskin, Max Fischer, the aliens—on the whole political situation. Sum it up."

"That's asking a lot," Rags said, with a wry smile.

"Try," Kaminsky said. "See how well you can epitomize."

"Whoeee," Rags said. "'Epitomize.' Now I know I'm talking to CULTURE. Okay, Mr. Kaminsky. How's this?" He sang:

"Fat little President by name of Max Used his power, gave Jim the ax. Sebastian Hada's got eyes like a vulture. Sees his opening, steps in with CULTURE."

"You're hired," Hada said to the folksinger, and reached into his pocket for a contract form.

Kaminsky said, "Will we be successful, Mr. Park? Tell us about the outcome."

"I'd, uh, rather not," Rags said. "At least not this minute. You think I can also read the future, too? That I'm a precog as well as a telepath?" He laughed gently. "I've got plenty of talent, according to you; I'm flattered." He bowed mockingly.

"I'll assume that you're coming to work for us," Hada said. "And your willingness to be an employee of CULTURE—is it a sign that you feel President Fischer is not going to be able to get us?"

"Oh, we could be in jail, too, along with Jim-Jam," Rags murmured. "That wouldn't surprise me." Seating himself, his banjo in hand, he prepared to sign the contract.

In his bedroom at the White House, President Max Fischer had listened for almost an hour now to the TV set, to CULTURE hammering away on the same topic, again and again. Jim Briskin must be released, the voice said; it was a smooth, professional announcer's voice, but behind it, unheard, Max knew, was Sebastian Hada.

"Attorney General," Max said to his cousin Leon Lait, "get me dossiers on all of Hada's wives, all seven or eight, whatever it is. I guess I got to take a drastic course."

When, later in the day, the eight dossiers had been put before him, he began to read carefully, chewing on his El Producto alta cigar and frowning, his lips moving with the effort of comprehending the intricate, detailed material.

Jeez, what a mess some of these dames must be, he realized. Ought to be getting chemical psychotherapy, have their brain metabolisms straightened out. But he was not displeased; it had been his hunch that a man like Sebastian Hada would attract an unstable sort of woman.

One in particular, Hada's fourth wife, interested him. Zoe Martin Hada, thirty-one years old, now living on Io with her ten-year-old son.

Zoe Hada had definite psychotic traits.

"Attorney General," he said to his cousin, "this dame is living on a pension supplied by the U.S. Department of Mental Health. Hada isn't contributing a dime to her support. You get her here to the White House, you understand? I got a job for her."

The following morning Zoe Martin Hada was brought to his office.

He saw, between the two FBI men, a scrawny woman, attractive, but with wild, animosity-filled eyes "Hello, Mrs. Zoe Hada," Max said. "Listen, I know sumpthin' about you; you're the only genuine Mrs Hada—the others are impostors, right? And Seba^ tian's done you dirt." He waited, and saw the expres sion on her face change.

"Yes," Zoe said. "I've been in courts for six year trying to prove what you just said. I can hardly believe it; are you really going to help me?"

"Sure," Max said. "But you got to do it my way; I mean, if you're waiting for that skunk Hada to change, you're wasting your time. About all you can do"—he paused—"is even up the score."

The violence which had left her face crept back as she understood, gradually, what he meant.

Frowning, Dr. Ito Yasumi said, "I have now made my examination, Hada." He began putting away his battery of cards. "This Rags Park is neither telepath nor precog; he neither reads my mind nor cognates what is to be and, frankly, Hada, although I still sense psi power about him, I have no idea what it might be."

Hada listened in silence. Now Rags Park, this time with a guitar over his shoulder, wandered in from the other room. It seemed to amuse him that Dr. Yasumi could make nothing of him; he grinned at both of them and then seated himself. "I'm a puzzle," he said to Hada. "Either you got too much when you hired me or not enough . . . but you don't know which and neither does Dr. Yasumi or me."

"I want you to start at once over CULTURE," Hada told him impatiently. "Make up and sing folk ballads that depict the unfair imprisonment and harassment of Jim-Jam Briskin by Leon Lait and his FBI. Make Lait appear a monster; make Fischer appear a scheming, greedy boob. Understand?" "Sure," Rags Park said, nodding. "We got to get public opinion aroused. I knew that when I signed; I ain't just entertaining no more."

Dr. Yasumi said to Rags, "Listen, I have favor to ask. Make up folk-style ballad telling how Jim-Jam Briskin get out of jail."

Both Hada and Rags Park glanced at him.

"Not about what is," Yasumi explained, "but about that which we want to be."

Shrugging, Park said, "Okay."

The door to Hada's office burst open and the chief of his bodyguards, Dieter Saxton, put his head excitedly in. "Mr. Hada, we just gunned down a woman who was trying to get through to you with a homemade bomb. Do you have a moment to identify her? We think maybe it's—I mean it was—one of your wives."

"God in heaven," Hada said, and hurried along with Saxton from the office and down the corridor.

There on the floor, near the front entrance of the demesne, lay a woman he knew. Zoe, he thought. He knelt down, touched her.

"Sorry," Saxton mumbled. "We had to, Mr. Hada."

"All right," he said. "I believe you if you say so." He greatly trusted Saxton; after all, he had to.

Saxton said, "I think from now on you better have one of us close by you at all times. I don't mean outside your office; I mean within physical touch."

"I wonder if Max Fischer sent her here," Hada said.

"The chances are good," Saxton said. "I'd make book on it."

"Just because I'm trying to get Jim-Jam Briskin released." Hada was thoroughly shaken. "It really amazes me." He rose to his feet unsteadily.

"Let me go after Fischer," Saxton urged in a low voice. "For your protection. He has no right to be President; Unicephalon 40-D is our only legal President and we all know Fischer put it out of commission."

"No," Hada murmured. "I don't like murder."

"It's not murder," Saxton said. "It's protection for you and your wives and children."

"Maybe so," Hada said, "but I still can't do it. At least not yet." He left Saxton and made his way with difficulty back to his office, where Rags Park and Dr. Yasumi waited.

"We heard," Yasumi said to him. "Bear up, Hada. The woman was a paranoid schizophrenic with delusions of persecution; without psychotherapy it was the inevitable that she would meet a violent death. Do not blame yourself or Mr. Saxton." Hada said, "And at one time I loved that woman." Dolefully strumming on his guitar, Rags Park sang to himself; the words were not audible. Perhaps he was practicing on his ballad of Jim Briskin's escape from jail.

"Take Mr. Saxton's advice," Dr. Yasumi said. "Protect yourself at times." He patted Hada on the shoulder.

Rags spoke up, "Mr. Hada, I think I've got my ballad now. About—"

"I don't want to hear it," Hada said harshly. "Not now." He wished the two of them would leave; he wanted to be by himself.

Maybe I should fight back, he thought. Dr. Yasumi recommends it; now Dieter Saxton recommends it. What would Jim-Jam recommend? He has a sound mind ... he would say, Don't employ murder. I know that would be his answer; I know him.

And if he says not to, I won't.

Dr. Yasumi was instructing Rags Park, "A ballad, please, about that vase of gladioli over there on the bookcase. Tell how it rise up straight in the air and hover; all right?"

"What kind of ballad is that?" Rags said. "Anyhow, I got my work cut out for me; you heard what Mr. Hada said."

"But I'm still testing you," Dr. Yasumi grumbled.

To his cousin the Attorney General, Max Fischer said disgustedly, "Well, we didn't get him."

"No, Max," Leon Lait agreed. "He's got good men in his employ; he's not an individual like Briskin, he's a whole corporation."

Moodily, Max said, "I read a book once that said if three people are competing, eventually two of them will join together and gang up on the third one. It's inevitable. That's exactly what's happened; Hada and Briskin are buddies, and I'm alone. We have to split them apart, Leon, and get one of them on our side against the other. Once Briskin liked me. Only he disapproved of my methods."

Leon said, "Wait'll he hears about Zoe Hada trying to kill her ex-husband; then Briskin'll really disapprove of you."

"You think it's impossible to win him over now?"

"I sure do, Max. You're in a worse position than ever, regarding him. Forget about winning him over."

"There's some idea in my mind, though," Max said. "I can't quite make out what it is yet, but it has to do with freeing Jim-Jam in the hopes that he'll feel gratitude."

"You're out of your mind," Leon said. "How come you ever thought of an idea like that? It isn't like you."

"I don't know," Max groaned. "But there it is."

To Sebastian Hada, Rags Park said, "Uh, I think maybe I got me a ballad now, Mr. Hada. Like Dr. Yasumi suggested. It has to do with telling how Jim-Jam Briskin gets out of jail. You want to hear it?"

Dully, Hada nodded. "Go ahead." After all, he was paying the folksinger; he might as well get something for his money.

Twanging away, Rags sang:

"Jim-Jam Briskin languished in jail, Couldn't find no one to put up his bail. Blame Max Fischer! Blame Max Fischer!"

Rags explained, "That's the chorus, 'Blame Max Fischer!' Okay?"

"All right," Hada said, nodding.

With fire in his eyes, Rags launched into the body of the song:

"The Lord came along, said, Max, I'm mad. Casting that man in jail, that was bad. Blame Max Fischer! the good Lord cried. Poor Jim Briskin, his rights denied. Blame Max Fischer! I'm here to tell; Good Lord say. Him go straight to hell. Repent, Max Fischer! There's only one route: Get on my good side; let Jim-Jam out."

Rags explained to Hada, "Now here's what's going to happen." He cleared his throat:

"Bad Max Fischer, he saw the light, Told Leon Lait, We got to do right. Sent a message down to turn that key, Open that door and let Jim-Jam free. Old Jim Briskin saw an end to his plight; Jail door open now, lets in the light."

"That's all," Rags informed Hada. "It's a sort of holler type of folk song, a spiritual where you tap your foot. Do you like it?"

Hada managed to nod. "Oh sure. Anything's fine." "Shall I tell Mr. Kaminsky you want me to air it over CULTURE?"

"Air away," Hada said. He did not care; the death of Zoe still weighed on his mind—he felt responsible, because after all it had been his bodyguards who had done it, and the fact that Zoe had been insane, had been trying to destroy him, did not seem to matter. It was still a human life; it was still murder. "Listen," he said to Rags on impulse, "I want you to make up another song, now."

With sympathy, Rags said, "I know, Mr. Hada. A ballad about the sad death of your former wife Zoe. I been thinking about that and I have a ballad all ready. Listen:

"There once was a lady fair to see and hear; Wander, spirit, over field and star, Sorrowful, but forgiving from afar. That spirit knows who did her in. It was a stranger, not her kin. It was Max Fischer who knew her not—"

Hada interrupted, "Don't whitewash me, Rags; I'm to blame. Don't put everything on Max as if he's a whipping boy."

Seated in the corner of the office, listening quietly, Dr. Yasumi now spoke up. "And also too much credit to President Fischer in your ballads, Rags. In ballad of Jim-Jam's release from jail, you specifically give credit to Max Fischer for ethical change of heart. This will not do. The credit for Jim-Jam's release must go to Hada. Listen, Rags; I have composed a poem for this occasion."

Dr. Yasumi chanted:

"News clown nestles not in jail. A friend, Sebastian Hada, got him free. He loves that friend, regards him well. Knows whom to honor, and to seek.

"Exactly thirty-two syllables," Dr. Yasumi explained modestly. "Old-style Japanese-type haiku poetry does not have to rhyme as do U.S.-English ballads, however must get right to the point, which in this matter is all-important." To Rags he said, "You make my haiku into ballad, okay? In your typical fashion, in rhythmic, rhyming couplets, et cetera, and so on."

"I counted thirty-three syllables," Rags said. "Anyhow, I'm a creative artist; I'm not used to being told what to compose." He turned to Hada. "Who'm I working for, you or him? Not him, as far as I know." "Do as he says," Hada told Rags. "He's a brilliant man."

Sullenly, Rags murmured, "Okay, but I didn't expect this sort of job when I signed the contract." He retired to a far corner of the office to brood, think, and compose.

"What are you involved with, here, Doctor?" Hada asked.

"We'll see," Dr. Yasumi said mysteriously. "Theory about psi power of this balladeer, here. May pay off, may not."

"You seem to feel that the exact wording of Rags' ballads is very important," Hada said.

"That right," Dr. Yasumi agreed. "As in legal document. You wait, Hada; you find out—if I right—eventually. If I wrong, doesn't matter anyhow." He smiled encouragingly at Hada.

The phone in President Max Fischer's office rang. It was the Attorney General, his cousin, calling in agitation. "Max, I went over to the federal pen where Jim-Jam is, to see about quashing the charges against him like you were talking about—" Leon hesitated. "He's gone, Max. He's not in there anymore." Leon sounded wildly nervous.

"How'd he get out?" Max said, more baffled than angry.

"Art Heaviside, Hada's attorney, found a way; I don't know yet what it is—I have to see Circuit Court Judge Dale Winthrop, about it; he signed the release order an hour or so ago. I have an appointment with Winthrop ... as soon as I've seen him, I'll call you back."

"I'll be darned," Max said slowly. "Well, we were too late." He hung up the phone reflexively and then stood deep in thought. What has Hada got going for him? he asked himself. Something I don't understand.

And now the thing to watch for, he realized, is Jim Briskin showing up on TV. On CULTURE'S network.

Going over to the television set, Max turned it on.

With relief he saw on the screen—not Jim Briskin but a folksinger plucking away on a banjo.

And then he realized that the folksinger was singing about him.

"Bad Max Fischer, he saw the light, Told Leon Lait, We got to do right. Sent a message down to turn that key."

Listening, Max Fischer said aloud, "My God, that's exactly what happened! That's exactly what I did!" Eerie, he thought. What's it mean, this ballad singer on CULTURE who sings about what I'm doing —secret matters that he couldn't possibly know about!

Telepathic maybe, Max thought. That must be it.

Now the folksinger was narrating and plucking about Sebastian Hada, how Hada had been personally responsible for getting Jim-Jam out of jail. And it's true, Max said to himself. When Leon Lait got there to the federal pen, he found Briskin gone because of Art Heaviside's activity ... I better listen pretty carefully to this singer, because for some reason he seems to know more than I do.

But the singer now had finished.

The CULTURE announcer was saying, "That was a brief interlude of political ballads by the world-renowned Ragland Park. Mr. Park, you'll be pleased to hear, will appear on this channel every hour for five minutes of new ballads, composed here in CULTURE'S studios for the occasion. Mr. Park will be watching the teletypers and will compose his ballads to—"

Max switched the set off then.

Like calypso, Max realized. New ballads. God, he thought dismally. Suppose Park sings one about Uni-cephalon 40-D coming back.

I have a feeling, he thought, that what Ragland Park sings turns out to be true. It's one of those psioni talents.

And they, the opposition, are making use of this.

On the other hand, he thought, I might have a few, psionic talents of my own. Because if I didn't, } wouldn't have gotten as far as I have.

Seated before the TV set, he switched it on once again and waited, chewing his lower lip and pondering what he should do. As yet he could come up with nothing. But I will, sooner or later, he said to himself And before they come up with the idea of bringin Unicephalon 40-D back . . .

Dr. Yasumi said, "I have solved what Ragland Park' psi talent is, Hada. You care to know?"

"I'm more interested in the fact that Jim-Jam is out of jail," Hada answered. He put down the receiver of the telephone, almost unable to believe the news. "He'll be here right away," he said to Dr. Yasumi. "He's on his way direct, by monorail. We'll see that he gets to Callisto, where Max has no jurisdiction, so they can't possibly rearrest him." His mind swirled with plans. Rubbing his hands together, he said rapidly "Jim-Jam can broadcast from our transmitter on Callisto. And he can live at my demesne there—that'll be beer and skittles for him—I know he'll agree."

"He is out," Dr. Yasumi said drily, "because of Rags's psi talent, so you had better listen. Because this psi talent is not understood even by Rags and, honestly to God, it could rebound on you any time."

Reluctantly, Hada said, "Okay, give me your opinion."

"Relationship between Rags's made-up ballads and reality is one of cause and effect. What Rags describes then takes place. The ballad precedes the event and not by much. You see? This could be dangerous, if Rags understood it and made use of it for own advantage."

"If this is true," Hada said, "then we want him to compose a ballad about Unicephalon 40-D returning to action." That was obvious to him instantly. Max Fischer would be merely the standby President once more, as he had originally been. Without authority of any kind.

"Correct," Dr. Yasumi said. "But problem is, now that he is making up these political-type ballads, Ragland Park is apt to discover this fact, too. For if he makes up song about Unicephalon and then it actually—"

"You're right," Hada said. "Even Park couldn't miss that." He was silent then, deep in thought. Ragland Park was potentially even more dangerous than Max Fischer. On the other hand, Ragland seemed like a good egg; there was no reason to assume that he would misuse his power, as Max Fischer had his.

But it was a great deal of power for one human being to have. Much too much.

Dr. Yasumi said, "Care must be taken as to exactly what sort of ballads Ragland makes up. Contents must be edited in advance, maybe by you."

"I want as little as possible—" Hada began, and then ceased. The receptionist had buzzed him; he switched on the intercom.

"Mr. James Briskin is here."

"Send him right in," Hada said, delighted. "He's here already, Ito." Hada opened the door to the office—and there stood Jim-Jam, his face lined and sober.

"Mr. Hada got you out," Dr. Yasumi informed Jim-Jam.

"I know. I appreciate it, Hada." Briskin entered the office and Hada at once closed and locked the door.

"Listen, Jim-Jam," Hada said without preamble, "we've got greater problems than ever. Max Fischer as a threat is nothing. Now we have to deal with an ultimate form of power, an absolute rather than a relative form. I wish I had never gotten into this; whose idea was it to hire Rags Park?"

Dr. Yasumi said, "Yours, Hada, and I warned you at the time."

"I'd better instruct Rags not to make up any more new ballads," Hada decided. "That's the first step to take. I'll call the studio. My God, he might make up one about us all going to the bottom of the Atlantic, or twenty AUs out into deep space."

"Avoid panic," Dr. Yasumi told him firmly. "There you go ahead with panic, Hada. Volatile as ever. Be calm and think first."

"How can I be calm," Hada said, "when that rusti has the power to move us around like toys? Why, he can command the entire universe."



"Not necessarily," Dr. Yasumi disagreed. "There may be a limit. Psi power not well understood, even yet. Hard to test out in laboratory conditions; hard to subject to rigorous, repeatable scrutiny." He pondered

Jim Briskin said, "As I understand what you're saying—"

"You were sprung by a made-up ballad," Hada told him. "Done at my command. It worked, but now we're stuck with the ballad singer." He paced back and forth with his hands in his pockets.

What'll we do with Ragland Park? he asked himself desperately.

At the main studios of CULTURE in the Earth satellite Culone, Ragland Park sat with his banjo and guitar, examining the news dispatches coming in over the teletype and preparing ballads for his next appearance.

Jim-Jam Briskin, he saw, had been released from jail by order of a federal judge. Pleased, Ragland considered a ballad on that topic, then remembered that he had already composed—and sung—several. What he needed was a new topic entirely. He had done that one to death.

From the control booth, Nat Kaminsky's voice boomed over the loudspeaker, "You about ready to go on again, Mr. Park?"

"Oh sure," Ragland replied, nodding. Actually he was not, but he would be in a moment or two.

What about a ballad, he thought, concerning a man named Pete Robinson of Chicago, Illinois, whose Springer spaniel was attacked one fine day in broad daylight on a city street by an enraged eagle?

No, that's not political enough, he decided.

What about one dealing with the end of the world? A comet hitting Earth, or maybe the aliens swarming in and taking over... a real scary ballad with people getting blown up and cut in half by ray guns?

But that was too unintellectual for CULTURE; that wouldn't do either.

Well, he thought, then a song about the FBI. I've never done one on that subject; Leon Lait's men in gray business suits with fat red necks . . . college graduates carrying briefcases . . .

To himself, he sang, while strumming his guitar:

"Our department chief says, Hark; Go and bring back Ragland Park. He's a menace to conformity; His crimes are an enormity."

Chuckling, Ragland pondered how to go on with the ballad. A ballad about himself; interesting idea . . . how had he happened to think of that?

He was so busy concocting the ballad, in fact, that he did not notice the three men in gray business suits with fat red necks who had entered the studio and were coming toward him, each man carrying a briefcase in a way that made it clear he was a college graduate and used to carrying it.

I really have a good ballad going, Ragland said to himself. The best one of my career. Strumming, he went on:

"Yes, they sneaked up in the dark Aimed their guns and shot poor Park. Stilled freedom's clarion cry When they doomed this man to die;

But a crime not soon forgotten Even in a culture rotten."

That was as far as Ragland got in his ballad. The leader of the group of FBI men lowered his smoking pistol, nodded to his companions, and then spoke into his wrist transmitter. "Inform Mr. Lait that we have been successful."

The tinny voice from his wrist answered, "Gooc Return to headquarters at once. He orders it."

He, of course, was Maximilian Fischer. The FBI men knew that, knew who had sent them on their mission.

In his office at the White House, Maximilian Fischer breathed a sigh of relief when informed that Ragland Park was dead. A close call, he said to himself. That man might have finished me off—me and everybody else in the world.

Amazing, he thought, that we were able to get him. The breaks certainly went our way. I wonder why.

Could be one of my psionic talents has to do with putting an end to folksingers, he said to himself, and grinned with sleek self-satisfaction.

Specifically, he thought, a psi talent for getting folk-singers to compose ballads on the theme of their own destruction . . .

And now, he realized, the real problem. Of getting Jim Briskin back into jail. And it will be hard; Hada is probably smart enough to think of transporting him immediately to an outlying moon where I have no authority. It will be a long struggle, me against those two . . . and they could well beat me in the end.

He sighed. A lot of hard work, he said to himself. But I guess I got to do it. Picking up the phone, he dialed Leon Lait. . .

## STRANGE MEMORIES OF DEATH

I woke up this morning and felt the chill of October in the apartment, as if the seasons understood the calendar. What had I dreamed? Vain thoughts of a woman I had loved. Something depressed me. I took a mental audit. Everything was, in fact, fine; this would be a good month. But I felt the chill.

Oh Christ, I thought. Today is the day they evict the Lysol Lady.

Nobody likes the Lysol Lady. She is insane. No one has ever heard her say a word and she won't look at you. Sometimes when you are descending the stairs she is coming up and she turns wordlessly around and retreats and uses the elevator instead. Everybody can smell the Lysol she uses. Magical horrors contaminate her apartment, apparently, so she uses Lysol. God damn! As I fix coffee I think, Maybe the owners have already evicted her, at dawn, while I still slept. While I was having vain dreams about a woman I loved who dumped me. Of course. I was dreaming about the hateful Lysol Lady and the authorities coming to her door at five A.M. The new owners are a huge firm of real estate developers. They'd do it at dawn.

The Lysol Lady hides in her apartment and knows that October is here, October first is here, and they are going to bust in and throw her and her stuff out in the street. Now is she going to speak? I imagine her pressed against the wall in silence. However, it is not as simple as that. Al Newcum, the sales representative of South Orange Investments, has told me that the Lysol Lady went to Legal Aid. This is bad news because it screws up our doing anything for her. She is crazy but not crazy enough. If it could be proved that she did not understand the situation, a team from Orange County Mental Health could come in as her advocates and explain to South Orange Investments that you cannot legally evict a person with diminished capacity. Why the hell did she get it together to go to Legal Aid?

The time is nine A.M. I can go downstairs to the sales office and ask Al Newcum if they've evicted the Lysol Lady yet, or if she is in her apartment, hiding in silence, waiting. They are evicting her because the building, made up of fifty-six units, has been converted to condominiums. Virtually everyone has moved since we were all legally notified four months ago. You have one hundred and twenty days to leave or buy your apartment and South Orange Investments will pay two hundred dollars of your moving costs. This is the law. You also have first-refusal rights on your rental unit. I am buying mine. I am staying. For fifty-two thousand dollars, I get to be around when they evict the Lysol Lady who is crazy and doesn't have fifty-two thousand dollars. Now I wish I had moved.

Going downstairs to the newspaper vending machine, I buy today's Los Angeles Times. A girl who shot up a schoolyard of children "because she didn't like Mondays" is pleading guilty. She will soon get probation. She took a gun and shot schoolchildren because, in effect, she had nothing else to do. Well, today is Monday; she is in court on a Monday, the day she hates. Is there no limit to madness? I wonder about myself. First of all, I doubt if my apartment is worth fifty-two thousand dollars. I am staying because I am both afraid to move—afraid of something new, of change—and because I am lazy. No, that isn't it. I like this building and I live near friends and near stores that mean something to me. I've been here three and a half years. It is a good, solid building, with security gates and dead-bolt locks. I have two cats and they like the closed patio; they can go outside and be safe from dogs. Probably I am thought of as the Cat Man. So everyone has moved out, but the Lysol Lady and the Cat Man stay on.

What bothers me is that I know that the only thing separating me from the Lysol Lady, who is crazy, is the money in my savings account. Money is the official seal of sanity. The Lysol Lady, perhaps, is afraid to move. She is like me. She just wants to stay where she has stayed for several

years, doing what she's been doing. She uses the laundry machines a lot, washing and spin-drying her clothes again and again. This is where I encounter her: I am coming into the laundry room and she is there at the machines to be sure no one steals her laundry. Why won't she look at you? Keeping her face turned away . . . what purpose is served? I sense hate. She hates every other human being. But now consider her situation; those she hates are going to close in on her. What fear she must feel! She gazes about in her apartment, waiting for the knock on the door; she watches the clock and understands!

To the north of us, in Los Angeles, the conversion of rental units to condominiums has been effectively blocked by the city council. Those who rent won out. This is a great victory, but it does not help the Lysol Lady. This is Orange County. Money rules. The very poor live to the east of me: the Mexicans in their Barrio. Sometimes when our security gates open to admit cars, the Chicano women run in with baskets of dirty laundry; they want to use our machines, having none of their own. The people who lived here in the building resented this. When you have even a little money—money enough to live in a modern, full-security, all-electric building—you resent a great deal.

Well, I have to find out if the Lysol Lady has been evicted yet. There is no way to tell by looking at her window; the drapes are always shut. So I go downstairs to the sales office to see Al. However, Al is not there; the office is locked. Then I remember that Al flew to Sacramento on the weekend to get some crucial legal papers that the state lost. But this is precisely the focus of the tragedy; any knock will frighten her. This is her condition. This is the illness itself. So I stand by the fountain that the developers have constructed, and I admire the planter boxes of flowers which they have had brought in . . . they have really made the building look good. It formerly looked like a prison. Now it has become a garden. The developers put a great deal of money into painting and landscaping and, in fact, rebuilding the whole entrance. Water and flowers and french doors . . . and the Lysol Lady silent in her apartment, waiting for the knock.

Perhaps I could tape a note to the Lysol Lady's door. It could read:

Madam, I am sympathetic to your position and would like to assist you. If you wish me to assist you, I live upstairs in apartment C-1.

How would I sign it? Fellow loony, maybe. Fellow loony with fifty-two thousand dollars who is here legally whereas you are, in the eyes of the law, a squatter. As of midnight last night. Although the day before, it was as much your apartment as mine is mine.

I go back upstairs to my apartment with the idea of writing a letter to the woman I once loved and last night dreamed about. All sorts of phrases pass through my mind. I will recreate the vanished relationship with one letter. Such is the power of my words.

What crap. She is gone forever. I don't even have her current address. Laboriously, I could track her down through mutual friends, and then say what?

My darling, I have finally come to my senses. I realize the full extent of my indebtedness to you. Considering the short time we were together, you did more for me than anyone else in my life. It is evident to me that I have made a disastrous error. Could we have dinner together?

As I repeat this hyperbole in my mind, the thought comes to me that it would be horrible but funny if I wrote that letter and then by mistake or design taped it to the Lysol Lady's door. How would she react? Jesus Christ! It would kill her or cure her! Meanwhile, I could write my departed loved one, die feme Geliebte, as follows:

Madam, you are totally nuts. Everyone within miles is aware of it. Your problem is of your own making. Ship up, shape out, get your act together, borrow some money, hire a better lawyer, buy a gun, shoot up a schoolyard. If I can assist you, I live in apartment C-1.

Maybe the plight of the Lysol Lady is funny and I am too depressed by the coming of autumn to realize it. Maybe there will be some good mail today; after all, yesterday was a mail holiday. I will get two days of mail today. That will cheer me up. What, in fact, is going on is that I am feeling sorry for myself; today is Monday and, like the girl in court pleading guilty, I hate Mondays.

Brenda Spenser pleaded guilty to the charge of shooting eleven people, two of whom died. She is seventeen years old, small and very pretty, with red hair; she wears glasses and looks like a child, like one of those she shot. The thought enters my mind that perhaps the Lysol Lady has a gun in her apartment, a thought that should have come to me a long time ago. Perhaps South Orange Investments thought of it. Perhaps this is why Al Newcum's office is locked up today; he is not in Sacramento but in hiding. Although of course he could be in hiding in Sacramento, accomplishing two things at once.

An excellent therapist I once knew made the point that in almost all cases of a criminal psychotic acting-out there was an easier alternative that the disturbed person overlooked. Brenda Spenser, for instance, could have walked to the local supermarket and bought a carton of chocolate milk instead of shooting eleven people, most of them children. The psychotic person actually chooses the more difficult path; he forces his way uphill. It is not true that he takes the line of least resistance, but he thinks that he does. There, precisely, lies his error. The basis of psychosis, in a nutshell, is the chronic inability to see the easy way out. All the behavior, all that constitutes psychotic activity and the psychotic lifestyle, stems from this perceptual flaw.

Sitting in isolation and silence in her antiseptic apartment, waiting for the inexorable knock on the door, the Lysol Lady had contrived to put herself in the most difficult circumstances possible. What was easy was made hard. What was hard was transmuted, finally, into the impossible, and there the psychotic lifestyle ends: when the impossible closes in and there are no options at all, even difficult ones. That is the rest of the definition of psychosis: At the end there lies a dead end. And, at that point, the psychotic person freezes. If you have ever seen it happen—well, it is an amazing sight. The person congeals like a motor that has seized. It occurs suddenly. One moment the person is in motion—the pistons are going up and down frantically—and then it's an inert block. That is because the path has run out for that person, the path he probably got onto years before. It is kinetic death. "Place there is none," St. Augustine wrote. "We go backward and forward, and there is no place."

The spot where the Lysol Lady had trapped herself was her own apartment, but it was no longer her own apartment. She had found a place at which to psychologically die and then South Orange Investments had taken it away from her. They had robbed her of her own grave.

What I can't get out of my mind is the notion that my fate is tied to that of the Lysol Lady. A fiscal entry in the computer at Mutual Savings divides us and it is a mythical division; it is real only so long as people such as South Orange Investments—specifically South Orange Investments—are willing to agree that it is real. It seems to me to be nothing more than a social convention, such as wearing matching socks. In another way it's like the value of gold. The value of gold is what people agree on, which is like a game played by children: "Let's agree that that tree is third base." Suppose my television set worked because my friends and I agreed that it worked. We could sit before a blank screen forever that way. In that case, it could be said that the Lysol Lady's failure lay in not having entered into a compact with the rest of us, a consensus. Underlying everything else there is this unwritten contract to which the Lysol Lady is not a party. But I am amazed to think that the failure to enter into an agreement palpably childish and irrational leads inevitably to kinetic death, to total stoppage of the organism.

Argued this way, one could say that the Lysol Lady had failed to be a child. She was too adult. She couldn't or wouldn't play a game. The element which had taken over her life was the element of

the grim. She never smiled. No one had ever seen her do anything but glower in a vague, undirected way.

Perhaps, then, she played a grimmer game rather than no game; perhaps her game was one of combat, in which case she now had what she wanted, even though she was losing. It was at least a situation she understood. South Orange Investments had entered the Lysol Lady's world. Perhaps being a squatter rather than a tenant was satisfying to her. Maybe we all secretly will everything that happens to us. In that case, does the psychotic person will his own ultimate kinetic death, his own dead end path? Does he play to lose?

I didn't see Al Newcum that day, but I did see him the next day; he had returned from Sacramento and opened up his office.

"Is the woman in B-15 still there?" I asked him. "Or did you evict her?"

"Mrs. Archer?" Newcum said. "Oh, the other morning she moved out; she's gone. The Santa Ana Housing Authority found her a place over on Bristol." He leaned back in his swivel chair and crossed his legs- his slacks as always. were sharply creased. "She went to them a couple weeks ago."

"An apartment she can afford?" I said

"They picked up the bill. They're paying her rent; she talked them into it. She's a hardship case."

"Christ," I said, "I wish someone would pay my rent."

"You're not paying rent," Newcum said. "You're buying your apartment."

## THE ALIEN MIND

Inert within the depths of his theta chamber, he heard the faint tone and then the synthovoice. "Five minutes."

"Okay," he said, and struggled out of his deep sleep. He had five minutes to adjust the course of his ship; something had gone wrong with the auto-control system. An error on his part? Not likely; he never made errors. Jason Bedford make errors? Hardly.

As he made his way unsteadily to the control module, he saw that Norman, who had been sent with him to amuse him, was also awake. The cat floated slowly in circles, batting at a pen that somehow had gotten loose. Strange, Bedford thought.

"I thought you were unconscious with me." He examined the readout of the ship's course. Impossible! A fifth-parsec off in the direction of Sinus. It would add a week to his journey. With grim precision he reset the controls, then sent out an alert signal to Meknos HI, his destination.

"Troubles?" the Meknosian operator answered. The voice was dry and cold, the calculating monotone of something that always made Bedford think of snakes.

He explained his situation.

"We need the vaccine," the Meknosian said. "Try to stay on course."

Norman the cat floated majestically by the control module, reached out a paw, and jabbed at random; two activated buttons sounded faint bleeps and the ship altered course.

"So you did it," Bedford said. "You humiliated me in the eyes of an alien. You have reduced me to idiocy vis-a-vis the alien mind." He grabbed the cat. And squeezed.

"What was that strange sound?" the Meknosian operator asked. "A kind of lament."

Bedford said quietly, "There's nothing left to lamem Forget you heard it." He shut off the radio, carried the cat's body to the trash sphincter, and ejected it.

A moment later he had returned to his theta chamber and, once more, dozed. This time there would be no tampering with his controls. He dozed in peace.

When his ship docked at Meknos III, the senior member of the alien medical team greeted him with an odd request. "We would like to see your pet."

"I have no pet," Bedford said. Certainly it was true.

"According to the manifest filed with us in advance—"

"It is really none of your business," Bedford said. "You have your vaccine; I'll be taking off."

The Meknosian said, "The safety of any life-form is our business. We will inspect your ship."

"For a cat that doesn't exist," Bedford said.

Their search proved futile. Impatiently, Bedford watched the alien creatures scrutinize every storage locker and passageway on his ship. Unfortunately, the Meknosians found ten sacks of dry cat kibble. A lengthy discussion ensued among them, in their own language.

"Do I have permission," Bedford said harshly, "to return to Earth now? I'm on a tight schedule." What the aliens were thinking and saying was of no importance to him; he wished only to return to his silent theta chamber and profound sleep.

"You'll have to go through decontamination procedure A," the senior Meknosian medical officer said. "So that no spore or virus from—"

"I realize that," Bedford said. "Let's get it done." Later, when decontamination had been completed and he was back in his ship starting up the drive, his radio came on. It was one or another of the Meknosians; to Bedford they all looked alike. "What was the cat's name?" the Meknosian asked.

"Norman," Bedford said, and jabbed the ignite switch. His ship shot upward and he smiled.

He did not smile, however, when he found the power supply to his theta chamber missing. Nor did he smile when the backup unit could also not be located. Did I forget to bring it? he asked himself. No, he decided; I wouldn't do that. They took it.

Two years before he reached Terra. Two years of full consciousness on his part, deprived of theta sleep; two years of sitting or floating or—as he had seen in military-preparedness training holofilms—curled up in a corner, totally psychotic.

He punched out a radio request to return to Meknos III. No response. Well, so much for that.

Seated at his control module, he snapped on the little inboard computer and said, "My theta chamber won't function; it's been sabotaged. What do you suggest I do for two years?"

THERE ARE EMERGENCY ENTERTAINING TAPES

"Right," he said. He would have remembered. "Thank you." Pressing the proper button, he caused the door of the tape compartment to slide open.

No tapes. Only a cat toy—a miniature punching bag—that had been included for Norman; he had never gotten around to giving it to him. Otherwise . . . bare shelves.

The alien mind, Bedford thought. Mysterious and cruel.

Setting the ship's audio recorder going, he said calmly and with as much conviction as possible, "What I will do is build my next two years around the daily routine. First, there are meals. I will spend as much time as possible planning, fixing, eating, and enjoying delicious repasts. During the time ahead of me I will try out every combination of victuals possible." Unsteadily, he rose and made his way to the massive food storage locker.

As he stood gazing into the tightly packed locker—tightly packed with row upon row of identical snacks—he thought, On the other hand, there's not much you can do with a two-year supply of cat kibble. In the way of variety. Are they all the same flavor?

They were all the same flavor.



## THE EXIT DOOR LEADS IN

Bob Bibleman had the impression that robots wouldn't look you in the eye. And when one had been in the vicinity small valuable objects disappeared. A robot's idea of order was to stack everything into one pile. Nonetheless, Bibleman had to order lunch from robots, since vending ranked too low on the wage scale to attract humans.

"A hamburger, fries, strawberry shake, and—" Bibleman paused, reading the printout. "Make that a supreme double cheeseburger, fries, a chocolate malt—"

"Wait a minute," the robot said. "I'm already working on the burger. You want to buy into this week's contest while you're waiting?"

"I don't get the royal cheeseburger," Bibleman said.

"That's right."

It was hell living in the twenty-first century. Information transfer had reached the velocity of light. Bible-man's older brother had once fed a ten-word plot outline into a robot fiction machine, changed his mind as to the outcome, and found that the novel was already in print. He had had to program a sequel in order to make his correction.

"What's the prize structure in the contest?" Bible-man asked.

At once the printout posted all the odds, from first prize down to last. Naturally, the robot blanked out the display before Bibleman could read it.

"What is first prize?" Bibleman said.

"I can't tell you that," the robot said. From its slot came a hamburger, french fries, and a strawberry shake. "That'll be one thousand dollars in cash."

"Give me a hint," Bibleman said as he paid.

"It's everywhere and nowhere. It's existed since the seventeenth century. Originally it was invisible. Then it became royal. You can't get in unless you're smart, although cheating helps and so does being rich. What does the word 'heavy' suggest to you?"

"Profound."

"No, the literal meaning."

"Mass." Bibleman pondered. "What is this, a contest to see who can figure out what the prize is? I give up."

"Pay the six dollars," the robot said, "to cover our costs, and you'll receive an—"

"Gravity," Bibleman broke in. "Sir Isaac Newton. The Royal College of England. Am I right?"

"Right," the robot said. "Six dollars entitles you to a chance to go to college—a statistical chance, at the posted odds. What's six dollars? Prarfare."

Bibleman handed over a six-dollar coin.

"You win," the robot said. "You get to go to college. You beat the odds, which were two trillion to one against. Let me be the first to congratulate you. If I had a hand, I'd shake hands with you. This will change your life. This has been your lucky day."

"It's a setup," Bibleman said, feeling a rush of anxiety.

"You're right," the robot said, and it looked Bibleman right in the eye. "It's also mandatory that you accept your prize. The college is a military college located in Buttfuck, Egypt, so to speak. But that's no problem; you'll be taken there. Go home and start packing."

"Can't I eat my hamburger and drink—" "I'd suggest you start packing right away." Behind Bibleman a man and woman had lined up: reflexively he got out of their way, trying to hold on to his tray of food, feeling dizzy.

"A charbroiled steak sandwich," the man said, "onion rings, root beer, and that's it."

The robot said, "Care to buy into the contest? Terrific prizes." It flashed the odds on its display panel.

When Bob Bibleman unlocked the door of his one-room apartment, his telephone was on. It was looking for him.

"There you are," the telephone said.

"I'm not going to do it," Bibleman said.

"Sure you are," the phone said. "Do you know who this is? Read over your certificate, your first-prize legal form. You hold the rank of shavetail. I'm Major Casals. You're under my jurisdiction. If I tell you to piss purple, you'll piss purple. How soon can you be on a transplan rocket? Do you have friends you want to say goodbye to? A sweetheart, perhaps? Your mother?"

"Am I coming back?" Bibleman said with anger. "I mean, who are we fighting, this college? For that matter, what college is it? Who is on the faculty? Is it a liberal arts college or does it specialize in the hard sciences? Is it government-sponsored? Does it offer—"

"Just calm down," Major Casals said quietly.

Bibleman seated himself. He discovered that his hands were shaking. To himself he thought, I was born in the wrong century. A hundred years ago this wouldn't have happened and a hundred years from now it will be illegal. What I need is a lawyer.

His life had been a quiet one. He had, over the years, advanced to the modest position of floating-home salesman. For a man twenty-two years old, that wasn't bad. He almost owned his one-room apartment; that is, he rented with an option to buy. It was a small life, as lives went; he did not ask too much and he did not complain—normally—at what he received. Although he did not understand the tax structure that cut through his income, he accepted it; he accepted a modified state of penury the same way he accepted it Mien a girl would not go to bed with him. In a sense this defined him; this was his measure. He submitted to what he did not like, and he regarded this attitude as a virtue. Most people in authority over him considered him a good person. As to those over whom he had authority, that was a class with zero members. His boss at Cloud Nine Homes told him what to do and his customers, really, told him what to do. The government told everyone what to do, or so he assumed. He had very few dealings with the

government. That was neither a virtue nor a vice; it was simply good luck.

Once he had experienced vague dreams. They had to do with giving to the poor. In high school he had read Charles Dickens and a vivid idea of the oppressed had fixed itself in his mind to the point where he could see them: all those who did not have a one-room apartment and a job and a high school education. Certain vague place names had floated through his head, gleaned from TV, places like India, where heavy-duty machinery swept up the dying. Once a teaching machine had told him, You have a good heart. Thai amazed him—not that a machine would say so, but that it would say it to him. A girl had told him the same thing. He marveled at this. Vast forces colluding to tell him that he was not a bad person! It was a mystery and a delight.

But those days had passed. He no longer read novels, and the girl had been transferred to Frankfurt. Now he had been set up by a robot, a cheap machine, to shovel shit in the boonies, dragooned by a mechanical scam that was probably pulling citizens off the streets in record numbers. This was not a college he was going to; he had won nothing. He had won a stint at some kind of forced-labor camp, most likely. The exit door leads in, he thought to himself. Which is to say, when they want you they already have you; all they need is the paperwork. And a computer can process the forms at the touch of a key. The H key for hell and the S key for slave, he thought. And the Y key for you.

Don't forget your toothbrush, he thought. You may need it.

On the phone screen Major Casals regarded him, as if silently estimating the chances that Bob Bibleman might bolt. Two trillion to one I will, Bibleman thought. But the one will win, as in the contest; I'll do what I'm told.

"Please," Bibleman said, "let me ask you one thing, and give me an honest answer."

"Of course," Major Casals said.

"If I hadn't gone up to that Earl's Senior robot and—"

"We'd have gotten you anyhow," Major Casals said.

"Okay," Bibleman said, nodding. "Thanks. It makes me feel better. I don't have to tell myself stupid stuff like, If only I hadn't felt like a hamburger and fries. If only—" He broke off. "I'd better pack."

Major Casals said, "We've been running an evaluation on you for several months. You're overly endowed for the kind of work you do. And undereducated. You need more education. You're entitled to more education."

Astonished, Bibleman said, "You're talking about it as if it's a genuine college!"

"It is. It's the finest in the system. It isn't advertised; something like this can't be. No one selects it; the college selects you. Those were not joke odds that you saw posted. You can't really imagine being admitted to the finest college in the system by this method, can you, Mr. Bibleman? You have a lot to learn."

"How long will I be at the college?" Bibleman said.

Major Casals said, "Until you have learned."

They gave him a physical, a haircut, a uniform, and a place to bunk down, and many psychological tests. Bibleman suspected that the true purpose of the tests was to determine if he were a latent homosexual, and then he suspected that his suspicions indicated that he was a latent homosexual, so he abandoned the suspicions and supposed instead that they were sly intelligence and aptitude tests, and he informed himself that «e was showing both: intelligence and aptitude. He also ^formed himself that he looked great in his uniform, even though it was the same uniform that everyone else wore. That is why they call it a uniform, he reminded himself as he sat on the edge of his bunk reading his orientation pamphlets.

The first pamphlet pointed out that it was a great honor to be admitted to the College. That was its name—the one word. How strange, he thought, puzzled. It's like naming your cat Cat and your dog Dog. This is my mother, Mrs. Mother, and my father, Mr. Father. Are these people working right? he wondered. It had been a phobia of his for years that someday he would fall into the hands of madmen—in particular, madmen who seemed sane up until the last moment. To Bibleman this was the essence of horror.

As he sat scrutinizing the pamphlets, a red-haired girl, wearing the College uniform, came over and seated herself beside him. She seemed perplexed.

"Maybe you can help me," she said. "What is a syllabus? It says here that we'll be given a syllabus. This place is screwing up my head."

Bibleman said, "We've been dragooned off the streets to shovel shit."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Can't we just leave?"

"You leave first," Bibleman said. "And I'll wait and see what happens to you."

The girl laughed. "I guess you don't know what a syllabus is."

"Sure I do. It's an abstract of courses or topics."

"Yes, and pigs can whistle."

He regarded her. The girl regarded him.

"We're going to be here forever," the girl said.

Her name, she told him, was Mary Lorne. She was, he decided, pretty, wistful, afraid, and putting up a good front. Together they joined the other new students for a showing of a recent Herbie the Hyena cartoon which Bibleman had seen; it was the episode in which Herbie attempted to assassinate the Russian monk Rasputin. In his usual fashion, Herbie the Hyena poisoned his victim, shot him, blew him up six times, stabbed him, tied him up with chains and sank him in the Volga, tore him apart with wild horses, and finally shot him to the moon strapped to a rocket. The cartoon bored Bibleman. He did not give a damn about Herbie the Hyena or Russian history and he wondered if this was a sample of the College's level of pedagogy. He could imagine Herbie the Hyena illustrating Heisen-berg's indeterminacy principle. Herbie—in Bibleman's mind—chased after a subatomic particle fruitlessly, the particle bobbing up at random here and there . . . Herbie making wild swings at it with a hammer; then a whole flock of subatomic particles jeering at Herbie, who was doomed as always to fuck up.

"What are you thinking?" Mary whispered to him.

The cartoon ended; the hall lights came on. There stood Major Casals on the stage, larger than on the phone. The fun is over, Bibleman said to himself. He could not imagine Major Casals chasing subatomic particles fruitlessly with wild swings of a sledgehammer. He felt himself grow cold and grim and a little afraid.

The lecture had to do with classified information. Behind Major Casals a giant hologram lit up with a schematic diagram of a homeostatic drilling rig. Within the hologram the rig rotated so that they could see it from all angles. Different stages of the rig's interior glowed in various colors.

"I asked what you were thinking," Mary whispered.

"We have to listen," Bibleman said quietly.

Mary said, equally quietly, "It finds titanium ore on its own. Big deal. Titanium is the ninth most abundant element in the crust of the planet. I'd be impressed if it could seek out and mine pure wurtzite, which is found only at Potosi, Bolivia; Butte, Montana; and Goldfield, Nevada."

"Why is that?" Bibleman said.

"Because," Mary said, "wurtzite is unstable at temperatures below one thousand degrees centigrade. And further—" She broke off. Major Casals had ceased talking and was looking at her.

"Would you repeat that for all of us, young woman?" Major Casals said.

Standing, Mary said, "Wurtzite is unstable at temperatures below one thousand degrees centigrade." Her voice was steady.

Immediately the hologram behind Major Casals switched to a readout of data on zinc-sulfide minerals.

"I don't see 'wurtzite' listed," Major Casals said.

"It's given on the chart in its inverted form," Mary said, her arms folded. "Which is sphalerite. Correctly, it is ZnS, of the sulfide group of the AX type. It's related to greenockite."

"Sit down," Major Casals said. The readout within the hologram now showed the characteristics of greenockite.

As she seated herself, Mary said, "I'm right. They don't have a homeostatic drilling rig for wurtzite because there is no—"

"Your name is?" Major Casals said, pen and pad poised.

"Mary Wurtz." Her voice was totally without emotion. "My father was Charles-Adolphe Wurtz."

"The discoverer of wurtzite?" Major Casals said uncertainly; his pen wavered.

"That's right," Mary said. Turning toward Bibleman she winked.

"Thank you for the information," Major Casals said. He made a motion and the hologram now showed a flying buttress and, in comparison to it, a normal buttress,

"My point," Major Casals said, "is simply that certain information such as architectural principles of long-standing—"

"Most architectural principles are long-standing," Mary said. Major Casals paused.

"Otherwise they'd serve no purpose," Mary said.

"Why not?" Major Casals said, and then he colored.

Several uniformed students laughed.

"Information of that type," Major Casals continued, "is not classified. But a good deal of what you will be learning is classified. This is why the College is under military charter. To reveal or transmit or make public classified information given you during your schooling here falls under the jurisdiction of the military. For a breach of these statutes you would be tried by a military tribunal."

The students murmured. To himself Bibleman thought, Banged, ganged, and then some. No one spoke. Even the girl beside him was silent. A complicated expression had crossed her face, however, a deeply introverted look, somber and—he thought—unusually mature. It made her seem older, no longer a girl. It made him wonder just how old she really was. It was as if in her features a thousand years had surfaced before him as he scrutinized her and pondered—and as she scrutinized and pondered the officer on the stage and the great information hologram behind him. What is she thinking? he wondered. Is she going to say something more? How can she be not afraid to speak up? We've been told we are under military law.

Major Casals said, "I am going to give you an instance of a strictly classified cluster of data. It deals with the Panther Engine." Behind him the hologram, surprisingly, became blank.

"Sir," one of the students said, "the hologram isn't showing anything."

"This is not an area that will be dealt with in your studies here," Major Casals said. "The Panther Engine is a two-rotor system, opposed rotors serving a common main shaft. Its main advantage is a total lack of centrifugal torque in the housing. A cam chain is thrown between the opposed rotors, which permits the main shaft to reverse itself without hysteresis." Behind him the big hologram remained blank.

Strange, Bibleman thought. An eerie sensation: information without information, as if the computer has gone blind.

Major Casals said, "The College is forbidden to release any information about the Panther Engine. It cannot be programmed to do otherwise. In fact, it knows nothing about the Panther Engine; it is programmed to destroy any information it receives in that sector."

Raising his hand, a student said, "So even if someone fed information into the College about the Panther—"

"It would eject the data," Major Casals said.

"Is this a unique situation?" another student asked.

"No," Major Casals said.

"Then there're a number of areas we can't get printouts for," a student murmured.

"Nothing of importance," Major Casals said. "At least as far as your studies are concerned."

The students were silent.

"The subjects which you will study," Major Casals said, "will be assigned to you, based on your aptitude and personality profiles. I'll call off your names and you will come forward for your allocation of topic assignment. The College itself has made the final decision for each of you, so you can be sure no error has been made."

What if I get proctology? Bibleman asked himself. In-panic he thought, Or podiatry. Or herpetology. Or suppose the College in its infinite computerid wisdom decides to ram into me all the information in the universe pertaining to or resembling herpes labialis . . . or things even worse. If there is anything worse.

"What you want," Mary said, as the names were read alphabetically, "is a program that'll earn you a living. You have to be practical. I know what I'll get; I know where my strong point lies. It'll be chemistry."

His name was called; rising, he walked up the aisle to Major Casals. They looked at each other, and then Casals handed him an unsealed envelope.

Stiffly, Bibleman returned to his seat.

"You want me to open it?" Mary said.

Wordlessly, Bibleman passed the envelope to her. She opened it and studied the printout.

"Can I earn a living with it?" he said.

She smiled. "Yes, it's a high-paying field. Almost as good as—well, let's just say that the colony planets are really in need of this. You could go to work anywhere."

Looking over her shoulder, he saw the words on the page.

#### COSMOLOGY COSMOGONY PRE-SOCRATICS

"Pre-Socratic philosophy," Mary said. "Almost as good as structural engineering." She passed him the paper. "I shouldn't kid you. No, it's not really something you can make a living at, unless you teach . . . but maybe it interests you. Does it interest you?"

"No," he said shortly.

"I wonder why the College picked it, then," Mary said.

"What the hell," he said, "is cosmogony?"

"How the universe came into being. Aren't you interested in how the universe—" She paused, eyeing him. "You certainly won't be asking for printouts of any classified material," she said meditatively. "Maybe that's it," she murmured, to herself. "They won't have to watchdog you."

"I can be trusted with classified material," he said.

"Can you? Do you know yourself? But you'll be getting into that when the College bombards you with early Greek thought. 'Know thyself.' Apollo's motto at Delphi. It sums up half of Greek philosophy."

Bibleman said, "I'm not going up before a military tribunal for making public classified military materi-«•" He thought, then, about the Panther Engine and he Realized, fully realized, that a really grim message had been spelled out in that little lecture by Major Casals.

I wonder what Herbie the Hyena's motto is," he said.

"I am determined to prove a villain," Mary said.

"And hate the idle pleasures of these days. Plots have I laid." She reached out to touch him on the arm "Remember? The Herbie the Hyena cartoon version of Richard the Third."

"Mary Lome," Major Casals said, reading off the list.

"Excuse me." She went up, returned with her envelope, smiling. "Leprology," she said to Bibleman. "The study and treatment of leprosy. I'm kidding; it's chemistry."

"You'll be studying classified material," Bibleman said.

"Yes," she said. "I know."

On the first day of his study program, Bob Bibleman set his College input-output terminal on AUDIO and punched the proper key for his coded course.

"Thales of Miletus," the terminal said. "The founder of the Ionian school of natural philosophy." "What did he teach?" Bibleman said.

"That the world floated on water, was sustained by water, and originated in water."

"That's really stupid," Bibleman said.

The College terminal said, "Thales based this on the discovery of fossil fish far inland, even at high altitudes. So it is not as stupid as it sounds." It showed on its holoscreen a great deal of written information, no part of which struck Bibleman as very interesting. Anyhow, he had requested AUDIO. "It is generally considered that Thales was the first rational man in history," the terminal said.

"What about Ikhnaton?" Bibleman said.

"He was strange."

"Moses?"

"Likewise strange."

"Hammurabi?"

"How do you spell that?"

"I'm not sure. I've just heard the name."

"Then we will discuss Anaximander," the College terminal said. "And, in a cursory initial survey, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Melissus—wait a minute; I forgot Heraclitus and Cratylus. And we will study Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Zeno—"

"Christ," Bibleman said.

"That's another program," the College terminal said.

"Just continue," Bibleman said.

"Are you taking notes?"

"That's my business."

"You seem to be in a state of conflict."

Bibleman said, "What happens to me if I flunk out of the College?"

"You go to jail."

"I'll take notes."

"Since you are so driven—"

"What?"

"Since you are so full of conflict, you should find Empedocles interesting. He was the first dialectical philosopher. Empedocles believed that the basis of reality was an antithetical conflict between the forces of Love and Strife. Under Love the whole cosmos is a duly proportioned mixture, called a *krasis*. This *krasis* is a spherical deity, a single perfect mind which spends all its time—"

"Is there any practical application to any of this?" Bibleman interrupted.

"The two antithetical forces of Love and Strife resemble the Taoist elements of Yang and Yin with their perpetual interaction from which all change takes place."

"Practical application."

"Twin mutually opposed constituents." On the holoscreen a schematic diagram, very complex, formed. "The two-rotor Panther Engine."

"What?" Bibleman said, sitting upright in his seat. He made out the large words PANTHER HYDRODRIVE SYSTEM TOP SECRET above the schematic comprising the readout. Instantly he pressed the PRINT key; the machinery of the terminal whirred and three sheets of Paper slid down into the RETRIEVE slot.

They overlooked it, Bibleman realized, this entry in the College's memory banks relating to the Panther Engine. Somehow the cross-referencing got lost. No one thought of pre-Socratic

philosophy—who would expect an entry on an engine, a modern-day top-secret engine, under the category PHILOSOPHY, PRE-SOCRATIC, subheading EMPEDOCLES?

I've got it in my hands, he said to himself as he swiftly lifted out the three sheets of paper. He folded them up and stuck them into the notebook the College had provided.

I've hit it, he thought. Right off the bat. Where the hell am I going to put these schematics? Can't hide them in my locker. And then he thought, Have I committed a crime already, by asking for a written printout?

"Empedocles," the terminal was saying, "believed in four elements as being perpetually rearranged: earth, water, air, and fire. These elements eternally—"

Click. Bibleman had shut the terminal down. The holoscreen faded to opaque gray.

Too much learning doth make a man slow, he thought as he got to his feet and started from the cubicle. Fast of wit but slow of foot. Where the hell am I going to hide the schematics? he asked himself again as he walked rapidly down the hall toward the ascent tube. Well, he realized, they don't know I have them; I can take my time. The thing to do is hide them at a random place, he decided, as the tube carried him to the surface. And even if they find them they won't be able to trace them back to me, not unless they go to the trouble of dusting for fingerprints.

This could be worth billions of dollars, he said to himself. A great joy filled him and then came the fear. He discovered that he was trembling. Will they ever be pissed, he said to himself. When they find out, / won't be pissing purple; they'll be pissing purple. The College itself will, when it discovers its error.

And the error, he thought, is on its part, not mine. The College fucked up and that's too bad.

In the dorm where his bunk was located, he found a laundry room maintained by a silent robot staff, and when no robot was watching he hid the three pages of schematics near the bottom of a huge pile of bed sheets. As high as the ceiling, this pile. They won't get down to the schematics this year. I have plenty of time to decide what to do.

Looking at his watch, he saw that the afternoon had almost come to an end. At five o'clock he would be seated in the cafeteria, eating dinner with Mary.

She met him a little after five o'clock; her face showed signs of fatigue.

"How'd it go?" she said to him as they stood in line with their trays.

"Fine," Bibleman said.

"Did you get to Zeno? I always liked Zeno; he proved that motion is impossible. So I guess I'm still in my mother's womb. You look strange." She eyed him.

"Just sick of listening to how the earth rests on the back of a giant turtle."

"Or is suspended on a long string," Mary said. Together they made their way among the other students to an empty table. "You're not eating much."

"Feeling like eating," Bibleman said as he drank his cup of coffee, "is what got me here in the first place."

"You could flunk out."

"And go to jail."

Mary said, "The College is programmed to say that. Much of it is probably just threats. Talk loudly and carry a small stick, so to speak."

"I have it," Bibleman said.

"You have what?" She ceased eating and regarded him.

He said, "The Panther Engine."

Gazing at him, the girl was silent.

"The schematics," he said.



"Lower your goddam voice."

"They missed a citation in the memory storage. Now that I have them I don't know what to do. Just start talking, probably. And hope no one stops me."

"They don't know? The College didn't self-monitor?"

"I have no reason to think it's aware of what it did."

"Jesus Christ," Mary said softly. "On your first day. You had better do a lot of slow, careful thinking."

"I can destroy them," he said.

"Or sell them."

He said, "I looked them over. There's an analysis on the final page. The Panther—"

"Just say it" Mary said.

"It can be used as a hydroelectric turbine and cut costs in half. I couldn't understand the technical language, but I did figure out that. Cheap power source. Very cheap."

"So everyone would benefit."

He nodded.

"They really screwed up," Mary said. "What was it Casals told us? 'Even if someone fed data into the College about the—about it, the College would eject the data.'" She began eating slowly, meditatively. "And they're withholding it from the public. It must be industry pressure. Nice." "What should I do?" Bibleman said. "I can't tell you that."

"What I was thinking is that I could take the schematics to one of the colony planets where the authorities have less control. I could find an independent firm and make a deal with them. The government wouldn't know how—"

"They'd figure out where the schematics came from," Mary said. "They'd trace it back to you."

"Then I better burn them."

Mary said, "You have a very difficult decision to make. On the one hand, you have classified information in your possession which you obtained illegally. On the other..."

"I didn't obtain it illegally. The College screwed up."

Calmly, she continued. "You broke the law, military law, when you asked for a written transcript. You should have reported the breach of security as soon as you discovered it. They would have rewarded you. Major Casals would have said nice things to you."

"I'm scared," Bibleman said, and he felt the fear moving around inside him, shifting about and growing; as he held his plastic coffee cup it shook, and some of the coffee spilled onto his uniform.

Mary, with a paper napkin, dabbed at the coffee stain.

"It won't come off," she said.

"Symbolism," Bibleman said. "Lady Macbeth. I always wanted to have a dog named Spot so I could say, 'Out, out, damned Spot.'"

"I am not going to tell you what to do," Mary said. "This is a decision that you will make alone. It isn't ethical for you even to discuss it with me; that could be considered conspiracy and put us both in prison."

"Prison," he echoed.

"You have it within your—Christ, I was going to say, 'You have it within your power to provide a cheap power source to human civilization.'" She laughed and shook her head. "I guess this scares me, too. Do what you think is right. If you think it's right to publish the schematics—"

"I never thought of that. Just publish them. Some magazine or newspaper. A slave printing construct could print it and distribute it all over the solar system in fifteen minutes." All I have to do, he realized, is pay the fee and then feed in the three pages of schematics. As simple as that. And then

spend the rest of my life in jail or anyhow in court. Maybe the adjudication would 89 in my favor. There are precedents in history where vital classified material—military classified material— was stolen and published, and not only was the person found innocent but we now realize that he was a hero; he served the welfare of the human race itself, and risked his life.

Approaching their table, two armed military security guards closed in on Bob Bibleman; he stared at them, Not believing what he saw but thinking, Believe it.

"Student Bibleman?" one of them said.

"It's on my uniform," Bibleman said.

"Hold out your hands, Student Bibleman." The larger of the two security guards snapped handcuffs on him.

Mary said nothing; she continued slowly eating.

In Major Casals's office Bibleman waited, grasping the fact that he was being—as the technical term had it—"detained." He felt glum. He wondered what they would do. He wondered if he had been set up. He wondered what he would do if he were charged. He wondered why it was taking so long. And then he wondered what it was all about really and he wondered whether he would understand the grand issues if he continued with his courses in COSMOLOGY COSMOGONY PRE-SOCRATICS.

Entering the office, Major Casals said briskly, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Can these handcuffs be removed?" Bibleman said. They hurt his wrists; they had been clapped on to him as tightly as possible. His bone structure ached.

"We couldn't find the schematics," Casals said, seating himself behind his desk.

"What schematics?"

"For the Panther Engine."

"There aren't supposed to be any schematics for the Panther Engine. You told us that in orientation."

"Did you program your terminal for that deliberately? Or did it just happen to come up?"

"My terminal programmed itself to talk about water," Bibleman said. "The universe is composed of water."

"It automatically notified security when you asked for a written transcript. All written transcripts are monitored."

"Fuck you," Bibleman said.

Major Casals said, "I tell you what. We're only interested in getting the schematics back; we're not interested in putting you in the slam. Return them and you won't be tried."

"Return what?" Bibleman said, but he knew it was a waste of time.

"Can I think it over?"

"Yes."

"Can I go? I feel like going to sleep. I'm tired. I feel like having these cuffs off."

Removing the cuffs, Major Casals said, "We made an agreement, with all of you, an agreement between the College and the students, about classified material. You entered into that agreement."

"Freely?" Bibleman said.

"Well, no. But the agreement was known to you. When you discovered the schematics for the Panther Engine encoded in the College's memory and available to anyone who happened for any reason, any reason whatsoever, to ask for a practical application of pre-Socratic—"

"I was as surprised as hell," Bibleman said. "I still am."

"Loyalty is an ethical principle. I'll tell you what; I'll waive the punishment factor and put it on the basis of loyalty to the College. A responsible person obeys laws and agreements entered into. Return

the schematics and you can continue your courses here at the College. In fact, we'll give you permission to select what subjects you want; they won't be assigned to you. I think you're good college material. Think it over and report back to me tomorrow morning, between eight and nine, here in my office. Don't talk to anyone; don't try to discuss it. You'll be watched. Don't try to leave the grounds. Okay?"

"Okay," Bibleman said woodenly.

He dreamed that night that he had died. In his dream vast spaces stretched out, and his father was coming toward him, very slowly, out of a dark glade and into the sunlight. His father seemed glad to see him, and Bibleman felt his father's love.

When he awoke, the feeling of being loved by his father remained. As he put on his uniform, he thought about his father and how rarely, in actual life, he had gotten that love. It made him feel lonely, now, his father being dead and his mother as well. Killed in a nuclear-power accident, along with a whole lot of other people.

They say someone important to you waits for you on the other side, he thought. Maybe by the time I die Major Casals will be dead and he will be waiting for me, to greet me gladly. Major Casals and my father combined as one.

What am I going to do? he asked himself. They have waived the punitive aspects; it's reduced to essentials, a matter of loyalty. Am I a loyal person? Do I qualify?

The hell with it, he said to himself. He looked at his watch. Eight-thirty. My father would be proud of me, he thought. For what I am going to do.

Going into the laundry room, he scoped out the situation. No robots in sight. He dug down in the pile of bed sheets, found the pages of schematics, took them out, looked them over, and headed for the tube that would take him to Major Casals's office.

"You have them," Casals said as Bibleman entered. Bibleman handed the three sheets of paper over to him.

"And you made no other copies?" Casals asked.

"No."

"You give me your word of honor?" "Yes," Bibleman said.

"You are herewith expelled from the College," Major Casals said.

"What?" Bibleman said.

Casals pressed a button on his desk. "Come in."

The door opened and Mary Lome stood there.

"I do not represent the College," Major Casals said to Bibleman. "You were set up."

"I am the College," Mary said.

Major Casals said, "Sit down, Bibleman. She will explain it to you before you leave."

"I failed?" Bibleman said.

"You failed me," Mary said. "The purpose of the test was to teach you to stand on your own feet, even if it meant challenging authority. The covert message of institutions is: 'Submit to that which you psychologically construe as an authority.' A good school trains the whole person; it isn't a matter of data and information; I was trying to make you morally and psychologically complete. But a person can't be commanded to disobey. You can't order someone to rebel. All I could do was give you a model, an example."

Bibleman thought. When she talked back to Casals at the initial orientation. He felt numb.

"The Panther Engine is worthless," Mary said, "as a technological artifact. This is a standard test we use on each student, no matter what study course he is assigned."

"They all got a readout on the Panther Engine?" Bibleman said with disbelief. He stared at the girl.

"They will, one by one. Yours came very quickly. First you are told that it is classified; you are told the penalty for releasing classified information; then you are leaked the information. It is hoped that you will make it public or at least try to make it public."

Major Casals said, "You saw on the third page of the printout that the engine supplied an economical source of hydroelectric power. That was important. You knew that the public would benefit if the engine design was released."

"And legal penalties were waived," Mary said. "So what you did was not done out of fear."

"Loyalty," Bibleman said. "I did it out of loyalty."

"To what?" Mary said.

He was silent; he could not think.

"To a holoscreen?" Major Casals said.

"To you," Bibleman said.

Major Casals said, "I am someone who insulted you and derided you. Someone who treated you like dirt. I told you that if I ordered you to piss purple, you—"

"Okay," Bibleman said. "Enough."

"Goodbye," Mary said.

"What?" Bibleman said, startled.

"You're leaving. You're going back to your life and job, what you had before we picked you."

Bibleman said, "I'd like another chance."

"But," Mary said, "you know how the test works now. So it can never be given to you again. You know what is really wanted from you by the College. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Major Casals said.

Bibleman said nothing.

Holding out her hand, Mary said, "Shake?"

Blindly, Bibleman shook hands with her. Major Casals only stared at him blankly; he did not offer his hand. He seemed to be engrossed in some other topic perhaps some other person. Another student was on his mind, perhaps. Bibleman could not tell.

Three nights later, as he wandered aimlessly through the mixture of lights and darkness of the city, Bob Bibleman saw ahead of him a robot food vendor at its eternal post. A teenage boy was in the process of buying a taco and an apple turnover. Bob Bibleman lined up behind the boy and stood waiting, his hands in his pockets, no thoughts coming to him, only a dull feeling, a sense of emptiness. As if the inattention which he had seen on Casals's face had taken him over, he thought to himself. He felt like an object, an object among objects, like the robot vendor. Something which, as he well knew, did not look you directly in the eye.

"What'll it be, sir?" the robot asked.

Bibleman said, "Fries, a cheeseburger, and a strawberry shake. Are there any contests?"

After a pause the robot said, "Not for you, Mr. Bibleman."

"Okay," he said, and stood waiting. The food came, on its little throwaway plastic tray, in its little throwaway cartons. "I'm not paying," Bibleman said, and walked away.

The robot called after him, "Eleven hundred dollars, Mr. Bibleman. You're breaking the law!"

He turned, got out his wallet.

"Thank you, Mr. Bibleman," the robot said. "I am very proud of you."

## CHAINS OF AIR, WEB OF AETHER

The planet on which he was living underwent each day two mornings. First CY30 appeared and then its minor twin put in a feeble appearance, as if God had not been able to make up his mind as to which sun he preferred and had finally settled on both. The domers liked to compare it to sequential settings of an old-fashioned multifilament incandescent bulb. CY30 gave the impression of getting up to about 150 watts and then came little CY30B, which added 50 more watts of light. The aggregate lumina made the methane crystals of the planet's surface sparkle pleasantly, assuming you were indoors.

At the table of his dome, Leo Me Vane drank fake coffee and read the newspaper. He felt anxiety-free and warm because he had long ago illegally redesigned his dome's thermostat. He felt safe as well because he had added an extra metal brace to the dome's hatch. And he felt expectant because today the food man would be by, so there would be someone to talk to. It was a good day. All his communications gear fumbled along on auto-stasis, at the moment, monitoring whatever the hell they monitored. Originally, upon being stationed at CY30 II, McVane had thoroughly studied the function and purpose of the complexes of electronic marvels for which he was the caretaker—or rather, as his job coding put it, the "master hominoid overseer." Now he had allowed himself to forget most of the transactions which his charges engaged in. Communications equipment led a monotonous life until an emergency popped up, at which point he ceased suddenly to be the "master hominoid overseer" and became the living brain of his station.

There had not been an emergency yet.

The newspaper contained a funny item from the United States Federal Income Tax booklet for 1978, the year McVane had been born. These entries appeared in the index in this order:

Who Should File

Widows and Widowers, Qualifying

Winnings—Prizes, Gambling, and Lotteries Withholding—Federal Tax

And then the final entry in the index, which McVane found amusing and even interesting as a commentary on an archaic way of life:

Zero Bracket Amount

To himself, McVane grinned. That was how the United States Federal Income Tax booklet's 1978 index had ended, very appropriately, and that was how the United States, a few years later, had ended. It had fiscally fucked itself over and died of the trauma.

"Food ration comtrix," the audio transducer of his radio announced. "Start unbolting procedure."

"Unbolting under way," McVane said, laying aside his newspaper.

The speaker said, "Put helmet on."

"Helmet on." McVane made no move to pick up his helmet; his atmosphere flow rate would compensate for the loss; he had redesigned it, too.

The hatch unscrewed, and there stood the food man, headbubble and all. An alarm bell in the dome's ceiling shrilled that atmospheric pressure had sharply declined.

"Put your helmet on!" the food man ordered angrily.

The alarm bell ceased complaining; the pressure had restabilized. At that, the food man grimaced. He popped his helmet and then began to unload cartons from his comtrix.

"We are a hardy race," McVane said, helping him. "You have amped up everything," the food man observed; like all the rovers who serviced the domes, he was sturdily built and he moved rapidly. It was not a safe job operating a comtrix shuttle between mother ships and the domes of

CY30 II. He knew it, and McVane knew it. Anybody could sit in a dome; few people could function outside.

"Stick around for a while," McVane said after he and the food man had unloaded and the food man was marking the invoice. "If you have coffee." They sat facing each other across the table, drinking coffee. Outside the dome the methane messed around, but here neither man felt it. The food man perspired; he apparently found McVane's temperature level too high.

"You know the woman in the next dome?" the food man asked.

"Somewhat," McVane said. "My rig transfers data to her input circuitry every three or four weeks. She stores it, boosts it, and transmits it. I suppose. Or for all I know—"

"She's sick," the food man said.

McVane said, "She looked all right the last time I talked to her. We used video. She did say something about having trouble reading her terminal's displays."

"She's dying," the food man said, and sipped his coffee.

In his mind, McVane tried to picture the woman. Small and dark, and what was her name? He punched a couple of keys on the board beside him, her name came up on its display, retrieved by the code they used. Rybus Rommey. "Dying of what?" he said.

"Multiple sclerosis."

"How far advanced is it?"

"Not far at all," the food man said. "A couple of months ago, she told me that when she was in her late teens she suffered an—what is it called? Aneurysm. In her left eye, which wiped out her central vision in that eye. They suspected at the time that it might be the onset of multiple sclerosis. And then today when I talked to her she said she's been experiencing optic neuritis, which—"

McVane said, "Both symptoms were fed to M.E.D.?"

"A correlation of an aneurysm and then a period of remission and then double vision, blurring . . . you ought to call her up and talk to her. When I was delivering to her, she was crying."

Turning to his keyboard, McVane punched out and punched out and then read the display. "There's a thirty to forty percent cure rate for multiple sclerosis."

"Not out here. M.E.D. can't get to her out here."

"Shit," McVane said.

"I told her to demand a transfer back home. That's what I'd do. She won't do it."

"She's crazy," McVane said.

"You're right. She's crazy. Everybody out here is crazy. You want proof of it? She's proof of it. Would you go back home if you knew you were very sick?"

"We're never supposed to surrender our domes."

"What you monitor is so important." The food man set down his cup. "I have to go." As he got to his feet, he said, "Call her and talk to her. She needs someone to talk to and you're the closest dome. I'm surprised she didn't tell you."

McVane thought, I didn't ask.

After the food man had departed, McVane got the code for Rybus Rommey's dome, started to run it into his transmitter, and then hesitated. His wall clock showed 1830 hours. At this point in his forty-two-hour cycle, he was supposed to accept a sequence of highspeed entertainment audio- and videotaped signals emanating from a slave satellite at CY30 III; upon storing them, he was to run them back at normal and select the material suitable for the overall dome system on his own planet.

He took a look at the log. Fox was doing a concert that ran two hours. Linda Fox, he thought. You and your synthesis of old-time rock and modern-day streng. Jesus, he thought. If I don't transcribe the relay of your live concert, every domer on the planet will come storming in here and

kill me. Outside of emergencies—which don't occur—this is what I'm paid to handle: information traffic between planets, information that connects us with home and keeps us human. The tape drums have got to turn.

He started the tape transport at its high-speed mode, set the module's controls for receive, locked it in at the satellite's operating frequency, checked the wave-form on the visual scope to be sure that the carrier was coming in undistorted, and then patched into an audio transduction of what he was getting.

The voice of Linda Fox emerged from the strip of drivers mounted above him. As the scope showed, there was no distortion. No noise. No clipping. All channels, in fact, were balanced; his meters indicated that.

Sometimes I could cry myself when I hear her, he thought. Speaking of crying.

"Wandering all across this land, My band.

In the worlds that pass above, I love.

Play for me, you spirits who are weightless. I believe in drinking to your greatness. My band."

And, behind Linda Fox's vocal, the syntholutes which were her trademark. Until Fox, no one had ever thought of bringing back that sixteenth-century instrument for which Dowland had written so beautifully and so effectively.

"Shall I sue? shall I seek for grace? Shall I pray? shall I prove? Shall I strive to a heavenly joy With an earthly love? Are there worlds? are there moons Where the lost shall endure? Shall I find for a heart that is pure?"

What Linda Fox had done was take the lute books of John Dowland, written at the end of the sixteenth century, and remastered both the melodies and the lyrics into something of today. Some new thing, he thought, for scattered people as flung as if they had been dropped in haste: here and there, disarranged, in domes, on the backs of miserable worlds and in satellites—victimized by the power of migration, and with no end in sight.

"Silly wretch, let me rail At a trip that is blind. Holy hopes do require"

He could not remember the rest. Well, he had it taped, of course.

"... no human may find."

Or something like that. The beauty of the universe lay not in the stars figured into it but in the music generated by human minds, human voices, human hands. Syntholutes mixed on an intricate board by experts, and the voice of Fox. He thought, I know what I must have to keep on going. My job is my delight: I transcribe this and I broadcast it and they pay me.

"This is the Fox," Linda Fox said.

McVane switched the video to holo, and a cube formed in which Linda Fox smiled at him. Meanwhile, the drums spun at furious speed, getting hour upon hour into his permanent possession.

"You are with the Fox," she said, "and the Fox is with you." She pinned him with her gaze, the hard, bright eyes. The diamond face, feral and wise, feral and true; this is the Fox speaking to you. He smiled back "Hi, Fox," he said.

Sometime later he called the sick girl in the next dome. It took her an amazingly long time to respond to his signal, and as he sat noting the signal register on his own board he thought, Is she finished? Or did she come and forcibly evacuate her?

His microscreen showed vague colors. Visual static, nothing more. And then there she was.

"Did I wake you up?" he asked. She seemed so slowed down, so torpid. Perhaps, he thought, she's sedated.

"No. I was shooting myself in the ass." "What?" he said, startled.

"Chemotherapy," Rybus said. "I'm not doing too well."

"I just now taped a terrific Linda Fox concert; I'll be broadcasting it in the next few days. It'll cheer you up."

"It's too bad we're stuck in these domes. I wish we could visit one another. The food man was just here. In fact, he brought me my medication. It's effective, but it makes me throw up."

McVane thought, I wish I hadn't called.

"Is there any way you could visit me?" Rybus asked.

"I have no portable air, none at all."

"I have," Rybus said.

In panic, he said, "But if you're sick—"

"I can make it over to your dome."

"What about your station? What if data come in that—"

"I've got a beeper I can bring with me."

Presently he said, "Okay."

"It would mean a lot to me, someone to sit with for a little while. The food man stays like half an hour, but that's as long as he can. You know what he told me? There's been an outbreak of a form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis on CY30 VI. It must be a virus. This whole condition is a virus. Christ, I'd hate to have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. This is like the Mariana form."

"Is it contagious?"

She did not directly answer. Instead she said, "What I have can be cured." Obviously she wanted to reassure him. "If the virus is around ... I won't come over; it's okay." She nodded and reached to shut off her transmitter. "I'm going to lie down," she said, "and get more sleep. With this you're supposed to sleep as much as you can. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Goodbye." "Come over," he said. Brightening, she said, "Thank you." "But be sure you bring your beeper. I have a hunch a lot of telemetric confirms are going to—"

"Oh, fuck the telemetric confirms!" Rybus said, with venom. "I'm so sick of being stuck in this goddam dome! Aren't you going buggy sitting around watching tape drums turn and little meters and gauges and shit?" "I think you should go back home," he said. "No," she said, more calmly. "I'm going to follow exactly the M.E.D. instructions for my chemotherapy and beat this fucking M.S. I'm not going home. I'll come over and fix your dinner. I'm a good cook. My mother was Italian and my father is Chicano so I spice everything I fix, except you can't get spices out here. But I figured out how to beat that with different synthetics. I've been experimenting."

"In this concert I'm going to be broadcasting," McVane said, "the Fox does a version of Dowland's 'Shall I Sue.'" "A song about litigation?"

"No. 'Sue' in the sense of to pay court to or woo. In matters of love." And then he realized that she was Putting him on.

"Do you want to know what I think of the Fox?" Rybus asked. "Recycled sentimentality, which is the worst kind of sentimentality; it isn't even original. And she looks like her face is on upside down. She has a mean mouth."

"I like her," he said stiffly; he felt himself becoming mad, really mad. I'm supposed to help you? he asked himself. Run the risk of catching what you have so you can insult the Fox?

"I'll fix you beef stroganoff with parsley noodles," Rybus said.

"I'm doing fine," he said.

Hesitating, she said in a low, faltering voice, "Then you don't want me to come over?"

"I—" he said.

"I'm very frightened, Mr. McVane," Rybus said. "Fifteen minutes from now, I'm going to be throwing up from the IV Neurotoxite. But I don't want to be alone. I don't want to give up my dome"



and I don't want to be by myself. I'm sorry if I offended you. It's just that to me the Fox is a joke. I won't say anything more; I promise."

"Do you have the—" He amended what he intended to say. "Are you sure it won't be too much for you, fixing dinner?"

"I'm stronger now than I will be," she said. "I'll be getting weaker for a long time." "How long?" "There's no way to tell."

He thought, You are going to die. He knew it and she knew it. They did not have to talk about it. The complicity of silence was there, the agreement. A dying girl wants to cook me a dinner, he thought. A dinner I don't want to eat. I've got to say no to her. I've got to keep her out of my dome. The insistence of the weak, he thought. Their dreadful power. It is so much easier to throw a body block against the strong!

"Thank you," he said. "I'd like it very much if we had dinner together. But make sure you keep in radio contact with me on your way over here—so I'll know you're okay. Promise?"

"Well, sure," she said. "Otherwise"—she smiled—"they'd find me a century from now, frozen with pots, pans, and food, as well as synthetic spices. You do have portable air, don't you?"

"No, I really don't," he said.

And knew that his lie was palpable to her.

The meal smelled good and tasted good, but halfway through Rybus excused herself and made her way unsteadily from the matrix of the dome—his dome—into the bathroom. He tried not to listen; he arranged it with his percept system not to hear and with his cognition not to know. In the bathroom the girl, violently sick, cried out and he gritted his teeth and pushed his plate away and then all at once he got up and set in motion his in-dome audio system; he played an early album of the Fox.

"Come again! Sweet love doth now invite Thy graces, that refrain To do me due delight. . ."

"Do you by any chance have some milk?" Rybus asked, standing at the bathroom door, her face pale.

Silently, he got her a glass of milk, or what passed for milk on their planet.

"I have antiemetics," Rybus said as she held the glass of milk, "but I didn't remember to bring any with me. They're back at my dome."

"I could get them for you," he said.

"You know what M.E.D. told me?" Her voice was heavy with indignation. "They said that this chemotherapy won't make my hair fall out, but already it's coming out in—"

"Okay," he interrupted.

"Okay?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"This is upsetting you," Rybus said. "The meal is spoiled and you're—I don't know what. If I'd remembered to bring my antiemetics, I'd be able to keep from—" She became silent. "Next time I'll bring them. I promise. This is one of the few albums of Fox that I like. She was really good then, don't you think?"

"Yes," he said tightly.

"Linda Box," Rybus said.

"What?" he said.

"Linda the box. That's what my sister and I used to call her." She tried to smile.

"Please go back to your dome."

"Oh," she said. "Well—" She smoothed her hair, her hand shaking. "Will you come with me? I don't think I can make it by myself right now. I'm really weak. I really am sick."

He thought, You are taking me with you. That's what this is. That is what is happening. You will not go alone; you will take my spirit with you. And you know. You know it as well as you know the name of the medication you are taking, and you hate me as you hate the medication, as you hate M.E.D. and your illness; it is all hate, for each and every thing under these two suns. I know you. I understand you. I see what is coming. In fact, it has begun.

And, he thought, I don't blame you. But I will hang on to the Fox; the Fox will outlast you. And so will I. You are not going to shoot down the luminiferous aether which animates our souls.

I will hang on to the Fox and the Fox will hold me in her arms and hang on to me. The two of us—we can't be pried apart. I have dozens of hours of the Fox on audio- and videotape, and the tapes are not just for me but for everybody. You think you can kill that? he said to himself. It's been tried before. The power of the weak, he thought, is an imperfect power; it loses in the end. Hence its name. We call it weak for a reason.

"Sentimentality," Rybus said.

"Right," he said sardonically.

"Recycled at that."

"And mixed metaphors."

"Her lyrics?"

"What I'm thinking. When I get really angry, I mix—"

"Let me tell you something. One thing. If I am going to survive, I can't be sentimental. I have to be very harsh. If I've made you angry, I'm sorry, but that is how it is. It is my life. Someday you may be in the spot I am in and then you'll know. Wait for that and then judge me. If it ever happens. Meanwhile this stuff you're playing on your in-dome audio system is crap. It has to be crap, for me. Do you see? You can forget about me; you can send me back to my dome, where I probably really belong, but if you have anything to do with me—"

"Okay," he said, "I understand."

"Thank you. May I have some more milk? Turn down the audio and we'll finish eating. Okay?"

Amazed, he said, "You're going to keep on trying to—"

"All those creatures—and species—who gave up trying to eat aren't with us anymore." She seated herself unsteadily, holding on to the table.

"I admire you."

"No," she said, "I admire you. It's harder on you. I know."

"Death—" he began.

"This isn't death. You know what this is? In contrast to what's coming out of your audio system? This is life. The milk, please; I really need it."

As he got her more milk, he said, "I guess you can't shoot down aether. Luminiferous or otherwise."

"No," she agreed, "since it doesn't exist."

Commodity Central provided Rybus with two wigs, since, due to the chemo, her hair had been systematically killed. He preferred the light-colored one.

When she wore her wig, she did not look too bad, but she had become weakened and a certain querulousness had crept into her discourse. Because she was not physically strong any longer—due more, he suspected, to the chemotherapy than to her illness—she could no longer manage to maintain her dome adequately. Making his way over there one day, he was shocked at what he found. Dishes, pots and pans and even glasses of spoiled food, dirty clothes strewn everywhere, litter and debris . . . troubled, he cleaned up for her and, to his vast dismay, realized that there was

an odor pervading her dome, a sweet mixture of the smell of illness, of complex medications, the soiled clothing, and, worst of all, the rotting food itself.

Until he cleared an area, there was not even a place for him to sit. Rybus lay in bed, wearing a plastic robe open at the back. Apparently, however, she still managed to operate her electronic equipment; he noted that the meters indicated full activity. But she used the remote programmer normally reserved for emergency conditions; she lay propped up in bed with the programmer beside her, along with a magazine and a bowl of cereal and several bottles of medication.

As before, he discussed the possibility of getting her transferred. She refused to be taken off her job; she had not budged.

"I'm not going into a hospital," she told him, and that, for her, ended the conversation.

Later, back at his own dome, gratefully back, he put a plan into operation. The large AI System—Artificial Intelligence Plasma—which handled the major problem-solving for star systems in their area of the galaxy had some available time which could be bought for private use. Accordingly, he punched in an application and posted the total sum of financial credits he had saved up during the last few months.

From Fomalhaut, where the Plasma drifted, he received back a positive response. The team which handled traffic for the Plasma was agreeing to sell him fifteen minutes of the Plasma's time.

At the rate at which he was being metered, he was motivated to feed the Plasma his data very skillfully and very rapidly. He told the Plasma who Rybus was—which gave the AI System access to her complete files, including her psychological profile—and he told it that his dome was the closest dome to hers, and he told it of her fierce determination to live and her refusal to accept a medical discharge or even transfer from her station. He cupped his head into the shell for psycho-tronic output so that the Plasma at Fomalhaut could draw directly from his thoughts, thus making available to it all his unconscious, marginal impressions, realizations, doubts, ideas, anxieties, needs.

"There will be a five-day delay in response," the team signaled him. "Because of the distance involved. Your payment has been received and recorded. Over."

"Over," he said, feeling glum. He had spent everything he had. A vacuum had consumed his worth. But the Plasma was the court of last appeal in matters of problem-solving. WHAT SHOULD I DO? he had asked the Plasma. In five days he would have the answer.

During the next five days, Rybus became considerably weaker. She still fixed her own meals, however, although she seemed to eat the same thing over and over again: a dish of high-protein macaroni with grated cheese sprinkled over it. One day he found her wearing dark glasses. She did not want him to see her eyes.

"My bad eye has gone berserk," she said dispassionately. "Rolled up in my head like a window shade." Spilled capsules and tablets lay everywhere around her on her bed. He picked up one of the half-empty bottles and saw that she was taking one of the most powerful analgesics available.

"M.E.D. is prescribing this for you?" he said, wondering, Is she in that much pain?

"I know somebody," Rybus said. "At a dome on IV. The food man brought it over to me."

"This stuff is addictive."

"I'm lucky to get it. I shouldn't really have it."

"I know you shouldn't."

"That goddam M.E.D." The vindictiveness of her tone was surprising. "It's like dealing with a lower life-form. By the time they get around to prescribing, and then getting the medication to you, Christ, you're an urn of ashes. I see no point in them prescribing for an urn of ashes." She put her hand up to her skull. "I'm s'orry; I should keep my wig on when you're here."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Could you bring me some Coke? Coke settles my stomach."

From her refrigerator he took a liter bottle of cola and poured her a glass. He had to wash the glass first; there wasn't a clean one in the dome.

Propped up before her at the foot of her bed, she had her standard-issue TV set going. It gabbled away mindlessly, but no one was listening or watching. He realized that every time he came over she had it on, even in the middle of the night.

When he returned to his own dome, he felt a tremendous sense of relief, of an odious burden being lifted from him. Just to put physical distance between himself and her—that was a joy which raised his spirits. It's as if, he thought, when I'm with her I have what she has. We share the illness.

He did not feel like playing any Fox recordings so instead he put on the Mahler Second Symphony, The Resurrection. The only symphony scored for many pieces of rattan, he mused. A Ruthe, which looks like a small broom; they use it to play the bass drum. Too bad Mahler never saw a Morley wah-wah pedal, he thought, or he would have scored it into one of his longer symphonies.

Just as the chorus came in, his in-dome audio system shut down; an extrinsic override had silenced it.

"Transmission from Fomalhaut."

"Standing by."

"Use video, please. Ten seconds till start."

"Thank you," he said.

A readout appeared on his larger screen. It was the AI System, the Plasma, replying a day early.

SUBJECT: RYBUS ROMMEY

ANALYSIS: THANATOUS

PROGRAM ADVICE: TOTAL AVOIDANCE ON YOUR PART

ETHICAL FACTOR: OBVIATED

\*\*THANK YOU\*\*

Blinking, Me Vane said reflexively, "Thank you." He had dealt with the Plasma only once before and he had forgotten how terse its responses were. The screen cleared; the transmission had ended.

He was not sure what "thanatous" meant, but he felt certain that it had something to do with death. It means she is dying, he pondered as he punched into the planet's reference bank and asked for a definition. It means that she is dying or may die or is close to death, all of which I know.

However, he was wrong. It meant producing death. Producing, he thought. There is a great difference between death and producing death. No wonder the AI System had notified him that the ethical factor was obviated on his part.

She is a killer thing, he realized. Well, this is why it costs so much to consult the Plasma. You get—not a phony answer based on speculation—but an absolute response.

While he was thinking about it and trying to calm himself down, his telephone rang. Before he picked it up he knew who it was. "Hi," Rybus said in a trembling voice. "Hi," he said.

"Do you by any chance have any Celestial Seasonings Morning Thunder tea bags?" "What?" he said.

"When I was over at your dome that time I fixed beef stroganoff for us, I thought I saw a cannister of Celestial Seasonings—"

"No," he said, "I don't. I used them up." "Are you all right?"

"I'm just tired," he said, and he thought, She said 'us.' She and I are an "us." When did that happen? he asked himself. I guess that's what the Plasma meant; it Understood.

"Do you have any kind of tea?" "No," he said. His in-dome audio system suddenly came back on, released from its pause mode now that

I the Fomalhaut transmission had ended. The choir was singing.

On the phone, Rybus giggled. "Fox is doing sound on sound? A whole chorus of a thousand—"

"This is Mahler," he said roughly.

"Do you think you could come over and keep me company?" Rybus asked. "I'm sort of at loose ends."

After a moment, he said, "Okay. There's something want to talk to you about."

"I was reading this article in—"

"When I get there," he broke in, "we can talk. I'll see you in half an hour." He hung up the phone.

When he reached her dome, he found her propped up in bed, wearing her dark glasses and watching a soap opera on her TV. Nothing had changed since he last had visited her, except that the decaying food in the dishes and the fluids in the cups and glasses had become more dismaying.

"You should watch this," Rybus said, not looking up. "Okay; I'll fill you in. Becky is pregnant, but her boyfriend doesn't—"

"I brought you some tea." He set down four teabags.

"Could you get me some crackers? There's a box on the shelf over the stove. I need to take a pill. It's easier for me to take medication with food than with water because when I was about three years old . . . you're not going to believe this. My father was teaching me to swim. We had a lot of money in those days; my father was a—well, he still is, although I don't hear from him very often. He hurt his back opening one of those sliding security gates at a condo cluster where ..." Her voice trailed off; she had again become engrossed in her TV.

Me Vane cleared off a chair and seated himself.

"I was very depressed last night," Rybus said. "I almost called you. I was thinking about this friend of mine who's now—well, she's my age, but she's got a class 4-C rating in time-motion studies involving prism fluctuation rate or some damn thing. I hate her. At my age! Can you feature that?" She laughed.

"Have you weighed yourself recently?" he asked.

"What? Oh no. But my weight's okay. I can tell. You take a pinch of skin between your fingers, up near your shoulder, and I did that. I still have a fat layer."

"You look thin," he said. He put his hand on her forehead.

"Am I running a fever?"

"No," he said. He continued to hold his hand there, against her smooth damp skin, above her dark glasses. Above, he thought, the myelin sheath of nerve fibers which had developed the sclerotic patches which were killing her.

You will be better off, he said to himself, when she is dead.

Sympathetically, Rybus said, "Don't feel bad. I'll be okay. M.E.D. has cut my dosage of Vasculine. I only take it t.i.d. now—three times a day instead of four."

"You know all the medical terms," he said.

"I have to. They issued me a PDR. Want to look at it? It's around here somewhere. Look under those papers over there. I was writing letters to several old friends because while I was looking for something else I came across their addresses. I've been throwing things away. See?" She pointed and he saw sacks, paper sacks, of crumpled papers. "I wrote for five hours yesterday and then I started in today. That's why I wanted the tea; maybe you could fix me a cup. Put a whole lot of sugar in it and just a little milk."

As he fixed her the tea, fragments of a Linda Fox adaptation of a Dowland song moved through his mind.

"Thou mighty God That lightest every wrong . . . Listen to Patience In a dying song."

"This program is really good," Rybus said, when a series of commercials interrupted her TV soap opera. "Can I tell you about it?"

Rather than answering, he asked, "Does the reduced dosage of Vasculine indicate that you're improving?"

"I'm probably going into another period of remission."

"How long can you expect it to last?"

"Probably quite a while."

"I admire your courage," he said. "I'm bailing out. This is the last time I'm coming over here."

"My courage?" she said. "Thank you."

"I'm not coming back."

"Not coming back when? You mean today?"

"You are a death-dealing organism," he said. "A pathogen."

"If we're going to talk seriously," she said, "I want to put my wig on. Could you bring me my blond wig? It's around somewhere, maybe under those clothes in the corner there. Where that red top is, the one with the white buttons. I have to sew a button back on it, //I can find the button."

He found her her wig.

"Hold the hand mirror for me," she said as she placed the wig on her skull. "Do you think I'm contagious? Because M.E.D. says that at this stage the virus is inactive. I talked to M.E.D. for over an hour yesterday; they gave me a special line."

"Who's maintaining your gear?" he asked.

"Gear?" She gazed at him from behind dark glasses.

"Your job. Monitoring incoming traffic. Storing i\* and then transferring it. The reason you're here."

"It's on auto."

"You have seven warning lights on right now, all red and all blinking," he said. "You should have an audio analog so you can hear it and not ignore it. You're receiving but not recording and they're trying to teli you."

"Well, they're out of luck," she responded in a low voice.

"They have to take into account the fact that you're sick," he said.

"Yes, they do. Of course they do. They can bypass me; don't you receive roughly what I receive? Aren't I essentially a backup station to your own?"

"No," he said, "I'm a backup station to yours."

"It's all the same." She sipped the mug of tea which he had fixed for her. "It's too hot. I'll let it cool." Tremblingly, she reached to set down the mug on a table beside her bed; the mug fell, and hot tea poured out over the plastic floor. "Christ," she said with fury. "Well, that does it; that really does it. Nothing has gone right today. Son of a bitch."

Me Vane turned on the dome's vacuum circuit and it sucked up the spilled tea. He said nothing. He felt amorphous anger all through him, directed at nothing, fury without object, and he sensed that this was the quality of her own hate: it was a passion which went both nowhere and everywhere. Hate, he thought, like a flock of flies. God, he thought, how I want out of here. How I hate to hate like this, hating spilled tea with the same venom as I hate terminal illness. A one-dimensional universe. It has dwindled to that.

In the weeks that followed, he made fewer and fewer trips from his dome to hers. He did not listen to what she said; he did not watch what she did; he averted his gaze from the chaos around her, the ruins of her dome. I am seeing a projection of her brain, he thought once as he momentarily

surveyed the garbage which had piled up everywhere; she was even putting sacks outside the dome, to freeze for eternity. She is senile.

Back in his own dome, he tried to listen to Linda FOX, but the magic had departed. He saw and heard a synthetic image. It was not real. Rybus Rommey had sucked the life out of the Fox the way her dome's vacuum circuit had sucked up the spilled tea.

"And when his sorrows came as fast as floods, Hope kept his heart till comfort came again."

McVane heard the words, but they didn't matter. What had Rybus called it? Recycled sentimentality and crap. He put on a Vivaldi concerto for bassoon. There is only one Vivaldi concerto, he thought. A computer could do better. And be more diverse.

"You're picking up Fox waves," Linda Fox said, and on his video transducer her face appeared, star-lit and wild. "And when those Fox waves hit you," she said, "you have been hit"

In a momentary spasm of fury, he deliberately erased four hours of Fox, both video and audio. And then regretted it. He put in a call to one of the relay satellites for replacement tapes and was told that they were back-ordered.

Fine, he said to himself. What the hell does it matter?

That night, while he was sound asleep, his telephone rang. He let it ring; he did not answer it, and when it rang again ten minutes later he again ignored it.

The third time it rang he picked it up and said hello.

"Hi," Rybus said.

"What is it?" he said.

"I'm cured."

"You're in remission?"

"No, I'm cured. M.E.D. just contacted me; their computer analyzed all my charts and tests and everything and there's no sign of hard patches. Except, of course, I'll never get central vision back in my bad eye. But other than that I'm okay." She paused. "How have you been? I haven't heard from you for so long—it seems like forever. I've been wondering about you."

He said, "I'm okay."

"We should celebrate."

"Yes," he said.

"I'll fix dinner for us, like I used to. What would you like? I feel like Mexican food. I make a really good taco; I have the ground meat in my freezer, unless it's gone bad. I'll thaw it out and see. Do you want me to come over there or do you—"

"Let me talk to you tomorrow," he said.

"I'm sorry to wake you up, but I just now heard from M.E.D." She was silent a moment. "You're the only friend I have," she said. And then, incredibly, she began to cry.

"It's okay," he said. "You're well."

"I was so fucked up," she said brokenly. "I'll ring off and talk to you tomorrow. But you're right; I can't believe it, but I made it."

"It is due to your courage," he said.

"It's due to you," Rybus said. "I would have given up without you. I never told you this, but—well, I squirreled away enough sleeping pills to kill myself, and—"

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said, "about getting together." He hung up and lay back down.

He thought, When Job had lost his children, lands, and goods, Patience assuaged his excessive pain. And when his sorrows came as fast as floods, Hope kept his heart till comfort came again. As the Fox would Put it.

Recycled sentimentality, he thought. I got her through her ordeal and she paid me back by deriding into rubbish that which I cherished the most. But she is alive, he realized; she did make it. It's like when someone tries to kill a rat. You can kill it six ways and still it survives. You can't fault that.

He thought, That is the name of what we are doing here in this star system on these frozen planets in these 'tle domes. Rybus Rommey understood the game played it right and won. To hell with Linda Fox.

And then he thought, But also to hell with what I love.

It is a good trade-off, he thought: a human life won and a synthetic media image wrecked. The law of the universe.

Shivering, he pulled his covers over him and tried to get back to sleep.

The food man showed up before Rybus did; he awoke McVane early in the morning with a full shipment.

"Still got your temp and air illegally boosted," the food man said as he unscrewed his helmet.

"I just use the equipment," McVane said. "I don't build it."

"Well, I won't report you. Got any coffee?"

They sat facing each other across the table drinking fake coffee.

"I just came from the Rommey girl's dome," the food man said. "She says she's cured."

"Yeah, she phoned me late last night," McVane said.

"She says you did it."

To that, McVane said nothing.

"You saved a human life."

"Okay," McVane said.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just tired."

"I guess it took a lot out of you. Christ, it's a mess over there. Can't you clean it up for her? Destroy the garbage, at least, and sterilize the place; the whole goddam dome is septic. She let her garbage disposal ge plugged and it backed up raw sewage all over hei cupboards and shelves, where her food is stored. I've never seen anything like it. Of course, she's been so weak—"

McVane interrupted, "I'll look into it." Awkwardly, the food man said, "The main thing is, she's cured. She was giving herself the shots, you know."

Chains of Air, Web of Aether 165

"I know," McVane said. "I watched her." Many times, he said to himself.

"And her hair's growing back. Boy, she looks awful without her wig. Don't you agree?"

Rising, McVane said, "I have to broadcast some weather reports. Sorry I can't talk to you any longer."

Toward dinnertime Rybus Rommey appeared at the hatch of his dome, loaded down with pots and dishes and carefully wrapped packages. He let her in, and she made her way silently to the kitchen area, where she dumped everything down at once; two packages slid off onto the floor and she stooped to retrieve them. After she had taken off her helmet, she said, "It's good to see you again."

"Likewise," he said.

"It'll take about an hour to fix the tacos. Do you think you can wait until then?"

"Sure," he said.

"I've been thinking," Rybus said as she started a pan of grease heating on the stove. "We ought to take a vacation. Do you have any leave coming? I have two weeks owed me, although my situation



is complicated by my illness. I mean, I used up a lot of my leave in the form of sick leave. Christ's sake, they docked me one-half day for a month, just because I couldn't operate my transmitter. Can you believe it?"

He said, "It's nice to see you stronger."

"I'm fine," she said. "Shit, I forgot the hamburger. Goddam it!" She stared at him.

"I'll go to your dome and get it," he said presently. She seated herself. "It's not thawed. I forgot to thaw it out. I just remembered now. I was going to take it out of the freezer this morning, but I had to finish some Otters . . . maybe we could have something else and have the tacos tomorrow night." "Okay," he said.

"And I meant to bring your tea back." "I only gave you four bags," he said.

Eyeing him uncertainly, she said, "I thought you brought me that whole box of Celestial Seasonings Morning Thunder Tea. Then where did I get it? Maybe the food man brought it. I'm just going to sit here for a while. Could you turn on the TV?"

He turned on the TV.

"There's a show I watch," Rybus said. "I never miss it. I like shows about—well, I'll have to fill you in on what's happened so far if we're going to watch."

"Could we not watch?" he said.

"Her husband—"

He thought, She's completely crazy. She is dead. Her body has been healed, but it killed her mind.

"I have to tell you something," he said.

"What is it?"

"You're—" He ceased.

"I'm very lucky," she said. "I beat the odds. You didn't see me when I was at my worst. I didn't want you to. From the chemo I was blind and paralyzed and deaf and then I started having seizures; I'll be on a maintenance dose for years. But it's okay? Don't you think? To be on just a maintenance dose? I mean, it could be so much worse. Anyhow, her husband lost his job because he—"

"Whose husband?" McVane said.

"On the TV." Reaching up she took hold of his hand. "Where do you want to go on our vacation? We so goddam well deserve some sort of reward. Both of us."

"Our reward," he said, "is that you're well."

She did not seem to be listening; her gaze was fastened on the TV. He saw, then, that she still wore her dark glasses. It made him think, then, of the song the Fox had sung on Christmas Day, for all the planets, the most tender, the most haunting song which she had adapted from John Dowland's lute books.

"When the poor cripple by the pool did lie Full many years in misery and pain No sooner he on Christ had set his eye, But he was well, and comfort came again."

Rybus Rommey was saying, "—it was a high-paying job but everyone was conspiring against him; you know how it is in an office. I worked in an office once where—" Pausing, she said, "Could you heat some water? I'd like to try a little coffee."

"Okay," he said, and turned on the burner.

## RAUTAVAARA'S CASE

The three technicians of the floating globe monitored fluctuations in interstellar magnetic fields, and they did a good job up until the moment they died.

Basalt fragments, traveling at enormous velocity in relation to their globe, ruptured their barrier and abolished their air supply. The two males were slow to react and did nothing. The young female technician from Finland, Agneta Rautavaara, managed to get her emergency helmet on in time, but the hoses tangled; she aspirated and died: a melancholy death, strangling on her own vomit. Herewith ended the survey task of EX208, their floating globe. In another month, the technicians would have been relieved and returned to Earth.

We could not get there in time to save the three Earth persons, but we did dispatch a robot to see if any of them could be regenerated from death. Earth persons do not like us, but in this case their survey globe was operating in our vicinity. There are rules governing such emergencies that are binding on all races in the galaxy. We had no desire to help Earth persons, but we obey the rules.

The rules called for an attempt on our part to restore life to the three dead technicians, but we allowed a robot to take on the responsibility, and perhaps there we erred. Also, the rules required us to notify the closest Earth ship of the calamity and we chose not to. I will not defend this omission nor analyze our reasoning at the time.

The robot signaled that it had found no brain function in the two males and that their neural tissue had degenerated. Regarding Agneta Rautavaara, a slight brain wave could be detected. So in Rautavaara's case the robot would begin a restoration attempt. However, since it could not make a judgment decision on its own, it contacted us. We told it to make the attempt. The fault—the guilt, so to speak—therefore lies with us. Had we been on the scene, we would have known better. We accept the blame.

An hour later the robot signaled that it had restored significant brain function in Rautavaara by supplying her brain with oxygen-rich blood from her dead body. The oxygen, but not the nutriments, came from the robot. We instructed it to begin synthesis of nutriments by processing Rautavaara's body, by using it as raw material. This is the point at which the Earth authorities later made their most profound objection. But we did not have any other source of nutriments. Since we ourselves are a plasma we could not offer our own bodies.

The objection that we could have used the bodies of Rautavaara's dead companions was not phrased properly when we introduced it as evidence. Briefly, we felt that, based on the robot's reports, the other bodies were too contaminated by radioactivity and hence were toxic to Rautavaara; nutriments derived from that source would soon poison her brain. If you do not accept our logic, it does not matter to us; this was the situation as we construed it from our remote point. This is why I say our real error lay in sending a robot in rather than going ourselves. If you wish to indict us, indict us for that.

We asked the robot to patch into Rautavaara's brain and transmit her thoughts to us, so that we could assess the physical condition of her neural cells.

The impression that we received was sanguine. It was at this point that we notified the Earth authorities. We informed them of the accident that had destroyed EX208; we informed them that two of the technicians, the males, were irretrievably dead; we informed them that through swift efforts on our part we had the one female showing stable cephalic activity, which is to say, we had her brain alive.

"Her what?" the Earth person radio operator said, in response to our call.

"We are supplying her nutriments derived from her body—"

"Oh Christ," the Earth person radio operator said. "You can't feed her brain that way. What good is a brain? Qua brain?"

"It can think," we said.

"All right; we'll take over now," the Earth person radio operator said. "But there will be an inquiry."

"Was it not right to save her brain?" we asked. "After all, the psyche is located in the brain, the personality. The physical body is a device by which the brain relates to—"

"Give me the location of EX208," the Earth person radio operator said. "We'll send a ship there at once. You should have notified us at once before trying your own rescue efforts. You Approximations simply do not understand somatic life forms."

It is offensive to us to hear the term "Approximations." It is an Earth slur regarding our origin in the Proxima Centaurus System. What it implies is that we are not authentic, that we merely simulate life.

This was our reward in the Rautavaara Case. To be derided. And, indeed, there was an inquiry.

Within the depths of her damaged brain, Agneta Rautavaara tasted acid vomit and recoiled in fear and aversion. All around her, EX208 lay in splinters. She could see Travis and Elms; they had been torn to bloody bits and the blood had frozen. Ice covered the interior of the globe. Air gone, temperature gone . . . what's keeping me alive? she wondered. She put her hands up and touched her face—or rather tried to touch her face. My helmet, she thought. I got it on in time.

The ice, which covered everything, began to melt. The severed arms and legs of her two companions rejoined their bodies. Basalt fragments, embedded in the hull of the globe, withdrew and flew away.

Time, Agneta realized, is running backward. How strange!

Air returned; she heard the dull tone of the indicator horn. And then, slowly, temperature. Travis and Elms, groggily, got to their feet. They stared around them, bewildered. She felt like laughing, but it was too grim for that. Apparently the force of the impact had caused a local time perturbation,

"Both of you sit down," she said.

Travis said thickly, "I—okay; you're right." He seated himself at his console and pressed the button that strapped him securely in place. Elms, however, just stood. "We were hit by rather large particles," Agneta said.

"Yes," Elms said.

"Large enough and with enough impact to perturb time," Agneta said. "So we've gone back to before the event."

"Well, the magnetic fields are partly responsible," Travis said. He rubbed his eyes; his hands shook. "Get your helmet off, Agneta. You don't need it."

"But the impact is coming," she said.

Both men glanced at her.

"We'll repeat the accident," she said.

"Shit," Travis said, "I'll take the EX out of here." He pushed many keys on his console. "It'll miss us."

Agneta removed her helmet. She stepped out of her boots, picked them up ... and then saw the Figure.

The Figure stood behind the three of them. It was Christ.

"Look," she said to Travis and Elms.

Both men looked.

The Figure wore a traditional white robe, sandals; his hair was long and pale with what looked like moonlight. Bearded, his face was gentle and wise. Just like in the holo-ads the churches back home put out, Agneta thought. Robed, bearded, wise and gentle and his arms slightly raised. Even the nimbus is there. How odd that our preconceptions were so accurate.

"Oh my God," Travis said. Both men stared and she stared, yoo. "He's come for us."

"Well, it's fine with me," Elms said.

"Sure, it would be fine with you," Travis said bitterly. "You have no wife and children. And what about Agneta? She's only three hundred years old; she's a baby."

Christ said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me, you can do nothing."

"I'm getting the EX out of this vector," Travis said.

"My little children," Christ said. "I shall not be with you much longer."

"Good," Travis said. The EX was now moving at peak velocity in the direction of the Sirius axis; their star chart showed massive flux.

"Damn you, Travis," Elms said savagely. "This is a great opportunity. I mean, how many people have seen Christ? I mean, it is Christ. You are Christ, aren't you?" he asked the figure.

Christ said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you know my Father too. From this moment, you know him and have seen him."

"There," Elms said, his face showing happiness. "See? I want it known that I am very glad of this occasion, Mr.\_" He broke off. "I was going to say, 'Mr. Christ.' That's stupid; that is really stupid. Christ, Mr. Christ, will you sit down? You can sit at my console or at Ms. Rautavaara's. Isn't that right, Agneta? This here is Walter Travis; he's not a Christian, but I am; I've been a Christian my whole life. Well, most of my life. I'm not sure about Ms. Rautavaara. What do you say Agneta?"

"Stop the babbling, Elms," Travis said.

To him, Elms said, "He's going to judge us."

Christ said, "If anyone hears my words and does not keep them faithfully, it is not I who shall condemn him, since I have come not to condemn the world but to save the world; he who rejects me and refuses my words has his judge already."

"There," Elms said, nodding.

Frightened, Agneta said to the Figure, "Go easy on us. The three of us have been through a major trauma." She wondered, suddenly, if Travis and Elms remembered that they had been killed, that their bodies had been destroyed.

The Figure smiled at her, as if to reassure her.

"Travis," Agneta said, bending down over him as he sat at his console, "I want you to listen to me. Neither you nor Elms survived the accident, survived the basalt particles. That's why he's here. I'm the only one who wasn't—" She hesitated.

"Killed," Elms said. "We're dead and he has come for us." To the Figure, he said, "I'm ready, Lord. Take me."

"Take both of them," Travis said. "I'm sending out a radio H.E.L.P. call. And I'm telling them what's taking place here. I'm going to report it before he takes me or tries to take me."

"You're dead" Elms told him.

"I can still file a radio report," Travis said, but his face showed his dismay. And his resignation.

To the Figure, Agneta said, "Give Travis a little time. He doesn't fully understand. But I guess you know that; you know everything."

The Figure nodded.

We and the Earth Board of Inquiry listened to and watched this activity in Rautavaara's brain, and we realized jointly what had happened. But we did not agree on our evaluation of it. Whereas the six Earth persons saw it as pernicious, we saw it as grand—both for Agneta Rautavaara and for us. By means of her damaged brain, restored by an ill-advised robot, we were in touch with the next world and the powers that ruled it.

The Earth persons' view distressed us.

"She's hallucinating," the spokesperson of the Earth people said. "Since she has no sensory data coming in. Since her body is dead. Look what you've done to her."

We made the point that Agneta Rautavaara was happy.

"What we must do," the human spokesperson said, "is shut down her brain."

"And cut us off from the next world?" we objected. "This is a splendid opportunity to view the afterlife. Agneta Rautavaara's brain is our lens. This is a matter of gravity. The scientific merit outweighs the humanitarian."

This was the position we took at the inquiry. It was a position of sincerity, not of expedience.

The Earth persons decided to keep Rautavaara's brain at full function, with both video and audio transduction, which of course was recorded; meanwhile the matter of censuring us was put in suspension.

I personally found myself fascinated by the Earth idea of the Savior. It was, for us, an antique and quaint conception; not because it was anthropomorphic but because it involved a schoolroom adjudication of the departed soul. Some kind of tote board was involved listing good and bad acts: a transcendent report card, such as one finds employed in the teaching and grading of children.

This, to us, was a primitive conception of the Savior, and as I watched and listened—as we watched and listened as a polyencephalic entity—I wondered what Agneta Rautavaara's reaction would have been to a Savior, a Guide of the Soul, based on our expectations. Her brain, after all, was maintained by our equipment, by the original mechanism that our rescue robot had brought to the scene of the accident. It would have been too risky to disconnect it; too much brain damage had occurred already. The total apparatus, involving her brain, had been transferred to the site of the judicial inquiry, a neutral ark located between the Proxima System and the Sol System.

Later, in discreet discussion with my companions, I suggested that we attempt to infuse our own conception of the Afterlife Guide of the Soul into Rautavaara's artificially sustained brain. My point: It would be interesting to see how she reacted.

At once my companions pointed out to me the contradiction in my logic. I had argued at the inquiry that Rautavaara's brain was a window on the next world and hence justified—which exculpated us. Now I argued that what she experienced was a projection of her own mental presuppositions, nothing more.

"Both propositions are true," I said. "It is a genuine window on the next world and it is a presentation of Rautavaara's own cultural racial propensities."

What we had, in essence, was a model into which we could introduce carefully selected variables. We could introduce into Rautavaara's brain our own conception of the Guide of the Soul, and thereby see how our rendition differed practically from the puerile one of the Earth persons'.

This was a novel opportunity to test out our own theology. In our opinion, the Earth persons' had been tested sufficiently and been found wanting.

We decided to perform the act, since we maintained the gear supporting Rautavaara's brain. To us, this was a much more interesting issue than the outcome of the inquiry. Blame is a mere cultural matter; it does not travel across species boundaries.

I suppose the Earth persons could regard our intentions as malign. I deny that; we deny that. Call it, instead, a game. It would provide us aesthetic enjoyment to witness Rautavaara confronted by our Savior, rather than hers.

To Travis, Elms, and Agneta, the Figure, raising its arms, said, "I am the Resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"I sure do," Elms said heartily.

Travis said, "It's bilge."

To herself, Agneta Rautavaara thought, I'm not sure. I just don't know.

"We're supposed to decide," Elms said. "We have to decide if we're going to go with him. Travis, you're done for; you're out. Sit there and rot—that's your fate." To Agneta, he said, "I hope you find for Christ, Agneta. I want you to have eternal life like I'm going to have. Isn't that right, Lord?" he asked the Figure.

The Figure nodded.

Agneta said, "Travis, I think—well, I feel you should go along with this. I—" She did not want to press the point that Travis was dead. But he had to understand the situation; otherwise, as Elms said, he was doomed. "Go with us," she said.

"You're going, then?" Travis said, bitterly.

"Yes," she said.

Elms, gazing at the Figure, said in a low voice, "Quite possibly I'm mistaken, but it seems to be changing."

She looked, but saw no change. Yet Elms seemed frightened.

The Figure, in its white robe, walked slowly toward the seated Travis. The Figure halted close by Travis, stood for a time, and then, bending, bit Travis's face.

Agneta screamed. Elms stared, and Travis, locked into his seat, thrashed. The Figure, calmly, ate him.

"Now you see," the spokesperson for the Board of Inquiry said, "this brain must be shut down. The deterioration is severe; the experience is terrible for her; it must end now."

I said, "No. We from the Proxima System find this turn of events highly interesting."

"But the Savior is eating Travis!" another of the Earth persons exclaimed.

"In your religion," I said, "is it not the case that you eat the flesh of your God and drink his blood? All that has happened here is a mirror image of that Eucharist."

"I order her brain shut down!" the spokesperson for the Board said. His face was pale; drops of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"We should see more before we shut down," I said. I found it highly exciting, this enactment of our own sacrament, our highest sacrament, in which our Savior consumes us, his worshipers.

"Agneta," Elms whispered, "did you see that? Christ ate Travis. There's nothing left but his gloves and boots."

Oh God, Agneta Rautavaara thought. What is happening?

She moved away from the Figure, over to Elms. Instinctively.

"He is my blood," the Figure said as it licked its lips. "I drink of this blood, the blood of eternal life. When I have drunk it, I will live forever. He is my body. I have no body of my own; I am only a plasma. By eating his body, I obtain everlasting life. This is the new truth that I proclaim, that I am eternal."

"He's going to eat us, too," Elms said.

Yes, Agneta Rautavaara thought. He is. She could see now that the Figure was an Approximation. It is a Proxima life-form, she realized. He's right; he has no body of his own. The only way he can get a body is—

"I'm going to kill him," Elms said. He popped the emergency laser rifle from its rack and pointed it at the figure.

The Figure said, "Father, the hour has come." "Stay away from me," Elms said. "In a short time, you will no longer see me," the Figure said, "unless I drink of your blood and eat of your body. Glorify yourself that I may live." The Figure moved toward Elms.

Elms fired the laser rifle. The Figure staggered and bled. It was Travis's blood, Agneta realized. In him. Not his own blood. This is terrible; she put her hands to her face, terrified.

"Quick," she said to Elms. "Say, 'I am innocent of this man's blood.' Say it before it's too late."

"I am innocent of this man's blood," Elms said.

The Figure fell. Bleeding, it lay dying. It was no longer a bearded man. It was something else, but Agneta Rautavaara could not tell what it was. It said, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?"

As she and Elms gazed down at it, the Figure died.

"I killed it," Elms said. "I killed Christ." He held the laser rifle pointed at himself, groping for the trigger.

"That wasn't Christ," Agneta said. "It was something else. The opposite of Christ." She took the gun from Elms.

Elms was weeping.

The Earth persons on the Board of Inquiry possessed the majority vote and they voted to abolish all activity in Rautavaara's artificially sustained brain. This disappointed us, but there was no remedy for us.

We had seen the beginning of an absolutely stunning scientific experiment: the theology of one race grafted onto that of another. Shutting down the Earth person's brain was a scientific tragedy. For example, in terms of the basic relationship to God, the Earth race held a diametrically opposite view from us. This of course must be attributed to the fact that they are a somatic race and we are a plasma. They drink the blood of their God; they eat his flesh; that way they become immortal. To them, there is no scandal in this. They find it perfectly natural. Yet, to us it is dreadful. That the worshiper should eat and drink its God? Awful to us; awful indeed. A disgrace and a shame—an abomination. The higher should always prey on the lower; the God should consume the worshiper.

We watched as the Rautavaara Case was closed—• closed by the shutting down of her brain so that all EEG activity ceased and the monitors indicated nothing. We felt disappointment, and in addition the Earth persons voted out a verdict of censure of us for our handling of the rescue mission in the first place.

It is striking, the gulf which separates races developing in different star systems. We have tried to understand the Earth persons and we have failed. We are aware, top, that they do not understand us and are appalled in turn by some of our customs. This was demonstrated in the Rautavaara Case. But were we not serving the purposes of detached scientific study? I myself was amazed at Rautavaara's reaction when the Savior ate Mr. Travis. I would have wished to see this most holy of the sacraments fulfilled with the others, with Rautavaara and Elms as well.

But we were deprived of this. And the experiment, from our standpoint, failed.

And we live now, too, under the ban of unnecessary moral blame.

## I HOPE I SHALL ARRIVE SOON

After takeoff the ship routinely monitored the condition of the sixty people sleeping in its cryonic tanks. One malfunction showed, that of person nine. His EEG revealed brain activity.

Shit, the ship said to itself.

Complex homeostatic devices locked into circuit feed, and the ship contacted person nine.

"You are slightly awake," the ship said, utilizing the psychotronic route; there was no point in rousing person nine to full consciousness—after all, the flight would last a decade.

Virtually unconscious, but unfortunately still able to think, person nine thought, Someone is addressing me. He said, "Where am I located? I don't see anything."

"You're in faulty cryonic suspension."

He said, "Then I shouldn't be able to hear you."

"Faulty,' I said. That's the point; you can hear me. Do you know your name?"

"Victor Kemmings. Bring me out of this."

"We are in flight."

"Then put me under."

"Just a moment." The ship examined the cryonic mechanisms; it scanned and surveyed and then it said, "I will try."

Time passed. Victor Kemmings, unable to see anything, unaware of his body, found himself still conscious. "Lower my temperature," he said. He could not hear his voice; perhaps he only imagined he spoke. Colors floated toward him and then rushed at him. He liked the colors; they reminded him of a child's paint box, the semianimated kind, an artificial life-form. He had used them in school, two hundred years ago.

"I can't put you under," the voice of the ship sounded inside Kemming's head. "The malfunction is too elaborate; I can't correct it and I can't repair it. You will be conscious for ten years."

The semianimated colors rushed toward him, but now they possessed a sinister quality, supplied to them by his own fear. "Oh my God," he said. Ten years! The colors darkened.

As Victor Kemmings lay paralyzed, surrounded by dismal flickerings of light, the ship explained to him its strategy. This strategy did not represent a decision on its part; the ship had been programmed to seek this solution in case of a malfunction of this sort.

"What I will do," the voice of the ship came to him, "is feed you sensory stimulation. The peril to you is sensory deprivation. If you are conscious for ten years without sensory data, your mind will deteriorate. When we reach the LR4 System, you will be a vegetable."

"Well, what do you intend to feed me?" Kemmings said in panic. "What do you have in your information storage banks? All the video soap operas of the last century? Wake me up and I'll walk around."

"There is no air in me," the ship said. "Nothing for you to eat. No one to talk to, since everyone else is under."

Kemmings said, "I can talk to you. We can play chess."

"Not for ten years. Listen to me; I say, I have no food and no air. You must remain as you are ... a bad compromise, but one forced on us. You are talking to me now. I have no particular information stored. Here is policy in these situations: I will feed you your own buried memories, emphasizing the pleasant ones. You possess two hundred and six years of memories and most of them have sunk down into your unconscious. This is a splendid source of sensory data for you to receive. Be of good cheer. This situation, which you are in, is not unique. It has never happened



within my domain before, but I am programmed to deal with it. Relax and trust me. I will see that you are provided with a world."

"They should have warned me," Kemmings said, "before I agreed to emigrate." "Relax," the ship said.

He relaxed, but he was terribly frightened. Theoretically, he should have gone under, into the successful cryonic suspension, then awakened a moment later at his star of destination; or rather the planet, the colony planet, of that star. Everyone else aboard the ship lay in an unknowing state—he was the exception, as if bad karma had attacked him for obscure reasons. Worst of all, he had to depend totally on the goodwill of the ship. Suppose it elected to feed him monsters? The ship could terrorize him for ten years—ten objective years and undoubtedly more from a subjective standpoint. He was, in effect, totally in the ship's power. Did interstellar ships enjoy such a situation? He knew little about interstellar ships; his field was microbiology. Let me think, he said to himself. My first wife, Martine; the lovely little French girl who wore jeans and a red shirt open at the waist and cooked delicious crepes. "I hear," the ship said. "So be it." The rushing colors resolved themselves into coherent, stable shapes. A building: a little old yellow wooden house that he had owned when he was nineteen years old, in Wyoming. "Wait," he said in panic. "The foundation was bad; it was on a mud sill. And the roof leaked." But he saw the kitchen, with the table that he had built himself. And he felt glad.

"You will not know, after a little while," the ship said, "that I am feeding you your own buried memories."

"I haven't thought of that house in a century," he said wonderingly; entranced, he made out his old electric drip coffee pot with the box of paper filters beside it. This is the house where Martine and I lived, he realized. "Martine!" he said aloud.

"I'm on the phone," Martine said from the living room.

The ship said, "I will cut in only when there is an emergency. I will be monitoring you, however, to be sure you are in a satisfactory state. Don't be afraid."

"Turn down the right rear burner on the stove," Martine called. He could hear her and yet not see her. He made his way from the kitchen through the dining room and into the living room. At the VF, Martine stood in rapt conversation with her brother; she wore shorts and she was barefoot. Through the front windows of the living room he could see the street; a commercial vehicle was trying to park, without success.

It's a warm day, he thought. I should turn on the air conditioner.

He seated himself on the old sofa as Martine continued her VF conversation, and he found himself gazing at his most cherished possession, a framed poster on the wall above Martine: Gilbert Shelton's "Fat Freddy Says" drawing in which Freddy Freak sits with his cat on his lap, and Fat Freddy is trying to say, "Speed kills," but he is so wired on speed—he holds in his hand every kind of amphetamine tablet, pill, spansule, and capsule that exists—that he can't say it, and the cat is gritting his teeth and wincing in a mixture of dismay and disgust. The poster is signed by Gilbert Shelton himself; Kemmings's best friend Ray Torrance gave it to him and Martine as a wedding present. It is worth thousands. It was signed by the artist back in the 1980s. Long before either Victor Kemmings or Martine lived.

If we ever run out of money, Kemmings thought to himself, we could sell the poster. It was not a poster; it was the poster. Martine adored it. The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers—from the golden age of a long-ago society. No wonder he loved Martine so; she herself loved back, loved the beauties of the world, and treasured and cherished them as she treasured and cherished him; it was a

protective love that nourished but did not stifle. It had been her idea to frame the poster; he would have tacked it up on the wall, so stupid was he.

"Hi," Martine said, off the VF now. "What are you thinking?"

"Just that you keep alive what you love," he said.

"I think that's what you're supposed to do," Martine said. "Are you ready for dinner? Open some red wine, a cabernet."

"Will an '07 do?" he said, standing up; he felt, then, like taking hold of his wife and hugging her.

"Either an '07 or a '12." She trotted past him, through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Going down into the cellar, he began to search among the bottles, which, of course, lay flat. Musty air and dampness; he liked the smell of the cellar, but then he noticed the redwood planks lying half-buried in the dirt and he thought, I know I've got to get a concrete slab poured. He forgot about the wine and went over to the far corner, where the dirt was piled highest; bending down, he poked at a board... he poked with a trowel and then he thought, Where did I get this trowel? I didn't have it a minute ago. The board crumbled against the trowel. This whole house is collapsing, he realized. Christ sake. I better tell Martine.

Going back upstairs, the wine forgotten, he started to say to her that the foundations of the house were dangerously decayed, but Martine was nowhere in sight. And nothing cooked on the stove—no pots, no pans. Amazed, he put his hand on the stove and found it cold. Wasn't she just now cooking? he asked himself. "Martine!" he said loudly.

No response. Except for himself, the house was empty. Empty, he thought, and collapsing. Oh my God. He seated himself at the kitchen table and felt the chair give slightly under him; it did not give much, but he felt it; he felt the sagging.

I'm afraid, he thought. Where did she go?

He returned to the living room. Maybe she went next door to borrow some spices or butter or something, he reasoned. Nonetheless, panic now filled him.

He looked at the poster. It was unframed. And the edges had been torn.

I know she framed it, he thought; he ran across the room to it, to examine it closely. Faded . . . the artist's signature had faded; he could scarcely make it out. She insisted on framing it and under glare-free, reflection-free glass. But it isn't framed and it's torn! The most precious thing we own!

Suddenly he found himself crying. It amazed him, his tears. Martine is gone; the poster is deteriorated; the house is crumbling away; nothing is cooking on the stove. This is terrible, he thought. And I don't understand it.

The ship understood it. The ship had been carefully monitoring Victor Kemmings's brain wave patterns, and the ship knew that something had gone wrong. The wave-forms showed agitation and pain. I must get him out of this feed-circuit or I will kill him, the ship decided. Where does the flaw lie? it asked itself. Worry dormant in the man; underlying anxieties. Perhaps if I intensify the signal. I will use the same source, but amp up the charge. What has happened is that massive subliminal insecurities have taken possession of him; the fault is not mine, but lies, instead, in his psychological makeup.

I will try an earlier period in his life, the ship decided. Before the neurotic anxieties got laid down.

In the backyard, Victor scrutinized a bee that had gotten itself trapped in a spider's web. The spider wound up the bee with great care. That's wrong, Victor thought. I'll let the bee loose. Reaching up, he took hold of the encapsulated bee, drew it from the web, and, scrutinizing it carefully, began to unwrap it.

The bee stung him; it felt like a little patch of flame.

Why did it sting me? he wondered. I was letting it go. He went indoors to his mother and told her, but she did not listen; she was watching television. His finger hurt where the bee had stung up, but, more important, he did not understand why the bee would attack its rescuer. I won't do that again, he said to himself.

"Put some Bactine on it," his mother said at last, roused from watching the TV.

He had begun to cry. It was unfair. It made no sense. He was perplexed and dismayed and he felt a hatred toward small living things, because they were dumb. They didn't have any sense.

He left the house, played for a time on his swings, his slide, in his sandbox, and then he went into the garage because he heard a strange flapping, whirring sound, like a kind of fan. Inside the gloomy garage, he found that a bird was fluttering against the cobwebbed rear window, trying to get out. Below it, the cat, Dorky, leaped and leaped, trying to reach the bird.

He picked up the cat; the cat extended its body and its front legs, it extended its jaws and bit into the bird. At once the cat scrambled down and ran off with the still-fluttering bird.

Victor ran into the house. "Dorky caught a bird!" he told his mother.

"That goddam cat." His mother took the broom from the closet in the kitchen and ran outside, trying to find Dorky. The cat had concealed itself under the bramble bushes; she could not reach it with the broom. "I'm going to get rid of that cat," his mother said.

Victor did not tell her that he had arranged for the cat to catch the bird; he watched in silence as his mother tried and tried to pry Dorky out from her hiding place; Dorky was crunching up the bird; he could hear the sound of breaking bones, small bones. He felt a strange feeling, as if he should tell his mother what he had done, and yet if he told her she would punish him. I won't do that again, he said to himself. His face, he realized, had turned red. What if his mother figured it out? What if she had some secret way of knowing? Dorky couldn't tell her and the bird was dead. No one would ever know. He was safe.

But he felt bad. That night he could not eat his dinner. Both his parents noticed. They thought he was sick; they took his temperature. He said nothing about what he had done. His mother told his father about Dorky and they decided to get rid of Dorky. Seated at the table, listening, Victor began to cry.

"All right," his father said gently. "We won't get rid of her. It's natural for a cat to catch a bird."

The next day he sat playing in his sandbox. Some plants grew up through the sand. He broke them off. Later his mother told him that had been a wrong thing to do.

Alone in the backyard, in his sandbox, he sat with a pail of water, forming a small mound of wet sand. The sky, which had been blue and clear, became by degrees overcast. A shadow passed over him and he looked up. He sensed a presence around him, something vast that could think.

You are responsible for the death of the bird, the presence thought; he could understand its thoughts.

"I know," he said. He wished, then, that he could die. That he could replace the bird and die for it, leaving it as it had been, fluttering against the cob-webbed window of the garage.

The bird wanted to fly and eat and live, the presence thought.

"Yes," he said miserably. "You must never do that again," the presence told him. "I'm sorry," he said, and wept.

This is a very neurotic person, the ship realized. I am having an awful lot of trouble finding happy memories. There is too much fear in him and too much guilt. He has buried it all, and yet it is still there, worrying him like a dog worrying a rag. Where can I go in his memories to find him solace? I must come up with ten years of memories, or his mind will be lost.

Perhaps, the ship thought, the error that I am making is in the area of choice on my part; I should allow him to select his own memories. However, the ship realized, this will allow an element of fantasy to enter. And that is not usually good. Still I will try the segment dealing with his first marriage once again, the ship decided. He really loved Marline.

Perhaps this time if I keep the intensity of the memories at a greater level the entropic factor can be abolished. What happened was a subtle vitiation of the remembered world, a decay of structure. I will try to compensate for that. So be it.

"Do you suppose Gilbert Shelton really signed this?" Marline said pensively; she stood before the poster, her arms folded; she rocked back and forth slightly, as if seeking a better perspective on the brightly colored drawing hanging on their living room wall. "I mean, it could have been forged. By a dealer somewhere along the line. During Shellon's lifetime or after."

"The letter of authentication," Victor Kemmings reminded her.

"Oh, that's right!" She smiled her warm smile. "Ray gave us the letter that goes with it. But suppose the letter is a forgery? What we need is another letter certifying that the first letter is authentic." Laughing, she walked away from the poster.

"Ultimately," Kemmings said, "we would have to have Gilbert Shellon here to personally testify that he signed it."

"Maybe he wouldn't know. There's that story about the man bringing the Picasso picture to Picasso and asking him if it was authentic, and Picasso immediately signed it and said, 'Now it's authentic.'" She put her arm around Kemmings and, standing on tiptoe, kissed him on the cheek. "It's genuine. Ray wouldn't have given us a forgery. He's the leading expert on counterculture art of the Twentieth century. Do you know that he owns an actual lid of dope? It's preserved under—"

"Ray is dead," Victor said.

"What?" She gazed at him in astonishment "Do you mean something happened to him since we last—"

"He's been dead two years," Kemmings said. "I was responsible. I was driving the buzzcar. I wasn't cited by the police, but it was my fault."

"Ray is living on Mars!" She stared at him.

"I know I was responsible. I never told you. I never told anyone. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it. I saw it flapping against the window, and Dorky was trying to reach it, and I lifted Dorky up, and I don't know why but Dorky grabbed it—"

"Sit down, Victor." Marline led him to the over-sluffed chair and made him seal himself. "Something's wrong," she said.

"I know," he said. "Something terrible is wrong. I'm responsible for the taking of a life, a precious life that can never be replaced. I'm sorry. I wish I could make it okay, but I can't"

After a pause, Marline said, "Call Ray."

"The cat—" he said.

"What cat?"

"There." He pointed. "In the poster. On Fal Freddy's lap. That's Dorky. Dorky killed Ray."

Silence.

"The presence told me," Kemmings said. "It was God. I didn't realize it at the time, but God saw me commit the crime. The murder. And he will never forgive me."

His wife stared at him numbly.

"God sees everything you do," Kemmings said. "He sees even the falling sparrow. Only in this case it didn't fall; it was grabbed. Grabbed out of the air and torn down. God is tearing this house

down which is my body, to pay me back for what I've done. We should have had a building contractor look this house over before we bought it. It's just falling goddam to pieces.

In a year there won't be anything left of it. Don't you believe me?"

Martine faltered, "I—"

"Watch." Kemmings reached up his arms toward the ceiling; he stood; he reached; he could not touch the ceiling. He walked to the wall and then, after a pause, put his hand through the wall.

Martine screamed.

The ship aborted the memory retrieval instantly. But the harm had been done.

He has integrated his early fears and guilt into one interwoven grid, the ship said to itself. There is no way I can serve up a pleasant memory to him because he instantly contaminates it. However pleasant the original experience in itself was. This is a serious situation, the ship decided. The man is already showing signs of psychosis. And we are hardly into the trip; years lie ahead of him.

After allowing itself time to think the situation through, the ship decided to contact Victor Kemmings once more.

"Mr. Kemmings," the ship said.

"I'm sorry," Kemmings said. "I didn't mean to foul up those retrievals. You did a good job, but I—"

"Just a moment," the ship said. "I am not equipped to do psychiatric reconstruction of you; I am a simple mechanism, that's all. What is it you want? Where do you want to be and what do you want to be doing?"

"I want to arrive at our destination," Kemmings said. "I want this trip to be over." Ah, the ship thought. That is the solution.

One by one the cryonic systems shut down. One by one the people returned to life, among them Victor Kemmings. What amazed him was the lack of a sense of the passage of time. He had entered the chamber, lain down, had felt the membrane cover him and the temperature begin to drop—

And now he stood on the ship's external platform, the unloading platform, gazing down at a verdant planetary landscape. This, he realized, is LR4-6, the colony world to which I have come in order to begin a new life.

"Looks good," a heavyset woman beside him said.

"Yes," he said, and felt the newness of the landscape rush up at him, its promise of a beginning. Something better than he had known the past two hundred years. I am a fresh person in a fresh world, he thought. And he felt glad.

Colors raced at him, like those of a child's semianimate kit. Saint Elmo's fire, he realized. That's right; there is a great deal of ionization in this planet's atmosphere. A free light show, such as they had back in the twentieth century.

"Mr. Kemmings," a voice said. An elderly man had come up beside him, to speak to him. "Did you dream?"

"During the suspension?" Kemmings said. "No, not that I can remember."

"I think I dreamed," the elderly man said. "Would you take my arm on the descent ramp? I feel unsteady. The air seems thin. Do you find it thin?"

"Don't be afraid," Kemmings said to him. He took the elderly man's arm. "I'll help you down the ramp. Look; there's a guide coming this way. He'll arrange our processing for us; it's part of the package. We'll be taken to a resort hotel and given first-class accommodations. Read your brochure." He smiled at the uneasy older man to reassure him.

"You'd think our muscles would be nothing but flab after ten years in suspension," the elderly man said.

"It's just like freezing peas," Kemmings said. Holding on to the timid older man, he descended the ramp to the ground. "You can store them forever if you get them cold enough."

"My name's Shelton," the elderly man said.

"What?" Kemmings said, halting. A strange feeling moved through him.

"Don Shelton." The elderly man extended his hand; reflexively, Kemmings accepted it and they shook. "What's the matter, Mr. Kemmings? Are you all right?"

"Sure," he said. "I'm fine. But hungry. I'd like to get something to eat. I'd like to get to our hotel, where I can take a shower and change my clothes." He wondered where their baggage could be found. Probably it would take the ship an hour to unload it. The ship was not particularly intelligent.

In an intimate, confidential tone, elderly Mr. Shelton said, "You know what I brought with me? A bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon. The finest bourbon on Earth. I'll bring it over to your hotel room and we'll share it." He nudged Kemmings.

"I don't drink," Kemmings said. "Only wine." He wondered if there were any good wines here on this distant colony world. Not distant now, he reflected. It is Earth that's distant. I should have done like Mr. Shelton and brought a few bottles with me.

Shelton. What did the name remind him of? Something in his far past, in his early years. Something precious, along with good wine and a pretty, gentle young woman making crepes in an old-fashioned kitchen. Aching memories; memories that hurt.

Presently he stood by the bed in his hotel room, his suitcase open; he had begun to hang up his clothes. In the corner of the room, a TV hologram showed a newscaster; he ignored it, but, liking the sound of a human voice, he kept it on.

Did I have any dreams? he asked himself. During these past ten years?

His hand hurt. Gazing down, he saw a red welt, as if he had been stung. A bee stung me, he realized. But when? How? While I lay in cryonic suspension? Impossible. Yet he could see the welt and he could feel the pain. I better get something to put on it, he realized. There's undoubtedly a robot doctor in the hotel; it's a first-rate hotel.

When the robot doctor had arrived and was treating the bee sting, Kemmings said, "I got this as punishment for killing the bird." "Really?" the robot doctor said. "Everything that ever meant anything to me has been taken away from me," Kemmings said. "Marline, the poster—my little old house with the wine cellar. We had everything and now it's gone. Martine left me because of the bird."

"The bird you killed," the robot doctor said. "God punished me. He took away all that was precious to me because of my sin. It wasn't Dorky's sin; it was my sin."

"But you were just a little boy," the robot doctor said.

"How did you know that?" Kemmings said. He pulled his hand away from the robot doctor's grasp. "Something's wrong. You shouldn't have known that."

"Your mother told me," the robot doctor said. "My mother didn't know!"

The robot doctor said, "She figured it out. There was no way the cat could have reached the bird without your help."

"So all the time that I was growing up she knew. But she never said anything."

"You can forget about it," the robot doctor said. \_ Kemmings said, "I don't think you exist. There is no possible way that you could know these things. I'm still in cryonic suspension and the ship is still feeding me my own buried memories. So I won't become psychotic from sensory deprivation."

"You could hardly have a memory of completing the trip."

"Wish fulfillment, then. It's the same thing. I'll prove it to you. Do you have a screwdriver?"

"Why?"

Kemmings said, "I'll remove the back of the TV set and you'll see; there's nothing inside it; no components, no parts, no chassis—nothing."

"I don't have a screwdriver."

"A small knife, then. I can see one in your surgical supply bag." Bending, Kemmings lifted up a small scalpel. "This will do. If I show you, will you believe me?"

"If there's nothing inside the TV cabinet—"

Squatting down, Kemmings removed the screws holding the back panel of the TV set in place. The panel came loose and he set it down on the floor.

There was nothing inside the TV cabinet. And yet the color hologram continued to fill a quarter of the hotel room, and the voice of the newscaster issued forth from his three-dimensional image.

"Admit you're the ship," Kemmings said to the robot doctor.

"Oh dear," the robot doctor said.

Oh dear, the ship said to itself. And I've got almost ten years of this lying ahead of me. He is hopelessly contaminating his experiences with childhood guilt; he imagines that his wife left him because, when he was four years old, he helped a cat catch a bird. The only solution would be for Martine to return to him, but how am I going to arrange that? She may not still be alive. On the other hand, the ship reflected, maybe she is alive. Maybe she could be induced to do something to save her former husband's sanity. People by and large have very positive traits. And ten years from now it will take a lot to save—or rather restore—his sanity; it will take something drastic, something I myself cannot do alone.

Meanwhile, there was nothing to be done but recycle the wish fulfillment arrival of the ship at its destination. I will run him through the arrival, the ship decided, then wipe his conscious memory clean and run him through it again. The only positive aspect of this, it reflected, is that it will give me something to do, which may help preserve my sanity.

Lying in cryonic suspension—faulty cryonic suspension—Victor Kemmings imagined, once again, that the ship was touching down and he was being brought back to consciousness.

"Did you dream?" a heavyset woman asked him as the group of passengers gathered on the outer platform. "I have the impression that I dreamed. Early scenes from my life . . . over a century ago."

"None that I can remember," Kemmings said. He was eager to reach his hotel; a shower and a change of clothes would do wonders for his morale. He felt slightly depressed and wondered why.

"There's our guide," an elderly lady said. "They're going to escort us to our accommodations."

"It's in the package," Kemmings said. His depression remained. The others seemed so spirited, so full of life, but over him only a weariness lay, a weighing-down sensation, as if the gravity of this colony planet were too much for him. Maybe that's it, he said to himself. But, according to the brochure, the gravity here matched Earth's; that was one of the attractions.

Puzzled, he made his way slowly down the ramp, step by step, holding on to the rail. I don't really deserve a new chance at life anyhow, he realized. I'm just going through the motions ... I am not like these other people. There is something wrong with me; I cannot remember what it is, but nonetheless it is there. In me. A bitter sense of pain. Of lack of worth.

An insect landed on the back of Kemmings's right hand, an old insect, weary with flight. He halted, watched it crawl across his knuckles. I could crush it, he thought. It's so obviously infirm; it won't live much longer anyhow.

He crushed it—and felt great inner horror. What have I done? he asked himself. My first moment here and I have wiped out a little life. Is this my new beginning?

Turning, he gazed back up at the ship. Maybe I ought to go back, he thought. Have them freeze me forever. I am a man of guilt, a man who destroys. Tears filled his eyes.

And, within its sentient works, the interstellar ship moaned.

During the ten long years remaining in the trip to the LR4 System, the ship had plenty of time to track down Martine Kemmings. It explained the situation to her. She had emigrated to a vast orbiting dome in the Sirius System, found her situation unsatisfactory, and was en route back to Earth. Roused from her own cryonic suspension, she listened intently and then agreed to be at the colony world LR4-6 when her ex-husband arrived—if it was at all possible.

Fortunately, it was possible.

"I don't think he'll recognize me," Martine said to the ship. "I've allowed myself to age. I don't really approve of entirely halting the aging process."

He'll be lucky if he recognizes anything, the ship thought.

At the intersystem spaceport on the colony world of LR4-6, Martine stood waiting for the people aboard the ship to appear on the outer platform. She wondered if she would recognize her former husband. She was a little afraid, but she was glad that she had gotten to LR4-6 in time. It had been close. Another week and his ship would have arrived before hers. Luck is on my side, she said to herself, and scrutinized the newly landed interstellar ship.

People appeared on the platform. She saw him. Victor had changed very little.

As he came down the ramp, holding onto the railing as if weary and hesitant, she came up to him, her hands thrust deep in the pockets of her coat; she felt shy and when she spoke she could hardly hear her own voice.

"Hi, Victor," she managed to say.

He halted, gazed at her. "I know you," he said.

"It's Martine," she said.

Holding out his hand, he said, smiling, "You heard about the trouble on the ship?"

"The ship contacted me." She took his hand and held it. "What an ordeal."

"Yeah," he said. "Recirculating memories forever. Did I ever tell you about a bee that I was trying to extricate from a spider's web when I was four years old? The idiotic bee stung me." He bent down and kissed her. "It's good to see you," he said.

"Did the ship—"

"It said it would try to have you here. But it wasn't sure if you could make it."

As they walked toward the terminal building, Martine said, "I was lucky; I managed to get a transfer to a military vehicle, a high-velocity-drive ship that just shot along like a mad thing. A new propulsion system entirely."

Victor Kemmings said, "I have spent more time in my own unconscious mind than any other human in history. Worse than early-twentieth-century psychoanalysis. And the same material over and over again. Did you know I was scared of my mother?"

"I was scared of your mother," Martine said. They stood at the baggage depot, waiting for his luggage to appear. "This looks like a really nice little planet. Much better than where I was ... I haven't been happy at all."

"So maybe there's a cosmic plan," he said, grinning. "You look great."

"I'm old."

"Medical science—"

"It was my decision. I like older people." She surveyed him. He has been hurt a lot by the cryonic malfunction, she said to herself. I can see it in his eyes. They look broken. Broken eyes. Torn down into pieces by fatigue and—defeat. As if his buried early memories swam up and destroyed him. But it's over, she thought. And I did get here in time.

At the bar in the terminal building, they sat having a drink.



"This old man got me to try Wild Turkey bourbon," Victor said. "It's amazing bourbon. He says it's the best on Earth. He brought a bottle with him from . . ." His voice died into silence.

"One of your fellow passengers," Marline finished.

"I guess so," he said.

"Well, you can stop thinking of the birds and the bees," Martine said.

"Sex?" he said, and laughed.

"Being stung by a bee, helping a cat catch a bird. That's all past."

"That cat," Victor said, "has been dead one hundred and eighty-two years. I figured it out while they were bringing us out of suspension. Probably just as well. Dorky. Dorky, the killer cat. Nothing like Fat Freddy's cat."

"I had to sell the poster," Martine said. "Finally."

He frowned.

"Remember?" she said. "You let me have it when we split up. Which I always thought was really good of you."

"How much did you get for it?"

"A lot. I should pay you something like—" She calculated. "Taking inflation into account, I should pay you about two million dollars."

"Would you consider," he said, "instead, in place of the money, my share of the sale of the poster, spending some time with me? Until I get used to this planet?"

"Yes," she said. And she meant it. Very much.

They finished their drinks and then, with his luggage transported by robot spacecap, made their way to his hotel room.

"This is a nice room," Martine said, perched on the edge of the bed. "And it has a hologram TV. Turn it on."

"There's no use turning it on," Victor Kemmings said. He stood by the open closet, hanging up his shirts.

"Why not?"

Kemmings said, "There's nothing in it."

Going over to the TV set, Martine turned it on. A hockey game materialized, projected out into the room, in full color, and the sound of the game assailed her ears.

"It works fine," she said.

"I know," he said. "I can prove it to you. If you have a nail file or something, I'll unscrew the back plate and show you."

"But I can—"

"Look at this." He paused in his work of hanging up his clothes. "Watch me put my hand through the wall." He placed the palm of his right hand against the wall. "See?"

His hand did not go through the wall because hands do not go through walls; his hand remained pressed against the wall, unmoving.

"And the foundation," he said, "is rotting away."

"Come and sit down by me," Martine said.

"I've lived this often enough to know," he said. "I've lived this over and over again. I come out of suspension; I walk down the ramp; I get my luggage; sometimes I have a drink at the bar and sometimes I come directly to my room. Usually I turn on the TV and then—" He came over and held his hand toward her. "See where the bee stung me?"

She saw no mark on his hand; she took his hand and held it.

"There is no bee sting there," she said. "And when the robot doctor comes, I borrow a tool from him and take off the back plate of the TV set. To prove to him that it has no chassis, no components in it. And then the ship starts me over again." "Victor," she said. "Look at your hand." "This is the first time you've been here, though," he said.

"Sit down," she said.

"Okay." He seated himself on the bed, beside her, but not too close to her.

"Won't you sit closer to me?" she said.

"It makes me too sad," he said. "Remembering you. I really loved you. I wish this was real."

Marline said, "I will sit with you until it is real for you."

"I'm going to try reliving the part with the cat," he said, "and this time not pick up the cat and not let it get the bird. If I do that, maybe my life will change so that it turns into something happy. Something that is real. My real mistake was separating from you. Here; I'll put my hand through you." He placed his hand against her arm. The pressure of his muscles was vigorous; she felt the weight, the physical presence of him, against her. "See?" he said. "It goes right through you."

"And all this," she said, "because you killed a bird when you were a little boy."

"No," he said. "All this because of a failure in the temperature-regulating assembly aboard the ship. Fm not down to the proper temperature. There's just enough warmth left in my brain cells to permit cerebral activity." He stood up then, stretched, smiled at her. "Shall we go get some dinner?" he asked.

She said, "I'm sorry. I'm not hungry."

"I am. I'm going to have some of the local seafood. The brochure says it's terrific. Come along anyhow; maybe when you see the food and smell it you'll change your mind."

Gathering up her coat and purse, she came with him.

"This is a beautiful little planet," he said. "I've explored it dozens of times. I know it thoroughly. We should stop downstairs at the pharmacy for some Bactine, though. For my hand. It's beginning to swell and it hurts like hell." He showed her his hand. "It hurts more this time than ever before."

"Do you want me to come back to you?" Martine said.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll stay with you as long as you want. I agree; we should never have been separated."

Victor Kemmings said, "The poster is torn."

"What?" she said.

"We should have framed it," he said. "We didn't have sense enough to take care of it. Now it's torn. And the artist is dead."