

Corona

by Samuel R. Delany

Pa ran off to Mars Colony before Buddy was born. Momma drank. At sixteen Buddy used to help out in a 'copter repair shop outside St. Gable below Baton Rouge. Once he decided it would be fun to take a 'copter, some bootleg, a girl named Dolores-jo, and sixty-three dollars and eighty-five cents to New Orleans. Nothing taken had ever, by any interpretation, been his. He was caught before they raised from the garage roof. He lied about his age at court to avoid the indignity of reform school. Momma, when they found her, wasn't too sure ("Buddy? Now, let me see, that's Laford. And James Robert Warren-I named him after my third husband who was not living with me at the time-now little James, he came along in ... two thousand and thirty-two, I do believe. Or thirty-four-you sure now, it's Buddy?") when he was born. The constable was inclined to judge him younger than he was, but let him go to grown-up prison anyway. Some terrible things happened there. When Buddy came out three years later he was a gentler person than before; still, when frightened, he became violent. Shortly he knocked up a waitress six years his senior. Chagrined, he applied for emigration to one of Uranus's moons. In twenty years, though, the colonial economy had stabilized. They were a lot more stringent with applicants than in his Pa's day: colonies had become almost respectable. They'd started barring people with jail records and things like that. So he went to New York instead and eventually got a job as an assistant servicer at the Kennedy spaceport.

There was a nine-year-old girl in a hospital in New York at that time who could read minds and wanted to die. Her name was Lee.

Also there was a singer named Bryan Faust.

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Slow, violent, blond Buddy had been at Kennedy over a year when Faust's music came. The songs covered the city, sounded on every radio, filled the title selections on every jukebox and Scopitone. They shouted and whispered and growled from the wall speaker in the spacehanger. Buddy ambled over the catwalk while the crossrhythms, sudden silences, and moments of pure voice were picked up by jangling organ, whining oboe, bass and cymbals. Buddy's thoughts were small and slow. His hands, gloved in canvas, his feet in rubber boots, were big and quick.

Below him the spaceliner filled the hanger like a tuber an eighth of a mile long. The service crew swarmed the floor, moving over the cement like scattered ball bearings. And the music-

"Hey, kid."

Buddy turned.

Bim swaggered toward him, beating his thigh to the rhythms in the falls of sound. "I was just looking for you, kid." Buddy was twenty-four, but

people would call him "kid" after he was thirty. He blinked a lot.

"You want to get over and help them haul down that solvent from upstairs? The damn lift's busted again. I swear, they're going to have a strike if they don't keep the equipment working right. Ain't safe. Say, what did you think of the crowd outside this morning?"

"Crowd?" Buddy's drawl snagged on a slight speech defect. "Yeah, there was a lot of people, huh. I been down in the maintenance shop since six o'clock, so I guess I must've missed most of it. What was they here for?"

Bim got a lot of what-are-you-kidding-me on his face. Then it turned to a tolerant smile. "For Faust." He nodded toward the speaker: the music halted, lurched, then Bryan Faust's voice roared out for love and the violent display that would prove it real. "Faust came in this morning, kid. You didn't know? He's been making it down from moon to moon through the outer planets. I hear he broke 'em up in the asteroids. He's been to Mars and the last thing I heard they love him on Luna as much as anywhere else. He arrived on Earth this morning, and he'll be up and down the Americas for twelve days." He thumbed toward the pit and shook his head. "That's his liner." Bim whistled. "And did we have a hell of a time! All them kids, thousands of 'em, I bet. And people old enough to know better, too. You should have seen the police! When we were trying to get the liner in here, a couple of hundred kids got through the police block. They wanted to pull his ship apart and take home the pieces. You like his music?"

Buddy squinted toward the speaker. The sounds jammed into his ears, pried around his mind, loosening things. Most were good things, touched on by a resolved cadence, a syncopation caught up again, feelings sounded on too quickly for him to hold, but good feelings. Still, a few of them ...

Buddy shrugged, blinked. "I like it." And the beat of his heart, his lungs, and the music coincided. "Yeah. I like that." The music went faster; heart and breathing fell behind; Buddy felt a surge of disorder. "But it's ... strange." Embarrassed, he smiled over his broken tooth.

"Yeah. I guess a lot of other people think so too. Well, get over with those solvent cans."

"Okay." Buddy turned off toward the spiral staircase. He was on the landing, about to go up, when someone yelled down, "Watch it-!"

A ten-gallon drum slammed the walkway five feet from him. He whirled to see the casing split-

(Faust's sonar drums slammed.)

-and solvent, oxidizing in the air, splattered.

Buddy screamed and clutched his eye. He had been working with the metal rasp that morning, and his gloves were impregnated with steel flakes and oil. He ground his canvas palm against his face.

(Faust's electric bass ground against a suspended dissonance.)

As he staggered down the walk, hot solvent rained on his back. Then something inside went wild and he began to swing his arms.

(The last chorus swung toward the close. And the announcer's voice, not waiting for the end, cut over, "All right all you little people out there in music land ...")

"What in the--"

"Jesus, what's wrong with--"

"What happened? I told you the damn lift was broken!"

"Call the infirmary! Quick! Call the--"

Voices came from the level above, the level below. And footsteps. Buddy turned on the ramp and screamed and swung.

"Watch it! What's with that guy--"

"Here, help me hold . . . Owwww!"

"He's gone berserk! Get the doc up from the infirm--"

("... that was Bryan Faust's mind-twisting, brain-blowing, brand-new release, Corona! And you know it will be a hit! ...")

Somebody tried to grab him, and Buddy hit out. Blind, rolling from the hips, he tried to apprehend the agony with flailing hands. And couldn't. A flash bulb had been jammed into his eye socket and detonated. He knocked somebody else against the rail, and staggered, and shrieked.

("... And he's come down to Earth at last, all you baby-mommas and baby-poppas! The little man from Ganymede who's been putting the music of the spheres through so many changes this past year arrived in New York this morning. And all I want to say, Bryan ...")

Rage, pain, and music.

("... is, how do you dig our Earth!")

Buddy didn't even feel the pressure hypo on his shoulder. He collapsed as the cymbals died.

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Lee turned and turned the volume knob till it clicked.

In the trapezoid of sunlight over the desk from the high, small window, open now for August, lay her radio, a piece of graph paper with an incomplete integration for the area within the curve  $X^4 + Y^4 = k^4$ , and her brown fist. Smiling, she tried to release the tension the music had built.

Her shoulders lowered, her nostrils narrowed, and her fist fell over on its back. Still, her knuckles moved to Corona's remembered rhythm.

The inside of her forearm was webbed with raw pink. There were a few

marks on her right arm too. But those were three years old; from when she had been six.

Corona!

She closed her eyes and pictured the rim of the sun. Centered in the flame, with the green eyes of his German father and the high cheekbones of his Arawak mother, was the impudent and insouciant, sensual and curious face of Bryan Faust. The brassy, four-color magazine with its endless hyperbolic prose was open on her bed behind her.

Lee closed her eyes tighter. If she could reach out, and perhaps touch- no, not him; that would be too much-but someone standing, sitting, walking near him, see what seeing him close was like, hear what hearing his voice was like, through air and light: she reached out her mind, reached for the music. And heard-

-your daughter getting along?

They keep telling me better and better every week when I go to visit her. But, oh, I swear, I just don't know. You have no idea now we hated to send her back to that place.

Of course I know! She's your own daughter. And she's such a cute little thing. And so smart. Did they want to run some more tests?

She tried to kill herself. Again.

Oh, no!

She's got scars on her wrist halfway to her elbow! What am I doing wrong? The doctors can't tell me. She's not even ten. I can't keep her here with me. Her father's tried; he's about had it with the whole business. I know because of a divorce a child may have emotional problems, but that a little girl, as intelligent as Lee, can be so-confused! She had to go back, I know she had to go back. But what is it I'm doing wrong? I hate myself for it, and sometimes, just because she can't tell me, I hate her-

Lee's eyes opened; she smashed the table with her small, brown fists, tautening the muscles of her face to hold the tears. All musical beauty was gone. She breathed once more. For a while she looked up at the window, its glass door swung wide. The bottom sill was seven feet from the floor.

Then she pressed the button for Dr. Gross, and went to the bookshelf. She ran her fingers over the spines: Spinoza, The Secret in the Ivory Charm, The Decline of the West, The Wind in the Wil-

She turned at the sound of the door unbolting. "You buzzed for me, Lee?"

"It happened. Again. Just about a minute ago."

"I noted the time as you rang."

"Duration, about forty-five seconds. It was my mother, and her friend who lives downstairs. Very ordinary. Nothing worth noting down."

"And how do you feel?"

She didn't say anything, but looked at the shelves.

Dr. Gross walked into the room and sat down on her desk. "Would you like to tell me what you were doing just before it happened?"

"Nothing. I'd just finished listening to the new record. On the radio."

"Which record?"

"The new Faust song, Corona."

"Haven't heard that one." He glanced down at the graph paper and raised an eyebrow. "This yours, or is it from one of your books?"

"You told me to ring you every time I ... got an attack, didn't you?"

"Yes-"

"I'm doing what you want."

"Of course, Lee. I didn't mean to imply you hadn't been keeping your word. Want to tell me something about the record? What did you think of it?"

"The rhythm is very interesting. Five against seven when it's there. But a lot of the beats are left out, so you have to listen hard to get it."

"Was there anything, perhaps in the words, that may have set off the mind reading?"

"His colonial Ganymede accent is so thick that I missed most of the lyrics, even though it's basically English."

Dr. Gross smiled. "I've noticed the colonial expressions are slipping into a lot of young people's speech since Faust has become so popular. You hear them all the time."

"I don't." She glanced up at the doctor quickly, then back to the books.

Dr. Gross coughed; then he said, "Lee, we feel it's best to keep you away from the other children at the hospital. You tune in most frequently on the minds of people you know, or those who've had similar experiences and reactions to yours. All the children in the hospital are emotionally disturbed. If you were to suddenly pick up all their minds at once, you might be seriously hurt."

"I wouldn't!" she whispered.

"You remember you told us about what happened when you were four, in kindergarten, and you tuned into your whole class for six hours? Do you remember how upset you were?"

"I went home and tried to drink the iodine." She flung him a brutal glance. "I remember. But I hear Mommy when she's all the way across the city. I hear strangers too, lots of times! I hear Mrs. Lowery, when she's teaching down in the classroom! I hear her! I've heard people on other planets!"

"About the song, Lee-"

"You want to keep me away from the other children because I'm smarter than they are! I know. I've heard you think too-"

"Lee, I want you to tell me more about how you felt about this new song-"

"You think I'll upset them because I'm so smart. You won't let me have any friends!"

"What did you feel about the song, Lee?"

She caught her breath, holding it in, her lids batting, the muscle in the back of her jaw leaping.

"What did you feel about the song; did you like it, or did you dislike it?"

She let the air hiss through her lips. "There are three melodic motifs," she began at last. "They appear in descending order of rhythmic intensity. There are more silences in the last melodic line. His music is composed of silence as much as sound."

"Again, what did you feel? I'm trying to get at your emotional reaction, don't you see?"

She looked at the window. She looked at Dr. Gross. Then she turned toward the shelves. "There's a book here, a part in a book, that says it, I guess, better than I can." She began working a volume from the half-shelf of Nietzsche.

"What book?"

"Come here." She began to turn the pages. "I'll show you."

Dr. Gross got up from the desk. She met him beneath the window.

Dr. Gross took it and, frowning, read the title heading: " 'The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music ... death lies only in these dissonant tones-' "

Lee's head struck the book from his hand. She had leapt on him as though he were a piece of furniture and she a small beast. When her hand was not clutching his belt, shirt front, lapel, shoulder, it was straining upward. He managed to grab her just as she grabbed the window ledge.

Outside was a nine-story drop.

He held her by the ankle as she reeled in the sunlit frame. He yanked, and she fell into his arms, shrieking, "Let me die! Oh, please! Let me die!"

They went down on the floor together, he shouting, "No!" and the little girl crying. Dr. Gross stood up, now panting.

She lay on the green vinyl, curling around the sound of her own sobs, pulling her hands over the floor to press her stomach.

"Lee, isn't there any way you can understand this? Yes, you've been exposed to more than any nine-year-old's mind should be able to bear. But you've got to come to terms with it, somehow! That isn't the answer, Lee. I wish I could back it up with something. If you let me help, perhaps I can-

She shouted, with her cheek pressed to the floor, "But you can't help! Your thoughts, they're just as clumsy and imprecise as the others! How can you-you help people who're afraid and confused because their own minds have formed the wrong associations! How! I don't want to have to stumble around in all your insecurities and fears as well! I'm not a child! I've lived more years and places than any ten of you! Just go away and let me alone-

Rage, pain, and music.

"Lee-

"Go away! Please!"

Dr. Gross, upset, swung the window closed, locked it, left the room, locked the door.

Rage, pain ... below the chaos she was conscious of the infectious melody of Corona. Somebody-not her-somebody else was being carried into the hospital, drifting in the painful dark, dreaming over the same sounds. Exhausted, still crying, she let it come.

The man's thoughts, she realized through her exhaustion, to escape the pain had taken refuge in the harmonies and cadences of Corona. She tried to hide her own mind there. And twisted violently away. There was something terrible there. She tried to pull back, but her mind followed the music down.

The terrible thing was that someone had once told him not to put his knee on the floor.

Fighting, she tried to push it aside to see if what was underneath was less terrible. ("Buddy, stop that whining and let you momma alone. I don't feel good. Just get out of here and leave me alone!" The bottle shattered on the door jamb by his ear, and he fled.) She winced. There couldn't be anything that bad about putting your knee on the floor. And so she gave up and let it swim toward her-

-suds wound on the dirty water. The water was all around him. Buddy leaned forward and scrubbed the wire brush across the wet stone. His canvas shoes were already soaked.

"Put your blessed knee on the floor, and I'll get you! Come on, move your ..." Somebody, not Buddy, got kicked. "And don't let your knee touch that floor! Don't, I say." And got kicked again.

They waddled across the prison lobby, scrubbing. There was a sign over the elevator: Louisiana State Penal Correction Institute, but it was hard to make out because Buddy didn't read very well.

"Keep up with 'em, kid. Don't you let 'em get ahead'n you!" Bigfoot yelled. "Just 'cause you little, don't think you got no special privileges." Bigfoot slopped across the stone.

"When they gonna get an automatic scrubber in here?" somebody complained. "They got one in the county jail."

"This Institute"-Bigfoot lumbered up the line-"was built in nineteen hundred and forty-seven! We ain't had no escape in ninety-four years. We run it the same today as when it was builded back in nineteen hundred and forty-seven. The first time it don't do its job right of keepin' you all inside-then we'll think about running it different. Get on back to work. Watch that knee!"

Buddy's thighs were sore, his insteps cramped. The balls of his feet burned and his pants cuffs were sopping.

Bigfoot had taken off his slippers. As he patrolled the scrubbers, he slapped the soles together, first in front of his belly, then behind his heavy buttocks. Slap and slap. With each slap, one foot hit the soapy stone. "Don't bother looking up at me. You look at them stones! But don't let your knee touch the floor."

Once, in the yard latrine, someone had whispered, "Bigfoot? You watch him, kid! Was a preacher, with a revival meeting back in the swamp. Went down to the Emigration Office in town back when they was taking everyone they could get and demanded they make him Pope or something over the colony on Europa they was just setting up. They laughed him out of the office. Sunday, when everyone came to meeting, they found he'd sneaked into town, busted the man at the Emigration Office over the head, dragged him out to the swamp, and nailed him up to a cross under the meeting tent. He tried to make everybody pray him down. After they prayed for about an hour, and nothing happened, they brought Bigfoot here. He's a trustee now."

Buddy rubbed harder with his wire brush.

"Let's see you rub a little of the devil out'n them stones. And don't let me see your knee touch the-"

Buddy straightened his shoulders. And slipped.

He went over on his backside, grabbed the pail; water splashed over him, sluiced beneath. Soap stung his eyes. He lay there a moment.

Bare feet slapped toward him. "Come on, kid. Up you go, and back to work."

With eyes tight, Buddy pushed himself up.

"You sure are one clumsy-"

Buddy rolled to his knees.

"I told you not to let your knee touch the floor!"

Wet canvas whammed his ear and cheek.

"Didn't I?"

A foot fell in the small of his back and struck him flat. His chin hit the floor and he bit his tongue, hard. Holding him down with his foot, Bigfoot whopped Buddy's head back and forth, first with one shoe, then the other. Buddy, blinded, mouth filled with blood, swam on the wet

stone, tried to duck away.

"Now don't let your knees touch the floor again. Come one, back to work, all of you." The feet slapped away.

Against the sting, Buddy opened his eyes. The brush lay just in front of his face. Beyond the wire bristles he saw a pink heel strike in suds.

His action took a long time to form. Slap and slap. On the third slap he gathered his feet, leapt. He landed on Bigfoot's back, pounding with the brush. He hit three times, then he tried to scrub off the side of Bigfoot's face.

The guards finally pulled him off. They took him into a room where there was an iron bed with no mattress and strapped him, ankles, wrist, neck, and stomach, to the frame. He yelled for them to let him up. They said they couldn't because he was still violent. "How'm I gonna eat!" he demanded. "You gonna let me up to eat?"

"Calm down a little. We'll send someone in to feed you."

A few minutes after the dinner bell rang that evening, Bigfoot looked into the room. Ear, cheek, neck, and left shoulder were bandaged. Blood had seeped through at the tip of his clavicle to the size of a quarter. In one hand Bigfoot held a tin plate of rice and fatback, in the other an iron spoon. He came over, sat on the edge of Buddy's bed, and kicked off one canvas shoe. "They told me I should come in and feed you, kid." He kicked off the other one. "You real hungry?"

When they unstrapped Buddy four days later, he couldn't talk. One tooth was badly broken, several others chipped. The roof of his mouth was raw; the prison doctor had to take five stitches in his tongue.

. . . . .

Lee gagged on the taste of iron.

Somewhere in the hospital, Buddy lay in the dark, terrified, his eyes stinging, his head filled with the beating rhythms of Corona.

Her shoulders bunched; she worked her jaw and tongue against the pain that Buddy remembered. She wanted to die.

Stop it! she whispered, and tried to wrench herself from the inarticulate terror which Buddy, cast back by pain and the rhythm of a song to a time when he was only twice her age, remembered. Oh, stop it! But no one could hear her, the way she could hear Buddy, her mother, Mrs. Lowery in the schoolroom.

She had to stop the fear.

Perhaps it was the music. Perhaps it was because she had exhausted every other way. Perhaps it was because the only place left to look for a way out was back inside Buddy's mind-

-When he wanted to sneak out of the cell at night to join a card game

down in the digs where they played for cigarettes, he would take a piece of chewing gum and the bottle cap from a Dr. Pepper and stick it over the bolt in the top of the door. When they closed the doors after free-time, it still fitted into place, but the bolt couldn't slide in-

Lee looked at the locked door of her room. She could get the chewing gum in the afternoon period when they let her walk around her own floor. But the soft drink machine by the elevator only dispensed in cups. Suddenly she sat up and looked at the bottom of her shoe. On the toe and heel were the metal taps that her mother had made the shoemaker put there so they wouldn't wear so fast. She had to stop the fear. If they wouldn't let her do it by killing herself, she'd do it another way. She went to the cot, and began to work the tap loose on the frame.

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Buddy lay on his back, afraid. After they had drugged him, they had brought him into the city. He didn't know where he was. He couldn't see, and he was afraid.

Something fingered his face. He rocked his head to get away from the spoon-

"Shhh! It's all right ..."

Light struck one eye. There was still something wrong with the other. He blinked.

"You're all right," she-it was a she voice, though he still couldn't make out a face-told him again. "You're not in jail. You're not in the ... joint any more. You're in New York. In a hospital. Something's happened to your eye. That's all."

"My eye ... ?"

"Don't be afraid any more. Please. Because I can't stand it."

It was a kid's voice. He blinked again, reached up to rub his vision clear.

"Watch out," she said. "You'll get-"

His eye itched and he wanted to scratch it. So he shoved at the voice.

"Hey!"

Something stung him and he clutched at his thumb with his other hand.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to bite your finger. But you'll hurt the bandage. I've pulled the one away from your right eye. There's nothing wrong with that. Just a moment." Something cool swabbed his blurred vision.

It came away.

The cutest little colored girl was kneeling on the edge of the bed with a

piece of wet cotton in her hand. The light was nowhere near a bright as it had seemed: just a nightlight glowed over the mirror above the basin. "You've got to stop being so frightened," she whispered. "You've got to."

Buddy had spent a good deal of his life doing what people told him, when he wasn't doing the opposite on purpose.

The girl sat back on her heels. "That's better."

He pushed himself up in the bed. There were no straps. Sheets hissed over his knees. He looked at his chest. Blue pajamas: the buttons were in the wrong holes by one. He reached down to fix them, and his fingers closed on air.

"You've only got one eye working so there's no parallax for depth perception."

"Huh?" He looked up again.

She wore shorts and a red and white polo shirt.

He frowned, "Who are you?"

"Dianne Lee Morris," she said. "And you're-" Then she frowned too. She scrambled from the bed, took the mirror from over the basin and brought it back to the bed. "Look. Now who are you?"

He reached up to touch with grease-crusting nails the bandage that sloped over his left eye. Short, yellow hair lapped the gauze. His forefinger went on to the familiar scar through the tow hedge of his right eyebrow.

"Who are you?"

"Buddy Magowan."

"Where do you live?"

"St. Gab-" He stopped. "A hun' ni'tee' stree' 'tween Se'on and Thir' A'nue."

"Say it again."

"A hundred an' nineteenth street between Second an' Third Avenue." The consonants his night school teacher at P. S. 125 had laboriously inserted into his speech this part year returned.

"Good. And you work?"

"Out at Kennedy. Service assistant."

"And there's nothing to be afraid of."

He shook his head, "Naw," and grinned. His broken tooth reflected in the mirror. "Naw. I was just having a bad ... dream."

She put the mirror back. As she turned, suddenly she closed her eyes and sighed.

"What's a matter?"

She opened them again. "It's stopped. I can't hear inside your head any more. It's been going on all day."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Maybe you read about me in the magazine. There was a big article about me in New Times, a couple of years ago. I'm in the hospital too. Over on the other side, in the psychiatric division. Did you read the article?"

"Didn't do much magazine reading back then. Don't do too much now either. What'd they write about?"

"I can hear and see what other people are thinking. I'm one of the three they're studying. I do it best of all of them. But it only comes in spurts. The other one, Eddy, is an idiot. I met him when we were getting all the tests. He's older than you and even dumber. Then there's Mrs. Lowery. She doesn't hear. She just sees. And sometimes she can make other people hear her. She works in the school here at the hospital. She can come and go as she pleases. But I have to stay locked up."

Buddy squinted. "You can hear what's in my head?"

"Not now. But I could. And it was ..." Her lip began to quiver; her brown eyes brightened. "... I mean when that man tried to ... with the ..." And overflowed. She put her fingers on her chin and twisted. "... when he ... cutting in your ..."

Buddy saw her tears, wondered at them. "Aw, honey-" he said, reached to take her shoulder-

Her face struck his chest and she clutched his pajama jacket. "It hurt so much!"

Her grief at his agony shook her.

"I had to stop you from hurting! Yours was just a dream, so I could sneak out of my room, get down here, and wake you up. But the others, the girl in the fire, or the man in the flooded mine ... those weren't dreams! I couldn't do anything about them. I couldn't stop the hurting there. I couldn't stop it at all, Buddy! I wanted to. But one was in Australia and the other in Costa Rica!" She sobbed against his chest. "And one was on Mars! And I couldn't get to Mars. I couldn't!"

"It's all right," he whispered, uncomprehending, and rubbed her rough hair. Then, as she shook in his arms, understanding swelled. "You came ... down here to wake me up?" he asked.

She nodded against his pajama jacket.

"Why?"

She shrugged against his belly. "I ... I don't ... maybe the music."

After a moment he asked, "Is this the first time you ever done something about what you heard?"

"It's not the first time I ever tried. But it's the first time it ever ..."

worked."

"Then why did you try again?"

"Because ..." She was stiller now. "... I hoped maybe it would hurt less if I could get-through." He felt her jaw moving as she spoke. "It does." Something in her face began to quiver. "It does hurt less." He put his hand on her hand, and she took his thumb.

"You knew I was ... was awful scared?"

She nodded. "I knew, so I was scared just the same."

Buddy remembered the dream. The back of his neck grew cold, and the flesh under his thighs began to tingle. He remembered the reality behind the dream-and held her more tightly and pressed his cheek to her hair. "Thank you." He couldn't say it any other way, but it didn't seem enough. So he said it again more slowly. "Thank you."

A little later she pushed away, and he watched her sniffing face with depthless vision.

"Do you like the song?"

He blinked. And realized the insistent music still worked through his head. "You can-hear what I'm thinking again?"

"No. But you were thinking about it before. I just wanted to find out."

Buddy thought awhile. "Yeah." He cocked his head. "Yeah. I like it a lot. It makes me feel ... good."

She hesitated, then let out: "Me too! I think it's beautiful. I think Faust's music is so," and she whispered the next word as though it might offend, "alive! But with life the way it should be. Not without pain, but with pain contained, ordered, given form and meaning, so that it's almost all right again. Don't you feel that way?"

"I ... don't know. I like it ..."

"I suppose," Lee said a little sadly, "people like things for different reasons."

"You like it a lot." He looked down and tried to understand how she liked it. And failed. Tears had darkened his pajamas. Not wanting her to cry again, he grinned when he looked up. "You know, I almost saw him this morning."

"Faust? You mean you saw Bryan Faust?"

He nodded. "Almost. I'm on the service crew out at Kennedy. We were working on his liner when ..." He pointed to his eye.

"His ship? You were?" The wonder in her voice was perfectly childish, and enchanting.

"I'll probably see him when he leaves," Buddy boasted. "I can get in where they won't let anybody else go. Except people who work at the port."

"I'd give-" she remembered to take a breath "-anything to see him. Just anything in the world!"

"There was a hell of a crowd out there this morning. They almost broke through the police. But I could've just walked up and stood at the bottom of the ramp when he came down. If I'd thought about it."

Her hands made little fists on the edge of the bed as she gazed at him.

"Course I'll probably see him when he goes." This time he found his buttons and began to put them into the proper holes.

"I wish I could see him too!"

"I suppose Bim-he's foreman of the service crew-he'd let us through the gate, if I said you were my sister." He looked back up at her brown face. "Well, my cousin."

"Would you take me? Would you really take me?"

"Sure." Buddy reached out to tweak her nose, missed. "You did something for me. I don't see why not, if they'd let you leave-"

"Mrs. Lowery!" Lee whispered and stepped back from the bed.

"-the hospital. Huh?"

"They know I'm gone! Mrs. Lowery is calling for me. She says she's seen me, and Dr. Gross is on his way. They want to take me back to my room!" She ran to the door.

"Lee, there you are! Are you all right?" In the doorway Dr. Gross grabbed her arm as she tried to twist away.

"Let me go!"

"Hey!" bellowed Buddy. "What are you doin' with that little girl!" He bounded up in the middle of the bed, shedding sheets.

Dr. Gross's eyes widened. "I'm taking her back to her room. She's a patient in the hospital. She should be in another wing."

"She wanna go?" Buddy demanded, swaying over the blankets.

"She's very disturbed!" Dr. Gross countered at Buddy, towering on the bed. "We're trying to help her, don't you understand? I don't know who you are, but we're trying to keep here alive. She has to go back!"

Lee shook here head against the doctor's hip. "Oh, Buddy ..."

He leapt over the foot of the bed, swinging. Or at any rate, he swung once. He missed wildly because of the parallax. Also because he pulled the punch in, half completed, to make it seem a floundering gesture. He was not in the Louisiana State Penal Correction Institute: the realization had come the way one only realized the tune playing in the back of the mind when it stops. "Wait!" Buddy said.

Outside the door the doctor was saying, "Mrs. Lowery, take Lee back up to her room. The night nurse knows the medication she should

have."

"Yes, Doctor."

"Wait!" Buddy called. "Please!"

"Excuse me," Dr. Gross said, stepping back through the door. Without Lee. "But we have to get her upstairs and under a sedative, immediately. Believe me, I'm sorry for this inconvenience."

Buddy sat down on the bed and twisted his face. "What's ... the matter with her?"

Dr. Gross was silent a moment. "I suppose I do have to give you an explanation. That's difficult, because I don't know exactly. Of the three proven telepaths that have been discovered since a concerted effort has been made to study them, Lee is the most powerful. She's a brilliant, incredibly creative child. But her mind has suffered so much trauma-from all the lives telepathy exposes her to-she's become hopelessly suicidal. We're trying to help her. But if she's left alone for any length of time, sometimes weeks, sometimes hours, she'll try to kill herself.

"Then when's she gonna be better?"

Dr. Gross put his hands in his pockets and looked at his sandals. "I'm afraid to cure someone of a mental disturbance, the first thing you have to do is isolate them from the trauma. With Lee that's impossible. We don't even know which part of the brain controls the telepathy, so we couldn't even try lobotomy. We haven't found a drug that affects it yet." He shrugged. "I wish we could help her. But when I'm being objective, I can't see her ever getting better. She'll be like this the rest of her life.

The quicker you can forget about her, the less likely you are to hurt her. Good night. Again, I'm very sorry this had to happen."

"G'night." Buddy sat in his bed a little while. Finally he turned off the light and lay down. He had to masturbate three times before he finally fell asleep. In the morning, though, he still had not forgotten the little black girl who had come to him and awakened-so much in him.

The doctors were very upset about the bandage and talked of sympathetic ophthalmia. They searched his left cornea for any last bits of metal dust. They kept him in the hospital three more days, adjusting the pressure between his vitreous and aqueous humors to prevent his till now undiscovered tendency toward glaucoma. They told him that the thing that had occasionally blurred the vision in his left eye was a vitreous floater and not to worry about it. Stay home at least two weeks, they said. And wear your eye patch until two days before you go back to work. They gave him a hassle with his workmen's compensation papers too. But he got it straightened out-he'd filled in a date wrong. He never saw the little girl again.

And the radios and jukeboxes and Scopitones in New York and Buenos Aires, Paris and Istanbul, in Melbourne and Bangkok, played the music of Bryan Faust.

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The day Faust was supposed to leave Earth for Venus, Buddy went back to the spaceport. It was three days before he was supposed to report to work, and he still wore the flesh colored eye patch.

"Jesus," he said to Bim as they leaned at the railing of the observation deck on the roof of the hanger, "just look at all them people."

Bim spat down at the hot macadam. The liner stood on the takeoff pad under the August sun.

"He's going to sing before he goes," Bim said. "I hope they don't have a riot."

"Sing?"

"See that wooden platform out there and all them loudspeakers? With all those kids, I sure hope they don't have a riot?"

"Bim, can I get down onto the field, up near the platform?"

"What for?"

"So I can see him up real close."

"You were the one talking about all the people."

Buddy, holding the rail, worked his thumb on the brass. The muscles in his forearm rolled beneath the tattoo: To Mars I Would Go for Dolores-jo, inscribed on Saturn's rings. "But I got to!"

"I don't see why the hell--"

"There's this little nigger girl, Bim--"

"Huh?"

"Bim!"

"Okay. Okay. Get into a coverall and go down with the clocker crew. You'll be right up with the reporters. But don't tell anybody I sent you. You know how many people want to get up there? Why you want to get so close for anyway?"

"For a ..." He turned in the doorway. "For a friend." He ran down the stairs to the lockers.

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Bryan Faust walked across the platform to the microphones. Comets soared over his shoulders and disappeared under his arms. Suns novaed on his chest. Meteors flashed around his elbows. Shirts of polarized cloth with incandescent, shifting designs were now being called Faustus. Others flashed in the crowd. He pushed back his hair, grinned, and behind the police block hundreds of children screamed. He laughed into

the microphone; they quieted. Behind him a bank of electronic instruments glittered. The controls were in the many jeweled rings hanging bright and heavy on his fingers. He raised his hands, flicked his thumbs across the gems, and the instruments, programmed to respond, began the cascading introduction to Corona. Bryan Faust sang. Across Kennedy, thousands-Buddy among them-heard.

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And on her cot, Lee listened. "Thank you, Buddy," she whispered. "Thank you." And felt a little less like dying.  
-New York

August 1966

The End

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