

THE INFINITY BOX

Kate Wilhelm

It was a bad day from beginning to end. Late in the afternoon, just when I was ready to light the fuse to blow up the lab, with Lenny in it, Janet called from the hospital.

“Honey, it’s the little Bronson boy. We can’t do anything with him, and he has his mother and father in a panic. He’s sure that we’re trying to electrocute him, and they half believe it. They’re demanding that we take the cast off and remove the suit.”

Lenny sat watching my face. He began to move things out of reach: the glass of pencils, coffee mugs, ashtray...

“Can’t Groppi do anything?” He was the staff psychologist.

“Not this time. He doesn’t really understand the suit either. I think he’s afraid of it. Can you come over here and talk to them?”

“Sure. Sure. We just blew up about five thousand dollars’ worth of equipment with a faulty transformer. Lenny’s quitting again. Some son of a bitch mislaid our order for wafer resisters... I’ll be over in half an hour.”

“What?” Lenny asked. He looked like a dope, thick build, the biggest pair of hands you’d ever see outside a football field, shoulders that didn’t need padding to look padded. Probably he was one of the best electronics men in the world. He was forty-six, and had brought up three sons alone. He never mentioned their mother and I didn’t know if she was dead, or just gone. He was my partner in the firm of Laslow and Leonard Electronics.

“The Bronson kid’s scared to death of the suit we put on him yesterday. First time they turned it on, he panicked. I’ll run over and see. Where’s that sleeve?” I rummaged futilely and Lenny moved stolidly toward a cabinet and pulled out the muslin sleeve and small control box. Once in a while he’d smile, but that was the only emotion that I’d ever seen on his face, a quiet smile, usually when something worked against the odds, or when his sons did something exceptionally nice—like get a full paid scholarship to MIT, or Harvard, as the third one had done that fall.

“Go on home after you see the kid,” Lenny said. “I’ll clean up in here and

try to run down the wafers.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow.”

Children’s Hospital was fifteen miles away, traffic was light at that time of day, and I made it under the half hour I’d promised. Janet met me in the downstairs foyer.

“Eddie, did you bring the sleeve? I thought maybe if you let Mr. Bronson feel it...”

I held it up and she grinned. Janet, suntanned, with red, sun-streaked hair, freckles, and lean to the point of thinness, was my idea of a beautiful woman. We had been married for twelve years.

“Where are the parents?”

“In Dr. Reisman’s office. They were just upsetting Mike more than he was already.”

“Okay, first Mike. Come on.”

Mike Bronson was eight. Three months ago, the first day of school vacation, he had been run over and killed by a diesel truck. He had been listed DOA; someone had detected an echo of life, but they said he couldn’t survive the night. They operated, and gave him a week, then a month, and six weeks ago they had done more surgery and said probably he’d make it. Crushed spine, crushed pelvis, multiple fractures in both legs. One of the problems was that the boy was eight, and growing. His hormonal system didn’t seem to get the message that he was critically injured, and that things should stop for a year or so, and that meant that his body cast had to be changed frequently and it meant that while his bones grew together again, and lengthened, his muscles would slowly atrophy, and when he was removed from the cast finally, there’d be a bundle of bones held together by pale skin and not much else.

At Mike’s door I motioned for Janet to stay outside. One more white uniform, I thought, he didn’t need right now. They had him in a private room, temporarily, I assumed, because of his reaction to the suit. He couldn’t move his head, but he heard me come in, and when I got near enough so he could see me, his eyes were wide with fear. He was a good-looking boy with big brown eyes that knew too much of pain and fear.

“You a cub scout?” I asked.

He could talk some, a throaty whisper, when he wanted to. He didn’t seem to want to then. I waited a second or two, then said, “You know what a ham radio set is, I suppose. If you could learn the Morse code, I could fix

a wire so that you could use the key.” I was looking around his bed, as if to see if it could be done, talking to myself. “Put a screen with the code up there, where you could see it. Sort of a learning machine. Work the wire with your tongue at first, until they uncover your hands anyway. Course not everybody wants to talk to Australia or Russia or Brazil or ships at sea. All done with wires, some people are afraid of wires and things like that.”

He was watching me intently now, his eyes following my gaze as I studied the space above his head. He was ready to deal in five minutes. “You stop bitching about the suit, and I start on the ham set. Right?” His eyes sparkled at that kind of language and he whispered, “Right.”

“Now the parents,” I told Janet in the hall. “He’s okay.”

Bronson was apelike, with great muscular, hairy forearms. I never did say who I was, or why I was there, anything at all. “Hold out your arm,” I ordered. He looked from me to Dr. Reisman, who was in a sweat by then. The doctor nodded. I put the sleeve on his arm, then put an inflatable splint on it, inflating it slightly more than was necessary, but I was mad. “Move your fingers,” I ordered. He tried. I attached the jack to the sleeve wire and plugged it in, and then I played his arm and hand muscles like a piano. He gaped. “That’s what we’re doing to your son. If we don’t do it, when he comes out of that cast he’ll be like a stick doll. His muscles will waste away to nothing. He’ll weigh twenty-five pounds, maybe.” That was a guess, but it made the point. “Every time they change the cast, we change the program, so that every muscle in his body will be stimulated under computer control, slightly at first, then stronger and stronger as he gets better.” I started to undo the splint. The air came out with a teakettle hiss. “You wouldn’t dream of telling Dr. Thorne how to operate on your boy. Don’t tell me my business, unless you know it better than I do.”

“But... Did it hurt?” Mrs. Bronson asked.

“No,” Bronson said, flexing his fingers. “It just tingled a little bit. Felt sort of good.”

I removed the sleeve and folded it carefully, and at the door I heard Mrs. Bronson’s whisper, “Who is he?” and Janet’s haughty answer, “That’s Edward Laslow, the inventor of the Laslow Suit.”

Enrico Groppi met me in the corridor. “I just came from Mike’s room. Thanks. Want a drink?” Groppi was an eclectic—he took from here, there, anything that worked he was willing to incorporate into his system.

“That’s an idea.” I followed him to his office, left word for Janet to meet me there, and tried not to think about the possibility that the suit wouldn’t work, that I’d built up false hopes, that Mike would come to hate

me and everything I symbolized...

I drove Janet home, leaving her car in the hospital lot overnight. That meant that I'd have to drive her to work in the morning, but it seemed too silly to play follow the leader back the county roads. To get home we took the interstate highway first, then a four-lane state road, then a two-lane county road, then a right turn off onto a dirt road, and that was ours. Sweet Brier Lane. Five one-acre lots, with woods all around, and a hill behind us, and a brook. If any of us prayed at all, it was only that the county engineers wouldn't discover the existence of Sweet Brier Lane and come in with their bulldozers and road-building equipment and turn us into a real development.

Our house was the third one on the narrow road. First on the left was Bill Glaser, a contractor, nice fellow if you didn't have to do more than wave and say hi from time to time. Then on the right came the Donlevy house that had been empty for almost three years while Peter Donlevy was engaged in an exchange program with teachers from England. He was at Cambridge, and from the Christmas cards that we got from them, they might never return. Then, again on the right, our house, set far back behind oak trees that made grass-growing almost impossible. Farther down and across the lane was Earl Klinger's house. He was with the math department of the university. And finally the lane dead-ended at the driveway of Lucas Malek and his wife. He was in his sixties, retired from the insurance business, and to be avoided if possible. An immigrant from East Europe, Hungary or some place like that, he was bored and talked endlessly if encouraged. We were on polite, speaking terms with everyone on the lane, but the Donlevys had been our friends; with them gone, we had drawn inward, and had very little to do with the neighbors. We could have borrowed sugar from any of them, or got a lift to town, or counted on them to call the fire department if our house started to burn down, but there was no close camaraderie there.

It was our fault. If we had wanted friends we certainly could have found them in that small group of talented and intelligent people. But we were busy. Janet with her work at the hospital where she was a physical therapist, and I at my laboratory that was just now after fourteen years starting to show a bit of profit. It could have got out of the red earlier, but Lenny and I both believed in updating the equipment whenever possible, so it had taken time.

It was a warm day, early in September, without a hint yet that summer had had it. I had the windows open, making talk impossible. Janet and I could talk or not. There were still times when we stayed up until morning,

just talking, and then again weeks went by with nothing more than the sort of thing that has to take place between husband and wife. No strain either way, nothing but ease lay between us. We had a good thing, and we knew it.

We were both startled, and a little upset, when we saw a moving van and a dilapidated station wagon in the driveway of the Donlevy house.

“They wouldn’t come back without letting us know,” Janet said.

“Not a chance. Maybe they sold it.”

“But without a sign, or any real-estate people coming around?”

“They could have been here day after day without our knowing.”

“But not without Ruth Klinger knowing about it. She would have told us.”

I drove past the house slowly, craning to see something that would give a hint. Only the station wagon, with a Connecticut plate. It was an eight-year-old model, in need of a paint job. It didn’t look too hopeful.

Every afternoon a woman from a nearby subdivision came to stay with the children and to straighten up generally until we got home. Mrs. Durrell was as mystified as we about the van and the newcomer.

“Haven’t seen a sign of anyone poking about over there. Rusty says that they’re just moving boxes in, heavy boxes.” Rusty, eleven, probably knew exactly how many boxes, and their approximate weight. “The kids are down at the brook watching them unload,” Mrs. Durrell went on. “They’re hoping for more kids, I guess. Rusty keeps coming up to report, and so far, only one woman, and a lot of boxes.” She talked herself out of the kitchen, across the terrace, and down the drive to her car, her voice fading out gradually.

Neither Pete Donlevy nor I had any inclination for gardening, and our yards, separated by the brook, were heavily wooded, so that his house was not visible from ours, but down at the brook there was a clear view between the trees. While Janet changed into shorts and sandals, I wandered down to have a look along with Rusty and Laura. They were both Janet’s kids. Redheads, with freckles, and vivid blue-green eyes, skinny arms and legs; sometimes I found myself studying one or the other of them intently for a hint of my genes there, without success. Laura was eight. I spotted her first, sitting on the bridge made of two fallen trees. We had lopped the branches off and the root mass and just left them there. Pete Donlevy and I had worked three weekends on those trees, cutting up the branches for our fireplaces, rolling the two trunks close together to

make a footbridge. We had consumed approximately ten gallons of beer during those weekends.

“Hi, Dad,” Rusty called from above me. I located him high on the right-angled branch of an oak tree. “We have a new neighbor.”

I nodded and sat down next to Laura. “Any kids?”

“No. Just a lady so far.”

“Young? Old? Fat?”

“Tiny. I don’t know if young or old, can’t tell. She runs around like young.”

“With lots of books,” Rusty said from his better vantage point.

“No furniture?”

“Nope. Just suitcases and a trunk full of clothes, and boxes of books. And cameras, and tripods.”

“And a black-and-white dog,” Laura added.

I tossed bits of bark into the brook and watched them bob and whirl their way downstream. Presently we went back to the house, and later we grilled hamburgers on the terrace, and had watermelon for dessert. I didn’t get a glimpse of the tiny lady.

Sometime during the night I was brought straight up in bed by a wail that was animal-like, thin, high-pitched, inhuman. “Laura!”

Janet was already out of bed; in the pale light from the hall, she was a flash of white gown darting out the doorway. The wail was repeated, and by then I was on my way to Laura’s room too.

She was standing in the middle of the floor, her short pajamas white, her eyes wide open, showing mostly white also. Her hands were partially extended before her, fingers widespread, stiff.

“Laura!” Janet said. It was a command, low-voiced, but imperative. The child didn’t move. I put my arm about her shoulders, not wanting to frighten her more than she was by the nightmare. She was rigid and unmoving, as stiff as a catatonic.

“Pull back the sheet,” I told Janet. “I’ll carry her back to bed.” It was like lifting a wooden dummy. No response, no flexibility, no life. My skin crawled, and fear made a sour taste in my mouth. Back in her bed, Laura suddenly sighed, and her eyelids fluttered once or twice, then closed and she was in a normal sleep. I lifted her hand, her wrist was limp, her fingers dangled loosely.

Janet stayed with her for a few minutes, but she didn't wake up, and finally Janet joined me in the kitchen, where I had poured a glass of milk and was sipping it.

"I never saw anything like that," Janet said. She was pale, and shaking.

"A nightmare, honey. Too much watermelon, or something. More than likely she won't remember anything about it. Just as well."

We didn't discuss it. There wasn't anything to say. Who knows anything about nightmares? But I had trouble getting back to sleep again, and when I did, I dreamed off and on the rest of the night, waking up time after time with the memory of a dream real enough to distort my thinking so that I couldn't know if I was sleeping in bed, or floating somewhere else and dreaming of the bed.

Laura didn't remember any of the dream, but she was fascinated, and wanted to talk about it: what had she been doing when we found her? how had she sounded when she shrieked? and so on. After about five minutes it got to be a bore and I refused to say another word. Mornings were always bad anyway; usually I was the last to leave the house, but that morning I had to drive Janet to work, so we all left at the same time, the kids to catch the schoolbus at the end of the lane, Janet to go to the hospital, and me to go to the lab eventually. At the end of the lane when I stopped to let the kids hop out, we saw our new neighbor. She was walking a Dalmatian, and she smiled and nodded. But Laura surprised us all by calling out to her, greeting her like a real friend. When I drove away I could see them standing there, the dog sniffing the kids interestedly, the woman and Laura talking.

"Well," was all I could think to say. Laura usually was the shy one, the last to make friends with people, the last to speak to company, the first to break away from a group of strangers.

"She seems all right," Janet said.

"Let's introduce ourselves tonight. Maybe she's someone from around here, someone from school." And I wondered where else Laura could have met her without our meeting her also.

We didn't meet her that day.

I got tied up, and it was after eight when I got home, tired and disgusted by a series of mishaps again at the lab. Janet didn't help by saying that maybe we had too many things going at once for just the two of us to keep track of. Knowing she was right didn't make the comment any easier to take. Lenny and I were jealous of our shop and lab. We didn't

want to bring in an outsider, and secretly I knew that I didn't want to be bothered with the kind of bookkeeping that would be involved.

"You can't have it both ways," Janet said. Sometimes she didn't know when to drop it. "Either you remain at the level you were at a couple of years ago, patenting little things every so often, and leave the big jobs to the companies that have the manpower, or else you let your staff grow along with your ideas."

I ate warmed-over roast beef without tasting it, and drank two gin-and-tonics. The television sound was bad and that annoyed me, even though it was three rooms away with the doors between closed.

"Did you get started on Mike's ham set yet?" Janet asked, clearing the table.

"Christ!" I had forgotten. I took my coffee and headed for the basement. "I'll get at it. I've got what I need. Don't wait up. If I don't do it tonight, I won't get to it for days." I had suits being tested at three different hospitals, Mike's, one at a geriatric clinic where an eighty-year-old man was recovering from a broken hip, and one in a veterans' hospital where a young man in a coma was guinea pig. I was certain the suit would be more effective than the daily massage that such patients usually received, when there was sufficient help to administer such massage to begin with. The suits were experimental and needed constant checking, the programs needed constant supervision for this first application. And it was my baby. So I worked that night on the slides for Mike Bronson, and it was nearly two when I returned to the kitchen, keyed up and tense from too much coffee and too many cigarettes.

I wandered outside and walked for several minutes back through the woods, ending up at the bridge, staring at the Donlevy house where there was a light on in Pete Donlevy's study. I wondered again about the little woman who had moved in, wondered if others had joined her, or if they would join her. It didn't seem practical for one woman to rent such a big house. I was leaning against the same tree that Rusty had perched in watching the unloading of boxes. I wasn't thinking of anything in particular, images were flitting through my mind, snaps, scraps of talk, bits and pieces of unfinished projects, disconnected words. I must have closed my eyes. It was dark under the giant oak and there was nothing to see anyway, except the light in Pete's study, and that was only a small oblong of yellow.

The meandering thoughts kept passing by my mind's eye, but very clearly there was also Pete's study. I was there, looking over the

bookshelves, wishing I dared remove his books in order to put my own away neatly. Thinking of Laura and her nightmare. Wondering where Caesar was, had I left the basement light on, going to the door to whistle, imagining Janet asleep with her arm up over her head, if I slept like that my hands would go to sleep, whistling again for Caesar. Aware of the dog, although he was across the yard staring intently up a tree bole where a possum clung motionlessly. Everything a jumble, the bookshelves, the basement workshop, Janet, Caesar, driving down from Connecticut, pawing through drawers in the lab shop, looking for the sleeve controls, dots and dashes on slides...

I whistled once more and stepped down the first of the three steps to the yard, and fell...

Falling forever, ice cold, tumbling over and over, with the knowledge that the fall would never end, would never change, stretching out for something, anything to grasp, to stop the tumbling. Nothing. Then a scream, and opening my eyes, or finding my eyes open. The light was no longer on.

Who screamed?

Everything was quiet, the gentle sound of the water on rocks, a rustling of a small creature in the grasses at the edge of the brook, an owl far back on the hill. There was a September chill in the air suddenly and I was shivering as I hurried back to my house.

I knew that I hadn't fallen asleep. Even if I had dozed momentarily, I couldn't have been so deeply asleep that I could have had a nightmare. Like Laura's, I thought, and froze. Is that what she had dreamed? Falling forever? There had been no time. During the fall I knew that I had been doing it for an eternity, that I would continue to fall for all the time to come.

Janet's body was warm as she snuggled up to me, and I clung to her almost like a child, grateful for this long-limbed, practical woman.

We met our new neighbor on Saturday. Janet made a point of going over to introduce herself and give her an invitation for a drink, or coffee. "She's so small," Janet said. "About thirty, or a little under. And handsome in a strange way. In spite of herself almost. You can see that she hasn't bothered to do anything much about her appearance, I mean she has gorgeous hair, or could have, but she keeps it cut about shoulder length and lets it go at that. I bet she hasn't set it in years. Same for her clothes.

It's as if she never glanced in a mirror, or a fashion magazine, or store window. Anyway, you'll see for yourself. She'll be over at about four."

There was always work that needed doing immediately in the yard, and on the house or the car, and generally I tried to keep Saturday open to get some of it done. That day I had already torn up the television, looking for the source of the fuzzy sound, and I had replaced a tube and a speaker condenser, but it still wasn't the greatest. Rusty wanted us to be hooked up to the cable, and I was resisting. From stubbornness, I knew. I resented having to pay seventy-five dollars in order to bring in a picture that only three years ago had been clear and sharp. A new runway at the airport had changed all that. Their radar and the flight paths of rerouted planes distorted our reception. But I kept trying to fix it myself.

Janet was painting window shades for Laura's room. She had copied the design from some material that she was using for a bedspread and drapes. She had baked two pies, and a cake, and a loaf of whole-wheat bread. The house was clean and smelled good and we were busy. And happy. It always sounds hokey to say that you're a happy man. Why aren't you tearing out your hair over the foreign mess, or the tax problem, or some damn thing? But I was a happy man. We had a good thing, and knew it. Janet always baked on Saturday, froze the stuff and got it out during the week, so the kids hardly even knew that she was a working mother. They were happy kids.

Then Christine came along. That's the only way to put it. That afternoon she came up through the woods, dressed in brown jeans, with a sloppy plaid shirt that came down below her hips and was not terribly clean. Laura ran down to meet her, and she was almost as big as Christine.

"Hi," Janet said, coming out to the terrace. "Mrs. Rudeman, this is Eddie. And Rusty."

"Please, call me Christine," she said, and held out her hand.

But I knew her. It was like seeing your first lover again after years, the same shock low in the belly, the same tightening up of muscles, the fear that what's left of the affair will show, and there is always something left over. Hate, love, lust. Something. Virtually instantaneous with the shock of recognition came the denial. I had never seen her before in my life, except that one morning on the way to work, and certainly I hadn't felt any familiarity then. It would have been impossible to have known her without remembering, if only because of her size. You remember those who aren't in the range of normality. She was possibly five feet tall, and couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds. It was impossible to tell what kind of a

figure she had, but what was visible seemed perfectly normal, just scaled down, except her eyes, and they looked extraordinarily large in so tiny a face. Her eyes were very dark, black or so close to it as to make no difference, and her hair, as Janet had said, was beautiful, or could have been with just a little attention. It was glossy, lustrous black, thick and to her shoulders. But she shouldn't have worn it tied back with a ribbon as she had it then. Her face was too round, her eyebrows too straight. It gave her a childlike appearance.

All of that and more passed through my mind as she crossed the terrace smiling, with her hand outstretched. And I didn't want to touch her hand. I knew that Janet was speaking, but I didn't hear what she said. In the same distant way I knew that Laura and Rusty were there, Laura waiting impatiently for the introductions to be over so she could say something or other. I braced myself for the touch, and when our fingers met, I knew there had been no way I could have prepared myself for the electricity of that quick bringing together of flesh to flesh. For God's sake, I wanted to say, turn around and say something to Rusty, don't just stand there staring at me. Act normal. You've never seen me before in your life and you know it.

She turned quickly, withdrawing her hand abruptly, but I couldn't tell if she had felt anything, or suspected my agitation. Janet was oblivious of any currents.

"But you and Rusty and Laura have all met," she said. "I keep forgetting how great kids are at insinuating themselves into any scene."

"Where's Caesar?" Laura finally got to ask.

I had another shock with the name. My nightmare, my waking nightmare. Or had I heard her calling to the dog?

"I never take him with me unless he's been invited," Christine said. "You never know where you'll run into a dog-hater, or a pet cat, or another dog that's a bit jealous."

They talked about the dog we had had until late in the spring, a red setter that had been born all heart and no brain. He had been killed out on the county road. Again I was distantly aware of what they were saying, almost as if I were half asleep in a different room, with voices droning on and on beyond the walls. I was simply waiting for a chance to leave without being too rude.

The kids wandered away after a little while, and Janet and Christine talked easily. I began to listen when she mentioned Pete's name.

“Pete and Grace had been my husband’s friends for a long time. Pete studied under him, and Grace and I were in classes together. So they invited me to stay in their house this year. Karl suggested Pete for the exchange program three years ago. He didn’t believe there was a coherent American school of philosophy, and he thought that it would be good for Pete to study under the Cambridge system of Logical Positivism.” She shrugged. “I take it that Pete didn’t write to you and warn you that I’d be moving in. He said he would, but I guess I didn’t really think he’d get around to it.”

Karl Rudeman. Karl Rudeman. It was one of those vaguely familiar names that you feel you must know and can’t associate with anything.

Janet had made a pitcher of gin and bitter lemon, and I refilled our glasses while I tried to find a tag to go with the name. Christine murmured thanks, then said, “It isn’t fair that I should know so much about you both—from Pete—and that you know nothing about me. Karl was a psychologist at Harvard. He worked with Leary for several years, then they separated, violently, over the drugs. He died last May.”

I felt like a fool then, and from the look on her face, I assumed that Janet did too. Karl Rudeman had won the Nobel for his work in physiological psychology, in the field of visual perception. There was something else nagging me about the name, some elusive memory that went with it, but it refused to come.

Christine stayed for another half hour, refused Janet’s invitation to have dinner with us, and then went back home. Back through the woods, the way she had come.

“She’s nice,” Janet said. “I like her.”

“You warn her about Glaser?”

“She’s not interested. And it does take two. Anyway she said that Pete gave her the rundown on everyone on the lane. You heard her.”

“Yeah,” I lied. I hadn’t heard much of anything anyone had said. “He must have been thirty years older than she is.”

“I suppose. I always wonder how it is with a couple like that. I mean, was he losing interest? Or just one time a month? Did it bother her?” Since Janet and I always wondered about everyone’s sex life, that wasn’t a strange line for our talk to have taken, but I felt uncomfortable about it, felt as if this time we were peeking in bedroom-door keyholes.

“Well, since you seem so sure she wouldn’t be interested in Bill Glaser, maybe she’s as asexual as she looked in that outfit.”

“Hah!” That’s all, just one Hah! And I agreed. We let it drop then.

We had planned a movie for that night. “Get some hamburgers out for the kids and I’ll take you around to Cunningham’s for dinner,” I said to Janet as she started in with the tray. She looked pleased.

We always had stuffed crab at Cunningham’s, and Asti Spumante. It’s a way of life. Our first date cost me almost a week’s pay, and that’s what we did, so I don’t suggest it too often, just a couple of times a year when things have suddenly clicked, or when we’ve had a fight and made up to find everything a little better than it used to be. I don’t know why I suggested it that night, but she liked the idea, and she got dressed up in her new green dress that she had been saving for a party.

When I made love to her late that night, she burst into tears, and I stroked her hair until she fell asleep. I remembered the first time she had done that, how frightened I’d been, and her convulsive clutching when I had tried to get up to bring her a drink of water or something. She hadn’t been able to talk, she just sobbed and held me, and slowly I had come to realize that I had a very sexy wife whose response was so total that it overwhelmed her, and me. She sighed when I eased my numb arm out from under her. Pins-and-needles circulation began again and I rubbed my wrist trying to hurry it along.

Christine Warnecke Rudeman, I thought suddenly. Christine Warnecke. Of course. The photographer. There had been a display of her pictures at the library a year or two ago. She had an uncanny way of looking at things, as if she were at some point that you couldn’t imagine, getting an angle that no one ever had seen before. I couldn’t remember the details of the show, or any of the individual pieces, only the general impression of great art, or even greater fakery. I could almost visualize the item I had read about the death of her husband, but it kept sliding out of focus. Something about his death, though. Something never explained.

Tuesday I went home for lunch. I often did, the lab was less than a mile from the house. Sometimes I took Lenny with me, but that day he was too busy with a printed circuit that he had to finish by six and he nodded without speaking when I asked if he wanted a sandwich. The air felt crisp and cool after the hot smell of solder as I walked home.

I was thinking of the computer cutting tool that we were finishing up, wondering if Mike had mastered the Morse code yet, anticipating the look on his face when I installed the ham set. I was not thinking of Christine,

had, in fact, forgotten about her, until I got even with the house and suddenly there she was, carrying a tripod out toward a small toolhouse at the rear of the lot.

I turned in the Donlevy drive. If it had been Ruth Klinger, or Grace Donlevy, or any of the other women who lived there, I would have offered a hand. But as soon as I got near her, I knew I'd made a mistake. It hit me again, not so violently, but still enough to shake me up. I know this woman, came the thought.

"Hi, Eddie." She put the tripod down and looked hot and slightly out of breath. "I always forget how heavy it can get. I had it made heavy purposely, so it could stay in place for months at a time, and then I forget."

I picked it up and it was heavy, but worse, awkward. The legs didn't lock closed, and no matter how I shifted it, one of them kept opening. "Where to?" I asked.

"Inside the toolshed. I left the door open..."

I positioned it for her and she was as fussy as Lenny got over his circuits, or as I got over wiring one of the suits. It pleased me that she was that fussy about its position at an open window. I watched her mount a camera on the tripod and again she made adjustments that were too fine for me to see that anything was changed. Finally she was satisfied. All there was in front of the lens was a maple tree. "Want to take a look?" she asked.

The tree, framed by sky. I must have looked blank.

"I have a timer," she said. "A time-lapse study of the tree from now until spring, I hope. If nothing goes wrong."

"Oh." My disappointment must have shown.

"I won't show them side by side," she said, almost too quickly. "Sort of superimposed, so that you'll see the tree through time..." She looked away suddenly and wiped her hands on her jeans. "Well, thanks again."

"What in hell do you mean, through time?"

"Oh... Sometime when you and Janet are free I'll show you some of the sort of thing I mean." She looked up, apologetically, and shrugged as she had that first time I met her. It was a strange gesture from one so small. It seemed that almost everything was too much for her, that when she felt cornered she might always simply shrug off everything with that abrupt movement.

“Well, I have to get,” I said then, and turned toward the drive. “Do you have anything else to lug out here, before I leave?”

“No. The timer and film. But that’s nothing. Thanks again.” She took a step away, stopped and said, with that same shy apologetic tone, “I wish I could explain what I want to do, in words. But I can’t.”

I hurried away from her, to my own house, but I didn’t want anything to eat after all. I paced the living room, into the kitchen, where the coffee I had poured was now cold, back to the living room, out to the terrace. I told myself asinine things like: I love Janet. We have a good life, good sex, good kids. I have a good business that I am completely involved in. I’m too young for the male climacteric. She isn’t even pretty.

And I kept pacing until I was an hour later than I’d planned on. I still hadn’t eaten, and couldn’t, and I forgot to make the sandwich for Lenny and take it back to him.

I avoided Christine. I put in long hours at the lab, and stayed in the basement workshop almost every evening, and turned down invitations to join the girls for coffee, or talk. They were together a lot. Janet was charmed by her, and a strong friendship grew between them rapidly. Janet commented on it thoughtfully one night. “I’ve never had many woman friends at all. I can’t stand most women after a few minutes. Talking about kids sends me right up the wall, and you know how I am about PTA and clubs and that sort of thing. But she’s different. She’s a person first, then a woman, and as a person she’s one of the most interesting I’ve ever run into. And she has so much empathy and understanding. She’s very shy, too. You never have to worry about her camping on your doorstep or anything like that.”

She’d been there almost two months when Pete’s letter finally arrived telling us about her. Janet read it aloud to me while I shaved.

“ She’s a good kid and probably will need a friend or two by the time she gets out of that madhouse in Connecticut. Rudeman was a genius, but not quite human. Cold, calculating, never did a thing by accident in his life. He wound her up every morning and gave her instructions for the day. God knows why she married him, why they stayed together, but they did. In his own way I think Rudeman was very much in love with her. He said once that if he could understand this one woman he’d understand the entire universe. May he rest in peace, he never made it. So be good to her.

“Grace sends love. She’s been redoing our apartment...”

I stopped listening. The letter went on for three pages of single-spaced typing. The letter had left as many questions as it had answered. More in

fact, since we already had found out the basic information he had supplied. I decided to go to the library and look up Rudeman and his death and get rid of that nagging feeling that had never gone away.

“Eddie, for heaven’s sake!” Janet was staring at me, flushed, and angry.

“What? Sorry, honey. My mind was wandering.”

“I noticed. What in the world is bothering you? You hear me maybe half the time, though I doubt it.”

“I said I’m sorry, Janet. God damn it!” I blotted a nick and turned to look at her, but she was gone.

She snapped at Rusty and Laura, and ignored me when I asked if there was any more mail. Rusty looked at me with a What’s-eating-her? expression.

I tried to bring up the subject again that night, and got nowhere. “Nothing,” she said. “Just forget it.”

“Sure. That suits me fine.” I didn’t know what I was supposed to forget. I tried to remember if it was time for her period, but I never knew until it hit, so I just left her in the kitchen and went downstairs to the workroom and messed around for an hour. When I went back up, she was in bed, pretending to be asleep. Usually I’d keep at it until we had it out in the open, whatever it was, and we’d both explain our sides, maybe not convincing each other, but at least demonstrating that each thought he had a position to maintain. That time I simply left the bedroom and wandered about in the living room, picked up a book to read, put it down again. I found Pete’s letter and saw that we’d been invited to visit them over Christmas. I seemed to remember that Janet had gone on about that, but I couldn’t recall her words. Finally I pulled on a jacket and walked out to the terrace. I looked toward the Donlevy house, Christine’s house now. Enough leaves had fallen by then so I could see the lights.

It’s your fault, I thought at her. Why don’t you beat it? Go somewhere else. Go home. Anywhere else. Just get out.

I was falling. Suddenly there was nothing beneath my feet, nothing at all, and I was falling straight down in a featureless grey vacuum. I groped wildly for something to hold on to, and I remembered the last time it had happened, and that it had happened to Laura. Falling straight down, now starting to tumble, my stomach lurching, nausea welling up inside me. Everything was gone, the house, terrace, the lights... I thought hard of the lights that had been the last thing I had seen. Eyes open or closed, the field of vision didn’t change, nothing was there. “Janet!” I tried to call, and had

no way of knowing if I had been able to make the sound or not. I couldn't hear myself. A second sweep of nausea rose in me, and this time I tasted the bitterness. I knew that I would start crying. I couldn't help it; nausea, fear, the uncontrollable tumbling, unable to call anyone. Fury then displaced the helplessness that had overcome me, and I yelled, again without being able to hear anything, "You did this, didn't you, you bitch!"

Donlevy's study was warm, the colors were dull gold, russet, deep, dark green. There was a fire in the fireplace. The room was out of focus somehow, not exactly as I remembered it, the furniture too large and awkward-looking, the shelves built to the ceiling were too high, the titles on the topmost shelf a blur because of the strange angle from which I saw them. Before me was Donlevy's desk, cleaner than I'd ever seen it, bare with gleaming wood, a stand with pens, and several sheets of paper. No stacks of reports, journals, overflowing ashtrays... I looked at the papers curiously, a letter, in a neat legible handwriting. Two pages were turned face down, and the third was barely begun: "... nothing to do with you in any way. When I have finished going through the papers, then I'll box up those that you have a right to and mail them to you. It will take many weeks, however, so unti..." The last word ended with a streak of ink that slashed downward and across the page, and ran off onto the desktop.

Where was she, Christine? How had I got... I realized that I wasn't actually there. Even as the thought formed, I knew precisely where I was, on my own terrace, leaning against a post, staring at the lights through the bare trees.

I looked at the letter, and slowly raised my hand and stared at it, both on the terrace and in the study. And the one in the study was tiny, tanned, with oval nails, and a wide wedding band...

"Eddie?"

Janet's voice jolted me, and for a moment the study dimmed, but I concentrated on it, and held it. "Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. I thought you were sleeping."

In the study... who the devil was in the study? Where was *she*? Then suddenly she screamed, and it was both inside my head and outside filling the night.

"My God!" Janet cried. "It's Christine! Someone must have..."

I started to run toward her house, the Donlevy house, and Janet was close behind me in her robe and slippers. In the split second before that

scream had exploded into the night, I had been overcome by a wave of terror such as I had never known before. I fully expected to find Christine dead, with her throat cut, or a bullet in her brain, or something. Caesar met us and loped with us to the house, yelping excitedly. Why hadn't he barked at a stranger? I wanted to kick the beast. The back door was unlocked. We rushed in, and while Janet hesitated, I dashed toward the study.

Christine was on the floor near the desk, but she wasn't dead, or even injured as far as I could tell from a hurried examination. Janet had dropped to her knees also, and was feeling the pulse in Christine's wrist, and I saw again the small tanned hand that I had seen only a few minutes ago, even the wedding band. The terror that had flooded through me minutes ago surged again. How could I have dreamed of seeing that hand move as if it were my own hand? I looked about the study frantically, but it was back to normal, nothing distorted now. I had been dreaming, I thought, dreaming. I had dreamed of being this woman, of seeing through her eyes, feeling through her. A dream, no more complicated than any other dream, just strange to me. Maybe people dreamed of being other people all the time, and simply never mentioned it. Maybe everyone walked around terrified most of the time because of inexplicable dreams. Christine's eyelids fluttered, and I knew that I couldn't look at her yet, couldn't let her look at me. Not yet. I stood up abruptly. "I'll have a look around. Something scared her."

I whistled for Caesar to come with me, and we made a tour of the house, all quiet, with no signs of an intruder. The dog sniffed doors, and the floor, but in a disinterested manner, as if going through the motions because that was expected of him. The same was true of the yard about the house; he just couldn't find anything to get excited about. I cursed him for being a stupid brute, and returned to the study. Christine was seated on one of the dark green chairs, and Janet on one facing her. I moved casually toward the desk, enough to see the letter, to see the top lines, the long streak where the pen had gone out of control.

Janet said, "Something must have happened, but she can't remember a thing."

"Fall asleep? A nightmare?" I suggested, trying not to look at her.

"No. I'm sure not. I was writing a letter, in fact. Then suddenly there was something else in the room with me. I know it. It's happened before, the same kind of feeling, and I thought it was the farmhouse, the associations there. But maybe I am going crazy. Maybe Victor's right, I need care and treatment." She was very pale, her eyes so large that she

looked almost doll-like, an idealized doll-like face.

“Who is Victor?” Janet asked.

“Eugenia’s husband. She’s... she was my husband’s daughter.” Christine sighed and stood up, a bit unsteadily. “If it starts again... I thought if I just got away from them all, and the house... But if it starts again here...”

“Eddie, we can’t leave her like this,” Janet said in a low voice. “And we can’t leave the kids alone. Let’s take her home for the night.”

Christine objected, but in the end came along through the woods with Janet and me. At our house Janet went to get some clothes on. Her gown and robe had been soaked with dew. While Janet was dressing, I poked up a fire in the fireplace, and then made some hot toddies. Christine didn’t speak until Janet came back.

“I’m sorry this happened,” she said then. “I mean involving you two in something as... as messy as this is.”

Janet looked at me, waiting, and I said, “Christine, we heard from Pete and he seemed to think you might need friends. He seemed to think we might do. Is any of this something that you could talk to Pete about?”

She nodded. “Yes. I could tell Pete.”

“Okay, then let us be the friends that he would be if he was here.”

Again she nodded. “Lord knows I have to talk to someone, or I’ll go as batty as Victor wants to believe I am.”

“Why do you keep referring to him?” Janet asked. Then she shook her head firmly. “No. No questions. You just tell us what you want to for now.”

“I met Karl when I was a student at Northwestern. He had a class in physiological psychology and I was one of his students and experimental subjects. He was doing his basic research then on perception. Three afternoons a week we would meet in his lab for tests that he had devised, visual-perception tests. He narrowed his subjects down to two others and me, and we are the ones he based much of his theory on. Anyway, as I got to know him and admire him more and more, he seemed to take a greater interest in me. He was a widower, with a child, Eugenia. She was twelve then.” Her voice had grown fainter, and now stopped, and she looked at the drink in her hand that she had hardly touched. She took a sip, and another. We waited.

“The reason he was interested in me, particularly, at least in the beginning,” she said haltingly, “was that I had been in and out of institutions for years.” She didn’t look up and her words were almost too

low to catch. “He had developed the theory that the same mechanism that produces sight also produces images that are entirely mental constructs, and that the end results are the same. In fact, he believed and worked out the theory that all vision, whether or not there is an external object, is a construct. Vision doesn’t copy anything in the real world, but instead involves the construction of a schematic, and so does visual imagination, or hallucination.”

I refilled our glasses and added a log to the fire, and she talked on and on. Rudeman didn’t believe in a psychological cause to explain schizophrenia, but believed it was a chemical imbalance with an organic cause that produced aberrated perception. This before the current wave of research that seemed to indicate that he had been right. His interest in Christine had started because she could furnish information on image projection, and because in some areas she had an eidetic memory, and this, too, was a theory that he was intensely interested in. *Eidetikers* had been discounted for almost a century in the serious literature, and he had reestablished the authenticity of the phenomena.

“During the year,” she said, “he found out that there were certain anomalies in my vision that made my value to him questionable. Gradually he had to phase me out, but he became so fascinated in those other areas that he couldn’t stand not starting another line of research immediately, using me extensively. That was to be his last year at Northwestern. He had an offer from Harvard, and he was eager to go there. Anyway, late in April that year I... I guess I flipped out. And he picked up the pieces and wouldn’t let me go to a psychiatrist, but insisted on caring for me himself. Three months later we were married.”

Janet’s hand found mine, and we listened to Christine like that, hand in hand.

“He was very kind to me,” Christine said slowly sometime during that long night. “I don’t know if he loved me, but I think I would have died without him. I think—or thought—that he cured me. I was well and happy, and busy. I wanted to take up photography and he encouraged it and made it possible. All those years he pursued a line of research that he never explained to me, that he hadn’t published up to the time of his death. I’m going through his work now, trying to decode it, separating personal material from the professional data.”

She was leaving out most of it, I believed. Everything interesting, or pertinent, or less than nattering to her she was skipping over. Janet’s hand squeezed mine; take it easy, she seemed to be saying. Christine was obviously exhausted, her enormous eyes were shadowed, and she was very

pale. But, damn it, I argued with myself, why had she screamed and fainted? How had her husband died?

“Okay,” Janet said then, cheerfully, and too briskly. “Time’s up for now. We’ll talk again tomorrow, or the next day, or whenever you’re ready to, Christine. Let me show you your room.” She was right, of course. We were all dead tired, and it was nearly three, but I resented stopping it then. How had her husband died?

She and Janet left and I kicked at the feeble fire and finished my last drink, gathered up glasses and emptied ashtrays. It was half an hour before Janet came back. She looked at the clock and groaned.

“Anything else?”

She went past me toward the bedroom, not speaking until we were behind the closed door. “It must have been gruesome,” she said then, starting to undress. “Victor and Eugenia moved in with her. Karl’s daughter and son-in-law. And Karl’s parents live there, too. And right away Victor began to press for Karl’s papers. They worked together at the university. Then he began to make passes, and that was too much. She packed up and left.”

I had finished undressing first, and sat on the side of the bed watching her. The scattering of freckles across her shoulders was fading now, her deep red tan was turning softly golden. I especially loved the way her hip bones showed when she moved, and the taut skin over her ribs when she raised her arms to pull her jersey over her head. She caught my look and glanced at her watch pointedly. I sighed. “What happened to her tonight?”

“She said that before she finally had to leave the farm up in Connecticut, the last night there, Victor came into her third-floor room and began to make advances—her word, by the way. She backed away from him, across the room and out onto a balcony. She has acrophobia, and never usually goes out on that balcony. But she kept backing up, thinking of the scandal if she screamed. Her stepdaughter’s husband, after all. In the house were Karl’s mother and father, Eugenia... Victor knew she would avoid a scene if possible. Then suddenly she was against the rail and he forced her backward, leaning out over it, and when she twisted away from him, she looked straight down, and then fainted. She said that tonight she somehow got that same feeling, she thinks that that memory flooded back in and that she lived that scene over again, although she can’t remember anything except the feeling of looking down and falling. She screamed and fainted, just like that other night.” Janet slipped into bed. “I think I reassured her a little bit anyway. If that’s what happened, it

certainly doesn't mean she's heading for another break. That's the sort of thing that can happen to anyone at any time, especially where one of those very strong phobias is concerned."

I turned off the light, and we lay together, her cheek on my shoulder, her left arm across my chest, her left leg over my leg. And I thought of Christine in the other room under the same roof. And I knew that I was afraid of her.

The next morning was worse than usual. Thank God it's Friday, we both said a number of times. I had no desire to see Christine that morning, and was relieved that she seemed to be sleeping late. I told Janet I'd leave a note and ask her to go out by the side door, which would latch after her. But when the kids left to catch their bus, she came out.

"I wasn't sure if you'd told them that I was here. I thought it would complicate things to put in an appearance before they were gone," she said apologetically. "I'll go home now. Thanks for last night. More than I can say."

"Coffee?"

She shook her head, but I was pouring it already and she sat down at the kitchen table and waited. "I must look like hell," she said. She hadn't brought her purse with her, her long hair was tangled, she had no makeup on, and her eyes were deeply shadowed with violet. I realized that she was prettier than I had thought at first. It was the appeal of a little girl, however, not the attraction of a grown woman.

She sipped the coffee and then put the cup down and said again, "I'll go home now. Thanks again."

"Want a lift to your house? I have to leave too."

"Oh, no. That would be silly. I'll just go back through the woods."

I watched her as far as I could make out the small figure, and then I turned off lights and unplugged the coffee pot and left. But I kept seeing that slight unkempt figure walking from me, toward the woods, tangled black hair, a knit shirt that was too big, jeans that clung to her buttocks like skin. Her buttocks were rounded, and moved ever so slightly when she walked, almost like a boy, but not quite; there was a telltale sway. And suddenly I wondered how she would be. Eager, actively seeking the contact, the thrust? Passive? I swerved the car, and tried to put the image out of mind, but by the time I had parked and greeted Lenny, I was in a

foul mood.

Lenny always left the mail to me, including anything addressed to him that came in through the lab. In his name I had dictated three refusals of offers to join three separate very good firms. That morning there was the usual assortment of junk, several queries on prices and information, and an invitation to display our computer cutting tool and anything else of interest in the Chicago Exposition of Building Trades. Lenny smiled. We talked for an hour about what to show, how best to display it, and so on, and finally came down to the question we'd both been avoiding. Who would go? Neither of us wanted to. We finally flipped a coin and I lost.

I called Janet at the hospital and told her, and she suggested that we have some literature printed up, ready to hand out, or to leave stacked for prospective buyers to pick up.

"We should have literature," I called to Lenny, who nodded. "We can have a sketch of the machine, I guess," I said to Janet.

"Don't be silly. Let Christine take some pictures for you."

"Our neighbor, Christine Warnecke, would probably take pictures for us," I told Lenny. He nodded a bit more enthusiastically.

We scheduled the next two weeks as tightly as possible, planning for eighteen-hour days, trying to keep in mind the commitments we already had. We had to get a machine ready to take to Chicago, get it polished for photographs, get an assortment of programs for the computer, keep the running check on the wired suits in the hospital cases, finish installing a closed-circuit TV in a private school, and so on.

I was late for dinner, and when I got there Janet simply smiled when I muttered, "Sorry."

"I know," she said, putting a platter of fried chicken down. "I know exactly what it will be like for the next few weeks. I'll see you again for Thanksgiving, or thereabouts."

I kissed her. While I was eating, the telephone rang. Christine, wondering if we'd like to see some of the work she'd done in the past few years. I remembered her offer to show us, but I shook my head at Janet. "Can't. I've got to write up the fact sheet tonight and be ready for the printers. They can take it Thursday. Did you mention the picture to her?" I motioned to the phone.

Janet shook her head. "I will."

"Hi, Christine. Sorry, but I've got things that I have to do tonight. Maybe Janet can. Listen, would you be willing to take a picture of a

machine for us, Lenny and me? He's my partner." She said of course, and I told her that Janet would fill in the details and hung up. I shooed Janet out, and went downstairs. Hours later I heard her come back, heard the basement door open slightly as she listened to see if I was still there. I clicked my pen on my beer glass, and the door closed. For a couple of seconds I considered my wife, decided she was a good sort, and then forgot her as I made another stab at the information sheet.

By twelve thirty I had a workable draft. It would need some polish, and possibly some further condensation, but it seemed to be adequate. I went upstairs for a drink before going to bed. I didn't turn on the living-room lights, but sat in the darkened room and went over and over the plans we had made. Tomorrow I'd get Christine over to take the pictures...

I suddenly saw her buttocks as she moved away from me, and her enormous eyes as she sat at the table and sipped coffee, and the very small hand with its wide band of gold. I closed my eyes. And saw the hand again, this time it opened and closed before my face, turning over and over as I examined it. I saw the other hand, and it was as if it were my own hand. I could raise and lower it. I could touch the right one to the left one, lift one to... my face. I stared at the room, the guest room in the Donlevy house. I had slept there before. Janet and I had stayed there years ago while paint dried in our house. I knew I was seated in the darkened living room, with a rum collins in my hand, knew Janet was sleeping just down the hall, but still I was also in that other room, seeing with eyes that weren't my eyes.

I started to feel dizzy, but this time I rejected the thought of falling. *No!* The feeling passed. I lifted the hands again, and got up. I had been in a deep chair, with a book on my lap. It slipped off to the floor. I tried to look down, but my eyes were riveted, fixed in a straight-ahead stare. I ordered the head to move, and with a combination of orders and just doing it, I forced movement. I forced her-me to make a complete turn, so that I could examine the whole room. Outside, I ordered, and walked down the hall to the living room, to the study. There were other thoughts, and fear. The fear was like a distant surf, rising and falling, but not close enough to feel, or to hear actually. It grew stronger as the walk continued. Dizziness returned, and nausea. I rejected it also.

The nausea had to do with the way my eyes were focusing. Nothing looked normal, or familiar, if my gaze lingered on it. And there was movement where I expected none. I made her stop and looked at the study from the doorway. The desk was not the straight lines and straight edges that I had come to know, but rather a blur that suggested desk, that I knew meant desk, and that did mean desk if I closed my eyes, or turned

from it. But while I looked at it, it was strange. It was as if I could look through the desk to another image, the same piece of furniture, but without the polish, without casters, the same desk at an earlier stage. And beyond that, a rough suggestion of the same desk. And further, wood not yet assembled. Logs. A tree on a forest floor. A tree in full leaf. As I looked at the tree, it dwindled and went through changes: leaves turned color and fell and grew again, but fewer; branches shortened and vanished and the tree shrank and vanished...

I jerked away, and in the living room my heart was pounding and I couldn't catch my breath. I waited for the next few minutes, wondering if I were having a heart attack, if I had fallen asleep, wondering if I were going mad. When I could trust my hands to move without jerking, I lifted the drink and swallowed most of it before I put it down again. Then I paced the living room for several minutes. Nothing had happened, I knew. Overtired, imaginative, half asleep, with vivid near-dreams. I refused to believe it was anything more than that. And I was afraid to try it again to prove to myself that that was all there was to it. I finished the drink, brushed my teeth, and went to bed.

Christine turned up at the shop at four the next afternoon. She shook Lenny's hand, businesslike and brisk, and thoroughly professional. He could have eaten her for breakfast without making a bulge. Her greeting to me was friendly and open. She looked very tired, as if she wasn't sleeping well.

"If you don't mind, Eddie, maybe Mr. Leonard can help me with the machine. I find that I work better with strangers than with people I know."

That suited me fine and I left them alone in the far end of the lab. Now and again I could hear Lenny's rumbling voice protesting something or other, and her very quiet answers. I couldn't make out her words, but from his I knew that she insisted on positioning the machine on a black velvet hanging for a series of shots. I groaned. Glamour yet.

"It's the contrast that I was after," she said when she was through. "The cold and beautifully functional machine, all shiny metal and angles and copper and plastic, all so pragmatic and wholesome, and open. Contrasted by the mystery of black velvet. Like a sky away from the city lights. Or the bowels of a cave with the lights turned off. Or the deepest reaches of the mind where the machine was really born."

Right until the last I was ready to veto the velvet for background without even seeing it, but she got to me. It had been born in such a black

bottomless void, by God. “Let’s wait for proofs and then decide,” I said. I wondered, had she looked at the machine, through it to the components; through them back to the idea as it emerged from the black? I tightened my hand on my mug and took a deep drink of the hot murky coffee. We probably had the world’s worst coffee in the lab because Lenny insisted on making it and he never measured anything, or washed the pot. On the other hand, he seemed to think the stuff he turned out was good.

“I’ll develop them later today and have proofs ready to show you tonight, if you want,” Christine said to us.

“You want to pick them up and bring them in with you in the morning?” Lenny asked. I said sure, and Christine left. I didn’t watch her walk away this time.

After dinner Janet and I both went over to her house to see the proofs. While I studied the pictures, Christine and Janet went to the kitchen to talk and make coffee. I finished and leaned back in my chair waiting for their return. Without any perceptible difference in my thoughts, my position, anything, I was seeing Janet through Christine’s eyes. Janet looked shocked and unbelieving.

I stared at her and began to see other faces there, too. Younger, clearer eyes, and smoother-skinned, emptier-looking. I turned my head abruptly as something else started to emerge. I knew that if I had tried, I would have seen all the personality traits, including the ugliness, the pettiness, everything there was that went into her.

“What is it?” Janet asked, alarm in her voice.

I shook my head, *her* head. She tried to speak and I wouldn’t let her. Without any warning I had crossed the threshold of belief. I knew I could enter her, could use her, could examine whatever was in her mind without her being able to do anything about it. I knew in that same flash that she didn’t realize what was happening, that she felt haunted, or crazy, but that she had no idea that another personality was inside her. I pulled away so suddenly that I almost let her fall down.

From the other room I heard Janet’s cry, followed by the sound of breaking glass. I hurried to the kitchen to find her standing over Christine, who was sitting on a stool looking dazed and bewildered and very frightened.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Janet shook her head. “I dropped a glass,” she said, daring me not to believe.

I wondered why she lied to me, but leaving them alone again, I knew why. I had always been the rationalist in the family. I refused to grant the existence of ghosts, souls, spirits, unseen influences, astrology, palmistry, ESP, anything that couldn't be controlled and explained. I marveled at my absolute acceptance of what had happened. It was like seeing a puzzle suddenly take form and have meaning, like a child's puzzle where animals are hidden in line drawings; once you locate them, you can't lose them again. You know. I knew now. It happens once, you don't believe it; twice, you still don't believe. Three times, it's something you've known all your life. I knew. My hands were shaking when I lighted a cigarette, but inwardly I felt calmer than I had felt before as I considered Christine. I wasn't afraid of her any longer, for one thing. It was something I was doing, not something being done to me. I could control it. And she didn't know.

I stubbed out the cigarette and sat down abruptly. Rudeman? Had he lived in her mind throughout their marriage? Is that what drew him to her, made him marry a girl twenty-five years younger than he'd been. Had he managed to keep her by this control? I couldn't use the word possession then. I wasn't thinking of it as possession. It was more like having someone else's mind open for inspection, a tour for the curious, nothing more.

If I talked to her now, made her see what had happened, quite inadvertently, she could probably get help, learn how to control it so that future intrusion would be impossible. If Rudeman had cared for her at all, hadn't wanted to use her, he would have cured her, or had it done somehow. Maybe he had known, maybe that's what those boxes of books were about, the years of experimentation. A little human guinea pig, I thought. Large-eyed, frightened, trusting. Completely ignorant of what was being done to it. And over the image of the frightened woman came the image of her slight figure as she walked away from me toward the woods, with her little fanny swinging gracefully, the rest of her body a mystery under concealing clothes.

The way she saw things, there wouldn't be any mystery about anything. Into and through and out the other side. No wonder Rudeman had been fascinated. How did she manage to live with so many conflicting images? Did that explain her schizophrenia? Just a name they applied to a condition that was abnormal, without knowing anything about what it was actually? The questions were coming faster and faster, and the thought of her, sitting out there in the kitchen, with answers locked up under that skull, was too much. I began to pace. Not again. Not now

especially, with Janet there. *She'd* begin to suspect me of being responsible, just as I had suspected her of being responsible long before I had an inkling of what was happening. I thought of Christine as *her*, with special emphasis on it, separating *her* from all other hers in the world, but not able or willing to think of her by name.

I wondered what they were doing in the kitchen. What was she telling Janet? I started through the hall toward the kitchen, then stopped, and hurriedly returned to the living room. I couldn't look at her yet. I had to think, to try to understand. I needed time to accept all the way through what had happened between us. And I suddenly wondered what she saw when she looked at me, through me to all the things that I had always believed were invisible.

I couldn't stand being in that house any longer. I grabbed the proofs and stuffed them back into the envelope. In the hallway I yelled out to Janet, "I'm going back through the woods. I'll leave the car for you. Take your time."

She stuck her head out from the kitchen. I thought she looked at me with suspicion and coldness, but her words were innocuous, and I decided that I had imagined the expression. "I won't be much longer, honey. Be careful."

It was dark under the oak trees, with the tenacious leaves still clinging to the twigs, rustling in the wind. The ground was spongy and water came through my shoes quickly, ice cold, squishing with each step. A fine film of ice covered the two logs. I cursed as I slipped and slid across, thinking of the black frigid water below. At our side of the brook I paused and looked back at the glowing windows, and for just an instant I entered her. No transition now, just the sudden awareness of what she was seeing, what she was hearing, feeling, thinking. She moaned and fear throbbed in her temples. She shut her eyes hard. I got out as fast as I had entered, as shaken as she had been. I hadn't meant to do it. The thought and the act, if it could be called that, had been simultaneous. I rushed home, stumbling through the familiar woods, bumping into obstacles that seemed ominous: a log where yesterday the path had been clear, a hole covered with leaves, a trap to break an ankle in, a low branch that was meant to blind me, but only cut my cheek, a root that snaked out to lasso my foot, throwing me down face first into the ice-glazed leaves and dirt. I lay quietly for a minute. Finally I stood up and went on, making no attempt to brush off the muck. Muck and filth. It seemed fitting.

I still had a couple of hours of work to do that night. The following day Mike's body cast was being changed, and I had to be on hand. He had his ham operator's license, and Janet had said that the only problem now was that he didn't want to stop to sleep or eat or anything else. He was doing remarkably well in every way. She had kissed me with tears in her eyes when she reported. In the morning I had to drop the pictures off for Lenny, scoot over to the hospital, return for the pictures, take them back to her... I changed my mind. I'd let Lenny deliver the proofs. In fact, I wouldn't see *her* at all again. Ever.

I got in the tub and soaked for fifteen minutes, then put on pajamas and robe and went down to the basement to check out the program for Mike's computer. I didn't hear Janet come in, but when I went up at twelve thirty, she was in the living room waiting for me.

"I'm really concerned for her," she said. "I don't think she ought to be alone. And I don't think she's crazy, either."

"Okay. Tell." I headed for the kitchen and she followed. Janet had made coffee and it smelled good. I poured a cup and sat down. "I don't know if I can or not," she said. "Christine has a gift of vision that I'm sure no one ever had before. She can see, or sense, the process of growth and change in things." I knew that I was supposed to register skepticism at that point, and I looked up at her with what I hoped was a prove-it expression. She became defensive. "Well, she can. She's trying to duplicate it with the camera, but she's very frustrated and disappointed in the results she's been able to get so far. She's got a new technique for developing time-lapse photographs. Whether or not it's what she is after, it's really remarkable. She prints a picture on a transparency, and shoots her next one through it, I think. When she prints that on another transparency, it gives the effect of being in layers, with each layer discernible, if you look hard enough. But she claims that for it to be successful, you should be able to see each stage, with all the others a blur, each one coming into focus with the change in attention you give to it. And that's how she sees."

I finished the coffee and got up to pour a second cup, without commenting. Standing at the stove, with my back to her, I said, "I'm willing to believe that she's some kind of a genius. But, this other thing, the fainting, screams, whatever happened tonight. She needs a doctor."

"Yes. I know. I talked her into seeing Dr. Lessing. Lessing will be good to her." She made a short laughing sound, a snort of quickly killed mirth. "And he'll tell her to pick up a man somewhere and take him to bed. He thinks that widows and widowers shouldn't try to break the sex habit cold turkey." Again the tone of her voice suggested amusement when she

added, “Knowing that she’s coming to him through us, he’ll probably recommend that she cultivate Lenny’s company, two birds with one stone.”

My hand was painfully tight on the cup handle. I remembered one night with Janet, saying, “Jesus, I wish I could be you just for once, just to see what happens to you when you cry like that, when you pass out, why that little smile finally comes through...”

I knew my voice was too harsh then. I couldn’t help it. I said, “I think she’s a spook. I don’t like being around her. I get the same feeling that I got when I was a kid around a great-uncle who had gone off the deep end. I was scared shitless of him, and I get the same feeling in the pit of my stomach when I’m near her.”

“Eddie!” Janet moved toward me, but didn’t make it all the way. She returned to her chair instead and sat down, and when she spoke again, her voice was resigned. Way back in Year One, we’d had an understanding that if ever either of us disliked someone, his feelings were to be respected without argument. It needed no rationalization: people liked or disliked other people without reason sometimes. And by throwing in a non-existent uncle I had made doubly sure that she wouldn’t argue with me. Finis. “Well,” Janet said, “she certainly isn’t pushy. If you don’t want to be around her, you won’t find her in your path.”

“Yeah. And maybe later, after I get out from under all this other stuff, maybe I’ll feel different. Maybe I’m just afraid right now of entanglement, because I’m too pressed for time as it is.”

“Sure,” Janet said. I liked her a lot right then, for the way she was willing to let me drop Christine, whom she had grown very fond of, and was intrigued by. She was disappointed that she had been cut off at the water, that she wouldn’t be able now to talk about Christine, speculate about her. God knows, I didn’t want to think about her any more than I had to from then on.

The next few days blurred together. I knew that things got done, simply because they didn’t need doing later, but the memory of seeing to them, of getting them done, was gone. The geriatric patient came out of his cast on Saturday practically as good as new. He was walking again the same day they removed it, with crutches, but for balance, and to give him reassurance. His leg and hip muscles were fine. Lenny and I laughed and pounded each other over the back, and hugged each other, and split a bottle of Scotch, starting at one in the morning and staying with it until it was gone. He had to walk me home because neither of us could find a car

key. Lenny spent the night, what was left of it. On Sunday I slept off a hangover and Lenny, Janet, the kids, and Christine all went for a long ride in the country and came back with baskets of apples, cider, black walnuts, and butternuts. And Janet said that Christine had invited all of us over for a celebration supper later on.

“I didn’t say we’d come,” Janet said. “I can call and say you still are hungover. I sort of hinted that you might be.”

“Honey, forget it. How’s Lenny? You should have seen him last night. He laughed!”

“And today he smiled a couple of times,” she said, grinning. “He’s over at Christine’s house now, helping with firewood, or something.”

“Tell her that we’ll be over,” I said.

The kids grumbled a little, but we got Mrs. Durrell in to sit and we went over to Christine’s. Lenny was in the living room mixing something red and steaming in a large bowl. “Oh, God,” I prayed aloud, “please, not one of his concoctions.” But it was, and it was very good. Hot cider, applejack, brandy, and a dry red wine. With cinnamon sticks in individual cups.

Steaks, salad, baked potatoes, spicy hot apple pie. “If I knew you was coming,” Christine had murmured, serving us, but she hadn’t belabored the point, and it was a happy party. She proposed a toast after pouring brandy for us. “To the good men of the earth. Eddie and Lenny, and others like them wherever they are.”

I knew that I flushed, and Lenny looked embarrassed and frowned, but Janet said, “Hear, hear,” and the girls touched the glasses to their lips. In a few moments we were back to the gaiety that was interrupted by the toast that lingered in my head for the rest of the evening.

Lenny was more talkative than I’d seen him in years. He even mentioned that he had been a physicist, something that not more than a dozen people knew. The girls were both looking pretty after a day in the cold air; their cheeks were flushed, and they looked happy. Janet’s bright blue-green eyes sparkled and she laughed easily and often. Christine laughed too, more quietly, and never at anything she said herself. She still was shy, but at ease with us. And it seemed that her shyness and Lenny’s introspective quiet were well matched, as if there had been a meeting of the selves there that few others ever got to know. I caught Lenny’s contemplative gaze on her once, and when she noticed also, she seemed to consider his question gravely, then she turned away, and the flush on her cheeks was a bit deeper. The air had changed somehow, had become more charged, and Janet’s touch on my hand to ask for a cigarette was a caress.

I looked at her, acknowledging the invitation. Our hands lingered over the cigarette in the non-verbal communication that made living with her so nice.

I was very glad we had that evening together. Janet and I left at about twelve. Lenny was sitting in a deep chair before the fire when we said goodnight, and he made no motion to get up and leave then too. In our car Janet sighed and put her head on my shoulder.

Images flashed before my eyes: Christine's buttocks as she moved away from me; the tight skin across Janet's ribs when she raised her arms over her head; Christine's tiny, tiny waist, dressed as she had been that night, in a tailored shirt and black skirt, tightly belted with a wide leather belt; the pink nipples that puckered and stiffened at a touch; and darker nipples that I had never seen, but knew had to be like that, dark and large. And how black would her pubic hair be, and how hungry would she be after so long a time? Her head back, listening to a record, her eyes narrowed in concentration, her mouth open slightly. And the thought kept coming back: What would it be like to be her? What did Janet feel? What would *she* feel when Lenny entered her body? How different was it for a woman who was sexually responsive? She wouldn't even know, if I waited until she was thoroughly aroused. Sex had been in the air in the living room, we'd all felt it. After such a long period of deprivation, she'd crumble at Lenny's first touch. She'd never know, I repeated to myself.

When we got out of the car I said to Janet, "Get rid of Mrs. Durrell as fast as you can. Okay?" She pressed her body against mine and laughed a low, throaty laugh.

I was in a fever of anxiety then, trying to keep from going out into *her* too soon. Not yet. Not yet. Not until I had Janet in bed, not until I thought that *she* and Lenny had had time to be at ease with each other again after being left alone. Maybe even in bed. My excitement was contagious. Janet was in bed as soon as she could decently get rid of the sitter, and when my hand roamed down her body, she shivered. Very deliberately I played with her and when I was certain that she wouldn't notice a shift in my attention, I went out to the other one, and found her alone. My disappointment was so great that momentarily I forgot about Janet, until her sudden scream made me realize that I had hurt her. She muffled her face against my chest and gasped, and whether from pleasure or pain I couldn't tell, she didn't pull away.

She was fighting eroticism as hard as she could. Drawing up thoughts of plans, of work not yet finished, of the notebooks that were so much harder to decipher than she had suspected they would be, the time-lapse

photos that were coming along. Trying to push out of her mind the ache that kept coming back deep in her belly, the awful awareness of her stimulation from too much wine, the nearness of Lenny and his maleness. She was hardly aware of the intrusion this time, and when I directed her thoughts toward the sensual and sexual, there was no way she could resist. I cursed her for allowing Lenny to leave, I threatened her, I forced her to unfold when she doubled up like a foetus, hugging herself into a tight ball. For an hour, more than an hour, I made love to Janet and tormented that other girl, and forced her to do those things that I had to experience for myself. And when Janet moaned and cried out, I knew the cause, and knew when to stop and when to continue, and when she finally went limp, I knew the total, final surrender that she knew. And I stared at the mirror image of the girl: large dark nipples, beautifully formed breasts, erect and rounded, deep navel, black shiny hair. And mad eyes, haunted, panic-stricken eyes in a face as white as milk, with two red spots on her cheeks. Her breath was coming in quick gasps. My control was too tight. Nothing that she thought was coming through to me, only what she felt with her body that had become so sensitive that when she lay back on the bed, she shuddered at the touch of the sheet on her back. I relaxed control without leaving and there was a chaotic blur of memories, of nights in Karl's arms, of giving up totally to him, being the complete houri that he demanded of her.

“Bitch!” I thought at her. “Slut.” I went on and on, calling her names, despising her for letting me do it to her, for being so manipulable, for letting me do this to myself. And I brought her to orgasm again, this time not letting her stop, or ease up, but on and on, until suddenly she arched her back and screamed, and I knew. I don't know if she screamed alone, or if I screamed with her. She blacked out, and I was falling, spinning around and around, plummeting downward. I yanked away from her. Janet stirred lazily against me, not awake, hardly even aware of me. I didn't move, but stared at the ceiling and waited for the blood to stop pounding in my head, and for my heart to stop the wild fibrillation that her final convulsion had started.

Janet was bright-eyed and pink the next morning, but when she saw the full ashtrays in the living room and kitchen, she looked at me closely. “You couldn't sleep?”

“Too much to think of,” I said, cursing the coffee pot for its slowness. “And just four days to do it.”

“Oh, honey.” She was always regretful when I was awake while she slept. She felt it was selfish of her.

I could hardly bring myself to look at Lenny, but he took my moods in stride, and he made himself inconspicuous. The machine was gleaming and beautiful, ready to crate up and put in the station wagon. We wouldn't trust it to anyone but one of us, and I would drive to Chicago on Friday, install it myself Saturday morning, hours before the doors of the exposition opened at four in the afternoon. Lenny, like Janet, took my jittery state to be nerves from the coming show. It was like having a show at the Metropolitan, or a recital at Carnegie Hall, or a Broadway opening. And I wasn't even able to concentrate on it for a period of two consecutive minutes. I went round and round with the problem I had forced on myself by not leaving Christine Warnecke Rudeman strictly alone, and I couldn't find a solution. I couldn't speak out now, not after last night. I couldn't advise her to seek help, or in any way suggest that I knew anything about her that she hadn't told us. And although the thoughts of the night before were a torture, I couldn't stop going over it all again and again, and feeling again the echo of the unbearable excitement and pleasures I had known. When Lenny left for lunch, I didn't even look up. And when he returned, I was still at the bench, pretending to be going over the installation plan we had agreed on for our space at the exposition. Lenny didn't go back to his own desk, or his work in progress on the bench. He dragged a stool across from me and sat down.

"Why don't you like Chris?" he asked bluntly.

"I like her fine," I said.

He shook his head. "No. You won't look at her, and you don't want her to look directly at you. I noticed last night. You find a place to sit where you're not in her line of sight. When she turns to speak to you, or in your direction, you get busy lighting a cigarette, or shift your position. Not consciously, Eddie. I'm not saying you do anything like that on purpose, but I was noticing." He leaned forward with both great hands flat on the bench. "Why, Eddie?"

I shrugged and caught myself reaching for my pack of cigarettes. "I don't know. I didn't realize I was doing any of those things. I haven't tried to put anything into words. I'm just not comfortable with her. Why? Are you interested?"

"Yes," he said. "She thinks she's going crazy. She is certain that you sense it and that's why you're uncomfortable around her. Your actions reinforce her feelings, giving you cause to be even more uncomfortable, and it goes on from there."

"I can keep the hell away from her. Is that what you're driving at?"

“I think so.”

“Lenny,” I said when he remained quiet, and seemed lost in his speculations, “is she? Going crazy again? You know she was once?”

“No. I doubt it. She is different, and difference is treated like mental illness. That’s what I know. No more. From demonic possession to witchcraft to mental illness. We do make progress.” His hands, that had been flat and unmoving on the benchtop, bunched up into fists.

“Okay, Lenny,” I said. “I believe you. And I won’t see her any more for the next couple of weeks, whatever happens. And, Lenny, if I’d known—I mean, I didn’t realize that anything of my attitude was coming through. I didn’t really think about it one way or the other. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt her... or you.”

He looked at me gravely and nodded. “I know that,” he said. He stood up and his face softened a bit. “It’s always people like you, the rationalists, that are most afraid of any kind of mental disorders, even benign ones. It shows.”

I shook my head. “A contradiction in terms, isn’t that? Mental disorders and benign?”

“Not necessarily.” Then he moved his stool back down the bench and went back to work. And I stared at the sketches before me for a long time before they came back into focus. The rest of the afternoon I fought against going back to her and punishing her for complaining about me. I thought of the ways I could inflict punishment on her, and knew that the real ace that I would keep for an emergency was her fear of heights. I visualized strolling along the lip of the Grand Canyon with her, or taking her up the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower, or forcing her up the face of a cliff. And I kept a rigid control of my own thoughts so that I didn’t go out to her at all. I didn’t give in all week, but I had her nightmares.

On Wednesday Janet suggested that I should let Lenny go to Chicago and I snapped at her and called her a fool. On Thursday Lenny made the same suggestion, and I stalked from the lab and drove off in a white fury. When Janet came home I accused them of getting together and talking about me.

“Eddie, you know better than that. But look at you. You aren’t sleeping well, and you’ve been as nervous as a cat. What’s the matter with you?”

“Just leave me alone, okay? Tired, that’s all. Just plain tired. And tired of cross-examinations and dark hints and suspicions.”

They were getting together, the three of them, all the time. I knew that Lenny was spending his evenings with Christine, and that Janet was with them much of the time when I was busy down in the basement workshop or out at the hospital. They said, Janet and Lenny, that they were trying to decipher the code that Karl Rudeman had used in making his notes. I didn't believe them.

They were talking about me, speculating on whether or not I was the one driving *her* crazy. I imagined the same conversation over and over, with Lenny insisting that I could have done *that* to her, and Janet, white-faced and frantic with indecision, denying it. Not while I had been with her, she would think. Not at a time like that.

Then I would snap awake, and either curse myself for being a fool, or become frightened by the paranoid drift of my thoughts. And I would know that none of it was true. Of course Janet wouldn't discuss what went on over there; I had practically forbidden her to do so. And Lenny wouldn't talk about it under the happiest circumstances, much less now.

Friday, driving to Chicago I began to relax, and after three hours on the road I was whistling and could almost forget the mess, could almost convince myself that I'd been having delusions, which was easier to take than the truth.

I slept deeply Friday night, and Saturday I was busy, getting our exhibit set up and getting acquainted with others who were also showing tools and machinery. From four until the doors closed at eleven, the hall got fuller and fuller, the noise level became excruciating, the smoke-laden air unbreathable. Our cutting tool drew a good, interested response, and I was busy. And too tired for the late dinner I had agreed to with two other exhibitors. We settled for hamburgers and beer in the hotel dining room, and soon afterward I tumbled into bed and again slept like a child. The crowds were just as thick on Sunday, but by Monday the idle curiosity-seekers were back at their jobs, and the ones who came through were businesslike and fewer in number. I had hired a business student to spell me, and I left him in charge from four until seven, the slack hours, so I could have an early dinner and get some rest. But I found myself wandering the streets instead, and finally I stopped in front of a library.

Karl Rudeman, I thought. How did he die? And I went in and looked up the clippings about him, and read the last three with absorption. When I went to dinner afterward, I was still trying to puzzle it out. He had had dinner with his family: his wife, parents, daughter, and son-in-law. After

dinner they had played bridge for an hour or two. Sometime after that, after everyone else had gone to bed, he had left the house to roam through the fields that stretched out for a quarter of a mile, down to the river. He had collapsed and died of a heart attack at the edge of a field. Christine, awakening later and finding him gone, had first searched the house, then, when she realized that Karl was in his pajamas and barefooted, she had awakened her stepson-in-law and started a search of the grounds. Karl wasn't found until daylight, and then the tenant farmer had been the one to spot the figure in orange-and-black striped pajamas. There was no sign of violence, and it was assumed that he had been walking in his sleep when the fatal attack occurred.

Back to the exhibit, and the flow of evening viewers. Invitations, given and accepted, for drinks later, and a beaver flick. Lunch with a couple of other men the following day. A long talk with a manufacturer who was interested in procuring the order for the cutting tool, should there be enough interest to warrant it.

The obscene movie had been a mistake, I knew as soon as the girl jerked off her slip and opened her legs. Suddenly I was seeing *her*, open-legged on the edge of the bed before a mirror.

I pushed my way through a cluster of men at the back of the theater to get out into the cold November air again. I walked back to the hotel. A freezing mist was hanging head high, not falling, but just hanging there, and I gulped it in, thankful for the pain of the cold air in my throat. A prowling car slowed down as it passed me, it picked up speed again and moved on down the street. I had bought a stack of magazines and some paperbacks to read, but nothing in the room looked interesting when I took off my damp clothes and tried to persuade myself that I could fall asleep now.

I had room service send up a bottle of bourbon and ice, and tried to read a Nero Wolfe mystery. My attention kept wandering, and finally I lay back on the bed, balancing my drink on my stomach, and thought about *her*.

It was so easy, and gentle even. She didn't suspect this time, not at all. She was saying, "... because they're abstractions, you see. Emotions like fear, love, anger. First the physiological change in the brain, the electrochemical changes that take place stimulating those abstractions, and then the experience of the emotion."

"You mean to say he really believed that the feeling of anger comes after the chemical changes that take place?"

“Of course. That’s how it is with a physiological psychologist. And you can see it operate; tranquilizers permit you to know intellectually but they don’t let you react, so you don’t experience the anger or fear, or whatever.”

Lenny was sitting back in the green chair in the study, and she was behind the desk that was spread with snapshots and proofs.

“Okay. What triggers those changes in the first place?”

“Well, his specialty was sight, or vision, as he preferred to call it. Light entering the eye brings about a change in the chromophore in the first thousandth of a second, and after that the rest of the changes are automatic, a causal chain that results in the experiencing of a vision of some sort.”

“I know,” Lenny said gently. “But what about the vision that doesn’t have an object in real space? The imaginary image? No light there to start the chain of events.”

“A change brought about by electrochemical energy? The leakage of energy from cellular functioning? The first step is on a molecular level, not much energy is involved, after all. Lenny, it’s happening...”

I got a jolt of fear then, along with the words spoken softly. Her hands clenched and a proof under her right hand buckled up and cracked. Before Lenny could respond, I pulled out and away.

I didn’t know how she had found out, what I had done to give my presence away. But her knowledge had been as certain as mine, and the fear was named now, not the fear of insanity. It was a directed fear and hatred that I had felt, directed at me, not the aimless, directionless, more-powerful fear that my presence had stimulated before. She knew that something from outside had entered her. I sat up and finished my drink, then turned off the light. And I wondered what they had been finding in those notes... Half a bottle and hours later I fell asleep.

I dreamed that I was being chased, that I kept calling back over my shoulder, “Stop, it’s me! Look at me! It’s me!” But it didn’t stop, and steadily it gained ground, until I knew that I was going to be caught, and the thought paralyzed me. All I could do then was wait in rigid, motionless, soundless terror for it to reach out and get me.

The nightmare woke me up, and it was minutes before I could move. It was nearly daylight; I didn’t try to sleep any more. I was too afraid of having *her* dreams again. At seven thirty I called Janet.

“Hey,” she said happily. “I thought we’d never hear from you.”

“I sent some cards.”

“But you’ll be here before they will. How’s it going?”

“Fine. Boring after the first day. I went to a dirty movie last night.”

“I hope you had bad dreams. Serve you right.” Her voice was teasing and cheerful and happy, and I could see her smile and the light in her eyes.

“How’s everything there?” I couldn’t ask about Lenny and Christine. If they had found out anything, they hadn’t told her. I’d know, if they had. We chatted for several minutes, then she had to run, and I kissed her over the wire and we both hung up at the same time, the way we always did. I was being stupid. Naturally they wouldn’t tell her. Hey, did you know that your husband’s been torturing this woman psychologically, that he raped her repeatedly, that he’s contemplating killing her? I jerked from the bed, shaking.

I had a dull pain behind my right eye when I went down to breakfast. A wind was driving sleet through the streets like sheer white curtains, and I stopped at the doorway, shivering, and went back inside to the hotel dining room. I couldn’t think, and I knew that I had to think now.

If Lenny deciphered the notebooks, and if Karl had known that she could be possessed—there, I thought with some satisfaction, I used the word. If he had known and put that in his notebooks, then Lenny was bright enough to know that the recurrence of her schizophrenia was more than likely due to a new invasion. I groaned. He wouldn’t believe that. *I* couldn’t even believe it. No one in his right mind would, unless he had done it and could prove it to himself... I gripped my cup so hard that coffee splashed out and I had to use both hands to return the cup to the saucer. Had Lenny gone into her too?

The pain behind my eye was a knife blade now. Lenny! Of course. I tried to lift the coffee and couldn’t. I flung down my napkin and got up and hurried back to my room, as fast as I could get out of there. I paced, but no matter how I came to it, I ended up thinking that the only way Lenny could have accepted the thing was through experience. First Rudeman, then me, and now Lenny.

He couldn’t have her. She was mine now. And I would never give her up.

The pain was unbearable and I collapsed, sprawled across the bed, clutching my head. I hadn’t had a migraine in years. It was not knowing. Not knowing how much they had found out, not knowing what they were doing, what they were planning, not knowing if there was a way they could learn about me.

I went to her abruptly, roughly. She dropped a pan of developer and

moaned, and caught the sink in a dark room. “No!” she cried. “Please. No!”

I tried to make her remember everything Lenny had said to her, tried to bring back his voice, but there was too much, it came too fast. She was too frightened, and intermixed were the revived thoughts of insanity, of Karl’s voice, Lenny’s words. Too much. She had to relax. I took her to the couch and made her lie down and stop thinking. I felt her fear, and hatred, and abhorrence, like a pulse beating erratically, with each beat the pressure increased, and then ebbed. She tried to break away, and we struggled, and I hurt her. I didn’t know what I had done, how I had managed it, but she groaned and wept and fell down again, and now my pain was also her pain. “Karl,” she whispered soundlessly, “please go. Please leave me alone. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Please.”

I stayed with her for more than an hour, and then I tried to force her to forget. To know nothing about my presence. She struggled again, and this time she screamed piercingly, and for a moment the feeling of a plunge straight down was almost overwhelming, but everything stopped, and I could find nothing there to communicate with, nothing to probe. It was like being swallowed by a sea of feathers that stretched out in all directions, shifting when I touched them, but settling again immediately. She had fainted.

I fell asleep almost immediately and when I awakened it was nearly two, and my headache was gone. I went to the exposition.

That afternoon a man returned who had been at the stall for almost an hour on Saturday. He had a companion this time. “Hi, Mr. Laslow. Hendrickson, remember? Like you to meet Norbert Weill.”

Of course, I knew who Norbert Weill was. If you had a home workshop, you had something of his in it. If you had a small commercial shop, you probably had something of his. If you had a hundred-man operation, you’d have something of his. He was about sixty, small and square, with muscles like a boxer’s. He grunted at the introduction, his handshake was a no-nonsense test of strength. “Hendrickson says it’ll cut through plastic, glass, aluminum, steel. Without changing nothing but the program. That right?”

“Yes. Would you like a demonstration?”

“Not here. In my shop. How much?”

“I can’t discuss that without my partner, Mr. Weill.”

“Get him, then. When can he make it?”

So it went. In the end I agreed to call Lenny, then get in touch with Weill again at his Chicago office. Lenny didn't sound very enthusiastic. “Let him have the machine in his own shop for a couple of weeks after you close down there. Then let him make an offer.”

“I think he'll make the offer without all that, if we're both on hand to discuss it. Outright sale of this machine, an advance against royalties. Could come to quite a bundle.”

“Christ! I just don't... Eddie, can you get away from that place for a couple of hours? I've got to have a talk with you. Not about this goddam machine, something else.”

“Sure. Look, plan to fly up on Friday. It'll take an hour, no more. A couple of hours for the talk with Weill. A couple more with me, then fly back. Six hours is all. Or less maybe. You can afford to take one lousy day off.”

“Okay. I'll call your hotel and let you know what time I'll get in.” He sounded relieved.

“Hey, wait a minute. What the hell is going on? Is it one of the suits? The closed-circuit TV giving trouble? What?”

“Oh. Sorry, Eddie. I thought I said personal. Nothing at the shop. Everything's fine. It's... it's something with Chris. Anyway, see you Friday.”

I didn't go back to the booth, but instead found a small coffee shop in the exposition building and sat there smoking and thinking about Lenny and Christine, and Janet and me, and Mr. Weill, and God knows what else. This was it, I thought, the break we'd been waiting for. I didn't doubt that. Money, enough for once to do the things we'd been wanting to do. A bigger shop, more equipment, maybe some help, even a secretary to run herd on books. And neither Lenny nor I cared. Neither of us gave a damn.

Sitting there, with coffee in front of me, a cigarette in my fingers, I probed Christine to see what was happening. She was talking in a low voice. Her eyes were closed. Going into her was like putting on distortion lenses, putting scrambling devices in my ears. Nothing was in clear focus, no thoughts were coherent all the way through. She was on something, I realized. Something that had toned down everything, taken off all the edges, all the sharpness.

“I used to walk on that same path, after... I saw the fields sown, the tractors like spiders, back and forth, back and forth, stringing a web of seeds. And the green shoots—they really do shoot out, like being released,

a rubber band that is suddenly let go, but they do it in slow motion. It was a wheatfield. Pale green, then as high as my shoulders so that I was a head floating over the field, only a head. Magician's best trick. Float a head. Then the harvesters came and the snow fell. And it was the same walk. You see? And I couldn't tell which was the real one. They were all real. Are real. All of them are. The tranquilizers. He said I shouldn't take them. Have to learn how to find which one is now and concentrate on it. No tranquilizers."

She sighed, and the images blurred, fused, separated again. She turned off a tape recorder, but continued to lie still, with her eyes closed. Her thoughts were a chaotic jumble. If she suspected that I was there, she gave no indication. She was afraid to open her eyes. Trying to remember why she had walked along that path so many times after Karl died out there. In the beginning, the hours of training, hours and hours of testing. Then the experiments. Afraid of him. Terribly afraid. He had cleared the world for her, but he might scramble it again. So afraid of him. If she took the capsules and went to bed, it didn't matter, but now. Afraid to open her eyes. Lenny? Isn't it time yet? It's been so long—days, weeks. Snow has fallen, and the summer heat has come and gone. I know the couch is under me, and the room around me, and my finger on the switch to the recorder. I know that. I have to repeat it sometimes, but then I know it. Mustn't open my eyes now. Not yet. Not until Lenny comes back.

I smelled burning filter and put out the cigarette and drank coffee. What would she see if she opened her eyes now? Was that her madness? A visual distortion, a constant hallucination, a mixture of reality and fantasy that she couldn't tell apart? She turned her head, faced the back of the couch.

Very slowly I forced her to sit up, and then to open her eyes. It was much harder than making her respond had been before. She kept slipping away from me. It was as if there were so many other impulses that mine was just one of a number, no more powerful than any of the illusory ones that kept holding up images for her to scan and accept, or reject. Finally she opened her eyes, and the room began to move. There was no sequence, no before and after, or cause and effect. Everything was. Winter, with a fire in the fireplace, summer with fans in the windows, company talking gaily, the room empty, children playing with puzzles, a couple copulating on the couch, a man pacing talking angrily... They were all real. I knew we—I had to get out of there, and there was no place to go. I was afraid of the outside world even more than the inside one. I was afraid to move. The couch vanished from behind me. The room was moving again. And I knew

it would vanish, and that I would fall, like I had fallen a thousand times, a million times.

“Help me!” I cried to the pacing man, and he continued to pace although the room was certainly fading. And the children played. And the couple made love. And the fans whirred. And the fire burned. And I fell and fell and fell and fell...

I sat in the coffee shop and shook. I was in a sweat, and I couldn't stop the shaking in my hands. I didn't dare try to walk out yet. No more! No more. I shook my head and swore, no more. I'd kill her. She had learned what to do, what not to do, and through my stupidity and blundering, I'd kill her.

“Sir? Is anything wrong? Are you all right?”

The waitress. She touched my arm warily, ready to jump back.

“Sir?”

“I... I'm sorry, Miss. Sleeping with my eyes open, I guess. I'm sorry.” She didn't believe me. Behind her I saw another woman watching. She must have sent the waitress over. I picked up the check, but I was afraid to try to stand up. I waited until the girl turned and walked away, and then I held the top of the table until I knew my legs would hold me.

I had the boy I'd hired relieve me for the rest of the day, and I walked back to my hotel, slowly, feeling like an old man. I started the hour-long walk making myself promises. I would never touch her again, I'd help Lenny find out the truth about her and do whatever could be done to cure her, and to get her and Lenny together. They needed each other, and I had Janet and the children, and the shop. Everything I had driven for was either mine, or within sight by now. Everything. She was a danger to me, nothing else. By the time I got to the hotel I knew the promises were lies. That as long as I could get inside that woman's head, I would keep right on doing it. And now the thought had hit me that I wanted to be with her physically, just her and me, when I did it next time. It was a relief finally to admit to myself that I wanted to seize her body and mind. And I knew that I wanted everyone else out of her life altogether. Especially Lenny. Everyone who might be a threat, everyone who suspected that there was a mystery to be unraveled. The notebooks would have to be destroyed. If Karl had known, the knowledge must be destroyed. All of it. No one to know but me.

I looked on her then as a gift from God or the Devil, but my gift. From the instant of our first meeting, when the shock of seeing her had rattled me, right through that moment, everything had been driving me toward

this realization. I hadn't wanted to see it before. I had ducked and avoided it. Pretending that she was abhorrent to me, making Janet and Lenny shield me from her, shield her from me. I walked faster and with more purpose. I had too much to do now to waste time. I had to learn exactly how to enter her without the panic she always felt as soon as she knew. And I had to find a way to make her rid herself of Lenny.

I bought a bottle of bourbon, and some cheese and crackers. I had to stay in to plan my campaign, make certain of all the details this time before I touched her. I knew I would have to be more careful than I had been in the past. I didn't want to destroy her, or to damage her in any way. I might have to hurt her at first, just to show her that she had to obey. That's what always hurt her, having to fight with her. And no more tranquilizers. Karl had been right. She shouldn't have drugs, not she. What else had he learned about her? How deep had his control been? The line from Pete's letter came back to me: "He wound her up each morning..."

The bastard, I thought with hatred. Goddamned bastard.

It was almost five when I got to my room. There was a message from Lenny, to call him at *her* number. I crumpled up the note and flung it across the room. How much of the notebooks had he been able to get through? How much had he told her about what he had found there? I poured a generous drink and tried to think about Lenny and Karl, and all the time I kept seeing her, a tiny, perfectly formed figure, amazingly large dark eyes, doll-like hands...

She would have called Lenny after my... visit. I cursed myself for clumsiness. I'd have her in an institution if I wasn't more careful. Had she been able to get back to present after I ran out this time? I realized that that's how I had always left her, in a panic, or in a faint. What if she, in desperation, jumped out a window, or took an overdose of something? I took a long drink and then placed the call. I was shaking again, this time with fear that she was hurt, really hurt.

Lenny answered. "Oh, Eddie. Can you get Weill tonight? I can get in by ten fifteen in the morning. Can you find out if he can see us then?"

I swallowed hard before I could answer. "Sure. He said to call anytime. Someone will be there. Is that all? I mean when I got the message to call you at... her house, I was afraid something had happened."

"No. It's all right. Chris has decided to feed me, that's all." There was a false note in his voice. Probably she was nearby, listening. I fought the impulse to go out to her to find out.

“Okay. If I don’t call back, assume that it’s set up.”

“What’s wrong with you? You sound hoarse.”

“Out in the rain. A bug. I’m catching that mysterious ‘it’ that’s always going around. See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Take care of yourself. Get a bottle and go to bed.”

“Sure, Lenny.”

I stared at the phone after hanging up. He was suspicious. I could tell from his voice, from the way he hedged when I asked a direct question. Maybe not simply suspicious. Maybe they actually knew by now. Not that he could prove anything. To whom? Janet? A jury? I laughed and poured another drink, this time mixing it with water. “This man, ladies and gentlemen, entered the mind of this woman at will...”

At breakfast the next morning I realized that I hadn’t eaten anything for a couple of days, and still didn’t want to then. I had coffee and toast, and left most of the soggy bread on the dish. Lenny met me at the hotel.

“God, Eddie, you’d better get home and go to bed. We can close up the display. You look like hell.”

“A bug. I’ll be all right. Maybe you could stay if I do decide to take off?”

“Let’s close the whole thing. It’s just three more days.”

“I’ll stay,” I said. What an ideal set-up that would have been. Him here, me back home, Janet working.

I let Lenny do the talking at Weill’s office, and we got a good offer, not as much as we had hoped, but probably more than Weill had planned to make. We ended up saying that our lawyer would go over the contract and be in touch.

“Let’s go to your room where we can talk without interruption,” Lenny said then, and neither of us mentioned Weill again. A few months ago, B.C., Before Christine, we’d have been arrested for disturbing the peace if we’d had this offer from someone like Weill, and now, we didn’t even mention it again.

I lay down on my bed and let Lenny have the only chair in the room. My head was ringing and aching mildly, and my back and legs were stiff and sore. I didn’t give a damn about Lenny’s problems then.

Lenny paced. “God, I don’t even know where or how to begin this,” he said finally. “Back at the beginning of Christine and Karl. She was such a

good subject for his experiments that he based much of his research on her alone, using the other two for controls mostly. Then he found out that she was too good, that what she could do was so abnormal that he couldn't base any conclusions on his findings on her. For instance, he trained her to see objects so small that they were too small to fall on the cones and rods in the retina. And he trained her to spot a deviation in a straight line so minute that it needs special equipment to measure. Same with a circle. She can tell the exact place that a circle deviates from sphericity, and again it needs sophisticated instruments to measure it. Stereo acuity. We lose it if the peripheral vision is flattened out, if we don't have the cues. She doesn't lose it. She can see things where there isn't enough light to see them. She can see things that are too far away to see. Same with her color perception. You need a spectrometer and a spectrophotometer to make the same differentiation she can do with a glance."

He stopped and threw himself down in the chair and lighted a cigarette before he continued. "I'm getting pretty well into the notebooks. It's tough going, very technical, in a field I know nothing about. And he knew nothing about physics, and used layman's language, and a sort of shade-tree mechanic's approach with some of the equipment he had to learn to use. Anyway, after a few years, he switched to a second code. He was paranoid about his secrets. A developing psychosis is written down there plain enough even for me to see. He was afraid of her." Lenny put out the cigarette and looked at me. I was watching him, and now I shook my head.

"What do you mean afraid? Her schizophrenia? Was she showing signs of it again?"

"Will you forget that! She's not a schizo! Pretend you look at this room and you see it as it's been all through its history, with everyone who was ever here still here. Suppose you can't stop yourself from straying in time, just the way you stray in space. If you were lost in a hotel like this one and had to knock on doors, or ask people the way to your room, that's being lost in space. Lost in time is worse because no one answers until you find your own time. But those who are in your time see the search, hear your end of it, and wham, you're in a hospital."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up, but the room was unsteady. I had to support my head on my hands, propped up on my knees. "So why isn't she locked up?"

"Because she learned how to control it most of the time. Maybe a lot of people are born able to see through time and learn as infants to control it, how to tell this present from all the other images that they see. Maybe only

a few do it, and most of them never learn control. God knows something drives some children into autism that they never leave. She learned. But in periods of high stress she backslid. If she became overtired, or sick, or under a strain, she couldn't hold the present in sharp enough focus. So they had her in and out of hospitals. And Rudeman became fascinated by her, and began to do his own line of research, using her, and he realized that she was seeing layers of time. Can't you just see it? Him the famous physiological psychologist denying mind from the start, being forced finally to concede that there's something there besides the brain. He struggled. It's all there. He couldn't accept, then he looked for a reasonable cause for her aberrations, finally he knew that she was somehow existing partly in another dimension that opened time just as space is opened to the rest of us." Lenny's sudden laugh was bitter and harsh. "He preferred to think he was going mad, that she was mad. But the scientist in him wouldn't let it rest there. He devised one experiment after another to disprove her abilities, and only got in deeper and deeper. First understanding, then control. He taught her how to look at *now*. He forced her into photography as part of her therapy, a continuing practice in seeing what is now."

He couldn't see my face. If he had found out that much, he must have learned the rest, I kept thinking. I couldn't tell if he suspected me or not, but if he knew that someone was driving her back into that condition, he would go down the list of names, and sooner or later he would get to me. I knew he would stop there. Too many signs. Too much evidence of my guilt. He'd know. Janet would know. I remembered the toast that *she* had made that night in her house: to the good men. I wanted to laugh, or cry.

"Christ, Eddie, I'm sorry. Here you are as sick as a dog, and I'm going on like a hysterical grandmother."

"I'm not that sick," I said and raised my head to prove it. "It just seemed like as good a way as any to listen. It's a pretty incredible story, you have to admit."

"Yeah, but you ain't heard nothing yet. Chris thinks that Rudeman is haunting her. And why not? If you know you can see the past, where do you draw the line at what is or isn't possible? She's certain that he found a way to come back and enter her mind, and she's having a harder and harder time holding on to the present. She thinks he's having revenge. He always threatened her with a relapse if she didn't cooperate wholly with him in his research."

Lenny's big face registered despair and hopelessness. He spread his hands and said, "After you swallow half a dozen unbelievable details, why

stop at one more? But, damn it, I can't take that, and I know something has driven her back to the wall."

I stood up then and looked through the drawer where I had put the bourbon. Then I remembered that it was in the bathroom. When I came back with it, Lenny took the bottle and said, "When did you eat last?"

"I don't remember. Yesterday maybe."

"Yeah, I thought so. I'll have something sent up, then a drink, or you'll pass out."

While we waited I said, "Look at it this way. She sees things that no one else sees. Most people would call that hallucinating. A psychiatrist would call it hallucinating. She thinks her dead husband is haunting her somehow. What in hell are you proposing to do, old buddy?"

Lenny nodded. "I know all that. Did you know that Eric is color blind?" I shook my head. Eric was his middle son. "I didn't know it either until he was tested for it at school. A very sophisticated test that's been devised in the past twenty-five years. Without that test no one would have suspected it ever. You see? I always assumed that he saw things pretty much the way I did. I assume that you see what I see. And there's no way on this earth to demonstrate one way or the other that you do or don't. The mental image you construct and call sight might duplicate mine, or it might not, and it doesn't matter as long as we agree that that thing you're sitting on is a bed. But do you see that as the same bed that I see? I don't know. Let me show you a couple of the easy tests that Karl Rudeman used." He held up a card and flashed it at me. "What color was it?"

I grinned. I had expected to be asked which one it was. "Red," I said. "Red Queen of Hearts."

He turned the card over and I looked at it and nodded, then looked at him. He simply pointed again to the card. It was black. A black Queen of Hearts. I picked it up and studied it. "I see what you mean," I said. I had "seen" it as red.

"Another one," he said. "How many windows are in your house?"

I thought a moment, then said, "Twenty-one."

"How do you know?"

"I just counted them." I was grinning at him and his simple-minded games. But then I started to think, how had I known, how had I counted them? I had visualized room after room, had counted the windows on the walls that I had drawn up before that inner eye. The bellboy rang and came in with a cart. I tipped him and we sat down to eat sandwiches and

drink coffee. “So?” I asked, with my mouth full. “So I visualized the windows. So what does that mean?”

“It means that that’s how you remember things. If you had an eidetic memory, you would have seen the walls exactly as they were when you memorized them, and you could have counted the books in your line of vision, read off the titles even. The question is: are you looking into the past? No answer yet. That’s what Chris can do. And that’s how she sees the past. That clearly. And she sees the anomalies. You see what you expect—a red Queen of Hearts. She sees what is. But, as you say, no psychiatrist would believe it. Rudeman didn’t for years, not until he did a lot of checking.”

I was wolfing down the sandwiches, while he was still working on the first one. I felt jubilant. He didn’t know. She didn’t know. Karl haunting her! That was as good a thing for her to think as anything else.

“Okay,” I said, pouring more coffee. “I see that she’d have a problem with a psychiatrist. But what’s the alternative, if she’s as— sick—or bothered as she seems to be?”

“The answer’s in the notebooks,” Lenny said. “She knows it. She tried to find it at the farmhouse, but it was impossible to work there. And now she’s afraid of Rudeman all over again. She believes that somehow she caused his death. Now she has to pay.”

The strong waves of guilt I had got from her. But why had he wandered out in the fields barefoot and in pajamas?

“What scares me,” Lenny said, “is the slowness of getting through those notes. Bad enough while he was sane, but immeasurably harder as his psychosis developed, for the last seven or eight years. It’s like trying to swim in a tar pit. By the end it was bad enough that he was certifiable, I guess. He knew the contents of those notebooks would invalidate all the work he had done in the past. Chris doesn’t want to talk about it, and all I know for sure is what I’ve been able to dig out of that code he used.”

“Psychotic how?”

“Oh, God! I don’t know what name they’d put on it. In the beginning he thought she was a puppet that he could manipulate as he chose. Then gradually he became afraid of her, Chris. Insanely jealous, mad with fear that she’d leave him, terrified that someone would find out about her capabilities and begin to suspect that there was more. Just batty.”

“So what do you intend to do?”

“That’s what I came up here to talk to you about. I’m going to marry

her.” I jerked my head around to stare at him in disbelief. He smiled fleetingly. “Yeah, it’s like that. Not until next year sometime. But I’m taking her on a long, long trip, starting as soon as we can get the books we’ll need ready. That’s why I want to wrap up a deal with Weill as fast as we can. I’ll need my share. We can handle the shop however you want—keep my bench waiting, or buy me out. Whatever.”

I kept on staring at him, feeling very stupid. “What books?” I asked finally, not wanting to know, but to keep him talking long enough for me to try to understand what it would mean to me.

“Rudeman used his library shelves as keys throughout. Things like one — eleven — two ninety-eight — three — six. Top row, eleventh book, page two ninety-eight, line three, word six. First three letters correspond to ABC and so on. He’d use that for a while, then switch to another book. Chris memorized those shelves, so she can find the key books. Stumbled onto it a couple of years ago. That’s why she dragged all of his books with her when she ducked out of that house. She just didn’t have time to go through the notebooks to sort out the ones he had used.”

“Lenny, are you sure? Isn’t it just the sick-bird syndrome? I mean, my God, maybe she really *is* crazy! A lot of beautiful, charming, talented people are.”

“No. She isn’t. Rudeman would have known after all those years. He wanted her to be, but he couldn’t convince himself in the slightest that she was.” He stood up. “I didn’t expect you to believe me. I would have been disappointed in you if you had. But I had to get it out, get some of this stuff said. Let you know you’ll have the shop to yourself for a year or so.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Go home. Move in the Donlevy house. She’s on tranquilizers, and they make it awfully hard to hold on to the present. She keeps wandering back and forth. It’ll take a week to get things ready to leave.” He mock-cuffed me and said, “Don’t look so worried. I know what I’m doing.”

When he was gone I wished that he had a real inkling of what he was doing, and I knew that he would never know. I thought about that line that everyone has that he can’t cross, no matter what the evidence, unless there is an inner revelatory experience. Rudeman couldn’t believe she looked into the past, until he experienced it through her. Then he drew the line at possession, until it was proven again, and with its proof he had come to doubt his own sanity. Lenny could accept the research that proved she could see the past, but no farther. Whatever Rudeman had said about possession he had written off as insanity. And I had blundered in

and swallowed the whole thing without reservation, through experience, firsthand experience. I tried to think in what ways I was like Rudeman, making it possible for me to do what he had done, wondering why Lenny couldn't do it, why others hadn't. My gift. Like my fingerprints were mine alone. I gave Lenny ten minutes to make sure that he really was gone, then I looked in on her. I said it to myself that way, Think I'll look in on her now.

Met by a wave of hatred stronger than anything I'd ever experienced. Resistance. Determination not to be taken again. Thoughts: not going crazy. You're real and evil. Die! Damn you, die! I killed you once! How many times! *Die!*

I drew back, but not all the way. She thought she was winning. She conjured a vision of a man in pajamas, orange and black stripes, walking, a pain in the chest, harder and harder, gasping for air... I clutched the arms of the chair and said, "No! Stop thinking. No more!" The pain returned, and this time I was falling, falling... I had to get out. Get away from her. The witch, bitch, which witch bitch. Falling. Pain. I couldn't get loose. Falling. Out the window, over the rail, backward, seeing the ground... She screamed and let go.

I lay back in the chair, trying to catch my breath, trying to forget the pain in my chest, my shoulder, my left arm. I didn't have a heart condition. Perfectly all right. Medical exam just last year. Perfectly all right. I flexed the fingers in my hand, and slowly raised the arm, afraid the pain would return with movement.

Bitch, I thought. The goddam bitch. She hadn't taken the tranquilizer, she had been waiting, steeled against me, ready to attack. Treacherous bitch. I pushed myself from the chair and stood up, and saw myself in the mirror. Grey. Aged. Terrified. I closed my eyes and said again, "Bitch!"

Was she panting also, like a fighter between rounds? If I went again now, would she be able to attack again so soon? I knew I wouldn't try. The pain had been too real.

I looked at my watch then and nearly fell down again. An hour and a half? I held it to my ear, and shook it hard. An hour and a half! Shakily I called Weill's office and told Hendrickson that he could have the machine tool picked up any time. I was going home.

There wasn't much else there, nothing that I couldn't get to the car alone. And by five I was on the highway. An hour and a half, I kept thinking. Where? Doing what?

She would kill me, I thought over and over. Just like she killed her

husband. The notebooks, I had to get them myself. I couldn't let Lenny take them away. Rudeman must have discovered too late that she had power too. But he must have suspected before the end. His psychosis. The new code, afraid she had learned the old one. He must have learned about this. He had kept her ten years before she killed him. It would be in the notebooks. I drove too fast, and got home in six hours. And not until the car squealed to a stop in the driveway did I even think about what I would tell Lenny or Janet. But I didn't have to tell her anything. She took one look at my face and cried, "Oh, my God!" And she pulled me from the car and got me inside and into bed somehow, without any help from me, but without hindrance either. And I fell asleep.

I woke up when Janet did to get the kids off to school. "Are you better? I called Dr. Lessing last night, and he said to bring you in this morning."

"I'm better," I said wearily. I felt like I was coming out of a long drugged sleep, with memories hazy and incomplete. "I need to sleep and have orange juice, and that's about it. No need for you to stay home." She said she'd see about that, and she went out to get Rusty up, and to find Laura's red scarf. I hadn't seen them for almost a week, hadn't even thought of them. They would expect presents. They always expected presents. When Janet came back in fifteen minutes, I convinced her that I really was all right, and finally she agreed to go on to work. She'd call at noon.

I had breakfast. I showered and dressed. And smoked three cigarettes. And convinced myself that I wasn't sick at all. And then I walked over to Christine's house.

Lenny met me at the door. "What the hell are you doing up and out? Janet said you came in sick as a dog last night." He gave me more coffee. At the kitchen table.

"I kept thinking about what you were saying about her." I indicated the rest of the house. "And I was sick, feverish, and decided I couldn't do anything else in Chicago. So I came home. Anything I can do to help?"

Lenny looked like he wanted to hug me, but he said merely, "Yeah, I can use some help."

"Tell me what to do."

"Just stick around until Chris wakes up. I gave her a sleeping pill last night. Should be wearing off soon. What I've been doing is going down the notebooks line by line and every time he used another book for his key, Chris visualizes the shelf and finds it there. Then we find that book in the boxes. And I go on to the next one. While she rests, or is busy with her work, I find the key words in the books and decode a line or two to make

sure. Rather not lug that whole library with us if I can avoid it.”

I was watching him as if he were a stranger. I was thinking of him as a stranger. I had no definite plan worked out, just a direction. *She* had to get rid of him. Before he learned any more from the notebooks.

And her. What did she know? I knew I had to find out without any more delay. I tried to reach her and found a cottony foggy world. The sleeping pill. I tried to jar her awake, and got glimpses of a nightmare world of grey concrete expanses. A hall, the grey of the floor exactly matched the grey of the walls and ceiling. The joints lost their squareness ahead of me, and the hallway became a tube that grew narrower and narrower and finally was only a point. I was running toward the point at a breakneck speed.

You're not Karl! Who are you? I pulled out. What if she brought the pain again? The pseudo heart attack? I was shaking.

“Jesus, Eddie, you should be in bed.” Lenny put his hand on my forehead. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

I shook my head. “I’m okay. Just get a chill now and then. How about the couch here? At least I’ll be handy when she gets up.”

He installed me in the study on the deep green couch, with an Indian throw over me. I drifted pleasantly for a while. Then, *Get out! Who are you?—I’ll never get out again. Karl knew, didn’t he? I’ll finish what he started. You can’t hurt me the way you hurt him. I’m too strong for you. We’ll go away, you and me.* I laughed, and laughing pulled away. At the same instant I heard her scream.

I sat up and waited. Lenny brought her down in a few minutes. I didn’t join them in the kitchen. I watched and listened through her, and she was so agitated now that she wasn’t even aware of my presence. I was getting that good at it.

“Listen, Lenny, and then leave me alone. I thought it was Karl, but it isn’t. I don’t know who it is. He can get inside my mind. I don’t know how. I know he’s there, and he makes me do things, crazy things. He’ll use me, just like Karl did all those years. I can’t help myself. And night after night, day after day, whatever he wants me to do, wherever he wants me to go...” She was weeping and her talk was beginning to break up into incoherent snatches of half-formed thoughts.

“Chris! Stop that! Your husband was crazy! He thought he could possess you. That’s insane! And he half convinced you that he could do it. But God damn it, he’s dead! No one else can touch you. I won’t let anyone near you.”

“He doesn’t have to be near me. All these weeks... He’s been in and out, watching, listening to us go over the notebooks. He knows what’s in them now. I... He won’t stop now. And if he says I have to go with him, I’ll have to.”

Her voice went curiously flat and lifeless. She was seeing again that tube that ended in a point, and suddenly she longed to be on it, heading toward that point. “I’d rather die now,” she said.

Lenny’s big face twisted with pain. “Chris, please, trust me. I won’t let anyone near you. I promise. Let me help you, Chris. Please. Don’t force me out now.”

“It won’t make any difference. You don’t understand. If he makes me go with him, I can’t fight it.”

But she could. I didn’t know if my thoughts reminded her of the heart attack, or if she would have thought of it herself. Karl sitting in her room, watching her with a smile on his face. “You will turn them down, of course, my dear. You can’t travel to Africa alone.”

“No, I won’t turn them down! I want to take this assignment...” Slipping, blurring images, fear of being alone, of not being able to keep the world in focus. Fear of falling through the universe, to a time where there was nothing, falling forever... Staring at the rejection of the offer in her own handwriting. Karl’s face, sad, but determined.

“You really don’t want to travel without me, my dear. It wouldn’t be safe for you, you know.”

And later, waking up from dreamless sleep. Knowing she had to get up, to go down the hall to his room, where he was waiting for her. *No! It’s over! Leave me alone.* Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, standing up, *NO! I HATE YOU! Your soft fat hands! You make me feel dirty! Why don’t you die! Have a heart attack and die.*

Fighting it to the door, dragging herself unwillingly to the door, fighting against the impulse, despising him and even more herself. He was forcing her up flights of stairs, without rails, straight down for miles and miles, and he was at her side, forcing each step. She pushed him, and he screamed. Then he was there again, and she pushed again. And again. Then he was running, and she, clinging to the doorknob in her bedroom, she was running too, pushing him off the steps as fast as he managed to climb back on, and he stumbled and fell and now she knew he would fall forever, even as she fell sometimes. Swirling into darkness with pain and terror for company. She slipped to the floor, and awakened there much later knowing only that something was gone from her life. That she felt

curiously free and empty and unafraid.

I lay back down and stared at the ceiling. I could hear her footsteps recede up the stairs, across the hall to her room. Lenny's heavy tread returned and there was the sound of measured pacing. Soon, I thought. Soon it would end. And after today, after she recovered from the next few hours... She would have to remain nearby, here in this house as long as possible. Above me she was starting to dress. I was there. She didn't doubt a presence haunting her. Nor did she question that he could force her to go away with him if he chose.

"Who?" she whispered, standing still with her eyes closed. She imagined the suppressed fury on Lenny's big face, the pulse in his temple that beat like a primitive drum summoning him from this time back to a time when he would have killed without a thought anyone who threatened his woman. I laughed and forced his face to dissolve and run like a painting on fire.

Suddenly I was jerked from my concentration by the sound of Janet's voice. "Where is he? How is he?"

"He's sleeping in the study. Feverish, but not bad." Lenny's reassuring voice.

Janet came into the study and sat on the couch and felt my face. "Honey, I was scared to death. I called and called and no answer. I was afraid you'd passed out or something. Let me take you over to Dr. Lessing."

"Get out," I said without opening my eyes. "Just get out and leave me alone." I tried to find *her*, and couldn't. I was afraid to give it too much attention with Janet right there.

"I can't just leave you like this. I've never seen you like this before. You need a doctor."

"Get out of here! When I need you or want you I'll be in touch. Just get the hell away from me now."

"Eddie!"

"For God's sake, Janet, can't you leave me alone? I've got a virus, a bug. I feel rotten, but not sick, not sick enough for a doctor. I just want to be left alone."

"No. It's more serious than that. Don't you think I know you better than that? It's been coming on for weeks. Little things, then bigger things, now this. You have to see a doctor, Eddie. Please."

Wearily I sat up and stared at her and wondered how I'd ever found her attractive or desirable. Freckled, thin, sharp features, razorlike bones... I turned away and said, "Get lost, Janet. Beat it. Yeah, it started a long time ago, but it takes a club over the head, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what you think I mean. I'm sick. I'm tired. I want to be alone. For a long time. Tonight. Tomorrow night. Next week. Next month. Just get out of here and leave me alone. I'll pick up some things later on after you've gone to work."

"I'm going to call Dr. Lessing."

I looked at her and hoped I wouldn't have to hit her. I didn't want to hurt her, too. Her freckles stood out in relief against the dead white of her skin. I closed my eyes. "I won't see him. Or anyone else. Not now. Maybe tomorrow. Just leave me alone for now. I have to sleep."

She stood up and backed away. She had seen. She knew that I'd hit her if she didn't get out. At the door she stopped, and the helplessness in her voice made me want to throw something at her. "Eddie? Will you stay here for the next hour?"

So she could bring in her men in white. I laughed and sat up. "I had planned to, but I guess I'd better plan again. I'll be in touch."

She left then. I could hear her voice and Lenny's from the kitchen, but I didn't try to make out their words. A clock chimed twelve. I wanted to go out there and throw Janet out. I didn't want her around for the next half hour or so. I heard the back door, then the sound of a motor, and I sighed in relief.

I went to the kitchen and got coffee and stood at the window watching snow fall.

Lenny joined me. "Janet says you had a fight."

"Yeah. I was rough on her. Sickness brings out her mother-hen instincts, and I can't stand being fussed at. What was wrong with Christine?"

"A dream." He stared at the snow. "Supposed to get a couple of inches by night, I think. Won't stick long. Ground isn't cold enough yet."

"Lenny, for God's sake quit kidding yourself. She's sick. She needs professional help."

"She thinks—she's certain that he learned enough about her to put an end to this so-called illness. She's desperately afraid of a relapse."

Hospitalization, shock therapy...”

“What if *you* are causing her present condition? Isn’t it suggestive? Her husband, now you. It’s a sexual fantasy. By making her reach a decision about you, you might push her off the deep end irreversibly.”

He looked shocked. “That’s crazy.”

“Exactly. Lenny, these things are too dangerous for a well-meaning but non-professional man to toy with. You might destroy her...”

“If she was crazy you’d be making good points,” Lenny said distinctly. “She isn’t.”

I finished my coffee. A doctor. Shots, pills, all yesterday and last years and decades ago. Questions. Lost forever and forever falling. Through all the yesterdays. Lenny wants to get a doctor for you. A psychiatrist. You have to get him out of here now. Immediately. Even if it kills him.

She resisted the idea. She kept trying to visualize his face, and I wouldn’t let it take shape. Instead I drew out of her memories of the institutions she’d been in.

Lenny’s voice startled me, and I left her.

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea for you to be here when she comes down. She knows you think she’s psycho.”

I put down my cup. “Whatever you say.”

She came into the kitchen then. She was deathly pale. She had a gun in her hand. I stared at it. “Where...?”

She looked at it too, looked at it in a puzzled manner. “I had it in my car when I came here,” she said. “I found it when I was unpacking and I put it upstairs in my room. I just remembered.”

“Give it to me,” Lenny said. He held out his hand and she put the small automatic in it.

I sighed my relief. That was the last thing I wanted her to do. She’d be locked up the rest of her life. Now if I could make her drive him out, maybe he’d use it himself.

Lenny kept his hand in his pocket, over the gun. “Why were you thinking of guns right now? Where was this?”

“In my train case. I told you...” She glanced at me and I turned my back to stare at the snow again. I was watching my own back then, and seeing Lenny’s face and the kitchen that I was keeping in focus only through great effort. “I told you,” she said again. “If he makes me go back with

him, I'll have no choice." I made her add, "The only way I escaped from Karl was through his death." She shuddered, and an image of Karl's face swam before her eyes. It was contorted with pain and fear. It was replaced by another face, Lenny's, also contorted by pain and fear. And the image of a hospital ward, and a doctor. And I watched his face change and become my own face. The image dimmed and blurred as I tried to force it away, and she fought to retain it. The concrete corridor was there. She forced the image of a man backward through the corridor, grey walls and ceiling and floor all one, no up and no down, just the cylinder that was growing smaller and smaller. I tried to pull away, and again there was a duel as she fought to keep the imagery. Cliffs, I thought. Crumbling edges, falling... Hospital, shots, electroshock...

"Chris, what is it?" Lenny's voice, as if from another world, faint, almost unrecognizable.

"I don't know. Just hold me. Please."

Cliffs... Exploding pain in my chest suddenly. Burning pain in my shoulder, my arm. Darkness. Losing her, finding her again. Losing...

"You!" Her voice coarse, harsh with disbelief. I turned from the window clutching my chest. The room was spinning and there was nothing to hold on to. *Let go. They'll lock you up. Pain.*

"Eddie!"

"You!" she said again, incredulously.

Get the gun back! Lenny. No more pretense now. My hand found something to hold, and the room steadied. Feeling of falling, but knowledge of standing perfectly still, fighting against the nausea, the pain. *Get the gun. Reach in his pocket and take it out.* We, she and I, were in that other place where the grey corridor stretched endlessly. We had time because there was no time. She backed a step away from Lenny, and I forced her to move closer again, seeing the beads of sweat on her forehead, the trembling in her hands. From somewhere else I could hear Lenny's voice, but I couldn't hear the words now. GET THE GUN!

"Lenny, get out! Leave. Go away fast. He'll kill you!" Her voice came from that other place, but the words were echoed up and down the corridor.

You and I. I'll take care of you. I won't let anyone hurt you.

Lenny's hands on me, trying to force me to a chair. Seeing myself sprawled across the table unconscious. "No!" I tried to make her fall down an elevator shaft, and saw even clearer my own figure across the table. I

tried to remember how it felt to fall in an uncontrollable plunge, and nothing came. She had to faint. Something could be salvaged even now, if only she would faint, or have hysterics, or something, I couldn't break out, pull away. She was holding the back of a chair with both hands, holding so hard her muscles hurt. I saw her grasp tighten and felt the pain erupt again, this time blacking out everything momentarily. Lenny... I couldn't make her move. I slipped my hand into his pocket then and my fingers felt the metal, warm from the close pocket. I pulled it out and aimed it at Lenny. I was seeing his face from a strange angle, her angle. A cross-section of his face. A Dali painting of fear and shock. She was beating on me and I closed my other hand over her wrist, a child's wrist. Laura's wrist. Back in that timeless corridor. *Why didn't you look into the future too? Why just the past?*

He said I did. I repressed it. Too frightening. The image of the man sprawled across the table, clearer, detailed. Real.

Absolute terror then. Hers. Everything shifting, spinning away, resolving into strange shapes, displaced items of furniture, strange people moving about. Intolerable pain as she lashed out in desperation to find her way through the maze of time. And I was outside again.

I tried to go into her and couldn't. I could see her, wide-eyed, catatonic, and couldn't reach her at all. It was as if the wall that had been breached had been mended now, and once again kept me and all others outside. I didn't know how I had gone through it before. I didn't even know if I had.

I heard the gun hit the floor before I realized that I had dropped it. I felt the table under my cheek before I realized that I had collapsed and was lying across it. I heard their voices, and I knew that she had found her way back, but I couldn't see them. For the moment I was free of the pain. Almost uninterested in the figure slumped across the table.

"You'd better get an ambulance," she said. I marveled at the calm self-assurance in her voice. What had she seen while she had stood unmoving, rigid? She touched my forehead with fingers that were cool and steady.

"Was it real?" I whispered. "Any of it?"

"You'll never know, will you?" I didn't know if she said the words aloud or not. I listened to their voices drifting in and out of consciousness while we waited for the ambulance. Was it real? I kept coming back to that. Was what real?

Anything.

The End