

MORNING-GLORY

Gene Wolfe

Smythe put his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling. He was a short and untidy man now well entered on middle age, and his face showed embarrassment.

"Well, go on," Black said.

Smythe said, "My father felt bread was sacred; if a piece was accidentally dropped on the floor he would demand that it be picked up at once and dusted off and eaten; if someone stepped on it he was furious."

"Was this element of your father's character present in reality, or is it only a part of the dream logic?"

Smythe put his head down and looked at Black in irritation. "This is just background," he said. "My father would say, 'Bread is the life of man, you dirty little hyena. Pick it up.' He had been brought up in Germany."

"Specifically, what was your dream?" Black opened his notebook.

Smythe hesitated. For years now he had been giving Black entries, and he had almost always made them up, thinking them out on the bus he took to the campus each morning. It seemed now a sort of desecration, a cheat, to tell Black a real dream. "I was a vine," he said, "and I was pounding on a translucent wall. I knew there was light on the other side, but it didn't do me any good where I was. My father's voice kept saying: *See! See! See!* Over and over like that. My father is dead."

"I had supposed so," Black said. "What do you think this dream has to do with your father's reverence for bread?"

More disturbed by the dream than he wanted Black to know, Smythe shrugged. "What I was trying to communicate was that my father had a sort of reverence for food. 'You are what you eat,' and all that sort of thing. I chewed morning-glory seeds once."

"Morning-glory seeds?"

"Yes. Morning-glory seeds are supposed to be a sort of hallucinogen, like LSD or peyote."

"I suppose your father caught you and punished you?"

Smythe shook himself with irritation. "Hell no. This wasn't when I was a child; it was about three years ago." He felt frustrated by Black's invincible obtuseness. "All the blah-blah was going on in the newspapers about drugs, and I felt that as a member of the department I ought to know at least a little bit about it. I didn't know where to get LSD or any of those other things, but of course I had morning-glory seed right in the lab." He

remembered the paper seed packet with its preposterously huge blue flower and how frightened he had been.

"You didn't think you should obtain departmental permission?"

"I felt," Smythe said carefully, "that it would be better for the department if it were not on record as having officially approved of something of that sort." *Besides*, he told himself savagely, *you were afraid that you would get the permission and then back out; that's the truth, and if you tell too many lies you may forget it.*

"I suppose you were probably right," Black said. He closed his notebook with a bored snap. "Did you really have hallucinations?"

"I'm not sure. It may have been self-hypnosis."

"Nothing striking though?"

"No. But you see, I had eaten - at least in a sense - the morning glory. I think that may be why my father-" He hesitated, lost in the complications of the thought he was trying to formulate. Black was the Freudian; he himself, at least by training, a Watsonian behaviorist.

"Further dreams may tell us more about what's going on," Black said. It was one of his stock dismissals. "Don't forget you've got counseling tomorrow." As Smythe closed the door Black added, "Good-bye, Schmidt."

Smythe turned, wanting to say that his father's father had been American consul in Nuremberg, but it was too late. The door had shut.

To reach his own laboratory he went down two flights of stairs and along a seemingly endless hall walled with slabs of white marble. The last lecture of the day had been finished at four, but as he approached the laboratory area in the rear of the building he heard the murmur of a few late-staying students still bent over their white rats. Just as he reached his own door one of these groups broke up, undergraduates, boys in sweaters and jeans, and girls in jeans and sweaters, drifting out into the corridor. A girl with long blond hair and a small heart-shaped face stopped as he opened the door, peering in at the twisting, glowing, rectangular tubes that filled the bright room. On an impulse Smythe said, "Come in. Would you like to see it?"

The girl stepped inside, and after a moment put the books she was carrying on one of the lab benches. "What do you do here?" she said. "I don't think I've ever seen this place." The light made her squint.

Smythe smiled. "I'm called a vine runner."

She looked at him quizzically.

"People who put rats through mazes are called rat runners; people who use flatworms are worm runners."

"You mean all these square pipes are to test the intelligence of plants?"

"Plants," Smythe said, allowing himself only a slight smile, "lacking a nervous system, have no intelligence. When they display signs of what, in such higher creatures as flatworms, would be called intelligence, we refer to it as para-intelligence or pseudo intelligence. Come here, and I'll show

you how we study it."

The rectangular passages were of clouded, milky white plastic panels held together with metal clips. He unfastened a panel, showing her the green, leafy tendril inside.

"I don't understand," she said. "And I don't think you really believe that about pseudo intelligence. Intelligence ought to be defined by the way something responds, not by what you find inside when you cut it open."

"Out of fear of being accused of heresy I won't agree with you - but I have, on occasion, been known to point out to my departmental superiors that our age is unique in preferring a pond worm to an oak tree."

The girl was still looking at the twisting white passages sprawling along the bench. "How does it work?" she asked. "How do you test them?"

"It's simple, really, once you understand that a plant 'moves' by growth. That's why it has no musculature, which in turn, by the way, is why it has no nervous system. These mazes offer the plants choice points in the form of forked passages with equal amounts of light available in each direction. As you see, we keep this room brightly lit, and these plastic panels are translucent. The trick is that we have more than twenty grades, ranging from ones which admit almost as much light as plate glass to ones which are nearly opaque." He held up the panel he had unfastened so that she could see the light through it, then rummaged in a drawer to produce another of the same color which nonetheless admitted much less light.

"I see," the girl said. "The smart plants find out by and by that there's less and less light when they go down a wrong turn, and so they stop and go back."

"That's right, except that the tendrils don't, of course, actually turn around and grow backward. The growth of the 'wrong' tendrils just slows and stops, and new growth begins where the bad decision was made."

The girl reached down and gently, almost timidly, stroked a leaf. "It's like a society more than it is an animal, isn't it? I mean it sort of grows an institution, and then if it finds out it's going the wrong way it grows another one. What's the name of this plant?"

"Bindweed," Smythe told her. "It's one of the most intelligent we've found. Far brighter, for example, than scarlet runner bean - which in turn is more intelligent itself than, say, most varieties of domestic grapes, which are among the stupidest vines."

"I ought to be going now," the girl said. She picked up her books. "What's that big one, though? The one that sprawls all over?"

Smythe was replacing the panel he had removed for her. "A morning-glory," he said. "I should rip it out, actually, so that I could use the room and the maze components for something else. What I did was to subject the seeds to radiation, and apparently that destroyed the vine's ability to discriminate between light levels. Once it makes a wrong turn it simply continues indefinitely in that direction."

"You mean its mind is destroyed?"

"No, not really. That's the odd thing. On other types of tests - for example, when we lop off tendrils until it memorizes a pattern of 'safe' turns: right, right, left, left, or something of the sort - it still does quite well. But it will keep running down a passage of diminishing light level until it reaches nearly total darkness."

"How horrible," the girl said. "Could I see it?" While he was unfastening a panel for her she asked suddenly, "Did you see that awful show on television the other night? about the turtles?"

He shook his head.

"They showed this atoll where there had been a hydrogen bomb test years ago. The sea turtles come there every year to lay eggs, and when they came after the test the radiation made them forget, somehow, that they were supposed to go back to the ocean. They just kept crawling inland, crawling and crawling until they died in the jungle and their bodies rotted. The shells are still there, and the birds have built nests in some of them." She looked intently for a moment at the spindly, white vine he showed her inside the maze. "It never blooms in there, does it?"

"No," he said, "it never blooms."

"I wonder what it looks like, to it, inside there."

"Like marble corridors, I suppose. As though it were walking down marble corridors."

The girl looked at him oddly, shifting her books on her hip.

After she had gone he wondered why he had said what he had, even putting four plastic panels together and peering down the short passage they formed. The white plastic did not actually look a great deal like marble.

On the bus he found himself still thinking of it, and forced himself to divert his attention, but everything he found to focus it on seemed worse. Newspaper headlines warned him of the air pollution he could see by merely looking through the windows of the bus, and the transistor radio of the man in the seat next to his told him that France, the world's fifth-ranking nuclear power, had now joined the "total destruction club" by acquiring (like the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Britain) enough hydrogen bombs to eliminate life on Earth. He looked at the man holding the radio, half tempted to make some bitter remark, but the man was blind and for some reason this made him turn away again.

Once at home he worked on his book for an hour (Publish or Perish!), ate dinner, and spent the remainder of the evening watching television with his wife. They went to bed after the late news, but Smythe found he could not sleep. After an hour he got up, made himself a drink, and settled into his favorite chair to read.

He was walking through an enormous building like a mausoleum, trailing behind him a sort of filmy green vapor insubstantial as mist. To either side of him doors opened showing gardens, or tables piled with food, or beds

so large as to be nearly rooms themselves; but the doors opened only after he had gone a step beyond, and he could not turn back. At last he made a determined effort, turning around and flailing his arms as if he were going to swim through the air back to one of the open doors - but the column of mist behind him which had seemed so insubstantial was now a green ram propelling him relentlessly down the corridor.

He woke up sweating and found that he had knocked his glass from the arm of his chair, spilling tepid water which had once been ice cubes over his crotch.

He changed into dry pajamas and returned to bed, but he could not sleep again. When his wife got up the next morning she found him reading the paper, shaved and fully dressed. "You look chipper," she said. "Sleep well?"

He shook his head. "I hardly slept at all, really. I've been up most of the night."

She looked skeptical. "It doesn't seem to have hurt you."

"It didn't." He turned a page of the paper. "I've got graduate counseling today - you know, suggesting topics for a thesis - and I've been thinking up ideas for them."

"You usually hate that," his wife said.

And he usually did, he reflected as he boarded his bus. But today, for almost the first time since that terrifying day (which he could not date) when he had wakened to find himself not only a man, but a man whose life had already, in its larger outlines, been decided in incompetency and idiocy by his father and the callow boy who had once been himself, he found he no longer regretted that his father had shattered forever the family tradition of diplomacy to become a small-town lawyer and leave his son a scholar's career.

What he was going to do he had decided in the dark hours while his wife and the city slept, but there were ramifications to be considered and possibilities to be guarded against. To propose a program was not nearly enough. He would have to sell it. To the head of the department, if at all possible. To as many of his fellow department members as he could; taking care to make no enemies, so that even those not in support were at least no worse than neutral. In time to the university administration and perhaps even to the public at large. But first of all to at least one intelligent graduate student. Two or three, preferably, but at least one; one without fail.

He was ten minutes early reaching his office. He unlocked his desk and spent a few moments glancing over the list of prospective doctoral candidates who would be coming in to see him, but he was too excited to pay it proper attention - the names danced before his eyes and he threw it back into his in-box and instead arranged the chair in which the students would sit and squared the bronze plaque reading *Dr. Smythe* on his desk.

Seated, he looked at the empty chair, imagining it filled already by an

eager, and probably fearful, candidate. Graduate students complained eternally of the inattention, hostility, and indifference of their overloaded counselors, men who were expected to guide them, teach, do original research, write, and play faculty politics all at the same time; but his, he vowed, would have no reason to complain of him. Not this year. Not next year either. (He would not deceive himself about the time they would need.) Nor the next. Nor the decade following.

He did not have the slightest idea how it could be done. He admitted that honestly to himself, though he would never admit it to the student. But the student would. The student, the right student, would have a hundred utterly insane ideas, and he would talk them over with him, pointing out flaws and combining half-workable thoughts until they hit on something that might be tried, something to be guided by his experience and the student's imagination.

There was a shuffle of feet in the reception room and he stood up, setting his face in the proper expression of reserved friendliness; a few minutes later he was saying to an earnest young man in his visitor's chair, "I'm quite certain it's never been done before. Never even been attempted. It would give you something quite different from the usual business of checking someone else's bad work." The young man nodded and Smythe leaned back, timing his pause like an actor. "You see, the idea of para-intelligence in plants is so new that reeducation - therapy, if you like, to a radiation-damaged instinct - has scarcely been dreamed of. And if we can learn to help children by studying rats, what might we not learn from plants when plants are analogs of whole societies?" He gestured toward the window and the threatened and choking world outside. "What you learn" - he strove to strike the right note - "might be widely applicable."

The young man nodded again, and for a moment Smythe saw something, a certain light, flicker in his expression. The green fingers of Smythe's mind reached toward that light, ready to grasp whatever support he found and never let go.