

The Plastic Abyss

by Kate Wilhelm

A 1971 Nebula Award Nominee

DOROTHY PAUSED AT THE DOOR TO THE LIVING ROOM and listened for a moment. Her husband was talking, his voice insistent, not raised, never, ever raised, but inescapable. She deliberately didn't hear the words, listened instead to the tone, the quality of his voice that now made his words sound so much more meaningful than they had been when he had practiced on her in halting phrases, stumbling over his ideas, garbling them. She was the yellow pulp paper on which he tried out his first draft; the guests who listened soberly were fine, smooth, twenty-pound bond. She turned from the door, to go back to the patio where she had retreated several minutes earlier. No one expected her to rejoin them that night, although no one would object if she did; they all liked Gary's pretty, young wife. She sat down and looked past the pool out over the sand to the ocean shimmering under a gibbous moon.

After a few moments she knew that she couldn't sit still any longer and she walked outside, kicked off her sandals, and went down to the hard sand of the high-tide mark and watched the play of waves. The sand felt cool to her bare feet, the wind cool on her cheeks. She wished that she had stopped to put on her bathing suit, or shorts; the wind was whipping her skirt about her legs. The light from the moon caught on the advancing front of the waves, creating gleaming yellow and black walls. The waves broke and the light shattered into thousands, millions of pieces, fractured, lost. And new walls formed. Farther out there was a broad undulating avenue of gold that stretched forever.

The walls advanced, broke, shattered. She started to stroll along the edge of the water. The golden avenue moved with her, inviting her to walk away. She thought of the talk going on in her house: Gary insistent, driving; Mr. Rosenthal, head of the legal department, listening inscrutably; Dr. Jarvis, a Ph.D. psychologist who was the public relations department, listening with his eyes half closed, doodling but making notes from the doodles that later he would be able to decipher. The other three men also listening raptly, taking their cue from Rosenthal and Jarvis. Gary talking: "Gentlemen, think of what I am saying. This material can absorb eighty-five per cent of all the radiant energy that strikes it. Absorb it and turn it into electricity to be stored in self-contained batteries—starlight, sunlight, moonlight, artificial light, radio waves. You name it. With the additional research that a government contract will make possible, we hope to increase that capacity to plus ninety per cent." But more polished, smoother. That was the first draft.

"Wouldn't that create an abyss?" she had asked, during dress rehearsal.

"Could. But, we can project whatever we want, and that's what will be seen."

"Illusion, then. Another shade of reality."

"Don't go mystical on me, Dorothy. Reality doesn't come in shades or gradations. It is real or it isn't. This table is real. This house. You. I. A projected image is a real image. It's just the damn semantics that makes that statement sound contradictory."

She touched the table as he had, a pale polished table with curved legs, on heavy glass rug protectors. The rug beneath it was pale blue, deeply carved, inches thick. She slid her foot on the rug.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Gary was watching her intently.

"Nothing. Nothing. Sometimes none of this seems real, or if it is, then I can't be. I don't know."

He took her hands, laughing, and pulled her to her feet. She was tall, they were well matched. She hardly tilted her head at all for his kiss. When the kiss was over, her heart was beating harder, and she could feel the pulse in her throat, and the heat on her cheeks flushing them. He looked at her, still smiling. "Real?"

She nodded, and arm in arm they walked through the living room, into a hall, into the bedroom. Their love-making was hard, intense, almost desperate, she thought later when it was over, and she was almost asleep in his arms, drifting, wondering why he was so desperate about making love to her, wondering why, when she closed her eyes, the house was so hard to believe in, wondering why, when Gary was away, he became less real to her. She should go back to work, back to writing articles, to traveling, prying, learning. Vegetating luxuriously was not good for her. Old man Davenport would be happy if she expressed an interest in writing the biography of his grandfather, or even an article about his attempts to clear the name of his grandfather. She could move her things to one of the spare bedrooms, make an office there, repaint it, haul out Vickie's furniture. . . . Not Vickie's, Gary's. He had selected everything for the house, hired the decorator and made all the arrangements. Not Vickie's things. But it felt like Vickie's house. She stirred restlessly, but settled down again almost immediately without waking up more than she was already. In her near dream state she could see the guest room outfitted as an office: steel blue walls, cold blue, with silver in the drapes, straight lines, hard surfaces where thoughts bounced, gathered strength, didn't suffocate in plush softness.

She still recalled the dream image vividly. Was it a real image, projected into her consciousness from . . . where? It seemed more real than the fairy-tale house with its women's magazine interior.

The walls of moonlight advanced and broke up into millions of pieces and each gleaming bit was lost. Like a phoenix a new wall grew, solid, glowing with light. She was in a strange city where all the buildings were polished marble, windowless as high as she could see, unbroken, green shading to black with specks of gold and silver. In both directions the broad, empty street vanished in solid darkness. The walls formed a broad upright avenue with a strip of light above them, but even as she noticed the light of the sky, it faded and darkened and there were only the walls. She walked, touching the wall on her left, letting her hand run along its smooth surface. It was cool, smooth as glass. Soon there would be a doorway, an arch, or a mall with windows and showcases. She moved soundlessly in a silent world, and she came to the corner and turned, keeping her hand on the wall. The corner was sharp, unequivocal. Soon now there would be a door, a section of show windows. Why was no one else about? She could hear only her own breathing and, looking down, realized that she was being so quiet because she had no shoes on. The sidewalk was twenty feet wide here, then the street at least twice that width, another sidewalk, another wall, faceless and unbroken. Another corner. She was content to walk, thinking. If you stare into the abyss long enough, the abyss stares back. Nietzsche? But if they were projecting images on top of the abyss, could you see if anything stared back? Or would it be a one-way view? No gradations in reality. Everything out there is a projection; only I am real. Whose projection?

A long wall, green shading to black, flecked with silver and gold, sometimes the silver and gold predominating, sometimes not. Unbroken, smooth, hard, cool. An abrupt figure-ground shift, and the walls were now horizontal, with broad golden avenues radiating from a center that was distant, that became the vanishing point. A change in her direction to step onto the golden avenue.

"Hi!"

She stopped, ankle deep in water that chilled her legs as the waves broke in their rush to land, sending spray to her knees. She turned and looked about wildly, not knowing where she was, or who had spoken. Then she saw a figure, a man. The moonlight was too dim now to see more than that, a man, a figure.

She left the water and looked up and down the beach uncertainly. She couldn't recognize any of it.

"Cigarette?" The man came toward her holding out a pack. She took one and he struck a match for her, cupping it with both hands until she had a light, shielding the flame, also concealing his face while examining hers.

"Thanks," she said, and started to move away, turning around, the water to her right. The man fell into step beside her, not talking. They walked side by side until her cigarette was gone, then she said, "Do you live around here?"

"Yes. You?"

"Right down there," she said, pointing generally down the beach. She still didn't know how far she had walked. She wanted to add, with my husband, but didn't. He wasn't being pushy, or even friendly, really. It was rather as if they both happened to be going in the same direction and it would have been more awkward to walk with beach separating them than it was to walk side by side. Then she saw the DePuys' house and involuntarily she sighed her relief. Along with her relief came a feeling of shocked surprise. This was at least a mile from her house. What had possessed her to walk so far? She felt as if she must have been sleepwalking, and the whole thing was vague and dreamlike. She could remember no thoughts that had preoccupied her, nothing.

When they got within sight of her house, the strange man stopped. "So long, Mrs. Hazlett."

Dorothy felt a touch of surprise. He knew her? She tried to see his face again, but there was too little light. "Good-by," she said. As she walked on she had the feeling that he was still standing there, watching her. She didn't turn around to see. At the walk that marked her yard, she did look, but the white sand stretched in both directions unbroken, uninhabited. She continued to the arched entrance of the garden, stopped for her sandals, and headed for the outside shower to clean the sand from her feet. She was thinking what a curious encounter it had been with the man on the beach, wondering who he was, how he happened to know her name and house. Off to her right, hidden by a shadow-like oleander with pale blossoms floating about it, was the swimming pool and clusters of patio furniture. She heard a clink of ice against glass and she paused with her hand on the shower faucet. Gary and his guests out for a late swim?

"Will Davenport make a patent application for this new development?"

"If Hazlett gets his way."

"Stall things awhile. Give me time to get in touch with Brock. I'll get back to you in a couple of days."

They moved away and there was a splash from the pool. Dorothy hadn't recognized either of the voices. She didn't turn on the water after all, but went around the house and entered her bedroom suite through a French window. The house was cold. She adjusted the air-conditioner and showered, and then paced, waiting for Gary to return.

Gary came in with his terry robe across his shoulders. He grinned at Dorothy and tossed his robe to a chair and began to undo his belt on the brief bathing suit, exposing a strip of white skin.

"Did we wake you up?"

"I wasn't asleep yet. Gary, who is Brock? I heard two of those men talking about a Brock. . . ."

He was paying no attention to her. He stripped off his trunks and, carrying them, started to the shower. Only the narrow band that his trunks covered was pale, everywhere else he was suntanned to a

deep red-brown, an Indian color. Every morning he swam a mile, then trotted back along the beach that same mile. His eyes were like pale milk chocolate, and his hair was bleached out almost blond. "Nice party," he said. "I think Jarvis is completely sold, and that means a lot at this point. He'll swing old man Davenport to our side."

"Gary? Do you know anyone named Brock?"

He paused in the doorway to the bathroom. "Brock? Don't think so. Why?"

"I told you. I heard two of your guests talking. One said to stall you until he gets in touch with Brock. ..."

Gary shrugged and turned from her to enter the bathroom. Dorothy followed him. "It sounded like a conspiracy or something."

Gary stopped and turned once more, smiling gently at her. "Honey, you were dreaming. How could you have heard anyone talking? It was a dream."

She shook her head. "I wasn't in bed yet. I was coming back from a walk on the beach. On the other side of the bushes by the pool I could hear them talking. One said that the other one should stall until he got in touch with Brock. The other one said all right, or something, and they both moved away toward the pool. I heard them clearly."

Gary touched her cheek lightly and shook his head. "Baby, I came in to see if you wanted to take a dip with us. You were asleep. You must have heard me moving about, getting my suit on. It started you dreaming."

"For heaven's sake, Gary, I should know if I was in bed asleep or not. I heard them!"

"Okay. We'll talk about it in the morning." He stepped into the shower and pulled the sliding doors shut.

Dorothy turned furiously back to the bedroom and stopped. The bed was mussed, her pillow indented, the top sheet thrown back diagonally across the bed, like a streamer of blue flowers against a paler blue bottom sheet. Her slippers were there, one on its side, the other straight, the way she usually left them. The book she had been reading that week was on the table, along with her cigarettes and lighter, cigarette stubs in the ashtray. Behind her was a pounding like a waterfall in the shower, but when she moved a step farther from the door, she moved into a profound silence, and all she could see was the ashtray with cigarette stubs, all she could hear was the ticking of the slender clock that was on the table, with silver hands now indicating three-fifteen. After three? Impossible. She had left the living room before twelve.

Angrily she shook her head and sat down at the dressing table and brushed her hair hard. When Gary emerged from the shower, toweling himself, she said, "Okay, joke's over. This is a side you've kept pretty well hidden, you know. Practical jokes at three in the morning somehow just don't seem all that funny." She stared at him in the mirror and pulled the brush; electricity from her hair crackled in the silence that followed. Gary's face showed surprise, then bewilderment, and finally resignation. He shrugged and pulled back the bedspread from the second bed. Dorothy continued to watch his reflection. "Why did you do that?" She pointed to her bed. "When did you do it?"

"Honey, let's go to sleep now. We'll talk about it in the morning."

He rolled over. Dorothy lay awake until dawn when the heavy drapes gave the early light a dusky,

used look. She fell asleep to dream of herself trying to peer around a corner where she knew she would find another version of the same girl, also trying to peer around the corner, from the other direction.

She woke up when Gary did, but she didn't get up, or speak to him. She kept her eyes closed and listened to his movements about the bedroom, in the dressing room, the bathroom, back to the bedroom. He stopped at the hall door, and for a moment she thought he would say something to her, but then he left, and soon afterward she heard the car start, crunch on the pebble driveway, and fade away. A gull screeched.

The men were due for lunch with old Mr. Davenport at twelve-thirty, and sometime after four Gary would be back alone. She resolved never to bring up his stupid practical joke again, or to mention Brock, or the conspiratorial exchange, anything from the night before.

Gary was in a black mood when he returned. "Davenport is cracking up, the old bastard," he said, mixing a martini. "He doesn't give a damn about this new idea. All he has on his mind now is that goddam celebration he's so hot about. For chrissake why's it so important to him to prove his grandfather was innocent? Who gives a damn?"

"That's only half of it," Dorothy said. "The half he understands and talks about. The other reasons, the ones he can't even put into words, are more to the point. He has to reenact the past to make it real. It's disconnected now, and things have to be tied together or we forget them. How can something be real if it isn't remembered? So by making it live again, even by proxy, the past will be realer, his place in the present will be firmer. There has to be a feeling of continuity."

"Good God," Gary said. "The old man wants his family name cleared. It's as simple as that. Pride. Just don't go profound on me right now. Okay?"

"This sort of mysticism is as simple as the mind of the most childish ancestor worshiper. It isn't especially profound. This is one of the ways we have of knowing our own reality. Through our parents, and their parents." Deliberately Dorothy goaded him, still angry with him for the not-so-funny joke and his refusal to admit to it. She knew he didn't want her to talk, she was supposed to listen to him, or, at best, to talk about what he wanted to hear. She realized with surprise how her own interests had dwindled and dropped away since their marriage.

"That's drivel, and you know it."

"No. It really isn't. We keep heirlooms, other people's if not our own. Antiques. Name our children for grandparents. Erect elaborate cenotaphs. . . ."

"To prove we're real?"

"Yes."

"Honey, just shut up. Right?" She grinned, but he was not amused, didn't even notice. "The old man's cracked on this subject. Okay, so we go along with him, play it his way. On Tuesday he wants us to have dinner with him and meet the reincarnation of his grandfather." Gary slammed his fist on the bar in frustration. He stared at his clenched fist for a moment, then relaxed it. "We don't have anything lined up for the weekend, do we, anything we can't get out of?"

"Joanne's coming. You promised her that you'd go sailing with her this time. That's all."

He shrugged it off. Joanne was his seventeen-year-old daughter. She lived with his first wife in

Atlanta. "You and Jo can take the boat out. She doesn't need me. Okay?" Taking his drink with him, he started for the door. "I'll be back in a few minutes. A couple of calls to make."

They both knew that Joanne wouldn't go sailing with Dorothy, that she would sulk the entire weekend if he broke his promise again, but they pretended that it would be all right. Dorothy poured a second cup of coffee for herself and wandered to the patio while Gary made telephone calls, and when he joined her there, it was dark. She could only guess from the tone of his voice that his plans were not going well.

Softly she said, "Why do you have to push so hard, Gary? It isn't your discovery, your company. You just work for Davenport. Why does it mean so much?"

"You wouldn't understand," he said.

"Try me."

"What's the use. The fact that you have to ask indicates that you don't see it at all." He sounded irritated with her and Dorothy let it drop. They were both silent for the next ten minutes or more. The moon, fuller, yellower than it had been the night before, softened the darkness, turned the sky into a pale backdrop; against it the swaying palm trees were black. Dorothy was thinking of Joanne and the inevitable icy reaction to the news that her father would be tied up Saturday and Sunday. She sighed. There had been a time when she was able to blame the failure of Gary's first marriage entirely on Vickie, but no longer. He was spoiled, petulant when crossed, demanding. . . . And she loved him. Damn, damn, damn, she thought, dreading the weekend.

Joanne Hazlett stared defiantly at her mother. "He'll talk to me this time, or I'll lose the sails out in the gulf, or get a hole in the gas tank, or something."

"Darling, I'm just warning you, don't count too much on it."

Joanne was so small, and slender, that she seemed younger than her seventeen years. Her waist-long hair made her look very much like Alice, Vickie was thinking, watching the barefoot girl pace furiously in the spacious apartment. Vickie was reminded of Joanne at eighteen months, stamping her fat foot, ordering imperiously, "Do it!" She wondered what would happen when Gary and Jo actually got on a collision course. They would, sooner or later. They were too alike to avoid it much longer, each one demanding the universe make way for him, each one refusing to be deterred from whatever path he happened to be on at any particular time. Thank God, she thought, that Jo is as tough as Gary is. And more resilient.

"Honey," she said, "just one thing. Then I have to be going. If there is a snag. If Gary is tied up, or something comes up and you don't get to talk to him, you might consider talking to Dorothy. I'm sure that she would see your side."

"Oh, Mother, for heaven's sake! Are you serious? Ask her for help?" Joanne was brought up short. She stared at Vickie. From the kitchen the dishwasher, changing cycles to rinse, sounded like an airplane landing in the apartment.

Vickie glanced at her watch and stood up. "Honey, I really do have to go. I told Walter I'd be in the lobby at nine. I won't be late. We're going to catch the show, then have a bite to eat and come back home. We'll talk some more if you're still up." She drew on white doeskin gloves and glanced at herself in the hall mirror. Looking past her own image, she said to her daughter, "Don't keep blaming her, Jo. It shows a certain immaturity in you, you know. People get lonesome. I can't blame her. Or Gary. It just happens, that's all." She blew a kiss and left.

Joanne didn't move until she was alone in the apartment, listening to the noisy dishwasher, and, beyond the outer door, the creaky elevator. Then she threw herself down on the couch and pounded the end pillow with her fist. "Damn," she muttered. "God damn it all to hell." Her mother and Walter? Was that the message? Walter, that smooth-faced hypocrite? She knew they were meeting in the lobby at Walter's insistence, to avoid friction, keep things as smooth as possible between them. Would they spend the weekend together? She sat upright, shocked at the thought, accepting it. Her mother and Walter. Her father and Dorothy. Plastic, all of them. All of them pretending so hard, all of them so phony, always playing roles, being so nice and polite, and all the time just waiting for her to be out of the way so they could let down the masks, be themselves. She tried to imagine what her mother was like apart from her, alone with Walter, and she couldn't. Another person, a stranger to her. She had sneaked into the hallway of the beach house once when a party was going on, just before the separation, and she had seen her mother standing close to a man who had his arm around her shoulder. There were others in the group, and now she knew that it had been meaningless, but then, at twelve, she had been frightened and indignant. She had wanted to run to them, to wrench his hand from her mother. She had searched the crowds for her father, wanting to warn him, to tell him to protect her mother, and when she had found him, in the midst of another group, his head had been close enough to touch the silver hair of another woman. Mrs. Joyner.

Was that why her mother was willing for her to go to Europe alone after finishing school? Expecting a fight, she had found no resistance at all. "I'm going one way or another. I want to live in France, for a year at least, and study art. I want to travel to Germany and Spain, and Norway, and . . . everywhere. If you and Dad won't let me, then I'll run away and go."

"Honey, isn't that a little drastic? I think it's a good idea. I'm on your side."

Joanne had felt cheated. All her beautiful arguments unused, unasked for. Her mother had balked only at seeking permission from Gary for the trip. "That's up to you, darling. I can't afford to finance it, and I can't argue your cause with him any longer."

"But he'll say no. He thinks I'm a baby."

"Then it's up to you to convince him that you know what you want, and that this is it."

Joanne stared ahead dry-eyed and wondered if her mother had secretly been relieved to get rid of her for the next year or two, knowing that after that she probably would be working, or back in college, or married, or at any rate out of her hair. She turned to stare at the hall mirror and saw again her mother standing there. Hair so beautifully coiffed, dyed, of course; make-up hiding her skin, her body shaped by diet, exercise, and a one-piece girdle and bra, her hands hidden by white gloves, her legs sheathed in flesh-colored nylon. Even her eyes had been covered, by contact lenses. For a terrifying moment she wondered if there had been anything behind all the layers. Would it be like stripping away the bandages of the invisible man, revealing only air beneath? She touched her own face, and ran her other hand down her body, pressing in hard, as if checking her own substance.

She was afraid to go to sleep until she heard her mother return home; Walter was with her. Joanne lay in her bed and waited for the elevator noise to tell her that Walter was gone again. She dozed and later awakened, frightened, and sat upright, unable to say what had awakened her, what had frightened her, A dream, she told herself. She got up and went to her mother's door and opened it quietly. She could see the dark head, covered with soft curlers, a shiny cheek that was soaking up a nutrient cream. Her mother sighed in her sleep and Joanne closed the door again, not certain of what she had expected to see. Even asleep her mother had seemed unreal and hollow.

Joanne pinched her leg until it hurt when she got back in bed. "I am real," she said softly. "I know I am

real." The fear persisted and she knew it was because she doubted. How could she be real, if her mother wasn't? Why should she be real? Nobody else was. Nobody at all.

Hank Pinelli sipped beer, his own home brew, and watched Gary Hazlett. Hank was five feet nine, twenty years older than Gary, fifty pounds lighter, but he always felt that he was watching a child when Gary Hazlett was with him. Gary was walking around the large table that held Hank's village. Looking down on it was like looking into swimming pools filled with nothing, surrounded by greenery, sidewalks, streets. Gary turned away and backed up several steps, then looked again. From this angle windows glowed yellow, street lights cast unwavering light in tiny circles, a train wound about the streets, paused in the small red station, gathered speed once more, then slowed to enter the town at the far end and retraced its route. Every building, the train, cars, all were topped by bits of black material that seemed more like holes cut from the scene than like coverings. Over the village a single two hundred watt bulb burned.

"You've done something new to it," Gary said, studying the scene.

"There's always something that can be done." Hank lifted the black roof from a square building and inside were seats and a stage. "Entertainment," he said, grinning. The underside of the roof was a maze of wires, and minuscule wafers that gleamed when he turned it. He replaced it and picked up his half quart stein once more.

"Look, Hank, you know what I'm after. You know that Cramer wants to work with you on the military aspects of this, with the holograms. Are you going to Davenport's party Tuesday night?"

Hank shrugged. "He asked me, and I said I'd let him know." Gary felt a twinge of jealousy at the easygoing relationship between the two old men. Davenport hadn't given him the option of attending or not. Hank drained his stein and put it down. "He doesn't want a government contract. You know that."

"God damn it, Hank. It could be the biggest thing ever to come out of the company. No one would be hurt any by it."

"No one?"

"Look, Hank, I'm authorizing you and Cramer to work up a demonstration of the plastic coupled with the holograms for Tuesday night. Cramer says he can do it, if you cooperate."

"I don't believe you have the power to authorize such a demonstration, Mr. Hazlett."

Hank lifted his stein and looked surprised to find it empty. He crossed the lab to the far side where a large wooden keg was on the counter amidst flasks and stacks of plastic chips. He filled the stein again, drank and wiped the foam from his mouth before he looked at Gary. "Beer?"

"No." Gary followed him across the room. "I'm issuing a direct order, Hank. I am the director of research of this company, you know. I do have the authority."

Hank chuckled deep in his throat and drank again. "Me, I don't know nothing about holograms and such, Gary, but I do know that invisibility as a visual quality only don't mean a thing nowadays. So we absorb the radar and infrared, and everything else you throw at it, but don't you see, boy, that's the same as sending it back. The message is the same."

"You let me worry about that end of it," Gary said. "I know what I'm doing."

"I wonder. You know, Gary, lot of times things that seem one way have a way of turning, shifting

ground so to speak, and suddenly it's a new picture altogether. Hard to know what's real and what only appears real until you lean out and try to touch it, handle it, work with it. Then you close a fist on air."

"Just say it, whatever it is you're driving at."

"Nothing, Gary. Nothing." He chuckled again and said, "I'll let you know. Got me a fishing date for this weekend, and that won't leave much time before Tuesday night."

Gary tried to relax his throat. He felt as if every muscle in his stomach and chest had been squeezed. It was that damn chuckle. That was the way Davenport treated him, like a small boy with golden curls, who was always wrong, but tolerated in spite of it. Pinelli with his toy village that he loved more than anything in the outside world; Davenport with his plans for the celebration coming up in another week or so, two old men dreaming away their lives, playing with illusions, laughing at the young men who were practical, who were looking ahead to a time when Davenport wouldn't control the company, to a time when the only men in the laboratories would be qualified scientists with the proper training and degrees. Pinelli went to the wall switches and turned off the two hundred watt bulb above his village. The batteries had enough energy stored to continue to light the tiny houses and buildings. He turned another switch to "off" and the village went out.

"Damn you, Pinelli, what are you doing? You never leave this lab. You live here seven days a week. You wouldn't know which end of a fishing rod to hold."

" 'Bout time I learned something practical like that, wouldn't you say?" Hank put down his beer and went to the hall door. "I'll be in touch with you, Gary. On Monday."

Gary stared at him another moment, then stamped from the lab, back to his office through deserted halls and past empty desks where typewriters were covered neatly and only the muted hush of the air-conditioner could be heard. Cramer was waiting for him.

"Get down there and talk to him before he has a chance to get out," Gary said. The other man shrugged and left. He was in his twenties, string-beanlike, with large glasses and long nervous hands. He had a Ph.D. in physics, and he was afraid of Hank Pinelli.

Sitting behind his desk, watching the door shut in slow, silent motion, Gary knew that he was afraid of Pinelli, and of Davenport, and that his was the fear of a child who knows he is pushing his parents too hard too fast, but is unable to stop. He did have the authority. No one else in the research department questioned it. He knew exactly what was going on in each of the labs. Who else could have pulled the separate projects together to come up with this new idea? No one, not even the old man. If he didn't have the authority to give Pinelli a direct order, what was he there for? Pinelli was only one of a dozen scientists working for the company. Six years now he'd had his own way, no one interfering, no one asking for justification for the expenses, and this one time that Gary did ask, direct, the old fool questioned his authority. Drumming his fingers on the desk, he knew that Pinelli would refuse to cooperate, and that, if he took the matter to Davenport, the old man would back his crony without a hearing, even if the matter happened to be one that the old man approved of. Okay, he'd go ahead, not wait until Pinelli turned him down. Let the old fool leave town, be out of reach over the weekend. He didn't yet have a private lock on his lab, and Gary had company keys. They'd go ahead without him. He must have stacks of the black roofing material ready to install. Let Cramer earn his salary by working overtime. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, and saw again the little rectangles of nothingness, the moving strip of nothingness that was the top of the train. He imagined an entire city covered with the stuff, crisscrossed so that rain could enter through the interstices, but to the eye presenting mile after mile of the abyss. The picture became more real, and he felt himself dropping toward that abyss, falling down into the void where nothing was or ever had been or ever would be. He jumped up, kicking his chair

back into the wall with a reassuring crash. He was shaking.

Perry Davenport was a relaxed seventy-one-year-old man. He walked around Tony Freemac appraisingly and touched his beard, testing the growth. "Coming along nicely, boy," he said. "Another week or ten days and you can start shaping it. The spitting image you'll be of him. Most remarkable likeness."

Tony also touched the stubby beard. "Mr. Davenport, any dark man with a beard is pretty much like any other dark man with a beard."

"That's what I thought until I started to search for the right man," the old man said. "Not true. You need the right bony structure, big bones, a broad face, wide forehead. I'm telling you, my boy, my grandfather was a real man. Big, broad, strong. A real man. And you're the spitting image of him."

Perry Davenport was a broad man, or had been, and was now in the process of shrinking slightly. His white hair was thick and coarse and much too long. Somewhere in his past he had acquired a navy blue skull cap, which he wore whenever he went outside, and he was proud of the fact that in twelve years now he'd worn shoes and socks only one time, at the funeral of an old friend. Nothing else could get him out of the sandals he favored. His knees were knobby, his white shorts dirty, and his chest was bare and brown, with a sprinkling of white hair. He didn't look much like a millionaire, or the president of an internationally known plastics company.

"Well, breakfast will be ready in five minutes, son. Had your dip yet?"

Tony nodded. "Yes, sir. An hour ago."

"Having trouble sleeping?"

"Not really. I've been getting up early, trying my hand with the morning light. It's different then." Tony glanced at the side of his room where he had canvases turned toward the wall. The old man's glance followed his. He didn't ask to see the paintings.

After a moment the old man said, "See you in the sunroom, five minutes." He left through the doors to the porch and strode down the beach into the surf. A minute later he was swimming vigorously, straight out. He dived, surfaced, turned, and swam back. Tony watched him a moment and, whistling, went to inspect his new beard in the bathroom mirror. He didn't care if the old man was nutty, he liked him, and the job was paying better than anything he'd ever done in the past.

Before he left his room he turned the canvas around and stared at it, perplexed by it, by himself. Never before had he attempted formless color and light, and he was ready to admit that he couldn't do it. It was like putting a punched card into a black box only to find that the holes weren't right, and not be able to see what was right. The times it did fit, the black box gave him a pleasurable feeling, and all he was getting from this painting was disquieting thoughts, uneasiness, an urge to rip it to pieces, to burn it, to take his easel out and try again. There had to be a communication line from the black box to his hands, a line that bypassed his consciousness usually, and he felt that the line had been disconnected. He backed away and squinted. There were broad streaks of green shading to black, flecked with gold, and another streak of gold, with something else coming through, as if the gold were nearly translucent. He wasn't satisfied with it, but he didn't know what was wrong, or what he had been trying to do, or how to fix it. He decided that in the morning he would start over. Unhappy, he swung the canvas to the wall once more and turned to leave his room. Glancing outside, he saw the old man wade from the rolling waves, and stop, looking up the beach. A tall, slender woman joined him and they stood at the edge of the water talking. The old man put his arm about her shoulders and seemed to aim her at the house, and they

walked toward it together. The woman—a girl actually—must have been out swimming also, Tony decided, when they got closer. She was wearing a white, short tunic and sandals, and she swung a bathing cap by its strap.

When Tony arrived on the sunporch, she was seated at the breakfast table. "Hi," he said, "Mr. Davenport dressing?"

"Yes. I'm Dorothy Hazlett." She looked sick and when she lifted her cup, her hand shook so hard the coffee almost spilled.

"Tony Freemac." He poured coffee and sat down with it. Mrs. MacIntyre appeared with a covered dish that she placed before him.

"You're sure now, Mrs. Hazlett? Toast maybe?" she asked.

"No thanks. I really did have breakfast already."

Tony felt her stare, and consciously kept his fingers away from the new beard. He lifted the cover from his dish and the old man came out to the porch, followed closely by the cook-housekeeper.

"Ah, sausage and apple rings," Davenport said.

Mrs. MacIntyre made a sound like a horse snorting and lifted the silver lid. There were two poached eggs on his plate. "I'll give you sausage," she said. "Like fun I will."

The old man winked at Dorothy. "I bewitched her into thinking I'm eating some bland tasteless concoction that she made," he said, "and all the while she is preparing exactly what I like most." He ate with gusto.

Again Tony felt Dorothy's gaze and he turned deliberately to look out at the ocean.

"Mr. Freemac, I'm sorry. I've been staring. You remind me so much of someone else." She stood up and held out her hand to Davenport. "I really have to go." She looked at the clock behind Davenport and shook her head slightly. There was a frown on her forehead and for a moment she looked as if she were going to faint. Tony watched her closely, but she seemed to gather herself together again.

"Honey, you just sit right back down there and wait for me to finish eating. Then I'm going to drive you back to your place."

"I'm due at the airport in half an hour." She said, "I . . . I'll call a taxi."

"Yeah, like fun you will," the old man said, "Just sit."

"I'll drive you home," Tony said. He wondered how she had got to the house.

As if sharing his wonder, she said, "It's about six or seven miles down the beach."

"You swam that far?" His tone said he didn't believe it.

"I couldn't have."

Davenport pushed his chair back then. He looked at Dorothy closely, then yelled, "Mrs. Mac, bring some more coffee for the young lady." To Dorothy he said, "You want to talk?"

"Mr. Davenport, I feel such a fool. I don't know how I got here. I guess I walked, but . . ." She shook

her head and turned to Tony. "And you. . . . I thought at first that I had met you down on the beach two nights ago. Did I?"

He shook his head. She nodded, as if to herself. "I'll call a cab now and go back home. I don't want to interrupt you any more than I have already, Mr. Davenport."

Davenport stood up also and led the way from the room, talking as he went. "I'm going down that way, want to see Hank Pinelli. You just wait a minute while I get a shirt on, young lady. And don't you touch the telephone. I've been wanting to get to know you better. Ever thought of writing a biography? Y'know I've paid a mint on research. Hate to see it go to waste." At the door she turned and looked again at Tony, as if begging him to remember. He shook his head ruefully.

"Good-by," she said, and followed Davenport into the hallway.

Tony took his coffee to his room with him and again turned the canvas around to study it. He thought he knew what was wrong with it suddenly, and he put the cup down on a low table, and got out his brushes. When Mrs. MacIntyre knocked to tell him that lunch was ready he stepped back to look at what he had done. He had a violent headache, and his fingers were stiff, but he had got it. Something. There was a marble city, empty, cold, and beautiful, and one figure, a woman, whose posture said that she was lost and alone and afraid. Her face was in shadow, only her attitude spoke, and it was eloquent. He had captured the greens and blacks, and had the gold where it belonged, leading away, up and away from the emptiness of the street scene.

The woman he had painted was Dorothy Hazlett. He stared at it, and even with the face hidden, he knew that shape, the carriage, the way her hands were held. He started to paint her out of the scene, but he stopped and withdrew his hand. He felt very tired. When Mrs. MacIntyre knocked again, he was sprawled out on the bed sound asleep.

Small hideous men squatted about a carcass tearing at the bloody meat with their hands. Naked, hairy, only their eyes and the purposefulness of their arrested motions gave them humanity. Dorothy stared at the illustration in fascination. Gone without a trace, their history a surmise only, an artist's conception of what their lives must have been like, if they actually had existed at all.

A row of artifacts headed the page and she studied them: bits of rough-hewn rock, shaped by hands? Weather? Tumbling? Shaped by machines? She looked past the page to see machines turning out artifacts, sending them along conveyor belts through aging rays, to other belts that carried them over the surface of the earth and deposited them. There was a three-dimensional screen with an unfocused image being resolved on it. The image firmed, became sharp-edged and real. It was a flint ax. As she watched, the ax floated against a black backdrop, settled, and the background filled in forming a forest scene, the remains of a fire pit at the edge of a cliff. Other artifacts were there, half buried in the soil, partially covered by pebbles, broken, with the pieces carefully arranged so that a whole could be discerned. The ax was positioned, one edge of it protruding from the ground, moss resolved over it, the entire scene panned briefly, then shifted to the black backdrop.

"Flight 104 now arriving Gate 12."

Dorothy shook herself awake and dropped the magazine she had been reading. She looked at the wall clock. Joanne's flight was half an hour late. The announcement was repeated and she knew that that was what had roused her. She hurried to Gate 12 in time to see the plane making its final turn and gliding to a stop. The ladder was rolled out, and presently Joanne was coming through the gate, looking past Dorothy, pretending not to be looking. She seemed too young, small, too vulnerable to be traveling

alone.

"Hello, Jo. Your father couldn't make it. Business. How are you?" She wanted to hug the girl, but Joanne's shoulders stiffened, her head raised a fraction of an inch, and her smile became glazed and set.

"Oh? That's too bad. I'll just go pick up my bag. Be right back." Joanne didn't look again at Dorothy, but hurried off to the baggage claim counter. She wondered briefly what was wrong with her stepmother, who seemed pale and nervous, but didn't dwell long on it. In the car on the way to the beach house neither of them spoke much, and Joanne pretended to believe that Dorothy needed to concentrate on her driving. Once or twice she glanced at Dorothy's profile, and she wondered if she would be able ever to talk to her. Her stepmother was only ten years older than she was, very pretty, and really very nice. She couldn't help it if she hated her. Jealous of her, she corrected bitterly. Shows a certain immaturity, don't you know. She wondered if Dorothy was sick, or pregnant. She savored the full bitterness of having her stepmother pregnant, and she caught herself hoping it was true, visualizing her stepmother dying in childbirth.

Nothing changes, Joanne thought. Edwards' store, the out-of-phase red light that had always seemed stuck on red, the smells, gulls above wheeling. . . . Dorothy said hesitantly, "Jo, if your father can't find the time to take the boat out with you . . ." And even that was right out of the past, same words, different speaker.

"Oh, I didn't really want to go sailing," Joanne said quickly. "That was just an excuse to come visit." It sounded like she was afraid that Dorothy was going to offer to go out with her, she realized too late. She glanced up in time to see Dorothy looking at her, and for a moment their gazes met and held. Dorothy smiled faintly and nodded.

"Okay," she said, and Joanne wanted to cry.

Joanne snorkeled lazily over the sand bar that paralleled the coast line for miles up and down the gulf. She made a right turn to get out of the path of a small inboard motorboat, but it turned also, and she lifted her head from the water and motioned to it to go away. A man yelled, "Are you crazy? What are you doing out here alone?"

He drew closer to her, and half crouching, made ready to throw a life preserver.

"What the bloody hell is the matter with you?" she shouted back at him. "Get that boat out of the way."

He stopped his movements with the white doughnut and stared at her. She replaced the snorkel and turned face down once more. She watched the shadow of the boat. He had turned off the motor and was keeping even with her, using a small paddle. Again she surfaced. "Why don't you go drown yourself somewhere else?"

"I thought you were a kid in trouble out here," he shouted back. "I came to rescue you."

She couldn't stop the sudden laughter that shook her. She pushed the face mask up on her head and said, "Right, and now you know that I'm not a kid in trouble. So you are dismissed. Okay?"

"So why not let me rescue you? I'm primed for a rescue job."

She glanced at him, young, bearded, very dark. She kicked herself toward the boat. "Okay. Rescue me already."

Sitting on the sea wall of the Davenport house he said, "But I did meet her this morning. Short, wavy, dark hair. Dark blue eyes. Twenties, tall, stacked. Right?"

"And I'm saying that's impossible. You lost a day somewhere. She met my plane this morning. She was at the airport before ten. And we didn't get back here to the beach until almost twelve."

She was drinking a lemonade, and he had a can of beer. Joanne finished her drink quickly and put the glass down. "I have to be going. No one knows where I am."

"Can I see you later?"

"Why?"

"Why do you think? I think you're a crazy kid. I want to show you my paintings."

"No etchings?"

"Don't be funny."

She shrugged, thinking of her father's reaction to her dating a bearded man and nodded. "Sure. Why not? After dinner. Do you have a car or should I borrow one and come up here?"

"I'll pick you up. Nine o'clock?"

They swam to the small motorboat and he took her back down the beach. Clouds had filled the sky to the west, and the setting sun lighted them from behind, making them seem alive, writhing with color, outlined with bold strokes of silver and gold. He cut the motor close to the shore so that when she slid from the boat she was in waist-deep water. She waved to him and waded in carrying her mask, flippers, and snorkel.

Dorothy was pacing up and down the walk that edged the garden when Joanne came into view. Dorothy bit her lip, then said, "I was starting to worry about you."

Joanne stopped and looked up at her stepmother. "I'm sorry," she said suddenly. "I should have called you, but I didn't think of it. I met a house guest of Mr. Davenport's and we were talking."

Dorothy smiled faintly. "We've been calling him the reincarnation of Mr. Davenport's grandfather," she said. "No one has met him yet. He's the surprise guest for a dinner Tuesday night."

"But . . ." Joanne stopped the sentence. Why had Tony Freemac lied about meeting her stepmother that morning? Such a blatant lie, so easily swept aside. Or, was Dorothy lying now about him? Had they met? Not this morning, of course, but another time? She shrugged and fell into step beside Dorothy. "Is Dad going to be home for dinner?"

"Yes, but he's bringing someone with him. He's tied in knots about getting a contract from the government, and it seems that Mr. Davenport is so involved in this celebration of his that he just doesn't care about the real business of the company right now. Your father is in a tizzy over it all."

"Wouldn't you know that I'd choose such a rotten time to come to him with my problems." Joanne kicked sand hard and scowled.

Dorothy looked at her quickly, wondering if she had been invited to substitute for Gary. She wished that she were a few years older, more motherly, or that she and Joanne had got off to a better start back in the beginning. No one else on earth could make her feel so out of place and unwanted and awkward.

"Joanne," she started, "I . . . if you want to talk about something. I mean if I can arrange it so that Gary realizes that you have to talk to him, I'll try."

"Thanks," the girl said. "I have to talk to him. To both of you, I guess. Maybe tomorrow before I have to get my flight back."

Gary and Donald Cramer were sitting in the living room with martinis when Dorothy and Joanne joined them. Cramer was leaning forward talking intently, his thin face set in lines of concentration. He stood up belatedly, as if manners had been hard to learn and then not very well. Joanne kissed her father, nodded to the young man, and made polite noises when the introductions were made. Cramer wished they hadn't come into it. He didn't know how to talk with women, even when they were as young as Joanne, or as firmly married as Dorothy. He finished his martini and waited for the rest of them to carry the conversation.

"Donald is the new physicist I was telling you about, honey," Gary said, moving to the bar. Dorothy shook her head when he indicated the pitcher. "He'll be working with Hank Pinelli on that new process I was telling you about."

"The plastic abyss," Dorothy murmured. "Will a demonstration be ready for Tuesday night?"

Cramer looked startled and reached hurriedly for the new drink that Gary had poured. "I think so," he said.

Joanne sat quietly and Dorothy turned to her and said, with a touch of irony, "Dr. Cramer is creating illusions in the lab. Somehow it seems strange, doesn't it, to train a man, put him through graduate school, spend thousands of dollars on his education so that he can manipulate lights in such a way as to confuse the senses, tell you you're seeing what isn't really there. The old Indian rope trick done with holograms."

Gary laughed, and again there was an edge to his voice. Joanne felt her interest sharpen and she looked from her father to her stepmother. Before he could reply to her, the cook announced dinner and they all went to the dining room.

Tony Freemac arrived before they had finished dinner and Joanne made the introductions gleefully, watching his face when she said, "And my stepmother, Dorothy." Dorothy nodded easily, smiled, and indicated a chair.

"Won't you have coffee, Mr. Freemac?"

He looked from her to Joanne, bewilderment crossing his face. "Mrs. Hazlett, haven't we met?"

Dorothy studied him closely, then shook her head. "I don't know. On the beach?"

He shrugged and looked quickly toward Gary, and then turned his attention to his coffee, as if he thought Dorothy was hiding something from her husband. He looked embarrassed. Joanne let her gaze take in Dr. Cramer, and she wondered at the difference between the two men, both the same age, different in every other way. Tony, she knew from their brief talk, was a perpetual drop-out, and probably an artist. Cramer had decided on his goal very early and had not deviated from it once. She was paying little attention to the words being said, but watching the faces of those about her, and it seemed that she was withdrawing from them, becoming more remote, less a participant than an observer. They were talking about the inevitable changes that had already been started and that would have to be finished before a desirable future could be planned and carried out.

"Like the population thing," Gary was saying. "It's too late now to control it. It's like a disease that has

been allowed to get a hold on the patient. All anyone can do is wait for it to run its course, and then talk about preventive medicine. You don't start an immunization program when the patient is weak from illness. Possibly gasping his last breaths."

"All the problems that we point to and scream about are in the same category," Cramer said. "Pollution of the air and streams. Slums. Poverty. Inertia will carry them on to the logical conclusions. After they've gone to the extreme, then we can start over, from different premises."

"So we simply sit back on our asses and wait for millions of people to get sick and die?" Tony said.

"Of course not," Cramer said with a touch of impatience. "You don't let the patient suffer any more than is necessary. You administer palliatives, bathe him, relieve his fever if you can. But you admit that he is ill and you admit that you can't cure him at this point."

"And if the patient dies?" Dorothy asked.

"Then you have learned something new that can be used the next time," Gary said, ending the conversation. He finished his coffee and looked pointedly at Dr. Cramer.

To Joanne, who was watching them from a great distance now, it seemed that they were on stage, talking idly about nothing, playing their roles with finesse. She looked past them and examined the stage props: pale furnishings, heavy gold drapes, pale blue rugs. The stage hadn't been changed since she had left, was exactly as she remembered from her earliest days. She squinted and stared at the props, past them, and saw blackness.

". . . just get bigger and bigger, less suited to the people they are supposed to serve. Why do we let it happen?"

"The cities reflect what we teach our architects to admire. This is the age of technocracy. The cities reflect that." Gary's voice sounded faint and distant. Joanne didn't look at him, or at Dorothy, who answered.

"And the walls will rise higher and be polished and smooth and unbroken. Dark green, almost black. A person walking along such sidewalks, with such walls on all sides of him, will be lost. . . ."

Joanne forced her gaze to penetrate the blackness that she saw, and the blackness was deep and endless, but forming in it now was a pale luminescence. She stared at it, and a shifting light seemed to steady itself, to take shape, as if images were coming into focus.

". . . lost from what? I don't know what you mean when you say something like that."

"Lost from humanity, maybe."

The light was not moving at all; it was as if gauze curtains were being dissolved, another stage, another set. A city.

"Man's humanity doesn't depend on his environment," Gary.

"But his humanity can be destroyed by it," Tony Freemac.

A city grew before her eyes, a city with tall green buildings that were cold and threatening. No one walked in the city.

"This whole thing could go on for hours and we would be where we were in the beginning. When we

get down to finding out exactly what we all mean by humanity, what we mean by man even, then we might have a profitable discussion about what's happening to mankind." Gary stood up and put his napkin down precisely on the table.

"All our problems will fade away if we just solve the semantics first," Dorothy said softly, with a trace of sarcasm.

"Don, let's get to our work," Gary said impatiently. "You coming in, honey?"

Dorothy nodded. "In a few minutes."

Tony had leaned forward when Gary stood up, and he said, "You admit, Mr. Hazlett, that something is happening to mankind? Can you go that far?"

Gary laughed easily. The impatience was well hidden when he said, "Man has more time for introspection than he's ever had in the past. More navel searching results in more lint finding, more unraveling to attempt. Mankind is better off today than at any time since the beginning of life. Maybe some of us are too well off. Leaves too much time to brood."

He motioned to Cramer and they went to the study and closed the door behind them. Dorothy looked from Tony to Joanne, who was still withdrawn and abstracted. "Are you two going out?" she asked.

"Nothing special," Tony said. Joanne seemed to shake herself and turned her gaze from infinity to look at Dorothy. "That city you described, Mrs. Hazlett," Tony said after a moment, "have you seen it somewhere? A magazine or something?"

Joanne and Tony were both watching her. Dorothy shook her head. "I don't think so."

"I saw it," Joanne said suddenly.

"Where?" Tony turned to her.

Joanne stared once more at the gold drapes. She walked over to touch the heavy fabric, then she pulled the edge of it aside and touched the wall behind it. When she turned again, she seemed paler, less certain of herself. "I don't know," she said. "It was like a dream, with my eyes open. And wide awake."

Tony pushed his chair back then and stood up abruptly. "Mrs. Hazlett, will you come with us. I wanted to show Joanne some of my paintings. I'd like to show you one, too. It's of your city."

"Can't it wait until Tuesday night?" Dorothy asked, glancing at Joanne.

Joanne said quickly, "It's all right, Dorothy. There's something funny happening. And I don't mean funny-ha-ha. It's sort of scary."

Dorothy still hesitated. After a pause she said, "I'll come in my car. You two go on, I'll follow you."

All the exits had been made on cue: exit, stage left; exit, stage right; leaving Dorothy alone in the spotlight pondering the silverware. She didn't want to go look at Tony's painting. She didn't want to probe the strange things that were happening, the strange things she was thinking and feeling. It all seemed to tie in with the practical joke that Gary had played on her, mussing her bed, pretending she had been asleep when she had actually been on the beach walking with a man she was now certain had been Tony Freemac. Why didn't he admit that he had been there? And this morning. . . She shook her head. She especially didn't want to think about the morning. She had gone to meet Joanne. Period. And yet, her bathing suit was wet, her white sharkskin tunic was stiff with salt water, and she had a memory of

something that hadn't happened. Or almost a memory—rather it was like a dimly remembered shadow, as substanceless as a shadow, but more persistent. She had met Joanne's plane. Exit Dorothy, stage right.

She and Joanne and Tony stared at the painting soundlessly. Dorothy realized that she had bitten blood from her lip only when she touched it and saw the red smear on her fingers. Joanne sat unmoving, her face white, her hands clenched hard in her lap.

"Telepathy," Joanne said through tight lips. "We've just had a practical demonstration of telepathy, and we're all scared to death by it."

"Somehow the three of us experienced this vision," Tony said. "You two saw it, I simply felt it. But telepathy is too simple."

"Simple?" Joanne sounded near hysteria. She couldn't take her eyes from the painting.

"Yes, simple. That doesn't explain how Dorothy could have been here this morning when she was also meeting you at the airport."

Dorothy started at his words. The memory that wasn't a memory, but a vision recalled. "What do you mean?"

"You were here," he said, and described her tunic, her bathing suit. "You were nervous, afraid. Mr. Davenport took you home." He rubbed his hand over the beard and wished for the first time that he had turned the old man down when he had approached him with the ridiculous proposal. The beard seemed obtrusive somehow, as if the old man had claimed him, given him colors, or a stamp of ownership.

Dorothy slowly shook her head. "You have to be wrong," she said. She had risen and was backing away from him, from the painting, groping behind her for the door. "That's crazy! First Gary, now you. . . . Why are you doing this?" She heard the rising tone of her voice and could do nothing to control it. Across the room, as if across a chasm, through clouds, she could see the chalky face of her stepdaughter. For an instant she reeled, and she heard Gary's voice: ". . . by eleven at the latest. Dinner will be over and his fool ceremony will be out of the way. In front of so many people, I don't think he'll put up too much of an objection, if you have everything ready to go. Okay?"

"I can have my end of it ready, but what about Pinelli? Won't he make a stink if we use his lab, his . . . ? Mrs. Hazlett, are you all right?"

"Yes, of course." She stared at the table in confusion. She had knocked over her wineglass, and sherry was spreading across the glossy surface of the table. She stood up abruptly. "How clumsy of me." Gary was mopping it up with his napkin, paying little attention to her, continuing his conversation with Dr. Cramer.

"I told you I'd see to Pinelli. Now look, there will be a stage, and that's perfect for the demonstration. . . ."

Dorothy watched his hands moving competently, cleaning up the spilled wine, and she tried to move her own fingers and found them chilled and stiff, as if she had allowed both hands to lie in an uncomfortable position so long that they had gone to sleep. Her mouth felt stiff, and there was a cold feeling about her face, her forehead. She sat down quickly.

"Dorothy!" Someone caught her arm and she was being led to a chair. Her head was being forced down. Voices nearby, but distant, indistinguishable, incoherent. After a moment she struggled to get up

again.

"Sip some of this," Tony said. It was straight bourbon. She tasted it, then pushed the glass away.

"I want to call my house," she said.

"Wait a minute or two," Tony said. "Then I'll take you home if you want."

She shook her head and looked around for the telephone. "I have to call now. Right now." Again the rising note was there. She bit her lip and took a deep breath. "I'm all right, but I have to call this minute."

Tony looked helplessly at Joanne, but she was staring wide-eyed at Dorothy. She was pale down to her lips. "Okay," he said. "Joanne, will you get the number." He helped Dorothy up, and made certain that she was steady, and they went into the study where Joanne dialed. Dorothy took the phone from her before she finished the last number. Tony pulled the phone from Dorothy's ear so that they could all hear the rings. Joanne moved in closer. The ringing stopped, and from the other end of the wire, they could hear Dorothy's low-pitched voice: "Hello."

Gary looked up at Dorothy, standing at the telephone stand with a puzzled look on her face. "Who was it at this hour?" he asked. "Jo?"

"No. I don't know. They hung up."

"Wrong number. Bad enough during the day, but at eleven . . ." Gary laughed and turned back to Cramer and the sketch of Davenport's study. "Now, the stage is just about here. I haven't seen it since the construction started, but I saw the plans. It's small, about ten by ten, a foot higher than the room. That's the area that I want you to consider. How much equipment will it take? How long to set up your gear, and so on? How many men to get everything in place? Can you arrange that end of it? You understand?"

"Sure. I can handle that. Be a good idea if I could get in ahead of time. Get it all fixed up and just press the light switch to start the show. More impressive that way."

Dorothy thought: reality needs more than a button to start it, Doctor.

Gary said, "On the stage there's going to be a judge's desk, a chair, and off to the side a gallows. Period. Look at the sketch again. The stage backs onto the porch, with a double door there. While you are projecting your images, we will open that door, and rearrange the stage."

Peel away curtains and find other sets, other stages, other curtains. How many layers? Dorothy heard the car stop on the pebble drive and stood up. The cook had gone home hours ago. Neither Gary nor Cramer had heard anything. Gary's pale hair and the doctor's thin face side by side like a Dali distortion, facets of the same thing, and the thing not what she had always called man before. She rose and walked from the room without drawing the attention of either of them. In the hallway she paused, and instead of going to the entrance, she turned and went into the bedroom and undressed quickly, and got into bed.

Tony and Joanne argued briefly. "Don't warn them with the doorbell," Joanne said. "Let me open it."

Dorothy stood to one side and waited silently. Tony looked at her worriedly and moved aside so that Joanne could fit her key into the lock. When the door swung open, Dorothy walked ahead of them to the study door. She opened it, turned, and smiled at them.

"You two are back early."

Tony felt the trembling in Joanne's arm and his fingers bit down hard. She moaned. "Yes, Jo forgot her purse." He studied Dorothy, but she seemed perfectly normal, smiling, almost amused by them, as if their paleness and jerky motions were signs of guilt at being caught reaching for forbidden cookies.

"Oh? Maybe it's in the living room." She moved ahead of them and glanced about. "Did you call a few minutes ago?"

Joanne shook her head, staring at Dorothy, her pallor so obvious now that Dorothy looked from her to Tony and then back. Very gently she asked, "Are you all right, Jo? Is anything wrong?" She took a step toward the girl, Joanne backed away.

"I'm fine. Fine. It must be in the car," she said quickly and wheeled about and ran from the room.

Dorothy started to follow, but Tony caught her arm. "Have you been here all night?"

"Of course. In the study with Gary and Dr. Cramer. Why?"

"I have to see Mr. Hazlett," he said. "It's important."

Dorothy closed her eyes for a second. "What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I have to see your husband, Dorothy." She looked surprised and alarmed at his tone, and the roughness of his grasp on her arm.

"I'll call him," she said. She left him in the living room and stood at the closed door for several seconds with her eyes shut. Why did he seem so familiar? Like someone she had known a long time ago, known well enough to trust. And why had Joanne acted as if she were terrified of her? She thought of the other night when they'd had guests, and slowly, with reluctance, she went down the hall to the bedroom she shared with Gary, and opened the door. She took only one step inside, enough to see that the bed was mussed, her pillow indented, her cigarettes on the table. . . .

Gary looked annoyed when she told him that Tony Freemac wanted to talk to him, but he got up and followed her to the living room. Joanne wasn't there. Dorothy didn't go in with Gary, but went to Jo's room and looked inside. She must have gone back to the car, looking for the purse. Dorothy saw Joanne opening her purse, taking a tissue from it, closing it again. They were in Davenport's study, and on the table the telephone, with Tony's hand covering it, Joanne pale, the echo of her scream still in the air. . . .

". . . out of here and stay out!"

"Ask Davenport. Ask Joanne. I'm telling . . ."

"You're telling me nothing. I'll call the police if you don't get out of here!"

She ran down the hall to the living room. Tony and Gary were standing face to face yelling at each other. Dr. Cramer emerged from the study, and Joanne materialized from the back of the hall. "What's going on?" Cramer asked.

"Nothing. Freemac is leaving," Gary said.

"Dad, you have to believe him!" Joanne cried. "I saw her. I was with her, and then she . . . she pretended . . ."

"Joanne, get to your room. And you, get out!"

"You won't listen because you're afraid to," Joanne screamed. "Who is posing as Dorothy? Why is

she pretending that she doesn't even know Tony? Who met me this morning?"

Dorothy caught the doorjamb and steadied herself. They were all so distant, their faces distorted by rage and fear, mouths opening and closing with nothing coming out. And behind them yawned the blackness, but none of them seemed to see it, to be aware that it was there. Her fingers clutching the doorjamb began to slip through it, and the wood melted away until her fingers met, and there was nothing to hold her up. She slid to the floor.

"Dorothy!" Gary lifted her from the floor and turned furiously to Tony. "See what you've done with your crazy talk. Now will you get out of here." He carried her to the bedroom and put her down and sat at her side gently rubbing her wrist.

"I'm all right," she said. "I didn't faint."

"Hush, darling. Just relax and rest."

She closed her eyes and felt hot tears gathering behind the lids. "Gary, what's happening? Am I going insane?"

His hand holding hers clenched, hurting her fingers. "Don't say that. It's that crazy kid out there. That bum that Davenport picked up."

The tears were being squeezed out. "I didn't faint," she said again. "There wasn't anything to stand on. Nothing to lean against. I fell down."

"Honey, stop. Just stay perfectly still. I'm going to go get you a sleeping pill. Now, don't move until I get back."

The tears were hot on her face, cold on her neck. She tried to stop them and couldn't. She was making no sound, but the tears wouldn't stop flowing.

She swallowed the capsule he brought her, and she lay with his hand stroking her forehead, her cheek. Thinking: Some of us need so many others to finish us. He needs others, like a colonial organization, or is it organism. One segment, all can survive but it isn't finished, isn't whole, and it knows, knows, and tries to find others it can fuse with, even if only temporarily. I almost complete him, sometimes I am enough for a while, it doesn't last. But I am complete. Drifting alone in the sea. Whole, sometimes splitting, becoming two, one to go this way, one that, each complete. Drifting on the surface only, never penetrating, sometimes seeing a break, seeing the bottomless sea that we are afloat on, seeing the layers and layers that we could peel away if we knew how. Surface tension keeping us in place, but others can pierce it, dive beneath it, rise above it. It's not a boundary to them. We're like water beetles skating along, never aware that the real world lies beneath. . . .

Gary stroked her forehead and watched her face. The tears stopped and gradually she relaxed, and took a long sighing breath. Her hand clutching his relaxed its grip, and fell away, the fingers curled. Very gently he wiped her cheeks and smoothed back her hair wet with tears. His hands were tender as he undressed her, and then pulled the sheet over her.

Tony, Joanne, and Donald Cramer were in the living room, not talking, but anxious, and apparently they had been talking. Cramer looked upset, and Joanne and Tony were sitting together defensively on the couch.

"Is she all right?" Joanne asked.

"I gave her a pill. She's asleep now."

"I guess I should be going." Cramer stood up.

"Wait a minute," Gary said. "Have you talked to him?" He indicated Tony. Cramer hesitated a moment and then nodded. "What do you make of it?"

"Nonsense, of course." Cramer glanced toward Joanne and smiled nervously. "Not deliberate, I think, but still . . ."

"You're a fool," Joanne said icily. "Why would we make up such a story? Wait until Mr. Davenport backs it up, and he will. He was with her this morning. He'll tell you."

"Honey, don't rely on the old man," Gary said. "He could be taken in too." He went to the bar and poured Scotch into four glasses, added soda, and handed one to Tony and one to his daughter. He got the other two and gave one of them to Cramer. Joanne held hers without testing it. "You need it," he said, and took a deep drink of his own. "Freemac, I'm sorry I blew up at you. We have to get to the bottom of what's going on, and that isn't the way. Now, you two say that Dorothy was with you in Davenport's house this evening. I say that she was here all night. Someone is mistaken, or . . ." He stopped and swirled his drink for several seconds before adding, "Or, someone is playing a monstrous hoax that is potentially very dangerous to Dorothy. And that brings up the question of why anyone would impersonate her for your benefit. I know that I couldn't be fooled by an impersonator, but you don't know her that well, Jo. You've been with her very little. And Freemac is a stranger to her. But why?"

"Daddy, I saw her go to the door of the study, turn around and pretend that she had been in there all night. She did it herself."

"How, honey? I knew she was here." He stopped suddenly and stared past his daughter. A few nights ago. She'd sworn she was out when he knew she was home.

Tony said, "She asked me if she had met me on the beach one night recently. She seemed to think she had, but I wasn't out there. Was there another time that this happened, Mr. Hazlett? A couple of nights ago?"

"I don't know," Gary said.

Cramer swallowed the rest of his drink and put the glass down. "If it's not a mistake, it's a hoax," he said. "I don't know how or why, but she wasn't in two places at the same time. There has to be someone else involved in it for reasons that we don't know yet."

"Axiomatic, isn't it, Doctor, that no one person can be in two places at the same time. Just like it's axiomatic that two parallel lines can't meet? That the shortest distance between two points is a straight line? That the sun and moon go around the earth? Has this particular axiom ever been proven? Or even questioned?"

"Good God," Cramer said in disgust. "Some things don't need more proof than is supplied by a sane mind."

Tony laughed darkly. "I know what I saw," he said. "And if something has to go, it's the goddam law of physics, not the evidence of my eyes."

"The least reliable evidence there is."

"Maybe." Tony leaned forward and added, "But I saw Dorothy Hazlett drop one role and pick up another. I saw and talked with her this morning at the same time Jo saw and talked with her thirty miles away."

Gary rubbed his hand across his eyes and stood up. "Let's leave it for tonight. Jo, you look exhausted. Go on to bed, honey. I'll see you tomorrow, Don. And Freemac, tomorrow afternoon, about four? Can you come over for a drink then?"

He sat up drinking Scotch and soda, wandering to the bedroom to stare at Dorothy now and again. She slept without movement. The sleeping pill was a strong one, too strong for her probably. She'd wake up feeling drugged and dopey. Finally he undressed and turned off the bedroom lights, and there was only moonlight in the room. Once more he stopped at the side of her bed; this time he dropped to his knees and buried his head in the sheet next to her warm body. "Please, please," he said. "Dorothy, I need you so much. Please, don't leave me. Please."

The sun was high and hot. Jo's shoulders were beginning to feel prickly, and she sat up and reached for a towel. Dorothy was just stepping onto the sand. "Here she comes," Joanne said. Tony sat up then. Joanne looked frightened.

"It's nearly noon," Dorothy said. "Your father really socked it to me with a mickey last night, didn't he?"

She went past them into the water, waded out until it was above her waist and then swam with a strong regular stroke. "She's rather terrific," Tony said, watching the white cap bobbing on the water.

"Yes. You'd think nothing ever happened to look at her now. She's always like that. Nothing ever throws her for long."

"Did she do something to you, or is this the stepdaughter syndrome showing?"

Joanne laughed. "Stepdaughter syndrome," she said. "I'll have to remember that. What a handy catch-all." He turned to look at her. "She's been very decent actually. More than I deserved, I guess."

"Okay. Just wondered."

"It's hard not to keep playing the game I made up."

"It must be."

"Let's swim."

Dorothy was dog paddling around the breakwater when they joined her. She looked surprised, then pleased to see them, and she pointed at a small hole in the concrete wall. A ten-inch octopus tentacle writhed. Joanne laughed and touched it, and it withdrew into the hole. They trod water waiting for it to reappear, but it didn't and finally they headed back to shore.

Dorothy toweled herself and lighted a cigarette. She didn't sit down. "I'm starving," she said, heading toward the house; she swung back around. "I don't know exactly what happened, not as much as anyone else it seems, but whatever it is, I'm not playing a joke. I'm not doing it."

"I don't think anyone is suggesting that, Dorothy," Tony said. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all. Dorothy saw that Joanne was equally exhausted. Probably she was the only one who had slept.

Joanne said, "How is Dad this morning? Does he think you're playing a trick on him?"

Dorothy shrugged. "He seems to think that I can stop all this nonsense if I want to." She laughed suddenly and tossed her cigarette away. "I suppose you could say he wants me to pull myself together."

Joanne looked startled, but Tony laughed. "Have you two had breakfast, lunch, brunch? Come on, let's eat."

"How can you laugh at it?" Joanne asked. "It's the most terrifying thing I ever heard of, and you laugh."

Dorothy stopped again. A haunted look had come over her face, leaving it pinched and very afraid. Quietly she said, "If I don't laugh at it, I'll go mad. You see, I don't know where I was last night. And I don't know who was sleeping in my bed when I went in to look at it. Someone had been." She was almost running as she led the way to the house.

"I stayed up talking to the old man last night," Tony said, spreading jam over toast. "He's delighted with this business. Can't wait to talk to you, and Gary, anyone else who might be able to add to the details. You'd think he had arranged it all, and was just finding out that it was paying off."

Dorothy wasn't eating much. She dabbled with her omelet, broke her toast into bits, and drank coffee. "Did he have any suggestions to make?"

"I don't know. He went on at some length about selective evidence to verify our view of reality. He asked if you write poetry. Do you?"

She shook her head. "Not since my first love light was blown out when I was twelve. I wrote an ode to lost love and the hopelessness of life."

"He says that it doesn't matter because you're living poetry." Joanne looked blank, and he shrugged. "I don't know what he meant, I'm just reporting. He's going to call you as soon as I pass the word that you're up and about."

Dorothy pushed her plate back and stood up. "I don't want to go into any of this with anyone." She walked to the screen door and stared over the ocean. "I keep wondering, what if I see her, the other one? Is it a doppelgänger? We hear about such things, read of them, shrug and go on. I mean what else can you do? We can't understand them or believe in them, or cope with them. You know, like poltergeists. We read of this or that family being torn up by poltergeist tricks. The stories die down, and we put it aside. It doesn't fit anywhere and we forget about it. I turned down an assignment once to do a series of articles about clairvoyance, telepathy, fortunetelling, the whole range, simply because I couldn't believe in any of it. I knew it would be such a debunking series that the editor would hand it back to me. He wanted a sympathetic treatment. Everybody wants to believe. But how? Seeing things at a distance or in the future. Who can believe in such things? How? Who can believe in a doppelgänger?"

From the open door to the hall another voice said, "And why don't those stories all die then? Doesn't matter how often they get buried, someone always digs 'em up again."

They turned to see Perry Davenport. "Dorothy, I'm buttin' in where I ain't been invited. Might as well let me stay, seeing that I'm one of the interested parties." He glared at Tony. "And you, what's the matter, you couldn't find a dime to make one lousy phone call?"

Tony grinned and stood up. He started to introduce Davenport to Joanne, but the old man stopped him. He grabbed the girl and hugged her. "You always make me think of a truth that we generally forget," he said to the embarrassed girl. "The smallest berries most often are the sweetest." He kissed her soundly and put her back down on her chair. He pulled one out for himself and sat down and regarded Dorothy, "First of all, that wasn't no poltergeist, and it wasn't no doppelgänger. It was you that I talked to yesterday, brought back to this house and watched walk inside it. You're not going to get nowhere long's you keep talking 'bout what it wasn't. Now you tell me what you remember doing yesterday morning."

Dorothy shrugged helplessly and moved away from the screen. Walking back and forth on the terrazzo floor, hearing the soft click of heel taps and nothing else, she said after a moment, "I went to the airport and waited for Joanne's plane, and we came home."

"Not enough," the old man said. "More details."

"Why? What difference does it make? I was there! I was here! Or someone was. I have to take your word, yours and his, that you were with someone who seemed to be Dorothy Hazlett. I don't know who that was. I just know where I was."

The old man nodded. He helped himself to coffee. "Take it easy, honey. Just start with getting up and try to recall as much as you can about the morning, the drive, waiting for the plane. Okay? Are you sure that it's as real in your mind as you think it is?"

"Oh," Dorothy cried, and sat down across the table from him. Vehemently she said, "It was as real as this is right now. Why won't anyone understand that?" She closed her eyes and leaned back, suddenly tired.

Perry Davenport patted her hand. "Honey, I believe it, but I don't think you do. Look at me, Dorothy." She opened her eyes and met his gaze. "Honey, I've seen a lot of phonies and a few real people in my time. You're one of the few, Dorothy. I think you're in trouble, and maybe I can help. Maybe not. I'd like to try, if you'll let me. Will you?"

She nodded. "I'll try to fill it all in, but there's so little. . . . I had breakfast out here. Orange juice, coffee, an egg." She stopped and he smiled encouragingly at her. "All right. I knew that I had to leave by nine, and I have a fear of being late for something like that, so I planned to be on my way by fifteen 'til nine." She talked on and in speaking of the details, they came back clearer and clearer: dreading the weekend, hoping Jo wouldn't be upset because Gary wouldn't be able to spend any time with her, and so on. The drive, the announcement of the late arrival, waiting, reading.

"What was the magazine?"

She frowned, trying to remember. "*Look*, or *Life*. I'm not certain. There was a big story on paleontology. I read that while I waited." She stopped, seeing again the men-things squatting about a fire, seeing the machine turning out projections of artifacts. She smiled and said, "I had a fantasy about faking history and then the plan. . . ."

"Whoa, girl. Just stop a minute there." Davenport leaned back, tilting his chair, and looked pleased. "This little fantasy, what about it?"

Dorothy tried to recall as much as she could about the fantasy. "Of course," she said when she felt that she had wrung it dry, "it all goes back to Gary's preoccupation with this innovation he's thought up, and the contract he's trying to get for the company."

"Starts there," Davenport said, "but you took it a giant step farther."

She looked puzzled and he said, "Don't you see? What Gary and Cramer are after is a three-dimensional image to confuse the eyes as long as the energy is on and the projectors work, and what you invented in the terminal is a four-dimensional image that would endure regardless of the energy and the projectors."

"Four dimensional? How?"

"Yours would endure in time, and that makes it about as substantial as anything you can see around

you right now." He pounded the table. "Is it there, or does my brain furnish the details working with pure energy only? I don't know." He stood up suddenly. "The other times that you were reported in two places at once, can you recall the same kind of details about them?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Were there fantasies involved in those instances?"

"I don't remember. I suppose so. Don't we all fantasize most of the time?"

"I'm looking for special kinds of fantasy, honey. When did you first see that city that Tony painted?"

He pounded at her and made her remember. For the next two hours he kept at it with her. The painting, the phone call that she made and answered, the spilled wine. Dorothy was haggard-looking when Joanne jumped up and cried, "Mr. Davenport, stop it! You have to stop and leave her alone. Why are you doing this to her?"

Davenport seemed to collapse in his chair, his face was gray with fatigue, and the sparkle that had lighted his eyes was gone, leaving them pale.

"Why?" he repeated faintly. "I'm tired, hiding my fear hardly at all. We scratch about in the ashes of great men, picking their bones dry and clean, stripping all their ideas, their genius from them, pretending that we're onto something new, something that explains a little more to us. But we're not. And whatever it is that they already found out is only ashes and bones. Sometimes a genius just seems to step right over everything we know, everything he's known, and there is a new vista opened before our eyes. But not often. By God, it's rare. Sometimes an artist, or a poet, does the same thing, blindly striking out to find something that is so new, so breathtaking, so beautiful, or frightful, that it awes us and whether we want to or not we've got to go where the vision takes us. Most of the time we grovel in the ashes and cry in the night when our body sleeps and our soul weeps fearing the new day. It's always the same fear: Is it real? Is there meaning? Does it, any of it, matter? Ashes in our past, ashes in our future? Why? That's all that science is about, philosophy, religion, art. They're all asking the same question. Is it real, any of it?" He looked at Dorothy's pale face and touched her cheek lightly. "I'm sorry, my dear. But you see, you scare the living hell out of me. You're asking too, and my God, I'm afraid that you're going to get answers."

He turned and left them, an old man with slumping shoulders, weariness making his feet drag, his hands hanging limply at his sides.

"I'd better see that he gets home all right," Tony said. He looked at Joanne and then to Dorothy. "Will you two be all right?"

Joanne nodded and her stepmother hardly seemed to hear him. He hesitated another moment, then hurried after Perry Davenport.

"Dorothy, can I get you something? Are you all right?" Joanne reached over the table to touch Dorothy's hand. It was cold. She shook it and her stepmother seemed to rouse from a trancelike state and look at her. "Dorothy, I'm so afraid. I . . ." She burst into tears and, sobbing, let herself be held tightly in Dorothy's arms. After what seemed like a long time her sobs stopped and she could hear the murmuring voice, the comforting words, and she felt secure, and even loved. She pushed herself away and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Dorothy produced a tissue and Joanne blew her nose. "I'm a big help," she said hoarsely. "I wanted to do something for you and instead I cried like a baby."

"Honey, you did something for me. Believe me, you did." Dorothy kissed her forehead and put her arm about the girl's shoulders. "Just rest a minute. It's been a hard weekend, hasn't it? What time is your

plane?"

Joanne sighed and pulled away again. "I'm not going. How can I go away right now?"

"But your school . . . ?"

"Oh, I could stay away a month and not miss a thing except some girls' room gossip."

"I was afraid that you'd got tied up with Cramer. You know that you asked Tony Freemac to come over this afternoon?" Dorothy accepted the steaming glass from Gary and sipped the Tom Collins he had made for her.

"We worked earlier. Then I talked to a detective at the police station." Gary had his back turned, mixing his own martini then.

"Detective? Are you serious?"

"Of course. Someone must be planning a robbery or something. Probably quite by accident your double was found, and someone decided it was too good a chance to pass up. This woman will come in when you are out and clean out your jewelry, silverware, everything they can get away with. . . ." He stopped. Dorothy made a strangled noise. He turned and saw that she was laughing hysterically.

She felt as if she were far off watching it all, unable to intervene, unable to make the woman stop laughing, to make the man stop pouting like a baby whose rattle had been taken away. She watched and listened when Dorothy finally gasped, "And they believed this? The police believed someone is planning a robbery?"

"It was their idea." Gary took her hand and rubbed it gently. "Honey, this really worries me, the way you are taking all this."

She laughed harder. After a moment she began to calm down again and presently she asked quietly, "Gary, the other night. The first time. . . . I *was* on the beach."

He shook his head. "I saw you, darling. You were dreaming. You know I wouldn't lie to you. No one could deceive me into believing someone else was you. I went to the bedroom for my trunks, and to see if you were awake. You weren't. You had fallen asleep with your book across your legs. Your gown strap was down. I kissed the little mole by your right nipple. In God's name, how much more would it take to convince me that it was you asleep on that bed? What earthly reason would I have to lie to you about that? I love you, Dorothy."

She stood up and let him hold her. "Gary, I am so frightened. I believe you, all of it. But that wasn't me. I heard men talking. . . ."

"I'm frightened, too, darling. Not by what seems to have happened. I think you dreamed a very vivid dream. I'm frightened because you can't seem to distinguish between the two. I don't want you to mention that incident to the police at all, honey. I simply told them that when you were meeting Joanne's plane, someone else was impersonating you at Davenport's house. And again last night, when you were entertaining a guest with me, someone else was with Jo and Freemac pretending to be you."

She sighed. "You don't want me to talk about last night, Gary. You see, I have memories of being here, and of being with Jo and Tony." She looked at the table where she had knocked over her sherry. She touched the spot, looking for a sign of the spilled wine. It had been cleaned up. "And of the two, the other one seems more real."

Gary caught her shoulders and shook her hard. "Stop this! Did you let them talk to you this morning? Did Jo and Freemac convince you that you were with them?"

"No. Let go of me. You're hurting me."

He released her abruptly. His voice was harsh, almost unrecognizable. "You do need a doctor. You hear scraps of talk and weave them into a whole and think it actually happened to you. I shouldn't have given you that sleeping pill last night. It made you too receptive to suggestion. You heard that crazy kid and during the night you let bits and pieces of his story become real to you so that now you don't know what is real and what isn't. Who knows anything about him? He could be behind all this."

There was a tap on the door and they both turned to see Joanne. "Tony is here, Dad. You told him to come over at four, remember?"

Gary nodded. "Tell him to come on in. Why don't you go get some rest," he said to Dorothy.

"I'd rather stay and listen."

Gary shrugged and began to mix a new drink. Tony paused at the door, glanced from Gary to Dorothy's pale face, then to Joanne, who lifted her shoulders in an "I don't know," manner. "Suit yourself," Gary said. He faced Tony then. "I called the police about this impersonation business, and someone will be over at Davenport's tomorrow to talk to you. They think a robbery is the motive, and I'm inclined to go along with that."

Tony sat down and studied him as he spoke. Gary's voice became crisper. "All you should tell them is that a woman that you thought was Dorothy arrived over there and spent an hour or so with you and Joanne. The three of you came back here and you don't know what became of her. Dorothy was here when you arrived. Is that clear?"

"And that there really is a Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny does bring the eggs."

"And what are my instructions?" Joanne asked angrily.

"You won't be here. You're a minor and I won't have them questioning you at all. You'll be at home with your mother."

"No I won't. I'm staying for the rest of the week."

"We'll talk about that later," Gary said. He turned again to Tony. "What could you add to what I just outlined that would do anything but confuse the whole issue?"

"And if it is already confused, we're to pretend it isn't. Is that it?" Tony glanced at his watch. "Mr. Davenport would like to talk to you sometime this afternoon," he said. "Are you going to give him a story too?"

"He's not mixed up in this," Gary said. "The police don't want to talk to him."

"But if there is a robbery planned, it might be his house that's being cased," Joanne said, too sweetly. "After all, the impostor did show up there twice now."

"Jo, I told you to keep out of this. If you interrupt again, I'll send you to your room."

"Don't you see, Daddy, that we can't tell your lies? It would show and they'd think we're all in a crazy conspiracy together. And if we tell them the truth, they'll want to send us all to the funny farm." Joanne

caught a warning gesture from Dorothy and she subsided, sinking down into a chair that was about three sizes too big for her, making her look very tiny, very young.

"How much of this does Davenport know?" Gary asked Dorothy.

"Everything. He was over here earlier. I told him everything. He is mixed up in it, Gary. He's one of the witnesses, after all."

"I want him kept out of it," Gary said. "That's all we need to blow this into a big publicity splash."

"He said that he wants to talk to you about Amory Brock," Tony said.

Gary stared at him, then turned to stare at Dorothy. "Did he say anything else?" he asked after a long pause.

"No. He wants you to call him. That's all."

Gary nodded. He finished his drink and returned to the bar. He poured Scotch into his glass and drank it, then added more and squirted seltzer into it this time. Finally he said, "So there is a Brock?" Suddenly he spun around and shouted at Dorothy, "If you know something, why don't you just come out with it? Why all this hocus pocus? Who is Brock? Where does he fit in this business? What do you know?"

Very quietly Dorothy said, "I've told you everything I know."

"I don't believe you."

"I know."

Joanne and Tony were stretched out in the late afternoon sun. "Why is Dad reacting so violently?" she asked.

"Since I don't know how he usually reacts, I don't have much to go on."

"Cool, very cool. In charge. Controlled. Not afraid of something new and different."

"Unhuh. New and different within certain boundaries. New and different applications of the same old things."

"I suppose so," Jo said, thinking about it. "Like this thing that Dorothy calls the plastic abyss. Two old ideas put together in a new way. And you think that what's happening is something really new?"

Tony sat up. He let sand run through his fingers and watched it build, then fall again. "Jo, I think that what's happening is enough to shake every idea we've ever had about the universe right down to its core."

"Remember what Dorothy said about poltergeists? We stop hearing about it and then simply forget the whole thing. Isn't this like that?"

"I don't know. Davenport doesn't seem to think so." He smoothed the sand again and added, "Don't ask me these things. I'm not a scientist. I'm just a bum who dabbles with paint." He was thinking about something else Davenport had said to him: "You and the girl, you don't have anything at stake in all this. You're not threatened by a shake-up of reality. You don't know where it's at now, so why would it concern you to have it shift? But the others? Hazlett, Cramer, people like them, maybe even me, we've

got a stake, we've built our lives on this one foundation and if you shake it too hard we might fall off and not land pretty."

"I'm ashamed of my father," Joanne said in a low voice. "You know that he's calling the police back and telling them that he made a mistake about Dorothy's being home all evening? He'll make Dr. Cramer back him up."

"Yeah. Can't say that I blame him too much. It was a dumb thing for him to do in the first place without more information than he had."

"Oh, he had it, but he wouldn't let himself see it."

"That's what I mean."

Dorothy and Gary stood at the porch door and looked at the two nearly naked bodies. "Isn't he a little old for her?" Gary asked.

"I don't know. Last week I would have said probably, but now, I just don't know. She's changed a lot in these two days."

"Dorothy, I'm sorry for that scene in the study. Davenport's due any second now, and I'd like for you to be in on it."

She nodded. "In a funny way I think yours is the most rational attitude of anyone mixed up in this. Those two out there simply accept. 'So there are two of her. How interesting, a little frightening, of course, but mostly just very curious.' And my own attitude. I'm afraid, but mostly curious, I think. I keep wondering if there is another me right now doing something somewhere else with someone else."

"Dorothy, don't. Let's not talk about this now. I can't accept it. There has to be an explanation. We'll find it."

"I know, dear. And that's comforting. You go right along with the statement: 'I think; therefore I am,' and I'm reduced to, I think I am. It's nice to have such certainty nearby." He drew her closer to him and she rested her head on his shoulder comfortably. "We're a nice pair. Other couples argue about religion or politics, so it's all right if we argue about what's real and unreal."

He squeezed her shoulder, too hard, but she didn't pull away. It was good to be hurt, to feel flesh and blood fingers on her flesh, to know that she was there, that he was there.

Perry Davenport arrived at six, accepted a shot of bourbon and a glass of ice water, and demanded that Joanne and Tony be permitted to sit in on the talk.

Gary didn't argue with him. When they had all gathered, Davenport said, "I want to tell you about the first government contract I ever got, Gary. I don't think you know the story, do you?"

Gary shook his head and the old man settled back in his chair and said, "It was early in the war, 'forty-two, and plastics was a new thing. We were all just beginning to get a whiff of the potentials at that time. Me and Pinelli worked twelve, fifteen, eighteen hours a day back then, just the two of us with a plant that was an old kitchen in a shed. All we had to our names, that shed, our ideas, and maybe five hundred dollars between us. We came up with Mirfab. And no one in Washington would talk to us. No one anywhere would talk to us. So I got me a torch and a piece of Mirfab about the size of a card-table top and I busted right into the middle of a fancy lunch where members, of the Defense Department and a smattering of generals were bending their elbows. I busted in with that torch blazing full strength at that

sample of plastic. They sat up, you bet your bottom dollar they did, and they listened. There was a pink-faced kid there. They'd got him fresh out of law school, put a uniform on him and taught him how to salute and called him lieutenant. Amory Brock. Lieutenant Amory Brock. We got to be buddies right quick, the young looie and me. He spent money on me like he owned the patent on it. And six months later Mirfab was being used in cockpits, on ships, seat coverings of jeeps. You name it, they had it. But none of it's ever been used in civilian life. You see? They own it for all practical purposes. Today they're using it on astronauts' suits, I hear."

He sipped his bourbon and looked at Gary thoughtfully. "I never went after another government contract," he said. "Lieutenant Brock rose to captain, then major, and now I hear he's a light colonel."

"But, the Defense Department does use a lot of our products," Gary said. "Corffloor, for example."

Davenport shook his head. "You don't seem to get the point, boy. Corffloor ain't ours no more. Mirfab ain't ours."

"Can they do that? Just take what you invent and keep it?" Joanne's voice was awed and indignant.

"Honey, what happens is this. We file for a patent, and they scan each and every patent application that goes in. Some of 'em get hauled out and stamped with a big red, S.O.—security order. It goes into a special envelope that is sealed, and the applicant gets a letter advising him that the Department of Defense, or the Army, or Navy, or whatever, has asked for a special hearing on that particular patent, that they foresee possible advantages in acquiring it for their forces, or something to that effect. A hand-picked board meets to consider those cases and if the decision goes in favor of the government, then you can go whistle up a stump. They can take it. They can sit on it, use it, contract for its manufacture, do whatever they want with it, and you're out of the picture. Oh, they have to pay. Eminent domain laws force them to pay the original applicant, but after that, he's off on the sideline somewheres wondering what happened."

Gary shrugged. "You can't have someone come up with a pocket-sized atom bomb and not be able to haul it out of the public files. National security demands such a law."

"Mebbe. Me, all I know is that Mirfab is not used for one goddam single civilian need. It should be on the walls of every schoolroom, should be in every home, in automobiles. It ain't. The Defense Department is a jealous mistress. It protects and keeps its own. Pinelli's been so careful this time. He made his first patent application five years ago on this stuff. We haven't named it, haven't given it special attention. Mixed up the patent application with a passel of others, and so far, we've not got that damned letter from Brock. But now . . . I don't know." He looked fondly at Dorothy. "You didn't pull that name out of thin air, honey. No sir, you did not. Brock is a name that marches through my nightmares."

Gary stood up and paced as he spoke. He seemed suddenly too restless to remain quiet. "You can't control what happens to what you invent. You put it out on the market and you don't know what people will use it for. You know what you intended, and that's all. If they decide that it has potential as a weapon, you can't help that."

"Right, but the point is that I want it for civilian use this time. I don't want to introduce it until we have it perfected as a building material to the point where it can be installed by any idiot who is pointed in the right direction. We are making it more and more simple, not more complicated. We want it to be used for buildings and energy to run those buildings, to light them and heat them and cool them. To run appliances in them. We won't let go until we have it worked down to such a fine point that any housewife will be able to go into a five and dime and order it by the yard and stick it on her house top with a tube of airplane glue."

"That plan won't necessarily be jeopardized," Gary said, but Davenport cut him off curtly.

"If this gets the S.O. stuck on it, we'll never see it again. Six months, maybe less than that, we'll be ready to put it out, and once the public gets its hands on it, there won't be no way to pull it back in. Then anyone could duplicate it, but not yet. There are still snags, as you know, since you're so hot for government money to step up the research."

"But if there's a leak, it won't matter anyway. They'll know. We should take advantage of our position and . . ."

Davenport stood up, ignoring Gary altogether. He looked at Dorothy and said slowly, "I'm not certain that in this world the secret's out. I'm not sure at all."

The abyss yawned before Gary suddenly and he clutched the arms of his chair. He heard Tony Freemac ask, "What does that mean?" He paid little attention to anyone in the room but stared ahead, slightly downward. Where had it come from, how?

"I don't know," Davenport said. "If there were two Dorothys there were two universes operating side by side, overlapping maybe. Either that, or a woman was created out of nothing to vanish back into nothing. And that introduces too much chaos, too much caprice even for me to swallow."

Gary knew there was no hole before him, knew that the floor was there, chairs, the rug. He had only to put his foot out to feel the rug. Slide it out carefully, inch by inch, over the thick pile, feeling the resistance, another inch, another. . . Nothing. His foot slipped from the rug over the edge, and with a gasp he jerked back. He closed his eyes, refusing to look into the blackness. It was unmoving, sharply defined, an opening that led nowhere into nothing.

"You're not serious about the alternate universes," Tony said. "And none of us believes that a woman can be created out of nothing, a real flesh and blood woman. What's left?"

The old man looked at Tony for a long moment, then said slowly, "Suppose, for the sake of a bit of mental exercise only, you understand, that there are forces manipulating the universe. Not Good and Evil, God and the Devil, nothing so fancy, just forces. Maybe from their elevated viewpoints they could define good and evil, but all we can do is say that today's evil might be tomorrow's good, and vice versa. Let's say that their motives and goals are unknowable. Only their methods and some of their actions show, and from these we can deduce certain directions. One direction is toward change and the other is toward stasis. And as far back as we can trace any history, written or otherwise, we know that those two directions have been present. Push forward. Pull back. And that the struggle between them has produced friction, hatreds, wars, all the evil we know."

Gary could hardly hear the droning voice now. He had to concentrate on refilling the void that he knew was still before him. Recreate the rug, thread by thread, take it out to the other side, fill in flooring beneath it. . . . Not to see the rug, and the chairs, not to feel the solidness of the floor was insanity. To fear that the void was enlarging even for one second was to risk absolute loss of control. He felt a tremor in his arm and loosened his grasp on the chair arm, then clutched it harder; the thought of an expanding void chilled him. He had never experienced this emptiness before. Never had to create reality before. Why now? Could he change the reality as he created it? He felt dizzy. The rug. Make it take shape in the blackness.

"Conservatism versus liberalism," Tony said dryly. "Seems a pretty mundane explanation for any of this."

"The players are as trapped as the pieces," Dorothy said suddenly. "Like a real game where the

pieces can be moved only in restricted ways. The players are forced to follow rules that bind them. They can't stop the game, there are too many elements involved now, and they can't end it. They keep introducing more pieces, not different, only more, and they bog down in the same morass of rules and limitations." She remembered a dream of the water beetle skimming the surface of the water and thinking that was the entire universe.

Davenport watched her closely, and when she stopped, looking dreamy-eyed and remote, he said, "The Greeks thought man's fate was in the hands of the gods, and Shakespeare put it another way: All the world's a stage, and we play our parts as written, or get replaced. But what's backstage? Where are the gods located? Who wrote the script? If an intelligent knight tumbled from a chessboard, wouldn't he be startled to find that his small board was just a very small speck in the universe?"

"Poor knight," Dorothy said, still dreamily. "Taken from his box and used awhile, then returned, learning nothing, gaining nothing. Momentary pleasures, momentary pains, then the blackness of the box. Only the player grows with each game, becoming wiser and more skillful."

"But still a player bound by the rules, forced to obey certain laws," the old man said.

Tony realized that the old man was leading her on, trying to coax something out of her, watching her as attentively as a surgeon watches the incision he has opened. And Dorothy seemed far apart from them, not looking at any of them, answering the leading statements and questions automatically, without effort, without thought.

"But if the player wins enough games, he can alter the rules, he can write new ones. He moves into a different class, a new category."

"And the pieces? Can they change categories?"

"Not most of them. They're mindless, thoughtless, programmed to do certain things only. They can't change. Some of them, somehow, get glimpses of the universe beyond the playing board, and they are given the chance to move into it, to leave the smaller world for the larger one, if they dare. Most of them don't realize what it is they're being offered, and they are afraid. So they go back to sleep."

Gary realized with a start that he was no longer hearing Dorothy's voice, not with his ears. It was inside him, part of him, as if she were speaking to him alone in a secret way that only they understood. He couldn't listen to her now, he had to remake the room that he had lost. He couldn't tell if he had finished or not without opening his eyes, and he was afraid to. Desperately he visualized the area as it had to be and very reluctantly he looked. There was still one small patch of the blackness, and as he looked into it, he thought he could see an image forming there, a woman. . . . He shut his eyes.

"The worst part of it," Dorothy said, and suddenly her voice lost its dreamy sound, and was firm and controlled again, "is that we can't help each other. We are given the choice or not; like Calvin's predestination, you are formed in such a way that you will or won't be able to see beyond the board."

"That's a worse theory than the alternate universe," Tony said.

"I know," Davenport admitted. "It's sort of like putting the whole concept of God into the old, white-bearded gentleman who is omnipotent. Guts knowledge. A certain amount of information gets lost in translation."

"So how about an explanation that we can understand?"

"His impersonation theory," Davenport said, indicating Gary. He was sitting rigidly with his eyes

closed. Davenport looked more closely at him, then said, "Gary, are you all right?"

Dorothy jumped up and ran across the room to his side. "Gary, what's wrong?"

He felt her hand on his arm and opened his eyes. The rug, chairs, solid flooring, a layer of smoke hanging in air. . . . "Nothing," he said. "Nothing. I was trying to think, that's all." He felt her hand, firm, real, fingers digging in, and he covered it with his hand. "I think we're all sharing a mass hallucination," he said. "Maybe we're all suffering from food poisoning. Something as simple as that."

"You saw it, something, didn't you?" Dorothy asked, her fingers on his arm digging in even harder.

"What? I saw what? Nothing."

Dorothy's hand loosened its grip and she moved away slowly. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know." She looked about her. "A poltergeist would be easier, wouldn't it? We could all disbelieve in it together. We could read books on it, call in investigators, rig cameras, laugh at it over drinks. But this. . . . We can't name it, can't describe it, but we all know that something is happening, something that can't happen in the world we know." She half turned to the hallway. "Listen," she said. "There's someone going out through our French doors."

Tony was the first one in the hallway, with Joanne and Davenport close behind. Dorothy had moved aside, and Gary was still sitting in his chair. He remembered the way his foot had slipped off the rug, downward, like slipping off the edge of a cliff.

"Are you afraid to get up?" Dorothy asked.

They could hear Tony shouting, "Stop! Come back! We have to talk to you."

Gary stood up. The rug was solid. Keeping his eyes on Dorothy, he took a step, then another. The rug was solid, as was the floor beneath it.

"We could see anything there is to see from the patio," she said, starting toward the outer doors.

"No! No, let's just wait for them to come back." Gary took the final step and was clear of the space that had been taken over by the abyss. He turned to look at it. The rug was there, the chairs in place. It had been an hallucination.

Dorothy was walking toward the patio, and he followed her. The sun was low in the sky, blinding them momentarily. A bank of clouds was afire, shot through with scarlet, gold, orange. The ocean was smooth glass that reflected the gaudy sky, gold at the horizon, the gold narrowing, pointing to them like an arrow.

Dorothy smiled, staring at the golden avenue. Again.

"There's the old man," Gary said. He took a step past Dorothy and called out, "What was it?"

Davenport turned and came back from the sea wall to join them. "Well, you won't like this, Gary, but from all appearances, it was your wife." He studied Dorothy, with a faint smile on his face. Then he shook his head, but he said nothing more.

"I know where she'll go," Dorothy said, gazing at the golden boulevard. "Into the water." Like walking into a haze that hides what's on the other side of it. . . . Walking on the avenue, gently rolling green on either side, aware of the others on the sand, following, but afraid, floundering. Walking down the city streets, smiling now at other strollers, glancing back, back through the haze, pitying them on the sand,

wet, clinging together, staring at the water. Laughing softly, with pity, with love.

"For God's sake, Dorothy! Snap out of it!" Gary shaking her.

"She walked right into the water."

"Not in it, on it."

"She vanished into the water! Just vanished. She didn't sink, or drown, or anything. She vanished!"

"Get the child a drink," Davenport said. "Something."

"A mass hallucination," Gary. Explaining, explaining, his voice insistent, persuasive. Gary, not believing a word until he uttered it aloud, then believing it to be gospel. We say what we want to hear, not what others want to hear, and when it pleases us, we call it truth.

Joanne, weeping almost in her efforts to understand what she was saying. "Walked on the water, not in it, on top of it." Weeping, listening to her words, not believing them, afraid not to say them because she feared the denial of what she had seen, needed to believe what her eyes saw.

"We never see what we think we do. It's a matter of training. We see lines, and we join them. We see partial figures, and we complete them. We see randomness and we make it orderly. Our minds refuse chaos, so we train our eyes and our brain to create order." Tony, wondering what order of chaos his eyes were reporting when they saw a woman walking on water. What order of reason his brain could derive from that, given time enough.

Dorothy on her knees by Davenport's chair saying, "Drink this. I'll hold it." No memory of returning to the study. No memory of sitting down, of seeing the others find chairs and sit down. Joanne's shoes were dry; she had changed clothes. Tony still wore his wet things. Beyond them all the evening was growing dark, twilight now. Half an hour or more, gone without a trace.

"I'll take him home," Tony said. "Jo, how about a drive later?" She nodded and he walked out holding Davenport's elbow.

Dorothy tried to talk to Gary about the city. "It's as if all this is a curtain that can be drawn back to let me see what's actually there." She waved her hand at the room. "Not a curtain, but the idea of a curtain, with depth, a substantial curtain deep enough to hold everything we think is real. . . ."

He stood up and started to leave the room. "Not tonight, Dorothy. Maybe never, but not now." His voice was too controlled, and with his back to her and his face hidden, she could tell nothing about him, except that he was not going to listen to her, that he would not talk about it. She watched him go silently.

There were fourteen guests at Perry Davenport's party. "They hate you for the beard," Joanne whispered to Tony, after the dinner was over and everyone was gathering in the improvised theater. "And me because I'm too young to tell dirty stories to, and too old not to understand them if they tell each other."

"Don't forget that I'm in the enemy's camp here," he said. "They recognize dimly that if I have a box, its shape is different from theirs, bigger maybe, but at least different."

"Box?"

"Sure. The limits of what you can do, how high you can grow, how far to the right or left you can step, how much deviation your brain is allowed before it comes to the edge. A bag. A box."

"Look at them. They're like dolls, all wound up with this program punched for tonight. Be polite, smile at the jokes of your equals, laugh at those of your superiors. Flirt, drink, make small talk. It's all so predictable, so horrible. And they don't know they are all pre-set."

"The box," Tony said. "Or, in your terms, a computer program. Anything not punched in can't be grasped, seen, understood, or even guessed at."

"Why don't you have one?"

"I guess I do, but it's different, gives me more leeway. Maybe that's the whole answer. We all have some blank tape, computer tape, and we fill it in as we choose. They've chosen that way. How will you fill yours in, little bit?"

But Joanne had become deadly serious. She glanced about the room: Gary talking in low tones to Dr. Cramer. "His would be very narrow and restricted, wouldn't it?" Joanne said, watching the thin face of the scientist as he spoke. "And Dad, is he programmed?" She nodded to herself and answered the question. "Of course. He has to win. He's programmed to win all the time, to see nothing but the small victory he's driving for. He never plans for more than whatever he's doing at the moment. He never seems to think of the past or beyond tomorrow. Only this one moment."

Davenport mounted the stage, and Tony said, "My cue. Wish me luck, little bit."

"I do."

"Ladies and gentlemen," the old man said, and there was immediate silence in the room. "I have asked you tonight to bear with me and the rehearsal of the show that will be presented to our company in three weeks at the annual ball. Now, I know that this will bore every soul in this room with the exception of me, but since I am the boss of the company, and since this is important to me, I trust that you will all pay attention to my little skit. I would appreciate any suggestions you might have to make following this rehearsal. Please feel free to criticize, to suggest change, anything you feel might make a better presentation, without changing the content of what you are about to see."

The old man took a legal-sized sheet of paper from a folder and read from it: "In the year 1868, September 29, one Alexander Davenport was hanged by the neck until dead, having been convicted of the heinous crime of treason and espionage." He looked up from the paper. "Alexander Davenport, as you all know, was my grandfather. Unfortunately he was not a wealthy man, not an important man. The notation I read to you is the only mention of him the courthouse revealed. But he was a man, of flesh and blood, who left an heir, my father. And he was a man wrongfully hanged, wrongfully accused of a crime which he did not commit. Let the play begin."

He stepped aside and the curtain was drawn back to reveal the judge's chair, the chair of the accused, occupied by a bearded man and behind and to one side the shadow of a gallows.

"Guilty!" said a voice from behind stage. Tony stood up and faced the audience.

"Guilt implies a knowledge of what is true, and the truth is not yet known. How can you know what is true when your eyes see only what you will, when your ears hear only what you wish to hear, when your tongues speak only what you wish to be said. Does every man have the right to shape the truth into the likeness that is most pleasing to himself, altering all facts to conform to his needs . . . ?" Tony paused, as if he had forgotten his lines. He closed his eyes and groped behind himself for the edge of the desk,

anything to hold. It lasted only a moment, then he opened his eyes once more and looked at the audience. When he spoke his voice was different, deeper, more commanding. He said, "You have gathered here to unveil the truth. Let us proceed."

It proceeded backward, forward, sideways.

He was hanged.

He watched himself hanging.

He was found guilty.

He was found not guilty.

He was not tried at all.

He was married/not married.

His wife was pregnant/not pregnant.

The stage was a window looking out onto another world, a world that shifted and changed and faded into shadows to be replaced by another firmer world. There were battles; there were cotton fields; there were mountains and prairies, and oceans. There were children playing, growing old, dying, turning to ashes, blowing away. There were mammoth trees growing, toppling, rotting, turning to ashes, blowing away. A bearded man was hanged. The same man stood on the ground and watched the hanging. The same man walked past the scene oblivious of it altogether. He grew young, lost his beard, became shrunken, pink-cheeked, vanished into the womb of his mother, who spun back in time and vanished. The bearded man walked past, became stooped, his hair and beard whitened, his skin darkened, his back bent, his legs grew weak and wobbly. He walked to his deathbed and died on it and turned to ashes and the ashes drifted from the window and were lost.

Gary saw it and refused it. He closed his eyes and waited until it was over.

Joanne saw it in fear and dread, but she watched it through.

Perry Davenport saw it and his heart pounded, blinding him with pain so that he could see no more.

Tony saw it, was in it, and he accepted it and moved with it.

Dorothy saw it.

Dr. Cramer saw nothing. Hank Pinelli saw and rejected it. Others saw something they didn't understand, saw and refused the vision, and forgot.

The curtain closed again and there was a moment's silence. Then applause. "Perry, it was marvelous! Who wrote it?"

"Mr. Davenport, you could put it on a commercial stage. . . ."

"I was so moved. Look, I've been weeping. . . ."

Joanne drew closer to Tony, who was pale. "My dear boy," Mrs. Jarvis was saying to him, "you made it come alive. You certainly must talk to my friend, Wallace Upton. The producer, you know. . . ."

Dorothy stood to one side and watched the others. She saw the pallor of Joanne's face and knew the

girl had shared the experience; as had Tony, and Gary. Mr. Davenport was shaken and quiet now. Dorothy moved toward him, but there were five or six of his guests crowding about his chair and she was stopped. He looked at her and stood up. He pushed his way through the people between them and said to Dorothy, "What is the truth? How can we ever know?"

"I don't know. I think we all have to mold it with our own hands, shape it, work with it."

There was a sharp ring of a spoon on a wineglass and they turned to look again at the stage. Dr. Cramer was standing on it. "God damn it," Davenport said. "Where's Pinelli? Is he double-crossing me too now?"

"The second half of our show, ladies and gentlemen, a sneak preview, so to speak," Cramer announced.

He stepped aside and at the same time the muslin curtain again was pulled open. The scene was as it had been before, the desk, chair, and gallows. With a flicker of light the scene vanished to be replaced by a forest glen with three scantily dressed girls dancing before a man playing a flute. Someone in the audience laughed. Someone close to Dorothy muttered, "How the devil did he get those trees in here?" It seemed very real. Dorothy couldn't tell where the projectors were.

The dance ended to applause. The girls curtsied prettily, and the images vanished to reveal a rocket and a tank on the stage, each one in silhouette only, stark black against the paler darkness of the night outside. There was a flicker and the rocket became a massive oak tree, the tank became a hut; flicker, the rocket was a lighthouse, the tank a fishing boat on a sparkling ocean. Flicker, the rocket was a pillar of a large building, the tank an automobile parked before it.

It ended as suddenly as it started. A final flicker of light, the tank and rocket again revealed in black, then curtain. There was stunned silence afterward.

Hank Pinelli broke it. "You can't be serious, Gary. I told you that the sophisticated methods of detection wouldn't be fooled a minute. . . ."

Dorothy moved from the group toward the door. The voices sounded distant and faint. "We have a dozen devices that would penetrate your illusions," Pinelli was saying. "It's a childish trick, that's all."

She stepped outside on the porch. The breeze was strong now, and fresh smelling. In her mind she saw the stage again: the muslin curtains, which she pulled aside to reveal the dancing girls and the flute player, another curtain. She pulled it aside. And the tree and the fishing boat, and the building and automobile. All were cast aside. Then the rocket and tank. She hesitated a moment, then added them to the discarded images. Blackness now to be filled in. Illusion, reality, illusion, layer on layer to be stripped away, and when the final reality rested alone with no more illusion. . . . Could man ever achieve that reality? She thought of it as a scale, a ladder with great open spaces between the rungs. The rungs were reality, the open spaces illusion to be filled in by the climber, and how he filled them in determined the next step. She could hear Gary's voice, although he was across the room, speaking in an insistent whisper to Pinelli and the old man.

"For God's sake, Pinelli, pay attention. You have to shift gears. You've been thinking of this stuff in one way for so long that you can't focus in on other applications. Think of a squadron of planes, all covered with your material, all projecting images of blue sky and clouds, or whatever is appropriate. No radar is going to show them. It's going to be absorbed and used by them."

Down the porch from Dorothy, Tony and Joanne were standing close together, Jo talking. "You just don't know what it's like. You go into the school, shapeless, unfinished, and they begin to fill you in, turn

you into the sort of person they don't have to watch and wonder about. You're like a sponge that soaks everything up without discrimination and when you're done, you're one of them. I have to get out of it, far away from it. I just have to. I don't know what I am, who I am, why, anything."

Back to the inside, listening to the sharp voice of Perry Davenport, "You're nothing, Gary, another hand on a body that can be lopped off any time. There's only two in the whole company that matter and they're Hank and me. We're the two-headed monster that runs it all, and now and again we pick up a new hand that's fancy, or that can write pretty letters, or, like you, that has good connections and looks good in the journals, but we can lop it back off if it begins scratching where we don't itch."

Dorothy could make out the next step now. She hesitated, but only a moment, because she knew that the struggle wouldn't end with it, that it would be intensified and more painful, but the pleasures and joys would also be greater. She could see the party now, all of it, all the guests, could hear all of their conversations at once and keep them separated. She could see the woman they called Dorothy standing alone on the porch, apart from the others, staring out at the dark sea where phosphorescent swells rolled toward the shore like blue shadows, to rise into blue-white breakers shooting out in both directions with crashing sounds.

She turned her attention to Joanne and the girl said to Tony, "Have you swum at night when the sea is calm like this? There are millions of dinoflagellates that glow. They coat your arms and legs and it is ghostly and beautiful."

She watched them walk hand in hand down the beach away from the lights and shed their clothes, and walk out into the glowing surf.

Gary searched for Dorothy and finally found her on the porch. "Let's go," he said.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'll let you know tomorrow. I think the old man just canned me."

Legs doing a scissors kick in the water were like white wings opening and closing, leaving diaphanous streamers behind. Tony watched them and he felt that something had happened to him that night that would change his future, as if he had stepped from one world into another without noticing the threshold. He had experienced a hanging, birth, death, love, and agony; he knew that each experience had been true and real, each had marked him in a way that vicarious experience could not. He felt at once exhilarated and awed by the new sense of power he felt he had. He wanted daylight to hurry so he could get to his oils. With a laugh, he pulled Joanne to him and kissed her hard and they both sank, sputtering and laughing, in the quiet water.

Hank Pinelli handed the old man his bourbon and water and sat down heavily. "I don't know how long we can keep it now," he said. "We tried. By God, we gave it a good try."

The old man swallowed half his drink without answering. Then he looked at his friend and it seemed to him later that everything blurred at that moment, that what had been separated and lonely became whole and peaceful. When he spoke, his face was serene and his voice firm. "We'll keep it, Hank. We're carving a future that's going to be different, and we're still carving. We're not out yet."

The new Player touched each of her pieces lovingly and watched them go their separate ways. She would try to make them see glimpses of the next step, and those who were ready for it would see and take the step, and she would try to see what her own next step was to be, and who her adversaries were. And one day, or year, or millennium, she would finally understand the goals and the reasons. There was time. She could wait and play out the present game and join in the new ones where they started. She

would initiate her own games. There was time.