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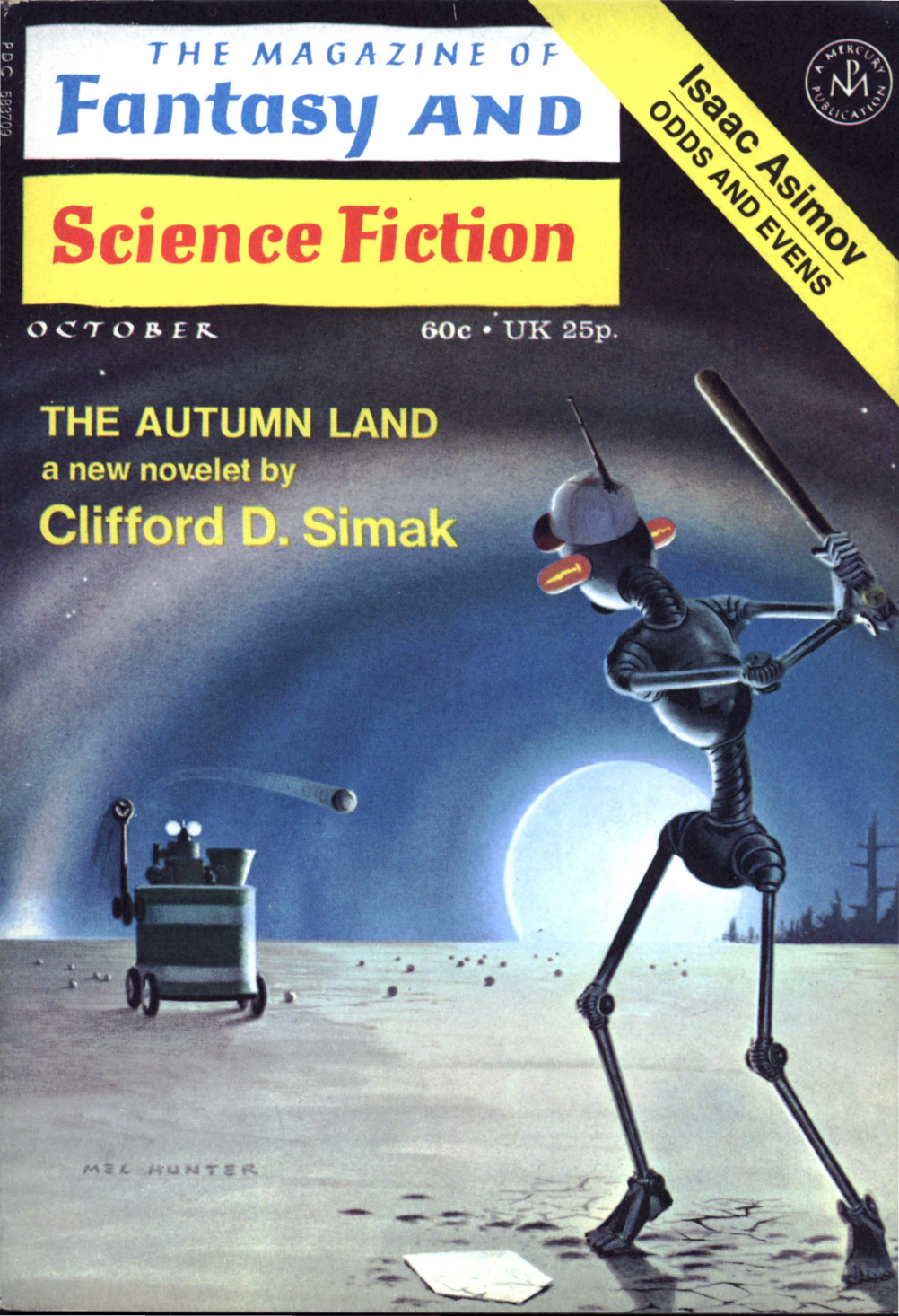
THE AUTUMN LAND
a new novelet by
Clifford D. Simak



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OCTOBER • 22ND YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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Clifford Simak has been writing with distinction in the sf field for more than 20 years. During the last decade he has confined himself largely to novels (most recently DESTINY DOLL, Putnam). We recently checked his author's card here and were a bit shocked to find that his last appearance in F&SF was almost ten years ago. When we learned of his well-deserved selection as guest of honor at the 29th World Science Fiction Convention (held in Boston this Labor Day weekend), we asked him for a story to coincide with the occasion. He obliged, and we're pleased to offer this rare and superior example of Mr. Simak's short fiction.

The Autumn Land

by CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

HE SAT ON THE PORCH, IN THE rocking chair, with the loose board creaking as he rocked. Across the street the old white-haired lady cut a bouquet of chrysanthemums in the never-ending autumn. Where he could see between the ancient houses to the distant woods and wastelands, a soft Indian-summer blue lay upon the land. The entire village was soft and quiet, as old things often are—a place constructed for a dreaming mind rather than a living being. It was an hour too early for his other old and shaky neighbor to come fumbling down the grass-grown sidewalk, tapping the bricks with his seeking cane. And he would not hear the distant children at their play until dusk had fallen—if he heard them then. He did not always hear them.

There were books to read, but he did not want to read them. He could go into the backyard and spade and rake the garden once again, reducing the soil to a finer texture to receive the seed when it could be planted—if it ever could be planted—but there was slight incentive in the further preparation of a seed bed against a spring that never came. Earlier, much earlier, before he knew about the autumn

and the spring, he had mentioned garden seeds to the Milkman, who had been very much embarrassed.

He had walked the magic miles and left the world behind in bitterness and when he first had come here had been content to live in utter idleness, to be supremely idle and to feel no guilt or shame at doing absolutely nothing or as close to absolutely nothing as a man was able. He had come walking down the autumn street in the quietness and the golden sunshine, and the first person that he saw was the old lady who lived across the street. She had been waiting at the gate of her picket fence as if she had known he would be coming, and she had said to him, "You're a new one come to live with us. There are not many come these days. That is your house across the street from me, and I know we'll be good neighbors." He had reached up his hand to doff his hat to her, forgetting that he had no hat. "My name is Nelson Rand," he'd told her. "I am an engineer. I will try to be a decent neighbor." He had the impression that she stood taller and straighter than she did, but old and bent as she might be there was a comforting graciousness about her. "You will please come in," she said. "I have lemonade and cookies. There are other people there, but I shall not introduce them to you." He waited for her to explain why she would not introduce him, but there was no explanation, and he followed her down the time-mellowed walk of bricks with great beds of asters and chrysanthemums, a mass of color on either side of it.

In the large, high-ceilinged living room, with its bay windows forming window seats, filled with massive furniture from another time and with a small blaze burning in the fireplace, she had shown him to a seat before a small table to one side of the fire and had sat down opposite him and poured the lemonade and passed the plate of cookies.

"You must pay no attention to them," she had told him. "They are all dying to meet you, but I shall not humor them."

It was easy to pay no attention to them, for there was no one there.

"The Major, standing over there by the fireplace," said his hostess, "with his elbow on the mantel, a most ungainly pose if you should ask me, is not happy with my lemonade. He would prefer a stronger drink. Please, Mr. Rand, will you not taste my lemonade? I assure you it is good. I made it myself. I have no maid, you see, and no one in the kitchen. I live quite by myself and satisfactorily, although my friends keep dropping in, sometimes more often than I like."

He tasted the lemonade, not without misgivings, and to his surprise it was lemonade and was really good, like the lemonade he had drunk when a boy at Fourth of July celebrations and at grade

school picnics, and had never tasted since.

"It is excellent," he said.

"The lady in blue," his hostess said, "sitting in the chair by the window, lived here many years ago. She and I were friends, although she moved away some time ago and I am surprised that she comes back, which she often does. The infuriating thing is that I cannot recall her name, if I ever knew it. You don't know it, do you?"

"I am afraid I don't."

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't. I had forgotten. I forget so easily these days. You are a new arrival."

He had sat through the afternoon and drank her lemonade and eaten her cookies, while she chattered on about her nonexistent guests. It was only when he had crossed the street to the house she had pointed out as his, with her standing on the stoop and waving her farewell, that he realized she had not told him her name. He did not know it even now.

How long had it been? he wondered, and realized he didn't know. It was this autumn business. How could a man keep track of time when it was always autumn?

It all had started on that day when he'd been driving across Iowa, heading for Chicago. No, he reminded himself, it had started with the thinnesses, although he had paid little attention to the thinnesses to begin with. Just been aware of them, perhaps as a strange condition of the mind, or perhaps an unusual quality to the atmosphere and light. As if the world lacked a certain solidity that one had come to expect, as if one were running along a mystic borderline between here and somewhere else.

He had lost his West Coast job when a government contract had failed to materialize. His company had not been the only one; there were many other companies that were losing contracts and there were a lot of engineers who walked the streets bewildered. There was a bare possibility of a job in Chicago, although he was well aware that by now it might be filled. Even if there were no job, he reminded himself, he was in better shape than a lot of other men. He was young and single, he had a few dollars in the bank, he had no house mortgage, no car payments, no kids to put through school. He had only himself to support—no family of any sort at all. The old, hard-fisted bachelor uncle who had taken him to raise when his parents had died in a car crash and had worked him hard on that stony, hilly Wisconsin farm, had receded deep into the past, becoming a dim, far figure that was hard to recognize. He had not liked his uncle, Rand remembered—had not hated him, simply had not liked him. He had shed no tears, he recalled, when the old man had been caught out in a pasture by a bull and gored to death. So now Rand was quite alone, not

even holding the memories of a family.

He had been hoarding the little money that he had, for with a limited work record, with other men better qualified looking for the jobs, he realized that it might be some time before he could connect with anything. The beat-up wagon that he drove had space for sleeping, and he stopped at the little wayside parks along the way to cook his meals.

He had almost crossed the state, and the road had started its long winding through the bluffs that rimmed the Mississippi. Ahead he caught glimpses, at several turnings of the road, of smokestacks and tall structures that marked the city just ahead.

He emerged from the bluffs, and the city lay before him, a small industrial center that lay on either side the river. It was then that he felt and saw (if one could call it seeing) the thinness that he had seen before or had sensed before. There was about it, not exactly an alienness, but a sense of unreality, as if one were seeing the actuality of the scene through some sort of veil, with the edges softened and the angles flattened out, as if one might be looking at it as one would look at the bottom of a clear-water lake with a breeze gently ruffling the surface. When he had seen it before, he had attributed it to road fatigue and had opened the window to get a breath of air or had stopped the car and gotten out to walk up and down the road a while, and it had gone away.

But this time it was worse than ever, and he was somewhat frightened at it—not so much frightened at it as he was frightened of himself, wondering what might be wrong with him.

He pulled off to the side of the road, braking the car to a halt, and it seemed to him, even as he did it, that the shoulder of the road was rougher than he'd thought. As he pulled off the road, the thinness seemed to lessen, and he saw that the road had changed, which explained its roughness. The surface was pocked with chuckholes and blocks of concrete had been heaved up and other blocks were broken into pebbly shards.

He raised his eyes from the road to look at the city, and there was no city, only the broken stumps of a place that had somehow been destroyed. He sat with his hands frozen on the wheel, and in the silence—the deadly, unaccustomed silence—he heard the cawing of crows. Foolishly, he tried to remember the last time he had heard the caw of crows, and then he saw them, black specks that flapped just above the bluff top. There was something else as well—the trees. No longer trees, but only here and there blackened stumps. The stumps of a city and the stumps of trees, with the black, ash-like flecks of crows flapping over them.

Scarcely knowing what he did, he stumbled from the car. Thinking of it later, it had seemed a foolish thing to do, for the car was the only thing he knew, the one last link he had to reality. As he stumbled from it, he put his hand down in the seat, and beneath his hand he felt the solid, oblong object. His fingers closed upon it, and it was not until he was standing by the car that he realized what he held—the camera that had been lying in the seat beside him.

Sitting on the porch, with the loose floor board creaking underneath the rocker, he remembered that he still had the pictures, although it had been a long time since he had thought of them—a long time, actually, since he'd thought of anything at all beyond his life, day to day, in this autumn land. It was as though he had been trying to keep himself from thinking, attempting to keep his mind in neutral, to shut out what he knew—or, more precisely perhaps, what he thought he knew.

He did not consciously take the pictures, although afterward he had tried to tell himself he did (but never quite convincing himself that this was entirely true), complimenting himself in a wry sort of way for providing a piece of evidence that his memory alone never could have provided. For a man can think so many things, daydream so many things, imagine so many things that he can never trust his mind.

The entire incident, when he later thought of it, was hazy, as if the reality of that blasted city lay in some strange dimension of experience that could not be explained, or even rationalized. He could remember only vaguely the camera at his eyes and the clicking as the shutter snapped. He did recall the band of people charging down the hill toward him and his mad scramble for the car, locking the door behind him and putting the car in gear, intent on steering a zigzag course along the broken pavement to get away from the screaming humans who were less than a hundred feet away.

But as he pulled off the shoulder, the pavement was no longer broken. It ran smooth and level toward the city that was no longer blasted. He pulled off the road again and sat limply, beaten, and it was only after many minutes that he could proceed again, going very slowly because he did not trust himself, shaken as he was, to drive at greater speed.

He had planned to cross the river and continue to Chicago, getting there that night, but now his plans were changed. He was too shaken up and, besides, there were the films. And he needed time to think, he told himself, a lot of time to think.

He found a roadside park a few miles outside the city and pulled into it, parking alongside an outdoor grill and an old-fashioned

pump. He got some wood from the small supply he carried in the back and built a fire. He hauled out the box with his cooking gear and food, fixed the coffee pot, set a pan upon the grill and cracked three eggs into it.

When he had pulled off the road, he had seen the man walking along the roadside; and now, as he cracked the eggs, he saw that the man had turned into the park and was walking toward the car. The man came up to the pump.

"Does this thing work?" he asked.

Rand nodded. "I got water for the pot," he said. "Just now."

"It's a hot day," said the man.

He worked the pump handle up and down.

"Hot for walking," he said.

"You been walking far?"

"The last six weeks," he said.

Rand had a closer look at him. The clothes were old and worn, but fairly clean. He had shaved a day or two before. His hair was long—not that he wore it long, but from lack of barbering.

Water gushed from the spout and the man cupped his hands under it, bent to drink.

"That was good," he finally said. "I was thirsty."

"How are you doing for food?" asked Rand.

The man hesitated. "Not too well," he said.

"Reach into that box on the tailgate. Find yourself a plate and some eating implements. A cup, too. Coffee will be ready soon."

"Mister, I wouldn't want you to think I came walking up here . . ."

"Forget it," said Rand. "I know how it is. There's enough for the both of us."

The man got a plate and cup, a knife, a fork, a spoon. He came over and stood beside the fire.

"I am new at this," he said. "I've never had to do a thing like this before. I always had a job. For seventeen years I had a job . . ."

"Here you are," said Rand. He slid the eggs onto the plate, went back to the box to get three more.

The man walked over to a picnic table and put down his plate. "Don't wait for me," said Rand. "Eat them while they're hot. The coffee's almost ready. There's bread if you want any."

"I'll get a slice later," said the man, "for mopping up."

John Sterling, he said his name was, and where now would John Sterling be, Rand wondered—still tramping the highways, looking for work, any kind of work, a day of work, an hour of work, a man who for seventeen years had held a job and had a job no longer? Thinking of Sterling, he felt a pang of guilt. He owed John Sterling a debt he never could repay, not knowing at the time they talked there was any debt involved.

They had sat and talked, eating their eggs, mopping up the plates with bread, drinking hot coffee.

"For seventeen years," said Sterling. "A machine operator. An experienced hand. With the same company. Then they let me out. Me and four hundred others. All at one time. Later they let out others. I was not the only one. There were a lot of us. We weren't laid off, we were let out. No promise of going back. Not the company's fault, I guess. There was a big contract that fizzled out. There was no work to do. How about yourself? You let out, too?"

Rand nodded. "How did you know?"

"Well, eating like this. Cheaper than a restaurant. And you got a sleeping bag. You sleep in the car?"

"That is right," said Rand. "It's not as bad for me as it is for some of the others. I have no family."

"I have a family," said Sterling. "Wife, three kids. We talked it over, the wife and me. She didn't want me to leave, but it made sense I should. Money all gone, unemployment run out. Long as I was around, it was hard to get relief. But if I deserted her, she could get relief. That way there's food for the wife and kids, a roof over their heads. Hardest thing I ever did. Hard for all of us. Someday I'll go back. When times get better, I'll go back. The family will be waiting."

Out on the highway the cars went whisking past. A squirrel came down out of a tree, advanced cautiously toward the table, suddenly turned and fled for his very life, swarming up a nearby tree trunk.

"I don't know," said Sterling. "It might be too big for us, this society of ours. It may be out of hand. I read a lot. Always liked to read. And I think about what I read. It seems to me maybe we've outrun our brains. The brains we have maybe were OK back in prehistoric days. We did all right with the brains we had until we built too big and complex. Maybe we built beyond our brains. Maybe our brains no longer are good enough to handle what we have. We have set loose economic forces we don't understand and political forces that we do not understand, and if we can't understand them, we can't control them. Maybe that is why you and I are out of jobs."

"I wouldn't know," said Rand. "I never thought about it."

"A man thinks a lot," said Sterling. "He dreams a lot walking down the road. Nothing else to do. He dreams some silly things: Things that are silly on the face of them, but are hard to say can't be really true. Did this ever happen to you?"

"Sometimes," said Rand.

"One thing I thought about a lot. A terribly silly thought. Maybe thinking it because I do so much walking. Sometimes people pick me up, but mostly I walk. And I got to wondering if a man should walk far enough could he leave it all behind? The farther a man might walk, the farther he would be from everything."

"Where you heading?" Rand asked.

"Nowhere in particular. Just keep on moving, that is all. Month or so I'll start heading south. Get a good head start on winter. These northern states are no place to be when winter comes."

"There are two eggs left," said Rand. "How about it?"

"Hell, man, I can't. I already . . ."

"Three eggs aren't a lot. I can get some more."

"Well, if you're sure that you don't mind. Tell you what—let's split them, one for you, one for me."

The giddy old lady had finished cutting her bouquet and had gone into the house. From up the street came the tapping of a cane—Rand's other ancient neighbor, out for his evening walk. The sinking sun poured a blessing on the land. The leaves were gold and red, brown and yellow—they had been that way since the day that Rand had come. The grass had a tawny look about it—not dead, just dressed up for dying.

The old man came trudging carefully down the walk, his cane alert against a stumble, helping himself with it without really needing any help. He was slow, was all. He halted by the walk that ran up to the porch. "Good afternoon," he said. "Good afternoon," said Rand. "You have a nice day for your walk." The old man acknowledged the observation graciously and with a touch of modesty, as if he, himself, might somehow be responsible for the goodness of the day. "It looks," he said, "as is we might have another fine day tomorrow." And having said that, he continued down the street.

It was ritual. The same words were said each day. The situation, like the village and the weather, never varied. He could sit here on this porch a thousand years, Rand told himself, and the old man would continue going past and each time the selfsame words would be mouthed—a set piece, a strip of film run over and over again. Something here had happened to time. The year had stuck on autumn.

Rand did not understand it. He did not try to understand it. There was no way for him to try. Sterling had said that man's cleverness might have outstripped his feeble, prehistoric mind—or, perhaps, his brutal and prehistoric mind. And here there was less chance of understanding than there had been back in that other world.

He found himself thinking of that other world in the same myth-haunted way as he thought of this one. The one now seemed as unreal as the other. Would he ever, Rand wondered, find reality again? Did he want to find it?

There was a way to find reality, he knew. Go into the house and take out the photos in the drawer of his bedside table and have a look at

them. Refresh his memory, stare reality in the face again. For those photos, grim as they might be, were a harder reality than this world in which he sat or the world that he had known. For they were nothing seen by the human eye, interpreted by the human brain. They were, somehow, fact. The camera saw what it saw and could not lie about it; it did not fantasize, it did not rationalize, and it had no faulty memory, which was more than could be said of the human mind.

He had gone back to the camera shop where he had left the film and the clerk had picked out the envelope from the box behind the counter.

"That will be three ninety-five," he said.

Rand took a five-dollar bill out of his wallet and laid it on the counter.

"If you don't mind my asking," said the clerk, "where did you get these pictures?"

"It is trick photography," said Rand.

The clerk shook his head. "If that is what they are, they're the best I've ever seen."

The clerk rang up the sale and, leaving the register open, stepped back and picked up the envelope.

"What do you want?" asked Rand.

The man shook the prints out of the envelope, shuffled through them.

"This one," he said.

Rand stared at him levelly. "What about it?" he asked.

"The people. I know some of them. The one in front. That is Bob Gentry. He is my best friend."

"You must be mistaken," Rand said coldly.

He took the prints from the clerk's fingers, put them back in the envelope.

The clerk made the change. He still was shaking his head, confused, perhaps a little frightened, when Rand left the shop.

He drove carefully, but with no loss of time, through the city and across the bridge. When he hit open country beyond the river, he built up his speed, keeping an eye on the rear-vision mirror. The clerk had been upset, perhaps enough to phone the police. Others would have seen the pictures and been upset as well. Although, he told himself, it was silly to think of the police. In taking the photos, he had broken no regulations, violated no laws. He had had a perfect right to take them.

Across the river and twenty miles down the highway, he turned off into a small, dusty country road and followed it until he found a place to pull off, where the road widened at the approach to a bridge that crossed a small stream. There was evidence that the pull-off was much used, fishermen more than likely parking their cars there while they tried their luck. But now the place was empty.

He was disturbed to find that his

hands were shaking when he pulled the envelope from his pocket and shook out the prints.

And there it was—as he no longer could remember it.

He was surprised that he had taken as many pictures as he had. He could not remember having taken half that many. But they were there, and as he looked at them, his memory, reinforced, came back again, although the photos were much sharper than his memory. The world, he recalled, had seemed to be hazed and indistinct so far as his eyes had been concerned; in the photos it lay cruel and merciless and clear. The blackened stumps stood up, stark and desolate, and there could be no doubt that the imprint that lay upon the photos was the actuality of a bombed-out city. The photos of the bluff showed the barren rock no longer masked by trees, with only here and there the skeletons of trees that by some accidental miracle had not been utterly reduced by the storm of fire. There was only one photo of the band of people who had come charging down the hill toward him; and that was understandable, for once having seen them, he had been in a hurry to get back to the car. Studying the photo, he saw they were much closer than he'd thought. Apparently they had been there all the time, just a little way off, and he had not noticed them in his astonishment at what had happened to the city. If they had been quieter about it, they could have been on top of him and overwhelmed him before he discovered them. He looked closely at the picture and saw that they had been close enough that some of the faces were fairly well defined. He wondered which one of them was the man the clerk back at the camera shop had recognized.

He shuffled the photographs together and slid them back into the envelope and put it in his pocket. He got out of the car and walked down to the edge of the stream. The stream, he saw, was no more than ten feet or so across; but here, below the bridge, it had gathered itself into a pool, and the bank had been trampled bare of vegetation, and there were places where fishermen had sat. Rand sat down in one of these places and inspected the pool. The current came in close against the bank and probably had undercut it, and lying there, in the undercut, would be the fish that the now-absent anglers sought, dangling their worms at the end of a long cane pole and waiting for a bite.

The place was pleasant and cool, shaded by a great oak that grew on the bank just below the bridge. From some far-off field came the subdued clatter of a mower. The water dimpled as a fish came up to suck in a floating insect. A good place to stay, thought Rand. A place to sit and rest awhile. He tried to blank his mind, to wipe out

the memory and the photos, to pretend that nothing at all had happened, that there was nothing he must think about.

But there was, he found, something that he must think about. Not about the photos, but something that Sterling had said just the day before. "I got to wondering," he had said, "if a man should walk far enough, could he leave it all behind."

How desperate must a man get, Rand wondered, before he would be driven to asking such a question. Perhaps not desperate at all—just worried and alone and tired and not being able to see the end of it. Either that, or afraid of what lay up ahead. Like knowing, perhaps, that in a few years time (and not too many years, for in that photo of the people the clerk had seen a man he knew) a warhead would hit a little Iowa town and wipe it out. Not that there was any reason for it being hit; it was no Los Angeles, no New York, no Washington, no busy port, no center of transportation or communication, held no great industrial complex, was no seat of government. Simply hit because it had been there, hit by blunder, by malfunction, or by miscalculation. Although it probably didn't matter greatly, for by the time it had been hit, the nation and perhaps the world might have been gone. A few years, Rand told himself, and it would come to that. After all the labor, all the hopes and dreams, the world would come to just that.

It was the sort of thing that a man might want to walk away from, hoping that in time he might forget it ever had been there. But to walk away, he thought, rather idly, one would have to find a starting point. You could not walk away from everything by just starting anywhere.

It was an idle thought, sparked by the memory of his talk with Sterling; and he sat there, idly, on the stream bank; and because it had a sense of attractive wonder, he held it in his mind, not letting go at once as one did with idle thoughts. And as he sat there, still holding it in mind, another thought, another time and place crept in to keep it company; and suddenly he knew, with no doubt at all, without really thinking, without searching for an answer, that he knew the place where he could start.

He stiffened and sat rigid, momentarily frightened, feeling like a fool trapped by his own unconscious fantasy. For that, said common sense, was all that it could be. The bitter wondering of a beaten man as he tramped the endless road looking for a job, the shock of what the photos showed, some strange, mesmeric quality of this shaded pool that seemed a place apart from a rock-hard world—all of these put together had produced the fantasy.

Rand hauled himself erect and turned back toward the car, but as

he did he could see within his mind this special starting place. He had been a boy—how old? he wondered, maybe nine or ten—and he had found the little valley (not quite a glen, yet not quite a valley, either) running below his uncle's farm down toward the river. He had never been there before and he had never gone again; on his uncle's farm there had been too many chores, too many things to do to allow the time to go anywhere at all. He tried to recall the circumstances of his being there and found that he could not. All that he could remember was a single magic moment, as if he had been looking at a single frame of a movie film—a single frame impressed upon his memory because of what? Because of some peculiar angle at which the light had struck the landscape? Because for an instant he had seen with different eyes than he'd ever used before or since? Because for the fractional part of a second he had sensed a simple truth behind the facade of the ordinary world? No matter what, he knew, he had seen magic in that moment.

He went back to the car and sat behind the wheel, staring at the bridge and sliding water and the field beyond, but seeing, instead of them, the map inside his head. When he went back to the highway, he'd turn left instead of right, back toward the river and the town, and before he reached them he would turn north on another road and the valley of the magic moment would be only a little more than a hundred miles away. He sat and saw the map and purpose hardened in his mind. Enough of this silliness, he thought; there were no magic moments, never had been one; when he reached the highway, he'd turn to the right and hope the job might still be there when he reached Chicago.

When he reached the highway, he turned not right, but left.

It had been so easy to find, he thought as he sat on the porch. There had been no taking of wrong roads, no stopping for directions; he'd gone directly there as if he'd always known he would be coming back and had kept the way in mind. He had parked the car at the hollow's mouth, since there was no road, and had gone on foot up the little valley. It could so easily have been that he would not have found the place, he told himself, admitting now for the first time since it all began that he might not have been so sure as he had thought he was. He might have gone up the full length of the valley and not have found the magic ground, or he might have passed it by, seeing it with other eyes and not recognizing it.

But it still was there, and he had stopped and looked at it and known it; again he was only nine or ten, and it was all right, the magic still was there. He had found a path he had not seen before and had fol-

lowed it, the magic still remaining; and when he reached the hilltop, the village had been there. He had walked down the street in the quietness of the golden sunshine, and the first person that he had seen had been the old lady waiting at the gate of her picket fence, as if she had been told that he would be coming.

After he had left her house he went across the street to the house she said was his. As he came in the front door, there was someone knocking at the back.

"I am the Milkman," the knocker had explained. He was a shadowy sort of person; you could see and yet you did not really see him; when one looked away and then looked back at him, it was as if one were seeing someone he had never seen before.

"Milkman," Rand had said. "Yes, I suppose I could do with milk."

"Also," said the Milkman, "I have eggs, bread, butter, bacon and other things that you will need. Here is a can of oil; you'll need it for your lamps. The woodshed is well stocked, and when there's need of it, I'll replenish it. The kindling's to the left as you go through the door."

Rand recalled that he'd never paid the milkman or even mentioned payment. The Milkman was not the kind of man to whom one mentioned money. There was no need, either, to leave an order slip in the milkbox; the Milkman seemed to know what one might need and when without being told. With some shame, Rand remembered the time he had mentioned garden seeds and caused embarrassment, not only for the Milkman, but for himself as well. For as soon as he mentioned them, he had sensed that he'd broken some very subtle code of which he should have been aware.

The day was fading into evening, and he should be going in soon to cook himself a meal. And after that, what he wondered. There still were books to read, but he did not want to read them. He could take out from the desk the plan he had laid out for the garden and mull over it a while, but now he knew he'd never plant the garden. You didn't plant a garden in a forever-autumn land, and there were no seeds.

Across the street a light blossomed in the windows of that great front room with its massive furniture, its roomy window seats, the great fireplace flaring to the ceiling. The old man with the cane had not returned, and it was getting late for him. In the distance now Rand could hear the sounds of children playing in the dusk.

The old and young, he thought. The old, who do not care; the young, who do not think. And what was he doing here, neither young nor old?

He left the porch and went down the walk. The street was empty, as it always was. He drifted slowly

down it, heading toward the little park at the village edge. He often went there, to sit on a bench beneath the friendly trees; and it was there, he was sure, that he would find the children. Although why he should think that he would find them there he did not know, for he had never found them, but only heard their voices.

He went past the houses, standing sedately in the dusk. Had people ever lived in them, he wondered. Had there ever been that many people in this nameless village? The old lady across the street spoke of friends she once had known, of people who had lived here and had gone away. But was this her memory speaking or the kind befuddlement of someone growing old?

The houses, he had noted, all were in good repair. A loose shingle here and there, a little peeling paint, but no windows broken, no loosened gutters, sagging from the eaves, no rotting porch posts. As if, he thought, good householders had been here until very recently.

He reached the park and could see that it was empty. He still heard the childish voices, crying at their play, but they had receded and now came from somewhere just beyond the park. He crossed the park and stood at its edge, staring off across the scrub and abandoned fields.

In the east the moon was rising, a full moon that lighted the landscape so that he could see every little clump of bushes, every grove of trees. And as he stood there, he realized with a sudden start that the moon was full again, that it was always full. It rose with the setting of the sun and set just before the sun came up, and it was always a great pumpkin of a moon, an eternal harvest moon shining on an eternal autumn world.

The realization that this was so all at once seemed shocking. How was it that he had never noticed this before? Certainly he had been here long enough, had watched the moon often enough to have noticed it. He had been here long enough—and how long had that been, a few weeks, a few months, a year? He found he did not know. He tried to figure back and there was no way to figure back. There were no temporal landmarks. Nothing ever happened to mark one day from the next. Time flowed so smoothly and so uneventfully that it might as well stand still.

The voices of the playing children had been moving from him, becoming fainter in the distance; and as he listened to them, he found that he was hearing them in his mind when they were no longer there. They had come and played and now had ceased their play. They would come again, if not tomorrow night, in another night or two. It did not matter, he admitted, if they came or not, for they really weren't there.

He turned heavily about and

went back through the streets. As he approached his house, a dark figure moved out from the shadow of the trees and stood waiting for him. It was the old lady from across the street. It was evident that she had been waiting his return.

"Good evening, ma'am," he said gravely. "It is a pleasant night."

"He is gone," she said. "He did not come back. He went just like the others and he won't come back."

"You mean the old man."

"Our neighbor," she said. "The old man with the cane. I do not know his name. I never knew his name. And I don't know yours."

"I told it to you once," said Rand, but she paid him no attention.

"Just a few doors up the street," she said, "and I never knew his name and I doubt that he knew mine. We are a nameless people here, and it is a terrible thing to be a nameless person."

"I will look for him," said Rand. "He may have lost his way."

"Yes, go and look for him," she said. "By all means look for him. It will ease your mind. It will take away the guilt. But you will never find him."

He took the direction that he knew the old man always took. He had the impression that his ancient neighbor, on his daily walks, went to the town square and the deserted business section, but he did not know. At no other time had it ever seemed important where he might have gone on his walks.

When he emerged into the square, he saw, immediately, the dark object lying on the pavement and recognized it as the old man's hat. There was no sign of the man himself.

Rand walked out into the square and picked up the hat. He gently reshaped and creased it and after that was done held it carefully by the brim so that it would come to no further damage.

The business section drowsed in the moonlight. The statue of the unknown man stood starkly on its base in the center of the square. When he first had come here, Rand recalled, he had tried to unravel the identity of the statue and had failed. There was no legend carved into the granite base, no bronze plate affixed. The face was undistinguished, the stony costume gave no hint as to identity or period. There was nothing in the posture or the attitude of the carven body to provide a clue. The statue stood, a forgotten tribute to some unknown mediocrity.

As he gazed about the square at the business houses, Rand was struck again, as he always was, by the carefully unmodern make-up of the establishments. A barber shop, a hotel, a livery barn, a bicycle shop, a harness shop, a grocery store, a meat market, a blacksmith shop—no garage, no service station, no pizza parlor, no hamburger joint. The houses along the quiet streets told

the story; here it was emphasized. This was an old town, forgotten and by-passed by the sweep of time, a place of another century. But there was about it all what seemed to be a disturbing sense of unreality, as if it were no old town at all, but a place deliberately fashioned in such a manner as to represent a segment of the past.

Rand shook his head. What was wrong with him tonight? Most of the time he was quite willing to accept the village for what it seemed to be, but tonight he was assailed with uneasy doubt.

Across the square he found the old man's cane. If his neighbor had come in this direction, he reasoned, he must have crossed the square and gone on down the street nearest to the place where he had dropped the cane. But why had he dropped the cane? First his hat and then his cane. What had happened here?

Rand glanced around, expecting that he might catch some movement, some furtive lurker on the margin of the square. There was nothing. If there had been something earlier, there was nothing now.

Following the street toward which his neighbor might have been heading, he walked carefully and alert, watching the shadows closely. The shadows played tricks on him, conjuring up lumpy objects that could have been a fallen man, but weren't. A half a dozen times he froze when he thought he detected something moving, but it was, in each case, only an illusion of the shadows.

When the village ended, the street continued as a path. Rand hesitated, trying to plan his action. The old man had lost his hat and cane, and the points where he had dropped them argued that he had intended going down the street that Rand had followed. If he had come down the street, he might have continued down the path, out of the village and away from it, perhaps fleeing from something in the village.

There was no way one could be sure, Rand knew. But he was here and might as well go on for at least a ways. The old man might be out there somewhere, exhausted, perhaps terribly frightened, perhaps fallen beside the path and needing help.

Rand forged ahead. The path, rather well-defined at first, became fainter as it wound its way across the rolling moonlit countryside. A flushed rabbit went bobbing through the grass. Far off an owl chortled wickedly. A faint chill wind came out of the west. And with the wind came a sense of loneliness, of open empty space untenanted by anything other than rabbit, owl and wind.

The path came to an end, its faintness finally pinching out to nothing. The groves of trees and thickets of low-growing shrubs gave way to a level plain of blowing

grass, bleached to whiteness by the moon, a faceless prairie land. Staring out across it, Rand knew that this wilderness of grass would run on and on forever. It had in it the scent and taste of foreverness. He shuddered at the sight of it and wondered why a man should shudder at a thing so simple. But even as he wondered, he knew—the grass was staring back at him; it knew him and waited patiently for him, for in time he would come to it. He would wander into it and be lost in it, swallowed by its immensity and anonymity.

He turned and ran, unashamedly, chill of blood and brain, shaken to the core. When he reached the outskirts of the village, he finally stopped the running and turned to look back into the wasteland. He had left the grass behind, but he sensed illogically that it was stalking him, flowing forward, still out of sight, but soon to appear, with the wind blowing billows in its whiteness.

He ran again, but not so fast and hard this time, jogging down the street. He came into the square and crossed it, and when he reached his house, he saw that the house across the street was dark. He did not hesitate, but went on down the street he'd walked when he first came to the village. For he knew now that he must leave this magic place with its strange and quiet old village, its forever autumn and eternal harvest moon, its faceless sea of grass, its children who receded in the distance when one went to look for them, its old man who walked into oblivion, dropping hat and cane—that he must somehow find his way back to that other world where few jobs existed and men walked the road to find them, where nasty little wars flared in forgotten corners and a camera caught on film the doom that was to come.

He left the village behind him and knew that he had not far to go to reach the place where the path swerved to the right and down a broken slope into the little valley to the magic starting point he'd found again after many years. He went slowly and carefully so that he would not wander off the path, for as he remembered it the path was very faint. It took much longer than he had thought to reach the point where the path swerved to the right into the broken ground, and the realization grew upon him that the path did not swing to the right and there was no broken ground.

In front of him he saw the grass again and there was no path leading into it. He knew that he was trapped, that he would never leave the village until he left it as the old man had, walking out of it and into nothingness. He did not move closer to the grass, for he knew there was terror there and he'd had enough of terror. You're a coward, he told himself.

Retracing the path back to the village, he kept a sharp lookout, go-

ing slowly so that he'd not miss the turnoff if it should be there. It was not, however. It once had been, he told himself, bemused, and he'd come walking up it, out of that other world he'd fled.

The village street was dappled by the moonlight shining through the rustling leaves. The house across the street still was dark, and there was an empty loneliness about it. Rand remembered that he had not eaten since the sandwich he had made that noon. There'd be something in the milkbox—he'd not looked in it that morning, or had he? He could not remember.

He went around the house to the back porch where the milkbox stood. The Milkman was standing there. He was more shadowy than ever, less well defined, with the moonlight shining on him, and his face was deeply shaded by the wide-brimmed hat he wore.

Rand halted abruptly and stood looking at him, astounded that the Milkman should be there. For he was out of place in the autumn moonlight. He was a creature of the early morning hours and of no other times.

"I came," the Milkman said, "to determine if I could be of help."

Rand said nothing. His head buzzed large and misty, and there was nothing to be said.

"A gun," the Milkman suggested. "Perhaps you would like a gun."

"A gun? Why should I want one?"

"You have had a most disturbing evening. You might feel safer, more secure, with a gun in hand, a gun strapped about your waist."

Rand hesitated. Was there mockery in the Milkman's voice?

"Or a cross."

"A cross?"

"A crucifix. A symbol . . ."

"No," said Rand. "I do not need a cross."

"A volume of philosophy, perhaps."

"No!" Rand shouted at him. "I left all that behind. We tried to use them all, we relied on them and they weren't good enough and now . . ."

He stopped, for that had not been what he'd meant to say, if in fact he'd meant to say anything at all. It was something that he'd never even thought about; it was as if someone inside of him were speaking through his mouth.

"Or perhaps some currency?"

"You are making fun of me," Rand said bitterly, "and you have no right . . ."

"I merely mention certain things," the Milkman said, "upon which humans place reliance . . ."

"Tell me one thing," said Rand, "as simply as you can. Is there any way of going back?"

"Back to where you came from?"

"Yes," said Rand. "That is what I mean."

"There is nothing to go back to," the Milkman said. "Anyone who comes has nothing to go back to."

"But the old man left. He wore a black felt hat and carried a cane. He dropped them and I found them."

"He did not go back," the Milkman said. "He went ahead. And do not ask me where, for I do not know."

"But you're a part of this."

"I am a humble servant. I have a job to do and I try to do it well. I care for our guests the best that I am able. But there comes a time when each of our guests leaves us. I would suspect this is a halfway house on the road to someplace else."

"A place for getting ready," Rand said.

"What do you mean?" the Milkman asked.

"I am not sure," said Rand. "I had not meant to say it." And this was the second time, he thought, that he'd said something he had not meant to say.

"There's one comfort about this place," the Milkman said. "One good thing about it you should keep in mind. In this village nothing ever happens."

He came down off the porch and stood upon the walk. "You spoke of the old man," he said, "and it was not the old man only. The old lady also left us. The two of them stayed on much beyond their time."

"You mean I'm here all alone?"

The Milkman had started down the walk, but now he stopped and turned. "There'll be others coming," he said. "There are always others coming."

What was it Sterling had said about man outrunning his brain capacity? Rand tried to recall the words, but now, in the confusion of the moment, he had forgotten them. But if that should be the case, if Sterling had been right (no matter how he had phrased his thought), might not man need, for a while, a place like this, where nothing ever happened, where the moon was always full and the year was stuck on autumn?

Another thought intruded and Rand swung about, shouting in sudden panic at the Milkman. "But these others? Will they talk to me? Can I talk with them? Will I know their names?"

The Milkman had reached the gate by now and it appeared that he had not heard.

The moonlight was paler than it had been. The eastern sky was flushed. Another matchless autumn day was about to dawn.

Rand went around the house. He climbed the steps that led up to the porch. He sat down in the rocking chair and began waiting for the others.

Gahan Wilson

ONE OF THE MAJOR PROBLEMS I HAVE ENcountered in some five years of reviewing fantasy and science fiction is sorting out and making the distinction between fantasy (including science fiction as a sub-genre) in the true sense, and literature that is allegorical, symbolic, satirical or surrealist. The question becomes more valid as more and more mainstream writers stray from outmoded realism of the Hemingway school, and yet lack that certain quality that makes for true fantasy—and of course the battle of strict definition of science fiction/fantasy is far from resolved and may never be. But three qualities I believe to be essential are strict interior logic, a single basic speculative assumption (whether it be as broad as an entire Galactic civilization or as small as one elf), and a kind of narrative integrity; i.e., that the work was not written to moralize, satirize, or educate, but written for its own sake.

I bring all this up because the four novels on the dissecting table this month run the gamut from surreal to classic sf, and one's reaction depends on one's range of taste in nonrealistic fiction. My own bias leans toward "pure" fantasy; I believe that the fantasy and science fiction authors of today are the last of the story tellers in the great tradition, for only in those fields does narrative fiction yet have fresh material with which to work.

Anna Kavan's ICE is labeled science fiction on its jacket, but its major quality is that surrealist murkiness so fashionable among the more abstruse literati of the past decade or so. What is so disconcerting to me is the unspecified nature of every character, location, and even event (proper nouns seem to be an unknown quantity to the author). An unnamed narrator returns to his unnamed homeland from somewhere else in search of a girl

(thereafter referred to as "the girl," no emphasis on *the*). Over this country hangs some unspecified disaster (a nice ice age, *perhaps;* much is made of the constant cold and snow); there already seems to be a state of near anarchy prevailing. The girl, for reasons best known to herself, flees, followed by the narrator who pursues her to another unspecified place which seems to have no political or social ties to any locale. It is ruled by the warden, who appropriates the girl, and . . . well, and so on. Nothing much ever happens, and one is never told just why the world is in the state it's in. I can but admire the author for maintaining any kind of narrative with characters lacking names. It's a sort of *tour de force,* and Kavan does not lack other skills. The constant sense of gloom and cold is consistently conveyed. It's the only book my mind's eye has ever conjured up entirely in black and white. But the vague problems and conflicts of these nebulous characters in these mysterious locales simply did not engage me at all.

Much more interesting to me was Brian W. Aldiss's introduction to the book where he tells of Anna Kavan's strange and tragic life and his own acquaintanceship with her. She did not know she had written a science fiction work in ICE; I must say I tend to agree with her. Nevertheless, Mr. Aldiss voted it the best science fiction novel of the year that it was published in England. I respect his high regard for this undeniably well-wrought work, but I simply cannot share it.

Kit Reed's ARMED CAMPS seemed to be heading in the same foggy direction as I started it, but it soon became apparent that Mrs. Reed's idea is to clarify as she goes, and in a sense the entire point of the novel is the gradual uncovering of why the two protagonists are in the spots they're in, and how (if at all) they will interconnect. It is told alternately from the viewpoint of each and, thank God, they both have names. Anne is a young girl fleeing from an event in her life that she cannot even bring herself to think about. Her flight takes her through an America of the near future reduced to a military dictatorship over those parts not totally divorced from any government. Danny is a slightly older man, a war hero who has apparently committed a crime so heinous that his punishment is to be hung by his wrist onto a metal cone on which he can neither lean nor lie in comfort, his torture constantly televised nationwide. We learn Danny's history from a running monologue he carries on with himself; Anne's we get in bits and pieces as she travels through a deranged society. She takes refuge first with a group of young people who have taken over a large estate, maintaining a 24-hour-a-day party on liquor and drugs with raids on the surrounding

area, less vicious than escapist. She flees this to find a sort of peace in a commune based on pacificism located in one of the national parks; it is eventually destroyed by internal and external forces. There are marvelous (and unnerving) inventions mentioned in passing, such as the Ten-Mile Traffic Jam outside Chicago, a permanent installation which has become a kind of squatter's jungle.

War, we learn from Danny's history, has been reduced theoretically to single combat. West Point graduating classes are only five men, trained to be killing machines. However, in the process of preparing for these single combats, thousands of soldiers and civilians continue to be wiped out in The War which continues eternally. Danny is a product of this military machine.

ARMED CAMPS is just vague enough, particularly at the beginning, to be a parable about the young doves and military establishmentarians developing in our time. As such, it is beautifully conceived and a far better anti-war, anti-establishment statement than most of the flaming rhetoric of the more obvious sort. But also, as one gets over the initial hump of obscurity, it becomes an involving story; one cares about Anne and Danny, where they're going and where they've been. My one major complaint is that there are myriad references at the beginning which are only clear if you've read the whole thing; I found this simply in back-checking for this review. Therefore, it is a book which should be read twice in a row for complete clarity, a lot to ask of any reader.

Yet another semi-anarchic America as milieu in Ron Goulart's GADGET MAN; I know the times lead one's mind in that direction, but it does seem to be becoming the only view of the near future around. Certainly in the field concerned with imaginative writing, someone must have the imagination to resolve this century in another way. In any case, I think Mr. Goulart had something in the way of satire in mind when he wrote this one. Southern California has seceded from the Union, and the story concerns the search of James Xavier Hecker, a sort of Southern Cal CIA type, through this addlepated new nation for Gadget Man, a mysterious figure probably responsible for riots that are becoming endemic in the rich suburbs.

The writing is TV out of comic books; i.e., a major event every page and the background structure may or may not be there, but who has time to think about it or keep track of the plot twists with something happening every minute? This is perfectly OK if the events are interesting enough, and one judges that by whether one keeps going. As I said above, I *think* some satire was intended, also. The hero runs into

extensions of many of the aberrations that make California what it is (motorcycle gangs as traveling players presenting allegorical plays that inevitably end in brawls, for instance), but since the culture of Southern California tends to seem satirical in its current reality, it's a little hard to tell. Perhaps it is simply that the author isn't a very funny writer. Whatever the reason, a lot of the conceits seemed a bit strained. On the surface it all seems very hip and with it, but there aren't many points of departure used that couldn't be gleamed from the more sociological sections of Time Magazine. And some of the word usage is downright dated. Two of the more often used insults in the book are "fairy" and "pansy"; Goulart might at least have used "faggot," the use of which pejoratively might not have endeared him to the gay community, but at least would have been a bit more *au courant*, if not *au future*.

And finally, a novel that simply sets out (and succeeds) in telling a story that does not moralize, proselytize, satirize, or symbolize. It is Keith Laumer's THE STAR TREASURE. I doubt if it will go down in history as a science fiction classic; on the other hand, I enjoyed reading it, got involved enough in it to wonder how it was going to come out, and in general had all those reactions one has when reading a good story.

This one is set in the far future. Earth has interstellar travel and has done some colonizing. All humanity is under the benevolent dictatorship of Earth's Five Companies and their five Star Lords. A young starship lieutenant is accidentally involved in a complex rebellion against the Star Lords, and is eventually cashiered and exiled to a "prison planet"; along the way he gathers bits and pieces of the stranglehold these five men have on humanity, and turns from a pro-status-quo type to an active rebel against the system. All these ingredients sound pretty standard, and they are, but it's what's done with them that's important, of course, and several things *are* nicely done here. The hero's realization of rottenness is a slow one, balanced against the headlong rush of events into which he is thrust, making for a nice narrative tension. There's a good *deus ex machina* toward the end, and it probably won't be too naughty to reveal that it is the remnants of a highly civilized race that preceded man in space, a device I'm always fond of when well handled. And while the pace is pell mell, a good solid background is built up for it. All in all. THE STAR TREASURE is a competent example of science fiction story telling.

Room only for a few excerpts from Sandy Fisher's brimming bio sheet: Age 34, attended Weequahic High School when Phillip Roth was there. Spent some time as a disc jockey, later as film maker; some films took awards at festivals in U.S. and abroad (Cannes). Did first full-scale light show on East Coast. Currently occupied as a rock engineer (was personal engineer to the late Jimi Hendrix). Despite the background, Mr. Fisher retains a feeling for the printed word, as demonstrated in this story about a man in an orbiting observatory who wakes up after a fatal accident to find his partner taking undue care of him . . .

Thank God You're Alive

by SANDY FISHER

KELLOGG'S HANDS WERE ON MY shoulders, holding me, pulling me back from the darkness. "You're alive," he said, prayer-like. "Thank God you're alive!"

My tongue tasted like clay, dry and immovable in the cave of my mouth, and all the hammers of Hell were at work on a spot just behind my eyes. "Wait," Kellogg said, "here. Hold still, turn your head this way . . . that's better. Now."

He carefully swabbed my mouth with something wet, and slowly the caked leather softened, worked, tried to form words. Kellogg shushed me. "It's all right, you made it through the regenerator. You're alive. Get some sleep now, you need it badly. We'll talk later."

Regenerator?

Kellogg gave me a shot. Sleep came as abruptly as a slamming door.

A long time of quiet. Then somebody was saying, "How do you feel now?"

I opened my eyes. It was Kellogg. I hunted around for my voice, found it in a cracked skin bag somewhere in my throat, tried to hook it up to my mouth. "Better . . ." I got out.

"That's good, take it easy. Don't

try to move around yet. Regeneration is a shock." Ignoring him, I struggled to a half-upright position, one elbow propping me up like a beached ship. Kellogg gently pushed me back. "Plenty of time for that. We're in no hurry, not where we're going. Otto will still be there."

Ice chips began to surface in the river of my brain. Otto . . . short for Orbiting Technical Observatory. Working in a repair pod outside. Explosion. Pod breaking away at high velocity . . . a wave of nausea hit me, and I clutched the edge of the bunk, fighting to keep my stomach down. I looked at Kellogg. "Where are we?"

He grimaced. "Hard to say. The explosion gave us a fat libration. It's still with us. No way to take sightings with what's on hand."

What was I doing in a regenerator—and how the hell did one get inside a repair pod? Kellogg must have been watching my face because he said, "You were rammed by a hatchway door. Blood clot on the brain. Death. The regenerator was on board to keep it out of the way until it could be dropped Earthside; it's obsolete. Nothing but luck. It didn't take long in the tank to straighten your head out; I got to you almost immediately."

"How long was I in?"

"Several days."

"Then we could be anywhere."

Kellogg shrugged. "Within a certain radius, yes. They'll be hunting for us with radar."

"Why radar? What's wrong with the beacon?"

"Smashed."

"Repairable?"

"You'll be able to tell better than I could; it's your line."

"I suppose so." I wiped my hand across my face; I was having trouble getting my memories straight. I said so.

"The regenerator always wipes short-term memory," Kellogg said, sitting on the edge of the bunk. "The rest'll come back in a few hours."

I looked up at him. "How can you tell that?"

Something flicked across his face, maybe an emotion, gone so fast that I couldn't even be sure that I'd seen anything. He looked at the wall for a second, then back at me. "I had a course in emergency procedures with the thing sometime back. It's absolute chance that there was a manual with this one." Before I could get my thoughts together, he jumped down off the bunk, said briskly, "We can straighten all that out after you're rested. You still look pretty beat."

He was right about that; I felt like death warmed over—which, in a sense, was pretty close to the truth. I lay back and slept, in spite of being scared out of my mind.

The module in which we happened to be at the time of the explosion was a small repair pod. It consisted of two levels connected

by a hatchway. The "upper" level contained communications equipment (apparently useless after the explosion), propulsion controls, the tiny "galley" with its warmer, and two old-style acceleration bunks. "Upper" level was in the shape of a cone, with the intership access hatch at the apex. Fortunately this hatch, which lacked an airlock, had been closed at the time of the explosion. The "lower" compartment contained the head, storage lockers, a small scavenging-type airlock . . . and, through some freakish chance, the regenerator. It carried its own supply tanks and operated on ship's current. Kellogg had been able to jury-rig it into operation within a few minutes after I got my skull stove in.

My first interest, after conquering my rubbery arms and legs, was the communications equipment. There were no specialized tools, no VTVMs aboard the pod. Still, even without meters, there are ways of jury-rigging a simple beacon and making reasonably sure that it's putting out stuff. I got a stylus and pad and started to make up a list of things to scavenge. The communicator was useless, since we employed it mainly to talk back and forth to whatever we were tied up to while we were working. I was pretty sure that it would have enough stuff to get the beacon on the air.

About five minutes later I realized that building the beacon would take a little longer than I'd anticipated; apparently regeneration leaves you weak and tired for a while. I found myself nodding off while I made up the list, letting the pencil slip out of my fingers and closing my eyes for a minute. Finally I gave in to it and leaned back.

I must have really dropped off into a deep sleep because I began to have dreams—bad dreams—not the running, scary kind, but really nauseous ones in which undefined things crawled loathsomely toward me in the dark. It went on and on for what seemed a long time. Finally I couldn't run any further and the stuff touched me. I recoiled so violently that I woke myself up. I was covered with cold sweat, my palms were clammy, and I was anything but rested.

Kellogg had been at the galley while I slept. When he heard me wake, he brought over some soup and attempted to feed me. I declined politely, took the bag myself. "I'm not that weak any more," I said, grinning.

Kellogg grinned back. "Just trying to help out," he said. "I used to be a pretty fair cook Earthside, you know."

"I hadn't."

"Oh, yes."

I nodded in appreciation.

"You ought to eat a little more of that," he said. "Regeneration cuts into your protein reserves badly."

I nodded. "Right." I looked at

the bag, then at Kellogg. "Yeah, thanks for thinking of it."

Kellogg nodded back, watching. I sucked at the bag indifferently, then glanced at him again. The guy was standing there on the verge of nodding encouragement. "Go on," he said. "It's what you need."

I put the bag down. "Look," I said, "if it's all the same to you, I appreciate the consideration but I'm really okay now. I can make my own food. You really don't have to do it for me." It made me feel silly, the elaborate formality implicit in what I was saying, but it could help to keep us sane. In the long run, if the beacon didn't check out right away, we'd be in each other's company for—days? Weeks? Weeks maybe—until rescue ships spotted us, caught up with us, and hauled us in. And even then, if the lock were jammed from the explosion, even after we were hauled in we would have to ride the capsule back on the inside. There was no spacesuit aboard, no way to use the tiny scavenger lock. Kellogg might be overconcerned, as a result of being confronted with spending an indeterminate amount of time with a corpse for company, and I saw no sense in abrading him—the two of us would have a tough time getting further than five feet apart, unless one of us moved to the "lower" compartment.

Still, I had the distinct feeling that Kellogg's feelings had been hurt. Maybe he was feeling paternal. Seeing somebody through regeneration, particularly when it was the only other person in your tiny, metal-walled universe, could generate a hell of a cathexis. And I noticed, in the next hours, that even when our routine duties kept us occupied as we worked to make the tiny repair pod sustain our metabolisms, Kellogg found little things to do to make my time a little easier.

Little niggling things.

Look—I'm just not used to being worried about. Since my wife and I got shut of each other, I've been the only person responsible for my welfare, and I like it that way. Did I say worried about? That's not the term I want. It's almost like . . . what's the word I want? Almost like being fussed over. I rested the screwdriver I was working with on a magnetic hold and thought about it. Kellogg spent several days alone while I was in the regenerator. Maybe the loneliness and the uncertainty of the jury-rigged regenerator had gotten to him, and he had tasted the feeling of being trapped in the pod alone, possibly without the knowledge to jury-rig the beacon. That would be enough to do it.

Or would it? Maybe the shock had been harder on him than I'd imagined, and maybe he was overreacting. Small wonder. I resolved to be more diplomatic, if that were possible, avoid hurting Kellogg's feelings if I could, until we were out of this thing.

Came a sleep period. I dreamed

of something that enfolded me in horrifying, cloying closeness, something that enveloped me with loathing. I woke trembling, unrested. Tried again, found myself kept awake by fear—fear of the dream. I gave up the sleep period as a bad job.

The jury-rigged test set I was building took slow shape under my hands. I had no solder, few tools, and had to scavenge wire from the useless intercom. Kellogg tended to the balky air-regeneration system, which had never been designed for extended periods of use. He periodically attempted to take position sightings, but our simple-minded computer couldn't handle the libration we'd picked up in being blown away. He continued his mother-hen attitude; I fielded his concern with the deftness of a ballet dancer. And so we continued our ritual of amenities, Kellogg advancing and I parrying, while the "days" slipped by.

By the fifth "day" I was beginning to feel definite signs of the strain. My newly sprouting beard itched intolerably; my eyes, sandpapered by lack of restful sleep, showed red-rimmed in the head's tiny mirror, and I began to have trouble focusing. I badly needed sleep; the dreams were regular events that I feared with an irrational dread and fought with an unthinking fury. It was getting so that my spasmodic reactions to my own dreams were consistently waking me; it was impossible to get any solid shut-eye.

Kellogg became, if anything, more solicitous. It left me with the haggard impression that he was wearing himself down worrying about me, rather than about rescue. In fact, he seemed relatively unworried about rescue. As he had explained to me, even in the event that the beacon was unworkable, eventually we would be radared, our velocity checked out by angle intercept and Doppler, and our blip identified as us.

"True enough," I commented to Kellogg, "but only possible up to a certain distance. If they don't lock onto us within a reasonable time, we'll look like another asteroid to their radar."

"They'll find us," Kellogg said, with surprising equanimity. "One way or another. They'll find us even if you don't get the beacon working."

And he turned away, to put two dinners in the warmer before I could stop him. Two dinners. I'd been finding out that it was virtually impossible for me to do such simple things as prepare my own meals or do the tiny amount of policing that was necessary without Kellogg getting there first. It was beginning to wear, getting harder for me to restrain myself from blowing up at him. My patience wore thinner along with my sleep.

I resolved to keep busier, which

wasn't easy. I'd been on the go almost all the time already, in an effort to avoid quiet periods in which I'd start to dwell on the possibilities of rescue. I was checking the antenna wiring, which ran through the deck plates in the "lower" compartment, and that necessitated taking up some of the plates. I found a ball bearing there, loose. Apparently it had dropped between the capsule's skin and the decking. It was resting now in a small, cup-shaped depression stamped into the skin of the pod. As I picked it out between thumb and forefinger, I reflected that the libration of the pod should have caused the ball to roll in its cup, leaving a tiny mark. With the aid of that mark, we might be able to help our half-witted computer along in calculating where we were.

I inspected the cup carefully, looking for the tiny mark in the metal that the unlubricated ball would have left as it traced out the irregularity in our motion. I couldn't find it. I got out a pocket magnifier and checked as closely as I could. There was no mark.

Days of near-sleeplessness interfered badly with my judgment. And at the rate that the dreams were recurring, I'd be a jacket case long before the rescue ships locked onto us. I fumbled my way forward, through the hatch, showed the ball to Kellogg. Kellogg, looking depressingly alert and well rested, took the ball in his palm and looked at it.

"What is it?"

"Just a ball bearing I found loose between the deck plates," I said. "It was resting in a little depression, and I thought we might be able to help out Old Halfwit by getting the libration angle from the mark it made in the metal." I rubbed at my already sore eyes.

Kellogg was looking at me. "Well?"

"I couldn't find any marks."

"Well, our libration isn't that large."

"Yeah, but if it's that small, you should be able to sight on something through the docking port."

"True, but the docking port is so badly situated for anything except docking and inspection that it's all but useless for actually looking around."

"Mmmm."

"Now if only we could get outside," Kellogg sighed, "there'd be no trouble at all. With a view that large, we'd know right away where we were. If we only had a spacesuit."

"Yeah," I said, rubbing my eyes. "If."

I was getting a few hours of fitful sleep each "night" period in spite of my dreams, when one night I put in a good, solid couple of hours. I awoke draggy and listless, to find Kellogg watching me.

"Feel refreshed?" he said.

"Not exactly," I mumbled, "how did you know I was sleeping better?"

"I put a pill in your coffee. It wasn't a great idea to do it without asking you, but you were sleeping so badly that I decided I'd have to do it to save your sanity." He smiled in his vaguely simpering way.

My temper, rubbed raw over the days, burst its restraint. "Look," I snarled, "when I decide I want a pill, I'll take one myself, okay?"

It was the first time a voice was raised in the tiny pod. The silence afterwards was deafening. Kellogg's face worked for a moment; then he turned away.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, "too little sleep."

He didn't answer.

My raw temper swung back the other way. "Look," I said to his retreating back, "I apologize. I'm sorry I got angry." I fumbled for words. "Look, I appreciate all the worrying you do on my account. There are just some things I feel I have to do for myself. You can understand that, can't you?"

He didn't answer. Fatigue was wearing me down, fast. "Okay," I said, with an air of finality, "I'm still sorry. I'll try to keep my temper in check after this."

He grunted something. To ease the tension, I got out of my bunk and moseyed to the beacon panel, now spread out on the jury-rigged shelf below. I expected to be able to fire up the beacon today. I hadn't told Kellogg yet, since I wasn't sure it was ready, and I wanted to pace the good things to suit the tension. Or had I told him? Stale air, dreams, the growing tension between us that Kellogg's fawning efforts only intensified, had frayed my nerves so badly that I couldn't be sure whether I'd mentioned it before I'd dropped off to sleep or not. Maybe my short-term memory was still affected by the regenerator.

I switched in the power to the oscillator, and after a moment's pause to keep the semi-conductors from blowing out, discovered immediately that I couldn't load the antenna.

I switched off again, puzzled, and repeated the wiring checks I'd recently finished. The antenna had loaded yesterday at test power. At least, I'd thought that it loaded. Today, nothing.

Maybe something was screwy. I reduced power to test level, fired up again. Still nothing. I switched off and stood looking at the unit, biting my already overchewed lip and thinking. Nothing was different. The antenna was connected at the beacon end, ran through a vacuum seal behind the panel and out to the antenna. The antenna coupling was made on the outside, in hard vacuum; no possible way to reach it. Yet overnight, something had happened between the beacon and the antenna.

I reflected that maybe we had had the extreme bad fortune to take a meteorite at the coupling point.

But I felt sure that we would have heard an impact of that magnitude clearly through the thin skin, and fragments would almost certainly have penetrated.

I was about to ask Kellogg if he knew anything about it, then changed my mind and decided to wait. Kellogg was radiating such an impression of wounded feelings that I was afraid of provoking some sort of retaliation. In fact, I reflected, Kellogg's attitude the past few days could only be described as . . . bitchy. So I checked everything through again carefully, or as carefully as my frayed nerves allowed. I stopped to rub the spots away from my eyes; caught sight of my haggard, seamed face reflected in a metal panel.

A few more days, I thought, and I'll be finished; even if we get back, they'll have to put me away for a while. Tiredness was a stone heartbeat in my temples. Exhaustion and—exhaustion and undernourishment and—being smothered with attention. Big Mama over there.

In fact, it dawned on me that, in a peculiar way, Kellogg seemed to be feeding on my tiredness. Or so it seemed. It seemed as though the more haggard and debilitated I became, the fatter and sassier and—yes—bitchier Kellogg became. Kellogg's personality was gradually pushing me into a corner, harrying me with solicitousness, sponging me to death.

But the beacon would change all that. I'd find the antenna defect and put the beacon on the air. The beacon would bring rescue ships with their radios and their hot showers and beds and their . . . *space.* Space between people, space separating people. And for the first few days, I wouldn't even look at another person, not get anywhere near anybody, just luxuriate in the bliss of being alone. Of being away from Kellogg, of being away from Kellogg and Kellogg's cloying attentions. Of being clean and rested and alone. . . .

I slipped into a fitful doze. The dream returned from where it had been hovering at the edges of my consciousness, snuffling, waiting to snigger in and worry at my sanity like a dirty, bloody rag. It cloyed at me with its loathsome, honeyed horror. It left me wide-eyed, raw-nerved and covered with sweat.

The twelfth day out I found the spacesuit.

I didn't find it bang, like that, but little by little. It was most cunningly concealed, behind access panels that neither of us had any occasion to open. It was broken down into small component pieces, each piece workable, each fitted neatly into its hiding place. Kellogg was asleep when I found the first piece. I'd been idly inspecting a screw-secured access panel when I'd noticed the fresh breaks on the screwheads, the sort of marks that a

man with poor tools would make trying to loosen them. It started me wondering what Kellogg had been doing with this particular access panel. I quietly retrieved my screwdriver from the table and gave the captive screws a half turn. The panel dropped away, and a pressure boot bulged out.

I stood looking at the boot for fully five minutes, my exhausted brain working and churning furiously. Then I quietly worked it out of the space between the plates, replaced the panel, and took the boot down to the lower compartment. The compartment where the lock was. The lock that had fresh scratches on the access door.

Leaving the boot there, I made a tour of the capsule, lifting all access panels I hadn't opened since we'd been here as quickly and quietly as I could manage. Within an hour I had the rest of the suit. I didn't think about how it got there or what its presence meant. I didn't want to. I simply collected its pieces in the lower compartment. When I had all of them laid out on the deck plates, I quietly closed the interconnecting hatch and got into the suit. It sent a good feeling up my arms, a sensation of action, of being in control again, ready for anything. The fabric of the body felt fine against my overworn coverall. I flexed my fingers, checked the air tanks: half full.

The lock cycled in silence, ionic pumps scavenging the air. I swung out, a little clumsy after twelve days without practice, holding myself against the slight centrifugal force of our spin, and immediately encountered the beacon antenna. The coupling had been neatly disconnected.

I stood looking at it, whistling through my teeth, trying to think. I found that nearly impossible. I reached down and reconnected the coupling. It went together smoothly and solidly, and I knew that the beacon would work. I had maybe five minutes in which to get back inside and get out a locator signal before Kellogg . . .

Kellogg!

What the hell was going on here? The antenna disconnected secretly, the suit hidden . . . you'd think that Kellogg didn't *want* to be picked up.

Maybe he didn't.

Chill. It wasn't the dark side of the pod that made my skin crawl, tighten up along my backbone. My God, even now we might be so far from the rescue operation that it could take days for a ship to reach them, days during which I'd be cooped up inside that hot little capsule with Kellogg. Let's see, if I could eyeball Mars or some other big hunk of mass nearby, I could estimate our distance and our chances. . . .

I watched things drift by for a minute. Then two. Then three. Gradually it dawned on me that something was terribly wrong.

There were no visible discs in sight at all. None. Only stars.

Impossible!

We couldn't possibly have drifted beyond sight of a planet, at least beyond sight of a disc visible to the naked eye. And where the hell was Sol? We'd have to have been drifting for months, perhaps years. And the blowup couldn't have been more than a few weeks ago!

Unless . . .

Things were coming a little too fast. I was letting repeated shocks numb me. I ducked back into the lock and cycled. There was a way to find out. If I had to wring it out of him. . . .

Kellogg met me as the lock opened to the inside. I'd been fumbling with the suit, trying to get it loose, but there's no room to maneuver in a scavenging lock. I slung the helmet aside, but my movements were still hampered by the deflated suit. Kellogg came on. "You couldn't wait," he said. "You weren't content. You couldn't wait and give things time to straighten out. Time for us to get to know each other. You were in such a hurry to get out, to get back . . . I couldn't let you do it, you know. I couldn't let you get away and apart, if they found us it would be all over between us, you have to understand . . . I couldn't . . ." Tears leaked out of his eyes. He had a large lug wrench.

I didn't wait to see what was going to happen; I didn't like the way he held that wrench. Not like a tool; like a club. I threw myself at him but he bounced out of the way.

The blow caught me on the neck. Light exploded inside my head and my body went numb. I sailed on by, crashed into the bulkhead, rolling onto my back. I tried to struggle away, couldn't coordinate my muscles. Dimly I could see Kellogg approaching slowly, almost tenderly, touching my face with one hand, tears running down his cheeks.

Revulsion surged through me, not at what he was doing but at what it reminded me of. *The dream* . . . the dream that regeneration couldn't quite erase, the dream that was real.

Inwardly I was screaming. I made a tremendous effort to get to my feet, strike out at him, but I couldn't get my muscles to work; I only twitched feebly.

"We'll work it out eventually, you know," Kellogg said, conviction swelling his voice. "You and I. You'll find out all the wonderful things I can do for you. You'll see . . ."

The lug wrench swung up, ever so slowly, and the dream in my mind surged forward, a mirror in which this scene was reflected, ten times, twenty times, countless times, again and again, each time ending with that tender touch . . . and that lug wrench . . .

(Continued on page 127)

Wesley Ford Davis is a professor of English at the University of South Florida. He is the author of a novel, THE TIME OF THE PANTHER, and short stories in many magazines. This superior story concerns a pro-football watching executive who suddenly finds religion and his wife, who, quite normally for these times, worries about his illusions and his sanity.

Ask and It May Be Given

by WESLEY FORD DAVIS

HER NOSE AGAINST THE WINDOW, the room lights behind her, she could see him plainly. The sky beyond the slight rise of his own self-constructed observation mound was perfectly clear, almost brilliant with a healthy new quarter moon which loomed surprisingly close, just above his head. And Venus almost cradled by the moon. Quite a sight, she had to admit. One of the more spectacular conjunctions of the heavenly bodies such as he waited for. Maybe this would be the night. The night for what? she had asked. His answer as always was irrefutable: Who knows? You never can tell.

It was no good saying again, as she had so often, that it happens every year, at least once a year, Venus and the new moon nestling close to one another, setting in the western sky, and a lot of other unusual phenomena—maybe not every year but often enough and predictably. And is a thing unusual if it happens repeatedly—no matter how long the interval—and predictably? Eclipses, comets, meteor showers. And how often had such things heralded the birth of the Messiah, or the end of the world, or even the end or the beginning of a great war or an earthquake, tidal wave, volcanic eruption, etc.?

You don't know, he would say, these things are not reported. They're covered up. You think that a scientific, technological, materialistic, secularistic, consumer-oriented, military-industrial-international complex of a Western Culture could afford to ac-

knowledge even the possibility of anything extranatural or suprarational? No, it couldn't, she admitted. But what did that matter? Wouldn't such a power—if such existed beyond what is or might be rationally and naturally explicable—assert itself in spite of what anybody or anything merely natural and/or political might think it could or could not afford?

Of course, of course, it would, and will, and has. People forget and they have no imagination. What's two thousand years? A long time in human history, but probably not even a moment in God's mind. Besides, you overlook one little logical ingredient. By its very nature, the extranatural event is unexpected. See what I mean?

Well, how the hell could you argue against that sort of logic? Or with somebody who was studying everyday and practicing every night—at least every moonlight night—to be literally a lunatic? Down here in the southern sky, he said, the heavenly bodies loom close. Stare straight into the full moon and you can sense the immensity of space beyond the moon—the unimaginable immensity of His universe—and after a while the moon seems to rush right at you. No good to tell him that if you stare straight at anything long enough, it will seem to rush right at you.

The telephone rang. On the third ring she pulled her nose away from the window glass and crossed the room, wearily and a bit apprehensively, to pick up the receiver. It was Doris, her husband's immediate subordinate's wife. Doris' husband was her husband's general sales manager. Yes, Doris. Yes, she understood. Yes, Doris didn't mean to meddle. Yes, Doris' husband Don didn't presume to tell Jake how to run the business. Of course not, she didn't take offense. Yes, Jake had told her about the latest reports. Sales were lagging behind last year's, but wasn't the whole country in a mild recession—with the administration taking measures to cool off the economy to slow inflation? Yes, she was a bit worried, and she'd talk with Jake. He was in the study now going over the new advertising campaign. Of course she didn't mind, she appreciated her and Don's concern.

She poured herself a stiff martini and moved back to the window, drink in hand. On the window seat, after taking a long, slow sip, she turned her face close to the glass. The new moon had dropped and slid northward away from Venus. The happy conjunction of the nighttime's brightest luminaries was done with again, but her husband still sat motionless, his eyes riveted on the moon. In a full lotus position, hands resting lightly on his thighs, palms upturned, spine straight, breathing easily and deeply, he sat on his observation mound.

Jeee-sus, she sighed, turning from the glass and sipping a long, long sip from her drink. If he was going to be a nut, why couldn't he also have had the Ford or Chevrolet agency instead of American Motors? Or even Volkswagen? If you were selling Fords or Chevvies, you could afford to be a queer duck part of the time. But not if you were selling Ambassadors and Ramblers, or even Javelins and Hornets. Of course, he said, we are making and selling the most economical, safest, best engineered, most sensible cars on the road today. Everybody knows we have the best product for the money on the market today. Yes, everybody except the people who went on buying Fords and Chevrolets by the hundreds of thousands year after year. Even the old Mormon wizard George Romney had known when to get out and get into a less hazardous business. Not even the Kennedys yet had a monopoly on high-level political office to match the hold of General Motors and Ford on the car business.

Drink in hand she drifted from the living room and down a dimly lit hallway and into the den—his study. She stirred the litter on the big desk: brochures showing the new models at rakish angles, with slender, long-haired blondes draped on hoods that seemed a half-mile long. The latest entry—the Hornet—American Motors' answer to Ford's new Maverick, caressed coolly but firmly by a tall, thin young man with gray streaks in his luxuriant dark hair, wearing heavy dark glasses, dressed and groomed to look as rich as Hugh Hefner and as chic as George Hamilton. That was the line taken by the national office in advertising the new *economy* car. DON'T be fooled by the price tag, mister. The base price on this little honey is just $1970, but you can go as high as $4000 on this little bomb if you can afford it.

Her husband was a bit dubious of the effectiveness of such subtleties of advertising technique. After all, this is still the South, he argued, and the old Protestant ethic of buy cheap and sell dear still has some force in these parts. He and Don had been considering a modification of the central office approach, more suitable to the damn dumb rednecks around here who had never heard of Hugh Hefner and George Hamilton.

But the desk was cluttered mostly with books, not stacked but piled with corners jutting forth at various angles for better balance and stability. From the top ends of many of them slips of paper used for markers spread like ragged bouquets. The titles were some of them things she wasn't embarrassed to mention at the Garden Club or even at the League of Women Voters. C. S. Lewis' *Miracle, Out of the Silent Planet;* Evelyn Underhill's *Practical Mysticism;* James' *Varieties of Religious Experience; The Diary of a Country Priest; The*

Seven-Story Mountain; The Power and the Glory. Such as these were referred to even at the Great Books Discussion. But toward the tops of the stacks or turned down on the desk or lying open—more recent acquisitions: *Out of Body Travel, They Speak with Other Tongues, Authenticated Accounts of Psychic Phenomena, The Abundant Life, The Power Within.* A whole corner of the desk was covered with books on Edgar Cayce, The Sleeping Prophet.

She drained her glass and set it down and pressed the tips of her fingers against her eyelids. This somewhat eased the dull pain behind her eyes. The sinus headaches were frequent lately. But of course, as her husband said, it was the season for them. The goddamned punk trees along the back of the house were in full bloom, and the ragweed on the empty lots, and the goldenrod. And he refused to lay his healing hands on her head. He hadn't that much control yet; he wasn't that strong a channel yet. She was his wife. How could a wife place that much faith in her own husband and his only recently felt motions of the Spirit? A prophet always has a rough time in his own home. Hadn't Our Lord himself said as much?

Her nose close to the study window, she saw her husband now in profile; his posture and attitude were the same, only now his head was cast farther back, his gaze lifted higher. The moon and Venus had dropped behind the tree line beyond the two intervening streets and the eleventh fairway of the Tierra Verde golf course. Damn it all, why had not God vouchsafed to her even *one* iota of the kind of conviction that kept her husband poised on his little prayer mound for several hours several nights a week when the weather permitted? If the weather had permitted or he had been a thoroughgoing Eastern mystic, he probably would by now have established permanent residence on the mound, with a cult of followers camped in the yard. But he was no Eastern mystic; he was a dynamic, proselytizing, apocalyptic, ex-Jewish, Christian eschatologist. He waited for the heavens to divide and split asunder and the King of the Universe to return in all His glory. Even the politicians, he said, are forever quoting from Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming." It was a fact. The Secretary of Defense and one of the Kennedys—she couldn't recall which one—had in recent speeches quoted the lines: "Things fall apart/The center cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." She had pointed out to her husband that none of the politicians had quoted from the second part of the poem wherein the poet pronounced the imminence of the second coming and his vision of the New Messiah: "Somewhere in sands of the desert/A shape with lion body and the head of a man,/A

gaze blank and pitiless as the sun . . ." Scant comfort for the faithful. Hardly the usual conception of the Blessed Lord returning in all His glory. That's all right, her husband responded, what would you expect from a non-Christian poet, even a great one like Yeats?

One thing she had to admit, though. Since the unhappy day when, as he put it, the light was turned on and he had felt the first faint stirrings of the Spirit—that day when by accident while he was waiting for the Sunday pro-football program, he had turned on the wrong channel and was practically stabbed in the groin by the outthrust finger of The Reverend Mister Oral Roberts looming like God Almighty on the twenty-one-inch full-color screen and who said to him: Expect a miracle. Expect a miracle! Since that fateful day her husband had gone a long way toward becoming an educated man. And, too, she had to admit that so far at least his business had not gone completely to rack and ruin. It had suffered some, but there was his tremendous capacity for work. He had always been a person of tremendous energy and stamina, but now—Spirit-filled as he claimed to be—he had, as he said, the strength of ten. He could work all day, sit on his goddamned observation mound half the night, read much of the rest of the night, and still come to bed, wake her, and perform his marital duties like a long-distance runner.

Gazing through the glass, slantwise toward his silhouetted figure on the mound, she breathed a question: What is my complaint? It was difficult to specify: a vague sense of dread, an uneasy apprehensiveness, a nameless fear.

At the desk again she aimlessly pulled out drawers, stirring their contents: papers, filing cards, pencils, clippings from magazines and newspapers. He was not orderly in his own study. As your thoughts become neater, he had said, you're less bothered by certain externals. She had no great quarrel with that. They had always had maid service twice weekly. The carpets were clean, the furniture dusted. As she pulled open the long middle drawer, she felt a twinge of guilt and wondered why she did so; they had always trusted each other and respected each other's privacy. Still, as her gaze fell on the big blue sheet of heavy drawing paper, she took it from the drawer and laid it on the desk. The drawing was captioned at the bottom: PRAYER TOWER, 250 Feet.

My God, she breathed. This was no eccentricity. It was simple insanity. And his drawing of the tower was simple too. What was to be its principal support—faith? She half expected to see guy wires strung from the stars to the four corners of the platform. In the lower right-hand corner of the sheet were the essential data. A simple twelve-by-twelve wooden

platform with guard rail. No roof. Three-by-three cupola in center, mounted on slender twelve-foot pole—to support and screen aviation warning light. Platform support: single central column, equipped with vertical steel ladder—approx. 250 rungs. (250 Ft. nightly vertical ascent and descent good for body as well as soul. Will this put me discernibly nearer to the heavenly bodies? No. But who knows whether or when it may bring them closer to me?) Check with State Forestry Service on Approx. cost of rangers' fire tower. Call Cone Bros. Cst. Co. on feasibility of single column support. Also city zoning authority. May be necessary to buy telescope and enroll in astronomy classes at University to justify. *Note:* Meanwhile, also re-read C. S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* and sequels; also do research on Old Testament story of Jacob's Ladder and similar related stories in Greek and other mythologies. *Note 2:* Consult further with Aaronson on subject of early retirement.

Her hands shook as she closed the drawer on the "blueprint." Her head ached terribly, and as she rose from the desk, she realized that the aching had moved into her back and arms and shoulders. Another virus going around probably. Moving toward the kitchen for another drink, she thought of calling her mother and immediately began to laugh out loud. Five years ago when her father died, her mother had moved to California. For the past four years or so, most of her mother's time and income had been given to the practice of spiritualism in an effort to communicate with her dead husband.

Fresh drink in hand, she moved to the ringing telephone. Thank goodness for the world we live in, she thought. When you've just about reached the limit of what you can tolerate inside your own head, the telephone rings. Steadying her voice she said, "Hello." It was Alan Aaronson, who aside from being their insurance agent, was also a close friend. Hence he did not ask for her husband but simply asked her to convey a message. His out-of-town trip had ended a day sooner than he had expected, and he would be able to see Jake first thing in the morning after all, if it were convenient for Jake. She assured him that she was certain it would be and then inquired about Charlotte and her new job. The job was fine, just what Charlotte had needed for a long time—good pay, stimulating associations. He laughed. Charlotte claimed you could feel the building vibrating with importance: Building a New Florida and Helping to House a Nation. She would probably call in a day or two to tell all about it. "You know, as soon as she gets her feet on the ground." He laughed again. "You know, when you're on the nineteenth floor of the biggest of-

fice building in town, it takes a little time to feel like you've got your feet on the ground. She'll make it, though. You know she's personal secretary to the company's seventh vice-president. You know what she calls him? You know, I mean behind his back? Mr. Peter Principle." They both laughed and said good-by.

For a few moments she sat and sipped her martini. She decided to call Don and Doris. She couldn't think what else to do. When Doris answered, she apologized for the lateness of the call. But she just had to talk to somebody. "It's all right, honey," Doris said, "we were just starting to watch Johnny Carson." She asked Doris if Don would mind getting on the extension, she wanted to talk to both of them. She described as exactly as she could the sketch she had found in her husband's desk. Before she had finished, Don started to giggle. Doris broke in and scolded him. "Don, you cut that out. Can't you see that this poor child is serious and upset?" He apologized. "I'm sorry, Marian, honey. Please forgive me. It's just that for a minute there it did seem awfully funny. A two hundred and fifty foot tower in his own backyard—in Temple Heights? My God, he must be out of . . . I mean, you don't mean you take him seriously. It's probably just one of these dreams like everybody has about going off into the woods or to some island and living like Robin. . ."

She interrupted him. "You don't know, Don. My God, I live with him. I tell you it's more serious than you can imagine. I've tried to put a good face on things and . . ."

"All right, honey, I know. I didn't mean to make light of the problem. I've felt it coming on pretty strong myself. I didn't want to butt in, but I'm glad you've called us. I've been afraid now for some time that things were going to get worse before they get better. But it's best to get it out into the open. Once you know about something, you have a chance to deal with it. You agree with me?"

She agreed. She knew now that it was too much for her to cope with alone. "Now," he said, "about this particular project of his, I don't think you have to worry. There's not a chance in the world that they'd let him do it. My God, a two hundred and fifty foot tower in Temple Heights, by the golf course. Just two fairways from the club. Honey, you know it's all rambling ranch-house building in your neighborhood. Christ, honey, he might as well think of adding a two hundred and fifty foot Gothic spire to the house. Now, honey, why don't you just mix yourself a good drink and go to bed. I'll talk to Jake tomorrow. I think it's better than fifty-fifty that you won't ever hear a word from him about any observation tower."

She thanked Doris and Don for their kindness and sympathy, and

quickly said good-by. The front door had slammed loudly and her husband was calling loudly, "Hey, baby. Baby. Baby, where are you?" as he moved through the living room and into the hallway. She rose to meet him and he came like a gazelle. A hundred and eighty pounds and six feet tall and in his forty-ninth year, he leapt and bounded to take her in his arms. Tears streamed down his cheeks and wetted her cheek and neck, and feeling the warmth of his tears and of his arms and body, she felt herself wholly his and him hers. Had they rejected him, she wondered, the far-off indifferent stars? She thought of a poem she had memorized in college, its key line—how did it go: Ah, love, let us then be true to one another, for the world something something something something hath neither love nor joy nor certitude nor something something . . .

His voice was husky when he finally spoke. "Baby, it's all true. Only more so. The Light of the world. Absolutely literally true. Nothing figurative or symbolical or allegorical or anagogical about it. My God, my . . ."

Rigid she drew back and pushed against his chest. Her vision blurred as the tears came, and her voice threatened to rise and become shrill, but she managed to speak evenly and cuttingly. "And what is it the heavenly bodies have revealed to the great prophet this goddamned evening?"

Releasing her, he raised his hands to swipe away the tears. His dark-blue eyes blazed in the dimly lit hallway, and his moistened cheeks shone. For a crazy moment she had the impression that he might burst into flame right before her eyes. Ignoring her sarcasm, he spoke with the assurance and conviction of Moses or Martin Luther King come down from the mountain.

"Not heavenly *bodies*, baby. *Body*. You see—*Body*. One body. All of it. Everything. You and me, the stars, this old Earth. The whole universe. He's It. It's He. Understand, baby! I saw It. I saw Him. My God. My God. I saw You."

He had turned from her and was pacing the floor. She followed him along the hallway and into the living room. As he moved toward the picture window, she could hear his heavy breathing, and as he raised his hands and leaned against the glass, she suddenly felt that the house was too small for him. She half expected the window glass to shatter and the walls to give way. She also felt what she imagined to be utter despair.

As she turned to go for a drink, she spoke listlessly over her shoulder. "Alan called. He said he could see you in the morning after all." He did not answer, but while she mixed a new batch of martinis, he joined her in the kitchen.

"I must go see Don," he said.

"At this hour?"

"Yes. Every minute now is pre-

cious." He grasped her shoulders and stared hard into her eyes. "You're with me in this, aren't you, baby?"

"In what?"

"My ministry, honey. You see, I've had the call. More than that—not just another one that's had the call. But *the* call. I have seen Him. Not as the disciples saw Him—incarnate in the flesh. But whole. The whole God. Remember what Our Lord said to His disciples, when he raised the dead? Greater things than this shall ye do in my name. Greater things. You understand? Greater things than *raising the dead.*"

Shrugging, she turned her head away. Tears welled in her eyes and coursed down her cheeks. And he moved about in the kitchen and then out into the dining room, pacing and turning like some newly caged great beast, again seeming too big for the house, and slamming his right fist into his left palm. "Of course, my darling baby," he went on, "this may seem very shocking to you at first, but you will see. This vision of mine will work through me to reach you. And millions upon millions of others. I tell you, honey, in this age of mass media *one person can turn the world around.*"

He stopped his pacing and turned to her, laughing softly. "You know what, sweetheart? You won't believe this. But last week I was drawing up plans to build a two hundred and fifty foot prayer tower out there in the backyard. Dear God, how foolish is the wisdom of men. Remember the Tower of Babel?" He hesitated in thought, the back of his hand pressed against his brow. "But wait a minute. Who knows? Maybe it was the necessary gesture—the intention, I mean. But wait. That won't do. God forgive me for trying to psych You out. God forgive us for our theology."

Moving close to her, he took the martini from her hand and downed it quickly. He sat at the table—for a moment lost in thought. And she felt simply lost. She could think of nothing to say, nothing to do. When at last he looked up, she had the impression again that he might start to smolder and burst into flame. His eyes blazed and his dark-tanned cheeks shone like new gold.

"It was all so simple, baby. After all the waiting and the struggle, so very, very simple. Sitting out there on my little mound, watching the magnificent conjunction of Venus and the moon, I suddenly recalled His words in the Gospel according to John: 'Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do.' And so I did. I simply asked: 'In Christ's name, show Yourself.' And he did, baby. You see, He did. He did indeed—which means *in fact.* At once, quicker than light, He took me—or should I say I was taken—on a trip. Beyond the universe. Beyond. Clean beyond. And I saw it all. His body. That's all there is—His body. My God, baby, do you see

the implications? All the world's ills—merely a disease in the Body of God. That's just one of—"

She interrupted his harangue, resorting in her despair to her only weapon, sarcasm. "And the great Milky Way? I suppose that's God's long white beard."

With a loud whoop of laughter, he rose and clapped his hands. "How did you know, baby? How in the world did you know? But there isn't time to talk about it now. I must go see Don, baby. Starting tomorrow, he'll be taking over the agency. And I—God willing—will start making preparations to go on the air and on television. Lord, Lord, tomorrow will be some busy day. I'll have to talk to Alan about borrowing against the insurance, et cetera, and I'll try to see Fleischmann down at WFOG. We may have to trim and cut back on some things, honey. You be thinking about the whole thing while I'm gone."

Squeezing her tight, he kissed her and was gone. In a moment she heard the pleasantly modulated whining of the little Hornet as he accelerated around the long curve of the 10th fairway. And she, making her slow way to the bedroom, her head splitting and martini in hand, wondered if she could invite sleep, this night or ever again. Stopping at the bathroom for a couple of tranquilizers, she tried to remember how much she had drunk. Probably five martinis at least—maybe six. She decided against the pills.

In the bedroom she slipped into a sheer sleeping gown, turned off the table lamp, and pulled the window drapes. She stared through the glass at a distant street lamp and listened to the sudden rise and gradual diminishing of the late-night traffic. Occasionally there came the squeal of tires as some teen-ager gunned his high-powered Mustang or Firebird or Chevy Super-Sport. And then as a big Diesel semi pulled into the new interstate highway a mile or so away, she was certain she could feel the tremor of the window glass on her fingertips. In one of his saner moments her husband had spoken of the time soon when the size of both trucks and cars would be limited by law. She felt the tears on her cheeks and heard herself saying aloud: "Oh, God, what am I to do?" At last her gaze moved to the spreading canopy of the Cuban myrtle in the front yard and just beyond to the little prayer mound. Again she breathed the words aloud: "Why not? Fight fire with fire."

She closed her eyes and prayed: Dear God, for my sake, undo what you have done. Set him free of this thing you have done to him. She could think of nothing more to say. Opening her eyes, she started to turn from the window, and as she freed her hands from the glass, she was aware of a tingling sensation in her left palm matched by a tingling sensation in her forehead. Her left

hand felt drawn to her forehead; it moved first slowly and then rapidly and came to rest with a slight smacking sound, cupped above her brow.

Lowering her hand gently, she moved to the bed and lay on her back. She had never felt so relaxed. Or maybe hardly ever. Sometimes after an especially satisfactory love-making session with Jake she had felt sleep come upon her almost without consciousness. And so it came upon her now, a delicious and complete drowsiness, and she was only vaguely aware that her headache was gone.

When she woke, she stared for a moment at the ceiling, made just visible by the light from down the hallway, wondering how long she had slept. It must have been hours, for she felt wide awake and completely rested; but rising and turning on her right elbow, she saw that it was still quite dark outside. For the moment she heard no traffic noise; then somewhere close-by a mockingbird began to sing. Of course her husband was not in bed, but that was not strange. He might be still at Don's, or he might have come and slept and gone again, to his study or to the office or God knew where. She turned the other way to look at the clock. The luminous hands showed one-fifteen. Was it possible she had slept for only a few minutes? Then down the hallway the telephone rang; she reached for the bedroom extension and lifted the receiver before the second ring. For the next few moments she had the experience, for the first time since she was a child, of reliving exactly some past event. How, she wondered, could it seem so familiar when it was all so shockingly new?

To Doris' initial inquiry, she answered, "Why, no, he isn't. Isn't he there? He left for your house about twenty-five minutes ago. He should have got . . ."

"Listen, honey, I think we had better come over. You just . . ."

"Doris, what is it? Just tell me now. Is something wrong?"

"All right, honey, now don't get upset. It may not be anything at all. But just now on the late news—after Johnny Carson—there was a report of an accident. And . . ."

The rest she listened to with half her mind, all of it so seemingly familiar. A small compact car—not a foreign make—had been struck almost broadside by a big truck and semitrailer as it had entered the freeway from Florida Avenue. The small car had been hurtled down the embankment, had exploded and burned. No immediate identification of either the car or its driver had been established. No charges were filed against the driver of the truck, since the small car had failed to yield.

"Yes, Doris, all right. Of course, I'll wait right here."

She moved down the hallway and

(Continued on page 127)

Dennis Etchison ("The Night of the Eye," March 1970) returns with a vivid and grim study of an astronaut who is the sole survivor of a mysteriously tragic test mission.

The Smell of Death

by DENNIS ETCHISON

THE LITTLE GIRL BUNDLED IN THE back seat of the Falcon wagon was covered with pink blotches, and as the man from the diner leaned over her, she released fast, shallow breaths almost directly in his face, breaths that smelled of bread hot from the oven. He drew back and stood shakily, a shudder passing down between his shoulder blades.

"I can't say what we'll do," whined the woman, "if we can't find that doctor. He's the only one for miles and miles. He's supposed to be fishin' all weekend, that's what that lazy nurse of his told us, but . . ." Her voice ebbed and she sank again into the shadow of the headrest.

"I *tol'* you," whispered her husband hoarsely, a big uneducated man with cracked hands, "t' stop it. Now we just got t' bear it. It's no one's trouble but our own."

The man from the diner turned away, dredging up a sigh from so low it shook his dry, thin chest, and kept his face from them. He walked back inside, made three ham sandwiches and two coffees in styrofoam cups and snapped on the lids, and brought it all out to them in a tight brown paper bag.

"Scarlet fever, is that so bad?" asked the wife hopefully, peering around her husband's shoulders from inside the car.

"That's not what it is," he told them. He handed the bag in and took the three wrinkled dollar bills, one for the gas, two for the food. He unfolded them, pocketed two, and handed one back impulsively. "Two'll do it."

"It ain't the fever, then?" said the husband, still suspicious, grasping for an alternative as he took back the bill unquestioningly. In the

light through the windshield his face took on a sallow look.

"Scarlatina," he said shortly. Before they could react to that, he waved a dark hand and directed them. "Go on straight down the highway to the first turnoff, veer right, and in about 30 miles you'll hit Alamagosa. There's a kind of clinic there. It's run for the Indians, but they'll see you. Ask at the Phillips station."

"Well, come on then," said the husband, slamming the worn transmission into reverse and hunching his head around over his big shoulder.

"No need to hurry," the man from the diner said. The car hesitated, the back end dipping on worn-out shocks as the transmission strained mightily to hold to the underside of the car.

He decided not to say anything more.

He walked around to the back and looked inside as the woman said, "I just can't thank you enough." She seemed ready to release a stream of words that had been locked up tightly for years, like a five-year diary waiting to spill open at the first touch. "You seem to know so much," she added, leaving the sentence up in the air in a kind of polite awe.

He emptied his lungs and bent a last time over the girl child, whose cheeks were the color of the inner surface of shells found on a beach at sunset, and took a heavy, very heavy breath. What he had been hoping not to find was there. It was there, and so there was nothing else left for him to do. He stretched inside to his waist and put his sunburned hands on the girl's face as if feeling for a fever.

The child was already delirious. He lowered his ear to her lips. She was muttering like lightning, most of it incoherent, but he caught a few words:

". . . Green stars going up to the sky . . . ride my bike. . . ."

He cupped his hands around the sides of her neck, meeting his fingers at the back in the sweat-steamed twists of blanket. He gazed down, hoping to see her eyes, but they were lidded over by almost translucent membranes streaked with veins swollen full of blood. He saw the jerky movements of her eyes fighting from side to side in their sockets. He held his breath, forcing the infection from his nostrils, and made an adjustment in her neck. He felt a nerve slip out of place. The girl's brow knitted quizzically for a passing moment, and then she died.

He stood up.

"You're a kind man," said the woman, extending her hand from the front window. He went around but did not let her touch him. "I want to thank you. When Rose Ann's well," she rushed on, trying to get it all out before the car bounded away, "we're going to stop back by here and—and buy the big-

gest dinner you ever served up!" She beamed. "That'll be all right, won't it, mister . . .?"

"Raven," he said, his mouth dry as dust, and turned on his worn heel and walked quickly back to his diner, head down, eyes hidden, not looking back and trying not to think of them again as the station wagon pummeled the rocky dirt and ground away down the highway, heading east.

He hoped it would be a long time before they checked the back seat.

The screen door slammed like an old overshoe against the door jamb. He shut his eyes as the air inside hit him. Doughnuts. Bologna and sharp brown mustard. Horseradish. Coffee, fresh and old grounds. Open packages of bread. Cheese, American and Swiss. And the acrid bus tray, blue with silver cleaner where the dirty forks and spoons were soaking. And apples and oranges and bananas, and the warm stickiness of runny chocolate.

And the sawdust.

Nostrils flaring, he stormed behind the counter and began rewrapping everything, twisting the end of the bread, hurling the cheese into the groaning refrigerator, screwing the cap back on the mustard, burying the can of chocolate syrup deep in the cupboard.

He turned to face the empty diner. The chairs dry sticks of kindling. The flowing window glass frozen in still heat mirages, the sills below burial pyres for the mummified flies.

He swayed over the sawdust.

It was a knife at his nostrils. And even as he shook his head, the fume of the oranges crept again from behind the door to the back room, the chocolate beginning to pour down invisibly from the crack in the cupboard, the old smells of slowly decomposing food filling the empty desert air like a crowd closing in on him from all sides.

He cursed, the pungent air barely moving in front of his shiny, creased lips.

He brought his hand down suddenly on the counter top with a force that stung his fingers and rattled the napkin holders. He brought his hand down again and again, slamming wrist and forearm as well, firing needles of pain that blocked out everything else again and again and again.

In his rage he did not see the figure approaching until the screen door screaked, bouncing lightly.

"Hey, you're open, aren't you? You gotta be."

It was a man, late twenties, coat slung over his shoulder, wide tie loosened at the bulging, moist collar.

"Menu's on the table," mumbled Raven. He turned to the water glasses.

"Uh, you run the station, too?" The young man hooked a thumb toward the pump outside and the garage.

Raven glanced back at him. He hadn't heard him drive up. He squinted, trying to see through the gaping rents in the weathered screen door.

The young man dragged his dusty feet to the counter and closed a shaky hand around the plastic tumbler. He drained it noisily in one pull. Raven flinched at the grease and gasoline permeating the man's skin, the almost rancid rilling in the hair curling behind the ears, and something else, an expensively androgynous floral cologne mingling with the perspiration, the mixture of smells strongest in the darkened armpits of the wilted sports coat over his shoulder.

"I said, would you mind?" the young man was saying.

Raven refilled the water glass.

Halfway through it the young man slowed down.

"See, ah, my car quit on me back there," (no direction that Raven could judge, just back, way back), "oh, five miles, maybe." The young man snickered at himself. "I haven't had this much exercise since I quit the rowing team!"

He meant it.

Raven nodded. He reached behind for the strings to his apron. "Get in the pickup," he said. Cost you five dollars, he started to add. But the thought of leaving the diner, all of it for a while, however briefly, seemed to lift something from his shoulders.

The keys almost burned his hand. He led the way outside, and the young man hauled himself up and in as if mounting a horse for the first time. They bounced onto the road and drove west, canvas water bags thumping against the bumper.

Raven breathed deeply, grateful for the clean chickweed and mesquite and the old blacktop baking in the sun. "Where you headed?" he heard himself ask.

The young man seemed relieved to talk. "Driving straight through to L.A.," he said, pulling his hair off the side of his face. "I thought I might find what I'm looking for out here, but there doesn't seem to be much but sand and lizards. Talking to the natives hasn't gotten me much but thirsty."

"You're looking for something?" asked the driver, keeping his eyes on the road, unnecessarily since the first curve was not for two miles.

"Well, I guess I should explain. I'm a reporter, sort of. With *Sandler's Monthly*. Was. Supposed to be on assignment, but I'm afraid my leave is about up. I wasn't able to get the story; so I guess they'll write the whole thing off somehow. They'd better."

The reporter blotted his forehead with his sleeve and put on his dark glasses, continuing to watch the flatlands for something, anything.

"It's crazy. A guy nobody's seen for fifteen years. Named McCabe, used to work for NASA. No family, his friends swear they haven't seen him since, not even the Internal

Revenue's heard a word. And I'm supposed to find him. Ha! 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation.' Don't ask."

"This way's shorter," said the driver, down-shifting and spinning out as the truck left the road. A tumbleweed lodged in the passenger's side of the truck, which had no doors; the reporter kicked it away and picked nettles from his dusty cuffless trouser leg.

"Some country," he said. "A guy gets lost out here, he may as well find a rock and start scratching out a headstone."

"Takes some getting used to," admitted the driver.

"Yeah, you could really lose yourself. I guess I'm a born city boy, though. I'm not ready for a place to escape to, at least not yet. Though I may need one, when I get back to New York empty-handed."

"It's not so much an escape," said the driver, his eyes on the distant hills, "as a haven." He added, "The air is relatively clean out here."

They drove on, passing the bleached skull of an animal of some kind, half-buried next to a cactus. The sandy ground, nearly white as salt, was fairly firm and smooth packed, so that the driver had no trouble controlling the truck.

"Tell me about your friend, the one you're looking for."

"Aw, it all happened a long time ago. It's a pretty depressing story, I'm afraid."

"I wouldn't ask if I weren't interested. Besides," the driver added flatly, "a man can get too used to being alone. Builds up a need for talk."

"Well, then, there now."

Breathing heavily, sweating like a pig, the reporter went ahead.

"See, this McCabe was part of a four-man team they were training in Houston for the first manned-satellite program. You remember how long ago *that* was. They put them through this 188-day milk run in a lab mock-up. Self-contained air purification, moisture retrieval, you know, the whole bit.

"Anyway, if you really want to hear it . . ." Since the driver said nothing, he kept talking. "What happened was this: At one point in the test they were supposed to be cut off completely from 'ground control'; it was planned that way, to simulate a power failure in the model space station's communications systems. For thirty-six hours. During that time audio-visual contact was suspended completely. And that's when it happened.

"In spite of the really unbelievably thorough immunization against any kind of infection or disease—permanent, lifetime inoculations, by the way, some in the experimental stage then and hush-hush now, reserved for presidents and people like that—despite every precaution, *something* went wrong. The x-factor, Jesus-factor, whatever you want to call it. Something hap-

pened, and the guys at NASA still aren't exactly sure what.

"At first they thought it was murder, but nobody had any idea why. They still haven't come up with a motive, but the label still sticks, I guess. I didn't buy it at the start of the investigation, and I don't buy it now, though it looks like I'll have to since I haven't come up with anything better. Needless to say, all four men had been screened by probably the most complete battery of psychological tests and interviews in the history of the planet. But when contact was finally resumed, only one man—McCabe—was alive. The other three, McReynolds, Armbruster and . . . I can't remember the other man's name, but—"

"It was Willard, wasn't it?"

"Ye-es, I think so. Yes. They were all dead. Just like that. Some vital nerve." The reporter reached around to touch a spot high between his shoulder blades and had to squint as the sweat ran into his eyes. "Right here, at the base of the neck. Something to do with the medulla. Actually that part isn't as weird as it sounds. Nerves, pressure points, all that stuff was part of the hand-to-hand training for the men who served in Special Forces in the war in Asia then, which includes McCabe, of course. He had seen duty in Danang and Phnom Penh."

"Let me ask you one thing," interjected the driver, bearing straight across the sands toward a point he had fixed on. "Why wasn't he charged?"

"Well, there wasn't time. Washington was red-faced, naturally. Kept him under wraps and shipped him off to a clinic outside San Diego, where he apparently put on an orderly's clothes one day and just walked out the front gate. And he hasn't been seen since. Vanished. That," sighed the reporter, "is about as far as I've been able to get with the story. Which is about exactly nowhere."

"They still think he murdered them, then," said the driver, his voice distant.

"What else? The big question still is: why? By the way," said the now curious passenger, "where the hell *are* we? If you don't mind my asking. Seems to me my car's over that way somewhere. Or there. . . ."

The truck crunched on over pale, porous rocks and sand, farther and farther away from anything remotely man-made. Down-shifting, the driver took them in a short arc between clumps of white sage and salt brush and pulled up short. He lurched back on the hand brake and closed his tanned fingers over the key ring.

"Wo-ow," puffed the reporter. "Listen to that." He suctioned his hands over his ears, pulled them loose with a pop. Now, the engine stilled, there was only the water in the radiator bubbling and settling. Finally that, too, was stilled.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," said the reporter, surprised. "That's what's so groovy. And the air! Man, it's clean, empty. Except for the dust back there, when we hit the sand, there's *nothing*. My sinus cavities never had it so good."

"Yes, clean, but not really empty." The driver leaned back and flared his nostrils distastefully. "Take a deep breath, if you can stand it. Gypsum. Caliche. Limestone. Even the damned silica."

"You can tell all that?"

He looked at the reporter with one hawk eye, not turning his head. "What I'm really interested in is your friend."

"Yeah. Well, you know, I think I'd better get—"

"Murder is an absolute term. You have to be absolutely sure before you use it."

"Oh, I wasn't accusing—"

"Imagine for a minute," bristled the driver, "that he wasn't responsible for their deaths."

The reporter puzzled.

"Suppose they were gone already."

"What, then? I'm sure the autopsy—"

"They were looking for something to substantiate the obvious, nothing more—and that's giving them the benefit of the doubt; you remember the Kennedys; at least you've read about them."

"Man, you're blowing my head! You know that?"

The driver darkened. He hoisted his pack from the boot and riffled carefully through the contents: a Kelty backpack; a sleeping bag; a smaller, open pack with emergency supplies such as nylon rope, canned water, halazone, vitamins, biscuits, pep pills, pemmican and salt; an eight-blade Army knife; a Mallory pocket flashlight; a light nylon-over-steel shovel. A compass. And a long Bowie knife. This he unsheathed, examined the fine burnished blade of Swedish steel, resheathed and snapped it to his belt.

There was a tense pause as the reporter lay his head back and squeezed his eyes shut. "Let me have a little of that water, would you?"

The driver complied.

There was another silence, all but unbearable this time. There was no breeze in the air, seemed as if there had never been.

"Man," the reporter broke, "this is really too far out. In more ways than one." He got out and stood looking around with his soft white hands half-hidden in his back pockets. "Anyway." He squinted and adjusted his dark glasses, as though they magnified the sun beyond endurance. "What'd you expect me to find out here?"

The driver swung down and led him a few yards past a sagging, stickled juniper palm.

There, just beyond, sat a huge rock, six, eight feet across, pitted by a thousand patternless holes, like a

mound of termite–ridden wood, or the surface of a burned-out tubercular brain mercifully relieved of its skull case.

The reporter shuffled around it, leaving a snake pattern in the sand with his chukka boot.

"Whew. Looks like this baby got caught in a sandstorm for a million years, huh? Hey, dig this." He bent and slipped inside, found room to sit.

After a minute the man from the diner said, "I don't give a damn about the rock, you know."

The reporter said nothing.

"But I know what you came looking for."

The reporter, straining to hear, said, "What?"

The man stepped closer. "You don't fool me."

"Well, thanks," said the reporter, not hearing. "Think I'll drive over here and take some pictures after my car's fixed. How far are we?"

"Don't move."

"You think you can fix it? Just sort of went off the road. Lost control. Not my fault, though. Something–"

"I said don't move!"

"What?"

The man took the knife from his belt slowly. He held it pointing forward, its tip honed as sharp as a broken piece of razor. He stepped closer, moving only his feet.

The reporter tensed, his trousers stretched shiny over his locked knees.

"You don't have to," he said weakly. "I only wanted to talk to you. . . ."

The man laughed. He hit it, a small coral snake, swiftly and silently as it lay coiled in the dark by the reporter's foot. A quick-spinning flicker of afterlife sent the young man from the opening in a paroxysm as intense as the dead snake's. He glanced down at his leg, at a flowing run of thick reptile blood, and, instantly white, lost his balance. The knife blade had nearly split the slender head from the triangulated, yellow-black-and-red-striped body, but the tail continued to writhe, jerking s's through its own blood drying on the heat of the rock.

The man from the diner wiped the blade on the sole of his boot.

"Might have been a ground snake, harmless, but I couldn't be sure. Out here you learn not to take chances."

"Jeezus," whispered the reporter.

"He shouldn't have been out here. Worm around where you don't belong, and you're playing loose with your life."

The reporter, grinning in a confused rictus, said simply, "Hey, you don't want to kill me!"

"I'm no murderer," spat the man from the diner. "Get that straight, you nosy son of a bitch."

"It was my job," gestured the reporter helplessly.

"Is it your job, too, to understand?"

"I think I could. You know?"

"Like it was *their* job to understand something they'd never come up against before. Sure. Maybe you would," he snapped suddenly. "But what about the rest? They have names for what I did, their own terms. Because they've never seen real suffering and had to pull together enough guts to help another human being through the misery of dying."

He stood.

"I'm sorry, kid. Sorrier than you know. But that's a feeling I've had to live with for years and years."

He started to walk away. He stopped. He poked at the bloody remains of the still-quivering snake on the rock. He stirred it with his knife blade. A strong whiff drifted up to him, and he angled his face away from it.

"Is it dead?" asked the reporter, because he couldn't think of anything else to say but knew he ought to go on talking. Nervously he smoothed his hair back from his face and drew his hand back quickly, his hair so hot and shining it stung his hand.

"It's dead, all right," said Raven, his stomach churning. "I'd know that smell anywhere."

A half hour later Raven was back on the highway. He found the car on the shoulder of an ill-paved detour that would cut several miles through the roughest terrain before reaching Alamagosa. The reporter must have read the map incorrectly, as a few unlucky tourists did from time to time; the broken line seemed to intersect the highway at a point just before the rest stop but in fact bypassed it by more than a mile.

He pulled over and braked, relieved again by the absolute silence. In a few hours, as night enshrouded the desert, the silence would deepen till it reached all the way from the blaze of the Milky Way down to the lonely sentinel arms of the saguaros scattered on the horizon. Then the cold would cut through the crystal air like a guillotine.

Raven started to work.

He loosed the chain on the winch at the truck's tailgate. Then it occurred to him that the boy might have been lying about the car, too. But he dismissed the notion, considering the heat and the location of the car. The young man had been lucky, all right. He must have had to walk the quarter mile back to the highway, another two miles on to the diner.

That was less than a fourth the distance he would try to walk today. Without a compass.

Raven got down on his back and sidled under the car, an old Rambler station wagon. The trouble was in the front end. The right tie-rod end had been snapped loose, probably by the impact of running off the road, or maybe by a bump that had sent the car off the road.

So he would have to tow it in.

He knew what he would say. That he found it abandoned on the roadside, that he went looking for the owner and finally had to give up. By that time—

That was just the part that made him sick. It was the first time that he had had to do this, to leave a man to die to insure his own safety. Not like that time years ago. Something had gone wrong with the air system; some kind of bacterial contamination in the diatom filters, that had been his guess. It got to Jack, to Rob, and even to Willard; and for hours he sat next to them as they died by the most painful progressions, until he could bear it no longer. It was unmistakable. He had read an article something like that once, about a nurse in a terminal cancer ward who swore she could predict which ones would die the following day; she said there was an odor given off by the dying, which once smelled was never forgotten. He had shrugged at the article then, of course. Then came the test. *The filters*—why didn't it affect him? For hours he sat strapped in, hearing the agony of the dying around him, filling the capsule until it filled his head, driving him almost mad with waiting. But it never hit him. Antibodies, genetics, some damned advantage or other he happened to possess. Or maybe it was the others, perhaps they had had trouble with the inoculations, like smallpox vaccinations that don't always take the first time, though that now seemed almost too ludicrously simple to believe. But the infection got them, and when it did he had to give them the only peace it was in his power to give. Once he had known for sure. And he had known. It was unmistakable.

Tell them that part of it when you write your damned—But this was one story that would never get written. It was too late for him to face the accusations, the questions, the disbelief; too late to live steeped in the rankness of city life ever again.

He wrapped the rubber guard over the bumper, wound the chain through the frame and locked it, reached in the cab of the truck, and threw the lever that activated the winch.

The car nosed up a foot, two feet. It stopped abruptly as the winch shivered, overloaded, and shut itself off.

He knelt and peered under. He saw nothing. He dropped to his back and hunched underneath again.

Crawling farther back, he twisted sideways on his shoulders. The A-frame was still good, near as he could see.

He crept on. There, the rear axle, straddling the edge of the ditch, the left wheel caught awkwardly on a chunk of granite. So. He'd have to lower the car, push it back with the truck, and try again. Back out like a sidewinder, trying not to think of anything but—

Wait. The car creaked over his body. Hold it, hold it—He saw the frame tipping. He had forgotten to set the hand brake on the car. But too late *too late*—He jerked his head to the side. The rear wheel broke free of the rock, and the car slipped halfway down the ditch.

He screamed as the car crunched to a stop, crushing his left arm deep in the gravel. His cry was muffled and lost. His head lolled from side to side, his face knocking loose bits of dried mud cake and grease into the corners of his eyes.

Seconds passed. He felt his ruptured life seeping into the ground.

Then, very slowly, he turned his head a last time to look at the remains of the arm pinned beneath the chassis.

Slowly, very slowly he reached his right hand to his belt, found the sheath. Grasping the handle decisively he drew up the burnished blade. It trembled briefly, its sharp point scratching the oil pan. More fragments of dry underseal fell onto his body.

He smelled oil and gasoline. He smelled burned axle grease. He smelled the stuffed upholstery up inside the car. He smelled no other person near and knew he would not.

Pinned in shadow, it seemed as if night had already fallen here.

He knew he had nothing else left to do. He had done almost the same thing several times since. They had been passing through. They had been truckers, problem pregnancies, fevered children with the cold sweat already sealing their eyes. He had had no choice.

He left his head turned to the side. There was no mistaking it. The arm, cracked open to infection, its systems destroyed, cells and tissues already mortifying in the dirt, would go first. Then the chill and the ache would spread up, not far, to his heart.

Quivering again, then steadying his hand with a grip of practiced resolution, he moved the sharp, curved blade toward his blood-soaked shoulder. *If thine eye offend thee,* he thought.

He knew what he had to do. He knew. For he had smelled it, that smell, and he knew what it was. He knew too well.

It was the smell of death.

Leo Kelley's new story is about Amelia Farnsworth, the witch of Three Deer Crossing, whose spells worked because they came straight from a heart full of belief and sweet dreams.

The True Believers

by LEO P. KELLEY

"ARE YOU REALLY A WITCH?" ASKED Wilbur Hatch, nine years old and no longer a believer in Santa Claus or fairies.

In her huge crypt of a kitchen, Miss Amelia Farnsworth set both of her eyes on Wilbur and let her nobody-knew-for-sure-how-old face wrinkle and wreath into a web any spider would envy as it spun its own silken engineering marvels. "There are those who say I am, yes," she replied, smiling and blue-eyeing Wilbur. She set out milk taken from Amos Braithwaite's cow, found gingerbread done to a turn in the oven, and cut a giant slice for her guest.

"You haven't even got a black cat," Wilbur accused, spitting tasty crumbs from a too full mouth. "I bet you don't even have a broomstick." He chewed thoughtfully for a moment and then said, "The gypsies camped out by the creek, I bet they have crystal balls and all!"

And then someone was knocking urgently on the screen door, and Amelia opened it to admit a hot gust of summer and Marylou Fayette.

"Miss Amelia," Marylou cried, "I have need of a most potent potion. Spring has come and gone and here is summer again and winter won't wait!"

"A most potent potion," Miss Amelia repeated, stuffing walnuts in Wilbur's pockets and shooing him through the screen door to dragonfly across the meadow beyond. "Chilblains come as sure as the snowflakes," she said, shaking her gray head. "Even in early summer. But potions melt them so the blood can flow free again. A pinch of pale spring parsley, a sprinkling of Egyptian mummy dust suspended in a spoon over a burning

beeswax candle—how will that do?"

"No," Marylou said, shaking her head and frowning all over her somewhat humdrum face. "It isn't chilblains that nettles me so. It's something here." She put both hands over her heart hidden in its fleshy prison. "I am almost thirty years old."

Amelia threw up her hands and expressed appropriate alarm. "Why, I remember all the way back to when I was almost thirty myself. That was when I was lucky and met Serafin, who was so magnificent." Slipping back in time, remembering. The kitchen disappearing and a glamorous stage replacing the old iron stove, footlights the woodbox where the dog shivered in its canine dream. "Did I ever tell you about Serafin the Magnificent?"

And Marylou, sorely needing her potion and knowing the unwritten rules of the game that everyone in Three Deer Crossing played with the gentle Miss Amelia, said, "Not that I can recall offhand, no, you didn't."

"My Serafin traveled the old Orpheum Circuit. But never you mind about that. Being almost thirty at this particular time and place definitely does have its disadvantages. He had hair the color of crows at midnight. His eyes were gray but sometimes they looked positively purple. Tall as grown timber he was, and gentle as a chipmunk."

"Was he an acrobat?" Marylou asked, as she had asked twice before when she had listened to Miss Amelia's story, still delighted with the idea of purple eyes.

"Oh, my, no, not Serafin. Serafin was a magician! He would wave those mysterious hands of his and white rabbits would scamper and doves would fly out of scarfs that were every color of the rainbow all at once. That was the kind of magician my Serafin was! He made water flow from empty bottles and flames flare where only a moment before there had been a beautiful bouquet of the reddest roses you ever laid eyes on."

"How wonderful."

"He was magnificent. That was in nineteen hundred and thirty. That was a time when the country had a dire need of magicians. There were men standing and looking lost on street corners and mothers worrying about the life span of their children's shoe leather. We all needed him so—his rabbits and his mysterious fires and his fine gentleman's face. I needed him most of all. I was a girl then and the theater was a temple. Serafin's performances were rites that left me a true believer."

"In the rabbits that scampered?"

"In the glory of true and tested love. You never saw such fires or such roses either as Serafin could conjure right there in front of your very eyes out of only air and emptiness."

Miss Amelia placed the pitcher

of milk back in the icebox and put the gingerbread away in an airtight tin. "Have I shown you his picture? No? Come, then." And she was gliding into the living room and over to the mantle and picking up the faded tintype in its gilded frame and holding it reverently out in front of her for Marylou to see and be awed by.

"He is very magnificent, there can be no doubt about it," Marylou declared sincerely, searching for the purple eyes and finding only ordinary ones where they should have been. "He looks truly magical in his black cape and mustache."

Miss Amelia nodded happily. "I would go and sit in the hush and darkness of the balcony and barely notice the juggler with his Indian clubs and oranges or the singer with too many pearls at her throat. Every night for six weeks, I sat and watched. And the men would come and change the cards in the corners of the stage and the new cards would declare, 'Serafin the Magnificent—Master of Marvels.' And he was all of that and already lord of my, oh, so hungry heart!"

"And then—"

"We met in the little tearoom next door to the theater. He was there with another girl and the juggler. The juggler pointed at me—most impolitely, I thought at the time—and then Serafin—how his face lit up! The juggler whispered something to him, and then he was on his feet and coming, coming . . . After that, he would walk home with me after the theater closed each night. We would sit close together on my front porch swing and he would tell me things."

"Things!"

"He told me he loved me truly, but I never told him that I had earlier made a potion and slipped it into his lemonade. He told me we would marry when he finished his tour. I wanted to accompany him, but he said that would not be proper, that it would not look right in a young lady of my social standing. So when he went away, I made myself ready to wait."

"And then he died," Marylou said and quickly clapped a hand over her offending mouth.

But Miss Amelia pretended she hadn't heard the remark and that she had not twice before told Marylou the sad but beautiful story of her doomed love for Serafin the Magnificent. "He was killed on the train, which went off its track while taking him to the next town. Before he left, I stood with him outside the theater, and he kissed my lips and told me again how much he loved me. I never again, not once, felt homely or unwanted."

"Were you homely and unwanted before Serafin?"

"Oh!" cried Miss Amelia, holding out the picture of her magician and smiling at it. "Ah!" she exclaimed, laughing her face into another web of wrinkles. "I was a field mouse, all brown and bland. I was a tame

barnyard turkey that no one ever looked at twice, not with my frumpy clothes and croak. I was never able to master the art of being beautiful, you see. Somehow, it escaped me totally. But Serafin didn't care because he saw me with those purple magician's eyes of his, and the mouse that I was became a miracle, the turkey turned into a bird of paradise. I liked myself so when he looked at me and I became a true believer in my witching and the power of my potions."

"But he died."

Amelia cocked her head at her magician caught forever in the gilded frame. "At first, I couldn't forgive him for that, but finally I did. Birds of paradise hold no grudges, my dear. Once we know we have been loved, we can teach others all about joys and jubilees. Which reminds me. I suppose you brought a lock of your young man's hair. A glove he once wore?"

Marylou, feeling her thirtieth birthday peeping eerily around the corner at her, eagerly handed Miss Amelia the chestnut froth of hair she had hidden in the depths of her apron pocket. "His name is Orly," she told Amelia. "Orly Saunders. He is not nearly as magnificent as Serafin, but I do so want him to be mine. Can you conjure him into my arms? Can you make a potent potion that will lock his heart to mine forever?"

Miss Amelia took the lock of Orly Saunder's hair and tied a black shoelace around it, humming happily to herself as she went back to the kitchen, followed by Marylou.

Out of the cupboard and onto the stove went her copper kettle. Into the kettle went pump water. And then, dried periwinkle.

"Periwinkle," she explained to Marylou, "induces true love between man and woman. It has been wrapped with earthworms and then dried. You must put a drop or two of this in the next malted you share with your young man at the drugstore." She stirred the mixture with a wire whisk. When it was boiling, she poured some into a tiny green vial which she gave to Marylou. "Now then, for the lock of his hair." She held the hair by the shoestring she had tied around it and swished it about in the remains of the potion bubbling in the sleek copper kettle. Taking it out, she squeezed it almost dry and then wrapped it in a clean piece of chamois. "Pin this on your camisole, my dear, right next to your heart. Now, one last thing. A dab of Emily Dickinson and the spell shall be most thoroughly and properly cast."

Marylou listened to Miss Amelia, spellbound.

" 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach . . . ' "

Marylou, under Miss Amelia's guidance, memorized the poem.

"Repeat it out loud every dawn, every noon, every sunset. Wear the

lock of his hair pinned above your heart. Sprinkle the potion in his malted. It is the very same one I gave long ago to my Serafin; so I'm sure it works. But, just as a precaution, buy yourself red slippers and touch attar of roses to the lobes of your ears."

"Oh, thank you!" Marylou said. "Did I tell you? His name is Orly."

"It's a truly lovely name," Miss Amelia said, properly impressed.

"I wish there was something I could do for you, Miss Amelia. I'll bring a fresh-killed goose, of course. But—"

"Tush. There's nothing you can do for me, child. My Serafin has already done all that can be done for a woman like me. Did I tell you? He loved me very much," Miss Amelia said, smiling.

As Marylou slipped through the screen door, she was in a dither of delight for two reasons. One, she was sure now that Orly would love her truly long before she turned thirty. Two, she thought she knew a wonderful way to repay Miss Amelia for her witching that would be better than any old fresh-killed goose.

Because her mind was already alive with the happy sounds of the shivaree to be, she barely noticed the arrival of Amos Braithwaite, who had come to the Witch of Three Deer Crossing for a charm that would make sure his cow calfed safely when it came her time.

"Orly," Marylou said firmly in the drugstore the next afternoon. "Now you listen to me, hear?" She crossed her too thick ankles, and her new red slippers sparkled wickedly. "We have got to do something for Miss Amelia Farnsworth."

"We'll have us a double chocolate malted," Orly told Cy Wilkinson as he appeared behind the soda fountain to take their order.

"What's this about having to do something for Miss Amelia?" Cy asked Marylou. "She sick?"

"No," Marylou replied. "It's just that she's always helping other folks out all over the Crossing with her witching, and, well, I think we ought to do something real nice for her in return."

"So do I," Cy said. "Why, only last month, she gave me a special spell to cause a rainbow. My missus was in a deep sulk because of all the rain we were having; so Miss Amelia, when I told her, why she put together some celandine and pennyroyal and told me some secret words to recite, and, by golly, there was a rainbow the very next day, big as life and twice as pretty!"

"I remember," Orly said. "I was down in Chatham Corners, and it reached all the way down there."

"Folks said it could be seen as far north as Forked Hill," Cy marveled. "It sure did pleasure a lot of people from what I hear."

"Well, that's what I mean," Marylou said, touching her blouse, beneath which her charm was

pinned securely to her camisole.

"We could save her a bushel or two of winter apples after the harvest," Orly said. "We could invite her to come on along to the husking bee come October."

"This is only June, Orly," Marylou said sternly. "I'm talking about right now. Winter's a far way off."

Cy set the double chocolate malted in front of them.

"Oh!" Marylou cried in alarm. "What ever is that?" She pointed a trembling finger out the store window.

As Cy and Orly turned to look, she poured Amelia's potion into the malted and then serenely began to unwrap a straw.

"Don't see nothing, Marylou," Cy said, puzzled. "Don't see nothing a-tall."

"I thought it was—well, I guess I'm just jittery thinking so hard about Miss Amelia and all."

"You're jittery," Orly said slyly, "because you got yourself some pretty new shoes. And nice new perfume too, I notice."

Marylou beamed as he bent to sip through his straw. She let him have more than half the malted all for himself.

"Now about Miss Amelia," she said when only chocolate froth remained inside the tall glass. "I was thinking about the time machine the town rented for the Fourth of July."

"She couldn't afford a trip even as far back as last week," Orly said, shaking his head. "She's too poor. Everybody knows that."

"We could take up a collection," Marylou suggested. "Miss Amelia must be getting tired of trussed-up hens and strings of onions and like that in payment for her witching. We could take up a collection, and she could go right on back to nineteen hundred and thirty, if folks be generous."

"Why all the way back there?" Cy inquired, scratching his bald head. "That's sure some real long trip."

"Cy," Marylou said, "do you mean to tell me Miss Amelia never mentioned Serafin the Magnificent to you?"

"Sure she did. She mentioned him lots of times."

"Well, there you are, don't you see?"

A week later, the Witch of Three Deer Crossing *oohhed* and *aahhed* with the rest of the villagers as the Fourth of July sky became spangled with fireworks. She sipped her root beer and slipped little Wilbur Hatch a box of jujubes which she just happened to have with her.

"We're going to get married come fall," Marylou whispered happily to her. "Orly and me. He promised. It worked just fine, that potion of yours."

"I knew it would," Miss Amelia said, believing in an even more powerful potion composed of equal parts of young blood and desire. "I

just knew it would work perfectly."

Orly put his arm around Miss Amelia and winked at Marylou, who winked right back, the signal that now was the time, and said, "We have a surprise for you, Miss Amelia."

"I really have more sacks of potatoes than all of Ireland," Miss Amelia said with a trace of a sigh. "You two just go on and be happy. That's payment enough for me."

"That's not what Orly means," Marylou said quickly. "He's talking about the time machine."

"You mean that contraption sitting over there in Foley's meadow? Whatever does it do?"

Marylou explained that the time machine had been rented by the town for the annual Fourth of July celebration with an option to buy it if it proved satisfactory. She said that it was a—she searched for the forgotten word.

"A spin-off," Orly said, coming to her rescue.

"Yes, that's right," Marylou went on. "It was a spin-off from the space-probe program, Miss Amelia. They make and sell them all over now. It can take a body back to almost anywhere—anytime, I mean. It could even take a body clear back to nineteen hundred and thirty, if a body had a real strong hankering to go all the way back there."

Miss Amelia looked with new respect and not a little wonder at the time machine that no longer seemed quite so cold and steely. "Nineteen hundred and thirty. Well, I do declare!"

"He'd be there," Marylou whispered excitedly. "He'd still be magnificent."

Miss Amelia touched a hand to her throat, tried to speak, found she could not for a moment. And then said, "The ticket to travel must cost a pretty penny."

Marylou and Orly smiled at each other, and Marylou said, "The whole village, every soul in it, chipped in. You can go back free of any charge at all!"

"Free of charge? Charity? I can't accept—"

"Yes, you can, Miss Amelia," Cy Wilkinson insisted as he joined them. "And I'm going along for the ride just to make sure everything works out all right."

Miss Amelia became aware of the fact that voices had hushed and that the eyes of the villagers were upon her. "When?" she asked in a hummingbird's voice.

"Now!" Marylou cried. "Right this very minute!"

"Not now," declared Miss Amelia firmly.

"Why not now?" wailed Marylou, her face falling, her hands whipping about in front of her in agitation.

"I must make myself presentable first," Miss Amelia explained, looking down at her faded apron and old oxfords. "It won't take me long." And she was gone.

While sparklers electrified the easy summer air, Marylou, Orly and Cy sipped root beer and walked about the vast bulk of the time machine and talked of witching and other scientific miracles. As the very last Roman candle flung its fiery challenge at the shocked stars, Miss Amelia returned, and all the villagers issued new *aahhhs* and *oohhs* at the surprising sight of her.

Her cloche hat of cream felt covered nearly all her gray hair except for the four spit curls she had painstakingly pasted to her lined forehead. Her long dress with a pleated skirt reached far below her knees, revealing only the faintest traces of trunk dust and the ancient odor of moth balls. Her patent leather pumps were polished and gleamed slickly in the light from the paper lanterns strung overhead.

"Twenty-three skiddoo!" cried Cy Wilkinson, breaking into a few steps of the bunny hop as she came shyly up to him.

"Oh, you kid!" responded Miss Amelia, joining in the spirit of his fond remembering.

The unfamiliar powder and rouge that she had applied gave her face the look of a prison. Behind the paint was a once-upon-a-time girl full of sweet dreams struggling to get out and back to an earlier wonderful world where magicians worked glittering miracles not only with white rabbits and old top hats but with young girls' hearts as well.

"Crank her up!" Cy yelled to the overalled technicians on hand beside the time machine. "Let her rip and let's go!"

Miss Amelia waved from behind the glass door once she was seated inside the time machine. Cy mouthed something the crowd didn't catch, although Marylou told Orly she thought he had shouted "Excelsior!"

The technicians checked voltages and timescans. They turned dials, and little lights flashed in response.

"Nineteen hundred and thirty!" Marylou called out to remind them.

They opened the glass door, asked something of Miss Amelia, and she answered them. They set the timestop for May 2, 1930.

A humming rose from the machine and a hurrah from the crowd, and then Miss Amelia and Cy winked out of sight inside the time machine, which simply stood there and went on humming to itself.

"You just go on now, Miss Amelia," Cy said when they arrived. "I'll wait right here by the ticket booth until you're ready to go on back home."

"Cy," she whispered, gripping his veined hand. "I'm so frightened. I do believe I should have brought along my vapors."

The poster in front of the theater screamed: BRING THE WHOLE FAMILY TO SEE SERAFIN THE MAGNIFICENT WORK HIS WONDERS! SEE THE MAN WHO KNOWS THE MYSTERY

OF LIFE—THE MAN WHO HAS APPEARED BEFORE ALL THE CROWNED HEADS OF EUROPE!

"Go on," Cy said, giving her a little push. "This is your second chance. Don't you dare miss it!"

So Miss Amelia went on. She bought a ticket as she had done so many times before and went into the theater, where popcorn crackled, and sat through the performance, dabbing now and then at her eyes with a lace handkerchief because the man on the stage before her was indeed magnificent in his black cape and manly beauty.

After the last rabbit had scampered off the stage and the last dove had flown up and away, Miss Amelia left the theater and made her way along the alley to the stage door. This was something she had never done before. Always before, she had waited demurely outside the theater entrance for the magnificent Serafin to come striding out of his mysterious world and take her arm and walk with her under the elms and take her home, after which they would . . . But tonight was different. A time machine that was more miraculous than any of her old charms or potions had made it different.

"What do you want?" asked the grizzled old bear of a man guarding the stage door.

What, oh, what? thought Miss Amelia, and her heart answered her at once and correctly. "I'm a friend of Mr. Serafin's," she announced proudly.

"Charlie's down the hall there. See him? He's down there talking to the juggler by the fire door."

Charlie?

Strange, Miss Amelia thought. I always thought his name was Serafin. But no matter. Whatever his real name, he was the same man who had said the wonderful words that had made her heart melt like butter whipped too long in the churn. She moved unsteadily toward him, trying to master the dark premonition that had suddenly made her knees weak and her palms moist.

"Her name's Amelia Farnsworth," Serafin/Charlie was saying to the juggler, who was dressed in sequined tights and ballet slippers. "She's some girl!"

Miss Amelia stopped in her tracks, not one for eavesdropping, but she couldn't help hearing.

"Then you did it?" asked the juggler suspiciously.

"Sure, I did it. I told you I would. Only last night, she sent this letter backstage to me. You wanted proof. Here it is."

The juggler took Amelia's gardenia-scented notepaper from the magician and began to read, his lips moving as he did so. Suddenly, he clapped one hand to his thigh and hooted loudly. "Listen to this, will you! 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my

soul can reach . . .' Now if that don't beat all!"

"I told you I could make any girl in any town fall in love with me. I made mousy Amelia Farnsworth fall in love with me even though I had to lie myself silly to do it. So I win the bet we made in the tearoom. Pay up!"

Grumbling, the juggler reached in his tights and pulled out a rumpled dollar bill, which he handed to the magician in payment for what he grudgingly acknowledged to be the very cleverest trick. "Your wife's going to have nine or ten fits when she finds out."

"What my wife doesn't know won't hurt her. Thanks for the buck and watch out who you bet with next time."

Floors tilting under her, tidal waves drowning her, Miss Amelia reached out and clung desperately to the curtains for support. She swallowed hard as she watched her once-beloved magician idly stuff the fake roses into his wand and scoop up a rabbit and plop it into the secret compartment in his tall top hat, all ready for his next performance.

And then, with the earth quaking under her, she ran before he had a chance to turn and see her, leaving behind all that had sustained her throughout the buffeting years. Through the alley she ran, imagining magpies mocking her as they juggled wings full of oranges. Through the alley and on into the arms of Cy Wilkinson she ran, and he *oommphed* as she thudded against him, a haunted thing, completely out of breath and hope.

"Miss Amelia, what—?"

"Back," she gasped. "I want to go back. Quick!"

Cy took one alarmed look at her stricken face and pressed the button on the mechanism the technicians had given him, and they *thupped* away.

"Miss Amelia!" Marylou shrieked as the Witch of Three Deer Crossing stumbled stunned through the glass door of the time machine. "You've got to help me!" She ran up and threw herself into Miss Amelia's arms. "While you were gone—Orly said he would be back in a little while, and when he wasn't, I went looking for him and—" She began to wail.

"There, there," said Miss Amelia, looking forlornly up at the suddenly melting stars.

"I found him—down in the meadow behind a haystack!" Marylou whimpered. "He was with one of those evil-eyed gypsy women from the camp out by the creek!"

"I understand," said Miss Amelia, and now she truly did.

"An amulet!" Marylou cried. "A secret word or two! Give me a charm to make him come back and love only me forever!"

"I can't. It wouldn't work."

"But you are a true believer!" Marylou exclaimed in shock, looking up at the broken face.

"Not any more. I am not a true believer any more. Not in mysterious magicians or my own potions."

"Wasn't he—wasn't he magnificent?" Marylou asked in a weak voice.

"Yes," Miss Amelia answered, wetly blinking away the stars. "He was very magnificent. But he wasn't mine—not him or his magnificence. He never had been. My potion proved totally worthless."

A moan from Marylou as she thought of Orly and what she had seen him doing down behind the haystack in the meadow made hot with dark gypsy desire.

"There, there," said Miss Amelia hopelessly as she and Marylou, no longer true believers, walked and wept together in the way of women everywhere over fallen altars and false gods.

This is a hard story to describe. It is in one sense a variation of one sf's classic themes; that of survival after some sort of catastrophe, but Mrs. Saxton's treatment is strikingly different and compelling.

Living Wild

by JOSEPHINE SAXTON

Cruelty has a Human Heart,
And Jealousy a Human Face;
Terror the Human Form Divine,
And Secrecy the Human Dress.

The Human Dress is Forged Iron,
The Human Form a fiery Forge,
The Human Face a Furnace seal'd,
The Human Heart its hungry Gorge.

William Blake, circa 1794

I AWOKE IN THE NIGHT, A VERY unusual occurrence. I never got to sleep quickly, but when I finally did it was always as if I had been transmuted into stone. I once slept through five-and-a-quarter hours of electric alarm clock.

I opened my eyes, and I had the impression that I had heard a kind of roaring, some sudden happening of sound that was not a jet plane and not a thunderclap but which could have been a great wind. Some vortex out of the sky, coming and going like the impulse to make love when the body is exhausted. Hot, rapid, hollow. It was cold in the bedroom, which was unusual too because the whole house was heated by small-bore steam pipes that my Stuart had fixed himself years before, in an attempt to dry out the ancient fabric of our house. I could see the full moon low over my laburnum tree, glowing red hot through the miasma rising off the nearby town, diesel exhaust and smoke and steam and particles of gypsum dust, all sucked up in the inhalations of the moon, making cancer in her ancient body. Someday she would issue an endless flood of polluted blood from some secret orifice, rain it down into our puny tides.

But why could I see the moon? I always slept with the thick velvet curtains carefully closed. The window was open. I never left the window open; I had always been frightened that an owl might fly in and

tear out my hair. A white owl, hooting and infested with fleas. Or bats, possibly worse. There were no curtains at the windows, that was it. Still torpid, I could not bring myself to get up and discover the curtains on the floor. I supposed there to have been a storm which had blown open the window and dislodged the rails from the plaster, which was crumbling in many places. Annoyed and shivering, I put out my hand for my cigarettes and lighter. I would fumigate myself a bit first, before coming to a decision about getting up. In a moment I might want to visit the bathroom and then perhaps make a malted milk, I thought. I have always hated getting out of bed. I got the cigarette packet and put the firmer, tipped end in my mouth. I scrabbled around for the lighter on the bedside table, which was higher than my head, it being really the cupboard end of a Victorian sideboard. I touched a plastic ashtray, a paperbacked book of Blake's *Songs of Experience*, and then something small and wet and cold, with a tail.

I shuddered under the blankets for a long time before the taste of chewed tobacco brought me to my senses enough to realize that what I had touched was not a dead mouse dropped by an invading owl, but the bowels of my lighter, the wick and fluid-soaked cotton wool. I had no recollection of having had the thing to pieces, as I sometimes do when it needs a new flint or wick. It always took me hours to get the bit of wire through the tiny hole; I was so useless with my hands that I sometimes thought I must be slightly spastic. I would sit up in bed with the bits of spring and flints, fiddling and poking far into the night. Yes, I thought, I had given up in despair. I surfaced from my steaming cave and fumbled for the switch on the cord of the lamp. It fell to pieces in my hand, bits of plastic rattled on the pediment of the cupboard and were then swallowed silently by my sheepskin rug. I cursed and lay back a moment, controlling my temper. I could tell it was not going to be an easy night, because with me, if one thing goes wrong, then many do. I would have to have a man in to fasten those bits of switch together again. Then it occurred to me that the wire could be live so I edged away to the opposite side of the bed—Stuart's side—and got my feet trapped in the tucked-in blankets. In a few weeks, when Stuart came back to discuss a reconciliation, would he sleep there again? I thought of that with longing and apprehension and struggled with the covers impatiently, drawing in my breath. I yelped with pain. It seemed I had lost the filling out of my front tooth; I must have swallowed the bit of silver amalgam when I brushed my teeth the night before. I got out of bed and found my robe and slapped around on the wall for the main light switch, and when I

found it, nothing happened. I felt around then for a sweater and jeans; it seemed as if I might not get back to sleep for some time. I could not fasten the zip of my jeans; the little metal runner that locked the nylon teeth had come off. Almost in tears I just fastened the button and abandoned the idea of shoes. There seemed to be a lot of things on the floor, none of them shoes. The curtains were in a heap, and when I lifted them up by the nylon rail, they slid off the ends; and the flexible rail sprang up and knocked something off my dressing table with a crash. Cursing, I threw it down and tried to shut the window but could not, for the old metal catch had come off. It was a very stiff window because of rarely being opened, and I heaved at it to try and jam it when the whole pane swung outwards and fell out of my hands down to the greenhouse below. The awful sound stopped, and I stood with my hands gripping my shoulders, all huddled up, ready to start wailing. I was horrified. Naturally. It took me a few minutes to decide what to do, to collect myself at all. Then I thought I would go and fix myself a drink and a snack. Calm down a bit. I could not find the doorhandle. I panicked then, I think. I recall running at the door with my shoulder once or twice, oblivious of pain, and there was a dreadful noise of rending wood, and somehow I forced my body round the side of the door where it had broken away from the flimsy frame. There was dry rot in that house, but still, I must have used a lot of force. I ran downstairs weeping, holding my shoulder with one hand and my mouth with the other, and was almost projected into empty space by a board that came up under the carpet, which was loose. I tried all the lights in the hall, but there was nothing happening; and I picked up the phone, but it was dead. Reeling and frightened, I ran into the kitchen and put my foot into about four inches of water. I started to wail and incongruously had only one thought in mind at this point: honey. I wanted several spoonfuls of Tasmanian Leatherwood Honey. And then a hot drink and a snack. I sloshed around in the wet and dark looking for the gas cooker, but it wasn't there; and where the stove should have been, there was just some rubble under the water. There was a smell of gas. I could believe none of it, and yet it was true. Somebody had swiped all the kitchen equipment. Ridiculous. Alarming. I ran outside onto the lawn, which was a sea of mud from the rain which was pouring heavily. The moon had gone behind rain clouds or the ends of the Earth. I hugged myself under the old laburnum, still aware of my desire for honey, but my passion for the stuff was not greater than my fear of going back into that house. If there was still a kitchen cupboard and honey in it, it could stay there. Ev-

erything was wrong in that house, and besides I had other thoughts forming, rising up in me like the news of a death when one always thinks first: No—it can't be!

I was adding up details like a computer that contains the inevitable answer to a problem but cannot deliver it until all the necessary circuits have connected. Lighter case, electric wires, dental filling, curtain screws, window latch, nails in floorboards, carpet hooks, zip fastener, cooker, stove, doorhandles. It was a list like an ironmonger's nightmare, and there was one other thing on it that he could not supply. My wedding ring. My hands were naked, empty. There had been a strange wind out of the sky. There had been a disaster. It was not an enemy hydrogen bomb; it was not germ warfare or anything like that. It was not enemies from this planet at all. I felt convinced of it. I began to know it. I could almost picture the great ships zooming down, pausing, giving out some frightful magnetic flash. I could hear again the sucking sound of air rushing into empty spaces where all the metal objects had been. And see the ships accelerate away with their strange bullion. They needed metal, we had it. So they took it. Some strange race of thieves had come in the night and lifted all the metal from the planet Earth. My God, I thought, and every nerve was alive in me with intuitive knowledge—My God! All the metal has gone!

I did not call out for help or scream or anything like that. Who could help, and who would hear, and what could they do? And did I want Them to return? They must be terribly powerful and probably unscrupulous and frightful. If They could do that, what else might They not do? I sort of jumped around in the mud and bit my knuckles and wept, but this was only for a while. I saw myself as ludicrous, and I also saw myself as just one amongst millions of panic-stricken people. Vast numbers would die in crashes and shipwrecks; buildings would crumple up; bridges would suddenly not be there; all machinery would disappear and scatter conveyor belts and bottles and boxes everywhere; lifts would plummet; surgeon's knives would disappear in midoperation; heaps of people would hurtle on for a while along railway lines until. . . . The sheer magnitude of this happening made me reel mentally, and I recoiled with horror when I realized that this would mean starvation also, especially here in England. No transport meant little food. There would be riots, massacres, fighting for food. There would also be disease because of no sewers and pipes, and there would be fires from escaping gas and explosions, and it came to me that I must, somehow, survive. Survival became central in my consciousness. And so I began to walk away from the house. There was only one other house nearby and

that was Henderson's. As I passed it, I stole some of his hard pears from the branches overhanging into the road and stuffed them down my sweater. Henderson was a widower, and he was now probably dead; he worked on the nightshift at the gypsum mine, and I thought he would surely be trapped forever down there, the metal cage gone up like his shout for help.

Our house is on the edge of a 'green belt' in the Pennines. The wildest moorland and valleys, accessible only on foot, are within ten miles of roaring mills and evil mines. I had set off from the house with some vague idea of making for the town, but I began to realize what an illogical step this would be. I began to wonder why on Earth I had not gone back indoors and realized that my instincts had served me well enough; for if there were to be rioting crowds and mass panic, I should aim for some safe solitude other than a house. People would maraud everywhere in search of supplies; I could be killed for my few groceries and my blankets. I hurried on, changing direction, taking a road that led to the meadows. It was raining heavily by then, and I slapped along in my bare feet and met no one and nothing. I wondered at first why there was no traffic about until once more it hit me that there were no cars or lorries any more. Peace and silence, if I could find somewhere secure!

As I began to climb the hill away from the town, I passed the small mental hospital that had once been a manse. I could hear voices at the other side of the high wall, but the place was inaccessible from the main road; they had taken out the great gates and walled it up, doubtless to prevent patients from running out into the traffic and to create privacy. I found toe holds in the huge stones and hauled myself up to look precariously over the top. There was broken glass set in concrete, but it was worn smooth with the sulphurous airs and driving rains that sweep the hills and valleys. A man in a white coat sat on the front steps, head in hands, weeping. Two pale women in night clothes, disheveled hair blowing, bent over him, comforting, persuading.

"There, there . . . Dr. Markowicz . . . come inside . . . we'll look after you. . . ."

So that was Dr. Markowicz! I could not help smiling at the spectacle of the psychiatrist so soon broken under shock, and his two madwomen apparently trying to be sensible in a crisis. I had been given a note to take to Dr. Markowicz's outpatient's sessions by my G.P. some months before, but I had not kept the appointment. I had not liked the idea of discussing my private life with strangers; my trouble was not serious, only worry and overtiredness when Stuart and I decided to separate temporarily. In

this world, the only person who can really help is oneself. My Yorkshire independence bordered on stubbornness, I daresay, and still does. It pays off in the end. So, independent, I slipped back onto the pavement, my hard pears sticking into me, and slopped on faster. I had to get across a meadow, and then I was in open country which belongs to no man. It was all either completely unclaimed or National Park. But in that meadow stood a bull that I had many times admired from a safe distance. He was a magnificent shaggy beast of a Highland breed, a famous sire and a fierce character. Did I dare walk past him without the protection of barbed wire? If he charged, could I run fast enough to get over the stile at the other end of the path? I had to risk it. I decided I would rather face the bull than a rabble of humanity. It was possible that he would not even notice me, of course, because although the dawn had broken, the moon was gone and it was a gloomy morning with all the rain. Could bulls detect by smell?

I gathered all my courage into one inhalation and began to walk quickly. I was more than halfway across when I saw him turn his head and stare at me. He put his head down and pawed the ground, and I stared back at him, not breathing for sheer fright. I got over the stile and almost collapsed with trembling at the other side. The bull turned and walked a few steps. I had won the battle, not with the bull, but with my own timidity. I have always been so easily terrified, it was a triumph. As I thought of the Stately Home nearby, I felt less brave. They had a pride of lions in a paddock to entertain the visitors. Was I to face them too? Bitterly I reflected that antique furniture was surely enough to attract visitors on a Sunday? Lions! Appalling! And there were no guns to shoot them with; I could only hope that they would forage for their food amongst the hordes in the town. Would the Duke be the first to go? In my distress I was becoming facetious. I longed intensely for a cigarette. So this was one way of giving up smoking—no cigarette factories, money, machines—wonderful!

But it was not going to be wonderful; it was going to be hard—and I of all persons. It had been a standing joke in our family, my ineptitude. I had caused my brothers endless amusement as a child; it had filled in their idle time, making fun of their stupid sister. But I did know my way across the hills, for they had allowed me to follow them on their way to summer camps, although I had always been sent home before teatime.

"Right, thee gan' on 'ooam, our Emma Jane. We' gunna camp up at Mermaid's Pool and tha's ooanly a lass." So, walking in the wet and dangerous morning, the first day of the Earth without metal (and I wondered if only the smelted metal

had been stolen, or vast supplies of ores also), I determined to visit Mermaid's Pool. And Madwoman's Stones, and Kinder Downfall, and the many stone circles. I would see them all, they would be my home. I would complete all the journeys that my brothers had made, and I would do it alone.

If my child Leonora had lived, she would not have been the kind of girl to be sent back home. She would have been as good at camping as she was at sewing and cooking and almost everything she tried. She was almost a prodigy; she just *did* things. Once she was shown how, a skill soon became hers. At seven she had been taught some elementary stitching by Mrs. Henderson, who died shortly before Leonora herself died. She had made herself a petticoat in a week and taken it proudly to school to show teacher, and the woman had accused her of lying, of having had help from me. If she had had help from me, the thing would have been ruined! How I hated that schoolteacher for humiliating my little girl. I had been humiliated many times at school but always for being stupid. School lessons were no problem to Leonora. Monday arithmetic did not blacken her Sundays with dread, tracing maps did not bother her. I recall my geography lessons, the tracing paper like ice, slithering, floating, black graphite marking me up to my elbows, the blurred edges of Africa, holes in the paper from my concentrated pencil and little wrinkled tatters from erasing. Torture! Shame! And Leonora learned to play the violin. Doubtless, the friends we then had thought her less of a musical genius than we did, but to hear her play—it baffled me. How could any person, let alone a seven-year-old girl, manage to move her fingers like that, one at a time, and meaningfully? I had never been able to entertain anyone with anything except my daftness. I remember one party where I was a great success, really made everyone laugh. I could not think of a fruit beginning with A.

That first night I slept in a gully on the edge of the moors. I had seen no human beings all day; I had just kept on walking and had eaten a stolen pear when I was very hungry. I was so exhausted that I did not mind the cold and the wet; all I cared about was that I was safe from the hordes of panic-stricken people, alive and alone. I kept thinking I heard things in the sky but saw nothing. There would be no more planes, I knew. I was just worried in case the thieves, whatever they were, came again for something else. Nothing happened.

I was several hundred feet too high above sea level for any real warmth in the camp I finally made. I spent hours trying to make a woven shelter with heather and bracken, but I could not make it watertight and windproof. When I

found my tiny cave, I was exultant. It was really no more than a hole under a huge rock, entered by a natural fissure that could be blocked with stones at night; but it was dry, and when I swept it out and made a bed of dry bracken, it seemed the most adequate home I had ever had. It was a long time before I succeeded in making a fire, but after the first few attempts I did not give up but decided to try every day for as long as my patience would last—longer than that I swore—and I *did* try every day, rubbing sticks in dry bracken and fibers until it happened for me. I kept telling myself that I was no more stupid than anyone else. I had hands and brain and will; I would have them co-ordinate. Being alone, I had no derisory audience except myself, and I told myself to shut up, calling me names, and watch the fire start. I knew it would start because I had a clear picture of it outside my cave. One day the smoke went up thin and miraculous and fire came. I never let it go out but fed it with sticks and peat. That fire represented everything I had longed to do on those holidays of my brothers. They, poor souls, had always taken matches. If they had been there to see me, they would have sworn that I was not the sister they had known. I spent many hours sitting by my fire, dreaming about those days and those camps that had been forbidden me, until in the end it did not matter any more, nothing hurt in the dreams. I wondered how my brothers, the two remaining alive since Charles had his accident, were faring in this emergency. I supposed the disaster to be world-wide—after all, why pick on tiny England—and therefore Harry in Brisbane and Joe in Nigeria would be in some kind of predicament also. Dead? I would never know, unless people invented something without any metal that would go so far. I visualized winged horses—it seemed like cosmic inefficiency not to have invented or evolved winged horses.

I thought a lot about Stuart. We were to have met that winter to discuss a reconciliation, to see how we had fared without each other. I felt horribly convinced that he had fallen in love with someone else. I had last heard of him in London. What a place to be in a crisis! Was he dead? But I had no time for mourning the unknown. I was still full of the vacuum he had left in me, and his possible death meant only that his absence would continue, which it might in any case. Deaths. Leonora's death. I thought about that too at nights by my glowing fire. If she had died suddenly instead of a bit at a time, it might have been better. But we should not have had that seven months of constant communication when I never left her alone. In the end we became telepathic for each other. Leonora became more and more like me, until at last she sur-

passed me in ineptitude. The mattress at the foot of the stairs, because she fell so often. The bed in the lounge, because she forgot how to walk. Her sticks of arms and legs, like the withered roots of some useless vegetable. The violin in the loft because she wept at the sounds it made for her. If they had taken away that tiny bean of stuff from within her brain, they would have taken her life with it.

"Nurse her at home, we can do no more than you."

Spoon-fed, bottle-fed, voice twisting, cracking, losing sense, babbling and whispering and then ceasing. I tried to recall if I had been to her funeral or not. I could only recall tea in plain white china, white ribbon bows, and thousands of flowers. And seedcake.

But I did not spend all my time dreaming. There was the business of getting food. There had been plenty of blackberries and bilberries, and although my gut writhed at first, they filled me sufficiently. Then I found a crop of mushrooms. Cautious at first, not certain which were deathcups, I finally became confident and astute at looking in the right places for them and even had a source of chanterelles, which I stored dry. There were a few birds' eggs although it was the wrong time of year for there to be many, and it was because of these that I learned to climb. I tried to make a bow and arrow, but I could not make a strong enough string to last more than a few feeble twangs. I cursed myself for an idiot for not looking by the roadside for an old auto tire on the way up, but how was I to think so far ahead? I suppose I must have been planning on a temporary escape at first. I was to see only one sheep, and that was away before I could get to it. I had always thought that sheep stayed outdoors all the year round. I was full of lust for its flesh and skin the moment I saw it; living wild makes essentials spring to the mind before any humanitarian consideration. There were plenty of rabbits and rodents and grouse, but these too eluded me. I had luck in finding two hazel bushes incongruously growing in a patch of beechwood by the river. I stripped off every nut and stored them in my cave, rationing myself to a very few each day.

But quite apart from scratching about for food, there was the pleasure of the landscape and the delight in roaming the hills. In only a couple of months or thereabouts I had become hardier than I would ever have thought possible, and my tattered jeans and sweater kept me warm even when snow came. Barefoot, I was not at the mercy of slipping leather and sliding rubber, I felt secure on high ledges, gripping with my toes. I learned to run slowly to keep warm, and the lack of cigarettes, which had been a trial at first, had allowed my lungs to expand. I breathed pure air all the

time and felt health rise in me as it had never done before. It was a mild winter compared to some those hills have, and the snow only stayed right on the top of the highest peaks. I went up to Madwoman's Stones in the snow and stood in the center of the perfect circle and looked all around at the vast whiteness of the moor. From that vantage point only wild country could be seen, not one man-made scar was in sight, except the circle itself, and that was no scar, it was an object of wonder to me. I became keenly aware that I was living the same kind of life as the people who had built that circle of stones and the barrows grouped around under the heather. Or was I? Perhaps they had been very civilized people, and there had been much more to their building than these few stones. I sensed some ancient intelligence. The earth was full of it; one only had to stand and listen and smell. I thought of the people over in the valley. Were they reverting to crude savagery as I had feared, or were they perhaps making a new kind of civilization such as there had been thousands of years ago, before metal had been smelted? I still had little confidence in human nature and no curiosity to find out.

And then came the terrible time.

Frightful fear in the night.

Padding of feet and growling and snuffling outside my doorway of stones.

I woke in the night to the sounds, and I think I have never been so frightened. I could smell a strong animal odor, and I peered out between the boulders and saw the shaggy hair against the moonlit sky. I heard the slap of great lips, and I was taken back about thirty years to when I was very tiny. At Whipsnade zoo I had seen and heard my first lion. This one had come up from the valley, searching for food. I thought it would be the end of everything. If I could not outrun and kill a sheep, I could do nothing to a lion. I sat on the floor of my cave and prayed to some nameless power that it would go away. After a while all was silent. The next morning I crept fearfully out and began tending my fire. There was a dreadful crashing of bracken on the hillside, and I looked up to see the creature leaping down towards me. I was inside the cave and had drawn in the stones to blockade it before he reached me. He growled and snuffled again, and I lay curled and trembling in terror. My free life was at an end. Many hours passed; two dawns came, I think, and I was appallingly thirsty, and the stench of my own excrement was horrible.

I decided to die. It seemed then as if that had been my mission all along that trip. To die. I would go outside at dawn the next day and wait to be attacked. Maybe my reactions would make me run, but not far. He would leap on me and kill. I would rather give myself up to the

beast than die in filth and fear. After I had made the decision, everything felt better. I began to doze comfortably and drifted into a series of dreams.

Then I rested in the milky quiet between sleeping and waking, waiting for the dawn when my death would happen.

And then a vision came to me. All the paranormal had become the normal, we humans were changed. An evolutionary step had suddenly taken place. It was the dream of the mystic and the amateur Yogin and the magician and the alchemist and the mad scientist come true. Suddenly. Why? I was not sure but I felt that it was some kind of test. And yet, if it was a test, who was the examiner? I had seen no vision of God, did not believe in personality beyond the human. The test perhaps of the Universe itself. If humanity proved useless in its new function, then might it not be sloughed or moulted like an out-of-season growth. Had we ever been anything else to the Universe? Were we any use in the *pattern?*

Did I in fact have new powers? I had facility with my body that I had never had, it was certainly as if I had rediscovered myself, expanded, grown. What about the thieves from space then? Were they a figment? I then supposed so, but I had severe doubts of any supernormal abilities. And yet had I not communicated telepathically with Leonora all those years ago? Sometimes then the edges of the circle had encompassed other things . . . and I was to die, had decided. I would speak to the lion with my heart. I would calm him, befriend him. If I failed, then death would come, and my vision would be a mere hallucination, or else I was still too stupid to benefit from new powers, or I would prove my new power in one direction at least. The vision would be true and all would be well. I pushed away the stones and crawled outside. With my eyes closed I staggered upright and held out my arms. I reached inside and gathered together all the thing I know to be love. I thought of the lion and I let it flow towards him. He crouched at my feet, lolled his great head, and made a soft growling. All was as I had hoped.

I called him Leo. My new powers did not include astonishing originality, nor did I succeed in finding any other thing within me except a sense of expansion in general. I could not move stones except with my hands. If I sent messages to any person, I received none in return. I could not transport myself except by walking. It was disappointing, and yet I had my friendly lion. He hunted rodents and rabbits for me, and I gave him most of his kill raw and roasted bits for myself in the hot ashes. We went for long scrambles around the hills, and all the time I was trying to think what to do about my vision. I had seen that humanity was unaware of what

had happened. Perhaps I had been chosen to tell them? But I let the weeks of winter slip by without acting on that possibility. I wanted no part of it. I was not ready to return to the world; the idea filled me with dread.

A day came that could be called a day of spring. It was clear and blue, and the little river ran bright and noisy over the pebbles, and the sun seemed to avoid the small white clouds that came and went rapidly. I had found a few wild violets and primroses, and this had made everything seem splendid and full of hope. I called Leo and we set off to go up to Mermaid's Pool. I had somehow not dared to go to this place alone, but now that Leo was with me, I had no misgivings. The paths are very steep but not impassable, even after the landslides that melting snow had caused. Perhaps if my brothers had not been so certain that I could not manage the climb, I too would have camped up there with them. We went straight up through a wood that threatened to slide away in its own leaf mold, scrambled from root to root and then out onto sheep tracks that led to a rocky escarpment like seacliffs, from which there was a magnificent view of the Downfall, a narrow watercourse about three hundred feet high, catching the sun like a slit filled with gold. Leo seemed more in his element the higher we climbed, and he joyfully crashed about in the patches of bracken that grew taller than myself, and for him it must have seemed like Africa that day. Then came the stony place where nothing grew; the floor was grey grit that would someday become the white sand that lit up the riverbed below, and the rocks piled up on each other with an eerie regularity that seemed like an ancient fortress more than a fortuitous scattering of compressed mud. Then we had to achieve the impossible. There was a scree at an angle of forty-five degrees, made of shale and sand, and it seemed that two steps forward made three sliding back. If one of us slipped, there was only a void before flesh met rock far below. I had learned by then how to decide not to be frightened, and so we went up, and then suddenly, at the top, everything was changed. It was like no place on earth that I had ever been.

We were not at the top of the mountain but on the lip of a huge cup, like the drinking fountain for a Great Horse, and the lees of the draught were still shining there at the bottom of an amphitheater of stones grown soft with moss and bog cotton. The very far edge of the pool met the sky where the water seeped silently away underneath the skin of the earth, and the few clouds swam in the water and slipped off into the blue without a tremor. It was a silent and enchanted place, without birds, and Leo padded without sound amongst the rocks, and I did not shout or

sing, although I might have, so exalted that day had become. It was impossible not to think of the Gods of the place and to feel that a secret had been penetrated and to sense also the men from the Stone Age who must have hunted there and stood where I stood, looking out through space towards the farther hills. I looked at the waters and the stones, and I thought that they were now the densest matter available to mankind, the lowest order of substances. I thought I could sense, almost as a scent, finer substances in and around me. What if the stones were 'lost' also—what would become of humanity? We would become finer than air, have no bodies, and there would be no planet Earth, for it is rock to its heart, molten, as I have read. If we were unprepared for that, as we were unprepared for our 'loss' of metal—it would be the end. Dross in the Universe, denied existence by the very order of things.

I removed my rags and stepped into the waters and swam three times around the rim of the cup, caressed by weeds and making as little mark on the surface as possible. To splash and play would have been sacrilege. When I had got dry and dressed again, Leo and I explored the place further, and he found a dead sheep, mummified by the drying winds. It lay like a white scar in a brown hollow, sunken slits where eyes had once missed nothing beneath the black foot; no flies and corruption, just death come and gone when the time was right for that sheep to give up life. I made the decision. I would go and tell the world how it was with things. I would come down from the hills.

The next day we set off to go down into the town. I was full both of dreadful uncertainties and sound convictions. I felt I needed miracles to prove my message. Would a tame lion be sufficient? Should I not be able to change water into wine, heal the sick? Were there other people who had realized the new potentials? If so, then all would be well; I could only add my word to theirs.

When we had reached smoother paths, I threw away my clothing; a prophet in raggy jeans—I felt it to be unsuitable. I sat astride Leo, who could bear my slight weight, for I was as thin as sticks and he was a strong animal. Once we were over the hilltop and had passed a reservoir, we could see Glossop in the valley, and beyond it the fantastic panorama towards Manchester. On a clear day the view is perfect for about twenty miles. Even the smog cannot obscure the Pennines on some days. It is the meeting of the ancient and wild with the modern and ordered—ordered only into greater chaos. Buildings smother the earth. I looked and saw smoke in the morning sun. Smoke rising in rose and pearl and amber until the dreadful beauty became unbear-

able. Smoke has risen on those hills for three hundred years, ceasing to belch ethereal Hell only on Sundays. Coal and coke burning in great metal boilers, metal rolling mills, metal looms, metal on the soles of the clogs and metal toecaps to prevent blood from beading up on the edges of the metal machines metal shovel metal cog metal nail and hammerhead cage wrench wire lock can gate trap hopper chain.

I could hear myself screaming as if it were some other woman, and I was aware that my voice reached Manchester, although by then it would be silent. Not only did my scream reach Manchester, it traveled out and out across the air until it left the planet at a tangent and carried straight on out through the masses of space until it reached the heart of things. I was no longer conscious of what I had screamed by then though; so I received no reply. I roared in rage at the furnaces and forges below me; I yelled and bellowed until vomit choked the chords, and I ran with rage and anger and fury so great that it was like a tunnel of fire passing through the heart of a foundry, melting all things to incandescent alikeness. My anger was at the deception I had suffered. I had been brought to believe that humanity was evolved to something greater, and it was not so. The metal was there as it had always been. Nothing had changed, any fool could see it. Only on Sundays had the mills rested, like the gods that they were, shaping existence. My humiliation was enormous; it was the greatest and stupidest and most foolish boob of my entire useless, silly life. I had surpassed myself in idiocy. I felt I could never speak of it to any person, that I could not live with myself. I saw plainly that I was insane, deluded, the victim of my own twisted perceptions and mad logic. I was the arch-jumper-to-conclusions. I thought. And my thought had produced a rare exile and a rare set of deductions. It was past laughing at; I had no sense of humor to cover an error such as I had made. We ran on, and I cut myself on barbed wire, and I saw that my paths had never led that way before. We were approaching the bogs. I banged into a post on which there was a notice which I read. It concerned foot-and-mouth disease. The whole countryside was banned to humanity until further notice. Thank you, I said to the filthy bacteria, for accomplishing my certain solitude. I must have read about foot-and-mouth disease and forgotten about it. Stored it away as a necessary element in my approaching psychosis. And the lion. A grotesque conjunction of chow and Great Dane, a dumb and shaggy sire come to comfort the mad lass, strayed from home like himself. He could not bark and neither could he roar. He could only course along beside me and raise wildfowl in his stupid canine joy. I was so ashamed.

I was so deeply ashamed of myself. There was no point to life for such a creature as me. Down in the town there are official sanctuaries for stray dogs and naked crazy women.

We came to a place that I knew and had always dreaded, for once my brothers had in play threatened to put me in it—a bottomless bog of slime marked by a prehistoric monolith called the Penny Stone, although the euphemism could not cloak its meaning. It stood erect and potent over millennia, a perpetual reminder of the necessity of continuing life. I defied it. I allowed myself to slide forward into the mire, accompanied by suckings that sounded like a massive womb taking in seed. I closed my eyes and deliberately relaxed against the cold, and loving hands of velvet mud caressed me, and I was lapped about by tiny secret streams that ran beneath the hair of the slough. I would join others who had died there, for the place had the reputation of claiming those who dared to touch it. I lifted my hand and marked black on my forehead where the stuff would reach, and I smiled happy in the knowledge that all would soon be over. I desired oblivion and it was obtainable. I felt to be airborne then and the dark was lit with softly colored lamps and everything was smooth and there was a sighing in my ears.

I became conscious of pouring rain, and I spewed bitter mud and bile. The dog was not there. I had a wound in my shoulder where his teeth had held me, and my scalp was torn. I can only suppose that I used his great back as a bridge and levered myself out on his sinking body. I could not spend time weighing up the relative values of his life and mine; it was too late. My deepest instincts had proved stronger than my will and desire, and he had been unfortunate in his faithfulness. There was no mark on the surface of the bog that might indicate a dead lion-dog. I knew I would never forget any moment of that day and so put it away and felt cleansed of poisons. Sober. Empty, exhausted, sober.

It was a night of reconciliations and realizations, acceptances and the sorting out of the facts that had made everything happen as it did. I wondered if I could ever again trust my perceptions, if I would ever be certain that I was not tricking myself into the fantastic through the misapprehension of the commonplace.

I had put my fingers on a wringing wet paper tissue that lay on my bedside table where I had left it after crying myself ill that night when 'the space thieves' came and thought it to be first a dead mouse and then a dismantled lighter. I had failed to find even one curtain screw, for something in me had decided even before I awoke that there were none. I had set the scene deep in my mind so that when I

awoke on the night of a bad storm when the power lines were down and the roads quiet because cut off by flood, everything would fit to make no less than an earth-shattering experience. A time had been reached when either enormous changes took place in me and in my life, for the better, or I would degenerate into psychosis. I could see it when I thought about it in retrospect. The strange thing was that I had indeed awoken to my mad self, but it had changed me for the better. Some people do not need quite so much as thieves coming from outer space and a vision in a mountain cave plus an attempt at suicide in order to grow and change and become themselves. Or maybe they do, but never get the chance!

I sat outside a shooting lodge all that night in the driving rain, getting the mud washed off me, and going back over events. The filling in my tooth had been out for weeks, but all memory of the avoided dental appointments had been wiped out conveniently by someone in me who had a more amusing idea. The window catch had been hanging by one screw for months, and a high wind could have wrenched it off. And I, in my crazy state, wrenched off the entire frame and also smashed the rotten doorframe. Not easy, but not impossible. There was hardly a sound frame in the house. Old and decrepit but beautiful when we bought it, it had had no attention after Stuart had left. He had done a lot of work, but there had been still much to do, and I was useless and hated the intrusion of workmen.

Everything that night had made me think only of vanished metal. I had left the broken light switch in despair after a futile attempt to mend it. Who but a person deluded would try to switch it on? And I chose to wear the jeans with the broken zip. I had another pair with metal studs, but those would have refuted the case I was building up for a great happening. The telephone had been cut off because I had not paid the bill. What an act I put on for myself! Turning left into the utility room instead of right into the kitchen, thereby not finding any stove or cooker but a flooded floor. That room always floods in a storm. The doorsill was broken and we did not use it for anything except storing surplus fuel. The unfortunate mental patient who thought he was Dr. Markowicz—or had I deliberately misheard?—comforted by two resident night nurses. Did they persuade him of his delusion that night? What would they have done with the more serious 'case' leaning on the wall eavesdropping? And I had braved a bull securely fastened in by green polyethylene-covered fencing, difficult to see in that light, impossible to see by one who has already decided that it is not there. For me, all the metal had gone. And it was not a meaningless delusion. I

had not become Napoleon or Mary Queen of Scots, condemned myself to cozy incarceration in a new and more congenial world where I was the biggest thing in all the crowd. I had accomplished something much more than that with my psychotic inventions. I had moved lead and iron out of my being, heated them, transmuted them, absorbed them, and survived. My vision was a vision of my own self.

By the time I was on my way back home under cover of darkness, I knew that I had never been more myself. There was also the problem of how to insert myself back into a sane world unnoticed, and I very much needed a hot bath and some clothes.

It was like housebreaking. I should hate to be a thief; I could not endure the stress, I thought, and then checked myself. I *had* endured stress, I had proved myself. The television was on in the lounge, and I had taken the risk of exploring upstairs, hoping at least to get some of my own clothes. But I could not be sure that it was my house. Perhaps Stuart had returned and sold it. Everything was different. New paintwork, floral carpet, and speckless emulsion paint. The hinges of the bedroom door were set in neatly carpentered insets of new wood. Who had put paint on my woodwork; who had mended, repaired and refurbished? I felt hostile and outcast.

In the bedroom the light was glowing softly through a pink shade that *had* been mine—ours—and in the bed a woman lay asleep, her head a strange flowering of blue rollers. At the foot of the bed was a wicker crib, and I held my breath to look over the neat blanket at the very young baby with little flames of dark hair sticking to its forehead with perspiration. I felt tempted to loose the cover but dared not touch at all. If I had touched, I would have pulled the blanket back and clutched the infant up to me, kissing and burning with love. The face of the baby reminded me of Leonora when she was tiny. I could remember every detail, even the tiny pores on the nose, still blocked from the fluids in my womb. Her womb. I had come too late. The house belonged to someone else, it seemed. Stuart and another woman? I realized how much I dreaded that. I wanted him back, wanted everything to begin again. The woman began to snore and turned over and opened her eyes and looked at me and closed them immediately. She began to dream then, I think, about a naked, filthy wild woman who stood looking into the crib, matted hair in a bush and staring eyes from which fell tears.

I crept out into the night, cringing at the din of the television (when we lived there we had no television; we liked each other's company—at least until we became two islands of sorrow without any

communication). I went down and broke into Mr. Henderson's house, knowing that he worked on the nightshift. I bathed and dressed myself in some of Mrs. Henderson's clothes that were still in the drawers and helped myself to a good meal from his store of cans. I left everything clean and neat and hoped that he would not notice. I felt slightly sick with the taste of monosodium glutamate in my mouth. I had lived better on the moor; the food of normal life was perceptibly slightly poisonous. But I held it down and soon felt stronger, and the aches and pains of the bog began to leave me. Thoroughly clean and brushed, my hair did not look too bad. It had stopped raining; so I walked down to a lunchroom on the main road and spent some of Mr. Henderson's loose change on further food and coffee until the day had begun. I felt guilty and decided I must pay him back somehow, just so long as he never got to know the truth. No one must ever know that.

Stuart and I have been back together five years now. We are very happy and our house thrives, tended by both of us. He knows nothing of my time in the hills and has no idea why I sometimes drop a knife or a needle in sheer astonishment, caught out by memory. He thinks it an echo of my old clumsiness come to warn me that I am far from perfect, even though I can run a household in a normal manner even to the extent of driving in a screw clockwise, not cursing as it leaps back out of the wood. I am not what I was; I am changed. Yet I am his. Our life is more like what we hoped for when we first married. I do not know where he went during our separation; it is a silent agreement between us that we shall not speak of it. Maybe something amazing happened to him too, for he is changed also. We love and nothing spoils it, not even the memory of Leonora whose death separated us instead of bringing us closer as it might have done.

Stuart had returned to the house shortly after I left. He had waited, meanwhile mending and drying out and painting the house. When we finally met again, it was not long before he fumbled in his wallet for my wedding ring, which he had saved all the time. I had left it on the kitchen windowsill, the scrap of metal that might have made all the difference to my secret plans for a sojourn in the wilderness.

And the woman lying in our bed the night I crept upstairs, wild and alone? Myself. Either past or future. An hallucination of something real. In a few weeks I shall give birth to a child, the wicker crib is all ready at the foot of the bed. It will be as I saw. Maybe I shall wake one evening and see a naked wild creature standing in the room, and close my eyes and say nothing. But I shall not need to wake in the night to

the echo of thieves from space.

If it ever happens in actuality, I shall be the only woman on Earth to laugh and take no notice. But my perceptions, my unconscious mind, my other, inner selves! I shall never be smug and say 'I am absolutely certain' again. And let it be so; let black become white and the sun green, and let chocolate taste of fried kidneys, so long as it all has some good purpose. The baby kicks. I shall make brown bread for tea. Things like that I live with and for; if they are illusion, then it is so. I know only that I am myself, that I know more of what I am than before. That's all. Not everything. Touch wood, touch stone, touch golden ring. Let here and now be real.

Odds and Evens

I HAVE JUST GONE THROUGH A RATHER unsettling experience. Ordinarily it is not very difficult to think up a topic for these monthly articles. Some interesting point will occur to me, which will quickly lead my mind to a particular line of development, beginning in one place and ending in another. Then, I get started.

Today, however, having determined to deal with asymmetry (in more than one article, very likely) and to end with life and antilife, I found that two possible starting points occurred to me. Ordinarily, when this happens, one starting point seems so much superior to me that I choose it over the other with a minimum of hesitation.

This time, however, the question was whether to start with even numbers or with double refraction, and the arguments raging within my head for each case were so equally balanced that I couldn't make up my mind. For two hours I sat at my desk, pondering first one and then the other and growing steadily unhappier.

Indeed, I became uncomfortably aware of the resemblance of my case to that of "Buridan's ass."

The reference, here, is to a 14th Century French philosopher, Jean Buridan, who was supposed to have stated the following: "If a hungry ass were placed

isaac asimov

exactly between two haystacks in every respect equal, it would starve to death, because there would be no motive why it should go to one rather than to the other."

Actually, of course, there's a fallacy here, since the statement does not recognize the existence of the random factor. The ass, no logician, is bound to turn his head randomly so that one haystack comes into better view, shuffle his feet randomly so that one haystack comes to be closer; and he would end at the haystack better seen or more closely approached.

Which haystack that would be one could not tell in advance. If one had a thousand asses placed exactly between a thousand sets of haystack-pairs, one could confidently expect that about half would turn to the right and half to the left. The individual ass, however, would remain unpredictable.

In the same way, it is impossible to predict whether an honest coin, honestly thrown, will come down heads or tails in any one particular case, but we can confidently predict that a very large number of coins tossed simultaneously (or one coin tossed a very large number of times) will show heads just about half the time and tails the other half.

And so it happens that although the chances of the fall of heads or tails is exactly even, just fifty-fifty, you can nevertheless call upon the aid of randomness to help you make a decision by tossing one coin once.

At this point, I snapped out of my reverie and did what a lesser mind would have done two hours before. I tossed a coin.

Shall we start with even numbers, Gentle Readers?

I suspect that some prehistoric philosopher must have decided that there were two kinds of numbers: peaceful ones and warlike ones. The peaceful numbers were those of the type 2, 4, 6, 8, while the numbers in between were warlike.

If there were 8 stone axes and two individuals possessing equal claim, it would be easy to hand 4 to each and make peace. If there were 7, however, you would have to give 3 to each and then either toss away the 1 remaining (a clear loss of a valuable object) or let the two disputants fight over it.

The fact that the original property that marked out the significance of what we now call even and odd numbers was something like this is indicated by the very names we give them.

The word "even" means fundamentally, "flat, smooth, without unusual depressions or elevations." We use the word in this sense when we say that a person says something "in an even tone of voice." An even number of identical coins, for instance, can be divided into two piles of exactly the same height. The two piles are even in height and hence the number is called even. The even number is the one with the property of "equal-

shares."

"Odd," on the other hand, is from an old Norse word meaning "point" or "tip." If an odd number of coins is divided into two piles as nearly equal as possible, one pile is higher by one coin and therefore rears a point or tip into the air, as compared with the other. The odd number possesses the property of "unequal-shares," and it is no accident that the expression "odds" in betting implies the wagering of unequal amounts of money by the two participants.

Since even numbers possess the property of equal-shares, they were said to have "parity," from a Latin word meaning "equal." Originally, this word applied (as logic demanded) to even numbers only, but mathematicians found it convenient to say that if two numbers were both even or both odd, they were, in each case "of the same parity." An even number and an odd number, grouped together, were "of different parity."

To see the convenience of this convention, consider the following:

If two even numbers are added, the sum is invariably even. (This can be expressed mathematically by saying that two even numbers can be expressed as $2m$ and $2n$ where m and n are whole numbers and that the sum, $2m + 2n$, is still clearly divisible by two. However, we are friends, you and I, and I'm sure we can dispense with mathematical reasoning and that I will find you willing to accept my word of honor as a gentleman in such matters. Besides, you are welcome to search for two even numbers whose sum isn't even.)

If two odd numbers are added, the sum is also invariably even.

If an odd number and an even number are added, however, the sum is invariably odd.

We can express this more succinctly in symbols, with E standing for even and O standing for odd:

$$\begin{aligned} E + E &= E \\ O + O &= E \\ E + O &= O \\ O + E &= O \end{aligned}$$

Or, if we are dealing with pairs of numbers only, the concept of parity enables us to say it in two statements, rather than four:

1) Same parities add to even.
2) Different parities add to odd.

A very similar state of affairs exists with reference to multiplication, if we divide numbers into two classes: positive numbers (+) and negative numbers (−). The product of two positive numbers is invariably positive. The product of two negative numbers is invariably positive. The product of a positive and a negative number is invariably negative. Using symbols:

$$+ \times + = +$$
$$- \times - = +$$
$$+ \times - = -$$
$$- \times + = -$$

Or, if we consider all positive numbers as having one kind of parity and all negative numbers as another, we can say, in connection with the multiplication of two numbers:

1) Same parities multiply to positive.
2) Different parities multiply to negative.

The concept of parity—that is, the assignment of all objects of a particular class to one of two subclasses and then finding two opposing results when objects of the same or of different subclasses are manipulated—can be applied to physical phenomena.

For instance, all electrically charged particles can be divided into two classes: positively charged and negatively charged. Again, all magnets possess two points of concentrated magnetism of opposite properties: a north pole and a south pole. Let's symbolize these as +, —, N and S.

It turns out that:

+ and + or N and N = repulsion
— and — or S and S = repulsion
+ and — or N and S = attraction
— and + or S and N = attraction

Again, we can make two statements:

1) Like electric charges, or magnetic poles, repel each other.
2) Opposite electric charges, or magnetic poles, attract each other.

The similarity in form to the situation with respect to the summing of odd and even, or the multiplying of positive and negative, is obvious.

When, in any situation, same parities always yield one result and different parities always yield the opposite result, we say that "parity is conserved." If two even numbers sometimes added up to an odd number; or if a positive number multiplied by a negative one sometimes yielded a positive product; or if two positively charged objects sometimes attracted each other; or if a north magnetic pole sometimes repelled a south magnetic pole, we would say that, "The law of conservation of parity is violated."

Certainly in connection with numbers and with electromagnetic phenomena, no one has ever observed the law of conservation of parity to have been violated, and no one seriously expects to observe a case in the future.

What about other cases?

Well, electromagnetism involves a field. That is, any electrically

charged particle, or any magnet, is surrounded by a volume of space within which its properties are made manifest on other objects of the same sort. The other objects are also surrounded by a volume of space within which their properties are made manifest on the original object. One speaks, therefore, of an "electromagnetic interaction" involving pairs of objects carrying electric charge or magnetic poles.

Up through the first years of the 20th Century, the only other kind of interaction known was the gravitational.

At first blush, there seems no easy way of involving gravitation with parity. There is no way of dividing objects into two groups, one with one kind of gravitational property and the other with the opposite kind.

All objects of a given mass possess the same intensity of gravitational interaction of the same sort. Any two objects with mass attract each other. There seems no such thing as "gravitational repulsion" (and, according to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity there *can't* be such a thing). It is as though, in gravity, we can say only that $E + E = E$ or $+ \text{X} + = +$.

To be sure, there is a chance that in the field of subatomic physics there might be some objects with mass that possess the usual gravitational properties and other objects with mass that possess gravitational properties of the opposite kind ("antigravity"). In that case, the chances are that it would turn out that two antigravitational objects attract each other just as two gravitational objects do; but that an antigravitational and a gravitational object would repel each other. The situation with respect to the gravitational interaction would be the reverse of the electromagnetic one (like gravities would attract and unlike gravities would repel) but, allowing for that reversal, parity would still be conserved.

The trouble is, though, that the gravitational interaction is so much more feeble than the electromagnetic interaction (see FIRST AND REARMOST, F & SF, October 1964) that gravitational interactions of subatomic particles are as yet impossible to measure, and a sub-tiny attraction can't be differentiated from a sub-tiny repulsion. —So the question of parity and the gravitational field remains in abeyance.

As the 20th Century wore on, it came to be recognized that the gravitational and electromagnetic interactions were not the only ones that existed. Subatomic particles involved something else. To be sure, electrons had negative charges, and protons had positive charges and with respect to this, they behaved in accordance with the rules of electromagnetic interaction. There were other events in the subatomic world, however, that had nothing to do with electromagnetism. There was, for instance, some sort of interaction involving particles, with or without electric charge, that

showed itself only in the super-close quarters to be found within the atomic nucleus.

Did this "nuclear interaction" involve parity?

Every subatomic particle has a certain quantum-mechanical property which can be expressed in a form involving three quantities, x, y, and z. In some cases, it is possible to change the sign of all three quantities from positive to negative without changing the sign of the expression as a whole. Particles in which this is true are said to have "even parity." In other cases, changing the signs of the three quantities *does* change the sign of the entire expression and a particle of which this is true is said to have "odd parity."

Why even and odd? Well, an even-parity particle can break up into two even-parity particles or two odd-parity particles, but never into one even-parity plus one odd-parity. An odd-parity particle, on the other hand, can break up into an odd-parity particle plus an even-parity one, but never into two odd-parity particles or two even-parity particles. This is analogous to the way in which an even number can be the sum of two even numbers or of two odd numbers, but never the sum of an even number and an odd number, while an odd number can be the sum of an even number and an odd number, but can never be the sum of two even numbers or of two odd numbers.

But then a particle called the "K-meson" was discovered. It was unstable and quickly broke down into "pi-mesons." Some K-mesons gave off two pi-mesons in breaking down and some gave off three pi-mesons and that was instantly disturbing. If a K-meson did one, it ought not to be able to do the other. Thus an even number can be the sum of two odd numbers ($10 = 3 + 7$) and an odd number can be the sum of three odd numbers ($11 = 3 + 7 + 1$), but no number can be the sum of two odd numbers in one case and three odd numbers in another. It would be like expecting a number to be both odd and even. It would, in short, represent a violation of the law of conservation of parity.

Physicists therefore reasoned there must be two kinds of K-meson; an even-parity variety ("theta-meson") that broke down to two pi-mesons, and an odd-parity variety ("tau-meson") that broke down to three pi-mesons.

This did not turn out to be an altogether satisfactory solution since there seemed to be no possible distinction one could make between the theta-meson and the tau-meson *except* for the number of pi-mesons it broke down into. To invent a difference in parity for two particles identical in every other respect seemed poor practice.

By 1956, a few physicists had begun to wonder if it weren't possible that

the law of conservation of parity might not be broken in some cases. If that were so, maybe it wouldn't be necessary to try to make a distinction between the theta-meson and the tau-meson.

The suggestion roused the interest of two young Chinese-American physicists at Columbia, Chen Ning Yang and Tsung Dao Lee, who took into consideration the following.

There is, as a matter of fact, not one nuclear interaction, but two. The one that holds protons and neutrons together within the nucleus is an extremely strong one, about 137 times as strong as the electromagnetic interaction, so it is called the "strong nuclear interaction."

There is a second "weak nuclear interaction" which is only about a hundred-trillionth the intensity of the strong nuclear interaction (but still some trillion-trillion times as intense as the unimaginably weak gravitational interaction).

This meant that there were four types of interaction in the universe (and there is some theoretical reason for arguing that a fifth of any sort cannot exist but I would hate to commit myself to that): 1) strong nuclear, 2) electromagnetic, 3) weak nuclear, and 4) gravitational.

We can forget about the gravitational interaction for reasons I mentioned earlier in the article. Of the other three, it had been well-established by 1956 that parity was conserved in the strong nuclear interaction and in the electromagnetic interaction. Numerous cases of such conservation were known, and the matter was considered settled.

No one, however, had ever systematically checked the weak nuclear interaction with respect to parity, and the breakdown of the K-meson involved a weak nuclear interaction. To be sure, all physicists assumed that parity was conserved in the weak nuclear interaction, but that was only an assumption.

Yang and Lee published a paper pointing this out—and suggested experiments that might be performed to check whether the weak nuclear interactions conserved parity or not. Those experiments were quickly carried out, and the Yang-Lee suspicion that parity would not be conserved was shown to be correct. There was very little delay in awarding them shares in the Nobel Prize in physics in 1957, at which time Yang was 34 and Lee 31.

You might ask, of course, why parity should be conserved in some interactions and not in others—and might not be satisfied with the answer, "Because that's the way the universe is."

Indeed, by concentrating too hard on those cases where parity *is* con-

served, you might get the notion that it is impossible, inconceivable, unthinkable to deal with a case where is *isn't* conserved. If the conservation of parity is then shown not to hold in some cases, the notion arises that this is a tremendous revolution that throws the entire structure of science into a state of collapse.

None of that is so.

Parity is not so essential a part of everything that exists that it must be conserved in all places, at all times and under all conditions. Why shouldn't there be conditions where it isn't conserved or, as in the case of gravitational interaction, where it might not even apply?

It is also important to understand that the discovery of the fact that parity was not conserved in weak nuclear interactions did not "overthrow" the law of conservation of parity, even though that was certainly the way in which it was presented in the newspapers and even by scientists themselves. The law of conservation of parity, in those cases in which its validity had been tested by experiment, *remained* and is still as much in force as ever.

It was only in connection with the weak nuclear interactions, where the validity of the law of conservation of parity *had never been tested* prior to 1956 and where it had merely been rather carelessly *assumed* that it applied, that there came the change. The final experiment merely showed that physicists had made an assumption they had no real right to make and the law of conservation of parity was "overthrown" only where it had never been shown to exist in the first place.

It might help if we look at some familiar, everyday case where a law of conservation of parity holds, and then on another where it is merely assumed to hold by analogy, but doesn't really. We can then see what happened in physics, and why an overthrow of something that really isn't there to begin with, *improves* the structure of science and does not damage it.

Human beings can be divided into two classes: male (M) and female (F). Neither two males by themselves nor two females by themselves can have children (no C). A male and a female together, however, can have children (C). So we can write:

M and M = no C
F and F = no C
M and F = C
F and M = C

There is thus the familiar parity situation:

1) Like sexes cannot have children

2) Opposite sexes can have children.

To be sure, there are sexually immature individuals, barren females, sterile or impotent men and so on, but these matters are details that don't affect the broad situation. As far as the sexes and children are concerned, we can say that the human species (and, indeed, many other species) conserves parity.

Because the human species conserves sexual parity with respect to childbirth, it is easy to *assume* it conserves it with respect to love and affection as well, so that the feeling arises that sexual love ought to exist only between men and women. The fact is, though, that parity is *not* conserved in that respect and that both male homosexuality and female homosexuality do exist and have always existed. The assumption that parity *ought* to be conserved, where, in actual fact, it isn't, has caused many people to find homosexuality immoral, perverse, abhorrent, and has created oceans of woe throughout history.

Again, in Judeo-Christian culture, the institution of marriage is closely associated with childbirth and therefore strictly observes the law of conservation of parity that holds for childbirth. A marriage can take place only between one man and one women because, ideally, that is the simplest system that makes childbirth possible.

Now, however, there is an increasing understanding that parity, which is rigidly conserved with respect to childbirth, is not necessarily conserved with respect to sexual relations. Increasingly, homosexuality is treated not as a sin or a crime, but as, at most, a misfortune (if that).

There is the further attitude, slowly growing in our society, that there is no need to force the institution of marriage into the tight grip of parity-conservation. We hear, more and more frequently, of homosexual marriages and of group marriages. (The old-fashioned institution of polygamy is an example of one kind of marriage, enjoyed by many of the esteemed men of the Old Testament, in which sexual parity was not conserved.)

Next month, then, we'll go on with the nature of the experiment that established the non-conservation of parity in the weak nuclear interaction and consider what happened afterward.

This story comes from the mountain of unsolicited manuscripts (sometimes called the slush pile) that we mine resolutely in hopes of extracting gems like the one below. That, in itself, is not unusual; the quality of submissions to F&SF from unpublished writers is in many instances quite high. The odd thing about the background of this piece is that we have been unable to locate the author even to pay him (her?) for the contribution. So if anyone knows the whereabouts of M. P. Brown (last known address Laramie, Wyoming), tell him to get in touch.

A Desert Place

by M. P. BROWN

"Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade"

—*Andrew Marvell*

"JUST ONE PACKET OF SEEDS? Please, Luke."

Every time they came to town, Ellen hovered at the seed display, clutching her husband's sleeve. "Please—"

Luke Hutchins sighed. "Alright, Ellen, alright—"

He dug into his levis for change and handed her a quarter. "What for you want to break your back and waste water on that bunch of nothing, I sure don't know."

"For the green, Luke. For all that green."

She missed it so. Her folks' farm had snuggled in a cluster of cottonwoods along the Platte River. An island of green in a desert place. Spring was a fog of green blotting away the dry hills, the heaving rolls of dusty brown fading fast in the heat. But nothing faded near her folks' house. No, it thickened and ripened and swelled instead to the full rich green of summer leaf and lawn. That's how she always remembered it.

"And you could hear the river chuckling and whispering with those big old trees a-chuckling and whispering right back. Lie on the lawn and look up and never catch more than a little flash of sun through a leaf. And know it

couldn't get to you. Cool and damp and green under those trees."

She gripped her little sack of seeds in both hands. Luke had been there often enough when they were courting between cattle sales.

"Don't you remember it, Luke? —the folks' place."

He hunched over the wheel of the old pickup. On the smoother paved highway it wheezed and creaked and clattered alarmingly. Any day it would fall apart. He nursed it along. He had no money to spare on a new pickup.

"Hell, Ellen. You couldn't see nothing there. Times I was there, it felt like being deep in a hole. A man's got to see."

They jounced onto the county road. Every mile or so she peeked into the sack—just to make sure the seeds hadn't vanished. She'd gotten mixed seeds. Those showed the prettiest on the packet, lots of green leaves all in clumps of marigolds and dahlias and nasturtiums and cornflowers and dozens more, gold and blue and deep winy reds . . . Not much *really*, not like big old trees. But something—something to break the monotony and the dust and the burnt harsh brown of the high plains when spring and summer came. She'd plant them on the southeast corner where the wind would find it harder to blow them off. Manure and straw would keep them through the spring blizzards. There was plenty of straw and stuff around, that was for sure.

The truck hit a pothole and bounced. They were on the washboard road that wound, not much more than ruts along the plain, to the house. Luke's face was set grim, as sharp and brown and rocky as the country. The seeds rattled at her—reassuring.

Weather-beaten to the color of the ground itself, the house huddled on the plain. All silver-buff, jack rabbit browns. It leaned a little into the wind. The outhouse, a barn that wasn't much more than shed, a junk heap of spare parts, battered pipes and fenders, an ancient leprous bathtub, all hunched to one side. The corral in front was a sagging makeshift; from the very center of its circle all the ground for yards beyond its poles was beaten and dried into a spreading infection of dust.

Oh, you could see all right, the same view for miles in every direction, dust, sage, clicking grass, washed-out gullies, and a single hawk hanging, adrift on the high currents, over the ragged bluffs. Sky rolled over it all and poured over the ends of the earth miles and miles away. Fierce blue, beating blue; even now, in failing winter, the sun stabbed from a flaming core of blue to sear sky and bluffs and blowing earth.

Ellen planted her seeds and hugged their rainbow packet to her heart. Luke was out on the range with his herd more than he was ever home with her. When he was

home, it was only to wolf down stew and fall into bed, bone-tired, beyond words, beyond the simplest touch.

The cows were dropping their calves. The blizzards, always wildest this time of year, threatened the entire stock. Tripping in an unsuspected gopher hole, his best horse went lame, one leg swollen and stiff, useless when he was most needed. Then the calves were going on time for branding and all the searing, bawling, bloody chaos that involved. The cows were ready for servicing again—money out for the service of the seed bull on a neighboring ranch. Ellen never had quite slipped into the pattern. It wasn't like home at all.

Summer was blowing full now, grass rippling briefly, tentative, green. Ellen lay awake, imagining how the seeds would be, pushing up through the brown soil she'd enriched so carefully, so many live kaleidoscopes, still glowing when the grass was parched to sand and weathered bone.

Some nights now, Luke was not too tired to mount her, grunting, lean and hard, pared to a single tissue of muscle and skin, ready to shred on the wind and sift away, falling from her with a sigh to sleep.

Everything she had known was changed here, transformed, the freshness and greenness stripped from all things. She was a hull, an empty seed pod. Luke rattled in her dry insides, both of them sucked dry and scraping one another. She shuddered into sleep to dream of the thrusting upward seeds and the new flowering they would bring to herself and Luke.

She watched and watered. When the broad expanse of grass had dried completely, a single shoot of seedling threaded to light, wispy green on the bare gound. Ellen crouched over it, breathless. Blood bubbled in her ears, tears welled in her eyes at the triumph of it.

"Oh, little green thing. Oh, green! C'mon. C'mon."

She nourished it with her soul, and every day it inched up. An eighth, a half, two. Needle thin, wobbly, but green. Bitty leaves unwound, transparent, veined like a fly's vibrating wings. Trembling in the wind. Helpless under the sun. For days she sheltered this tiny tender thread of green. All day, every day she huddled beside it. She glared back at the sun. She puffed her cheeks in defiance to the wind. And she willed her seed to grow. Everything around her might fade and dry and float off, cobwebs of dust in a harsh air, but her seed would grow and flourish. And Luke would open like a lily, leaping inside her, a flower candle that would flame with live seed—

Dust and grit settled in the already worn-out kitchen. Mending piled up on the sofa, sagging by the stove. Dishes crusted in the sink. It could all wait; nothing mattered but that small green shoot. When it

was strong, when it could face the desert place alone, then . . . then. . . .

Luke bellowed out of the house.

"Where the hell's a clean shirt, Ellen? And proper mended britches—"

She was kneeling over the seedling, dribbling a fine steady stream of water from her pail, drip, drip, drip, over it, soaking the ground dark. Beads of water misted, glistened on each fragile fingernail of leaf. A shaft of sun, diluted through her fingers, shadowed each grain of dirt to green. She scrambled to her feet when he towered over her, fists clenched.

"Oh, Luke—I forgot."

"You forgot?! I suppose you forgot to fix chow again—"

She scurried into the house. His yell shattered the wind at her heels.

"Dammit, Ellen. I catch you moonin' over that damn sprout when you might better be worrying over me, I'll tan you. I will."

The shed door slammed.

For another week she took care of Luke. She concentrated on him, only taking care to water the sprout every day at sundown. Otherwise she never saw it. She carefully fixed Luke's favorite meals; she washed and ironed everything to newness in his meager wardrobe; she mended and patched. The two rooms of the house gleamed spotless. She rubbed his back when he came in at night exhausted; she kissed him awake in the morning. And for that time he was gentle.

But the sprout died.

He held her that night, and she was stiff as a wire cutter in his arms, crying until there were no tears left.

"It was only a dumb plant, honey. For pete sake—Ellen?"

The tears showered into every weathered pore of him. She jerked away. His hands fell, helpless.

"Don't I count for something, El?"

She stiffened again beside him in the bed. Wind ripped at the house corners. The plains raced with it, stark and empty under the moon, to anywhere. And Luke, Luke was racing with them . . . .

"You. When do I have you? Mostly never. But that little bit of green, that was here. That stayed with me. But you couldn't even stand to let me have that. All the time I was doing for you, and you off with the wind somewhere—it was dying. Just shriveling away, just"

He reached an arm around her waist.

"How can I be with you all the time and keep a roof over our heads, honey? How can I build us something worth having if I don't work my tail off? You grew up on a farm. You know what it's like. Your ma didn't carry on—"

She rolled out of his arm and away, hugging the edge of the bed.

"Ma had the trees. I don't even have a skinny little sprout now."

She heard the thump of his fist in the pillow.

"You and that damn sprout—trees, hell. Your ma had plenty of kids. Wasn't trees, it was kids filled her life. If you had kids—"

Her voice was a whisper, deep in her throat.

"When you ever plant a seed in me that took root?"

The mattress bucked with the violence of his toss away from her. She clenched the sheet into knots, crumples of tears.

"Nothing takes root here, nothing can grow, not your seed, not my seed, nothing. It just withers up and blows away. Like everything else in this place."

Luke fixed his own breakfast. There was a clatter of cast iron. A sizzle of bacon—last strip—tempted her nose. The engine ground as he started the pickup. It lurched off, tailgate banging. She listened, but she didn't move.

A dust mote drifted on the sun splintering into the room. It was already hot. Her hair clung in tendrils to her skin. The heat, the heat. Despite the wind. She spread-eagled on the bed and stared around the room. Drab walls. Feed sack curtains. The bed, hollow in the middle. A cedar chest, scarred on top. Clothes dangling from a pole across the back wall.

Outside was less to see. Emptiness.

The waste that haunted her worst nightmares. That waste was Luke's world. He thrived on its hardness. Any more it seemed she could look right through the spaces of his body to the land itself; he was no more than a magnifying glass for the space, and the sun focused through him to sear her very heart. No green anywhere, not a speck. And she was so thirsty for it, parched for it.

She hated to leave town, small and dusty as it was. At least there were a couple of trees. But Luke rushed around, hustling her back here.

"We might as well live in two different worlds entirely. Just entirely different."

She wished they did. Let Luke have his desert place. She would have a place like . . . oh, like an emerald, glowing green, kept in her mind where Luke couldn't kill it, where his world wouldn't reach.

She had seen a real emerald once—on her senior trip. It had been the center display in a jeweler's window. All her life she had never seen anything so beautiful, and it stopped her short, hypnotized her with all its lines and levels of light, shifting flow of clear cool crystal green. And the light flooding through it was thinned and filtered to a moist rich growing softness. She remembered it still.

Her folks' place had been like that, like the inside heart of an emerald. The grass—thick and soft and

really, really green, every single blade, so green you couldn't imagine it anything else. Grass that was good to lie in, bury your face in, draw all its nose-tickling damp greenness into you. Grass to lie on, and then look up—to see arched over you, branches drooping almost to the ground, the trees. Cottonwoods, solid, with a heavy heart-curved leaf. Willow, shifting tongues of leaf, pale, shimmery, watery green. Sun striking the leaves to scatter in a haze of green, shower of misty fern-tinged gold. Blurred. Softened. As long as she sheltered in that enchanted gem of a world.

"That's the kind of world I want. Not Luke's. Not that. Why did I ever leave . . . ."

She opened her eyes again. Sky burned through the window. The bluffs at peak of day were bleached bare, bones of the earth, broken, crumbling through the striped flesh of the world.

"Oh, God."

She buried her face in the pillow; if she thought hard enough, she could get back into that emerald, that sweetness of green. A halo of leaves on the fringes of her mind. Sweat slithered beads along her backbone. They pooled in the cleft of her hips. The day swooped and skittered by. The emerald never came back. All the sweat and grit assaulting her nose from the pillow creases defeated her. Wind snickered on the roof. Hopeless.

She crawled into shorts and T-shirt. With one flick of the wrist she tossed the sheets straight on the bed. Then she went outside and kicked dirt over her garden patch, dry-eyed, no tears left at all, dragged a battered, scraped black fender from the scrap heap, and planted it over the scuffed ground. She stood for a minute, staring, then trudged back into the kitchen to puddle through the skillet and the greasy dishes Luke had left in the sink.

As she swished the dishes through the water, she could see the spare cow horse, lanky, sparse strand of tail whisking, as he grazed beside the shed. Luke's favorite horse, a slick, compact sorrel ablaze with light, limped towards the trough. Whorls of dust puffed up under his careful steps. On the edge of the yard a hawk stooped to the wind, so close she could scan the cold yellow pits of his eyes, the speckled motley of his dull feathers. He sailed in narrowing circles, dropped. When he drifted up and away, his meal dangled in shreds from his talons—a jack rabbit's wind-riffled fur, guts coiling out and spilling . . . .

She gagged. Luke's world.

She hadn't known it would be like this. All the times he'd come, buying stock from her dad because dad's was some of the finest in the state, all those times he'd talked of the spread his folks had left him, its size, its potential, what he was going to do with this stock, how the spread would build and grow, how

beautiful it was, an ocean of grass, flower-speckled in the spring. About like this place, he'd said. Only you can see farther. It sounded wonderful.

She'd grown up in this green circle after all, but she couldn't stay there all her life. She wanted a home and family, too. And Luke, Luke was like no one she'd dated in her life. He wasn't a boy; he was a man. He had his own land already, his own stock, he was making his dreams come true, not just bragging about them. He was coaxing a seed into fruit. Lean and tall like one of her trees. It would be wonderful to shelter in Luke's shade. He would be her green circle, and she would need nothing more. And so they were married.

"And so here I am—with the wind crying through my bones."

The truck wheezed into the yard along after she'd gone to bed. Luke slammed into the house. She listened to his clumping and banging in the kitchen. He stamped into the bedroom finally. The amber sting of whiskey prickled the air with each breath as he stood at the foot of the bed. She never stirred. Her breath rose and fell evenly. Let him stand; she crept back and back in her mind away from him, back to the trees, back to the emerald until everything was a fresh, soothing fog of green. She didn't even feel Luke crash into bed beside her, never knew him stiff and stony beside her all night.

He was gone when the sun finally slashed her eyelids open. She tossed. Another naked day. The wind tossed the dust, chittering, against the window. She covered her ears. It was almost noon when she hauled herself into the kitchen.

And stopped—gasping—at the door.

The walls, the curling linoleum underfoot, the rickety table, the cobwebbed enamel of the sink—everything!—was puddled and pooled with lime and jade and emerald and moss. The whole kitchen was splashed green. Transparent round shadows of green made an orchard of the room. A large plant on the shelf over the sink arched proudly in the green glow created with its offering of leaves to sun. A tuft of red budded upward from its heart, the promise of a flower flame to come.

Ellen took a deep breath and then another. She hesitated. Maybe she was still asleep and dreaming. Maybe if she touched it, it would burst like a bubble and be gone. She crept, cautious, toward it. She stretched a fingertip to its pot, then snatched it back. Growing smells, fresh and green and wet, tingled in her nose. She sighed. At last she stroked the smallest curve of the smallest leaf. It didn't disappear. A smile trembled across her face. She sat down to watch her plant, floating blissful in that flood of greenness.

Luke's hand on her shoulder,

feather light, startled her to her feet. She faced him, hands clasped and eyes glowing.

"Oh, Luke, it's like a whole grove of trees. Right here in the house. It's beautiful."

He nodded.

"It's a . . . a geranium, that gal at Klymer's told me."

He searched her face.

"Is it alright, Ellen?"

She flung herself in his arms then. All the joy of the plant bubbled through her.

"Oh, Luke. Thank you. Thank you. It is. It's wonderful."

His hand stroked her ruffled hair as he would have caressed a baby rabbit, terrified under his touch, heart flickering along its ribs, trapped, barred from the dark safety of its burrow and suspended high in the unknown.

That night she opened to him, petal by petal falling velvet away to expose the waxy golden tuft of flower core; and the sap of him, hot and sweet and sticky torrents, rushed through her. She sprawled full-blown and content on the pillow. He clung to her still and moaned against the leaf-smooth skin of her shoulder.

"I love you so much, honey. Oh, God, I do."

The geranium bloomed, complacent on its window sill, small explosions of fire. The kitchen was washed with green during the last sunny days of summer. And then one day there was no monthly trickle of blood to remind Ellen that she was a woman as barren as the high plains. She whispered her hopes to the geranium.

"I think I'm going to have a baby—"

But she remembered the first green sprout Luke had given her, and how it had fallen into dust, and never told Luke. When she looked past the richness of her plant and saw the desolate expanse he loved, she knew she was right in guarding this secret. She wasn't going to give his empty, dead wastes of world a single chance to get at her new little shoot and destroy it.

She watched the geranium grow and spread until it filled the whole window with branches and stems and round, ruffled leaves. It blotted all the outside world away, filling the kitchen with green, with ferny fertile breaths. Autumn never came for Ellen; she never went outside now. She curled up on the sofa with her housework, safe in her kitchen, tending her plant and her slowly stirring child.

Luke had to prop the geranium with a stake, so big and heavy it had grown. He grumbled as he did it.

"Damn thing's gonna take over this whole house. Oughta be thinned, El, and cut to size."

He'd come in at night, flung in the door on a gust of sterile wind, and choke on the wonderful green smell.

"That can't be healthy, Ellen.

Dammit, some of it ought to go."

She stared back at him, seeing him through new eyes.

"You just can't stand green growing, can you, Luke? Everything's got to be stamped flat and shriveled dry and blown away before you like it—"

"Aah—"

The grunt, and the clatter of the door, as he escaped to the shed—to feed the horses and mend bridles and tinker with spare parts—confirmed her in her determination to keep her secret hidden. She nursed the plant always more carefully, guarding its precious billowing life. She was first into the kitchen in the morning, last out of it at night. Luke griped constantly now.

"You spend too much time in the house. There's plenty you could do outside."

She washed the dishes, sniffed the earthy leaves of the geranium and ignored him.

"Sittin' in here with that—thing in the window, it ain't healthy, El. Puttin' weight on you."

She mended his levis, torn on the barbed wire in section eight, head bent. She and the plant, they were swollen with life. She checked the geranium carefully before she went to bed. Was it drying out? Had she given it enough water? She poked a finger into the dirt, peered into each shred of bloom, pinched at the leaves. When she came out in the morning, one leaf was curling and brown, like a smoldering corner of cellophane. Her heart thumped. She huddled on a chair by the sink and watched it all day. It was going to wither and go brown and dry like the rest of the land. That night she watered it until its roots swam. The baby floated in her body. She fought back tears. She would make it live. Somehow.

The next morning two more leaves were crumpled in the sink, and the whole plant drooped. She loosened the soil. She forced herself to run out to the shed for a scoop of the muck in the barn. She was panting and shivering when she got back to the shelter of the kitchen. She talked to the plant and begged it with her voice and her will to survive. Luke wrinkled his nose when he came home. Over the odor of a supper burnt because she'd been too busy worrying over the plant was a stink of corrals and barn.

"God, Ellen. What the hell's going on?"

She dished up the dry remnants of Swiss steak, leather.

"I was just taking care of the plant."

He gulped down his coffee with each bite.

"The place stinks." He eyed her. "Least you got out of the house. You don't start working off some of that lard around your middle, I'll work it off for you. You *and* that damn . . . geranium."

She felt the baby shift under her heart. The plant quivered in a window draft. Oh, she was right. She

was right. He and his world. They'd destroy the green growing without a second thought and never miss it. The baby bumped at her stomach. She caught her breath.

"Don't, don't. Be still. Don't let him know you're there."

The plant dwindled. Contracted. Each morning there were more faded chips of petal in the sink. Each morning more leaves were furled in upon themselves, and washed out. Yellow. Transparent brown. Ghosts. She climbed on a chair over the sink, and tacked a towel to the window, over the frosting panes to keep the cold away. She pruned dead branches. She watered. One morning she came rushing out, and—

Only the original stalk of the geranium stood firm and green to greet her. She hung, belly churning, in the middle of the room. The wail burst from her without warning, unexpected, uncontrolled.

"No! Not again. NOT A-G-AIN!"

Luke stumbled out of the bedroom, stubbled and barely awake.

"Dammit, woman. What now?"

She choked on her terror. "It's dying. This one's dying, too."

"For God's sake—" He stamped to the stove for coffee. "It's that time of year. Everything dies now. Hell."

She clutched her belly at the thought of everything dying. Her sobs increased. "Not *every*thing. Not indoors. NOT MY PLANT!"

He slung his chair back under the table so violently that a rung rolled loose, clattering past her rooted feet, lost under the stove. He brushed past her, veins exploding along his forehead, jerked the geranium off the window ledge, plant, pot, everything, deaf to his wife's shriek. He lunged through the door and hurled it on a cutting slash of first snow all the way to the rusted rims of the junk heap. A shower of green shattering.

She stared at his fierceness. She swayed. The snow sliced in at her legs. Luke's face stabbed past her as he grabbed his coat and stormed out of the house, breakfast be damned. She stood there in the middle of the chilled grey kitchen, hugging her belly. There was no movement. Her heart hopped in aimless thuds, flopping up and down and open. The wind shrilled at her.

Bring it back. Bring it back. Make it grow again. The sprout. The shoot. The emerald glowing green. The flooding green . . . rich sheltering green green green.

The wind swept a falling sky, flurries, snatches of snow, sailing with it, swooping down, stooping on the hare's belly plain. The wind swept endlessly past, rushing broken grass and hawk feathers and seeds and dreams and the dust of men from one end of the unprotected land to the other.

Luke came in late, hungry, a little shamefaced from his morning outburst. Calling.

"Ellen—" And stopped, gasping in the doorway.

"ELLEN"

The large plant swayed proudly, reflected in upon its glowing, pulsing, growing heart, basked in its rich green glow, lime and emerald and jade and moss in flowing pools around the little kitchen. A tuft of red budded upward, promise of flowering, root and shoot and fire-flaming petals soon to burst. It burgeoned upward, outward from the center of the room, silent; and it never saw the barren sweep of winter, and it never heard the wind.

And never heard the man sob "Ellen?!" watering the desert place.

There's a bit of nostalgia for all you B-murder mystery fans in this latest Ron Goulart story. It finds free-lancer Jose Silvera on board a luxury space flight to the planet Murdstone and in the midst of a complex and deadly rivalry between a porno film maker and a cooking personality.

Passage to Murdstone

by RON GOULART

THE LONG DARK GIRL IN THE BLACK polyethylene lingerie asked Silvera, "Does it affect your powers of concentration, his nibbling on my foot like that?"

"No, Lissa," replied Jose Silvera. He moved back from her lounging chair, edged around one of the robot cameras in the stateroom, and looked out a porthole of the space liner. He was a tall, wide-shouldered man, dark-haired and in his early thirties.

"I noticed you weren't taking notes," said the long-haired Lissa. She drew up one tan leg, and the large blond actor who'd been kneeling at her feet looked up, blinking.

Silvera watched the dark silent space between planets. "What's significant I remember."

Lissa rubbed long fingers up along her inner thigh, tangling her fingertips in black lace. She shrugged. "I've never done an autobiography before; so I was only just wondering. Obviously, Joe, you're an old pro. Oh, stop for a minute, Rollo." She made her hand into a fist and socked the youthful actor on the top of his curly head.

Rollo O'Sorley ceased licking at the young actress' knee and stretched away from the white pseudo-leather sofa. "My art means a lot to me, Lissa. Acting to me is a way of life. It's a house and a home, a wife and little ones. So when a director I respect as much as I respect Almondega says we need about two hours more foreplay footage for *Buttocks*, I oblige. But then my ego is my ego and not yours."

Lissa gave a gentle snort, her

pretty left cheek puckering. She rolled more completely onto her back and thrust one bare foot up at his chest. "Oh, okay, fondle my ankle or something. Just so you don't distract Joe. You are being distracted, aren't you, Joe?"

A second robot motion picture camera rolled in front of Silvera and glided in for a close-up of Rollo nuzzling Lissa's ankle with his broad straight nose. "Not at all," replied Silvera. He came back to the girl's sofa. "Will it spoil the filming if I sit here?"

"You don't know Almondega's work, obviously," said Rollo as he nuzzled.

"I saw his *Hunkers* in an arthouse satellite orbiting Tarragon last fall," said Silvera, sitting.

"A writer," observed Rollo, kissing Lissa's instep, "even a professional hack, ought to have some sensitivity, Silvera. The credo of Almondega is... how shall I put it? . . . is whatever happens is art. Yes, whatever happens is art. You sit there and you are now part of art and part of Almondega's *Buttocks.*"

"I should get paid actor's scale," said Silvera.

"You're being more than amply paid to assist Lissa in this silly autobiographical project," said Rollo. "Hold on, Lissa. I think this is a good place to take off my shirt. Yes, Silvera, $5000 for merely giving shape to Lissa's rambling memoirs is my notion of a generous, more than generous, sum. Not to mention the fact Almondega threw in this first-class passage to Murdstone for free."

"I wasn't planning to go to Murdstone," said Silvera.

"When I was young," said Rollo, starting to unzip the front of his butterfly-patterned tunic, "and I'm not quite thirty now, I worked for a good deal less than $5000. Of course, with me it's art."

Silvera noticed Lissa had placed her left foot in his lap. Watching her wiggling toes, he said, "You were telling me about your life in the convent school."

Lissa put her tongue against her inner cheek, closing one long-lashed eye. "You know, Joe, in most of my six large-grossing Almondega films I've been teamed with pale blond types like Rollo here. I'm wondering. How'd you like to be written into *Buttocks?* A big dark fellow like you might be interesting."

Silvera shook his head. "Let's get on with your autobiography, Lissa. Barnum News Synd wants to start running the serial version of *Un Vie* early next month. As of today we haven't written you out of grade school yet."

Lissa crinkled her toes against Silvera's flat stomach. "You're right. We've got enough copy on my sensual awakening. I told you the anecdote about the bishop, didn't I?"

"I've got that, yes."

"Zipper is stuck," complained Rollo. He had his tunic bunched up

around his midsection. "This hasn't happened to me since I did *Haunches* with Almondega two years ago. Darn." He was breathing heavily and a slight wheeze sounded in his chest.

The third silver robot camera in the cabin dollied up to watch and record Rollo's struggles with his zipper.

Lissa brought her long legs together and rested her palms on her bare stomach. "I wonder if my readers would be interested in my summer job on the girl scout rocket when I was fifteen. The navigator tried to seduce me. Maybe the incident is too close to the bishop anecdote. What do you think?"

"We can always use one more attempted seduction," Silvera told the pretty young girl.

"We're getting closer to the years when the attempts start succeeding more regularly," said Lissa, steepling her fingers over her convex navel. She frowned at the three cameras now circling the wheezing Rollo. "Sometimes I think Almondega's method of filming is too demanding. You know? Cameras grinding on, recording hour after hour of everything you do." She sighed. "I suspect he has other, teenier cameras hidden all around, too. There's a sequence in *Hindquarters* I swear I never expected to see on the screen. Well, scenes like that account for my success, I guess. Later on, Joe, we'll put some speculations and reflections into my autobiography. My philosophy of life. If you think my readers want any philosophy."

"In moderation."

The door of the stateroom popped open, and a small large-faced man jumped in, calling out, "Cut!"

The three robot cameras pulled back from the panting Rollo, regrouping near the newly arrived Almondega. "Have I botched up the foreplay footage?" asked the wheezing Rollo.

"We have, I believe, enough," announced Almondega. "You seem to be tiring yourself, dear Rollo. Even youth, I believe, must rest now and again."

Rollo gave his director a brief negative look. "The business with the zipper might play well on the screen."

Almondega shook his large head. "I was watching it on the monitors in my stateroom, and I feel not. How is the autobiography of dear Lissa progressing, Silvera? I like the title. *Un Vie.* A provocative and, I believe, potentially saleable title."

"The title's the best of what we have so far," said Silvera.

Almondega placed a hand on Rollo's back. "Go to your stateroom and rest, Rollo. You young people must learn, as those of us who are in our middle years have, when to rest and relax."

Rollo rezippered his tunic. "Why are you suddenly so benevolent?"

Almondega's large eyebrows

rose. "Does it show, Rollo? I am, I believe, highly elated. You can't imagine who I'm lunching with today. She turns out, completely unanticipated by me, to be a passenger on this very same luxury space flight to the planet Murdstone."

Lissa stretched out, putting both long legs across Silvera's lap. "Not Mrs. Searl again? I thought you agreed to drop your affair with her."

"The ex-Mrs. Searl," corrected Almondega.

Silvera lifted Lissa's legs and stood up suddenly. "Would she be any relation to Lurton Searl?"

"Ex-relation," said Almondega, grinning widely. "A very difficult man, Lurton Searl. As I learned during my past encounters with the former Mrs. Searl. In fact, the impetuous fellow has pursued her onto this very spaceship."

"Lurton Searl is on board? asked Silvera.

Lissa hugged her knees again. "I didn't know you followed ladies' television, Joe. Are you actually a fan of Searl's Masked Glutton show?"

Silvera said, "I wrote three of Searl's Masked Glutton cookbooks. Ghosted them."

"My mother has all his books," said Lissa. "Which ones did you do?"

"*Stew*," said Silvera, striding toward the door. "*Dumplings* and *Squash*."

"I remember the last time I saw my mother she spoke of being especially fond of *Squash*," said Lissa. "She never dreamed you could have so much fun with only just squash."

Silvera said, "Searl still owes me the final $3000 of my fee for those books."

Rollo had moved to the cabin door. "That's right. You have some sort of free-lance code about always getting paid, no matter how long it takes. I would think such a credo might get you in trouble."

"Often," said Silvera as the youthful actor left.

The uniformed steward grabbed at Silvera's arm with one white-gloved hand. "The drop holes are on strike, sir," he cautioned. "Temporarily."

Silvera stepped back from the edge of the drift tube entrance. "On strike?"

"Not the holes themselves, but the drop hole operators," explained the crimson-uniformed man. "Up here in first class you never actually see the operators, a pack of ill-kempt lizard men. They want to renegotiate the sick benefits clause in their contract to cover hives and roseola. Top-level talks have been going on around the clock, and full service should be returned shortly. I'm in the process of taping up a sign warning all first-class passengers to avoid the drop holes during this emergency and thus avoid a dangerous plummet."

"I never saw a lizard man with the hives."

"They feel there's always a first time," said the steward. "The captain suggests passengers use the belt stairs during this temporary labor dispute."

"I want to get to the main galley," Silvera told the brightly uniformed man. "The android valet in Lurton Searl's stateroom tells me he's down there autographing utensils for the ship's cooking staff."

The steward chuckled. "For a man with a broken heart, Mr. Searl is being quite co-operative and jovial. Take Stairwell 26, sir."

At the white metal doorway to the spaceship's galley, a shaggy seven-foot-tall man in a pastry chef's hat and suit placed a giant floury hand against Silvera's chest. "Staff only," he said.

"I'm an associate of Mr. Searl's."

Behind the enormous pastry chef stretched a long narrow kitchen, rich with hanging copperware and robot equipment. Five cooks and chefs clustered near a tall lanky man who was etching his name across the bottom of a skillet with an electric knife. "Whoops," he said in his thin voice, "I almost didn't have enough room for the final 1." He smiled a small puckered smile and then happened to look toward the entrance. "Whoops. Jose Silvera. How are you, Jose?"

"Three thousand dollars," said Silvera, starting to push by the giant pastry chef.

"Whoops." Searl was not wearing his famous mask now, and his whole face showed pale.

The huge pastry chef commenced gripping Silvera. "You know this man, Mr. Searl?"

Searl puckered his mouth and swallowed. "Yes, he's a notorious industrial spy who specializes in stealing recipes. I suggest you have the captain put him in irons. Or at least lock him up a safe distance away from me."

"I'll take care . . ." began the pastry chef.

Silvera swung an elbow into the big shaggy man's stomach and then brought the flat of his palms against both sides of his neck.

The enormous chef hopped backwards, with a raspy bellow, wiping his flour-smeared hands on his striped apron. He got himself upright and swung a giant right at Silvera.

Silvera ducked under the blow and dived, crouching, through the galley doorway.

"Whoops," said Searl.

The head chef was a smooth, red-faced man, nearly as tall as the pastry chef. He grabbed the autographed skillet from Searl and came stalking through the kitchen equipment, swinging the utensil. "We don't take kindly to those who violate the sanctity of the kitchen."

As he swung the heavy skillet, Silvera made a swooping jump to the left. "Either cash or a certified check," he called toward Searl.

"Jose," said the Masked Glutton, "I really had to do extensive rewriting on those three books you lent a hand on. For instance, in *Dumplings* you gave all the measurements in tablespoons instead of teaspoons."

Quite near to Silvera's back someone hooted, "Oh, ho!"

A giant shaggy hand, smelling of soy flour and pseudo-sugar, clamped itself over Silvera's mouth and chin while a similar hand clutched him in the groin.

The head chef leaped in, and his autographed skillet thunked down twice on the top of Silvera's skull.

"Call the authorities," suggested Searl as Silvera fell.

A round-headed man in a fuzzy plaid cape was feeling Silvera's head. "Every boulder that falls through a cottager's roof brings at least one mountain wild flower with it," he said.

Sitting up on the white infirmary table, Silvera blinked awake. "Inspector Ludd of the Murdstone Police."

"Yes," acknowledged the round-headed policeman. "I was remarking that your unfortunate encounter in the kitchens of this great space liner performed the small positive service of bringing us together once again." He reached up and poked again at the top of Silvera's head. "I've investigated sufficient blow-on-the-head cases to have become something of an expert. I'd say you were only mildly injured."

Silvera felt his head himself. "Are the ship's doctors on strike, too?"

Inspector Ludd shuffled back from the table. "You've picked up a nice suntan since we met on Murdstone during the Commando Killer case, Jose."

"I just finished ghosting a manifesto for the leader of a band of desert guerrillas on Tarragon. Why are you on this flight?"

"We've extradited a notorious telekinetic criminal. A rascal who specialized in teleporting women across state lines for immoral purposes. I'm escorting him back home to Murdstone," explained the inspector. "Careful you don't step on the nurse's aide."

Silvera looked down and noticed a broken android sprawled on the white floor. The android's head and chest had been battered in, and then a compartment in its side had been pried roughly open. "Who did this?"

"Sometimes life hands us the pieces of the jigsaw without giving us a look at the picture on the puzzle box," said the round-headed inspector. "The ship's captain, knowing something of my reputation, asked me to investigate this unfortunate incident. As yet, I know neither the why or the who."

Silvera swung to the floor, wobbling toward the inspector and then getting his balance. "I was trying to collect a fee from a television chef."

"Once again your free-lance philosophy has brought us together," said Ludd, nodding. "I was here when you were brought in, and I interceded to keep you from the brig."

"Searl owes me $3000." Silvera knelt beside the ruined medical android. "Don't these medico-tech andys have a compartment here to keep patient records in?"

"Yes," said the inspector. "Perhaps whoever put an end to this poor mechanism's life wanted those records. As you can see, they've been, rather rudely, taken."

Massaging the back of his neck, Silvera said, "Doesn't look as though we'll be collaborating on this case." He stood and moved away from the ruined medical android. "I'm going to concentrate on writing the life of an actress named Lissa. And on collecting $3000 from Lurton Searl."

"Streams commence in many locations but often meet in the same ocean," observed Inspector Ludd. "Give my compliments to Lissa. We confiscated one of her films in a recent raid back home on Murdstone. It was entitled *Dorsal Region*, and I thought her performance quite charming. It must be difficult to exude charm in some of those positions."

"You ought to see some of the positions we write the autobiography in." Silvera avoided a pool of machine oil and went to the infirmary exit.

"By the way," added the round-headed inspector. "I understand Mr. Searl has been persuaded to give one of his Masked Glutton cooking demonstrations for the passengers. He'll appear in the first-class passenger auditorium at three this afternoon, complete with mask. I noticed, in one of my strolls of the ship, that to reach the performer's entrance of the auditorium from the dressing rooms, one must pass along Corridor 22 for several hundred yards. Perhaps you might encounter Mr. Searl there a bit before three today."

"Perhaps," said Silvera.

Inspector Ludd went sliding across the dining room floor, studying the lunch crowd. He approached the first of a row of alcoves and looked in. "Excuse me, please," he said, bowing his round head for an instant. "The steward informed me Mr. Rollo O'Sorley would be lunching here with you, Mr. Almondega."

The large-faced director grinned. "There's been a last minute, and highly pleasant, change. You're Inspector Ludd, aren't you? Yes. Let me introduce you to the former Mrs. Lurton Searl. Marianna, Inspector Ludd of Murdstone."

Marianna Searl was a small, tan woman of thirty-six. She had been sitting with her fingers pressed against the alcove's large view window, gazing out at the immensity of space. "Can you arrest people

between planets, inspector?"

"Depending on the crime."

"My ex-husband is hounding me," she said, turning wide grey eyes toward Ludd. "He attempts to gain access to my stateroom. He makes passionate calls over the first-class intercom. He sends me baked goods with sentimental messages iced on top. He slips sample menus for future love feasts under my door."

Almondega clutched one of Marianna's hands. "I'll do something about Lurton, my dear Marianna. This is an affair of the heart, inspector, and not a police matter."

"With the heart in the driver's seat, the omnibus of life often turns into unexpected byways."

Almondega grinned once more. "Rollo is in Alcove 3."

Two alcoves down from the director, Ludd heard O'Sorley and Lissa. The young actress was saying, "Imagine making a fortune with a simple gimmick like that. Putting on a mask while you give recipes. Well, I suppose women like an element of mystery and romance, even in the kitchen. You know, Searl's probably made more putting on that little mask than I have taking off everything. Now he goes and hits Joe on the head with a pot."

O'Sorley said, "Silvera is the kind of fellow who invites attacks with pots. Anyway, it was a skillet in this instance, and I understand a chef, not the Masked Glutton, struck the actual blow."

"I hope Joe isn't going to be too groggy to continue my autobiography."

"Mr. Silvera, whom I've just left in his cabin, is in excellent condition," said Inspector Ludd, bowing into the alcove. "I am Inspector Ludd, attached to the police of Murdstone. Mr. O'Sorley, I understand you were one of the people who required some sort of medical aid earlier today."

The youthful blond actor broke a soy roll in half. "Well, yes. Why?"

"Something unusual has happened. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Lissa rose from her chair. "We're just finishing, inspector. Why don't you sit down and talk right here. That is, if police regulations allow you to cross-examine suspects in dining alcoves."

"I'm not a suspect in anything, Lissa," said O'Sorley. "And Inspector Ludd isn't going to cross-examine. Lawyers do that."

"Now I am merely dropping pebbles down the well to see how much water splashes up into my listening ear."

"Very nicely put." Lissa patted the inspector's cheek. "I'm going to see if I can comfort Joe. It is okay to comfort him in his present condition, isn't it?"

"Perfectly." Inspector Ludd waited until the long lovely actress had departed and then turned to O'Sorley.

The tall masked man came around a bend in Corridor 22 and stopped. "Whoops," he said, touching knobby fingers to his full-face black metal mask.

"About the $3000." Silvera was standing, hands on hips, in mid-corridor.

"Joe, I really ought to show you the sales figures on *Stew*," said the masked man. "Even with all those attractive three-dimensional pop-up illustrations, the book's sales were, whoops, terribly low."

"My fee has nothing to do with sales." Silvera reached for the tall thin man.

The Masked Glutton dropped both hands to his sides, giving a wheezing sigh. "Joe, do you realize the expenses involved with being an interplanetary gourmet television chef? Why, during the last fiscal year alone, I spent well over $3000 to send out autographed pots to my ladies."

Silvera took hold of the masked man's thin shoulder. "You're going to end up on the Culinary Writers of the Universe blacklist, Searl. Then you won't be able to hire any reputable ghosts."

The Masked Glutton twisted away from Silvera. "Joe, you've hit home, you Latin rogue. I don't want to get in Dutch with CWU, especially this year when they're planning to send out twenty thousand copies of *Mutton* as Christmas gifts." He slid a thin hand back into his hip pocket and drew forth a wallet. "Cash will satisfy you, won't it?"

Silvera let go and watched the masked man. "Yes."

"Let's see then. Whoops, that's only a $100 bill. Ah, the rest are $500s. One, two, three, four, five, six. There, $3000. Oh, you may as well keep this extra $100 for your trouble."

Silvera pocketed the six bills and handed the $100 back. "Three thousand is what you owe me."

"Your code again," said the masked man, laughing behind the black metal. "Care to come in and watch my lecture and demonstration? I'm going to be featuring several of the recipes you helped write. Oh, and I'm fairly certain your latest customer, Lissa, is going to attend."

"Okay, but don't call on me to sample anything."

The Masked Glutton walked on toward the auditorium entrance. "You don't know what you're missing."

Silvera stayed in the corridor a moment longer, his eyes on the still blackness outside the portholes.

The Masked Glutton's wrist snapped twice over the kettle on the portable stove. "Whoops, not too much thyme." He set the spice cruet aside and reached for a bottle of wine. "Now, ladies, we want three generous cups of this full-bodied young red wine. So. One, two, three." After he measured out each

cup, he flipped it into the kettle. "The real secret of this particular stew from the backwoods of Murdstone is the handful of dummler beans which we, whoops, fling into the pot."

Silvera turned from Lissa and frowned toward the stage of the small auditorium.

"Now, ladies," continued the Masked Glutton, "and you smattering of gentlemen, too, while our stew begins to simmer, let's sample some of the Martian fondue we began earlier." He wiped steam off the black surface of his metal face mask and scooped a chafing dish up from the top of his worktable. Inserting a fork holding a square of bread into the fondue mixture, he asked, "Who will be the first to sample this delight?" He sat himself on the edge of the low stage and studied the audience of some thirty passengers.

In the second row, arms folded and shoulders hunched, sat Almondega. "Cheap bits of business," he muttered. He was the only man, besides Silvera, in the audience.

"Whoops," said the masked man. "I think—don't you, ladies?—the most sceptical member of our little audience should be the first to be converted to the joys of interplanetary gourmet cooking. He came only to heckle me, but he may stay to enjoy the food." He dropped from the stage, cradling the chafing dish. "A famous recipe for a famous talent. Here, Mr. Almondega."

The large-faced director turned away from the proffered square of dipped bread.

"It tastes best while still warm." The Masked Glutton thrust the fork toward Almondega's mouth.

"Don't be churlish," called out one of the older women in the audience. "Try it, for goodness sake."

"Okay, okay." Almondega made a chomping sound and caught the fondued bread off the fork.

"Delicious, isn't it?" asked the masked man, watching him chew. "Now, ladies, let's take another squint at our backwoods stew." He gave a knees-together lump and was back on stage.

Almondega swallowed, making an odd noise.

"Whoops, I've forgotten to add the bay leaves. Excuse me, ladies, and I'll fetch some." The Masked Glutton went bounding off into the wings.

Almondega stood up, his arms straight out at his sides. "I believe I've . . ." His head snapped back once and then fell against his chest. The toppled over.

Lissa said, "Jesus," and bolted out of the seat next to Silvera.

"Easy," he said, following her to the aisle and toward the fallen director.

A broad woman in a simulated-fur suit reached Almondega first. "Back, ladies. I'm a physician." She squatted down and touched the director. "Huh."

Lissa stopped beside the lady physician. "What's the matter with him?"

"Dead." The broad woman sniffed. "Poison."

Lissa turned toward the stage. "What did you give him, Searl?"

The kettle was still simmering on the portable stove, but the Masked Glutton had not returned to the stage.

Inspector Ludd came into the dressing room with his characteristic skating shuffle. He had his hands in the slash pockets of his loose plaid cape. "Arrows shot from different bows sometimes reach the same target," he said, smiling at Silvera.

"He was partially trussed up when I ran in," said Silvera, nodding at the unmasked Lurton Searl, who was seated on the floor with a coil of rope still entwined around his lanky legs.

"Partially? I was sufficiently tied for my tastes, Silvera." The gourmet chef tilted his head at Inspector Ludd. "Are you a physician? I was clouted on the head. Probably by this mercenary Silvera. See the lump?"

Ludd put his fingers to Searl's head. "Yes, a lump surely." To Silvera he said, "How long after the Masked Glutton left the stage did you reach here, Jose?"

"Three or four minutes. Searl seemed to be bound and gagged when I came in. I ran straight down the corridor after jumping up on the stage. By the way, Searl, your stew's burning."

"What stew?" Searl, who was in a suit of all-season underwear, shook himself up out of the ropes. "Do you have an alibi for the time of the assault, Silvera?"

"What's more important, Searl, is your alibi."

"Whoops, since when do I need an alibi for an attack on myself? What's he talking about, doctor?"

"I am Inspector Ludd of the Murdstone police." The round-headed inspector kicked at the floor dispoze hole with one foot. He bent and retrieved a square of paper from the lip of the hole. "Fortunately the trash burners are on strike this afternoon. Do you use meskin in your cooking, Mr. Searl?"

"No, what is it?"

"A deadly vegetable poison, native to the planet Jaspar. I have here the label from a packet."

"Jaspar?" asked Silvera.

"This is of some significance to you, Jose?"

Silvera replied, "The Masked Glutton got his stew recipes mixed up out there. The ingredients he gave, especially the dummler beans, were for a Jaspar-style stew and not what he announced. Searl and I collaborated on his stew book; so I know."

"What Masked Glutton are you talking about?" Searl was on his feet and scowling.

"The thicker the sand the longer

it takes to run through the hourglass," said Inspector Ludd. "For now, Mr. Searl, let me say only that some fifteen minutes ago three dozen people saw you murder your rival, Almondega."

"Whoops," said Searl.

The bandmaster dropped his baton and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now beginning a work slowdown as a move to gain higher wages for members of the Interplanetary Dance Band Guild. We hope you'll bear with us in this honest effort to improve our lot and will not mind our playing only one number every fifteen minutes."

"If I'd known, I wouldn't have sat this last one out," said Lissa, who was dressed now in a noryl-vinyl sheath and sitting across a table from Silvera.

Silvera watched the dozen musicians on the bandstand set aside their instruments and begin tilting back in their chairs and chatting. From an inner pocket of his tunic he withdrew a notebook. "Maybe we'll progress more rapidly with *Un Vie* if I do take notes."

"I'm not sure I should be reliving happy memories with poor Almondega just dead and stretched out on a slab," said the lovely dark girl. "It is a slab, isn't it?"

"No, a drawer."

"Maybe I shouldn't even have come to this cocktail dance. But then I can't stay in mourning forever." She rested one slender hand on her noryl purse, her fingers drumming. "Do you think Almondega would understand?"

"I can't speak for him." Silvera turned to a fresh page in the notebook. "Myself, if I'm ever murdered by a masked gourmet chef using poisoned fondue, I'll have no objection to your going dancing the same afternoon."

"The dancing is probably not so bad," said Lissa. "I probably shouldn't drink, though. Out of respect for the dead?"

"Speaking for myself, I wouldn't object any more to drinking than to dancing, Lissa."

"What do you and Inspector Ludd think about the murder, Joe? Did somebody really impersonate Searl, or is he only trying to make it look that way? He was jealous of Almondega and his ex-wife."

"The Masked Glutton I met in Corridor 22 paid me the $3000 I was owed without much objection," said Silvera. "Though Searl might do something uncharacteristic to establish the idea that it wasn't him behind the mask."

"Oh, you did get your money then?"

"Inspector Ludd has it right now and is checking for fingerprints," said Silvera. "Why don't we pick up the narrative of your life at your fifteenth year. You told me you went to the old actors' home to participate in a holiday show and . . ."

Lissa shook her head. "I remember a better anecdote from when I

was still fourteen." She pulled the notebook from Silvera. "Let me write it down. I'm too embarrassed to tell it out loud."

A heavy-set man was standing directly in front of the bandstand. "My doctor says I have to dance an hour a day for the exercise, schmucks," he shouted. "Not sit. You trying to kill me off? Come, strike up the band."

"Wait ten minutes," called the small bandleader.

"Fah." The heavy-set man ran closer to the stand, wheezing some, and grabbed the leader's baton. He snapped it over his knee.

"You shouldn't take our legitimate slowdown action this way, sir."

The heavy-set man caught the small bandleader by one short leg and pulled him from the stand, attempting thereafter to break the man's leg as he had the baton.

The rest of the bandsmen leaped in sequence from the stand and piled onto the heavy-set man and the leader. Patrons of the spaceship's lounge ran to watch and participate. The heavy-set man freed himself from the group and ran out an exit.

The lights in the dim lounge all went out.

"Darn," said Lissa. "I dropped your notebook, Joe. Wait, I'll fetch the thing. I'm good at finding stuff in the dark." Her chair made a skidding sound.

Suddenly their table gave off a great splintering crack and glass smashed. Silvera was on his feet and reaching for a dark shape showing to the right of Lissa's chair. Something round and metallic cracked against the side of his head, and Silvera tripped into Lissa's chair and fell over atop the lovely girl.

"I found it, Joe," said Lissa, close to his ear. "Why did you fall? And what was that noise?"

The illumination returned and Silvera looked around. There was no sign of the person who had hit him and tried for Lissa. "Somebody wanted to hit you on the head with a pipe."

Lissa came up beside him, looking at the ruined table. "If I'd been in the chair, my head would look like that tabletop. Where's my purse?"

"Gone," he said after scanning the floor. "What was in it?"

"Ninety-five dollars in cash, eight charge cards, and all kinds of keys. Keys to my stateroom and luggage and so on."

Silvera said, "The guy who attempted to do you in won't risk going to your stateroom now. Had you been knocked out, though, he'd have had time to search it."

"You know, I wonder if this ties in with poor dead Almondega."

"How?"

"He gave me a little reel of film to guard for him. I've got it in my stateroom safe. That's one of the keys in the purse."

"Let's check the safe."

"Can you open it without the key?"

"It's one of the things you learn in this business," he told her.

Inspector Ludd paced, in his skating fashion, around the captain's cabin as the short piece of film flickered to a conclusion. The bed-sheet screen showed an old man sitting in a massage chair in a metal-walled living room. The old man wheezed slightly now and again as the chair ran its multiple hands over him. The film ended. "Sometimes fate gives away free floor plans to the labyrinth," said the inspector.

The captain, a tall sparse-haired man, said, "I was under the impression Almondega's films were a little more sensual. Or did I miss something?" He moved to the sheet tacked to his wall. "I'm sorry our robot projectionists are on strike today."

Inspector Ludd frowned across the room at Lissa and Silvera. "Do you recognize the old gentleman, Lissa? Or the room in which the film was made?"

The long lovely girl shook her head. "I can't shake the habit of holding hands in the movies," she said, letting go of Silvera as the inspector turned up the lights. "Sorry, Inspector Ludd, I've never seen that old man before. I don't know where Almondega took the pictures, though I'd guess he used one of his hidden cameras."

"I'll go ahead and put this sheet back on my bed then?" asked the captain, reaching for it.

"Thank you so much," murmured Ludd. "Jose?"

"The wheeze is familiar," replied Silvera.

"Learned to make a bed in the Space Marines." The captain removed the sheet from the wall and returned it to his bunk.

"Rollo O'Sorley." Lissa grabbed Silvera's hand back. "You're right, Joe. That was Rollo O'Sorley's wheeze."

The captain brought his watch up near his face. "You folks'll excuse me, but I'm going on strike now. The Interplanetary Brotherhood of Spaceship Captains has called a symbolic walkout for this hour." He ceased making his bed and marched to the door. "Don't worry. The token strike will only last three hours. I'll be back in command in time for the ball tonight." He left his cabin.

"What ball?" asked Silvera.

"The first-class passengers' Psychoencounter Ball," explained Lissa. "Therapeutic dancing is very popular on Murdstone, you know. The ship's social therapist has asked me to be the queen of tonight's ball. That means I'm to be the first one to take off my shoes."

Silvera turned to the still-pacing Inspector Ludd. "Have you questioned O'Sorley about the murder?"

Removing the film from the captain's small projector, the inspector

said, "Mr. O'Sorley has disappeared."

Lissa let go of Silvera again and pressed her palms to her breasts. "Rollo's vanished?"

"There is no longer a Rollo O'Sorley aboard our ship." Ludd unrolled the film from the reel, bringing each frame up close to his face. "I questioned Mr. O'Sorley earlier today in connection with the assault on the medical android. According to the ship's records, he was one of the three passengers treated by the machine before its accident. O'Sorley suffered a slight fall on the deck and was momentarily giddy. Against his will he was taken to the infirmary and examined. Mr. O'Sorley maintained he was playing badminton with one of the staff robots on the recreation deck at the time of the actual attack on the android."

Silvera asked, "His alibi didn't check?"

"During that particular hour, the robots were taking a temporary job action and no badminton was played. No tennis or handball, for that matter."

"Whose fingerprints did you find on the money I was given?"

Inspector Ludd, with film tangled round him, drew a folding of money from beneath his plaid cape. "Yours," he said, "and Lurton Searl's. Here, as my semiofficial associate in this case, you will look after this cash once again." He winked and flipped Silvera the $3000.

Catching the money, Silvera said, "The Masked Glutton I encountered had the O'Sorley wheeze. I was expecting his fingerprints on this."

"What do you think the mechanical nurse might have found out about Rollo O'Sorley?" asked the inspector.

Silvera watched the frames of film unraveling between the inspector's fingers. "That's O'Sorley in the film. He's not really thirty at all. He's a seventy-year-old man. The medical android would have found that out during the examination. No matter what O'Sorley looks like on the outside, he's seventy-some on the inside."

"This old gentleman in Almondega's secret film is someone I have seen before," said the inspector. "He is an old actor from the planet Jaspar who is a suspect in the murder four years ago of a one-time Chameleon Corps physician."

"Chameleon Corps?" said Lissa. "They're secret agents who can change shape, aren't they?"

"Their shape and even their fingerprints," replied the inspector. "O'Sorley must have been processed, illegally, by the doctor. Once he'd learned to change himself into a seeming youth, he did away with the helpful doctor."

"Actors," said Lissa. "They all want to make a comeback."

"Almondega's hidden cameras picked up this footage of O'Sorley when he was relaxing as himself,"

continued Inspector Ludd. "Almondega was no doubt blackmailing the now highly successful O'Sorley. Then O'Sorley impersonated the Masked Glutton, down to his fingerprints, to make everyone think Searl had killed Almondega in a moment of jealousy."

Lissa shifted in her chair. "So where is Rollo?"

"O'Sorley is by now aware I suspect him in the assault on the medical android and possibly even in the matter of Almondega," said Inspector Ludd. "I imagine he has assumed a new identity and will attempt to maintain it until we land on Murdstone and he can slip safely away."

Silvera said, "Suppose we insert a small tribute into the Psychoencounter Ball tonight. A tribute to Almondega."

"Would that really be in good taste?" asked the lovely Lissa.

"And announce Almondega's last film, a fragment he entrusted to Lissa, will be shown," resumed Silvera.

Inspector Ludd nodded and began to roll the film back on its spool.

From the ballroom projection booth Lissa's voice sounded dim and small. She was on a pedestal in the center of the ship's large dance floor, wearing a slit-front polyester ball-gown. "The idea is, you know," she was saying into her silver handmike, "to have fun, get to know people, and lose our various neuroses. Statistics tell us you can expect to shed about one neurosis per dance. So you can see what a whole evening will do. At first, to break the ice, grab onto someone you'd like to dance with. Then, as you dance, start telling your partner what's wrong with him or her. Oh, and you'll feel much better if you yell that stuff. You know, things like, 'I can't stand that mole on your fat chin!' or 'You're a cold-hearted son of a bitch, aren't you?' Don't worry about not being able to hear the music over all the shouting and screaming because our orchestra leader assures me that he and the boys are really rested up after their little strike this afternoon and are going to play really loud. By the way, don't come up on the bandstand and ask for therapy. The orchestra isn't allowed by its union to practice therapy. No, you have to wait until one of the ship's several social therapists cuts in on you. Let us begin then by taking off our shoes, which has been shown to have a pronounced effect on our awareness of each other." She hopped on one long leg and tugged off a shoe. "Oh, and let's not forget we're going to stop midway in tonight's ball and pay tribute to a great fallen giant of the cinema. So don't get so involved and engaged you can't take a few minutes to look at Almondega's last film."

Inspector Ludd turned away from the window of the booth and

began his slide-footed pacing. He held the small reel of film against his caped chest. Two large man-high robot projectors stood nearby. "Evil often befalls the man who gets into the trap along with the cheese," he murmured to himself.

The band started playing and the sound of a hundred shoes dropping drifted up to the small cool booth.

"Certainly exciting, isn't it?" asked the captain, stepping into the room.

"And a fitting tribute to a great film artist."

The sparse-haired captain strode nearer to the inspector. He started to speak, but a rattling wheeze came out of his mouth instead of words. "I really think it would be better for no one to see this film, inspector." From beneath his gold and white captain's tunic he drew a blaster pistol.

"Good evening, Mr. O'Sorley," acknowledged Ludd.

"Your trap has closed on you," said the spurious captain.

A large panel in the second robot projector swung open and knocked O'Sorley's pistol from his grasp. Silvera leaped from the gutted machine and grabbed the old actor. "You ought to do something about that wheeze." He got O'Sorley's arms locked behind him. "It gives you away every time."

"I know," panted O'Sorley. "Whenever I get excited, it shows up. I've had it since I was a kid, a long time." Gradually he let his face change away from that of the captain.

Inspector Ludd stepped forward and put manacles on the bent old actor.

Silvera left them and went downstairs to the ballroom to encounter Lissa.

THANK GOD YOU'RE ALIVE

(From page 38)

It crashed down. Pain, breaking sounds. Vision dissolved in red haze. Again. Again. And again. Pain! Pain! Pain!

And finally, blackness. . . .

Death. A vast poem of silence. Lethe, the gift of forgetfulness, darkness and forgetfulness . . . and then:

Kellogg's hands were on my shoulders, holding me, pulling me back from the darkness. "You're alive," he whispered, prayer-like. "Thank God you're alive . . ."

ASK AND IT MAY BE GIVEN

(From page 49)

to the kitchen. She sat at the table waiting for Don and Doris. She drank and thought, and thought and drank. A disease in God's body, he had said. Had He felt pain? she wondered. When the tiny Hornet exploded, and car and man had burst into flame, had it been like the bursting of a wee pimple on His great cheek or the plucking of a tiny errant hair from His great white beard?

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