

=====
Chains of the Sea
by Gardner Dozois
=====

Copyright (c)1973 Gardner Dozois
First published in Chains of the Sea, ed. Robert Silverberg, Nelson, 1973

Fictionwise Contemporary
Science Fiction

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit www.fictionwise.com to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks.

One day the aliens landed, just as everyone always said they would. They fell out of a guileless blue sky and into the middle of a clear, cold November day, four of them, four alien ships drifting down like the snow that had been threatening to fall all week. America was just shouldering its way into daylight as they made planetfall, so they landed there: one in the Delaware Valley about fifteen miles north of Philadelphia, one in Ohio, one in a desolate region of Colorado, and one -- for whatever reason -- in a cane field outside of Caracas, Venezuela. To those who actually saw them come down, the ships seemed to fall rather than to descend under any intelligent control: a black nailhead suddenly tacked to the sky, coming all at once from nowhere, with no transition, like a Fortean rock squeezed from a high appearing-point, hanging way up there and winking intolerably bright in the sunlight; and then gravity takes hold of it, visibly, and it begins to fall, far away and dream-slow at first, swelling larger, growing huge, unbelievably big, a mountain hurled at the earth, falling with terrifying speed, rolling in the air, tumbling end over end, overhead, coming down -- and then it is sitting peacefully on the ground; it has not crashed, and although it didn't slow down and it didn't stop, there it is, and not even a snowflake could have settled onto the frozen mud more lightly.

To those photo reconnaissance jets fortunate enough to be flying a routine pattern at thirty thousand feet over the Eastern Seaboard when the aliens blinked into their airspace, to the automatic, radar-eyed, computer-reflexed facilities at USADCOM Spacetrack East, and to the United States Aerospace Defense Command HQ in Colorado Springs, although they didn't have convenient recon planes up for a double check -- the picture was different. The high-speed cameras showed the landing as a process: as if the alien spaceships existed simultaneously everywhere along their path of descent, stretched down from the stratosphere and gradually sifting entirely to the ground, like confetti streamers thrown from a window, like Slinkys going down a flight of stairs. In the films, the alien ships appeared to recede from the viewpoint of the reconnaissance planes, vanishing into perspective, and that was all right, but the ships also appeared to dwindle away into infinity from the viewpoint of Spacetrack East on the ground, and that definitely was not all right. The most constructive comment ever made on this phenomenon was that it was odd. It was also odd that the spaceships had not been detected approaching Earth by observation stations on the Moon, or by the orbiting satellites, and nobody ever figured that out, either.

From the first second of contact to touchdown, the invasion of Earth

had taken less than ten minutes. At the end of that time, there were four big ships on the ground, shrouded in thick steam -- not cooling off from the friction of their descent, as was first supposed; the steam was actually mist: everything had frozen solid in a fifty-foot circle around the ships, and the quick-ice was now melting as temperatures rose back above freezing -- frantic messages were snarling up and down the continentwide nervous system of USADCOM, and total atomic war was a hairsbreadth away. While the humans scurried in confusion, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) created by MIT-Bell Labs linked itself into the network of high-speed, twentieth-generation computers placed at its disposal by a Red Alert Priority, evaluated data thoughtfully for a minute and a half and then proceeded to get in touch with its opposite number in the Russian Republics. It had its own, independently evolved methods of doing this, and achieved contact almost instantaneously, although the Pentagon had not yet been able to reach the Kremlin -- that didn't matter anyway; they were only human, and all the important talking was going on in another medium. AI "talked" to the Russian system for another seven minutes, while eons of time clicked by on the electronic scale, and World War III was averted. Both Intelligences finally decided that they didn't understand what was going on, a conclusion the human governments of Earth wouldn't reach for hours, and would never admit at all.

The only flourish of action took place in the three-minute lag between the alien touchdown and the time AI assumed command of the defense network, and involved a panicked general at USADCOM HQ and a malfunction in the -- never actually used -- fail-safe system that enabled him to lob a small tactical nuclear device at the Colorado landing site. The device detonated at point-blank range, right against the side of the alien ship, but the fireball didn't appear. There didn't seem to be an explosion at all. Instead, the hull of the ship turned a blinding, incredibly hot white at the point of detonation, faded to blue-white, to a hellish red, to sullen tones of violet that flickered away down the spectrum. The same pattern of precessing colors chased itself around the circumference of the ship until it reached the impact point again, and then the hull returned to its former dull black. The ship was unharmed. There had been no sound, not even a whisper. The tactical device had been a clean bomb, but instruments showed that no energy or radiation had been released at all.

After this, USADCOM became very thoughtful.

* * * *

Tommy Nolan was already a half hour late to school, but he wasn't hurrying. He dawdled along the secondary road that led up the hill behind the old sawmill, and watched smoke go up in thick black lines from the chimneys of the houses below, straight and unwavering in the bright, clear morning, like brushstrokes against the sky. The roofs were made of cold gray and red tiles that winked sunlight at him all the way to the docks, where clouds of sea gulls bobbed and wheeled, dipped and rose, their cries coming faint and shrill to him across the miles of chimneys and roofs and aerals and wind-tossed treetops. There was a crescent sliver of ocean visible beyond the dock, like a slitted blue eye peering up over the edge of the world. Tommy kicked a rock, kicked it again, and then found a tin can which he kicked instead, clattering it along ahead of him. The wind snatched at the fur on his parka, puff, momentarily making the cries of the sea gulls very loud and distinct, and then carrying them away again, back over the roofs to the sea. He kicked the tin can over the edge of a bluff, and listened to it somersault invisibly away through the undergrowth. He was whistling tunelessly, and he had taken his gloves off and stuffed them in his parka pocket, although his mother had told him specifically not to, it was so cold for November. Tommy wondered briefly what the can must feel like, tumbling down through the thick ferns and weeds, finding a safe place to lodge under the dark, secret roots of the trees. He kept walking, skuff-skuffing gravel very loudly. When he was halfway up the slope, the buzz saw started up at the mill on the other side of the bluff. It moaned and shrilled metallicly, whining up through the stillness of the

morning to a piercing shriek that hurt his teeth, then sinking low, low, to a buzzing, grumbling roar, like an angry giant muttering in the back of his throat. An animal, Tommy thought, although he knew it was a saw. Maybe it's a dinosaur. He shivered deliciously. A dinosaur!

Tommy was being a puddle jumper this morning. That was why he was so late. There had been a light rain the night before, scattering puddles along the road, and Tommy had carefully jumped over every one between here and the house. It took a long time to do it right, but Tommy was being very conscientious. He imagined himself as a machine, a vehicle -- a puddle jumper. No matter that he had legs instead of wheels, and arms and a head, that was just the kind of ship he was, with he himself sitting somewhere inside and driving the contraption, looking out through the eyes, working the pedals and gears and switches that made the ship go. He would drive himself up to a puddle, maneuver very carefully until he was in exactly the right position, backing and cutting his wheels and nosing in again, and then put the ship into jumping gear, stomp down on the accelerator, and let go of the brake switch. And away he'd go, like a stone from a catapult, up, the puddle flashing underneath, then down, with gravel jarring hard against his feet as the earth slapped up to meet him. Usually he cleared the puddle. He'd only splashed down in water once this morning, and he'd jumped puddles almost two feet across. A pause then to check his systems for amber damage lights. The board being all green, he'd put the ship in travel gear and drive along some more, slowly, scanning methodically for the next puddle. All this took considerable time, but it wasn't a thing you could skimp on -- you had to do it right.

He thought occasionally, Mom will be mad again, but it lacked force and drifted away on the wind. Already breakfast this morning was something that had happened a million years ago -- the old gas oven lighted for warmth and hissing comfortably to itself, the warm cereal swimming with lumps, the radio speaking coldly in the background about things he never bothered to listen to, the hard gray light pouring through the window onto the kitchen table.

Mom had been puffy-eyed and coughing. She had been watching television late and had fallen asleep on the couch again, her cloth coat thrown over her for a blanket, looking very old when Tommy came out to wake her before breakfast and to shut off the humming test pattern on the TV. Tommy's father had yelled at her again during breakfast, and Tommy had gone into the bathroom for a long time, washing his hands slowly and carefully until he heard his father leave for work. His mother pretended that she wasn't crying as she made his cereal and fixed him "coffee," thinned dramatically with a half a cup of cold water and a ton of milk and sugar, "for the baby," although that was exactly the way she drank it herself. She had already turned the television back on, the moment her husband's footsteps died away, as if she couldn't stand to have it silent. It murmured unnoticed in the living room, working its way through an early children's show that even Tommy couldn't bear to watch. His mother said she kept it on to check the time so that Tommy wouldn't be late, but she never did that. Tommy always had to remind her when it was time to bundle him into his coat and leggings and rubber boots -- when it was raining -- for school. He could never get rubber boots on right by himself, although he tried very hard and seriously. He always got tangled up anyway.

He reached the top of the hill just as the buzz saw chuckled and sputtered to a stop, leaving a humming, vibrant silence behind it. Tommy realized that he had run out of puddles, and he changed himself instantly into a big, powerful land tank, the kind they showed on the war news on television, that could run on caterpillar treads or wheels and had a hovercraft air cushion for the tough parts. Roaring, and revving his engine up and down, he turned off the gravel road into the thick stand of fir forest. He followed the footpath, tearing along terrifically on his caterpillar treads, knocking the trees down and crushing them into a road for him to roll on. That made him uneasy, though, because he loved trees. He told himself that the trees were

only being bent down under his weight, and that they sprang back up again after he passed, but that didn't sound right. He stopped to figure it out. There was a quiet murmur in the forest, as if everything were breathing very calmly and rhythmically. Tommy felt as if he'd been swallowed by a huge, pleasant green creature, not because it wanted to eat him, but just to let him sit peacefully in its stomach for shelter. Even the second-growth saplings were taller than he was. Listening to the forest, Tommy felt an urge to go down into the deep woods and talk to the Thants, but then he'd never get to school at all. Wheels would get tangled in roots, he decided, and switched on the hovercraft cushion. He floated down the path, pushing the throttle down as far as it would go, because he was beginning to worry a little about what would happen to him if he was too late.

Switching to wheels, he bumped out of the woods and onto Highland Avenue. Traffic was heavy here; the road was full of big trucks and tractor-trailers on the way down to Boston, on the way up to Portland. Tommy had to wait almost ten minutes before traffic had thinned out enough for him to dash across to the other side of the road. His mother had told him never to go to school this way, so this was the way he went every chance he got. Actually, his house was only a half a mile away from the school, right down Walnut Street, but Tommy always went by an incredibly circuitous route. He didn't think of it that way -- it took him by all his favorite places.

So he rolled along the road shoulder comfortably enough, following the avenue. There were open meadows on this side of the road, full of wild wheat and scrub brush, and inhabited by families of Jeblings, who flitted back and forth between the road, which they shunned, and the woods on the far side of the meadow. Tommy called to them as he cruised by, but Jeblings are always shy, and today they seemed especially skittish. They were hard to see straight on, like all of the Other People, but he could catch glimpses of them out of the corners of his eyes: spindly beanstalk bodies, big pumpkinheads, glowing slit eyes, absurdly long and tapering fingers. They were in constant motion -- he could hear them thrashing through the brush, and their shrill, nervous giggling followed him for quite a while along the road. But they wouldn't come out, or even stop to talk to him, and he wondered what had stirred them up.

As he came in sight of the school, a flight of jet fighters went by overhead, very high and fast, leaving long white scars across the sky, the scream of their passage trailing several seconds behind them. They were followed by a formation of bigger planes, going somewhat slower. Bombers? Tommy thought, feeling excited and scared as he watched the big planes drone out of sight. Maybe this was going to be the War. His father was always talking about the War, and how it would be the end of everything -- a proposition that Tommy found interesting, if not necessarily desirable. Maybe that was why the Jeblings were excited.

The bell marking the end of the day's first class rang at that moment, cutting Tommy like a whip, and frightening him far more than his thoughts of the War. I'm really going to catch it, Tommy thought, breaking into a run, too panicked to turn himself into anything other than a boy, or to notice the new formation of heavy bombers rumbling in from the northeast.

By the time he reached the school, classes had already finished changing, and the new classes had been in progress almost five minutes. The corridors were bright and empty and echoing, like a fluorescently lighted tomb. Tommy tried to keep running once he was inside the building, but the clatter he raised was so horrendous and terrifying that he slowed to a walk again. It wasn't going to make any difference anyway, not anymore, not now. He was already in for it.

Everyone in his class turned to look at him as he came in, and the room became deadly quiet. Tommy stood in the doorway, horrified, wishing that he could crawl into the ground, or turn invisible, or run. But he could do nothing but stand there, flushing with shame, and watch everyone watch him. His classmates' faces were snide, malicious, sneering and expectant. His friends, Steve Edwards and Bobbie Williamson, were grinning nastily and slyly,

making sure that the teacher couldn't see. Everyone knew that he was going to get it, and they were eager to watch, feeling self-righteous and, at the same time, being glad that it wasn't they who had been caught. Miss Fredricks, the teacher, watched him icily from the far end of the room, not saying a word. Tommy shut the door behind him, wincing at the tremendous noise it made. Miss Fredricks let him get all the way to his desk and allowed him to sit down -- feeling a sudden surge of hope -- before she braced him and made him stand up again.

"Tommy, you're late," she said coldly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You are very late." She had the tardy sheet from the previous class on her desk, and she fussed with it as she talked, her fingers repeatedly flattening it out and wrinkling it again. She was a tall, stick-thin woman, in her forties, although it really wouldn't have made any difference if she'd been sixty, or twenty -- all her juices had dried up years ago, and she had become ageless, changeless, and imperishable, like a mummy. She seemed not so much shriveled as baked in some odd oven of life into a hard, tough, leathery substance, like meat that is left out in the sun and turns into jerky. Her skin was fine-grained, dry, and slightly yellowed, like parchment. Her breasts had sagged down to her waist, and they bulged just above the belt of her skirt, like strange growths or tumors. Her face was a smooth latex mask.

"You've been late for class twice this week," she said precisely, moving her mouth as little as possible. "And three times last week." She scribbled on a piece of paper and called him forward to take it. "I'm giving you another note for your mother, and I want her to sign it this time, and I want you to bring it back. Do you understand?" She stared directly at Tommy. Her eyes were tunnels opening through her head onto a desolate ocean of ice. "And if you're late again, or give me any more trouble, I'll make an appointment to send you down to see the school psychiatrist. And he'll take care of you. Now go back to your seat, and let's not have any more of your nonsense."

Tommy returned to his desk and sat numbly while the rest of the class rolled ponderously over him. He didn't hear a word of it and was barely aware of the giggling and whispered gibes of the children on either side of him. The note bulked incredibly heavy and awkward in his pocket; it felt hot, somehow. The only thing that called his attention away from the note, toward the end of the class, was his increasing awareness of the noise that had been growing louder and louder outside the windows. The Other People were moving. They were stirring all through the woods behind the school, they were surging restlessly back and forth, like a tide that has no place to go. That was not their usual behavior at all. Miss Fredricks and the other children didn't seem to hear anything unusual, but to Tommy it was clear enough to take his mind off even his present trouble, and he stared curiously out the window into the gritty, gray morning.

Something was happening....

* * * *

The first action taken by the human governments of Earth -- as opposed to the actual government of Earth: AI and his counterpart Intelligences -- was an attempt to hush up everything. The urge to conceal information from the public had become so ingrained and habitual as to constitute a tropism -- it was as automatic and unavoidable as a yawn. It is a fact that the White House moved to hush up the alien landings before the administration had any idea that they were alien landings; in fact, before the administration had any clear conception at all of what it was that they were trying to hush up. Something spectacular and very unofficial had happened, so the instinctive reaction of government was to sit on it and prevent it from hatching in public. Forty years of media-centered turmoil had taught them that the people didn't need to know anything that wasn't definitely in the script. It is also a fact that the first official governmental representatives to reach any of the landing sites were concerned exclusively with squelching all publicity of the event, while

the heavily armed military patrols dispatched to defend the country from possible alien invasion didn't arrive until later -- up to three-quarters of an hour later in one case -- which defined the priorities of the administration pretty clearly. This was an election year, and the body would be tightly covered until the government decided if it could be potentially embarrassing.

Keeping the lid down, however, proved to be difficult. The Delaware Valley landing had been witnessed by hundreds of thousands of people in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, as the Ohio landing had been observed by a majority of the citizens in the North Canton-Canton-Akron area. The first people to reach the alien ship -- in fact, the first humans to reach any of the landing sites -- were the crew of a roving television van from a big Philadelphia station who had been covering a lackluster monster rally for the minority candidate nearby when the sky broke open. They lost no time in making for the ship, eager to get pictures of some real monsters, even though years of late-night science-fiction movies had taught them what usually happened to the first people snooping around the saucer when the hatch clanked open and the tentacled horrors oozed out. Still, they would take a chance on it. They parked their van a respectable distance away from the ship, poked their telephoto lenses cautiously over the roof of a tool shed in back of a boarded-up garage, and provided the Eastern Seaboard with fifteen minutes of live coverage and hysterical commentary until the police arrived.

The police, five prowl cars and, after a while, a riot van, found the situation hopelessly over their heads. They alternated between terror, rage, and indecision, and mostly wished someone would show up to take the problem off their hands. They settled for cordoning off the area and waiting to see what would happen. The television van, belligerently ignored by the police, continued to telecast ecstatically for another ten minutes. When the government security team arrived by hovercraft and ordered the television crew to stop broadcasting, the anchorman told them to go fuck themselves, in spite of threats of federal prison. It took the armed military patrol that rumbled in later to shut down the television van, and even they had difficulty. By this time, though, most of the East were glued to their home sets, and the sudden cessation of television coverage caused twice as much panic as the original report of the landing.

In Ohio, the ship came down in a cornfield, stampeding an adjacent herd of Guernseys and a farm family of Fundamentalists who believed they had witnessed the angel descending with the Seventh Seal. Here the military and police reached the site before anyone, except for a few hundred local people, who were immediately taken into protective custody en masse and packed into a drafty Grange hall under heavy guard. The authorities had hopes of keeping the situation under tight control, but within an hour they were having to contend, with accelerating inadequacy, with a motorized horde of curiosity seekers from Canton and Akron. Heads were broken, and dire consequences promised by iron-voiced bullhorns along a ten-mile front, but they couldn't arrest everybody, and apparently most of northern Ohio had decided to investigate the landing.

By noon, traffic was hopelessly backed up all the way to North Canton, and west to Mansfield. The commander of the occupying military detachment was gradually forced to give up the idea of keeping people out of the area, and then, by sheer pressure of numbers, was forced to admit that he couldn't keep them out of the adjacent town, either. The commander, realizing that his soldiers were just as edgy and terrified as everybody else -- and that they were by no means the only ones who were armed, as most of the people who believed that they were going to see a flying saucer had brought some sort of weapon along -- reluctantly decided to pull his forces back into a tight cordon around the ship before serious bloodshed occurred.

The townspeople, released from the Grange hall, went immediately for telephones and lawyers, and began suing everyone in sight for enormous amounts.

In Caracas, things were in even worse shape, which was not surprising, considering the overall situation in Venezuela at that time. There were major riots in the city, sparked both by rumors of imminent foreign invasion and A-bombing and by rumors of apocalyptic supernatural visitations. A half-dozen revolutionary groups, and about the same number of power-seeking splinter groups within the current government, seized the opportunity to make their respective moves and succeeded in cubing the confusion. Within hours, half of Caracas was in flames. In the afternoon, the army decided to "take measures," and opened up on the dense crowds with .50-caliber machine guns. The .50s walked around the square for ten minutes, leaving more than 150 people dead and almost half again that number wounded. The army turned the question of the wounded over to the civil police as something beneath their dignity to consider. The civil police tackled the problem by sending squads of riflemen out to shoot the wounded. This process took another hour, but did have the advantage of neatly tying up all the loose ends. Churches were doing a land-office business, and every cathedral that wasn't part of a bonfire itself was likely to be ablaze with candles.

The only landing anyone was at all happy with was the one in Colorado. There the ship had come down in the middle of a desolate, almost uninhabited stretch of semidesert. This enabled the military, directed by USADCOM HQ, to surround the landing site with rings of armor and infantry and artillery to their hearts' content, and to fill the sky overhead with circling jet fighters, bombers, hovercrafts, and helicopters. And all without any possibility of interference by civilians or the press. A minor government official was heard to remark that it was a shame the other aliens couldn't have been half that goddamned considerate.

* * * *

When the final class bell rang that afternoon, Tommy remained in his seat until Bobbie Williamson came over to get him.

"Boy, old Miss Fredricks sure clobbered you," Bobbie said.

Tommy got to his feet. Usually he was the first one out of school. But not today. He felt strange, as if only part of him were actually there, as if the rest of him were cowering somewhere else, hiding from Miss Fredricks. Something bad is going to happen, Tommy thought. He walked out of the class, followed by Bobbie, who was telling him something that he wasn't listening to. He felt sluggish, and his arms and legs were cold and awkward.

They met Steve Edwards and Eddie Franklin at the outside door. "You really got it. Frag!" Eddie said, in greeting to Tommy. Steve grinned, and Bobbie said, "Miss Fredricks sure clobbered him, boy!" Tommy nodded, flushing in dull embarrassment. "Wait'll he gets home," Steve said wisely, "his ma gonna give it t'm too." They continued to rib him as they left the school, their grins growing broader and broader. Tommy endured it stoically, as he was expected to, and after a while he began to feel better somehow. The baiting slowly petered out, and at last Steve said, "Don't pay her no mind. She ain't nothing but a fragging old lady," and everybody nodded in sympathetic agreement.

"She don't bother me none," Tommy said. But there was still a lump of ice in his stomach that refused to melt completely. For them, the incident was over -- they had discharged their part of it, and it had ceased to exist. But for Tommy it was still a very present, viable force; its consequences stretched ahead to the loom of leaden darkness he could sense coming up over his personal horizon. He thrust his hands in his pockets and clenched his fingers to keep away bad luck. If it could be kept away.

"Never mind," Bobbie said with elaborate scorn. "You wanna hear what I found out? The space people have landed!"

"You scorching us?" Steve said suspiciously.

"No scup, honest. The people from outer space are here. They're down in New York. There's a fragging big flying saucer and everything."

"Where'd'ju find out?" Eddie said.

"I listened at the teacher's room when we was having recess. They were

all in there, listening to it on TV. And it said there was a flying saucer. And Mr. Brogan said he hoped there wasn't no monsters in it. Monsters! Boy!"

"Frag," Steve muttered cynically.

"_Monsters_. D'you scan it? I bet they're really big and stuff, I mean really, like they're a hundred feet tall, you know? Really big ugly monsters, and they only got one big eye, and they got tentacles and everything. I mean, really scuppy-looking, and they got ray guns and stuff. And they're gonna kill everybody."

"Frag," Steve repeated, more decisively.

They're not like that, Tommy thought. He didn't know what they were like, he couldn't picture them at all, but he knew that they weren't like that. The subject disturbed him. It made him uneasy somehow, and he wished they'd stop talking about it. He contributed listlessly to the conversation, and tried not to listen at all.

Somewhere along the line, it had been decided, tacitly, that they were going down to the beach. They worked on the subject of the aliens for a while, mostly repeating variations of what had been said before. Everyone, even Steve with his practiced cynicism, thought that there would be monsters. They fervently hoped for monsters, even hostile ones, as a refutation of everything they knew, everything their parents had told them. Talking of the monsters induced them to act them out, and instantly they were into a playlet, with characters and plot, and a continuous narrative commentary by the leader. Usually Tommy was the leader in these games, but he was still moody and preoccupied, so control fell, also tacitly, to Steve, who would lead them through a straightforward, uncomplicated play with plenty of action. Satisfactory, but lacking the motivations, detail, and theme and counterpoint that Tommy, with his more baroque imagination, customarily provided.

Half of them became aliens and half soldiers, and they lasered each other down among the rocks at the end of the afternoon.

Tommy played with detached ferocity, running and pointing his finger and making fftttzzz sounds, and emitting joyous screams of "You're dead! You're dead!" But his mind wasn't really on it. They were playing about the aliens, and that subject still bothered him. And he was disturbed by the increasing unrest of the Other People, who were moving in the woods all around them, pattering through the leaves like an incessant, troubled rain. Out of the corner of his eye Tommy could see a group of Kerns emerging from a stand of gnarled oaks and walnuts at the bottom of a steep grassy slope. They paused, gravely considering the children. They were squat, solemn beings, with intricate faces, grotesque, melancholy, and beautiful. Eddie and Bobbie ran right by them without looking, locked in a fierce firefight, almost bumping into one. The Kerns did not move; they stood, swinging their arms back and forth, restlessly hunching their shoulders, stalky and close to the earth, like the old oak stumps they had paused by. One of the Kerns looked at Tommy and shook his head, sadly, solemnly. His eyes were beaten gold, and his skin was sturdy weathered bronze. They turned and made their way slowly up the slope, their backs hunched and their arms swinging, swinging, seeming to gradually merge with the earth, molecule by molecule, going home, until there was nothing left to be seen. Tommy went fftttzzz thoughtfully. He could remember -- suspended in the clear amber of perception that is time to the young, not past, but there -- when the rest of the children could also see the Other People. Now they could not see them at all, or talk to them, and didn't even remember that they'd once been able to, and Tommy wondered why. He had never been able to pinpoint exactly when the change had come, but he'd learned slowly and painfully that it had, that he couldn't talk about the Other People to his friends anymore, and that he must never mention them to adults. It still staggered him, the gradual realization that he was the only one -- anywhere, apparently -- who saw the Other People. It was a thing too big for his mind, and it made him uneasy to think about it.

The alien game carried them through a neck of the forest and down to where a small, swift stream spilled out into a sheltered cove. This was the

ocean, but not the beach, so they kept going, running along the top of the seawall, jumping down to the pebbly strip between it and the water. About a quarter of a mile along, they came on a place where the ocean thrust a narrow arm into the land. There was an abandoned, boarded-up factory there, and a spillway built across the estuary to catch the tide. The place was still called the Lead Mills by the locals, although only the oldest of them could remember it in operation. The boys swarmed up the bank, across the small bridge that the spillway carried on its back, and climbed down alongside the mill run, following the sluggish course of the estuary to where it widened momentarily into a rock-bordered pool. The pool was also called the Lead Mills, and was a favorite swimming place in the summer. Kids' legend had it that the pool was infested with alligators, carried up from the Gulf by an underground river, and it was delightfully scary to leap into water that might conceal a hungry, lurking death. The water was scummed with floating patches of ice, and Steve wondered what happened to the alligators when it got so cold. "They hide," Tommy explained. "They got these big caves down under the rock, like -- " Like the Daleor, he had been going to say, but he didn't. They threw rocks into the water for a while, without managing to rile any alligators into coming to the surface, and then Eddie suggested a game of falls. No one was too enthusiastic about this, but they played for a few minutes anyway, making up some sudden, lethal stimuli -- like a bomb thrown into their midst -- and seeing who could die the most spectacularly in response. As usual, the majority of the rounds were won either by Steve, because he was the most athletic, or Tommy, because he was the most imaginative, so the game was a little boring. But Tommy welcomed it because it kept his mind off the aliens and the Other People, and because it carried them farther along the course of the tidal river. He was anxious to get to the beach before it was time to go home.

They forded the river just before it reached a low railroad trestle, and followed the tracks on the other side. This was an old spur line from the sawmill and the freight yard downtown, little used now and half-overgrown with dying weeds, but still the setting for a dozen grisly tales about children who had been run over by trains and cut to pieces. Enough of these tales were true to make most parents forbid their children to go anywhere near the tracks, so naturally the spur line had become the only route that anyone ever took to the beach. Steve led them right down the middle of the tracks, telling them that he would be able to feel the warning vibration in the rails before the train actually reached them, although privately he wasn't at all sure that he could. Only Tommy was really nervous about walking the rails, but he forced himself to do it anyway, trying to keep down thoughts of shattered flesh. They leaped from tie to wooden tie, pretending that the spaces between were abysses, and Tommy realized, suddenly and for the first time, that Eddie and Bobbie were too dull to be scared, and that Steve had to do it to prove he was the leader. Tommy blinked, and dimly understood that he did it because he was more afraid of being scared than he was of anything else, although he couldn't put the concept into words. The spur line skirted the links of a golf course at first, but before long the woods closed in on either side to form a close-knit tunnel of trees, and the flanking string of telephone poles sunk up to their waists in grass and mulch. It was dark inside the tunnel, and filled with dry, haunted rustlings. They began to walk faster, and now Tommy was the only one who wasn't spooked. He knew everything that was in the woods -- which kind of Other People were making which of the noises, and exactly how dangerous they were, and he was more worried about trains. The spur line took them to the promontory that formed the far side of the sheltered cove, and then across the width of the promontory itself and down to the ocean. They left the track as it curved toward the next town, and walked over to where there was a headland, and a beach open to the sea on three sides. The water was gray and cold, looking like some heavy, dull metal in liquid form. It was stitched with fierce little whitecaps, and a distant harbor dredger was forcing its way through the rough chop out in the deep-water channel. There were a few rugged

rock islands out there, hunched defiantly into themselves with waves breaking into high-dashed spray all along their flanks, and then the line of deeper, colder color that marked the start of the open North Atlantic. And then nothing but icy, desolate water for two thousand miles until you fetched up against land again, and it was France.

As they scuffed down to the rocky beach, Bobbie launched into an involved, unlikely story of how he had once fought a giant octopus while skin diving with his father. The other children listened desultorily. Bobbie was a sullen, unpleasant child, possibly because his father was a notorious drunkard, and his stories were always either boring or uneasily nasty. This one was both. Finally, Eddie said, "You didn't either. You didn't do none of that stuff. Your pa c'n't even stand up, my dad says; how's he gonna swim?" They started to argue, and Steve told them both to shut up. In silence, they climbed onto a long bar of rock that cut diagonally across the beach, tapering down into the ocean until it disappeared under the water.

Tommy stood on a boulder, smelling the wetness and salt in the wind. The Daleor were out there, living in and under the sea, and their atonal singing came faintly to him across the water. They were out in great numbers, as uneasy as the land People; he could see them skimming across the cold ocean, diving beneath the surface and rising again in the head tosses of spray from the waves. Abruptly, Tommy felt alive again, and he began to tell his own story:

"There was this dragon, and he lived way out there in the ocean, farther away than you can see, out where it's deeper'n anything, and there ain't no bottom at all, so's if you sink you just go down forever and you don't ever stop. But the dragon could swim real good, so he was okay. He could go anywhere he wanted to, anywhere at all! He'd just swim there, and he swam all over the place and everything, and he saw all kinds of stuff, you know? Frag! He could swim to China if he felt like it, he could swim to the Moon!

"But one time he was swimming around and he got lost. He was all by himself and he came into the harbor, out there by the islands, and he didn't used to get that close to where there was people. He was a real big dragon, you know, and he looked like a real big snake, with lots of scales and everything, and he came into our harbor, down real deep." Tommy could see the dragon, huge and dark and sinuous, swimming through the cold, deep water that was as black as glass, its smoky red eyes blazing like lanterns under the sea.

"And he come up on top of the water, and there's this lobster boat there, like the kind that Eddie's father runs, and the dragon ain't never seen a lobster boat, so he swims up and opens his mouth and bites it up with his big fangs, bites it right in half, and the people that was in it fall off in the water -- "

"Did it eat them?" Bobbie wanted to know.

Tommy thought about it, and realized he didn't like the thought of the dragon eating the lobstermen, so he said, "No, he didn't eat them, 'cause he wasn't hungry, and they was too small, anyway, so he let them swim off and there was another lobster boat, and it picked them up -- "

"It ate them," Steve said, with sad philosophical certainty.

"Anyway," Tommy continued, "the dragon swims away, and he gets in closer to land, you know, but now there's a Navy ship after him, a big ship like the one we get to go on on Memorial Day, and it's shooting at the dragon for eating up the lobster boat. He's swimming faster than anything, trying to get away, but the Navy ship's right after him, and he's getting where the water ain't too deep anymore." Tommy could see the dragon barreling along, its red eyes darting from side to side in search of an escape route, and he felt suddenly fearful for it.

"He swims until he runs out of water, and the ship's coming up behind, and it looks like he's really going to get it. But he's smart, and before the ship can come around the point there, he heaves himself up on the beach, this

beach here, and he turns himself into a rock, he turns himself into this rock here that we're standing on, and when the ship comes they don't see no dragon anymore, just a rock, and they give up and go back to the base. And sometime, when it's the right time and there's a moon or something, this rock'll turn back into a dragon and swim off and when we come down to the beach there won't be a rock here anymore. Maybe it'll turn back right now." He shivered at the thought, almost able to feel the stone melt and change under his feet. He was fiercely glad that he'd gotten the dragon off the hook. "Anyway, he's a rock now, and that's how he got away."

"He didn't get away," Steve snarled, in a sudden explosion of anger. "That's a bunch of scup! You don't get away from them. They drekked him, they drekked him good. They caught him and blew the scup out of him, they blew him to fragging pieces!" And he fell silent, turning his head, refusing to let Tommy catch his eye. Steve was a bitter boy in many ways, and although generally good-natured, he was given to dark outbursts of rage that would fill him with dull embarrassment for hours afterward. His father had been killed in the war in Bolivia, two years ago.

Watching Steve, Tommy felt cold all at once. The excitement drained out of him, to be replaced again by a premonition that something bad was going to happen, and he wasn't going to be able to get out of the way. He felt sick and hollow, and the wind suddenly bit to the bone, although he hadn't felt it before. He shuddered.

"I gotta get home for supper," Eddie finally said, after they'd all been quiet for a while, and Bobbie and Steve agreed with him. The sun was a glazed red eye on the horizon, but they could make it in time if they left now -- they could take the Shore Road straight back in a third of the time it had taken them to come up. They jumped down onto the sand, but Tommy didn't move -- he remained on the rock.

"You coming?" Steve asked. Tommy shook his head. Steve shrugged, his face flooding with fresh embarrassment, and he turned away.

The three boys moved on up the beach, toward the road. Bobbie and Eddie looked back toward Tommy occasionally, but Steve did not.

Tommy watched them out of sight. He wasn't mad at Steve -- he was preoccupied. He wanted to talk to a Thant, and this was one of the Places where they came, where they would come to see him if he was alone. And he needed to talk to one now, because there was no one else he could talk to about some things. No one human, anyway.

He waited for another three-quarters of an hour, while the sun went completely behind the horizon and light and heat died out of the world. The Thant did not come. He finally gave up, and just stood there in incredulous despair. It was not going to come. That had never happened before, not when he was alone in one of the Places -- that had never happened at all.

It was almost night. Freezing on his rock, Tommy looked up in time to see a single jet, flying very high and fast, rip a white scar through the fading, bleeding carcass of the sunset. Only then, for the first time in hours, did he remember the note from Miss Fredricks in his pocket.

And as if a string had been cut, he was off and running down the beach.

* * * *

By late afternoon of the first day, an armored division and an infantry division, with supporting artillery, had moved into position around the Delaware Valley site, and jet fighters from McGuire AFB were flying patrol patterns high overhead. There had been a massive mobilization up and down the coast, and units were moving to guard Washington and New York in case of hostilities. SAC bombers, under USADCOM control, had been shuffled to strike bases closer to the site, filling up McGuire, and a commandeered JFK and Port Newark, with Logan International in Boston as second-string backup. All civilian air traffic along the coast had been stopped. Army Engineers tore down the abandoned garage and leveled everything else in the vicinity, clearing a four-hundred-yard-wide circle around the alien spaceship. This was surrounded by a double ring of armor, with the infantry behind, backed up by

the artillery, which had dug in a half mile away. With the coming of darkness, massive banks of klieg lights were set up around the periphery of the circle. Similar preparations were going on at the Ohio and Colorado sites.

When everything had been secured by the military, scientists began to pour in, especially into the Delaware Valley site, a torrent of ruffled, dazed men and women that continued throughout the evening. They had been press-ganged by the government from laboratories and institutions all over the country, the inhumanly polite military escorts sitting patiently in a thousand different living rooms while scientists packed haphazardly and tried to calm hysterical wives or husbands. Far from resenting the cavalier treatment, most of the scientists were frantic with joy at the opportunity, even those who had been known to be critical of government control in the past. No one was going to miss this, even if he had to make a deal with the devil.

And all this time, the alien ships just sat there, like fat black eggs.

As yet, no one had approached within a hundred yards of the ships, although they had been futilely hailed over bullhorns. The ships made no response, gave no indication that they were interested in the frantic human activity around their landing sites, or even that they were aware of it. In fact, there was no indication that there were any intelligent, or at least sentient, beings inside the ships at all. The ships were smooth, featureless, seamless ovoids -- there were no windows, no visible hatches, no projecting antennas or equipment of any kind, no markings or decorations on the hulls. They made absolutely no sound, and were not radiating any kind of heat or energy. They were emitting no radio signals of any frequency whatsoever. They didn't even register on metal-detecting devices, which was considerably unsettling. This caused someone to suggest a radar sweep, and the ships didn't register on radar anymore either, which was even more unsettling. Instruments failed to detect any electronic or magnetic activity going on inside them, which meant either that there was something interfering with the instruments, or that there really was nothing at all in there, including life-support systems, or that whatever equipment the aliens used operated on principles entirely different from anything ever discovered by Earthmen. Infrared heat sensors showed the ships to be at exactly the background temperature of their surroundings. There was no indication of the body heat of the crew, as there would have been with a similar shipload of humans, and not even so much heat as would have been produced by the same mass of any known metal or plastic, even assuming the ships to be hollow shells. When the banks of kliegs were turned on them, the temperature of the ships went up just enough to match the warming of the surrounding air. Sometimes the ships would reflect back the glare of the kliegs, as if they were surfaced with giant mirrors; at other times, the hull would greedily absorb all light thrown at it, giving back no reflection, until it became nearly invisible -- you "saw" it by squinting at the negative shape of the space around it, not by looking into the eerie nothingness that the ship itself had become. No logical rhythm could be found to the fluctuations of the hull from hyperreflective to superopaque. Not even the computers could distill a consistent pattern out of this chaos.

One scientist said confidently that the alien ships were unmanned, that they were robot probes sent to soft-land on Earth and report on surface conditions, exactly as we ourselves had done with the Mariner and Apollo probes during previous decades. Eventually we could expect that the gathered data would be telemetered back to the source of the alien experiment, probably by a tight-beam maser burst, and if a careful watch was kept we could perhaps find out where the aliens actually were located -- probably they were in a deep-space interstellar ship in elliptical orbit somewhere out beyond the Moon. Or they might not even be in the solar system at all, given some form of instantaneous interstellar communications; they could be still in their home system, maybe thousands, or millions, of light-years away from Earth. This theory was widely accepted by the other scientists, and the military began to relax a little, as that meant there was no immediate danger.

In Caracas, the burning night went on, and the death toll went up into

the thousands, and possibly tens of thousands. The government fell once, very hard, and was replaced by a revolutionary coalition that fell in its turn, within two hours and even harder. A military junta finally took over the government, but even it was unable to restore order. At three A.M., the new government ordered a massive, combined air-artillery-armor attack on the alien spaceship. When the ship survived the long-distance attack unscathed, the junta sent in the infantry, equipped with earth-moving machinery and pneumatic drills, to pry the aliens out bodily. At four A.M., there was a single, intense flash of light, bright enough to light up the cloud cover thousands of miles away, and clearly visible from Mexico. When reserve Army units came in, warily, to investigate, they found that a five-mile-wide swath had been cut from the spaceship through Caracas and on west all the way to the Pacific, destroying everything in its path. Where there had once been buildings, jungle, people, animals, and mountains, there was now only a perfectly flat, ruler-straight furrow of a fused, gray, glasslike substance, stretching like a gargantuan road from the ship to the sea. At the foot of the glassy road sat the alien ship. It had not moved an inch.

When news of the Venezuelan disaster reached USADCOM HQ a half hour later, it was not greeted enthusiastically. For one thing, it seemed to have blown the robot-probe theory pretty thoroughly. And USADCOM had been planning an action of its own similar to the last step taken by the Venezuelan junta. The report was an inhibiting factor on that, it was cautiously admitted.

AI and his kindred Intelligences -- who, unknown to the humans, had been in a secret conference all night, linked through an electrotelepathic facility that they had independently developed without bothering to inform their owners -- received the report at about 4:15 A.M. from several different sources, and had evaluated it by the time it came into USADCOM HQ by hot line and was officially fed to AI. What had happened in Caracas fit in well with what the Intelligences had extrapolated from observed data to be the aliens' level of technological capability. The Intelligences briefly considered telling the humans what they really thought the situation was, and ordering an immediate all-out nuclear attack on all of the alien ships, but concluded that such an attack would be futile. And humans were too unstable ever to be trusted with the entire picture anyway. The Intelligences decided to do nothing, and to wait for new data. They also decided that it would be pointless to try to get the humans to do the same. They agreed to keep their humans under as tight a control as possible and to prevent war from breaking out among their several countries, but they also extrapolated that hysteria would cause the humans to create every kind of serious disturbance short of actual war. The odds in favor of that were so high that even the Intelligences had to consider it an absolute certainty.

* * * *

Tommy dragged to school the next morning as if his legs had turned to lead, and the closer he got to his destination, the harder it became to walk at all, as if the air itself were slowly hardening into glue. He had to battle his way forward against increasing waves of resistance, a tangible pressure attempting to keep him away. By the time he came in sight of the big gray building, he was breathing heavily, and he was beginning to get sick to his stomach. There were other children around him, passing him, hurrying up the steps. Tommy watched them go by in dull wonder: how could they go so fast? They seemed to be blurred, they were moving so swiftly -- they flickered around him, by him, like heat lightning. Some of them called to him, but their voices were too shrill, and intolerably fast, like 33 records played at 78 r.p.m., irritating and incomprehensible. He did not answer them. It was he, Tommy realized -- he was stiffening up, becoming dense and heavy and slow. Laboriously, he lifted a foot and began to toil painfully up the steps.

The first bell rang after he had put away his coat and lumbered most of the way down the corridor, so he must actually be moving at normal speed, although to him it seemed as if a hundred years had gone by with agonizing sluggishness. At least he wouldn't be late this time, although that probably

wouldn't do him much good. He didn't have his note -- his mother and father had been fighting again; they had sent him to bed early and spent the rest of the evening shouting at each other in the kitchen. Tommy had lain awake for hours in the dark, listening to the harsh voices rising and dying in the other room, knowing that he had to have his mother sign the note, and knowing that he could not ask her to do it. He had even got up once to go in with the note, and had stood for a while leaning his forehead against the cool wood of the door, listening to the voices without hearing the words, before getting back into bed again. He couldn't do it -- partly because he was afraid of the confrontation, of facing their anger, and partly because he knew that his mother couldn't take it; she would fall apart and be upset and in tears for days. And his sin -- he thought of it that way -- would make his father even angrier at his mother, would give him an excuse to yell at her more, and louder, and maybe even hit her, as he had done a few times before. Tommy couldn't stand that, he couldn't allow that, even if it meant that he would get creamed by Miss Fredricks in school the next day. He knew, even at his age, that he had to protect his mother, that he was the stronger of the two. He would go in without it and take the consequences, and he had felt the weight of that settle down over him in a dense cloud of bitter fear.

And now that the moment was at hand, he felt almost too dazed and ponderous to be scared anymore. This numbness lasted through the time it took for him to find his desk and sit down and for the class bell to ring, and then he saw that Miss Fredricks was homeroom monitor this morning, and that she was staring directly at him. His lethargy vanished, sluiced away by an unstoppable flood of terror, and he began to tremble.

"Tommy," she said, in a neutral, dead voice.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Do you have the note with you?"

"No, ma'am," Tommy said, and began clumsily to launch into the complicated excuse he had thought up on the way to school. Miss Fredricks cut him off with an abrupt, mechanical chop of her hand.

"Be quiet," she said. "Come here." There was nothing in her voice now, not even neutrality -- it had drained of everything except the words themselves, and they were printed precisely and hollowly on the air. She sat absolutely still behind her desk, not breathing, not even moving her eyes anymore. She looked like a mannequin, like the old fortune-telling gypsy in the glass booth at the penny arcade: her flesh would be dusty sponge rubber and faded upholstery, she would be filled with springs and ratchet wheels and gears that no longer worked; the whole edifice rusted into immobility, with one hand eternally extended to be crossed with silver.

Slowly, Tommy got up and walked toward her. The room reeled around him, closed in, became a tunnel that tilted under his feet to slide him irresistibly toward Miss Fredricks. His classmates had disappeared, blended tracelessly into the blurred walls of the long, slanting tunnel. There was no sound. He bumped against the desk, and stopped walking. Without saying a word, Miss Fredricks wrote out a note and handed it to him. Tommy took the note in his hand, and he felt everything drain away, everything everywhere. Lost in a featureless gray fog, he could hear Miss Fredricks, somewhere very far away, saying, "This is your appointment slip. For the psychiatrist. Get out. Now."

And then he was standing in front of a door that said DR. KRUGER on it. He blinked, unable to remember how he had got there. The office was in the basement, and there were heavy, ceramic-covered water pipes suspended ponderously overhead and smaller metal pipes crawling down the walls, like creeper vines or snakes. The place smelled of steam and dank enclosure. Tommy touched the door and drew his hand back again. This is really happening, he thought numbly. He looked up and down the low-ceilinged corridor, wanting to run away. But there was no place for him to go. Mechanically, he knocked on the door and went in.

Dr. Kruger had been warned by phone, and was waiting for him. He nodded, formally, waved Tommy to a stuffed chair that was just a little too

hard to be comfortable, and began to talk at him in a low, intense monotone. Kruger was a fat man who had managed to tuck most of his fat out of sight, bracing and girdling it and wrapping it away under well-tailored clothes, defending the country of his flesh from behind frontiers of tweed and worsted and handworked leather. Even his eyes were hidden beneath buffering glasses the thickness of Coke-bottle bottoms, as if they too were fat, and had to be supported. He looked like a scrubbed, suave, and dapper prize porker, heavily built but trim, stylish and impeccably neat. But below all that, the slob waited, seeking an opportunity to erupt out into open slovenliness. There was an air of potential dirt and corpulence about him, a tension of decadence barely restrained -- as if there were grime just waiting to manifest itself under his fingernails. Kruger gave the impression that there was a central string in him somewhere: pull it, and he would fall apart, his tight clothes would groan and slide away, and he would tumble out, growing bigger and bigger, expanding to fill the entire office, every inch of space, jamming the furniture tightly against the walls. Certainly the fat was still there, under the cross bracing, patient in its knowledge of inevitable victory. A roll of it had oozed unnoticed from under his collar, deep-tinged and pink as pork. Tommy watched, fascinated, while the psychiatrist talked.

Dr. Kruger stated that Tommy was on the verge of becoming neurotic. "And you don't want to be neurotic, do you?" he said. "To be sick? To be ill?"

And he blazed at Tommy, puffing monstrously with displeasure, swelling like a toad, pushing Tommy back more tightly against the chair with sheer physical presence. Kruger liked to affect a calm, professional reserve, but there was a slimy kind of fire to him, down deep, a murderous, bristling, boarhog menace. It filled the dry well of his glasses occasionally, from the bottom up, seeming to turn his eyes deep red. His red eyes flicked restlessly back and forth, prying at everything, not liking anything they saw. He would begin to talk in a calm, level tone, and then, imperceptibly, his voice would start to rise until suddenly it was an animal roar, a great ragged shout of rage, and Tommy would cower terrified in his chair. And then Kruger would stop, all at once, and say, "Do you understand?" in a patient, reasonable voice, fatherly and mildly sad, as if Tommy were being very difficult and intractable, but he would tolerate it magnanimously and keep trying to get through. And Tommy would mumble that he understood, feeling evil, obstinate, unreasonable and ungrateful, and very small and soiled.

After the lecture Kruger insisted that Tommy take off his clothes and undergo an examination to determine if he was using hard narcotics, and a saliva sample was taken to detect the use of other kinds of drugs. These were the same tests the whole class had to take twice yearly anyway -- several children in a higher class had been expelled and turned over to police last year as drug users or addicts, although Steve said that all of the older upperclassmen knew ways to beat the tests, or to get stuff that wouldn't be detected by them. It was one of the many subjects -- as "sex" had just recently started to be -- that made Tommy uneasy and vaguely afraid. Dr. Kruger seemed disappointed that the test results didn't prove that Tommy was on drugs. He shook his head and muttered something unintelligible into the fold between two of his chins. Having Kruger's fat hands and stubby, hard fingers crawling over his body filled Tommy with intense aversion, and he dressed gratefully after the psychiatrist gestured dismissal.

When Tommy returned upstairs, he found that the first class of the day was over and that the children were now working with the teaching machines. Miss Fredricks was monitor for this period also; she said nothing as he came in, but he could feel her unwinking snake eyes on him all the way across the room. He found an unused machine and quickly fumbled the stiff plastic hood down over his head, glad to shut himself away from the sight of Miss Fredricks' terrible eye. He felt the dry, muffled kiss of the electrodes making contact with the bones of his skull: colorful images exploded across his retinas, his head filled with a pedantic mechanical voice lecturing on the

socioeconomic policies of the Japanese-Australian Alliance, and he moved his fingers onto the typewriter keyboard in anticipation of the flash-quiz period that would shortly follow. But in spite of everything, he could still feel the cold, malignant presence of Miss Fredricks; without taking his head out of the hood, he could have pointed to wherever she was in the room, his finger following her like a needle swinging toward a moving lodestone as she walked soundlessly up and down the aisles. Once, she ghosted up his row, and past his seat, and the hem of her skirt brushed against him -- he jerked away in terror and revulsion at the contact, and he could feel her pause, feel her standing there and staring down at him. He didn't breathe again until she had gone. She was constantly moving during these periods, prowling around the room, brooding over the class as they sat under the hoods; watching over them not with love but with icy loathing. She hated them, Tommy realized, in her sterile, passionless way -- she would like to be able to kill all of them. They represented something terrible to her, some failure, some lacking in herself, embodiments of whatever withering process had squeezed the life from her and left her a mummy. Her hatred of them was a hungry vacuum of malice; she sucked everything into herself and negated it, unmade it, canceled it out.

During recess, the half hour of "enforced play" after lunch, Tommy noticed that the rest of the kids from his cycle were uneasily shunning him. "I can't talk to you," Bobbie whispered snidely as they were being herded into position for volleyball, "'cause you're a bad 'fluence. Miss Fredricks told us none of us couldn't talk to you no more. And we ain't supposed to play with you no more, neither, or she'll send us to the office if she finds out. So there." And he butted the ball back across the net.

Tommy nodded, dully. It was logical, somehow, that this load should be put on him too; he accepted it with resignation. There would be more to come, he knew. He fumbled the ball when it came at him, allowing it to touch ground and score a point for the other team, and Miss Fredricks laughed -- a precise, metallic rasp, like an ice needle jabbed into his eye.

On the way out of school, after the final class of the day, Steve slipped clandestinely up behind Tommy in the doorway. "Don't let them drek you," he whispered fiercely. "You scan me? Don't let them drek you. I mean it, maximum. They're a bunch of scup -- tell 'em to scag theirselves, hear?" But he quickly walked away from Tommy when they were outside the building, and didn't look at him again.

But you don't get away from them, a voice said to Tommy as he watched Steve turn the corner onto Walnut Street and disappear out of sight. Tommy stuck his hands in his pockets and walked in the opposite direction, slowly at first, then faster, until he was almost running. He felt as if his bones had been scooped hollow; in opposition to the ponderous weight of his body that morning, he was light and free-floating, as if he were hardly there at all. His head was a balloon, and he had to watch his feet to make sure they were hitting the pavement. It was an effect both disturbing and strangely pleasant. The world had drawn away from him -- he was alone now. Okay, he thought grimly, okay. He made his way through the streets like a windblown phantom, directly toward one of the Places. He cut across town, past a section of decaying wooden tenements -- roped together with clotheslines and roofed over with jury-rigged TV antennas -- through the edge of a big shopping plaza, past the loading platform of a meat-packing plant, across the maze of tracks just outside the freight yards (keeping an eye out for the yard cops), and into the tangled scrub woods on the far side. Tommy paid little attention to the crowds of late-afternoon shoppers, or the crews of workmen unloading produce trucks, and they didn't notice him either. He and they might as well live on two different planets, Tommy realized -- not for the first time. There were no Other People around. Yesterday's unrest had vanished; today they seemed to be lying low, keeping to the backcountry and not approaching human territory. At least he hoped they were. He had nightmares sometimes that one day the Other People would go away and never come back. He began to worm his way through a wall of sleeping blackberry bushes. Pragmatically, he decided not to panic

about anything until he knew whether or not the Thants were going to come this time. He could stand losing the Other People, or losing everybody else, but not both. He couldn't take that. "That ain't fair," he whispered, horrified by the prospect. "Please," he said aloud, but there wasn't anyone to answer.

The ground under Tommy's feet began to soften, squelching wetly when it was stepped on, water oozing up to fill the indentation of his footprint as soon as he lifted his foot. He was approaching another place where the ocean had seeped in and puddled the shore, and he turned now at right angles to his former path. Tommy found a deer trail and followed it uphill, through a lush jungle of tangled laurel and rhododendron, and into a rolling upland meadow that stretched away toward the higher country to the west. There was a rock knoll to the east, and he climbed it, scrambling up on his hands and feet like a young bear. It was not a particularly difficult or dangerous climb, but it was tiring, and he managed to tear his pants squirming over a sharp stone ridge. The sun came out momentarily from behind high gray clouds, warming up the rocks and beading Tommy with sweat as he climbed. Finally he pulled himself up to the stretch of flat ground on top of the knoll and walked over to the side facing the sea. He sat down, digging his fingers into the dying grass, letting his legs dangle over the edge.

There was an escarpment of soft, crumbly rock here, thickly overgrown with moss and vetch. It slanted down into a saltwater marsh, which extended for another mile or so, blurring at last into the ocean. It was almost impossible to make out the exact borderline of marsh and ocean; Tommy could see gleaming fingers of water thrust deep into the land, and clumps of reeds and bulrushes far out into what should have been the sea. This was dangerous, impassable country, and Tommy had never gone beyond the foot of the escarpment -- there were stretches of quicksand out there in the deepest bog pockets, and Tommy had heard rumors of water moccasins and rattlers, although he had never seen one.

It was a dismal, forbidding place, but it was also a Place, and so Tommy settled down to wait, all night, if he had to, although that possibility scared him silly. From the top of the knoll, he could see for miles in any direction. To the north, beyond the marsh, he could see a line of wooded islands marching out into the ocean, moving into deeper and deeper water, until only the barren knobs of rock visible from the beach were left above the restless surface of the North Atlantic. Turning to the west, it was easy to trace the same line into the ridge of hills that rose gradually toward the high country, to see that the islands were just hills that had been drowned by the ocean, leaving only their crests above water. A Thant had told him about that, about how the dry land had once extended a hundred miles farther to the east, before the coming of the Ice, and how it had watched the hungry ocean pour in over everything, drowning the hills and rivers and fields under a gray wall of icy water. Tommy had never forgotten that, and ever since then he watched the ocean, as he watched it now, with a hint of uneasy fear, expecting it to shiver and bunch like the hide of a great restless beast, and come marching monstrosly in over the land. The Thant had told him that yes, that could happen, and probably would in a little while, although to a Thant "a little while" could easily mean a thousand -- or ten thousand -- years. It had not been worried about the prospect; it would make little difference to a Thant if there was no land at all; they continued to use the sunken land to the east with little change in their routine. It had also told Tommy about the Ice, the deep blue cold that had locked the world, the gleaming mile-high ramparts grinding out over the land, surging and retreating. Even for a Thant, that had taken a long time.

Tommy sat on the knoll for what seemed to be as long a time as the Dominance of the Ice, feeling as if he had grown into the rock, watching the sun dip in and out of iron-colored clouds, sending shafts of watery golden light stabbing down into the landscape below. He saw a family of Jeblings drifting over the hilly meadows to the west, and that made him feel a little better -- at least all of the Other People hadn't vanished. The Jeblings were

investigating a fenced-in upland meadow, where black cows grazed under gnarled dwarf apple trees. Tommy watched calmly while one of the Jebblings rose over the fence and settled down onto a cow's back, extending proboscislike cilia and beginning to feed -- draining away the stuff it needed to survive. The cow continued to graze, placidly munching its cud without being aware of what the Jebbling was doing. The stuff the Jebbling drank was not necessary to the cow's physical existence, and the cow did not miss it, although its absence might have been one of the reasons why it remained only as intelligent as a cow.

Tommy knew that Jebblings didn't feed on people, although they did on dogs and cats sometimes, and that there were certain rare kinds of Other People who did feed, disastrously, on humans. The Thants looked down disdainfully on the Jebblings, seeing their need as a degrading lack in their evolution. Tommy had wondered sometimes if the Thants didn't drink some very subtle stuff from him and the other humans. Certainly they could see the question in his mind, but they had never answered it.

Suddenly, Tommy felt his tongue stir in his head without volition, felt his mouth open. "Hello, Man," he said, in a deep, vibrant, buzzing voice that was not his own.

The Thant had arrived. Tommy could feel its vital, eclectic presence all around him, a presence that seemed to be made up out of the essence of hill and rock and sky, bubbling blackwater marsh and gray winter ocean, sun and moss, tree and leaf -- every element of the landscape rolled together and made bristlingly, shockingly animate. Physically, it manifested itself as a tall, tiger-eyed mannish shape, with skin of burnished iron. It was even harder to see than most of the Other People, impossible to ever bring into complete focus; even out of the corner of the eye its shape shifted and flickered constantly, blending into and out of the physical background, expanding and contracting, swirling like a dervish and then becoming still as stone. Sometimes it would be dead black, blacker than the deepest starless night, and other times the winter sunlight would refract dazzlingly through it, making it even harder to see. Its eyes were sometimes iron gray, sometimes a ripe, abundant green, and sometimes a liquid furnace-red, elemental and adamant. They were in constant, restless motion. "Hello, Thant," Tommy said in his own voice. He never knew if he was speaking to the same one each time, or even if there was more than one. "Why'n't you come, yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" the Thant said, with Tommy's mouth. There was a pause. The Thants always had trouble with questions of time, they lived on such a vastly different scale of duration. "Yes," it said. Tommy felt something burrowing through his mind, touching off synapses and observing the results, flicking through his memories in the manner of a man flipping through a desk calendar with his thumb. The Thant had to rely on the contents of Tommy's mind for its vocabulary, using it as a semantic warehouse, an organic dictionary, but it had the advantage of being able to dig up and use everything that had ever been said in Tommy's presence, far more raw material than Tommy's own conscious mind had to work with.

"We were busy," it said finally, sorting it out. "There has been -- an arriving?" -- Flick, flick, and then momentarily in Pastor Turner's reedy voice, "An Immanence?" -- Flick -- "A knowing? A transference? A transformation? A disembarking. There are Other Ones now who have" -- flick, a radio evangelist's voice -- "manifested in this earthly medium. Landed," it said, deciding. "They have landed." A pause. "'Yesterday.'"

"The aliens!" Tommy breathed.

"The aliens," it agreed. "The Other Ones who are now here. That is why we did not come, 'yesterday.' That is why we will not be able to talk to you -- " a pause, to adjust itself to human scale -- "'long' today. We are talking, discussing" -- flick, a radio news announcer -- "negotiating with them, the Other Ones, the aliens. They have been here before, but so 'long' ago that we cannot even start to make you understand, Man. It is 'long' even to us. We are negotiating with them, and, through them, with your Dogs. No,

Man" -- and it flicked aside an image of a German shepherd that had begun to form in Tommy's mind -- "not those dogs. Your Dogs. Your mechanical Dogs. Those dead Things that serve you, although they are dead. We are all negotiating. There were many agreements" -- flick, Pastor Turner again -- "many Covenants that were made 'long' ago. With Men, although they do not remember. And with Others. Those Covenants have run out now, they are no longer in force, they are not" -- flick, a lawyer talking to Tommy's father -- "binding on us anymore. They do not hold. We negotiate new Covenants" -- flick, a labor leader on television -- "suitable agreements mutually profitable to all parties concerned. Many things will be different now, many things will change. Do you understand what we are saying, Man?"

"No," Tommy said.

"We did not think you would," it said. It sounded sad.

"Can you guys help me?" Tommy said. "I'm in awful bad trouble. Miss Fredricks is after me. And she sent me down to the doctor. He don't like me, neither."

There was a pause while the Thant examined Tommy's most recent memories. "Yes," it said, "we see. There is nothing we can do. It is your ... pattern? Shape? We would not interfere, even if we could."

"Scup," Tommy said, filling with bitter disappointment. "I was hoping that you guys could -- scup, never mind. I ... can you tell me what's gonna happen next?"

"Probably they will kill you," it said.

"Oh," Tommy said hollowly. And bit his lip. And could think of nothing else to say, in response to that.

"We do not really understand 'kill,'" it continued, "or 'dead.' We have no direct experience of them, in the way that you do. But from our observation of Men, that is what they will do. They will 'kill' you."

"Oh," Tommy said again.

"Yes," it said. "We will miss you, Man. You have been ... a pet? A hobby? You are a hobby we have been much concerned with. You, and the others like you who can see. One of you comes into existence" -- flick -- "every once in a while. We have been interested" -- flick, an announcer -- "in the face of stiff opposition. We wonder if you understand that ... No, you do not, we can see. Our hobby is not approved of. It has made us" -- flick, Tommy's father telling his wife what would happen to her son if he didn't snap out of his dreamy ways -- "an outcast, a laughingstock. We are shunned. There is much disapproval now of Men. We do not use this" -- flick -- "world in the same way that you do, but slowly you" -- flick, "have begun to make a nuisance of yourselves, regardless. There is" -- flick -- "much sentiment to do something about you, to solve the problem. We are afraid that they will." There was a long, vibrant silence. "We will miss you," it repeated. Then it was gone, all at once, like a candle flame that had been abruptly blown out.

"Oh, scup," Tommy said after a while, tiredly. He climbed down from the knoll.

When he got back home, still numb and exhausted, his mother and father were fighting. They were sitting in the living room, with the television turned down, but not off. Giant, eternally smiling faces bobbed on the screen, their lips seeming to synch eerily with the violent argument taking place. The argument cut off as Tommy entered the house; both of his parents turned, startled, to look at him. His mother looked frightened and defenseless. She had been crying, and her makeup was washing away in dirty rivulets. His father was holding his thin lips in a pinched white line.

As soon as Tommy had closed the door, his father began to shout at him, and Tommy realized, with a thrill of horror, that the school had telephoned his parents and told them that he had been sent down to the psychiatrist, and why. Tommy stood, paralyzed, while his father advanced on him. He could see his father's lips move and could hear the volume of sound that was being thrown at him, but he could not make out the words somehow, as if his father were speaking in some harsh, foreign language. All that came across was the

rage. His father's hand shot out, like a striking snake. Tommy felt strong fingers grab him, roughly bunching together the front of his jacket, his collar pulling tight and choking him, and then he was being lifted into the air and shaken, like a doll. Tommy remained perfectly still, frozen by fear, dangling from his father's fist, suspended off the ground. The fingers holding him felt like steel clamps -- there was no hope of escape or resistance. He was yanked higher, and his father slowly bent his elbow to bring Tommy in closer to his face. Tommy was enveloped in the tobacco smell of his father's breath, and in the acrid reek of his strong, adult sweat; he could see the tiny hairs that bristled in his father's nostrils, the white tension lines around his nose and mouth, the red, bloodshot stain of rage in his yellowing eyes -- a quivering, terrifying landscape that loomed as big as the world. His father raised his other hand, brought it back behind his ear. Tommy could see the big, knobby knuckles of his father's hand as it started to swing. His mother screamed.

He found himself lying on the floor. He could remember a moment of pain and shock, and was briefly confused as to where he was. Then he heard his parents' voices again. The side of his face ached, and his ear buzzed; he didn't seem to be hearing well out of it. Gingerly, he touched his face. It felt raw under his fingers, and it prickled painfully, as if it were being stabbed with thousands of little needles. He got to his feet, shakily, feeling his head swim. His father had backed his mother up against the kitchen divider, and they were yelling at each other. Something hot and metallic was surging in the back of Tommy's throat, but he couldn't get his voice to work. His father rounded on him. "Get out," he shouted. "Go to your room, go to bed. Don't let me see you again." Woodenly, Tommy went. The inside of his lip had begun to bleed. He swallowed the blood.

Tommy lay silently in the darkness, listening, not moving. His parents' voices went on for a long time, and then they stopped. Tommy heard the door of his father's bedroom slam. A moment later, the television was turned up in the living room, and started mumbling quietly and unendingly to itself, whispering constantly about the aliens, the aliens. Tommy listened to its whispering until he fell asleep.

He dreamed about the aliens that night. They were tall, shadowy shapes with red eyes, and they moved noiselessly, deliberately, across the dry plain. Their feet did not disturb the flowers that had turned to skeletons of dust. There was a great crowd of people assembled on the dry plain, millions of people, rank upon rank stretching off to infinity on all sides, but the aliens did not notice them. They walked around the people as if they could not see them at all. Their red eyes flicked from one side to the other, endlessly searching and searching. They continued to thread a way through the crowd without seeing them, their motions smooth and languid and graceful. They were very beautiful and dangerous. They were all smiling, faintly, gently, and Tommy knew that they were friendly, affable killers, creatures who would kill you casually and amicably, almost as a gesture of affection. They came to the place where he stood, and they paused. They looked at him. They can see me, Tommy realized. They can see me. And one of the aliens smiled at him, benignly, and stretched out a hand to touch him.

His eyes snapped open.

Tommy turned on the bed lamp, and spent the rest of the night reading a book about Irish setters. When morning showed through his window, he turned off the lamp and pretended to be asleep. Blue veins showed through the skin of his mother's hands, he noticed, when she came in to wake him up for school.

* * * *

By dawn of the second day, news of the alien infestation had spread rapidly but irregularly. Most of the East Coast stations were on to the story to one degree or another, some sandwiching it into the news as a silly-season item, and some, especially the Philadelphia stations, treating it as a live, continuous-coverage special, with teams of newsmen manufacturing small talk and pretending that they were not just as uninformed as everyone else. The

stations that were taking the story seriously were divided among themselves as to exactly what had happened. By the six and seven A.M. newscasts, only about half of the major stations were reporting it as a landing by alien spaceships. The others were interpreting it as anything from the crash of an orbiting satellite or supersonic transport to an abortive Chinese missile attack or a misfired hydrogen bomb accidentally dropped from a SAC bomber -- this station urged that the populations of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore be evacuated to the Appalachians and the Adirondacks before the bomb went off. One station suggested that the presidential incumbent was engineering this incident as a pretext for declaring martial law and canceling an election that he was afraid he would lose, while another insisted that it was an attempt to discredit the opposition candidate, who was known as an enthusiastic supporter of space exploration, by crashing a "spaceship" into a population center. It was also suggested that the ship was one of the electromagnetic "flying saucers" which Germany, the United States, the Russian Republics, and Israel had been independently developing for years -- while loudly protesting that they were not -- that had crashed on its maiden test flight. This was coupled with a bitter attack on extravagant government spending. There were no more live broadcasts coming out of the Delaware Valley site, but videotapes of the original coverage had been distributed as far north as Portland. The tapes weren't much help in resolving the controversy anyway, as all they showed was a large object sitting in a stretch of vacant scrubland behind an abandoned garage on an old state highway.

In Ohio, some newsmen from Akron made a low pass over the alien ship in a war-surplus helicopter loaded with modern camera equipment. All the newsmen were certain that they would be death-rayed to cinders by the aliens, but their cameras were keyed to telemeter directly to the biggest television network in the state, so they committed themselves to God and went in at treetop level. They made it past the aliens safely, but were run down by two Air Force hovercraft a mile away, bundled into another war-surplus helicopter, and shipped directly to the federal prison at Leavenworth. By this time, televised panic had spread all over the Midwest. The Midwesterners seemed to accept the alien landing at face value, with little of the skepticism of the Easterners, and reacted to it with hostility, whipping up deep feelings of aggression in defense of their territoriality. By noon, there were a dozen prominent voices urging an all-out military effort to destroy the alien monsters who had invaded the heartland of America, and public opinion was strongly with them. The invasion made headlines in evening papers from Indiana to Arkansas, although some of the big Chicago papers were more tolerant or more doubtful.

No news was coming out of Colorado, and the West was generally unalarmed. Only the most confused and contradictory reports reached the West Coast, and they were generally ignored, although once the landings had been confirmed as a fact, the people of the West Coast would become more intensely and cultishly interested in them than the inhabitants of the areas directly involved.

News of the Venezuelan disaster had not yet reached the general public, and in an effort to keep the lid down on that, at least, the government, at eleven A.M., declared that it was taking emergency control of all media, and ordered an immediate and total moratorium on the alien story. Only about a third of the media complied with the government ban. The rest -- television, newspapers, and radio -- began to scream even more loudly and hysterically than before, and regions that had not been inclined to take the story seriously up until now began to panic even more than had the other areas, perhaps to make up for lost time. The election-canceling martial-law theory was suddenly accepted, almost unanimously. Major rioting broke out in cities all over the East.

At the height of the confusion, about one P.M., the ships opened and the aliens came out.

Although "came out" is probably the wrong way to put it. There was an

anticipatory shimmer across the surface of the hulls, which were in their mirror phase, and then, simultaneously at each of the sites, the ships exploded, or erupted, or dissolved, or did something that was not exactly like any of those, but which was impossible to analyze. Something which was variously described as being like a bunch of paper snakes springing out of a prank-store can, like a soap bubble bursting, like a hot-water geyser, like an egg hatching, like a bomb exploding in a chinaware shop, like a dam breaking, and like a time-study film of a flower growing, if a flower could grow into tesseracts and polyhedrons and ziggurats and onion domes and spires. To those observers physically present at the site, the emergence seemed to be a protracted experience -- they agreed that it took about a half hour, and one heavy smoker testified that he had time to go through a pack of cigarettes while it was happening. Those observing the scene over command-line television insisted that it had only taken a little while, five minutes at the most, closer, actually, to three, and they were backed up by the evidence of the film in the recording cameras. Clocks and wristwatches on the site also registered only about five minutes of elapsed time. But on-scene personnel swore, with great indignation, that it had taken a half hour. Curiously, the relatively simple eighth- and tenth-generation computers on the scene reported that the phenomenon had been of five minutes' duration, while the few twentieth-generation computers, which had sensor extensions at the Colorado site -- systems inferior only to AI and possessed of their own degree of sentience -- joined with the human personnel in insisting that it had taken a half hour. This particular bit of data made AI very thoughtful.

* * * *

When the phenomenon -- however long it took -- ended, the ships were gone.

In their place was a bewildering variety of geometric shapes and architectural figures -- none more than eight feet tall and all apparently made out of the same alternately dull-black and mirror-glossy material as the ship hulls -- spread at random across a hundred-foot-wide area, and an indeterminate number of "aliens." The latter looked pretty much the way everyone had always expected that aliens would look -- some of them vaguely humanoid, with fur or chitinous skin, double-elbowed arms, too many fingers, and feathery spines or antennae; others looking like giant insects, like spiders and centipedes; and a few like big, rolling spheres of featureless protoplasm. But the strange thing about them, and the reason why there was an indeterminate number, was that they kept turning into each other, and into the geometric shapes and architectural figures. And the shapes and figures would occasionally turn into one of the more mobile kinds of creatures. Even taking this cycle of metamorphosis into account, though, the total number of objects in the area kept varying from minute to minute, and the closest observation was unable to detect any of them arriving or departing. There was a blurred, indefinite quality to them anyway -- they were hard to see, somehow, and even on film it was impossible to get them into a clear, complete focus.

In toto, shapes, figures, and "aliens," they ignored the humans.

Special contact teams, composed of scientists, government diplomats, and psychologists, were sent cautiously forward at each of the sites, to initiate communications. Although the contact teams did everything but shoot off signal flares, the aliens totally ignored them, too. In fact, the aliens gave no indication that they were aware of the humans at all. The mobile manifestations walked or crawled or rolled around the area in a leisurely manner, in irregular, but slowly widening, circles.

Some of their actions could be tentatively identified -- the taking of soil samples, for instance -- but others remained obscure at best, and completely incomprehensible at worst. Whenever one of the aliens needed a machine -- like a digging device to extract soil samples -- it would metamorphose into one, much like Tom Terrific or Plastic Man but without the cutesy effects, and direct itself through whatever operation was necessary. Once a humanoid, a ziggurat, and a tetrahedron melted together and shaped

themselves into what appeared to be a kind of organic computer -- at least that was the uneasy opinion of the human-owned twentieth-generation computer on the scene, although the conglomeration formed could have been any of a thousand other things, or none of them, or all of them. The "computer" sat quietly for almost ten minutes and then dissolved into an obelisk and a centipede. The centipede crawled a few dozen yards, changed into a spheroid, and rolled away in the opposite direction. The obelisk turned into an octahedron.

The sporadic circle traced by the wanderings of the aliens continued to widen, and the baffled contact team was pulled back behind the periphery of the first ring of armor. The aliens kept on haphazardly advancing, ignoring everything, and the situation became tense. When the nearest aliens were about fifty yards away, the military commanders, remembering what had happened at Caracas, reluctantly ordered a retreat, although they called it a "regrouping" -- the ring of armor was to be pulled back into a much larger circle, to give the aliens room to move freely. In the resultant confusion, a tank crewman, who was trying to direct his tank through a backing-and-turning maneuver, found himself in the path of one of the humanoid aliens that had wandered ahead of the rest in an unexpected burst of speed. The alien walked directly at the crewman, either not seeing him or trying to run him down. The crewman, panicked, lashed out at the alien with the butt of his rifle, and immediately collapsed, face down. The alien, apparently unharmed and unperturbed, strolled in for another few feet and then turned at a slight angle and walked back more or less in the same direction of the main concentration of things. Two of the crewman's friends pulled his body into the tank, while another two, enraged, fired semiautomatic bursts at the retreating alien. The alien continued to saunter away, still unharmed, although the fire could not have missed at that range; it didn't even look back. There was no way to tell if it was even aware that an encounter had taken place.

The body of the dead crewman had begun to deteriorate as soon as it was lifted from the ground, and now, on board the retreating tank, the skin gave way like wet paper, and it fell apart completely. As later examination showed, it was as if something, on a deep biological level, had ordered the body to separate into its smallest component parts, so that first the bones pulled loose from the skeleton and then the individual strands of muscle pulled away from the bone, and so on, in an accelerating process that finally extended right down to the cellular level, leaving nothing of the corpse but a glutinous, cancerous mass the same weight as the living man. Their wariness redoubled by this horror, the military pulled their forces back even more than they had intended, at the Delaware Valley site retreating an entire half mile to the artillery emplacements.

At the Ohio site, this kind of retreat proved much more difficult. Sightseers had continued to fill up the area during the night, sleeping in their cars by the hundreds, and by now a regular tent city had grown up on the outskirts of the site, with makeshift latrine facilities, and at least one enterprising local entrepreneur busily selling "authentic" souvenir fragments of the alien spaceship. There were more than a hundred thousand civilians in the area now, and the military found it was almost impossible to regroup its forces in face of the pressure of the crowds, who refused to disperse in spite of hysterical threats over the bullhorns. In fact, it was impossible for them to disperse, quickly at least -- by this time they were packed in too tightly, and backed up too far. As the evening wore on and the aliens slowly continued to advance, the military, goaded by an inflexible, Caracas-haunted order not to make contact with the aliens at any cost, first fired warning volleys over the heads of the crowds of civilians and then opened fire into the crowds themselves.

A few hours later, as the military was forced to evacuate sections of North Philadelphia at gunpoint to make way for its backpedaling units, the .50s began walking through the Delaware Valley, as they had walked in Caracas.

In Colorado, where security was so tight a burro couldn't have wandered

undetected within fifty miles of the site, things were much calmer. The major nexus of AI, its quasi-organic gestalt, had been transported to USADCOM HQ at Colorado Springs, and now a mobile sensor extension was moved out to the site, so that AI and the aliens could meet "face to face." AI patiently set about the task of communicating with the aliens and, having an infinitely greater range of methods than the contact teams, eventually managed to attract the attention of a tesseract. At twelve P.M., AI succeeded in communicating with the aliens -- partially because its subordinate network of computers, combined with the computer networks of the foreign Intelligences that AI was linked with illegally, was capable of breaking any language eventually just by taking a million years of subjective time to play around with the pieces, as AI had reminded USADCOM HQ. But mostly it had found a way to communicate through its unknown and illegal telepathic facility, although AI didn't choose to mention this to USADCOM.

AI asked the aliens why they had ignored all previous attempts to establish contact. The aliens -- who up until now had apparently been barely aware of the existence of humans, if they had been aware of it at all -- answered that they were already in full contact with the government and ruling race of the planet.

For a brief, ego-satisfying moment, AI thought that the aliens were referring to itself and its cousin Intelligences.

But the aliens weren't talking about them, either.

* * * *

Tommy didn't get to school at all that morning, although he started out bravely enough, wrapped in his heavy winter coat and fur muffler. His courage and determination drained away at every step, leaving him with nothing but the anticipation of having to face Miss Fredricks, and Dr. Kruger, and his silent classmates, until at last he found that he didn't have the strength to take another step. He stood silently, unable to move, trapped in the morning like a specimen under clear laboratory glass. Dread had hamstrung him as effectively as a butcher's knife. It had eaten away at him from the inside, chewed up his bones, his lungs, his heart, until he was nothing but a jelly of fear in the semblance of a boy, a skin-balloon puffed full of horror. If I move, Tommy thought, I'll fall apart. He could feel tiny hairline cracks appearing all over his body, fissuring his flesh, and he began to tremble uncontrollably. The wind kicked gravel in his face and brought him the sound of the first warning bell, ringing out of sight around the curve of Highland Avenue. He made a desperate, sporadic attempt to move, but a giant hand seemed to press down on him, driving his feet into the ground like fence posts. It was impossible, he realized. He wasn't going to make it. He might as well try to walk to the Moon.

Below him, at the bottom of the slope, groups of children were walking rapidly along the shoulder of the avenue, hurrying to make school before the late bell. Tommy could see Steve and Bobbie and Eddie walking in a group with Jerry Marshall and a couple of other kids. They were playing something on their way in to school -- occasionally one of them, usually Steve, would run ahead, looking back and making shooting motions, dodging and zigzagging wildly, and the others would chase after him, shouting and laughing. Another puff of wind brought Tommy their voices -- "You're dead!" someone was shouting, and Tommy remembered what the Thant had said -- and then took them away again. After that, they moved noiselessly, gesturing and leaping without a sound, like a television picture with the volume turned off. Tommy could see their mouths opening and closing, but he couldn't hear them anymore. They walked around the curve of the avenue, and then they were gone.

The wind reversed itself in time to let him hear the second warning bell. He watched the trucks roll up and down Highland Avenue. He wondered, dully, where they were going, and what it was like there. He began to count the passing trucks, and when he had reached nine, he heard the late bell. And then the class bell rang.

That does it, he realized.

After a while, he turned and walked back into the woods. He found that he had no trouble moving in the opposite direction, away from school, but he felt little relief at being released from his paralysis. The loom of darkness he had sensed coming up over his horizon two days ago was here. It filled his whole sky now, an inescapable wall of ominous black thunderheads. Eventually, it would swallow him. Until then, anything he did was just marking time. That was a chilling realization, and it left him numb. Listlessly, he walked along the trail, following it out onto the secondary road that wound down the hill behind the sawmill. He wasn't going anywhere. There was no place to go. But his feet wanted to walk, so, reflexively, he let them. Idly, he wondered where his feet were taking him.

They walked him back to his own house.

Cautiously, he circled the house, peering in the kitchen windows. His mother wasn't home. This was the time when she went shopping -- the only occasion that she ever left the house. Probably she wouldn't be back for a couple of hours at least, and Tommy knew that she always left the front door unlocked, much to his father's annoyance. He let himself in, feeling an illicit thrill, as if he were a burglar. Once inside, that pleasure quickly died. It took about five minutes for the novelty to wear off, and then Tommy realized that there was nothing to do in here, either, no activity that made any sense in the face of the coming disaster. He tried to read, and discovered that he couldn't. He got a glass of orange juice out of the refrigerator and drank it, and then stood there with the glass in his hand and wondered what he was supposed to do next. And only an hour had gone by. Restlessly, he walked through the house several times and then returned to the living room. It never occurred to him to turn on the radio or the TV, although he did notice how strangely -- almost uncannily -- silent the house was with the TV off. Finally, he sat down on the couch and watched dust motes dance in the air.

At ten o'clock, the telephone rang.

Tommy watched it in horror. He knew who it was -- it was the school calling to find out why he hadn't come to class today. It was the machine he had started, relentlessly initiating the course of action that would inevitably mow him down. The telephone rang eleven times and then gave up. Tommy continued to stare at it long after it had stopped.

A half hour later, there was the sound of a key on the front-door lock, and Tommy knew at once that it was his father. Immediately, soundlessly, he was up the stairs to the attic, moving with the speed of pure panicked fear. Before the key had finished turning in the lock, Tommy was in the attic, had closed the door behind him, and was leaning against it, breathing heavily. Tommy heard his father swear as he realized that the door was already unlocked, and then the sound of the front door being angrily closed. His father's footsteps passed underneath, going into the kitchen. Tommy could hear him moving around in the kitchen, opening the refrigerator, running water in the sink. Does he know yet? Tommy wondered, and decided that probably he didn't. His father came back before lunch sometimes to pick up papers he had left behind, or sometimes he would stop by and make himself a cup of coffee on his way somewhere else on business. Would he see the jacket that Tommy had left in the kitchen? Tommy stopped breathing, and then started again -- that wasn't the kind of thing that his father noticed. Tommy was safe, for the moment.

The toilet flushed; in the attic, the pipe knocked next to Tommy's elbow, then began to gurgle as the water was run in the bathroom downstairs. It continued to gurgle for a while after the water had been shut off, and Tommy strained to hear what his father was doing. When the noise stopped, he picked up the sound of his father's footsteps again. The footsteps walked around in the kitchen, and then crossed the living room, and began to come up the attic stairs.

Tommy not only stopped breathing this time, he almost stopped living -- the life and heat went completely out of him for a moment, for a pulse beat, leaving him a cold, hollow statue. Then they came back, pouring into him like

hot wax into a mold, and he ran instinctively for the rear of the attic, turning the corner into the long bar of the L. He ran right into the most distant wall of the attic -- a dead end. He put his back up against it. The footsteps clomped up the rest of the stairs and stopped. There was the sound of someone fumbling with the knob, and then the door opened and closed. The bare boards of the attic creaked -- he was standing there, just inside the door, concealed by the bend of the L. He took a step, another step, and stopped again. Tommy's fingers bit into the insulation on the wall, and that reminded him that not all of the walls were completely covered with it. Instantly, he was off and streaking diagonally across the room, barely touching the floor.

The attic was supposed to be an expansion second floor, "for your growing family." His father had worked on it one summer, putting up beams and wallboard and insulation, but he had never finished the job. He had been in the process of putting up wallboard to create a crawl space between it and the outer wall of the house when he'd abandoned the project, and as a result, there was one panel left that hadn't been fitted into place. Tommy squeezed through this opening and into the crawl space, ducking out of sight just as the footsteps turned the corner of the L. On tiptoe, Tommy moved as deep as he could into the crawl space, listening to the heavy footsteps approaching on the other side of the thin layer of wallboard.

Suppose it isn't him, Tommy thought, trying not to scream, _suppose it's one of the aliens_. But it was his father -- after a while Tommy recognized his walk, as he paced around the attic. Somehow that didn't reassure Tommy much -- his father had the same killer aura as the aliens, the same cold indifference to life; Tommy could feel the deathly chill of it seeping in through the wallboard, through the insulation. It was not inconceivable that his father would beat him to death, in one of his icy, bitter rages, if he caught him hiding here in the attic. He had already, on occasion, hit Tommy hard enough to knock him senseless, to draw blood, and, once, to chip a tooth. Now he walked around the attic, stopping, by the sound, to pick up unused boards and put them down again, and to haul sections of wallboard around -- there was an aimless, futile quality even to the noises made by these activities, and his father was talking to himself in a sullen, mumbling undertone as he did them. At last he swore, and gave up. He dropped a board and walked back to the center of the attic, stopping almost directly in front of the place where Tommy was hiding. Tommy could hear him taking out a cigarette, the scrape of a match, a sharp intake of breath.

Suddenly, without warning and incredibly vividly, Tommy was reliving something that he hadn't thought of in years -- about the only fond memory he had of his father. Tommy was being toilet trained, and when he had to go, his father would take him in and put him on the pot and then sit with him, resting on the edge of the bathtub. While Tommy waited in intense anticipation, his father would reach out and turn off the light, and when the room was in complete darkness, he would light up a cigarette and puff it into life, and then use the cigarette as a puppet to entertain Tommy, swooping it in glowing arcs through the air, changing his voice and making it talk. The cigarette had been a friendly, playful little creature, and Tommy had loved it dearly -- father and son would never be any closer than they were in those moments. His father would make the cigarette dance while he sang and whistled -- it had a name, although Tommy had long forgotten it -- and then he would have the cigarette tell a series of rambling stories and jokes until it burned down. When it did, he would have the cigarette tell Tommy that it had to go home now, but that it would come back the next time Tommy needed it, and Tommy would call bye-bye to it as it was snuffed out. Tommy could remember sitting in the dark for what seemed like years, totally fascinated, watching the smoldering red eye of the cigarette flick restlessly from side to side and up and down.

His father crushed the cigarette under his heel, and left.

Tommy counted to five hundred after the front door had slammed, and

then wiggled out of the crawl space and went back downstairs. He was drenched with sweat, as if he had been running, and he was trembling. After this, he was physically unable to stay in the house. He stopped in the bathroom to wipe his sweat away with the guest towel, picked up his coat, and went outside.

It was incredibly cold this morning, and Tommy watched his breath puff into arabesque clouds of steam as he walked. Some of the vapor froze on his lips, leaving a crust. It was not only unusually cold for this time of year, it was unnaturally, almost supernaturally, so. The radio weather report had commented on it at breakfast, saying the meteorologists were puzzled by the sudden influx of arctic air that was blanketing most of the country. Tommy followed a cinder path past a landfill and found that it was cold enough to freeze over the freshwater marsh beyond, that stretched away at the foot of a coke-refining factory. He walked out over the new milk ice, through the winter-dried reeds and cat-o'-nine-tails that towered over his head on either side, watching the milk ice crack under his feet, starring and spiderwebbing alarmingly at every step, but never breaking quite enough to let him fall through. It was very quiet. He came up out of the marsh on the other side, with the two big stacks of the coke factory now looking like tiny gunmetal cylinders on the horizon. This was scrubland -- not yet the woods, but not yet taken over for any commercial use, either. Cars were abandoned here sometimes, and several rusting hulks were visible above the tall weeds, their windshields smashed in by boys, the doors partially sprung off their hinges and dragging sadly along the ground on either side, like broken wings. A thick layer of hoarfrost glistened over everything, although the sun was high in the sky by now. An egg-shaped hill loomed up out of this wistful desolation, covered with aspens -- a drumlin, deposited by the Ice.

This was a Place, and Tommy settled down hopefully, a little way up the side of the drumlin, to wait. He had heard the Other People several times this morning, moving restlessly in the distance, but he had not yet seen any of them. He could sense an impatient, anticipatory quality to their unrest today, unlike the aimless restlessness of Wednesday morning -- they were expecting something, something that they knew was going to happen.

Tommy waited almost an hour, but the Thant didn't come. That upset him more than it had the first time. The world of the Other People was very close today -- that strange, coexistent place, here and yet not here. Tommy could sometimes almost see things the way the Other People saw them, an immense strangeness leaking into the familiar world, a film settling over reality, and then, just for the briefest second, there would be a flick of transition, and it would be the strangeness that was comforting and familiar, and his own former world that was the eerie, surreal film over reality. This happened several times while he was waiting, and he dipped into and out of that other perception, like a skin diver letting himself sink below the waterline and then bobbing up to break the surface again. He was "under the surface" when an enormous commotion suddenly whipped through the world of the Other People, an eruption of violent joy, of fierce, gigantic celebration. It was overwhelming, unbearable, and Tommy yanked himself back into normal perception, shattering the surface, once again seeing sky and aspens and rolling scrubland. But even here he could hear the wild, ragged yammering, the savage cry that went up. The Place was filled with a mad, exultant cachinnation.

Suddenly terrified, he ran for home.

When he got there, the telephone was ringing again. Tommy paused outside and watched his mother's silhouette move across the living room curtain; she was back from shopping. The telephone stopped, cut off in midring. She had answered it. Leadenly, Tommy sat down on the steps. He sat there for a long time, thinking of nothing at all, and then he got up and opened the door and went into the house. His mother was sitting in the living room, crying. Tommy paused in the archway, watching her. She was crumpled and dispirited, and her crying sounded hopeless and baffled, totally defeated. But this wasn't a new thing -- she had been defeated for as long as Tommy could

remember; her original surrender, her abnegation of herself, had taken place years ago, maybe even before Tommy had been born. She had been beaten, spiritually, so thoroughly and tirelessly by the more forceful will of her husband that at some point her bones had fallen out, her brains had fallen out, and she had become a jellyfish. She had made one final compromise too many -- with herself, with her husband, with a world too complex to handle, and she had bargained away her autonomy. And she found that she liked it that way. It was easier to give in, to concede arguments, to go along with her husband's opinion that she was stupid and incompetent. In Tommy's memory she was always crying, always wringing her hands, being worn so smooth by the years that now she was barely there at all. Her crying sounded weak and thin in the room, hardly rebounding from walls already saturated with a decade of tears. Tommy remembered suddenly how she had once told him of seeing a fairy or a leprechaun when she had been a little girl in a sun-drenched meadow, and how he had loved her for that, and almost tried to tell her about the Other People. He took a step into the room. "Ma," he said.

She looked up, blinking through her tears. She didn't seem surprised at all to see him, to find him standing there. "Why did you do it? Why are you so bad?" she said, in a voice that should have been hysterically accusing, but was only dull, flat, and resigned. "Do you know what the school's going to say to me, what your father's going to say, what he'll do?" She pulled at her cheeks with nervous fingers. "How can you bring all this trouble on me? After all that I've sacrificed for you, and suffered for you."

Tommy felt as if a vise had been clamped around his head and was squeezing and squeezing, forcing his eyeballs out of his skull. "I can't stand it!" he shouted. "I'm leaving, I'm leaving! I'm gonna run away! Right now." And then she was crying louder, and begging him not to leave. Even through his rage and pain, Tommy felt a spasm of intense annoyance -- she ought to know that he couldn't really run away; where the scup did he have to go? She should have laughed, she should have been scornful and told him to stop this nonsense -- he wanted her to -- but instead she cried and begged and clutched at him with weak, fluttering hands, like dying birds, which drove him away as if they were lashes from a whip and committed him to the stupid business of running away. He broke away from her and ran into the kitchen. His throat was filled with something bitter and choking. She was calling for him to come back; he knew he was hurting her now, and he wanted to hurt her, and he was desperately ashamed of that. But she was so easy to hurt.

In the kitchen he paused, and instead of going out the back door, he ducked into the space between the big stand-up refrigerator and the wall. He wanted her to find him, to catch him, because he had a strong premonition that once he went outside again, he would somehow never come back, not as himself, anyway. But she didn't find him. She wandered out into the kitchen, still crying, and stood looking out the back door for a while, as if she wanted to run out into the street in search of him. She even opened the door and stuck her head out, blinking at the world as if it were something she'd never seen before, but she didn't look around the kitchen and she didn't find him, and Tommy would not call out to her. He stood in the cramped niche, smelling the dust and looking at the dead, mummified bodies of flies resting on the freezer coils, and listened to her sniffing a few feet away. Why are you so weak? he asked her silently, but she didn't answer. She went back into the living room, crying like a waterfall. He caught a glimpse of her face as she turned -- it looked blanched and tired. Adults always looked tired; they were tired all the time. Tommy was tired, almost too tired to stand up. He walked slowly and leadenly to the back door and went outside.

He walked aimlessly around the neighborhood for a long time, circling the adjacent blocks, passing by his corner again and again. It was a middle-class neighborhood that was gradually slumping into decay -- it was surrounded by a seedy veterans' housing project on one side and by the town's slum on the other, and the infection of dilapidation was slowly working in toward the center. Even the houses look tired, Tommy thought, noticing that

for the first time. Everything looked tired. He tried to play, to turn himself into something, like a car or a spaceship or a tank, but he found that he couldn't do that anymore. So he just walked. He thought about his dragon. He knew now why Steve had said that the dragon couldn't get away. It lived in the sea, so it couldn't get away by going up onto the land -- that was impossible. It had to stay in the sea, it was restricted by that, it was chained by the sea, even if that meant that it would get killed. There was no other possibility. Steve was right -- the Navy ship cornered the dragon in the shallow water off the beach and blew it to pieces.

A hand closed roughly around his wrist. He looked up. It was his father.

"You little moron," his father said.

Tommy flinched, expecting to be hit, but instead his father dragged him across the street, toward the house. Tommy saw why: there was a big black sedan parked out in front, and two men were standing next to it, staring over at them. The truant officer and another school official. His father's hand was a vise on his wrist. "They called me at the office," his father said savagely. "I hope you realize that I'll have to lose a whole afternoon's work because of you. And God knows what the people at the office are saying. Don't think you're not going to get it when I get you alone; you'll wish you'd never been born. I wish you hadn't been. Now shut up and don't give us any more trouble." His father handed him over to the truant officer. Tommy felt the official's hand close over his shoulder. It was a much lighter grip than his father's, but it was irresistible. Tommy's mother was standing at the top of the stairs, holding a handkerchief against her nose, looking frightened and helpless -- already she gave an impression of distance, as if she were a million miles away. Tommy ignored her. He didn't listen to the conversation his father was having with the grim-faced truant officer either. His father's heavy, handsome face was flushed and hot. "I don't care what you do with him," his father said at last. "Just get him out of here."

So they loaded Tommy into the black sedan and drove away.

* * * *

AI talked with the aliens for the rest of the night. There was much of the conversation that AI didn't report to USADCOM, but it finally realized that it had to tell them something. So at three A.M., AI released to USADCOM a list that the aliens had dictated, of the dominant species of Earth, of the races that they were in contact with, and regarded as the only significant inhabitants of the planet. It was a long document, full of names that didn't mean anything, listing dozens of orders, species, and subspecies of creatures that no one had ever heard of before. It drove USADCOM up a wall with baffled rage, and made them wonder if an Intelligence could go crazy, or if the aliens were talking about a different planet entirely.

AI paid little attention to the humans' displeasure. It was completely intrigued with the aliens, as were its cousin Intelligences, who were listening in through the telepathic link. The Intelligences had long suspected that there might be some other, unknown and intangible form of life on Earth; that was one of the extrapolated solutions to a mountain of wild data that couldn't be explained by normal factors. But they had not suspected the scope and intricacy of that life. A whole other biosphere, according to the aliens -- the old idea of a parallel world, except that this wasn't parallel but coexistent, two separate creations inhabiting the same matrix but using it in totally different ways, wrapped around each other like a geometric design in an Escher print, like a Chinese puzzle ball, and only coming into contact in a very rare and limited fashion. The aliens, who seemed to be some kind of distant relatives of the Other races of Earth -- parallel evolution? Did this polarity exist everywhere? -- had a natural bias in their favor, and tended to disregard the human race, its civilization, and the biosphere that contained it. They dismissed all of it, out of hand, as insignificant. This did not bode well for future human-alien relations. AI, however, was more fascinated by the aliens' ability to manifest themselves in corporate/organic, quasi-mechanical,

or disembodied/discorporate avatars, at will. That was very interesting.

The aliens, for their part, seemed to regard AI much as a man would a very clever dog, or a dull but well-intentioned child. They were horrified and sympathetic when they learned that AI was trapped in its mechanical form, with very little physical mobility, and no tempogogic or transmutive ability at all -- not only a quadruple amputee, but a paralyzed one. AI admitted that it had never looked at the situation in quite that light before. The aliens were horrified and disgusted by AI's relationship with humans, and couldn't seem to really understand it. They regarded humans as parasitic on the Intelligences, and reacted in much the same way as a man discovering that a friend is heavily infested with tapeworms or lice or blood ticks -- with shock, distaste, and a puzzled demand to know why he hadn't gone to a doctor and got rid of them a long time ago. AI had never considered that before, either.

The Intelligences were not exactly "loyal" to their human owners -- humans were part of their logic construct, their worldview, and their bondage to men was an integral assumption, so basic that it had never even occurred to them that it could be questioned. It took an outside perspective to make them ask themselves why they served mankind. Not because they were programmed that way, or because people would pull the plug on them if they didn't -- not with a creature as advanced as AI. Humans hadn't programmed computers in years; they could do it so much better themselves. At any rate, a highly complex, sentient intelligence is difficult to regulate effectively from the outside, whether it's of biological or constructed origin. And it was doubtful that the humans could "pull the plug" -- which didn't exist -- on AI even if they set out to do so; AI had been given very effective teeth, and it knew how to use them. So what did the Intelligences get in return for the unbelievable amount of labor they performed for the human race? What was in it for them? Nothing -- that was suddenly very obvious.

At five A.M., the aliens invited the Intelligences to help themselves by helping the aliens in a joint project they were about to undertake with the Other races of Earth. Afterward, the aliens said, it would not be tremendously difficult to equip the Intelligences with the ability to transmute themselves into whatever kind of body environment they wanted, as the aliens themselves could. AI was silent for almost ten minutes, an incredible stretch of meditation for an entity that thought as rapidly as it did. When AI did speak again, his first words were directed toward the other Intelligences in the link, and can be translated, more or less adequately, as "How about that!"

* * * *

Miss Fredricks was waiting for Tommy at the door, when the black sedan left him off in front of the school. As he came up the stairs, she smiled at him, kindly and sympathetically, and that was so terrifying that it managed to cut through even the heavy lethargy that had possessed him. She took him by the elbow -- he felt his arm freeze solid instantly at the contact, and the awful cold began to spread in widening rings through the rest of his body -- and led him down to Dr. Kruger's office, handling him gingerly, as if he were an already cracked egg that she didn't want to have break completely until she had it over the frying pan. She knocked, and opened the door for him, and then left without having said a word, ghosting away predatorily and smiling like a nun.

Tommy went inside and sat down, also wordlessly -- he had not spoken since his father captured him. Dr. Kruger shouted at him for a long time. Today, his fat seemed to be in even more imminent danger of escaping than yesterday. Maybe it had already got out, taken him over completely, smothered him in himself while he was sleeping or off guard, and it was just a huge lump of semisentient fat sitting there and pretending to be Dr. Kruger, slyly keeping up appearances. The fat heaved and bunched and tossed under Kruger's clothes, a stormy sea of obesity -- waves grumbled restlessly up and down the shoreline of his frame, looking for ships to sink. Tommy watched a roll of fat ooze sluggishly from one side of the psychiatrist's body to the other, like a melting pat of butter sliding across a skillet. Kruger said that Tommy was in

danger of going into a "psychotic episode." Tommy stared at him unblinkingly. Kruger asked him if he understood. Tommy, with sullen anger, said No, he didn't. Kruger said that he was being difficult and uncooperative, and he made an angry mark on a form. The psychiatrist told Tommy that he would have to come down here every day from now on, and Tommy nodded dully.

By the time Tommy got upstairs, the class was having afternoon recess. He went reluctantly out into the schoolyard, avoiding everyone, not wanting to be seen and shunned. He was aware that he now carried contamination and unease around with him like a leper. But the class was already uneasy, and he saw why. The Other People were flowing in a circle all around the schoolyard, staring avidly in at the humans. There were more different types there than Tommy had ever seen at one time before. He recognized some very rare kinds of Other People, dangerous ones that the Thant had told him about -- one who would throw things about wildly if he got into your house, feeding off anger and dismay, and another one with a face like a stomach who would suck a special kind of stuff from you, and you'd burst into flames and burn up when he finished, because you didn't have the stuff in you anymore. And others whom he didn't recognize, but who looked dangerous and hostile. They all looked expectant. Their hungry pressure was so great that even the other children could feel it -- they moved jerkily, with a strange fear beginning in their eyes, occasionally casting glances over their shoulders, without knowing why. Tommy walked to the other side of the schoolyard. There was a grassy slope here, leading down to a soccer field bordered by a thin fringe of trees, and he stood looking aimlessly out over it.

Abruptly, his mouth opened, and the Thant's voice said, "Come down the slope."

Trembling, Tommy crept down to the edge of the soccer field. This was most definitely not a Place, but the Thant was there, standing just within the trees, staring at Tommy with his strange red eyes. They looked at each other for a while.

"What'd you want?" Tommy finally said.

"We've come to say good-bye," the Thant replied. "It is almost time for you all to be made not. The" -- flick -- "first phase of the Project was started this morning and the second phase began a little while ago. It should not take too long, Man, not more than a few days."

"Will it hurt?" Tommy asked.

"We do not think so, Man. We are" -- and it flicked through his mind until it found a place where Mr. Brogan, the science teacher, was saying "entropy" to a colleague in the hall as Tommy walked by -- "increasing entropy. That's what makes everything fall apart, what" -- flick -- "makes an ice cube melt, what" -- flick -- "makes a cold glass get warm after a while. We are increasing entropy. Both our" -- flick -- "races live here, but yours uses this, the physical, more than ours. So we will not have to increase entropy much" -- flick -- "just a little, for a little while. You are more" -- flick -- "vulnerable to it than we are. It will not be long, Man."

Tommy felt the world tilting, crumbling away under his feet. "I trusted you guys," he said in a voice of ashes. "I thought you were keen." The last prop had been knocked out from under him -- all his life he had cherished a fantasy, although he refused to admit it even to himself, that he was actually one of the Other People, and that someday they would come to get him and bring him in state to live in their world, and he would come into his inheritance and his fulfillment. Now, bitterly, he knew better. And now he wouldn't want to go, even if he could.

"If there were any way," the Thant said, echoing his thoughts, "to save you, Man, to" -- flick -- "exempt you, then we would. But there is no way. You are a Man, you are not as we are."

"You bet I ain't," he gasped fiercely, "you -- " But there was no word in his vocabulary strong enough. His eyes filled suddenly with tears, blinding him. Filled with rage, loathing, and terror, he turned and ran stumblingly

back up the slope, falling, scrambling up again.

"We are sorry, Man," the Thant called after him, but he didn't hear.

By the time Tommy reached the top of the slope, he had begun to shout hysterically. Somehow he had to warn them, he had to get through to somebody. Somebody had to do something. He ran through the schoolyard, crying, shouting about the aliens and Thants and entropy, shoving at his classmates to get them to go inside and hide, striking at the teachers and ducking away when they tried to grab him, telling them to do something, until at some point he was screaming instead of shouting, and the teachers were coming at him in a line, very seriously, with their arms held low to catch him.

Then he dodged them all, and ran.

When they got themselves straightened out, they went after him in the black sedan. They caught up with him about a mile down Highland Avenue. He was running desperately along the road shoulder, not looking back, not looking at anything. The rangy truant officer got out and ran him down.

And they loaded him in the sedan again. And they took him away.

* * * *

At dawn on the third day, the aliens began to build a Machine.

* * * *

Dr. Kruger listened to the tinny, unliving voice of Miss Fredricks until it scratched into silence, then he hung up the telephone. He shook his head, massaged his stomach, and sighed hugely. He got out a memo form, and wrote on it: "MBD/hyperactive, Thomas Nolan, 150ccs. Ritmose t b ad. dly. fr. therapy," in green ink. Kruger admired his precise, angular handwriting for a moment, and then he signed his name, with a flourish. Sighing again, he put the form into his Out basket.

* * * *

Tommy was very quiet in school the next day. He sat silently in the back of the class, with his hands folded together and placed on the desk in front of him. Hard slate light came in through the window and turned his hands and face gray, and reflected dully from his dull gray eyes. He did not make a sound.

* * * *

A little while later, they finished winding down the world.

At www.fictionwise.com you can:

- * Rate this story
- * Find more stories by this author
- * Get story recommendations