

# A BROTHER TO DRAGONS, A COMPANION OF OWLS

This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I *am*, and there is none beside me: how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! every one that passeth by her shall hiss, and wag his hand.

## Kate Wilhelm

It is late in the afternoon, a warm, hazy autumn day; the frost has already turned the leaves golden and scarlet, and the insects are quieted for the season. Although there are no fires in the city, no smokestacks sending clouds to meet clouds, the air is somehow thick and blurs the outlines of things in the distance. In the distance the buildings seem more blue than stone-colored, more grey than they are, and they have no distinct edges. Finally the canyons of the buildings and the thick air blend and there is only the grey-blue. The city is still.

In the fourth-floor apartment of one of the buildings overlooking a park, an old man sits at a table that is six feet long, covered with books and notebooks. There is a kerosene lamp on the table, not lighted at this hour. The books are Bibles, and a concordance that is a thousand pages thick. Another table abuts the work table, and it is covered also, but most of the material there is the old man's writing. Notebooks filled, others opened, not yet completed, card files, piles of notes on yellow paper.

The old man is bent over the table, following a line of print with his finger, pursing his lips, his face rigid with concentration. He wears glasses that are not properly fitted, and now and again he pushes them onto the bridge of his nose. Occasionally he pauses in his reading and looks at the park across the street, the source of the yellow in the light. The trees at this end of the park are almost uniformly gold now. The old man thinks that one day he will study the trees and relearn their names—he knew them once—and the names of the flowers that are still blooming, having become naturalized in the park long ago. Wildflowers, that is all he knows about them. They are yellow also. The old man thinks that it is shameful

that he knows so little about the trees, the flowers, the insects. They all have names, every tree its own name, every kind of grass, every kind of insect. The clouds. The kinds of soils, the rocks. And he knows none of them. Only recently has he begun to have such thoughts. He rubs his eyes; they tend to water after reading too long, and he wonders why so many of the Bibles were printed in such small type. He thinks it was to save paper, to keep the weight manageable, but that is only a guess. Perhaps it was custom. He pushes his glasses up firmly and bends over the books again.

The old man is strong, with good muscles in his legs and arms, his back strong and straight. His hair is very light, and even though it has whitened in the past three years, it looks much the same as always, except that now it has become very fine, almost like baby's hair. It is as if his hair is wearing out before anything else. He has a beard that is soft also, not the coarse pubic hair of many beards. When the wind blows through it, it parts in unfamiliar ways, just as a girl's long hair does, and when the wind is through rearranging it, it falls back into place easily and shows no disarray. The old man reads, and now he turns and searches among the many notebooks, finds the one he wants and draws it to him. On the cover is his name, written in beautiful script: Llewellyn Frick.

He begins to write. He is still writing when the door is flung open and another man runs in wildly, his face ashen. He is plump and soft, unfinished-looking, as if time that has carved the old man's face has left his untouched. He is forty perhaps, dressed in a red cape that opens to reveal a blue robe. He is barefoot. He rushes to the desk and grabs the old man's arm frantically.

"Not now, Boy," the old man says, and pulls his arm free. He doesn't look up. Boy has made him trail a thick line down the page and he is too irritated to show forgiveness immediately, but neither does he want to scold. Boy shakes him again and this time his insistence communicates itself and the old man looks at him.

"For God's sake, Boy . . ." The old man stops and stands up. His voice becomes very gentle. "What is it, Boy? What happened?"

Boy gestures wildly and runs to the window, pointing. The old man follows, sees nothing on the streets below. He puts his arm about Boy's shoulders and, holding him, says, "Calm down, Boy, and try to tell me. What is it?"

Boy has started to weep, and the old man pulls him away from the window and forces him into a chair. He is much stronger than Boy, taller, heavier. He kneels in front of Boy and says soothingly, "It's all right, Boy.

It's all right. Take it easy." He says it over and over until Boy is able to look at him and start to gesticulate in a way the old man can understand.

Once, many years ago, a pack of wild dogs entered the city and almost ran Boy down. He fled through the alleys, through stores, through backyards, every short cut that he knew, and they followed, yelping, driven by hunger. The old man heard them blocks from the apartment building and went out with his shotgun.

Now Boy makes the same motions he made then. *They almost caught him. They were after him.* The old man returns to the window. "Dogs?" He looks out and the city is quiet; the sun is very low now and the shadows fall across the streets, fill the streets. Boy runs after him and tries fiercely to pull him away from the window, shaking his head. *Not dogs.*

He shakes his head wildly now, and he touches the old man, touches himself, then holds his hand at waist level, then a bit higher, a bit lower. "Animals?" the old man asks. Again the wild shake. "People? Little people? Children?"

*Children!* The old man stares at Boy in disbelief. Children? In the city? Boy pulls at him again, to get him away from the window. The old man searches the darkening shadows and sees nothing. The city is very quiet. No wind blows. There is nothing out there to make a sound.

Children! Again and again he demands that Boy change his story. It was animals. Dogs. Wild cats. Anything but children. Boy is weeping again, and when the old man starts to light the lamp, Boy knocks it from his hands. The oil spills and makes a gleaming, dark pattern on the tile floor, a runner from the door to the center of the room. The old man stares at it.

"I'll have to tell the others," the old man says, but he doesn't move. He still can't believe there are any children in the city. He can't believe there are any children anywhere in the country, in the world. Finally he starts to move toward the door, avoiding the oil. Boy tugs at him, holds his robe, clutches at his arm.

"Boy," the old man says gently, "it's all right. I have to tell everyone else, or they might make fires, put lights on, draw the children this way. Don't you understand?" Boy's eyes are insane with fear. He looks this way and that like an animal that smells the blood of slaughter and is helpless to communicate its terror. Suddenly he lets go the old man's robe and darts to the door, out into the hall, and vanishes into the shadows that are impenetrable at the end of the hall.

It is not so dark outside, after all. The twilight is long at this time of year, but there is a touch of frost in the air, a hint that by morning the

grass will have a white sheath, that the leaves will be silver and gold, that the late-blooming flowers will be touched and that perhaps this time they will turn brown and finally black. The old man walks through the corner of the park, and it makes little difference to him if there is light or not. For thirty-two years he has lived in that building, has walked in this park at all hours; his feet know it as well by night as by day. It is easier to walk in the park than on the city streets and sidewalks. Whole sections of roadways have caved in, and other sections are upthrust, tilting precariously. Everywhere the grass has taken hold, creeping along cracks, creating chasms and filling them. When the old man emerges from the trees, he is on the far side of a wide street from a large department store. This side of the building is almost all open. Once it was glass-fronted and very expensive; now it is Monica Auerbach's private palace.

Inside the palace graceful columns of black marble rise out of sight. The counters have been removed and oddities now occupy the spots where the rough construction might otherwise show. A bronze Buddha from the garden shop; a cupid with a birdbath, chalklike in the dim light; a bookcase with knick-knacks on its shelves—china cups in matching saucers, a teapot, a jade bowl, owls. Monica is very fond of owls. There is something draped in tattered and brittle material that over the years has turned to a strange blue with a violet sheen. Farther back everything fades into shadows as the light fails. The old man starts up the wide, ornate stairs. On the second floor he calls her. On the third floor he finds her.

This floor once housed the furniture department and a plush restaurant. One side is open to the last rays of the still bright western sky, and the sunlight slants through a forest scene, not yet finished, but already thick with greenery. It even smells like a living forest, and the old man realizes what Boy's missions for Monica have been during the past weeks: there are dozens of six- to eight-foot evergreens in planters in the foreground, and a small hill of pine cones. Monica is creating a green spot to see her through the coming winter.

Now the old man sees Monica. She is tying red balls on one of the plastic trees. She must have scoured the city for the greenery, there is so much of it. Palm trees, vines, garlands of leaves. Monica glances his way and her face sets in hard lines; she is furious with him for ruining her surprise, for intruding before opening day. She ignores him, passes behind the tree she is decorating, and continues to tie on the red balls.

The old man walks over a carpet of plastic earth and grass (but the rocks scattered on the path are real) and approaches her. Across the room are lanterns already lighted; often Monica works on into the night.

"Boy saw children in the city today, Monica."

She turns her back on him and studies the tree, her eyes narrowed in thought.

"Boy saw children!" he shouts at her.

Her hands shake now when she reaches for the tree, and she jerks them back behind her.

"There are children in the city, Monica! You should not show any lights tonight, until we decide what to do. Do you understand?"

Monica is pouting. She looks away from him and he is afraid she is going to weep because he has spoiled her surprise. The old man begins to turn off the lanterns. Monica doesn't look at him. She is a silhouette against the pale sky, slender still, elegant-looking with her hair carefully done up, wearing a long dress that, in this dim light, no longer shows the slits where brittle age has touched it. She is looking at the city when he leaves.

Now the stars are out, and the streets are too dark to see more than a hundred yards in any direction. The old man hesitates outside the church, then resolutely goes inside and climbs to the belfry. The bell has always been their signal to gather. And if the children hear? He shakes his head and pulls the rope; the bell sounds alarmingly loud. The children already know there is someone in the city, and perhaps they are still too far from this area to hear the bell. He catches the clapper before it can strike a second time.

He waits in the church for the others to assemble, and he tries to remember when the last night session was called. He has only one candle burning, its light far from the massive doors. As the others arrive, the one light is a message, and they become subdued and fearful as they enter and silently go to the front of the church. They are as quiet as ghosts, they look like ghosts in their floor-length robes and capes. Sixteen of the surviving twenty-two residents attend the meeting. The old man waits until it seems likely that no one else will come, and then he tells them about the children. For an hour they talk. There is Sam Whitten, the senior member, who is senile and can't cope with the idea of children at all. There is Sandra Littleton, who wants an expedition sent out immediately to find the children, bring them in to the warmth of her fires, who wants to feed them, school them, care for them. There is Jake Pulaski, who thinks they should be caught and killed. Someone else wants them run out of town again. Another thinks everyone should hide and let the children roam until they get tired and leave. And so on, for an hour. Nothing is decided.

Boy is still hiding when the old man returns to his apartment. He may hide for days or weeks. The old man prepares his dinner and eats it in an inner room where the lights won't show, and then he stands at the window looking at the dark city for a long time. The old man and Boy are the only ones who live in rooms this high; everyone else has found a first- or second-floor apartment, or a house, and sometimes they complain about the old man's stairs. Sometimes they have to stand in the street and shout for him when they need his help. Recently the old man's legs have been bothering him a bit, not much, not often, but it is an indication that before long he will have to descend a floor or two. He will do it reluctantly. He likes to be able to look out over the city, to be above the trees.

It is very cold when he finally goes to bed, chilled. He has decided not to have a fire. No fire, no smoke, no lights. Not yet. Sometime in the night Monica slips into his bed.

"Lew, are there really children?"

"Boy says so."

She is silent, warmer than he is, sharing her warmth with him.

"And we have grown so used to thinking that we were the last," she says after a long time. "Everything will change now, won't it?"

"I don't know. Maybe they'll just vanish again."

Neither of them believes this. After a time they sleep, and when the old man awakens, at the first vague light of dawn, Monica is gone. He lies in the warm bed and thinks about the many nights they shared, not for warmth, and he has no regrets, only a mild curiosity that it could have died as it did, leaving memories without bitterness.

The children play in the rubble of the burned-out block of apartments visible from the old man's building, between the park and the river warehouse district. The old man is standing at an eighth-floor window watching one of them, a small girl, through a telescope that brings her so close he feels he can reach out and touch her golden hair. There are seven of them, the oldest probably no more than thirteen, the youngest, the blond girl, about five or six.

"Let me have a turn, Lew," Myra Olney says. Her eyes are red. She has been weeping ever since she first saw the children. She is waiting for her son Timmy to come home. Timmy has been dead for fifty-five years. The old man moves aside, and Myra swings the telescope too far and loses the

children. Walter Gilson adjusts it for her and rejoins the others.

"We can't just ignore them, pretend they don't exist," Walter says. He hoists his robe to sit down, and it drapes between his knees. Only three of the men still wear trousers. Their robes are made of wool, old blankets, cut-apart overcoats sewn together in a more practical style. The wool holds up better than any other material. The synthetics have split and cracked as they aged.

"Just exactly what did Boy say?" Sid Elliston asks for the third time.

"I told you. He said they tried to catch him. He could have been frightened and imagined it. You know he's terrified of anything out of the ordinary."

They all know about Boy. He is cleverer than most of them about practical things: he found the tanks they all use to collect water on the roofs, and the pipes to provide running water. He found nuts and a grinder, so they have flour of a sort. He found the hospital supplies deep in a hidden vault. They know that without Boy their lives would be much harder, perhaps impossible. Also, they know that Boy is strange.

Sid has taken Myra's place at the telescope, and she sits by the old man and clutches his arm and pleads with him. They all seem to regard the children as his problem, perhaps because Boy found them, and they know Boy is his problem.

"You have to go out there and bring them in," Myra says, weeping. "It's getting colder and colder. They'll freeze."

"They've managed to stay alive this long," Harry Gould says. "Let them go back to where they came from. It could be a trap. They draw us out and then others grab our houses, our food."

"You know we could feed a hundred times that many," Walter says. "They ain't carrying nothing. What do you suppose they've been eating?"

"Small game," someone suggests. "Boy says there are rabbits right here in the city, and birds. I saw some birds last week. Robins."

The old man shakes his head. Not robins. They come in the spring, not in the fall.

He goes back to the window, and Sid doesn't question his right to the telescope but moves aside at his approach. The old man locates the children and searches for the little blond girl. They are throwing sticks and stones at something, he can't make out what it is. A can? There are no cans; they have all rusted away. A rat? He wonders if there are rats again. Monica has told him that before he arrived in the city there were millions

of rats, but their numbers have dwindled, and he has seen none at all for five years or more.

"We will bring them in," he says suddenly, and leaves the window. "We can't let them starve or freeze."

"It's our God-given duty," Myra says tearfully, "to care for them. It's the start of everything again. I knew it couldn't all just end like that. I knew it!"

"We'll have to educate them! Teach them math and literature!"

"Maybe they'll be able to make the lights work again!"

"And they will plant crops. Corn. Wheat. String beans."

"And keep cattle. I can teach them how to milk. My father had fifty head of cattle on his farm. I know how to milk."

"We shall teach them to live by ethics. No more religion. No sects. No discrimination. A pure system of ethics."

"What do you mean? How can you teach them ethics without religion? A contradiction in terms, isn't it?" Walter glares at Sid, who turns away scowling.

"We'll teach them all religions, in a historical sense, so they'll grasp the allusions in the books they'll read."

"And democracy . . ."

"What do you know about democracy? What we have, what's worked for us is pure anarchy, nothing more or less."

At the telescope Mary Halloran suddenly screams softly and backs away from the eyepiece, her hands over her mouth. "Lew! Look at them!"

He looks and sees that they have built a fire, and they are roasting rats. He can see the rats clearly: they are not yet dead, but writhe and squirm, and he imagines he can hear their shrill cries. The children are squatting in a circle about the fire, watching intently. The blond girl's face is still, and a spot appears at the corner of her mouth and catches the light, glistens in the light. She is drooling.

"Savages!" Mary whispers in horror. "They're savages! Let them go back to the wilderness where they belong."

"They're survivors!" Sid yells at her, suddenly furious. "Look at us! Tons of freeze-dried food, enough to feed thousands of people. Warm buildings. Water. Plenty of clothes. Books. And they've got nothing except courage. I'm going down there!"



Harry stops him at the door. "You're right. We have to try, but maybe we shouldn't bring them here. You know? Why let them know exactly where we are, where our stuff is until we're sure about them? There could be others still hiding."

And so it is agreed. Sid and Harry and two of the women will meet the children and take them to the far end of the park, to the hospital, over a mile from the nearest home. The old man will join them later in the afternoon. He will examine the children. The old man is the nearest thing they have to a doctor. He was in his first year of medical school when the end came. He knows his limitations, but he also knows he can do little harm with what is available to him; sometimes he can do a little good. No one expects miracles. He is very good at tooth extractions. The people's teeth are all very bad. Those who had dentures before are the lucky ones.

Myra pleads to be allowed to go with Harry and Sid, but they won't let her; they know she cannot walk that far. Mary and Eunice are chosen, and they decide to take a gift of food with them. They ask the old man for some of Boy's wild honey, but he refuses. Let Boy offer it if he wants, he tells them, and they have to be content with that. Boy has never told anyone where he finds the honey; he can barter it for clothes and music. He will listen to Myra play her violin for as long as she is willing to play. He gives honey freely to the old man, asking nothing in return.

The old man stays with the telescope until the children vanish among the buildings, and then he returns to his apartment on the fourth floor. Monica is there with Ruth and Dore Shurman. Ruth is seventy and Dore a little older. It is the first time in ten years that he has entertained them in his home. He is very pleased to have them here. Monica has already given them food, flat cakes baked on a grill. The cakes are nutty, crisp, very good.

"We want to go north," Ruth says. "Remember? Where the cottages are still standing? They won't come there. Too much rubble between the city and the suburbs."

"But why?"

"I think Boy was telling the truth when he said they tried to catch him. I think they're dangerous."

The old man pities Ruth; he knows she will never be able to travel even to the edge of her own district, much less the ten miles or more to the suburb she is talking about. He looks at Dore and knows he also understands.

"You have nothing to fear," he says finally. "Even if they are wild, they

wouldn't bother any of us. Why should they? There's enough food for all of us. Enough shelter. God knows, we won't go out of our way to harm them."

"You never know what will threaten someone else," Ruth says firmly.

Thirty-two years ago, when the old man first came to the city, Ruth was lovely, with abundant chestnut-colored hair, mature figure, and no trace of the fear that turned her husband into an invalid. Ruth had had three children, and she was still fertile, she told Lew. Perhaps they could produce yet another child or two, she and Lew. For three years he lived with them, cared for Dore and made love to Dore's wife, until suddenly Ruth stopped menstruating. There was no menopause; she simply stopped, and she went back to her husband. Slowly Dore regained his sanity, but he has no memory of the bad years. The old man has always thought Dore understands much more than he has ever indicated by word or action. A firm friendship has grown up between the two. When Ruth turned away from Lew, she changed. Terror seized her with the realization that there would be no more children, and gradually Dore has come to be her support, as she had been his while there was still hope. Time has healed her fears, and resignation is the scar. But now she is terrified again.

"Lew, come with us. Don't go to the children, today or ever. Let them live or die as God wills, don't help them."

The old man doesn't look at her. He can't tell her that she will never make it out of the city; her heart is bad, she has grown too fat, her blood pressure is too high.

"There are only seven of them, for heaven's sake," Monica says reasonably. "Even if they breed like guppies, we'll all be dead long before they could be a threat to us."

"Lew, please come with us," Ruth pleads. "I'm afraid to go without you. What if Dore has an attack, or I do?"

"Look, Ruth, go home and stay inside for the next few days. All right? No one will tell them where any of us live, I promise you.

This was a city of over a million people. And there are only seven of them, and three of them are very little." He visualizes again the small girl's intent face as she waited for the rat to stop jerking on the stick. "Very little," he repeats. "They could never find us in such a big city."

They finally leave him and Monica in his apartment. "Are you so sure they aren't dangerous?" Monica asks. She is elegant in a long gown that she made out of a heavy blue brocade. She sews beautifully, always has

new clothes. She does her hair up in intricate swirls; it is so white it looks false.

"They're too few and too young," he says impatiently. "Unless they're full of disease germs, something like that. They could be."

She clutches her throat. For many years no one in the city has had a cold, flu, sore throat. Nothing but age, he thinks. Boy is the youngest resident of the city, or was before today.

"I have to get back," she says hastily. "I have to water my trees."

The old man sits at his work table for a long time after Monica leaves him. He wonders for the first time why he is working on a concise edition of the Bible. For whose benefit? And isn't it blasphemy? Supposing, of course, that one believed in God. He is puzzled by the repetitions in the Bible, the same story told over and over in different versions. With proper editing, he has reasoned, the Bible will be an eighth of its present length.

Boy has not come out of hiding by the time the old man leaves for the hospital. He knows it would be futile to try to find him. He walks under the golden sycamores with his usual long, unhurried stride. He tries not to think of the children yet. He thinks instead of the fear shown by Mary, by Monica, Ruth and Dore. The others will come to feel it also, he knows, just as he is feeling it.

The hospital is a rambling two-story building, ultramodern when built, with outside windows for every room, wide vinyl-floored corridors, flowered wall coverings, spacious, airy waiting rooms and lounges. It was designed as an emergency center for this section of the country, with room after room of subbasements stocked with freeze-dried food, blankets, clothing, medical supplies. No one has ever raided it. No one has distributed the food, the oil, the clothing, blankets. Years ago Boy discovered the cache, and the citizens of the city, one hundred twenty people or more then, took what they needed—most of them would never have to return for anything else—and they left the remaining stores undisturbed.

In those early years in the city, the old man used to play doctor. He dressed in a surgical gown, tied on a mask, and stalked the corridors in search of a patient. He read all the medical books, some of them many times, and handled the equipment until he was familiar with it. More recently, only five or six years ago, he found himself one night sitting at the side of a bed, garbed in white, with a stethoscope and a thermometer, talking earnestly to a nonexistent patient. Frightened, he left the hospital, and he hasn't been back since. He finds that he is walking somewhat

slower than before, and deliberately he lengthens his stride.

Eunice is waiting on the top step; she comes forward to meet him. She is stout and robust-looking, with a florid complexion and iron-grey hair in long braids down her back. Now she is pale and frightened. "Lew, they were awful! They really are savages. We caught one of them, but the others all ran away, and they threw stones at us. Sid is hurt."

"Where are they?"

"In your examination room. They had to tie up the boy. He tried to bite Harry, and he kicked, and scratched like a devil. He's more like a wildcat than a human being."

The examination room is the former emergency room of the hospital. It has two padded tables, several desks, scales that no longer work, a cabinet of surgical implements, gauze. It is seldom used any longer; they all have first-aid kits in their homes, and the old man sees them there when they need him.

The boy is on one of the tables, strapped down at ankles and wrists, a band of elastic bandaging about his chest, another about his throat to keep his head down. The old man doesn't approach him, after one glance to be certain he is all right.

Sid is on another table, conscious but pale from shock and loss of blood. A gauze pad is on his head, blood-soaked, and when the old man lifts it, he knows that Sid needs stitches. The cut is jagged and deep, from above his eyebrow across his temple to his ear.

"I'll have to sew it up, Sid," the old man says, and Sid's eyelids flutter. "Cover him up, keep him warm. I'll get things going." He washes his hands, cleans them again from a freshly opened bottle of alcohol, opens a sealed package of surgical gloves, another of needles and gut and bandages, and another of a local anesthetic that the directions say will remain potent for one hundred years. All the supplies have been labeled this way: date of packing, date of expiration of potency. In one of the pharmaceutical books the old man has found explicit directions for combining ingredients in order to make sedatives and tranquilizers. Previously compounded medicines, he assumes, have long since lost their potency. Those that he makes up are all very effective.

Eunice prepares Sid; she shaves his eyebrow, part of his beard, some of his hair. The old man is not as swift as he would like to be, but he is thorough, and when he finishes, he knows that a real doctor would not have done better with the wound. Sid is breathing shallowly; he is still in shock. Only after he is finished with Sid does the old man approach the

other table.

The boy is filthy, his hair caked and matted, his fingernails jagged, packed with grime; he looks as if he has never had a bath. He is wearing a one-piece garment, a shiftlike thing made of coarse material, tied at the shoulders. It has been twisted about him and conceals little. His muscles show good development; his teeth, which remain bared from the time the old man nears him until he steps back, seem good.

"I don't want to move Sid for a couple of hours, maybe not until tomorrow," the old man says. "Let's give this little beggar a bath and have a better look at him."

The boy strains against his bonds, and a low moaning sound starts deep in his throat. Eunice brings a basin of water. There are tanks on the hospital roof, overflowing probably, since no one uses the water here. The water is cool, not cold enough to hurt the child, but he howls when the old man starts to scrub him, and doesn't stop until the old man is through.

The boy is sun-browned, with pale skin where the garment has covered him. His hair is brown, with a slight wave; his eyes are grey. His legs are covered with old wounds, all well healed. The old man purses his lips, however, as he makes a closer examination. The testicles are atrophied. He kneads the boy's stomach, listens to his heart, his lungs, and finally sits down and stares at the child.

"You finished with him?" Harry asks. He has been staring at the child and has said very little. Like most of the men, Harry is bearded, has rather long hair. There is a long red scratch on his hand. The boy has stopped screaming and howling. He is watching the old man.

"Yes, that's all. Healthy as a boy ought to be. Eight, nine years old. Boy, what's your name?"

The boy makes no sign that he understands.

"Okay, Lew, now it's my turn," Harry says. He has found a thick leather strap and has it wrapped around his hand, with a loose end of two and a half feet that he hits against his leg from time to time. "I aim to beat the hell out of the little bugger."

The boy's eyes close involuntarily and he swallows, and again strains to get loose.

The old man waves Harry back. "Not so fast, Harry. What happened when you found the kids?"

"We didn't find them. We went down to the warehouse section and looked around and they were gone. Then we put the food and stuff down

where they could find it and started back, and they jumped us."

"They didn't jump us," Mary says. "We startled them. We scared them to death, coming on them suddenly like we did. They began to pick up anything they could find to throw at us, and they ran. This one fell over something and Sid grabbed him. That's when someone hit him with the rock. He fell on top of this boy and held him down until Harry got to them."

"What do you mean, you came on them suddenly?"

"We went down there out in the open, in the middle of the street, not trying to hide or anything. Then, I don't know why, when we couldn't find them, we sort of quieted down, and we weren't making any noise at all on the way back, and we were in old Wharf Alley, you know how narrow it is, how dark. They were coming out of one of the warehouses, just as we approached it. I don't know who was more scared, them or us."

Eunice nods at Mary's recital, and Harry hits his leg with the strap, watching the boy.

"So, as far as they know, you jumped them and then made off with one of them. Kidnapped him." The old man is watching the boy, and he knows the boy has understood everything. "I'll take him back," the old man says suddenly.

"No! By God! Make him tell us a few things first." Harry steps closer to the table.

"Harry, don't be an ass," Mary says. "We can't hold this child. And you certainly are not going to beat him."

Harry looks from one to the other of the women, then to the old man. Sullenly he moves back to the other table, where Sid is, and pays no more attention to the boy.

The old man starts to loosen the bands about the boy's chest and throat. "Now, you listen to me, son. I'm taking you back to where your friends are. I'm going to keep your hands tied until we get there, and I'm going to hold the cord. You understand. No rock throwing, no biting. When we get there, I'll turn you loose and I'll leave. If you want us, you can come back here. Tell the others the same thing. We won't come to find you again."

The old man takes the boy out the front of the hospital, through the ruined city streets. He doesn't want him to associate the park with any of the people in the city, just in case there are adults using the children as decoys. He talks as they go.

"We have plenty of food and warm clothes. There are a lot of empty

buildings and oil to heat them. You and your friends, or brothers and sisters, whatever they are, can live here if you want to. No one will hurt you or bother you."

The boy walks as far from the old man as the tether will permit. He looks at him from the corner of his eye and gives no sign of comprehension.

"I know damn well that you understand," the old man says conversationally. "I don't care if you ever answer me. I'm just telling you what to tell the others. The oldest one, the girl, you tell her what I said, you hear? And the big boy. They'll know what to do. You tell them."

Midway to the dock area the old man knows they are being followed. The boy knows it also. Now he is looking over his shoulder, past the old man, to the other side of the street. They won't start throwing as long as the boy is so close to him, the old man hopes. He stops at the mouth of an alley and takes out his knife. The boy's eyes widen with fear, and he is shaking when the old man cuts through the cord.

"Now scat," the old man says, and steps into the dark alley. No rocks are thrown. He doesn't wait to find out if the truce is to be a lasting one.

It is a time of waiting. The old man visits Sid often; his head is healing nicely, but he is nervous and demanding. Eunice is caring for him.

Most of the people are staying indoors now, waiting. A week has gone by since the children arrived, and no one has seen or heard them again. The old man visits all his friends during the week. Dore and Ruth are pretending that nothing at all has happened, nothing has changed. Ruth's heart has developed a new palpitation that the old man does not understand, does not know how to treat.

Monica is in her palace creating her garden and refuses to see him. Boy is still in hiding. Every afternoon now, the old man walks to the hospital and remains there for an hour or two.

The hospital corridors have remained bright; the windows are unbroken except for a pane or two on the west side where the storm winds most often come. The old man's sandals make little noise on the cushioned floors. He walks each corridor in turn, examines the surgery wing, pauses there to people the rooms and watch the skillful surgeons for a time, then walks some more. The children have been all through the hospital. They have found the food. There are open containers, contents strewn about; they don't know about freeze-dried food, to them it is inedible. They have

raided the blankets, however. At least they will be warmer. And they have taken a number of surgical instruments.

In his room the old man continues to work on his Bible project. It is a lifetime occupation, he knows, more than enough for one lifetime. Of those who now survive, only one or two do not have such preoccupations. Harry Gould has become a fine leather craftsman; they all wear his sandals and shoes. Dore has studied until he has made himself an expert in chess. He has written several books, reanalyzing championship games of the past. Myra is copying the library of music in India ink on skins, to preserve it forever. And so on. The empty ones were the first to go.

The old man glances over his most recent notes and presently is engrossed in them once more. The Biblical narrative from the Creation to the Ten Commandments is treated in his Bibles in the first eighty pages or so. By editing out the many begats, he thinks, that will come down to fifty pages. He has a theory that the begats are simply to show with some force that before the Flood man's life-span was over eight hundred years, and that after it, his span gradually decreased to about one hundred years. He has written: *A drastic change in climate? An increase in the amount of ultraviolet light penetration of the atmosphere?* If the begats are included in order to establish a lineage, then the same thing could be done with a simple statement. The same is true of the census in Numbers. Then there is the question of the function of the Books of Moses— part of Exodus, almost all of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They exist in order to detail the numerous laws of the Israelites. Since the laws, with the exception of the Decalogue, were so temporal, applying to such a small group of people in particular circumstances, he has decided to extract and summarize them in a companion volume. A modern counterpart of the Books of Moses, he thinks, would be a city's books of ordinances, or a state's laws, including everything from the legal definition of murder down to grade-school admission requirements. He has been puzzled by the various versions of the story of Abraham and his wife, Sarah, whom Abraham calls his sister. Which is the original? He stares at the fine print, tapping his fingers, and then swings around to find his notebook. Boy is standing at the door. The old man doesn't know how long Boy has been in the room. He stands up and embraces Boy, makes him sit down in his usual chair.

"Have you eaten? Are you all right?"

Boy is fine, he has eaten. He keeps glancing toward the window, but now his terror is contained.

The old man doesn't return to his work. He sits opposite Boy and says quietly, "Do you remember when I found you? You were very small, no



more than seven or eight. Remember?" Boy nods. "And you were hurt. Someone had hurt you badly, left you for dead. You would have died if I hadn't found you, Boy. You know that, don't you?" Again Boy nods.

"Those children will probably die, Boy, if we don't help them."

Boy jumps up and starts for the door again, his face quivering. Boy has never learned to read or write. He makes things, finds things; that is his preoccupation. What he is thinking, what he feels, is locked inside him. The outer signs, the quivering of his face, the tears in his eyes, the trembling of his hands, how much of the whirlwind of his mind do they convey? The old man stops him at the door and draws him back inside.

"They won't hurt you, Boy. They are children. I'll keep you safe." Boy is still pulling away. The old man says, "Boy, I need you," and Boy yields. The old man is ashamed of himself, but he is afraid that Boy will run away, and winter is coming.

"Can you find them for me, Boy? Don't let them see you. Just find out where they are, if they are still nearby."

Boy nods and indicates with a lowering of his hand and a wave at the sky that he will wait until night. The old man is satisfied. "Go rest now, Boy. I'll be here. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Boy has found the children. His hands fly as he describes their activities of the past three days. They hunt rats, birds, dig up grubs and worms to eat. They huddle about a fire, wrapped in blankets at night. They avoid the buildings, staying in the open, under trees, or in the ruins where they are not threatened by walls. Now they are gathered at the hospital, apparently waiting for someone from the city to come to them. Belatedly Boy indicates that one of them is hurt.

"I'll go," the old man says. "Boy, take a note to Sid for me. I'll want him. They should see that he is not dead, that I cured him." He scribbles the note and leaves, feeling Boy's anxious gaze on his back as he starts across the park. He walks fast.

The children are under the overhang of the ambulance entrance. They are all filthy. The boy stands up and points to the injured child. A girl has a long sliver of metal strap sticking out of her leg. It is embedded deeply in her thigh and she is bleeding heavily. God, not an artery, the old man prays silently, and he kneels down close to the girl, who draws away, her hands curled up to strike like a cat's. She is blanched-looking, from loss of blood or from fear, he cannot say. The old man stands up and takes a step

back.

"I can help her," he says slowly, carefully. "But you must bring her inside and put her on the table. Where the boy was." The oldest girl, thirteen, possibly even fourteen, shakes her head hard. She points to the child imperiously. The old man crosses his arms and says nothing. The adolescent girl is their leader, he thinks. She is as dirty as the others, but she has the unmistakable bearing of an acknowledged leader. The older of the two boys is watching her closely for a sign. He is almost as tall as she, heavier, and he is holding one of the scalpels they have stolen. The old man doubts that he is very adept with it, but even a novice can do great damage with a scalpel. He continues to stand silently.

The girl makes a motion as if withdrawing the metal from the thigh of the injured child. She watches the old man.

"You'll kill her if you remove it," he says. "She'll bleed to death." The girl knows that, he thinks. That's why they brought the child for him to treat. He wonders how much else she knows.

She is furious, and for an instant she hesitates, then turns toward the boy with the scalpel. He grasps it more firmly and takes a step toward the old man. The girl points again to the injured child.

"Inside," the old man says quietly.

Suddenly the smaller boy says, "Look!" He points, and they all look at the park. Sid is coming toward them. He is alone. The little boy whispers to the girl. He motions, puts his hand on his head, closes his eyes, a dramatic enactment. The girl suddenly decides.

"Bring her in," she says, and she walks around the building toward the entrance.

Sid is his assistant when he performs the operation. The metal must have been packaging material, the old man thinks. It is a strap, flexible still, but pitted with corrosion. Probably it came from a box that has long since rotted away under it. The warehouses near the river are full of such junk, easy enough to fall on in the dark there. He has to use an anesthetic, and the child's unconsciousness alarms the other children. They huddle and whisper, and stop when the old man begins to speak softly. "She'll sleep and then wake up again. I shall cut into her leg and take out the metal and then sew it up, and she will feel nothing. Then she will awaken." Over and over he says this, as he goes about the operation. The child's body is completely covered with sheets, she is motionless. She'd better awaken, he thinks. He is doing the best he can.

Afterward he lights a space heater, and now the children are regarding him with large, awed eyes. The room grows warm quickly. It is getting dark outside and tonight there will be a hard freeze.

The children sleep on the floor, wrapped in blankets, all except the boy with the scalpel, who sits watching the old man. He watches sharply, closely, with intelligence. He will remember what he sees.

The old man asks Sid to bring up food, and together they prepare it and cook it over the space heater. There is no cooking stove in the hospital, except the giants in the kitchen that no one has used in sixty years. Sid makes a thick aromatic stew. The boy refuses to taste it. He has said nothing throughout the afternoon and night. But the children can talk, and they speak perfectly good English. Where did they come from? How have they survived? The old man eats his stew and ponders the sleeping children. Presently Sid climbs onto one of the examination tables to sleep, and the old man takes the other.

For three days the old man remains in the hospital and cares for the child. Either the leader girl or the older boy is always there. The others come and go. Sid leaves and returns once. The people are uneasy about the old man. They want him out of there, back in his own home. They are afraid he might be hurt by the children. And they need him.

"The children need me more than they do," the old man says. "Tell them I'm all right. The kids are afraid of me, my powers." He laughs as he says this, but there is a bitterness in his laugh. He doesn't want them to fear him, but rather to trust him and like him, confide in him. So far they have said nothing.

After the leader girl smelled a plate with steak on it, then moved back, shaking her head, they have refused his offers of food. They won't talk to him. They watch his every movement, the older boy especially. The old man watches them closely for signs of hunger, and finds none. The only one he knows is eating regularly is the injured little girl, and he feeds her.

On the fourth day Sid returns again, and this time Harry and Jake Pulaski are with him. "Come out here, Lew!" Harry calls from the hospital yard.

"What's wrong?" the old man asks before he reaches them.

"Myra Olney is gone," Jake says. "She'll freeze in this weather. We have to find her."

"Gone? What do you mean?" Myra wouldn't run away.

"No one's seen her for days," Harry says. "Eunice went over to find out if

she was hurt or something and she was gone. Just not there at all."

Myra is soft and dependent, always looking for someone to help her do something—the last one who would try to manage alone. "If you find her and she's hurt," the old man says finally, "bring her over here. I'll stay here and wait." They never find her.

His small patient is recovering fast. He takes the stitches out and the wound looks good. She is a pretty little girl—large grey eyes, the same soft brown hair that her brother has, with slightly more wave in it than his. She is the first to smile at him. He sits by her and tells her stories, aware that the others are listening also. He tells her of the bad places to the east, places where they must never go. He tells her of the bad places to the south, where the mosquitoes bring sickness and the water is not good to drink. He tells her how people bathe and keep themselves clean in order to stay healthy and well, and to look pretty. The little girl watches him and listens intently to all that he says. Now when he asks if she is thirsty or hungry, she answers.

The next day the old man realizes the oldest girl is menstruating. She has swathed herself in a garment tied between her legs, and looks very awkward in it, very uncomfortable. Conversationally, not addressing her at all, he tells the small girl about women and babies and the monthly blood and says that he has things that women use at those times.

The adolescent stands up and says, "Show me those things."

He takes her to one of the lounges and says, "First you must bathe, even your hair. Then I shall return with them."

One day he brings wool shirts from the basement and cuts off the sleeves to make them fit the smaller children. He dresses his patient and leaves the other shirts where the children can help themselves. The smaller boy strips unhesitatingly and puts on a warm shirt. It covers him to mid-calf; the sleeves leave his hands free. Presently the others also dress in the shirts, all but the older boy, who doesn't go near them all morning. Late in the afternoon he also pulls off his filthy garment, throws it down, and picks up one of the shirts. His body is muscular, much scarred, and now the old man sees that he never will impregnate a woman either. Both boys have atrophied testes. He feels his eyes burn and he hurries away, down the corridor, to weep alone in one of the patients' rooms.

As soon as the little girl can walk again, the children leave the hospital and vanish into the city once more. The old man sits alone in the examination room and feels empty for a long time after they leave. There were no good-byes, no words exchanged, no backward glances. That

afternoon he returns to his apartment and stares at the work spread on his tables. It is many days before he can bring himself to open one of the Bibles again.

In December Ruth dies in her sleep. They bury her with the others at the west side of the park where the wildflowers carpet the ground in spring and ferns grow in summer. The night after her burial Boy wakes the old man with a hand pressed hard on his lips. He drags at him, trying to get him out of bed, and thrusts robe and stout winter shoes at him. He has no light, nor does he need one. Boy is an owl, the old man thinks, awake now, but sluggish and stiff.

Boy leads him out and into the park, winding among the cedars that are as black as coal. A powdery snow has fallen, not enough to cover the ground, but enough to change the world into one unfamiliar and beautiful.

Boy stops abruptly and his fingers are hard on the old man's arm. Then he sees them. The children are dragging Ruth's body from the grave. Sickened, he turns away. Finally he knows by the silence that they have gone. Boy's face is a white blank in the dark night, his fingers start to shake spasmodically on the old man's arm. They can arouse the city, ring the church bell, hunt the children down, recover the corpse and rebury it, but then what? Kill the children? Post a grave watch? And Dore, what would it do to Dore? The old man can't seem to think clearly, all he can do is stare at the empty grave. If they knew, if the people knew, they would hunt down the children, kill them all. Many of the men still have guns, ammunition. He has a shotgun and shells. It can't be for this that the children have survived so long! That can't be what they came here to find!

Finally he says, "Go get two shovels, Boy. Bring them here. Quietly. Don't wake anyone."

And they fill in the grave again. And smooth the tracks and then go home.

The winters have grown progressively worse for the people of the city. Each bitter cold snap enervates them all, and each winter claims its toll. This year Sam Whitten has become more and more helpless, until now he is a bed-ridden invalid who must be attended constantly. His talk is all of his childhood.

They seldom mention the children. It is hoped that they will depart with the spring. Meanwhile, it is easier to pretend that they are not in the city at all.

The old man nurses Sam Whitten so conscientiously that Sid intervenes, spokesman for the rest of the people, he says.

"If you wear yourself down, then who'll they have if they need help?"

The old man knows Sid is right, but if Sam dies, will the children steal his body also? He is tormented by the thought and can tell no one of his fears. His sleep is restless and unsatisfying; he wakes often and stares into darkness wondering if he has been awakened by a noise too close by, wondering if the children are prowling about the city while everyone sleeps.

In January they have their first real snowfall, only a few inches, and it doesn't last more than two days, but now the weather turns bitter cold, Arctic weather. And Mary Halloran disappears. This time the bell in the church tower clamors for attendance, and everyone who is able gathers there.

"Jake, you tell them," Harry says, his voice harsh. He is carrying his rifle, the first time he has had it out in fifteen years.

"Yeah. Me and Eunice and Walter and Mary was going to play pinochle this afternoon, like we always do. Mary didn't come and I said I would go get her. When I got to her house, she wasn't there. And there's blood on her floor. Her door wasn't closed tight either."

"She could have hurt herself," Sid says, but there is doubt in his voice. "She could be wandering out there right now, dazed. We have to search for her before it gets dark."

"Stay in pairs," Jake says harshly.

"Today we'll search for Mary, and tomorrow we'll search for those goddamn kids," Harry says.

"Boy knows where they are," Jake says. He looks around. "Where is he? I saw him a minute ago."

Boy is gone again. The old man waits up for him until very late, but he doesn't come back. The next day the old man finds Sid in his room when he returns from his morning visit to Sam Whitten.

"You joining the hunt?" Sid asks.

"No. You?"

"No. They won't find the kids. Too many places to hide. Some-one'll have a heart attack out there in the cold." Sid looks out the window toward the park. "Will you come over to the hospital with me in a little while?"

"Something wrong, Sid?" The old man can't keep the anxiety out of his voice.

Sid shakes his head. "I want to put my notebooks, diaries and stuff, in the vault. Seems like a good time."

The old man is silent for a moment, then he says, "We can use Boy's wagon. Do you have much to take over?"

"Couple of boxes. We'd need the wagon."

That afternoon they walk through the park, two old men in dark cloaks, pulling a stout wagon over the frozen ground. Their breath forms white clouds in front of their faces.

"They didn't get a glimpse of the kids," Sid says. "Didn't think they would."

"Are they going out again?"

"Sure. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow."

They smile briefly at each other and walk, taking turns pulling the wagon. It is hard to pull over the uneven ground.

"I keep wondering," Sid says presently, "if this wasn't part of the plan. Give us all time to die off and then bring out the new people and let them take over."

"They can't take over," the old man says bitterly. "If that was the plan, it's as much a failure as the first one was." And he tells Sid about the boys' testicles.

"That will change their minds for them," Sid says thoughtfully. "The others who are holding back now. Harry only got five others to go with him and Jake, you know. The rest will go out too if they know this. Why not? Them or us. And we're all doomed anyway."

"I know." They are almost through the park now.

"You think you could get Boy near that girl?"

The old man makes a rude noise. "He'd sooner couple with a snake. I don't think he could, anyway. Psychologically. Even if I could explain and make him understand, which I probably couldn't." He considers it another moment, then shakes his head. He could never make Boy understand.

They take the wagon up the ramp and inside the hospital, and with much struggling they get it down the stairs to the subbasements. The vault is a freezer unit. There is a second section where the temperature was even colder once, and this part made tears come to the old man's eyes

when he first found it. He closed the door of the sperm bank that day, long ago, and hasn't opened it since. The vault hasn't been chilled at all for sixty years. It is simply a good place to store valuables. They cleared the shelves of blood plasma, medicines, unidentified vials, and now in their place are boxes of jewelry, books, photographs.

"You in a hurry?" Sid asks. "Might make just one more entry. What you just told me sure has changed everything."

The old man shrugs and lights another lamp. Already Sid is writing with concentration, and the old man goes out into the corridor. No one has ever visited this section of the hospital often. Machinery is stored here, spare parts for the surgical units, tanks for oxygen, collapsible wheelchairs. The old man has never paid much attention to the machinery. They have had little use for motors to raise and lower hospital beds. Now he strolls through the storage room. Near the back of the room, he stops and stares. A generator. Boxed, a metal-clad box, in fact. Meant to be stored for an indefinite time. Taped to the box is a booklet of instructions. The air in the subbasements is very dry, the booklet is legible.

Sid is still writing, doesn't notice when the old man glances in at him. The old man follows the diagram in the front of the booklet, through a door marked A-1, to the end of the room with miscellaneous pipes and tanks, to the far end where there is a small stainless steel door four feet above the floor. Behind the door there is a gauge registering full, a valve, a set of instructions riveted to a curved shiny surface. Twenty thousand gallons of fuel oil in a stainless steel tank! The pipes and the holding tanks are all designed so that the oil will flow by gravity when the valves are opened. They provided a Diesel-powered generator to be connected to the freezer unit, he realizes, with enough oil in storage to run it for years. No one ever started the generator; no one ever opened the valves. His feet drag when he leaves the room and joins Sid once more in the vault.

Sid is no longer writing. He is leafing through his diaries, first one, then another, not pausing long anywhere.

"What happened, Sid? How did it start?"

Sid shrugs. "I was reading some of the earliest books," he says. "Didn't realize at the time how contradictory the statements were. First they said China hit Russia with missiles. Then they said that type A flu virus was pandemic. Then biological warfare. God knows."

"I was home on vacation," the old man says. "We started to run. My father was afraid we'd all die of plague. The cities were emptied practically



overnight. I remember that. Was it plague?"

Again Sid shrugs. "A combination, I guess." He snaps the book shut, puts it back in the box with the others, and pushes the box against the wall. "Ready?"

There are many meetings now. No one is to live alone any longer. Each group must have a man with a gun, and they have to fortify their homes, put bars on the windows, locks on the doors. No one is to wander outside alone, or after dark. And the daily expeditions to find the children will continue. Sid doesn't disclose the old man's secret. To the old man he says, "I won't help them find the kids and destroy them. Neither will I help the kids in any way."

The old man is tormented now, unable to sleep, and all the while it seems that an obsession is growing within him. He knows that his people are threatened, that the children are the enemy, that their hunger will be more powerful than the stratagems adopted by the people. And still he is obsessed with the idea that he has to act for them, make them accept his help. This old man and the man who is his son in all but the flesh, they will save humanity. He is hardly aware when Sam Whitten dies. The ground is frozen now; they will bury him in the spring, and until then the cold will preserve the thin old body. The people have become despondent and more fearful. There are outbursts of talk, then a strained silence among them as they listen to hear if the shadows are alive. Dore and Sid have moved into Monica's palace. She is tearing down the forest in order to create an early American tavern. The old man doesn't visit her.

Only Boy still ventures out after dark, but his forays are less frequent and most of the time he is close to the old man. Every day they go to the hospital, where they clean out the vault. They assemble the generator according to instructions and turn on the valves and start one Diesel; slowly the vault is chilled below zero. Unquestioningly Boy does what the old man tells him to do. The old man often addresses him as "Son," and Boy accepts this also.

Somehow, the old man thinks, he must learn about artificial insemination. He must collect sperm from Boy. He must impregnate the wild girl with it. And he must instruct her, or the eunuch boys, in the method so that when the other girls reach childbearing age, they also can be impregnated. And in the privacy of his rooms, the old man laughs. Boy watches him fearfully. Sid and Dore also watch him when they are there, and Dore's face reveals his worry. They think he is going mad, the old man knows, and he doesn't know how to demonstrate that he is not,

Now when Boy starts to leave him, the old man says, "Don't go out. Don't leave me alone." And Boy obediently sits down again. The old man is afraid that Boy will go out and won't come back again, that he will not be allowed to finish what he knows he must do. He feels ashamed, implicitly lying to Boy, but he does it repeatedly in order to keep Boy nearby. He knows that he has to collect the semen very soon, that time may be working against him now.

Every night he prepares tea for himself and Boy; sometimes they have the flat nut cakes, sometimes the freeze-dried food, which is not as nourishing as it once was. This night the old man drugs Boy heavily and while he sleeps the old man kneels over him, weeping silently, and masturbates him and collects the ejaculate in a sterile flask. He is too blinded by tears to be certain he has covered Boy properly when he leaves him. Later he returns and arranges the blankets, and kisses Boy on the forehead.

It is cold, but not cold enough to preserve the semen; he has to take it to the vault that night, divide it among several vials, seal them, label them, freeze them. It is almost dawn when he returns and drops to his bed exhausted. Time and age, he thinks, unable to sleep, aching and afraid of the way his heart is palpitating. Time and age.

Every night he makes his solitary journey to the hospital with another flask, and each day his face is greyer, he is more fatigued. Dore is insistent that the old man move to the palace, or at least let someone come and stay with him in his apartment. The old man refuses irritably, and Dore leaves him alone. But they are talking about him, he knows. It is hard to find time alone now. Someone always seems to be with him, observing him, afraid that if he breaks, they will be without any medical help at all. How very old they all are, he thinks one day, surprised that he has never realized it before. The survivors are all over seventy, all except Boy. It is time for them all to die.

That night when he returns from the hospital, Boy is gone.

For hours the old man sits at his window, staring blindly at the dark city. He is frozen, he cannot weep, cannot think, cannot feel. Soon after dawn he unwraps his shotgun and carefully inspects it, rubs the metal with an oil-soaked rag, and then examines his shells. He loads the gun and puts the rest of his shells into a pouch that he wears like a necklace, and then he goes to the eighth floor where the telescope is. Slowly, painstakingly, he scans what he can see of the city, not looking at the ruined streets and buildings but at the black line where city and sky meet, and finally he finds a place where the air shimmies, and, squinting, he

believes he can see smoke. It is very far away, miles up the river, close to the downtown section. He dresses warmly and starts out, not thinking anything at all.

When he nears the downtown area, he knows where he will find them, and he turns toward the bridge that is still standing, with great gaping holes in the roadbed, and supporting posts that are eaten through in places with corrosion, but not enough to collapse the structure. With their fear of enclosed places, the children will huddle under the bridge, and anyone approaching will be visible a long way off. He doesn't approach yet. He goes inside an office building and climbs up to the third floor where he can look out and see the children. They are here as he expected: four of them, the smaller ones, are huddled close to a small fire; the older ones are not in sight. As he watches, one of the little ones, who are indistinguishable in their blankets, nods again and again and finally lies down on the ground and draws up into a compact ball to sleep. There is no sign of Boy's body.

The old man waits at the window. He dozes and starts into wakefulness many times, and his legs grow stiff with cold and fatigue. There is a ringing in his head, and when he is awake, he has a sense of euphoria now, of well-being and contentment. Suddenly he wakes thoroughly and knows that he will freeze to death if he doesn't move. He should have eaten. He should have brought food with him. He tries to stand and reels into the wall and nearly falls down, catching himself clumsily. A fall could be fatal, he knows. A broken leg or hip, and he will die in this office building. He flexes his muscles slowly, and with each movement there is a burning pain that races through his body. Finally he is able to move; he stumbles to the door and down to the street again. He stays in the alleys until he is very close to the bridge. The other three children are back. He counts them. Seven. The old man is almost close enough now to reveal himself, to be able to fire into the group and be certain of killing or injuring most of them with the two shots in his gun. He takes another step, and suddenly he hears a whisper behind him.

"Lew! Damn it, wait a minute!" It is Jake Pulaski, with his rifle. Jake hurries to him. "Wait a minute until Harry has time to get to the other side of the bridge, to head them off."

The old man stares at Jake in perplexity; he has forgotten what it was he meant to do. He sees the rifle in Jake's hands and without thinking he swings his shotgun hard, catches Jake in the stomach and knocks him down. And he steps into the open and walks toward the children.

They jump up wildly. Their faces are pinched with cold.

"You get to the hospital and wait for me," the old man says in his hardest voice. "Or you will be killed."

They don't move. Behind him the old man hears Jake advancing, and he hears the click of a safety being released.

"There are many men who are coming to kill you!" the old man thunders. "Run to the hospital and wait for me there!" He whirls around and sees Jake at the alley mouth now, the rifle rising, pointing past him at the group. The old man raises his shotgun and pulls both triggers together, and the shocking noise of his gun drowns out the sound of the rifle. At the noise the children scatter like leaves in a whirlwind.

For hours the old man stumbles in the ruins. He weeps and his tears freeze in his beard. Sometimes he can hear voices close by and he reaches for them, tries to find them, and even as he does so, he knows the voices are in his head. The voices of his mother and father. Monica's voice. Sid's voice. Sometimes he sees Boy ahead and he finds strength to walk on when he would rather sit down and sleep. And finally he comes back to the hospital when the day is finished and the shadows fill all open spaces.

Numbly he lights the stove and then he falls to the floor and sleeps. When he awakens the children are there. The old man sits up, suffering, and he finds his shotgun on his legs. He lifts it and the children cringe away from him.

"You are filth and scum," he says savagely at them. "And I shall punish you. And your punishment will be life, life for your children, for their children." And he laughs.

He drags himself to his feet, each new motion a new agony. He raises his shotgun and the children cover their faces in terror, and bow before him and his terrible wrath.

**The End**