

IF THIS IS WINNETKA, YOU MUST BE JUDY

by F.M. Busby

The ceiling was the wrong colour – grey-green, not beige. Alert, well-rested, but still unmoving after sleep, Larry Garth thought: It could be the Boston apartment, or possibly the one in Winnetka – or, of course, someplace new. Throwing off the covers and rolling over, he put his feet over the side of the bed and sat up. His back did not protest; cancel Boston.

The walls were grey-green also, the furniture stained walnut. Yes, Winnetka. As a final check before going into the bathroom, he raised the window shade and looked out. It had been a long time, but he recognised the details. Winnetka for sure, and he was thirty-five or thirty-six; there were only about two years of Winnetka. One question of importance remained: Judy, or Darlene?

The bathroom mirror agreed with him; he was at the time of the small moustache; he'd seen the thing in pictures. He didn't like it much, but spared it when he shaved; it was bad policy, at beginnings, to introduce unnecessary change.

He went back to the bedroom and got his cigarettes and lighter from the bedside stand, hearing pans rattle in the kitchen. Judy or Darlene? Either way, he'd better get out there soon. As soon as he checked his wallet – first things first.

He lit a cigarette and leafed through the cards and minutiae that constituted his identity in the outside world. Well ... knowing himself, his driver's permit would be up-to-date and all credit cards unexpired. The year was 1970. Another look outside: autumn. So he was thirty-five, and the pans clattered at the hands of Judy.

Just as well, he thought. He hadn't had the break-up with Darlene, but he knew it was, had to be, hectic and bitter. He'd have to have it sometime, but 'sufficient unto the day ...' Now, his wedding with Judy was only days or weeks distant – but he didn't know which way. The trees

across the street were no help; he couldn't remember when the leaves turned colour here, or began to fall. Well, he'd listen; she'd let him know ...

In a plastic cover he found an unfamiliar card with a key taped to one side. He drew it out; the other side was more than half-filled with his own small, neat printing, mostly numbers. The first line read: '1935-54, small misc. See chart. 8/75-3/76. 2/62-9/63. 10/56-12/56.' There was much more: wonder rose in him. And then excitement, for suddenly the numbers made sense. Months and years – he was looking at a listing of the times of his life, in the order he had lived them. '9/70-11/70' caught his eye – that was *now*, so he wasn't married to Judy yet, but would be before this time ended. And the crudely dated record listed six more life fragments between this one he was beginning and the one that had ended yesterday! He scanned it, scowling with concentration. Automatically he took a ball-point from the stand and completed the final entry, so that it read: '12/68-9/70.'

He'd never kept records before, except in his head. But it was a good idea; now that his later self had thought of it, he'd continue it. No, he'd *begin* it. He laughed, and then he didn't laugh. He'd begin it because he'd found it; when and how was the actual beginning? He grappled with the idea of circular causation, then shrugged and accepted what he couldn't fully understand – like it or not, it was there. He looked again at the card, at the signposts on his zigzag trail.

A short time, this one, ending a few days after the wedding. Then about seven months of being twenty and back in college; probably it would be when he found the sense to quit that farcical situation, in which he knew more of many things than his instructors did, but very little of what his exams would cover. He looked forward to seeing his parents again, not only alive but in good health. They'd nag him for quitting school, but he could jolly them out of that.

And next – no, he'd look at it again later; Judy would be getting impatient. A quick look at the other side. Below the key was printed *First Mutual Savings* and the bank's address. The key was numbered: 1028. So there was more information in a safety-deposit box. He'd look at it, first chance he got.

He put on a robe and slippers; the last time with Judy, in 1972-73, her freedom from the nudity taboo was still new and strange to her. Shuffling along the hall toward breakfast, he wondered how the record he'd just seen was lost, wiped out, between now and that time. Did he later, in some time between, change his mind – decide the knowledge was more harm than help? He came to the kitchen and to Judy, with whom he'd lived

twice as husband, but never met.

“Morning, honey.” He moved to kiss her. The kiss was brief; she stepped back.

“Your eggs are getting cold. I put them on when I heard the water stop running. There’s a cover on them, but still ... what took you so long, Larry?”

“It took a while to think myself awake, I guess.” Looking at her, he ate with little heed to temperature or flavour. She hadn’t changed much, going the other way. Red-gold hair was pinned up loosely into a swaying, curly mass instead of hanging straight, and of course she was bundled in a bulky robe rather than moving lithely unencumbered. But she had the same face, the same ways, so different from his first time with her. That was in the late, quarrelling stages, five years away, when she drank heavily and was fat, and divorce was not far off. He did not know what went so wrong in so short a time between. Now at the start, or close to it, he wished he could somehow rescue the fat drunk.

“More coffee, Larry? And you haven’t even looked at the paper.”

“Yes. Thanks. I will, now.” Damn! He had to get on track better, and fast. “Well ... what’s new today?”

He didn’t care, really. He couldn’t; he knew, in large, how the crises and calamities of 1970 looked in diminishing perspective. The paper’s only use was to orient him – to tell him where in the middle of the movie he was, what he should and should not know. And today, as on the first day of any time, he looked first for the exact date. September 16, 1970. His wedding was six weeks and three days ahead of him, on Halloween. And this day was Wednesday; the bank would be open.

As if on cue, she asked, “Anything special you need to do today?”

“Not much. I want to drop in at the bank, though. Something I want to check on.” That was safe; she’d know about the bank. He kept only essential secrets. “Anything you’d like me to pick up at the groshry?” He remembered to use their joke-pronunciation.

“I’ll look. I have a couple of things on the list, but they’re not urgent.”

“Okay. Come here a minute first, though.” Short and still slim, she fit well on his lap, as she had two years later. The kisses became longer.

Then she pulled back. “Larry. Are you sure?”

“Sure of what?” He tried to bring her to him, but she resisted, so he relaxed his grip. “Something on your mind, Judy?”

“Yes. Are you sure you want to get married again, so soon after ... ?”

“Darlene?”

“I know you had a hideous time, Larry, and – well, don’t get on that horse again just to prove you’re not afraid to.”

He laughed and tightened his hold; this time she came close to him. “Proving things isn’t my bag, Judy. To myself, or to anybody.”

“Then why do you want to marry me, when you have me already? You don’t have to – all you have to do is not change, stay the same for me. So why, Larry?”

“Just old-fashioned, I guess.” It was hard to kiss and laugh at the same time, carrying her to the bedroom. But he managed, and so did she, her part.

She got up first; the ‘groshry’ list was ready when he was dressed to leave. Their goodbye kiss was soft.

Downstairs, he recognised the car with pleasure – a year old Volvo he knew from two and five years later; it was even more agile and responsive now.

The drive to the bank gave him time to think.

In his early time-years the skips were small, a day or two, and his young consciousness took them for bad dreams – to wake with unfamiliar sensations, body changed and everything out of size. Much later, waking in a hospital, he learned they were real.

“Do you use drugs, Mr. Garth?”

“No, I don’t.” A little grass now and then wasn’t ‘drugs.’ “I’d like to know why I’m here.”

“So would we. You were found lying helpless, unable to talk or co-ordinate your movements. Like a baby, Mr. Garth. Do you have any explanation, any pertinent medical history?”

So this is where I was, he thought. “No. I’ve been under a lot of pressure.” That was probably safe to say, though he didn’t know his body-age or circumstances. But in some thirty consciousness-years he’d learned to keep cover while he got his bearings in a new time. And eventually, as he hoped and expected, they told him most of what he needed to know about himself, and let him go. As sometimes happened, his research into the parameters of now was largely wasted; the time lasted only a dozen or so days. But the waste was not total, for when the

following time came to him, he would still remember.

Once as a four-year-old he woke to middle age and panicked, screaming for his mother. He remembered being taken to the hospital that time, and did not look forward with pleasure to waking in it. But what had been would be. And he was certain there was at least one more infancy skip to be lived down someday.

At first he did not talk of these things in 'home' time because he had no speech. Then he remained silent because he thought it was the same for everyone. And finally he kept his counsel because he realised no one could help or understand, or even believe.

Once in his seventh consciousness-year he woke with a throbbing joy at his groin; the woman beside him overrode his bewilderment and fulfilled his unrealised need. It was a time of a single day, and he hadn't seen her again. He didn't know the time-year or where he was, but he knew enough to say very little. He kept the situation as simple as possible by saying he was tired and didn't feel well, remembering just in time that grownups say they're not going to *work* today – he almost said *school*. He got away with it, and his confidence improved.

There were other dislocations from his early time-years, but none major until he went to sleep aged nineteen and woke to spend seven months as a forty-year-old man, twice-divorced. He wondered what was wrong, that twice he had failed in marriage. His unattached state simplified his adjustment, but after a time he became convinced that he'd lost twenty years and was cheated. But the next skip was to an earlier time, and then he began to know the way of his life.

The changes came always during sleep, except for the one that came at death. He didn't know how old he died; his brain's constricted arteries would not maintain an attention-span of any useful length. Inside him, his brief thoughts were lucid, but still the effect was of senility. How old, though? Well, he'd once had a year that included his seventieth birthday and golf, an operation for cataracts, a lawsuit successfully defended and a reasonably satisfying state of potency. So when he came to the last, he knew he was *damned* old.

Having died, he still feared death. It would be merely a different way of ending. For he had no clear idea how much of his life had been lived, back and forth in bits and pieces. One day he would use up the last un-lived segment, and then ... he supposed he simply wouldn't wake up. At his best estimate, he had lived something less than half his allotted time-years. He couldn't be sure, for much of his earlier conscious time was unmeasured.

Dying itself was not terrible; even his senile brain knew he had not yet filled all the blank spaces of his life. The pain was bad, as his heart fought and for a time would neither function nor gracefully succumb, but he had felt worse pain. His mind lost focus, and came clear only for a few seconds at the end. He died curious, wondering what might come next.

It was the other book end; the circle closed. He was trapped, constricted, pushed. Pressured and convulsed, slowly and painfully. Finally cold air reached his head and bright light stabbed at his eyes; at the consciousness-age of perhaps thirty, he was born. Except for the forgotten instinctive rapture of feeding, he found the new-born state unpleasant.

Filling early skips involuntarily, he dipped twice again into infancy. The first time bored him almost to apathy; he could neither see clearly nor move well. The second time, better-learned, he concentrated on his wide-open senses, trying to understand the infant condition. He found the experience instructive, but still was glad when next he woke adult.

Relationships with others were ever difficult; always he came in at the middle of the second feature, unsure of what had gone before, and of correct responses to people he was supposed to know. He learned to simulate a passive streak that was not his by nature so that his friends would accept the quiet necessary to each new learning period. He cheated no one by this small deceit; it was as much for their benefit as his. And while he stayed in one time, at rest between zigzag flights, his friends and lovers – and their feelings – were real to him, of genuine concern. When he met them again, before or afterward, it pained him that they could not also know and rejoice in the reunion.

Early in his experience he sometimes fumbled such reunions. Now he knew how to place the time and adjust his mental files to produce only acceptable knowledge for the year.

There was no way he could pursue a conventional career with organisational status and seniority, and at the end of it a pension. Hell, he couldn't even finish college. Luckily, at his first major change, when he skipped from nineteen to forty, he found himself a published author of fiction. He read several of his works and enjoyed them. In later times, half-remembering, he wrote them, and then others that he had not read. His writings never hinted at the way of his own life, but a reviewer said of them: 'Garth presents a unique viewpoint, as though he saw life from a different angle.'

It was a strange life, he thought. How did they manage it? Living and seeing solely from one view that plodded along a line and saw only one

consecutive past.

So that they could never, ever understand him. Or he, them.

He had attuned so easily to the car and the locality, hands and feet automatically adjusting to four-on-the-floor and quick brakes and steering that, daydreaming, he nearly drove past the turnoff to First Mutual Savings. But from the right-hand lane, braking and signalling quickly, he made his turn without difficulty. He found a slot at the end of a parking row, well away from the adjacent car in case its driver was a door-crasher.

He didn't know the bank, so he walked in slowly and loitered, looking around with care. The safety-deposit counter was to his left; he approached it. On it, a marker read 'Leta Travers'; behind the desk was a grey-haired woman, spectacularly coifed, who wore marriage rings. He couldn't remember how people in this suburb in this time addressed each other in business dealings. Well, it couldn't be too important ...

"Good morning, Mrs. Travers."

She came to the counter. "Mr. Garth. Going to change your will again?"

What the hell! No; she was smiling; it must be a 'family joke.' Damn, though; how had he later come to set up such a stupid thing? He knew better than that, *now*.

Well, go along with it. "Yep. Going to leave all my millions to the home for retired tomcats." But he'd have to kill this for later, or else change banks. Or some next-time, off-guard, it could be bad. Maybe that's why he dropped the records ... wait and see.

Leta Travers led him to the aseptic dungeon, where their two keys together opened Box 1028. Saying the usual polite things, she left him to its contents.

The envelope was on top. He didn't like the label: *This Is Your Life* with his signature below. That was show-off stuff. Or dumbhead drunk. He'd brought a pen; with it, he scribbled the designation into garble. He thought, then wrote: *Superannuated; For Reference Only*. He repeated the phrase subvocally, to fix it in his mind.

He unfolded the envelope's contents and was impressed. There were two major parts, plus some side-trivia he could study later. The last looked interesting, but it had waited and could wait awhile longer.

First was an expanded version of the card in his wallet: a chronology of his consciousness, more exactly dated than he could verify from memory.

Somehow, later, he'd checked these things more closely. He couldn't imagine how to do it. Or maybe, along with the dumbhead labelling, he had taken to putting exact dates to inexact recalls. He didn't like to think of his mind going so flyblown, and determined to watch against such tendencies.

He skimmed without going deeply into memory. The list seemed accurate; he'd have to look more closely later. The second paper described his life from a different aspect: by time-years it showed the parts he'd had and what he'd known and guessed of what had gone between. At the back was a summary in chart form.

Both parts went well past his own experience, as the card had done. He looked at the first and read, after the college section: 'February 6, 1987, through March 4, 1992. Three years wonderful with Elaine and the others, then two so terrible as she died and afterward. She died November 10, 1990, and we are alone.'

He could not read any more; he couldn't make sense of it. Elaine – how could she die so soon? He was *counting* on her, someday, for a lot of good years: now and then, as it would happen. Suddenly he could see a reason for destroying records – he'd rather not know the end of Elaine. But obviously he hadn't thought that way afterward, or the papers wouldn't be here before him. Something else must happen, later, to change his mind.

He knew Elaine from two times: first when their matured marriage was joined fully to that of Frank and Rhonda. Only two months then. And later, starting when they were six months married, he had the next year and a few months more. And she was the person he most wanted, most loved ... and most missed.

He couldn't take any more of it, not yet. He needed to study and memorise the record, but not here, not now. Well, Judy wasn't nosy; he could take it home. He put the envelope in a pocket. Everything else went back in the lock-box; he pushed it in to click its assurance of security. All right; time to go.

At the counter he thanked Mrs. Travers. "And I've decided to leave my will alone from now on," he said. "The retired tomcats will just have to do the best they can."

She laughed, as he'd hoped she would. "Well, whatever you say, Mr. Garth."

"True," he said, "it's my nickel, isn't it? Well, then ... see you again, Mrs. Travers, and thank you."

He walked toward the door.

The black-haired girl walked by as he came out to the sidewalk, and before he could think, he called to her. “Elaine!”

She turned, frantically he tried to think of a non-incriminating excuse. But her eyes went wide, and her arms; she ran to him and he could not resist her embrace. “Larry! Oh, Larry!”

“Uh – I guess I made a mistake,” he said. His mind churned uselessly. “Perfectly natural. I guess I do look like a lot of other people.”

She shook her head, scattering the tears that leaked onto her lashes. “No mistake, Larry.” Her hands gripped his upper arms; he could feel the nails digging in. “Oh, think of it! You too, Larry! You too!”

His mind literally reeled; he felt dizzy. He breathed deeply, and again, and a third time. “Yes,” he said. “Look. Elaine – let’s go someplace quiet and have a coffee or a drink or something. We’ve got to talk.”

“Oh, yes! We have to talk – more than any other two people in the world.”

They found a small bar, quiet and dimly lit, and sat at a corner table. Three men occupied adjacent stools at the bar; across the room a couple talked quietly. The bartender, scowling in concentration, mixed something in a tall glass.

Larry looked at Elaine, ten years younger than he had ever seen her. She aged well, he thought; the little lines at the corners of her eyes hadn’t advanced much by the time they were married. The grey eyes themselves did not change, and the line of her chin was durable. The black hair was longer than he’d seen it; the few threads of grey were yet to appear. He could close his eyes and see the slim body under her bright dress; he felt desire, but remotely. More important now were things of the mind – of both their minds.

The bartender was coming to their table. “Vermouth on the rocks?” Larry said. “You always like that.”

“I do?” She laughed. “That’s right; I do, later. Well, perhaps this is where I begin to acquire the taste. All right.”

He ordered the same. Both were silent while the drinks were brought. He started to raise his glass in a toast, but she didn’t wait.

“How much have you had, Larry? Of us?”

“I haven’t met you. Except now, of course. I had the last half of our first year and most of our second.” He showed her the envelope. “I have the dates here. And earlier I had a few weeks in the middle, in ’85, when we were with Frank and Rhonda. I was pretty young; it really confused me at first.”

She nodded. “I should have known then. I’ve had that part too, and suddenly you seemed withdrawn, you wouldn’t talk. Then, gradually, you came out of it.”

“How much have you had, Elaine? I mean – how much do we have left, together? Not too long from now I get the last –” Good Lord! What was he *saying*? “Elaine – have you had, uh, your death yet?”

She nodded. “Yes. It wasn’t as bad as it probably seemed. I looked awful and smelled awful, toward the end, I know. And made noises from the pain. But that was just my body. Inside, except for seeing how all of you hurt for me, I was pretty much at peace; the pain was out there someplace where I hardly felt it.

“Poor Larry! I gave you a bad time, didn’t I?”

“I haven’t had that time yet. I’ll be having it pretty soon, though.”

“You’ll *what*? How can you know that?” Her face seemed to crumple. “Oh! We’re not the same, after all?”

He took her hand. “Yes, we are. It’s – I keep records, or I will. And I found them, written in the time just before now.” He showed her the lists from the envelope. “Here – you can see what I’ve had, up to here, and what I’ll be having up through the time that ended a couple of days ago.”

She recovered quickly and studied his life-records with obvious fascination. “But this is marvellous! I never thought of doing it; I don’t know why. It’s obvious, when you think about it. Stupid me!”

“Stupid me too, Elaine,” he said. He sipped his drink. The ice had melted; the taste was watery. “I didn’t think of it either, until I saw it on paper.”

“But that means you did it because you’d done it.” She grasped the circularity of the process instantly – which was more than he had done.

“Larry, do you mind if I mark on this – the chart here – a little bit? In pencil? I want to see how much we have left together.” Quickly she drew neat lines. “Both *knowing*; won’t that be – what’s a bigger word than ‘wonderful’?”

“Whatever it is, it fits.” Impatience gripped him. “Well, how does it

look?”

“Better than I expected, but not as good as I’d like. Damn! I’ve met you and you haven’t met me. Then here, late in 1980, we overlap; we’ve both had a couple of months there. And you’ve had most of 1981 and a little of ’85, and I’ve had nearly all of ’85 and all of the last three years. Oh, dammit! See here? Out of our ten years, one or the other of us has already had nearly six. Not knowing. Not *knowing*, Larry!” She wiped her eyes and gulped from her glass.

“Yes, Elaine; I feel the same way. But what’s lived is lived; we can’t change it.”

“Can’t we?” She raised her face to him, shaking back the hair that had fallen forward. “What if – what if the next time you’ve had and I haven’t, I just *tell* you? Or the other way around? Why not, Larry? Why the hell not?”

He shook his head, not negating her but stalling. The idea had come to him too, and the implications rocked him. Not her, though – God, how he loved that bold mind! But he needed time to think.

“I’m not sure, Elaine. What would happen? We were there, you see, and we *didn’t* tell, either of us, our selves who remembered sitting here right now. Why didn’t we?” He was still holding her hand; he squeezed it once and let go. “Was it because of something we decided in the next few minutes? Or hours, or days? We’ve got to think, Elaine. We’ve got to think in ways no one’s ever had to think before.”

She smiled. “You’re sure of that? There are two of us. Maybe there are others.”

“Maybe. I’ve watched, and never – what are the odds against recognition? If I hadn’t been off-guard, you know, I’d never have given myself away.”

“But I’m so glad you did. Aren’t you?”

“Of course, Elaine. Christ, yes! I mean, even if it’s only the four years ...”

“But maybe we could have *more*. The overlap – you see? – the parts we’ve both had, where neither of us knows about the other – there’s not much of it.”

“No, there isn’t.” He signalled the bartender, holding up a glass and extending two fingers of the hand that raised it. “Elaine, we don’t have to decide this right away. Put it on the back burner and let it simmer. Let’s talk about us. For instance, how old are you?”

She laughed. “I thought your memory was better than that. I’m two years and five days younger than you are.”

It was his turn to chuckle. “I don’t mean body-years. How old in consciousness-years?”

“Oh. I call them life-years. About twenty-four, I think, give or take a couple. And you?”

“Close to forty; I can’t be exact about it either.”

The bartender brought filled glasses, collected his money and went back to the bar, all silently.

“Getting old and cautious, are you, Larry? No, I don’t mean that. We learn to be cautious; we have to. It’s just that *this* – not to be alone with the way I live – I’ll take *any* risk. Any risk at all, Larry.” She sipped vermouth; the ice clinked as her hand shook slightly. “But yes, let’s talk about us.”

“You asked about my death,” she said. “Have you had yours? Or what’s the oldest you’ve been?”

“I had it, and I don’t know; I was senile. You’re all right on the inside, but you can’t keep track for very long. But I was damned old; I know that. Because I was seventy for a while once, and still in pretty good shape.”

“And I died at fifty-three. God *damn* it, Larry!”

“Elaine!” What could he say? “Sometimes quality counts more than quantity.”

She made a disgusted grimace and a half-snort. “Some quality! Do you remember any of my life history? Well, I’m with my first husband, Joe Marshall, and he’s just making a start on drinking himself to death. It takes him fifteen years, as I recall. Oh, I can’t complain about my childhood, or college, or even the first five years of the marriage, what I’ve had of it. But I’ve also had four of the next eight, before the divorce. In three times, separated and out of sequence. No, Larry. When it comes to quality, it’s all in the times with you. With you and our other two.”

“Those were good times for me too,” he said. “But you know something? I tried to feel alike to everybody, the way we were supposed to. And I was with all three of you *before* the time you and I were alone earlier, but I felt more yours than Rhonda’s, anyway.” He paused and drank. “I wonder if somehow the body gives feedback, under our conscious memory.”

Her mind looked at him from somewhere far behind her eyes. “I don’t know. Sometimes there are hunches ... feelings ...” She shook her head and

smiled. "Larry, how is it with you now?"

"Mixed up, for one thing. I've probably told you, maybe in some time you've had and I haven't, about my first two marriages – what I knew of them. Well, you can see here on this diagram – I woke up today between wives."

"Today? You're just beginning a time today?"

"Yes. Judy's living with me; we get married in about six weeks."

"Judy? She's the lush, isn't she?"

"Not now, and not two years from now. Maybe I'd had only the bad end of it when I told you about her – yes, that's right. Someday I'll find out what happened, I expect. I just hope it isn't my fault. But it probably is ..."

"You can't afford to think like that. You didn't ask to be born zigzag, any more than I did. If we can take it, why can't they?"

"Can we take it, Elaine?"

"We're doing it, aren't we?" She looked at her watch. "Oh, I have to go! Joe – my husband – I'm an hour late! He'll be drunk again if I don't hurry."

"Yes. All right. When can we see each other?"

"I don't know yet, but we will. We have things to settle, you and I. You're in the phone book?" He nodded. "I'll call."

She stood, and he with her. She started to move away, but he took her arm. "Just a minute, Elaine. It's been a long time." They kissed long, before they moved apart and walked out.

"I go this way," she said. "It's only a few blocks. Don't come with me."

He stood looking after her, at the grace of her walk. After a few steps, she turned. "I'll call you tonight," she said. "We can meet tomorrow, if I'm still here. Still now, I mean."

"Well, you have to be, is all." They smiled and waved; then he turned and walked to the parking lot.

When he unlocked his apartment door, he almost knocked Judy off the ladder; she nearly dropped the picture she was hanging. "Oh, it's you!" she said. "Here, catch this." Off-balance, she leaned to hand him the picture. Her hair was hanging loose, brushed smooth, and her robe was open. She descended, and closed the robe before she turned to face him.

“Have you had lunch, Larry? I waited awhile, but then I got hungry and had mine. I’ll do yours if you want, though why I should when you’re so late ...”

He started to say he wasn’t hungry, then realised he was; he’d missed lunch. “Go ahead with what you’re doing, Judy; I’ll make a sandwich. My own fault; I got hung up.” From the refrigerator he took bread, meat to slice, pickles and a jar of mustard. “When we’re both done, let’s have a beer and chat some.”

She went back to her task, picture in one hand, hammer in the other and tacks silencing her mouth. Climbing a ladder, he thought, does a lot for a good round butt.

He knew what he wanted to talk about. A trip out of town, a fictitious assignment. A pre-honeymoon, by about ten years, with Elaine.

Keeping cover was one thing; he’d always had to do that. Lying was something else, he found, as he and Judy talked, sipping beer from bottles as though it were champagne from frosted goblets. The beer went well, after his sandwich.

“I’m not sure yet,” he said, “but I may need to cut out for the last of this week and the weekend.” He knew his slang had to be a little out of date, one way or the other, but always there was some leeway in speech patterns. “Let you know for sure, soon as I can.”

“Sure, Larry. I wish I could go with you, but you know I’m tied this weekend.”

“Sure.” He hadn’t known it, but it helped. “Next time, maybe.”

She was vital and desirable, Judy. Mobile mouth, bright hair, lithe body carrying no more than five excess pounds, all nicely hidden. No genius, but a good mind and compatible nature. And in bed, like a mink with its tail on fire. So why could he not cleave to her? Because she was of the other species, the one that lived along a single line and knew nothing else.

And was that the reason she would become a fat, surly drunk? He wished he knew, and that it didn’t have to happen.

Dinner wasn’t much to brag about. “Leftovers Supreme,” said Judy; her grin was wry. They were drinking coffee when the phone rang.

It was Elaine; he put her on ‘Hold’. “Business stuff,” he said to Judy. “I’ll take it in the other room so you can read your book.” Again it hurt to lie; Judy didn’t deserve lies.

On the bedroom extension: “Elaine?” The connection was noisy.

“Yes, Larry. I’ve been thinking.”

“So have I. We need more time.”

She laughed through the circuit noises. “Yes. We always do.”

“I mean, time to ourselves. To think, and talk together.” He paused, surprised to find himself embarrassed. “And to have each other, if you’d like that. I would.”

She was silent for a moment. “What’s the matter? Are you hard up? Has your lush gone dead?”

Anger! “You have no right to say that. You don’t know her. And why –?”

Her voice came softly, almost drowned in the crackling sounds. “All right, Larry, so I’m jealous. Sorry about that. Shouldn’t have said it. I’m a little drunk, boozing along with Kemo Sahib before he passed out a while ago. Leaving myself untouched, as usual. It does make me bitchy, when he spends all evening working up to nowhere. I wish I knew what he does with it.”

“I wish I knew a lot of things,” he said. “But never mind that. What do you say – Elaine, let’s just take off for a few days; the hell with everything. Okay?”

She waited longer than he liked. Then, “I can get away with it if you can.” Another pause. “And we can talk? Everything?”

“That’s what I was hoping.”

“All right, Larry. I’ll be in that same bar tomorrow, about noon. Or a little later; I’m not much for being on time. But there. With my suitcase.”

“Yes. Yes, Elaine. And goodnight.”

“Cautious Larry. It’s all right; I can wait for you to say the rest.” The phone went dead, dial tone blurring at his ear. He listened as though there were meaning in the noise, then hung up and went back to Judy.

She was reading, TV on but the sound off; he’d never understood that habit, either time he’d known her. It’s not so alone, was all she ever said.

“Like a beer or anything?” he said. “I think I’ll have one or two, look at the paper a little. And then crap out early.”

“With or without?”

“Huh?”

“Me.”

“Oh. With.”

“Good. Yes, I’d like a beer with you, Larry.”

That part was good. Instead of reading, they talked. After a while, he told her about his ‘assignment’ – not what or where, but when. “I’ll be leaving tomorrow morning, not too early, and be back Monday. Maybe Sunday night.”

“Yes. Well, with luck I’ll be too busy to miss you properly.”

He began to laugh, but stopped. For he didn’t expect to be missing Judy.

He finished his beer and went to the refrigerator. “Another, honey?”

“No, but you go ahead and have one while I shower.” He did, then showered also.

Later, plunging together and close to all of it, he found his mind was with Elaine. Fantasy in sex was nothing new, but this reality deserved better. He almost failed to climax then; when he did, it was minor, a mere release. But he had good luck with Judy-the-unpredictable; she made it big and asked no questions. He was glad of that much.

Elaine, suitcase and all, arrived as the bartender set drinks on the table. “Am I late, Larry?” He shook his head; they kissed briefly.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked. “Anyplace special?”

“Yes, I think so, if you like the idea. If you don’t think it’s too far.” She sipped the chilled vermouth. “There are some lakeside cabins a little north of Fond Du Lac. I was there once, with the great white bottle-hunter.”

“Oh? Memories?”

She made a face. “He hated it; I loved it.”

“Do you remember the name of the place? Maybe we should call first.”

She shook her head. “It’s past the season. School’s started; all the little sunburns are back in their classrooms.”

“Okay. I’ll take the chance if you will.”

They left their drinks unfinished.

The cabin was at the north end of the row, adjoining a grove of maples.

The inside was unfinished, the studding exposed, but the bed was comfortable and the plumbing worked. They sunned beside the lake, swam a little, and dined on Colonel Sanders' fried chicken. Correct dinner attire was a towel to sit on.

"Tomorrow we'll go out and eat fancy," he said, "but tonight we're at home."

"Yes, Larry. Just don't lick your fingers, or I'll swat you."

Indian summer cooled in twilight; they had waited for the heat to slacken. Now, he thought, comes our time together. It did, and not much later, again.

Then they sat side by side on the bed. He brought a wooden chair to hold cigarettes, ashtray and two bottles of cold beer. For a time they talked little, busy smoking, sipping beer, touching each other and smiling. It's just the way it was, he thought.

He touched the breast, small and delicately curved, that was nearest him.

"I was never much in that department, was I?" she said.

"Beauty comes in all sizes, Elaine."

"Yes, but you know, I felt so one-down, with Frank and Rhonda. She was so damned superbly – uh, endowed, it just killed me." She was smiling, but she stopped. "It did, you know. Literally."

He was running his hand through her hair, bringing it over to brush slowly across his cheek and then letting it fall, over and over. "I don't understand."

"Larry, I knew I had a lump. For more than a year, before you found out and made me see a doctor – what was his name? Greenlee."

"But why –?"

"I didn't have much, and I was afraid of losing what I had. So I tried to think it wasn't serious. And the worst – I don't know if I should even tell you ..."

"Come on, Elaine. You and I can't afford secrets."

She butted her cigarette with firm straight thrusts. "All right. Greenlee told me, after the examination, that if I'd gone to him earlier I could have gotten by with a simple mastectomy at *worst*, and not too much of a scar. But I couldn't take the idea, Larry. So I put it off, and ended up with that ghastly double radical, all the muscles, all that goddamned radiation and – *you* know – and even that was too late." Her eyes were crying but she

made no sound.

“Jesus, Elaine!” He had to hold her, because there was nothing else he could do. And besides, he had to hold her.

Finally he spoke. “You just made up my mind for me; you know that?”

“About what?”

“What you said. Next time we’re together we tell each other, even though we didn’t. If we can; I’m not sure. But if we can – look; the record says I’m with you again, right after this time and then a few months back in college. And first thing, I’m going to try to tell you. About how we’re the same, and then about the cancer too.”

“But I’ve lived that, Larry. And died of it.”

He was up and pacing. He laughed shortly, without humour, and went to the refrigerator. He set two fresh beers on the chair and sat again.

“I’ve never tried to change anything before, Elaine. I guess I thought it couldn’t be done. Or I was too busy keeping cover to think of making waves. I don’t mean I followed any script; I didn’t have one. But I went along with how things were, and it all seemed to fit. Not now, though.” He gripped her shoulder and turned her to face him. “I don’t want you to die as you did.”

He was really too tired for sex, he thought. But he found he wasn’t.

They planned to stay until Monday, but Sunday came grey, cold with wind and rain. So for breakfast, about ten o’clock, Larry scrambled all the remaining eggs, enough for four people. They had more toast than they could manage, and gave the rest to a hungry brood of half-grown mallards.

In the cabin, luggage packed. “I hate to leave, Larry.”

“I know. Me too.” He grinned. “We could stop at a motel for seconds if you like.”

She shook her head. “No. It wouldn’t be the way it is here.” So they didn’t. Except for a mid-afternoon snack break, he drove non-stop, and pulled up to let her off at her apartment house.

“It can’t be as good, Elaine, but we’ve got to see each other anyway. I’m only here through November ninth.”

“I don’t know how long I am, of course. But, yes – I have to see you.”

After the kiss she walked inside without looking back. He drove home, trying to put his mind in gear for Judy.

But Judy wasn't there, and neither were her possessions.

The letter was on the kitchen table.

I'm sorry Larry but I'm bugging out. I don't know what's wrong but I know something is, you aren't the same. It's not just you going off this weekend, I need people to be the same. I love you, you know that Larry, but you changed on me. The day you went to the bank you came up different. I need you to be the same to me, I need that. So I'm bugging out now. Don't worry, I'll call off all the wedding present stuff, you won't be bothered with it. I do love you when you were the same and I'll miss you a lot.

Judy

Well. She didn't say where she was going; it could be anywhere. The hell with unpacking; get a beer, sit down and think it out.

Two cigarettes later, the memory came – the time she told him about this.

“Remember when I ran out on you, Larry? I was really spooked; I don't know why, now. And I never knew how you found me. You didn't even know I *had* a cousin Rena Purvis.” He laughed and memorised the name, as he did all things concerning his future in someone else's past.

Rena Purvis' number was in the book. He dialled the first three digits, then thought a moment and hung up. He dialled Elaine instead.

A man's voice answered. “H'lo? Who'that?” Kemo Sahib had a good start.

How to play it? “Mr. Marshall? Mr. Garth here. I have the report Mrs. Marshall requested early last week.”

“S'okay. I'take it, fella.”

“I'm sorry – Mrs. Marshall's instructions ... would you put her on the line, please?”

“I said I'take it. Or leave it. Take it or leave it. Get it?”

“Perhaps Mrs. Marshall could call me back? Mr. Garth?”

The slurred voice harshened. “Saaay – you' the bastard she was off with, right?”

The hell with it. “The very bastard, Joe; the very same. Your own stupid

fault, Joe – waste not, want not. Now are you going to put Elaine on the phone, or am I going to come over there and show you just how much of a bastard I can be if I put my mind to it?”

It took Marshall three slams to get his phone safely on the hook; the crashes hurt Larry’s ears. That was dumb of me, he thought – or was it? Should he get over there in a hurry? No. Whatever else Elaine felt about her husband, she wasn’t afraid of him ... and the slob had sounded completely ineffectual. So, give it a few minutes ...

It took twenty; then his phone rang. “Hello. Elaine?”

“Yes, Larry. Joe ...”

“Any trouble? I can be there fast.”

“Noise trouble, is all. As usual. He’s settled down; he’s telling his troubles to his glass teddy-bear. What in the world did you say to him?”

“Sorry. I tried to play it nice, but he wouldn’t. So I laid the truth on him. Maybe I shouldn’t have?”

“No, that’s all right. I’d already told him, and that he and I are through. We were talking about changing things, Larry? I’m doing it. I don’t know if it will work; I lived through four years with him after this, so probably I get stupid and relent. But for now, I’ve had it.” She paused. “But you’re the one who called. What is it?”

He told her, reading Judy’s letter aloud. “... and then I didn’t call her. And maybe I shouldn’t go bring her back, even though I did. Because I think I made her a lush, not being the same, not being able to be the same. What do you think?”

“I think you’re not through talking yet, and I’m not done listening.”

It wasn’t easy, but he had to laugh. “Yes, Elaine. Will you come live here?”

“Where else?”

“Tomorrow?”

“I haven’t unpacked my suitcase.”

“Shall I come get you?”

“No. I’ll take a cab.”

“All right. You have the address?”

“Yes. And number 204, right?”

“I’ll leave the door unlocked. Hell, I’ll leave it open!”

Time, stolen from a programmed future, was sweet. Despite everything, he felt occasional guilt about Judy. But she didn't call, and neither did he. Joe Marshall called several times, more or less coherently. Larry always answered, gently, "Forget it, Joe." Elaine simply hung up at first recognition.

All too soon, like Judgement Day, came November ninth. They made a ceremony of it, with dinner in the apartment from none other than Colonel Sanders. Larry did not lick his fingers. Later, in bed, they did everything slowly, to make it last until ... whenever.

He woke. Elaine's face was close above his; her smile was wistful. "Hello, Larry. Do you *know*?"

To see, he had to push her soft hair aside; the ceiling was grey-green. "I *know*. But what's the date?"

"November tenth, 1970." Her voice was level, cautious.

He whooped. He kissed her with fierce joy, with elation; he kissed her out of breath. "Elaine! We changed it! I didn't skip!" Tears flowed down her cheeks, around her laughing mouth.

For the second part of their celebration he scrambled eggs in wine; it was messy, he thought, but festive.

"How much can we count on, Larry?"

"I don't know; we can't know." He held up the envelope with its carefully detailed records. "But this is useless now."

"Yes. Don't throw it away yet. I want to see where you've been, and talk about it together."

"All right. We can sort it out later."

It was a new life; he set out to live as though it would be endless. They couldn't marry, but Elaine filed for divorce. Joe Marshall filed a countersuit. It didn't matter; no law could force her to live away from Larry Garth.

New Year's Eve they drove to Chicago for dinner and night's lodging at the Blackhawk. The occasion was a thorough success.

The ceiling was silver, with fleeting iridescent sparkles. He came awake slowly, feeling minor aches one by one. Whatever this was, it was no part of college. For one thing, he hadn't often slept double there, and now a

warm body pressed against him.

He turned to see. Only a brief spill of hair, salt-and-pepper, closely cut, showed between covers and pillows. He drew the cover away.

She *would* age well, he thought. Then Elaine opened her grey eyes.

He had to say it fast. "I'm new here, Elaine. Straight from 1970. Nothing in between."

"Nothing? Oh, Larry, there's so *much*. And I've had only a little of it myself. Back and forth – and it's all so different."

"From ... before, you mean?" His fingers ruffled her hair, then smoothed it.

"Yes." Her eyes widened. "Why, you don't *know* yet, do you? Of course not; you can't."

"Know what, Elaine?"

"How much have you had after 1970? How many years?"

"How much have I used up? I don't know – twelve years? Fifteen, maybe? Why?"

"Because it's *not* used up; it's all new!" Her hand gripped his wrist tightly, to the edge of pain. "Larry, I came here from '75 – from a time I'd had *before*, married to Joe. But this time I was with you. This time we're together all the way."

He couldn't speak and his laugh was shaky, but his mind flashed. I'll have to die again, he thought – or will I? And then: We've gained ten years together; could we make it twenty? I've never had the actual wedding to Darlene! What if ...

But he said only, "There's a lot to tell, isn't there?" And so much he wanted to ask, when there was time for that.

"Yes." She turned her face upward, wriggled her head and neck hard into the pillow, then smiled. "I saw Judy once, in '74. She married a lawyer and had twins. And she wasn't a lush."

"I'm glad."

"I know. You were there when I told you then too."

He laughed. "What lives we lead, Elaine. What lives ..."

Then he remembered. "But *you*. Are you –?" The bulky comforter hid her contours. Two breasts, one, or none? He told himself it didn't matter. She was alive, wasn't she?

“Oh, I’m fine, really,” she said. “It worked. Of course the scar was horrid at first. To me – *you* never seemed to mind. But it’s faded now; you can hardly see it.”

“How long –?”

“It’s been five years.” She must have seen the question in his face; she shook her head. “No; I don’t know how long I live – or you. This is the oldest I’ve been. And I haven’t known a *you* who’s been older.”

“Elaine? How old are we now?”

She smiled, and then her mouth went soft and full. She pushed the cover back and turned to face him squarely. He looked and saw that she had lost nothing of herself, save for the tribute to the years. Part of him that had been prepared to comfort and reassure her took a deep breath and relaxed.

“How old?” she said. “Old enough to know better, I suppose, but I hope we don’t.”

“Does it matter? We’ll have time enough to be young.”

One of them reached out, and the other responded.

The End