

# *Child of All Ages*

**P. J. PLAUGER**

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P. J. Plauger is a relative newcomer within the genre. He was first generally heard of when he received the John W. Campbell, Jr. Award for Best New Author so recently as Aussiecon, 1975's World Science Fiction Convention.

He has a Ph.D. in nuclear physics, worked for over five years as a "computer scientist" (the quotation mark are his own) at Bell Laboratories, and is now a consultant in data processing for a New York-based firm which specializes in advanced seminars. As Vice President of Technical Services for that company (Yourdon inc.), he is in charge of the technical staff, the in-house computer, and the technical quality of the company's courses. The job has sent him to Europe and Australia at regular intervals, which, he says, he thoroughly enjoys.

"Sadly," he further says, "this leaves me very little time for writing sf, which I also enjoy, or for making color prints in my darkroom, or for building electronic toys, or for doing a million other things in which I delight. I, consider myself a natural philosopher, and I want to do everything."

He now lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan within rock-throwing distance of the Hayden Planetarium, and is sometimes at home. His award-winning story appears in this collection only because one phone call caught him with a day to spare before he left for Tahiti (for a rest) and then Australia (the workaday life again).

Science fiction by hoary tradition acknowledges no limits to its province as to space or time, but Plauger's Corollary must surely be: Peripatetic people write about peripatetic people.

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The child sat in the waiting room with her hands folded neatly on her lap. She wore a gay print dress made of one of those materials that would have quickly revealed its cheapness had it not been carefully pressed. Her matching shoes had received the same meticulous care. She sat prim and erect, no fidgeting, no scuffing of shoes against chair legs, exhibiting a patience that legions of nuns have striven, in vain, to instill in other children. This one looked as if she had done a lot of waiting.

May Foster drew back from the two-way mirror through which she had been studying her newest problem. She always felt a little guilty about spying on children like this before an interview, but she readily conceded to herself that it helped her handle cases better. By sizing up an interviewee in advance, she saved precious minutes of sparring and could usually gain the upper hand right at the start. Dealing with "problem" children was a no-holds-barred proposition, if you wanted to survive in the job without ulcers.

That patience could be part of her act, May thought for a moment. But no, that didn't make sense. Superb actors that they were, these kids always reserved their performances for an audience, - there was no reason for the girl to suspect the special mirror on this, her first visit to Mrs. Foster's office. One of the best advantages to be gained from the mirror, in fact, was the knowledge of how the child behaved when a social worker wasn't in the room. Jekyll and Hyde looked like twins compared to the personality changes May had witnessed in fifteen years of counseling.

May stepped out of the darkened closet, turned on the room lights and returned to her desk. She scanned the folder one last time, closed it in front of her and depressed the intercom button.

"Louise, you can bring the child in now."

There was a slight delay, then the office door opened and the child stepped in. For all her preparation, May was taken aback. The girl was thin, much thinner than she looked sitting down, but not to the point of being unhealthy. Rather, it was the kind of thinness one finds in people who are still active in their nineties. Not wiry, but enduring. And those eyes.

May was one of the first Peace Corps volunteers to go into central Africa. For two years she fought famine and malnutrition with every weapon, save money, that modern technology could bring to bear. In the end it was a losing battle, because politics and tribal hatred dictated that thousands upon thousands must die the slow death of starvation. That was where she had seen eyes like that before.

Children could endure pain and hunger, forced marches, even the loss of their parents, and still recover eventually with the elasticity of youth. But when their flesh melted down to the bone, their bellies distended, then a look came into their eyes that remained ever with them for their few remaining days. It was the lesson learned much too young that the adult world was not worthy of their trust, the realization that death was a real and imminent force in their world. For ten years after, May's nightmares were haunted by children staring at her with those eyes.

Now this one stood before her and stared into her soul with eyes that had looked too intimately upon death.

As quickly as she had been captured, May felt herself freed. The girl glanced about the room, as if checking for fire exits, took in the contents of May's desk with one quick sweep, then marched up to the visitor's chair, and planted herself in it with a thump.

"My name is Melissa," she said, adding a nervous grin. "You must be Mrs. Foster." She was all little girl now, squirming the least little bit and kicking one shoe against another. The eyes shone with carefree youth.

May shook herself, slowly recovered. She thought she had seen everything before, until now. The guileless bit was perfect—Melissa looked more like a model eight-year-old than a chronic troublemaker going on, what was it? Fourteen. *Fourteen?*

"You've been suspended from school for the third time this year, Melissa," she said with professional sternness. May turned on her best Authoritarian Glare, force three.

"Yep," the child said with no trace of contrition. The Glare faded, switched to Sympathetic Understanding.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" May asked softly.

Melissa shrugged.

"What's to say? Old Man M—uh, Mr. Morrissey and I got into an argument again in history class." She giggled. "He had to pull rank on me to win." Straight face.

"Mr. Morrissey has been teaching history for many years," May placated. "Perhaps he felt that he knows more about the subject than you do."

"Morrissey has his head wedged!" May's eyebrows skyrocketed, but the girl ignored the reproach, in her irritation. "Do you know what he was trying to palm off on the class? He was trying to say that the Industrial Revolution in England was a step backward.

"Kids working six, seven days a week in the factories, going fourteen hours at a stretch, all to earn a few pennies a week. That's all he could see! He never thought to ask *why* they did it if conditions were so

bad.”

“Well, why did they?” May asked reflexively. She was caught up in the child’s enthusiasm.

The girl looked at her pityingly.

“Because it was the best game in town, that’s why. If you didn’t like the factory, you could try your hand at begging, stealing, or working on a farm. If you got caught begging or stealing in those days, they boiled you in oil. No joke. And farm work.” She made a face.

“That was seven days a week of busting your tail from *before* sunup to *after* sundown. And what did you have to show for it? In a good year, you got all you could eat; in a bad year you starved. But you worked just as hard on an empty gut as on a full one. Harder.

“At least with a factory job you had money to buy what food there was when the crops failed. That’s progress, no matter how you look at it”

May thought for a moment.

“But what about all the children maimed by machinery?” she asked. “What about all the kids whose health was destroyed from breathing dust or stoking fires or not getting enough sun?”

“Ever seen a plowboy after a team of horses walked over him? Ever had sunstroke?” She snorted. “Sure those factories were bad, but everything else was *worse*. Try to tell that to Old Man Morrissey, though.”

“You talk as if you were there,” May said with a hint of amusement.

Flatly. “I read a lot.”

May recalled herself to the business at hand.

“Even if you were right, you still could have been more tactful, you know.” The girl simply glowered and hunkered down in her chair. “You’ve disrupted his class twice, now, and Miss Randolph’s class too.”

May paused, turned up Sympathetic Understanding another notch.

“I suspect your problem isn’t just with school How are things going at home?”

Melissa shrugged again. It was a very adult gesture.

“Home.” Her tone eliminated every good connotation the word possessed. “My fa—my foster father died last year. Heart attack. Bam! Mrs. Stuart still hasn’t gotten over it” A pause.

“Have you?”

The girl darted a quick glance.

“Everybody dies, sooner or later.” Another pause. I wish Mr. Stuart had hung around a while longer, though. He was OK.“

“And your mother?” May prodded delicately.

“My *foster* mother can’t wait for me. to grow up and let her off the hook. Jeez, she’d marry me off next month if the law allowed.” She stirred uncomfortably. “She keeps dragging boys home to take me out”

“Do you like going out with boys?”

A calculating glance.

“Some. I mean boys are OK, but I’m not ready to settle down quite yet” A nervous laugh. “I mean I don’t *hate* boys or anything. I mean I’ve still got lots of time for that sort of stuff when I grow up.”

“You’re nearly fourteen.”

I’m small for my age.“

Another tack.

“Does Mrs. Stuart feed you well?”

“Sure.”

“Do you make sure you eat a balanced diet?”

“Of course. Look, I’m just naturally thin, is all. Mrs. Stuart may be a pain in the neck, but she’s not trying to kill me off or anything. It’s just that—” a sly smile crossed her face. “Oh, I get it”

Melissa shifted to a pedantic false baritone.

“A frequent syndrome in modern urban society is the apparently nutrition-deficient early pubescent female. Although in an economic environment that speaks against a lack of financial resources or dietary education, said subject nevertheless exhibits a seeming inability to acquire adequate sustenance for growth.

“Subject is often found in an environment lacking in one or more vital male supportive roles and, on close examination, reveals a morbid preoccupation with functional changes incident to the onset of womanhood. Dietary insufficiency is clearly a tacit vehicle for avoiding responsibilities associated with such changes.” .

She took an exaggerated deep breath.

“Whew! That Anderson is a long-winded son of a gun. So they stuck you with his book in Behav. Psych, too, huh? She smiled sweetly.

“Why, yes. That is, we read it. How did you know?”

“Saw it on your bookshelf. Do you have any candy?”

“Uh,no.”

“Too bad. The last social worker I dealt with always kept some on hand. You ought to, too. Good for public relations.” Melissa looked aimlessly around the room.

May shook herself again. She hadn’t felt so out of control in years. Not since they tried her out on the black ghetto kids. She dug in her heels.

“That was a very pretty performance, Melissa. I see you do read a lot But did it ever occur to you that what Anderson said might still apply to you? Even if you do make a joke out of it”

“You mean, do I watch what I eat, because I’m afraid to grow up?” A nod. “You’d better believe it. But not because of that guff Anderson propagates.”

The girl glanced at the photographs on the desk, looked keenly into May's eyes.

"Mrs. Foster, how open-minded are you? No, strike that I've yet to meet a bigot who didn't think of himself as Blind Justice, Incarnate. Let's try a more pragmatic test. Do you read science fiction?"

"Uh, some."

"Fantasy?"

"A little."

"Well, what do you think of it? I mean, do you enjoy it?" Her eyes bored.

"Well, uh, I guess I like some of it. Quite a bit of it leaves me cold." She hesitated. "My husband reads it mostly. And my father-in-law. He's a biochemist," she added lamely, as though that excused something.

Melissa shrugged her adult shrug, made up her mind.

"What would you say if I told you my father was a wizard?"

"Frankly, I'd say you've built up an elaborate delusional system about your unknown parents. Orphans often do, you know."

"Yeah, Anderson again. But thanks for being honest; it was the right answer for you. I suspect, however," she paused, fixed the woman with an unwavering sidelong glance, "you're willing to believe that I might be more than your average maladjusted foster child."

Under that stare, May could do nothing but nod. Once. Slowly.

"What would you say if I told you that I am over twenty-four hundred years old?"

May felt surprise, fear, elation, an emotion that had no name.

"I'd say that you ought to meet my husband."

The child sat at the dinner table with her hands folded neatly on her lap. The three adults toyed with their aperitifs and made small talk. Melissa responded to each effort to bring her into the conversation with a few polite words, just the right number of just the right words for a well-behaved child to speak when she is a first-time dinner guest among people who hardly know her. But she never volunteered any small talk of her own.

George Foster, Jr., sensed that the seemingly innocent child sitting across from him was waiting them out, but he couldn't be sure. One thing he was sure of was that if this child were indeed older than Christendom he didn't have much chance against her in intellectual games. That much decided, he was perfectly willing to play out the evening in a straightforward manner. But in his own good *time*.

"Would you start the salad around, Dad?" he prompted. "I hope you like endive, Melissa. Or is that also a taste acquired in adulthood, like alcohol?" The girl had refused a dry sherry, politely but firmly.

"I'm sure I'll enjoy the salad, thank you. The dressing smells delicious. It's a personal recipe, isn't it?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact it is," George said in mild surprise. He suddenly realized that he habitually classified all thin people as picky, indifferent eaters. A gastronome didn't have to be overweight.

“Being a history professor gives me more freedom to schedule my time than May has,” he found himself explaining. ‘It is an easy step from cooking because you must, to cooking because you enjoy it. That mustard dressing is one of my earliest inventions. Would you like the recipe?’”

“Yes, thank you. I don’t cook often, but when I do I like to produce something better than average.” She delivered the pretty compliment with a seeming lack of guile. She also avoided, George noted, responding to the veiled probe about her age. He was becoming more and more impressed. They broke bread and munched greens. *How do I handle this? By the way, May tells me you’re twenty-four hundred years old.* He met his father’s eye, caught the faintest of shrugs. *Thanks for the help.*

“By the way, May tells me you were in England for a while.” Now why in hell did he say that?

“I didn’t actually say so, but yes, I was. Actually, we discussed the Industrial Revolution, briefly.” *Were you there?*

I’m a medievalist, actually, but I’m also a bit of an Anglophile.“ George caught himself before he could lapse into the clipped, pseudo-British accent that phrase always triggered in him. He felt particularly vulnerable to making an ass of himself under that innocent gaze.

“Do you know much about English royalty?” He was about as subtle as a tonsillectomy.

“We studied it in school some.”

“I always wanted to be another Admiral Nelson. Damned shame the way he died. What was it the king said after his funeral, it was Edward, I think—”

Melissa put her fork down.

“It was King George, and you know it Look, before I came here I lived in Berkeley for a while.” She caught May’s look. “I know what my records say. After all, I wrote them... as I was saying, I was in Berkeley a few years back. It was right in the middle of the worst of the student unrest and we lived not three blocks from campus. Every day I walked those streets and every night we’d watch the riots and the thrashing on TV. Yet not once did I ever see one of those events with my own eyes.”

She looked at them each in turn.

“Something could be happening a block away, something that attracted network television coverage and carloads of police, and I wouldn’t know about it until I got home and turned on Cronkite. I think I may have smelled tear gas, once.”

She picked up her fork.

“You can quiz me all you want to, Dr. Foster, about admirals and kings and dates. I guess that’s what history is all about But don’t expect me to tell you about anything I didn’t learn in school. Or see on television.”

She stabbed viciously at a last scrap of endive. They watched her as she ate.

“Kids don’t get invited to the events that make history. Until very recently all they ever did was work, Worked until they grew old or worked until they starved or worked until they were killed by a passing war. That’s as close as most kids get to history, outside the classroom. Dates don’t mean much when every day looks like every other.”

George was at a loss for something to say after that, so he got up and went to the sideboard where the

main dishes were being kept warm. He made an elaborate exercise out of removing lids and collecting hot pads.

“Are you really twenty-four hundred years old?” asked George Foster, Sr. There, it was out in the open.

“Near as I can tell,” spooning chicken and dumplings onto her plate. “like I said, dates don’t mean much to a kid. It was two or three hundred years before I gave much thought to when everything started. By then, it was a little hard to reconstruct. I make it twenty-four hundred and thirty-three years, now. Give or take a decade.” *Give or take a decade!*

“And your father was a magician?” May pursued. “Not a magician, a wizard.” A little exasperated. “He didn’t practice magic or cast spells; he was a wise man, a scholar. You could call him a scientist, except there wasn’t too much science back then. Not that he didn’t know a lot about some things!—obviously he did—but he didn’t work with an *organized* body of knowledge the way people do now.”

Somehow she had contrived to fill her plate and make a noticeable dent in her chicken without interrupting her narrative. George marveled at the girl’s varied social talents.

“Anyway, he was working on a method of restoring youth. Everybody was, in those days. Very stylish. There was actually quite a bit of progress being made. I remember one old geezer actually renewed his sex Me for about thirty years.”

“You mean, you know how to reverse aging?” George, Sr. asked intently. The candlelight couldn’t erase all the lines in his face.

“Sorry, no, I didn’t say that” She watched the elder Foster’s expression closely, her tone earnestly entreating him to believe her. “I just said I know of one man who did that once. For a while. But he didn’t tell anyone else how he did it, as far as I know. The knowledge died with him,”

Melissa turned to the others, looking for supporting belief.

“Look, that s the way people were, up until the last few centuries. Secrecy was what kept science from blossoming for so long. I saw digitalis appear and disappear at least three times before it became common knowledge... I really can’t help you.” Gently.

I believe you, child.“ George, Sr. reached for the winebottle.

“My father spent most of his time trying to second-guess the competition. I suppose they were doing the same thing. His only real success story was me. He found a way to stop the aging process just before puberty, and if s worked for me all this time.”

“He told you how he did it?” George, Sr. asked.

“I know what to do. I don’t understand the mechanism, yet I know it’s of no use to adults.”

“You’ve tried it?”

“Extensively.” An iron door of finality clanged in that word.

“Could you describe the method?”

“I could. I won’t Perhaps I am just a product of my age, but secrecy seems to be the only safe haven in this matter. I’ve had a few painful experiences.” They waited, but she did not elaborate.

George, Jr. got up to clear the table. He reached to pick up a plate and stopped.

“Why have you told us all this, Melissa?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She folded her hands on her lap in that posture of infinite patience. “No, I suppose it isn’t unless you’ve lived as I have.

“After my father died, I hung around Athens for a while—did I mention, that’s where we lived? But too many people knew me and began to wonder out loud about why I wasn’t growing up. Some of the other wizards began to eye me speculatively, before I wised up and got out of town. I didn’t want to die a prisoner before anyone figured out I had nothing useful to divulge.

“I soon found that I couldn’t escape from my basic problem. There’s always someone happy to take in a child, particularly a healthy one that’s willing to do more than her share of the work. But after a few years, it would become obvious that I was not growing up like other children. Suspicion would lead to fear, and fear always leads to trouble. I’ve learned to Judge to a nicety when it’s time to move on.”

George, Jr. placed a covered server on the table and unveiled a chocolate layer cake. Like all children throughout time, Melissa grinned in delight.

If s a decided nuisance looking like -a child—*being* a child—particularly now. You can’t just go get a job and rent your own apartment. You can’t apply for a driver’s license. You have to *belong* to someone and be In school, or some government busybody will be causing trouble. And with modern recordkeeping, you have to build a believable existence on paper too. That’s getting harder all the time.”

“It would seem to me,” interposed George, Jr., “that your best bet would be to move to one of the less developed countries. In Africa, or South America. There’d be a lot less hassle.”

Melissa made a face.

“No, thank you. I learned a long time ago to stick with the people who have the highest standard of living around. It’s worth the trouble... *Nur wer in Wohlstand lebt, lebt angenehm*. You know Brecht? Good.”

The girl gave up all pretense of conversation long enough to demolish a wedge of cake.

“That was an excellent dinner. Thank you.” She dabbed her lips daintily with her napkin. “I haven’t answered your question completely.

I’m telling you all about myself because it’s time to move on again. I’ve overstayed my welcome with the Stuart’s. My records are useless to me now—in fact they’re an embarrassment. To keep on the way I’ve been, I have to manufacture a whole new set and insinuate them into someone’s files, somewhere. I thought it might be easier this time to take the honest approach.”

She looked at them expectantly. “You mean, you want us to help you get into a new foster home?” George, Jr. strained to keep the incredulity out of his voice. Melissa looked down at her empty dessert plate. “George, you are an insensitive lout,” May said with surprising fervor. “Don’t you understand? She’s asking us to take her in.” George was thunderstruck.

“Us? Well, ah. But we don’t have any children for her to play with. I mean—” He shut his mouth before he started to gibber. Melissa would not look up. George looked at his wife, his father. It was clear that they had completely outpaced him and had already made up their minds.

“I suppose it’s possible,” he muttered lamely. The girl looked up at last, tears lurking in the corners of her eyes.



“Oh, please. I’m good at housework and I don’t make any noise. And I’ve been thinking—maybe I don’t know much history, but I do know a lot about how people lived in a lot of different times and places. And I can read all sorts of languages. Maybe I could help you with your medieval studies.” The words tumbled over each other.

“And I remember some of the things my father tried,” she said to George, Sr. “Maybe your training in biochemistry will let you see where he went wrong. I know he had some success.” The girl was very close to begging, George knew. He couldn’t bear that.

“Dad?” he asked, mustering what aplomb he could.

“I think it would work out,” George, Sr. said slowly. “Yes. I think it would work out quite well”

“May?”

“You know my answer, George.”

“Well, then.” Still half bewildered. I guess it’s settled. When can you move in, Melissa?”

The answer, if there was one, was lost, amidst scraping of chairs and happy bawling noises from May and the girl. *May always wanted a child*, George rationalized, *perhaps this will be good for her*. He exchanged a tentative smile with his father.

May was still hugging Melissa enthusiastically. Over his wife’s shoulder, George could see the child’s tear-streaked face. For just one brief moment, he thought he detected an abstracted expression there, as though the child was already calculating how long this particular episode would last. But then the look was drowned in another flood of happy tears and George found himself smiling at his new daughter.

The child sat under the tree with her hands folded neatly on her lap. She looked up as George, Sr. approached. His gait had grown noticeably less confident in the last year; the stiffness and teetery uncertainty of age could no longer be ignored. George, Sr. was a proud man, but he was no fool. He lowered himself carefully onto a tree stump.

“Hello, Grandpa,” Melissa said with just a hint of warmth. She sensed his mood, George, Sr. realized, and was being carefully disarming.

“Mortimer died,” was all he said.

“I was afraid he might. He’d lived a long time, for a white rat. Did you learn anything from the last blood sample?”

“No.” Warily. “Usual decay products. He died of old age. I could put it fancier, but that’s what it amounts to. And I don’t know why he suddenly started losing ground, after all these months. So I don’t know where to go from here.”

They sat in silence, Melissa patient as ever.

“You could give me some of your potion.”

“No.”

I know you have some to spare—you’re cautious. That’s why you spend so much time back in the woods, isn’t it? You’re making the stuff your father told you about“

“I told you it wouldn’t help you any and you promised not to ask.” There was no accusation in her voice, it was a simple statement.

“Wouldn’t you like to grow up, sometime?” he asked at length.

“Would you choose to be Emperor of the World if you knew you would be assassinated in two weeks? No, thank you. I’ll stick with what I’ve got”

“If we studied the make-up of your potion, we might figure out a way to let you grow up and still remain immortal.”

I’m not all that immortal. Which is why I don’t want too many people to know about me or my methods. Some jealous fool might decide to put a bullet through my head out of spite... I can endure diseases. I even regrew a finger once—took forty years. But I couldn’t survive massive trauma.“ She drew her knees up and hugged them protectively.

“You have to realize that most of my defenses are prophylactic. I’ve learned to anticipate damage and avoid it as much as possible. But my body’s defenses are just extensions of a child’s basic resource, growth. It’s a tricky business to grow out of an injury without growing up in the process. Once certain glands take over, there’s no stopping them.

“Take teeth, for instance. They were designed for a finite lifetime, maybe half a century of gnawing on bones. When mine wear down, all I can do is pull them and wait what seems like forever for replacements to grow in. Painful, too. So I brush after meals and avoid abrasives. I stay well clear of dentists and their drills. That way I only have to suffer every couple of hundred years.”

George, Sr. felt dizzy at the thought of planning centuries the way one might lay out semesters. Such incongruous words from the mouth of a little girl sitting under a tree hugging her knees. He began to understand why she almost never spoke of her age or her past unless directly asked.

“I know a lot of biochemistry, too,” she went on. “You must have recognized that by now.” He nodded, reluctantly. “Well, I’ve studied what you call my ‘potion’ and I don’t think we know enough biology or chemistry yet to understand it. Certainly not enough to make changes.

“I know how to hold onto childhood. That’s not the same problem as restoring youth.”

“But don’t you want badly to be able to grow up? You said yourself what a nuisance it is being a child in the Twentieth Century.”

“Sure, it’s a nuisance. But it’s what I’ve got and I don’t want to risk it.” She leaned forward, chin resting on kneecaps.

“Look, I’ve recruited other kids in the past Ones I liked, ones I thought I could spend a long time with. But sooner or later, every one of them snatched at the bait you’re dangling. They all decided to grow up ‘just a little bit.’ Well, they did. And now they’re dead. I’ll stick with my children’s games, if it please you.”

“You don’t mind wasting all that time in school? Learning the same things over and over again? Surrounded by nothing but children? *Real* children?” He put a twist of malice in the emphasis.

“What waste? Time? Got lots of that. How much of your life have you spent actually doing research, compared to the time spent writing reports and driving to work? How much time does Mrs. Foster get to spend talking to troubled kids? She’s lucky if she averages five minutes a day. We all spend most of our time doing routine chores. It would be unusual if any of us did not.

“And I don’t mind being around kids. I like them.”

“I never have understood that,” George, Sr. said half abstractedly. “How well you can mix with children so much younger than you. How you can act like them.”

“You’ve got it backward,” she said softly. “They act like me. All children are immortal, until they grow up.”

She let that sink in for a minute.

“Now I ask you, Grandpa, you tell me why I should want to grow up.”

“There are other pleasures,” he said eventually, “far deeper than the joys of childhood.”

“You mean sex? Yes, I’m sure that’s what you’re referring to. Well, what makes you think a girl my age is a virgin?”

He raised his arms in embarrassed protest, as if to ward such matters from his ears.

“No, wait a minute. You brought this up,” she persisted. “Look at me. Am I unattractive? Good teeth, no pock marks. No visible deformities. Why, a girl like me would make first-rate wife material in some circles. Particularly where the average life expectancy is, say, under thirty-five years—as it has been throughout much of history. Teen-age celibacy and late marriage are conceits that society has only recently come to afford.”

She looked at him haughtily.

“I have had my share of lovers, and you can bet I’ve enjoyed them as much as they’ve enjoyed me. You don’t need glands for that sort of thing so much as sensitive nerve endings—and a little understanding. Of course, my boyfriends were all a little disappointed when I failed to ripen up, but it was fun while it lasted.

“Sure, it would be nice to live in a woman’s body, to feel all those hormones making you do wild things. But to me, sex isn’t a drive, it’s just another way of relating to *people*. I already recognize my need to be around people, uncomplicated by any itches that need scratching. My life would be a lot simpler if I could do without others, heaven knows. I certainly don’t have to be forced by glandular pressure to go in search of company. What else is there to life?”

*What else, indeed?* George, Sr. thought bitterly. One last try.

“Do you know about May?” he asked.

“That she can’t have children? Sure, that was pretty obvious from the start. Do you think I can help her? You do, yes. Well, I can’t I know even less about that than I do about what killed Mortimer.”

Pause.

I’m sorry, Grandpa,“

Silence.

I really am.“

Silence.

Distantly, a car could be heard approaching the house. George, Jr. was coming home. The old man got

up from the stump, slowly and stiffly.

“Dinner will be ready soon.” He turned toward the house. “Don’t be late. You know your mother doesn’t like you to play in the woods.”

The child sat in the pew with her hands folded neatly on her lap. She could hear the cold rain lash against the stained-glass windows, their scenes of martyrdom muted by the night lurking outside. Melissa had always liked churches. In a world filled with change and death, church was a familiar haven, a resting place for embattled innocents to prepare for fresh encounters with a hostile world.

Her time with the Fosters was over. Even with the inevitable discord at the end, she was already able to look back over her stay with fond remembrance. What saddened her most was that her prediction that first evening she came to dinner had been so accurate. She kept hoping that just once her cynical assessment of human nature would prove wrong and she would be granted an extra year, even an extra month, of happiness before she was forced to move on.

Things began to go really sour after George, Sr. had his first mild stroke. It was George, Jr. who became the most accusatory then. (The old man had given up on Melissa; perhaps that was what angered George, Jr. the most.) There was nothing she could say or do to lessen the tension. Just being there, healthy and still a prepubescent child unchanged in five years of photographs and memories—her very presence made a mockery of the old man’s steady retreat in the face of mortality.

Had George, Jr. understood himself better, perhaps he would not have been so hard on the girl. (But then, she had figured that in her calculations.) He thought it was May who wanted children so badly, when in actuality it was his own subconscious striving for that lesser form of immortality that made their childless home ring with such hollowness. All May begrudged the child was a second chance at the beauty she fancied lost with the passing of youth. Naturally May fulfilled her own prophecy, as so many women do, by discarding a little more glow with each passing year.

George, Jr. took to following Melissa on her trips into the woods. Anger and desperation gave him a stealth she never would have otherwise ascribed to him. He found all her hidden caches and stole minute samples from each. It did him no good, of course, nor his father, for the potion was extremely photo-reactant (her father’s great discovery and Melissa’s most closely guarded secret). The delicate long chain molecules were smashed to a meaningless soup of common organic substances long before any of the samples reached the analytical laboratory.

But that thievery was almost her undoing. She did not suspect anything until the abdominal cramps started. Only twice before in her long history—both times of severe famine—had that happened. In a pure panic, Melissa plunged deep into the forest, to collect her herbs and mix her brews and sleep beside them in a darkened burrow for the two days it took them to ripen. The cramps abated, along with her panic, and she returned home to find that George, Sr. had suffered a second stroke.

May was furious—at what, she could not say precisely—there was no talking to her. George, Jr. had long been a lost cause. Melissa went to her room, thought things over a while, and prepared to leave. As she crept out the back door, she heard George, Jr. talking quietly on the telephone.

She hot-wired a neighbor’s car and set off for town—Cars were pulling into the Foster’s drive as she went past, hard-eyed men climbing out Melissa had cowered in alleyways more than once to avoid the gaze of Roman centurions. These may have been CIA, FBI, some other alphabet name to disguise their true purpose in life, but she knew them for what they were. She had not left a minute too soon.

No one thinks to look for stolen cars when a child disappears; Melissa had some time to maneuver. She abandoned the sedan in town less than a block away from the bus depot. At the depot, she openly bought a one-way ticket to Berkeley. She was one of the first aboard and made a point of asking the driver, in nervous little-girl fashion, whether this was really the bus to Berkeley. She slipped out while he was juggling paperwork with title dispatcher.

With one false trail laid, she was careful not to go running off too quickly in another direction. Best to lay low until morning, at least, then rely more on walking than riding to get somewhere else. Few people thought to walk a thousand miles these days; Melissa had done it more times than she could remember.

“We have to close up, son,” a soft voice said behind her. She suddenly remembered her disguise and realized the remark was addressed to her. She turned to see the priest drifting toward her, his robes rustling almost imperceptibly. “It’s nearly midnight,” the man said with a smile, “you should be getting home.”

“Oh, hello, Father. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Is everything all right? You’re out very late.”

“My sister works as a waitress, down the block. Dad likes me to walk her home. I should go meet her now. Just came in to get out of the rain for a bit. Thanks.”

Melissa smiled her sincerest smile. She disliked lying, but it was important not to appear out of place. No telling how big a manhunt might be mounted to find her. She had no way of knowing how much the Fosters would be believed. The priest returned her smile.

“Very good. But you be careful too, son. The streets aren’t safe for anyone, these days.”

*They never have been, Father.*

Melissa had passed as a boy often enough in the past to know that safety, from anything, depended little on sex. At least not for children.

That business with the centurions worried her more than she cared to admit. The very fact that they turned out in such numbers indicated that George, Jr. had at least partially convinced someone important.

Luckily, there was no hard evidence that she was really what she said she was. The samples George, Jr. stole were meaningless and the pictures and records May could produce on her only covered about an eight-year period. That was a long time for a little girl to remain looking like a little girl, but not frighteningly out of the ordinary.

If she was lucky, the rationalizations had already begun, Melissa was just a freak of some kind, a late maturer and a con artist. The Fosters were upset—that much was obvious—because of George, Sr. They should not be believed too literally.

Melissa could hope. Most of all she hoped that they didn’t have a good set of her fingerprints. (She had polished everything in her room before leaving.) Bureaucracies were the only creatures she could not outlive—It would be very bad if the U.S. Government carried a grudge against her.

Oh well, that was the last time she would try the honest approach for quite some time.

The rain had backed off to a steady drizzle. That was an improvement, she decided, but it was still imperative that she find some shelter for the night. The rain matted her freshly cropped hair and soaked through her thin baseball jacket. She was cold and tired.

Melissa dredged up the memories, nurtured over the centuries, of her first, real childhood. She remembered her mother, plump and golden-haired, and how safe and warm it was curled up in her lap. That one was gone now, along with millions of other mothers out of time. There was no going back.

Up ahead, on the other side of the street, a movie marquee splashed light through the drizzle. Black letters spelled out a greeting:

WALT DISNEY

TRIPLE FEATURE

CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCES

FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

*That's me*, Melissa decided, and skipped nimbly over the rain-choked gutter. She crossed the street on a long diagonal, ever on the lookout for cars, and tendered up her money at the ticket window. Leaving rain and cold behind for a time, she plunged gratefully into the warm darkness.