

A Scraping at the Bones

Algis Budrys

"It's in there, Officer," the foreman was saying with a relinquishing gesture toward the open inspection plate, the wave of his arm ending with his hand in front of his mouth.

"All right," Brosmer said. "I'll look."

Down here, many levels below the dwelling units that clambered skyward in the complex shape of Panorama Tower, it was all pumps and tubing and worklights. The particular duct from which the smell came was four feet in diameter, and was painted an ivory white. Coded red decal symbols identified it as the north tower branch feed to the central waste macerator.

The hatch was a three-by-two plate, swung back and up; an extension light dangled over it, swaying from the cord as the constant air currents within the duct came gusting out. "Are we going to get flooded?" Brosmer asked, and the foreman shook his head violently.

"Hell, no!" he said. "We got this branch shut off back there, where the tube comes straight down from upstairs and makes that bend, see? There's this surge tank there, like you got to have, and you can use that big valve to block everything between it and here."

"Got you," Brosmer said. "Would a body pass through that valve?"

"No way. Jam it, maybe. But most likely it would just stay in the tank until the next time we cleaned it out."

"So it probably went into the duct right through this hatch."

"That, would figure, yeah. Somebody came down here and put it in."

"Or it's suicide."

"You're kidding! Who would want to drown himself in-"

"I was kidding," Brosmer said. He had taken a respirator from his kit bag and was putting it on. His voice sounded remote in his ears, as if he were on dope. He sighed and looked into the duct.

The air flow was backing up from the hydrolizing tanks beyond the macerator, whistling against the torn edges of the thin metal blade that terminated the duct. The blade was designed to rotate at high rpm; it had shattered against something in the body, which had been passing feet-first through it without incident up to that point. Brosmer clenched his teeth, grasped one of the shoulders, and turned it over. A white male, middle-aged, hair gray, eyes brown, several post-mortem abrasions and superficial lacerations, and the apparently fatal puncture wound in the upper right-hand quadrant of the thorax. Made with a thin, long, sharp weapon, Brosmer decided, for he had seen the exit wound below the left shoulder blade. It wouldn't have bled very much; whatever rags had mopped up the spill had probably preceded the corpse down the duct, and were on their way to the farmers by now. And Brosmer looked more closely. Right. A stainless steel replacement ball and Teflon socket for the original left hip joint. That was what had stopped the blade.

Brosmer drew his head and shoulders back out of the inspection hatchway. "Recognize him, Mr. Johnson?" he said to the foreman. "Take a good look. Sorry." He kept himself out of the way and put a hand on Johnson's elbow to urge him forward.

Johnson craned briefly, then stepped back. "No-I don't know him."

"He's just about got to live in this unit," Brosmer said.

"I don't see none of them. They're up there and I'm down here. There's thousands of them and three guys in my crew and me. That's the way they want it, and that's the way I want it. This is a different kind of place down here." "OK," Brosmer said. No matter what, the longest delay in making an identification would be a routine four-hour turnaround time for the Social Security print files in Omaha; sooner if anybody wanted to rush it. He stripped off his examining gloves and dropped them in a waste can. "Somebody'll be along to pick it up."

"Is this all?" the foreman asked.

Brosmer looked at him with the appearance of great wisdom. "You mean, where's the sergeant and the lieutenant and the Chief Medical Examiner of New York City? Well, the sergeant's tied up collating officers' reports, and the lieutenant's in a conference with some sergeants. There'll be a photographer with the meat wagon crew. You see," he explained patiently, "this isn't a stage set; this is real. We don't need a lot of mouths full of dialogue to establish the plot."

"You're all the cop we're going to get on this case?"

"I'm 3-D and in color, Mr. Johnson. You can even feel me, if you don't get personal. That's good enough for an unidentified male found in a sewer."

"Well, you sure as hell look young to me, to be handling something like this all by yourself."

"That's right, I do," Brosmer said, packing away his respirator. "You've got my card. Call me if anybody starts asking you questions about the plumbing. I'm getting out of here. I hate dismal places." He turned back once: "Don't tell anybody about this, or I'll bust your ass to someplace where they use buckets." At the lobby level, Brosmer walked through one Kasuba environment after another, eschewing their invitations to energy or lassitude, until he had reached the lobby area. He rang Building Management.

"Please state your business," the hologram said, and then caught itself. "Oh, it's you, Officer." Her lips took on fullness, but her eyes widened with something other than love. "I'll put you through to Mr. Vermeil." She faded, to be replaced by a naively interesting sculpture that rotated gently under lights, and with the sound of Japanese wind chimes, which in turn yielded to a representation of a man all in body-fitting burgundy crushed velvet. It seemed to Brosmer it was a little early in the evening for that, but perhaps the manager was an early riser.

"Yes, Officer?" Vermeil said busily, not having bothered to put down his frappe.

"There'll be a mortuary truck to get the body, so you'll want to alert your perimeter security people," Brosmer said. "A police photographer will take ID shots; you'll be expected to look at them, in case you can identify the victim. It's almost a sure thing he's one of your residents."

"Good heavens, Officer, I don't know every Torn, Dick and Harry who lives here! Why on earth should I?"

"Nobody ever calls you up about anything? You know, there was a time when tenants hammered on pipes for more heat, or had their dripping faucets fixed by the super. And the manager came around every month to collect the rent. They've got to be in touch with you now and then."

"I *don't* remember them, Officer. The bank evicts them if their credit goes, and Central Services has the building maintenance contract. They can hammer all they want to on their . . . *pipes*, did you say? Why, yes, Officer, there *was* a time when pipes brought on the heat, wasn't there?" He smirked.

"Vermeil, when the photographer calls you up and shows you the pictures, look at them. And remember it's a sworn admissible communication, whatever you tell him. I'll be in touch when I need you." Brosmer rang off. He went to the lobby doors and flashed his buzzer at the sensing devices. The inner doors opened, and he stepped into the lock. "NYPD Shield number 062-26-8729," he said perfunctorily. "One man going out."

There was a pause, and the intervening sound of wind chimes. Then the outer doors opened. He stepped into the raw air, grimacing, and walked toward the transit station, keeping clear of low walls and shrubbery. Above him, the brownish precast concrete settings clambered heavenward to frame waterfalls of reflectorized glass. As he walked, he rang a police channel and talked to his sergeant, telling him the story.

"What do you think, Ned?" the sergeant asked when he had all the data.

"I think somebody knows in his heart he got away with it. Thinks our victim's a bag of nutrient for the rutabaga. I'm going to get that sucker."

"Why do you suppose he wanted to obliterate the body? How'd he know how plumbing works?"

"What are you, Sarge-an old fire horse? Those are *my* questions."

"All right. You gonna be home?" "Ten minutes transit time first. Thereafter."

"Good. I'll call you on a landline as soon as we have a working collation."

"I'll be there when I'm needed." "Say hello to Dorrie for me." "Should I give any particular name?"

Once on the train, he punched his destination on the coder in his armrest. When the straps went around him, the back of his mind thought of Dorrie. The train took off as soon as his interlock was made, and the front of his mind busied itself reviewing the people in the other seats. There were two or three persons with lunchbucket faces; technicians. The rest were pimps and whores. All of us personal servants make up the subway-riding public, he thought.

In the middle of his mind, he pondered an individual who could stuff a stripped corpse into the Jakes, but was too overwhelmed by his or her accomplishment to cut down through an old orthopedic scar and just check to see what might lie behind it. An amateur. But then, professionals just left 'em lying. There weren't any more feckless people. Everyone was numbered. When they died, there was a hole in the credit banks, the dwelling occupancy budget, the place where ongoing supermarket billings might be. There were no unmarked graves; IBM's tombstone punches represented more substance than the incidental flesh could ever show.

Please note, he told the place where he stored his experience: With the lower limbs absent, the

free-floating position is face down.

He lived in Riverscene Heights. In the lobby lock, he said, "City civil servant," which put him in the system's admissible tenant class, and then gave his Social Security number. "One man coming in," he said for the voiceprint. In the motionless elevator, he gave his apartment number. In this building, the

systems played music during intervals. When he had been properly scanned, the elevator unlocked and took him to his floor. He got out and walked down Hall 114, which also recognized him, and came to Door 11489, which let him in. Dorrie moved toward him out of the forefront of a crowd of dancers.

She was slight and dark, wearing black openwork hip-huggers and bronze jewelry; her long ashy hair fell over one eye; the apartment lights reflected from the amber lens over the other.

"Hello," he said.

She touched her upper lip with her tongue. "Welcome home," she said softly. They touched each other.

He couldn't get enough of her. Wincing, he pulled his shirt open so more of them would be touching. "Can't stay long," he said, "Working." She had put perfume on the top of her head. Her hands passed gently over his deltoid musculature.

"Home tonight?" she asked softly.

"Don't know. Probably not."

"I'll go down the hall, then. Iris Ruthven asked me to join her Bezant class with her."

He grimaced into her hair.

"You know," she said quickly, "that's not something you can do by phone." She leaned back in his arms, took off her glasses, and looked directly into his eyes. "I mean, when you all get around the table, you actually have to *touch* hands, or it doesn't work."

"Does it work if you do?"

"Oh, don't be so *rational!*" She tapped his bicep mock-pettishly with her glasses.

And don't be such a liar, he thought. Another thing worked better in the flesh, too. Why she thought she had to be so convincing and yet so transparent, he couldn't imagine. Husbands weren't supposed to be selfish, were they? But he was; he was, and he was pretty sure she lied to reproach him subtly, come to think of it.

"Rational is as rational does," he said. "There's one fresh soul I'd sure like to contact. I'll bet he's got a story he'd love to tell."

She danced away from him a little, replacing her glasses. "Are you on a murder?" she asked, her lips parting.

"Over at Panorama." He moved toward a chair.

"Where the *artists* live? Did you go inside? What are the units like? I'll bet they're *fabulous!*"

"They don't get any more cubic feet per body than we do," he said, dropping into the chair. "Besides, I wasn't up on the dwelling levels." He put his feet up on the edge of the daybed and sighed. He reached out and touched Dorrie's thigh as she moved about him. "Listen, I hate to cut off the party, but I want to watch the news."

She nodded. "'S OK." He switched off the hi-fi and the dancers winked out. Moving toward the bar, Dorrie rummaged, keeping one hip cocked so as not to break the contact between his hand and her leg. "Stick?" she asked.

Dialing the phone for Laurent Michaelmas, he shook his head. "Working," he reminded her.

"You're funny," she murmured fondly as the Michaelmas hologram formed a few paces to her left. "You wouldn't even be back downstairs before your head was all straight again."

"Working *now*," he said, evading the central issue.

"Good evening," Michaelmas said. He was, as usual, in a plain black suit. Looking at him, Brosmer thought that the self-contained, square-bodied man, with his economical gestures and his lively, intelligent face, might understand him. He hoped that someday an assignment would let them meet. But it seemed hardly likely; Brosmer wasn't even sure whether Michaelmas lived in Manhattan, and 'he worked all over the world.

"I just want *local crime*," Brosmer said to him, uttering the last two words distinctly. Michaelmas nodded. There was a slight flicker. "Local crime," he said. He began a series of expositions, some of which involved Brosmer in the chase of a stolen boat, hunting over the riparian complexes like a midge among the stock shelves of a glass shoe store, sweeping down over the Hudson with a flurry of vanes and surging rpm changes in the turbines, whirling skyward again among the glittering windows as the thieves throttled down and circled disconsolately in the bay. In another sequence, ambulances ran mugging victims toward resuscitation centers, whistling among the pylons and , freight ramps of the streets. Michaelmas' voice was crisp and measured, his data succinct. Dorrie, the broken end of a stick trailing between her enameled nails, smiled roguishly toward Brosmer and intertwined her limbs with Michaelmas, running her hands over the back shoulders of the suit, miming with such casual skill that Brosmer had to laugh as Michaelmas continued to speak and move obliviously. Only a few of his gestures surpassed her anticipation; at one point, his left arm protruded between her shoulder blades, but in the next she had recovered and was mock-biting gently with her white teeth along his forearm. There was nothing about Panorama.

"All right," Brosmer said to himself, and to Michaelmas by way of good-bye as he dialed him off. The hologram disappeared from Dorrie's caresses. She turned and faced Brosmer slump-shouldered, dangling her glasses in one hand against her thigh and looking at him through her lashes. Her lower lip was tentatively between her teeth. She moved her feet. She reached behind her to fully opaque the window wall.

Grinning awkwardly, Brosmer shook his head. "You know we're on open police landline. George Holmeir could be calling any time now."

Well, what would he see that he didn't know first-hand? Brosmer thought as Dorrie smiled at him sadly. But her expression did change slightly at the mention of the sergeant's name. What would he see? Brosmer finished the thought. He'd see me. He might feel it was inappropriate.

And in fact Holmeir formed without preliminaries, between Dorrie and Brosmer. "OK, Ned," he said. "Here's what there is."

Brosmer shifted in his chair so the pickup would give Holmeir eye-contact with him. "Go ahead."

"Your DOA is Charles Castelvechio. Resident at 25609 Panorama North, accompanied by Nola Furness Castelvechio and one infant son. Castelvechio was a writer on the *Warbirds of Time* series. Here's the stats on them; want to take it?" Holmeir held up the sheet. Brosmer nodded and activated his camera.

"Got it."

Holmeir put the sheet down on his desk. "OK. Now that's a positive ID. Positive. Fingerprints, dental charts, surgical records, every way we could do it."

Brosmer raised his eyebrows. "Thorough." "Had to be. He's still doing business; we reviewed his phone calls. He was part of a story conference half an hour ago. Seemed a little jumpy, but did his fair share."

"While he was down in that duct all the time."

"Dead twelve hours, Forensics says, and soaking in that thing for an hour before he was found."

"Killed in the building."

"Had to be. He didn't just materialize." Holmeir looked at Brosmer expectantly.

"How do you mean?"

"He never went in or out through any door. But the elevator wasn't used once all day. That's what the building tapes say."

"It's a glitch. You're getting a false memory readout."

Holmeir nodded. "Sure. Something screwed up in the building system. It happens. Of course, maybe nobody *did* use the elevator. That happens, too. So maybe somebody's found a way to make a hologram you can feel. Only which one is it-the dead one or the one that suggested sending a squadron of Spads to strafe Charlemagne?"

"Come off it, Sarge."

"Well, I'll be damned if I can explain it. But I don't have to. Sergeants sit and officers walk."

"How about the widow? Did you talk to her?"

"Come off it, Ned. How would I know she didn't do it? It's all yours. He's not even officially dead."

Brosmer nodded. "It's a sweetheart of a case."

Holmeir grinned. "Yeah. I never heard of an MO like this. You're gonna be breaking new ground. They'll give it your name at the Academy-every time it ever comes up again, they'll call it a Brosmer. It'll be good for you when you're tired enough to apply for sergeant."

"And I'll apply for green feathers and fly to the moon," Brosmer said, trying to picture himself as Holmeir, and wincing.

"OK," he said. "I'll call in when I've got something."

"Right. I'm going off-shift in about an hour. But I'll leave a cue in my phone for you."

"OK."

Dorrie had moved around to where the pickup could find her. "Hello, George," she said.

"Hello, Dorrie."

"See you, Sarge," Brosmer said.

As soon as he was gone, Dorrie turned to Brosmer with her glasses off and her eyes full of stick. Hearing himself gasp, he knew there was nothing he could do to prevent it, or wanted to. Afterward, soft in his arms, blurred with lassitude, full of confidentiality, she murmured: "You silly, don't you know I don't see George any more; I've even mostly forgotten where he lives in this building. And besides, it's *you* I want to live with. You're so gentle with me," and he wished she didn't try so hard to teach a

coherent understanding of the world to him.

It was funny how it all fell together. He had decided to call on the widow and see if there was any sense to be made of it. Appropriately dressed, his pockets full of supporting data, he walked up to her door as if it hadn't been his buzzer that had gotten him in, but when he rang at the door, nothing happened for a while. Brosmer stood plumply in the hall, thinking now about calling in for a warrant unlock, but instead the next door opened, and a man was standing there. "May I help you?" he said from under unceasingly restless eyes.

Brosmer shifted his feet in awkwardness and scratched the back of his neck. "Well, I don't know . . ." he said.

The man was tall and fleshy, dressed in a floor-length robe of figured iridescent orange. The flesh under one eye was jumping regularly, and his upper lip was wet. "It's all right. It's all right. I often come out," he said reassuringly. "The Castelvechios aren't home; were they expecting you?"

"Well, yeah, Charlie left a cue in the system for me, and . . ."

"Strange. Yet he's not here. I'm Timothy Fortnum."

"Lou Marchant," Brosmer said. "I'm his cousin."

"Of this city?"

"Chicago," Brosmer said, having been there on a fugitive pickup once. Originally, he had been a young writer from the Bronx, for the widow's benefit, and he was shifting things around inside, watching Fortnum, looking nonplussed, wondering how a man could look so guilty and still keep talking.

Fortnum was calming down. "I knew he had no relatives in New York," he said, "Well, come in-let me offer you some hospitality while we straighten this thing out." He took Brosmer by the upper arm to urge him inside. Brosmer had to relax his muscles instantly to come off the pressure plates in the police undersuit beneath his garments, but his arm was only humanly resistant when Fortnum's hand closed on it.

Fortnum was much bolder now. His hip swung to bump Brosmer past him. Most of his attention was concentrated on closing and locking the door with swift, complex motions of his fingers.

"Sit down . . . sit down!" Fortnum said heartily, moving up behind him. "This is my wife, Martita. Darling, this is Mr. Marchant, Charles Castelvechchio's Chicago cousin, come to us unexpectedly."

Brosmer found himself having to look up. Martita Fortnum was leaning over the railing of an area to his left whose floor began at normal ceiling height. She was a slim, blonde woman in a red veil khaftan, her limbs long and straight, but aging as she descended a circular staircase. The elevated area, he saw, occupied the unit's worth of space above the Castelvechchio unit. Over his head, the ceiling, two ceilings high, supported a crystalline chandelier with soft lights playing upon it. Hanging gardens of opaque silky fabric draped the wall where three window frames ought to have been visible.

"I've never seen a place like this!" Brosmer said.

"Yes. I'm an architect. It's amazing what you can do. *Sit* down, Mr. Marchant. Tell us about yourself." His hand pressed Brosmer's shoulder. "Martita-bring our guest something, will you?"

The wall in the far corner was for shelves of books, a swing-down drawing board, and a prose encoder. Beside the encoder was a roughly similar machine-if he had not seen one in a documentary on popular music, he would not have known it was for editing tune material. All that space was occupied. These people had no visible food preparation area.

Fortnum's hand was still pressing. Brosmer let himself fall into the chair beside the wall between the Fortnum and Castelvechchio units.

Martita Fortnum had reached this floor. She turned with a fluidity strongly reminiscent of youth and passed through an opening behind the staircase. Its edges were fresh; unfinished. There were wall board fragments on a dropcloth laid in the opening, and it led into the next unit. Martita Fortnum threw Brosmer a fleeting smile as she moved out of sight.

"What are you *doing*?" Brosmer asked, turning his face up to Fortnum.

"Why, we're entertaining you," Fortnum said heartily. "There's so much I want to know about you. Any visitor of Charlie's is bound to be such a surprise to me. He was saying to me just yesterday that he never received any callers." Fortnum put one buttock on the arm of another chair, which stood where the daybed ought to have been, and eyed Brosmer's face intently. A

pair of huge antique geometrician's dividers, massive in bronze, each slender two-foot arm ending in a glistening steel point, hung on the wall near his right shoulder.

"It's an old cue," Brosmer said. "I called him weeks ago and said I'd be in town on business, and he put it into the building system for me right then."

"What business are you in, Mr. Marchant?"

"I'm a writer," Brosmer answered, slapping his pocket so Fortnum could hear the impact on the cassette he'd put there when he still thought Castelvechio had any survivors.

"Like Charles. Talent runs in families. Ah, here's Martita with some refreshment. Do you have any gifted children, Mr. Marchant? But you're so young-are you even married?"

"I'm a bachelor," Brosmer said. "In fact, I'm an orphan. Charlie's my only relative." He watched Fortnum's eyes widen in satisfaction. It was always so easy to believe what you hoped for. Brosmer reached out and took the goblet Martita Fortnum handed him silently, her broad mouth pursed quizzically, her eyes peering pale blue amid dark cosmetics.

"Have a drink," she said in a husky whisper when he held the rim to his lips. "Both of us have just had some, or we'd join you."

Ah, Jesus, he thought as he inhaled. It was a thing they called Swindle on the street; none of the successful pimps would use it, but the whores all did. It made things so easy. And she hadn't lied; you could see it in both their eyes-they were drifting and dreaming of tense cleverness, lazily riding the hurtling nightmare.

"A harmless relaxant," Fortnum was saying.

Oh, yes, yes, yes, Brosmer thought. In a little while, you can play music and I can dance, I can toss up my hair and be one with the wind, and when you speak to me, I shall answer in tongues that I learned as a child and forgot that I knew.

He pressed his arm against his side, firing Dexedrine into his body, and took a long draught. Amateur animals, he thought, gazing amiably, his nostrils tingling with fumes.

"Isn't that better?" Martita Fortnum whispered.

"Mm-hmm," He smiled at Fortnum. "Do you know where Charlie is? He must have taken his whole family with him."

"Oh, as a matter of fact, they went slightly ahead of him," Fortnum' said, and Martita Fortnum giggled.

He could feel it working on him; not just the Swindle gradually winning over the clumsily saurian rages of the Dexedrine, but the rightness, the inevitability of these monsters and what had been swimming in their systems long before entertainment chemistry had come along with snappily saleable products to validate it. What the hell am I doing here? he thought. I fly a Spad and these people are propelled by turbines.

He lolled his head back in his chair and looked up. There were brass placards in bronze frames hanging over where the door to 25709 could still be faintly made out in mid-air. Over the door to 25711, and over a bed, he imagined, was a nearly wall-width painting which, he deduced from what he could see of it, was of the ocean as one might glimpse it from a bower in a sea cave. The brass placards over the (permanently locked) door to 25709 were bas-reliefs of people in coveralls tearing patches off their clothing, baring buttocks and breasts.

"You killed them for their space." he whispered. "You chewed away their walls, and you stuffed them in the duct for their dwelling allocations."

Fortnum sprang to his feet. Martita recoiled. Fortnum stared at him goggle-eyed: "You're a cop!"

Brosmer lolled in his chair. He gestured idly with his goblet. "Cousin Fuzz." He keyed his phone to the DA's channels. "NYPD shield number 062-26-8729 arresting Timothy and Martita Fortnum, 25609 North Panorama, charge Murder 1 three counts with additional pending. Attempted Murder of Police Officer, one count. Stand by and monitor. Sit down, Fortnum," he said.

Martita Fortnum sat down at the foot of the circular stairs, one hand over her eyes, the other wandering idly, clambering unconsciously up the banister to its fullest extension, then trailing swiftly back down to the newel post and clambering again.

Brosmer smiled from very far away. He held out his goblet to Fortnum. "Drink me," he said. "That's an order. You are being questioned."

Breathing sharply through white nostrils, Fortnum complied.

"How do you do it?" Brosmer said after the proper interval.

Fortnum sprawled. "Do what? Get through the walls? That's no trick-you just scrape away the material without nicking the sensors; you know, they're just all elementary. Thermocouples and manometers and things; standard hardware. After you get the wall structure cleared out, you swing all the wiring up so the sensors are reading each other; all the damn building systems care about is whether things are burning or flooding, or if the windows are broken. Then you hang drapes over it."

"Do architects know about plumbing?"

Fortnum raised his head and snorted. "What the hell do you think architecture is, these days? Everybody's got the same space allocation, and the building code's uniform, isn't it? What the hell makes a difference between units except the efficiency of the services? The hell, man, *you* could do it-dial up the library. It's all in there. Plumbing, phone systems . . . everything." A spasm crossed his face. "But *you* never thought of that. You're going home to your place, wherever it is, and dial up *Warbirds*, or do you watch cop shows?"

"I get along," Brosmer said. "Is that how you got to the elevator memory? Do you know about that from the library?"

"*You'd* have to. I *learned* it." It was amazing how much scorn and pride were getting through the Swindle. Brosmer took it in through the buzzing in his ears.

"The story conference," he said.

"I can see how you might have learned to intercut tapes of Castelvechio, but how did you fake being a writer?"

Fortnum giggled shockingly. He wiped his open lips. "Fake being a writer," he grinned. "Fake. Writers." He stood up suddenly and pulled the covering off the chair. Underneath was a metal cabinet. "There she is," he said fondly, running his hands over the home - joined crackled panels. He peered over his shoulder at Brosmer. "This is what it takes," he said, "you know. It's just an assembly of standard logic circuits. Nothing Buck Rogers about it. It's a synthesizing phone switchboard. You give it a lot of tapes of Charlie Castelvechio sitting in a chair and babbling his life away, and when you speak into it, it puts his face on the phone and talks in his voice. Every time it can't match a lip-movement, it shows him turning his face away from the point of view or putting his hand in front of his mouth. It makes him look like he's

got the jerks, but who's gonna notice that?"

"And it does the writing for you?"

"Writing? You simple boob, all you need is a hero the audience can identify with, and you give him an immediate serious problem. Then you introduce complications that get him in deeper and deeper, but in the end he does something characteristic on his own hook, and gets out of it. The rest is just atmosphere. You think that stuff in your living room is *art*? Listen-" He waved his arm and dialed. Music swelled up in the room. It thrummed and shook in the air. "That's art," Fortnum said, bracing himself against the wall with one hand. "That's a little ditty called *Jesu, Joy of Men's Desiring*, by Johann Sebastian Bach, the mightiest voice in the Public Domain." He dialed it off hastily. "You know what you can do with that? You can give it an up-tempo, write a set of words that make sounds like screwing but don't use the word, and you're rich. That's how that *momser* upstairs makes his living," Fortnum gasped, waving at the chandelier. And over *there*," he panted, pointing into the emptiness above his bed, "is the woman who sculpts by dipping paper strands in epoxy and throwing them into the air just before they harden. I can be any of them. I can be all three of them and me, too, all at the same time. And what do you think of that, cop?" He turned, and for a moment his hand rested on the antique scribe. He looked over his shoulder guiltily at Brosmer. Brosmer shook his forefinger at him.

It was the woman who moved - who sprang from her place and flew to the wall, and so it developed that it was for her-for the To Be Widow Fortnum-that Brosmer had worn his suit. She gaped at him unbelievably as his servos operated the auxiliary mesh skin over his body and gave him the speed and strength of ten, so that though she flew as the gannet, he struck as the hawk. And then it was over; she and her husband sat comforting each other with justifications, a police lock on their open phone and police locks on their door(s) as Brosmer made his way home.

Dorrie greeted him. Her eyes did not meet his. "You-you're home very soon," she said. "I haven't left yet. Do you want me to stay?"

He went over to his chair, walking around her as best he could, thinking. He thought of what would happen. Perhaps already, the libraries were being restricted in access. Only those with certain credentials, such as police buzzers, would be able to obtain certain classes of data.

"Ned?"

"What? Oh-no, no. you go ahead and do what you've promised. I've been thinking," he said. "Panorama owes me the standard rate on about seven Murder I's, and even after I give George his 25-percent commission, and pay the bill from Forensic, that's pretty good. I think maybe we should get mirrors put in. On the walls . . . maybe on the ceiling."

Dorrie put her fingertip to her mouth. "It'll make it so much sexier in here," she murmured. "Bigger," he said. "For a while."