TALES FROM THE DARKSIDE

Tom Allen and Mitchell Galen

America's Most Frightening TV Show!

VOLUME ONE

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It's not quite a smile. "Still here, Richard," her mouth said to him.

"And don't you forget it."

He typed: MY WIFE'S PICTURE HANGS ON THE WEST WALL OF MY STUDY.

He looked at the words and liked them no more than he liked the picture itself. He punched the DELETE button. The words vanished. Now there was nothing at all on the screen but the steadily pulsing cursor.

He looked up at the wall and saw that his wife's picture had also vanished.

He sat there for a very long time—it felt that way, at least—looking at the wall where the picture had been. What finally brought him out of his daze of utter unbelieving shock was the smell from the CPU—a smell he remembered from his childhood as clearly as he remembered the Magic Eight Ball that Roger had broken because it wasn't his. The smell was essence of electric-train transformer. When you smelled that, you were supposed to turn the thing off so it could cool down.

And so he would.

In a minute.

He got up and walked over to the wall on legs that felt numb. He ran his fingers over the Armstrong paneling. The picture had been here, yes, right here. But it was gone now, and the hook it had hung on was gone and there was no hole where he had screwed the hook into the paneling.

Gone.

The world abruptly went gray, and he staggered backward, thinking dimly that he was going to faint, like an actress in a bad melodrama. He reached down into his crotch and squeezed himself, suddenly and brutally. The pain was terrible, but the world came back into sharp focus.

He looked from the blank place on the wall where Lina's picture had been to the word processor his dead nephew had cobbled together.

"You might be surprised," he heard Nordhoff saying in his mind, "You might be surprised, you might be surprised." Oh, yes; if some kid in the fifties could discover particles that travel backward through time, you might be surprised what your genius of a nephew could do with a bunch of discarded word processor elements and some wires and electrical components.

You might be so surprised that you'd feel as if you were going insane.

The transformer smell was richer, stronger now, and he could see wisps of smoke rising from the vents in the CRT housing. The noise from the CPU was louder, too. It was time to turn it off—smart as Jon had been, he apparently hadn't had time to work out all the bugs in this crazy thing.

But had he known it would do this?

Feeling like a figment of his own imagination, Richard sat down in front of the screen again and typed:

MY WIFE'S PICTURE IS ON THE WALL, WHERE IT WAS BEFORE.

He looked at this for a moment, looked back at the key board and then hit the EXECUTE key.

He looked at the wall.

Lina's picture was back, right where it had always been.

"Jesus," he whispered. "Jesus Christ."

He rubbed a hand up his cheek, looked at the screen (blank again except for the cursor) and then typed:

MY FLOOR IS BARE

He then touched the INSERT button and typed:

EXCEPT FOR 12 SPANISH DOUBLOONS IN A SMALL COTTON SACK.

He pressed EXECUTE.

He looked at the floor, where there was now a small white-cotton sack with a drawstring top.

"Dear Jesus," he heard himself saying in a voice that wasn't his. "Dear

Jesus, dear good Jesus—"

He might have gone on invoking the Savior's name for minutes or hours if the word processor had not started steadily beeping at him. Flashing across the top of the screen was the word OVERLOAD.

Richard turned off everything and left his study as if all the devils of hell were after him.

But before he went, he scooped up the small drawstring sack and put it in his pants pocket.

When he called Nordhoff that evening, a cold November wind was playing tuneless bagpipes in the trees outside. Seth's group was downstairs, murdering a Bob Seger tune. Lina was at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows, playing bingo.

"Does the machine work?" Nordhoff asked.

"It works, all right," Richard said. He reached into his pocket and brought out a coin. It was heavy and crudely uneven, wavering from an eighth of an inch on one side to almost a quarter of an inch on the other. A conquistador's head was embossed on one side, along with the date 1587. "It works in ways you wouldn't believe." He giggled. He put a hand to his mouth, but the giggle came through anyway.

"I might," Nordhoff said evenly. "He was a very bright boy, and he loved you very much, Mr. Hagstrom. But be careful.

A boy is only a boy, bright or otherwise, and love can be misdirected.

Do you take my meaning?"

Richard didn't take his meaning at all. He felt hot and feverish. That day's paper had listed the current market price of gold at $514 an ounce. The coins had weighed out at an average 4.5 ounces each on his postal scale. At the current market rate, that added up to $27,756. And he guessed that was perhaps only a quarter of what he could realize for those coins if he sold them as coins.

"Mr. Nordhoff, could you come over here? Now? Tonight?"

"No," Nordhoff said. "I don't think I want to do that, Mr. Hagstrom. I think this ought to stay between you and Jon."

"But—"

"Just remember what I said. For Christ's sake, be careful." There was a small click, and Nordhoff was gone.

He found himself in his study again half an hour later, looking at the word processor. He touched the ON/OFF key but didn't turn it on. The second time Nordhoff had said it, Richard had heard him. "For Christ's sake, be careful." Yes. He would have to be careful. A machine that could do such a thing- How could a machine do such a thing?

He had no idea, but in a way, that was no bar at all to acceptance. It was, in fact, par for the course. He was an English teacher and a sometime writer, not a technician, and he had a long history of not understanding how things worked:

phonographs, gasoline engines, telephones, televisions, the flushing mechanism in his toilet. His life was a history of understanding operations rather than principles. Was there any difference here, except in degree?

He turned the machine on. As before, it said:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD!

JON.

He pushed EXECUTE, and the message from his nephew disappeared.

This machine is not going to work for long, he thought suddenly. He felt sure that Jon must have been working on it when he died, confident that there was time; Uncle Richard's birthday wasn't for three weeks, after all- But time had run out for Jon, and so this totally amazing word processor, which could apparently insert new things or delete old things from the real world, smelled like a frying train transformer and started to smoke after a few minutes.

Jon hadn't had a chance to perfect it. He- Confident that there was time?

But that was wrong, and Richard knew it. Jon's still, watchful face, the sober eyes behind the thick spectacles . .

there was no confidence there, no belief in the fullness of time. What was the word that had occurred to him earlier that day? Doomed. It wasn't just a good word for Jon; it was the right word. That sense of doom had hung about the boy so palpably that there had been times when Richard had wanted to hug him, to tell him to lighten up a little bit, that sometimes there were happy endings and the good didn't always die young.

Then he thought of Roger's throwing his Magic Eight Ball at the

sidewalk, throwing it just as hard as he could; he heard the plastic

splinter and saw the Eight Ball's magic fluid—just water, after

all—running down the sidewalk. And this picture merged with a picture

of Roger's dusty mongrel van, HAGSTROM'S

WHOLESALE DELIVERIES written on the side, plunging over the edge of some dusty, crumbling cliff out in the country, hitting dead squat on its nose. He saw—though he didn't want to—the face of his brother's wife disintegrate into blood and bone.

He saw Jon burning in the wreck, screaming, turning black.

No confidence. Always exuding that sense of time running out. And in the end, it had been Jon who turned out to be right.

"What does that mean?" Richard muttered, looking at the blank screen.

ASK AGAIN LATER.

The noise coming from the CPU was getting louder again, and more quickly than this afternoon. Already he could smell the train transformer Jon had lodged in the machinery behind the word processor's getting hot.

Magic dream machine.

Word processor of the gods.

Was that what it was? Was that what Jon had intended to give his uncle for his birthday. The space-age equivalent of a magic lamp or a wishing well?

He heard the back door of the house bang open and then the voices of Seth and the other members of Seth's band. The voices were too loud, too raucous. They had been either drinking or smoking dope.

"Where's your old man, Seth?" he heard one of them ask.

"Goofing off in his study, like usual, I guess," Seth said. "I think

he—"

The wind rose again then, blurring the rest, but not blurring their vicious tribal laughter.

Richard sat listening to them, his head cocked a little to one side, and suddenly he typed:

MY SON IS SETH ROBERT HAGSTROM.

His finger hovered over the DELETE button.

What are you doing? his mind screamed at him. Can you be serious? Do you intend to murder your own son?

"He must do somethin' in there," on of the others said.

"He's a goddamned dimwit," Seth answered. "You ask my mother sometime.

She'll tell you. He—"

I'm not going to murder him. I'm going to . . . delete him.

His finger stabbed down on the button.

"Ain't never done nothing but—"

The words MY SON IS SETH ROBERT HAGSTROM vanished from the screen.

Outside, Seth's words vanished with them.

There was no sound out there now but the cold November wind, blowing grim advertisements for winter.

Richard turned off the word processor and went outside.

The driveway was empty. The group's lead guitarist, Norm Somebody, drove a monstrous old LTD station wagon in which the group carried their equipment to their infrequent gigs. It was not parked in the driveway now. Perhaps it was somewhere n the world, tooling down some highway or parked in the parking lot of some greasy hamburger hangout, and Norm was also somewhere in the world; as was Davey, the bassist, whose eyes were frighteningly blank and who wore a safety pin dangling from one earlobe; as was the drummer, who had no front teeth. They were somewhere in the world, somewhere, but not here.

Seth had been deleted.

"I have no son," Richard muttered. How many times had he read that melodramatic phrase in bad novels? A hundred? Two hundred? It had never rung true to him. But here it was true.

Now it was true. Oh, yes.

The wind gusted, and Richard was suddenly seized by a vicious stomach cramp that doubled him over, gasping.

When it passed, he walked into the house.

The first thing he noticed was that Seth's ratty tennis shoes—he had four pairs of them and refused to throw any of them out—were gone from the front hall. He went to the stairway banister and ran his thumb over a section of it. At the age of ten (old enough to know better, but Lina had still refused to allow Richard to lay a hand on the boy), Seth had carved his initials deeply into the wood of that banister—wood that Richard had labored over for almost an entire summer. He had sanded and filled and revarnished, but the ghost of those initials had remained.

They were gone now.

Upstairs. Seth's room. It was neat and clean and unlived in, dry and devoid of personality. It might as well have had a sign on the doorknob reading GUEST ROOM.

Downstairs. And it was there that Richard lingered the longest. The snarls of wire were gone; the amplifiers and microphones were gone; the litter of tape-recorder parts that Seth was always going to fix up was gone (he did not have Jon's hands or concentration). The room bore Lina's personality like a stamp—heavy, florid furniture and saccharine velvet tapes tries (one showing The Last Supper, and another showing deer against a sunset Alaskan skyline)--but Seth was gone from it.

Richard was still standing at the foot of the stairs and looking around when he heard a car pull into the driveway.

Lina, he thought, and felt a surge of almost frantic guilt. It's Lina, back from bingo, and what's she going to say when she sees that Seth is gone? What . . . what . . .

"Murderer!" he heard her screaming. "You murdered my boy!"

But he hadn't murdered Seth.

"I deleted him," he muttered and went upstairs.

Lina was fatter.

He had sent her off to bingo weighing a hundred and eighty or so pounds. She had come back weighing at least three hundred, perhaps more; she had to twist slightly sideways to get in through the back door. Elephantine hips and thighs rippled in tidal motions beneath polyester slacks the color of overripe green olives. Her skin, merely sallow three house before, was now sickly and pale. Although he was no doctor, Richard thought he could read serious liver damage or incipient heart disease in that skin. Her heavy-lidded eyes regarded Richard with a steady contempt.

She was carrying the frozen corpse of a huge turkey in one of her flabby hands. It twisted and turned within its cellophane wrapper like the body of a bizarre suicide.

"What are you staring at, Richard?" she asked.

You, Lina. I'm staring at you. Because this is how you turned out in a world where we had no children. This is how you turned out in a world where there was no object for your love—poisoned as your love may be. This is how Lina looks in a world where everything comes in and nothing at all goes out.

You, Lina. That's what I'm staring at. You.

"That bird, Lina," he managed finally. "That's one of the biggest damned turkeys I've ever seen."

"Well, don't just stand there looking at it, idiot! Help me with it!"

He took the turkey and put it on the counter, feeling its waves of cheerless cold. It sounded like a block of wood.

"Not there!" she cried impatiently, and gestured toward the pantry. "It's not going to fit in the fucking refrigerator! Put it in the freezer!"

"Sorry," he murmured. They had never had a freezer before. Never in the world where there had been a Seth.

He took the turkey into the pantry, where a long Amana freezer sat under white fluorescent tubes like a cold white coffin. He put it inside, along with the cryogenically preserved corpses of other birds and beasts, and then went back into the kitchen. Lina had taken the glass jar of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups from the cupboard and was eating them meth odically, one after another.

"It was the Thanksgiving bingo," she said. "We had it this week instead of next because next week Father Phillips has to go into the hospital and have his gall bladder out. I won the cover-all." She smiled. A brown mixture of chocolate and peanut butter dripped and ran from her teeth.

"Lina," he said, "are you ever sorry we never had children?"

She looked at him as if he had gone utterly crazy. "What in the name of God would I want a rug rat for?" she asked. She shoved the jar of peanut-butter cups, now reduced by half, back into the cupboard. "I'm going to bed. Are you coming or are you going back out there and moon over your typewriter some more?"

"I'll go out for a little while more, I think," he said.

His voice was surprisingly steady, "I won't be long."

"Does that gadget work?"

"What—" Then he understood, and he felt another flash of guilt. She knew about the word processor; of course she did.

Seth's deletion had not affected Roger and the track that Roger's family had been on. "Oh. Oh, no. It doesn't do anything."

She nodded, satisfied. "That nephew of yours. Head always in the clouds. Just like you, Richard. If you weren't such a mouse, I'd wonder if maybe you hadn't been putting it where you hadn't ought to have been putting it about fifteen years ago."

She laughed a coarse, surprisingly powerful laugh—the laugh of an aging, cynical bawd—and for a moment he almost leaped at her. Then he felt a smile surface on his own lips—a smile as thin and cold as the first skim of ice on a winter pond.

"I won't be long," he said. "I just want to note down a few things."

"Why don't you write a Nobel Prize-winning short story or something?" she asked indifferently. The hall floorboards creaked and muttered as she swayed her huge way toward the stairs. "We still owe the optometrist for my reading glasses, and we're a payment behind on the Betamax. Why don't you make us some damned money?"

"Well," Richard said, "I don't know, Lina. But I've got some good ideas tonight. I really do."

She turned to look at him, seemed about to say something sarcastic—something about how none of his good ideas had put them on Easy Street but she had stuck with him anyway—and then didn't. Perhaps something about his smile deterred her. She went upstairs. Richard stood below, listening to her thundering tread. He could feel sweat on his forehead. He felt simultaneously sick and exhilarated.

He turned and went back out to his study.

This time, when he turned the unit on, the CPU did not hum or roar; it began to make an uneven howling noise. That hot train-transformer smell came immediately from the housing behind the screen, and as soon as he pushed the EXECUTE button, erasing the HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! message, the unit began to smoke.

Not much time, he thought. Nor; that's not right. No time at all.

The choices came down to two: Bring Seth back with the INSERT button—he was sure he could do it; it would be as easy as creating the Spanish doubloons had been—or finish the job.

The smoke was getting thicker, more urgent. In a few moments, surely no more, the screen would start blinking its OVERLOAD message.

He typed:

MY WIFE IS ADELINA MABEL WARREN HAGSTROM.

He hit DELETE.

He typed:

I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE.

Now the word began to blink steadily in the upper right hand corner of the screen: OVERLOAD OVERLOAD OVERLOAD.

Please. Please let me finish. Please, please, please . .

The smoke coming from the vents in the video cabinet was thicker and grayer now. He looked down at the screaming CPU and saw that smoke was also coming from its vents . . . and down in that smoke, he could see a sullen, red spark of fire.

Magic Eight Ball, will I be healthy, wealthy, wise? Or will I live alone and perhaps kill myself in sorrow? Is there time enough?

CANNOT SEE NOW. TRY AGAIN LATER.

Except there was no later.

He struck the INSERT button and the screen went dark except for the constant OVERLOAD message, which was now blinking at a frantic, stuttery rate.

He typed:

EXCEPT FOR MY WIFE, BELINDA, AND MY SON, JONATHAN.

Please. Please.

He hit the EXECUTE button.

The screen went blank. For what seemed like ages, it remained blank except for OVERLOAD, which was now blinking so fast that, except for a faint shadow, it seemed to remain constant, like a computer executing a closed loop of command.

Something inside the CPU popped and sizzled, and Richard groaned.

Then green letters appeared on the screen, floating mystically on the black:

I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE EXCEPT

FOR MY WIFE, BELINDA, AND MY SON, JONATHAN.

He hit the EXECUTE button twice.

Now, he thought. Now I will type: ALL THE BUGS IN THIS

WORD PROCESSOR WERE FULLY WORKED OUT BEFORE MR. NORDHOFF

BROUGHT IT OVER HERE. Or I'll type: I HAVE IDEAS FOR AT LEAST

20 BEST-SELLING NOVELS. Or I'll type: MY FAMILY AND I ARE

GOING TO LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER. Or I'll type- But he typed nothing.

His fingers hovered stupidly over the keys as he felt—literally felt—all the circuits in his brain jam up like cars gridlocked in the worst Manhattan traffic jam in the history of internal combustion.

The screen suddenly filled up with the word OVERLOADOVER

LOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOA D.

There was another pop and then an explosion from the CPU.

Flames belched out of the cabinet and then died away. Richard leaned back in his chair, shielding his face in case the screen should implode. It didn't. It only went dark.

He sat there, looking at the darkness of the screen.

CANNOT TELL FOR SURE. ASK AGAIN LATER.

"Dad?"

He swiveled around in his chair, his heart pounding so hard he felt that it might actually tear itself out of his chest.

Jon stood there, Jon Hagstrom, and his face was the same but somehow different; the difference was subtle but notice able. Perhaps, Richard thought, it was the difference in pat ernity between two brothers. Or perhaps it was simply that the wary, watchful expression was gone from his eyes, slightly overmagnified by thick spectacles (wire rims now, he noticed;

not the ugly industrial horn-rims that Roger had always gotten the boy because they were fifteen dollars cheaper.)

Maybe it was something even simpler: That look of doom was gone from the boy's eyes.

"Jon?" he said hoarsely, wondering if he had actually wanted something more than this. Had he? It seemed ridiculous, but he supposed he had. He supposed people always did.

"Jon, it's you, isn't it?"

"Who else would it be?" Jon nodded toward the word processor. "You didn't hurt yourself when that baby went to data heaven, did you?"

Richard smiled. "No, I'm fine."

Jon nodded. “I’m sorry it didn’t work. I don’t know what ever possessed me to use all those cruddy parts.” He shook his head. “Honest to God, I don’t. It’s like I had to. Kid stuff.”

“Well,” Richard said, joining his son and putting an arm around his shoulders, “you’ll do better next time maybe.”

“Maybe. Or I might try something else.”

“That might be just as well.”

“Mom said she had a cocoa for you if you wanted it.”

“I do,” Richard said, and the two of them walked together from the study to a house into which no frozen turkey won in a bingo cover-all game had ever been brought. “A cup of cocoa would go down just fine right now.”

“I’ll cannibalize anything worth cannibalizing out of that thing tomorrow and then take it to the dump,” Jon said.

Richard nodded. “Delete it from our lives,” he said, and they went into the house and the smell of hot cocoa, laughing together.

A CASE OF THE STUBBORNS

by Robert Bloch

The morning after he died, Grandpa come downstairs for break fast.

It kind of took us by surprise.

Ma look at PaPa looked at little sister Susie, and Susie looked at me.

Then we all just set there looking at Grandpa.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “Why you all staring at me like that?”

Nobody said, but I knowed the reason. Only been last night since all of us stood by his bedside when he was took by his attack and passed away right in front of our very eyes.

But here he was, up and dressed and feisty as ever.

“What’s for breakfast?” he said.

Ma sort of gulped. “Don’t tell me you fixing to eat?”

“’Course I am. I’m nigh starved.”

Ma looked at Pa, but he just rolled his eyes. Then she went and hefted the skillet from the stove and dumped some eggs on a plate.

“That’s more like it,” Grandpa told her. “But don’t I smell sausages?”

Magot Grandpa some sausage. The way he dug into it, there sure was nothing wrong with his appetite.

After he started on seconds, Grandpa took heed of us staring at him again.

"How come nobody else is eating?" he asked.

"We ain't hungry," Pa said. And that was the gospel truth.

"Man's got to eat to keep up his strength," Grandpa told him. "Which reminds me—ain't you gonna be late at the mill?"

"Don't figure on working today," Pa said.

Grandpa squinted at him. "You all fancied up this morning. Shave and a shirt, just like Sunday. You expecting company?"

Ma was looking out the kitchen window, and she give Grandpa a nod. "Yes indeedy. Here he comes now."

Sure enough, we could see ol' Bixbee hotfooting up the walk.

Ma went through the parlor to the front door—meaning to head him off, I reckon—but he fooled her and came around the back way. Pa got to the kitchen door too late, on account of Bixbee already had it and his mouth open at the same time.

"Morning, Jethro," he said, in that treacle-and-molasses voice of his.

"And a sad grievous morning it is, too! I purely hate disturbing you so

early on this sorrowful occasion, but it looks like today's another

scorcher." He pulled out a tape measure. "Best if I got the

measurements so's to get on with the arrangements. Heat like this, the

sooner we get everything boxed and squared away the better, if you take

my meaning—"

"Sorry," said Pa, blocking the doorway so ol' Bixbee couldn't peek inside. "Needs be you come back later."

"How much later?"

"Can't say for sure. We ain't rightly made up our minds as yet."

"Well, don't dilly-dally too long," Bixbee said. "I'm liable to run short of ice."

Then Pa shut the door on him and he took off. When Ma come back from the parlor, Pa made a sign for her to keep her gap shut, but of course that didn't stop Grandpa.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"Purely a social call."

"Since when?" Grandpa looked suspicious. "Ol' Bixbee ain't nobody's friend—him with his high-toned airs! Calls hisself a Southern planter. Shucks, he ain't nothing but an undertaker."

"That's right Grandpa," said sister Susie. "He come to fit you for your coffin."

"Coffin?" Grandpa reared up in his seat like a hog caught in a bobwire fence. "What in bo-diddley blazes do I need with a coffin?"

"Because you're dead."

Just like that she come out with it. Ma and Pa was both ready to take after her but Grandpa laughed fit to bust.

"Holy hen tracks, child—what on earth give you an idee like that?"

Pa moved in on Susie, taking off his belt, but Ma shook her head. Then she nodded to Grandpa.

"It's true. You passed on last night. Don't you recol lect?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with my memory," Grandpa told her.

"I had one me one of my spells, is all."

Ma fetched a sigh. "Wasn't just no spell this time."

"A fit, mebbe?"

"More'n that. You was took so bad, Pa had to drag Doc Snodgrass out of his office—busted up the game right in the middle of a three-dollar pot. Didn't do no good, though. By the time he got here you was gone."

"But I ain't gone! I'm here."

Pa spoke up. "Now don't git up on your high horse, Grandpa. We all saw you. We're witnesses."

"Witnesses?" Grandpa hiked his galluses like he always did when he got riled. "What kind of talk is that? You aim to hold a jury trial to decide if I'm alive or dead?"

"But Grandpa—"

"Save your sass, sonny." Grandpa stood up. "Ain't nobody got a right to put me six feet under 'thout my say-so."

"Where you off to?" Ma asked.

"Where I go evvy morning," Grandpa said. "Gonna set on the front porch and watch the sights."

Durned if he didn't do just that, leaving us behind in the kitchen.

"Wouldn't that frost you?" Ma said. She crooked a finger at the stove. "Here I went and pulled up half the greens in the garden, just planning my spread for after the funeral. I already told folks we'd be serving possum stew. What will the neighbors think?"

Don't you go fret now," Pa said. "Mebbe he ain't dead after all."

Ma made a face. "We know different. He's just being

persnickety." She nudged at Pa. "Only one think to do. You go fetch Doc Snodgrass. Tell him he'd best sashay over here right quick and settle this matter once and for all."

"Reckon so," Pa said, and went out the back way. Ma looked at me and sister Susie.

"You kids go out on the porch and keep Grandpa company.

See that he stays put till the Doc gets here."

"Yessum," said Susie, and we traipsed out of there.

Sure enough Grandpa set in his rocker, big as life, squinting at cars over the road and watching the drivers cuss when they tried to steer around our hogs.

"Lookee here!" he said, pointing. "See that fat feller in the Hupmobile? He came barreling down the road like a bat outa hell—must of been doing thirty mile an hour. 'Fore he could stop, ol' Bessie poked out of the weeds right in front of him and run that car clean into the ditch. I swear I never seen anything so comical in all my life!"

Susie shook her head. "But you ain't alive, Grandpa."

"Now don't you start in on that again, here!" Grandpa looked at her, disgusted, and Susie shut up.

Right then Doc Snodgrass come driving up front in his big Essex and parked alongside ol' Bessie's pork butt. Doc and Pa got out and moseyed up to the porch. They was jawing away something fierce and I could see Doc shaking his head like he purely disbelieved what Pa was telling him.

Then Doc noticed Grandpa setting there, and he stopped cold in his tracks. His eyes bugged out.

"Jumping Jehosephat!" he said to Grandpa. "What you doing here?"

"What's it look like?" Grandpa told him. "Can't a man set on his own front porch and rock in peace?"

"Rest in peace, that's what you should be doing," said Doc. "When I examined you last night you were deader'n a dor nail!"

"And you were drunker'n a coot, I reckon," Grandpa said.

Pa give Doc a nod. "What'd I tell you?"

Doc paid him no heed. He come up to Grandpa. Mebbe I was a wee bit mistaken," he said. "Mind if I examine you now?"

"Fire away," Grandpa grinned. "I got all the time in the world."

So Doc opened up his little black bag and set about his business. First off he plugged a stethoscope in his ears and tapped Grandpa's chest. He listened, and then his hands begun to shake.

"I don't hear nothing." he said.

"What do you expect to hear—the Grand Ol' Opry?"

"This here's no time for funning," Doc told him. "Suppose I tell you your heart's stopped beating?"

"Suppose I tell you your stethoscope's busted?"

Doc begun to break out in a sweat. He fetched out a mirror and held it up to Grandpa's mouth. Then his hands got to shaking worse than ever.

"See this?" he said. "The mirror's clear. Means you got no breath left in your body."

Grandpa shook his head. "Try it on yourself. You got a breath on you would knock a mule over at twenty paces."

"Mebbe this'll change your tune." Doc reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "See for yourself."

"What is it?"

"Your death certificate." Doc jabbed his finger down.

"Just you read what it says on this line. 'Cause of death- card-y-ak arrest." That's medical for heart attack. And this here's a legal paper. It'll stand up in court."

"So will I, if you want to drag the law into this,"

Grandpa told him. "Be a pretty sight, too—you standing on one side with your damfool piece of paper and me standing on the other! Now, which do you think the judge is going to believe?"

Doc's eyes bugged out again. He tried to stuff the paper into his pocket but his hands shook so bad he almost didn't make it.

"What's wrong with you?" Pa asked.

"I feel poorly," Doc said. "Got to get back to my office and lie down for a spell."

He picked up his bag and headed for his car, not looking back.

"Don't lie down too long," Grandpa called. "Somebody's liable to write out a paper saying you died of a hangover."

When lunchtime come around nobody was hungry. Nobody but Grandpa, that is.

He set down at the table and put away black-eyes peas, hominy grits, a double helping of chitlins, and two big slabs of rhubarb pie with gravy.

Ma was the king who liked seeing folks enjoy her vittles, but she didn't look kindly on Grandpa's appetite. After he finished and went back on the porch she stacked the plates on the drainboard and told us kids to clean up. Then she went into the bedroom and come out with her shawl and pocketbook.

"What you all dressed up about?" Pa said.

"I'm going to church."

"But his here's only Thursday."

"Can't wait no longer," Ma told him. "It's been hot all forenoon and looking to get hotter. I seen you wrinkle up your nose whilst Grandpa was in here for lunch."

Pa sort of shrugged. "Figgered the chitlins was mebbe a little bit spoiled, is all."

"Weren't nothing of the sort," Ma said. "If you take my meaning."

"What you fixing to do?"

"Only thing a body can do. I'm putting evvything in the hands of the Lord."

And off she skedaddled, leaving sister Susie and me to scour the dished whilst Pa went out back, looking powerful troubled. I spied him through the window, slopping the hogs, but you could tell his heart wasn't in it.

Susie and me, we went out to keep tabs on Grandpa.

Ma was right about the weather heating up. That porch was like a bake-over in the devil's own kitchen. Grandpa didn't seem to pay it any heed, but I did. Couldn't help but notice Grandpa was getting ripe.

"Look at them flies buzzing 'round him," Susie said.

"Hush up, Sister. Mind your manners."

But sure enough, them old blueflies buzzed so loud we could hardly hear Grandpa speak. "Hi, young 'uns," he said.

"Come visit a spell."

"Sun's too hot for setting," Susie told him.

"Not so's I can notice." He weren't even working up a sweat.

"What about all them blueflies?"

"Don't bother me none." Big ol' fly landed right on Grandpa's nose and he didn't even twitch.

Susie begun to look scared. “He’s dead for sure,” she said.

“Speak up, child,” Grandpa said. “Ain’t polite to go mumbling your elders.”

Just then he spotted Ma marching up the road. Hot as it was, she come along lickety-split, with the Reverend Peabody in tow. He was huffing and puffing, but she never slowed until they fetched up alongside the front porch.

“howdy, Reverend,” Grandpa sung out.

Reverend Peabody blinked and opened his mouth, but no words come out.

“What’s the matter?” Grandpa said. “Cat got your tongue?”

The Reverend got a kind of sick grin on his face, like a skunk eating bumblebees.

“Reckon I know how you feel,” Grandpa told him. “Sun makes a feller’s throat parch up.” He looked at Ma. “Addie, whyn’t you go fetch the Reverend a little refreshment?”

Ma went in the house.

“Well, now, Rev,” said Grandpa. “Rest your britches and be sociable.”

The Reverend swallowed hard. “This here’s not exactly a social call.”

“Then what you come dragging all the way over here for?”

The Reverend swallowed again. “After what Addie and Doc told me, I just had to see for myself.” He looked at the flies buzzing around Grandpa. “Now I wish I’d just took their word on it.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning a man in your condition’s got no right to be asking questions.

When the good Lord calls, you’re supposed to answer.”

“I ain’t heard nobody calling,” Grandpa said. “ ‘Course, my hearing’s not what it used to be.”

“So Doc says. That’s why do don’t notice your heart’s not beating.”

“Onny natural for it to slow down a piece. I’m pushing ninety.”

“Did you ever stop to think that ninety might be pushing back? You lived a mighty long stretch, Grandpa. Don’t you reckon mebbe it’s time to lie down and call it quits? Remember what the Good Book says—the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.”

Grandpa got that feisty look on his face. “Well, he ain’t gonna taketh away me.”

Reverend Peabody dug into his jeans for a bandana and wiped his forehead. “You got no cause to fear. It’s a mighty rewarding experience. No more sorrow, no more care, all your burdens laid to rest. Not to

mention getting out of this hot sun."

"Can't hardly feel it." Grandpa touched his whiskers.

"Can't hardly feel anything."

The Reverend give him a look. "Hands getting stiff?"

Grandpa nodded. "I'm still all over."

"Just like I thought. You know what that means? Rigor mortis is setting in."

"Ain't never heard tell of anybody named Rigger Morris,"

Grandpa said. "I got me a tough of the rheumatism, is all."

The Reverend wiped his forehead again. "You sure want a heap of convincing," he said. "Won't take the word of a medical doctor, won't take the word of the Lord. You're the con trariest old coot I ever did see."

"Reckon it's my nature," Grandpa told him. "But I ain't unreasonable.

All I'm asking for is proof. Like the feller says, I'm from Missouri.

You got to show me."

The Reverend tucked away his bandana. It was sopping wet anyhow, wouldn't do him a lick of good. He heaved a big sigh and stared Grandpa right in the eye.

"Some things we just got to take on faith," he said.

"Like you setting here when by rights you should be six feet under the daisies. If I can believe that, why can't you believe me? I'm telling you the mortal truth when I say you got no call to fuss. Mebbe the notion of lying in the grave don't rightly hold much appeal for you.

Well, I can go along with that. But one thing's for sure. Ashes to

ashes, dust to dust—that's just a saying. You needn't trouble yourself

about spending eternity in the grave. Whilst your remains rest peaceful

in the boneyard, your soul is on the wing. Flying straight up,

yessiree, straight into the arms of the Lord! And what a great day it's

fixing to be—you free as a bird and scooting around with them heavenly

hosts on high, singing the praises of the Almighty and twanging away

like all git-out on your genuine eighteen carats solid golden harp—"

"I ain't never been much for music," Grandpa said. "And I get dizzy just standing on a ladder to shingle the privy." He shook his head. "Tell you what—you think heaven is such a hellfired good proposition, why don't you go there yourself?"

Just then Ma come back out. "We're fresh out of lemon made," she said.

"All's I could find was a jug. I know your feelings about such things,

Reverend, but—"

"Praise the Lord!" The Reverend snatched the jug out of her hand, hefted it up, and took a mighty swallow.

"You're a good woman," he told Ma. "And I'm mush beholden to you." Then he started down the path for the road, moving fast.

"Here, now!" Ma called after him. "What you aim to do about Grandpa?"

"Have no fear," the Reverend said. "We must put our trust now in the power of prayer."

He disappeared down the road, stirring dust.

"Danged if he didn't take the jug!" Grandpa mumbled.

"You ask me, the onny power he trusts is in that corn likker."

Ma give him a look. Then she bust out crying and run into the house.

"Now, what got into her?" Grandpa said.

"Never you mind," I told him. "Susie, you stay here and whisk those flies off Grandpa. I got things to attend to."

And I did.

Even before I went inside I had my mind set. I couldn't hold still to see Ma bawling that way. She was standing in the kitchen hanging on to Pa, saying, "What can we do? What can we do?"

Pa patted her shoulder. There now, Addie, don't you go carrying on. It can't last forever."

"Nor can we," Ma said. "If Grandpa don't come to his senses, one of these mornings we'll go downstairs and serve up breakfast to a skeleton. And what do you think the neighbors will say when they see a bag of bones setting out there on my nice front porch? It's plumb embarrassing, that's what it is!"

"Never you mind, Ma, " I said. "I got an idea."

Ma stopped crying. "What kind of idea?"

"I'm fixing to take me a hike over to Spooky Hollow."

"Spooky Hollow?" Ma turned so pale you couldn't even see her freckles.

"Oh, no, boy—"

"Help is where you find it, " I said. "And I reckon we got no choice."

Pa took a deep breath. "Ain't you afeard?"

"Not in daylight," I told him. "Now don't you fret. I'll be back afore dark."

Then I scooted out the back door.

I went over the fence and hightailed it along the back forty to the crick, stopping just long enough to dig up my piggy bank from where it was stashed in the weeds alongside the rocks. After that I waded across the water and headed for tall timber.

Once I got into the piney woods I slowed down a smidge to get my bearings. Weren't no path to follow, because nobody never made one. Folks tended to stay clear of there, even in daytime—it was just too dark and too lonesome. Never saw no small critters in the brush, and even the birds kep' shut of this place.

But I knowed where to go. All's I had to do was top the ridge, then move straight on down. Right smack at the bottom, in the deepest, darkest, lonesomest spot of all, was Spooky Hollow.

In Spooky Hollow was the cave.

And in the cave was the Conjure Lady.

Leastwise I reckoned she was there. But when I come tip py-toeing down to the big black hole in the rocks I didn't see a mortal soul, just the shadows bunching up on me form all around.

It sure was spooky, and no mistake. I tried not to pay any heed to the way my feet was itching. They wanted to turn and run, but I wasn't about to be put off.

After a bit I started to sing out. "Anybody home? You got company."

"Who?"

"It's me—Jody Tolliver."

"Whooo?"

I was wrong about the birds, because now when I looked up I could see the big screech owl glaring at me from a branch over yonder near the cave.

And when I looked down again, there she was—the Conjure Lady, peeking out at me from the hole between the rocks.

It was the first time I ever laid eyes on her, but it couldn't be no one else. She was a teensy rail-thin chicka biddy in a linsey-woolsey dress, and the face under her poke bonnet was black as a lump of coal.

Shucks, I says to myself, there ain't nothing to be afeard of—she's just a little ol' lady, is all.

Then she stared up at me and I saw her eyes. They was lots bigger than the screech owl's, and twice as glarey.

My feed begun to itch something fierce, but I stared back.

"Howdy, Conjure Lady," I said.

"Whoooo?" said the screech owl.

"It's young Tolliver," the Conjure Lady told him. "What's the matter, you got wax in your ears? Now go on about your business, you hear?"

The screech owl give her a dirty look and took off. Then the Conjure Lady come out into the open.

"Pay no heed to Ambrose," she said. "He ain't rightly used to company.

All's he ever sees is me and the bats."

"What bats?"

"The bats in the cave." The Conjure Lady smoothed down her dress. "I beg your pardon for not asking you in, but the place is purely a mess. Been meaning to tidy it up, but what with one thing and another—first that dadblamed World War and then this dadgummed Prohibition—I just ain't got 'round to it yet."

"Never you mind," I said, polite-like. "I come on business."

"Reckoned you did."

"Brought you a pretty, too," I give it to her.

"What is it?"

"My piggy bank."

"Thank you kindly," said the Conjure Lady.

"Go ahead, bust it open," I told her.

She whammed it down on a rock and the piggy bank broke, spilling out money all over the place. She scrabbled it up right quick.

"Been putting aside my cash earnings for night onto two years now," I said "How much is they?"

"Eighty-seven cents, a Confederate two-bits piece, and this here button." She kind of grinned. "Sure is a purty one, too! What's it say on there?"

"Keep Cool With Coolidge."

"Well, ain't that a caution." The Conjure Lady slid the money into her pocket and pinned the button atop

her dress.

"Now, son—purty is as purty does, like the saying goes. So what can I do for you?"

"It's about my Grandpa," I said. "Grandpa Titus Tol liver."

"Titus Tolliver? Why, I reckon I know him! Use to run a still up in the toolies back of the crick. Fine figure of a man with a big black beard, he is."

"Is turns to was," I told her. "Now he's all dried up with the rheumatiz. Can't rightly see too good and can't hear for sour apples."

"Sure is a crying shame!" the Conjure Lady said. But sooner or later we all get to feeling poorly. And when you gotta go, you gotta go."

"That's the hitch of it. He won't go."

"Meaning he's bound up."

"Meaning he's dead."

The Conjure Lady give me a hard look. "Do tell," she said.

So I told. Told her the whole kit and kaboodle, right from the git-go.

She heard me out, not saying a word. And when I finished up she just stared at me until I was fixing to jump out of my skin.

"I reckon you mightn't believe me," I said. "But it's the gospel truth."

The Conjure Lady shook her head. "I believer you, son.

Like I say, I knowed your Grandpappy from the long-ago. He was plumb set in his ways then, and I take it he still is. Sounds to me like he's got a case of the stubborns.

"Could be," I said. "But here's nary a thing we can do about it, nor the Doc or the Reverend either."

The Conjure Lady wrinkled up her nose. "What you 'spect from them two?

They don't know grit from granola."

"Mebbe so. But that leaves us betwixt a rock and a hard place—'less you can help."

"Let me think on it a piece."

The Conjure Lady pulled a corncob out of her pocket and fired up. I don't know what brand she smoked, but it smelled something fierce. I begun to get itchy again—not just in the feet but all over. The woods was darker now, and a kind of cold wind come wailing down between the trees, making the leaves whisper to themselves.

"Got to be some way," I said. "A charm, mebbe, or a spell."

She shook her head. "Them's ol'-fashioned. Now this here's one of them newfangled mental things, so we got to use newfangled idees. Your Grandpa don't need hex nor hoodoo.

Like he says, he's from Missouri. He got to be showed, is all."

"Showed what?"

The conjure Lady let out a cackle. "I got it!" She give me a wink. "Sure 'enough, the very thing! Now just you hold your water—I won't be a moment." And she scooted back into the cave.

I stood there, feeling the wind whooshing down the back of my neck and listening to the leaves that was like voices whispering things I didn't want to gear too good.

Then she come out again, holding something in her hand.

"Take this," she said.

"What is it?"

She told me what it was, and then she told me what to do with it.

"You really reckon this'll work.?"

"It's the onny chance."

So I stuck it in my britches' pocket and she give me a little poke.

"Now, sonny, you best hurry and get home afore supper."

Nobody had to ask me twice—not with that chill wind moaning and groaning in the trees, and the dark creeping and crawling all around me.

I give her my much-obliged and lit out, leaving the Con jure Lady standing in front of the cave. Last I saw of her, she was polishing her Coolidge button with a hunk of poison oak.

Then I was tearing through the woods, up the hill to the ridge and over. By the time I got to the clearing it was pitch-dark, and when I waded the crick I could see the moon light wiggling on the water. Hawks on the hover went flippy flapping over the back forty but I didn't stop to heed. I made a beeline for the fence, up and over, then into the yard and through the back door.

Ma was standing at the stove holding a pot whilst Pa ladled up the soup.

They looked downright pleasured to see me.

"Thank the Lord!" Ma said. "I was just fixing to send Pa after you."

"I come quick as I could."

"And none too soon," Pa told me. "We like to go clean out'n our heads, what with the ruckus and all."

"What kind of ruckus?"

"First off, Miss Francy. Folks in town told her about Grandpa passing on, so she done the neighborly thing—mixed up a mess of stew to ease our appeytite in time of sorrow. She come lollygagging up the walk, all rigged out in her Sunday go-to-meeting clothes, toting the bowl under her arm and looking like lard wouldn't melt in her mouth. Along about then she caught sight of Grandpa setting there on the porch, king of smiling at her through the flies."

"Well, up went the bowl and down come the whole shebang.

Looked like it was raining stew greens all over that fancy Sears and Roebuck dress. And then she turned and headed for kingdom come, letting out a whoop that'd peel the paint off a privy wall."

"That's sorrowful," I said.

"Save your grieving for worse," Pa told me. "Next thing you know, Bixbee showed up, honking his horn. Wouldn't come nigh Grandpa, nosiree—I had to traipse clear down to where he set in the hearse."

"What'd he want?"

"Said he'd come for the remains. And if we didn't cough them up real fast, he was aiming to take a trip over to the county seat first thing tomorrow morning to get hisself a injection."

"Injunction," Ma said, looking like she was ready to bust out with the bawls again. "Said it was a scandal and a shame to let Grandpa set around like this. What with the sun and the flies and all, he was fixing to have the Board of Health put us under quar-and-tine."

"What did Grandpa say?" I asked.

"Nary a peep. Ol' Bixby gunned his hearse out of here and Grandpa kep' right on rocking with Susie. She come in 'bout half hour ago, when the sun went down—says he's getting stiff as a board but won't pay it no heed. Just keeps asking what's to eat."

"That's good," I said. "On account of I got the very thing. The Conjure Lady give it to me for his supper."

"What is it—pizen?" Pa looked worried. "You know I'm a God-fearing man and I don't hold with such doings. 'Sides, how you 'spect to pizen him if he's already dead?"

"Ain't nothing of the sort," I said. "This here's what she sent."

And I pulled it out of my britches pocket and showed it to to them.

"Now what in the name of kingdom come is that?" Ma asked.

I told her what it was, and what to do with it.

"Ain't never heard tell of such foolishness in all my born days!" Ma told me.

Pa looked troubled in his mind. "I knowed I shouldn't have let you go down to Spooky Hollow. Conjure Lady must be short of her marbles, putting you up to a thing like that."

"Reckon she knows what she's doing," I said. "'Sides, I give all my savings for this here—eight-seven cents, a Confederate quarter, and my Coolidge button."

"Never you mind about no Coolidge button," Pa said. "I swiped it off'n a Yankee, anyway—one of them revenooers." He scratched his chin. "But hard money's something else. Mebbe we best give this notion a try."

"Now, Pa—" Ma said.

"You got any better plan?" Pa shook his head. "Way I see it, what with the Board of Health set to come a-snapping at our heels tomorrow, we got to take a chance."

Ma fetched a sigh that come clean up from her shoes, or would if she's been wearing any.

"All right, Jody," she told me. "You just put it out like the Conjure Lady said. Pa, you go fetch Susie and Grandpa.

I'm about to dish it up."

"You sure this'll do the trick?" Pa asked, looking at what I had in my hand.

"It better," I said. "It's all we got."

So Pa went out and I headed for the table, to do what the Conjure Lady had in mind.

Then Pa come back with sister Susie.

"Where's Grandpa?" Ma asked.

"Moving slow," Susie said. "Must be that Rigger Morris."

"No such thing." Grandpa come through the doorway, walking like a cockroach on a hot griddle. "I'm just a wee mite stiff."

"Stiff as a four-by-four board," Pa told him. "Upstairs in bed, that's where you ought to be, with a lily in your hand."

"Now don't start on that again," Grandpa said. "I told you I ain't dead so many times I'm blue in the face."

"You sure are," said Susie. "Ain't never seen nobody look any bluer."

And he was that—blue and bloated, kind of—but he paid it no heed. I recollected what Ma said about mebbe having to put up with a skeleton at mealtime, and I sure yearned for the Conjure Lady's notion to work. It plumb had to, because Grandpa was getting deader by the minute.

But you wouldn't think so when he caught sight of the vittles on the table. He just stirred his stumps right over to his chair and plunked down.

"Well, now," Grandpa said. "You done yourself proud tonight, Addie.

This here's my favorite—collards and catfish heads!"

He was all set to take a swipe at the platter when he up and noticed what was setting next to his plate.

"Great day in the morning!" he hollered. "What in tarnation's this?"

"Ain't nothing but a napkin," I said.

"But it's black!" Grandpa blinked. "Who ever heard tell of a black napkin?"

Pa looked at Ma. "We figger this here's king of a special occasion," he

said. "If you take my meaning—"

Grandpa fetched a snort. "Consarn you and your meaning!

A black napkin? Never you fear, I know what you're hinting around at, but it ain't a-gonna work—nosiree, but!"

And he filled his plate and dug in.

The rest of us just set there staring, first at Grandpa, then at each other.

"What'd I tell you?" Pa said to me, disgusted-like.

I shook my head. "Wait a spell."

"Better grab whilst you can git," Grandpa said. "I aim to eat me up a storm."

And he did. His arms was stiff and his fingers scarce had enough curl left to hold a fork and his jaw muscles worked extra hard—but he went right on eating. And talking.

"Dead, am I? Ain't never seen the day a body'd say a thing like that to me before, let alone kinfolk! Now could be I'm tolerable stubborn, but that don't signify I'm mean. I ain't about to make trouble for anyone, least of all my own flesh and blood. If I was truly dead and knowed it for a fact -why, I'd be the first one to go right upstairs to my room and lie down forever. But you got to show me proof 'fore I do.

That's the pure and simple of it—let me see some proof!"

"Grandpa," I said.

"What's the matter sonny?"

"Begging your pardon, but you got collards dribbling all over your chin."

Grandpa put down his fork. "So they is. I thank you kindly."

And before he rightly knowed what he was doing, Grandpa wiped his mouth on the napkin.

When he finished he looked down at it. He looked once and he looked twice. Then he just set the

napkin down gentle-like, stood up from the table, and headed straight for the stairs.

"Goodbye all," he said.

We heard him go clumping up the steps and down the hall into his room and we heard the mattress sag when he laid down on his bed.

Then everything was quiet.

After a while Pa pushed his chair back and went upstairs.

Nobody said a word until he come down again.

"Well?" Ma looked at him.

"Ain't nothing more to worry about," Pa said. "He's laid down his burden at last. Gone to glory, amen."

"Praise be!" Ma said. Then she looked at me and crooked a finger at the napkin. "Best get rid of that."

I went 'round and picked it up. Sister Susie give me a funny look.

"Ain't nobody fixing to tell me what happened?" she asked.

I didn't answer—just toted the napkin out and dropped it deep down in the crick. Weren't no sense telling anybody the how of it, but the Conjure Lady had the right notion after all.

She knowed Grandpa'd get his proof—just as soon as he wiped his mouth.

Ain't nothing like a black napkin to show up a little ol'

maggot.

INSIDE THE CLOSET

by Michael McDowell

(Based on a Teleplay by Michael McDowell)

She'd been told the house was Victorian and about two minutes from the campus. It was, however, at least a mile and a half from the campus, down a steep hill, across a picturesque iron bridge crossing and ugly trickle of water that was called the Alewife Brook, and finally up an even steeper hill. Further more, the house wasn't Victorian at all, but Edwardian. Built around 1914, Gail guessed. Because her undergraduate thesis had been on the domestic architecture of Philadelphia, she was confident she wasn't more than a year or two off.

It was three stories high, but its wide windows and its horizontal planking, its lazy porches and its doubled doors made it look as if it had been squashed down from a house that was much more pleasantly vertical. It was surrounded by evergreen trees—the kind that grew slowly, grew tall, and provided the house not so much shade as black shadow all year round. The lot was large, fenced, with a prickly hawthorn hedge outside the fence. The house faced differently from its neighbors, fronting a dead-end lane of empty wooded lots.

Gail wondered at her good fortune.

The porch light was encased in an iron lantern Gail was certain was original to the house. She admired the stained glass that bordered the front door on either side. More richly secular colors than you'd find in a church, and new soldering showed her they'd been carefully reinforced. There was a bell, but Gail used the knocker instead—brass, in the form of a horned goat's head.

The man who opened the door was tall, middle-aged, dour.

"I called," said Gail "Dr. Fenner?"

"Miss Aynsley," he replied, confirming she'd gotten the address right.

"Gail," she said.

He politely stepped aside, allowing Gail into the hallway.

She went in cautiously and glanced around without moving her head. She didn't want to appear too curious.

The woodwork was original, mahogany or perhaps even the more exotic gumwood. The wallpaper was an elegant wide-weave canvas, painted cream, the lighting fixtures tarnished brass with low-wattage bulbs. It was exactly the sort of low-keyed elegance Gail adored.

Or would have adored had it not been for the hangings on the walls:

mounted heads of small animals. Small angry animals. Tiny screaming primates. Small snarling rodents. The long-haired gaping faces of unhappy mammals she couldn't give a name to.

"I'm told I have the last available space in town," said Dr. Fenner.

The books Gail was carrying slipped out of her arms.

Embarrassed, she knelt on the dark carpet—a faded, frayed, and exquisitely valuable Circassian runner. "I should've started looking earlier. The term begins next week. I'm a graduate student in fine arts."

"I'm dean of the veterinary school," he replied, in frigid amiableness. "There's a reason the room hasn't been rented yet." Gail stood, her books and tablets gathered together.

Since she's started her studies in architecture, the history of design, and the development of domestic architecture, she'd always wanted to appened that she was desperate for a place to live. She wondered what she could say to persuade Dr. Fenner to accept her as a tenant.

"I'm a strict landlord," said Dr. Fenner after a moment, when she had said nothing. "I do most of my work here at home—I write and teach and administrate—and I have to have quiet. So no stereos, no television, no boyfriends trooping through at all hours of the night."

"All I've got is my slide projector," returned Gail hesitantly, "and I promise not to run it late."

Fenner softened. "No boyfriends?"

"It's me and my books." Gail smiled.

"Bookcases I have," said Fenner. "Third floor. All to yourself."

Fenner led her up a thickly carpeted dark staircase, down a long unlighted corridor past wide dark doors with brass knobs, around an unexpected turn, to a small triangular landing.

"Bath and kitchenette," said Fenner, thumbing through the old iron keys on the old iron ring. "But basically illegal."

"Illegal?" Gail echoed as he found the key and shoved it in the lock.

The key turned easily.

"I'm not zoned for tenants," he replied as he pushed open the door. "No exterior staircase, no fire escape."

"I don't smoke, either." said Gail.

"Twenty-five off the rent." He turned on the light, stepped inside, making room for Gail. "It was my daughter's room."

The same dark wood—she still couldn't tell if it was mahogany or gumwood. Plaster walls painted a long-faded ocher.

A long bank of square windows with faded white curtains. An unadorned ceiling that slanted here and there beneath the sharply pitched roof of the house. Simply and predictable furnished with a straight chair and a round tea table on a hooked rug. A narrow painted iron bed with a chenille spread. A standing cedar wardrobe. Behind a green baize curtain were a tiny stove and refrigerator with shelving above. A small bathroom with white porcelain fixtures and yellowed tile.

And in the wall next to the bathroom, one more door.

Obviously the door of a closet—but perhaps not quite obviously, for the door was not quite four feet high.

It was smaller than any door she'd seen elsewhere in the house, but with the same panels, the same hinges, the same brass knob, the same keyhole. So it had been built that way.

"Is that the closet?" Gail asked.

"It was the closet," he replied coldly. "But it's locked now and I've lost the key."

She tried the knob. The door was locked.

"That's why the standing wardrobe is in here. If you don't have enough room for your things, you can put them in one of the closets downstairs.

So if you're—"

“But why is this door so small?” she asked, interrupting him.

Fenner didn’t answer the question. He ashed another in return: “Do you want the room?”

“Yes,” she replied, startled. “Yes, of course I do.”

In the first-floor entryway, Fenner stood still and silent, listening.

Nothing was to be heard.

Nothing from outside.

Nothing from any of the rooms that opened off of the entryway: a living room he hadn’t set foot into in ten years;

his study, where he spent a third of his life; the kitchen he never cooked in, where the cabinets were padlocked..

Silence from upstairs. His bedroom. A bath. Three more bedrooms filled with boxes and bottles and jars and bones and pelts and skulls and the severed hands of rare primates in which wire had been played through the fingers so the withered, dead fingers might still splay or fist.

Nothing from the third floor, where Miss Aynsley slept.

Or where Miss Aynsley, if she was not yet asleep, crept about softly on her bare feet.

Fenner locked the front door and turned off the lights.

He gave a swift, hard kick to a box of belongings Mis Aynsley had left beneath the hall table and hoped he had broken something inside. Then he went upstairs.

Gail went softly on her bare feet, folding and putting away the last of her clothes,. She arranged things in the medicine chest in the bathroom, placing a folded towel in the sink just in case she fumbled one of the glass bottles. Because hid=she had a fear of electrical shortages, she placed her hair dryer, her electric curlers, her iron, her cup warmer, her contact lens cleaner, and her slide projector in the sturdiest of her cardboard cartons and shoved it beneath the bed, well away from any electrical outlet.

Gail’s fear of the dark, however, was greater than her fear of being burned in her sleep, so she allowed herself the luxury of a night-light. She plugged it into an outlet near the foot of the bed, then carefully pinned the corner of the chenille away from its glowing shade.

She brushed her hair, untied the ribbon at the neck of her nightgown, and climbed into bed.

Gail shortly fell asleep and some time after that dreamed she slept beneath a chenille spread in an iron bed in a room with ocher walls and a closet door that was only four feet high.

Dreamed that something crouched on the other side of that diminutive door and turned the brass knob this way and that, slowly and quietly, so that she, sleeping and dreaming in the bed, would not hear and awaken.

Gail awakened and sat up in the bed so quickly, the iron joints and the iron springs of the iron bed

scraped and rocked and creaked.

The knob of the closet door gleamed faintly in the pink illumination of the night-light.

It was not turning at all.

But Gail still thought there was something behind that closet door.

Because she could hear its nails scrabbling against the wood.

Then the scrabbling stopped.

Because whatever was inside the closet knew she was awake.

Fenner was buttoning his coat. Gail waited at the landing a moment, watching him, hoping that he'd notice her before she had to speak. But if he noticed her, he did not acknowledge her presence.

"Dr. Fenner," she called at last.

The way he looked up, the way he wrapped the scarf around his neck, convinced her he had known she was there.

"Yes, what is it?"

"You forgot to give me keys."

He took them from a basket on the hall table and tossed them up to her.

"They're labeled," he said. "I have to get to my office."

He started for the door.

"Dr. Fenner . . ." she said in a tone of voice meant to detain him.

"Yes?" he replied in a voice meant to express his impatience at being detained.

"There was a rat in my room last night."

"A rat?" He wasn't alarmed. In fact, he smiled the superior sort of smile that professors employed to keep timid graduate student in their place. "The only rats in this house are the ones I keep in formaldehyde."

"This one was alive. I heard it scrabbling around in that closet. It woke me up twice."

Fenner shoved several stamped envelopes into the pocket of his overcoat.

"There are no rats in this house." he said.

Gail returned to her room to finish drying her hair and dress for the first class of her graduate career, but she couldn't help glancing at the closet. In daylight its surprising smallness was no less disturbing than it had been the night before. She took the key from the lock of the hallway door and tried it in the closet

door.

It turned, but the door remained securely locked.

Gail's emotions were contrary: she was disappointed that she didn't discover what was behind the door; and was just as pleased that she didn't find out.

When she returned from classes that day, Gail brought in a sack of groceries: frozen dinners, cans of expensive soups, and cartons of mixed natural juices to stock her tiny kitchen.

Then, from the bottom of the bag, she took a log of processed cheese and a mousetrap. She tasted the cheese, found it gratifyingly unpalatable, then baited the trap with it. She knelt on the floor before the closet door and gingerly prodded the trap toward it, as if fearful the mouse, the rat—the whatever—would pounce upon it suddenly.

Nothing pounced. But when she stood, she brushed against the doorknob of the locked closet. The knob turned, and the closet door swung open.

It hadn't been locked, after all.

She swallowed her surprise and peered into the darkness.

The closet was dark and reassuringly empty. A few shelves on either side. A rack for clothes. Some old hangers on the rack and nothing else.

Gail peered along the floorboards, looking for a ragged hole that a mouse or a rat or a squirrel might have gnawed through, but she saw none.

She pushed the baited trap inside the closet and eased the door shut.

The key from the hallway door she had tried that morning was still in the lock. She turned it, experimentally. Then she tried the knob.

The door was locked again.

Evidently the key did work.

Or at any rate, if it couldn't unlock the door, it could lock it.

Gail forced herself to be satisfied: the closet was empty; the baited trap was inside the empty closet; the closet door was locked; and whatever might find its way inside there could not get out.

As the sky blackened beyond the dense evergreens outside Gail's window, she heated her frozen dinner in her tiny oven.

She listened for Dr. Fenner, but he did not come home. She went downstairs once, checked to make sure the outside doors were locked, peered out a few windows, and went back upstairs.

She put out her dinner on the little round tea table, making sure the double thickness of a towel protected the cheap veneer, and ate it by the light of her slide projector.

She had her first class that morning in Renaissance Painters of Northern Europe and had already decided that her midterm paper would be "Secular Symbolism in the Low Countries." She wasn't entirely sure what that was, but it was the sort of title that always garnered an A. In preparation for this work, she clicked slide to slide, studying details of Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights.

Click. A gaunt old woman in black was hatched from a broken egg.

Click. A naked dwarf was prodded with a pitchfork toward a precipice over broken rocks.

Click. A pair of adulterous lovers, with milky skin and flaxen hair, embraced naked in a cauldron of boiling oil.

Snap. The trap sprung inside the locked closet.

Gail turned off the projector. She pushed away the tray of her congealing defrosted dinner. She turned on the small lamp with the frilled shade that had belonged to Fenner's daughter. She went over and knelt before the closet door.

She turned the key and then tried the knob.

It was locked.

She rattled the knob, turned the key, rattled the knob again, turned the key twice, beat upon the panels.

The door would not open.

She placed her ear to the panels, to hear the whimpering of whatever creature had been caught in the trap. She heard nothing at all. Evidently the thing that had been caught in the trap had died in it.

Gail wanted to wait up for Fenner, but she had a class at eight in the morning. When he had not come home by eleven o'clock, she tried the closet door one more time, found it still locked, and went to bed.

At the top of the house, the windows of her room were closed, and she didn't hear the wind in the trees outside. She didn't hear the green boughs sliding along the roof above her head.

She didn't hear Fenner when he quietly opened the door downstairs, slapped on the light in the entryway, and sliced open the mail with the sharp brass letter opener some student had given him many years before. She didn't hear when Fenner climbed the stairs to the second floor, unlocked his bedroom door, went inside, and then turned the key once more, this time locking the door from within.

She didn't hear when the knob of the small closet door in her room turned slowly. Didn't hear when the door swung slowly open and didn't hear when- But she did hear it. Heard it all. Heard the wind in the trees outside the closed locked windows. Heard the branches sighing against the roof.

Heard Fenner enter the house; heard the ripping of enve lopes, one after the other; and the impatient crumpling of stupid letters and advertisements. Heard his steps upon the stairs, heard the key turning twice in the lock of his bedroom door.

Heard the creature in the closet as it slowly turned the knob and opened the door and hurtled out across the floor.

Hear its quick, shallow breath as it secreted itself nervously behind the chair near the window.

In her dream she heard its padded feet- She sat up in the iron bed fully awake, and instantly whipped out the flashlight she always kept beneath her pillow.

She flicked it on and shone it toward the closet.

The closet door was open.

She slid off the bed, knowing what she had to do and dreading it. She approached the closet and shone the light all around the close walls, the narrow floorboards, the shallow shelving.

It was as empty as it had been that morning. No creature, twisted and stiffened in a little pool of dark congealed blood.

In fact, the trap was gone as well—the slab of pine with the manufacturer's name in bleeding blue ink, the steel catch and the hook, the foul cheese.

"Where's the trap?" she said aloud, to hear her voice.

She slammed shut the closet door. She returned quickly to her bed, shut off the flashlight, and crammed it beneath the pillow again. She pulled the covers up to her neck. Lying on her side, she stared out through the curtains and the closed windows and through the dense evergreens to a distant street light that wasn't nearly close enough. Fell asleep.

And dreamed.

Dreamed she was still awake, staring through the curtains and the closed windows and through the dense evergreens to the distant streetlight. Dreamed that another pair of eyes stared at the streetlight too. Large, round, wet, blinking eyes.

Stared from beneath the bed.

Gail dreamed she stayed awake all night, huddled beneath the covers, not daring to get out of bed, drop to her kneed, and peer beneath the bed at the creature that had taken refuge there. The creature that lived in the closet.

"If you still want a ride to campus, I'm leaving in two minutes," said Fenner.

She hurried around, clearing cup, saucer, plate, knife, and spoon. She hadn't slept properly, she had dreamed too much, and she was short with him. "There's a rat in that closet."

Fenner looked at the closet but said nothing.

"I managed to get it open."

"How?"

"The key to this door also fits the closet. I'll show you."

She took the key from the hallway door, knelt before the closet door, and inserted it.

The key didn't work.

"My daughter lost the key a long time ago. That door hasn't been opened in years."

"I got it open last night," Gail returned sharply. "And I put a mousetrap inside."

Fenner raised one brow. "What did you catch?"

"Nothing. The trap disappeared." She stared gathering her books.

Fenner glanced around the room. "Do you think the rat appropriated it to his own uses?"

"It must have moved the trap somewhere else."

Gail noticed she had left her hair dryer on the chair.

She put down her books, picked up the dryer, and neatly wrapped it in its cord.

"Maybe your rat was raised on rutabagas."

"Rutabagas?"

"Rutabagas are brain food," Fenner explained with deadpan seriousness. "Rats may be smart enough to avoid a trap, but they're not smart enough to rearrange the furniture."

Gail pulled the box of appliances from beneath the bed and put the hair dryer in it. She stood up and looked Fenner in the eye.

"What's on the other side of that closet?"

"Attic space. But it's closed off. There's no way of getting to it."

"It could be fumigated," Gail suggested.

Fenner checked his watch. "I'm going to be late." He turned on his heel and started down the stairs.

Gail hurriedly picked up her books and started out. As she was pulling the door shut behind her, she noticed she had forgotten to put her box of appliances back beneath the bed.

It grated against her sense of order and neatness, but Fenner's tread down the stairs was quick and hurried, so she left it and pulled the door shut behind her.

A moment later she caught up with Fenner.

A moment after that he locked the front door behind them.

A moment after that Gail got into the front seat of Fen ner's car and peered through the windshield up at the windows of her room.

A moment after that, inside Gail's locked room, inside the locked house, the cardboard box of Gail's

appliances was drawn slowly back beneath the bed, where it belonged.

"No," said Gail, speaking aloud to the writer of the letter she had just received, addressed to Mr. and Mrs. G. Aynsley, "I would not care to invest in Krugerrands today, thank you very much. All my assets are tied up in rutabagas. . ."

She tossed the letter into the trash and stacked her books neatly on the table. It had taken an investment firm located in Dover, Delaware, only three days, both to find her in this new home and to create an imaginary companion for her. She shook her head, wondering at—"—wondering at the open closet door.

In the three days since she'd heard the trap snap shut behind the door, she'd heard nothing else from inside the closet.

She'd dreamed no dreams of something that hid behind that door she could not open.

She smoothed the front of her dress and went over to the closet. She knelt before it and slowly pulled the door wide.

The closet was filled with clothes.

The rack sagged with the weight of dozens of dressed—a little girl's dresses, with crinoline skirts, puffed sleeves, ruffs, pleats, and swags. The shelves were jammed with neatly stacked cotton underwear, crisply folded blouses, and folded socks. The floor was lined with a dozen pair of tiny polished shoes.

It was the wardrobe of a five-year-old girl, the way an obsessive mother would arrange it. But all the clothes were definitely out of current fashion. They weren't even the fashion of the clothes Gail had worn as a child. They were the clothes Gail had seen in photos of her mother, who's been five in 1954.

When Gail pushed aside the dresses to see if there was anything on the hoods on the back wall, she saw two large round eyes staring coldly back at her.

She startled and fell back. As she scrambled to her feet and flailed out to slam shut the closet door on whatever the creature was inside there, one of the staring pupils shifted so that the two eyes became quite comically crossed.

Gail pushed the dresses even farther aside, revealing a china-headed doll lolling on a hook that snagged her pink pinafore. Gail laughed at her own fear, and placing her left hand on the floor of the closet for leverage, she reached deep into the closet to unsnag the doll and- Snap. That was the mousetrap, clapping shut on Gail's ring finger.

She cried out in pain, stood up suddenly—and banged her head on the door lintel.

Crying both for the pain in her fingers and on the crown of her head, she shook the trap loose and ran to the sink to run cold water over the throbbing joints. She fumbled with the faucet handle, then thrust her fingers beneath the cold water.

At the same time she rubbed the crown of her head, and at the same time as that, looked back at the closet wondering how the trap had been set again and how- The closet door swung shut of its own accord.

The water spilled from the faucet and swirled down the drain.

Gail watched the closet door to see if it would open again and listened to hear if anything moved inside.

She held her injured hand before her frightened face, gripping the swelling fingers tightly.

Blood dripped slowly from her smashed nails onto her white canvas shoe.

"It was Margaret's room," replied Fenner, placing his hat on the rack just inside the front door. His scarf and overcoat followed.

"Where is she now?" She spoke to him from the landing, hoping the psychological effect of her elevation would help the inquiry.

"Montpelier, Vermont. She has a boyfriend. I paid for four years of college and two years of graduate school. So now, of course, she's painting houses for a living."

"What about your wife?" asked Gail.

"A lump."

"A lump?"

"In her breast," explained Fenner, slicing open the top envelope on the stack of his mail that had arrived earlier.

"Mastectomy. Another lump. A second mastectomy."

"I—" Gail had started to protest that this wasn't what she was asking about at all, but Fenner didn't choose to notice her embarrassed fumbling.

"Chemotherapy. Spleen, liver. Death and inheritance taxes."

"I can't get that closet door open," Gail said abruptly.

"Of course not. I told you that when you moved in."

"It was open this afternoon when I got home from school.

Then it shut by itself and I can't get it open again. I tried a

screwdriver."

"That's why I put the standing wardrobe in there," he said with caustic logic. He crumpled a letter and simply dropped it on the floor. "So you wouldn't have to bother with that closet."

"There's something living inside that closet, Dr. Fenner!"

He did not answer, and as if Gail's difficulties with the closet were both trivial and boring, he began to

read a printed article that had been sent him in a large manila envelope.

It had rained late in the afternoon, and hours later the evergreens in the yard still slowly dripped water onto the sodden ground.

Gail lay beneath her cover, her face turned toward the wall. The covers were drawn up to her neck. Her breathing was slow and regular.

Ritttch. Ritttch.

Horny nails scratching furtively on wood.

It was what Gail had been waiting for, for an hour now, absolutely still beneath the covers. She sat up suddenly and straight in the bed and flicked on the light, pointing it directly on the knob of the closet door.

The brass gleamed as the knob was turned this way and that. Turned by whatever was on the other side of that closet door.

She turned off the flashlight, threw back the covers, and slid quietly off the bed to the floor. With the flashlight held so it wouldn't knock against the floor, Gail crawled across the darkened room toward the closet door.

Click.

The door was unlocked now.

As she crawled closer, the door of the closet swung slowly open.

The dresses, the neatly folded underwear and blouses, the polished shoes, all were gone again. Inside the closet was only blackness.

She raised her flashlight, directed it into the interior of the closet, and then flicked it on.

The creature writhed and squealed in the glare of the flashlight. Yellow and naked, it was scarcely two feet high, no larger than the china-headed doll that had so startled Gail that afternoon. Hairless, with bowed legs and flat feet with webbing between the toes. Its arms were bony and short, the fingers long, with sharp, horny nails. It had large, wet eyes and no ears, and many small yellow teeth. When it squealed, its anger was like that of Gail's younger retarded brother when he was interrupted at play.

The creature swiped the flashlight out of her hand. When Gail turned and fled, the creature leapt upon her back. Its webbed feet had claws, too, for they tore through her nightgown and raked deep into her flesh.

One of its hands caught in her hair, and the creature's strength was such that it tore that fistful of hair out of her scalp.

When she started to scream, the creature clapped its other clawed hand across her face, dragging bloodily across cheek, lip, and gum. Gail stumbled against the cheap tea table that had belonged to Fenner's daughter, and fell to the floor. Her head cracked against the floorboards.

The creature, who had leapt clear, lifted Gail's head, then knocked it twice more against the floor, even more sharply.

Then with one clawed hand entwined in her hair, and the other nails digging deeply and bloodily into her wrist, the creature pulled Gail into the closet and shut the door after them.

"I spoke to her briefly last night, yes . . ." Fenner admitted impatiently. He held the letter opener between the palms of his hands, slowly turning it point-up and point-down as he talked into the telephone cradled against his shoulder.

"No, I didn't see her this morning," he answered in the sort of patient voice that very clearly expressed impatience.

"Mrs. Aynsley, I rented your daughter a room in my house.

I did not become her legal guardian."

Mrs. Aynsley fretted on at length, and Fenner did not hear the door on the third-floor landing as it was softly opened, then softly closed again.

"Probably she wasn't even awake when I left this morning,"

Fenner said. "I have early office hours on Thursdays."

Fenner stabbed the letter opener through the cover of one of Gail's art history books, which had been left on the hall table. His back was to the staircase, and he did not hear the soft, bare tread on the thick stair carpet.

"No, I will not see if she has an appointment book, Mrs. Aynsley. I teach veterinary science, not espionage. I'm sure she'll call you when she's settled in," he said hurriedly, interrupting another torrent of distress. "Now you really must excuse me, I'm having root-canal work done in half an hour.

Good-bye."

He hung up the telephone with a smile and- --and cried aloud at the pain in his leg. Something sharp had sheared through the cloth of his trousers and raked through his skin. Fenner gazed down at the creature that was holding tightly to his leg.

It peered coyly up at him.

"Oh, you bad, bad girl!" Fenner cried reprovingly. "Do you know what kind of trouble you've gotten me into?"

The creature hung its head and chittered a guilty sort of chitter.

"What am I going to do with you?" said Fenner softly, shaking his head. The creature bowed its head between its bony yellow shoulders, then peered up pitifully at Fenner. He grabbed up the creature, shook it with playful wrath, nuzzled its tiny head against his cheek, and laughed indulgently.

"What am I going to do with my naughty, naughty little girl?!"

The creature chittered its happiest chitter, the happy sound of a loved, forgiven child.

PRINTER'S DEVIL

by Ron Goulart

This isn't about making a pact with Satan.

Alex Kellaway never claimed to be the devil or even one of his emissaries. He was nothing more, Kellaway always maintained, than a crack literary agent who used unorthodox meth ods.

Me and the Devil was the title of a barely passable occult novel by Junior Harmon that was rejected by eleven paperback houses in Manhattan in the space of nine weeks. A proposal, tattered and coffee-stained long since, was returned to him by the eleventh house—with an insulting note from the fresh out-of-college associate editor saying it was god-awful, and inquiring, further, why a worn-down hack who was pushing fifty still signed himself "Junior"—Harmon decided to seek out an agent.

He'd been peddling his own stories, articles, and books for the last three years, ever since his then agent had leaped to her death from her fifth-floor offices in the East Sixties.

Although there'd been a half-read proposal of Harmon's on her desk, he attributed her plunge to economic woes.

The past few months he'd been hearing good things about a relatively new literary agent named Alex Kellaway. Kellaway didn't exactly conduct his business in a style that impressed Junior favorably, though. There were, for instance, ads in all the writers' magazines. ANY SCHMUCK CAN SELL WHAT HE WRITES!

a typical headline proclaimed. LET KELLAWAY PUT SOME MAGIC IN YOUR

CAREER! Another, accompanied by a grainy photo of the pudgy Kellaway

holding up fistfuls of cash, blared MAKE BUCKS

AS A WRITER! For the unpublished author there was a modest reading fee; for pros like Harmon, there was only a commission charged.

"Let's get that straight right off," Kellaway said to him on his initial visit. "I take twenty percent of all your dough."

"20 percent? The standard comm—"

"I don't do a standard job, kiddo."

Kellaway in the flesh was not impressive. He was even fatter than his photos suggested, somewhere in his forties, clad in a rumpled brown suit that dated back to the late 1950s.

His tie, which had several blackish splotches, was decorated with an enormous flock of geese going south. And so matter when you encountered him, he always looked as though he hadn't shaved since yesterday.

“Well, I have heard good things about the—“

“Before we go any further,” cut in Kellaway, holding up a pudgy hand.

“Let me check something, Junior.”

Reaching into his worn briefcase, Harmon said, “I brought a list of all

my publish—“

“I already know all that crap.” With a grunt, Kellaway opened a low drawer of his claw-footed wooden desk. He produced a milky, slightly greasy crystal ball and plopped it down in a small clear space amidst the clutter on his desk. “We need to take a gander into the future.”

Harmon sat up in his lopsided chair. “The future?”

“Button your bazoo for a while,” suggested the agent.

Harmon dropped his briefcase back onto the faded carpet and glanced around the room. It didn’t exactly reek of success. The office was small and the ceiling so low, it gave you the impression it was lowly descending to crush you. The solitary window was smeared with soot and gave a view of a stone wall the color of a starless midnight. Bookshelves lined one wall, but they held few books. Instead, there were small stuffed animals, old brass candlesticks, strings of gaudy glass beads, three human skulls, framed photos of faded people from the last century, little lacquered boxes, and a few odd knives.

“Ommmmmmmmm,” Kellaway was droning, both fat hands stro king the crystal ball.

Clearing his throat, Harmon glanced over his shoulder at the door out.

“Maybe I made a mistake in—“

“Shut your yap.” Kellaway continued to fondle the crystal. “Draw back

thy curtain, O Time. Huh . . . here she comes

. . . a hundred thousand smackers a year. Not bad. I’ll make a neat twenty thou on that. Yeah, not a bad take for a schlep like you, Junior.”

Blinking, Harmon inquired. “You see a hundred thousand in income in there for me?”

“I see eighty thousand for you and twenty thousand for yours truly.”

“Listen, I’ve been free-lancing since—“

“Nineteen sixty-four, when your first wife dumped you and her pappy

fired you as manager of his shoe store in Queens,”

said the fat agent. “Feldman’s Shoetree. What a dimwit name.

You’ve never earned more than seventeen thousand in any given year since then. Which isn’t surprising,

considering your talent."

Harmon got to his feet. "Wait now, if you think I'm lousy, why do

you—"

"What the hell does lousy have to do with it" Have you read Lobo Sardinian's new thriller, The Dickensheet Interface?

Six hundred forty-two pages of crapola, but I got the simp four hundred thousand from Pillar Books for the frapping paperback rights. That's not bad money for these troubled times, Junior."

"If writing ability doesn't mean any—"

"Magic is what does it." The agent grinned.

"You mean your gifts as a salesman and—"

"Naw, I mean sorcery and witchcraft," said Kellaway impatiently. "Haven't you ever perused The New York Times bestseller list of a Sunday and wondered how a book about how to make your backside lovelier could be the hottest tome in the whole flapping country? Or how a novel about a homosexual midget could sell to the movies for a million five? Witchcraft and magic. Simple. And I'm far from the only literary agent working this angle, kiddo."

"Yeah, but I'm a good writer," protested Harmon. "Any success I've had

has been because people like what I do and—"

Kellaway made a loud raspberry noise. "Bushwa," he said.

"I can take any dimwit off the street and make him or her into a

successful author. Well, no, not every single dimwit." He tapped the

crystal with his plump forefinger. "I've never exactly figured this

out, but I can work the trick only with certain—"

His phone rang.

"Miss DeBeck, I told you I didn't want to be bothered,"

he snarled into the receiver. "I'm in the midst of an import—ah? You've tracked the rotten little deadbeat to his scummy lair, eh? Good, good, put him on." Kellaway gave Harmon a wink. "Giford? What? You'll have to whine a little louder, I can't . . . That's better. Okay, Giffy, why haven't I been paid for the writing lesson in five long months? Leg braces for your . . . No, no, Giford. That won't wash.

Kellaway has to come first with you. Now listen to me, Giford, you're blind in one eye now, right? Okay, schlep, you've got until Friday to get that two hundred and twenty dollars to me or—" Kellaway took the phone away from his ear for a second, wincing. "Giford, how many times have I told you not to do those agonized screams so close to the phone? Okay, I accept your apology. Send me the money or

go blind. ‘Bye.” He hung up and chuckled. “Who owes you money, Junior?”

Swallowing, Harmon said, “Well, as a matter of face, I haven’t been able

to get some four hundred and eighty dollars that Hightower Magazines has

owed me for some articles I did for their girlie magazines. One, in

Snatch two months ago, about foot fetishes around the world, is supposed

to pay a hundred and seventy-five and—“

“Miss DeBeck, get that swine Mo Hightower on the horn,”

Kellaway said into the phone as he began to poke down in another desk drawer. “We do a lot of business with that ganef, Junior, so I already have a doll for him.”

“Doll?”

“Voodoo doll.” Kellaway dropped a six-inch-high wax figure next to the crystal ball. The figure was chubby, bald, wearing a double-breasted gray suit. “Mo, is that you? Fine, and yourself? Mo, I’m representing Junior Harmon. Yes, I agree he certainly is a gifted young writer. And you owe the schlep five hundred eighty dollars, you moneygrubbing toad.”

“Four hundred eighty,” corrected Harmon in a quiet voice.

“What, Mo? Your accountant’s sick and your computer’s down. Remember when you owed Mitch Jazzminski a hundred and sixty dollars?” Kellaway was poking around amid the piles of papers on his desk top. To Harmon he mouthed, “Got a straight pin?”

“No, I—“

“Never mind. I’ll use this ballpoint pen . . . Mo, you still there? Okay, this is going into your tummy.” He jabbed at the wax figure with the tip of the silvery pen. “Sure, it hurts. Remember the last time? This is going to be much worse, because there’s a larger sum of money involved. After the stomachache we’ll try your crotch, Mo, and then . . . What?

Okay, but a certified check. Sent over by messenger, Mo.

Thanks, ‘bye” Hanging up, he put the doll carefully away.

“How’d you—“

“Magic.” Kellaway rubbed the tip of the pen. “Voodoo in this case. I have an eclectic approach to agenting, Junior.

You’ll find me using voodoo, witchcraft, Satanism . . . what ever’s best for my clients.”

“Hightower’s really going to send the money right over?”

“Of course. He’s no sap. After that coronary I gave him two years ago, he doesn’t mess around. That

was for fifteen hundred dollars he owed us on a serialization for Nipples.

"This is impressive, but—"

"Sure, the unorthodox takes a little getting used to."

Kellaway leaned back, stroked his stubbly chins. "How'd you like to sell Me and the Devil to 4Most Paperbacks for five thousand dollars?"

"They've already bounced it."

"Leave me a copy of the proposal, one of the ones you have in that tacky briefcase."

"How'd you know I had—"

"On the simpler sales and collection problems, I can go it alone," the agent continued. "With novels and bigger advances, you have to cooperate."

"You mean lunch with the editor or—"

"No, no, stay away from that bitch at 4Most." Kellaway closed his puffy eyelids for a few seconds. "Yes, here's what you have to do. Sleep in a graveyard."

"Beg pardon?"

"Graveyard," repeated Kellaway, a shade impatient. "Sleep in one. From midnight tonight to dawn tomorrow. Be sure your frapping head points north."

"What's that got to do with selling—"

"Trust me," cut in Kellaway. "For an agent-author relationship to work well, there must be mutual trust. Right?"

"I suppose, sure, but where would I find a graveyard in—"

"There's one, a nice eighteenth-century relic, about six blocks from that hovel you live in in the Village, Junior.

Attached to the Church of St. Norbert the Divine."

"Won't they chase me away if—"

"Do you want to sell this damn book or not?"

"Yes, since it's the best idea I've come up with in a long time. Still,

though—"

"Sleep. Graveyard. Midnight to dawn." He rose. "Do you want your eighty percent of that five hundred and eighty dollars today?"

"It would help with an alimony payment I'm behind on."

"Sit out in the reception room with Miss DeBeck until it arrives," said Kellaway. "She'll write you a check for four hundred and sixty-four dollars soon as the messenger comes tottering in." He held out his right hand. "We're going to have a fruitful relationship, Junior."

The night in the cemetery wasn't as bad as Harmon had anticipated. He actually managed to sleep for nearly four hours, and when he awoke, although he discovered someone had swiped his shoes right off his feet, he didn't feel all that bad. Four days later Kellaway phoned to inform him that Me and the Devil had been sold to 4Most for seven thousand five hundred dollars.

Harmon was elated, and his reservations about the agent—most of them—vanished. It looked like Kellaway was going to be the most effective agent he'd ever had.

As he worked away on completing the occult novel, which had been sold on the basis of three lackluster chapters and a muddled outline, Harmon's social life began to change. At the annual banquet of the Foot Writers of America, less than two months after joining up with Kellaway, he met an absolutely stunning fashion model named Pert Rainey. She was slim, blonde, twenty-seven, and she professed to be a great fan of his. Harmon's article on famous feet of yesteryear, which had run in a health-oriented girlie magazine called Vegetarian Tits, was up for a Big Toe Award, and Pert had sought out Harmon to inform him she was rooting for him to win.

"I just dote on your work, Mr. Harmon, and this is a real thrill meeting you in person, especially as you don't look anywhere near as runty as you do in the author's photo on your last hardcover book."

"You read that?" He's done only two hardcover books in his life; the last had come out six years ago.

"I'm honestly surprised it wasn't on the bestseller list."

The lovely blonde squeezed his arm fondly. "The minute I saw the title, A Picture History of Shoes, I knew I was going to love it. And not just because I'm a shoe model by profession.

I mean, your prose style is absolutely breathtaking, and fur thermore .

She went on to tell him she'd read all five of his Pow dersmoke Kid adult Westerns for Runt Books, three out of the four Lady from BOSOM novels he'd done for Rooster Books in the early 1970s, and even his latest historical, The Lusty Duchess. That very night, although Harmon lost out on the Big Toe, he spent the night with Pert in her impressive Central Park West penthouse apartment.

Kellaway called him there the next morning at a few minutes after nine.

"You off your ox, Junior?" he inquired.

"How'd you know I was—"

"How's Pert in the sack? Does she grab as much as she does when she's upright?"

"Whoa now, Kellaway. There's no way you could've known I was going

to—"

"Before noon go into a church and light six black candles while reciting the Lord's Prayer in Latin backward."

"Hum? They don't have black candles in church or—"

"You have to bring the candles yourself, dimwit. And don't let the priests catch you."

"Why am I supposed to—"

"It's to cinch the romance. See, like I told you, Junior, you've got to

play a role. Sometimes before the fact, some times after. In this

case—"

"You're trying to tell me Pert fell instantly in love with me because of some damn magic spell?" He glanced anxiously at the door of the bedroom the lovely girl had returned to after summoning him to the phone.

"Would a rational woman, even a half-wit like Pert, fall for you otherwise?"

"I was married twice, after all."

"Did they look like Pert?"

"Well, not exactly . . . but she's read all my books. She told me."

"She only thinks she has."

"C'mon, she can quote—"

"Have you ever before, anywhere, met a human being who admitted to reading a single Lady from BOSOM novel?"

"No, not yet—"

"Go light the candles. Get hold of a Latin version of the Lord's prayer. Backward, remember?"

"Kellaway, it's not right or honest to have somebody sleeping with me if

it's only because of some dark supernatural trick you—"

"She's a better lay than your wives?"

"Sure, I guess so, but—"

"Come into my office at eleven on Monday morning. I've got a new deal cooking for you."

Harmon sat with the phone resting on his naked lap for several minutes.

Then he went and lit the candles.

Cinching the three-book deal for a new series of macho Westerns wasn't that difficult, even though the Western market had supposedly gone soft. Harmon did feel a trace silly putting on the long black robe with the golden moons and planets on it and reciting pages of Chinese while standing Kellaway's desk with Miss DeBeck playing the bongos and the fat agent setting off sticks of sulfur. It worked, though, and Harmon was to get ten thousand dollars per novel. The very editor who's once made fun of his name took him to lunch the day the contracts were signed.

Lunch at a restaurant where the entrees started at

$17.95. A far cry from the usual editorial lunches he'd had, at delis and Chinese carry-out joints. Success was coming his way at last.

Pert continued to adore him. When Harmon left his dingy rooms in Greenwich Village for a six-room apartment on East Seventy-third, the lovely blonde moved in with him.

Me and the Devil was published just before Christmas and did fairly well. Harmon got favorable reviews, was invited to be on local talk shows, and there was even an autographing party at a bookshop in Yonkers.

He would have coasted along, enjoying his enlarged income and the stunning Pert, turning out the three Westerns at a leisurely pace of one every couple of months. But Kellaway wasn't one for resting on the oars.

"You ought to have some stories in Playpen and Houseboy,"

he told Harmon on a bleak December afternoon while gray snow hit at his smeary office window.

"They're not very high on foot-oriented nonfiction in the manner of Roald Dahl and Harlan Ellison. Bright, witty stuff with a lot of razzle-dazzle prose. I'll get you three thousand dollars per yarn."

"I suppose I could try a—"

"First buy a chicken."

"Hm?"

"A chicken." Kellaway flapped his elbows and clucked a few times. "There's a poultry shop over on Second Avenue near your new place that sells 'em live."

"I don't want a live chicken, Alex. I can't have pets in the apartment,

and even if I could, I'd lean more toward gold fish or—"

"Buy a live chicken. A black one, if you can." the hefty agent instructed him. "Take it to Central Park tonight at midnight. Slit its throat."

Harmon popped up out of his chair. "I don't really have to sell to Playpen, ever."

"Yeah, you do." Kellaway's left eye narrowed. "It's important for your career plan."

"Why can't I write the stories first? That'll take me a month or more.

Then we can talk about the chicken again."

Kellaway shook his head. "Chicken first. Then write."

"How come?"

"Listen, schlep, I don't make up these frapping spells,"

explained the annoyed Kellaway. "The ancient book of black magic I'm

using on this particular problem specifies—"

"How does an ancient book know anything about Playpen and Houseboy?"

"Actually, the original spell is for selling a five-act tragedy to the Globe Theatre in Elizabethan England, but the principle's the same," Kellaway told him. "That's the good thing about magic. Dependability."

Harmon killed the chicken.

When the first of his new Westerns came out the following spring, it was optioned by Paragon-Mecca Films immediately for fifteen thousand dollars.

"That'll be six chickens," Kellaway informed him when he announced the sale. "Tonight at midnight, also in the park."

"Can't we use a different sort of spell? With that last chicken I

almost got frostbite, and I was nearly mugged, and a gay nighttime

jogger tried to—"

"Six chickens. Be nice if one of 'em was a red rooster."

Harmon killed the chickens.

"The Book-of-the-Month Club?" Pert clapped her pretty hands together and smiled across the white table at him.

They were dining at a French restaurant where the appe tizers commenced at $17.95.

"I don't know," said Harmon forlornly.

"But, Junior, it's basically wonderful. How many other adult Western paperbacks get picked as the Main Selection of the month?"

"I have to kill a goat," he said in a low voice.

The candlelight made her golden hair sparkle as she shook her lovely head sympathetically. "Just one?"

"One is plenty, Pert."

"In the park again, same as the chickens?"

He nodded. "By midnight tonight."

She sighed. "Do you have the goat yet?"

"Miss DeBeck's bringing it around in her van at eleven."

After a moment Pert said, "It is the Book-of-the-Month Club, Junior."

Harmon killed the goat.

A morose robin was perched on Kellaway's drab windowsill.

"Can you write a thriller in the Lobo Sardinian manner?"

Kellaway asked Harmon. "Something like The Eisenberg Runar ound or The Hickenlooper Bypass or The Hungerford Gambit?

"Sure," answered Harmon. "Soon as I finish my third Western, I'll whip up a proposal."

"Sooner."

"Well, when exactly?"

"Sardinian's hardcover publisher, Dragoman and Brothers, wants something by late fall.

"Why can't Sardinian write it?"

"He'll be dead before then." The agent tapped his ample chest. "Heart."

"That's awful. I just saw Lobo at the last Suspense Writers of America cocktail party a few weeks ago, and he looked chipper and fit."

"Lobo doesn't know about it."

"Then how do you . . . oh."

"To guarantee a seventy-five thousand dollar advance, Junior, requires a very heavy spell and lots of ritual."

"Such as?"

"We'll need a human sacrifice."

"No!" Harmon leaped up, shaking. "No, nope, not at all."

Making a take-it-easy motion with his left hand, the agent said, "Look, schmuck, we don't need anybody special on this one. Any sort of human sacrifice will do. A Bowery bum'll be fine."

"A chicken I went along with, and even a goat. But not people, Alex."

"A bum, I said." said Kellaway. "They got hundreds of

'em down there. You go down there tonight, pick out a likely deadbeat, and kill him. They got 'em sprawled in every alley.

Use something like a carving knife and . . . zip! No problem."

"I can't do that."

"How's you wisdom tooth?"

"What the hell does that have to do with this?"

"Had a pretty bad toothache last night didn't you? From about eleven-thirty until almost two A.M."

"I hurt it on a chunk of lobster tail at . . . wait." He put the chair between himself and his agent. "Are you hinting you caused that toothache?"

"Only schmucks hint. I did cause it, kiddo." Kellaway smiled up at him.

"Tonight it'll be a migraine."

Harmon started to walk toward the desk. "Do you have a wax figure of me?"

"I don't keep it here. None of my clients are here."

Harmon halted. "I've had migraines before."

Kellaway chuckled. "Not like this one."

"I won't do it."

He held out until nearly midnight.

Then Harmon went and killed the bum.

His thriller was published in early spring and did fairly well.

The reviews were cordial if not excited. The novel didn't make it to the best-seller lists, though it made Harmon quite a bit of money.

A week later on the official publication date, he and Pert flew to the small, idyllic Caribbean island of San Norberto.

They rented a private villa on a tranquil stretch of private beach.

He was sleeping pretty well again these days. He was gaining weight and could eat three meals a day without gagging or throwing up. He hardly ever had the screaming nightmares anymore. He had never

told Pert about what he'd done in the Bowery that night.

The blonde, wearing only the bottom part of a crimson bikini, was down at the edge of the incredibly blue water, and Harmon was watching her from the green-shaded terrace of the villa when the phone on the glass-topped table next to his lounging chair rang.

"Hello?"

"How goes it, Junior? Soaking up the sun, heh?"

"I've been thinking," said his agent. "Your thriller is doing okay."

"Yes, it is."

"But I think it's time for you to go for the big one,"

said Kellaway. "What we want next is a guaranteed best seller."

LEVITATION

by Joseph Payne Brennan

Morgan's Wonder Carnival moved into Riverville for an overnight stand, setting up its tents in the big ball park on the edge of the village. It was a warm evening in early October and by seven o'clock a sizable crowd had made its way to the scent of a raucous amusement.

The traveling show was neither large nor particularly impressive of its type, but its appearance was eagerly welcomed in Riverville, an isolated mountain community many miles from the motion picture houses, vaudeville theaters and sports are has situated in larger towns.

The natives of Riverville did not demand sophisticated entertainment; consequently the inevitable Fat Lady, the Tat tooed Man and the Monkey Boy kept them chattering animatedly for many minutes at a time. They crammed peanuts and buttered popcorn into their mouths, drank cup after cup of pink lemon made, and got their fingers all but stuck together trying to scrape the paper wrappers off colored taffy candies.

Everyone appeared to be in a relaxed and tolerant state of mind when the barker for the Hypnotist began his spiel. The barker, a short stocky man wearing a checkered suit, bellowed through an improvised megaphone, while the Hypnotist himself remained aloof at the rear of the plank platform erected in front of his tent. He appeared disinterested, scornful, and he scarcely deigned to glance at the gathering crowd.

At length, however, when some fifty souls had assembled in front of the platform, he stepped forward into the light. Amurmur went up from the crowd.

In the harsh overhead electric glare, the Hypnotist made a striking appearance. His tall figure, thin to the point of emaciation, his pale complexion, and most of all his dark, sunken eyes, enormous and brilliant, compelled immediate attention. His dress, a severe black suit and an archaic black string tie, added a final Mephistophelean touch.

He surveyed the crowd coolly, with an expression betraying resignation and a kind of quiet contempt.

His sonorous voice reached to the far edge of the throng.

"I will require one volunteer from among you," he said. "If someone

will kindly step up—"

Everyone glanced around, or nudged his neighbor, but nobody advanced toward the platform.

The Hypnotist shrugged. "There can be no demonstration," he said in a weary voice, "unless one of you is kind enough to come up. I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, the demonstration is quite harmless, quite without danger."

He looked around expectantly and presently a young man slowly elbowed through the crowd toward the platform.

The Hypnotist helped him up the steps and seated him in a chair.

"Relax," said the Hypnotist. "Presently you will be asked, and you will do exactly what I tell you to do."

The young man squirmed on the chair, grinning selfcon sciously toward the crowd.

The Hypnotist caught his attention, fixing his enormous eyes on him, and the young man stopped squirming.

Suddenly someone in the crowd threw a large ball of colored popcorn toward the platform. The popcorn arched over the lights, landing squarely atop the head of the young man sitting in the chair.

He jerked sideways, almost falling off the chair, and the crowd, quiet a moment before, guffawed boisterously.

The Hypnotist was furious. He turned scarlet and literally shook with rage as he glared at the crowd.

"Who threw that?" he demanded in a choking voice.

The Hypnotist continued to glare at them. At length the color left his face and he stopped trembling, but his brilliant eyes remained baleful.

Finally he nodded to the young man seated on the platform, dismissing him with brief thanks, and turned again toward the crowd.

"Due to the interruption," he announced in a low voice, "it will be necessary to recommence he demonstration—with a new subject. Perhaps the person who threw the popcorn would care to come up?"

At least a dozen people in the crowd turned to gaze at someone who stood half in the shadow at the rear of the gathering.

The Hypnotist spotted him at once; his dark eyes seemed to smolder. "Perhaps," he said in a purring, mocking voice, "the one who interrupted is afraid to come up. He prefers to hide in the shadows and throw popcorn!"

The culprit voiced a sudden exclamation and then pushed belligerently toward the platform. His appearance was not in any way remarkable; in fact, he somewhat resembled the first young man, and any casual observer would have placed the two of them in the farm-laborer class, neither more nor less capable than the average.

The second young man sat down in the platform chair with a distinct air of defiance and for some minutes visibly fought the Hypnotist's suggestion to relax. Presently, however, his aggressiveness disappeared and he dutifully stared into the smoldering eyes opposite his own.

In another minute or two he arose at the Hypnot ist's command and lay flat on his back on the hard planks of the platform. The crowd gasped.

"You will fall asleep," the Hypnotist told him. "You will fall asleep.

You are falling asleep. You are falling asleep.

You are asleep and you will do anything which I command you to do.

Anything which I command you to do. Anything . . ."

His voice droned on, repeating repetitious phrases, and the crowd grew perfectly silent.

Suddenly a new note entered the Hypnotist's voice and the audience became tense.

"Do not stand up—but rise from the platform!" the Hypnotist commanded. "Rise from the platform!" His dark eyes became wild and luminous-looking and the crowd shivered.

"Rise!"

Then the crowd drew in its collective breath with an audible start.

The young man lying rigid on the platform, without moving a muscle, began to ascent horizontally. He arose slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, but soon with a steady and unmistakable acceleration.

"Rise!" the Hypnotist's voice rang out.

The young man continued to ascend, until he was feet off the platform, and still he did not stop.

The crowd was sure it was some kind of trick, but in spite of themselves they stared openmouthed. The young man appeared to be suspended and moving in midair without any possible means of physical support.

Abruptly the focus of the crowd's attention was shifted;

the Hypnotist clasped a hand to his chest, staggered, and rumpled to the platform.

There were calls for a doctor. The barker in the checkered suit appeared out of the tent and bent over the motionless form.

He felt for a pulse, shook his head and straightened up.

Someone offered a bottle of whiskey, but he merely shrugged.

Suddenly a woman in the crowd screamed.

Everyone turned to look at her and a second later followed the direction of her gaze.

Immediately there were further cries—for the young man whom the Hypnotist had put to sleep was still ascending.

While the crowd's attention had been distracted by the fatal collapse of the Hypnotist, he had continued to rise. He was now a good seven feet above the platform and moving inexorably upward. Even after the death of the Hypnotist, he continued to obey that final ringing command:

"Rise!"

The barker, eyes all but popping out of his head, made a frantic upward leap, but he was too short. His fingers barely brushed the moving figure above and he fell heavily back to the platform.

The rigid form of the young man continued to float upward, as if he were being hoisted by some kind of invisible pulley.

Women began screaming hysterically; men shouted. But no one knew what to do. A look of terror crept over the face of the barker as he stared up. Once he glanced wildly toward the sprawled shape of the Hypnotist.

"Come down, Frank! Come down!" the crowd shrieked.

"Frank! Wake up! Come down! Stop! Frank!"

But the rigid form of Frank moved ever upward. Up, up, until he was level with the top of the carnival tent, until he reached the height of the tallest trees—until he passed the trees and moved on into the soft moonlit sky of early October.

Many in the crowd threw hands over horror-stricken faces and turned away.

Those who continued to stare saw the floating form ascend into the sky until it was no more than a tiny speck, like a little cinder drifting far up near the moon.

Then it disappeared altogether.

HALOWEEN CANDY

by Michael McDowell

(Based on a Teleplay by Michael McDowell)

The neighborhood was neither this nor that. Half the houses had been built in the early twenties. The other half had been built in the early fifties. All the houses were shabby, all the houses need paint, all the houses stayed on the market at least a year before they sold. All the houses went at what the realtors called bargain prices, and all the buyers of all these houses felt they'd been taken. People lived in these

houses for forty years, or else they lived in them for two months.

Daniel Killup had lived in the house on Dana Street for forty years.

He'd carried his bride over the threshold there.

He'd seen her coffin taken over the same threshold a little over three decades later. He owned the house, and that was the most that could be said for it.

The house was small. Most of the first floor was taken up by a large living room with furniture that had been assembled in the first years of Killup's marriage. Dusty velvet and rotten springs and mahogany that was dark with decades of wax.

Only two pieces of the furniture were in current use—Killup's recliner and the television set that faced it. Through a swinging door behind Killup's recliner was a galley kitchen that had been modern and inconvenient in 1945 and was old fashioned and inconvenient in 1985. Upstairs were cramped rectangular bedrooms, a leaking tiled bathroom, a few tiny closets, and a hallway without either lights or windows. Kil lup's wife died of cancer and boredom after thirty-seven years of marriage, and Killup had halfheartedly tried to commit suicide, out of meanness and boredom, a year later. He drove his car into a ditch, telling his son and the state police that a moving van had tried deliberately to run him off the road.

He didn't die, but now he wore a neck brace because of genuine injuries suffered to his spine.

Killup had a daughter who lived in Seattle and telephones once a year on his birthday and said she loved him but he never otherwise heard from her and knew neither her address nor her married name. His son, Michael, lived two suburbs over, was unhappily married, and earned seventy thousand dollars a year doing something or other in the city.

"I hate Halloween," said Killup.

"You shouldn't smoke, Daddy," said Michael. "You smoke too much."

Michael Killup took the burning cigarette of his father's hand. He crushed it out in the shallow ashtray on the arm of Killup's armchair.

Ashes spilled on the dark red carpet.

"I hate those kids coming around," said Killup. "Last year they played tricks. Last year they soaped my windows.

Last year they put toilet paper in my trees."

"That's because you didn't give them any Halloween candy," said Michael.

"They have no right to expect candy."

"Mother always gave them Halloween candy."

"Your mother's dead," said Killup. "I'm not your mother.

I'm not going to give candy to kids as a reward for ringing my doorbell."

Michael Killup looked around the room. It hadn't changed.

Same draperies on the windows, but faded by endless afternoons of slanting sunlight. Same cheap Brussels rug, but worn threadbare along the paths from Mr. Killup's reclining chair to the front door and from the reclining chair to the kitchen.

The same television set, from the era when only NBC had prime-time color in lurid greens. The same splotchy brass and horns flanking a fireplace that never saw a fire. It all depressed Michael Killup.

"Everybody on this street gives out Halloween candy," he told his father.

"The kids expect it. I remember one year Mrs. Claussen didn't give us any candy. We sheared her poodle. I cut off the end of her garden hose myself. The old woman deserved it. She was meaner than you are, Daddy."

Killup lit another cigarette.

"Mrs. Claussen is dead," Killup said, and laughed.

"Makes me the meanest on the block."

Michael saw no reason to contradict his father. He had been the meanest on the block even before Mrs. Claussen died.

Michael went into the kitchen. He visited his father twice during the week, once on the weekend. He brought with him groceries, and took away with him whatever bills had arrived since his last visit. Killup never thanked his son for doing any of this, and in fact, was always careful to have something to complain about with each visit.

"What are you doing in there?" Killup called from his chair.

"Nothing!" Michael called back. He was, in fact, opening half a dozen bags of cheap candy and pouring in out into shal low bowl for the trick-or-treaters his father so much despised.

As he was reaching a third bowl out of a high cabinet, the door of the refrigerator swung slowly open. The metal handle popped sharply against his hip as it had done many, many times before.

"Door hasn't worked for nine years," Michael said to him self, giving it a sharp kick with his heel. The refrigerator door was one of those things Killup complained about frequently. At the same time, he wouldn't allow Michael to buy a new one. Killup claimed that the ice made by new refrigerators tasted funny.

"Michael!" his father called again from the next room. "I know you're doing something in there."

Michael kicked open the swinging door and entered the living room behind his father. He balanced the bowls of candy on his arms and carried them to the rickety table beside the front door. He gave his father's chair a wide berth. Killup wasn't above sticking out a foot for the nuisance of it.

"I don't intend to wash your windows this year, Daddy.

And I certainly don't intend to climb up in those trees and take down five rolls of toilet paper. So I brought you some candy to give out."

"Waste of money," said Killup.

"A waste of my money," Michael amended.

"I'm glad you don't have children."

Michael set the three bowls of candy on the table, slid the table a few inches nearer the front door, and then turned back to his father.

"I decided against it. I thought I might end up as bad a father to than as you are to me."

Neither the honesty nor the insult of the remark had any effect on Killup. Michael considered that his relationship with his father had improved over the years, for, if nothing else, he could say aloud anything he damned well felt.

"If you want that stuff given out, you're going to have to stay here and do it yourself."

"No," said Michael, "you're going to do it. You're not senile, you're not crippled, you're certainly capable of getting up and answering the door. It's one night a year, and it's all over by eight o'clock. Halloween doesn't last for ever."

"If I'm lucky," said Killup, "maybe one of them will drop dead of an overdose of sugar, right on the doorstep."

"It's no wonder you're so popular in this neighborhood.

It's no wonder I love you so much. I have to get back to work."

"Lock the windows before you go," said Killup.

"What for!"

"I don't want those kids trying to sneak into the house.

They do that nowadays. Sneak in the house and scare you if you don't give 'em candy."

"Then give them the candy!" Michael cried in exasperation.

When Michael made no move to comply with his father's wish, Killup made a great show of weakly raising himself from his chair and shuffling over to the window. He groped through the slats of the closed blinds, searching for the latch on the casements. Then, as Michael continued to watch grimly, his father shuffled over to the nearer window and repeated the process with excruciating slowness. Michael finally sighed in exasperation, shoved his father aside, and completed the operation.

His father didn't thank him. Not even when Michael prompted with a sarcastic, "Satisfied?"

"Hate Halloween," said Killup. "Hate being bothered.

Doorbell starts ringing and goes on forever. Drives me crazy."

Michael looked at his father, slightly shaking his head.

Maybe he was the meanest man on the block, but he was also a lonely old widower.

"Go home with me," Michael said, buttoning his overcoat.

"I invited you."

Killup shook his head. "Those kids would burn down the house if I didn't stay here and protect it. There's no end to the trouble they cause. When are you coming back?"

"Tomorrow after work," said Michael. "Your refrigerator's almost empty. Five eggs, half a pound of swiss cheese, a tub of whipped butter, and half a gallon of buttermilk. Choles terol City. I filled the thing up on Saturday. Have you been stuffing yourself lately?"

"I'm hungry all the time," said Killup. "Nothing else to do except eat."

Michael reached into his pocket, took out a piece of the cheap candy he'd bought, untwirled the purple cellophane wrap per, and popped it into his mouth.

"It tastes terrible," said Michael, grimacing. "So don't eat it all yourself." He opened the front door, stepped out onto the porch.

"Not a chance," said Killup. His father had already pushed the door half closed, as if to show how eagerly he anticipated Michael's departure. "Bring me some waffles tomorrow night. Real frozen ones. Not the kind you pour out of a carton.

Michael straightened the lapels on his father's cardigan.

He saw that the rip in the shoulder seam was wider than two days ago. In the voice that parents employ to demand a clean room of a ten-year-old, Michael said, "When I come back tomorrow, I want to see all that candy gone, you understand?"

Killup made no reply but silently adjusted the sign that read, NO

SALESMEN, CENSUS TAKERS, OR RELIGIOUS FANATICS so that it covered the doorbell.

"If you're not nice to those kids tonight, you're going to deserve anything they can do to you," Michael warned his father. He uncovered the doorbell again, then stalked off toward his car in the driveway.

Killup's only good-bye to his son was to shut the front door more loudly than was at all necessary. The dull red oak leaves swirled up for a moment, then settled again on the narrow, railed porch of sinking boards.

"Trick or treat," said the child in a fuzzy white suit and a slick white mask with white plastic whiskers and a big wicker Easter basket that danced before Killup.

"I'm sick," Killup said. "See my brace? Why are you bothering me?

Didn't you see I didn't turn on the porch light?

Go annoy somebody else."

"Trick or treat, mister," said the Rabbit again, as if it might have thought Killup's brace and invective were only a sort of Halloween costume for adults.

"I don't have any candy," said Killup, the candy clearly visible on the table behind him. "Wouldn't give you any if I did."

He slammed the door in the Rabbit's whimsical face. The Rabbit didn't run off but quietly reached into the bottom if its Easter basket and withdrew a can of flourescent orange spray paint. The Rabbit shook it as quietly as possible, then thumbed off the cap. Its white-gloved finger was on the button when the door suddenly flew open again. Killup took an admo nitory swipe through the air and scowled at the Rabbit.

"I know your tricks. Don't even think about spraying this door with that paint. I've already called the police, and they're on their way."

The Rabbit ran off into the night. Killup smiled his first real smile of the day and quietly shut the door.

He padded back toward his chair in the living room, moving not much faster and with little more ease than he'd shown earlier when he'd tried to make his son feel guilty about not helping him lock the windows. Killup was genuinely a weak man.

If he wanted to look to the left, he had to turn his whole body that way. Any movement of his neck caused a sharp pain that was followed by a dull pain that turned into a headache. His chair was placed so he could look directly ahead at the television. Here he stayed all day, ignoring the doorbell, ignoring the telephone (unless he thought it might be Michael), getting up only to go to the bathroom or to fumble in the kitchen drawer Michael kept full of cigarettes. Just as he was easing himself down into his chair again, the door buzzer sounded once more.

He sat down, determined to ignore it.

It buzzed again. Then again, too insistently to ignore.

This one wore a clown's suit, with a woolly white wig and a peaked cap. The Clown's mask was dead white with splotched red cheeks and a wide, lurid grin.

"Trick or treat, mister . . ."

"Go home," said Killup. "There's no candy here. No free food. No treats. And if any of you kids soap my windows, I'm calling the police. After I shoot you. After I bang your head against that porch rail.

After I pour hot grease down your throat with a ladle."

He slammed the door.

The buzzer sounded again immediately.

Killup flung open the door. "I thought I told you—"

“Trick or treat” said the Devil. Pointed ears, slanted eyes,

diamond-shaped mouth, and painted flames on his suit.

“Did you just change masks?” asked Killup. There was no sign of the Clown.

“Trick or treat,” said the Devil, holding open his bag.

Killup slammed the door.

The doorbell buzzed again immediately.

“Trick or treat,” he heard through the closed door.

“Trick or treat,” emphasized with a stomping on the floorboards.

“Go to hell! You little monster . . . Go to Hell!”

There was silence for a moment. Killup sighed.

“Trick or treat, Trick or treat, Trick or treat!”

“Candy?” cried Killup grimly, glaring at the closed door.

“You want candy?”

He grabbed up one of the three bowls of candy and strode off to the kitchen with it—despite the pain the motion and speed caused in his neck and in the joints of his hips. He pulled honey from one of the cabinets and poured it over the candy. He took a plastic container of white glue and squirted it over the honey. Once again the refrigerator door opened of its own accord. He smeared a large dollop of mayonnaise over the honey, then broke open the largest of the five eggs on the top. He stirred the contents of the shallow dish with the blade of a rusting knife. The buzzer still buzzed. The Devil still chanted “Trick or Treat” and stamped his feet on the porch in a nauseating rhythm.

“I have candy,” Killup said with grim glee as he opened the door.

“Goblin candy.”

The Devil cringed backward, but Killup grabbed the edge of his bag and spilled the mixture into the sack over the Devil’s other loot. Killup laughed as the Devil stalked off into the night.

“Tell your friends!” Killup called after.

Evidently the Devil did warn the other trick-or-treaters, for the buzzer didn’t sound again. Killup watched sitcoms and didn’t laugh. Killup watched a movie made for television that was about a disease he’d never heard of and fell asleep before any of the actors died of it.

The door buzzer jerked him awake.

"Eleven-thirty," he complained, looking at his watch.

"Damn kids."

He listened for the buzzer to repeat. It didn't. The television showed only static. He changed the channel but couldn't find a picture. He turned off the set and lit a cigarette.

He inhaled deeply. The buzzer sounded again.

Even stiffer than usual with sleep, Killup rose from the chair and went cautiously to the window. The buzzer sounded again. He pried open the slats of the blinds and peered out.

The porch light was on, though he was certain he'd turned it off. Dull red oak leaves blew down the length of the porch.

The hanging swing rattled on its chains. But no trick-or treater was there—neither Rabbit, nor lurid Clown, nor painted Devil.

"Good," he said, turning away. The blinds snapped back into place.

The buzzer sounded again.

"Tricks," Killup breathed in anger as he stalked toward the entrance way. A chill October wind blew open the front door just as he reached for the knob.

"Trick or treat," said the Goblin. It wore a belted, hooded robe. The toes of its shoes turned up and were belled.

Its mask was dark, elongated, and furrowed. The eyes behind it were tiny, black, and twinkling. A stiff tail—operated by batter, Killup surmised—swished right and left behind the Goblin. Swished the way a cat's tail sometimes swishes, in leisurely contempt.

"No," said Killup. "You're not getting any candy. It's too late. I don't have any left. I gave it all away. Never had any to begin with."

He slammed the door and shot the bolt in the lock. "Trick or treat," sounded the Goblin from outside.

The knob turned, the door jarred against the bolt. The Goblin was trying to get in.

"Trick or treat."

"Go away!" Killup cried. "It's almost midnight!"

"No!"

Killup went to the door, turned the bolt, and flung the door wide. "It's too late to be out trick-or-treating!" he cried.

He looked down the length of the porch.

No Goblin.

The Goblin was obviously hiding in the dark bushes beyond the railing.

As soon as he shut the door again, the Goblin would return.

"It's nearly midnight," Killup called into the darkness.

"Go home! Tell your mother I said you were a wicked child."

He waited a moment. Silence. Stillness. He waited another moment.

Still nothing.

He slowly pushed the door shut. He slowly shot the bolt into the lock.

The Goblin kicked open the door.

Sere leaves and a cold wind blew in on Killup.

"Trick or treat," said the Goblin, and, holding his bag of coarse burlap open before him, took two deliberate steps into Killup's house.

In the light of the hallway the trick-or-treater's mask seemed a very fine piece of the modeler's work. The furrows deepened when the Goblin spoke. The flesh around the black, twinkling eyes creased when the Goblin grinned at Killup.

The Goblin's gloves were on a par with the mask, eight inch fingers, gnarled skin, scales and ridges that bent and stretched as the Goblin delicately plucked a single candy from one of the dishes on the table.

The Goblin delicately dropped the wrapped candy into his burlap bag.

He reached for another.

Killup grabbed at the Goblin's hand angrily, in order to pull off the glove and expose the childish hand beneath.

But the Goblin was quick, twisting its hand so that it snatched not another piece of wrapped candy but Killup's wristwatch, nearly pulling it over his wrist, over his palm, sliding it past his fingers.

Terrified and incensed by this intrusion, Killup grabbed the Goblin by the shoulders and tried to push him out the door.

The Goblin slipped out of his grasp and fell backward on the floor. Before Killup could react, the Goblin turned the neatest of neat backward somersaults and was upright upon the threshold.

Then, with hardly a bending of the knees, the Goblin leapt up and backward, neatly balancing on the rotten porch rail. It was not something Killup could have done as a child. It was not something he had ever seen anyone do.

The Goblin waved to Killup, a friendly wave that was somehow not friendly at all.

The Goblin smiled at Killup, a genial smile that was somehow not genial at all.

The door slammed shut.

Killup opened it instantly.

No Goblin perched on the porch railing.

No sound but the wind and the rustling dead leaves. Both wind and rustling dead leaves blew in upon Killup.

He shut the door slowly and carefully. As he turned the lock, the clock on the living room wall began to chime the hour. He turned, took one step, and heard a crack.

Killup looked down and found he'd trod upon his watch.

Kneeling carefully in such a way that minimized the pain in his neck, Killup retrieved the watch. The hands pointed to midnight exactly. He put the watch to his ear. No ticking.

"Broken," he said. "Damn that kid."

The clock chimed the twelfth stroke of midnight and then was silent.

In his chair before the television Killup waited for the Goblin to return, to push the buzzer, to stomp on the echoing floor boards, to call out "Trick or treat" in that harsh, low voice that didn't sound like a child's at all.

The Goblin did not return.

Killup turned the television set back on. He still got nothing but static. Obviously the cable was out again. He thought about calling the cable company, but after midnight he'd only get a recorded voice, and there would be others calling, anyway.

He went through every channel, from 2 to 56. Nothing but static. He looked at his watch.

Midnight exactly.

Then he remembered he'd broken the watch by stepping on it.

He decided he'd climb the stairs to bed. He only went up and down the stairs once a day. Down in the morning, only once. Up again at the end of day, only once.

He turned off the television.

In the sudden silence he heard a faint rustling.

Like leaves blowing on the porch outside.

But it wasn't that.

The rustling was from inside.

Killup blinked his eyes so that he could focus them beyond the distance of the television set. He peered into the hallway and for the first time noticed that the Goblin had left behind his trick-or-treat bag.

It was small, rectangular, of coarse burlap.

As Killup peered at it, trying to determine whether the slight, continuing rustling sound was coming from it, the trick-or-treat bag began to inch across the floor. Not as if someone were hiding out of sight behind the stairs, pulling on it with an invisible string, but moving as if a severed but lifeful hand inside the bag were slowly clawing its way down the hallway, sneaking out of Killup's sight, headed for the kitchen.

Killup stood out of his chair. But as he moved to the entryway the burlap bag suddenly changed direction and headed toward him. As if, once discovered in its attempt to secrete itself, the bag had decided to attack.

With one hand grasping the edge of the open doorway for balance, Killup raised his foot to stomp on the burlap bag and whatever was inside it.

At that moment the bag overturned. Cockroaches swarmed out of it. It was not a severed hand but the random motion of a hundred insects—of all different sizes but all the same glowing chocolate color—that had propelled the bag across the floor.

Killup brought his foot down on them—or on one or two of them, at any rate. The rest disappeared beneath the iron base of the standing floor lamp, beneath the television stand, beneath Killup's chair, beneath the rug. They slipped into crevices between the floorboards and hid in the shadows of the faded curtains.

Killup ground the burlap sack beneath his heel and kicked it into a corner. He went to the telephone on the hall table and peered at a scrap of paper wedged in the wainscoting. It read:

"Michael—KL5--1186."

Killup quickly dialed the number, and his call was answered before he even got the receiver to his ear.

"At the tone, the time will be midnight exactly."

The tone sounded, and at that same moment the clock in the living room once more began to chime the hour.

Killup hung up. His hand remained on the receiver as he counted the strokes of the clock.

. . . ten . . . eleven . . . twelve.

Not only had his watch stopped, the clock was broken too.

He dialed his son's number again, this time speaking each digit aloud as he read it on the scrap of paper.

"At the tone, the time will be midnight exactly."

Killup slammed down the receiver. He picked it up again and dialed 0, for the operator.

"At the tone, the time will be midnight exactly."

Once more he slammed down the receiver, held it there, picked it up again in order to dial 0, but before his finger had even touched the dial, he heard: "At the tone, the time will be midnight exactly."

Killup put down the receiver. He stood still for several moments and tried to make sense of what had happened. He couldn't, which suggested that nothing really had happened at all. Sometimes, at his age, things got confused. He stood with his hand on the newel post and looked up the stairs.

He decided he'd sleep in his chair tonight. He was tired, and some nights the stairs were steep. He had no telephone on the second floor, and just in case it rang, he wanted to be down here. And just in case that child dressed in the Goblin costume was still around, he'd prefer to meet him down here, where windows could be locked, and doors bolted, and where he could see that dreadful child in the dreadful mask that didn't look like a mask. Killup wanted, as much as he dreaded, the return of the Goblin. So that he could slip his fingers beneath that mask and pull it off sharply to expose the putty putto face behind it.

Once more Killup peered between the slats of the venetian blinds. The leaves blew across the porch and the swing creaked on its chains and that was all. He rummaged over to his chair, more weary than confused or frightened now, slipped into it comfortable, adjusted his brace, and fell asleep.

He dreamed vivid dreams, but in the very instant of waking forgot them completely. He looked around the room. No light showed through the blinds. But that didn't seem right.

"Feels like I've slept for hours," he said aloud. "It should be morning by now."

Automatically he glanced at his watch.

The broken watch still read midnight.

He laughed, that first croaking laugh of morning. Except it wasn't morning.

"Still midnight. Halloween. But it feels like it should be morning. I feel like breakfast."

He roused himself, stretched and twisted, and pressed till he was upright and out of the chair. It was hard to remember a time when simply getting up out of a chair didn't hurt. If it wasn't morning, then at least it was very late. If it was very late, then he should climb the stairs toward bed. He headed that way but stopped at the clock on the living room wall.

Both hands were upraised to twelve. Broken, like his watch. He took advantage of the coincidence and decided that if it was still midnight by the evidence of two different timepieces, he might still call Michael.

He peered at the scrap of paper in the wainscoting and picked up the receiver. Without dialing a single digit he heard: "At the tone, it will be midnight exactly."

He put down the phone hastily and, without thinking what anything might mean, went into the kitchen. He pushed aside the ruffled curtains that covered the panes in the back door and peered out at the sky.

All was darkness beyond.

"I know I slept for hours," said Killup aloud and carefully. "I feel it. It's morning, but the sky is dark.

That's all. Dark clouds in the sky make it seem like night."

Hungrily he turned toward the cabinet, raising his hand to open it. But his hand fell when he saw the kitchen clock.

It, too, was stopped at midnight.

"This one stopped too," said Killup aloud. A kitchen clock that ran on electricity, a wall clock that was wound once every seven days on Sunday, a wristwatch that operated on a battery for a year—and they'd all stopped with both hands pointing to twelve.

Once more Killup deliberately ignored the increasing improbability of this coincidence. He spoke aloud to reassure himself: "I don't care if it is midnight. I still feel like I haven't eaten in days."

The refrigerator door swung open of its own accord. There was nothing strange in this, for the magnetic catch hadn't worked properly in the last nine years.

Michael Killup had found five eggs in the refrigerator that afternoon. Killup had broken one into the glop he poured into the trick-or-treat bag of the tiny Devil. Four eggs were left. Of its own accord, one of those four rolled down the aluminum grid of the refrigerator shelf, poised a moment on the precipice, and then plunged to the floor.

It broke open, and cockroaches swarmed out of the broken shell.

Killup crushed the shell beneath his feet. The cock roaches, gleaming like expensive Swiss chocolate, fled to safety beneath the refrigerator, beneath the stove, slipped beneath the sliding door into the living room, hid themselves in the shadows.

Killup slammed the refrigerator shut. Hunger still gnawed, but at the same time his appetite was gone. He'd also decided that this was also more than mere late-night confusion.

He wanted no more recorded voices on the telephone, no more goblins that appeared and disappeared, no more timepieces that stopped at midnight, and especially no more insects.

The stove swarmed with them. They swam up from beneath the white porcelain, they flared in the pilot lights, they crawled on the surfaces of the pot in which he warmed his canned soup, they scurried around the lid of his coffeepot.

It was time to leave. No matter what time of night it was. No matter what time of night it was. No matter that he couldn't get Michael on the phone. He turned the bolt on the back door and opened it.

Tried to open the door. It remained locked. Sometimes the door stuck in wet weather, but it hadn't rained in weeks.

The autumn had been dry. Killup turned the knob again and the door remained locked. He shot the bolt again. Unlocked it again. Still the door wouldn't open.

When he turned around again, all the insects had disappeared from the surface of the stove. It was blotched with rust and spots of dried grease that looked like insects, but that was all. Probably he's imagined the swarming cockroaches.

The late hour. The fretting over the trick-or-treaters. His stomach was empty, his throat dry. He upturned a glass in the drainboard, turned on the faucet, and filled the glass with water. He sighed a long sigh and raised it to his lips. It was the middle of the night. He was confused, and there was no more to be said about it. As he raised the glass to his lips he sensed something behind him. He turned quickly.

Through the window over the sink, where he'd hoped for a glimmer of dawn, he saw only the Goblin. The Goblin grinned that friendly grin that wasn't friendly, cocked its head, and disappeared.

All was darkness again, and Killup said aloud, "That's not a mask."

The glass he held to his lips was empty of water. But it was filled with cockroaches the color of expensive Swiss chocolate. They cluttered up the sides of the glass toward his mouth.

He dropped the glass on the floor and it shattered. Once more the insects scattered, hiding out of his sight and out of danger of his tread.

The refrigerator door swung slowly open once more.

Without closing it, without glancing out the window, without looking again at the clock, Killup stumbled through the swinging door into the living room again.

Treats. Or. Tricks.

The Goblin was outside. Killup stumbled toward the front door, not minding the pain in the joints of his hips, the pain in his neck that stung with every lurching step. He pulled his cane from the umbrella stand, not for support but for a weapon. He pulled on the front door.

It was locked too.

In his frustration Killup picked up one of the bowls of candy on the

table and flung it at the door. The china smashed, the candy scattering

across the floor. Killup stumbled backward against the table, knocking

"At the tone, the time will be midnight exactly."

Killup kicked the telephone cord from the wall, nearly losing his balance in the process.

He went into the living room, dragged the draperies aside and ripped down the venetian blinds to get at the latch on the casement.

It wouldn't turn, no matter how hard he jerked at it.

Behind him, the television switched on. Only static.

Killup stared at it a moment, then swung his cane at the window.

It didn't break.

Bracing himself not to fall, he swung harder.

Still the glass did not break.

It was still night, and leaves blew down the length of the porch.

Killup hooked his cane between the slats of the blinds on the second window and jerked them down. He then tried to shatter the window.

The glass did not break.

Treats. Or. Tricks. Mr. Killup.

The voice spoke not from outside the house but through the television speakers.

The Goblin's furrowed face grinned at him from the screen.

Then there was only static again.

"How do you know my name?" he cried, and swung his cane at the picture tube.

Unlike the windows, the picture tube shattered. Inside, the old tubes exploded in sparks and acrid smoke.

The doorbell sounded again. Louder than before, somehow.

Insistent and clamoring.

Killup went back to the window, peering out to see the Goblin pushing the buzzer.

But the Goblin wasn't at the door. He stood in the swing at the opposite end of the porch, gently rocking in the moon light.

The Goblin waved the friendly wave that somehow wasn't friendly.

The front door opened slowly. The dead, red leaves of the oak tree in front of the house blew into the entryway.

"How—"

When he looked back out onto the porch, the Goblin was no longer in the swing. Killup turned to go to the door—but was face-to-face with the Goblin, who perched on the table between the two locked windows.

The Goblin's furrowed face wasn't a mask.

The Goblin lightly brushed Killup's cheek with a finger that wasn't a rubber glove at all but had scaly flesh and a nail that was as sharp and tough as horn.

"Trick or treat, Killup."

With a growl that was equal parts anger, fear, despair, and confusion, Killup knocked the Goblin off the table.

But in doing so, Killup lost his balance. In attempting to regain that balance, Killup slipped on a piece of Halloween candy wrapped in purple cellophane.

Killup's head banged hard against the floor. He heard cracks that had to be his bones. The pain in his neck was cold like frozen metal, hot like burning grease, electric like a wet finger stuck into an electrical socket. He couldn't move either leg. He couldn't move his head or his left arm. His only luck was that he held the cane in his right hand. He flailed about with it, weakly calling, "Help, help, I'll give you candy, I'll give you all my Halloween candy."

But the Goblin was gone, and because Killup couldn't feel the October wind, he knew the front door was shut and locked once more.

He flailed about with his cane, calling weakly.

He knocked the telephone from the hook and dragged the receiver close to his ear.

"Operator," Killup pleaded softly. "Operator, I'm—"

"At the tone, the time will be midnight exactly."

"I'd get a lawyer if I were you." said the medical examiner.

to Michael Killup.

"A lawyer?" Michael repeated mechanically. He'd found his father's corpse that morning, when he'd brought the groceries he'd promised the day before. Real frozen waffles, not the kind you pour out of a carton.

"Clearest case of neglect I've ever seen."

Michael shook his head. "I didn't like my father very much, but I certainly didn't neglect him."

"Your father died of starvation."

"What?" said Michael.

"He starved to death," said the medical examiner simply.

He took Michael Killup's hand and dropped a sticky square of paper cellophane into it. "Your father appears to have subsisted for several weeks in this house on nothing but a bagful of Halloween candy."

Michael turned back toward the entrance way. At a nod from the medical examiner, the attendant pulled back the sheet.

Killup's frame was savagely emaciated, brittle bones rattling in a rusty cardigan. His neck was shrunken and loose in the brace that had once fit too snugly. Killup's face was a slack-jawed skull with a skin of parchment. Sunk deep in their dark sockets, his eyes stared, wide and fearing.

"Your father didn't die nice," said the medical examiner, "and he didn't die quick."

Michael Killup said nothing. He took one step closer to the shrunken corpse, to crush a cockroach that scurried out from beneath his father's head.

THE SATANIC PIANO

by Carl Jacobi

Midnight, and I was seated at the old concert grand in my study, running my fingers over the keys to the wild melody of Saint-Saens's Danse Macabre. Outside, the fog, like some toothless centenarian, peered in at the glowing electroliers and drooled mist and greenish drizzle on the windowpanes.

Hollow and muffled through the thick air, Big Ben boomed its chimes of the hour.

I was restless, the night was hardly conducive to sleep.

The empty weeks in London with Martha, my fiancee, gone for an extended visit upcountry, had reached a climax of lone linesss in the preceding solitary hours at the theater. And above all, that puzzling messsage which had come to my door a few moments past still lay there on the chair, leering up at me with the insistence of a spoken command. It read:

Come at once to 94 Milford Lane. I have something of the utmost importance to show you. It concerns your music.

Wilson Farber For a moment, as I stared down upon the black card with the peculiar writing in white ink, I was almost inclined to smile. Farber, eh? Wilson Farber. Yes, I remembered the man, remembered the day I had first come upon him in his dirty little music shop on lower Telling Street. I had gone there in search of some old collection of Russian folk dances, and he, sitting amid his jumble of tarnished horns and battered violins, had led me into a conversation. And I remembered his book, which had attracted such wide interest and which psychology professors had been forced to admit opened new fields for thought in the subjects of hypnotism and telepathy.

Once again after that I had visited this shop, and while I must confess I was impressed by the man's queer erudition, still I had been only too glad to remove myself from his presence. There was something disturbing about the way he stared into your eyes, seemed to plumb your very soul. Nor did I like the silent way he glided about, dragging his thick ebony cane, or that high-pitched laugh that sounded like the mirthless squeak of a ventriloquist.

Tall and gaunt, with a shock of sable hair and a ragged beard the color of slate, he was at once a commanding and repelling figure. There were rumors about the man, rumors that came into existence when his unorthodox book first appeared in the stalls. Was it the work of a trained or a neurotic brain? And was there any significance in the fact that a James Wilson Farber had been released from St. Mary's Institution for the Insane some nine months before?

I say now that had that last line, "It concerns your music," not been included in the missive, I should probably have dismissed the matter entirely from my mind. But the thought stole upon me that perhaps back in the shadows of his shop he had come upon some rare old music composition and was offering it for sale. Farber knew my weakness. He knew that for years I have amused myself by collecting original manuscripts and unknown works of forgotten composers. This hobby has brought me almost as much

enjoyment as my own creation for the piano, and I hated to let my valuable work slip through my fingers.

Yet even musical compositions were not so important but that they could wait until tomorrow.

I moved to my favorite armchair, and tried to immerse myself in the pages of a half-read novel. For a time the movements of the characters attracted my full attention, and the disturbing message of Farber faded slowly out of my thoughts. But when in the course of a quarter hour the narrative before me began to lag, I found my eyes inadvertently returning to the bit of paper there on the chair.

For the third time I read its imperative lines. And suddenly I began to impulse.

Five minutes later, clad in trench coat and cap, I was rolling across the wet streets in an eastbound cab past Piccadilly Circus down Haymarket and through a world of white to the Strand. The fog was even thicker here by the Embankment and it seemed to increase as we sped onward.

Milford Lane was almost a half hour's drive from my apartment. It was close to one o'clock by my watch when I stood before the frowning door of number 94, and by the light of a single street lamp, gazed upon the gigantic jumble of brick and wrought iron that formed the ancient edifice. I hesitated there, the fog and drizzle pressing close against my face like wet gauze, the rumble of a distant tram reaching my ears hollowly as if from some lower world. Then I stepped forward and rattled the knocker.

The sounds had but died away into silence when the door opened, and I found myself staring once again into the iron countenance of Wilson Farber. Even though I had known what to expect, I confess I recoiled slightly before those black eyes.

"You sent for me--?" I began.

He nodded. "I'm glad you've come, Bancroft. I think you'll find it well worth your trouble. This way, please."

He conducted me through a dark corridor to a brilliantly lighted room in the rear of the house, thrust forward a chair, and bade me sit down. Slowly unbuttoning my coat, I glanced at my surroundings. Glanced, I say—then stared.

Without fear of contradiction, I believe I can safely put down that room to be the strangest chamber in all London.

The four walls had been painted or frescoed a dead white, and over this in black, beginning from the ceiling and continuing down to the very floor, were a series of five lines of the musical scale, adorned with notes—full notes, half notes, and flagged eighths and sixteenths. At two-foot intervals on the wall, with no show of artistic placement, hung a line of musical instruments, the choice of which seemed to have been guided by a bizarre taste rather than a love for harmony. There were several lutes, battered and ornate, an oboe, a mandolin, a Javanese drum, and a number of queer elongated horns. Over in a far corner stood a harpsi chord dating to an early period. Heavy black drapes curtained the two windows, and a white porcelain operating table stood under the glare of a green-shaded lamp in the center of the room.

There was a desk at my side, the top littered with man uscript, chemical vials and tubes, and a disorderly array of books. Some of the volumes, I saw by the titles, were technical studies of music composers and their various works, but the majority dealt with such subjects as hypnotism, exper iments of Dr. Mesmer and telepathy.

Farber was leaning forward now, placing before me a glass and a decanter, and motioning that I help myself.

I shook my head. "It's late," I said, "and I live a long way from here.

What do you want with me?"

He settled in his chair, hooked his thumbs in the vest of his black suit and studied me closely.

"Bancroft," he said, "you're a concert pianist and a composer. Are you not?"

I looked at him carefully before I made my answer.

There was power in that face. Every line suggested cruel determination as if once he were moving toward an end, nothing could stop him. The mouth with its thin bluish lips was fixed in that characteristic half smile, half sneer. The eyes under their heavy brows gleamed like separate entities.

"I suppose you might call me that," I replied. "My public appearances have been a source of livelihood for some years now. But although I've written a lot, only one number of mine ever acquired much notice."

He nodded slowly. "I know," he said. "Satanic Dance.

It has been acclaimed one of the fines examples of modern music in the last decade. And at present you are working on a sonata which you plan to present at your next convert at Kensington Hall."

"Will you kindly tell me where you obtained that information?" I inquired coldly. "That sonata was to come as a complete surprise."

With a gesture of his hand he waved my question aside.

"That is beside the point," he said. "I am in possession of a number of facts this blundering world will someday be surprised to learn about. When the time comes . . . but never mind. What I want to know now is this: What, exactly is your method of composing music?"

"Method?" I repeated.

"Yes. For example, how did you go about writing Satanic Dance? What was your procedure?"

The question was so prosaic, so matter-of-fact, that I leaned back in disappointment. To be drawn out of one's apartment at such an hour, led to a distant point of the city, and then amid such surroundings, asked a simple detail about my bread-earning profession—as I have rationally come to look upon it—was indeed disillusioning.

"Basically speaking," I replied, "the composing of music is no different from the writing of, well . . . say fiction.

Half inspiration, half craftsmanship, I suppose. A central theme, a strain of melody courses through my mind. I immediately go to the piano, play as much of it as I can—play it several times, in fact—and then put the proper notes as far as my memory permits, on paper. Is that what you mean?"

The thin lips twisted into a smile of satisfaction.

"Yes," he said. "And what do you find to be your greatest difficulties in this method?"

"That," I replied, "is obvious. In transposing from the mind to the keys of the piano, and then to the printed notes on the page, much of the original inspiration is lost. It cannot be otherwise."

He reached for the decanter, poured himself a glassful and sipped it slowly.

"Suppose," he said, "an instrument were to be placed at your disposal—a machine, let us call it—which under certain conditions would seize this musical inspiration that courses through your brain and transform it of its own accord into the actual living sound, a device so delicate that it would record permanently, note for note, the very melody that exists in your thoughts. How valuable do you think it would be?"

"If such an instrument could be created," I said slowly, "it would bring fame to its musical owner in twenty-four hours. It would make a mere writer of songs a master musician, and it would make a great musician a genius. But it's impossible. I know something of science, and I know that telepathy—if that's what you're driving at—has never been acknowledge. Oh, I'm aware there are so-called mind-reading machines for use in criminal courts, but they are mere lie detectors and show only the presence or absence of emotion."

Without further word he got to his feet, stepped to the door leading to the adjoining room and disappeared. Silence swept down upon me as I found myself alone. What on earth was this Farber person driving at? What was the significance of all the conversation regarding the composition of music?

And why had I of all people been summoned here to be a party to it? As my wristwatch ticked off the passing seconds, a mounting sense of uneasiness welled up within me.

At length, impatiently, I stepped across to one of the heavily curtained windows at the far side of the room, thrust the drapes aside and peered out into the pool of drifting fog. But my vision was interrupted. Heavy iron bars were there, preventing access either to or from the street. A wild sudden thought that I might be a prisoner here whipped me about. The sight of the open door, however, reassured me, and when Farber put in his appearance a moment later, I chided myself for being a nervous fool.

He was staggering forward, arms strained and bent under the weight of a large object shrouded in a black cloth covering. Reaching the operating table, he set the square shaped thing under the glare of the suspended light, then turned and carefully placed my chair on a parallel five feet away.

"Bancroft," he said as I sat down, "I want you to listen and obey instructions very closely. Keep perfectly quiet, fasten your eyes on the object on the table and concentrate your mind upon it as much as you possibly can."

He turned and whipped off the cloth covering. I stared in astonishment. There before me was a midget piano, the shape of a concert grand, three feet in width and about eighteen inches high. Its sides were painted a lurid crimson, and at a glance I saw that from the ivory keys of its little keyboard to the tiny strings revealed by the open sounding-top, it was a piano complete in every detail. The carving on the diminutive legs was as intricate as that on the huge Lonway in my study, the entire woodwork perfectly formed. A thick hard-rubber baseboard served as a mounting for the instrument, and at one extreme end of this was a small box with a glass panel. The panel bore a single black-faced dial, but within I could see a world of wires, coils, queer-shaped bulbs and a thick glass winding tube filled with some black liquid.

Farber busied himself for some moments, adjusting and readjusting the dial. Presently the black liquid in the glass tube began to surge back and forth like a steam pressure gage.

Then as my concentration grew more intense, there came a slight hiss, and the fluid raced through the tube, boiling and bubbling like lava. One of the bulbs began to glow cherry red.

At last Farber looked up. "For ten years," he said, "I have worked on the instrument you see here on the table.

Until tonight I have had only ridicule and failure for my reward. But tonight, a few hours before you came, chance showed me where I erred. There was only a slight correction to be made, but it changed the principle of the entire working mechanism.

He turned to the dial again and began moving it slowly.

"You will in a moment find yourself in complete operation of one of the most drastic inventions science has ever known," he said. He was speaking quickly and loudly now, running his words together and almost gasping for breath.

"Up until now genius has been vested in only a few persons, and those persons have been hailed as leaders in their field.

The truth is that there is genius in many of us, but it is unable to find its proper expression outlet. It is born and dies in the brain without ever seeing the light of the word."

"Psychology has known for a long time that the nervous impulses which course through the brain are electrochemical in nature, but that these impulses while in action set up a wave motion, psychology has steadfastly refused to admit.

"Call it telepathy, if you need a term, but my postulation was that each thought, each idea, and particularly each strain of melody which passes through the brain sets up a distinct field of motion as existent as the field of an electromagnet, and that if an instrument could be made delicate enough, it would seize those waves and transform them into their actual sound.

"You know yourself how clearly a certain bit of music will pass through and linger in your mind. The very orchestra, instrument or voice seems to live there in your brain. IN your case, perhaps, this is accentuated a thousand times because you are a trained musician.

"Very well, Bancroft, I want you to think back, remember some one of your music numbers, some piece which you have played and heard many times and which you can recall note for note. Keep your attention upon this piano, and think of that music!."

It was with a curious mixture of emotions that I sat there listening to him. The little crimson piano rested on the table before me like some elaborate toy. The black liquid in the glass tube pulsed steadily upward. And Farber's face was contorted now into an expression of delirious absorption. His hands were opening and closing convulsively.

I tried to guide my mind backward into the maze of piano compositions I have committed to memory. Names of titles, of composers, spun through my head: waltzes, scherzoes, capri ces—what was it I had been playing when Farber's message arrived at my door? Saint-Saens's Danse Macabre. The weird melody seemed a fitting one for the occasion. I puzzled my brain as to how the composition began. A

moment of seeking a mental impression of the opening chord; and then, simulta neously with that instant when the train of melody entered my mind, an astounding thing happened. The piano, five feet away, trembled violently. The light in the queer-shaped bulb increased from a cherry red to a brilliant flaming orange, and the keyboard—as though controlled by invisible hands- that keyboard leaped into motion and began to play—the very music of which I was thinking!

I turned and stared at Farber. He was watching the instrument of his making with dilated eyes.

"It's . . . it's reading my mind!" I cried.

On played the piano, the little keys pressing downward to form the chords and racing along the octaves with lightning speed—faster and faster as my brain ran over the familiar melody. It was Danse Macabre—the Dance of Death—Saint Saens's masterpiece, and it was filling the room with all the tone and depth of a standard-size instrument.

Suddenly, however, as the utter singularity of it claimed my full attention, the tones of the piano dwindled off, and the keys came to a standstill.

Farber turned abruptly. "The music is no longer passing through your brain," he said. "The musical thought waves have ceased, given way, I presume, to your complete surprise.

You are wondering at the natural tone coming from an instrument of such small size. This is accomplished by a sound chamber beneath the strings, made of zyziphus wood, an importation from central Baluchistan. A rotation light ray is sent through the sound chamber which automatically brings the reborn tones to the proper vibration. But see if you can concentrate again. Try another composition, one of your own, if you wish, and keep your eyes on the piano."

In a moment I was intoxicated with the strangeness of

it. Sitting there tensely, my palms cold with perspiration, I ran my mind through the opening strains of my own fantasy, Satanic Dance, and from that with a rush into the middle of Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C Sharp Minor, and then, not waiting an instant, into the slow tempo of a Chopin lullaby. The piano did not falter. Even as the chords entered my mind they were born into sound on the keyboard. In full obedience the instrument played a few bars of one selection, then leaped to another.

It was weird, and as I sat there I found it difficult to repress an actual shudder. Yet the moment I submitted to incredulity, and my thoughts, as a result, slipped away from the remembered music—that moment the piano, finding no stimuli, fell into a sudden silence. I saw that in order to make it continue smoothly, I must call every bit of concentration I could to mind, that I must control my thoughts to an absolute chronological succession of the notes and chords of any certain composition. To do this through an entire piece, keyed to fever pitch as I was, was almost an impossibility, and the piano consequently raced from the work of one composer to another in a mad, chaotic fashion.

At last, when it seemed I could think no more, I sank back into my chair and stared speechlessly at Farber. He, too, appeared strangely affected by the performance and for a moment said nothing. There was a deep flush of victory slowly mounting in his cheeks, and there was a wild stare of suppressed emotions in his eyes.

"You see, Bancroft," he said, "the piano proves my theory and opens a new world for research. This is only the beginning. But let me show you another feature of the instrument, the one probably that will be the greatest aid in the art of composing."

He reached for a second knob, which I had not seen before, and turned it with a snap. The piano began again, this time with no effort on my part. Then in an instant I understood. It was repeating all that it had received, playing it all a second time exactly as it had before. It was not hard to recognize the significance of this act. Once born into sound, the musical inspiration was recorded permanently, could be played as many times as one wished, and then set down on paper at leisure.

All my desire to have that machine on the table as my own personal possession burst forth within me.

"Is it for sale?" I asked hoarsely. "Will you part with it? Will you make me a duplicate? You can name your price -any price!"

He surveyed me in silence, apparently weighing his answer.

"The piano is still incomplete," he said. "There are other features, additional mechanisms, I plan to add. But it will take me three weeks or more to get it ready. During that time I am willing to lend you the instrument for work on you new sonata, provided"—his lineaments hardened suddenly -"provided you will agree to one thing."

"If your composition is pronounced a success, you must declare to the world that it was conceived—from your own brain, of course—but by the sole means of this piano. You can readily see that my invention can be introduced only by a great musician. In my own hands it would be a mere recorder of simple tunes. Do you agree?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then I will have the piano expressed to your apartment early tomorrow.

It is, of course, much too heavy for you to carry with you."

I nodded and followed him out of the door and through the dark hallway.

At the street entrance I paused.

"May I ask," I inquired, "the nature of the mechanism you plan to add?

The instrument seems very complete."

His face was a study in black and white there in the corridor's gloom.

The dark eyes stared past me into the street of drizzle and fog.

"Now it is only a servant of the will," he said in a low voice. "It can only receive and bring forth what it receives into sound. Perhaps someday it may create and compose itself."

For two weeks the piano had been mine, two delirious weeks with the door of my apartment locked to the world.

During that time I had worked like a creature bewitched, composing, buried deep in the ecstasy of new creative music.

During those fourteen days I brought into creation Valse du Diable,

Idyls to Martha, Mountain Caprice, and The March of the Cannoneers, all

of which compositions I knew to be the best I had ever accomplished. It

was a tremendous amount of work, yet more than that I wove to a sublime

finis the thing I had been laboring on for so many months, my Sonata in

B

Flat Minor.

As Farber had said, the repeat device of the instrument was its chief asset. There was no more toiling through the octaves, bar by bar, line by line. I let my brain run unhampered through as much of the passing fancy as I could, then turned the little second knob on the instrument panel and recorded the notes on paper as the piano repeated the strains a second, a third, or a fourth time.

I became intoxicated with the spell of it. I sat there hour in and hour out, searching for a basic theme that was original.

The piano's uncanny reaction to the slightest stimulus my brain chose to give it, its apparently effortless operation, affected me like drafts of old wine. Like some instrument of Satan, it stood there on my literary table, the little white keys leaping erratically, feverishly, from chord to chord.

And yet I lived under a distinct feeling of unease. The impression stole upon me that the piano was a living thing, that it was watching through hidden eyes my every move.

On the fifteenth day Martha returned from her visit up Cheshire way, an I hurried over to her apartment. Martha Fleming was the girl I was engaged to marry, and during her long absence from London I had almost died of lonesomeness.

I had met her a year before in the course of some musical contact, a common interest in the piano bringing us together.

She was an accomplished pianist herself, and I have always maintained that her rendition of Brahms was far more intelligent than my own.

I found Martha's face darkened with a troubled frown when I arrived. There was anxiety in her eyes, and when I took her in my arms, her usual joviality seemed missing.

"Martha," I said at last, "what's wrong?"

She sat staring out through the open window into the humming traffic of St. Anne's Court.

"It's Kari again," she said slowly.

"Kari?" I glanced at the door of the opposite room, but the maid was not in sight. A year ago Martha had toured and visited the various beauty spots of the West Indies. And it was somewhere in Jamaica that she had found Kari, who was still living a life steeped in the black rites her slave trade ancestors had

brought from Africa.

She was on obea woman, a performer of obi, that sorcery still practiced by inland West Indian Negroes, which the most rigid British law enforcement has failed to suppress. I had heard of this weird form of black magic before, had read somewhere how the unfortunate victims would fall into a morbid state which would finally terminate in a slow unexplain able death, or how the obea woman would reveal the events that awaited on in the future.

For some reason Martha had been attracted to Kari there in Jamaica. Her heart had gone out to the Negro girl when she saw the squalor and superstition under which the poor creature was living, and when she had returned to England, she had contrived to take Kari along as her maid.

I remembered the day Martha had first brought the young dark-faced woman forward and smilingly introduced me to her.

"The poor thing's life would have been a sordid thing," Mar that had said. "I couldn't bear to leave her there to practice her evil worship."

But she hadn't made a perfect maid. Although Martha had drilled her in the customs of European etiquette, Kari still clung to her black background. Several times she had given in to her inborn desire for mumbled incantations, and several times she had persisted in foretelling events of the future.

In this respect, I confess my skepticism regarding such matters suffered a severe blow. On three occasions, once in my presence, the Negro girl had seemed to throw herself into a trance and slowly chanted a prophecy of what lay ahead.

And strangely enough, three times she had been correct almost to every detail.

"What has she told you now?" I asked Martha.

For a moment the girl who was to be my wife said nothing. Then she sketched briefly Kari's latest psychic introspection.

At intervals during the train ride from Cheshire, the Negro girl had lapsed into fits of crying and had begged Martha to exercise the utmost caution in everything she did for the next few days. The immediate future, she declared, was very black, and a terrible misfortune lay in store for both of them.

"You shouldn't let such throwbacks to superstition bother you," I said.

"They mean nothing at all."

"There was a time when I would have thought the same,"

she answered slowly, "but you—you don't know Kari. Some times I almost believe obi to be an actual power, something fundamental and primitive which we can not understand."

I talked to destroy her fears, and in the end we left for my apartment, where I was anxious to show her the powers of Farber's strange invention.

While we walked I enumerated the compositions I had written in the past few days and waxed enthusiastic over them separately. The strange instrument I described in detail.

Finally we reached the door of my study. I thrust it open and strode ahead toward the table. Two feet away I stopped.

The piano was gone! Only empty space on the walnut table met my eyes.

For a moment I stood there, motionless, disappointment sweeping over me. Then I saw the slip of paper lying on the floor where the draft had evidently blown it, and picking it up, I read the following:

Bancroft:

I am very sorry, but the changes I have planned to include in the piano are almost ready, and I shall have to take the instrument back sooner than I expected. I trust that in the short time you have had it, you have found it the means of bringing forth some excellent compositions. If they are favorably received, remember your promise to give the piano its full credit. Possibly when the new additions are fully completed, I may permit you to operate it again.

Wilson Farber The adventure was at an end. Those hours which had seemed like an excerpt from the Arabian Nights had run to their close. Well, at least I had not wasted the opportunity. Through the instrument's powers I had finished my Sonata in B Flat Minor.

An urgent request that I go to Chatham Downs to the country manor of my old friend, Major Alden, and play for a group of weekend guests came early the next morning. Alden was prominent behind one of the largest music-publishing houses in all Britain. To strain his friendship, if only from a monetary standpoint, would be foolhardy. I telephoned Martha and caught the first train.

Three days later, bored with an interlude of playing before an audience that thought more of cricket than of music, and horribly lonesome, I arrived back in London. But the instant I stepped into the station, tragedy fell upon me.

Even after its full significance had been brought to me by the pages of the Times, I found myself walking the streets sick with despair, helpless as to what I should do next.

The disappearance of Martha Fleming caused a furor in music circles. A member of the Saturday Musicale and the Etude Society, she had countless friends who were shocked at the thought that anything had happened to her. Scotland Yard raced to the case.

From the landlord of her apartment building I gathered only the feeblest of information. Martha had left her rooms about eight o'clock in the evening, apparently bound for the little sweet shop around the corner. The landlord had noticed her exit on this evening because of the strange action of Kari, her West Indian Negro maid. Scarcely had the street door closed behind Martha, he said, when the Negro girl slipped stealthily down the hall and followed her.

The two of them had failed to return!

As my bewilderment slowly settled into cold reasoning I became frantic for Martha's safety. I questioned the other occupants of the building. I searched her apartment trying to find some clue. But I found nothing. Nor did Scotland Yard have any better results. Martha and her Negro maid had disappeared as completely as if they had fallen into another dimension.

I paced along the night streets, searching the face of every passerby.

Hopelessly I offered a reward for information as to her whereabouts.

There seemed no reason. If it had been kidnapping, there would have been a ransom note; and if murder—I shuddered—some traces of the crime. There was nothing, nothing save Kari's black prophecy to stand out in an otherwise clueless mystery.

At last one night I returned to my study, utterly discouraged.

I sat there slumped in the chair, brooking with my thoughts. Then, as if to add to my unpleasantness, came- Wilson Farber.

He entered my apartment without knocking, and almost before I was aware of it, he was pushing me out of the door and into the hallway.

"I tell you I'm not interested in your piano," I said.

"I don't care how much you've improved it. I have other things on my mind. Please go away and leave me alone."

"I know, Bancroft," he said. "But I must have a man who is musically trained inspect the instrument in its new form.

"Get someone else, then," I snapped. "You can throw the thing into the Thames for all I care."

"You are the only man I can trust, Bancroft, the only one I've told my secret. Come. It can do not harm. Perhaps it may freshen your mind and give you new vigor in continuing your search."

Almost as in a dream I permitted Farber to lead me into a waiting cab. Then once again I was gliding toward that fantastic room in Milford Lane.

I found that wild music chamber with its note decorations, aged instruments and black drapes the same as before.

But I looked vainly for the midget piano. The operating table was empty. Then, following Farber's gaze, I saw the thing.

It was mounted on a small extending shelf high up on the right wall at a point just below the ceiling. And as I looked upon it, there came that same feeling that it was watching me.

"I have placed the instrument up there," explained Far her, "because I find it is more susceptible to the thought waves if at a higher position than the level of the operator's eyes. Now your full attention, please, while I adjust its tuning."

He propped a chair against the wall, stood on it and began to turn the little dial on the instrument panel. Five seconds later I saw the little bulb within glow cherry red and the black liquid in the glass tube bubble and mount slowly upward.

"I shall leave you to yourself now," said Farber, stepping down.

He strode to the door, pulled it open, then slowly turned and faced me again. "I think, Bancroft," he said

softly, "I think you will agree that the improvements I have added are very much worthwhile."

Moments dragged by. As before, that same sense of uneasiness, which seemed to fill the room whenever I was in the piano's presence, stole over me. Mingled with it now was a curious impression that the pulsations of the liquid in the glass tube were following the rhythmic cadence of a human heart.

But suddenly I roused myself, and tried to guide my thoughts to the opening chords of my Sonata in B Flat Minor.

The instrument was changed, eh? Well, I would operate it once more, and then I would tell Farber I was through with the thing.

Abruptly, as the first strains of my sonata flashed upon my brain, the piano up on the shelf quivered and broke out into the familiar sounds. I leaned forward in my chair, that queer exhilaration rushing over me. But something was wrong.

I sensed it, felt it with every nerve of my body. Something like an impalpable miasma was rising from the scarlet instrument and contamination the air about me.

It happened without warning! For a few bars the midget piano followed my thought waves and played the sonata note for note exactly as I had composed it. Then suddenly it lapsed into silence. There was an instant's hesitation. And then with a leap downward the keys burst forth into a crash of discord. The piano began again, swung wildly into the middle of my sonata, and I stiffened in horror.

It was my sonata, yes. It was my own composition, the work which I knew to be my masterpiece, and the chords were manipulated by my own brain. But oh, how changed, how different! They were rotten with malignity; they were obscene with basic evil. Like a screech from the grave they crashed into sound, searing their way into my eardrums in grinding cacophony. My sonata, which had once been an idyllic interpretation of a peaceful sea, now shrieked at me a body of despair, a dirge of horror. Quivering, vibrating, the piano pounded insane harmony, defiling the composition with music of the damned.

It was diabolical—that music, befouled, sullied by every repulsive sound from the depths, played in a pitch insufferable to the human organism.

And as I sat there, the painted notes on the frescoed walls seemed to reel before my eyes in bacchanalian accompa niment. The mounted mandolins and lutes cried out in an obbligato of sympathetic vibration. On and on through the second and third movements the piano raced, faster and faster as though drunk with its power.

Trained musician though I am, with years of experience in searching through all the intricate combinations known to the laws of harmony, I was hearing now for the first time a melody from an unknown register, from unexplored octaves in black.

The third movement ended in the climax of the composition. It was here that the sonata pounded into a dramatic crescendo of booming chords, descriptive of storm waves lashing the Irish coast. And it was here that the midget piano suddenly crashed out in demoniac fury.

An instant I stood it—no longer. Then with a wild cry I was out of that chair and lunging for the door. Blindly through the gloom of the outer hall I ran.

I reached the door, leaped down the steps to the side walk. There I halted, trembling. My heart was

pounding, my ears throbbing. And then, as the silence of the deserted street gathered to soothe me, I turned and began to walk slowly toward the Strand. But from behind, from the huge dark house to the rear, a sound swept through the night air to follow me. It was a laugh filled with mockery.

I spent the next day combing London once more in a det ermined search for Martha. I wandered through Limehouse; I visited filthy grogshops and sailors' hangouts, engaging in conversation all who were willing to talk. And I beseeched Scotland Yard to continue their hunt.

Nightfall found me plodding wearily along Essex Street, despondent after having run down the last vague rumor to a futile end. A cabdriver had reported he had driven two women, who he vaguely thought answered the description to an address somewhere in this district. But just where, he had forgotten, and the scant information was of little value.

The fog was rolling in from the river again, thick and moist. And the darkness behind it hung close upon the yellow glare of the street lamps like a curtain.

At first I walked aimlessly. But gradually there came the impression that my steps were not altogether haphazard.

I was entering a part of the city I seldom frequented.

Strangely enough, as I stopped to consider it, a distinct urge that I continue stole over me.

I was on Milford Lane, and the black bulk brooding there just ahead I recognized as number 94, the house of Wilson Farber. I shuddered as I recalled the wild events which had sent me running down those steps the night before.

There was something strangely magnet about that dark building, something that drew me toward its portals and at the same time seemed to warn me away. And then . . .

A sound emerged from somewhere in the depths of that house, a sound that penetrated the silence of the street like a muted tocsin. It was a woman's scream. And distorted though it was, I knew that voice!

With a cry I leaped up those steps, wrenched open the door and plunged into the blackness of the inner corridor.

The way before me was steeped in silence, sounding only to my footsteps.

At the far end of the hall I came upon that door leading to the music room. A pencil of light filtered under the sill, but within was dead quiet. I waited an instant, listening. Then I grasped the knob and pushed the door open.

The sight that met my eyes flung me backward.

The room was dazzling in its brilliance. Farber was there, bending over the lighted operating table, stretched out as in death, lay the figure of Martha Fleming!

Exactly what happened after that I cannot be sure. I remember standing there framed in the doorway, staring at Farber, who was still unaware of my presence. I remember growing suddenly sick as I saw him unfasten her dress at the throat and, bending down, mumble some words of incantation.

Then I lunged forward, leaped upon the man and struck him with every ounce of strength I could call to arm.

It was a tiger that whipped around to face me. Farber's face was contorted into a mask of rage and hate.

"So you've come, Bancroft?" he said. "Well, I expected you. Even a fool will blunder into the truth, and you had plenty of time. Had you arrived a few moments later you would have missed a very rare operation."

I seized him by the arm. "If you have harmed that girl, I'll—"

"She is in a state of hypnotic trance," he said. "But in a few moments

she will be dead. I shall take her soul and—"

With a crashing blow to his jaw I closed in. Back and forth across the floor of that fantastic room we struggled, pounding each other mercilessly. There was power and physical strength in those gaunt arms, and in a moment I realized I had more than met my match.

We crashed to the floor and rolled over and over. His knee lashed out into my abdomen. And then all at once I grew faint. One of those hands seized my wrist and was slowly twisting my arm backward to the breaking point.

With a jerk he raised me from the floor higher and higher until I lay squirming in his hands two feet over his head. Then his arms shot forward, and I felt myself catapulted into space. The wall leaped to meet me; my head seemed to split open with a dull roar. A wall of flame and dancing lights broiled in my vision, and I sank into a cloud of oblivion.

I was conscious that but a few minutes had elapsed when I opened my eyes. My temple throbbed, and as I struggled to rise I found that my hands and feet had been tightly lashed behind me. Two feet away stood Farber, swaying sardonically on the balls of his feet.

"I have delayed the operation for your sake, Bancroft," he said. "I knew you wouldn't have wanted to miss it."

"In God's name," I cried, "what are you going to do?"

He stared at me silently a moment, then turned and pointed high up on the wall at his right. There, on the overhanging shelf, was the midget piano.

"The piano, Bancroft," he said. "I'm going to make my dream of ten years come true. I am going to do something no man has done before. As it stands the instrument will receive your musical thought waves and transpose them into the actual sound. But I want it to do more than that. I want to make it compose . . . create. . . play music of its own making without anyone's help."

"You're mad!"

He shrugged. "Madness? It is only a relative state.

Perhaps I am mad. But if I am, so were the old alchemists of the Middle Ages. Have you ever studied

alchemy, Bancroft?

The learning of those sorcerers is a lost art. They made hold out of lead, and the one necessary essence of their mixture was the soul of a young maiden.

"It is obvious no cold mechanical thing could create music. No, it must be an object of warmth; must have a woman's soul. And more than that, the soul of one who has lived a life of music. Are you following me, Bancroft?

Martha Fleming is such a woman."

He removed his coat and began to roll back his sleeves.

"When I lured her here by telling her you were taken suddenly ill in my apartment, I did not expect the Negro maid to come along. But Kari was a most interesting person. I found to my surprise that she was an obea woman from the West Indies. Obi—an admirable system of sorcery, Bancroft. The civilized world would do well to study it. I thus had two totally different yet ideal subjects for my experiment. I tried the native girl first."

"You mean—"

"I mean that while Kari was not musically trained, her occult background

made her worthy of the experiment. You perhaps noticed last night her

heart pulsing in the glass tube in the piano. She—"

"You murdered her!"

"In the interests of science," he said. "The piano still would not compose, but it was no longer a cold, inani mate thing. The powers of obi had been woven into it. It was that that rose up and colored your sonata last night."

He stepped across to the operating table and adjusted carefully the powerful light suspended over it.

A sense of utter helplessness swept over me. Motion less, she lay there on the operating table, face white under the glaring light.

Farber left the operating table now and moved toward the farther wall. My eyes never left him. Directly under the shelf that held the midget piano was a built-in wall cabinet, and opening the door, the bearded man drew forth a white enameled tray.

As if measured into focus, a single object took form in my vision—the midget piano up on the shelf. There was that damnable creation that had thrown me into this well of terror. There it stood, tuned to my thought wave as on the night before.

All my loathing and hatred for it rose up within me.

Then suddenly it happened! As I gazed with utter abhorrence upon it, as my concentration increased a thou sandfold, the little bulb within the glass panel flared into orange brilliancy. The ivory keys trembled, and an electric shock swept through me from head to foot. An invisible bond seemed to connect my

brain with that piano.

And somehow I understood. It was not music that was sweeping from my mind to the inner vitals of that instrument. It was hate! Hate—and the piano was reacting to it in a manner which Farber had never dared dream was within its scope. Hate—a thought wave a thousand times more potent than any musical fancy.

Up there on the shelf the keys were trembling violently.

Abruptly they came to a standstill. Then, with a soul rending thunder of discord, those keys surged downward in unison. The piano shook and swayed, and the strings under the open sound-top screeched forth a chord.

Farber, at the wall cabinet directly beneath, stared with astonishment.

The tray of knives slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor.

The chord passed on, and there came now from somewhere within the piano's sides a low, humming sound, as of a distant electric motor.

Louder and louder, growing into a subdued roar, it filled the room. The ivory keys began again, quivered in rotation down the octaves. Back and forth in trembling vibration the instrument swayed, rocked on its hard-rubber base.

And then—a single repercussion burst forth from the bowels of that piano. To the edge of the shelf the piano topped, hung there, the strings screeching that symphony of horror.

Farber came to life too late. With one mad lunge he sought to throw himself out of the instrument's reach.

The piano fell. Straight toward that upturned bearded face it hurtled—struck with a sickening thud. There was a single shriek of agony, a rending of wood and broken bone, and I turned my eyes away.

It is Martha, not I, who remembers the happenings of the next few

moments. The death of Farber released her from her hypnotic trance. She

came to her senses slowly, looked about her as if awakening from some

wild dream, and then stumbled from the operating table. It was she who

released me from my

bonds. Then we passed out the door and through the black corridor to the street. I looked back when I reached the walk.

There was that huge, disproportionate building with the three bulging colonnades rising to form a claw of granite before the black facade. There were the dark, eyelike windows staring sullenly.

I passed my arm around Martha, and led her gently toward the Strand.

SLIPPAGE

by Michael P. Kube-McDowell

It did not begin as a time of madness.

Richard Hall tossed his rain-dampened ski cap into the nearest chair and ran his fingers back through his thinning hair. "Elaine?" he called.

She appeared at the bedroom door and moved to hug him.

"You look frazzled."

"Am," he said, face buried in her hair. "Fought half the morning with a dimwit from Human Resources who tried to tell me I don't know my Social Security number. Took the IRS's word over mine. Ha!"

"Take a short loving recharge," she invited.

"Glad to," he said, tightening his embrace.

"That's enough," she said, and pushed him back. "Choose:

Start dinner or get the mail in. My hands were full."

"Mail, thank you." He took the key from her hand and the stairs to the

lobby, returning with six pieces of junk mail- one promising "Sexually

Oriented Advertisements," one bill, a letter from Elaine's mom, and a

tattered copy of the Cross Creek Weekly Chronicle. Cross Creek, which

was every bit as small as its name implied, had been Hall's birthplace

and home for seventeen years. His mother still lived there, and the

subscription was an annual gift from her, about which he had never had

the courage to say, "Please don't bother." The paper came average of

three weeks late, by the cheapest class of mail, and the high point of

it was frequently a list of where townspeople had gone on vacation or

the weights of the 4-H

sheep.

Settling back on the sofa and kicking off his shoes, Hall ripped out the staples and turned to the front page. He immediately frowned, and read quickly.

"Elaine?" he called. "Listen to this."

"If it's the balance on the Total Charge bill, I'd rather not hear it," she called back.

"No—something in the Chronicle. They're closing my old high school."

"Why?" Elaine appeared, bringing him a cold soft drink.

"According to this, the school board decided that they could get better value sending the students over to the new consolidated high school in Atlasburg. Cross Creek High School was too run-down and had too few students. So the last day of classes will be"—Hall looked at his watch—"tomorrow.

Oh—and they're going to hold an all-class reunion as a kind of going away party."

"When's that? You'll want to go, won't you?"

"It's . . ." Hall scanned for the date. "It was yesterday," he said, his voice dropping.

"Oh, Rick, I'm sorry. You missed it."

"I've been meaning to get back and visit the teachers, my old friends . . . what happened to the six years, Elaine? It doesn't feel like it's been that long," he said, shaking his head. "Listen to this: 'Class officers will be assisting Mr. Hutchins and Principal Jane Warden in contacting all graduates." Jim Harris is our class officer, and he has my address.

I should have heard from them before this."

Elaine moved next to him and rubbed his shoulder, and he smiled at her.

"I feel cheated. It would have meant a lot to be able to be there. I haven't really kept in touch with some people that were good friends, either."

"It's two hundred kilometers away," Elaine said, trying to let him off his own hook.

"I could have written."

"I'm surprised your mom didn't let you know."

"So am I." The timer on the oven began ringing, signaling that dinner was ready, and they rose together to rescue it.

Cross Creek High was forgotten for the time.

But that night, after Elaine had fallen asleep beside him, Richard Hall lay in the darkness with the hum of the clock and the creaking of the walls, and thought about high school and the friends he had lost track of, and felt alone.

He eased out of bed without disturbing his wife, and moved quietly to the den. It was only nine-thirty in Cross Creek, and a good friend should be able to excuse a call at that hour.

Hall dug the small white address book out of the back recesses of the desk. Some of the entries, he

saw, were very old.

Too old, in fact. The number he had for Jim Harris was no longer in service. The same was true when he tried calling his closest friend. The phone of Ruth, whom he had been both friend and boyfriend to , was answered by a sleepy man who said gruffly, "You got a wrong number." And the phone of a teacher who'd been more than a teacher rang thirty times without being answered.

Hall returned to bed, feeling both anger at himself and a deep depression. Something good that had been his had slipped away, and in the darkness it was easy to believe that it was forever beyond his grasp.

A few days later, Richard and Elaine arrive home from work close enough together to take the same elevator to the fifth floor.

"I'll bet dinner didn't cook itself tonight," she said.

He smiled. "I won't take that bet."

When they reached the apartment, she disappeared for a moment into the kitchen. "I was right," she said on her return.

"Want me to fix it tonight?"

"No. I want you to take me out."

"Suggestions?"

"The little lakeside restaurant outside of North Spring field."

"Our old summer rendezvous. The one where we had the wedding reception."

"That's the one."

"That's a good hour's drive away—and I'm not even sure I can find it again."

"You'd better be able to!"

Hall showed a mock grimace. "We'd better get going, then."

The Halls were generally silent while driving—Richard disliked being distracted. But as they neared the lake, Elaine turned away from watching the scenery—it was growing too dark to see well—and spoke.

"Do you think they still have our picture on the wall?"

"I don't see why not. Pictures of customers are the only decoration they use."

"It's been a while since we've been here. Maybe they move the old ones out every so often."

Hall pursed his lips. "Would you be angry if I couldn't remember the name of this place?"

"No, because you never remember anything. But I won't tell you what it is—you'll have to work for it."

"The Beachcraft . . . the Beachhouse . . ."

"Something like that."

"Beachbelch . . ."

"Oh, come on!"

"Beachwood!" he said triumphantly.

"That's it."

"I can't claim any credit—just saw it on a sign back there. Isn't this the exit up here?"

"I think so."

They turned off the highway, headlights sweeping across the undisturbed grass-covered sandy mounds found everywhere near the lake. A kilometer farther on, the road turned to parallel the shore.

"It's not too far now," Elaine said.

"No."

They both watched the roadside ahead, expecting at any moment to see the sign, the building, lights, parked cars.

"That's odd," Hall said, frowning. "I was positive it was just a bit after the road turned."

The car bored through the lakeside night for a minute more, and then Richard slowed the car and pulled onto the shoulder. "We must have passed it right at the beginning, when we were talking," he said as he made a wide U-turn. "It was never that well lit."

"But it sits right out in the open—right on the shore.

We couldn't have missed it. I don't think we went far enough."

"I'm not going to drive all the way to Cleveland. If we didn't pass it, then we're on the wrong road."

They drove back the way they had come, confused.

"There's someone walking." Elaine said suddenly, as the headlights picked up the shape on the lake side of the road.

"Let's ask him."

Hall was already slowing down, and rolled down his window.

The rushing roar of the small breakers filled the car for the first time. "Sir?" he called. "Could you help us with directions?"

The man, carrying a fishing rod and tackle box, crossed the road slowly and came to Hall's window. He

was at least sixty years old. “If I can.”

“We’re trying to find a restaurant called the Beachwood.”

The old man pointed at the sands across the road. “Right there.”

Richard looked where the old man was pointing. “There’s nothing there.”

“That’s right. She burned down, mebbe six months ago- mebbe more. It it were day, you could see the pilings she sat on; that’s all that’s left.”

“Oh, what a shame!” Elaine said.

They thanked the fisherman, then watched him fold back into the darkness behind them as they drove away.

“Home?” Hall asked.

“Nonsense. You owe me dinner.”

“The Hearth?” he offered.

“That will be acceptable. Drive on, James.”

“Yes, Madame,” he said, but the heartiness was false. For the second time in a week, Richard Hall felt the tug of something lost.

The graphics department supervisor made his way slowly through the maze of drawing tables in the room, dropping off yellow paycheck envelopes as he went.

“Afternoon, Richard,” he said as he reached Hall’s table.

He riffled through the remaining checks. “How’s your day going?”

“Pretty well.”

The supervisor reached the end of the bundle of checks and started again at the top envelope, frowning. “You didn’t get your check early, did you?”

“No.”

“And you weren’t on an unpaid leave these last two weeks?”

“I wasn’t on any kind of leave. I was right here.”

“Well, your day just took a turn for the worse. There’s no check here for you.”

“Let me see.”

“Don’t you trust me?” It’s not here.”

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, you'll have to go on down to payroll and get it straightened out."

Hall started to push back his chair, and the supervisor held up his hand. "Oh, not now. We need those charts for the taping this afternoon. Go down on your lunch hour," he said, and walked away to complete his rounds.

"I can't wait to tell you I quit," Hall said in a diplomatically hushed voice, glaring at his supervisor's receding back. He pulled the phone toward him, consulted a piece of paper in his wallet, and dialed.

"Concept Execution. May I help you?"

"Personnel."

"Thank you.: A new voice: "Mary Anders, Personnel. May I help you?"

"This is Richard Hall," Hall said, keeping his voice low.

"I submitted an application to you several weeks ago—I wanted to make certain it was all in order."

"Yes, Mr. Hall, I remember. I'm glad you called. We recently reviewed your application when filling an opening, and found it is not yet complete. We still need a copy of your birth certificate and your educational transcripts."

"I sent for both the day I applied," Hall said. "The transcript is coming to you directly—I can write and make sure it's been sent. If you recall, I explained that my original birth certificate is gone, and I'm trying to get a duplicate from the state. It should be here soon, and I'll see that you get it right away."

"Very good. By the way, we've also had a little difficulty tracking

down one of the references you gave us. Would you confirm that we have

the correct address? 'Spark and Son, 213 High Street—'"

"Cross Creek, Pennsylvania," he finished for her. "That's correct. My supervisor was John Spark, the owner."

"Has the company moved or gone out of business, to your knowledge?"

"No, Spark and Son is kind of a town fixture. I can't imagine them moving. I can try to check on that, too, though."

When he had hung up, Hall turned to the artist working at the board to his right.

"Chris?"

"Yeah?" Chris Wood laid down his pen and looked at Hall.

"Is it possible to catch a disease that causes everyone to try to ignore you?"

"Why?"

"Because if there is, I've got it," he said, and laughed.

There was a thick collection of mail, and Hall looked through it as he walked to the apartment. He shook his head unhappily as he walked through the door.

"Have I been especially bad lately?" he asked Elaine, who was seated on the couch watching television.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm beginning to feel like a victim."

"Of what?" she asked, tilting her head quizzically.

"Of a new crime—you take an guy and ignore him, pretend he's not there, until he cracks up. I feel like Jimmy Stewart in It's a Wonderful Life, only there's no guardian angel."

"What's making you feel that way?"

"Here here's the perfect example. There's ten pieces of junk mail here, all with your name. Two even have your maiden name."

"My lucky day,: she said, smiling and taking them from him. "When they're in your name, you throw them out before I can see them. What else, besides the mail?"

"No check for me this morning. I had to spend my whole lunch hour fighting with payroll, and I still don't have one.

I wasn't in the computer, that's how bad they screwed up, and they couldn't process a check by hand until Monday."

"That's enough to ruin your day," she agreed.

"I can't wait to get out of there. Say, I didn't get to see yesterday's mail. Was there anything from the state on my birth certificate?"

Elaine hesitated, but only briefly. "No. Nothing came."

"It figures. Where's tonight's newspaper?"

"I left it in the kitchen."

"Okay," When he had disappeared through the swinging saloon-style doors, Elaine moved quickly to the buffet and gathered up several folded sheets of paper that were lying there in a neat pile. She buried them in the back of the end table drawer nearest her chair, closing it just as Richard reappeared.

"What do you have there?"

"Oh, just some trash," Elaine said, flustered.

“Well, don’t put it in there. Give it to me and I’ll put it in the compactor.”

“I don’t—“

“Come on, give it to me while I’m still standing up.”

“It’s not really trash, not yet.”

“Are you trying to hide something from me?”

“No—I—“

“You are! Get them out. I want to see them.”

“No!” she said angrily. “They’re private.”

“Come on, Elaine, it took you too long to think of that.

What could they be that they’re so terrible I can’t see them?”

Slowly she retrieved the papers from the drawer and held them out. “I

would have shown them to you. I just didn’t want you to see them

tonight, feeling the way you do. Some of the things you said—“

Hall took the papers gently, and reversed them so that he could read them. The first was from the university he had graduated from and which Elaine had attended for a year.

Elaine stood up and crossed the room, standing with her back to him as he read.

“Can’t find my record to issue a transcript,” he said.

“You’re right. I could have done without seeing that tonight.”

He unfolded the second sheet, which bore the seal of the State of Pennsylvania—Bureau of Vital Statistics.

“Oh, no,” was all he said, very quietly. He moved it to the bottom of the pile and looked at the final paper. It was smaller, of stiffer paper, and very official.

He looked up from it at his wife. “Why did you change the title to the car?” he asked, and his voice had acquired a hard edge.

“I didn’t,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t know why it came that way.”

“The car used to be in both our names,” he said more loudly. “Now it’s only in yours! You’re the only one who could do that!”

“They must have made a mistake printing the registration—“ she started.

But she did not get to finish the sentence.

"You! It's been you doing these things!" He stepped for ward, trembling from the force of will needed to restrain him self. "Why, Elaine? Why?"

She stepped back. "You're scaring me, Richard. Please don't come near me," she said in the calmest voice she could muster.

"I don't deserve this,: he said, tossing the papers on the floor behind him. He had lowered his voice, but that made it even more threatening.

"Please, Richard . . ."

He stepped toward her, and she turned to run to the bed room with its locking door. She was too slow; he caught her by the shoulder of her loose-fitting blouse and yanked her back, the thin fabric tearing to the seam as he did. "Why are you doing this?" he shouted, his breath hot on her face. "What did I do to you?"

"Richard, I didn't—"

"You want me out? You don't have to make me think I'm crazy to get it." He was shaking her, holding her by the upper arms in a powerful and painful grip. In the face of his anger, her strength had fled; without his hands, she would have collapsed. "You've got it, if that's what you want! I won't stay and let you mess with my mind!" He flung her into a chair and, pausing only to scoop up his keys, stalked from the apartment.

Elaine Hall half stumbled, half crawled to the chair beside the phone. She could not control the trembling in her limbs, and misdialed twice before making the connection she wanted.

"Chris? This is Elaine." Her voice communicated more than her words.

"Are you all right?" Wood asked immediately.

"I—I think so. Yes, I am. I'm just a little shook up.

Can you come over, Chris? I need you to be here—and Rick he—" The tears came streaming from her eyes. "Rick's going to need both our help."

Reassured by the presence of a full fuel tank, Richard Hall turned up the radio to a level that precluded coherent thought and simply drove.

Presently he became aware of where he was:

on the highway that would bring him nearest to Cross Creek.

Once he had realized that fact, he did not think about it further.

It was nearly eleven-thirty when he turned off the engine, parked in front of the wood frame house in which he had grown up. There were no lights on inside, but by the glow of the porch lamp he could see that the house's paint was departing in long, ragged strips. A cloud of insects—gnats, mosquitoes, and the occasional bulk of a moth—circled in the halo of yellow.

Hall climbed out of the car to find that the street was as quiet as it had ever been. Only his footsteps on the walk and the chirrup-chirrup of crickets broke the silence. The doorbell button moved under his finger, but there was no sound inside the house, so Hall opened the screen door to knock.

After a dozen heavy blows with his fist, Hall stepped back to look at the front of the house. A light now showed at the window marking his parents' bedroom, and he followed his mother's progress to the front door by the other lights that came on, one by one.

Finally he heard a rustling on the other side of the door, and realized he had not thought of what he would say, how he would explain his presence. Before he could consider the question, though, the front door was yanked open to the limit of the security chain, and a woman's face, old and marked by suspicion, peered out through the gap.

"Mom—hi. How are you doing?" Hall said, smiling self consciously.

Anger crossed the woman's face. "You disgusting drunk!"

she screeched. "I'm not your mother. Go away now, and leave a woman to sleep. Go, or I'll call the police."

For punctuation, she slammed the door shut with surprising strength.

"Thank God I've found you," Chris Wood said, his voice showing his relief.

Hall stepped away from the motel door reluctantly and let his friend in.

"I wish you hadn't."

"That's very well for you," Wood said, sitting on the edge of the bed, "but I've used almost all my vacation time to do it. Elaine is very worried about you. I am, too, only I'm a little more confused than she is."

"She didn't need to worry," Hall said, closing the door.

"I'm all right."

"You might have called her and let her know."

Hall moved to the window and held the curtains apart with his hands so that he could look out. "I was afraid to."

"She's eager to have you back. She's not angry."

"You don't understand," Hall said, turning to face him.

"I was afraid she wouldn't be there—or that she would be, and wouldn't know me."

"Why would you think that?"

"Do you know where I went the night I ran out?"

"No. If I'd known that, I'd have found you sooner."

"I drove to Cross Creek to see my mother. And she didn't know who I was."

"Come on, Rick. You're not making any sense."

"She denied that I was her son! She slammed the door on me, and after I got it open again, she slammed it a second time."

"Could she have been angry? You'd have gotten there late, wouldn't

you—"

"No, no! She was right—I'm not her son."

"She's getting on in year, isn't she—"

"You're not listening to me!" Hall shouted. "She'd never known me!"

"I wish you'd listen to yourself," Wood said gently.

"You're standing there screaming some very strange things at your old friend."

Hall sighed, and sat down in the nearest chair. "I thought all those things you're trying to say," he said softly.

"I thought them in about the first ten seconds, and then I couldn't. I got her to open the door again, Lord knows how.

There's been a photograph"—Hall took a deep breath—"hanging above Mom's couch for almost ten years. A picture of the four of us, taken when Diane was graduating from high school."

"Diane's the oldest, right?"

Hall nodded deeply. "The picture is still hanging there, but I'm not in it anymore. There's no blank space—nothing's been cut out—Diane and Kris are just standing a little closer together.

"Now do you understand? Now do you know why I was afraid to call Elaine or go home? Can you imagine what it would feel like to go home to your wife and have her deny that you are what you think you are? That would be too much, Chris. I'd crack."

"She's there, and she isn't going to deny you. She wants you."

Hall did not seam to hear. "I've never believed in God, Chris. Maybe—maybe He's finally decided He resents that. No, I don't really believe that. I'm trying to be rational. But the things that have been happening—they just aren't."

"You mean the college records—and the registration . . ."

"The restaurant, not being invited to the reunion, my mom—all of them.

They have to be related."

Wood loosened his tie. "How?"

Hall stood up and went to the window again, as if watching for something. "I feel like I'm being followed—like someone is tracking me down the paths I've taken through life and systematically tearing them up behind me. And getting closer to where I am, all the time. It's as if I've done something terrible, and to punish me they are erasing the traces that I ever existed."

"Rick, please come sit down."

Hall reluctantly complied. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?" he asked tiredly.

Wood chose his words carefully. "I want you to listen to me for a couple of minutes. I'm going to offer you another explanation for the things that you experienced. And you've got to try to accept it, and believe it, because if you can't—if you can't, Rick, then you're going to have to admit that you've already cracked. There has been a series of unfortunate, but totally explainable occurrences that for some reason—overwork, perhaps—has hit you in a very strange way.

I'm going to take every single incident and explain it. If I miss any, you tell me.

"The invitation to the reunion—lost in the mail, with a million other pieces of mail this year. The restaurant—does a fire need explanation? You're not the only customers or the only couple that had a picture on those walls.

"The check—would that be the first error ever coming from the man-machine interface? Your mother—the sudden onset of senility. I'm sorry, but it happens. The phone calls—the fact that you hadn't called in years is explanation enough.

"The junk mail—they all buy the same list, and add and remove names all the time. You're off because you don't buy, Elaine's on because she does. The registration—the law has been changed so that joint ownership is automatic, and you wife's name was first, so that's the only one they printed.

"The transcript—eight thousand people in your graduating class? That means they lost zero point triple-zero one percent of their records. The loss of your birth registration—do you think the flood that destroyed the regional office had you in mind when it swept the filing cabinets and microfiche away?

"The picture in your mother's home—that damning picture.

Was that the only picture taken that day? Did they perhaps take one 'just with the girls'?"

"There were a lot of pictures," Hall said slowly.

"Is it impossible that something happened to the picture that's been there for ten years, so that she had to put up another?"

"Or I might have just not seen things clearly," Hall said.

"That night—I could have seen anything I wanted to."

"Did I leave anything out?"

"Stark and Son, my first job. They couldn't find them to use as a

reference."

"And?"

"I had the wrong address." He rested his head on his folded hands. "I had myself thinking, 'My God, they've moved the building.'"" He looked up and sighed. "I want to go home to Elaine."

For a few days, anchored by overtime and bolstered by Elaine's affection, Hall gave every sign of having stabilized. But inside he was still unsettled, fighting to understand his own foolishness. Chris had shown him how he had misread events, but not why.

Presently, however, he became aware of a hollowness, a space left by friends lost and not replaced. My own doing, Hall thought. One group left in Cross Creek—another scattered by college graduation. Too much work to keep the friendships alive. But all I have here are acquaintances and coworkers- except for Elaine, no real friends. Even Chris is more Elaine's friend than mine.

Having fixed the blame on himself, Hall could do nothing else but try to atone. He waited for a night when Elaine turned in early with a magazine. Old cold trails, he told himself as he opened the address book. But how much can we have changed? Still—start small.

After eight rings, the phone was answered.

"Greider residence," said the voice.

"This is Rick—Rick Hall, Mr. Greider," Hall said happily.

"I've been trying to call you for a couple of weeks, but no one's been home."

"I've been quite busy cleaning out my things at the school. Who did you say you were again?"

"Richard Hall—chemistry, six years ago. Remember? Our lab group didn't get an experiment right until May, and you threw a party."

Greider didn't answer right away. "Young man, I'm sorry, but I don't remember you. I had a Kristen Hall, two years ago."

"That's my sister."

"Hmm. You say you attended Cross Creek six years ago?"

"That was my senior year. Then I went to MSU, in design."

"I'm really very sorry, but I don't seem to be able to remember you very clearly."

"I'm surprised; I came over to your house several times that year. Do you still have the little file cards on

us?"

"No. I'm retiring this year, and I got rid of those. I do apologize, Mr. Hall, but there have been so many students over so many years. .

."

"I understand."

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"No, I just wanted to say hello."

It was a small failure, but substantial enough to blunt his enthusiasm. He sat quietly for a moment and flipped through the address book. There were names to which he could not even attach faces. Perhaps it has been too long.

The yearbooks were on the top shelf, and Hall had to drag a chair over to the bookcase and stand on it to reach them.

They were well coated with dust; it had been some time since he had looked at them.

Hall permitted himself a few nasty thoughts at Greider's picture in the faculty section, and then turned to the pictures of the clubs. He looked for his face among the dozen below the label, "Art Club," but failed to find it. But that's right—he had missed three days with the flu, and most of the photos had been taken those days. He had thought he had been listed below it as "Missing from photo: R. Hall," but there was no such notation. He must have been wrong.

Turning to the seniors section, he paused several times to admire the young beauty of the girls he had dated, frozen by silver chemistry and printer's ink. Then he turned the page, and his own face smiled up from the page at him—cheerfully seventeen, the irrepressible lock of hair over his right ear sticking out.

Hall reached for his drink, resting on a coaster on the

table beside him, but his hand never closed on it; he stared, incredulous at the page, the muscles in his left hand standing out as he gripped the yearbook tightly.

The page had rippled, like water disturbed by a pebble, and when it cleared, his picture was gone.

"Chris?"

"More trouble?"

"Can you help me find him again?"

"When did he leave."

"No more than an hour ago."

"Why not call the police this time, Elaine? I don't like to have to say it, but we don't know whether he might be dangerous—if not to others, then to himself."

"No. He's my responsibility; I'm his wife."

"He's his own responsibility, and right now he can't handle it."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if we get him back, he needs more than a little extra attention this time. He needs more help than even you can give him."

"Professional help."

"The county mental-health agency could decide what was best for him."

"What if he doesn't agree with them?"

"Your testimony in court would take care of that."

"I couldn't," Elaine said. "Not even now. I've got to love him back to health."

"That's my condition for going out after him—that you promise to do whatever's necessary for him to get better. And if you say no, I'm going to have to call the police myself."

"Oh, Chris . . ." She sounded tired. "Find him. I promise."

All Wood had to go on was what his friend had done the first time—head for Cross Creek. There were too many places Hall could have gone, and too few people searching. For the first time, Wood wished he had given in and bought a citizen's band radio. But he hadn't, and he could find little enthusiasm as he pulled onto the North-South Freeway.

Not expecting to find Hall anywhere but on the road or in Cross Creek, Wood nearly drove past the unlit car on the shoulder. Bus as he neared it, he caught a glimpse of the many bumper stickers adorning the back of the car, and recognized it as Hall's. He pulled onto the shoulder himself and stepped out of the car into a night well lit by a gibbous moon.

The car was empty, and Wood started up the grassy hill to the row of trees above. A short trail led through the clump of trees and to a clearing, in the middle of which Hall sat cross-legged. Wood approached him cautiously.

"I understand," Hall said clearly.

"Richard?" Wood said tentatively.

Hall turned his head. "Hello, Chris."

"Richard, I want you to come back with me."

"I was nearly ready to go, even if you hadn't come here."

"What are you doing?"

"I was listening."

"Listening?"

"Yes—to the world."

"Meditating."

"If you wish." Hall rose and brushed the bits of grass and dirt from his jeans. He seemed exceptionally calm.

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing—nothing from outside. From inside, a great deal."

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Perfectly. Are you ready to go?"

They walked down the slope, and Wood steered Hall away from his car.

"Leave it here, we'll get it later. Please, ride with me."

Hall smiled understandingly. "You're afraid I might run off again."

"Yes," Wood admitted. "Shouldn't I be?"

"No. Not anymore. Of course I'll come with you, if that's what you prefer."

"I do."

"Can you explain it to me?"

Wood found Hall's almost beatific calm disturbing, but hesitated to say anything, for fear of setting Hall off once more. Finally he could not resist any longer. "You seem very different."

"It's just that I understand what's happening now."

"No." Hall twisted on the seat so that he was facing Wood. "How can you see from the outside what I can barely grasp from the inside? I wish I could make you understand.

You and Elaine both. I want you to be able to accept it. You have the closest ties to me, so it should happen to you last."

"All right, Richard. You don't have to go on."

"I would if I knew what to say—that I'm slipping into the cracks

between moments—that a mistake is being edited out of the cosmos—"

"Please stop. It's hard for me to listen to you talk like this."

"It'll be harder when I'm gone and you don't understand.

There isn't much time left. They're very close to me now."

"We'll protect you," Wood said, near tears. "We'll get you all the help you need."

"I don't need any help." They are nearing the city;

traffic was building up and structures outnumbered trees along the highway. "I'm not afraid, Chris. When I'm gone, every thing will be in the place that was intended for it. At least that's how I feel. I've made my peace."

Wood took his eye off the road. "Dammit, stop!" he blurted. "You're sick but you're going to get better. Just grab on to that thought, all right?"

"That car is stopping," Hall said in measured tones.

Wood glanced back at the road. "Idiot drivers," he said, braking and honking the horn. He looked in the side mirror, saw that the next lane was clear, and swung the car out of danger with a twitch on the steering wheel. The screech of tearing metal said that the car behind them had not done as well.

To his credit, Wood did not cause an accident himself when he saw that his passenger was gone.

The apartment door opened only moments after he knocked.

"I'm sorry, Elaine," Wood said. "I had him, and I lost him. I was distracted by traffic, and he must have taken that moment to jump out. I couldn't look for him very long, because he was on foot and I had a car back on the highway."

"Find him? Find who? What are you talking about?" she said, kissing him perfunctorily.

The kiss had the emotional impact of a heavyweight's best punch. "Richard, of course." When she showed no recognition or understanding, he added, "Your husband."

"You have a strange sense of humor sometimes," she said stiffly. The phone rang. "Come in and sit; I'll be ready in a few moments."

Wood stared as she disappeared into the kitchen, the folds of her long dress swishing with her precise steps. Then he looked at the rest of the room, seeking some clue that would relieve him of his confusion.

Almost immediately his eye fell on the picture that hung by the front closet. It had been a huge print of Richard and Elaine's wedding picture. Had been. Had been. Now there was a graduation photo of Elaine, and beside it in a second frame, her college diploma. Why had she changed it? No—how had she done it—the diploma she had never earned, because she had married Richard.

Wood felt beside him for a chair and fell back into it.

He held his head in his hands, fighting the pain of accepting the unacceptable. Then he looked back at

the photo and diploma, and was confused. It had been a fine graduation—a beautiful clear day, a wild party at night.

Elaine returned from the kitchen. "Now, will you please explain your joke about Richard? You make me feel like such a dummy sometimes."

Wood looked up at her and frowned. "Richard who?"

Elaine sighed. "I'm not going through that again. Do you have the tickets? I'm ready to go."

Wood patted his pocket absently, as though something had happened that he had missed. "Yes."

That night they enjoyed each other as though it were the first time.

THE SHRINE

by Pamela Sargent

Christine heard the childish, high voice giggling out an indistinct sentence; the woman's voice was lower and huskier. She waited. A door squeaked open and then she heard her mother's rapid footsteps on the stairs.

Christine stepped into the hall and peered at the slightly open door.

Her mother had been in Christine's old room again; she had been there last night when Christine first heard the voices and had recognized one as her mother's. She went to the door, pushed it all the way open, and gazed.

Her mother had done no redecorating here, as she had everywhere else.

Christine entered, turning to look at the wall of framed photographs and documents above the slightly battered dresser. A young Christine with wavy blond hair and a wide smile stood with a group of other little girls in Brownie uniforms. A thirteen-year-old Christine wore a white dress and held a clarinet; an older Christine, slightly broadshoulder but still slender, grinned up from a pool where she floated with other members of the Mapeno Valley High Aquanettes; a bare-shouldered Christine in a green formal stood at the side of a tall, handsome boy in a white dinner jacket. Her high-school diploma was framed, along with other certificates; another photo showed her parents beaming proudly as they stood behind Christine and her luggage at the Titus County Airport, waiting for the plane that would take their daughter to Wellesley.

There, as far as the room indicated, Christine's life ended. She had lasted less than one year at Wellesley.

She gazed at the top of the dresser, where her high-school yearbook had been opened to her page. A pretty girl with flowing locks smiled up at her.

Matthews, Christine "Onward and Upward!"

National Merit Scholar; National Honor Society, 3,4; Student Council 2,3; Class Vice-President, 4; Aquanettes, 3,4; Assistant Editor, Mapeno Valley Clarion, 3,4; Dramatics Club, 3,4; Orchestra, 2,3,4; Le Cercle Francais, 2,3,4; Yearbook Staff, 4.

She closed the yearbook. The room was suddenly oppressive. She was surrounded by past glories; the room, with its embroidered pillows and watercolor paintings, was a shrine to what she had once been. Her mother could drive to her brother's house, only forty-five minutes away, to view his athletic trophies and his various certificates, but Christine's had remained here. She had been a good daughter, as Charles had been a good son. He was still a good son. Christine had not been a good daughter for a long time.

"Just coffee for me," Christine said as she entered the kitchen. Her mother looked up from the stove. "Now, Chrissie, you know how important a good breakfast is."

"I never eat breakfast."

"You should."

Christine sat down at the small kitchen table while her mother served the food. "Well," she said, and sipped her coffee.

"Well," Mrs. Matthews replied. She poked her eggs, took a bite of toast, then gazed at her daughter with calm gray eyes. "So it really is over between you and Jim."

"He moved all his stuff out."

"I was sorry to hear it. Maybe if you and JIm had gotten married—"

"Oh, Mom, that would have been great. The lawyers would have made everything even worse. I suppose you think a divorce would have been more respectable." Christine caught herself, too late. "I'm sorry."

"I meant that if you had been married, you would have had more of a commitment, and you both might have worked harder to stay together."

Mrs. Matthews lowered her eyes. "Your father and I had almost thirty pretty good years. Maybe we wouldn't have had that much without a strong commitment. We had more than a lot of people have. Actually, I'm not alone—I think a third of my friends are divorced. Or widowed—that's probably worse."

Christine ate part of an egg, then nibbled at some sausage. "You haven't redone my room. You've redone every other room in the house.

Every time I come here, the whole house is different."

"I only do a little once in a while. If you came home more often, you'd see I don't redecorate that much."

"You know I don't have time." Christine's voice was harsh.

"I know, dear. I was only making a point, not an accusation."

Christine sighed, trying to thing of what else to say.

"You never hung up my degree from State."

"I guess I never got around to it."

"You didn't put it up because you expected more from me."

"Now, Chrissie, you know that isn't true. I only wanted you to be happy."

Christine said, "I heard voices last night, in my old room."

Her mother's head shot up; Christine saw fear in her eyes. Mrs. Matthew's once-blond hair was nearly all gray. Her face was thinner, too, the hollows in her cheeks deeper; her long blue housedress deemed looser. One blue-veined hand pushed the plate of sausage and eggs aside;

Mrs. Matthews had barely touched her breakfast.

"It was the radio," the older woman said at last. "One of those plays on the public station."

"It didn't sound like the radio. I heard your voice, and someone else's.

A child's."

"It was the radio." Mrs. Matthew's voice was unusually firm.

"Maybe it was." Christine drummed on the tabletop with her fingers, then stood up. "I'm going for a walk."

"I'll clean up here. Your brother jogs now, you know. Three miles a day."

"I don't jog. I only walk."

Colonial houses stood on each side of the winding road. Christine searched the neighborhood for signs of change. Three houses now had solar panels; others had cords of wood stacked in yards under tarpaulins.

A young woman hurried down a driveway, juggling a box and a large purse.

"Toni!" Christine shouted.

"Chris!" The woman opened her car door, threw in the box and the purse, and strode toward Christine. "God, I haven't seen you in ages. You haven't changed."

Christine smiled at the lie, grateful that her raincoat hid her heavy thighs. Toni was stockier, her dark hair shorter and frizzed by a permanent. "Mother told me you were back."

Toni hooted. "Back! What a nice way to put it. I guess she must have told you about my divorce."

"She mentioned it."

"My parents have really been great. Mom takes care of Mark when he gets home from school. I have a job at the mall now, with Macy's." Toni glanced at her watch. "How's that guy you're living with."

"We broke up."

"God, I'm sorry to hear it."

"Don't be. I wasn't." Christine tried to sound hard and rational. "This place looks the same."

"It'll never change. It's stuck in a time warp or something. There's a couple down the street with four kids—can you imagine anyone having four kids nowadays? I don't know how they afford it. Mrs. Feinberg's running a day-care thing in her house—you can't afford these houses without two incomes. Maybe a few things have changed." Toni paused.

"How is your mother, by the way?"

"She's all right."

"I don't want to sound nosy. She looks kind of pale to me. She's in your old room a lot."

Christine looked up, started.

"I can't help noticing," Toni went on. "I see the light at night. She's in there almost every day after she comes home."

"She likes to listen to the radio there while she does her sewing."

Christine hoped that she sounded convincing.

Toni looked at her watch again. "Hey, why don't you come over tonight?

We can talk after Mark goes to bed?"

Christine saw two girls standing by a pool, giggling; they would swim through life as they had swum through the blue, chlorinated water. "I can't. We're going to Chuck's for supper."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Mother has tickets for the symphony. And I'm leaving the day after."

"Well. Next time, maybe."

"Next time."

"See you, Chris."

As she approached her mother's house, Christine looked up at the window of her old room. The window was at the side of the house, overlooking the hedged-in-yard.

A shape moved past the window; a small hand pressed against the pane. A little girl was looking at her through the glass; her long blond hair curled over her shoulders. The child smiled.

Except for the child's bright, golden hair, thicker and wavier than hers had ever been, she might have been looking at herself as a little girl.

The child continued to smile, then reached for the curtains and pulled them shut.

Christine hurried around the yard to the back door and pushed it open, entering the kitchen. The house was still. At last she heard her mother's footfall in the hall above, and then the creak of the stairs.

"Chrissie," her mother said as she entered the kitchen. She still wore her long blue housedress; she had always dressed early in the morning before.

"Who's that little girl?"

"What little girl?"

"The one I saw in my room, looking out the window."

"You must be mistaken." Her mother's voice was flat. "There was no one in your room."

"I saw her."

"You're imagining it."

Christine passed her mother and pounded up the stairs. The door to her old room was still open; she hurried through it.

The little girl was not there. The room felt cold; Christine pulled her coat more tightly about her. Abruptly the floor shifted under her feet.

She staggered, righted herself, and heard the sound of a child's laughter.

Christine covered her ears, then let her hands drop. The room was warm again; everything was as it had been. Her mother had said that there was no little girl; that meant she had imagined it all. She would have to put it out of her mind.

After Christine had greeted her sister-in-law, said hello to her nephew, and peeked into the baby's room, Charles led her to the basement. His bar sat in one corner in front of a stainless-steel sink. He poured her a bourbon, then opened the refrigerator and took out a light beer. "My refuge," he said. He came around the bar and sat down next to her.

"Shouldn't we go upstairs?"

"It's all right. Jenny's got to nurse Trina again, and then she'll have to put Curt to bed, and then she and Mom'll watch the MacNeil-Lehrer Report before supper. We can go up then." He paused. I heard about Jim."

"He moved all his stuff out finally."

"I thought you two would be together forever. I kept expecting you to call and say you'd gotten married."

Christine sipped her bourbon, then gazed at the glass. "After he left, I came home one day and started fixing drinks. Jim always had a vodka and tonic and I always had a bourbon. Well, I fixed myself a drink

and then I suddenly realized I'd fixed his, too. That was when I finally cried about it." She shook her head. "You seen=m to be doing all right."

"I guess so." Charles's ash-blond hair was already thinning around his temples; his mustache was thicker, as if to compensate. "One thing about being a dentist—the customers can't talk back to you while you're working."

"You'll be all right. You always were. You were always the good child.

I screwed up."

"Chris, Mom worries about you sometimes."

"No, she doesn't. She's never forgiven me, not since my breakdown. It was as if I was saying she was a lousy mother because I didn't turn out right. And I'm not married, and I don't have kids, and I don't have a lovely home and a fine husband. She hates me for it, but she won't say so." Christine gulped at her bourbon. "If she says she worries about me, it's only because she thinks she's supposed to say it."

"Oh, Chris, come on."

"She never came to see me when I was in that expensive bin. She never asked me why I broke down. After that, I was damaged goods as far as she was concerned. As long as I was perfect, she loved me. When I wasn't, she just turned herself off."

"What do you want her to do, say she's sorry?"

"That wouldn't change anything."

"Then forget it. It's your problem, Chris. You can't keep feeling sorry for yourself."

She glared at him. "It's easy for you to talk, Chuck. You didn't fall."

"You think so? Every time Dad visits, he asks me why I don't keep up my sports more, maybe coach Little League. I know he would have liked to see me pitch in the major leagues—hell, I wanted it, too. Nobody grows up thinking, 'Boy, I'm really into teeth." But I'm not going to get depressed over it."

"Chuck, Mother's been spending a lot of time in my old room. It worries me. She" Christine was about to mention the little girl, but changed her mind. "That room gives me the willies. I wish she'd put all my old crap away."

"You could take it with you when you drive back to the city."

"I don't have room. And I wouldn't care to be reminded of how wonderful I once was."

"Chris, you've got to stop it. You have the rest of your life—don't poison it. Grow up. Everyone fails in some way. You have to learn to live with that."

* * *

She heard the voices again.

Christine threw off her sheet and coverlet and tiptoed toward the door, opening it slowly. Creeping into the darkened hallway, she moved cautiously toward her old room.

A child's voice giggled. "Do you like it?"

"I think it's beautiful. But you always do everything well."

"I'm glad. I love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too."

Christine trembled as she recognized her mother's voice.

"Read to me, Mommy." Bedsprings squeaked.

"Which book?"

"The House at Pooh Corner."

"You're such a good little girl. You won't disappoint me, will you Chrissie?"

"Never."

Chrissie. Christine backed toward the guest room. How long had the child been living in this house, and what had enabled her to appear?

She knew the answer to the second question—her own failure, and her mother's disappointment. She shook her head. It was a dream; it had to be.

She got back into bed and lay there, awake, for along time.

Christine had slept uneasily and her eyes felt gritty in the morning.

She got out of bed, pulled on her robe, and darted into the hall before she had time to change her mind. As she entered her old room, she closed the door behind her.

The bed had been made, or had never been slept in at all. The artifacts of her childhood and youth still hung on the walls in their usual places, and the House at Pooh Corner was back on the bookshelf between Winnie-the-Pooh and Stuart Little. The yearbook was open once again, this time to a picture of Christine and a boy named Lars Heldstrom under the caption "Most Likely to Succeed."

She gripped the dresser; her hands became claws. "Come out", she muttered. "Damn you, come out." The room was still. She was having another breakdown; the breakup with Jim and the visit home had unhinged her. But her mother had been in the room, and she had seen the child in the window.

"Who are you? If you don't come out, I'll take Mother away. You'll never see her again."

"No, you won't." The voice seemed to hover above her; she clutched at the dresser, afraid to move. "She's mine now. Go away."

Christine spun around. The little girl was standing in front of the closet door, dressed in a pair of blue overalls and a white turtleneck.

Her small hands held a clarinet; her blue eyes were icy.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Chrissie. Don't you know that?" The girl's voice was low and harsh. "This isn't your room anymore. Mommy comes to visit me every day."

"She's not your mommy."

"She is. I could feel her calling me, and I wanted to be with her so much. I found out I could come in here and stay for a while. I'll never let her go away."

"You will. I'll force you to."

"You won't. She loves me. She doesn't love you anymore."

Christine strode toward the child. The little girl retreated to a corner, her back against the closet door. As Christine reached for the girl, the wall suddenly dropped away; she was standing at the edge of the floor, gazing down into a thick gray fog. She teetered on the edge, afraid she would fall and keep falling, and clawed at the gray mists, then staggered back and fell across the bed.

She sat up. The room was as it had been; the little girl was gone.

Christine pressed her hands to her face. She had never had delusions; even during the worst days of her illness, she had never seen things that weren't there. Depression had been her affliction, and despair, and guilt.

She rushed from the room and was halfway down the stairs before she had time to think. Her mother would only evade a confrontation, and there was no one else to help her.

Christine climbed the front steps, reached into her purse, and removed the key she had taken from the kitchen wall that morning; she had parked her car in front of a house farther down the street. Her mother would not be expecting her; Christine had said that she was going to the mall to see Toni.

Opening the storm door, she propped it against her back while inserting the key, turning it slowly so that the lock would not snap, then pushed the door open. After closing both doors, she took off her coat and put it on the entryway's wooden bench with her purse, then slipped off her shoes.

The living room was a beige desert, its modular furniture unstained, its only oases of color two potted plants and a Picasso print over the fireplace. Her stockinged toes curled against the thick, pale rug. She could hear nothing; she knew where her mother was.

She moved stealthily through the dining room and toward the back of the house, stopping when she reached the staircase. Her face was flushed; she pressed icy fingers to her cheeks. She had often sneaked up the stairs when she came home late from dates, always able to avoid the steps that creaked.

She set her foot down on the first, skipping the second, holding on to the banister.

When she reached the next floor, she could hear the voices; the door to her room was ajar. She moved toward the crack of light; the wood under her feet was hard and cold. The child said, "I'm going to be the best, Mommy. I'm going to be the best at everything."

Christine thrust the door open violently; it bounced against the doorstop. The little girl, still dressed in overalls, looked up; she was kneeling on the floor, her arms around Mrs. Matthews legs. The older woman sat in a rocker; she gazed past Christine, her gray eyes empty.

"Mother," Christine said. The woman's face seemed even paler now, her hair more silvery. "Mother."

The child stood up slowly. "Leave her alone," the little girl said.

"You can't have her. She's mine. She'll always be mine."

"Mother, listen to me." Mrs. Matthews stirred slightly at Christine's words. "You have to come away from here."

"She gave you everything," the child said. "She did everything for you, and you failed. But I won't."

"Mother, come out of this room."

"It's too late," the little girl said. "It's too late. You can't change anything now. You can't say you're sorry—it won't help." She grabbed the older woman's hand. "She's mine."

Christine looked around the room, the monument to her past. She strode to the wall, pulled off a framed photograph, and smashed it on the floor. "This isn't me now. You should have thrown all this out years ago." She pulled down another photo, then hurled the National Merit certificate against the wall.

"Chrissie." Her mother was standing now. Christine took a step toward her, then noticed that Mrs. Matthews was gazing down at the child. "May I go with you now??

The little girl smiled. "Yes. We'll never come back, never."

"No," Christine cried.

"I need her now," the child said. "You don't." She tugged at Mrs.

Matthew's hand, leading her toward the corner next to the closet door.

Christine darted after them, stepped off the floor, and was surrounded by fog. "Come back!" The gray formlessness swallowed her words; the thick masses pinned her arms to her side. She could feel nothing under her feet. "Mother, don't go." The mists parted for a moment, revealing a distant room, a tiny canopied bed, the small figures of a little girl and a woman in a blue housecoat. "I need you, too." The fog closed around her again, imprisoning her.

Hands gripped her shoulders; she was being pulled back. She flailed about, stumbled, and found herself leaning against the closet door, clinging to someone's arm.

"Chrissie. Chrissie, are you all right.?

Christine raised her head. A woman was with her. She wore a long housedress; her face was Mrs. Matthews's. But her blond hair was only lightly sprinkled with silver, and her gray eyes were warm.

"I'm fine," she said, letting go of the woman's arms.

"I hope so. You look a little pale. I thought I'd find you here." The woman waved a hand at the wall. "Maybe I can help you decide what to take with you—I'll just store these old things in the attic otherwise."

She poked at the broken glass on the floor with one toe, then tilted her head to one side. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Christine managed to nod her head.

"Good. I'd better get dressed so we can get started. I wish you could stay longer—I do so enjoy having you home."

Before she left the room, Christine leaned for a moment against her new mother, the one, who, through some slip in possibility, would understand and forgive, the one she had always wanted.

IN THE CARDS

by Michael McDowell

The storefront was downtown, and the streets to the west of it were rapidly degenerating while those to the east were gentrifying just as quickly. In the single plate-glass window was a sign reading:

MADAME CATRINA

PALM AND TAROT

INQUIRE WITHIN

Behind this discreet placard was a curtain of bright flowered material, heavily lined so that it was impossible to see inside. The glass in the narrow shopfront door was blocked with the same material. A smaller sign here read:

OPEN

PLEASE RING BELL

Inside, Catherine was painting her toenails as she talked into the telephone cradled on her shoulder. "Yeah, Billy," she said, generously smiling her most winning smile just as if Billy had been there to bask in it, "that sounds good. Now, listen, I want the letters to be sort of occult-looking. And Madame Catrina at the top on a line all by itself."

It was only in print—on the placard in the front window, in flyers tacked to telephone poles, in advertisements in neighborhood newsletters—that Catherine Dally called herself Madame Catrina. She asked even first-time customers to call her plain old Catherine, and close friends knew her by Cat.

"How about the photograph?" she asked Billy. "Is that gonna reproduce okay?" She finished the little toe on her right foot, wagged it for good luck, then put that foot down on the floor and raised her left foot to the edge of the table. "Well, I'm glad you like it, and Billy, I want you to put one more thing in the adA palm."

She listened for a moment as she brushed the red lacquer on the nail of her big toe.

"No, Billy, not a tree. A palm—a picture of a human hand—with lifelines and everything. Think you can handle that? And this'll be ready in a week?"

She listened smiling. "Well, if it is, maybe we can have that drink."

The bell rang. Catherine looked up. A woman's shadow appeared against the curtain over the door glass.

"In your dreams, Billy," she said in a lower voice to conclude the conversation with the printer. She hung up the phone, grimaced as she slipped her still wet toenails into dark slippers, pulled a fringed shawl around her shoulders, slipped several more silver bracelets onto her wrist, primped her wavy blond hair in a pier glass, and then opened the door before the woman on the street felt obliged to ring the bell a second time.

"My name is Marlene," the woman said with that hesitancy all new customers displayed. She was fifty or so, dressed the way suburban women dress when their husbands aren't yet dead and haven't yet run away with younger women. "You're Madame Catrina?"

"Call me Catherine." Catherine led the lady to the little tea table, covered with dark cloth, that sat in the middle of the small parlor.

"I've heard such marvelous things about you!" Marlene whispered breathily, as if in contemplation of a slightly disreputable indulgence.

"I just know this will be fun!"

The ticking clock on the low bookcase chimed two, but Catherine didn't look up, wanting to avoid the impression that she worked by the clock.

Twenty cards from a pack of seventy-eight, shuffled by Catherine and cut by Marlene, had been upturned and laid out in a precise, symmetrical design that nearly covered the cloth on the tea table.

But a few moments later, when the echo of the chimes had died out, Catherine looked up with her winning smile. "Yes. Definitely. A man."

Marlene laughed softly. "No wonder my husband doesn't believe in all this."

"He's young," said Catherine, knowing in her heart that Marlene's husband wasn't. "Handsome. Intelligent. But lean and strong, too."

She cocked her head and peered at one of the cards that was laid sideways. "Possibly a tennis instructor . . .?"

"Are you sure?" Marlene seemed thrilled.

"I see it in the cards," said Catherine confidently. "And this one here—the Knight of Swords—he never lies."

She tapped the card knowingly, then began to gather the cards together again, reversing the order of their laying-out. That started her with the Knight of Swords, and ended her with the Fool, with his snug black cap, his wooden sword, and his belled scepter.

"How do you know what the Knight of Swords is saying?"

"You have to learn to interpret, you see. That is . . . the art of it."

"Well," said Marlene, and her type always made the weakest jokes of anyone who visited Catherine, "you must be an artist!" She opened her purse in her lap and withdrew a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

"I'll get change," said Catherine, taking it.

"Everyone said you'd be cheerful and bring good news. You have that reputation, you know."

Catherine stood at her dresser and opened the lid of the lacquered box where she kept her money. Making sure she held her back carefully turned toward her customer, Catherine peered closely at the note to make sure it was genuine.

But while Catherine's back was turned, the lady at the table reached into her purse and brought out another deck of tarot cards, identical in size and design to Catherine's and slid them onto the table.

She picked up Catherine's deck and put it into her purse. She quickly snapped the bag shut.

"This is so exciting," said Marlene when Catherine brought her the change.

Iris inhaled deeply, closed her eyes against the candle flames, and wobbled a little, in the way she thought people wobbled when they were in ecstasy. "Sandalwood," she breathed. "It smells so . . . so Indian. I love it."

Iris wasn't twenty, and it was only when you weren't twenty that you could try to look dissipated and not quite achieve it. Her hair was dyed black and chopped, her pants were tourniquet-tight, and her blouse was too then and didn't have enough buttons. Her eyes, however, were wide and naive, and spoiled the effect.

"Catherine?" said Iris, for Madame Catrina had pored over the cards for more than five minutes now.

Catherine looked up over the tarot. "You have a question . . ." she said, distracted.

"Yes . . ." said Iris with a widening of those naive black eyes.

"It's . . . it's about your boyfriend."

"Far out," said Iris. "He's meeting me here. Had you know?"

"I can see it," said Catherine. "In the cards."

"So how's it gonna turn out?" Iris demanded.

Swish.

(A noise like that of a broom in the corner suddenly spilling to the floor. Like that, but metallic.)

Catherine stared at Iris, said nothing.

"Our relationship, I mean," Iris prompted. She lightly touched the Knight of Swords, the twentieth card turned.

Abruptly Catherine gathered the cards together again, not reversing the order as she usually did but sweeping them together, shoving the twenty cards back into the pack of seventy-eight and shuffling them together.

"Iris, I'm going to ask you to cut the cards again."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I couldn't read the hand. Please, cut them again."

"You read that hand. And you saw something—"

"No, I didn't. We'll just do another layout."

She pushed the tarot deck across the table. Iris cut it, and Catherine turned up the cards.

"The Fool," whispered Iris. "That was the first card last time too."

"The Burning Tower," said Catherine.

"And that was the second card," whispered Iris, in awe.

And so through the twentieth card, the Knight of Swords.

"It's the same hand, isn't it?" cried Iris. "Exactly the same hand. And that proves something!"

"This is impossible," said Catherine. She pushed her chair back from the table.

"What do you see?" Iris demanded. "Tell me!"

"Iris, the cards say your boyfriend is going to die."

Iris screamed, then over that scream was the squeal of brakes, and Iris's boyfriend, who was on his way to meet her at Madame Catrina's storefront, never made it, and, in fact, never made any appointment ever again.

Swish. Clang.

(The metal broom fell to the floor again. But this time it struck a bell.)

She stared at the layout of the cards, then drew the painted silk robe tighter over her short white slip.

No matter how thoroughly she shuffled, no matter how often she laid out the cards, the twenty cards began with the Fool and ended with the Knight of Swords. In between was always Death, Despair, Doom, Desolation, and the Destruction of Dynasties.

The bell rang and she scattered the cards.

"For you, dear Catrina," said the old man as he handed her a single white rose. He had a rusty black coat, polished blue eyes, a tonsure of silky white hair, and a yarmulke of black silk.

"The rose is beautiful, Isaac. Come in." She flipped onto their backs half a dozen of the scattered cards that had landed faceup.

Isaac took the visitor's chair at the table. "I know I'm early. But your cards—they always tell me such happy stories. A man at my age, who has seen what I have seen, he doesn't mind paying for a happy story."

Catherine tried to smile her best smile, but it didn't quite come this time. The cards lay in a neat stack in the center of the table, waiting for Isaac's cut.

"When old friends are gone—" Isaac went on, but Catherine interrupted him.

"Isaac, did you touch those cards?" she demanded.

"No, dear," he said, placing his hand atop hers. "You know I always wait for you. The cards are yours, and they speak only for you . . ."

Neither Catherine nor Isaac had gathered the scattered cards. Yet here they were, in a neat deck, ready for the old man's cut.

Swish. Clang.

That the twentieth card was the Knight of Swords was no more a surprise than that the first card had been the Fool and the second card the Burning Tower.

"What's wrong, Catrina?" Isaac said.

"I'm dizzy . . ." she said, leaning back in her chair, ashen. "Could you get me some water, please? In the fridge.."

When he slipped behind the curtain at the back of the room, Catherine slipped the Knight of Swords beneath the tablecloth and replaced it with the card at the bottom of the deck.

The innocent lovers.

"Drink," said Isaac, bringing her a glass filled with water from the tap. "Rest, and don't worry."

"Don't worry?"

"It's not your fault," he said, pulling his chair around closer to her.

"Sometimes we can't tell happy stories."

"Isaac, I don't tell you stories—"

"Shhh," he said, smiling. "Either this is just a foolish game . . .

or we must accept the power of the cards. Even when they don't smile."

"Isaac, what are you saying?"

"The truth." He shrugged. "Tarot comes from the Cabalah—from the words, the soul, of our mystics. They are not our Belief—they are not our Fate—they are Truth itself." He shrugged again, smiled again, "So when the Angel of Death appears, there is no appeal."

"How do you know what the cards said?" Catherine demanded.

"This one—with the other cards around it—this one doesn't lie."

He tapped the twentieth card, the Knight of Swords.

Catherine fumbled beneath the cloth for the cad she'd placed there, facedown—the Knight of Swords.

She turned it over.

Swish. Clang.

The innocent Lovers.

"I'm sorry that I will hear no more of your happy stories, Madame Catrina," said Isaac, rising. At the door he bowed with grave politeness. "I thank you for the happiness you tried to give, to me, to others. Happiness is precious. Goodbye, Madame Catrina."

Catherine gathered the cards, feverishly counted them twice to make certain she had all seventy-eight, both times making certain the Fool was at the top, the Knight of Swords at the bottom. She dropped them into a ten-gallon plastic garbage bag, wound two metal ties around the top, and shoved it deep into a trash barrel at the degenerating end of the street.

When she returned to her storefront, slipping through the curtained door (where the sign had been turned to CLOSED), Iris was waiting for her.

Her black, spiked hair seemed horribly appropriate, mourning hysteria.

"You started a reading. You have to finish it. There were other things in the cards, things you didn't tell me. I could see it in your face."

"Don't do this, Iris." Catherine pushed shut the street door, pulled back the curtain across the doorway. She looked at herself in the pier glass and wondered why she could now read exactly what the cards said, when before she had read only the faces of the customers.

"You've got to tell me!" cried Iris. "Last night you knew what was going to happen to Randy. That's

what kept me awake last night—not Randy dying but your knowing that he was going to die. What else did you see, Catherine?"

"I don't know," said Catherine. "I can't remember."

"Then read the cards again."

"They're gone," said Catherine, glad she could tell the truth. "I threw them away."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Iris. "Look."

Catherine turned slowly. Turned slowly, because she knew what she'd see.

Swish. Clang.

"Well," said Iris.

The first card was the Fool.

"It's almost the same," said Catherine flatly. "Very bad."

"But there's more, isn't there?"

The second card was the Burning Tower, and the last card was the Knight of Swords.

"Go home, Iris."

"What did you mean, 'almost the same'? What's different?"

"Your boyfriend's dead now,: said Catherine heavily, after a moment.

"That's all."

Iris stared at her.

Catherine abruptly gathered the cards together.

"You've heard enough, Iris," she said heavily. "And they're only cards.

So go home. Go home now. Please . . ."

She leaned against the refrigerator, dialing by the light of the sodium lamp that shone at the mouth of the alley in back.

"Esther,: she said in vast relief. "Thank God you're back, I've been calling all day. Can you come over? Right now?"

The refrigerator motor hummed through Catherine's bones.

"I have to talk to you about—our work. The cards. No, this is not--?

She squeezed the mouthpiece with her hand, listening to Esther's remonstrances.

"No, I'm not all right," Catherine cried finally, near tears. "Nothing's right."

She pushed the tarot cards to the side and placed the largest of her set of three stainless-steel mixing bowls in the center of the table. She dropped half the deck into the bowl and poured out half the sandalwood-scented oil in the spirit lamp she kept on her dresser. She put in the remainder of the deck and poured over it the rest of the fragrant oil.

The Knight of Swords lay faceup atop the pile, his visage glistening in the oil.

She lit a match and dropped it into the bowl.

The oil flared in a rush of blue flame and incense.

Swish. Clang.

Esther wore a long, shapeless coat in threadbare herringbone tweed, and long earrings in Central American silver, hammered so thin that candlelight shone through it.

"Cat!" she cried, staring less at Catherine's drawn face than at the hideous afghan around Catherine's slumped shoulders. "Cat! What's wrong?"

"Something's happening," said Catherine, shutting the street door and locking it. "I don't understand it."

"This you'll understand." Esther pulled a large paper bag with fragrant grease stains from beneath her long wool coat. "A cheeseburger, double onions. Tea with lemon."

"Thanks," said Catherine, whose smile wasn't what it used to be. "I can't think about eating now."

"You look exhausted." Automatically Esther took the customer's place across the tea table.

"I couldn't sleep last night."

"Because of Isaac," said Esther with soft understanding.

"What happened to Isaac?" cried Catherine.

"It was in both papers. He was going up to his apartment, in the elevator. The cable . . .it just snapped."

"My God. I knew it. I saw it in the cards."

Esther paused a moment before speaking. "Cat, it's not your fault." She

put her hand atop Catherine's just the way Isaac had. "You are

definitely working too hard. Everybody gives happy readings—but not

the way you do. They're draining you. Oh, sure, they're good for

business. For your business, I mean. Not for anybody else's. You're

taking all our customers—“

“I don’t want anybody’s customers!” Catherine jumped up from the chair and went to the sideboard. She opened the second drawer and withdrew the cash box, which long ago she’d shellacked with cards from an incomplete tarot. “The cards only predict horrible things now! Things that always come true!”

“Always come true?” Esther laughed. “I know people who’d kill for that gift.”

“It’s not a gift!” Catherine cried, slamming the box on the table. “Stay here tonight and I’ll show you.”

She took a key from a chain around her neck, unlocked the box, and placed the tarot deck inside. She slammed shut the lid and locked the box again.

“All right, Cat.” Esther laughed, accepting the chain with the key and draping it around her own neck. “So what can happen now?”

They sat at the tiny table against the tiny kitchen window, drinking lemon tea. Esther told stories about her customers and tried to make Catherine laugh, but when Catherine should have laughed, she only looked blank.

“You’re not listening to me—“ Esther protested.

“Shhh!”

Catherine was listening to something else.

Esther cocked her ear—and was surprised she could hear something too.

A metallic rattling in the next room.

“What is that?” whispered Esther, frightened.

Catherine smiled, a small grim smile. She reached across the table and touched Esther’s neck.

Touched the chain with the key to the locked box on it.

Catherine rose, pulled open the curtain, and turned on the light.

Esther rose, too, and looked over Catherine’s shoulder.

The box remained exactly as it had been left.

The tarot deck sat beside it, in the center of the tea table.

Catherine stalked to the table, knocked her cash box to the floor with the back of her hand. “What is it?” she yelled at the cards. “Tell me!

What do you want from me?”

They sat at the little kitchen table by the little window, but now it was the morning sun that shone through

and not the buzzing sodium lamp.

"I do want to help you," said Esther.

"How? You saw what the cards can do."

"Their power must come from something. There has to be a reason for it.

Let's go back. When did the bad readings—the dangerous

readings—start?"

"Two days ago. With Iris. She's a regular."

"Before Iris?"

"A new client. Marlene. I don't think she told me her last name."

"How did she find you?"

"Some friend recommended me. She didn't say who it was."

"What did Marlene look like? How old?"

"Fifty, fifty-five. Sandy hair. She colors it."

Esther thought for a moment. "Marlene . . ."

"Lives in the suburbs," Catherine added. "Paid me with a new fifty."

Esther smiled grimly. "Madame Marlena."

"She does readings?" cried Catherine, astonished. "Why'd she come here?"

"She's mad at you. You've been stealing her clients."

"I don't drag people in here," Catherine protested.

"She thinks you do."

Catherine thought a moment, then jumped up from the table. "Where does she work out of?"

"Collins Street. Near the place I got my glasses last Christmas."

Esther followed Catherine into the front room and helped her struggle into her stiff khaki overcoat.
"You're going over there?"

"Time I got my fortune told," Catherine said, smiling grimly.

"It'll do you good to get out," said Esther softly. "Just make sure you leave those things behind." She pointed to the cards on the table.

There were no cards on the table.

At the door, Catherine reached into the deep pocket of her jacket and pulled out the tarot deck.

"I can't leave them behind, Esther. They won't let me go."

Swish. Clang.

"Madame Marlena?" Catherine asked.

There had been no sign in the window of the storefront, which was even narrower than her own place, but Catherine had asked the receptionist in the eye doctor's office, and the young woman had pointed the place out.

No answer when she rang the bell, but the door had been unlocked.

Inside, the small room—even smaller than Catherine's—had been nearly stripped. Silver-framed posters of the zodiac leaned neatly against the bare walls. Cardboard boxes were tied, stacked, and labeled. Three suitcases, each with a luggage tag, waited in ascending order of size by the door. A sheet had been thrown over a long sofa, and at one end of the sheeted sofa sat a woman in a black dress and a black turban.

Her hands were folded in her lap, and all the rings on her fingers were silver. Her face was turned away from Catherine.

"Marlene?" asked Catherine again, approaching the sofa.

The woman turned. "Yes," she replied. Despair and bitterness, Catherine thought—that was what was in Marlene's face.

"It was you," said Catherine.

"What are you doing here?" Marlene asked in a tone of voice suggesting she wasn't at all surprised that Catherine was here."

"I want a reading," said Catherine.

"There's no sign in the window. Everything's packed. I'm closed."

said Marlene, galled indifference in her voice.

"I've come such a long way, I'd hate to be disappointed," said Catherine. She went around the back of the sofa and leaned over Marlene's shoulder. "And I've heard such marvelous things about you, Marlene. Sorry, Madame Marlena." Catherine took the tarot deck from her pocket and thrust the cards before Marlene's face. "What did you want from me? What is this deck?"

Marlene didn't flinch. "You were a liar, Madame Catrina. You pretended to believe in the cards. You told people only what they wanted to hear."

"They paid me—I put on a show. They gave me money—I made them feel good."

"You fed them lies."

Catherine went all the way around the sofa and seated herself at the opposite end from Marlene. She tossed the deck on the cushion that separated them. "What is this deck?" Where did it come from?"

"All the cards are one." Marlene smiled a sad, cold smile. "They come from the Hebrews . . . the Persians . . .the Egyptians. From Astaroth, the Goddess of Fertility and Rottenness. From Shiva the Destroyer and Shiva the Resurrection. The cards have the power to dream. And the dreams of the tarot are more powerful than our reality.

You mocked them."

"I'm not going to do this work anymore. I don't want the cards," said Catherine.

"They won't leave you. But you know that already."

"There must be a way I can get rid of them."

"As far as I know, there's only one way. You pass them on . Not to just anyone, of course—but to someone who has mocked them. The way you did, and the way I did once."

"You palmed them off on me!"

"I had to get rid of them," said Marlene simply. "They tortured me .

. . for my disbelief. So I turned them over—to another disbeliever.

That's what you'll have to do."

"Take them back!"

"I can't." Marlene laughed. "Don't you see? I believe in them now!"

The notice advertising the presence of Madame Catrina had been removed from the window, and for good measure the sign in the door had been turned to CLOSED. Inside, Catherine was struggling into her "Serious Audition" dress, which she hadn't worn in three years and ten pounds. It was tight and uncomfortable, but it put her in the mood for playing the part of a moderately repressed young woman who might, on impulse and on her birthday, visit a palm reader for the first time in her life. She wore a single strand of pearls and pulled off all her rings.

She savagely brushed her unruly hair and pulled it back hard. She checked her wallet for cash, then tossed it in her shoulder bag. Then she went to the tea table, where the tarot deck sat neatly in the middle, the Knight of Swords faceup. She picked it up, put it in her bag, and then started- --stopped. She took the cards out again, spilled them on the table, and left, not bothering to lock the door behind her.

In the back of the taxi, after she'd given the driver an address in the very worst part of the city, Catherine checked her shoulder bag again.

The tarot deck was there, of course. The Fool was on the bottom, and the Knight of Swords on the top.

Swish. Clang.

Behind the three chains and the police lock, the fourth-floor room was like a jungle. Dark walls painted with black-trunked palms and vines with purple flowers. Real trees with black trunks in black pots, and real vines with purple flowers, dark red rugs, dark blue curtains to keep out the sunlight, black bird cages with yellow chattering birds, red screaming birds, and green silent birds that beat their wings against the painted bars.

"I've come for a reading," said Catherine.

Mrs. McNeil wore a long dark dress and a purple scarf painted with the images of yellow, red, and green birds.

"How do you come here?" asked Mrs. McNeill. Her voices lilted. She was West Indian.

"A friend of mine recommended you."

"What friend?"

"Well, not a friend, actually," said Catherine, looking around nervously. The nervousness wasn't all disguise. "A girl who works at the place where I always get my contact lenses. She gave me your address."

Mrs. McNeill considered this a moment. "You have money?"

"Certainly I can pay you."

"Then sit."

She pointed to a small table—round and the size of Catherine's own table, covered with a cloth that was black and purple.

Catherine sat nervously. Mrs. McNeill pushed aside the fronds of a palm Catherine had at first thought was only painted on the wall. From a wooden shelf—perhaps it was even an altar of sorts—Mrs. McNeill unfolded a length of fringed silk from around the tarot deck.

She whispered words Catherine could scarcely hear and could not make out at all.

She brought the cards to the table, placed them in the exact center, and looked at Catherine.

"You have a question?"

Catherine paused a moment, as if unfamiliar with the ritual. "I do," she said at last.

"Ask your question in silence."

Catherine closed her eyes a moment, the way she had when she was a little girl, wishing on a dying star.

"Now touch the cards . . ."

Hesitantly Catherine pressed the deck with two fingers.

Mrs. McNeill shuffled the deck, many times, rhythmically, again murmuring so that Catherine could not quite hear, nor quite understand.

"Now cut," said Mrs. McNeill, pushing the deck across the table.

Catherine cut the deck, rearranged it neatly, and dropped it into Mrs.

McNeill's proffered hand.

Mrs. McNeill placed her other palm over the deck, closed her eyes, and tilted her head back. She raised the tarot to her lips.

More murmured words, unheard or unclear.

Mrs. McNeill lowered her head, opened her eyes, and started to turn over the first card.

Catherine placed her hand over the deck. "Wait."

"What is wrong?"

"It's too dark in here."

"This is my home. It is not too dark for me."

"I've been nervous lately. Upset. Darkness is part of it. That's why I came. Please—could you just let in a little light?"

Mrs. McNeill looked doubtful. "You are frightened—but not of the dark."

"Please—" Catherine begged. Her trembling wasn't feigned.Mrs. McNeill put down the cards, went to the window, and opened the blue drapes an inch or two.

A shaft of sunlight fell on Catherine's face as she took the deck from the table and replaced it with the cards from her shoulder bag.

Mrs. McNeill turned back to her. "Is that better?" she asked.

"Much, much better," said Catherine. "Thank you."

"Now we begin," said Mrs. McNeill, taking her place again, picking up the tarot deck and beginning to deal.

The Fool first.

But after that CAtherine breathed more easily. The cards were laid out, one by one. But they meant nothing to her. She couldn't read their pattern.

Seventeen was the Priestess.

Eighteen was the Lovers.

Nineteen was the Hanged Man.

Mrs. McNeill stopped. She looked at Catherine, almost angrily.

"What is it?" Catherine demanded.

"I have not seen such a thing as this . . ."

"Tell me—"

"Hush. There is one more."

"No there's not," cried Catherine, "because you're going to stop." She snatched the deck out of Mrs. McNeill's hands and slapped it down on the table.

Swish. Clang.

The twentieth card, at the top of the deck, flipped over of its own accord and laid itself crosswise over the Fool.

"How did you do that?" Catherine said, snarling.

"I did nothing!"

"I hate tricks," said Catherine, getting up and grabbing her coat and bag.

"I make no magic," said Mrs. McNeill softly, staring at the layout.

"Take this," said Catherine, dropping two bills on the table. "I've got an appointment."

"But your reading—"

"I don't want it. I don't want to know the future. And it's tricks, anyway. Tricks and lies."

Catherine clattered down the tenement stairs, through the vestibule with its rifled mailboxes, down the cracked concrete stoop, and along the street. No taxi was in sight, but she knew she could find something at the intersection a couple of blocks up. She hurried along, fingering the tarot deck in her pocket.

Then she stopped suddenly, realizing she could not wait to find out if her plan had worked. She slipped into a small alleyway between two decrepit buildings and took the pack from her pocket—Mrs. McNeill's innocent pack. Catherine riffled through it till she found the Knight of Swords. She held it up, flicked a cigarette lighter, and held the flame beneath the card.

The pasteboard caught and burned between her fingers. She held it till she felt the heat of the flame, then she dropped the charred card to the ground.

She laughed aloud in her relief. Then, as if in further evidence of her good luck, she saw an unoccupied taxi pass along the street. She hurried out toward the mouth of the alley, happily calling, "Taxi!"

But Catherine didn't make it to the mouth of the alley, for a strong wrist grabbed her hand and she looked up into the face of a tall man with wide shoulders. A black knit cap with three tassels was pulled over his brow.

A black knit cap with three tassels just like the Fool wore.

Swish. Clang.

He grabbed her bag with one hand. With his other he slashed out with a knife, to cut the straps.

Catherine drew back, frightened, not of the thief, but of the Fool.

The blade missed the straps. It found Catherine and slid up through her ribs to her heart.

When the Fool had clattered off, Catherine slipped to the rough pavement of the alley the way a child slips to his bed after a long day of relatives and food and car journeys. Her eyes looked a moment at the sky, then heavily slid down the smoky brick of the condemned apartment house, then past her bare arm with the flecks of blood like bright freckles, then to the bit of bright pasteboard that lay so close to her face, its image was blurred.

It's image of the Knight of Swords, his face pale and impassive, on a rearing horse, brandishing his bloodstained sword.

Swish. Clang.

THE BITTEREST PILL

by Frederik Pohl

Margery tried putting the phone back on the hook, but it immediately rang again. She kicked the stand, picked up the phone and said: "Hang up, will you? We don't want any!" She slammed the phone down to break the connection and took it off the hook again.

The doorbell rang.

"My turn," I said, and put down the paper—it looked as though I never would find out what the National League standings were. It was Patrolman Gamelsfelder.

"Man to see you, Mr. Binns. Says it's important." He was sweating—you could see the black patches on his blue shirt. I knew what he was thinking: We had air-conditioning and money, and he was risking his life day after day for a lousy policeman's pay, and what kind of a country was this anyhow? He'd said as much that afternoon.

"It might be important to him, but I don't want to see anybody. Sorry, Officer." I closed the door.

Margery said: "Are you or are you not going to help me change the baby?" I said cheerfully: "I'll be glad to, dear." And it was true—besides being good policy to say that, since she was pretty close to exploding.

It was true because I wanted something to do myself. I wanted some nice, simple, task like holding a one-year-old down with my knee in the middle of his chest, while one hand held his feet and the other one pinned the diaper. I mean, it was nice of Uncle Otto to leave me the money, but did they have to put it in the paper?

The doorbell rang again as I was finishing. Margery was upstairs with Gwennie, who took a lot of calming down because she'd had an exciting day, and because she always did, so I stood the baby on his fat little feet and answered the door myself. It was the policeman again. "Some telegrams for you, Mr. Binns. I wooden let the boy deliver them."

"Thanks." I tossed them in the drawer of the telephone stand. What was the use of opening them? They were from people who had heard about Uncle Otto and the money, and who wanted to sell me something.

"That fellow's still here," Patrolman Gamelsfelder said sourly. "I think he's sick."

"Too bad." I tried to close the door.

"Anyway, he says to tell Cuddles that Tinker is here."

I grabbed the door. "Tell Cud. . ."

"That's what he said." Gamelsfelder saw that that hit me, and it pleased him. For the first time he smiled.

"What—what's his name?"

"Winston McNeely McGhee," said Officer Gamelsfelder happily, "or anyway that's what he told me, Mr. Binns."

"Send the son of a—Send the fellow in," I said, and jumped to get the baby away from the ashtray where Margery had left a cigarette burning.

Winnie McGhee—it was all I needed to finish my day.

He came in holding his head as though it weighed a thousand pounds. He was never what you'd call healthy-looking, even when Margery stood me up at the altar in order to elope with him. It was his frail, poetic charm, and maybe he still had that, and maybe he didn't, but the way he looked to me, he was sick, all right. He looked like he weighed a fast hundred pounds not counting the head; the head looked like a balloon. He moaned, "Hello, Harlan, age thirty-one, five-eleven, one seventy-three.

You got an acetylsalicylic acid tablet?" I said, "What?" But he didn't get a chance to answer right away because there was a flutter and a scurry from the expansion attic and Margery appeared at the head of the stairs. "I thought—" she began wildly, and then she saw that her wildest thought was true. "You!" She betrayed pure panic—fussing with her hair with one hand and smoothing her Bermuda shorts with the other, simultaneously trying to wiggle, no hands, out of the sloppy old kitchen apron that had been good enough for me.

McGhee said pallidly, "Hello. Please, don't you have an acetylsalicylic acid tablet?"

"I don't know what it is," I said simply.

Margery chuckled ruefully. "Ah, Harlan, Harlan," she said with fond tolerance, beaming lovingly at me as she came down the stairs. It was enough to turn the stomach of a cat.

"You forget, Winnie. Harlan doesn't know much chemistry. Won't you find him an aspirin, Harlan? That's all the wants."

"Thanks," said Winnie with a grateful sigh, massaging his temples.

I went and got him an aspirin. I thought of adding a little mixer to the glass of water that went with it, but there wasn't anything in the medicine chest that looked right, and besides, it's against the law. I don't mind admitting it, I never liked Winnie McGhee, and it isn't just because he swiped my bride from me. Well, she smartened up after six months, and then, when she turned up with an annulment and sincere repentance—well, I've never regretted marrying her. Or anyway, not much. But you can't expect me to like McGhee. My heavens, if I'd never seen the man before I'd hate his little purple guts on first contact, because he looks like a poet and talks like a scientist and acts like a jerk.

I started back to the living room and yelled: "The baby!"

Margery turned away from simpering at her former husband and sprang for the puppy's dish. She got it away from the baby, but not quite full.

There was a good baby-sized mouthful of mixed mild and dog biscuit that she had to excavate for, and naturally the baby had his way of counterattacking for that.

"No bite!" she yelled, pulling her finger out of his mouth and putting it in hers. Then she smiled sweetly. "Isn't he a darling, Winnie?

He's got his daddy's nose, of course. But don't you think he has my eyes?"

"He'll have your fingers, too, if you don't keep them out of his mouth," I told her.

Winnie said: "That's normal. After all, with twenty-four paired chromosomes forming the gamete, it is perfectly obvious that the probability of inheriting none of his traits from one parent—that is, being exactly like the other—is one chance in 8,388,608. Ooh, my head."

Margery gave him a small frown. "What?"

He was like a wound-up phonograph. "That's without allowance for

spontaneous mutation," he added. "Or induced. And considering the

environmental factors in utero—that is, broad-spectrum antibiotics,

tripling of the background radiation count due to nuclear weapons,

dietary influences, et cetera—yes, I should put the probability of

induced mutation rather high. Yes. Perhaps of the order of—"

I interrupted. "Here's your aspirin. Now, what do you want?"

"Harlan!" Margery said warningly.

"I mean—well, what do you want?"

He leaned his head on his hands. "I want you to help me conquer the world," he said.

Crash-splash. "Go get a mop!" Margery ordered; the baby had just spilled the puppy's water. She glared at me and smiled at Winnie. "Go ahead," she coaxed. "Take your nice aspirin, and we'll talk about your trip around the world later."

But that hadn't been what he said.

Conquer the world. I heard it plain as day. I went to fetch the mop, because that was as good a way as any to think over what to do about Winston McNeely McGhee. I mean, what did I want with the world? Uncle Otto had already bequeathed me the world, or anyway, as much of it as I ever hoped to own.

When I came back, Winnie was tottering around the room, followed at respectful distance by my wife holding the baby. She was saying to the prospective conqueror of all the world: "How did you hear about Harlan's good lu—About the tragic loss of his dear uncle, I mean?"

He groaned, "I read it in the paper." He fiddled aimlessly with the phone.

"It's all for the best, I say," said Margery in a philosophic tone, carving damp graham-cracker crumbs out of the baby's ear. "Dear Otto lived a rich and full life. Think of all those years in Yemen! And the enormous satisfaction it must have given him to be personally responsible for the installation of the largest petroleum-cracking still west of the Suez!"

"East, my dear. East. The Mutawakelite Kingdom lies just south of Saudi Arabia."

She looked at him thoughtfully, but all she said was, "Winnie, you've changed."

And so he had; but for that matter, so had she. It was not like Margery to be a hypocrite. Simpering over her ex-husband I could understand—it wasn't so bad; she was merely showing the poor guy how very much better off she was than she every would have been with him. But the tragic loss of my dear uncle had never occasioned a moment's regret in her—or in me; the plain fact of the matter is that until the man form the Associated Press called up she didn't even know I had an Uncle Otto.

And I had pretty nearly forgotten it myself. Otto was the brother that my mother's family didn't talk about. How were they to know that he was laying up treasures of oil and gold on the Arabian Peninsula?

The phone rang; Winnie had thoughtlessly put it back on the hook. "No!"

Margery cried into it, hardly listening, "We don't want any uranium stock! We've got closets full!"

I said, taking advantage of the fact that her attention was diverted:

"Winnie. I'm a busy man. How about you telling me what you want?"

He sat down with his head on his hands and made a great effort.

"It's—difficult," he said, speaking very slowly. EAch word came out by

itself, as though he had to choose and sort painfully among all the

words that were rushing to his mouth. "I—invented something. You

understand? And when I heard about you inheriting money—"

"You thought you could get some of it away from me." I sneered.

"No!" He sat up sharply—and winced and clutched his head. "I want to make money for you."

"We've got closets full," I said gently.

He said in a desperate tone, "But I can give you the world, Harlan.

Trust me!"

"I never have—"

"Trust me now! You don't understand, Harlan. We can own the world, the two of us, if you'll just give me a little financial help. I've invented a drug that gives me total recall."

"How nice for you," I said, reaching for the knob of the door.

But then I began to think.

"Total recall?" I asked.

He said, sputtering with eagerness, "The up welling of the unconscious!

The ability to remember everything—the eidetic memory of an idiot savant and the indexing system of a quiz winner. You want to know the first six kings of England? Egbert, Ethelwulf, Ethelbald, Ethelbert, Elthelred and Alfred. You want to know the mating call of a ruff-necked grouse?" He demonstrated the call of the ruff-necked grouse.

"Oh," said Margery, coming back into the room with the freshly diapered baby. "Bird imitations."

"And more!" cried Winnie. "Do you know about the time the United States had two presidents?

"No, but—"

"March the third," he said. "Eighteen seventy-seven. Rugherford B.

Hayes—I'd better say Rutherford Birchard Hayes—was about to succeed

Grant, and he was sworn in a day early. I ought to explain that—"

"No," I said. "Don't explain."

"Well, how about this? Want me to name the ABC bowling champions from

1931 to date? Clack, Nitschke, Hewitt, Vidro, Brokaw, Gagliardi,

Anderson—oh, wait a minute. I forgot 1936. That's Warren. Then

Gagliardi, Anderson, Danek—"

"Winnie," I said, "cut it out, will you? This has been a tough day."

"But this is the key to conquering the world!"

"Hah," I said. "You're going to bore everybody to death by naming bowling champions."

"Knowledge is power, Harlan." He rested his head on his palms briefly.

"But it does make my head ache."

I took my hand off the knob of the door.

I said grudgingly, "Sit down, Winnie. I admit you've got me interested.

I can't wait to hear what the swindle is."

"Harlan!" warned Margery.

Winnie said: "There's no swindle, I promise you. But think what it can mean! Knowledge is power, Harlan, as I say. Why, with my superbrain we can outwit the rulers of any country anywhere. We can own the world!

And—money, you say? Knowledge is money too. For instance"—he winked—"worried about taxes? I can tell you the minority opinion in U.S.

Government versus Oosterhagen, 486 Alabama 3309. There's a loophole there you could drive an armored truck through!"

Margery sat down with a cigarette in the long, long holder I'd bought her to square a beef the year after we were married. She looked at me and then at the cigarette; and it penetrated, and I raced over with a match.

"Thank you, darling," she said throatily.

She had changed herself as well as the baby. She now wore something more suitable for a coheiress of a big fat hunk of money entertaining an ex-husband. It was a gold lame housecoat, and she had bought it, within an hour of the time the Associated Press man had called, on a charge account we'd never owned until the early editions of the papers hit the stores around Levittown.

And that reminded me. Money. Who needed money? What was the use of inheriting all that loot from Uncle Otto if I couldn't throw Winnie out on his ear?

Politeness made me temporize: "All this is very interesting, Winnie,

but—“

“Harlan, the baby!” Margery yelled. “Get him out of the pretzels!”

I did, while Winnie said faintly behind me: “The shape of a pretzel

represents children’s arms folded in prayer—or so it was thought in the

seventeenth century. A good pretzel bender can bend more than

thirty-five a minute. Of course, machines are faster.” I said,

“Winnie—“

“Like to know the etymology of the word navvy? Most people think it has something to do with sailors.”

“Winnie, listen to me—“

“It doesn’t, though. It comes from the laborers on the Inland Navigation Canals—eighteenth-century England, you know. Well, the laborers—“ I said firmly, “Winnie, go away.”

“Harlan!”

“You stay out of this Margery,” I told her. “Winnie’s after my dough, that’s all. Well, I haven’t Had it long enough to want to throw it away. Besides, who wants to rule the world?”

“Well . . .” Margery said thoughtfully.

“With all our money?” I cried. “Who needs it?”

Winnie clutched at his head. “Oh,” he moaned. “Wait, Harlan. All I need is a stake. I’ve got the long-term cycles of every stock on the Exchange down in my head—splits and dividends and earnings records since 1904! I know the private brokers’ hand signals on the Curb—wave up for buy, wave down for sell; look, see how my fingers are bent? That means the spread between bid and asked is three-eights of a point. Give me a million dollars, Harlan!”

“No.”

“Just a million, that’s all. You can spare it! And I’ll double it in a week, quadruple it in a month—in a year we’ll have a billion. A billion dollars!”

“I shook my head. “The taxes—“

“Remember U.S. Government versus Oosterhagen!” he cried. “And that’s a bare beginning. Ever think what a billion dollars could do in the hands of a supergenius!” He was talking faster and faster, a perfect diarrhea of words, as though he couldn’t control the spouting. “Here!” he yelled, clutching at his temple with one hand, pulling something out of his pocket with the other. “Look at this, Harlan! It’s yours for a million dollars—no, for a hundred thousand. Yes, a hundred thousand dollars and you can have it! I’ll sell it for that, and then I won’t split with you—we’ll both be supergeniuses. Eh? Fair enough?”

I was trapped by my own curiosity. “What is it?” I asked. He waved it at me—a squat little bottle half

filled with pale capsules.

"Mine," he said proudly. "My hormone. It's a synapse relaxer. One of

these and the blocks between adjoining cells in your brain are weakened

for an hour. Three of them, for every twenty pounds of body weight, and

you're a supergenius for life. You'll never forget! You'll remember

things you think have passed out of your recollection years ago! You'll

recall the postpartum slap that started you breathing, you'll remember

the name of the nurse who carried you to the door of your father's

Maxwell. Oh, Harlan, there is no limit to—"

"Go away," I said, and pushed him.

Patrolman Gamelsfelder appeared like a genie from a lamp.

"Thought so," he said somberly, advancing on Winnie McGhee. "Extortion's your game, is it? Can't say I blame you, brother, but it's a trip to the station house and a talk with the sergeant for you."

"Just get rid of him," I said, and closed the door as Winnie was challenging the cop to name an opera by Krenek, other than Johnny Spielt Auf.

Margery put the baby down, breathing hard.

She said: "Scuffling and pushing people around and bad manners. You weren't like this when we were married, Harlan. There's something come over you since you inherited that money!" I said, "Help me pick these things up, will you?" I hadn't pushed him hard, but all the same, those pills had gone flying.

Margery stamped her foot and burst into tears. "I know how you feel about poor Winnie," she sobbed, "but it's just that I'm sorry for him.

Couldn't you at least be polite? Couldn't you at least have given him a couple of lousy hundred thousand dollars.?"

"Watch the baby," I warned her. At the head of the stairs Gwennie appeared, attracted by the noise, rubbing her eyes with her fists and beginning to cry.

Margery glared at me, started to speak, was speechless, turned her back and hurried up to comfort Gwennie.

I began to feel the least little bit ashamed of myself.

I stood up, patting the baby absentmindedly on the head, looking up the stairs at the female half of our household. I had been, when you stopped to think of it, something of a clunk.

Item: I had been rough on poor old Winnie. Suppose it had been I who discovered the hormone and needed a few lousy hundred thousand, as Margery put it so well, as a stake in order to grasp undreamed-of wealth and power? Well, why not? Why shouldn't I have given it to him? The poor fellow was evidently suffering the effect of the hormone wearing off as much as from any hangover. I could have been more kind, yes.

And, item: Margery did have a tough time with the kids and all, and on this day of all days she was likely to be excited.

And, item: I had just inherited a bloody mint!"

Why wasn't I—the thought came to me with a sudden, appalling clarity—using some of Uncle Otto's money to make life easier for all of us?

I galloped up the steps two at a time. "Margery," I cried. "Margery, I'm sorry!"

"I think you should—" she began and then looked up from Gwennie and saw my face.

I said: Look, honey. Let's start over. I'm sorry about poor Winnie, but forget him, huh? We're rich. Let's start living as though we were rich! Let's go out, just the two of us—it's early yet! We'll grab a cab and go into New York—all the way by cab, why not? We'll eat at the Colony, and see My Fair Lady from the fifth row on the aisle—you can get quite good seats, they tell me, for a hundred bucks or so. Why not?"

Margery looked up at me, and suddenly smiled. "But—" she patted Gwennie's head. "The kids. What about them?"

"Get a baby-sitter," I cried. "Mrs. Schroop'll be glad of the word."

"But it's such short notice—"

"Margery," I said, "we don't inherit a fortune every night. Call her up."

Margery stood up, holding Gwennie, beginning to smile. "Why," she said, "that sounds like fun, Harlan! Why not, as you say? Only—do you remember Mrs. Schroop's number?"

"It's written down," I told her.

"No, that was on the old directory." She frowned. "You've told it to me a thousand times. It isn't listed in her own name—it's her son-in-law's. Oh, what is that number...?"

A thin voice from down the stairs said:"Ovington 8-0014. It's listed under Sturgis, Arthur R., 41 Universe Avenue.

Margery look at me, and I looked at Margery.

I said sharply: "Who the devil said that?"

"I did, Daddy," said the owner of the voice, all of eighteen inches tall, appearing at the foot of the steps. He had to use one hand to steady himself, because he didn't walk so very well; in the other hand he held the squat glass bottle that Winnie McGhee had dropped.

The bottle was empty.

Well, we don't live in Levittown anymore—of course.

Marjorie and Gwennie and I have tried everything—changing our names, dyeing our hair, even plastic surgery once. It didn't work, so we had the same surgeon change us back.

People keep recognizing us.

What we mostly do now is cruise up and down the coast of the U.S. in our yacht, inside the twelve-mile limit. When we need supplies we send some of the crew in with the motor launch. That's risky, yes. But it isn't as risky as landing in any other country would be; and we just don't want to go back to J.I.—as they've taken to calling it these days. You can't blame us. How would you like it?

I wish he'd leave us alone.

The way it goes, we just cruise up and down, and every once in a while he remembers us and calls up on ship-to-shore. He called yesterday, matter of fact. He said: "You can't stay out there forever, Daddy. Your main engines are due for a refit after eleven months, seven days of running and you've been gone ten months, six. What are you using for dairy products? The load you shipped in Jacksonville must have run out last Thursday week. There isn't any point in your starving yourself.

Besides, it's not fair to Gwennie and Mom. Come home. We'll make a place for you in the government."

"Thanks," I said, "But no thanks."

"You'll be sorry," he warned, pleasantly enough. And he hung up.

Well, we should have kept him out of those pills.

I guess it was my fault. I should have listened and when old Winnie—heaven rest his soul, wherever he is—said that the lifetime dose was three tablets for every twenty pounds of body weight. The baby only weighed thirty-one pounds then—last time we'd taken him to the pediatrician; naturally, we couldn't take him again after he swallowed the pills. And he must've swallowed at least a dozen.

But I guess Winnie was right. At the very least, the world is well on its way to being conquered now. The United States fell to Juvens Imperator, as he calls himself (and I blame Margery for that—I never used Latin in from of the kid) in eighteen months, after his sensational coup on the $256,000 Question, and his later success in cornering soybean futures and the common stock of United States Steel. The rest of the world is just a matter of time. And not very much time, as that.

And don't they just know it, though; that's why we daren't land abroad.

But who would have thought it?

I mean, I watched his inauguration last October, on the television. The country has had some pretty peculiar people running it, no doubt. But did you ever think you'd live to see the oath of office administered to my little boy, with one hand upraised and the thumb of the other in his mouth?

HUSH!

by Zenna Henderson

June sighed and brushed her hair back from her eyes automatically as she marked her place in her geometry book with one finger and looked through the dining-room door at Dubby lying on the front-room couch.

"Dubby, please,"she pleaded. "You promised your mother that you'd be quiet tonight. How can you get over your cold if you bounce around making so much noise?"

Dubby's fever-bright eyes peered from behind his tented knees where he was holding a tin truck which he hammered with a toy guitar.

"I am quiet, June. It's the truck that made the noise.

See?" And he banged on it again. The guitar splintered explosively and Dubby blinked in surprise. He was wavering between tears at the destruction and pleased laughter for the awful noise it made. Before he could decide, he began to cough, a deep-chested, pounding cough that shook his small body unmercifully.

"That's just about enough out of you, Dubby," Said June firmly, clearing the couch of toys and twitching the covers straight with a practiced hand. "You have to go to your room in just fifteen minutes anyway—or right now if you don't settle down. Your mother will be calling at seven to see if you're okay. I don't want to have to tell her you're worse because you wouldn't be good. Now read your book and keep quiet. I've got work to do."

There was a brief silence, broken by Dubby's sniffling and June's scurrying pencil. Then Dubby began to chant:

"Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight Shrimp boatses running a dancer

tonight Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight SHRIMP BOATses RUNning a

DANcer toNIGHT—"

"Dub-by!" called June, frowning over her paper at him.

"That's not noise," protested Dubby. "It's singing.

Shrimp boatses—" The cough caught him in mid-phrase and June busied herself providing Kleenexes and comfort until the spasm spent itself.

"See?" she said. "Your cough thinks it's noise."

"Well, what can I do, then?" fretted Dubby, bored by four days in bed and worn out by the racking cough that still shook him. "I can't sing and I can't play. I want something to do."

"Well," June searched the fertile pigeonholes of her babysitter's repertoire and came up with an idea that Dubby had once originated and dearly loved.

"Why not play-like? Play-like a zoo. I think a green giraffe with a mop for a tail and roller skates for feet would be nice, don't you?"

Dubby considered the suggestion solemnly. "If he had egg beaters for ears," he said, overly conscious as always of ears, because of the trouble he so often had with his own.

"Of course he does," said June. "Now you play-like one."

"Mine's a lion," said Dubby, after mock consideration.

"Only he has a flag for a tail—a pirate flag—and he wears yellow pajamas and airplane wings sticking out of his back and his ears turn like propellers."

"That's a good one," applauded June. "Now mine is an eagle with rainbow wings and roses growing around his neck.

And the only thing he ever eats is the song of birds, but the birds are scared of him and se he's hungry nearly all the time—pore ol'iggle."

Dubby giggled. "Play-like some more," he said, settling back against the pillows.

"No, it's your turn. Why don't you play-like by yourself now? I've just got to get my geometry done."

Dubby's face shadowed and then he grinned. "Okay."

June went back to the table, thankful that Dubby was a nice kid and not like some of the brats she had met in her time. She twined both legs around the legs of her chair, running both hands up through her hair. She paused before tackling the next problem to glance in at Dubby. A worry nudged at her heart as she saw how pale and fine-drawn his features were. It seemed, every time she came over, he was more nearly transparent.

She shivered a little as she remembered her mother saying, "Poor child.

He'll never have to worry about old age.

Have you noticed his eyes, June? He has wisdom in them now that no child should have. He has looked too often into the Valley."

June sighed and turned to her work.

The heating system hummed softly and the out-of-joint day settled into a comfortable accustomed evening.

Mrs. Warren rarely ever left Dubby because he was ill so much of the time, and she practically never left him until he was settled for the night. But today when June got home from school, her mother had told her to call Mrs. Warren.

"Oh, June," Mrs. Warren had appealed over the phone, "could you possibly come over right now?"

"Now?" asked June, dismayed, thinking of her hair and nails she's planned to do, and the tentative date with Larryanne to hear her new album.

"I hate to ask it," said Mrs. Warren. "I have no patience with people who make last-minute arrangements, but Mr. Warren's mother is very ill again and we just have to go over to her house. We wouldn't trust Dubby with anyone but you. He's got that nasty bronchitis again, so we can't take him with us. I'll get home as soon as I can, even if Orin has to stay. He's home from work right now, waiting for me. So please come, June!"

"Well . . ." June melted to the tears in Mrs. Warren's voice. She could let her hair and nails and album go and she could get her geometry done at the Warren's place. "Well, okay. I'll be right over."

"Oh, bless you, child," cried Mrs. Warren. Her voice faded away from the phone. "Orin, she's coming—" and the receiver clicked.

"June!" He must have called several times before June began to swim back up through the gloomy haze of the new theorem.

"Joo-un!" Dubby's plaintive voice reached down to her and she sighed in exasperation. She had nearly figured out how to work the problem.

"Yes, Dubby," The exaggerated patience in her voice signaled her displeasure to him.

"Well," he faltered. "I don't want to play-like anymore.

I've used up all my thinkings. Can I make something now?

Something for true?"

"Without getting off the couch?" asked June cautiously, wise from past experience.

"Yes," grinned Dubby.

"Without my to-ing and fro-ing to bring you stuff?" she questioned, still wary.

"Uh-huh," giggled Dubby.

"What can you make for true without anything to make it with?" June asked skeptically.

Dubby laughed. "I just thought it up>" Then all in one breath, unable to restrain his delight:

"It's-really-kinda-like-play-like, but-I'm going-to-make something-that-isn't-like-anything-real-so it'll-be-for-true, cause it-won'the-play-like-anything-that's-real!"

"Huh? Say that again," June challenged. "I bet you can't do it."

Dubby was squirming with excitement. He coughed tentatively, found it wasn't a prelude to a full production and said: "I can't say it again, but I can do it, I betcha. Last time I was sick, I made up some new magic words. They're real good. I betcha they'll work real good like anything."

"Okay, go ahead and make something," said June. "Just so it's quiet."

"Oh, it's real quiet," said Dubby in a hushed voice.

"Exter quiet. I'm going to make a Noise-eater."

"A Noise-eater?"

"Uh-huh!" Dubby's eyes were shining. "It'll eat up all the noises. I can make lotsa racket then, 'cause it'll eat it all up and make it real quiet for you so's you can do your jommety."

"Now that's right thunkful of you, podner," drawled June.

"Make it a good one, because little boys make a lot of noise."

"Okay," And Dubby finally calmed down and settled back against his pillows.

The heating system hummed. The old refrigerator in the kitchen cleared its throat and added its chirking throb to the voice of the house. The mantel clock tocked firmly to itself in the front room. June was absorbed in her homework when a flutter of movement at her elbow jerked her head up.

"Dubby!" she began indignantly.

"Shh!" Dubby pantomimed, finger to lips, his eyes wide with excitement. He leaned against June, his fever radiating like a small stove through his pajamas and robe. His breath was heavy with the odor of illness as he put his mouth close to her ear and barely whispered.

"I made it. The Noise-eater. He's asleep now. Don't make a noise or he'll get you."

"I'll get you, too," said June. "Play-like is play-like, but you get right back on that couch!"

"I'm too scared," breathed Dubby. "What if I cough?"

"You will cough if you—" June started in a normal tone, but Dubby threw himself into her lap and muffled her mouth with his small hot hand. He was trembling.

"Don't! Don't!" he begged frantically. "I'm scared. How do you un-play-like? I didn't know it'd work so good!"

There was a choonk and a slither in the front room. June strained her ears, alarm stirring in her chest.

"Don't be silly," she whispered. "Play-like isn't for true. There's nothing in there to hurt you."

A sudden succession of musical pings startled June and threw Dubby back into her arms until she recognized Mrs. Warren's bedroom clock striking seven o'clock—early as usual.

There was a soft, drawn-out slither in the front room and then silence.

"Go on, Dubby. Get back on the couch like a nice child.

We've played long enough."

"You take me."

June herded him ahead of her, her knees bumping his reluctant back at every step until he got a good look at the whole front room. Then he sighed and relaxed.

"He's gone," he said normally.

"Sure he is, " replied June. "Play-like stuff always goes away." She tucked him under his covers. Then, as if hoping to brush his fears—and hers—away, by calmly discussing it, "What did he look like?"

"Well, he had a body like Mother's vacuum cleaner—the one that lies down on the floor—and his legs were like my sled, so he could slide on the floor, and had a nose like the hose on the cleaner, only he was able to make it long or short when he wanted to."

Dubby, overstrained, leaned back against his pillows.

The mantel clock began to boom the hour deliberately.

"And he had little eyes like the light inside the refrigerator—"

June heard a choonk at the hall door and glanced up.

Then, with fear-stiffened lips, she continued for him, "And ears like TV antennae because he needs good ears to find the noises." And watched, stunned, as the round metallic body glided across the floor on shiny runners and paused in front of the clock that was deliberating on the sixth stroke.

The long, wrinkly trunklike nose on the front of the thing flashed upward. The end of it shimmered, then melted into the case of the clock. And the seventh stroke never began. There was a soft sucking sound and the nose dropped free. On the mantel, the hands of the clock dropped soundlessly to the bottom of the dial.

In the tight circle of June's arms, Dubby whimpered. June clapped her hand over his mouth. But his shoulders began to shake and he rolled frantic imploring eyes at her as another coughing spell began. He couldn't control it.

June tried to muffle the sound with her shoulder, but over the deep hawking convulsions, she heard the choonk and slither of the creature and screamed as she felt it nudge her knee.

Then the long snout nuzzled against her shoulder and she heard a soft hiss as it touched the straining throat of the coughing child. She grabbed the horribly vibrating thing and tried to pull it away, but Dubby's cough cut off in mid-spasm.

In the sudden quiet that followed she heard a gurgle like a straw in the bottom of a soda glass and Dubby folded into himself like an empty laundry bag. June tried to straighten him against the pillows, but he slid laxly down.

June stood up slowly. Her dazed eyes wandered trancelike to the clock, then to the couch, then to the horrible thing that lay beside it. Its glowing eyes were blinking and its ears shifting planes—probably to locate sound.

Her mouth opened to let out the terror that was constricting her lungs, and her frantic scream coincided with the shrill clamor of the telephone. The Eater hesitated, then slid swiftly toward the repeated ring. In the pause after the party line's four identifying rings it stopped, and June clapped both hands over her

mouth, her eyes dilated with paralyzed terror.

The ring began again. June caught Dubby up into her arms and backed slowly toward the front door. The Eater's snout darted out to the telephone and the ring stilled without even an after-resonance.

The latch of the front door gave a rasping click under June's trembling hand. Behind her, she heard the choonk and horrible slither as the Eater lost interest in the silenced telephone. She whirled away from the door, staggering off balance under the limp load of Dubby's body. She slipped to one knee, spilling the child to the floor with a thump. The Eater slid toward her, pausing at the hall door, its ears tilting and moving.

June crouched on her knees, staring, one hand caught under Dubby. She swallowed convulsively, then cautiously withdrew her hand. She touched Dubby's bony little chest. There was no movement. She hesitated indecisively, then backed away, eyes intent on the Eater.

Her heart drummed in her burning throat. Her blood roared in her ears. The starchy krunkle of her wide skirt rattled in the stillness. The fibers of the rug murmured under her knees and toes. She circled wider, wider, the noise only loud enough to hold the Eater's attention—not to attract him to her. She backed guardedly into the corner by the radio. Calculatingly, she reached over and clicked it on, turning the volume dial as far as it would go.

The Eater slid tentatively toward her at the click of the switch. June backed slowly away, eyes intent on the creature.

The sudden insane blare of the radio hit her an almost physical blow. The Eater glided up close against the vibrating cabinet, its snout lifting and drinking in the horrible cacophony of sound.

June lurched for the front door, wrenching frantically at the doorknob.

She stumbled outside, slamming the door behind her.

Trembling, she sank to the top step, wiping the cold sweat from her face with the underside of her skirt. She shivered in the sharp cold, listening to the raucous outpouring from the radio that boomed so loud it was no longer intelligible.

She dragged herself to her feet, pausing irresolutely, looking around at the huddled houses, each set on its own acre of weeds and lawn. They were all dark in the early winter evening.

June gave a little moan and sank on the step again, hugging herself desperately against the penetrating chill. It seemed an eternity that she crouched there before the radio cut off in mid-note.

Fearfully, she roused and pressed her face to one of the door panes. Dimly through the glass curtains she could see the Eater, sluggish and swollen, lying quietly by the radio. Hysteria was rising for a moment, but she resolutely knuckled the tears from her eyes.

The headlights scythed around the corner, glittering swiftly across the blank windows next door as the car crunched into the Warren's driveway and came to a gravel-skittering stop.

June pressed her hands to her mouth, sure that even through the closed door she could hear the choonk and slither of the thing inside as it slid to and fro, seeking sound.

The car door slammed and hurried footsteps echoed along the path. June made wild shushing motions with her hands as Mrs. Warren scurried around the corner of the house.

"June!" Mrs. Warren's voice was ragged with worry. "Is Dubby all right? What are you doing out here? What's wrong with the phone?" She fumbled for the doorknob.

"No, no!" June shouldered her roughly aside. "Don't go it! It'll get you, too."

She heard a thud just inside the door. Dimly through the glass she saw the flicker of movement as the snout of the Eater raised and wavered toward them.

"June!" Mrs. Warren jerked her away from the door. "Let me in! What's the matter? Have you gone crazy?"

Mrs. Warren stopped suddenly, her face whitening. "What have you done to Dubby, June?"

The girl gulped with the shock of the accusation. "I haven't done anything, Mrs. Warren. He made a Noise-eater and it—it—" June winced away from the sudden blaze of Mrs. Warren's eyes.

"Get away from that door!" Mrs. Warren's face was that of a stranger,

her words icy and clipped. "I trusted you with my child. If anything

has happened to him—"

"Don't go in—oh, don't go in!" June grabbed at her coat hysterically.

"Please, please, wait! Let's get—"

"Let go!" Mrs. Warren's voice grated between her tightly clenched teeth. "Let me go, you—you—" Her hand flashed out and the crack of her palm against June's cheek was echoed by a choonk inside the house. June was staggered by the blow, but she clung to the coat until Mrs. Warren pushed her sprawling down the front steps and fumbled at the knob, crying, "Dubby, Dubby!"

June, scrambling up the steps on hands and knees, caught a glimpse of a hovering something that lifted and swayed like a waiting cobra. It was slapped aside by the violent opening of the door as Mrs. Warren stumbled into the house, her cries suddenly stilling on her slack lips as she saw her crumpled son by the couch.

She gasped and whispered, "Dubby!" She lifted him into her arms. His head rolled loosely against her shoulder. Her protesting, "No, no, no!" merged into half-articulate screams as she hugged him to her.

And from behind the front door there was a choonk and a slither.

June lunged forward and grabbed the reaching thing that was homing in on Mrs. Warren's hysterical grief. Her hands closed around it convulsively, her whole weight dragging back ward, but it had a strength she couldn't match. Desperately then, her fists clenched, her eyes tightly shut, she screamed and screamed and screamed.

The snout looped almost lazily around her straining throat, but she fought her way almost to the front door before the thing held her, feet on the floor, body at an impossible angle, and stilled her frantic

screams, quieted her straining lungs and sipped the last of her heartbeats, and let her drop.

Mrs. Warren stared incredulously at June's crumpled body and the horrible creature that blinked its lights and shifted its antennae questioningly. With a muffled gasp, she sagged, knees and waist and neck, and fell soundlessly to the floor.

The refrigerator in the kitchen cleared its throat and the Eater turned from June with a choonk and slid away, crossing to the kitchen.

The Eater retracted its snout and slid back from the refrigerator. It lay quietly, its ears shifting from quarter to quarter.

The thermostat in the dining room clicked and the hot-air furnace began to hum. The Eater slid to the wall under the register that was set just below the ceiling. Its snout extended and lifted and narrowed until the end of it slipped through one of the register openings. The furnace hum choked off abruptly and the snout end flipped back into sight.

Then there was quiet, deep and unbroken, until the Eater tilted its ears and slid up to Mrs. Warren.

In such silence, even a pulse was noise.

There was a sound like a straw in the bottom of a soda glass.

A stillness was broken by the shrilling of a siren on the main highway four blocks away.

A choonk and a slither and the metallic bump of runners down the three front steps.

And a quiet, quiet house on a quiet side street.

Hush.

THE CIRCUS

by Sydney J. Bounds

Because he had been drinking, Arnold Bragg considered it a stroke of good fortune that the accident happened a long way from any main road and the chance of a patrolling police car.

He had no exact idea of his location, just that it was some where in the West Country.

He was on his way back from Cornwall where he'd been covering a story, an expose of a witches' coven, for the Sunday Herald. He drove an MG sports car and, as always with a few drinks inside him, drove too fast. With time to spare, he'd left the A30 at a whim. It was a summer evening, slowly cooling after the heat of the day. The countryside was what he called "pretty," with lanes twisting between hedgerows. He took a corner at speed and rammed the trunk of a tree that jutted into the road around the bend.

Shaken but unhurt, he climbed from his car and swore at a leaking radiator. Then he got back in and drove on, looking for a garage. He found one, a couple of miles farther along, next to a pub with a scattering of cottages; there were not enough of them to justify calling them a village.

A mechanic glanced at the hood and sniffed his breath.

"ArI can fix it. Couple of hours, maybe."

Arnold Bragg nodded. "I'll be next door when you've finished."

It was the kind of pub that exists only in out-of-the-way places, and then rarely; a house of local stone with a front room converted as a bar. The door stood open and he walked in past a stack of beer crates. The walls were thick and it was cool inside. On a polished counter rested two casks, one of cider and one of beer. A gray-haired woman sat knitting behind the counter, and two oldish men sat on a wooden bench by the window.

Bragg turned on a charm that rarely failed him. "I'll try a pint of your local beer."

The woman laid her knitting aside, picked up a glass mug and held it under the tap; sediment hung in the rich brown liquid.

Bragg tasted it, then drank deeply. "I didn't know anyone still brewed beer like this." He glanced around the room.

"Perhaps you gentlemen will join me?"

"Ar, likely we will, sir. And many thanks."

Bragg's gaze moved on to a poster thumb-tacked to the wall. It had obviously been hand-printed, and read:

CIRCUS

Before your very eyes, werewolf into man!

See the vampire rise from his coffin!

Bring the children—invest in a sense of wonder!

As Arnold Bragg stared and wondered if beer had finally rotted his brain, sluggish memory stirred. In his job, he always listened to rumors; some he hunted down and obtained a story. There had been this crazy one, crazy but persistent, of a freak circus that never visited towns but stopped only for one night at isolated villages. He'd come across it first in the fens, then on the Yorkshire moors, and again in a Welsh valley.

The knowledge that this circus was here, now, sobered him.

He set down his glass on the counter, unfinished. When he scented a lead, he could stop drinking. And this one was likely to prove the apex of a career dedicated to discrediting fakes and phonies of all kinds.

He studied the poster carefully. No name was given to the circus. There was no indication of time or place of performance. Still, it shouldn't be hard to find.

He strolled outside, passed the garage where the mechanic worked on his car, and sauntered toward the cottages. A few families, young husbands and wives with their offspring, were walking down a lane, and

he followed them. Presently he glimpsed, in the distance, the canvas top of a large tent showing above some trees.

He kept to himself, observing the people on the way to the circus; there was no gaiety in them. With solemn faces and measured step they went, people who took their pleasure seriously.

Beyond a screen of trees was a green field with the big top and a huddle of caravans and Land-Rovers. People formed a small line at an open flap of the tent, where a little old man sold tickets. He sported a fringe of white hair, nut-brown skin and the wizened appearance of a chimpanzee.

Bragg dipped a hand into his pocket and brought out some loose change.

"I don't believe you'll like our show, sir." The accent was foreign.

"It's purely for the locals, you understand.

Nothing sophisticated for a London gentleman."

"You're wrong," Bragg said, urging money on him. "This is just right for me." He snatched a ticket and walked into the tent.

Seats rose in tiers, wooden planks set on angle irons. In the center was a sawdust ring behind low planking; an aisle at the rear allowed performers to come and go. There was no provision for a high-wire act.

Bragg found an empty seat away from the local people, high enough so that he commanded a clear view, but not so far from the ringside that he would miss any detail.

Not many seats were occupied. He lit a cigarette and watched the crowd. Grave faces, little talk; the children showed none of that excitement normally associated with a visit to the circus. Occasionally eyes turned his way and were has tily averted. A few more families arrived, all with young children.

The old man who sold tickets doubled as ringmaster. He shuffled across the sawdust and made his announcement in hardly more than a whisper. Bragg had to strain to catch the words.

"I, Dr. Nis, welcome you to my circus. Tonight you will see true wonders. The natural world is full of prodigies for those who will open their eyes and minds. We begin with the vampire."

Somewhere, pipe music played; notes rippled up and down a non-Western scale, effecting an erie chant. Two laborers came down the aisle, carrying a coffin. The coffin was far from new and they placed it on the ground as if afraid it might fall to pieces.

The pipes shrilled.

Bragg found he was holding his breath and forced himself to relax.

Tension came again as the lid of the coffin moved.

It moved upward, jerkily, an inch at a time. A thin hand with long fingernails appeared from inside. The lid was pushed higher, creaking in the silence of the tent, and the vampire rose and stepped out.

Its face had the pallor of death, the canine teeth showed long and pointed, and a ragged cloak swirled about its human form.

One of the laborers returned with a young lamb and tossed it to the vampire. Hungrily, teeth sank into the lamb's throat, bit deep, and the lips sucked and sucked . . .

Bragg stared, fascinated and disgusted. When, finally, the drained carcass was tossed aside, the vampire appeared swollen as a well-filled leech.

The laborers carried the coffin out and the vampire walked behind.

Jesus, Bragg thought—this is for kids?

Dr. Nis made a small bow.

"You who are present tonight are especially fortunate.

Not at every performance is it possible to show a shape changer.

Lycanthropy is not a condition that can be perfectly timed—and now,

here is the werewolf"

He placed a small whistle to his lips and blew into it.

No sound came, but a large gray wolf trotted into the sawdust ring, moving as silently as the whistle that called it. Slanting eyes glinted yellowish-green. The animal threw back its head and gave a prolonged and chilling howl.

Hairs prickled on the back of Bragg's neck and he almost came out of his seat. He blinked his eyes as the wolf-shape wavered. The creature appeared to elongate as it rose high on its hind limbs. The fur changed. Bragg moistened suddenly dry lips as the wolf became more manlike . . . and more . . . till it was a naked man who stood before them.

An attendant draped a blanket about his shoulders and together they walked off. Blood pounded through Bragg's head;

it had to be a fake, obviously, but it was a convincing fake.

"The ancient Egyptians believed in physical immortality,"

Dr. Nis whispered. "They had a ceremony known as the Opening of the Mouth. This ceremony restored to the body, after death, its ability to see, hear, eat and speak. Here now, a mummy from the land of the Pharaohs."

A withered mummy, wrapped in discolored linen bandages, its naked face dark-skinned, was carried into the ring. Four jars were placed about it.

"These are canopic jars, containing the heart and lungs and the viscera of the deceased."

A voice spoke, a voice that seemed to come from the mummy.

It spoke in a language unfamiliar to Bragg.

Dr. Nis said smoothly: "I will translate freely. The mummy speaks:

True believers only are safe here—those who doubt are advised to open their hearts."

Bragg wanted to laugh, but sweat dried cold on his flesh and laughter wouldn't come.

The mummy was carried off.

"We have next," Dr. Nis said with pride, "an experiment of my own. Can a corpse be reanimated? Can the component parts of a man be brought together and endued with life? I shall allow you to judge how successful I have been."

A travesty of a man shuffled down the aisle and into the ring. It was hideous. The limbs were not identical; they had not come from the same body. The head, waxen and discolored, lolled at an angel, as if insecurely hinged at the neck. It lumbered unsteadily around the sawdust ring, and it smelled.

The man-thing did not speak; it stumbled over uneven feet, rocking from side to side as it tried to recover balance, and lost its head.

A small gasp was jerked from Bragg's lips as the detached head hit the sawdust and rolled to a stop. The headless cadaver blundered on aimlessly, like a decapitated chicken, until attendants hurried to guide it from the ring.

Bragg felt sick, and his fingers drummed nervously on his knees. Impossible to believe the thing was just a freak; yet he had to believe, or admit the impossible.

Dr. Nis looked unhappy. "I must apologize—obviously my experiment is not yet perfected for public viewing. And so we come to our final offering this evening. You all know, if only in a vague way, that before men inhabited his world, the reptiles ruled for millions of years. They were the true Lords of the Earth. Science maintains that they died out before men appeared, but science has been wrong before. There was interbreeding . . ."

The creature that slithered into the ring was about five feet long. It had the general appearance of a man on all fours, but its skin was scaly and iridescent. The hands were clawed, the head narrowed and thrust forward, and a forked tongue hung from the mouth.

An attendant brought a plastic bag and released from it a cloud of flies. The creature reared up, long tongue flickering like forked lighting, catching the flies and swallowing them.

A sick show, Bragg decided; an outrage to perform this sort of thing before children. The catchphrases of popular journalism ran through his head—This Show Must Be Banned!

Pipe music played again, a falling scale. Dr. Nis bowed and left the ring. Families rose and filed quietly out, their offspring subdued.

Bragg vaulted into the ring, crossed the sawdust and left by the aisle exit. As he hurried toward the caravans, he saw Dr. Nis entering one of them.

The door was just closing when Bragg arrived and leaned on it. Dr. Nis turned to peer at him.

"Ah, Mr. Bragg, I was half expecting you. You are, after all, well known in your trade."

Bragg pushed his way into the caravan and felt like a giant in a doll's house; everything seemed smaller, neat and tidy in its appointed place.

"Then you'll know the paper I work for and the sort of thing I write."

He couldn't be bothered to turn on the charm.

"Tell me—tell the Herald's millions of readers—how do you justify your show? Horror for adults—okay, we'll go along with that. But the kids?"

Dr. Nis made a small deprecating motion with his hands.

"Horror, Mr. Bragg? I deplore the term. My life is spent trying to keep alive a faith, a faith in the mystery of Nature.

Strange things happen. If a man who believes sees a ghost, is he frightened? Yet a man who disbelieves and comes face-to face with one may well die of shock. So perhaps my show serves a useful purpose . . . as for children, what better time to develop a sense of wonder?"

"That's your story—now let's have the lowdown on how your gimmicks work."

"Gimmicks?" Dr. Nis regarded him calmly. "I assure you I do not deal in trickery. Consider this: Who knows you are here? And aren't you just a little bit frightened?"

Bragg flinched. "Who, me? Of a bunch of freaks?" But his voice was edged with doubt.

Dr. Nis said, "I do not want the kind of publicity you have in mind, Mr. Bragg. I don't think it would serve my purpose." He smiled suddenly, and his smile was not for his visitor.

Arnold Bragg turned. Freaks crowded the door of the car avan: the vampire, the werewolf and the lizard-man. The resurrected man was conspicuously absent.

"I think it would be best if Mr. Bragg disappeared," Dr. Nis said quietly. "But don't damage his head, please." He looked again at Bragg, his eyes bright and hard. "You see, Mr. Bragg, I believe I have a use for it."

DISTANT SIGNALS

by Andrew Weiner

There was something not quite right about the young man. His suit appeared brand-new. Indeed, it glistened with an almost unnatural freshness and sharpness of definition. Yet it was made in a style that had not been fashionable since the late 1950s. The lapels were too wide, the trousers too baggy; the trouser legs terminated in one-inch cuffs. The young man's hair was short—too short. It was parted neatly on the left-hand side and plastered down with some sort of grease. And his smile was too wide. Too wide, at least for nine o'clock on a Monday morning at the Parkdale Public Library.

Out for the day, was the librarian's first and last thought on the matter. Out, that is, from the state-run mental-health center just three blocks away.

"I would like," said the young man, "to be directed to the TV and film section."

His voice, too, had an unnatural definition, as if he were speaking through some hidden microphone. It projected right across the library.

Several patrons turned their heads to peer at him.

"Over there," said the librarian, in a very pointed whisper. "Just over there."

STRANGER IN TOWN. Series, 1960. Northstar Studios for NBC-TV.

Produced by KEN ODELL. From an original idea by BILL HURN. Directors included JASON ALTBERG, NICK BALL, and JIM SPIEGEL, 26 b/w episodes.

Running time: 26 minutes.

Horse opera following the exploits of Cooper aka The Stranger (VANCE MACCOBY), an amnesiacal gunslinger who wanders from town to town in search of his lost identity, stalked always by the mysterious limping loner Loomis (TERRY WHITE) who may or may not know his real name.

Despite this promisingly mythic premise, the series quickly degenerated into a formulaic pattern, with Cooper as a Shane-style savior of widows and orphans. The show won mediocre ratings, and NBC declined to pick up its option for a second season. The identity of Cooper was never revealed. See also: GUNSLINGERS; HOLLYWOOD EXISTENTIALISM; LAW AND ORDER; WESTERNS.

MACCOBY, VANCE (1938?-). Actor. Born Henry Mulvin in Salt Lake City, Utah. Frequent quest spots in WAGON TRAIN, RIVERBOAT, CAPTAIN CHRONOS, THE ZONE BEYOND, etc., 1957-59. Lead in the 1960 oater STRANGER IN TOWN and the short-lived 1961 private-eye show MAX PARADISE, canceled after six episodes. Subsequent activities unknown. One of dozens of nearly interchangeable identikit male stars of the first period of episodic TV drama, Maccoby had a certain brooding quality, particularly in b/w, that carried him far, but apparently lacked the resources for the long haul.

See also: STARS AND STARDOM—From The Complete TV Encyclopedia, Chuck Gingle, editor.

There was something distinctly odd about the young man in the white loafers and pompadour hairstyle, the young man who had been haunting the anteroom of his office all day.

Had the Kookie look come back? Feldman wondered.

"Look, kid," he said, not unkindly, "as my secretary told you, I'm not taking on any more clients. I have a full roster right now. You'd really be much better off going to Talentmart, or one of those places.

They specialize in, you know, unknowns."

"And as I told your secretary," the young man said, "I don't want to be an actor; I want to hire one. One of your clients. This is strictly a business proposition."

Business proposition my ass, Feldman thought. Autograph hunter, more like. But he said wearily, "Which one would that be? Lola Banks? Dirk Raymond?"

"Vance Maccoby."

"Vance Maccoby?" For a moment he had to struggle to place the name.

"Vance Maccoby?" he said again. "That bum? What the hell do you want with Vance Maccoby?"

"Mr. Feldman, I represent a group of overseas investors interested in independently producing a TV series for syndicated sale. We want Mr. Maccoby to star. However, we have so far been unable to locate him."

"I haven't represented him in years. No one has. He hasn't worked in years. Not since . . . what was that piece of crap called? Max Paradise? I don't like to speak ill of former clients, but the man was impossible, you know. A drunk. Quite impossible. No one could work with him."

"We're aware of that," the young man said. "We've taken all that into consideration, and we are still interested in talking to Mr. Maccoby.

We think he is the only man for the part. And we believe that if anyone can find him, you can."

The young man opened his briefcase and fumbled inside it. "We would like," he continued, "to retain your services toward that end. And we are prepared to make suitable remuneration whether or not a contract should be signed with Mr. Maccoby and whether or not you choose to represent him as agent of record in that transaction."

"Kid," Feldman began, "what you need is a private detective—" He stopped and stared at the bar-shaped object in the young man's hand.

"Is that gold?"

"It certainly is, Mr. Feldman. It certainly is."

The young man laid the bar on the desk between them "An ounce of gold?"

"One point three four ounces," said the young man. "We apologize for the unusual denomination."

He held open the briefcase. "I have twenty-four more such bars here. At the New York spot price this morning, this represents a value of approximately fifteen thousand dollars."

"Fifteen thousand dollars to find Vance Maccoby?" Feldman said.

He got up and paced around the desk.

"Is that stuff hot?" he asked, pointing to the briefcase, feeling like a character in one of the more banal TV shows into which he booked his clients.

"Hot?" echoed the young man. He reached out and touched the gold bar on the desk. "A few degrees below room temperature, I would say."

"Cute," Feldman said. "Don't be cute. Just tell me, is this on the level?"

"Oh, I see," said the young man. "Yes, absolutely. We have a property which we wish to develop, to which we have recently purchased the rights from the estate of the late Mr. Kenneth Odell. There is only one man who can star in this show, and that is Vance Maccoby."

"What property?"

"Stranger in Town," said the young man.

"I knew it," she said. "I knew you would come back."

"You knew more than I did," Cooper said. "I was five miles out of town and heading west. But something . . . something made me turn around and come back here and face the Kerraway Brothers."

"You're a good man," she said. "You couldn't help yourself."

"I don't know if I'm a good man," Cooper said. "I don't know what kind of man I am." He stared morosely at the corpses strewn out on the ground around the ranch house. "I just couldn't let the Kerraways take your land."

He mounted his horse. "Time to be moving on," he said. "You take good care of yourself and little Billy, now."

"Will you ever come back?"

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe after I find what I'm looking for."

"I think you found it already," she said. "You just don't know it yet.

You found yourself."

"That may be so," Cooper said. "But I still gotta put a name to it."

He rode off into a rapidly setting sun.

The video picture flickered, then resolved itself into an antique Tide commercial. Hurn cut the controls. He turned to the strange young man in the too-tweedy jacket and the heavy horn-rimmed glasses.

"That?" he said, gesturing at the screen. "You want to remake that .

. . garbage?"

"Not remake," the young man said. "Revive. Continue. Conclude. Tell the remainder of the story of the stranger Cooper, and of the reacquisition of his memory and identity."

"Who cares?" Hurn asked. "Who the hell cares who Cooper is or what he did? Certainly not the views. Do you know how many letters we got after we canceled the series? Sixteen. Sixteen letters. That's how many people cared."

"That is our concern, Mr. Hurn. We believe that we do have a market

for this property. That is why we are making this proposition. We are

prepared to go ahead with or without you. But certainly we would much

rather have you with us. As the main creative force behind the original

series—"

"Creative?" Hurn said. "Frankly, that whole show to me was nothing but an embarassment. And I was glad when they canceled it, actually. I wrote those scripts for one reason and one reason alone. Money."

"We can offer you a great deal of money, Mr. Hurn."

Hurn gestured, as though to indicate the Oriental rugs on the floor, the rare books in the shelves on the wall, the sculptures and the paintings, the several-million-dollar Beverly Hills home that contained all this.

"I don't need money, Mr.—what did you say your name was?"

"Smith."

"Mr. Smith, I have all the money I could ever want. I have done well in this business, Mr. Smith. Quite well. I am no longer the struggling writer who conceived Stranger in Town. These days I choose my projects on the basis of quality."

"You disparage yourself unnecessarily, Mr. Hurn. We believe that Stranger in Town was a series of the highest quality. In some ways, in fact, it represented the very peak of televisual art. The existential dilemma of the protagonist, the picaresque nature of his journeyings, the obsessive fascination with the nature of memory . . . That scene . . ." The young man's eyes came alive. "That scene when Cooper bites into a watermelon like this. I remember summer days, summer nights, a cool breeze on the porch, the river rushing by. I remember a woman's lips, her eyes, her deep blue eyes. But where, damn it? Where?"

Hurn stared, openmouthed. "You remember that? Word for word? Oh, my God."

"Art, Mr. Hurn. Unabashed art."

"Adolescent pretension. Fakery. Bullshit," Hurn said. "Embarrassing.

Oh, my God, how embarrassing."

"In some ways trite," the young man conceded. "Brash. Even clumsy sometimes. But burning with an inner conviction. Mr. Hurn, you must help us. You must help us bring back Stranger in Town."

"You can't," Hurn said. "You can't bring it back. Even if I agreed it was worth bringing back—and I'll admit to you that I've thought about it on occasion, though not in many years. I've always had a sense of it as a piece of unfinished business . . . But even if I wanted to help you, it couldn't be done. Not now. It's too late, much too late. You can't repeat the past. We have absolutely no doubt on that question."

"Boats against the current," Hurn said. "But no, no, I can't agree.

It's like when those promoters wanted to reunite the Beatles."

"Beetles?" Smith asked. "What beetles?"

"The Beatles," Hurn said, astonished. "'She Loves You." I Want to Hold Your Hand." Like that."

"Oh, yes," Smith said vaguely.

Where is this guy from? Hurn wondered. Mongolia?

"What exactly is your proposition, Mr. Smith?"

The young man became businesslike. He pulled a sheaf of notes from his briefcase. "One episode of Stranger was completed but not edited when the cancellation notice came from the network. We have acquired that footage, and it would be a simple matter to put it together. We have also acquired five scripts for the second season, commissioned prior to the cancellation. And we have an outline of your proposal for subsequent episodes, including a concluding episode in which the identity of Cooper is finally revealed. We would like you to supervise the preparation of these unwritten scripts and to write the final episode yourself. We are looking at season of twenty-six fifty minute episodes. For these services we are prepared to pay you the equivalent of two million dollars."

"The equivalent, Mr. Smith?"

"In gold, Mrs. Hurn." The young man picked up the large suitcase he had brought with him into the writer's house. He opened it up. It was packed with yellowish metallic bars.

"My God," Hurn said. "That suitcase must weigh a hundred pounds."

"About one hundred and twenty-five pounds," said Mr. Smith. "Or the equivalent of about one million dollars at this morning's London gold fixing."

The young man, Hurn recalled, had carried in this suitcase without the slightest sign of exertion. He hefted it now as though it were full of feathers. Obviously he was not as frail as he looked.

"Tell me, Mr. Smith. Who is going to star in this show?"

"Oh, Vance Maccoby. Of course."

"Vance Maccoby, if he is even still alive, is a hopeless alcoholic, Mr. Smith. He hasn't worked in this town in twenty years. I don't even know where he is. Have you signed up Vance Maccoby, Mr. Smith?"

"Not yet," the young man said. "But we will. We will."

"My name's Loomis," said the tall man with the limp as he stood beside Cooper at the bar. He picked up the shot glass and stared into it thoughtfully.

"First or last?" Cooper asked.

"Just Loomis," said the man.

"I'm Cooper," said the other. "Or at least that's what I call myself.

One name's as good as another. There was a book in my saddlebag by a man named Cooper . . ."

"You forgot your name?"

"I forgot everything," he said. "Except to speak and ride and shoot."

Loomis drained his drink. "Some things a mon don't forget," he said.

Cooper stared at him intently, "Have I seen you in here before? There's something familiar. . ."

"I don't think so," Loomis said. "I'm a stranger here myself."

The edges of the TV screen grew misty, then blurred. The picture dissolved. Another took shape. A bright, almost hallucinatorily bright summer day. A farmhouse. Chickens in a coop. The door of the house open, banging in the wind.

The camera moved through the door, into a parlor. Signs of struggle, furniture upended, a broken dish on the floor. A man stooped to pick up the fragments.

"Aimee?" he called. "Aimee?"

The camera moved on, into a bedroom. A woman's body sprawled brokenly across the bed. The window open, the curtain blowing. And then a face, a man's face, staring into the room. His arm, holding a gun. A gunshot.

Darkness closed in. Outside, the shadow of a man running away. A shadow with a kind of limp.

And back, suddenly, to the bar.

"You all right, Cooper?"

"I'm all right," he said, gripping the bar tightly. "I'm all right."

Yehh," said the fat, bald man in the armchair. "Let's hear it for the strong silent ones."

He picked up his glass from the TV table in front of him, made a mocking toast to the blank screen, then winked to his old agent, Feldman, sitting on the couch next to the young man. There was something a little odd about the young man, but the fat man was too drunk to put his finger on it. Maybe it was the Desi Arnaz haircut. . .

"Vance," Feldman said. "Vance, I—I hate to see you like this."

"Like what?" said the fat man who had once been Vance Maccoby. "And the name if Henry. Henry Mulvin."

He raised his bulk from the armchair and waddled into the tiny kitchen of the trailer to refreshen his drink.

Feldman looked helplessly at the young man.

"I told you, Smith. I told you this was pointless. You're going to have to find yourself another boy. Jesus, there must be hundreds in this town."

"There's only one Vance Maccoby," the young man said firmly. "Mr. Feldman, would you leave us together for a while? I promise you that I'll be in touch in the morning in regard to contractual arrangements."

"Contractual arrangements? You're whistling in the wind."

"I can be quite persuasive, Mr. Feldman. Believe me."

I believe you, Feldman thought. Or what would I be doing in this stinking trailer?

When the sound of Feldman's Mercedes had disappeared into the distance, the young man turned to Vance Maccoby.

"Mr. Maccoby," he said almost apologetically, "we have to have a serious talk. And in order to do that you will have to be sober."

"Sober?" the fat man laughed. "Never heard of it."

"This won't hurt," the young man said, producing a flat, boxlike device from his pocket and pointing it at the fat man. "It will merely accelerate the metabolization of the alcohol in your bloodstream." He pushed a button.

"But I don't want to be sober," the fat man said. He began to cry.

"When this is all over, Mr. Maccoby," the young man said soothingly, " you need never be sober nor unhappy ever again."

"Guess I should ride on," Cooper said. "You got a nice little town here and I could easily settle in it. But a man can't settle anyplace until he knows who he is."

"You think he knows?" the girl asked. "You think that limping man knows who you are?"

"Yes, he does," Cooper said. "He knows, and he's going to tell me. Fact is, he's itching to tell me. He thinks he just wants to kill me, but first of all he wants to tell me. Otherwise he would have just finished me off back at Oscar's barn. Him and me, reckon we got ourselves a piece of unfinished business. But he's got the better of me, because he knows what it is."

"He may kill you yet," the girl said, dabbing at the tears that had begun to well up in her eyes.

"I can take care of myself."

"Will you come back?" she asked. "Afterward?"

"Maybe so," he said. "Maybe so."

He rode off into the distance.

"Print it," said the director. "And see you all tomorrow."

Carefully Vance Maccoby dismounted from his horse and began to walk back to his dressing room. Bill Hurn fell in step with him.

"That was good stuff, Vance," he said.

Maccoby smiled, although it was more like a tic. The skin of his face had been stretched tight by the face-lift operations, so that his usual expression was even blanker than it had been in his heyday. He took off his hat and ran his hand through his recently transplanted hair. Under the supervision of the strange young man called Smith, he had lost close to a hundred pounds in the three months prior to shooting.

For all these changes, close up Maccoby looked every one of his forty-six years. The doctors could do little about the lines around his eyes, and nothing at all about the weariness in them. And yet the camera was still good to him, particularly in black and white. Hurn had argued fiercely on the subject of film stock, but Smith had been adamant. "It must be black and white. Just like the original. Cost is not the question. This is a matter of aesthetics."

Black and white helped hide the ravages of time. It just made Maccoby look more intense, more haunted. Perhaps that was why Smith had been so insistent. But Hurn doubted that. In many ways Smith was astonishingly ignorant of the mechanics of filmmaking.

"I didn't know," Maccoby said, "that he was still in here." He pointed to his chest.

"Cooper?"

"Maccoby," he said. "Vance Maccoby. Inside me, Henry Mulvin. Still there, after all these years. I thought I'd finished him off for good.

But he was still in there."

Maccoby had not, to Hurn's knowledge, touched a drop of alcohol in six months. He was functioning well on the set, with none of the moodiness or tantrums that had marked his final days in Hollywood. But the stripping away of that alcoholic haze had only revealed the deeper sickness beneath: his unbearable discomfort with himself, or rather with the fictional person he had become—Vance Maccoby, TV star. Isolated, cut off, torn away from his roots, existing only on a million TV screens and in the pages of mass-circulation magazines.

Was that, Hurn wondered—and not for the first time—why he had made such a great Cooper? Despite his mediocrity as an actor, there had never been anyone else to play the role.

"Vance," he said. "Henry . . ."

"Call me Vance. You always did. That's who I am here. For this little command performance."

"Vance, why did you agree to do this?"

"Why did you agree, Bill?" And don't tell me it was the money. You don't care about the money any more than I do. You have all you want.

I had all I needed to stay drunk."

"I don't know," Hurn said. "Smith . . . he just made it seem so important. Like there were millions of people just sitting around waiting for a new season of Stranger in Town. He flattered me. And he tempted me. This was my baby, remember, and the network killed it. And I suppose there was a part of me that always wanted to do this. Finish it properly, tie up all those loose ends. . . . And yet I know the whole thing is crazy. This show will never run on a U.S. network. Not in black and white. Unless we put it straight into reruns." He snickered. "Maybe that's the plan. I mean, who would even know the difference? This whole thing is so--1960."

They had reached Maccoby's dressing room.

"Well," Maccoby said, "Smith is telling the truth, in a way. There are millions of people waiting for this."

"In Hong Kong? North Korea? I mean, where does he expect to sell this stuff? Who are these overseas investors of his? HOw can he piss so much money away like water, and how does he expect to ever recoup it?

The whole thing is bizarre."

"Oh, it's bizarre all right," Maccoby said. "It sure is bizarre." He glanced up briefly into the hard blue sky. Then he said, "Well, I better get cleaned up."

"You killed her," Cooper said. "You killed her and you tried to kill me. But somehow I survived. And I crawled out of there, halfway out of my mind. And I crawled into the desert. And a wagon train found me.

And they carried me along with them, and nursed me. And when I woke up I didn't even know my name. You took it. You took away my name."

"Stevens," Loomis said. "Brad Stevens." His hand did not waver on the gun.

"Oh, I remember that now," he said. "I remember it all. I remember Aimee . . . I remember it all."

"I'm glad about that," Loomis said. "I truly am. I've been waiting for you to remember for the most wearisome time. Not much sense in killing a person when he doesn't even know why."

He tightened his grip on the trigger. "But there's something more," he said. "More than that. Something you couldn't remember, because you never knew. Something I been meaning to tell you for a long time.

Longer than you could imagine."

"Make sense," said the man who called himself Cooper. "Make some kind of sense."

"Your name," Loomis said. "It ain't really Stevens. Not really. The name you've been trying so hard to remember isn't even your real name.

Isn't that a hoot? Isn't that the funniest thing you ever heard?" He laughed.

"Make sense," said the man on the ground. "You're still not making any."

"Stevens," Loomis said. "That's just a name they gave you. The folks who picked you out at the orphanage. Picked out the pretty little baby.

That was their name. Good God-fearing folds. But they only wanted the one, and they wanted a baby, not a full-grown child. And for sure they didn't want a gimp."

"I was adopted? You're saying I was adopted? How could you know that?"

"I was there, little brother. I was there. I was the gimp they passed over for the pretty little baby. I was only four years old at the time.

But some things you really don't forget."

"Brother?"

"Right," Loomis said. "You and me, we're children of the very same flesh. Arnold and Mary Jane LOomis. Nobody ever changed my name.

Nobody wanted the poor little crippled boy."

"Our parents . . ."

"Dead," Loomis said. "Indians. They killed Pa. Killed Ma, too, after they got through with her. Would have killed us, too, except they got interrupted."

Slowly, deliberately, the man who had been called Cooper climbed to his feet. "We were separated?" he said.

"For nearly thirty years. You eating your good home cooking and me eating poorhouse gruel. You growing into a solid citizen and marrying and farming. And me drifting from town to town like a piece of dried-up horse dung blown around by the wind. Never finding a place I could call home. And looking, looking for my little brother. And finally I found you . . ."

"Why?" he asked. "Why did you do it?"

"I didn't mean to . . ." Loomis faltered. "It was like a kind of madness came over me. Seeing your house and your farm and your wife, everything you had and I didn't, everything I hated you for having . .

.

But I don't know. Maybe that was what I was intending all along, intending to make you suffer just a little of what I had to suffer. I don't know. I don't think I meant to kill Aimee, but when I did, I knew I would have to kill you, too. And I thought I did. And then I saw you alive. And I realized that you didn't remember, didn't remember a single thing. So I just waited, watched and waited, until you did start to remember. So you would know why I had to kill you. And now it's time. It's time."

"You can't stand yourself, brother, can you?" said the man who had been called Cooper. "You and you, they don't get along at all. I can understand that. I been through a little of that myself. Not knowing who the hell I was or what I might have done or what I should be doing.

But you find out. Maybe not your name, but how you should be living. If you're any good at all, you find that out."

He took a step toward Loomis. "But you're not any good, brother, and you never were. Sure, you had some lousy breaks, sure you did. But that isn't any kind of excuse for what you did. You're just no good to anyone, not even yourself. And if you kill me, you'll have nothing to live for. Nothing. Because nobody will know your name and nobody will care."

Another step.

"But I care, brother. I care in the worst way. You made me care.

Buzzing around me like some housefly waiting to be swatted. Waiting for me to remember. Trying to make me remember. Remember you."

Another step. He was only a few paces from Loomis now. He glanced down to his own gun on the floor of the stable. It was nearly within reach.

"Stay there," Loomis said. "Stay right where you are."

He took another step.

"I remember you, brother. For what you did to me. No one else will.

Kill me and you'll be all alone again, alone with yourself, the way you always were. Run away now and you'll have something to keep you going.

Fear, brother. Fear. That's a kind of something. Something to make you feel alive. And me, too. I'll have something to keep me going, too."

Loomis took a step backward. "Don't move." he said. "Don't move or I'll kill you now."

"What are you waiting for?" his brother asked him.

The gun wavered in his hand.

The man who called himself Cooper stopped swiftly and scooped up his own gun from the floor.

Two guns blared.

Loomis stood straight for a moment. A strange smile spread over his face. And then slowly, he crumpled to the floor of the stable.

The other continued to stand, in the clearing smoke, holding his wounded left arm.

"Damn," he said softly, "Damn."

The lights in the screening room came up. One man was applauding vigorously. Smith. All heads turned toward him.

"Bit of an anticlimax," Hurn said, "don't you think? We were afraid it might be. I think, in a way, we were afraid of having to finish it."

"On the contrary, Mr. Hurn," Smith said. "On the contrary. It's absolutely perfect. Perfect. Real mythic power. A glimpse into human condition. Into a world in which brother must slay brother, even as Cain slew Abel. Archetypal, Mr. Hurn. Archetypal.

He stood up and addressed the small crowd.

"I want to thank all of you," he said, "for making this possible. In particular I want to thank Mr. Hurn and the one and only Vance Maccoby, without whom none of this would have been possible."

Maccoby grinned in a spaced-out way. Hurn could smell the drink on his breath from two rows away.

The cure didn't take, he thought. Well, it took for long enough.

"I will be leaving tomorrow," Smith said, "and I will not be returning in the near future. So let me just say what a wonderful group of people you have been to work with, and what a great, great privilege this has been for me."

There was still, Hurn reflected, something rather odd about the young man. He was dressed now in what could pass as the uniform of the young Hollywood executive—safari jacket, open-collar sport shirt, gold medallion, aviator shades—and yet there was still something not quite right about it. He looked as if he had just stepped out of central casting.

"The show," Hurn said as Smith headed toward the door. "When is the show going to run?"

"Oh, soon," Smith said. "Not in this country at the present time, but we have plenty of interest overseas."

A Canadian tax shelter? Hurn wondered. One of those productions that never actually play anywhere? But surely they would not have gone to so much trouble.

"Where?" he persisted. "Where will it run?"

"Oh, faraway places," Smith said, fingering his aviator shades. "Far, far away." He disappeared through the door. Hurn would not see him again.

"Far away," Hurn repeated to himself.

"Very far," Maccoby said, staggering a little as he rose from his seat in the back row. He was quite drunk.

"You know something I don't know?" Hurn asked, following him from the screening room.

"Very far," Maccoby repeated as they stepped into the parking lot. The smog was thin that night. Stars twinkled faintly in the sky. "About twenty light-years," he said, looking up.

"What?"

"Twenty light-years," he repeated. "Twenty years for the signals to reach them. Distant, distant signals.

And then they stop. The signals stop. Before the story ends. And they don't like that."

"They?"

"Smith's people. Our overseas investors. Our faraway fans."

"Wait a minute," Hurn said. "You're telling me that our show was picked up . . . out there?"

Now he, too, craned his head to look up into the night sky. He shivered.

"I don't believe it," he said.

"Sure you do," Maccoby said.

"But it's crazy," Hurn said. "The whole thing is incredible. Up to and including the fact that they picked on our show."

"I wondered about that myself," Maccoby said. "But you've got to figure that their tastes are going to be, well . . . different."

"Then he really meant it," Hurn said. "When he said that our show was—what did he call it? The peak of televisual art."

Maccoby nodded. "He really meant it."

"Art." Hurn tested the word on his tongue. "Life is short but art is long. Isn't that what they say? Something like that, at any rate."

"Right," Maccoby said absently. "Art. Or something like that."

He was staring now at the great mast of the TV antenna on the hill above the studio.

"Signals," he said again. "Distant, distant signals."

THE ODDS

by Michael McDowell

You would have passed it by, even on your thirstiest days. It was set seven crumbling steps down in the basement of a sooty Brooklyn brownstone. A buzzing Ballantine Ale sign in the small, grimy front window futilely announced that this was Phil's Bar and Grill.

When you looked steeply down through the front window from street level, all you could see was a portion of tiled floor patched so many times, it was it was impossible to discern the original pattern: several metal chairs with warped legs and red vinyl seats; and the corner of a scarred pool table, so old that it didn't even have the quarter plungers.

In Phil's Bar and Grill you got to play free.

On one particularly hot day in August, however, the only real customer wasn't playing. He sat on a tall stool with his head buried in his folded arms on the bar. He hadn't ordered for an hour and a half, but his

beer glass remained more than half full.

There was a jukebox, but the records in it hadn't been changed since 1964, and it hadn't been plugged in since 1967. There was a bartender who polished a glass all day long as he leaned against the wall with his ear against the buzzing speaker of a Bakelite radio tuned to an all-talk station. He went by the name of Phil, though that wasn't the name his mother had given him.

The background music this particularly stultifying afternoon was a one-note synthesized rendition on "Mary Had a Little Lamb." It was punched out on a small gold-colored calculator the size and thickness of a credit card.

Punched out by a clean-shaven balding man in a white shirt with an open collar. This clean-shaven balding man was named Horace, and he was one of those men who was born to be fifty-seven years old. Horace had witnessed a murder twenty-three years ago and had made a life for himself holding his tongue.

Horace sat in the last booth in Phil's Bar and Grill, the crown of his balding head constantly brushing against the uncoiled cord of the pay phone just above him.

Across from Horace sat Tommy Vale, a bookie. The last booth at Phil's Bar and Grill had been his office for a little more than three decades.

It was beneath Vale to answer the phone himself—Horace did that. It was beneath Vale to look at whoever might come in the bar—Horace did that and gave a quick whispered description. Tommy Vale took bets and calculated odds, kept a careful ledger with the stub of a number 1-1/2 pencil, and arranged and constantly rearranged tiny ragged scraps of paper before him on the scratched Formica table.

Tommy Vale was nicknamed "The Odds." But all the people who had called him that were dead, or had moved to the West Coast. Now he was just Vale, and no one knew that he had once been big and good and hot enough to merit a nickname. Like Horace, Vale was fifty-seven and balding. He, too, wore a white shirt with an open collar, but Vale had suspenders and a bigger paunch than Horace.

Its fleece was white as snow.

"Cut the concert, will ya?" said Vale, looking up from the newly arranged scraps of penciled notepaper before him. "Ya givin' me a headache."

"Yeah, boss." Horace always deferred to Vale immediately. Afterward he decided whether he should then protest or not.

"Whaddaya practicin' for, Carnegie Hall?"

"I got it for you."

"Well, that's very sweet of you, Horace. Only I don't trust them things. I been calculatin' thirty-one years with this 'n' this."

Vale tapped the chewed eraser of the stub of the number 1-1/2 against his noggin.

"It's the modern age, boss. You gotta keep up. Nobody's phoned in a bet for three days." When he

realized that this sounded as if it might have been a reproach, Horace recast the observation in a softer light:

"It's been getting pretty quiet in here lately."

"I keep up," said Vale, as if everything were a matter of contest between hexagonal pencil and rectangular calculator. "I never been cheated and I never been broken. I'm still the best."

Vale opened his ledger and began to make an entry.

Horace, taking the cue he knew so well that he hardly knew it was a cue, wiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. "It's hot," Horace said.

"I need a soak." Horace used old slang. He knew the newer terms, but he old slang reminded Horace—and Vale, he liked to suppose—of a richer, noisier time. "You want one?"

"Yeah, I want a soak, yeah," said Vale grumpily. "And take that thing with you."

Horace got up slowly—he's gotten arthritis at that booth at the back of Phil's Bar and Grill—and headed for the bar.

Vale looked at the phone and resisted the temptation to put in a coin only to reassure himself the machine didn't need repairing. He opened his ledger again and made up another double entry, three bets that were never made, exactly countered by three equally imaginary payoffs. He shuddered against a sudden draft of clammy air that blew his scraps of papers into his lap, onto the floor, up into the air.

"Hey, Phil," Vale called, without turning around. "Cut the fan a bit, willya? Ya freezin' me out."

At the bar, Horace and Phil looked up at the overhead fan. The blades were rusted and still.

"It's off now," said Horace.

"Didn't even hear the door open," said Phil, not speaking of the fan, nor of the gust of wind that should have been welcome but wasn't, but rather referring to the figure who stood with one nervous hand tapping the scarred rim of the pool table.

The man was young and thin. He wore the sort of gleaming white linen suit that shows off tans and even sunburns to such splendid advantage in Florida and California. But this was Brooklyn, and the man had no tan or burn. He skin bore a dingy, blotched pallor. He wore a white Panama hat with an attempt at jaunty insouciance that didn't come off.

The man passed the drunk sleeping at the bar.

He walked by Phil and Horace.

He went to the back of the room and seated himself in the booth across from Tommy Vale.

Vale squinted at him, as if wondering if he knew him or hand known him.

As if wondering why the man didn't sweat. As if he were trying to figure out why the man smiled the way he smiled.

"Somebody ticklin' you leg or what?" Vale asked, and made a show of leaning down to peer under the table.

The man smiled a moment more, opened his mouth to speak, and then didn't speak. he reached into the breast pocket of his white linen jacket for—for something that wasn't there. He frowned. He patted both jacket pockets at once, nervously. He pulled a scrap of notepaper from his left-hand jacket pocket and peered at it.

"Five hundred on Ryan's Daughter to win. In the first at Belmont."

Vale raised an eyebrow for the benefit of Horace, who brought his soak.

"Try again, kid. She's forty-to-one, long. Don't want you to get hurt."

The man took his right hand from his jacket pocket and dropped five silver dollars on the table in front of him. He pushed them across the table to Vale.

"Don't worry, it's a nickel," he said, employing the old slang for five hundred dollars. "They're uncirculated."

Beep beep beep.

Chime.

"Hey," snapped Vale, glowering at Horace. "Stop playin' with that thing when I'm doin' business."

"I didn't. It's the clock." He held up the calculator. "It does that every hour."

Vale pushed the five uncirculated silver dollars back across the scarred Formica.

"Too high for you, Tommy? Tommy Vale."

"Too high? That phrase aint't in my dictionary. Try too late. Post time at Belmont's two."

He nodded toward the clock on the wall. Two minutes past two. The man in the white linen suit turned slowly in the booth to look at the time.

His smile went away again.

"Philly!" Vale called. "Turn on the race. Let's see what Mr. Sunshine missed."

. . . and the horses are approaching the starting gate for the first

race after a slight delay here on a sweltering Saturday at Belmont Park

. .

.

The man in the white suit relaxed and pushed the coins back across the table to Vale.

Phil turned the volume higher on the Bakelite radio.

They're off! And it's Snowbird on the inside, leading Lucy Girl by a length, followed by Tammy Shanter, Native Princess, First Lady, Bold Dancer, with Ryan's Daughter bringing up the rear. . .

Vale raked the coins off the edge of the table and into the palm of his hand. They chinked bright and silver there.

Bold Dancer's making an early move, moving on the outside. Now it's Lucy Girl. Now it's Lucy Girl and . . .

Vale relit his cigar, without any idea of how long he had chewed it unlit. He stared at the man in the white suit.

. . .Native Princess, Tammy Shanter, Snowbird, First Lady, Bold Dancer, and Ryan's Daughter. Now we're . . .

The private joke enjoyed by the grinning man in the white suit grew funnier and more enjoyable.

. . . coming into the halfway mark, and it's Lucy Girl in the lead by two lengths, followed by Tammy Shanter, Native Princess, Bold Dancer, First Lady, Snowbird, and Ryan's Daughter.

Tommy Vale laughed, too, now, a laugh from deep in his throat. The coins chinked brighter and louder in his wet palms.

. . . and coming into the turn it's Native Princess in front now by a neck. It's Native Princess and Tammy Shanter. It's Native Princess and Tammy Shanter, followed by First Lady, Snowbird, Lucy Girl, Bold Dancer, and Ryan's Daughter in the rear. . .

Horace played taps on the credit-card sized calculator. Though the man in the white suit still did not sweat, his studied insouciance faltered.

But only a few moments later it was Horace's notes that began to falter.

. . . Ryan's Daughter making a bold move on the outside. And coming into the homestretch it's Native Princess and Tammy Shanter. Snowbird and—Ryan's Daughter! Ryan's Daughter coming on strong! It's Native Princess and Tammy Shanter and Ryan's Daughter! Riding like the devil, it's Native Princess and Ryan's Daughter. It's Native Princess and Ryan's Daughter. Coming down to the wire, it's Native Princess and Ryan's Daughter, neck and neck. It's Ryan's Daughter still pulling!

It's Ryan's Daughter! It's Ryan's Daughter by a nose! At the finish it's Ryan's Daughter, followed by Native Princess, Tammy Shanter, Snowbird . . .

The bloodless smile was back on the pallid face of the man in the gleaming white suit.

"I'll have the twenty grand tomorrow," said Vale, sweating only from the heat.

"What's the line on Detroit tonight?" asked the man in the white suit.

"Not much payoff there. One-to-three."

"I like big payoffs. And little birdies. So put my money on the Orioles. Twenty thousand."

"That's suicide, mister," said Horace.

The man in the white linen suit tipped his Panama Hat to Horace.

"Boss," said Horace in a quick whisper as he turned the calculator over and over in his palm. "That's sixty thou. You ain't got time to lay that off."

Vale stared hard at the man in the white suit.

"I've never refused a bet," Vale said.

The man in the white suit said nothing, but his smile was as broad as it was bloodless when he walked toward the door of Phil's Bar and Grill.

Vale relit his cigar and chinked the silver coins bright and hard in his damp palm.

That evening the light was murkier in Phil's Bar and Grill. The same drunk nursed his second glass of beer in six hours, and Phil leaned in a corner, polishing a glass and listening close to his all-talk station on the Bakelite radio.

At the back the telephone rang, for the thirty-second time in the last six hours, and Horace answered it immediately.

Before Tommy Vale were arranged a hundred scraps of notepaper that made no sense no matter how often they were arranged and rearranged.

Vale reached for Horace's calculator and punched out some numbers with his sausage-like forefinger.

The machine gave no answers, played no tune.

"Hey! How the heck do you use this thing?"

Horace, still on the phone, waved Vale off. Vale shook his head and dispiritedly made an entry in his ledger.

"Put T.J. down for fifty on the Orioles," said Horace, sitting down again. As Vale made out one more slip Horace said diffidently, "You know, boss, someone's passing hunches."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Beep Beep Beep Chime.

"Eight o'clock," said Horace. "Wanna watch the game?"

Vale looked up at the round, luminous Ballantine clock on the wall, then down at the flat, rectangular calculator at his elbow.

"No," Vale said. Then he inched the calculator toward Horace with his elbow. "Show me how to use that thing, will you?"

The next morning was different in Phil's Bar and Grill insofar as the light was a little less murky than it had been the night before. Phil brought a bottle of whiskey over to the booth in the back. One slip of paper remained on the table in front of Tommy Vale.

"Hurt pretty bad, huh, Tommy?"

Vale shrugged and waved away the bottle. "Let's just say business has been better, Phil."

"My business has never been better," said the man in the white suit, who stood silhouetted in the swirling light at the front of Phil's Bar and Grill.

Phil returned to the bar. Horace backed off, leaving the place across from Vale empty. As the man sat down Vale took a shoe box from the seat beside him and pushed it across the scarred Formica tabletop.

The man lifted the lid and smiled at the untidy stacks of twenty-dollar bills inside.

Vale crumpled the last scrap of paper and tossed it onto the floor. "You always share your hunches with the general public?"

"I like to spread the good word. I like to see people happy. I see happy people, I'm happy."

The man laughed a strange, hoarse laugh: like a cat with asthma, or like a strangled man choking for breath.

Vale stared at the man, then blinked. "Horace! Come over here!"

Horace came over from the bar, leaned on the scarred Formica table, and looked hard at the man, who had at last stopped his choking laugh.

"Well," Horace said, "if it ain't a walking public-service message."

"Mr. Sunshine here," said Vale, gesturing toward the man in the white linen suit. "He remind you of someone?"

Horace looked at the man in the white suit even harder than before. "I been thinkin' all along, he looks real familiar, but I can't place the face."

"Horace," said Vale, "try way back. Maybe you remember Bill Lacey?"

"Yeah! Oh, yeah! That's it. I remem—" Horace stopped abruptly and pulled back from the table.

"So you're Bill Lacey's kid?" Vale said pointedly.

"Nice box," Lacey remarked, and smiled a little less enigmatically. "I like to box. I like boxing. I like Jorge Ramirez tonight at the Garden."

"Ramirez, he's an eight-to-one shot!" Horace protested.

"Ramirez, the Bold Avenger," said Vale dryly. "Very apropos. You trying to put me outa business, Kid, huh?"

Lacey smiled an unenigmatic smile of assent.

"The Bold Avenger's a long shot, all right, but you're so hot that I'm gonna cut your odds in half. In addition, you're on rolling odds. If you announce your choices, your odds go down with the others. You understand? Now, maybe you wanna go to someone else."

"Sounds like you're chickening out," said Lacey.

"I never turn down a bet, kid. But those are your odds."

"You're on."

"How much?" asked Vale, tearing off another square of paper and licking the tip of his number 1-1/2 pencil.

Lacey tapped the top of the box again. "You're looking at it."

Tommy Vale was looking, not at the box but at the face of the man named Lacey. "I gotta make a call."

Lacey grinned. "Not broken yet, are you, Tommy?"

Vale stood up and went for the phone. He dug into his pockets for the change but a moment later spoke to Horace in a low, grim voice: "Got a quarter?"

Once more Lacey laughed the laugh of the asthmatic cat, the laugh of the man strangled. He reached deep into the pocket of his white linen trousers. "Add it to the bet, Tommy. Sixty grand and a quarter." He held the coin up between two fingers, and Vale plucked it from there with a strangled politeness. "I don't extend credit." Lacey smirked.

"But that's your policy, isn't it?"

Vale smiled weakly but made no reply. He dialed his call, then huddled away from Horace and Lacey.

Horace punched out a series of numbers on the calculator and produced a dismal little tune of enormous payoffs. "This new technology . . .

Cripes," he said, looking up at Lacey, "win this one . . .No wonder Tommy's on the phone."

"Guess I'm lucky," said Lacey.

"Guess so," said Horace. "But you didn't get that from your old man.

One thing Bill Lacey wasn't, was lucky. He was a nice guy, though.

Another thing you didn't inherit from him, either."

"He was a fool," said Lacey.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"You should respect the dead," said Horace, raising an admonitory finger.

"He shouldn't be dead," said Lacey. "Tommy Vale should be dead."

"Is that what you have in mind, kid?" asked Vale, returning from the telephone.

Lacey smiled, showing no discomfort in being overheard.

"There are ways of doing things, and there are ways of doing things."

"Listen, kid, I didn't kill Bill Lacey. I didn't throw him off the bridge. He took the easy way out of a bad situation."

"You wouldn't see him a quarter. You had his back to the wall!"

"He put his back to the wall! No one told him to bet over his head. And I don't muscle no one."

Nervously Lacey got up, pushing past Horace. "Just have my money here tomorrow."

"If you win," said Vale.

"So," Vale said calmly, "you can't go wrong, it seems." He pushed across the table two boot boxes filled with untidily wrapped packages of twenty-dollar bills.

"You wanna go on taking bets?" Lacey's suit looked brighter, only because his skin looked dingier than the day before.

Vale tapped half an inch of ash from his cigar. "I told you, I never turn away a bet. That's my reputation. I stick with it. 'Course, I get to choose the odds. And for you . . . the odds are gettin' short."

"How about even money? One for one. Double or nothing."

"Now you're talking."

"On your life," said Lacey.

A peanut went the wrong way down Horace's throat and he choked, but Tommy Vale didn't flinch. "I see. The Bold Avenger. What's the bet, kid?"

"I bet you're dead by eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

"That's easy. Shoot me dead and take the money."

"At your autopsy the coroner will find you have died of natural causes."

Horace shook his head sharply no. Vale ignored him.

"That's fair. I'm in good health . . ." Vale looked at his cigar, then crushed out the glowing tip in the ashtray. "You get your dough.

I'll bring mine. Come back tonight and we'll sit it out till morning."

Lacey took his boxes of cash, one under each arm, and headed toward the front door of Phil's Bar and Grill.

"Boss," whispered Horace, leaning on the table, "he ain't lost a bet yet!"

"I know," said Vale. He glanced over his shoulder, but Lacey was already gone. And no one had heard the door close.

That night Phil leaned across the bar on his elbows and talked in a low voice to the drunk. The drunk snored lightly.

The light from an ocher sodium lamp flickered through the front window, shining glumly on the gritty tile.

Horace played "Mary Had a Little Lamb" with precision and surety, but no heart.

"Horace," said Tommy Vale, "I'm touched at how well you're playing that thing. And if I lose the bet, I want you to play at my funeral."

"Boss!" Horace protested.

Tommy Vale broke into laughter that was at once genial and hysterical.

Horace didn't laugh at Vale's morbidity, and neither did the large square man in a cheap dark suit and porkpie hat, hunkering at one of the center tables. This man, who was guarding a battered briefcase laid flat on the table, had a thick mustache, hunched shoulders, and no neck at all. He only looked puzzled at Vale's joke, but a moment later he shuddered against the cold draft that blew through Phil's Bar and Grill.

Lacey stood beside the pool table, in his white linen suit again, his white linen hat not jauntily but perched businesslike atop his head.

Beside him stood another man, of identical build and height, but his face in shadow. This companion wore a linen suit of identical cut to Lacey's, but black. The identical black linen hat atop his head, too, was perched in an identically businesslike fashion, and he carried a battered briefcase, identical to the one watched over by the no-necked guardian in the porkpie hat.

Lacey and his companion came forward, their pace at once casual but lockstepped. One in black, one in white, they looked like negative images of each other.

"This guy gives me the creeps, boss," Horace whispered.

Lacey's negative-imaged companion seated himself at the same table as the man with no neck. They opened their identical cases at the same time, revealing that each was filled with untidy stacks of

twenty-dollar bills, three hundred thousand dollars in each. They closed their cases at the same time.

Snap, snap—in unison. The bets were placed. Even odds that Tommy Vale would die of natural causes before eight A.M. the following morning.

Lacey slipped into the booth across from Vale, pressing Horace against the peeling wall.

From his breast pocket Tommy Vale took a toothpick and politely offered it to Lacey. Lacey politely declined with a wave of his hand.

Tommy Vale smiled and pressed the tip of the toothpick into his gums. "I gave up cigars," he said. "They can be hazardous to your health."

For a long moment no one said anything. Then Vale leaned back, closed his eyes, and sighed a deep sigh.

The no-necked guardian jumped up from the table, hurried over, and shook Vale by the shoulders.

"Whaddaya doin'?" Vale demanded.

"What are you doin'?" echoed the man who was present to guard the bet.

"I'm relaxing! Is that okay? The bet is I won't die! I'm allowed to sleep. Shees!" Vale shook his head impatiently. "Look, I don't know about you guys, but I'm gonna get a little shut-eye. Horace," he said, giving his lieutenant the kind of look that had kept Horace loyal for so many years, "wake me if I die."

Vale closed his eyes and dropped his head back on the hard vinyl seat.

The man with no neck nervously fingered the weapon weighing down the inside pocket of his cheap suit.

"He always sleeps sitting up," said Horace reassuringly, and waved the nervous guardian back to his table Beep beep beep.

Chime.

The hands on the round Ballantine clock read midnight.

Vale slowly opened his eyes and looked around at all the unclosed eyes staring back at him.

Beep beep beep.

Chime.

The hands on the round Ballantine clock read one.

Vale's head slid along the back of the vinyl seat and banged softly against the wall.

Lacey stared and watched. Not sweating—but not smiling, either.

Horace and the man with no neck and a gun in his pocket fought against sleep. The man in the black linen suit with the black hat perched businesslike atop his head kept his face turned into the shadows so

that no one could say if he slept or kept watch.

Phil, whose real name was Mikey, didn't fight the hour but slept leaning against the wall, his arms crossed across his chest, his fists wrapped in a damp towel.

Beep beep beep.

Chime.

Three o'clock? Four o'clock?

Horace was asleep. The man with no neck snored.

The light in Phil's Bar and Grill was murkier than on days when it stormed, murkier than on nights when the acrid fog spilled in from the East River.

Beep beep beep.

Chime.

"Boss? Hey, boss!"

Horace reached across the table and shook Tommy Vale by the shoulders.

Shook him without response.

The guard with no neck shook himself awake with a snort, checked to make certain he had his weapon, checked to see if the three hundred thousand dollars was still beneath his elbow, then finally checked to see if Tommy Vale was still alive.

"Boss! Boss, don't die!" cried Horace as he shook Vale harder.

In the grim morning light, Tommy Vale's face bore the blankness of death, whose ledger always tallies exactly if you only wait long enough.

Then Tommy Vale laughed in Horace's face.

He laughed till his eyes watered.

"Horace," Vale said at last, when he had caught his breath. "Get me some coffee."

"Yes, boss!"

When Horace hurried out of the way, Vale turned his attention to Lacey.

"You're still smiling," Vale said. "You must know something I don't."

"I know it's seven fifty-five, and I still got five minutes."

"That ain't much," said Vale. "You should be sweating by now."

"Five minutes? I don't sweat the small stuff."

"You used to." Vale took the coffee Horace brought to him and swirled it once to make sure the sugar was dissolved. "You used to sweat the small stuff and choke on the big stuff. And now you're gonna choke again when I don't die by eight."

Lacey's smile was gone.

"You think I don't know who you are," said Vale, sipping the coffee and blinking in its steam. "and how you got here and how come you're so hot. I knew you as soon as you walked in here, Bill Lacey."

Horace spilled his own steaming coffee into the white linen lap of Lacey's suit, but Lacey didn't flinch at the scalding liquid.

"Lacey's dead!" Horace protested, and peered into the dead man's face.

"I went to the funeral."

"That may be," said Tommy Vale, "but he's sitting right there, and he's still a cheap little coward, a cheat, still pulling cheap tricks, trying to cheat me, trying to break me, trying to be the big shot. Sure, he found out from the other side when I was gonna croak, and he took that inside dope and tried to make it pay."

The man with no neck made the sign of the cross over the lapels of his cheap dark suit and found no comfort in the weapon inside it.

Bill Lacey craned his head around on his dingy neck and looked at the Ballantine clock. "It ain't eight, Tommy Vale."

"You know, Lacey, you should never underestimate the power of the human will. That's one thing I learned just sitting in this seat for the last thirty years. It's the doggonedest thing, the human will. Either you got it or you don't. You were a scared rabbit, you're gonna be a scared rabbit again. Leaving a wife with TB and two little girls 'cause you were scared to face the music."

With one hand Lacey pulled out a small white handkerchief, and with the other he lifted the hat, for the first time revealing his bald head. The bare crown of pallid, stretched flesh made him look weasley and disreputable, cunning and weak. "I lost everything," he said.

"You sure did, you dumb jerk. And you're gonna lose it all again."

For the first time since he's awakened with laughter, Vale looked up at the clock.

Lacey, Horace, and the two guardians of the briefcases followed his gaze.

The second hand lurched closer to twelve, and with it went the minute hand. With them both, the hour hand crept closer to eight.

Beep beep beep.

Chime.

Eight o'clock.

The man with no neck grinned, grabbed two briefcases and six hundred thousand dollars, and ran out of Phil's Bar and Grill, inwardly reflecting on the unreliability, the strangeness, and the disreputable power of dreams.

"Never underestimate the power of the human will," said Tommy Vale again. Then once more he began to laugh.

Lacey stood up, white and sweating. He didn't look at Vale again. He brushed past Horace. Joined by his darker angel, Lacey hurried toward the door. Vale was grinning and lighting a cigar, but Horace was watching as Bill Lacey and his companion vanished in the murky light beside the pool table.

Vale saw in Horace's eyes that the two were gone.

"Quick," he said, his grin gone. "Hand me the book."

Vale pulled out his pencil, glanced up at the clock, and began to write:

"The Last Will and Testament of Tommy Vale . . ."

"But you beat the odds, boss. You're still alive," Horace protested.

Vale laughed. "That dumb jerk Lacey. He was always a loser, Horace."

He called out to the ether: "You're a loser, Lacey!" He continued to write, shaking his head and chuckling. "My time has come. I know that.

My number's up. But I made a monkey out of that guy, didn't I, Horace?

When you're up, remember to set the clock back. He fell for the oldest trick in the book. Setting the clock ahead." Vale shook with laughter and continued to write. "This is good," he said with a gasp, "I'm gonna die laughing."

Horace gaped at him. Vale caught his stare and laughed anew.

"C'mon, c'mon, don't worry, pal, I'm leaving plenty for you. That is, if you promise you'll play at my funeral." He pointed the gnawed eraser of his pencil at Horace's calculator. "Member to set that back too. I particularly liked the sound effects. But for calculatin'?"

Vale tapped the pencil against his noggin and laughed again.

"Horace, get me a soak, will ya? It's hot in here."

Horace hesitated a moment, but when Vale gave him another confirming nod, he got up and went to the bar. Vale wrote figures in the ledger in the soft, thick lead of the number 1-1/2 pencil. Then he looked at them with satisfaction.

Phil poured two beers from the tap.

"I'm gonna die laughing," Vale said in a low, quiet voice, closing the ledger.

Horace brought the beers back to the booth in the back of Phil's Bar and Grill.

The number 1-1/2 pencil rolled across the scarred Formica tabletop and dropped on the floor.

"Hey, boss," said Horace, putting down the beers and picking up the pencil.

But Tommy Vale didn't respond. His ledger shut with honor and profit, Vale leaned comfortably against the wall, smiling and dead.