

THE WAY IT WAS

By Frederik Pohl

This is the third kiss of death story in this volume. This one I was maneuvered into by that secret master of us all, Harlan Ellison. He called me up one day to tell me there was a new magazine to be published by Bob Guccione-not *Omni*; it was long before *Omni*- whose editor, he said, was slaving to have a short article on the future written by me. Well, short articles on the future I sneeze out at the slightest request, and the money was good; when the editor called a little later, I told her I'd be glad to do it. We talked a little bit about subject matter, and I sat down to write it. I was typing happily along when the phone rang again. Had I understood, she wanted to know, that by 'piece' she meant *fiction* piece-specifically, not an article but a short story? I had not. I wouldn't have started on the thing if I had. Still, in the course of thinking about the themes I wanted to touch on in the article I had dreamed up what seemed to me a brand-new aspect of a long considered subject. So I said, all right, I'll do a story.. . and did.. and then, what do you know, the new magazine died stillborn. The story languished in Bob Guccione's files for a year or two until he started another new magazine. This one was called *Viva*, and my story appeared in its first issue. But this time the Pharaoh's curse had not yet finished its work. *Viva's* first issue was also its last, and this time I had slain not one but *two* magazines with a single story.

This is the way it was with Stan and Evanie: they fell in love. When Stan came out of the waking-up room at Blue Balls, Evanie was there, pretty and new on the job and a little flustered, to give him his check and see that everything was all right. One thing led to another. An hour later they were lying in the long grass at the foot of a waterfall, gently stoned, skin bare on the warm, soft turf, listening to Rorschach Rock while sweet bunnies and gentle chipmunks peered at them from the edges of the lawn.

It was like the first time for both of them, only better, because they each knew every move the other was going to make and leapt to meet each other; there was never skin softer or smoother than Evanie's, never a breast as firm. Stan stayed hard inside her for fifty-four minutes, never impatient, bringing her with joy through gasps and shudders until both of them had had it all and they lay spent and contented among the violets. It was like the first time, because it was always like the first time; and, as always, the first they knew that it was over was when the waterfall stopped and the bunnies froze in midhop.

"Oh," said Evanie drowsily, "shit. She sat up and leaned away from him, scratching the inside of her thigh. "I guess I better get back to work, Sam.

"Stan.

"It was really nice, though, Stan.

"Yeah. Now that the breezes had stopped, too, Stan became aware of the way they smelled. In the city outside this room he would never have noticed it, but after the perfumed flowers it was a bring-down, and now that the soft sunlight was off, the lawn was only CelloTurf again and it itched.

The next couple was already waiting in the entry room. Stan and Evanie nodded to them and pushed their checks into the locker slots. As they got dressed Stan said, "I'd really like to do this again some time.

"Zip me up, will you?"

"No, I mean it, Evanie.

She patted his shoulder absently and pushed the door open. They walked out into the city, and the heat and the stink smote them. Behind them the liquid-crystal sign glowed its message:

Harry's Place 30 Studsy Sex Spectaculars 30

The colors flowed into Super-Stud embracing the tenderest blond beauty who ever lived, with waving palms dissolving into mirrored walls behind them.

"Thanks, Stan. I'll see you.

He put out his hand to stop her. "I seriously mean I want to do it again, Evanie.

"But it's so expensive!

"I've got a thousand dollars a week, he said proudly. "I can afford it now, what the hell?"

She was suddenly blinded with tears. "And how do you get it?" she sobbed. No! Let go of my arm, Stan. I've got to go.

He called after her, sweet little rump jouncing under the hem of the work-mini as she hurried away. but she didn't look back. Perplexed-and, he realized, hungry- he pushed his way through the crowded hall to a fast-food. "Fuck her," he said to the cashier as he pushed his credit card into its slot, but it was only a money machine and did not reply.

Two hours later he was still sitting at the same table in the fast-food, but he had switched from food to drink. "I don't have to eat in a joint like this, he told the man across from him. The man had been sitting there for ten minutes, nursing a cup of imitation coffee and eyeing Stan's collection of empty glasses. He brightened up.

"Yeah. I could tell that by looking at you. You're used to better places, right, Mac?"

"I damn am.

"You can always tell somebody with, you know, some kind of status. It's the way you sit there, even.

"Right, said Stan. "Want a drink?"

The man looked at the flickering digits on the wall clock. "Well, he said, "I really ought to be getting along- Which was doubtful; he was Welfare from clipped head to fabric shoes, nothing to do but wait for Thursday (payday), just the way Stan had been most of his life. Stan's face must have showed what he was thinking; the man said quickly, "Still, I wouldn't mind a beer.

Stan pushed his card into the cashier and read out the total glumly; after the beer, the readout showed he

had \$766.22 left in his account. Harry's Place wasn't cheap. "I just came from Harry's, he said. "You ever been there? Nice little screwery, if the company's right.

"I bet she was, huh?

"You won that bet. Prettiest little thing you ever saw. I met her at... I met her where we both work.

"I had a job, the man said enviously. "What kind of work do you do'?"

"Parts. What about your job?"

"Well, it was in personal service. I worked up in the penthouse areas when I was younger. Sort of general handyman. I used to go to places like Harry's all the time. Stud farms, casinos, travel-I've been skiing, two or three times. He knocked back the rest of his beer and pushed the empty container absentmindedly into the middle of the table. "Yeah, you can have a pretty good life, when you have a job. What kind of parts do you mean?"

"All different ones. The forget-it shots were wearing off, the selective proteins that numbed the sense of boredom and made everything seem fresh and exciting, even sex, and Stan was rapidly tiring of his company. Funnily, he wasn't tiring of Evanie. In his not particularly adventurous life she was probably the five- or six-hundredth girl he'd screwed, and the fourth or fifth he had taken to Harry's, after he found out how to get a thousand dollars a week for practically nothing, but there was something about her that stuck in his mind. No, not in his mind; he could feel a crawling between his thighs when he thought of her, even with the forget-it wearing off and being in this crummy joint.

The Welfare man saw his next free beer wriggling off the hook. "Let me tell you what it's like, up in the high- rent district, he said. "You know they've got swimming pools bigger than this whole restaurant, water so clean you'd think it was perfume? Dances, with live orchestras?"

"I heard.

"It isn't the same, just hearing it or seeing it on the tube; you have to be there. Friend, the happiest days of my life were when I was up there. The women wore clothes that lit up, and turned peekaboo, and just hugged their little butts like skin. Just to look at them was enough! Almost enough. And half of them were just begging to get balled by the hired help, beds you wouldn't believe, all the grass and fine wine you could handle-

"You talked me into it, Stan said cruelly. "I think I'll head up there for a visit now.

It wasn't exactly a lie, he told himself. He really could go up there, at least long enough to spend the rest of his thousand dollars in one of the restaurants looking out into the clouds over the ocean; and maybe he would.

* * *

Plenty of money in the balance, nothing to do Stan wandered through the midlevel streets of the city, reminding himself that anything he saw he could buy if he wanted to. This was all Welfare country; not a soul in sight that had had a dime in capital or a dollar's pay in ten years. He wasted a few dollars in a game parlor. bought himself a new wristlet because it looked like something Evanie would appreciate. stopped to buy some popsoy to give to a couple of nice-looking, hungry-looking kids but decided against it-you never knew when they might threaten to call the fuzz for molesting them if you didn't pay

off. That wasn't his style; all he wanted to molest was a pretty lady. There was plenty of that around, too, and he cased the available material carefully without seeing anything that took his fancy.

What took his fancy was Evanie.

But what was the use of that, when she let him spend two and a half big bills in Harry's Place and then took off without even saying she'd see him again? Most girls appreciated that kind of thing a little more. That was half the best part of it, not just the fucking but taking her to a place your average working man couldn't afford more than twice a year and your Welfare stiff couldn't get inside the door of.

He found he was near an observation gallery, and pushed his card into the admissions turnstile-five dollars to look out the window!-and strolled out. Even there it was crowded, mostly couples and cops, the couples to make out in some place other than their dormitories and the cops to keep them from it.

He stood looking over Lower New York Bay through the smoggy clouds, without seeing much that interested him. The high walls of Jersey City were lighting up as it got dark, and far out past Sandy Hook he could see the lights of the offshore oil condominiums, It was the third time he had been there in three days. and it wasn't worth it. It was only worth it when you couldn't afford it; the reality was a waste of time.

All the things they used to talk about in the dorms, they were true enough. Having a job wasn't just getting a paycheck. Having a job was a thing to organize your life around. It was something to do. Having a job was thirty-two hours a week when you felt it mattered, some way or another, whether you were in one place or some different place.

Having a job was a lot better than being in parts, even though the pay there was all you could want.

Shortly before the end of the shift he went up to the Blue Balls office. The sign didn't say that, the sign said:

Associated Medical Services
of Greater New York
TransParts Division

but everyone knew it by the other name. Usually he didn't like to hang around there, but apart from being where he got his money, it was also where Evanie worked. The trouble with that was that he hadn't caught her last name.

Stan walked in through the door as though he had never been there before, and a receptionist smiled and said, "Good evening, sir. One of our account executives will be with you right away.

"I just wanted to ask you-

"Yes, sir. It's company policy that our account executives give out all information. Here you are, Mr. Medway is ready to see you.

Pale, slim Mr. Medway in a sober scarlet jacket, smiling at the door, was waving him in. "Welcome to TransParts, sir. Please sit down. Would you care for a drink? Coffee? A Coke?

"I just wanted to ask you something.

"Certainly, sir! But before that, let me congratulate you on your civic spirit. Whatever you decide-and remember, TransParts will not attempt to influence your decision in any way-just the fact that you came here shows that you are an extraordinary person. Well. Let me tell you a little about us. TransParts supplies all of the surgical facilities in the Greater New York area with organs for transplant. Under Title Seven, Federal Statute 683, we are authorized to accept and process whole-body donations from any competent adult, and to reward the donor to the extent of fifty thousand dollars-assuming, of course, that the donor meets our rather rigid physical standards. But looking at you, sir, you seem the picture of health!

"That wasn't what-

"No outright sale, eh? twinkled Mr. Medway, stroking his lightly graying sideburns. "I don't blame you for that! Well, I think I know what you would like. We can offer you one thousand dollars for what is, essentially, a fifty-to-one chance that you will walk out of this office with everything you had when you came in, *plus* our cheek for a thousand deposited direct to your credit account. The procedure? Simplicity itself. We bring you to a very comfortable room and present you with a tray containing fifty sealed bottles of a very fine liqueur. Each of them has something added. Forty-nine of them contain a mild sleeping potion; you fall asleep; eight hours later you wake up, you walk out. The fiftieth-well, sir, that's the gamble, eh? And you can come back and repeat this process every week if you like. Think of that! A guaranteed income, a thousand dollars a week for life! Why, we have clients who have been living off the fat of the land for *years!* if you'll let me have your credit card, for identification purposes- It was easier to do it than to argue. Stan handed it over, while Mr. Medway babbled on. "I'm sure you know, sir, that TransParts is officially licensed by the Federal government. We operate under the most rigid inspection possible. If you fear that there might be some-what shall I say? tinkering?'-with the odds, let me tell you that our license would be pulled in a minute. We wouldn't dare! No, it's a fair draw and- He stopped, staring at the card reader.

He looked up at Stan, his expression ugly. "What the fuck, man? You're already on our books!

"I know that.

"Then what the hell are you doing here?

"I just wanted to ask you a question.

"Ask!

"There's a girl, said Stan. "Her name's Evanie. I. . . wanted to get in touch with her. She works here.

Mr. Medway stared at him for a minute, then laughed. He tossed Stan's credit card back and punched a combination on his desk top. "Yeah, he said, reading. "She's in Post-Session Care, right? She's just about to go off duty. You can probably catch her at the employees' entrance.

The most astonishing thing about Evanie was, she still looked good. A little depressed, but good. When she caught sight of Stan her face flickered into a smile, then became sadder than ever.

"Hi, Evanie.

"Hey, Stan.

He put his hand on her shoulder, then pulled her to him and kissed her deep and long. He didn't let go,

and she smiled up at him. "Don't you ever wear out, Stan?"

"I'm the picture of health. Want to do something, Evanie? We could go back and try out one of the other rooms at Harry's.

"Stan, it's crazy to waste your money like that.

"Why is it crazy? That's what I get it for, to spend it. If I run out, I go back and get some more.

"*Maybe* you get some more. Maybe you never come out again, and next week some guy on the two-hundred-and-fiftieth floor's wearing your balls.

He winced and backed away, and saw that she was near tears again. "Oh, Stan, I hate to think of you in there.

"Why me? You work there!"

"That's different, I know I'll be coming out at the end of the day. You-do you know what they do to you in there, when you lose, I mean?"

"For Christ's sake, Evanie, of course I know. It's an organ bank. if I lose . . . if I lose that's the last I know, right? I just don't wake up the next morning. And they take me apart and heal sick people with my parts, heart here, lungs there, anywhere somebody needs a transplant. What's wrong with that?" He knew he was repeating what the account executive had been saying, all the while he was signing up, but he went on anyway. "My life might save, I don't know, ten or twenty other lives, and that's a fair rate of exchange. And meanwhile I'm off Welfare! I've got a few dollars in my pocket, I can live like a human being-

"Stan, she said, "hold still.

"What are you doing? She had taken something out of her purse, was clipping it to his tunic.

"That's my ID badge, it'll get you past if they don't look at it too closely. Me they know. I'm going to show you what Blue Balls looks like from the inside.

He didn't have the heart for Harry's Place. But neither of them wanted to go back to their dorms, so they wound up in a cramped but not awful hotel room, rented, to the desk clerk's surprise, for the whole night. It had a good- sized bed, if nothing else. At first Stan didn't have the heart for sex, either, or even for talking, but after a while in the gentle dark with Evanie warm and tender beside him, his spirits rose. They screwed and drowsed, whispered and explored each other, and drowsed again.

And when it was nearly time to get up and get out Evanie said, "Stan, I really like you, and you turn me on better than anybody else I ever knew.

"Me, too, Evanie. I wouldn't have believed it. Even here, without the sets, without the forget-it, it's as good as Harry's Place with anybody else.

"*Don't* say that, Stan, you didn't let me finish. It's no good, Stan. I'm not going to see you again.

Fist to the solar plexus, when he hadn't been expecting an attack. He got his breath. "Evanie, that doesn't make sense.

"To me it makes sense. Every dollar you spend, it's a piece of your body. What did it cost you for the night, a hundred dollars? That brings you a hundred dollars closer to the time you go back to Blue Balls and take your chances again. I can't stand that, Stan, it'll drive me up the wall if I let it.

"I'm willing to take the chance.

"I'm not! Stan, don't you remember what I just showed you? The used-up stiff with nothing left? You want to be like that? One leg, a head without the eyes or ears, plastic tubing where your gut used to be, pumping along on a heart-lung machine until somebody decides there's not enough left of you to sell and they pull the plug?

Stan winced; he had been devoting a lot of his attention that whole night to trying to forget all that. "They weren't all like that, he protested. "Some of them looked just fine! Like they were only asleep.

"Asleep! Yeah, they keep some going-rare blood types, they just keep them on the machine to make blood to sell, for a while anyway. But they're not asleep. When you do it to a frog you call it 'pithing'; the brain's disconnected, there's nothing there but a vegetable. And even so, you didn't look too close, because they take off all the spare parts they can anyway. What's a blood factory need with a weenie, Stan? But some old guy'll pay plenty of money for it. You think I like it when I feel you inside me like that, thinking that same thing might be in me some other time but with some other guy on the other end of it?

"Oh, hell, Evanie-

"At least you're a man, she said morosely. "You see those pregnant women in the shops? They're making babies for somebody. Of course, they don't feel anything, because they're pithed, too. But I feel. I look at them and think about myself being there, after somebody has reached way up inside me with a light pipe and a flexible forceps and pulled out my own ovum and thrown it away and stuck in some other woman's ovum. And then they fertilize it with sperm from her husband or her boy friend or whoever- She pushed her pillow up and sat higher, looking down at him. "If you're the customer it's okay. You get the baby and you don't have to pay off in morning sickness or looking funny. Just in money. Daddy turns in a sperm sample, Mom picks out a nice-looking breeder female from the photograph album-of course, the picture shows her the way she used to be, not the way she is now. A couple quick squirts on the day shift and nine months later the hulk on the heart-lung machine squeezes out Junior for you.

"Evanie-

"So I can't take it, Stan. If we had some real money, you know, enough for six months or so. . . if you had a job. . . But that's not the way it is. My job won't keep us both, it barely keeps me off Welfare. I don't want to go back to living on the fortieth floor.

"I don't want you to do that.

"And I know you can't get a job. Stan, I'm not blaming you. I'm just telling you what I can take, and this is past it.

"How did you get the job, Evanie?

"I laid the right people, what did you think?

"Oh. He scratched uncomfortably. "Do you suppose I-

"Who are you going to screw, Mr. Medway? Any of the account execs, male *or* female? They don't need you, Stan. No offense. You're a real great guy, you know I think you are. But that was just luck, and a section chief who liked young chicks, and it won't happen again in a million years. Those guys in the upper brackets at Blue Balls, they don't just get salaries, they get a commission- for keeping you on the hook, Stan, for making sure you come in and take your bottle of fluid every week. They go to school for that, psychology, salesmanship; once they've got the degree they're set for life, and they can buy whatever they want. Even you, if they wanted you bad enough, a lot cheaper than putting you on the payroll. So this is it, Stan. I hope I never see you again, especially at work.

He kept the room an extra day, the hell with the expense, and got a decent sleep, and followed it up with a shower, clean clothes from the slot machines, and the best meal he could find that didn't take more than half an hour to eat. Half an hour was as long as he was sure his courage would hold out; and then he took the transit elevator up to the Blue Balls office. "I want to talk to Medway, he told the receptionist.

"Mr. Medway? I'm afraid he's with a client just now, but one of our other account executives...

"Medway. Tell him he's got a live one.

When Mr. Medway appeared, it took him a moment to recognize Stan. "Oh, the one who was looking for the girl. Didn't she work out? You want to pick another?

"No, Mr. Medway, I want to make a deal. I want to take twenty bottles, one after another. I walk out of here with twenty thousand dollars or you get to keep the bod.

Medway sank back behind his desk, thumbs in his armpits, looking at Stan. "You're a real gambler, he said admiringly. "But you can't do that. It'd kill you. Twenty is an overdose.

"I'll take that chance, Medway. I want the money. I want to take it and he hesitated "...all right, I want to take it and go to school and train for your job. I want real money, Medway.

"Wow, said Medway softly. "I have to say I admire your spirit. Well, you can't do it the way you say, but TransParts is willing to roll the dice with any of its clients, any stakes, just so it's a fair shot. How about this. You get your choice of two bottles. One puts you to sleep for the night, the other. . . that's a fifty-fifty chance, and what you get if you win is twenty-five thousand dollars. Or if you're really hot, you can take the long shot. The same fifty bottles as always. Only this time only one of them is just a sleeping pill. All the other forty-nine are too-bad- Charlie. That's a forty-nine-to-one shot, according to the arithmetic, but TransParts is willing to absorb the difference, so if you win that one, you walk away with fifty thou. You can even get a hundred to one if you want it, or a thousand. You name it. We'll set it up, just so the arithmetic works out.

A thousand to one! My God, a million dollars! But to have only one chance in a thousand of surviving. If I take the twenty-five, he said.

"Good bet, nodded Medway. "When?

"Right now.

Medway punched a combination into his desk top and stood up. "Come on, they'll have it ready for you by the time we get there. And so they did, the standard room with its single bed and vase of flowers, and

on the sideboard the little tray of bottles; but this time there were only two on it.

You could spend the whole night arguing which is which, Stan thought grayly, and reached out for the nearer. He flipped off the top and drank it down. "Might as well get a good night's sleep, he said, turning toward the bed. "So long, Medway.

He didn't look around as the account executive went out, and so he didn't see that someone had come in, until she said, "I really liked you, Stan. I mean it.

He turned around, feet tingling in his pants legs. "Evanie!

"Go ahead, Stan, get into bed. You'll be feeling it in a minute.

"I know. And he was, the same warm whirling that he had felt every other time. That was good. But not really good, he thought, the killer dose would feel the same going down, he just wouldn't ever wake up. He tried a pleasantry. "I thought maybe you were coming to... to. .

The words got harder and harder to get out, but she knew what he meant. "Not this time, sweetie, she said, drawing the cover over him. I just came in because I wanted to tell you two things.

"Wh- He couldn't even finish the "-at.

"That I really liked you. And that it wasn't anything personal, Stan. You see, I get a commission too.