

Camera Obscura

by Thomas F. Monteleone

Like a flower blooming, the explosion unfolded as Lieberman focused through the lens.

He rotated the barrel, fingers moving automatically, quickly, to imprison a crystal-sharp image. Then a second, more violent eruption eclipsed the first. The air became a hammer, shattering him. Pieces of hot metal ripping, slashing at him. Lieberman felt the camera torn from his hands, white heat gouging at his eyes.

Pain.

And darkness.

Even his thoughts, graying into black. His last was of the shutter, and if there had been time to depress it.

His shivered body was taken to the Biotechnical Division of the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, where they peeled back his flayed skin, aluminized the fractured bones, implanted skin-regenerative cultures, sealed the ruptured organs, closed the terrible wounds. Everything but the eyes.

They were lifeless knots of nerve and jelly, their pathways dark within his skull, leaving him blind and dancing with thoughts of death. For truly Lieberman was dead without his eyes—the most vital tools of his art. It was not like him to suffer so; he was not the fragile, sensitive martyr type. In an age of laser-imaging, holography, and light-sculpture, Lieberman had clung to old ways, beating new prophets at their game. His desire had been as fierce as a desert wind, his energy like the sun, and he had burned himself a place among the past masters: Stieglitz, Weston, Adams, Cartier-Bresson... and now—Lieberman. From the beginning, his work had spoken eloquently of a medium without the machine. His prints were more than mere two-dimensional phantoms. His visions, his images, screamed a challenge to the New Arts, humbling them with multireversals, impossible colors, compositions delicate yet outrageous, and technique as intelligent as it was *avant*. There was no aspect of the art that Lieberman had indulged in and then not found wanting. He had broken all the rules by establishing new ones; his work sang his message to the critics with all the subtlety of a Beethoven symphony.

Their labels annoyed him: Classicist, Recidivist, Neoromantic. They wished to confine him by defining him, to impale him like the dry husk of a butterfly beneath a pin. But Lieberman would not be captured so easily.

And so he ignored them, even as he accepted their money and their praise. While the light-sculptors and holographists struggled through commercial hackwork, Lieberman created what and where he chose. His corporation, Image Design Unlimited, became preferred stock on the Exchange, as much for its status appeal among the affluent as its financial stability. Lieberman had become that rarest of all creatures: an artist recognized within his own lifetime.

But now he lay in darkness, reliving his Promethean past, shuddering at the thought of his dark future. He had always hated sleep, and so it was doubly ironic that he now live in the half-world of the sleeper. To awake from dreamless oblivion, to feel his eyelids flutter, spring open, greet nothingness, was a chilling thing. *Déjà vu* struck him like a solitary musical note; as if he had breathed the darkness in retreating dreams.

In time, the doctors brought him hope. He would receive new eyes. Prosthetic optics were not yet commonplace, but working models were in operation, with new designs and modifications emerging from the labs steadily. Lieberman was scheduled to receive one of the latest prototypes, and this was a great comfort to him. But he did not think much about the new eyes, or the day when he would see again. He had discovered an unknown side of his nature while blind: an inclination to self-pity, a pleasure in feeling sorry for himself. It was from this feeling that he kept Elise from seeing him. By denying himself her presence and her love he was more fully able to suffer.

Days passed, however, and the new eyes were brought to him.

Despite the local anesthetics, Lieberman felt the doctors probing, calibrating, anchoring the things to his hollow sockets; he heard their monotonic voices coach and comment upon the operation. What he received was the result of years of careful design and testing: two monolithic microprocessors, grafted to the optic nerves by Soviet myoelectric synapses, which accepted information through laser-encoded lenses. As a cosmetic concession, he received fully orbiting, gel coverings that glistened like natural eyes. Tiny sensors and servomotors moved them, once he had "learned" how to control them. Each time he shifted his gaze or the iris changed diameter, Lieberman heard the resonant hum of the servos within his skull.

At last, when the adjustments were at an end, the final tunings made, the circuits tested, and the switches thrown, did Lieberman see. His brain whited out as he fought to interpret the rush of information. Slowly the light coalesced, quieted, assumed familiar configurations: substance, depth of field, shadow. There were three people, dressed in white, standing over his bed—a woman and two men—all smiling with self-satisfaction. He responded to their questions, asked his own, cooperated with their tests. Yes, everything seemed right. Clarity, resolution, even color was as it should be, as he had recalled it in the dark dreamtimes, and before the accident at the Solar Furnace Exposition. Blinking his eyes, he felt moisture at their corners; they had retained his lachrymal ducts. The gel was washed and lubricated although it required neither.

As he became newly familiar with the new sight organs, doubts shimmered like specters only half-perceived. Something seemed to be lingering just beyond the periphery of Lieberman's new vision. Something different. Something changed.

But when he searched it out, he found nothing but his fear.

He learned to ignore this as he gained mastery over the machine parts, as the scars healed and his strength returned. The time had finally come when he allowed Elise to see him. He hoped she had not minded the exclusion, since their relationship had always been an honest one. He hoped she would know that there was a part of him—call it vanity, fear, or whatever you wish—that could not let her see him disfigured or in pain.

It was a sun-bright morning when she came to him. The door opened quickly and she suddenly appeared: an auburn splash of hair framing an oval face, eyes of polished serpentine, Celtic nose over slightly pouting lips. She smiled as she touched him with pale, almost translucent hands, delicately veined like Carrara marble. He kissed, held her close. They talked and he was comfortable and serene—save the interrupting moments when the servos hummed, when his gaze danced about her as she spoke.

Looking at her, he remembered. She had been one of his first models, and his only lover. She had been the final, interlocking piece in the creative puzzle; after Elise, Lieberman had begun his rise. Of all the women he had since photographed, he had wanted none of them, no matter how fervently they had forced themselves upon him. Once immersed within his art and his love, Lieberman's passion flourished somewhere beyond, or perhaps on a parallel path with, the needs of the flesh. Elise knew this, admired it. Both of them were happy with it.

He was neither surprised nor disappointed when she asked, "When do we get back to work?"

"We already have," he said, smiling.

He spent the drive through Washington studying the familiar landmarks, calling back remembered images, comparing them to new machine constructs. His mind was on these things when they arrived at their town house in fashionable Georgetown and he barely perceived her mention of the surprise.

"Surprise? For what?" he said as he palmed the lock and entered the foyer.

"For you, silly. You know—'welcome home' and all that." She laughed and guided him down the hall. "It's in the den. Go on. Look."

Lieberman walked slowly down the corridor, which was dark save for a solitary sconce at its midpoint. A humming within his head spoke of the changed illumination and the automatic adjustment to it.

A Tiffany lamp bathed the den in soft yellows, orange, magenta, complementing the warm

tones of the Persian rug and the barn-wood walls. On his desk sat a large package in white paper, dressed in a green satin bow. "What is it?" he asked, playing the ritual-game of picking it up, hefting it, before tearing away the poorly wrapped paper (Elise was never very good at such things). Underneath lay a plastiboard freight cube, bearing the stamps of overseas customs inspection. Lieberman pulled at the sealing tab, and excelsior flooded out and into his hands. He opened the package slowly now, respecting the exquisite European care with which the object had been packed, until he could lift the gift from its wrappings.

"My God, it's beautiful," he said, staring at the camera he now held in his hands. "Where'd you ever find it?"

Elise answered him, but he did not record the answer—so intensely did he examine the prize. It was a masterpiece of craft and design, form and function. More than thirty centimeters on a side, hand-rubbed rosewood body, black fabric bellows on delicately oiled tracks. Across the top he read the manufacturer's name: deardorf. His fingers touched the black metal that encircled the camera's great lens—a gently convex dome of hand-ground glass. In white letters, rimming the lens, were the words schneider-kreuznach, maker of the most perfect optics ever produced. A more perfect camera had never been designed, and there were but a handful left throughout the world. Lieberman held it carefully with both hands, walked across the room, and selected a large sturdy tripod.

"I'd been looking for it a long time," she said as he fitted the pod to the camera's brass bottom mount. "Long before the... the accident. It was just luck that it came when it did."

"It's really beautiful," he said, standing up, taking her hand, and drawing her close. He kissed her once. "Like you. Thank you very much."

She kissed him with her eyes closed, but he kept his own open, studying the closeup detail of her long lashes and trembling lids.

"Here," he said, stepping back to pick up a focusing cloth—a large black rectangle of opaque fabric. "Let me look at you." The cloth was a relic from another age, but it was necessary to appreciate the crystalline perfection of the Deardorf.

Elise sat in a Regency chair by the balcony window doors. Sunlight seeped through, became entangled in her hair like the corona of an eclipse. Her lime-green body shift clung approvingly to her.

Across the room, Lieberman positioned the camera and threw the black cloth over his head. Beneath the shroud, darkness clutched at him as the eyes hummed their adjustments. He tensed, for a moment, against the sudden blackness. Then, fingers groping for the catch on the rear panel, he swung it down to reveal the image on the ground glass. He blinked his eyes to see—

—a view from a great height. Looking down upon a murky sea burned by a blue-white sun, where roiling mist boiled off into hot, still air. The sky was a metallic gray, and—

— Stumbling back, Lieberman threw off the cloth, which seemed to be clinging to him like some live thing, choking him. His eyes refocused on the warmly lit room, quietly posed Elise.

“What’s the matter?” she said, reading his confused expression. She rushed to him.

“Frederick, what’s wrong. Are you all right?”

He waved his hand. “Yes, yes. It’s okay. It’s nothing. Just got dizzy for a minute there. I’m all right now. Go on, now. Please, sit down.”

Frowning, Elise obeyed him.

Lieberman tented himself in the shroud, forcing his eyes to the ground glass where—

— something dark, indistinct, moved across the surface of the water, sending out a wake of endless V’s. The alien sun flared above the edge of shoreline trees, but there was no strong illumination. Everything bathed in shadow-light: a coldness, suggesting dampness, decay. He panned, with camera, across the sea to a sheer-walled cliff. Something dark fluttered past the lens, and he flinched. Some flying thing. Its afterimage flickered in his mind. Almost familiar, oddly terrifying, as it lingered on the edge of memory. Twisting the lens, he attempted more resolution, the metal growing slippery in his hand—

—“Frederick?” Elise touched his shoulder.

He backed out of the cloth, stood up, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, stared at her blankly.

“What’s the matter with you?” Her voice was keen-edged; she sensed a terror within him.

Lieberman rubbed his false eyes, out of habit more than need. “I don’t know. I don’t know.” Moving back from the camera, he pointed to it. “Look in there. Tell me what you see.”

Elise slipped beneath the focusing cloth, remained there as she spoke. “What am I supposed to see? The chair. The window...”

“What about the water? Don’t you see the water?”

“Water?” She dropped the cloth, looked at him. “Frederick—”

He pushed out of the way, peered through the ground glass where the image danced, saw the ripples of the dark sea. “Elise, look at it! I’m not crazy! Look!”

But she saw nothing.

Gently she explained to him, listened to him. She was afraid for him, but not *of* him.

Lieberman turned her off, not hearing her words as soon as it was clear that only he could see it. Looking again, he saw subliminal movements across the water. Almost hypnotic, its effect upon him, until he forced himself away from it, to join Elise on the couch.

Lieberman lit a cigarette, his sweaty hands staining the paper. "Oh, God, this is crazy! What's happening to me?"

She could taste the desperation in his words, the fear. "What do you see?" She whispered the words.

"You'd believe me, wouldn't you?"

She nodded, because she could not speak.

He inhaled, exhaled slowly, closed his eyes. Slowly he described what he had seen.

Elise looked at the camera. "I don't understand... I'm sorry, but—"

He was not listening. Suddenly he rose and left the room in silence. She was afraid to follow him, but felt she must. While she wrestled with her indecision, he returned with an armful of 8 × 10 sheet film already sealed in lightproof holders. He walked past her, covered himself with the cloth, adjusted the lens, then slipped the film into its place before the ground glass. He cocked the shutter release, then pressed it. Withdrawing the film, he inserted another, swiveled the camera thirty degrees, exposed the film. Elise watched him take three more exposures, before he gathered them up and departed for the developing lab in the cellar.

Lieberman was baffled when the prints did not reveal the world of the lens. He tried more shots, moving the camera about the room, to the balcony, different rooms. More exposures, but the same results. There was no way to prove to her what he saw. Twice he had seen a shape moving across the oily sea—an ill-defined *thing* that raised the hackles on the back of his neck. If only he could pin it down, *photograph* it.

Experimenting through the long hours of evening, he inspected his other cameras, all the antique collection pieces. But there was nothing odd within them. Only the Deardorf peered into madness, as if it were the only window into nightmare—

—where great green oceans of Jurassic-like forests lay shimmering. Corridors cut through giant ferns and ginkgos—paths worn smooth by light-years of reptilian traffic. Tall towers of carved milk glass rose above the swampy lowlands, their shapes suggesting the interlocking complexity of oriental puzzle boxes. Things moving past the lens, so close as to be a blur or so distant as to be only a speck. But within the green shadows he saw them: hunched, long-legged things with burning eyes and sawtooth mouths. Small grasping forelimbs carrying what could only be tools or weapons. Out of nightmare, these saurian things appeared, working the gem-cut cities and primitive screaming forests.

"It must be the camera," he said over breakfast with Elise. Sunlight streamed through bottle-glass windows. Bacon crackled in a cast-iron pan. "There's something about the

Deardorf..."

"And you," she said. "Maybe you. Your... eyes."

"I've thought of that, too. But *how*?"

"Maybe we should call NIH?" she asked as she poured more coffee.

"No, not yet. I don't want them prying. No proof yet. If there were only some way to get a picture of that place. Elise, you should see it! What prints I could make!"

"You're way behind in your work, Frederick. The commissions by the Canadian Embassy are already paid for. Biochemcorp wants the proofs from the—"

"They'll have to wait." He cut her off abruptly, consumed as he was with his own thoughts, not aware that he was hurting her.

And they did wait. Weeks were wasted as Lieberman carried the Deardorf about the city, peering into the other world from every possible vantage point. He became familiar with it, but could do little else. It was his private vision, and he could share it with no audience.

In the evenings he sat alone in the den watching the camera, which sat on long legs like a great one-eyed insect. The servos hummed inside his head with each glance, reminding him each time that perhaps it was *he* that was the bridge between the worlds. Or perhaps a singular combination of the lens and his prosthetics. Thoughts of it obsessed him, so fascinated was he by that place where reptiles carried the twin-edged blade of intelligence, where man remained a wide-eyed tarsier thing. His time and his creative energies were sapped by the mystery, and part of him wanted to give it up, to return to his past life. How much easier would it be to attribute the other place to imagination, to consign it to that world where all men indulge their private fantasies. But as he lay in the darkness, when the house was silent save the breathing sleep of Elise beside him, the visions through the lens would haunt him, call to him like sirens, would not leave him even in his dreams.

The days melted into weeks, becoming a meaningless smear of time. Elise managed the affairs of Image Design, while he attempted new routes toward a solution. He consulted libraries, wading through works of physics, meta- and otherwise, optics, electronics. Nowhere was there a key. Nothing.

When he attempted his old work, he felt cut adrift and lifeless. There was no longer magic in his work; the trademarks of his art faded into pale phantoms of earlier genius. The cameras had become cold, alien things in his hands, which groped about them unsteady, unsure. Color and imagination were lost within him, even in his industrial work, where now he produced only studied clichés, crude pastiches of earlier triumphs. His critics and his clients sensed the difference in him, although they could not articulate any particular problem.

But they felt it just the same. Something was wrong with Frederick Lieberman.

And he knew it himself, which made it worse. It was an agonizing thing for an artist to feel that he could no longer create. In one respect, though, Lieberman's pain was more localized, more defined, than with others. In most cases, they wake up one morning and find that the spark is gone, the Muse has moved on to touch another, leaving them alone with their thoughts. At least Lieberman *knew* where the blackness lay: in the corner of the den on three legs, one eye mocking him.

Finally, he gave himself to Elise, and she absorbed his pain and his words, trying to understand him, to love him. She convinced him to return to NIH so that the doctors might help him. They had discussed it into the quiet darkness of many nights, until, exhausted, Lieberman gave in.

She drove him to the Bethesda complex, where they questioned him, tested him, monitored his body responses, telemetered his cyborg parts. Then they questioned him again, disassembled him, reassembled, retested, and then all over again. His pain, whereas it had only been psychological before, became physical as well. Old wounds were reopened and the demons entombed there were loosed again.

When it was over, completely over, she came to see him in his white room.

"Frederick, I love you," she began, ready to slip quietly into the speech she had prepared on the drive up from the city.

"Love isn't enough now," he said, looking away from her, focusing on a nondescript spot on the nondescript far wall. His skull hummed to itself.

"Don't say that," she said.

"Didn't they tell you what they think? The 'doctors,' I mean."

She shook her head, forcing herself to look at the man who had once been so confident, arrogant, in his creating. "No, I haven't talked to anybody. I came right up here."

"They don't believe me, Elise. They've taken the Deardorf apart and put it back together. Did the same with me. Built mockups of my eyes, hooked them to the camera. Nothing. There's nothing there."

"When they called, they said you could come home now."

"Home? What for? There's nothing left for me there." He picked up a newsfax from the bedstand. "Did you see McCauley's column? 'The Lost Art of Lieberman' he calls it. Shit! How the hell did those cretins find out about this!"

"Frederick, you've got to forget all this. Start new things again. I can't keep things going forever. Image needs you. *I* need you."

"Don't you understand what it's like to see something, to *know* that it's there, and not be able to touch it? There's a whole world of new material. A *world*, Elise! And I can't make it real."

"They said you can come home now."

"You're not listening to me."

"I can listen better at home."

"All right. Tell them I'm ready."

But he was not ready.

Elise brought him home and he retreated to the false womb of his office and den. The walls surrounded him in a tasteful blend of bookcases and paneling where his finest prints were hung in chrome frames and nonglare glass. Rows of reference works stared at him; the names on the spines glowed iridescently—Feininger, Haas, Porter, Cosindas, Avedon. On the opposite wall stood smoked Plexiglas cabinets, their shelves holding cameras of past ages. Lieberman looked at them, their lenses staring like the eyes of caged cyclopean beasts. The closed door was covered by a giant self-portrait: curly black hair, backlit to effect an aura of brilliance, high forehead, bright eyes that were also dark obsidian wells, a wry smile twisted slightly to the left of the thin face. Lieberman stepped back from the sneering image as its eyes followed him. He looked away from it, then back again. Again the obscene hum of the servos. He rubbed his temples, squeezed shut his eyes, to banish the sound. The print watched, smiled broadly as the lips parted and formed silent laughter.

Lieberman looked at it, ran to the door, and ripped the matted portrait down from its architectural-pin moorings, splitting it down the middle with rough motions. The paper groaned as he destroyed it, but Lieberman was not appeased. Turning, he was captured by the chrome-frame prints. Near the upper left corner was his first Best of Show—a wide-angle closeup of an American Indian. Shot with UV film and printed on Kolorlith, the creased face was staring at him.

"You stole my soul," it said to him.

"No!" He dropped the ripped self-portrait, backed against the bookcases.

Another print, a multi-image of a child's face locked within a cut diamond, moved and spoke: "It's cold here. Where you left me."

Below it, a print of Elise. She stood naked in knee-deep water while infrared highlighted beads of moisture upon her perfect skin. She leaned forward, out of the picture, called out to him, "The light, Frederick. The light is dying, and something... is killing me."

Now the entire gallery was dissolving, moving, changing into grotesque parodies of itself. Their

voices, murmuring, rose up like the crash of surf on a midnight beach. Their words a roaring susurration, cicada cries which he could not understand. But he could feel the mocking tones of hate, inflections of disgust.

Staggering, he reached his desk and his hand fell upon a marble paperweight. It was a platinum medallion from the New York School of Visual Arts. The weight in his hand gave him a sense of power, strength; he hurled it across the room, striking a portrait of Elise. Glass shattered into diamond fragments, and the gallery screamed. Amid their wailing, he attacked them, ripping their matted images from the wall, sending them across the room. A chrome-edged missile struck the Plexiglas cabinet, splintering it open, pushing a shelf of old cameras into a heap. One of them, a bellows Graflex, fell to the floor, and Lieberman picked it up, fired it through the bottle-glass panes of the balcony doors. Then he embraced the cabinet, uprooting it, heaving it over in a thunderous crash.

Through the wreckage, he noticed movement. The door had opened and Elise stood framed by its sill. Her agate eyes aflame. Shock and disbelief. "Frederick! Oh, God! Stop it!"

"It's over, Elise. All over! They won't hurt me anymore. They can't—"

"Frederick, what happened to you? I've got to get help." She turned to leave, and he leaped across the room, grabbing her thin wrist.

"No! *You* can't leave. You pushed me into this. You and that goddamned camera! You can't leave now."

"Let go of me! I didn't do anything to hurt you. Please!"

Lieberman looked into her eyes and he adjusted for the extreme closeup, humming. The sound reminded him. She was right; she was not to blame. He rubbed at his temples, feeling for the servos implanted there, just beyond the thin wall of bone. He stood, wavering, thinking, only vaguely aware that she had broken free of him and was running down the stairs to the street level. But that did not matter now; he was concerned with what he had become, what they had made of him.

He walked away from the broken pieces of his life, turned to face the Deardorf in the corner. The lens faced him like the barrel of a weapon, and he thought of the world seen through its glass. The place of steaming mist and reptilian shapes—symbols of man's underside, his evil—stalking where man should have been. Why had he seen it so? If it was not real, then what did it mean? Was it, in its own perverse way, *art*?

The answers lie within, he thought, wiping sweat from his face. They lie twisted and trapped among the microcircuits between his brain and the metal eyes. To know was to untangle that mass of flesh and steel.

Pushing through the broken balcony doors, he stood upon a small platform, felt the filigree of the railing bite into his thighs, his groin. Moonlight scampered across the river's surface;

high-rise lights from the Virginia side punctured the sky, washing out the stars. Servos hummed as he stared out into the night. Lightly he touched hands to his cheeks, felt their clammy coldness. His fingers slipped upward till he reached the gel hemispheres—alien and cold. He ripped them out to reveal the machinery in dark sockets.

Oddly, there was no pain. The nerve endings had been cauterized long ago, his anguish extinguished. Lieberman forced his fingertips between the orbit and the lenses, digging his nails into the brittle alloy shells, touching the tiny harnesses of wire filaments. He pulled delicately at first, like a surgeon, dislodging the hooks and metal anchors in the remaining strips of tiny muscle fiber. Then more violently. Stroboscopic pulses of purple, orange, brilliant yellow flickered at the threshold of his brain, wiping out the sparkling Potomac. Metal fell away from flesh, circuits shorted out, myoelectrics crackled, sizzled. Pain probed beyond his fingers.

A spasm jerked his hands away from empty sockets, and pieces of wire and machine cascaded down his cheeks. The December night was freezing fast, and a cold, cruel wind whipped through his eyeless skull, underlining the darkness there. Lieberman considered the distance between him and the street below. It would be so simple to end it now, to just lean forward, to change the balance point by a few centimeters and feel the cool rush of night before impact, before the end.

Seconds ticked off inside his head as he courted death, but he wavered, now that his fury was spent, knowing that he could not kill himself.

Blindly, wrapped in a darkness that was somehow comforting more than terrifying, he staggered back from the railing, felt his way past broken panes, and into the room. Lieberman felt an odd calm descend upon him. He knew it now: when he had lost his real eyes, he had lost his true artistic vision, and the replacement eyes would never restore that lost personal vision of the world. It mattered little now whether the other place had been real or imagined. Perhaps it was, as the doctors had implied, a construct of a traumatized unconscious.

Lieberman found a chair, amid the room's rubble, groped his way into it. He collapsed, shoulders slumping forward, forehead in his hands. He knew that the unconscious was the crucible where his creations had been forged—a wellspring of desire and fear. It was probably true, then, that his other-mind, that secret mind place, had known from the beginning what he only now accepted.

He had been given back a functional view of the world, and had found that it was not enough. That message had been locked within that piece of German glass, although Lieberman knew that the camera had been only a catalyst, a focal point for his unspoken fears. It was true, just as he had often read, that the Fates are sometimes cruel to those who seek their Muse. But there would be no more machine eyes. If he could not see as an artist, he chose not to see at all.

The night wind whispered through the room and he sat, passing silent time, until he heard

footsteps on the stairs. "In there," he heard Elise's voice.

Footsteps crossing the threshold, muffled by the carpeting. "Frederick... are you all right? I brought Mr. Dillon, from next door. He—"

He heard them coming closer as she spoke, and slowly he lifted his head from his concealing hands, letting the lamplight touch his empty sockets, stained by tears. He heard Elise scream, heard the sound melt into a whimpering cry. He heard his neighbor choke, and mutter a quick *ohmigod!* He heard Elise saying his name over and over.

Mr. Dillon stepped back toward the door, said something about an ambulance, and was gone.

"I'm sorry," said Lieberman, after a silence returned to the room. "I'm sorry it was like this."

"Why, Frederick? Why?"

"Could you love a blind man, Elise?" He dropped his head, suddenly aware of how horrible he must look to her.

"What do you mean?" Her voice was shot through with pain.

"Could you love me if... if I stay like this?"

"I *do* love you." She spoke the words strongly and he felt something spark within his chest. "But *why* like this?"

He reached out in the blackness for her hand, and found it grasping quickly for his own. He drew her close, smelling her hair upon his cheek. "Understanding comes slowly, Elise. I'll explain it all, but not right now. I've just learned it myself."

And she held him close upon her breast, struggling to know this new aspect of his inner self. He would one day tell her that there was no artistic machine but man. And for a man like Frederick Lieberman there were no replaceable parts.

Someday he would tell her this, and she would understand.

But not tonight.

Columbia, Maryland

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