

A GLOW OF CANDLES,

A UNICORN'S EYE

Charles L. Grant

I mentioned the fact that writers need to serve an apprenticeship in order to master their craft. Charles Grant surely did, in one of the hardest and most thankless jobs any writer has ever taken on. His exalted title was Executive Secretary of the Science Fiction Writers of America; but the reality behind-the-hyperbole was that he was the person who did everything the volunteer committee people and officers of SFWA were supposed to do, but didn't. And he learned-as is proven by stories like "A Glow of Candles, A Unicorn's Eye."

There are no gods but those that are muses. You may quote me on that if you are in need of an argument. It's original. One of the few truly original things I have done with my life, in my life, throughout my life, which has been spent in mostly running. Bad grammar that, I suppose. But nevertheless true for the adverb poorly placed.

And how poorly placed have I been.

Not that I am complaining, you understand. I could have, and with cause, some thirty years ago, and for the first thirty-seven I did-though the causes were much more nebulous. But the complaints I have now are of the softer kind, the kind that grows out of loving, and are meant-in loving-not to be heard, not to be taken seriously.

For example, consider my beard. Helena loved it, once she became accustomed to its prickly assaults. But I do not need it anymore. There is no need for the hiding because I have been forgiven my sins-or so it says here on this elegant paper I must carry with me in case the message has been lost-forgiven my

\*Winner, Nebula, for Best Novelette of 1978.

trespasses. But I like the stupid beard now. Its lacing of gray lends a certain dignity to a face that is never the same twice in one week. And it helps me to forget what I am beneath the costumes and the

makeup and the words that are not mine. Yet it's not a forgetting that is demanded by remorse, nor is it a forgetting necessitated by a deep and agonizing secret.

It is a forgetting of years, to keep me from weeping.

Because the secret is out.

Has been, in fact, since the first evening I presented this prologues device not original, but originally apt.

No secret, then.

But I like the beard anyway.

And so did my Helena , whose hair-such hairl-was once so wonderfully long.

Attend then--or so says the script I no longer need to guide me-but before you decide where applause is warranted, be sure that you understand, be sure that you know exactly what you are applauding. We are still, after all, and in the last sight of the law, criminals, you know. I nearly murdered, and she nearly surrendered.

And I think that they will catch up with us at the last. Not because we have escaped and were pardoned. But because we have escaped and have been free.

1

Gordon was alone and friendless ....

Well, not really, but at the time there wasn't much that I wanted more. I tried to be careful, however, not to disrupt the taping session by allowing my reinforced skepticism and growing discomfort to put lines in my face where character should be, and where, I prayed constantly, it would stay before the bottom dropped out of this market, too, and I had to return to so-called regular employment to build up my account. To cover myself then, I placed right palm to right cheek in what I had been taught was an overt display of not-quite-hopeless despair coupled subtly with the proper degree of Shakespearean melancholy, Then, working at not flinching, I lowered my buttocks onto the conveniently flat rock behind me and stared at the river. They called it a river. Actually, it was something less than two hundred meters of recycled water not nearly deep enough to drown a gnat .

. . . his weary but undaunted brain struggling mightily for the miraculous wherewithal to extricate him from his precarious dilemma ....

The subvocal narration buzzing in my left ear so I could follow the cues raised in me first a gagging sensation, then an impulse to swat at a nonexistent fly. I managed to swallow several times without its showing, then shifted my palm to my chin and supported it by resting my elbow on one knee. I could have brought it off. But my concentration slipped. The fact that I was naked, cold, and resignedly anticipating a drenching from the slate-gray clouds massing efficiently overhead goaded me into a mistake. After five minutes of gazing I could not help but frown instead of assuming the attitude of intense

problem-solving on the subconscious level. And when it was done, there was no taking it back. . . and I knew it without anyone's prompting.

Unfortunately, no one bothered to turn off the tiger.

I heard it, a grumbling that should have come from the clouds. I rose quickly as it stalked into view, a creature so magnificent in the terror that it instilled that I could not take my eyes from its pelt, its face, the waterlike rippling of its muscles at shoulder and haunch.

A dark-feathered bird swept in front of it, but its gaze did not leave me for even the length of a blink.

Slowly, I backed toward the river, crouched, my fingers hooked into pitiful imitations of claws. Everything inside me from heart to stomach had suddenly become weightless and was floating toward my throat, and I felt a curious giddiness that split the air into fluttering dark spots before coalescing into stripes, massive paws, and disdainful curled lips exposing sharp white death.

It should have leaped when it reached the boulder I had been sitting on. And it did. And despite the training, the quiet talks, the assurances of my continuing good health . . . despite it all, I screamed.

The tiger struck me full on the chest, its front paws grabbing for a hold, its rear claws reaching to disembowel. I fell as I used the creature's momentum to spin us around, dropping off the edge of the low bank and into the water. There were three rows of fire across my ribs, six more on my shoulder blades, but I held the tiger under, a minute, more, until at last it quieted and I thrust it away from me and staggered back to land. The entire sequence could not have lasted more than three minutes from start to finish, but I felt as though a dozen years had been suddenly added to my life. What there was of it.

I fell, gasping, spitting out water, then rolled onto my back and stared at my hands. They were bloody, and I sat up abruptly, looking around wildly for someone to patch me.

This was not supposed to happen.

I was to be strong, clever, luring the beast to its drowning... but I was not supposed to be clawed.

Immediately, a white-coated tech raced out from behind me and waded into the water with two assistants, the better to lug the simulacrum back to the shop for another repair job and, I imagined, another shot at another sucker like me. A fourth man, his shirt and trousers rumpled and soiled, wandered over to me and slapped in quick succession antiseptic and medpatches onto my injuries. I smiled at him. He scowled. I knew what was bothering him. If I couldn't be cajoled into doing it again, he would have to do some pretty fancy editing to keep the blood from showing. I think he expected me to feel sorry for him. As though it were my fault.

And when he was done, with not a word of condolence, or, even of encouragement, I moved stiffly back to my rock and sat, waiting with dripping hair while those clouds waited to soak me until, finally, the artfully gnarled bole of a beautiful oak on the opposite bank split open with a zipperlike tear, and the director stepped out.

"Great," I muttered, and dropped my hands into my lap.

The director paused for a moment as if reorienting him- .. self, sighed, and retrieved a powered

megaphone from the ' rushes on the riverbank. He sniffed, looked everywhere but at me, and yanked a crimson beret down hard over an impossibly battered left ear. '

"You're Gordon Anderson, right?" The voice should have " been godlike, undei the circumstances. Unfortunately, it

wasn't. It squeaked. i

I nodded.

"You okay?"

Bless you, I thought sourly, and nodded. .

"Shouldn't have done that."

I didn't know whether he meant me or the tiger.

"Gordon Anderson," he said again, as if tasting it for some hint of its flavor, or for some trace of its poison.

He stared at the sky, sighed once more, and then I aealized I was expected to stand up. That I refused to do. The last . time I was naked and standing, my female costar had nearly

strangled laughing. It had almost cost me the job, but she had felt sorry for me and blamed it on her lunch.

Besides, those patches weren't new. The antiseptic was weak and I was hurting, badly.

Meanwhile, the squeaking continued.

"Sorry about the animal, but you're supposed to be experienced at this sort of thing, Anderson. That's what they told me at casting. You're supposed to be experienced. A stage actor, right? You're supposed to know about these things,Anderson , if I know anything about that sort of... living, Am I getting through to you, Anderson? You're supposed to know!"

I could think of little more to do at the moment but nod again. My fingers kept returning to the patches, touching, pressing, wondering how I was supposed to handle the flood sequence without ripping open the bandages and bleeding to death. I would see the Diagmed people afterward, of course, but I had a feeling they could do nothing for me. The healing would be speeded up, but there probably would be scars. And why not?

"You're supposed to be brave, yet frightened,Anderson ," the voice piped on, as though my screams hadn't been real enough. "Fearless, yet hinting at grave doubts as to your next plan of action. There is a flood coming,Anderson , a flood! Do you have any idea what that means?"

"I'll drown," I said, just loud enough for him to misunderstand.

"I don't think you're right for this job,Anderson , to tell you the truth," the director said after a carefully measured dozen beats of pacing, and waiting for word that the tiger was all right. "You . . . you are required, you see, to set an example, the perfect example, for the audience-in case you've forgotten.

You must radiate courage, determination, and just a drop of apprehension. You have trials yet to come, remember, trials that you cannot possibly imagine. And these trials that you cannot possibly imagine are filling you with challenge and trepidation. And, I might add, those children out there who are watching will want to be with you! They have to understand not only the vicissitudes of -life, but also their symbolic representations in your journey. If they don't, they're only going to get nightmares. Do you follow me, Anderson? I say, do you follow me?"

Whither thou directeth, midget, I thought, then quickly nodded and raised my hands in a virtuoso combination

display of supplication (for the continuance of the job), ,! surrender (to the director's artistic authority), and defiance (for the sole benefit of the tapeman who was still running his :J idiotic machine).

The director grinned.

I clamped my hands firmly on my knees and straightened  
to my full sitting height. '!

"That's fine,Anderson . I knew we would be able to  
communicate once you got to know me a little better. Now, u  
we have about thirty minutes or so before the flood. Why i  
don't you take a short break and prepare yourself? We can .  
run through the close-ups later on, when the flood goes  
down. Is that all right with you?" ;1

"Whatever you say, boss," I said. And after he had tramped off somewhere to commune with whatever he communed with to make these tapes, I slid off the rock to the carefully trimmed grass, crossed my legs, and folded my hands over my stomach. After a doubtful glance at the sky, I closed my eyes, wrinkled my brow in practiced concentration, and fell ^' asleep.

When I dreamed, it was of a small glass unicorn surrounded by low-burning candles.

The flood came precisely on cue-the director wouldn't  
have had it otherwise-but the finely woven strands of  
safety line that should have prevented me from being swept  
away into the next sound stage snapped under the pressure.  
Luckily, I was out of position and managed to grab on to the

director's oak, where they found me tightly gripping the trunk when the waters subsided. When I opened my eyes and they realized I was far more frightened than injured, they let me be. Except for the director, who slapped me on the back, patted me slyly on the left cheek (both of them), and strode bellowing off toward the setting of the next scene-the earthquake. \_

Slowly, testing one limb at a time, I unwrapped myself from the plastic tree and snatched at the robe one of the crewmen held out for me. After a moment's hard glare at the water and the sky, I stumbled off to the dressing room we all used in common. There was no one inside the long, narrow building when I arrived, and for that one small favor I was eternally grateful. I dried myself as best I could with my hands refusing to close, my arms disobeying the commands

from my muddled brain, then I sat in front of my mirror and watched a single drop of water fall from my chin.

I stared at my reflection. Stared at the array of small and large jars, long and short tubes, hairpieces and skin dyes, falseflesh and false eyes. Stared at them all until they blurred into a parody of a rainbow; stared, grunted, and swung my fist into their midst, smashing until all were scattered on the floor.

Stared at the mirror, at the reflection, at the high creased forehead and brown eyes and slightly hooked nose and slightly soft chin. My fist came up to my shoulder. Trembled. I wanted to split open my knuckles on that face in the mirror, and drive cracks through the world that existed behind my back.

But at the moment-and only at the moment-it was all the world I had, and my hand dropped slowly to the table, where it rested on a ragged bit of cloth I used out of habit to wipe off my face.

In the beginning the idea had been a tempting one. Begun by the British and expanded by the Americans, the tapes were the foundation of a dream-induced system through which young people would hopefully be matured without actually suffering through the birth pangs of adolescence. Hospital wards with soft colors, nurses with kind faces, and for two hours and twenty minutes every other day the young were wired and hooked and taped to a machine, which I and others like me, those actors with no place to go, inhabited. We -wrestled with tigers, endured floods, endured women and men and disasters personal. It was, as the narration stressed again and again and again-who knows how often? -all very symbolic, and all very real.

Watch! the voice ordered.

Take care, the voice cautioned.

Watch, and take care, and listen, and apply . . . apply... apply . . . listen . . . apply...

A debriefing, then, which lasted for something like an hour. More, if you were new to growing

without aging. Less, if you'd been in the system for a year or more.

The first children/adults would not be through the entire program for, the director once told me, at least another ten months. But, if you listened to him carefully and believed his raving, things were moving along just splendidly.

I could see it without much prompting.

Eleven-year-olds with graying hair and wrinkles and a walk that bordered on the burlesque of infirmity.

A girl twelve with the mind of a woman.

A boy ten with the rebellion sponged-exorcised out of him, exorcised and leaving him without dreams of how it had been when he had been ...but he never had been ...young.

It was, admittedly, exciting. And the nightmares I had about the possible consequences were only just that. So I rationalized whenever I went to the studio. After all, frankly, it was a job. An actor's job. Just about the only one left.

I had been in Lofrisco, wandering about that coast-long cityplex, when Vivian-my-agent called me and brought me back to Philayork. It was the break, she told me confidently the chance for exposure, and the cash, that I needed.

"Listen, Gordy," she'd said, "these kids will know you for the rest of their lives! Not by name, but they'll recognize your face! They'll want to see you on stage-if that's what you're still after--on the comunit channels, the cinema bowls. You'll have it made, you idiot. You can't pass this up."

And, to be honest, I hadn't. But neither had I forgotten the near-empty houses I had played to when I had managed to wheedle permission to leave those joyhall holovid arenas and cinema bowls.

Near empty.

Partially full.

There had been five in which I was an understudy. I didn't much care. It was live, actors and audience, and I drifted from one theater to another waiting for the chance to get in on the action. But they all folded in less than a month, the audiences deserting them long before the last curtain. Drifting in, stalking out, curious more than anything, and no one bothered to wait for the players who slunk from their failures from unlocked stage doors. Several times I tried to ask someone just why he was leaving, but never got an answer that cured the question.

Finally, when I cornered one of the directors and demanded to know why her play was a failure, she only snapped an arm toward the gap that was the stage and shrugged. "I guess we're running out of gimmicks. We need a new one. I don't know. The way things are going, I don't really care."

The Storm's Eye had three dozen sets, and auditorium

seats that slowly tilted back to focus audience attention on a holovid simulation of the typhoon

threatening the actors on stage.

Great World Yearning had catapults and springboards, trapezes, and a 360-degree stage.

Blessing had four orchestras, three tenors, waterfalls, ceilingatorms, a marching band, rehearsals for the audience's instrument parts, and a prominent reviewer who insisted on getting every name in the theater for his comprehensive critique.

Take This Crown had seventy-nine speaking parts and four burnings at the stake.

Where Hath God Raged had a planetarium, an espenarrator, and a colonist from the Moon.

Three playwright/producers had created them all. And when the last one gave up hope, I took the slip marking the deposit to my account and wandered from theater to theater. Something, I knew, had died in both artist and observer. Then, taking the easy way out, I managed to locate and assault with tears and fists all three of the creators one by one. All in darkness, I sought out those so-called playwrights, and after each attack I fled until my lungs burned me to a halt.

My justification at the time was simple: They were murderers, of something I could not yet understand. They had been part of a conspiracy to kill off words.

I wandered, waiting to be caught for my crime, listening for the accusing scream of a WatchDog swooping angrily beneath the Walkways, netting me, lifting me, locking me away.

I had to have been mad to have done it. But there were no still and small voices directing my attacks, no sudden blind fury that drove me to the call of insanity that guided my hand, only those questions, all beginning with why? and the knowledge that the playwrights had been midwives to disaster, had birthed disasters before, and were part and parcel of what I knew was the dying of a dying art.

Yet there was no feeling of catharsis.

I had done it.

Nothing more.

So I sat in front of the dressing-room mirror and thought of the tiger and its claws, and of the tiny director who was forcing me unknowingly to remember.

It was a play within a play within a play within a dream, -

Like a beautiful thing I had seen once, and from which all I could remember was a tiny, shattered, fragile glass unicorn.

I pushed away from the table and dressed as best I could with the patches pulling at my shoulders and ribs. My fingers fumbled as I snapped my shirt closed. My thighs were elastic as I slipped on my boots. Sooner or later I would have to tell someone what I had done. There had been nothing on the news and, though I wondered, I kept myself silent.

But not for long.           ra



Helena.

A studio flyer took me to the entrance of my Keyloft and, once inside the lobby, I sagged against the liftube frame and ~' held on. Looking down. Looking up. Rising free, falling free. No need to worry, Gordon, old son, the magic of science will give you faith.

2

I had been born, raised, and eventually cast willingly adrift in Thilayork, the largest of the East Coast cityplexes. My father was the owner/manager of a joyhall which, in addition to the usual game rooms, gaming rooms, and stunt rooms, had a small cinema arena. None of the major features played there, but the minor ones were nevertheless sufficient to lure me from spools and tapes, to spend days and hours drifting through the stories that holoed around me. It wasn't the technics that ensnared me, enraptured me, but the men and women who portrayed the characters, and the men and women who paid their small admissions to eavesdrop on the plots\_ -

("Marts, over here, hurry! Listen to what this guy is saying about the Count." "You listen, Will, I'm trying to find out what happened to the Colonel. We'll meet by theGrand Canyon when I'm done,")

They all knew it was sham and that they could if they wished put their hands through heads and cannon fire and the rings of Saturn or the domes on the Moon. But naturally they wouldn't. They listened, compared notes, reconstructed stories, and returned for what they had missed.

By the time I was in University, I succumbed to a tempts-

tion, which was easy enough since I knew most of the plots by rote. I stole time here, sleep there, and several times managed to last through nearly three quarters of a show before anyone realized I wasn't part of the action. The idea that I could be something and someone I wasn't intrigued me. I did research, spent time in regular theaters in the less-visited parts of the city, and changed my emphasis in University without, telling my father. When he did find out, and heard my dreams, one of us lost, and I left.

Studied. Learned.

Discovered agents and sold myself to Vivian. Who laughed at my studies. ("My God, Gordy, nobody needs a script on the stage anymore; who told you you needed to learn how to memorize?") She took me quite literally in hand and showed me what show business was, outside of the school.

For eighteen years, then, I managed a fairly steady and obviously unspectacular living playing that man over there in the corner talking to the beautiful blonde, and that wounded trooper crawling through the Martian sandstorm, and that body, and that face, and . . . and. Until, between takes, I found myself wandering back into theaters that had stages and audiences and waterfalls and . . . and...

There's nothing to say that would stand alone as a reason. I loved it, that's all. Loved it, and hated it, because it didn't take long for me to see that something was wrong. Lethally wrong.

"You're crazy, you know that, Gordon."

"Just get me the jobs, Viv, that's all I ask."

"It takes a special kind of training. I've told you it's not like learning lines from a holovid script!"

"I'll learn."

"But, Gordon, you'll have to improvise! That's all the whole thing is, except for the effects. You're given an outline and you bluff your way through it. It takes years to learn it right."

"I've done it before, you know that. What's the big fuss? You'll get your percentage."

"You don't get it, do you?"

"I'll learn. That's all there is to it."

"You don't get it at all."

There was a wave of nostalgia that had, for the briefest of lightning-lit moments, the old-style theaters rejuvenated, rejoicing, rehiring actors and producers and directors and

such. Lord, how we tried. But the wave flattened, sad by the time I was making those dream-tapes for children, nothing was left but the must, the dust, and the drifting in and out.

3

I went into my home: living room, bedroom, alcoves for lav and ovenwall. All in shades of black and white.

I ate, not tasting, and stared at the Keylofts across the street. I watched a news summary and discovered the playwrights I had attacked were recovering. Euphemisms abounded, but the message was the same: person or persons unknown.

God, I wished that hadn't been so bloody damned true.

And fifteen minutes later, Philip and Helena came for a visit and I fed them their eager rations of stories about my taping day. All the time watching Helena, as though Philip were only a ghost along for

the ride.

"He sounds like an insect I worked for once," Philip said of the director. Philip was fifteen years older than my own thirty-seven (Helena was four years younger). He enjoyed reminiscing about the, as he called it, flesh-and-blood theater he had been in, but it was a dream that he lived. Helena told me he had been a minor bit player who seldom had lines and was lucky to find two weeks' work in fifty. I don't know why, perhaps because of Helena, but he liked me. "An insect, Gordon. Stamp him out. You won't miss him. I promise you."

"Oh, don't be a fool," Helena muttered. "He has to finish the contract." She was sitting cross-legged in the center of the floor, swirling a snifter half full of a brandy I had hoped to save for another, more special, occasion. Not that just being able to look at her wasn't special—and the moment I thought that was the first time I realized that I'd fallen in love. "Gordy, you can't pass up that money, you know. I mean, that's as far as it goes. No money, no food. How much simpler can it get?"

Philip, who was portly and conscientiously pompous, nodded and retrenched, scratching at his hairless scalp. "She's right, you know. There's no sense ranting about artistic integrity when you have to provide bread for the table."

"It isn't fair," I mumbled.

calming deep breath and began talking. Explaining. Describing. Telling her everything and knowing that if she wanted to, she could run out to the Blues and probably collect a reward. The police were always giving out rewards. It was part of the system of mutual cooperation and protection. I stopped my confession only once, when her hands left my shoulder. But I finished. And when I was done, everything that had been keeping me upright deserted me. I sagged. She caught me and led me into the bedroom. And this time there was a catharsis of a sort. The weight of the attempted murders was, not lifted, but lessened. And I'm ashamed to admit that I was doubly relieved that she had not run to the Blues, for the reward.

And when we lay on the bed, each to a side, and did not touch or attempt to peel off our clothes, I knew she did not pity me, but loved me instead.

"I can't believe they're not really dead," I said into the darkness when the silence grew too long for me to accept. "But from the report I heard—and would you believe it was only just before you came here?—from what I heard, none of them will be the same when they recover. The worst part is: now that I've told you I don't feel guilty anymore. And that's got to be wrong! I wonder if I should stick around until I'm caught. I'm bound to be, you know. One of them must have seen something. And if my name and picture go out through the network, there's no place I can hide. Not for long, anyway,"

But Gordy, it's been nearly two weeks. If the police knew something, they'd be busting already."

I smiled. Grinned. Shook my head even though I knew she couldn't see it. "What's their hurry? I haven't tried to leave the country."

"Maybe . . . maybe you were lucky. Maybe they didn't know who it was, didn't recognize you, I mean."

I rolled over onto my side, one arm up against my cheek. I tried to see her, but couldn't. But I saw her anyway. "I keep telling myself that. It's a hope, I guess. I wish I knew."

"Gordy?"

"I'm awake."

"Are you wondering if I hate you for what you did? I mean, I did a show for one of them a year or so ago."

"A little, I think."

"Well, it's dumb, but I don't. I'm a bit frightened, though." "I know that one well enough, don't I? Two weeks, and I still can't figure out why I did it."

"You were angry. Furious. That's obvious enough."

"Sure, but why? It wasn't the first time I was ever in a flop." I worked at a laugh, then, to take the sting out. "When you think about it, I guess, they're all flops, aren't they?"

"Of course they are. You just don't know why."

"Gordy, I want to help you."

"Escape?"

"No. I want to find out what's going wrong. I don't want it to happen. I...I have some scripts in my loft. I keep them under the bed, and when I get too depressed I read them."

"Scripts I don't need, believe me."

"No, not those kind. I mean real play scripts. Shakespeare, Williams, Miller, Chekhov . . . people like that. I'll bet I have more than two dozen of them. I got them . . . well, let's say they just gravitated into my gorgeous little fingers when I was visiting friends . . . places."

"God, Helena, you're a crook!"

"Look who's talking. It's funny, Gordy, but I'll bet I know almost every line of them by heart. It ifust have been nice, not to have to make up things as you went along. It's all down there, just like your cinema things. 'When beggars die there are no comets seen.' You sure can't improvise something like that, can you?"

"Who said that?"

"I don't know. Miller, maybe. I don't remember."

"You should."

"Why? Who cares besides you and me?"

"What about the guy who wrote it?"

I drifted back and forth from a sleep filled with candles and unicorns, and when I asked Helena about it, she told me the scene was from something about a hundred and seventy years old. She quoted me a long passage from the end of the play, about worlds lit by lightning and change and things like that. I'm no history buff, so I can't say how appropriate that might have been to the time it appeared, but I know about lightning now. And when I tried to explain it to her, all I could do was choke and tell her never mind.

\*        \*

Finally, just before dawn took the black from the ocean outside the plex, I cupped and pillowed my hands behind my head and whistled softly a song I once knew. It would have been nice if it had been a lullaby my father used to sing. Would have been. But it wasn't.

"Helena, there's one thing I know, now."

"What? And don't you ever get tired?"

"No, not often. And what I know is: we're dying. You and me and Philip and the rest of the' whole stupid stable. Now that's a good word: stable. We're horses, Helena, in a motorcar world. One by one they're shooting us down. These tapes I'm making, they're supposed to be helping kids grow up. And what do I do? Me, the hero who survives floods and earthquakes and invasions of god-awful monsters? just like a kid I lash out and hit someone just because I don't get it. I almost killed those guys, Helena. And they'll come for me. Someday."

A rustling. The bedclothes. Helena had finally given up and slipped in between the sheets. "Then we'll have to escape. It's as simple as that."

"We?"

"Oh, come on, Gordy! Do you think I'm going to let you have all the fun?"

This time the laughter was real, delightfully so, and I stretched out, gathered her to me, and we rocked, like children, until the spasms had passed and we were sober again.

"Look," I said, "there's no sense in my making some big dramatic escape until, and unless, the Blues come for me. It'll be easy to hide in a plex this big, right? And I want to finish the contract so I can get a job somewhere else if I have to. I don't need that blot on my work record, not now. And I have to find something else out. Like you said, sort of: I want to rate a comet. Even a small one. And to do it, I'll have to learn everything I can about why we're... dying."

"I know the answer already."

"Sure."

"The public doesn't like us anymore. It took a few thousand years, but they've finally decided they don't want us to live."

"No," I said, hovering close to an answer, yet not close enough to know what I was seeing. "No, there's something more. And before I start running, I want to know what."

"Then the first thing you're going to have to do is not to be so solemn. If we're going to hunt for this thing of yours, we'd better do it smiling."

„Why?"

"Oh, go to sleep, Gordon. You're no fun anymore."

Two days later a pamphlet came, announcing the limited engagement of a series of original material to be performed by players from one of the lunar domes. I had seen them before. I needed to see them again, knowing without knowing that they held the key. Vivian got me the tickets, and I repaid her by showing that simple director just how good an actor I could be. He loved me. I loved me. And, thankfully, I still wasn't picked up by a WatchDog patrol. I still jumped at shadows, still looked over my shoulder, but I was beginning to believe that I would always remain free. Or so I tried telling myself each night before sleeping.

The second day after the lunar pamphlet came, I was stopped in the Keyloft lobby by my landlord, who told me there was a friend of mine waiting upstairs.

"He didn't have a latch, Mr. Anderson," he said, "but I seen him around here a lot of times so I figured you wouldn't mind that I tubed up and let him in."

I nodded thoughtfully, thanked him for his kindness, and spent most of the time in the liftube wondering if maybe it had been a Blue plant, and my dear old landlord would be collecting that reward.

But it wasn't.

It was Philip.

He was just signing off the phone when I came in, and as fast as I stepped around the couch to see who he was talking to, he shifted his bulk until the screen stacked into darkness.

"What?" I said, perching on the couch's arm.

Philip spread his arms in an attitude of peace-making. I didn't believe it for a minute. Without a single direct word, I had taken Helena from him, and had made him admit twice that he was living a deadly romantic lie. The friendship we had had was buried. Deep.

"Come on, Phil, I'm hungry, and then I have some studying to do for tomorrow." Half true. After

eating, I was going to continue reading some of the scripts Helena had. let me borrow.

"All right, then," he said, still standing by the vione. "I've

come to inform you that I overheard something this morning that I believe you would be interested in. In return, I expect a favor."

"I don't get it," I said. "You want to make some kind of deal?"

He nodded.

"For what? A lousy favor? What do you need, money? A place to stay?"

"Just wait a moment, Gordon, and you'll find out everything. I am, as you well know, currently unemployed. According to procedure, just being part of Vivian's client menagerie marked me employed. When she unceremoniously, and without real cause, dumped me, I had to gain a measure of strength and make myself known to the nearest Blue Station Local to . . . to sign up for the complete dole." His hands fluttered, clapping at his stomach, grabbing at the baggy trousers he hadn't bothered to tuck into his boots. He was all in green today, his lucky color.

"I'm sorry, Phil."

His grin was short-lived and insincere. "I'm sure you are. But that's not the point, is it? While I was there I overheard a couple of the Locals-one was a Dog pilot, I think-talking about a series of criminal attacks down in the old district. Where you hang out, Gordon. I imagine you've heard about them."

I nodded, slowly, my face a masterpiece of serenity.

"Well, one of them was a regular patron of..." He rolled his eyes in an effort to display to me how distasteful his words were. To him. Not for me. "He enjoyed spending many off-duty hours in a joyhall." The words came in a rush, as if acidic on his tongue. "Arena stuff. You know what I mean. The sagas and things that you are always blathering about."

"Phil," I said, rising and heading for the ovenwall, "if you're going to be snide, just show yourself out, okay? I don't need that kind of aggravation today."

"I'm sorry," he said, standing behind me as I selected my last-meal, and pointedly made the selection for one. When I turned around, he shrugged. "The Local was saying that he was sure that one of the actors fit the description of the man-they think those things were done by one man, you see-of the man who did them. Of course, I couldn't hear what the man looked like."

He stopped. I waited.

"I thought you might like to know."

"Oh? What for?"

"Well, really, Gordon, you holo folk stick together like I don't know what. I thought you might like to put out the word to your friends, have them watch their backs. So to speak."

I kept my hands in my pockets-clenched, to keep them from trembling. I nodded, hoping to appear contrite and grateful simultaneously, and led him toward the door.

"The favor?"

"What favor?" I said. "Oh. Well, sure. What is it?"

He took my arm at the elbow, his fat hand tight, the fingers pinching. "Please, talk to Vivian, won't you? I can't stand having to beg for a meal every day. I mean-really, Gordon, it's so demeaning, if you know what I mean."

"Philip, Vivian could get you a dozen parts tomorrow if you would only let her. But you won't. And until you do, there's nothing I can do, either."

He stepped back as if I had slapped him. Then, a scowl as dark as midnight crowding his face, he shouldered by me into the corridor outside the loft. He took a step toward the lift tube, looked back over his shoulder, and smiled.

"You'd force me to do that, wouldn't you?"

"Phil, I'm not forcing you to do a thing. You want me to ask Vivian to let you back, you'll have to compromise. That, my friend, is all there is to it."

"I'm sorry for you, then," he said, and left.

I waited for him to make a reappearance-waited, then hurried back into the loft and made a careful search to see if he had taken anything, disturbed anything. The only evidence he'd been there, however, was the pamphlet. It had been picked up from my couch, obviously read, and tossed onto the floor. I retrieved it, folded it into quarters, and stuffed it

into my pocket. It had on it the date Vivian had gotten me, the tickets, and the man I was to see to pick them up.

I felt sorry for Philip and his nonsense ways, but had more important things to worry about at the time. I ate rapidly, watched the news for indications of impending arrests, then called Helena and we spent the rest of the night tying up the vines, reading random scenes from the scripts she had lent me. I would read a line and try to stump her for the next. I, seldom won, but what was more important: I was learning

them myself, and moving about the room grandly, until she snapped once that I kept disappearing from the vines' range.

It was, without a doubt or a worry, the single best way to pass the time-short of actually having her in my arms, of course.

That, I promised her a dozen times during the night, would come later. And often.

And all the time, that hovering I had felt drew more steady, closer, and the answering light more clear.



At last, a week later, I stood in front of the theater in the park. It was a low dome, black and silver and sprouting several cowl-like entrances through which people were already filing. A mosaic apron in blue, gold, and white led up to the dome, and from its center rose a tall post with four huge spotlights. Their soft glare was somewhat reassuring, but it turned the surrounding foliage into a dense black wall.

"Gordon!"

My name was like a slap across the back of my head. I stiffened, not knowing whether to run or surrender, then turned. It was Helena who stepped out of the shadows. Lithe, she looked uncommonly lovely in a plain gray tunic and trousers. Her auburn hair was almost like a veil. I held out my hands and she grasped them, pulled me close, and we kissed, once, lightly, forever.

Then I told her about Philip's visit, and she shattered her loveliness with a vicious scowl. "Relax," I said, rubbing at her arm. "The most he can do is swear a lot."

The floodlights dimmed twice.

"Time, great hunter," she said. "No more stalling."

There were dozens of gold guidelights hovering at the head of each aisle. I held up my tickets and one of them brightened and led us to our seats, seats in an auditorium that radiated back from a traditional stage. I mentally blessed poor Vivian's efforts, crossed my legs, and held Helena's hand. Waiting. Staring at the proscenium, which was studded with holovid representations of the solar system, each planet revolving in truncated orbit, the moon in its center, dotted with blue specks that marked the colonists' domes. I was

impressed, and depressed. I was cold, unusually so, and I could not figure out just why this was so.

I tried concentrating on the curtains, on the flecks of, ' crimson that flashed whenever a guidelight flitted too close;:

I tried listening to the audience around me, its muffled; laughter, gossip, scoldings, coughing.

Something.

Something. v

I knew it was there, but when I tried to drive it away so I~ could enjoy the show, it balked as if yanking on my arm to j tell me something far more important.

Music, then, and I was distracted.

And three quarters of the way through the first act, it all ~fell into place, solidly, painfully, so that with

some mum

bled :I

. excuse to Helena, I crept up the aisle and hurried:: outside.

Walked. Paced, rather, in a large circle around the lightpost. i There was no doubt that the performance was something I would never forget-if novelties are things from which memories are spun. The company was expert, the same I had seen a

'those long months ago, and this particular oarkdome had a been reconstructed to approximate and give semblance to the absence of gravity the players' were accustomed to on -their own home satellite.

It was, in one dark sense, beautiful.

On the stage they were in all manner of costume. Free. Floating. Swimming. A free-form exercise complete with sets and speeches. The women were pale snowflakes drifting around men who were the same. I hadn't been able to follow. the story very well-something about a starship lost around ' Andromeda-but many times there were long pauses in the action and in the flow of words, and the children in the audience grew restless and whispered. As did the adults by the time I had left. I could see, then, that before it was done, few would be listening to the dialogue magnified and booming. They would be watching only--and for that they all could \_j have just as easily attended a joyhall show.

The play was a circus. ui

The Lunars were freaks. i

That was why the people came. And that, I finally understood, was why they went to other plays, in theaters, on \_ , stages. I was a freak. A freak who happened to be around

when volcanoes erupted or a ceilingstorm thundered or the sets changed so rapidly it gave one a headache. There was no longer any discipline, either in players or audience, no feel for words, because the words were instantaneous.

It was stupid. I should have seen it before. It was obvious, so obvious that I had overlooked it in search of something far more complicated, far less damning.

What did the man say? The man who broke the unicom of my dreams and who tries now to blow out my candles? A world something by lightning. Well, I was struck.

And I was . . . I was mad.

The night wind chilled suddenly. An arthritic attendant with a small pouch at -his side shambled around the area looking for debris to justify his pension. But the apron yeas clean and he vanished without once looking up at me, disappearing around the theater dome curve. A clock figure, I thought, with no hours to chime.

I scowled then, and shook myself like a drenched dog. I was falling too quickly into a self-pitying morbid mood that would do me no good if I wanted to devise some way to reverse the trend I had so

belatedly discovered. I decided to get Helena and take us home, and had already started for the entrance when I stopped, a peculiar whining bothering my ears. I rubbed lightly at my temples, and the whining grew louder. Familiar. Another step, and I glanced up and saw the spiderleg spotlights walking a WatchDog toward the place where I was standing.

Frozen for a moment, I stood like an idiot until I realized they'd be landing not far from where I stood. I bolted into the theater and pressed myself against the door frame, watching as the sleek black-and-gold police machine settled onto the heart of the mosaic like a bloated dragonfly. A Blue leaped out, steadied himself, and reached up a hand to assist the others following. There were only eight that I could see, standing around in a curious display of alert watchfulness and indecisiveness. Then my nails dug unfelt into my legs. Philip lumbered from the exit, disdainfully brushing away an offer of assistance. I must have lost my temper, and a good part of my reason, because I found myself standing just outside then, and when a pinlight suddenly flared and caught me, Philip pointed.

A bell, small and unobtrusive, sounded behind me. Intermission had begun.

The Blues had already taken their stunts from their waists, and I could see by the glowing tips that they were going to kill me if they had to.

Ah, you fat-bellied Judas, I thought, and spun back inside, fighting my way through the people seeking exit, grabbing at Helena's wrist when I saw her. I dragged her several meters before she tried to pull back, but all I had to do was yell "Blues" into her ear and she was with me, running down the aisle toward the curtains. Without bothering to stop and think, I vaulted onto the stage, hauled her after me, and raced into the wings and along the narrow corridor I knew would run the length of the theater's rear wall. There was a great deal of commotion back in the auditorium, and though I wanted just a moment to think things out, to ask Helena for advice, I slammed up against the fire exit and went through without stopping. A handful of Blues darted around the corner, yelling when they spotted us, but before they could set their stunts for a firing charge, we were through the trees and into the underbrush so thoughtfully managed to make our flight easier.

Suddenly I stopped and Helena yelped. Except for the faint glow of the theater's lights, the darkness here was complete and, falsely or not, I felt a momentary safety.

"What?" she whispered as we heard the Dog's whining pitch as it lifted from the clearing.

The darkness was complete, I thought, and if we continued headlong as we were, we would be bound for injury that would make a mockery of our trying. I slapped impatiently at my thigh, then took her hand and made my way back,

angling in a crouch toward the front of the dome.

The WatchDog whine screamed.

Handheld spotlights shattered through leaves and branches.

With only eight Blues immediately available, I knew my chances of at least getting to the park gates were fairly good. But it had to be done quickly, before reinforcements were summoned. I whispered all this to Helena as we moved, the words snapping singly, like those of a sprinter out of breath. Twice we had to duck out of the way of the thinly spread cordon, but soon enough we were at the clearing. The

playgoers had already been herded back inside, and only

Philip remained, talking quietly with an officer who was holding a comunit circuit in his hand. Instinctively, I took a step toward them, but Helena jerked me back.

"Later," she hissed in my ear. "And save a piece for me."

It was pleasantly obvious from the dour expression on the officer's face that we weren't going to be easily caught-if at all. Emboldened, then, I made my way through the trees to the pathway I had taken only a brief hour earlier. A minute's waiting that seemed twice a lifetime, and we broke from the cover and into a steady trot. We ran on our toes to keep the echoes from betraying us, and left the path only when we came to a bend too acute to enable us clear sight ahead, or to skirt the now unfortunately well-lighted gardens.

I thought of Philip, wondering how, until I remembered the mailer with dates and names scribbled on it.

I thought of him again, and wondered why, until I remembered his pride and the beating I had given it. Well, at least he would have the reward, I thought with a grin, though how much good it would do him was moot, since I had every intention of getting away.

I grinned even wider. Intentions. I had intended so many, perhaps too many things in these first thirty-seven years. And this was the first time I had actually been driven to action, to do something, to move. I almost felt good, I almost felt joyous.

And the feeling lasted until, only twenty or so meters from the gate, we had to veer sharply into the brush. A Blue had suddenly come from streetside and planted himself directly in front of the only way we had now of leaving the park. Dropping to the ground, I ground knuckles into my cheekbone, trying to force through the pain something I could use to eliminate that man before he was doubled, tripled, made unassailable.

We crept closer. The shouts behind us had separated, nearly vanished. Once, the WatchDog sailed above us, above us and beyond, back into the park. Then Helena jabbed me on the arm with a finger and pointed at the Blue. At herself. She made a steadying motion with her palm and rose to her feet before I could stop her. I tried a lunge, but it was too late. She was already in the middle of the path and walking toward the gates, her legs affecting a slightly drunken gait, one hand brushing through her hair, the other angled out from her side as if providing balance.

As, she moved, then, so did I. Staying within .the boundary  
of the hedging along the path, I made it to within five meters  
of the Blue before I had to stop-,and watch-my hands  
pressed to the ground, ignoring the sharp digging of pebbles  
cutting into my skin.       s

Listening to the Dog still circling above.

Helena began an off-key whistling, and the Blue almost dropped into an offensive crouch, then saw her straighten. She giggled, hiccuped-I thought she was over doing it more than a little.-and reached with one finger to unseam her tunic. The Blue raised a warning hand, cautioning her to remain where she was. She giggled again, lurched

forward, and swayed. The Blue young man who should have known better, but didn't because he was young--took that first important step toward her. She swayed again, the ' , allowed her knees to buckle. The Blue moved instinctively,, catching her around the waist, allowing her weight to carry him around and down, his knees not quite touching the ground.

Immediately he moved, however, so did I again, this time: racing from the brush to get behind him, and before he had completed his dipping motion, I had his stunt in hand. Fumbling with the studs on the handgrip of the cylinder, I tried to set the electric charge as low as I could. Then I lay the tip alongside the Blue's head. He jerked as Helena wriggled out of his grasp. He jerked, his arms snapping back, his hands almost touching at the base of his spine. Jerked, his tongue protruding and his breath inhaling in one explo-

sive wheeze.

A silent dance while I was too dumbfounded to run.

Ending.

"Come on," I said more harshly than I had intended, and with Helena's assistance I dragged him into the bushes.

"Into the breach, isn't that what they say?" she asked me, as we clasped hands once more and raced for the nearest walkway.

"Who says?"

"Who cares?"

"You're not making sense."

It was apparent that neither of our lofts would be safe for us any longer. I had no doubt that Philip had also told the police about Helena's involvement with me. They'd be looking for her, too, once they'd discovered she wasn't coming

home. But the walkway had its terminus at the edge of the cityplex, and from there it was only normal highways for landcars and hovercats. They were only sparsely used, of course, for the villages and towns not linked into a plex, but walking them was unthinkable, especially at night.

So it was less a coincidence than has been reported that we ended up at Vivian's place less than an hour later.

"I'm leaving," I told her after we'd barged in and cornered her on a chair near her bedroom. "Sorry about the dreamtapes and all, but we're in rather a hurry."

She was too surprised to do more than blink, then quickly gathered her dignity about her like the

gold-and-green robe she wore to cover her weight. "I heard on that"-she nodded toward the comunit  
"that you were wanted. God, Gordy, what made you do a thing like that?"

"I don't know. I wanted to be a star."

"There aren't any anymore, but you're too thick to know it."

"I know one thing, Viv," I said, "and that's why."

"So? Tell me."

"Viv," I said when Helena coughed, "one last favor. The keys to your landcar."

"What will you do if I don't? Beat me to death?"

I shook my head, rose, and after a moment's long agony, she reached into a drawer in the table  
beside her and tossed me the keys as though they were hot. "I'll report the thing stolen, you know."

I laughed, moved as though to kiss her, then joined Helena, who was already in the hall.

"Listen," Viv shouted suddenly from the doorway, "if you get a job, remember you're still my client!"

The vehicle was an old one, but it got us through the plex r tunnels to the outside, and once on the  
highway with no t Dogs in our wake, I managed to slow down a bit. But we ran,

through valleys of trees that had no hand to arrange them,

past dimly lighted villages where we dared not stop. Twice

in four hours we passed other vehicles, all going in the

opposite direction, and each time I felt as if I would strangle

until the headlights glared by and we were in darkness

again. ,

H Helena sat quietly in the passenger seat keeping watch on

the starred sky. She was pale, far more pale than I had ever

seen .her now that the excitement had given way to realization. I kept telling myself that she had done  
nothing wrong, that she could easily go back to Philayork and claim I had taken her by force, or some  
such nonsense. I kept telling myself that as though it were a prayer.

And finally her weariness caught up with me and I had to find a small clearing at the side of the road.  
When I did, I pulled over and, without so much as a kiss or a wink, I fell asleep.

This time, there were no dreams.

4

We rode for two days more, staying away from the main arteries, sticking to the tinier, less-traveled roads that webbed off the highway. It was difficult at first for several reasons. y The hardest adjustment was to the continuing sky, the mountains, the sudden inducement of vertigo when the road would suddenly bend and drop and we were faced with a broad and green valley several kilometers wide. And now that we were running, we abruptly realized that we had no ' place to go. No friends. No contacts. Only the certain belief?

that should we attempt to enter a cityplex again, we would be trapped as fast as we walked into the first restaurant for something to eat.

Only Helena and I, then, and some half-formed hopes.

And finally, a small town called Eisentor, where we grabbed what courage we could and stopped. With what money we had we bought provisions, some clothes, and extra fuel for the car. No one asked us questions, no one paid us any more mind than they would a taxman drifting through his rounds:

When it became obvious that we weren't suddenly going to be jumped and shackled, we relaxed, found a small eatahop, and had us a decent meal. We said little, however, because = the fear of the flight was still ghosting around our eyes. We ate, only, and drank what we could. r

Then we walked awhile through narrow streets with wooden, brick, or clayboard houses. We sat on a bench and watched several children playing around a puddle left over from the previous night's rain.

Suddenly, without consulting Helena, I walked over to the children and asked them what their favorite shows on the x

comunit were. They didn't seem too eager to talk to a stranger, but they answered me anyway; and when I did a few lines from one of the plays Helena had given me, did a few lines and some comic strutting, they laughed. They were puzzled, to be sure, because they didn't really know why, but they laughed and asked for more.

I gave it to them, as much as I could, but when I saw their mother peering anxiously from behind a nearby house, I excused myself and hurried to get Helena.

"Did you see that?" I said excitedly as we made our way back to the car. "Did you see those kids?"

Helena kept nodding as I kept repeating the questions, and when she finally laid a hand across my chest to shut me up, I still couldn't stop grinning.

"Feels good, does it?" she asked smugly, as though she already knew the answer but was making me say it.

"Well, of course it does," I said. "But..."

"But what?"

"I don't know. It feels good, and it feels . . . funny." I scratched at my head, my throat, moved rapidly away from the edge of the sidewalk when a hovercat aired by, its skirts keeping down the blow of brown dust from its fans. "Things ought to be banned," I muttered as I brushed at my trousers.

"Progress," she said. "But what do you mean, 'funny'? You've acted before. What's . . . I don't know what's funny about it?"

When we reached the vehicle still parked in front of the eatshop, I hadn't yet found an answer. I thought about it, thought about what I had learned from the lunar production, and from Philip and Vivian, trying right there in the middle of that town to squeeze in, one way or another, the last piece.

To put together, as Helena said much later, years later, the last fragile piece of a broken unicorn.

And when I did I hustled her into her seat, slid quickly behind the wheel, and drove off much faster than I thought I was going. A few heads turned, a few faces frowned as we sped through Eisentor and back into the hills, and as soon as I realized it I eased the acceleration. The one thing I didn't need now was to have our faces remembered.

"All right," I said as I turned onto another side road, "I have to find a place where I can do some thinking."

"Isn't there anything else you do but think?"

Her bitterness amazed me, so much so that I almost stopped right there.



"I mean, Gordy, aren't you getting tired? Didn't those people . . . didn't they do anything for you?"

I made excuses for her. She was overtired-we'd hardly gotten the best of rest, sleeping in the car or on the ground beside it. She was still overwrought from our flight. She had not yet been able to accept the status she had willingly, knowingly, adopted when she came with me.

I made excuses, but for the next two hours or so we argued. About little things, dumb things, sniping and picking until it was apparent one of us was going to leap from the car if we didn't calm down.

By nightfall, I knew she was ready to give up. Maybe she had thought I had a meticulous plan already worked out; maybe she thought there was still some vestige of romance in weariness and hunger, dirt and thirst. Whatever it was, it angered me, and I was just about ready to turn around from wherever we were and take her back to Philayork when I realized that if I did, if I gave her up without some sort of trying, I would be no better than Philip and his incredible paunch.

I slowed and began to talk, ignoring her gibes as best I could, noticing after a while that they grew fewer and less acid. I talked, roughing out the idea I had had when prompted by the children. Her skepticism fed on it for nearly an hour, but I refused to give it up. And when I was done, with all her objections buried in the darkness around us, she was silent.

Shortly afterward, we came upon a solitary abandoned house, one of many that belonged to those who, having no direct contact with any of the smaller towns, decided that perhaps the plexes weren't so bad after all. Those we had come across before had been done in by the weather or vandals or a brutal combination of both, but this one had recently been vacated, and it didn't take me long to force my way in. There were scant provisions left in the ovenwall, but they were enough to fill us. The comunit still worked and, while I made some effort to hide the car, Helena watched the news for some sign of our escapade, and much later, years later, we both admitted that our egos were blunted sorely when nothing was broadcast. We were minor criminals then, it seemed, not worth the airtime.

We slept in the tiny bedroom. Apart. Alone.

I began to have doubts.

"We'll have to stay here for a few days," I said the next morning. "Just to be sure. I want to be completely sure before we go on."

"It happened too fast, Gordy," she said. We were sitting opposite each other in the living room. Her eyes were swollen and red, . her hair in uncaring disarray. "Everything was moving just nicely, slowly. I guess that's what I mean. Then you showed .up, and all of a sudden I couldn't blink without something happening. You know, we didn't even have time to say-"

"We had no one to say it to, really, you know."

"There was Vivian, I suppose. I guess we said good-bye to her. In a way."

"But she fired you!"

"She was still someone I knew."

"Well, for all that, so am I"

"Yes, but you're here."

"You really think we can get away with it, don't you?"

"Why not? We won't have some thirty-room loft overlooking the ocean, but we'll manage. It all depends on your priorities."

"We'll have to change, then, won't we?"

"I'm afraid so. Not radically, mind you, but enough to confuse anyone we might happen to meet that knew us."

"Now what are the odds of that, Mr. Anderson?"

"Fantastically small."

"Do you have any idea how many years it took for this hair to get this long? You're asking an awful lot of me."

"That, too, depends on your priorities."

"If you're not careful, Gordon Anderson, you're going to get as pompous as Philip. Hand me that knife."

"The food's running out. They must have disconnected the supply when they moved. Must have? Of course they did. I must be getting stir crazy or something. It's all that practicing you're making me do."

"Well, if the food's running out, then we might as well start planning to make our first move. You know, Philip said he was starving. I wish he'd walk through that door right now. I'd tie him permanently to a chair and face him to the ovenwall. Then I'd smash the thing and let him watch the food rot while he shriveled."

"You're vicious."

"I have a sense of the dramatic."

"Do you like the color of my hair? Black sets off my skin rather nicely, don't you think?"

"Do you like my beard? Vivian kept telling me I had an agreeably weak chin."

"Helena!" ..

"What's the matter, don't you like it?"

"Where . . . where did you get it?"

"There's a storage room upstairs. I was looking for some clothes, those over there, and I found this little chest. I think there must have been children here sometime. A long time ago. Anyway, I opened it, and there were all these baubles and things. This one was at the bottom."

"I can't... it would look better on you."

"No. It's yours. See? It has a chain around its neck, just like a halter. You can wear it around yours. For luck."

"It's too small, Helena. I'll break it."

"I'm not going to argue with you. You'll wear it and like it. If someone asks you, you can tell them you have a fetish for horses."

"They'll know it's not a horse."

"I wouldn't bet on it. Besides, you and I are the only ones it'll matter to, anyway."

"It matters to you?"

"If it doesn't, I've learned all those parts for nothing, haven't I? You know something, Gordy, you really can be dense sometimes. You really can. Now put it on."

"I feel funny."

"Don't. Just, wear it."

"It's so small, it's buried in my palm."

"Wear it! It'll keep the beasts away."

It did.

5

I stood at the rear wall of the meetinghouse. I think, that year, it was somewhere in Michigan. In front of me were several rows of static chairs dragged in by volunteers from

the attics and storerooms that had been opened to us when we arrived. Already there was a fair crowd

waiting. Talking. Nudging with elbows. Pointing with only halfhearted disdain at the crudely painted backdrop on the far wall. It depicted, rather impressionistically, a forest none of them believed existed, but a forest nevertheless. They drifted in and smiled when handing me their admission, but promptly forgot I was there once the money had changed hands. Which was perfectly all right with me. I had worked toward that end. Now I could watch them without fear of being rude-gauging, searching their faces, estimating their average age and income, style, and education.

Most of the time my conclusions were correct, and the material that would be presented to the audience, numbering just under fifty, would be geared to whatever imagination I thought they possessed. It was a skill, and a necessary one, that I had developed over the years after we nearly landed in the clutches of the local Blues the first time we tried our little show. We had hoped that anything in those scripts Helena had stolen would be sufficient to enthrall. Sadly, and realistically, it didn't work out that way. Luckily, however, we'd been given a second chance, and after I had had an opportunity to talk with those who had come to see us that night, I knew which of our plays they would enjoy the most.

We did it.

And they did. '

It was simple, actually, once I understood that even in the towns the audiences had been... not spoiled, but despoiled.

We worked out a routine then, which grew into a science. A week or so in each community. The first night an informal education. The second a performance with intermittent explanation. The third through the fifth or sixth something done in earnest.

No gimmicks.

Just words.

And that crudely painted backdrop became a forest indeed.

We grew. A boy here, a young woman there, an elderly couple with young stars in their eyes. But it was, as always at the last, Helena and I--and our children when they grew.

Philip came to see us one evening, trailing behind a representative of some official or other who, having heard of our little troupe, had come to see. I had been nervous throughout the entire performance, thinking that fat and

now enfeebled old man had pursued his idiot revenge to the extreme. But when we were done, Helena and I were given.

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some papers in which, with much legal phrasing and hyper-',,

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bole almost sickening, we were granted our pardons. Artistic merit had rehabilitated us, I gathered. The

only catch: we were not allowed back in a cityplex, for any reason, at any time. And I think Philip was truly enraged when both Helena and I accepted the terms. Laughing.

I sighed silently. I waited until I was sure there would be no latecomers, then lifted a finger, which dimmed the lights. Working swiftly and carefully then, I adjusted the makeshift spots that had been bolted for us over the lintel of the meetingroom door. And once lighted, the forest became natural, and once populated, it lost what was artificial in the words of the players.

There were no curtains, so we walked our exits.

There were no musicians, so we improvised our songs.

And the costumes we used were bits of rags, shards of cloaks, and sometimes only the clothes on our backs.

I watched from the back, waiting for my cue, and as I did, I took -from beneath my shirt the gift Helena had given me when we had given birth to our dream. It sat in my palm, glowing, its eyes catching the light like two miniature candles.

And when my cue came from Helena, the laughter was real.

"When beggars die, there are no comets seen," Helena has said. It was her favorite line.

Helena.

Is dead. -

Last year.

She was eighty.

But my favorite line... "I didn't go to the moon-I went much further-for time is the longest distance between two points."

She was eighty.

Prologues and epilogues.

I give them alone.

But no matter how often my world is lit by that lightning-I'll not now, nor will I ever, blow out my candles. When all is done, and done . . . and done, a tiny glass unicorn still sits on my palm.