

Devil You Don't Know

Dean Ings

Maffei, brushing at his cheap suit, produced his papers with confidence. They were excellent forgeries. "I dunno the patient from whozis," he said. "Will she need sedation? A jacket?"

The receptionist was your standard sanitarium model: stunning, crisp, jargony, her uniform a statement of medical competence as spurious as Maffei's authorization. "Dina Valerie Clarke," she read. "I did an ops transfer profile on her. If I may see your ID, sir?" It was not really a question.

Both driver's license and psychiatric aide registration were genuine enough. Neither card hinted that this stocky aide, Christopher Maffei, was also M.D., Ph.D., and in his present capacity, SPY. To stay in character he rephrased his question while surrendering the cards. "Will the kid need restraint?"

"It doesn't say," she murmured, returning his ID. "We can sign her over to you after your exit interview."

"My interview? Lady, I'm just the taxi to some clinic in Nebraska."

"It's only a formality," she purred, fashioning him a brief bunny-nose full of sexual conspiracy.

Maffei avoided laughing. In three years of residency and five of research, he had observed enough morons to be a passable simulacrum on his own. "I never done that before," he lied. He had listened to these sales pitches only too often. "Can I use your phone? Dr. Carmichael can talk to you from Springfield . . ."

"Sign here, please, and here, and there," in ten-below tones.

Maffei smiled and signed. *You're beaten by invincible ignorance*, he thought. *Maybe we should start a club*. He straightened and looked around, realizing that the receptionist had buzzed for Val Clarke.

She came toward him slowly at first down the long hallway, made smaller by her outsized luggage. It was very expensive luggage, the guilt-assuaging hardware a wealthy parent would provide for an unwanted child. Chris still chafed at what it had cost him.

As Val neared him, he saw that her hair had been shorn almost to the scalp. Lice, probably. Her height was scarcely that of a ten-year-old. The frail angular body, still too large for her head, was yet too small for its oddly misaligned and bovine eyes. She wore the same white ankle socks, slippers, and trousers she'd had when entering Nodaway Retreat two weeks before. Her smiling gaze swept up to his, then past, and she broke into a stumbling skip toward the entrance.

"You must be Valerie Clarke," Maffei said with forced gaiety, catching gently at her pipestem wrist.

The vacant smile foundered. A silent nod. No more skipping; the girl stood awaiting whatever this vast authoritarian world might dictate.

"Let's get you to an ice-cream cone," Maffei said, letting her bring the suitcases. He maintained the running patter while strapping her into his electric fourseater and stowing the luggage behind. "I bet you'd like a Frostylite, hm?"

Tucking his slight paunch under the steering wheel, Maffei whirred them toward the automatic gate. It slid

aside, then back, as they emerged onto the highway. Val Clarke slumped in her seat with a lip-blubbing parody of released tension. "Oh, come on, Val, it can't be that bad," Maffei smirked.

"Not for you it can't. It isn't your screwed-up implants, pal, you try running an inside surveillance with an intermittent transceiver short sometime and I'll patronize *you*."

He glanced from the road to her, reached out to her tiny skull and gently stroked behind her ear. "No swelling. If it were a mastoid infection you'd know it for sure."

The girl shrugged upward in her seat, barely able to see over the battery cowl ahead. "I'll survive. Well, what do you make of Nodaway Retreat?"

"Typical ultraconservative ripoff," he mused, barely audible over the hum and tire noise. "From your reports I make it one staff member per twenty patients, minimal life-support for everyone concerned except for the up-front crew; one honest-to-God R.N. and a pair of general practitioners who look in once a month from Des Moines to trade sedatives for fees."

"I've seen worse. Remember Ohio?"

Maffei nodded sagely. Val Clarke had scarcely been admitted when her transmissions began to read like a bedlam litany. Rickettsia and plain starvation, a "bad ward" where three children of normal intelligence were chained, and a nightly victimization of youthful male patients by the staff. "That's what my survey is about; to change all that. It was the worst I ever saw," he admitted.

Val flicked him a quick glance, but Maffei intended no sarcasm. He had seen two staff members wearing masks of outraged innocence, and strap marks on Val's thin calves after the general warrant had been served—really more raid than service, brought on by Val's moment-to-moment account via her minuscule implanted transceiver. In the space of thirty-six hours Val had seen two compound femur fractures on a girl who had jumped from her high window, and a gang assault of one profoundly retarded child by besmocked thugs. The worst Maffei had seen in Ohio was not precisely the worst Val Clarke had seen; but then, Maffei bore no stigmata of retardation.

It was Valerie Clarke's tragedy to have been born with an autosomal dominant inheritance which was instantly diagnosed as mental retardation. The astonishing width between her eyes had a name of its own: hyper-telorism. It explained nothing except that Val's great brown orbs were set a trifle too far apart to please a society which, paradoxically, distrusted eyes set too close together. Her lustrous roan hair normally covered a skull which, from its small size, also had a special stigma with label attached: microcephaly. Her ears flared a bit, particularly noticeable now that her hair was shorn, and at twenty-two, Val Clarke passed for twelve even without her training bra.

Any competent specialist could adjust to the fact that Val's intelligence was normal, her motivation superb—a recipe for "genius." The unadjusted expectation was something else again. Val, an early victim of maldiagnosis and parental rejection, knew the signs of a good sanitarium from the inside because she had experienced enough bad ones in childhood.

When Val was thirteen, a suspicious young intern named Chris Maffei taught her basic algebra and the scatology of three foreign languages to prove his point. After that, her schooling was more formal if not exactly conventional. Any girl who patterned herself after Chris Maffei could junk the word "convention" at the outset, with the obvious exception of medical conventions, where Chris read scholarly papers and pumped for any grant money he could locate.

Now Chris was a year into a fat HEW grant to study the adequacy of private mental homes; and if he had not actually suggested that Val volunteer for commitment in these places, he had not omitted oblique

hints at the notion. Nor turned down her offer. It was a symbiosis : Maffei had his spy, Val her spymaster.

"Hey," she said. He looked around and briefly laid his hand over the one she offered palm up. "Thanks for reeling me in so fast."

One corner of his mouth went up. "Had to. That short was interfering with my favorite live soap opera."

"Schmuck," she said tenderly—Maffei had never entirely managed to socialize her language. "Speaking of soap, you could introduce Nodaway to the idea."

"I'll note it when I debrief you after supper, I was in the army with a G.P. near here. If I know Farr, he'll do an Onward Christian Soldiers when I send him my notes on the place."

"Fine. And by the way, good guru, you just passed a Frostylite. You p'omised," she added, expertly faking a vocal retardation slur.

"First things first. We need a battery recharge to make Joplin tonight."

Startled: "Why Joplin, of all places? That's south."

"Because I have you scheduled for a scrub-up and transceiver check there tonight. And because after that we're going into the Deep South."

She was silent but he lip-read her response: *Oh, my God.*

After the Joplin stop, Maffei's little sedan hummed on barrel tires toward Mississippi. Val failed to concentrate on Durrell's *Clea*. The source of her unease was not the September heat, but the fact that she had slept at the clinic in Joplin. Chris lavished care on her as he would on a rare and exorbitant device, but she did not delude herself on the point. Val needed a secure relationship and physical human warmth. Very well then: he shared motel rooms with her. She also needed passionate attention, as anyone might when in constant proximity to a beloved. Chris dutifully pleased her when, on rare occasions, she was insistent enough. The one thing Valerie Clarke could not elicit from Chris was his desire.

Durrell's velvet prose wasn't helping Val's mood. She studied her reflection in the car window. *Ms. Universe I'm not. If I expect this sex object of mine—okay, twenty pounds overweight and why shouldn't he be?—to come fawning over my Dumbo ears I'm worse than microcephalic, I'm scatocephalic.* She traced a tentative forefinger along the pink smoothness of one ear. At least she had perfect skin. "Chris, why do you put me out before making the transceiver check if you don't make an incision?"

He yawned before answering, flexing strong hands on the wheel. "We do, Val. Those antennae are so fine I can run 'em just inside the dermis, on the fossa of your helix—uh, inside your ear rim. A microsurgical scalpel does it; almost no bleeding and it heals quick as boo. But I have to keep you abso-bloody-lutely still. Same for the X-ray check on your implant circuitry. It's a whole lot bigger in area than it might be, since I wanted it spread out for easy maintenance."

"You didn't cut down to the mastoid?"

"No need to fix the resonator; I just incised a tiny slit to your circuit chip. It was a hairline circuit fracture, just right for laser repair. Total heat doesn't amount to a paramecium's hotfoot, using the miniaturized Stanford rig. See, you don't *have* to hurt the one you love." He grinned.

"I'll remind you of that after supper." He clucked his tongue in mock dismay, still grinning. Message clear, will comply, out. She returned to Durrell as the kilometers hummed away.

The supper hush puppies in Vicksburg were a pleasant surprise, not by being in the least digestible but in their lingering aftertaste. When she and Chris vented simultaneous belches later, her fit of giggles might have caused a lesser man to make war, not love. All credit to the Maffei mystique, she decided still later, as she lazed on the motel bed and watched Chris attack his toenails. "You never told me how you got those mangled toes," she murmured. "We beautiful people are repelled by physical deformity, y'know."

He looked up, preoccupied, then grinned. "Same way I got this," he rubbed his finger over the broken nose that gave him a faintly raffish look. "Soccer. Did I ever tell you I once played against Pele?"

She fetched him a wondering smile. "Wow; no."

Deadpan: "Well, I never did—but Lord knows what I may've told you." Dodging the flung pillow, he went on. "You'd best save your energy for tomorrow, Val. We'll be delivering you up to the graces of Gulfview Home around noon."

Retrieving the pillow, she placed it in her lap and hugged it, eyes half closed, dreaming awake. "A view of the gulf will be nice. I hope this is a clean place—and please, God, air conditioned."

"Don't count on it. It's forty kilometers from the gulf; how's that for an auspicious start?"

She shrugged. "It figures. But why this place? We're kind of off our itinerary." She wriggled beneath the covers, hiding her thin limbs.

He put away his clippers and reached for the light-plate, waving it to a diffuse nightlight. "A tip from HealthEdWelfare," he said, swinging under the coverlet. After a long pause he added, "You'll have a contact inside: a Ms. May Endicott. She won't know about you, but she knows something, I guess. And an insider's tip is a good place to start. Better the devil you know, and all that. I'll find out what sent her running to HEW after we commit you. Most likely a snoopy old dowager with fallen arches and clammy handshake." He grew silent, realizing that Val's response was the softest of snores. Chris Maffei fell asleep wondering if Gulfview and old Ms. Endicott would fit his preconceptions.

Gulfview Home squatted precisely in the center of its perimeter fencing; held its white clapboard siding aloof like skirts from the marauding grass. Viewing the grounds, it was hard to imagine much organized recreation for patients. Chris identified himself to the automatic gate, then rolled his window back up to escape the muggy air. In silence, they pulled up before the one-story structure.

Their expectations followed earlier studies which, since the 1950s, had always shown higher per capita need for institutional treatment in the Southeast—and lower per capita effectiveness. The region was catching up; but, in 1989, still lagged. To Chris, it was a problem in analysis. To Val, stumbling up Gulfview's steps with her luggage, the first problem was a dread akin to stage fright. It always was; and as always, she hid her fear from Chris. The air conditioning was a relief, but a new fear sidled up to Val when they found the receptionist. She was, and wasn't, old Ms. Endicott.

Chris saw that Ol' Miz Endicott had very high arches for such small feet. He stood watching as May Endicott ushered a vacant-eyed Val Clarke from the reception room. A waist he could span with two hands, but la Endicott hourglassed to very nice extremes. Rather like a pneumatic gazelle by Disney, he judged.

Endicott boasted thick brown curls. "Dye job" was Val's whispered aside as she stumbled, entirely in character, with her luggage. But Chris was not listening.

The Endicott woman returned in moments, to help Chris complete papers placing Val Clarke squarely in the hands of a private jail—or asylum, rehab home, whatever it might prove to be. "We were expectin' you, but the senior staff are busy at the moment. The child's history seems well documented," she remarked in a soft patrician drawl. "Do you think she might be a trainable?"

Chris hesitated. A trainable might have free run of the place, or might be closely watched if it were more of a prison. Suddenly he remembered that May Endicott was, after all, a potential ally. "Depends on how good you are, I guess," he said. "I'm told you're concerned for the patients."

"We try—I think," she said as if genuinely pondering.

"I mean you, personally."

A flicker of subtlety in the dark sloe eyes. "I can't imagine who ..."

"Just a friend in the discipline," he said easily. "Henry E. Wilks. How's that for a set of initials?"

"I don't ..." she began, and then she did. "Well," she said in a throaty whisper. It set Maffei atingle. "And what are all the Wilkses doin' these days?"

"Waiting to hear from me," he replied, enjoying the respect in her oval face. "And I'm waiting to hear from you. I don't need to meet the staff just yet."

"I'm in the book, M. A. Endicott, in town. Perhaps this evenin'?"

He nodded and continued with the forms, pointedly sliding a blank set into his disreputable attache case. As he rose, he noted that May Endicott's hands trembled. Anticipation? Fear?

Chris made a leisurely trip into town, bought a sandwich, then found the Endicott address. It was after five P.M. when he parked. He began to study the commitment forms—the fine print could sometimes raise hackles—and remembered the barbecue sandwich. During his third bite he remembered Val Clarke and fumbled for his comm unit. Although the major amplification and tight-band scrambling modes were built into the car, they also enhanced the signal to and from his pocket unit. Without the car, his range was perhaps two kilometers. With it, over thirty. Val, behind high fencing and well beyond the town limits, should be within range. But you never knew ...

He thumbed the voice actuator. The cassette, as usual, was recording all transmission into the system. "Val? How's a girl? I haven't heard a peep." *Nor thought about one*, he told himself. He waited for a moment and was about to try again.

"i gave up on you around suppertime," the speaker replied. Implant devices did not yet rival conventional transmission. Val could receive a voice with fair fidelity but could only transmit by subvocalizing. With lips parted slightly she could transmit almost silently and as well as, say, a tyro ventriloquist; but bone conduction and minute power sources had their limitations. Val Clarke's nuances of intonation and verbal style were sacrificed for the shorthand speech of covert work. In short, she sounded very like a machine. Maffei would have denied that he preferred it that way.

"I was doing errands. And it's only getting to be suppertime now," he objected.

"not when you're running a money mill," Val replied. "it's on cassette, these people use patients to serve meals—and to cook 'em, from the taste of it. yuchhh."

"If you're bitching about the food, you can't have much worse on your mind."

"yeah? try thinking of me in here on an army cot, and you outside with miz handy cot."

"Endicott," he chuckled at the mike. "I'll review the tape later. What else is new?"

"i'm in isolation 'til they figure how to use me, i think, two males, a female, all young and retarded, doing chores."

He thought for a moment. "Good therapy for 'em, unless the chores include lobotomies and group gropes. Who's in charge?"

"you got me, chris. and i wish you did, this doesn't smell right, quiet as a tomb in my room with very soft wallpaper and no view at all. when i say isolated, i mean locked away, but the kids gave me a toy."

"Something educational?"

"a rubber duckie, swear to god. well, they're nice kids."

"Look; I have some reading to do, and a session with the Endicott lady so we can plan. I'll check with you later. Don't eat your duckie."

"same to you, fella," in monotonic reply. He smirked at the speaker, but no answer seemed very useful. He pocketed the comm unit and returned to his sandwich and forms.

Although commitment forms varied, they generally claimed almost total control over their wards. Chris Maffei had doctored Val's records to assure that she would not be subjected to insulin shock treatment, surgery, or unusual medication. The forms implied that Gulfview could damned well amputate her head if they chose, but there were safeguards against such treatment. For one thing, Val could transmit her plight and get help from Maffei. Or, if it came to that, she could simply admit her charade. In sixteen previous investigations, she had never blown her cover.

Maffei was munching a pickle slice when he saw the steam plume of the bus, two blocks away. It slid past him a moment later, slowing to disgorge the unmistakable form of May Endicott. She had a very forthright stride, he decided, and admired it until she disappeared into her apartment. The pickle disposed of, Maffei crammed the forms into his attache case and grunted, sweating, from the car. Val was right: he'd have to watch his weight.

At his knock, the door whisked open. May Endicott tugged him in by a sleeve, darting quick looks over his shoulder at her innocent shrubbery. She shut the door just as quickly and jumped at his reaction. "Gentlemen don't usually laugh at me."

"They should, if you treat 'em like jewel thieves," Maffei grinned. Beneath the makeup, he saw, she was quite young. "A poor beginning, ma'am. We really don't have anything to be furtive about, do we?"

The faintest relaxation of erect shoulders, and: "I'm not sure, Mr. Moffo."

"Maffei; Dr. Christopher Maffei, Johns Hopkins, to be insufferable about it," he said, getting the expected response. "Can we sit?"

She had a merry musical laugh of her own, waving him to a couch between stacks of periodicals. He saw several journals on abnormal psychology and special education. Idly he checked the issue numbers as they talked. His first goal was to put this latent centerfold at ease, simply done by asking her to talk about herself.

May was agreeable to the low-key interrogation. Modestly raised in Montgomery; a two-year nursing certificate with notions of an R.N. to come; parents retired; summer work in a state hospital. "I don't know if I have a callin'," she finished, "but I like to feel I'm bein' used well."

"You will be," Maffei said cryptically, and flipped back the journal he held. "Thought I might find myself here. Just a small reference," he added with exaggerated modesty.

She saw him referenced by another author and looked away. "You embarrass me, Dr. Maffei; I should've recognized your name."

"Hey, none of that," he laughed. "I'm Chris and you're May, if you don't mind it. You seemed jumpy and I wanted to reassure you, that's all. Want my full ID?"

She sat back, relaxed, strong calves crossed fetchingly as she glanced through his cards. Maffei had a rising sense that this would be one of his more pleasant investigations. "Understand, May, I hope you're wrong about your job. As you know, private homes run a long gamut from excellent to atrocious." She nodded, beginning to pour an aperitif.

"I can't survey every asylum in the country, but the HEW agreed to pick up the tab for a little"—he searched for an Endicott trigger-word—"chivalrous snooping. I have no official standing beyond what the AMA lends me, which is vague enough, God knows. But soon I'll have a fair sampling of the virtues and vices of private sanitariums. Who's mistreating patients? What staff training is most needed? Where should the gummint step in? Not exactly cloak-and-dagger stuff, May, but not the questions your average institutional exec likes to hear." He did not add that the book from his research might be a muckraking best seller.

"So you don't ask out loud," she prompted.

"Right; I try to find someone like you, and whisper in her ear."

Rising smoothly, she purred, "Well, now I know you're really a doctor. Developin' your bedside manner." Maffei realized his gaffe too late and refused to admit it was accidental. "Let's say my Freudian half-slip is showing and let it go," he said. "I mean, no, dammit, that's not what I meant." A pause. "Do you have this effect on everybody?"

She stood quietly, reaching some internal decision. Then, "It's a problem," she admitted, with a sunburst grin that took Maffei by frontal assault. "Physician, heal thyself."

"It may take some patchwork," he chuckled, "but bear with me."

A nod; slow and ageless.

"Professionally, I need you to check on a list of things. You reported that the last receptionist had no specialized training, was lucky to have the job, but seemed anxious to leave. And when she left, she did it in style. Expensive car and so on."

"A Lotus Cellular, no less," May put in. "And I know Lana Jo Fowler's family and they couldn't support that kind of spo'ty habit."

"Maybe she had sugar-daddy support?"

"That's how she let on," May said, "but she wouldn't say that if it were true. I think she was bein' paid off. I don't know what for. Lana Jo was no dumplin', and no brain either."

"Then there's Dr. Tedder," she continued, "I mean both Drs. Tedder, Lurene and Rhea." It did not escape Maffei that she named the woman first. "They live on the grounds and I don't see him much, but he isn't my idea of a doctor, more like a wino, and she—is—a—sight, a proper *sight*," she finished, rolling her eyes melodramatically.

"You haven't mentioned the honcho."

"Dr. Merkle? Rob Merkle is unmentionable, maybe that's why. Those soft sausage hands; but when he keeps 'em to himself he's competent. I'll say this, he knows where every penny goes."

"No doubt. Well, I need data like where Merkle and the Tedders did their residencies, what's the cost of boarding a patient, the sources of referrals, types of therapy, type and dosage of drugs prescribed and by whom, dietician's schedule . . ."

"Whew," with lips pursed in kissable-fashion, Maffei thought. "That's a tall number."

"I haven't begun," he said sadly.

"We both have," she smiled. "I smell cheap barbecue sauce on you, but could you use a shrimp salad anyway?"

"A small one. Need help?"

"It's woman's work," she said, surprising him again by her atavism. By the end of the evening, May had a long list of Maffei's professional needs and a sketchy idea of his personal ones. Never once did he mention Valerie Clarke. He could not have said exactly why.

Val awoke to depressingly familiar voices, muffled by the padding on her walls. It was not the timbre of a remembered person but the quasi-linguistic chanting of mentally retarded children that she recognized. Aware that the staff might be watching by monitor, Val lay on her musty bedding and played with her fingers. She reconstructed the ward's morning by inference from the subdued noises. A parrotlike male recited a holovision commercial with astonishing fidelity: *one* trainable, sure as hell. Footsteps, peals of animal glee, angry hoots in their wake: horseplay, probably unsupervised and therefore dangerous. A bucket dropped (kicked?) hard and a howl of dismay; some poor MR klutzing his cleaning chores. Every few minutes, shuffling thumps at her door. Val gave up on that one and lay back to give her fingers a rest.

Her door swung open so quickly that Val jumped. It was no trick to register a fearful MR grimace. The heavy door seemed a trifle to the dray-horse muscles of Dr. Lurene Tedder. The pale deepset eyes flanked an aquiline Tudor nose, and Val sensed great stamina in Lurene Tedder's hundred and seventy pounds. Yet the most striking feature was hair, seemingly tons of it, a cascade of blue-black tresses spilling over her shoulders, an emblem utterly female crowning the stocky woman.

A voice fortified with testosterone: "Hello, Valerie. Time for us to get up." A practiced smile fled across the face, to be replaced by a gaze that promised to miss very little. "Do we understand?"

Val waited a moment to nod assent, then stood, hands at her sides.

"Can we talk? Dr. Lurene, can we say that? Dr. Lurene," the big woman crooned.

My, but she loves the sound of that, Val thought. She nodded.

"Then *say* it, you ... try and say it, Valerie."

Val said it in unfeigned fright. Lurene Tedder's ignorance of MR training was so blatant that Val wondered momentarily if she were being baited by a patient. "Docta Luween," she said again, dully, and again.

Lurene Tedder nodded, again treated Val to a smile; but this time it lingered. "I think we're gonna work out fine."

And the operative word is "work," Val thought. She risked a hint of a smile with eyes that begged for acceptance. Only half of it was pretense.

Lurene Tedder motioned Val from the cell, and Val, scurrying to comply, nearly collided with May Endicott. Thrusting a folder brusquely at May, the Tedder woman produced an expensive hairbrush and, sweeping it through her one glory, hurried off. "Find something therapeutic for this one," she flung over a broad shoulder.

May, placing a gentle hand on Val's arm, called, "Were you going to do an assessment?" Her tone implied that Tedder had merely forgotten.

"Oh, sure, yeah," as the big woman sailed on from the ward, her voice booming louder. "Send her to, uh, our office about three."

Thick steel-faced fiber doors swung to and fro in Lurene Tedder's wake. Val looked straight ahead, half fearing that eye contact with May Endicott would reveal too much. May aspirated a bitter sigh, then brightened as she turned to Val. "I'm goin' to introduce you to some people, Valerie," she promised. These were the first friendly words Val had heard, and almost she began to forgive May Endicott her splendor in gender.

May did not hurry, nor ask questions of Val, but maundered, talking easily, from one patient to another down the row of beds. Val noted the linolamat floor approvingly; you could fall on it without harm, yet May's virginally white, whorishly spiked heels left no indentation. *Why must the woman flaunt it so?* The floor's barely perceptible slope led to a small drainage grate in the ward center; Val thought herself petty to hope a high-style heel might catch in it. She let details register without quick eye movement, indexing data with mnemonic tricks Chris had taught her. This was Val's metier, and doing it well, she outpaced her fears for the moment.

But: *Why doesn't she slip me the high sign,* Val thought. She and Chris always chose a fresh code word for ID and a general all-is-well signal, but May Endicott had not used it.

May broke into the reverie: "Is there anything you'd like to see especially, Valerie?"

After a long pause for pseudoserious pondering: "Chitlins?"

Val privately admitted that the Endicott bimbo had a nice laugh. "Well, not today anyway. We're havin' a fortified soup—" as if to herself adding, "what else?"

Val pointed to a patient May had ignored. "Big Boy," she slurred.

May smiled again at this wholly understated description, then walked to the end bed. Val stepped near and gazed upon a mountain of flesh. It was alive, in a way.

"This is Gerald Rankine," May began. Doubtless, she did not expect Val to understand much, but persisted. Rankine was eighteen, an enormous smooth-faced cherub in cutaway pajamas. Severely retarded, he would vegetate in a clinic for as long as his body might function. May guessed his weight at four hundred pounds, and Val saw, with an old shock of recognition, that the great body was

asymmetrical. The limbs and even the head were distinctly larger on the right side. "He can eat when we help," May ended, "and we give him medicine so he won't hurt himself."

Hurt himself? If this great thing was subject to seizures, Val opined silently, he needed better accommodations than these. She wondered if Rankine had bedsores; and if he felt them; and if it were more ethical to maintain him or not to, under the circumstances. It was hopeless to feel assured at any answer. She was saved from further speculation by May's greeting to someone approaching from the ward kitchen. Val knew better than to turn on her own volition.

"Laura, honey," May said happily. "We have a new girl; I think she might be a help." And then May pulled Val around, and Val swept her eyes up a slender girlish form to meet—no eyes at all.

Laura Dunning was in many respects a lissome sixteen. She moved well, spoke with a charming drawl, dressed neatly, with pert nose and an enviable rosebud mouth. But the high forehead continued down to her cheeks with only faint, shallow depressions where her eyes would be in a more rational world. Val cudged her memory for a similar case, could find none. And somehow, inexplicably, Laura Dunning was very beautiful to look upon. Perhaps her animated speech helped; an old theorist's prescription for superb speech performance was an intelligent female with good hearing, blind from birth.

Val expected a fleeting fingertip inspection of her face, shoulders, arms and hands by the blind Laura. Instead, she offered her hand to be shaken. Another discard from an embarrassed family, Laura was obviously no more MR than was Val herself.

As Val took the proffered hand, May seemed to shift roles and excused herself. "I'll go double-check that darlin' soup," she said in pleasant sarcasm, and Val was left with the blind girl.

Laura began talking, talking, eliciting brief answers now and then from Val, evidently deciding what chores Val might be willing and able to perform. Disturbingly, the blind girl studied every answer with satisfaction—or was it secret amusement? When Laura turned to lead Val to the ward kitchen, she did so with balletic grace. Val was no stranger to the blind—but in some way, she felt, Laura Dunning was extraordinarily sighted.

Under close supervision, Val had no chance to give a detailed response when Maffei transmitted before noon. She cut in only long enough to respond with their code word. Anxious to begin his paper chase of senior staff documentation, Chris elected to leave Val on her own. "We can count on Endicott," he assured her. "I'll leave the comm unit recorder here at the motel; you can report when you get the chance, even if I'm out of range." Again Val muttered their code word, loudly enough that May, hovering supportively near, chuckled. Satisfied, Chris keyed out.

Lunch was passable, kitchen chores simple, her three o'clock assessment a misnomer. Val left the Tedder office at supertime, squired by Laura Dunning and too angry at the Tedder couple to trust herself in an immediate report. Laura, her every gesture as assured as a sighted dancer's, wangled fresh bedding for Val in a ward bed next to Laura's own. Val waited a half-hour, pulled her pillow over most of her head, and began to transmit.

". . . and then i realized they never intended legit tests," she recorded, nearing the crux of her message, "assessment? i scrubbed their deleted floor! rhea tedder's stoned on something; middle-age, middle-size, middlin' scared of docta luween. he'd make a great spy, you can overlook him so easy, i expected him to float up to the ceiling when he wasn't grabbing for my goodies, no sweat, lurene handled him. but they had no motor skills hardware, no nothing for m.r. tests that i saw.

"the rankine boy could be hell on square wheels if he is epileptic, can't tell from laura if it's grand mal, akinetic, myoclonic, whatever, i can hear me asking!

"caught sight of merkin—see merkle's goatee and you get the connection, fifty, hefty, soft mouth, dead eyes, voice like the bottom note of a pipe organ, bad-liver skin, i'd say. treats lurene as peer, maybe something going there between 'em.

"drug dispensing: weird but may be okay, there's a lot of it. the blind girl—her you have to meet—does the work and i swear she's efficient, gets dosages from the staff, boy, does she empathize; a girl had a petit mal seizure tonight, laura's ears must be like tuning forks, stopped dead, turned toward the kid shuddering, lucky me, i got to help clean the beddypoo. laura says she doesn't mind, helping the helpers, some help: profound m.r. and epilepsy.

"and what's with miz bandicoot, haven't you told her i'm me? and what the hell keeps you out so long, can't you xmit? sure leaves me out on a long string, and if you infer i'm strung out, you're improving.

"i suspect merkle uses drugs as babysitters; no organized play beyond what laura fixes, they all love her. 'course, some get enough exercise working, i think they do it for laura, and i also think lurene knows it.

"nutrition: okay, i think, hell of a good modern kitchen with equipment they don't need to make soupy m.r.'s keep the stainless shiny, tons of soy flour; so what else is new? Tedders and merkle set up meals after lights out, i can hear 'em in there now. merkle doesn't seem the type for menial work, but that's his voice.

"and i ache all over from charlady chores, drop me a postcard someday, i could use good news." Sleep came easily to Val after that; the lax operation at Gulfview had given Val a breadth of insight that ordinarily might take weeks. Surely, she felt, Chris would wrap this job up easily. It was a lullaby thought, a beguiling diversion that left her utterly unprepared for the morrow.

Val tried to doze through the ward's early morning chaos, failed, and feigned sleep to query Chris Maffei. Instantly his reply began in her head. She felt the elation of contact trickle away as he continued.

"Hey, Mata Hari, we're making progress," he began. "I'm transcribing now at, uh, two A.M. Got back from—uh—an interview to the comm unit late and just finished your tape. Great stuff, hon." Val needed one guess to identify his late evening interviewee.

"Nothing on the Tedders yet," he went on. "But data retrieval isn't all that good here in town, I can get to a records center in Biloxi if I'm up bright and early."

So he's already hull-down on the horizon from me this morning, Val thought.

"Keep your eyes open for indiscriminate use of phenobarb, Valium, Zarontin, all the old standby zonkers. You recall the drill: Valium's the same size pill regardless of dose, it's the color—well, you know.

"I haven't blown your cover to May . . ."—the barest of hesitations, then the surname added— "Endicott because what she doesn't know, she can't reveal. What she already knows is incriminating enough. Merkle might be tricky—or worse.

"The rundown on Robin Terence Merkle looked okay at first; bona fides from med school and AMA. But no special work with MR; he went into pharmaceutical research with a chemical company from '71 to '83. Took an enviable vacation, then until starting Gulfview in '85. On a hunch, I dropped in at the

local cop shop and asked about the last receptionist before Endicott; Lana Jo Fowler, a local girl. And there's a missing-persons sheet on her. They found her nifty Lotus abandoned in a Hattiesburg parking lot and she'd been dropping school-girl hints about hitting it rich. It occurred to me that maybe something rich hit *her*.

"The desk sergeant said they'd done their number on the Fowler girl, a plain sort who got her popularity the only way she knew how. One of their many blind leads was a gentleman who'd recently paid for her visa and hovercraft fare to Cancun, down the Yucatan. A very proper professional man. Rob Merkle.

"The police aren't disposed to worry about it, but the girl's family is. Which leaves me with hunches. If any of 'em are right, Merkle knows where Lana Jo Fowler is, and she knows where something expensive is. Mexico? Ironic thing is, I'm in a better position than a small-time police department to spend time on it.

"In case you wonder: I'm not sidestepping to pursue this little mystery. I suspect the Gulfview operation should be shut down, but I don't want to pillory a guy who may be doing his half-assed best." His yawn whispered through Val's head. "If you're as tired as I am, you'll thank me for not waking you. I'll get a few hours' sleep and then head for Biloxi. 'Night."

Val struggled to avoid a sense of being discarded. Told herself that Chris had given so little new instruction because she had done so much so quickly. Took it for granted that Chris was seeing May Endicott at night, and rationalized that he had no better way to confer with the woman. Val's intuition said that Chris was lagging at his forte, the massing of inferences from paperwork. *He's floundering for once, poor love*, she told herself, then felt the gentle touch of Laura Dunning on her arm. She could arise easily enough, but must remember not to shine.

The blind girl seemed pleased that her new retarded helper wanted to accompany her everywhere—even to the bathroom, where Val affected concern that she was made to stand away from Laura's stall. Val sensed no suspicion when Laura allowed her to help dispense the morning's dosages in the ward. Again there was that rarely felt response in deeply retarded patients to a special person. Laura dispensed as much tender loving care as anything, but one oddity began to form a pattern. The more obvious the retardation in a patient, generally the less assured was Laura's deft handling of capsule or liquid suspension. The great vegetative Rankine took a Shetland pony's dose of Dilantin, the cream-yellow suspension given by syringe directly into his slack mouth. Yet Laura fumbled the simple task.

Val was congratulating herself on a complete survey of all-too-heavy ward drug dosage when: "Did we miss anyone?" Laura asked.

Val thought, *How would I know, with an IQ of 40*, and only smiled in answer, a gesture totally lost on Laura.

Laura persisted, "Did we have any medicine left?" Perspiration began to form at Val's hairline. The questions could be innocent, but they were perfect tripwires for an unwary actress. Val chose the most equivocal response she knew, a murmuring whine that begged relief from stress without imparting any linguistic content. "Mmmmuuhummmaaaahh," she sniveled.

Laura's laugh was merry, guileless. "Well, I guess not." She straightened up from the silent mass of young Rankine, and her hand unerringly found Val's head to pat it, once. "You're a great help. Thank you," she said, and permitted Val to follow her to a holovision set at the end of the ward. Laura, Val found, could enjoy the audio even if she could not receive the images; and she enjoyed company.

Val squirmed as she watched the holo. Suspicions caromed through her head, leaving hot sparks that would not die. It was barely possible that Laura was equipped with some incredibly effective stage

makeup and could see—but that seemed wildly unlikely. It was more possible that she had been briefed by the staff to test newcomers for hidden intelligence. Or perhaps Val had somehow conveyed something to this child-woman, something that Laura's sensitivity would respond to, without knowing what that something was. It was also quite likely that Val was overly suspicious; but Valerie Clarke had learned the folly of easily accepting the comfortable answer. She began to hum a repetitious tune from a holo commercial in what she hoped was suitably MR until a male patient shushed her.

Val helped at the noon meal, serving two patients who were unable to eat by themselves. Laura kept one hand on the patient's chin, the other she laid lightly on Val's wrist, until satisfied that Val could complete the chore. The meal and its inevitable cleanup served to lessen Val's ennui while Chris Maffei chased his papers—but Val was not to be idle for long.

The afternoon quiet was punctuated by the skritch of scrub brushes on linolamat as Dr. Robin Merkle made his rounds. Val, part of the work force, entertained a faint hope that Merkle gave adequate attention to his charges. Merkle propped a clipboard on his substantial belly to make occasional notations. The inconspicuous Rhea Tedder cradled more clipboards as he followed behind. Several times the smaller man spoke—Val thought, a little diffidently. Merkle smiled, or did not smile, behind the goatee, but only shrugged in reply. Lurene Tedder stood before the great locked double doors of the ward, preening her dark tresses with her brush, watching her minions scrub. With stolid calm, scrubbing more quietly, Val crept within earshot of the men.

Tedder eased up to exchange clipboards with Merkle. "Lissen, Rob, I could really use a hit," he wheedled. Val paused, addressed a speck of detritus with a trembling fingernail. "Just a little one," Tedder insisted.

Val kept her face down, trying to be invisible, and was rewarded. "One more request," Merkle said in his quietest pleasant basso, "and you get none tonight. We want to be on top of our cycle for tonight's delivery, don't we?" Val thought, *Now I know where Docta Luween gets that "we" crap. Really grooves on Merkle.*

New hope surged in Rhea Tedder's voice. "Then after tonight, again tomorrow with supper?"

A long silence. Val could almost taste the astringent look from Merkle.

"Just checkin' on my cycle," Tedder said. "You're the expert."

An avuncular laugh from the portly Merkle. "Yes, indeed," he bubbled, "and we'll be friends then, will we not?"

Tedder joined in the laugh, a neurotic *henh, henh* that Val knew from a thousand holo stereotypes of dirty old men. Rhea Tedder was nominally harmless, she thought. *Unless you weigh eighty pounds like I do.*

A crackling slap from across the ward drew the men's attention. Val began to scrub away from them. She could hear, but not yet see, Lurene Tedder at *her* specialty: corporal punishment.

The victim was a young man perhaps twenty-five years old, a quiet one with teeth ruined from habitual gritting together. Val risked a view from her vantage point behind Laura Dunning's bed. Laura sat, knuckles pale as she gripped the coverlet, facing away from the scene.

"You act like a dog, you get treated like a dog," the Tedder woman said in derision. One hand still

holding the hairbrush, Lurene Tedder clutched her other hand into the young man's tangled hair. She was plainly pleased that he struggled as she forced his face into something on the floor.

Merkle raised his voice slightly in reproof: "Lurene ..."

She released her hold with a shrug-and-grin display, satisfied with her punishment of any patient who fouled her ward floor with his excrement. Val mused that it might actually be possible to train a patient away from such pathetic lapses, in the manner of a Lurene Tedder—but at what cost to the patient? Then she saw what the others missed: the youth rising, arms wind-milling crazily as the woman looked away. He fell on her without warning. His hands were fouled, too, and while he dealt no serious blows, Val thought his repayment apt.

It was no contest; neither of the male staff tried to help, and in a moment, repeated slaps reduced the youth to a cringing serf at Lurene Tedder's feet. She then applied further discipline. In all, the hairbrush hammered only a dozen times; but Val shuddered each time it fell. She realized that Lurene Tedder was not using the flat of the brush but the far more damaging bristles, a thousand dull needles seeking passage through the coarse fabric of the youth's ward smock. Seeking, and finding.

The woman paused for breath. Merkle stepped up, took her hairbrush gently, his face a study in mild pique. He ignored the sobbing wretch at their feet. Rhea Tedder, shuffling near them, was the only member of the staff to notice the real victim. He managed to get the young man to his feet and hauled him toward the distant bathroom, and Laura moved in swift silence to help.

Val followed. She paused at the bathroom entrance to survey the ward. Some patients were unaffected by the beating, but others contributed to a pulsing obbligato of fear and misery. Over it, Rob Merkle soothed his dear friend Lurene, who had now taken her brush. It was faintly stained with blood, but unheeding, she brushed away her waning fury and punctuated each stroke with curses. Merkle knew his patients; he drew Lurene out of the ward with practiced aplomb and a promise of gin.

In the bathroom, Rhea Tedder had relinquished the youth to Laura, who peeled the filthy smock from the patient with infinite care. Val remembered to make a low repetitive moan without words, though the words were dangerously close at hand. The youth's back, neck, and arms oozed bright red pinprick droplets. The physical damage was only moderate, Val saw as they bathed their charge in water hot enough to be soporific as well as cleansing. The damage to a muddled psyche would be impossible to assess.

When Laura Dunning asked for synthoderm, Tedder grumbled, but he got it and applied the healing spray himself, mumbling all the while. His complaints were all variants on the "Why me, God?" theme, but he was at least willing to give minimal aid, and for this, Val was grateful.

As he left them, Tedder paused an instant and Val felt a grasp on her buttock. It was untimely, covert, somehow more prank than overture. *He's easily pleased*, she thought. Laura would have to wonder why Val chuckled.

But: "Yes, it's too much, Charles Clegg," Laura said. This was the first time Val had heard the youth's name. "She just doesn't know. But," Laura added opaquely, "she will."

Valerie Clarke puzzled over this prediction. Laura, withdrawn into herself and for once less than agile, enlisted Val's aid in getting young Clegg dried, reclothed, and back to his bed. Drugs were again dispensed to some of the patients after supper but this time Laura rejected Val's help. "Go and see the nice holo," she said in no-nonsense tones, and Val played the obedient child.

Alone for all practical purposes, Val signaled Chris Maffei while she watched the distant Laura move

among the beds. As she expected, Chris was still out of range. She spoke to the remote cassette. ". . . haven't seen any of the staff since then," she said, completing her account of the ward violence, "didn't see your sweetie-pie at all. she too sleepy today?"

"dental care: have i mentioned it? some m.r.'s need caps and there's caries everywhere, and something about laura has me on edge, something i can't specify, yes, i can, too; she isn't on merkle's side but maybe not on ours either, i guess she's just on her own side, and i can't blame her.

"i gave you rhea tedder's conversation with merkle verbatim, and if he's not on a drug maintenance schedule i'm an m.r. for real, and his sweet wife needs a leash; her ordinary interactions are patho, can't guess why merkle keeps either of 'em. maybe you can tell me what delivery merkle expects at night; my guess is, it ain't pepperoni pizza, i get the feeling i'm holding a basketful of cobras and no flute, how soon can you reel me in? i really can't justify a mayday, but i mean, how much do we need to learn beyond this? well, it's your show, just get back to me, okay? all i have to do is play with my fingers and hope the evening stays nice and dull."

Presently, Laura slipped into a tattered seat near Val. Fidgety at first, the blind girl soon began to relax, and Val guessed, incorrectly, that Laura's quietude was a pure effort of will. They watched the holo for hours, becalmed with the surrogate window on a trivial make-believe world. It was quite late when Val heard the staff in the nearby kitchen, and later still when the screaming began.

Val, semientranced before the holovision set, started up violently. The ward lights had automatically cycled off at nine P.M., and only she and Laura lounged before the holo. Vainly she peered down the ward to identify the noise that had aroused her. Was there a spasmodic movement on one of the beds? Val darted a glance at Laura, whose shadowed face and inert form suggested sleep. With the barest whisper of her clothing, Val snaked out of her seat and into the ward's center aisle.

The next moment found her unable to cope. The noise ripped through the ward again: a hoarse, unsexed and dreadful mooing from the nearby ward kitchen. A bombard of metal gongs told her that something flailed among the huge kitchen metalware. She could hear Merkle shouting, and now his voice held tenor overtones. As the terrible lowing segued to a gasping scream, Val recognized the voice of Lurene Tedder, muffled by blows.

Val glanced quickly toward Laura and had the nightmare sense of duality, two places at once, cause and effect in one. At the same instant, the kitchen door emitted stark light that flooded the ward, followed by the struggling forms of Merkle and the Tedders. Rhea hung from one of Lurene's arms while Merkle pinioned the other. Lurene Tedder's prized hair-brush fell at their feet as the men steered her toward the cell where Val had spent her first night. Valerie Clarke crouched motionless in the aisle, alone and desperately vulnerable— but unseen in the tumult.

Lurene's feet seemed willing enough to follow Merkle's staggering lead, yet her arms strained convulsively for freedom. Val ducked between beds, saw Rhea Tedder lose his grip for a twinkling. Lurene's arm thrashed once, catching herself squarely on the chin. She sagged at the blow and her husband regained his purchase. The big woman subsided into breathless sobs as the men led her into the cell. The cell door remained ajar.

Val saw the vandalized kitchen through its open door. Dark ovals of blood shared spots on the floor with a scattering of white powder that Val supposed was sugar until she heard the voices in the cell.

"I can hold her," came the deep voice between labored breaths. "Get the hypospray and a cartridge of

cytoovar from my office. Wait: first grab her damnable security brush and toss it in here, it might help. Can you do that much?"

The brush lay two meters from Val. She sank to the floor. A pair of feet shambled near and she heard Rhea Tedder in an old monologue as he retrieved the brush. He stood erect, paused, gave a *huh?* of surprise, and Val gave herself up—too soon. Rhea Tedder strolled back toward the cell, oblivious of the struggle Val could plainly hear in the cell.

Rhea Tedder paused at the cell and tossed the brush in. He spoke calmly, detached. "What about the shipment, it's all over the floor in there. Hell of a waste . . ."

"LATER," Merkle boomed. "Or do *you* want to hold her?"

The smaller man hurried away from this threat, pausing only to unlock the doors at the end of the ward. The big room was awash with light, the cell door still open, a patient moving uneasily in her bed nearby, and Rob Merkle only meters away with a madwoman barely under control, when Valerie Clarke crept to the kitchen door. She held a discarded paper cup pilfered from a wastebasket, and in one scurrying pass she scooped a bit of powder from the floor. Then she was in darkness again, frenziedly duckwalking in deep shadow toward the holo area.

Val thrust the wadded cup far down into the seam of her seat as she settled down beside Laura Dunning. She opened her mouth wide to avoid puffing as she drew lungfuls of sweet air and waited for her adrenalin to be absorbed. She had no pockets, no prepared drop, no confederates—and no delusions of well-being if her petty theft were discovered. She bit her tongue as Laura spoke.

"I've been bad, Valerie, but so were you." The sweet voice scarcely carried between the seats. "We shouldn't be here, we'll have to sneak to bed." With that, the blind girl swirled up from her seat and in an erect glide, quickly found her bed near the kitchen-lit center of the ward. Val trailed her in double-tune.

Then: "Pretend sleep," Val heard—or did she imagine it?—from Laura, who took her own advice. Valerie did not, for several minutes, recover enough presence of mind to call Chris Maffei. Instead she lay facing away from the cell where Lurene Tedder lay moaning, tended by Merkle and, at his shuffling return, Rhea. Val was certain that Rhea Tedder had neither the inclination nor the guts to attack his sturdy wife. She wondered how and why Merkle, the only other person with Lurene, had chosen to punish her. Valerie had not yet grasped a shred of the truth.

"chris, oh, god, chris, be there," Val transmitted her prayer of hope from halfway under her pillow.

The response was an intercept code promising live dialogue after a short wait. Then abruptly, with great good cheer: "Hi, Val! I'm working late, believe it or not, but I have a little time . . ."

"you have a mayday, too." Val rushed through her synopsis of the past few minutes, adding, "you wanta come get me? i don't know what's in this cup, but it's part of the shipment—and it bothers this little addict more'n his wife does, if you hurry you might be able to figure what they're up to in the kitchen and storeroom."

After a long pause, Maffei replied, "I don't think Merkle will have time to worry about you tonight. You can slip your sample to May, I'll have her stop by and see you tomorrow."

"tomorrow?" The word was bereft of hope.

"Look, Val, these people are fumbling something; I've only just realized what it might be. You're my eyes and ears while they do it, and you could pick up something a whole lot bigger than either of us ever bargained for."

"e.g., rigor mortis . . ."

"Don't be melodramatic. I have a make on the Tedders; he's a pussycat. Dr. Tedder, all right. Doctor of divinity from a diploma factory in South Texas. The old mail-order business, he may pray you to death but he's a harmless fraud. His wife's a reject physical ed teacher from a girl's military school, with some experience in a chemical plant—curiously, the same company Merkle worked for. My guess is, they're a matched pair of technicians Merkle can count on."

"for what?"

"You ready for this? Sleet! A refrigerated cocaine derivative the feds turned up in New Orleans last year. It avoids most of the side effects of snow—ulcerated sinuses, convulsions, stuff your higher class of cocaine addict will pay to avoid. Potent and highly addictive. Sleet was concocted by somebody pretty bright; pure snow processed with a powdered enzyme and protein. You take it with food, the enzyme comes up to your body temperature, and your stomach lining lays a swell little hit on you when the three components interact."

"you think they're cutting it here?"

"I think Rob Merkle could be the capital-S source. You say soy flour's abundant there? I damn well bet it is, to keep fresh batches of enzyme going. It'd have to be slurried and centrifuged, dried—but, hell, once you had the process and the enzyme, your only problem would be keeping the secret and maybe fighting off your buyers. Merkle may have caught Miz Tedder sneaking some."

Val coded a "hold" signal and emerged slowly from beneath her pillow. She could hear Lurene Tedder speaking with the men, her enunciation mushmouthed but steady. Val employed cloze procedure to mentally fill in the words she missed and listened for several minutes, mystified. When she burrowed under the edge of the pillow again, she brought a new loose end with her. "something's not meshing, chris. merkle's asking lurene what happened and she can't tell him; doesn't blame him for anything, as if the invisible man lambasted her." It was a much closer guess than Val knew.

Maffei used her simile to press his earlier point. "It's *all* been invisible until now. You have a chance to see things I couldn't even get close to, and ..."

". . . and you can't see past those big boobies." The wrong moment, she knew; but there it was.

Chris answered *sotto voce*, as if to a male friend, and Val knew that May Endicott was within hailing distance of him. "If it'll make you feel better, she, ah, puts up a good front."

"i swoon with delight, you bastard, you could have the good sense to lie about it."

"My work is too important for lies between us, Val."

"but not too important for lays with miz randycu . . ."

"Val!" In dulcet reasonable tones: "A certain—relationship—can enhance motivation on the job." Too late he saw the sweep of that truth.

"don't i know it. but the job isn't a clean scholarly paper, the job is people—a boy who doesn't know the hurt is because nobody cares that his teeth are rotting— a lovely girl with smooth flesh where eyes should

be, piecing her world together alone—kids that might be curable if anybody cared."

She could hear anger rising in Maffei's answers. For years she had used that as her motive for retreat. "And the first step is just what I'm doing, Val."

"my, my, do tell me all about it."

"*We're* doing! You know I include you."

"when you think about it." Her tones, she knew, were flat; her words harsh. She should be pleading, begging him to complement her love and need, but Valerie Clarke could not cling this time, "look, you have things to do and i don't need this, send—send may around."

"Right, I ... you're transmitting oddly. Rhythm's off or something. Trouble?" He rapped out the last word.

She was glad Chris could not see the runny nose, cheeks glistening with her tears, "i'm—jumpy, i guess, forget it."

"Well—if you're sure you don't need bailout." His intonation asked, instead of offering, reassurance.

Despite her growing fear, choking back a reminder that she had clearly sent a mayday, she replied, "i'm sure, go 'way, lemme sleep—please, chris."

For a full half-minute Val lay still, commanding her small frame to stop heaving with sobs that might wake Laura. It was easier than ever, now, to empathize with children who could not expect help from Outside.

Then: "Val?"

"yeah."

"Are you really sure? I'm worried; you don't sound right."

"you want a framed affidavit? i said i was."

"I just sensed ... as if someone had tied you up and forced you to say it. Give me the word."

"somebody did, a long time ago; and chitlins, god-damnit, chitlins!"

Then the channel was silent. For a long while, sleep evaded Valerie. Self-doubt shored her insomnia. She was both losing Chris Maffei and throwing him away; the hard facts militated against her when opponents were violent and massive; and somehow, she knew, she had been witness to more than she could absorb. Sleep came while she searched for a neglected detail. She should have analyzed them in pairs.

If Valerie Clarke awoke sluggishly, she could take comfort in the notion that the staff had managed even less sleep than she. The kitchen was spotless and Rhea Tedder, not Lurene, superintended the breakfast. When May Endicott appeared in the ward to help him, Val noted the shadows under those seductive eyes and enjoyed a nice mixture of emotions.

Twice May found Val's gaze and twice Val treated her to the briefest of enigmatic smiles. Under Laura's tutelage, Val fed two patients and there was no secret way to retrieve her problematic sample, much less pass it on. Immediately after the cleanup—always necessary with patients who fed like caged creatures—Val made her way to the holo area. May could not know Val's intent and soon followed in a

manner much too bright, forthright, and amateurish.

May's greeting was tentative and too loud. Val replied in a mumble. "Beg your pardon," May said, leaning near.

"Quit calling attention to us," Val murmured calmly, "and sit down, and especially, *pipe* down."

May sat as if felled. She was blushing as she studied the holo. "Dr. Maffei said tell you his communication set is damaged," she said finally. Two other patients, sitting near, ignored their entire exchange. "But he's getting it fixed now. And he trusted me as a courier. You do have something for me to bring him?" The naive brown eyes radiated concern.

A nod indistinguishable at any distance. "When I leave, it'll be in my seat. For God's sake, get it out of here. And get me out, too, as soon as you can. Don't delay."

A winsome glance from May. Val wished the woman weren't so likable. "We say 'dawdle' in these parts." Then after a long pause, in kaffeeklatsch camaraderie: "I had no idea he was usin' you like this."

"You're even stealing my lines," Val muttered the multiple entendre with relish. To soften its impact she continued, "That goddam comm set! What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know, Chr—Dr. Maffei said he must've hit it with his heel."

Val examined this datum for a moment. Only the scrambler module, a recent addition, was mounted in Maffei's car where it could be struck by a foot. And then only by someone in the passenger's side by kicking upward with one's toe. But with the heel . . . ?

The heel. Right. Val turned her head with great deliberation and, despite herself, a twitch on her lips. She said nothing, only looked volumes. And saw a furious blush mount the Endicott features as May realized her gaffe to someone intimately familiar with Maffei's car. Suddenly shamed by her meanness, Val arose clumsily without a word and wandered off. She had found the bit of paper cup by blind fumbling and let it drop into the seat in plain sight.

Val adopted a shuffling gait as Lurene Tedder entered the ward doorway with a tray of medication. The big woman did not notice Val's spindly person, so intent was she on something at the far end of the ward. With prickly hot icicles at the back of her head, Val knew that Lurene was studying the holo region.

Quickly the woman stepped out to the hallway and keyed a wall intercom. "Dr. Merkle, Dr. Merkle," she called in smug parody of a hospital page, "you are wanted in the ward. Right *now*," she added with the assurance of a drill sergeant.

The intercom replied, but Val could not hear it clearly.

"No I can't, buddy-boy, I just caught me a stasher and I ain't gonna take my eyes off her." Another faint answer. "You come and see. I'll give you a hint, lover: this makes two in a row. I could be wrong, but can you chance it?"

Lurene Tedder marched into the ward again and, without conversation, relinquished the tray to Laura Dunning. The woman never took her stare from the end of the ward, and Val, playing finger games for camouflage, studied the square Tedder face. Under the telltale gleam of synthoderm the entire face was puffy, facial planes indistinct under localized swellings. Like collodion of old, synthoderm tended to peel around the mouth; the naked skin that showed was freckled with tiny scabs. A chill scuttled down Val's backbone; Lurene's punishment had been a terrific hiding across her face with her own hairbrush! The eyes glittered even more deeply beneath swollen brows and Val knew that Lurene Tedder was fortunate

to retain her eyesight. Yet she could be civil to Merkle—who strode into the ward at the moment Laura chose to begin dispensing dosages.

Val shuddered with relief as the pair moved past her. She hurried to Laura's side to take her "instruction" in dispensing the drugs. A backward glance revealed that Merkle and Tedder, talking quickly, were converging on May Endicott. Val wondered whether May had the good sense to think of a cover activity, and guessed against it. As she saw her guess confirmed, Val began to hope that May would brazen or physically force her way out.

From the first moment, May's fear was emblazoned on her face. The dialogue rose in volume until Laura paused, her head cocked attentively. "She's the only good thing that's happened here," Laura said quietly, "and now she'll be gone."

May exchanged glares with Lurene while Merkle, much the tallest, looked down at May. For a second he craned his head to one side at May's cleavage, then thrust one hand into it in a lightning maneuver. May jerked her hands up—too late. Merkle stepped back to examine his prize and Lurene Tedder moved to intercept May's desperate grab.

While May darted anguished looks around her, Merkle studied the scrap of heavy paper and its contents. Brusquely he gave an order and fell behind as May led a procession toward Val's end of the ward. It seemed that they might pass outside until Merkle, with a silent thumb-jerk, indicated the isolation cell to Lurene Tedder. Val considered, for one instant, the possibility of a diversion. Flinging the tray; anything.

No one was prepared for Laura Dunning's reaction. Screaming, "She doesn't hurt anybody," Laura dived past Val and upset the tray as she flung herself at the sounds of combat.

Merkle spun to catch the lithe girl while Lurene grappled with May. He took no punishment and, with a backhand cuff, sent Laura squalling to the floor. The blind girl, hopelessly unequal to the fray, moaned as she rolled aside. She nursed her right shoulder as, still sobbing, she found her bed and lay back.

Val knelt in the spill of drugs, terrified and inert. She had never felt so vulnerable to physical violence, and almost transmitted an open "mayday" before remembering that Maffei could not receive it.

May's body was not fashioned for the rough-and-tumble of a Lurene Tedder, and after a brief struggle, May was flung into the cell. The door slammed shut, locked under Tedder's key.

Merkle ignored Val, the drugs, and faint pounding from inside the cell, patting Lurene in the manner of a coach with a favored athlete. "You were right," he grunted. They were three meters from Valerie Clarke. "Where did she get it?"

Val hefted a bottle, wondering which skull to aim for, somehow remembering to keep her jaw slack and her eyes slightly averted. An eternal moment later Lurene hazarded, "Must've hidden it down by the holo someplace. You'll have to ask her when."

"You anticipate me," Merkle said jovially, urging Lurene to the ward entrance. As he paused to lock the ward doors, Val heard him continue. "She has to sleep sometime; it'll be simple to find out then." They receded down the hall, and Val heard a last fragment. "No shortage of time, or of scop. I told you this setup would be ideal for it ..."

A youth began to take interest in the strewn capsules and Val scooped up the mess quickly before taking it to Laura. A corner of her brain marveled that Merkle could simply stride away from an addict's array of downers, knowing that any of the patients might ingest any or all of the drugs—or simply lie down and

wallow in them. She sat down heavily on the side of Laura's bed and leaped up again at Laura's quick gasp.

"Don't, oh, don't! My shoulder," Laura moaned, and Val realized that her small mass had jarred the bed. "Valerie?"

Val answered guardedly. She could call no one, trust no one; Laura might suspect, but had no proof that Val was equipped with that formidable tool, knowledge. On the other hand, May certainly knew. And if Merkle employed scopolamine on May Endicott, he would soon strip the imposture bare. Val sat on her bed, trembling.

It was clear that Laura could not dispense medication. Val judged it was half-past ten, and thinking of the chaos of a dozen interrupted medication schedules in an unsupervised MR ward, she administered the dosages she recalled. Nor was she really out of character: idiot-savant retardates had been known to demonstrate a memory far beyond that of normal people.

The docile Rankine was one of her failures. Laura had evidently stepped on the big needleless syringe which she would have used to administer his whopping dose of Dilantin suspension. Val wasted half a bottle of the stuff trying to pour it past his lips, then gave it up. Rankine was not disposed to help take the dosage by this unfamiliar method; very well, then. He would simply have to bear it with several others whose dosages Val could not recall.

Val lay back on her bed, vainly transmitting to Chris Maffei every few minutes. Interrupted by a low sobbing from Laura, she suddenly considered the remaining drugs. Surely a yellow Valium, only five milligrams, couldn't hurt. She found one in her leftover cache and laid it to Laura's lips.

Laura took it greedily with an attempted smile. "Not enough," she confided. Val stiffened, then relaxed. Even recognizing the drug by taste or shape, how could the blind Laura know a white two-milligram pill from a potent blue ten? But perhaps even ten would not be too much. If the scapula were broken, Laura's pain was surely intense. Val administered another yellow pill and lay back to narrowcast another blazing "mayday" to Chris Maffei.

Two patients scuffled briefly. Another yodeled for joy. Val studied the narrow clerestory windows, knowing that even her very small head would not fit, presuming that she could smash the glass tiles. And if she tried to signal May, only meters away in the isolation cell, the staff could easily pick it up via monitors.

Laura breathed more regularly now, the Valium taking its effect. Lying full length on her bed, Val found satisfaction in her act of loving kindness. Then, without preamble, a delicious lassitude washed through her body as through gauze. Val saw that her right hand was stroking her thigh. Eerily, it did not respond to her next command. "Stop that," she said aloud. She felt a presence not her own; it was purest intuition to reply.

Val composed another message. Deliberately unformed, not vocalized but simply broadcast thought, a cloudy montage of unease and avoidance. No effect, but her left forearm nuzzled her bud of a breast before she could stop it. On an instant surmise Val thought hard of a putrid shine, mentally smelled it, pictured it. Holding the thought, she felt something slip away. It was like a fever breaking, a fever unannounced but somehow benign, that now began reluctantly to loose its hold. Quickly Val visualized a smile; the smile she valued most, the dimpled puckish leer of Chris Maffei.

Then, despite her effort to halt it, her right hand patted her left wrist, twice. She watched her hands intently, a sham catatonic, for many seconds. Whatever it was, it had withdrawn. To where?

Across from Valerie Clarke lay the girl who was prone to mild epileptic seizures. Charles Clegg, the youth who had taken the hairbrush beating, stood near the girl, pointing, laughing. Below a certain level of socialization there is little empathy, and Clegg's amusement stemmed from the girl's loss of control. It was over now, at any rate, with no harm done.

Val told herself she had her own goose flesh to ponder, then in a fresh surge of adrenalin mentally connected the events. Lurene Tedder did not know the source of her flogging. And Val had a lucid flash of memory during *that* event: the epileptic girl had jerked on her bed while Laura Dunning, otherwise inert before the holo, sat and pounded her hand on her chair arm. Suddenly Laura's subliminal hand movement was meaningful.

Just now, the MR girl had suffered another spasm, while some unseen presence bade Val to caress herself. Who had reason to thank Val? She rolled over, lying now on her side, and faced Laura.

"What do you need?" Laura spoke soothingly, in deep repose. Val had said nothing.

All thought of keeping her cover vanished, Val answered, "You said you'd been bad, Laura. Did *you* make that woman punish herself?"

"I'm not sorry."

Good Jesus, I'm hallucinating. This isn't real. "And you thanked me just then—a minute ago?"

"I *am* sorry for that," was the contrite reply. "You're normal, you didn't need it like that."

Another thought whirled in Val's head. "I don't even have to talk out loud, do I?"

"Better to talk. Thoughts are so fast they're confusing sometimes. And it hurts sometimes."

"You don't know your strength," Val confided. "I believe you trigger those seizures the others have."

Laura could not weep tears, but she could cry. "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. So much pain and confusion, I try to help. I'm sorry."

"You do help," Val said. "You can help now if you can listen in on those miserable sons of bitches to see what they're up to."

A long pause, then: "Too far away. I have to take medicine to make people do things. I steal it. Can't be sure when the power will come, sometimes it doesn't. Sorry, sorry," the blind girl wept, her high forehead furrowed in grief.

Val soothed Laura, kneeling next to her, thin fingers on the girl's wrist. A rattle of keys at the ward doorway, and Val eased back onto her bed. Merkle came in first, Lurene next. They held the doors open for Rhea, who wheeled a gurney into the ward. Val realized then that they did not intend May Endicott to walk out of the cell, and subvocalized a prayerful plea to Maffei. Nothing. *Kicked it with your heel, you turd*, she raged.

There was no desperate speed in the preparations. Val guessed they had simply tired of waiting for answers, and had elected to overpower May Endicott before drugging her. "Laura," she whispered, "can you help May when they open that cell door?"

"It's not coming," Laura breathed as the cell door swung open. The trio stormed the pathetic May and slammed the door.

Val flew to the cell and cursed herself for not having checked the lock mechanism earlier. No use in any case: without a key, she could not lock them in, and she went jelly-kneed at the thought of entering that cell with anything less than a riot gun. From the muffled noises Val knew that May was going under sedation. Merkle's bass resonated in the cell but wall padding strained it of content.

She ran to the ward doors. Metal-faced, securely locked, as was the kitchen. But with enough mass piled on the waiting gurney, it might just possibly be accelerated down the ward to smash the doors. And smashing the wheeled metal cot itself might slow them in getting May from the ward. Val did not need a legal opinion to conclude that, with every additional step a fresh felony, the staff of Gulfview might welcome premeditated murder. Whatever might have happened to the Fowler girl, Val did not relish seeing it repeated. She tugged at the gurney, wheeled it up the center aisle toward the holo area. Perhaps the chairs would serve, if she could pile them on, or enlist patients in her enterprise.

She could get no one to aid in her little game. Patients strolled over to watch, slack-jointed and empty-eyed, as Val managed to tip two seats up into the gurney. Whimpering with the effort, she pulled the vehicle near the ponderous holovision set, all of a meter wide and massing perhaps a hundred pounds. She reached to disconnect the wiring, but at least one patient knew what that meant. He wanted his program, and the skinny girl with frightened eyes wanted to pull its plug. He screamed, face twisted in sudden ferocity, and thrust Val away.

Val raced to the side of Laura Dunning, who seemed asleep but for the mobility of her features. "Laura, is Valium the medicine for your power? Could you make some patients help me smash those doors?"

"Dilantin's the only thing that works," came the soft reply. "I only discovered it recently. Do you have any?"

Val whirled to her cache of unused drugs beneath her pillow. They were gone. Disoriented for the moment, she looked up to see young Charles Clegg. He held capsules in one hand while trying to bite off the safety cap of the Dilantin bottle. He had seen people drink it; maybe it would taste good.

Valerie Clarke did not know she could leap so fast, with such hand-eye coordination. She flashed past Clegg in a two-handed grab and the bottle was hers. Clegg was between her and Laura, but Val thought to circle around behind beds across the ward. It was at this juncture that Dr. Robin Merkle emerged from the cell.

He scanned the ward, saw Val, and then spotted the gurney filled with furniture. He looked almost pleased. Val saw it in his face: her cover was blown.

Val held the crucial Dilantin and Merkle, the advantage. He also wielded the hypospray, which could accept pressure cartridges of anything from saline solution to curare. While he could not know Val's intention, Merkle obviously proposed to take her into custody here and now. Their eyes locked. Neither spoke. Lurene Tedder hurried to cut Val off from her narrow corridor between beds and wall.

"Easy, Rob," Lurene cautioned, and Merkle stopped to listen. Val took a step back, poised. "This li'l thing didn't get here on her own, somebody Outside will be askin'."

"If we wait, it's a sure bust," Merkle rumbled as if reasserting an old position. "On the new schedule, we can process another, oh, say eighty pounds of protein." He beamed at Valerie. "Thirty hours or so at twenty-three Celsius."

At this, even Lurene Tedder blinked. "We're gonna *process* these two?" Val first saw the flicker of revulsion in the woman's face, then realized what it meant to her, Valerie Clarke, and had to steady herself against fainting.

"For more enzyme. Matuase doesn't care what it feeds on," Merkle said, pleased at his logic. "These ladies will complete a perfect irony. Part of the operation, as it were."

Sickened with loathing, Val fanned a faint spark of hope that Lurene would rebel. The lump in Val's throat forbade her any speech; the pounding of her heart was physical pain. Then, with a great sigh, Lurene said, "Well, it's better tactics than planting 'em, like you-know-who," and closed in on Valerie Clarke.

The thought of herself as finely ground fodder in some unknown enzyme production phase nearly robbed Val of consciousness, but the approach of Lurene and Merkle was galvanic. Val spun and ran for the gurney, hoping to get it underway before they could stop her. A quasi-female laugh followed her like a promise of extinction. Val collided against an inert patient, reached the gurney, began to thrust it ahead of her down the center of the ward. Even as it began to roll, she saw that she was simply too small for the task.

Lurene danced almost playfully out into the aisle, hands spread before her to intercept the loaded gurney. Val grabbed the thing she held in her teeth and hurled it at the woman, then was aware of her mistake. Val's missile connected against Lurene Tedder's forehead, but the soft plastic bottle had little effect and Lurene diverted the gurney between two beds. Val saw Merkle stoop to retrieve the Dilantin bottle as it skittered near him. The bottle went into his pocket. She had literally hurled her last hope away, and his stumbling panic Val fell over the huge form of Gerald Rankine, looming in his bed near the holo.

Rankine stirred slightly and opened unfocused eyes. Val scrambled over the great form and into the holo area, now devoid of its two heaviest seats. Lurene Tedder bawled for Rhea, who trotted up the ward for his instructions.

As Val cowered behind the holovision, mindless with terror, Lurene waved Rhea around while she herself took a frontal approach. Merkle moved to cut off any escape behind the beds; and the very proximity of the three triggered Val as it might any small and cornered animal.

Val flung herself into Rhea Tedder as Lurene crashed against the holo set in pursuit. Rhea found himself grappling with a small demon, all thin sticks and sharp edges, that spat and clawed as he held on. Recovering, the sturdy Lurene thrust herself away from the holo, already tottering on its stand from her impact, and then Lurene tackled Val in a smothering embrace. Merkle had time to laugh once as he saw Lurene's clumsy success, but he did not see the holo as it toppled onto the silently staring young Rankine.

Lifted aloft by the big woman, Val caught a glimpse of the holo set. It leaned drunkenly on Rankine's midriff, its great window facing his eyes, its picture transmuted into bursts of flickering light by the rough handling.

Val took two fistfuls of hair and wrenched, trying to tear it from Lurene Tedder's abundant mop. Val's throat was too constricted to scream and Lurene only snarled. From down the ward, then, floated a dreamlike, ecstatic moan. "Ohhhh, it's a *lovely* one," cried Laura Dunning, borne into an orgasmic flood of silently thundering energy.

Because Merkle was most distant from the melee, he was first to catapult himself down the aisle. Val felt

muscular arms relax and, kicking furiously, vacated Lurene Tedder's shoulder. Lurene staggered, nearly fell, then began to accelerate down the center of the ward after Merkle. Rhea Tedder tried to follow but tripped over Val before he began to run.

A welter of impressions clamored in Val's head. The holo, crashing to the floor as young Rankine jerked in the throes of a truly leviathan epileptic seizure. Howls of helpless terror from Merkle and the woman, bleats from Rhea, as the three found themselves sprinting harder down the ward. Laura Dunning's cooing luxuriance in a stream of almost sexual power was lower-pitched, but Val heard it. Valerie Clarke splayed hands over her ears and blanched an instant before Merkle impacted against the great double doors.

Merkle, with a hysterical falsetto shriek, never even raised his hands. He slammed the metal door-facing with a concussive report that jolted every patient, every fixture. Head-first, arms and legs pumping, driven by two hundred and sixty pounds of his beloved protein, Dr. Robin Merkle comprised part one of Laura Dunning's battering ram.

Lurene Tedder's last scream was entirely feminine; she managed to turn her head to one side as she obliterated herself against the sheet steel.

The doors, bent under Merkle's hapless assault, flew ajar; a lock mechanism clattered into the corridor beyond as Lurene fell into the opening. Rhea Tedder, ever the rear guard, called his wife's name as he hurtled into the space. One shoulder caught a door frame with pitiless precision, hurled the door wide as the addict ricocheted into a corridor wall. Val, leaping to her feet, saw Rhea disappear down the corridor, lying on his side, still pantomiming a sprinter's gait on the floor. He did not stop for moments afterward; Val could hear the tortured wheeze of his breath, the ugly measured tattoo of his feet and arms beating against the corridor floor and baseboard.

The patients were shocked into retreat from the violence at the ward doorway, and none seemed tempted to approach it. For one thing—*two*—the remains of Rob Merkle and Lurene Tedder sprawled grotesquely in their way.

With all the caution of a nocturnal animal, Val rifled Merkle's lab smock. She found the hypospray intact and felt armed; then she hefted the Dilantin bottle—and in a moment's reflection, realized that she was doubly armed. As she faced her puzzle, odd pieces began to warp into place, and for the first time in many days, Valerie Clarke knew what it meant to smile in relief.

Quickly, gently Val checked for vital signs. She saw the ruined, misshapen head of Robin Merkle and knew why he had no pulse. Lurene Tedder lay dying, insensible, extremities twitching. In the hallway lay Rhea Tedder, unconscious from shock and fractures, his breathing fetid but steady. She judged that he would live. Her small joy in this judgment was proof that Val could still surprise herself. It was true that Rhea Tedder could answer crucial questions—but it was also true that he could ogle a homely girl. She made a note to tell Chris Maffei: *Blessed are the easily pleased, for theirs is the kingdom of Earth.*

The corridor intercom needed no special key. She punched Outside, idly musing at the closeness of help for anyone who could reach the corridor. In moments, a policewoman was taping her call.

Two minutes later Val reentered the ward. She opened the isolation cell with Merkle's keys, once again tense almost to the point of retching with thoughts of what she might find inside. May Endicott lay sprawled in fetching disarray on the cot, drugged to her marrow but apparently unhurt. That enviable body would decay one day, Val thought; but not today, at twenty-three degrees Celsius. She could see

from a distance that Gerald Rankine had passed the tonic stage of his seizure, and was well into the clonic, his body jerking slightly as the effects of the monstrous seizure passed. She moved to Laura Dunning's side. It felt good to smile again.

Val wondered how to begin. "I have news for you, Laura," she said gently.

Laura was awake but, with the Valium, quite mellow.

"I know. I did it without the medicine," the blind girl said proudly.

"Well—yes and no. It's seizures by other people that bring on the power, Laura. No wonder you couldn't tell when the power would come: *it isn't your power!*"

Confusion wrinkled Laura's nose. "But I make people do things."

"Can you ever," Val agreed, "but not alone. You're a—a modulator, I suppose. Rankine did not get his Dilantin today; and that could've brought on a seizure by itself. You see—oh, excuse me—you understand, whenever you stole a dose of Dilantin from Rankine or that young girl, the patient who needed it was in danger of an epileptic seizure. But the surest way to bring on a seizure is a strong blinking light—and that holo set zapped poor Rankine into the grandpaw of all grand mals, thank God."

"My," Laura murmured with a secret smile, "but it was good. But you mean, I never needed the medicine myself?"

"It probably impedes you. You need a carrier wave from some strong source, and you manage to modulate it into commands. You know what electroencephalography is? Anyway, a real thunderation seizure comes with the damndest electrical brain discharge you can imagine, far more intense than any normal discharge. Of course, that same intensity raises hell with the higher centers of that same brain. Like trying to send Morse code through a flashlight, using lightning bolts." She raised her hands, then let them drop in frustration. "All I know is, you've gotta be sensitized in some way to modulate other people's brain discharges into commands. Normal brain activity just doesn't feature such power; those huge discharge spikes are characteristic of epilepsy. All this is simplistic, but I haven't time to detail it now." *Nor understand it yet*, she thought.

Laura sought Val's hand with her own. "You know something about these things? You'll stay with me?"

The idea settled over Valerie Clarke like a security blanket. "I've learned some from a man. I need to learn more." This astonishingly gifted girl needed her, Val realized. Her smile broadened as she stroked Laura Dunning's brow. "I'm going to claim Rhea Tedder went berserk and stampeded the others into that door. It's a weak story, Christ knows, but it'll accommodate the facts you can see." The ethics of her decision disturbed Val until she remembered Rhea Tedder holding her for the processing team.

A sigh from Laura: "I wish I really could see."

"Don't you? Through other people?"

As if showing a hole card, Laura said, "Kind of." Her hand gripped Val's desperately. "If I could do it better, I could help some of my friends here a lot more. Some of them are trying to climb walls in their heads, to get out to us."

It was possible, Val admitted to herself. And who would be a better tool than an honest-to-God telepath? With a machine-generated carrier wave, could Laura reinforce improved behavior patterns in a trainable MR? The possibilities were untouched, and staggering. Chris Maffei had spoken of Gulfview's problems as the devil he knew, but Val smiled at a new thought: *the devil you don't know may be an*

angel in disguise.

"Who've you been talking to at night?" Val realized that Laura had, at the very least, known of the transmissions at her end.

"Dr. Christopher Maffei," Val answered. Curiously, it sounded flat. The name no longer held its familiar emotional lift. She considered this further.

"Can he help us—me?"

"Us." Val's correction was an implicit promise. "Yes, but he's a proud man, Laura. He'll want to make you famous." *Because it'll make him famous*, an inner voice added.

Slowly, Laura replied, "I don't think I want that."

"We may be more useful without it," Val agreed. "But I know Chris, and he has strong opinions." She grinned at a sudden unbidden thought. "'Course, you could always run his opinions off a cliff—and I'm kidding, by the way."

After a long pause Laura asked, "Do you love him?"

Since Laura could probably sense a lie anyway, Val resolved to use utter candor. "Yes." With a starshell burst of insight Val added, "But now I don't think I need him much. Does that sound harsh?"

"Your thinking isn't harsh. And Dr. Maffei: does he need you?"

Put in such blunt terms, the questions brought answers Val had never formalized. They hurt. "Yes; but you see, he's never loved me much."

"I love you." Laura's admission was shy, tentative. "But I don't think it's the same, is it?"

Val chuckled. "'Fraid not. But it's enough. Was it Vonnegut who said the worst thing that can happen to you is not to get used?" A new resolve sped Val's answer. "In a few minutes a whole raft of people will be here to turn everything upside down and set it right again. You're sedated, baby, so you be goddamn good and sedate! Keep your ability to yourself, don't force any automatic behavior on anybody, don't even hint about it—until I come for you. And I will."

The hand tightened again over Val's thinner one. "You have to leave?"

"For a while. Weeks, maybe. But you and I will figure out how you tick, and we don't want Chris Maffei diddling with your metronome so he can compose a best-selling ditty with it. Later, maybe. And maybe not. The trick is being used properly, isn't it, Laura?"

"You're the boss," Laura said meekly. And listening to police beepers in the distance, Valerie Clarke knew that she was, indeed, ready to assume the leaden mantle of decision-making. She wondered if Maffei's scrambler unit was repaired yet. It was the simplest of matters to find out, but Val could wait. There was plenty of time for her to put Maffei to use.