## A SEPULCHRE OF SONGS Orson Scott Card

She was losing her mind during the rain. For four weeks it came down nearly every day, and the people at the Millard County Rest Home didn't take any of the patients outside. It bothered them all, of course, and made life especially hellish for the nurses, everyone complaining to them constantly and demanding to be entertained.

Elaine didn't demand entertainment, however. She never seemed to demand much of anything. But the rain hurt her worse than anyone. Perhaps because she was only fifteen, the only child in an institution devoted to adult misery. More likely because she depended more than most on the hours spent outside; certainly she took more pleasure from them. They would lift her into her chair, prop her up with pillows so her body would stay straight, and then race down the corridor to the glass doors, Elaine calling, "Faster, faster," as they pushed her until finally they were outside. They told me she never really said anything out there, just sat quietly in her chair on the lawn, watching everything. And then later in the day they would wheel her back in.

I often saw her being wheeled in -- early, because I was there, though she never complained about my visits' cutting into her hours outside. As I watched her being pushed toward the rest home, she would smile at me so exuberantly that my mind invented arms for her, waving madly to match her childishly delighted face; I imagined legs pumping, imagined her running across the grass, breasting the air like great waves. But there were the pillows where arms should be, keeping her from falling to the side, and the belt around her middle kept her from pitching forward, since she had no legs to balance with.

It rained four weeks, and I nearly lost her.

My job was one of the worst in the state, touring six rest homes in as many counties, visiting each of them every week. I "did therapy" wherever the rest home administrators thought therapy was needed. I never figured, out how they decided -- all the patients were mad to one degree or another, most with the helpless insanity of age, the rest with the anguish of the invalid and the crippled.

You don't end up as a state-employed therapist if you had much ability in college. I sometimes pretend that I didn't distinguish myself in graduate school because I marched to a different dnunmer. But I didn't. As one kind professor gently and brutally told me, I wasn't cut out for science. But I was sure I was cut out for the art of therapy. Ever since I comforted my mother during her final year

of cancer, I had believed I had a knack for helping people get straight in their minds. I was everybody's confidant.

Somehow I had never supposed, though, that I would end up trying to help the hopeless in a part of the state where even the healthy didn't have much to live for. Yet that's all I had the credentials for, and when I (so maturely) told myself I was over the initial disappointment, I made the best of it.

Elaine was the best of it.

"Raining raining raining," was the greeting I got when I visited her on the third day of the wet spell.

"Don't I know it?" I said. "My hair's soaking wet."

"Wish mine was," Elaine answered.

"No, you don't. You'd get sick."

"Not me," she said.

"Well, Mr. Woodbury told me you're depressed. I'm supposed to make you happy."

"Make it stop raining."

"Do I look like God?"

"I thought maybe you were in disguise. I'm in disguise," she said. It was one of our regular games. "I'm really a large Texas armadillo who was granted one wish. I wished to be a human being. But there wasn't enough of the armadillo to make a full human being; so here I am." She smiled. I smiled back.

Actually, she had been five years old when an oil truck exploded right in front of her parents' car, killing both of them and blowing her arms and legs right off. That she survived was a miracle. That she had to keep on living was unimaginable cruelty. That she managed to be a reasonably happy person, a favorite of the nurses -- that I don't understand in the least. Maybe it was because she had nothing else to do. There aren't many ways that a person with no arms or legs can kill herself.

"I want to go outside," she said, turning her head away from me to look out the window.

Outside wasn't much. A few trees, a lawn, and beyond that a fence, not to keep the inmates in but to keep out the seamier residents of a rather seamy town. But

there were low hills in the distance, and the birds usually seemed cheerful. Now, of course, the rain had driven both birds and hills into hiding. There was no wind, and so the trees didn't even sway. The rain just came straight down.

"Outer space is like the rain," she said. "It sounds like that out there, just a low drizzling sound in the background of everything."

"Not really," I said. "There's no sound out there at all."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"There's no air. Can't be any sound without air."

She looked at me scornfully. "Just as I thought. You don't really know. You've never been there, have you?"

"Are you trying to pick a flght?"

She started to answer, caught herself, and nodded. "Damned rain."

"At least you don't have to drive in it," I said. But her eyes got wistful, and I knew I had taken the banter too far. "Hey," I said. "First clear day I'll take you out driving."

"It's hormones," she said.

"What's hormones?"

"I'm fifteen. It always bothered me when I had to stay in. But I want to scream. My muscles are all bunched up, my stomach is all tight, I want, to go outside and scream. It's hormones."

"What about your friends?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? They're all out there, playing in the rain."

"All of them?"

"Except Grunty, of course. He'd dissolve."

"And where's Grunty?"

"In the freezer, of course."

"Someday the nurses are going to mistake him for ice cream and serve him to the guests."

She didn't smile. She just nodded, and I knew that I wasn't getting anywhere. She really was depressed.

I asked her whether she wanted something.

"No pills," she, said. "They make me sleep all the time."

"If I gave you uppers, it would make you climb the walls."

"Neat trick," she said.

"It's that strong. So do you want something to take your mind off the rain and these four ugly yellow walls?"

She shook her head. "I'm trying not to sleep."

"Why not?"

She just shook her head again. "Can't sleep. Can't let myself sleep too much."

I asked again.

"Because," she said, "I might not wake up." She said it rather sternly, and I knew I shouldn't ask anymore. She didn't often get impatient with me, but I knew this time I was coming perilously close to overstaying my welcome.

"Got to go," I said. "You will wake up." And then I left, and I didn't see her for a week, and to tell the truth I didn't think of her much that week, what with the rain and a suicide in Ford County that really got to me, since she was fairly young and had a lot to live for, in my opinion. She disagreed and won the argument the hard way.

Weekends I live in a trailer in Piedmont. I live alone. The place is spotlessly clean because cleaning is something I do religiously. Besides, I tell myself, I might want to bring a woman home with me one night. Some nights I even do, and some nights I even enjoy it, but I always get restless and irritable when they start trying to get me to change my work schedule, or take them along to the motels I live in or, once only, get the trailerpark manager to let them into my trailer when I'm gone. To keep things cozy for me. I'm not interested in "cozy." This is probably because of my mother's death; her cancer and my responsibilities as housekeeper for my father probably explain why I am a neat housekeeper. Therapist, therap thyself. The days passed in rain and highways and depressing people depressed out of their minds; the nights passed in television and sandwiches and motel bedsheets at state expense; and then it was time to go to the Millard County Rest Home again, where Elaine was waiting. It was then that I thought of her and realized that the rain had been going on for more than a week, and the poor girl must be almost out of her mind. I bought a cassette of Copland conducting Copland. She insisted on cassettes, because they stopped. Eight-tracks went on and on until she couldn't think.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Locked in a cage by a cruel duke in Transylvania. It was only four feet high, suspended over a pond filled with crocodiles. I got out by picking the lock with my teeth. Luckily, the crocodiles weren't hungry. Where have you been?"

"I mean it. Don't you keep a schedule?"

"I'm right on my schedule, Elaine. This is Wednesday. I was here last Wednesday. This year Christmas falls on a Wednesday, and I'll be here on Christmas."

"It feels like a year."

"Only ten months. Till Christmas. Elaine, you aren't being any fun."

She wasn't in the mood for fun. There were tears in her eyes. "I can't stand much more," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid."

And she was afraid. Her voice trembled.

"At night, and in the daytime, whenever I sleep. I'm just the right size."

"For what?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you were just the right size."

"I did? Oh, I don't know what I meant. I'm going crazy. That's what you're here for, isn't it? To keep me sane. It's the rain. I can't do anything, I can't see anything, and all I can hear most of the time is the hissing of the rain."

"Like outer space," I said, remembering what she had said the last time.

She apparently didn't remember our discussion. She looked. startled. "How did you know?" she asked.

"You told me."

"There isn't any sound in outer space," she said.

"Oh," I answered.

"There's no air out there."

"I knew that."

"Then why did you say, 'Oh, of course?' The engines. You can hear them all over the ship, it's a drone, all the time. That's just like the rain. Only after a while you can't hear it anymore. It becomes like silence. Anansa told me."

Another imaginary friend. Her file said that she had kept her imaginary friends long after most children give them up. That was why I had first been assigned to see her, to get rid of the friends. Grunty, the ice pig; Howard, the boy who beat up everybody; Sue Ann, who would bring her dolls and play with them for her, making them do what Elaine said for them to do; Fuchsia, who lived among the flowers and was only inches high. There were others. After a few sessions with her I saw that she knew that they weren't real. But they passed time for her. They stepped outside her body and did things she could never do. I felt they did her no harm at all, and destroying that imaginary world for her would only make her lonelier and more unhappy. She was sane, that was certain. And yet I kept seeing her, not entirely because I liked her so much. Partly because I wondered whether she had been pretending when she told me she knew her friends weren't real. Anansa was a new one.

"Who's Anansa?"

"Oh, you don't want to know." She didn't want to talk about her; that was obvious.

"I want to know."

She turned away. "I can't make you go away, but I wish you would. When you get nosy."

"It's my job."

"Job!" She sounded contemptuous. "I see all of you, running around on your healthy legs, doing all your jobs."

What could I say to her? "It's how we stay alive," I said. "I do my best."

Then she got a strange look on her face; I've got a secret, she seemed to say, and I want you to pry it out of me. "Maybe I can get a job, too."

"Maybe," I said. I tried to think of something she could do.

"There's always music," she said.

I misunderstood. "There aren't many instruments you can play. That's the way it is." Dose of reality and all that.

"Don't be stupid."

"Okay. Never again."

"I meant that there's always the music. On my job."

"And what job is this?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she said, rolling her eyes mysteriously and turning toward the window. I imagined her as a normal fifteen-year-old girl. Ordinarily I would have interpreted this as flirting. But there was something else under all this. A feeling of desperation. She was right. I really would like to know. I made a rather logical guess. I put together the two secrets she was trying to get me to figure out today.

"What kind of job is Anansa going to give you?"

She looked at me, startled. "So it's true then."

"What's true?"

"It's so frightening. I keep telling myself it's a dream. But it isn't, is it?"

"What, Anansa?"

"You think she's just one of my friends, don't you. But they're not in my dreams, not like this. Anansa ---"

"What about Anansa?"

"She sings to me. In my sleep."

My trained psychologist's mind immediately conjured up mother figures. "Of course," I said.

"She's in space, and she sings to me. You wouldn't believe the songs."

It reminded me. I pulled out the cassette I had bought for her.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome. Want to hear it?"

She nodded. I put it on the cassette player. Appalachian Spring. She moved her head to the music. I imagined her as a dancer. She felt the music very well.

But after a few minutes she stopped moving and started to cry.

"It's not the same," she said.

"You've heard it before?"

"Turn it off. Turn it off!"

I turned it off. "Sorry," I said. "Thought you'd like it."

"Guilt, nothing but guilt," she said. "You always feel guilty, don't you?"

"Pretty nearly always," I admitted cheerfully. A lot of my patients threw psychological jargon in my face. Or soap-opera language.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just -- it's just not the music. Not the music. Now that I've heard it, everything is so dark compared to it. Like the rain, all gray and heavy and dim, as if the composer is trying to see the hills but the rain is always in the way. For a few minutes I thought he was getting it right."

"Anansa's music?"

She nodded. "I know you don't believe me. But I hear her when I'm asleep. She tells me that's the only time she can communicate with me. It's not talking. It's all her songs. She's out there, in her starship, singing And at night I hear her."

"Why you?"

"You mean, why only me?" She laughed. "Because of what I am. You told me yourself. Because I can't run around, I live in my imagination. She say that the threads between minds are very thin and hard to hold. But mine she can hold, because I live completely in my mind. She holds on to me. When I go to sleep, I can't escape her now anymore at all."

"Escape? I thought you liked her."

"I don't know what I like. I like -- I like the music. But Anansa wants me. She wants to have me -- she wants to give me a job."

"What's the singing like?" When she said job, she trembled and closed up; I referred back to something that she had been willing to talk about, to keep the floundering conversation going.

"It's not like anything. She's there in space, and it's black, just the humming of the engines like the sound of rain, and she reaches into the dust out there and draws in the songs. She reaches out her -- out her fingers, or her ears, I don't know; it isn't clear. She reaches out and draws in the dust and the songs and turns them into the music that I hear. It's powerful. She says it's her songs that drive her between the stars."

"Is she alone?"

Elaine nodded. "She wants me."

"Wants you. How can she have you, with you here and her out there?"

Elaine licked her lips. "I don't want to talk about it," she said in a way that told me she was on the verge of telling me.

"I wish you would. I really wish you'd tell me."

"She says -- she says that she can take me. She says that if I can learn the songs, she can pull me out of my body and take me there and give me arms and legs and fingers and I can run and dance and--"

She broke down, crying.

I patted her on the only place that she permitted, her soft little belly. She refused to be hugged. I had tried it years before, and she had screamed at me to stop it. One of the nurses told me it was because her mother had always hugged her, and Elaine wanted to hug back. And couldn't.

"It's a lovely dream, Elaine."

"It's a terrible dream. Don't you see? I'll be like her."

"And what's she like?"

"She's the ship. She's the starship. And she wants me with her, to be the starship with her. And sing our way through space together for thousands and thousands of years."

"It's just a dream, Elaine. You don't have to be afraid of it."

"They did it to her. They cut off her arms and legs and put her into the machines."

"But no one's going to put you into a machine."

"I want to go outside," she said.

"You can't. It's raining."

"Damn the rain."

"I do, every day."

"I'm not joking! She pulls me all the time now, even when I'm awake. She keeps pulling at me and making me fall asleep, and she sings to me, and I feel her pulling and pulling. If I could just go outside, I could hold on. I feel like I could hold on if I could just--"

"Hey, relax. Let me give you a--"

"No! I don't want to sleep!"

"Listen, Elaine. It's just a dream. You can't let it get to you like this. It's just the rain keeping you here. It makes you sleepy, and so you keep dreaming this. But don't fight it. It's a beautiful dream in a way. Why not go with it?"

She looked at me with terror in her eyes.

"You don't mean that. You don't want me to go."

"No; Of course I don't want you to go anywhere. But you won't, don't you see? It's a dream, floating out there between the stars."

"She's not floating. She's ramming her way through space so fast it makes me dizzy whenever she shows me."

"Then be dizzy. Think of it as your mind finding a way for you to run."

"You don't understand, Mr. Therapist. I thought you'd understand."

"I'm trying to."

"If I go with her, then I'll be dead."

I asked her nurse, "Who's been reading to her?"

"We all do, and volunteers from town. They like her. She always has someone to read to her."

"You'd better supervise them more carefully. Somebody's been putting ideas in her head. About spaceships and dust and singing between the starg. It's seared her pretty bad."

The nurse frowned. "We approve everything they read. She's been reading that kind of thing for years. It's never done her any harm before. Why now?"

"The rain, I guess. Cooped up in here, she's losing touch with reality."

The nurse nodded sympathetically and said, "I know. When she's asleep, she's doing the strangest things now."

"Like what? What kind of things?"

"Oh, singing these horrible songs."

"What are the words?"

"There aren't any words. She just sort of hums. Only the melodies are awful. Not even like music. And her voice gets funny and raspy. She's completely asleep. She sleeps a lot now. Mercifully, I think. She's always gotten impatient when she can't go outside."

The nurse obviously liked Elaine. It would be hard not to feel sorry for her, but Elaine insisted on being liked, and people liked her, those that could get over the horrible flatness of the sheets all around her trunk. "Listen," I said. "Can we bundle her up or something? Get her outside in spite of the rain?"

The nurse shook her head. "It isn't just the rain. It's cold out there. And the explosion that made her like she is -- it messed her up inside. She isn't put together right. She doesn't have the strength to fight off any kind of disease at all. You understand -- there's a good chance that exposure to that kind of weather would kill her eventually. And I won't take a chance on that."

"I'm going to be visiting her more often, then," I said. "As often as I can. She's got something going on in her head that's scaring her half to death. She thinks she's going to die."

"Oh, the poor darling," the nurse said. "Why would she think that?"

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"Doesn't matter. One of her imaginary friends may be getting out of hand."

"I thought you said they were harmless."

"They were."

When I left the Millard County Rest Home that night, I stopped back in Elaine's room. She was asleep, and I heard her song. It was eerie. I could hear, now and then themes from the bit of Copland music she had listened to. But it was distorted, and most of the music was unrecognizable -- wasn't even music. Her voice was high and strange, and then suddenly it would change, would become low and raspy, and for a moment I clearly heard in her voice the sound of a vast engine coming through walls of metal, carried on slender metal rods, the sound of a great roar being swallowed up by a vast cushion of nothing. I pictured Elaine with wires coming out of her shoulders and hips, with her head encased in metal and her eyes closed in sleep, like her imaginary Anansa, piloting the starship as if it were her own body. I could see that this would be attractive to Elaine, in a way. After all, she hadn't been born this way. She had memories of running and playing, memories of feeding herself and dressing herself, perhaps even of learning to read, of sounding out the words as her fingers touched each letter. Even the false arms of a spaceship would be something to fill the great void.

Children's centers are not inside their bodies; their centers are outside, at the point where the fingers of the left hand and the fingers of the right hand meet. What they touch is where they live; what they see is their self. And Elaine had lost herself in an explosion before she had the chance to move inside. With this strange dream of Anansa she was getting a self back.

But a repellent self, for all that. I walked in and sat by Elaine's bed, listening to her sing. Her body moved slightly, her back arching a little with the melody. High and light; low and rasping. The sounds alternated, and I wondered what they meant. What was going on inside her to make this music come out?

If I go with her, then I'll be dead.

Of course she was afraid. I looked at the lump of flesh that filled the bed shapelessly below where her head emerged from the covers. I tried to change my perspective, to see her body as she saw it, from above. It almost disappeared then, with the foreshortening and the height of her ribs making her stomach and hint of hips vanish into insignificance. Yet this was all she had, and if she believed -- and certainly she seemed to -- that surrendering to the fantasy of Anansa would mean the death of this pitiful body, is death any less frightening to those who have not been able to fully live? I doubt it. At least for Elaine, what life she had lived had been joyful. She would not willingly trade it for a life of music and metal arms, locked in her own mind. Except for the rain. Except that nothing was so real to her as the outside, as the trees and birds and distant hills, and as the breeze touching her with a violence she permitted to no living person. And with that reality, the good part of her life, cut off from her by the rain, how long could she hold out against the incessant pulling of Anansa and her promise of arms and legs and eternal song?

I reached up, on a whim, and very gently lifted her eyelids.

Her eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling, not blinking.

I closed her eyes, and they remained closed.

I turned her head, and it stayed turned. She did not wake up. just kept singing as if I had done nothing to her at all.

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On Friday it looked as if the clouds were breaking, but after only a few minutes of sunshine a huge new bank of clouds swept down from the northwest and it was worse than before. I finished my work rather carelessly, stopping a sentence in the middle several times. One of my patients was annoyed with me. She squinted at me. "You're not paid to think about your woman troubles when you're talking to me." I apologized and tried to pay attention. She was a talker; my attention always wandered. But she was right in a way. I couldn't stop thinking of Elaine. And my patient's saying that about woman troubles must have triggered something in my mind. After all, my relationship with Elaine was the longest and closest I had had with a woman in many years. If you could think of Elaine as a woman.

Catatonia, or the beginning of catalepsy. She's losing her mind, I thought, and if I don't bring her back, keep her here somehow, Anansa will win, and the rest home will be caring for a lump of mindless flesh for the next however many years they can keep tins remnant of Elaine alive.

"I'll be back on Saturday," I told the administrator. "Why so soon?"

"Elaine is going through a crisis of some kind," I explained. An imaginary woman from space wants to carry her off -- that I didn't say. "Have the nurses keep her awake as much as they can. Read to her, play with her, talk to her. Her normal hours at night are enough. Avoid naps."

## "Why?"

"I'm afraid for her, that's all. She could go catatonic on us at any time, I think. Her sleeping isn't normal. I want to have her watched all the time." "This is really serious?"

"This is really serious."

On Saturday I drove back to Millard County and found the nurses rather distraught. They didn't realize how much she was sleeping until they tried to stop her, they all said. She was dozing off for two or three naps in the mornings, even more in the afternoons. She went to sleep at night at seven-thirty and slept at least twelve hours. "Singing all the time. It's awful. Even at night she keeps it up. Singing and singing."

But she was awake when I went in to see her.

"I stayed awake for you."

"Thanks," I said.

"A Saturday visit. I must really be going bonkers."

"Actually, no. But I don't like how sleepy you are."

She smiled wanly. "It isn't my idea."

I think my smile was more cheerful than hers. "And I think it's all in your head."

"Think what you like, Doctor."

"I'm not a doctor. My degree says I'm a master."

"How deep is the water outside?"

"Deep?"

"All this rain. Surely it's enough to keep a few dozen arks afloat. Is God destroying the world?"

"Unfortunately, no. Though He has killed the engines on a few cars that went a little fast through the puddles."

"How long would it have to rain to fill up the world?"

"The world is round. It would all drip off the bottom."

She laughed. It was good to hear her laugh, but it ended too abruptly, and she looked at me fearfully. "I'm going, you know."

"You are?"

"I'm just the right size. She's measured me, and I'll fit perfectly. She has just the place for me. It's a good place, where I can hear the music of the dust for myself, and learn to sing it. I'd have the directional engines."

I shook my head. "Grunty the ice pig was cute. This isn't cute, Elaine."

"Did I ever say I thought Anansa was cute? Grunty the ice pig was real, you know. My father made hun out of crushed ice for a luau. He melted before they got the pig out of the ground. I don't make my friends up."

"Fuchsia the flower girl?"

"My mother would pinch blossoms off the fuchsia by our front door. We played with them like dolls in the grass."

"But not Anansa."

"Anansa came into my mind when I was asleep. She found me. I didn't make her up."

"Don't you see, Elaine, that's how the real hallucinations come? They feel like reality."

She shook her head. "I know all that. I've had the nurses read me psychology books. Anansa is -- Anansa is other. She couldn't come out of my head. She's something else. She's real. I've heard her music. It isn't plain, like Copland. It isn't false."

"Elaine, when you were asleep on Wednesday, you were becoming catatonic."

"I know."

"You know?"

"I felt you touch me. I felt you turn my head. I wanted to speak to you, to say good-bye. But she was singing, don't you see? She was singing. And now she lets me sing along. When I sing with her, I can feel myself travel out, like a spider along a single thread, out into the place where she is. Into the darkness. It's lonely there, and black, and cold, but I know that at the end of the thread there she'll be, a friend for me forever."

"You're frightening me, Elaine."

"There aren't any trees on her starship, you know. That's how I stay here. I think of the trees and the hills and the birds and the grass and the wind, and how I'd lose all of that. She gets angry at me, and a little hurt. But it keeps me here. Except now I can hardly remember the trees at all. I try to remember, and it's like trying to remember the face of my mother. I can remember her dress and her hair, but her face is gone forever. Even when I look at a picture, it's a stranger. The trees are strangers to me now."

I stroked her forehead. At first she pulled her head away, then slid it back.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I usually don't like people to touch me there."

"I won't," I said.

"No, go ahead. I don't mind."

So I stroked her forehead again. It was cool and dry, and she lifted her head almost imperceptibly, to receive my touch. Involuntarily I thought of what the old woman had sad the day before. Woman troubles. I was touching Elaine, and I thought of making love to her. I immediately put the thought out of my mind.

"Hold me here," she said. "Don't let me go. I want to go so badly. But I'm not meant for that. I'm just the right size, but not the right shape. Those aren't my arms. I know what my arms felt like."

"I'll hold you if I can. But you have to help."

"No drugs. The drugs pull my mind away from my body. If you give me drugs, I'll die."

"Then what can I do?"

"Just keep me here, any way you can."

Then we talked about nonsense, because we had been so serious, and it was as if she weren't having any problems at all. We got on to the subject of the church meetings.

"I didn't know you were religious," I said.

"I'm not. But what else is there to do on Sunday? They sing hymns, and I sing with them. Last Sunday there was a sermon that really got to me. The preacher talked about Christ in the sepulchre. About Him being there three days before the angel came to let Him go. I've been thinking about that, what it must have been like for Him, locked in a cave in the darkness, completely alone."

"Depressing."

"Not really. It must have been exhilarating for Him, in a way. If it was true, you know. To he there on that stone bed, saying to Himself, 'They thought I was dead, but I'm here. I'm not dead.""

"You make Him sound smug."

"Sure. Why not? I wonder if I'd feel like that, if I were with Anansa."

Anansa again.

"I can see what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'Anansa again."

"Yeah," I said. "I wish you'd erase her and go back to some more harmless friends."

Suddenly her face went angry and fierce.

"You can believe what you like. Just leave me alone."

I tried to apologize, but she wouldn't have any of it. She insisted on believing in this star woman. Finally I left, redoubling my cautions against letting her sleep. The nurses looked worried, too. They could see the change as easily as I could.

That night, because I was in Millard on a weekend, I called up Belinda. She wasn't married or anything at the moment. She came to my motel. We had dinner, made love, and watched television. She watched television, that is. I lay on the bed, thinking. And so when the test pattern came on and Belinda at last got up, beery and passionate, my mind was still on Elaine. As Belinda kissed and tickled me and whispered stupidity in my ear, I imagined myself without arms and legs. I lay there, moving only my head.

"What is the matter, you don't want to?"

I shook off the mood. No need to disappoint Belinda -- I was the one who had called her. I had a responsibility. Not much of one, though. That was what was at me. I made love to Belinda slowly and carefully, but with my eyes closed. I kept superimposing Elaine's face on Behnda's. Woman troubles. Even though Belinda's fingers played up and down my back, I thought I was making love to Elaine. And the stumps of arms and legs didn't revolt me as much as I would have thought. Instead, I only felt sad. A deep sense of tragedy, of loss, as if Elaine were dead and I could have saved her, like the prince in all the fairy tales; a kiss, so symbolic, and the princess awakens and lives happily ever after. And I hadn't done it. I had failed her. When we were finished, I cried.

"Oh, you poor sweetheart," Belinda said, her voice rich with sympathy. "What's wrong -- you don't have to tell me." She cradled me for a while, and at last I went to sleep with my head pressed against her breasts. She thought I needed her. I suppose that, briefly, I did.

I did not go back to Elaine on Sunday as I had planned. I spent the entire day almost going. Instead of walking out the door, I sat and watched the incredible array of terrible Sunday morning television. And when I finally did go out, fully intending to go to the rest home and see how she was doing, I ended up driving, luggage in the back of the car, to my trailer, where I went inside and again sat down and watched television.

Why couldn't I go to her?

Just keep me here, she had said. Any way you can, she had said.

And I thought I knew the way. That was the problem. In the back of my mind all this was much too real, and the fairy tales were wrong. The prince didn't wake her with a kiss. He wakened the princess with a promise: In his arms she would be safe forever. She awoke for the happily ever after. if she hadn't known it to be true, the princess would have preferred to sleep forever.

What was Elaine asking of me?

Why was I afraid of it?

Not my job. Unprofessional to get emotionally involved with a patient.

But then, when had I ever been a professional? I finally went to bed, wishing I had Belinda with me again, for whatever comfort she could bring. Why weren't all women like Belinda, soft and loving and undemanding?

Yet as I drifted off to sleep, it was Elaine I remembered, Elaine's face and hideous, reproachful stump of a body that followed me through all my dreams.

And she followed me when I was awake, through my regular rounds on Monday and Tuesday, and at last it was Wednesday, and still I was afraid to go to the Millard County Rest Home. I didn't get there until afternoon. Late afternoon, and the rain was coming down as hard as ever, and there were lakes of standing water in the fields, torrents rushing through the unprepared gutters of the town.

"You're late," the administrator said.

"Rain," I answered, and he nodded. But he looked worried.

"We hoped you'd come yesterday, but we couldn't reach you anywhere. It's Elaine."

And I knew that my delay had served its damnable purpose, exactly as I expected.

"She hasn't woken up since Monday morning. She just lies there, singing. We've got her on an IV. She's asleep."

She was indeed asleep. I sent the others out of the room.

"Elaine," I said.

Nothing.

I called her name again, several times. I touched her, rocked her head back and forth. Her head stayed wherever I placed it. And the song went on, softly, high and then low, pure and then gravelly. I covered her mouth. She sang on, even with her mouth closed, as if nothing were the matter.

I pulled down her sheet and pushed a pin into her belly, then into the thin flesh at, her collarbone. No response. I slapped her face. No response. She was gone. I saw her again, connected to a starship, only this time I understood better. It wasn't her body that was the right size; it was her mind. And it was her mind that had followed the slender spider's thread out to Anansa, who waited to give her a body.

A job.

Shock therapy? I imagined her already-deformed body leaping and arching as the electricity coursed through her. It would accomplish nothing, except to torture unthinking flesh. Drugs? I couldn't think of any that could bring her back from where she had gone. In a way, I think, I even believed in Anansa, for the moment. I called her name. "Anansa, let her go. Let her come back to me. Please. I need her."

Why had I cried in Belinda's arms? Oh, yes. Because I had seen the princess and let her lie there unawakened, because the happily ever after was so damnably much work.

I did not do it in the fever of the first realization that I had lost her. It was no act of passion or sudden fear or grief. I sat beside her bed for hours, looking at her weak and helpless body, now so empty. I wished for her eyes to open on their own, for her to wake up and say, "Hey, would you believe the dream I had!" For her to say, "Fooled you, didn't I? It was really hard when you poked me with pins, but I fooled you." But she hadn't fooled me.

And so, finally, not with passion but in despair, I stood up and leaned over her, leaned my hands on either side of her and pressed my cheek against hers and whispered in her ear. I promised her everything I could think of. I promised her no more rain forever. I promised her trees and flowers and hills and birds and the wind for as long as she liked. I promised to take her away from the rest home, to take her to see things she could only have dreamed of before.

And then at last, with my voice harsh from pleading with her, with her hair wet with my tears, I promised her the only thing that might bring her back. I promised her me. I promised her love forever, stronger than any songs Anansa could sing.

And it was then that the monstrous song fell silent. She did not awaken, but the song ended, and she moved on her own; her head rocked to the side, and she seemed to sleep normally, not catatonically. I waited by her bedside all night. I fell asleep in the chair, and one of the nurses covered me. I was still there when I was awakened in the morning by Elaine's voice.

"What a liar you are! It's still raining."

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It was a feeling of power, to know that I had called someone back from places far darker than death. Her life was painful, and yet my promise of devotion was enough, apparently, to compensate. This was how I understood it, at least. This was what made me feel exhilarated, what kept me blind and deaf to what had really happened.

I was not the only one rejoicing. The nurses made a great fuss over her, and the administrator promised to write up a glowing report. "Publish," he said.

"It's too personal," I said. But in the back of my mind I was already trying to figure out a way to get the case into print, to gain something for my career. I was ashamed of myself, for twisting what had been an honest, heartfelt commitment into personal advancement. But I couldn't ignore the sudden respect I was receiving from people to whom, only hours before, I had been merely ordinary.

"It's too personal," I repeated firmly. "I have no intention of publishing."

And to my disgust I found myself relishing the administrator's respect for that decision. There was no escape from my swelling self-satisfaction. Not as long as I stayed around those determined to give me cheap payoffs. Ever the wise psychologist, I returned to the only person who would give me gratitude instead of admiration. The gratitude I had earned, I thought. I went back to Elaine.

"Hi," she said. "I wondered where you had gone."

"Not far," I said. "Just visiting with the Nobel Prize committee."

"They want to reward you for bringing me here?"

"Oh, no. They had been planning to give me the award for having contacted a genuine alien being from outer space. Instead, I blew it and brought you back. They're quite upset."

She looked flustered. It wasn't like her to look flustered -- usually she came back with another quip. "But what will they do to you?"

"Probably boil me in oil. That's the usual thing. Though, maybe they've found a way to boil me in solar energy. It's cheaper." A feeble joke. But she didn't get it.

"This isn't, the way she said it was -- she said it was--"

She. I tried to ignore the dull fear that suddenly churned in my stomach. Be analytical, I thought. She could be anyone.

"She said? Who said?" I asked.

Elaine fell silent. I reached out and touched her forehead. She was perspiring.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You're upset."

"I should have known."

"Known what?"

She shook her head and turned away from me.

I knew what it was, I thought. I knew what it was, but we could surely cope. "Elaine," I said, "you aren't completely cured, are you? You haven't got rid of Anansa, have you? You don't have to hide it from me. Sure, I would have loved to think you'd been completely cured, but that would have been too much of a miracle. Do I look like a miracle worker? We've just made progress, that's all. Brought you back from catalepsy. We'll free you of Anansa eventually."

Still she was silent, staring at the rain-gray window.

"You don't have to be embarrassed about pretending to be completely cured. It was very kind of you. It made me feel very good for a little while. But I'm a grownup. I can cope with a little disappointment. Besides, you're awake, you're

back, and that's all that matters." Grown-up, hell! I was terribly disappointed, and ashamed that I wasn't more sincere in what I was saying. No cure after all. No hero. No magic. No great achievement. Just a psychologist who was, after all, not extraordinary.

But I refused to pay too much attention to those feelings. Be a professional, I told myself. She needs your help.

"So don't go feeling guilty about it."

She turned back to face me, her eyes full. "Guilty?" She almost smiled. "Guilty." Her eyes did not leave my face, though I doubted she could see me well through the tears brimming her lashes.

"You tried to do the right thing," I said.

"Did I? Did I really?" She smiled bitterly. It was a strange smile for her, and for a terrible moment she no longer looked like my Elaine, my bright young patient. "I meant to stay with her," she said. "I wanted her with me, she was so alive, and when she finally joined herself to the ship, she sang and danced and swung her arms, and I said, 'This is what I've needed; this is what I've craved all my centuries lost in the songs.' But then I heard you."

"Anansa," I said, realizing at that moment who was with me.

"I heard you, crying out to her. Do you think I made up my mind quickly? She heard you, but she wouldn't come. She wouldn't trade her new arms and legs for anything. They were so new. But I'd had them for long enough. What I'd never had was -- you."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Out there," she said. "She sings better than I ever did." She looked wistful for a moment, then smiled ruefully. "And I'm here. Only I made a bad bargain, didn't I? Because I didn't fool you. You won't want me, now. It's Elaine you want, and she's gone. I left her alone out there. She won't mind, not for a long time. But then -- then she will. Then she'll know I cheated her."

The voice was Elaine's voice, the tragic little body her body. But now I knew I had not succeeded at all. Elaine was gone, in the infinite outer space where the mind hides to escape from itself. And in her place -- Anansa. A stranger.

"You cheated her?" I said. "How did you cheat her?"

"It never changes. In a while you learn all the songs, and they never change. Nothing moves. You go on forever until all the stars fail, and yet nothing ever moves."

I moved my hand and put it to my hair. I was startled at my own trembling touch on my head.

"Oh, God," I said. They were just words, not a supplication.

"You hate me," she said.

Hate her? Hate my little, mad Elaine? Oh, no. I had another object for my hate. I hated the rain that had cut her off from all that kept her sane. I hated her parents for not leaving her home the day they let their car drive them on to death. But most of all I remembered my days of hiding from Elaine, my days of resisting her need, of pretending that I didn't remember her or think of her or need her, too. She must have wondered why I was so long in coming. Wondered and finally given up hope, finally realized that there was no one who would hold her. And so she left, and when I finally came, the only person waiting inside her body was Anansa, the imaginary friend who had come, terrifyingly, to life. I knew whom to hate. I thought I would cry. I even buried my face in the sheet where her leg would have been. But I did not cry. I just sat there, the sheet harsh against my face, hating myself.

Her voice was like a gentle hand, a pleading hand touching me. "I'd undo it if I could," she said. "But I can't. She's gone, and I'm here. I came because of you. I came to see the trees and the grass and the birds and your smile. The happily ever after. That was what she had lived for, you know, all she lived for. Please smile at me."

I felt warmth on my hair. I lifted my head. There was no rain in the window. Sunlight rose and fell on the wrinkles of the sheet.

"Let's go outside," I said.

"It stopped raining," she said.

"A bit late, isn't it?" I answered. But I smiled it her.

"You can call me Elaine," she said. "You won't tell, will you?"

I shook my head. No, I wouldn't tell. She was safe enough. I wouldn't tell because then they would take her away to a place where psychiatrists reigned but did not know enough to rule. I imagined her confined among others who had also made their escape from reality and I knew that I couldn't tell anyone. I also knew I couldn't confess failure, not now.

Besides, I hadn't really completely failed. There was still hope. Elaine wasn't really gone. She was still there, hidden in her own mind, looking out through this imagmary person she had created to take her place. Someday I would find her and bring her home. After all, even Grunty the ice pig had melted.

I noticed that she was shaking her head. "You won't find her," she said. "You won't bring her home. I won't melt and disappear. She is gone and you couldn't have prevented it."

I smiled. "Elaine," I said.

And then I realized that she had answered thoughts I hadn't put into words.

"That's right," she said, "let's be honest with each other. You might as well. You can't lie to me."

I shook my head. For a moment, in my confusion and despair, I had believed it all, believed that Anansa was real. But that was nonsense. Of course Elaine knew what I was thinking. She knew me better than I knew myself. "Let's go outside, " I said. A failure and a cripple, out to enjoy the sunlight, which fell equally on the just and the unjustifiable.

"I don't care," she said. "Whatever you want to believe: Elaine or Anansa. Maybe it's better if you still look for Elaine. Maybe it's better if you let me fool you after all."

The worst thing about the fantasies of the mentally ill is that they're so damned consistent. They never let up. They never give you any rest.

"I'm Elaine," she said, smiling. "I'm Elaine, pretending to be Anansa. You love me. That's what I came for. You promised to bring me home, and you did. Take me outside. You made it stop raining for me. You did everything you promised, and I'm home again, and I promise I'll never leave you."

She hasn't left me. I come to see her every Wednesday as part of my work, and every Saturday -and Sunday as the best part of my life. I take her driving with me sometimes, and we talk constantly, and I read to her and bring her books for the nurses to read to her. None of them know that she is still unwell -- to them she's Elaine, happier than ever, pathetically delighted at every sight and sound and smell and taste and every texture that they touch against her cheek. Only I know that she believes she is not Elaine. Only I know that I have made no progress at all since then, that in moments of terrible honesty I call her Anansa, and she sadly answers me.

But in a way I'm content. Very little has changed between us, really; And after a few weeks I realized, with certainty, that she was happier now than she had ever been before. After all, she had the best of all possible worlds, for her. She could tell herself that the real Elaine was off in space somewhere, dancing and singing and hearing songs, with arms and legs at last, while the poor girl who was confined to the limbless body at the Millard County Rest Home was really an alien who was very, very happy to have even that limited body.

And as for me, I kept my commitment to her, and I'm happier for it. I'm still human -- I still take another woman into my bed from time to time. But Anansa doesn't mind. She even suggested it, only a few days after she woke up. "Go back to Belinda sometimes," she said. "Belinda loves you, too, you know. I won't mind at all." I still can't remember when I spoke to her of Belinda, but at least she didn't mind, and so there aren't really any discontentments in my life. Except.

Except that I'm not God. I would like to be God. I would make some changes.

When I go to the Millard County Rest Home, I never enter the building first. She is never in the building. I walk around the outside and look across the lawn by the trees. The wheelchair is always there; I can tell it from the others by the pillows, which glare white in the sunlight. I never call out. In a few moments she always sees me, and the nurses wheel her around and push the chair across the lawn.

She comes as she has come hundreds of times before. She plunges toward me, and I concentrate on watching her, so that my mind will not see my Elaine surrounded by blackness, plunging through space, gathering dust, gathering songs, leaping and dancing with her new arms and legs that she loves better than me. Instead I watch the wheelchair, watch the smile on her face. She is happy to see me, so delighted with the world outside that her body cannot contain her. And when my imagination will not be restrained, I am God for a moment.

I see her running toward me, her arms waving. I give her a left hand, a right hand, delicate and strong; I put a long and girlish left leg on her, and one just as sturdy on the right.

And then, one by one, I take them all away.

## AMERICA By Orson Scott Card

The difference between Latin America and North America's United States has always been vast; the first being in virtual colonial aspect to the Empire of the Dollar. Now beyond the border between Mexico and the U.S.A. there lives another race, that of the native Americans miscalled Indians. The majority of the inhabitants of those countries are among the dispossessed of the world. This may change; indeed, as history always calls the tune, no matter how long or in what fashion it takes, it will change.

Sam Monson and Anamari Boagente had two encounters in their lives, forty years apart. The first encounter lasted for several weeks in the high Amazon jungle, the village of Agualinda. The second was for only an hour near the ruins of the Glen Canyon Dam, on the border between Navaho country and the State of Deseret.

When they met the first time, Sam was a scrawny teenager from Utah and Anamari was a middle-aged spinster Indian from Brazil. When they met the second time, he was governor of Deseret, the last European state in America, and she was, to some people's way of thinking, the mother of God. It never occurred to anyone that they had ever met before, except me. I saw it plain as day, and pestered Sam until he told me the whole story. Now Sam is dead and she's long gone, and I'm the only one who knows the truth. I thought for a long time that I'd take this story untold to my grave, but I see now that I can't do that. The way I see it, I won't be allowed to die until I write this down. All my real work was done long since, so why else am I alive? I figure the land has kept me breathing so I can tell the story of its victory, and it has kept you alive so you can hear it. Gods are like that. It isn't enough for them to run everything. They want to be famous, too.

## Agualinda, Amazonas

Passengers were nothing to her. Anamari only cared about helicopters when they brought medical supplies. This chopper carried a precious packet of benaxidene; Anamari barely noticed the skinny, awkward boy who sat by the crates, looking hostile. Another Yanqui who doesn't want to be stuck out in the jungle. Nothing new about that. Norteamericanos were almost invisible to Anamari by now. They came and went.

It was the Brazilian government people she had to worry about, the petty bureaucrats suffering through years of virtual exile in Mannaus, working out their frustration by being petty tyrants over the helpless Indians. No I'm sorry we don't have any more penicillin, no more syringes, what did you do with the AIDS vaccine we gave you three years ago? Do you think we're made of money here? Let them come to town if they want to get well. There's a hospital in Sao Paulo de Olivenca, send them there, we're not going to turn you into a second hospital out there in the middle of nowhere, not for a village of a hundred filthy Baniwas, it's not as if you're a doctor, you're just an old withered up Indian woman

yourself, you never graduated from the medical schools, we can't spare medicines for you. It made them feel so important, to decide whether or not an Indian child would live or die. As often as not they passed sentence of death by refusing to send supplies. It made them feel powerful as God.

Anamari knew better than to protest or argue-it would only make that bureaucrat likelier to kill again in the future. But sometimes, when the need was great and the medicine was common, Anamari would go to the Yanqui geologists and ask if they had this or that. Sometimes they would share, but if they didn't, they wouldn't lift a finger to get any. They were not tyrants like the Brazilian bureaucrats. They just didn't give a damn. They were there to make money.

That was what Anamari saw when she looked at the sullen light-haired boy in the helicopter-another Norteamericano, just like all the other Norteamericanos, only younger.

She had the benaxidene, and so she immediately began spreading word that all the Baniwas should come for injections. It was a disease that had been introduced during the war between Guyana and Venezuela two years ago; as usual, most of the victims were not citizens of either country, just the Indios of the jungle, waking up one morning with their joints stiffening, hardening until no movement was possible. Benaxidene was the antidote, but you had to have it every few months or your joints would stiffen up again. As usual, the bureaucrats had diverted a shipment and there were a dozen Baniwas bedridden in the village. As usual, one or two of the Indians would be too far gone for the cure; one or two of their joints would be stiff for the rest of their lives. As usual, Anamari said little as she gave the injections, and the Baniwas said less to her.

It was not until the next day that Anamari had time to notice the young Yanqui boy wandering around the village. He was wearing rumpled white clothing, already somewhat soiled with the greens and browns of life along the rivers of the Amazon jungle. He showed no sign of being interested in anything, but an hour into her rounds, checking on the results of yesterday's benaxidene treatments, she became aware that he was following her.

She turned around in the doorway of the government-built hovel and faced him. "O que e'?" she demanded. What do you want?

To her surprise, he answered in halting Portuguese. Most of these Yanquis never bothered to learn the language at all, expecting her and everybody else to speak English. "Posso ajudar?" he asked. Can I help?

"Nao," she said. "Mas pode olhar." You can watch.

He looked at her in bafflement.

She repeated her sentence slowly, enunciating clearly. "Pode olhar."

"Eu?" Me?

"Voce, sim. And I can speak English."

"I don't want to speak English."

"Tanto faz," she said. Makes no difference.

He followed her into the hut. It was a little girl, lying naked in her own feces. She had palsy from a bout with meningitis years ago, when she was an infant, and Anamari figured that the girl would probably be one of the ones for whom the benaxidene came too late. That's how things usually worked-the weak suffer most. But no, her joints were flexing again, and the girl smiled at them, that heartbreakingly happy smile that made palsy victims so beautiful at times.

So. Some luck after all, the benaxidene had been in time for her.

Anamari took the lid off the clay waterjar that stood on the one table in the room, and dipped one of her clean rags in it. She used it to wipe the girl, then lifted her frail, atrophied body and pulled the soiled sheet out from under her. On impulse, she handed the sheet to the boy.

"Leva fora," she said. And, when he didn't understand, "Take it outside."

He did not hesitate to take it, which surprised her. "Do you want me to wash it?"

"You could shake off the worst of it," she said. "Out over the garden in back. I'll wash it later."

He came back in, carrying the wadded-up sheet, just as she was leaving. "All done here," she said. "We'll stop by my house to start that soaking. I'll carry it now."

He didn't hand it to her. "I've got it," he said. "Aren't you going to give her a clean sheet?"

"There are only four sheets in the village," she said. "Two of them are on my bed. She won't mind lying on the mat. I'm the only one in the village who cares about linens. I'm also the only one who cares about this girl."

"She likes you," he said.

"She smiles like that at everybody.

"So maybe she likes everybody."

Anamari grunted and led the way to her house. It was two government hovels pushed together. The one served as her clinic, the other as her home. Out back she had two

metal washtubs. She handed one of them to the Yanqui boy, pointed at the rainwater tank, and told him to fill it. He did. It made her furious.

"What do you want!" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said.

"Why do you keep hanging around!"

"I thought I was helping." His voice was full of injured pride.

"I don't need your help." She forgot that she had meant to leave the sheet to soak. She began rubbing it on the washboard.

"Then why did you ask me to . . ."

She did not answer him, and he did not complete the question.

After a long time he said, "You were trying to get rid of me, weren't you?"

"What do you want here?" she said. "Don't I have enough to do, without a Norteamericano boy to look after?"

Anger flashed in his eyes, but he did not answer until the anger was gone. "If you're tired of scrubbing, I can take over."

She reached out and took his hand, examined it for a moment. "Soft hands," she said. "Lady hands. You'd scrape your knuckles on the washboard and bleed all over the sheet."

Ashamed, he put his hands in his pockets. A parrot flew past him, dazzling green and red; he turned in surprise to look at it. It landed on the rainwater tank. "Those sell for a thousand dollars in the States," he said.

Of course the Yanqui boy evaluates everything by price. "Here they're free," she said. "The Baniwas eat them. And wear the feathers."

He looked around at the other huts, the scraggly gardens. "The people are very poor here," he said. "The jungle life must be hard."

"Do you think so?" she snapped. "The jungle is very kind to these people. It has plenty for them to eat, all year. The Indians of the Amazon did not know they were poor until Europeans came and made them buy pants, which they couldn't afford, and built houses, which they couldn't keep up, and plant gardens. Plant gardens! In the midst of this magnificent Eden. The jungle life was good. The Europeans made them poor."

"Europeans?" asked the boy.

"Brazilians. They're all Europeans. Even the black ones have turned European. Brazil is just another European country, speaking a European language. Just like you Norteamericanos. You're Europeans too."

"I was born in America," he said. "So were my parents and grandparents and greatgrandparents."

"But your bis-bis-avos they came on a boat."

"That was a long time ago," he said.

"A long time!" She laughed. "I am a pure Indian. For ten thousand generations I belong to this land. You are a stranger here. A fourth-generation stranger."

"But I'm a stranger who isn't afraid to touch a dirty sheet," he said. He was grinning defiantly.

That was when she started to like him. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Fifteen," he said.

"Your father's a geologist?"

"No. He heads up the drilling team. They're going to sink a test well here. He doesn't think they'll find anything, though."

"They will find plenty of oil," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Because I dreamed it," she said. "Bulldozers cutting down the trees, making an airstrip, and planes coming and going. They'd never do that, unless they found oil. Lots of oil."

She waited for him to make fun of the idea of dreaming true dreams. But he didn't. He just looked at her.

So she was the one who broke the silence. "You came to this village to kill time while your father is away from you, on the job, right?"

"No," he said. "I came here because he hasn't started to work yet. The choppers start bringing in equipment tomorrow."

"You would rather be away from your father?"

He looked away. "I'd rather see him in hell."

"This is hell," she said, and the boy laughed. "Why did you come here with him?"

"Because I'm only fifteen years old, and he has custody of me this summer."

"Custody," she said. "Like a criminal."

"He's the criminal," he said bitterly.

"And his crime?"

He waited a moment, as if deciding whether to answer. When he spoke, he spoke quietly and looked away. Ashamed. Of his father's crime. "Adultery," he said. The word hung in the air. The boy turned back and looked her in the face again. His face was tinged with red.

Europeans have such transparent skin, she thought. All their emotions show through. She guessed a whole story from his words, beloved mother betrayed, and now he had to spend the summer with her betrayer. "Is that a crime?"

He shrugged. "Maybe not to Catholics."

"You're Protestant?"

He shook his head. "Mormon. But I'm a heretic."

She laughed. "You're a heretic, and your father is an adulterer."

He didn't like her laughter. "And you're a virgin," he said. His words seemed calculated to hurt her.

She stopped scrubbing, stood there looking at her hands. "Also a crime?" she murmured.

"I had a dream last night," he said. "In my dream your name was Anna Marie, but when I tried to call you that, I couldn't. I could only call you by another name."

"What name?" she asked.

"What does it matter? It was only a dream." He was taunting her. He knew she trusted in dreams.

"You dreamed of me, and in the dream my name was Anamari?"

"It's true, isn't it? That is your name, isn't it?" He didn't have to add the other half of the question: You are a virgin, aren't you?

She lifted the sheet from the water, wrung it out and tossed it to him. He caught it, vile water spattering his face. He grimaced. She poured the washwater onto the dirt. It spattered mud all over his trousers. He did not step back. Then she carried the tub to the water tank and began to fill it with dean water. "Time to rinse," she said.

"You dreamed about an airstrip," he said. "And I dreamed about you."

"In your dreams you better start to mind your own business," she said.

"I didn't ask for it, you know," he said. "But I followed the dream out to this village, and you turned out to be a dreamer, too."

"That doesn't mean you're going to end up with your pinto between my legs, so you can forget it," she said.

He looked genuinely horrified. "Geez, what are you talking about! That would be fornication! Plus you've got to be old enough to be my mother!"

"I'm forty-two," she said. "If it's any of your business."

"You're older than my mother," he said. "I couldn't possibly think of you sexually. I'm sorry if I gave that impression."

She giggled. "You are a very funny boy, Yanqui. First you say I'm a virgin-•,

"That was in the dream," he said.

"And then you tell me I'm older than your mother and too ugly to think of me sexually."

He looked at her ashen with shame. "I'm sorry, I was just trying to make sure you knew that I would never-"

"You're trying to tell me that you're a good boy."

"Yes," he said.

She giggled again. "You probably don't even play with yourself," she said.

His face went red. He struggled to find something to say. Then he threw the wet sheet back at her and walked furiously away. She laughed and laughed. She liked this boy very much.

The next morning he came back and helped her in the clinic all day. His name was Sam Monson, and he was the first European she ever knew who dreamed true dreams. She had thought only Indios could do that. Whatever god it was that gave her dreams to her, perhaps it was the same god giving dreams to Sam. Perhaps that god brought them

together here in the jungle. Perhaps it was that god who would lead the drill to oil, so that Sam's father would have to keep him here long enough to accomplish whatever the god had in mind.

It annoyed her that the god had mentioned she was a virgin. That was nobody's business but her own.

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Life in the jungle was better than Sam ever expected. Back in Utah, when Mother first told him that he had to go to the Amazon with the old bastard, he had feared the worst. Hacking through thick viney jungles with a machete, crossing rivers of piranha in tickinfested dugouts, and always sweat and mosquitos and thick, heavy air. Instead the American oilmen lived in a pretty decent camp, with a generator for electric light. Even though it rained all the time and when it didn't it was so hot you wished it would, it wasn't constant danger as he had feared, and he never had to hack through jungle at all. There were paths, sometimes almost roads, and the thick, vivid green of the jungle was more beautiful than he had ever imagined. He had not realized that the American West was such a desert. Even California, where the old bastard lived when he wasn't traveling to drill wells, even those wooded hills and mountains were gray compared to the jungle green.

The Indians were quiet little people, not headhunters. Instead of avoiding them, like the adult Americans did, Sam found that he could be with them, come to know them, even help them by working with Anamari. The old bastard could sit around and drink his beer with the guys-adultery and beer, as if one contemptible sin of the flesh weren't enough-but Sam was actually doing some good here. If there was anything Sam could do to prove he was the opposite of his father, he would do it; and because his father was a weak, carnal, earthy man with no self-control, then Sam had to be a strong, spiritual, intellectual man who did not let any passions of the body rule him. Watching his father succumb to alcohol, remembering how his father could not even last a month away from Mother without having to get some whore into his bed, Sam was proud of his self-discipline. He ruled his body; his body did not rule him.

He was also proud to have passed Anamari's test on the first day. What did he care if human excrement touched his body? He was not afraid to breathe the hot stink of suffering, he was not afraid of the innocent dirt of a crippled child. Didn't Jesus touch lepers? Dirt of the body did not disgust him. Only dirt of the soul.

Which was why his dreams of Anamari troubled him. During the day they were friends. They talked about important ideas, and she told him stories of the Indians of the Amazon, and about her education as a teacher in Sao Paulo. She listened when he talked about history and religion and evolution and all the theories and ideas that danced in his head. Even Mother never had time for that, always taking care of the younger kids or doing her endless jobs for the church. Anamari treated him like his ideas mattered. But at night, when he dreamed, it was something else entirely. In those dreams he kept seeing her naked, and the voice kept calling her "Virgem America." What her virginity had to do with America he had no idea-even true dreams didn't always make sense-but he knew this much: when he dreamed of Anamari naked, she was always reaching out to him, and he was filled with such strong passions that more than once he awoke from the dream to find himself throbbing with imaginary pleasure, like Onan in the Bible, Judah's son, who spilled his seed upon the ground and was struck dead for it.

Sam lay awake for a long time each time this happened, trembling, fearful. Not because he thought God would strike him down-he knew that if God hadn't struck his father dead for adultery, Sam was certainly in no danger because of an erotic dream. He was afraid because he knew that in these dreams he revealed himself to be exactly as lustful and evil as his father. He did not want to feel any sexual desire for Anamari. She was old and lean and tough, and he was afraid of her, but most of all Sam didn't want to desire her because he was not like his father, he would never have sexual intercourse with a woman who was not his wife.

Yet when he walked into the village of Agualinda, he felt eager to see her again, and when he found her-the village was small, it never took long-he could not erase from his mind the vivid memory of how she looked in the dreams, reaching out to him, her breasts loose and jostling, her slim hips rolling toward him-and he would bite his cheek for the pain of it, to distract him from desire.

It was because he was living with Father; the old bastard's goatishness was rubbing off on him, that's all. So he spent as little time with his father as possible, going home only to sleep at night.

The harder he worked at the jobs Anamari gave him to do, the easier it was to keep himself from remembering his dream of her kneeling over him, touching him, sliding along his body. Hoe the weeds out of the corn until your back is on fire with pain! Wash the Baniwa hunter's wound and replace the bandage! Sterilize the instruments in the alcohol! Above all, do not, even accidentally, let any part of your body brush against hers; pull away when she is near you, turn away so you don't feel her warm breath as she leans over your shoulder, start a bright conversation whenever there is a silence filled only with the sound of insects and the sight of a bead of sweat slowly etching its way from her neck down her chest to disappear between her breasts where she only tied her shirt instead of buttoning it.

How could she possibly be a virgin, after the way she acted in his dreams?

"Where do you think the dreams come from?" she asked.

He blushed, even though she could not have guessed what he was thinking. Could she?

"The dreams," she said. "Why do you think we have dreams that come true?"

It was nearly dark. "I have to get home," he said. She was holding his hand. When had she taken his hand like that, and why?

"I have the strangest dream," she said. "I dream of a huge snake, covered with bright green and red feathers."

"Not all the dreams come true," he said.

"I hope not," she answered. "Because this snake comes out of--I give birth to this snake."

"Quetzal," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"The gathered serpent god of the Aztecs. Or maybe the Mayas. Mexican, anyway. I have to go home."

"But what does it mean?"

"It's almost dark," he said.

"Stay and talk to me!" she demanded. "I have room, you can stay the night."

But Sam had to get back. Much as he hated staying with his father, he dared not spend a night in this place. Even her invitation aroused him. He would never last a night in the same house with her. The dream would be too strong for him. So he left her and headed back along the path through the jungle. All during the walk he couldn't get Anamari out of his mind. It was as if the plants were sending him the vision of her, so his desire was even stronger than when he was with her.

The leaves gradually turned from green to black in the seeping dark. The hot darkness did not frighten him; it seemed to invite him to step away from the path into the shadows, where he would find the moist relief, the cool release of all his tension. He stayed on the path, and hurried faster.

He came at last to the oilmen's town. The generator was loud, but the insects were louder, swarming around the huge area light, casting shadows of their demonic dance. He and his father shared a large one-room house on the far edge of the compound. The oil company provided much nicer hovels than the Brazilian government.

A few men called out to greet him. He waved, even answered once or twice, but hurried on. His groin felt so hot and tight with desire that he was sure that only the shadows and his quick stride kept everyone from seeing. It was maddening: the more he thought of trying to calm himself, the more visions of Anamari slipped in and out of his waking mind, almost to the point of hallucination. His body would not relax. He was almost running when he burst into the house. Inside, Father was washing his dinner plate. He glanced up, but Sam was already past him. "I'll heat up your dinner."

Sam flopped down on his bed. "Not hungry."

"Why are you so late?" asked his father.

"We got to talking."

"It's dangerous in the jungle at night. You think it's safe because nothing bad ever happens to you in the daytime, but it's dangerous."

"Sure, Dad. I know." Sam got up, turned his back to take off his pants. Maddeningly, he was still aroused; he didn't want his father to see.

But with the unerring instinct of prying parents, the old bastard must have sensed that Sam was hiding something. When Sam was buck naked, Father walked around, and looked just as if he never heard of privacy. Sam blushed in spite of himself. His father's eyes went small and hard. I hope I don't ever look like that, thought Sam. I hope my face doesn't get that ugly suspicious expression on it. I'd rather die than look like that.

"Well, put on your pajamas," Father said. "I don't want to look at that forever."

Sam pulled on his sleeping shorts.

"What's going on over there?" asked Father.

"Nothing," said Sam.

"You must do something all day."

"I told you, I help her. She runs a clinic, and she also tends a garden. She's got no electricity, so it takes a lot of work."

"I've done a lot of work in my time, Sam, but I don't come home like that. "

"No, you always stopped and got it off with some whore along the way."

The old bastard whipped out his hand and slapped Sam across the face. It stung, and the surprise of it wrung tears from Sam before he had time to decide not to cry.

"I never slept with a whore in my life," said the old bastard.

"You only slept with one woman who wasn't," said Sam.

Father slapped him again, only this time Sam was ready, and he bore the slap stoically, almost without flinching.

"I had one affair," said Father.

"You got caught once," said Sam. "There were dozens of women."

Father laughed derisively. "What did you do, hire a detective? There was only the one."

But Sam knew better. He had dreamed these women for years. Laughing, lascivious women. It wasn't until he was twelve years old that he found out enough about sex to know what it all meant. By then he had long since learned that any dream he had more than once was true. So when he had a dream of Father with one of the laughing women, he woke up, holding the dream in his memory. He thought through it from beginning to end, remembering all the details he could. The name of the motel. The room number. It was midnight, but Father was in California, so it was an hour earlier. Sam got out of bed and walked quietly into the kitchen and dialed directory assistance. There was such a motel. He wrote down the number. Then Mother was there, asking him what he was doing.

"This is the number of the Seaview Motor Inn," he said. "Call this number and ask for room twenty-one-twelve and then ask for Dad."

Mother looked at him strangely, like she was about to scream or cry or hit him or throw up. "Your father is at the Hilton," she said.

But he just looked right back at her and said, "No matter who answers the phone, ask for Dad."

So she did. A woman answered, and Mom asked for Dad by name, and he was there. "I wonder how we can afford to pay for two motel rooms on the same night," Mom said coldly. "Or are you splitting the cost with your friend?" Then she hung up the phone and burst into tears.

She cried all night as she packed up everything the old bastard owned. By the time Dad got home two days later, all his things were in storage. Mom moved fast when she made up her mind. Dad found himself divorced and excommunicated all in the same week, not two months later.

Mother never asked Sam how he knew where Dad was that night. Never even hinted at wanting to know. Dad never asked him how Mom knew to call that number, either. An amazing lack of curiosity, Sam thought sometimes. Perhaps they just took it as fate. For a while it was secret, then it stopped being secret, and it didn't matter how the change happened. But one thing Sam knew for sure--the woman at the Seaview Motor Inn was not the first woman, and the Seaview was not the first motel. Dad had been an adulterer for years, and it was ridiculous for him to lie about it now.

But there was no point in arguing with him, especially when he was in the mood to slap Sam around.

"I don't like the idea of you spending so much time with an older woman," said Father.

"She's the closest thing to a doctor these people have. She needs my help and I'm going to keep helping her," said Sam.

"Don't talk to me like that, little boy."

"You don't know anything about this, so just mind your own business."

Another slap. "You're going to get tired of this before I do, Sammy."

"I love it when you slap me, Dad. It confirms my moral superiority. •.

Another slap, this time so hard that Sam stumbled under the blow, and he tasted blood inside his mouth. "How hard next time, Dad?" he said. "You going to knock me down? Kick me around a little? Show me who's boss?"

"You've been asking for a beating ever since we got here."

"I've been asking to be left alone."

"I know women, Sam. You have no business getting involved with an older woman like that."

"I help her wash a little girl who has bowel movements in bed, Father. I empty pails of vomit. I wash clothes and help patch leaking roofs and while I'm doing all these things we talk. Just talk. I don't imagine you have much experience with that, Dad. You probably never talk at all with the women you know, at least not after the price is set."

It was going to be the biggest slap of all, enough to knock him down, enough to bruise his face and black his eye. But the old bastard held it in. Didn't hit him. Just stood there, breathing hard, his face red, his eyes tight and piggish.

"You're not as pure as you think," the old bastard finally whispered. "You've got every desire you despise in me."

"I don't despise you for desire, " said Sam.

"The guys on the crew have been talking about you and this Indian bitch, Sammy. You may not like it, but I'm your father and it's my job to warn you. These Indian women are easy, and they'll give you a disease."

"The guys on the crew," said Sam. "What do they know about Indian women? They're all fags or jerk-offs."

"I hope someday you say that where they can hear you, Sam. And I hope when it happens I'm not there to stop what they do to you."

"I would never be around men like that, Daddy, if the court hadn't given you shared custody. A no-fault divorce. What a joke."

More than anything else, those words stung the old bastard. Hurt him enough to shut him up. He walked out of the house and didn't come back until Sam was long since asleep.

Asleep and dreaming.

Anamari knew what was on Sam's mind, and to her surprise she found it vaguely flattering. She had never known the shy affection of a boy. When she was a teenager, she was the one Indian girl in the schools in Sao Paulo. Indians were so rare in the Europeanized parts of Brazil that she might have seemed exotic, but in those days she was still so frightened. The city was sterile, all concrete and harsh light, not at all like the deep soft meadows and woods of Xingu Park. Her tribe, the Kuikuru, were much more Europeanized than the jungle Indians-she had seen cars all her life, and spoke Portuguese before she went to school. But the city made her hungry for the land, the cobblestones hurt her feet, and these intense, competitive children made her afraid. Worst of all, true dreams stopped in the city. She hardly knew who she was, if she was not a true dreamer. So if any boy desired her then, she would not have known it. She would have rebuffed him inadvertently. And then the time for such things had passed. Until now.

"Last night I dreamed of a great bird, flying west, away from land. Only its right wing was twice as large as its left wing. It had great bleeding wounds along the edges of its wings, and the right wing was the sickest of all, rotting in the air, the feathers dropping off."

"Very pretty dream," said Sam. Then he translated, to keep in practice. "Que sonho lindo."

"Ah, but what does it mean?"

"What happened next?"

"I was riding on the bird. I was very small, and I held a small snake in my hands-"

"The feathered snake."

"Yes. And I turned it loose, and it went and ate up all the corruption, and the bird was clean. And that's all. You've got a bubble in that syringe. The idea is to inject medicine, not air. What does the dream mean?"

"What, you think I'm a Joseph? A Daniel?"

"How about a Sam?"

"Actually, your dream is easy. Piece of cake."

"What?"

"Piece of cake. Easy as pie. That's how the cookie crumbles. Man shall not live by bread alone. All I can think of are bakery sayings. I must be hungry."

"Tell me the dream or I'll poke this needle into your eye."

"That's what I like about you Indians. Always you have torture on your mind."

She planted her foot against him and knocked him off his stool onto the packed dirt floor. A beetle skittered away. Sam held up the syringe he had been working with; it was undamaged. He got up, set it aside. "The bird," he said, "is North and South America. Like wings, flying west. Only the right wing is bigger." He sketched out a rough map with his toe on the floor.

"That's the shape, maybe," she said. "It could be."

"And the corruption-show me where it was."

With her toe, she smeared the map here, there.

"It's obvious," said Sam.

"Yes," she said. "Once you think of it as a map. The corruption is all the Europeanized land. And the only healthy places are where the Indians still live."

"Indians or half-Indians," said Sam. "All your dreams are about the same thing, Anamari. Removing the Europeans from North and South America. Let's face it. You're an Indian chauvinist. You give birth to the resurrection god of the Aztecs, and then you send it out to destroy the Europeans."

"But why do I dream this?"

"Because you hate Europeans."

"No," she said. "That isn't true."

"Sure it is."

"I don't hate you. "

"Because you know me. I'm not a European anymore, I'm a person. Obviously you've got to keep that from happening anymore, so you can keep your bigotry alive."

"You're making fun of me, Sam."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not. These are true dreams, Anamari. They tell you your destiny."

She giggled. "If I give birth to a feathered snake, I'll know the dream was true."

"To drive the Europeans out of America."

"No," she said. "I don't care what the dream says. I won't do that. Besides, what about the dream of the flowering weed?"

"Little weed in the garden, almost dead, and then you water it and it grows larger and larger and more beautiful-"

"And something else," she said. "At the very end of the dream, all the other flowers in the garden have changed. To be just like the flowering weed." She reached out and rested her hand on his arm. "Tell me that dream."

His arm became still, lifeless under her hand. "Black is beautiful," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"In America. The U.S., I mean. For the longest time, the blacks, the former slaves, they were ashamed to be black. The whiter you were, the more status you had-the more honor. But when they had their revolution in the sixties-"

"You don't remember the sixties, little boy."

"Heck, I barely remember the seventies. But I read books. One of the big changes, and it made a huge difference, was that slogan. Black is beautiful. The blacker the better. They said it over and over. Be proud of blackness, not ashamed of it. And in just a few years, they turned the whole status system upside down."

She nodded. "The weed came into flower."

"So. All through Latin America, Indians are very low status. If you want a Bolivian to pull a knife on you, just call him an Indian. Everybody who possibly can, pretends to be of pure Spanish blood. Pure-blooded Indians are slaughtered wherever there's the slightest excuse. Only in Mexico is it a little bit different."

"What you tell me from my dreams, Sam, this is no small job to do. I'm one middle-aged Indian woman, living in the jungle. I'm supposed to tell all the Indians of America to be proud? When they're the poorest of the poor and the lowest of the low?"

"When you give them a name, you create them. Benjamin Franklin did it, when he coined the name American for the people of the English colonies. They weren't New Yorkers or Virginians, they were Americans. Same thing for you. It isn't Latin Americans against Norteamericanos. It's Indians and Europeans. Somos todos indios. We're all Indians. Think that would work as a slogan?"

"Me. A revolutionary."

"Nos somos os americanos. Vai fora, Europa! America p'ra americanos! All kinds of slogans."

"I'd have to translate them into Spanish."

"Indios moram na India. Americanos moram na America. America nossa! No, better still: Nossa America! Nuestra America! It translates. Our America."

"You're a very fine slogan maker."

He shivered as she traced her finger along his shoulder and down the sensitive skin of his chest. She made a circle on his nipple and it shriveled and hardened, as if he were cold.

"Why are you silent now?" She laid her hand flat on his abdomen, just above his shorts, just below his navel. "You never tell me your own dreams," she said. "But I know what they are."

He blushed.

"See? Your skin tells me, even when your mouth says nothing. I have dreamed these dreams all my life, and they troubled me, all the time, but now you tell me what they mean, a white-skinned dream-teller, you tell me that I must go among the Indians and make them proud, make them strong, so that everyone with a drop of Indian blood will call himself an Indian, and Europeans will lie and claim native ancestors, until America is all Indian. You tell me that I will give birth to the new Quetzalcoatl, and he will unify and heal the land of its sickness. But what you never tell me is this: Who will be the father of my feathered snake?"

Abruptly he got up and walked stiffly away. To the door, keeping his back to her, so she couldn't see how alert his body was. But she knew.

"I'm fifteen," said Sam, finally.

"And I'm very old. The land is older. Twenty million years. What does it care of the quartercentury between us?"

"I should never have come to this place."

"You never had a choice," she said. "My people have always known the god of the land. Once there was a perfect balance in this place. All the people loved the land and tended it. Like the garden of Eden. And the land fed them. It gave them maize and bananas. They took only what they needed to eat, and they did not kill animals for sport or humans for hate. But then the Incas turned away from the land and worshiped gold and the bright golden sun. The Aztecs soaked the ground in the blood of their human sacrifices. The Pueblos cut down the forests of Utah and Arizona and turned them into red-rock deserts. The Iroquois tortured their enemies and filled the forest with their screams of agony. We found tobacco and coca and peyote and coffee and forgot the dreams the land gave us in our sleep. And so the land rejected us. The land called to Columbus and told him lies and seduced him and he never had a chance, did he? Never had a choice. The land brought the Europeans to punish us. Disease and slavery and warfare killed most of us, and the rest of us tried to pretend we were Europeans rather than endure any more of the punishment. The land was our jealous lover, and it hated us for a while.

"Some Catholic you are," said Sam. "I don't believe in your Indian gods."

"Say Dens or Cristo instead of the land and the story is the same," she said. "But now the Europeans are worse than we Indians ever were. The land is suffering from a thousand different poisons, and you threaten to kill all of life with your weapons of war. We Indians have been punished enough, and now it's our turn to have the land again. The land chose Columbus exactly five centuries ago. Now you and I dream our dreams, the way he dreamed."

"That's a good story," Sam said, still looking out the door. It sounded so close to what the old prophets in the Book of Mormon said would happen to America; close, but dangerously different. As if there were no hope for the Europeans anymore. As if their chance had already been lost, as if no repentance would be allowed. They would not be able to pass the land on to the next generation. Someone else would inherit. It made him sick at heart, to realize what the white man had lost, had thrown away, had torn up and destroyed.

"But what should I do with my story?" she asked. He could hear her coming closer, walking up behind him. He could almost feel her breath on his shoulder. "How can I fulfill it?"

By yourself. Or at least without me. "Tell it to the Indians. You can cross all these borders in a thousand different places, and you speak Portuguese and Spanish and Arawak and Carib, and you'll be able to tell your story in Quechua, too, no doubt, crossing back and forth between Brazil and Colombia and Bolivia and Peru and Venezuela, all close together here, until every Indian knows about you and calls you by the name you were given in my dream."

"Tell me my name."

"Virgem America. See? The land or god or whatever it is wants you to be a virgin."

She giggled. "Nossa senhora," she said. "Don't you see? I'm the new Virgin Mother: It wants me to be a mother, all the old legends of the Holy Mother will transfer to me; they'll call me virgin no matter what the truth is. How the priests will hate me. How they'll try to kill my son. But he will live and become Quetzalcoatl, and he will restore America to the true Americans. That is the meaning of my dreams. My dreams and yours."

"Not me," he said. "Not for any dream or any god." He turned to face her. His fist was pressed against his groin, as if to crush out all rebellion there. "My body doesn't rule me," he said. "Nobody controls me but myself."

"That's very sick," she said cheerfully. "All because you hate your father. Forget that hate, and love me instead."

His face became a mask of anguish, and then he turned and fled.

He even thought of castrating himself, that's the kind of madness that drove him through the jungle. He could hear the bulldozers carving out the airstrip, the screams of falling timbers, the calls of birds and cries of animals displaced. It was the terror of the tortured land, and it maddened him even more as he ran between thick walls of green. The rig was sucking oil like heartblood from the forest floor. The ground was wan and trembling under his feet. And when he got home he was grateful to lift his feet off the ground and lie on his mattress, clutching his pillow, panting or perhaps sobbing from the exertion of his run.

He slept, soaking his pillow in afternoon sweat, and in his sleep the voice of the land came to him like whispered lullabies. I did not choose you, said the land. I cannot speak except to those who hear me, and because it is in your nature to hear and listen, I spoke to you and led you here to save me, save me, save me. Do you know the desert they will make of me? Encased in burning dust or layers of ice, either way I'll be dead. My whole purpose is to thrust life upward out of my soils, and feel the press of living feet, and hear the songs of birds and the low music of the animals, growling, lowing, chittering, whatever voice they choose. That's what I ask of you, the dance of life, just once to make the man whose mother will teach him to be Quetzalcoatl and save me, save me, save me.

He heard that whisper and he dreamed a dream. In his dream he got up and walked back to Agualinda, not along the path, but through the deep jungle itself. A longer way, but the leaves touched his face, the spiders climbed on him, the tree lizards tangled in his hair, the monkeys dunged him and pinched him and jabbered in his ear, the snakes entwined around his feet; he waded streams and fish caressed his naked ankles, and all the way they sang to him, songs that celebrants might sing at the wedding of a king. Somehow, in

the way of dreams, he lost his clothing without removing it, so that he emerged from the jungle naked, and walked through Agualinda as the sun was setting, all the Baniwas peering at him from their doorways, making clicking noises with their teeth.

He awoke in darkness. He heard his father breathing. He must have slept through the afternoon. What a dream, what a dream. He was exhausted.

He moved, thinking of getting up to use the toilet. Only then did he realize that he was not alone on the bed, and it was not his bed. She stirred and nestled against him, and he cried out in fear and anger.

It startled her awake. "What is it?" she asked.

"It was a dream," he insisted. "All a dream."

"Ah yes," she said, "it was. But last night, Sam, we dreamed the same dream." She giggled. "All night long."

In his sleep. It happened in his sleep. And it did not fade like common dreams, the memory was clear, pouring himself into her again and again, her fingers gripping him, her breath against his cheek, whispering the same thing, over and over. "Aceito, aceito-te, aceito." Not love, no, not when he came with the land controlling him, she did not love him, she merely accepted the burden he placed within her. Before tonight she had been a virgin, and so had he. Now she was even purer than before, Virgem America, but his purity was hopelessly, irredeemably gone, wasted, poured out into this old woman who had haunted his dreams. "I hate you," he said. "What you stole from me."

He got up, looking for his clothing, ashamed that she was watching him.

"No one can blame you," she said. "The land married us, gave us to each other. There's no sin in that."

"Yeah," he said.

"One time. Now I am whole. Now I can begin."

And now I'm finished.

"I didn't mean to rob you," she said. "I didn't know you were dreaming."

"I thought I was dreaming," he said, "but I loved the dream. I dreamed I was fornicating and it made me glad." He spoke the words with all the poison in his heart. "Where are my clothes?"

"You arrived without them," she said. "It was my first hint that you wanted me."

There was a moon outside. Not yet dawn. "I did what you wanted," he said. "Now can I go home?"

"Do what you want," she said. "I didn't plan this."

"I know. I wasn't talking to you." And when he spoke of home, he didn't mean the shack where his father would be snoring and the air would stink of beer.

"When you woke me, I was dreaming," she said.

"I don't want to hear it."

"I have him now," she said, "a boy inside me. A lovely boy. But you will never see him in all your life, I think."

"Will you tell him? Who I am?"

She giggled. "Tell Quetzalcoatl that his father is a European? A man who blushes? A man who burns in the sun? No, I won't tell him. Unless someday he becomes cruel, and wants to punish the Europeans even after they are defeated. Then I will tell him that the first European he must punish is himself. Here, write your name. On this paper write your name, and give me your fingerprint, and write the date."

"I don't know what day it is."

"October twelfth," she said.

"It's August."

"Write October twelfth," she said. "I'm in the legend business now."

"August twenty-fourth," he murmured, but he wrote the date she asked for.

"The helicopter comes this morning," she said.

"Good-bye," he said. He started for the door.

Her hands caught at him, held his arm, pulled him back. She embraced him, this time not in a dream, cool bodies together in the doorway of the house. The geis was off him now, or else he was worn out; her body had no power over his anymore.

"I did love you," she murmured. "It was not just the god that brought you."

Suddenly he felt very young, even younger than fifteen, and he broke away from her and walked quickly away through the sleeping village. He did not try to retrace his wandering

route through the jungle; he stayed on the moonlit path and soon was at his father's hut. The old bastard woke up as Sam came in.

"I knew it'd happen," Father said.

Sam rummaged for underwear and pulled it on.

"There's no man born who can keep his zipper up when a woman wants it." Father laughed. A laugh of malice and triumph. "You're no better than I am, boy."

Sam walked to where his father sat on the bed and imagined hitting him across the face. Once, twice, three times.

"Go ahead, boy, hit me. It won't make you a virgin again."

"I'm not like you," Sam whispered.

"No?" asked Father. "For you it's a sacrament or something? As my daddy used to say, it don't matter who squeezes the toothpaste, boy, it all squirts out the same."

"Then your daddy must have been as dumb a jackass as mine." Sam went back to the chest they shared, began packing his clothes and books into one big suitcase. "I'm going out with the chopper today. Mom will wire me the money to come home from Manaus."

"She doesn't have to. I'll give you a check."

"I don't want your money. I just want my passport."

"It's in the top drawer." Father laughed again. "At least I always wore my clothes home."

In a few minutes Sam had finished packing. He picked up the bag, started for the door.

"Son," said Father, and because his voice was quiet, not derisive, Sam stopped and listened. "Son," he said, "once is once. It doesn't mean you're evil, it doesn't even mean you're weak. It just means you're human." He was breathing deeply. Sam hadn't heard him so emotional in a long time. "You aren't a thing like me, son," he said. "That should make you glad."

Years later Sam would think of all kinds of things he should have said. Forgiveness. Apology. Affection. Something. But he said nothing, just left and went out to the clearing and waited for the helicopter. Father didn't come to try to say good-bye. The chopper pilot came, unloaded, left the chopper to talk to some people. He must have talked to Father because when he came back he handed Sam a check. Plenty to fly home, and stay in good places during the layovers, and buy some new clothes that didn't have jungle stains on them. The check was the last thing Sam had from his father. Before he came home from that rig, the Venezuelans bought a hardy and virulent strain of syphilis on the black market, one that could be passed by casual contact, and released it in Guyana. Sam's father was one of the first million to die, so fast that he didn't even write.

## Page, Arizona

The state of Deseret had only sixteen helicopters, all desperately needed for surveying, spraying, and medical emergencies. So Governor Sam Monson rarely risked them on government business. This time, though, he had no choice. He was only fifty-five, and in good shape, so maybe he could have made the climb into Glen Canyon and back up the other side. But Carpenter wouldn't have made it, not in a wheel-chair, and Carpenter had a right to be here. He had a right to see what the red-rock Navaho desert had become.

Deciduous forest, as far as the eye could see.

They stood on the bluff where the old town of Page had once been, before the dam was blown up. The Navahos hadn't tried to reforest here. It was their standard practice. They left all the old European towns unplanted, like pink scars in the green of the forest. Still, the Navahos weren't stupid. They had come to the last stronghold of European science, the University of Deseret at Zarahemla, to find out how to use the heavy rainfalls to give them something better than perpetual floods and erosion. It was Carpenter who gave them the plan for these forests, just as it was Carpenter whose program had turned the old Utah deserts into the richest farmland in America. The Navahos filled their forests with bison, deer, and bears. The Mormons raised crops enough to feed five times their population. That was the European mindset, still in place: enough is never enough. Plant more, grow more, you'll need it tomorrow.

"They say he has two hundred thousand soldiers," said Carpenter's computer voice. Carpenter could speak, Sam had heard, but he never did. Preferred the synthesized voice. "They could all be right down there, and we'd never see them."

"They're much farther south and east. Strung out from Phoenix to Santa Fe, so they aren't too much of a burden on the Navahos."

"Do you think they'll buy supplies from us? Or send an army in to take them?"

"Neither," said Sam. "We'll give our surplus grain as a gift."

"He rules all of Latin America, and he needs gifts from a little remnant of the U.S. in the Rockies?"

"We'll give it as a gift, and be grateful if he takes it that way."

"How else might he take it?"

"As tribute. As taxes. As ransom. The land is his now, not ours."

"We made the desert live, Sam. That makes it ours."

"There they are."

They watched in silence as four horses walked slowly from the edge of the woods, out onto the open ground of an ancient gas station. They bore a litter between them, and were led by two-not Indians-Americans. Sam had schooled himself long ago to use the word American to refer only to what had once been known as Indians, and to call himself and his own people Europeans. But in his heart he had never forgiven them for stealing his identity, even though he remembered very clearly where and when that change began.

It took fifteen minutes for the horses to bring the litter to him, but Sam made no move to meet them, no sign that he was in a hurry. That was also the American way now, to take time, never to hurry, never to rush. Let the Europeans wear their watches. Americans told time by the sun and stars.

Finally the litter stopped, and the men opened the litter door and helped her out. She was smaller than before, and her face was tightly wrinkled, her hair steel-white.

She gave no sign that she knew him, though he said his name. The Americans introduced her as Nuestra Senora. Our Lady. Never speaking her most sacred name: Virgem America.

The negotiations were delicate but simple. Sam had authority to speak for Deseret, and she obviously had authority to speak for her son. The grain was refused as a gift, but accepted as taxes from a federal state. Deseret would be allowed to keep its own government, and the borders negotiated between the Navahos and the Mormons eleven years before were allowed to stand.

Sam went further. He praised Quetzalcoatl for coming to pacify the chaotic lands that had been ruined by the Europeans. He gave her maps that his scouts had prepared, showing strongholds of the prairie raiders, decommissioned nuclear missiles, and the few places where stable governments had been formed. He offered and she accepted, a hundred experienced scouts to travel with Quetzalcoatl at Deseret's expense, and promised that when he chose the site of his North American capital, Deseret would provide architects and engineers and builders to teach his American workmen how to build the place themselves.

She was generous in return. She granted all citizens of Deseret conditional status as adopted Americans, and she promised that Quetzalcoatl's armies would stick to the roads through the northwest Texas panhandle, where the grasslands of the newest New Lands project were still so fragile that an army could destroy five years of labor just by marching through. Carpenter printed out two copies of the agreement in English and Spanish, and Sam and Virgem America signed both.

Only then, when their official work was done, did the old woman look up into Sam's eyes and smile. "Are you still a heretic, Sam?"

"No," he said. "I grew up. Are you still a virgin?"

She giggled, and even though it was an old lady's broken voice, he remembered the laughter he had heard so often in the village of Agualinda, and his heart ached for the boy he was then, and the girl she was. He remembered thinking then that forty-two was old.

"Yes, I'm still a virgin," she said. "God gave me my child. God sent me an angel, to put the child in my womb. I thought you would have heard the story by now."

"I heard it," he said.

She leaned closer to him, her voice a whisper. "Do you dream, these days?"

"Many dreams. But the only ones that come true are the ones I dream in daylight."

"Ah," she sighed. "My sleep is also silent."

She seemed distant, sad, distracted. Sam also; then, as if by conscious decision, he brightened, smiled, spoke cheerfully. "I have grandchildren now."

"And a wife you love," she said, reflecting his brightening mood. "I have grandchildren, too." Then she became wistful again. "But no husband. Just memories of an angel."

"Will I see Quetzalcoatl?"

"No," she said, very quickly. A decision she had long since made and would not reconsider. "It would not be good for you to meet face to face, or stand side by side. Quetzalcoatl also asks that in the next election, you refuse to be a candidate."

"Have I displeased him?" asked Sam.

"He asks this at my advice," she said. "It is better, now that his face will be seen in this land, that your face stay behind closed doors."

Sam nodded. "Tell me," he said. "Does he look like the angel?"

"He is as beautiful," she said. "But not as pure."

They embraced each other and wept. Only for a moment. Then her men lifted her back into her litter, and Sam returned with Carpenter to the helicopter. They never met again.

In retirement, I came to visit Sam, full of questions lingering from his meeting with Virgem America. "You knew each other," I insisted. "You had met before." He told me all this story then.

That was thirty years ago. She is dead now, he is dead, and I am old, my fingers slapping these keys with all the grace of wooden blocks. But I write this sitting in the shade of a tree on the brow of a hill, looking out across woodlands and orchards, fields and rivers and roads, where once the land was rock and grit and sagebrush. This is what America wanted, what it bent our lives to accomplish. Even if we took twisted roads and got lost or injured on the way, even if we came limping to this place, it is a good place, it is worth the journey, it is the promised, the promising land.

## ATLANTIS Orson Scott Card

Kemal Akyazi grew up within a few miles of the ruins of Troy; from his boyhood home above Kumkale he could see the waters of the Dardanelles, the narrow strait that connects the waters of the Black Sea with the Aegean. Many a war had been fought on both sides of that strait, one of which had produced the great epic of Homer's ILIAD.

This pressure of history had a strange influence on Kemal as a child. He learned all the tales of the place, of course, but he also knew that the tales were Greek, and the place was of the Greek Aegean world. Kemal was a Turk; his own ancestors had not come to the Dardanelles until the fifteenth century. He felt that it was a powerful place, but it did not belong to him. So the ILIAD was not the story that spoke to Kemal's soul. Rather it was the story of Heinrich Schliemann, the German explorer who, in an era when Troy had been regarded as a mere legend, a myth, a fiction, had been sure not only that Troy was real but also where it was. Despite all scoffers, he mounted an expedition and found it and unburied it. The old stories turned out to be true.

In his teens Kemal thought it was the greatest tragedy of his life that Pastwatch had to use machines to look through the the millennia of human history. There would be no more Schliemanns, studying and pondering and guessing until they found some artifact, some ruin of a long-lost city, some remnant of a legend made true again. Thus Kemal had no interest in joining Pastwatch. It was not history that he hungered for--it was exploration and discovery that he wanted, and what was the glory in finding the truth through a machine? So, after an abortive try at physics, he studied to become a meteorologist. At the age of eighteen, heavily immersed in the study of climate and weather, he touched again on the findings of Pastwatch. No longer did meteorologists have to depend on only a few centuries of weather measurements and fragmentary fossil evidence to determine long-range patterns. Now they had accurate accounts of storm patterns for millions of years. Indeed, in the earliest years of Pastwatch, the machinery had been so coarse that individual humans could not be seen. It was like time-lapse photography in which people don't remain in place long enough to be on more than a single frame of the film, making them invisible. So in those days Pastwatch recorded the weather of the past, erosion patterns, volcanic eruptions, ice ages, climatic shifts.

All that data was the bedrock on which modern weather prediction and

control rested. Meteorologists could see developing patterns and, without disrupting the overall pattern, could make tiny changes that prevented any one area from going completely rainless during a time of drought, or sunless during a wet growing season. They had taken the sharp edge off the relentless scythe of climate, and now the great project was to determine how they might make a more serious change, to bring a steady pattern of light rain to the desert regions of the world, to restore the prairies and savannahs that they once had been. That was the work that Kemal wanted to be a part of.

Yet he could not bring himself out from the shadow of Troy, the memory of Schliemann. Even as he studied the climatic shifts involved with the waxing and waning of the ice ages, his mind contained fleeting images of lost civilizations, legendary places that waited for a Schliemann to uncover them.

His project for his degree in meteorology was part of the effort to determine how the Red Sea might be exploited to develop dependable rains for either the Sudan or central Arabia; Kemal's immediate target was to study the difference between weather patterns during the last ice age, when the Red Sea had all but disappeared, and the present, with the Red Sea at its fullest. Back and forth he went through the coarse old Pastwatch recordings, gathering data on sea level and on precipitation at selected points inland. The old TruSite I had been imprecise at best, but good enough for counting rainstorms.

Time after time Kemal would cycle through the up-and-down fluctuations of the Red Sea, watching as the average sea level gradually rose toward the end of the Ice Age. He always stopped, of course, at the abrupt jump in sea level that marked the rejoining of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. After that, the Red Sea was useless for his purposes, since its sea level was tied to that of the great world ocean.

But the echo of Schliemann inside Kemal's mind made him think: What a flood that must have been.

What a flood. The Ice Age had locked up so much water in glaciers and ice sheets that the sea level of the whole world fell. It eventually reached a low enough point that land bridges arose out of the sea. In the north Pacific, the Bering land bridge allowed the ancestors of the Indies to cross on foot into their great empty homeland. Britain and Flanders were joined. The Dardanelles were closed and the Black Sea became a salty lake. The Persian Gulf disappeared and became a great plain cut by the Euphrates. And the Bab al Mandab, the strait at the mouth of the Red Sea, became a land bridge.

But a land bridge is also a dam. As the world climate warmed and the glaciers began to release their pent-up water, the rains fell

heavily everywhere; rivers swelled and the seas rose. The great south-flowing rivers of Europe, which had been mostly dry during the peak of glaciation, now were massive torrents. The Rhone, the Po, the Strimon, the Danube poured so much water into the Mediterranean and the Black Sea that their water level rose at about the same rate as that of the great world ocean.

The Red Sea had no great rivers, however. It was a new sea, formed by rifting between the new Arabian plate and the African, which meant it had uplift ridges on both coasts. Many rivers and streams flowed from those ridges down into the Red Sea, but none of them carried much water compared to the rivers that drained vast basins and carried the melt-off of the glaciers of the north. So, while the Red Sea gradually rose during this time, it lagged far, far behind the great world ocean. Its water level responded to the immediate local weather patterns rather than to worldwide weather.

Then one day the Indian Ocean rose so high that tides began to spill over the Bab al Mandab. The water cut new channels in the grassland there. Over a period of several years, the leakage grew, creating a series of large new tidal lakes on the Hanish Plain. And then one day, some fourteen thousand years ago, the flow cut a channel so deep that it didn't dry up at low tide, and the water kept flowing, cutting the channel deeper and deeper, until those tidal lakes were full, and brimmed over. With the weight of the Indian Ocean behind it the water gushed into the basin of the Red Sea in a vast flood that in a few days brought the Red Sea up to the level of the world ocean.

This isn't just the boundary marker between useful and useless water level data, thought Kemal. This is a cataclysm, one of the rare times when a single event changes vast reaches of land in a period of time short enough that human beings could notice it. And, for once, this cataclysm happened in an era when human beings were there. It was not only possible but likely that someone saw this flood--indeed, that it killed many, for the southern end of the Red Sea basin was rich savannah and marshes up to the moment when the ocean broke through, and surely the humans of fourteen thousand years ago would have hunted there. Would have gathered seeds and fruits and berries there. Some hunting party must have seen, from the peaks of the Dehalak mountains, the great walls of water that roared up the plain, breaking and parting around the slopes of the Dehalaks, making islands of them.

Such a hunting party would have known that their families had been killed by this water. What would they have thought? Surely that some god was angry with them. That the world had been done away, buried under the sea. And if they survived, if they found a way to the Eritrean shore after the great turbulent waves settled down to the more placid waters of the new, deeper sea, they would tell the tale to anyone who would listen. And for a few years they could take their hearers to the water's edge, show them the treetops barely rising above the surface of the sea, and tell them tales of all that had been buried under the waves.

Noah, thought Kemal. Gilgamesh. Atlantis. The stories were believed. The stories were remembered. Of course they forgot where it happened--the civilizations that learned to write their stories naturally transposed the events to locations that they knew. But they remembered the things that mattered. What did the flood story of Noah say? Not just rain, no, it wasn't a flood caused by rain alone. The "fountains of the great deep" broke open. No local flood on the Mesopotamian plain would cause that image to be part of the story. But the great wall of water from the Indian Ocean, coming on the heels of years of steadily increasing rain--THAT would bring those words to the storytellers' lips, generation after generation, for ten thousand years until they could be written down. As for Atlantis, everyone was so sure they had found it years ago. Santorini--Thios--the Aegean island that blew up. But the oldest stories of Atlantis said nothing of blowing up in a volcano. They spoke only of the great civilization sinking into the sea. The supposition was that later visitors came to Santorini and, seeing water where an island city used to be, assumed that it had sunk, knowing nothing of the volcanic eruption. To Kemal, however, this now seemed far-fetched indeed, compared to the way it would have looked to the people of Atlantis themselves, somewhere on the Mits'iwa Plain, when the Red Sea seemed to leap up in its bed, engulfing the city. THAT would be sinking into the sea! No explosion, just water. And if the city were in the marshes of what was now the Mits'iwa Channel, the water would have come, not just from the southeast, but from the northeast and the north as well. flowing among and around the Dehalak mountains, making islands of them and swallowing up the marshes and the city with them. Atlantis. Not beyond the pillars of Hercules, but Plato was right to associate the city with a strait. He, or whoever told the tale to him, simply replaced the Bab al Mandab with the greatest strait that he had heard of. The story might well have reached him by way of Phoenicia, where Mediterranean sailors would have made the story fit the sea they knew. They learned it from Egyptians, perhaps, or nomad wanderers from the hinterlands of Arabia, and "within the straits of Mandab" would guickly have become "within the pillars of Hercules," and then, because the Mediterranean itself was not strange and exotic enough, the locale was moved outside the pillars of Hercules.

All these suppositions came to Kemal with absolute certainty that

they were true, or nearly true. He rejoiced at the thought of it: There was still an ancient civilization left to discover. Everyone knew that Naog of the Derku People was going to be a tall man when he grew up, because his father and mother were both tall and he was an unusually large baby. He was born in floodwater season, when all the Engu clan lived on reed boats. Their food supply, including the precious seed for next year's planting, was kept dry in the seedboats, which were like floating huts of plaited reeds. The people themselves, though, rode out the flood on the open dragonboats, bundles of reeds which they straddled as if they were riding a crocodile--which, according to legend, was how the dragonboats began, when the first Derku woman, Gweia, saved herself and her baby from the flood by climbing onto the back of a huge crocodile. The crocodile--the first Great Derku, or dragon--endured their weight until they reached a tree they could climb, whereupon the dragon swam away. So when the Derku people plaited reeds into long thick bundles and climbed aboard, they believed that secret of the dragonboats had been given to them by the Great Derku, and in a sense they were riding on his back.

During the raiding season, other nearby tribes had soon learned to fear the coming of the dragonboats, for they always carried off captives who, in those early days, were never seen again. In other tribes when someone was said to have been carried off by the crocodiles, it was the Derku people they meant, for it was well know that all the clans of the Derku worshipped the crocodile as their savior and god, and fed their captives to a dragon that lived in the center of their city.

At Naog's birthtime, the Engu clan were nestled among their tether trees as the flooding Selud River flowed mudbrown underneath them. If Naog had pushed his way out of the womb a few weeks later, as the waters were receding, his mother would have given birth in one of the seedboats. But Naog came early, before highwater, and so the seedboats were still full of grain. During floodwater, they could neither grind the grain into flour nor build cooking fires, and thus had to eat the seeds in raw handfuls. Thus it was forbidden to spill blood on the grain, even birthblood; no one would touch grain that had human blood on it, for that was the juice of the forbidden fruit.

This was why Naog's mother, Lewik, could not hide alone in an enclosed seedboat for the birthing. Instead she had to give birth out in the open, on one of the dragonboats. She clung to a branch of a tether tree as two women on their own dragonboats held hers steady. From a near distance Naog's father, Twerk, could not hide his mortification that his new young wife was giving birth in full view, not only of the women, but of the men and boys of the tribe. Not that any but the youngest and stupidest of the men was overtly looking. Partly because of respect for the event of birth itself, and partly because of a keen awareness that Twerk could cripple any man of the Engu that he wanted to, the men paddled their boats toward the farthest tether trees, herding the boys along with them. There they busied themselves with the work of floodwater season--twining ropes and weaving baskets.

Twerk himself, however, could not keep from looking. He finally left his dragonboat and climbed his tree and watched. The women had brought their dragonboats in a large circle around the woman in travail. Those with children clinging to them or bound to them kept their boats on the fringes--they would be little help, with their hands full already. It was the older women and the young girls who were in close, the older women to help, the younger ones to learn. But Twerk had no eyes for the other women today. It was his wide-eyed, sweating wife that he watched. It frightened him to see her in such pain, for Lewik was usually the healer, giving herbs and ground-up roots to others to take away pain or cure a sickness. It also bothered him to see that as she squatted on her dragonboat, clinging with both hands to the branch above her head, neither she nor any of the other women was in position to catch the baby when it dropped out. It would fall into the water, he knew, and it would die, and then he and everyone else would know that it had been wrong of him to marry this woman who should have been a servant of the crocodile god, the Great Derku.

When he could not contain himself a moment longer, Twerk shouted to the women: "Who will catch the baby?"

Oh, how they laughed at him, when at last they understood what he was saying. "Derku will catch him!" they retorted, jeering, and the men around him also laughed, for that could mean several things. It could mean that the god would provide for the child's safety, or it could mean that the flood would catch the child, for the flood was also called derkuwed, or dragonwater, partly because it was aswarm with crocodiles swept away from their usual lairs, and partly because the floodwater slithered down from the mountains like a crocodile sliding down into the water, quick and powerful and strong, ready to sweep away and swallow up the unwary. Derku will catch him indeed!

The men began predicting what the child would be named. "He will be Rogogu, because we all laughed," said one. Another said, "It will be a girl and she will be named Mehug, because she will be spilled into the water as she plops out!" They guessed that the child would be named for the fact that Twerk watched the birth; for the branch that Lewik clung to or the tree that Twerk climbed; or for the dragonwater itself, into which they imagined the child spilling and then being drawn out with the embrace of the god still dripping from him. Indeed, because of this notion Derkuwed became a childhood nickname for Lewik's and Twerk's baby, and later it was one of the names by which his story was told over and over again in faraway lands that had never heard of dragonwater or seen a crocodile, but it was not his real name, not what his father gave him to be his man-name when he came of age.

After much pushing, Lewik's baby finally emerged. First came the head, dangling between her ankles like the fruit of a tree--that was why the word for HEAD and was the same as the word for FRUIT in the language of the Derku people. Then as the newborn's head touched the bound reeds of the dragonboat, Lewik rolled her eyes in pain and waddled slowly backward, so that the baby flopped out of her body stretched along the length of the boat. He did not fall into the water, because his mother had made sure of it.

"Little man!" cried all the women as soon as they saw the sex of the child.

Lewik grunted out her firstborn's baby-name. "Glogmeriss," she said. GLOG meant "thorn" and MERISS meant "trouble"; together, they made the term that the Derku used for annoyances that turned out all right in the end, but which were quite painful at the time. There were some who thought that she wasn't naming the baby at all, but simply commenting on the situation, but it was the first thing she said and so it would be his name until he left the company of women and joined the men.

As soon as the afterbirth dropped onto the dragonboat, all the other women paddled nearer--like a swarm of gnats, thought Twerk, still watching. Some helped Lewik pry her hands loose from the tree branch and lie down on her dragonboat. Others took the baby and passed it from hand to hand, each one washing a bit of the blood from the baby. The afterbirth got passed with the baby at first, often dropping into the floodwater, until at last it reached the cutting woman, who severed the umbilical cord with a flint blade. Twerk, seeing this for the first time, realized that this might be how he got his name, which meant "cutting" or "breaking." Had his father seen this remarkable thing, too, the women cutting a baby off from this strange belly-tail? No wonder he named him for it. But the thing that Twerk could not get out of his mind was the fact that his Lewik had taken off her napron in full view of the clan, and all the men had seen her nakedness, despite their efforts to pretend that they had not. Twerk knew that this would become a joke among the men, a story talked about whenever he was not with them, and this would weaken him and mean that he would never be the clan leader, for one can never give such respect to a man that one laughs about behind his back.

Twerk could think of only one way to keep this from having the power

to hurt him, and that was to confront it openly so that no one would laugh behind his back. "His name is Naog!" cried Twerk decisively, almost as soon as the baby was fully washed in river water and the placenta set loose to float away on the flood.

"You are such a stupid man!" cried Lewik from her dragonboat. Everyone laughed, but in this case it was all right. Everyone knew Lewik was a bold woman who said whatever she liked to any man. That was why it was such a mark of honor that Twerk had chosen to take her as wife and she had taken him for husband--it took a strong man to laugh when his wife said disrespectful things to him. "Of course he's naog," she said. "All babies are born naked."

"I call him Naog because YOU were naked in front of all the clan," answered Twerk. "Yes, I know you all looked when you thought I couldn't see," he chided the men. "I don't mind a bit. You all saw my Lewik naked when the baby came out of her--but what matters is that only I saw her naked when I put the baby in!"

That made them all laugh, even Lewik, and the story was often repeated. Even before he became a man and gave up the baby-name Glogmeriss, Naog had often heard the tale of why he would have such a silly name--so often, in fact, that he determined that one day he would do such great deeds that when the people heard the word NAOG they would think first of him and his accomplishments, before they remembered that the name was also the word for the tabu condition of taking the napron off one's secret parts in public.

As he grew up, he knew that the water of derkuwed on him as a baby had touched him with greatness. It seemed he was always taller than the other boys, and he reached puberty first, his young body powerfully muscled by the labor of dredging the canals right among the slaves of the dragon during mudwater season. He wasn't much more than twelve floodwaters old when the grown men began clamoring for him to be given his manhood journey early so that he could join them in slave raids--his sheer size would dishearten many an enemy, making them despair and throw down his club or his spear. But Twerk was adamant. He would not tempt Great Derku to devour his son by letting the boy get ahead of himself. Naog might be large of body, but that didn't mean that he could get away with taking a man's role before he had learned all the skills and lore that a man had to acquire in order to survive.

This was all fine with Naog. He knew that he would have his place in the clan in due time. He worked hard to learn all the skills of manhood--how to fight with any weapon; how to paddle his dragonboat straight on course, yet silently; how to recognize the signs of the seasons and the directions of the stars at different hours of the night and times of the year; which wild herbs were good to eat, and which deadly; how to kill an animal and dress it so it would keep long enough to bring home for a wife to eat. Twerk often said that his son was as quick to learn things requiring wit and memory as to learn skills that depended only on size and strength and quickness. What Twerk did not know, what no one even guessed, was that these tasks barely occupied Naog's mind. What he dreamed of, what he thought of constantly, was how to become a great man so that his name could be spoken with solemn honor instead of a smile or laughter.

One of Naog's strongest memories was a visit to the Great Derku in the holy pond at the very center of the great circular canals that linked all the Derku people together. Every year during the mud season, the first dredging was the holy pond, and no slaves were used for THAT. No, the Derku men and women, the great and the obscure, dredged the mud out of the holy pond, carried it away in baskets, and heap it up in piles that formed a round lumpen wall around the pond. As the dry season came, crocodiles a-wandering in search of water would smell the pond and come through the gaps in the wall to drink it and bathe in it. The crocodiles knew nothing of danger from coming within walls. Why would they have learned to fear the works of humans? What other people in all the world had ever built such a thing? So the crocodiles came and wallowed in the water, heedless of the men watching from trees. At the first full moon of the dry season, as the crocodiles lay stupidly in the water during the cool of night, the men dropped from the trees and quietly filled the gaps in the walls with earth. At dawn, the largest crocodile in the pond was hailed as Great Derku for the year. The rest were killed with spears in the bloodiest most wonderful festival of the year.

The year that Naog turned six, the Great Derku was the largest crocodile that anyone could remember ever seeing. It was a dragon indeed, and after the men of raiding age came home from the blood moon festival full of stories about this extraordinary Great Derku, all the families in all the clans began bringing their children to see it.

"They say it's a crocodile who was Great Derku many years ago," said Naog's mother. "He has returned to our pond in hopes of the offerings of manfruit that we used to give to the dragon. But some say he's the very one who was Great Derku the year of the forbidding, when he refused to eat any of the captives we offered him."

"And how would they know?" said Twerk, ridiculing the idea. "Is there anyone alive now who was alive then, to recognize him? And how could a crocodile live so long?"

"The Great Derku lives forever," said Lewik.

"Yes, but the true dragon is the derkuwed, the water in flood," said

Twerk, "and the crocodiles are only its children."

To the child, Naog, these words had another meaning, for he had heard the word DERKUWED far more often in reference to himself, as his nickname, than in reference to the great annual flood. So to him it sounded as though his father was saying that HE was the true dragon, and the crocodiles were his children. Almost at once he realized what was actually meant, but the impression lingered in the back of his mind.

"And couldn't the derkuwed preserve one of its children to come back to us to be our god a second time?" said Lewik. "Or are you suddenly a holy man who knows what the dragon is saying?"

"All this talk about this Great Derku being one of the ancient ones brought back to us is dangerous," said Twerk. "Do you want us to return to the terrible days when we fed manfruit to the Great Derku? When our captives were all torn to pieces by the god, while WE, men and women alike, had to dig out all the canals without slaves?" "There weren't so many canals then," said Lewik. "Father said." "Then it must be true," said Twerk, "if your old father said it. So think about it. Why are there so many canals now, and why are they so long and deep? Because we put our captives to work dredging our canals and making our boats. What if the Great Derku had never refused to eat manfruit? We would not have such a great city here, and other tribes would not bring us gifts and even their own children as slaves. They can come and visit our captives, and even buy them back from us. That's why we're not hated and feared, but rather

LOVED and feared in all the lands from the Nile to the Salty Sea." Naog knew that his father's manhood journey had been from the Salty Sea all the way up the mountains and across endless grasslands to the great river of the west. It was a legendary journey, fitting for such a large man. So Naog knew that he would have to undertake an even greater journey. But of that he said nothing.

"But these people talking stupidly about this being that same Great Derku returned to us again--don't you realize that they will want to put it to the test again, and offer it manfruit? And what if the Great Derku EATS it this time? What do we do then, go back to doing all the dredging ourselves? Or let the canals fill in so we can't float the seedboats from village to village during the dry season, and so we have no defense from our enemies and no way to ride our dragonboats all year?"

Others in the clan were listening to this argument, since there was little enough privacy under normal circumstances, and none at all when you spoke with a raised voice. So it was no surprise when they chimed in. One offered the opinion that the reason no manfruit should be offered to this Great Derku was because the eating of manfruit would give the Great Derku knowledge of all the thoughts of the people they ate. Another was afraid that the sight of a powerful creature eating the flesh of men would lead some of the young people to want to commit the unpardonable sin of eating that forbidden fruit themselves, and in that case all the Derku people would be destroyed.

What no one pointed out was that in the old days, when they fed manfruit to the Great Derku, it wasn't JUST captives that were offered. During years of little rain or too much rain, the leader of each clan always offered his own eldest son as the first fruit, or, if he could not bear to see his son devoured, he would offer himself in his son's place--though some said that in the earliest times it was always the leader himself who was eaten, and they only started offering their sons as a cowardly substitute. By now everyone expected Twerk to be the next clan leader, and everyone knew that he doted on his Glogmeriss, his Naog-to-be, his Derkuwed, and that he would never throw his son to the crocodile god. Nor did any of them wish him to do so. A few people in the other clans might urge the test of offering manfruit to the Great Derku, but most of the people in all of the tribes, and all of the people in Engu clan, would oppose it, and so it would not happen.

So it was with an assurance of personal safety that Twerk brought his firstborn son with him to see the Great Derku in the holy pond. But six-year- old Glogmeriss, oblivious to the personal danger that would come from the return of human sacrifice, was terrified at the sight of the holy pond itself. It was surrounded by a low wall of dried mud, for once the crocodile had found its way to the water inside, the gaps in the wall were closed. But what kept the Great Derku inside was not just the mud wall. It was the row on row of sharpened horizontal stakes pointing straight inward, set into the mud and lashed to sharp vertical stakes about a hand's-breadth back from the point. The captive dragon could neither push the stakes out of the way nor break them off. Only when the floodwater came and the river spilled over the top of the mud wall and swept it away, stakes and all, would that year's Great Derku be set free. Only rarely did the Great Derku get caught on the stakes and die, and when it happened it was regarded as a very bad omen.

This year, though, the wall of stakes was not widely regarded as enough assurance that the dragon could not force his way out, he was so huge and clever and strong. So men stood guard constantly, spears in hand, ready to prod the Great Derku and herd it back into place, should it come dangerously close to escaping.

The sight of spikes and spears was alarming enough, for it looked like war to young Glogmeriss. But he soon forgot those puny sticks when he caught sight of the Great Derku himself, as he shambled up on the muddy, grassy shore of the pond. Of course Glogmeriss had seen crocodiles all his life; one of the first skills any child, male or female, had to learn was how to use a spear to poke a crocodile so it would leave one's dragonboat--and therefore one's arms and legs--in peace. This crocodile, though, this dragon, this god, was so huge that Glogmeriss could easily imagine it swallowing him whole without having to bite him in half or even chew. Glogmeriss gasped and clung to his father's hand.

"A giant indeed," said his father. "Look at those legs, that powerful tail. But remember that the Great Derku is but a weak child compared to the power of the flood."

Perhaps because human sacrifice was still on his mind, Twerk then told his son how it had been in the old days. "When it was a captive we offered as manfruit, there was always a chance that the god would let him live. Of course, if he clung to the stakes and refused to go into the pond, we would never let him out alive--we poked him with our spears. But if he went boldly into the water so far that it covered his head completely, and then came back out alive and made it back to the stakes without the Great Derku taking him and eating him, well, then, we brought him out in great honor. We said that his old life ended in that water, that the man we had captured had been buried in the holy pond, and now he was born again out of the flood. He was a full member of the tribe then, of the same clan as the man who had captured him. But of course the Great Derku almost never let anyone out alive, because we always kept him hungry." "YOU poked him with your spear?" asked Glogmeriss.

"Well, not me personally. When I said that WE did it, I meant of course the men of the Derku. But it was long before I was born. It was in my grandfather's time, when he was a young man, that there came a Great Derku who wouldn't eat any of the captives who were offered to him. No one knew what it meant, of course, but all the captives were coming out and expecting to be adopted into the tribe. But if THAT had happened, the captives would have been the largest clan of all, and where would we have found wives for them all? So the holy men and the clan leaders realized that the old way was over, that the god no longer wanted manfruit, and therefore those who survived after being buried in the water of the holy pond were NOT adopted into the Derku people. But we did keep them alive and set them to work on the canals. That year, with the captives working alongside us, we dredged the canals deeper than ever, and we were able to draw twice the water from the canals into the fields of grain during the dry season, and when we had a bigger harvest than ever before, we had hands enough to weave more seedboats to contain it. Then we realized what the god had meant by refusing to eat the manfruit. Instead of swallowing our captives into the belly of the water where the god lives, the god was giving them all back to us,

to make us rich and strong. So from that day on we have fed no captives to the Great Derku. Instead we hunt for meat and bring it back, while the women and old men make the captives do the labor of the city. In those days we had one large canal. Now we have three great canals encircling each other, and several other canals cutting across them, so that even in the dryest season a Derku man can glide on his dragonboat like a crocodile from any part of our land to any other, and never have to drag it across dry earth. This is the greatest gift of the dragon to us, that we can have the labor of our captives instead of the Great Derku devouring them himself." "It's not a bad gift to the captives, either," said Glogmeriss. "Not to die."

Twerk laughed and rubbed his son's hair. "Not a bad gift at that," he said.

"Of course, if the Great Derku really loved the captives he would let them go home to their families."

Twerk laughed even louder. "They have no families, foolish boy," he said. "When a man is captured, he is dead as far as his family is concerned. His woman marries someone else, his children forget him and call another man father. He has no more home to return to." "Don't some of the ugly-noise people buy captives back?"

"The weak and foolish ones do. The gold ring on my arm was the price of a captive. The father-of-all priest wears a cape of bright feathers that was the ransom of a boy not much older than you, not long after you were born. But most captives know better than to hope for ransom. What does THEIR tribe have that we want?"

"I would hate to be a captive, then," said Glogmeriss. "Or would YOU be weak and foolish enough to ransom me?"

"You?" Twerk laughed out loud. "You're a Derku man, or will be. We take captives wherever we want, but where is the tribe so bold that it dares to take one of US? No, we are never captives. And the captives we take are lucky to be brought out of their poor,

miserable tribes of wandering hunters or berry-pickers and allowed to live here among wall-building men, among canal- digging people, where they don't have to wander in search of food every day, where they get plenty to eat all year long, twice as much as they ever ate before."

"I would still hate to be one of them," said Glogmeriss. "Because how could you ever do great things that everyone will talk about and tell stories about and remember, if you're a captive?"

All this time that they stood on the wall and talked, Glogmeriss never took his eyes off the Great Derku. It was a terrible creature, and when it yawned it seemed its mouth was large enough to swallow a tree. Ten grown men could ride on its back like a dragonboat. Worst of all were the eyes, which seemed to stare into a man's heart. It was probably the eyes of the dragon that gave it its name, for DERKU could easily have originated as a shortened form of DERK-UNT, which meant "one who sees." When the ancient ancestors of the Derku people first came to this floodplain, the crocodiles floating like logs on the water must have fooled them. They must have learned to look for eyes on the logs. "Look!" the watcher would cry. "There's one with eyes! Derk-unt!" They said that if you looked in the dragon's eyes, he would draw you toward him, within reach of his huge jaws, within reach of his curling tail, and you would never even notice your danger, because his eyes held you. Even when the jaws opened to show the pink mouth, the teeth like rows of bright flame ready to burn you, you would look at that steady, all-knowing, wise, amused, and coolly angry eye.

That was the fear that filled Glogmeriss the whole time he stood on the wall beside his father. For a moment, though, just after he spoke of doing great things, a curious change came over him. For a moment Glogmeriss stopped fearing the Great Derku, and instead imagined that he WAS the giant crocodile. Didn't a man paddle his dragonboat by lying on his belly straddling the bundled reeds, paddling with his hands and kicking with his feet just as a crocodile did under the water? So all men became dragons, in a way. And Glogmeriss would grow up to be a large man, everyone said so. Among men he would be as extraordinary as the Great Derku was among crocodiles. Like the god, he would seem dangerous and strike fear into the hearts of smaller people. And, again like the god, he would actually be kind, and not destroy them, but instead help them and do good for them.

Like the river in flood. A frightening thing, to have the water rise so high, sweeping away the mud hills on which they had built the seedboats, smearing the outsides of them with sun-heated tar so they would be watertight when the flood came. Like the Great Derku, the flood seemed to be a destroyer. And yet when the water receded, the land was wet and rich, ready to receive the seed and give back huge harvests. The land farther up the slopesof the mountains was salty and stony and all that could grow on it was grass. It was here in the flatlands where the flood tore through like a mad dragon that the soil was rich and trees could grow.

I will BE the Derkuwed. Not as a destroyer, but as a lifebringer. The real Derku, the true dragon, could never be trapped in a cage as this poor crocodile has been. The true dragon comes like the flood and tears away the walls and sets the Great Derku crocodile free and makes the soil wet and black and rich. Like the river, I will be another tool of the god, another manifestation of the power of the god in the world. If that was not what the dragon of the deep heaven of the sea intended, why would he have make Glogmeriss so tall and strong?

This was still the belief in his heart when Glogmeriss set out on

his manhood journey at the age of fourteen. He was already the tallest man in his clan and one of the tallest among all the Derku people. He was a giant, and yet well-liked because he never used his strength and size to frighten other people into doing what he wanted; on the contrary, he seemed always to protect the weaker boys. Many people felt that it was a shame that when he returned from his manhood journey, the name he would be given was a silly one like Naog. But when they said as much in Glogmeriss's hearing, he only laughed at them and said, "The name will only be silly if it is borne by a silly man. I hope not to be a silly man." Glogmeriss's father had made his fame by taking his manhood journey from the Salty Sea to the Nile. Glogmeriss's journey therefore had to be even more challenging and more glorious. He would go south and east, along the crest of the plateau until he reached the legendary place called the Heaving Sea, where the gods that dwelt in its deep heaven were so restless that the water splashed onto the shore in great waves all the time, even when there was no wind. If there was such a sea, Glogmeriss would find it. When he came back as a man with such a tale, they would call him Naog and none of them would laugh.

Kemal Akyazi knew that Atlantis had to be there under the waters of the Red Sea; but why hadn't Pastwatch found it? The answer was simple enough. The past was huge, and while the TruSite I had been used to collect climatalogical information, the new machines that were precise enough that could track individual human beings would never have been used to look at oceans where nobody lived. Yes, the Tempoview had explored the Bering Strait and the English Channel, but that was to track long-known-of migrations. There was no such migration in the Red Sea. Pastwatch had simply never looked through their precise new machines to see what was under the water of the Red Sea in the waning centuries of the last Ice Age. And they never WOULD look, either, unless someone gave them a compelling reason. Kemal understood bureaucracy enough to know that he, a student meteorologist, would hardly be taken seriously if he brought an Atlantis theory to Pastwatch--particularly a theory that put Atlantis in the Red Sea of all places, and fourteen thousand years ago, no less, long before civilizations arose in Sumeria or Egypt, let alone China or the Indus Valley or among the swamps of Tehuantapec.

Yet Kemal also knew that the setting would have been right for a civilization to grow in the marshy land of the Mits'iwa Channel. Though there weren't enough rivers flowing into the Red Sea to fill it at the same rate as the world ocean, there were still rivers. For instance, the Zula, which still had enough water to flow even today, watered the whole length of the Mits'iwa Plain and flowed down into the rump of the Red Sea near Mersa Mubarek. And, because of the different rainfall patterns of that time, there was a large and dependable river flowing out of the Assahara basin. Assahara was now a dry valley below sea level, but then would have been a freshwater lake fed by many rivers and spilling over the lowest point into the Mits'iwa Channel. The river meandered along the nearly level Mits'iwa Plain, with some branches of it joining the Zula River, and some wandering east and north to form several mouths in the Red Sea.

Thus dependable sources of fresh water fed the area, and in rainy season the Zula, at least, would have brought new silt to freshen the soil, and in all seasons the wandering flatwater rivers would have provided a means of transportation through the marshes. The climate was also dependably warm, with plenty of sunlight and a long growing season. There was no early civilization that did not grow up in such a setting. There was no reason such a civilization might not have grown up then.

Yes, it was six or seven thousand years too early. But couldn't it be that it was the very destruction of Atlantis that convinced the survivors that the gods did not want human beings to gather together in cities? Weren't there hints of that anti-civilization bias lingering in many of the ancient religions of the Middle East? What was the story of Cain and Abel, if not a metaphorical expression of the evil of the city-dweller, the farmer, the brother-killer who is judged unworthy by the gods because he does not wander with his sheep? Couldn't such stories have circulated widely in those ancient times? That would explain why the survivors of Atlantis hadn't immediately begun to rebuild their civilization at another site: They knew that the gods forbade it, that if they built again their city would be destroyed again. So they remembered the stories of their glorious past, and at the same time condemned their ancestors and warned everyone they met against people gathering together to build a city, making people yearn for such a place and fear it, both at once.

Not until a Nimrod came, a tower-builder, a Babel-maker who defied the old religion, would the ancient proscription be overcome at last and another city rise up, in another river valley far in time and space from Atlantis, but remembering the old ways that had been memorialized in the stories of warning and, as far as possible, replicating them. We will build a tower so high that it CAN'T be immersed. Didn't Genesis link the flood with Babel in just that way, complete with the nomad's stern disapproval of the city? This was the story that survived in Mesopotamia--the tale of the beginning of city life there, but with clear memories of a more ancient civilization that had been destroyed in a flood. A more ancient civilization. The golden age. The giants who once walked the earth. Why couldn't all these stories be remembering the first human civilization, the place where the city was invented? Atlantis, the city of the Mits'iwa plain.

But how could he prove it without using the Tempoview? And how could he get access to one of those machines without first convincing Pastwatch that Atlantis was really in the Red Sea? It was circular, with no way out.

Until he thought: Why do large cities form in the first place? Because there are public works to do that require more than a few people to accomplish them. Kemal wasn't sure what form the public works might take, but surely they would have been something that would change the face of the land obviously enough that the old TruSite I recordings would show it, though it wouldn't be noticeable unless someone was looking for it.

So, putting his degree at risk, Kemal set aside the work he was assigned to do and began poring over the old TruSite I recordings. He concentrated on the last few centuries before the Red Sea flood--there was no reason to suppose that the civilization had lasted very long before it was destroyed. And within a few months he had collected data that was irrefutable. There were no dikes and dams to prevent flooding--that kind of structure would have been large enough that no one would have missed it. Instead there were seemingly random heaps of mud and earth that grew between rainy seasons, especially in the drier years when the rivers were lower than usual. To people looking only for weather patterns, these unstructured, random piles would mean nothing. But to Kemal they were obvious: In the shallowing water, the Atlanteans were dredging channels so that their boats could continue to traffic from place to place. The piles of earth were simply the dumping-places for the muck they dredged from the water. None of the boats showed up on the TruSite I, but now that Kemal knew where to look, he began to catch fleeting glimpses of houses. Every year when the floods came, the houses disappeared, so they were only visible for a moment or two in the Trusite I: flimsy mud-and-reed structures that must have been swept away in every flood season and rebuilt again when the waters receded. But they were there, close by the hillocks that marked the channels. Plato was right again--Atlantis grew up around its canals. But Atlantis was the people and their boats; the buildings were washed away and built again every year.

When Kemal presented his findings to Pastwatch he was not yet twenty years old, but his evidence was impressive enough that Pastwatch immediately turned, not one of the Tempoviews, but the still-newer TruSite II machine to look under the waters of the Red Sea in the Massawa Channel during the hundred years before the Red Sea flood. They found that Kemal was gloriously, spectacularly right. In an era

when other humans were still following game animals and gathering berries, the Atlanteans were planting amaranth and ryegrass, melons and beans in the rich wet silt of the receding rivers, and carrying food in baskets and on reed boats from place to place. The only thing that Kemal had missed was that the reed buildings weren't houses at all. They were silos for the storage of grain, built watertight so that they would float during the flood season. The Atlanteans slept under the open air during the dry season, and in the flood season they slept on their tiny reed boats. Kemal was brought into Pastwatch and made head of the vast new Atlantis project. This was the seminal culture of all cultures in the old world, and a hundred researchers examined every stage of its development. This methodical work, however, was not for Kemal. As always, it was the grand legend that drew him. He spent every moment he could spare away from the management of the project and devoted it to the search for Noah, for Gilgamesh, for the great man who rode out the flood and whose story lived in memory for thousands of years. There had to be a real original, and Kemal would find him.

The flood season was almost due when Glogmeriss took his journey that would make him into a man named Naog. It was a little early for him, since he was born during the peak of the flood, but everyone in the clan agreed with Twerk that it was better for a manling so well-favored to be early than late, and if he wasn't already up and out of the flood plain before the rains came, then he'd have to wait months before he could safely go. And besides, as Twerk pointed out, why have a big eater like Glogmeriss waiting out the flood season, eating huge handfuls of grain. People listened happily to Twerk's argument, because he was known to be a generous, wise, good-humored man, and everyone expected him to be named clan leader when sweet old ailing Dheub finally died.

Getting above the flood meant walking up the series of slight inclines leading to the last sandy shoulder, where the land began to rise more steeply. Glogmeriss had no intention of climbing any higher than that. His father's journey had taken him over those ridges and on to the great river Nile, but there was no reason for Glogmeriss to clamber through rocks when he could follow the edge of the smooth, grassy savannah. He was high enough to see the vast plain of the Derku lands stretching out before him, and the land was open enough that no cat or pack of dogs could creep up on him unnoticed, let alone some hunter of another tribe.

How far to the Heaving Sea? Far enough that no one of the Derku tribe had ever seen it. But they knew it existed, because when they brought home captives from tribes to the south, they heard tales of such a place, and the farther south the captives came from, the more vivid and convincing the tales became. Still, none of them had ever seen it with their own eyes. So it would be a long journey, Glogmeriss knew that. And all the longer because it would be on foot, and not on his dragonboat. Not that Derku men were any weaker or slower afoot than men who lived above the flood--on the contrary, they had to be fleet indeed, as well as stealthy, to bring home either captives or meat. So the boys' games included footracing, and while Glogmeriss was not the fastest sprinter, no one could match his long-legged stride for sheer endurance, for covering ground quickly, on and on, hour after hour.

What set the bodies of the Derku people apart from other tribes, what made them recognizable in an instant, was the massive development of their upper bodies from paddling dragonboats hour after hour along the canals or through the floods. It wasn't just paddling, either. It was the heavy armwork of cutting reeds and binding them into great sheaves to be floated home for making boats and ropes and baskets. And in older times, they would also have developed strong arms and backs from dredging the canals that surrounded and connected all the villages of the great Derku city. Slaves did most of that now, but the Derku took great pride in never letting their slaves be stronger than they were. Their shoulders and chests and arms and backs were almost monstrous compared to those of the men and women of other tribes. And since the Derku ate better all year round than people of other tribes, they tended to be taller, too. Many tribes called them giants, and others called them the sons and daughters of the gods, they looked so healthy and strong. And of all the young Derku men, there was none so tall and strong and healthy as Glogmeriss, the boy they called Derkuwed, the man who would be Naog.

So as Glogmeriss loped along the grassy rim of the great plain, he knew he was in little danger from human enemies. Anyone who saw him would think: There is one of the giants, one of the sons of the crocodile god. Hide, for he might be with a party of raiders. Don't let him see you, or he'll take a report back to his people. Perhaps one man in a pack of hunters might say, "He's alone, we can kill him," but the other hunters would jeer at the one who spoke so rashly. "Look, fool, he a javelin in his hands and three tied to his back. Look at his arms, his shoulders--do you think he can't put his javelin through your heart before you got close enough to throw a rock at him? Let him be. Pray for a great cat to find him in the night."

That was Glogmeriss's only real danger. He was too high into the dry lands for crocodiles, and he could run fast enough to climb a tree before any pack of dogs or wolves could bring him down. But there was no tree that would give a moment's pause to one of the big cats. No, if one of THEM took after him, it would be a fight. But Glogmeriss had fought cats before, on guard duty. Not the giants that could knock a man's head off with one blow of its paw, or take his whole belly with one bite of its jaws, but still, they were big enough, prowling around the outside of the clan lands, and Glogmeriss had fought them with a hand javelin and brought them down alone. He knew something of the way they moved and thought, and he had no doubt that in a contest with one of the big cats, he would at least cause it grave injury before it killed him.

Better not to meet one of them, though. Which meant staying well clear of any of the herds of bison or oxen, antelope or horses that the big cats stalked. Those cats would never have got so big waiting around for lone humans--it was herds they needed, and so it was herds that Glogmeriss did NOT need.

To his annoyance, though, one came to HIM. He had climbed a tree to sleep the night, tying himself to the trunk so he wouldn't fall out in his sleep. He awoke to the sound of nervous lowing and a few higher-pitched, anxious moos. Below him, milling around in the first grey light of the coming dawn, he could make out the shadowy shapes of oxen. He knew at once what had happened. They caught scent of a cat and began to move away in the darkness, shambling in fear and confusion in the near darkness. They had not run because the cat wasn't close enough to cause a panic in the herd. With luck it would be one of the smaller cats, and when it saw that they knew it was there, it would give up and go away.

But the cat had not given up and gone away, or they wouldn't still be so frightened. Soon the herd would have enough light to see the cat that must be stalking them, and then they WOULD run, leaving Glogmeriss behind in a tree. Maybe the cat would go in full pursuit of the running oxen, or maybe it would notice the lone man trapped in a tree and decide to go for the easier, smaller meal.

I wish I were part of this herd, thought Glogmeriss. Then there'd be a chance. I would be one of many, and even if the cat brought one of us down, it might not be me. As a man alone, it's me or the cat. Kill or die. I will fight bravely, but in this light I might not get a clear sight of the cat, might not be able to see in the rippling of its muscles where it will move next. And what if it isn't alone? What if the reason these oxen are so frightened yet unwilling to move is that they know there's more than one cat and they have no idea in which direction safety can be found?

Again he thought, I wish I were part of this herd. And then he thought, Why should I think such a foolish thought twice, unless the god is telling me what to do? Isn't that what this journey is for, to find out if there is a god who will lead me, who will protect me, who will make me great? There's no greatness in having a cat eviscerate you in one bite. Only if you live do you become a man of stories. Like Gweia--if she had mounted the crocodile and it had thrown her off and devoured her, who would ever have heard her name?

There was no time to form a plan, except the plan that formed so quickly that it might have been the god putting it there. He would ride one of these oxen as Gweia rode the crocodile. It would be easy enough to drop out of the tree onto an ox's back--hadn't he played with the other boys, year after year, jumping from higher and higher branches to land on a dragonboat that was drifting under the tree? An ox was scarcely less predictable than a dragonboat on a current. The only difference was that when he landed on the ox's back, it would not bear him as willingly as a dragonboat. Glogmeriss had to hope that, like Gweia's crocodile frightened of the flood, the ox he landed on would be more frightened of the cat than of the sudden burden on his back.

He tried to pick well among the oxen within reach of the branches of the tree. He didn't want a cow with a calf running alongside--that would be like begging the cats to come after him, since such cows were already the most tempting targets. But he didn't want a bull, either, for he doubted it would have the patience to bear him. And there was his target, a fullsized cow but with no calf leaning against it, under a fairly sturdy branch. Slowly, methodically, Glogmeriss untied himself from the tree, cinched the bindings of his javelins and his flintsack and his grainsack, and drew his loincloth up to hold his genitals tight against his body, and then crept out along the branch until he was as nearly over the back of the cow he had chosen as possible. The cow was stamping and snorting now--they all were, and in a moment they would bolt, he knew it--but it held still as well as a bobbing dragonboat, and so Glogmeriss took aim and jumped, spreading his legs to embrace the animal's back, but not SO wide that he would slam his crotch against the bony ridge of its spine.

He landed with a grunt and immediately lunged forward to get his arms around the ox's neck, just like gripping the stem of the dragonboat. The beast immediately snorted and bucked, but its bobbing was no worse than the dragonboat ducking under the water at the impact of a boy on its back. Of course, the dragonboat stopped bobbing after a moment, while this ox would no doubt keep trying to be rid of him until he was gone, bucking and turning, bashing its sides into other oxen.

But the other animals were already so nervous that the sudden panic of Glogmeriss's mount was the trigger that set off the stampede. Almost at once the herd mentality took over, and the oxen set out in a headlong rush all in the same direction. Glogmeriss's cow didn't forget the burden on her back, but now she responded to her fear by staying with the herd. It came as a great relief to Glogmeriss when she leapt out and ran among the other oxen, in part because it meant that she was no longer trying to get him off her back, and in part because she was a good runner and he knew that unless she swerved to the edge of the herd where a cat could pick her off, both she and he would be safe.

Until the panic stopped, of course, and then Glogmeriss would have to figure out a way to get OFF the cow and move away without being gored or trampled to death. Well, one danger at a time. And as they ran, he couldn't help but feel the sensations of the moment: The prickly hair of the ox's back against his belly and legs, the way her muscles rippled between his legs and within the embrace of his arms, and above all the sheer exhilaration of moving through the air at such a speed. Has any man ever moved as fast over the ground as I am moving now? he wondered. No dragonboat has ever found a current so swift.

It seemed that they ran for hours and hours, though when they finally came to a stop the sun was still only a palm's height above the mountains far across the plain to the east. As the running slowed to a jolting jog, and then to a walk, Glogmeriss kept waiting for his mount to remember that he was on her back and to start trying to get him off. But if she remembered, she must have decided she didn't mind, because when she finally came to a stop, still in the midst of the herd, she simply dropped her head and began to graze, making no effort to get Glogmeriss off her back. She was so calm--or perhaps like the others was simply so exhausted--that Glogmeriss decided that as long as he moved slowly

and calmly he might be able to walk on out of the herd, or at least climb a tree and wait for them to move on. He knew from the roaring and screaming sounds he had heard near the beginning of the stampede that the cats--more than one--had found their meal, so the survivors were safe enough for now.

Glogmeriss carefully let one leg slide down until he touched the ground. Then, smoothly as possible, he slipped off the cow's back until he was crouched beside her. She turned her head slightly, chewing a mouthful of grass. Her great brown eye regarded him calmly.

"Thank you for carrying me," said Glogmeriss softly.

She moved her head away, as if to deny that she had done anything special for him.

"You carried me like a dragonboat through the flood," he said, and he realized that this was exactly right, for hadn't the stampede of oxen been as dangerous and powerful as any flood of water? And she had borne him up, smooth and safe, carrying him safely to the far shore. "The best of dragonboats."

She lowed softly, and for a moment Glogmeriss began to think of her

as being somehow the embodiment of the god--though it could not be the crocodile god that took this form, could it? But all thoughts of the animal's godhood were shattered when it started to urinate. The thick stream of ropey piss splashed into the grass not a span away from Glogmeriss's shoulder, and as the urine spattered him he could not help but jump away. Other nearby oxen mooed complainingly about his sudden movement, but his own cow seemed not to notice. The urine stank hotly, and Glogmeriss was annoyed that the stink would stay with him for days, probably.

Then he realized that no COW could put a stream of urine between her forelegs. This animal was a bull after all. Yet it was scarcely larger than the normal cow, not bull-like at all. Squatting down, he looked closely, and realized that the animal had lost its testicles somehow. Was it a freak, born without them? No, there was a scar, a ragged sign of old injury. While still a calf, this animal had had its bullhood torn away. Then it grew to adulthood, neither cow nor bull. What purpose was there in life for such a creature as that? And yet if it had not lived, it could not have carried him through the stampede. A cow would have had a calf to slow it down; a bull would have flung him off easily. The god had prepared this creature to save him. It was not itself a god, of course, for such an imperfect animal could hardly be divine. But it was a god's tool. "Thank you," said Glogmeriss, to whatever god it was. "I hope to know you and serve you," he said. Whoever the god was must have known him for a long time, must have planned this moment for years.

There was a plan, a destiny for him. Glogmeriss felt himself thrill inside with the certainty of this.

I could turn back now, he thought, and I would have had the greatest manhood journey of anyone in the tribe for generations. They would regard me as a holy man, when they learned that a god had prepared such a beast as this to be my dragonboat on dry land. No one would say I was unworthy to be Naog, and no more Glogmeriss. But even as he thought this, Glogmeriss knew that it would be wrong to go back. The god had prepared this animal, not to make his manhood journey easy and short, but to make his long journey possible. Hadn't the ox carried him southeast, the direction he was already heading? Hadn't it brought him right along the very shelf of smooth grassland that he had already been running on? No, the god meant to speed him on his way, not to end his journey. When he came back, the story of the unmanned ox that carried him like a boat would be merely the first part of his story. They would laugh when he told them about the beast peeing on him. They would nod and murmur in awe as he told them that he realized that the god was helping him to go on, that the god had chosen him years before in order to prepare the calf that would be his mount. Yet this would all be the opening, leading to the main point of the story, the

climax. And what that climax would be, what he would accomplish that would let him take on his manly name, Glogmeriss could hardly bear to wait to find out.

Unless, of course, the god was preparing him to be a sacrifice. But the god could have killed him at any time. It could have killed him when he was born, dropping him into the water as everyone said his father had feared might happen. It could have let him die there at the tree, taken by a cat or trampled under the feet of the oxen. No, the god was keeping him alive for a purpose, for a great task. His triumph lay ahead, and whatever it was, it would be greater than his ride on the back of an ox.

The rains came the next day, but Glogmeriss pressed on. The rain made it hard to see far ahead, but most of the animals stopped moving in the rain and so there wasn't as much danger to look out for. Sometimes the rain came down so thick and hard that Glogmeriss could hardly see a dozen steps ahead. But he ran on, unhindered. The shelf of land that he ran along was perfectly flat, neither uphill nor downhill, as level as water, and so he could lope along without wearying. Even when the thunder roared in the sky and lightning seemed to flash all around him, Glogmeriss did not stop, for he knew that the god that watched over him was powerful indeed. He had nothing to fear. And since he passed two burning trees, he knew that lightning could have struck him at any time, and yet did not, and so it was a second sign that a great god was with him. During the rains he cross many swollen streams, just by walking.

Only once did he have to cross a river that was far too wide and deep and swift in flood for him to cross. But he plunged right in, for the god was with him. Almost at once he was swept off his feet, but he swam strongly across the current. Yet even a strong Derku man cannot swim forever, and it began to seem to Glogmeriss that he would never reach the other side, but rather would be swept down to the salt sea, where one day his body would wash to shore near a party of Derku raiders who would recognize from the size of his body that it was him. So, this is what happened to Twerk's son Glogmeriss. The flood took him after all.

Then he bumped against a log that was also floating on the current, and took hold of it, and rolled up onto the top of it like a dragonboat. Now he could use all his strength for paddling, and soon he was across the current. He drew the log from the water and embraced it like a brother, lying beside it, holding it in the wet grass until the rising water began to lick at his feet again. Then he dragged the log with him to higher ground and placed it up in the notch of a tree where no flood would dislodge it. One does not abandon a brother to the flood. Three times the god has saved me, he thought as he climbed back up to the level shelf that was his path. From the tooth of the cat, from the fire of heaven, from the water of the flood. Each time a tree was part of it: The tree around which the herd of oxen gathered and from which I dropped onto the ox's back; the trees that died in flames from taking to themselves the bolts of lightning meant for me; and finally this log of a fallen tree that died in its home far up in the mountains in order to be my brother in the water of the flood. Is it a god of trees, then, that leads me on? But how can a god of trees be more powerful than the god of lightning or the god of the floods or even the god of sharp-toothed cats? No, trees are simply tools the god has used. The god flings trees about as easily as I fling a javelin.

Gradually, over many days, the rains eased a bit, falling in steady showers instead of sheets. Off to his left, he could see that the plain was rising upcloser and closer to the smooth shelf along which he ran. On the first clear morning he saw that there was no more distant shining on the still waters of the Salty Sea--the plain was now higher than the level of that water; he had behind the only sea that the Derku people had ever seen. The Heaving Sea lay yet ahead, and so he ran on.

The plain was quite high, but he was still far enough above it that he could see the shining when it came again on a clear morning. He had left one sea behind, and now, with the ground much higher, there was another sea. Could this be it, the Heaving Sea?

He left the shelf and headed across the savannah toward the water. He did not reach it that day, but on the next afternoon he stood on the shore and knew that this was not the place he had been looking for. The water was far smaller than the Salty Sea, smaller even than the Sweetwater Sea up in the mountains from which the Selud River flowed. And yet when he dipped his finger into the water and tasted it, it WAS a little salty. Almost sweet, but salty nonetheless. Not good for drinking. That was obvious from the lack of animal tracks around the water. It must usually be saltier than this, thought Glogmeriss. It must have been freshened somewhat by the rains. Instead of returning to his path along the shelf by the route he had followed to get to this small sea, Glogmeriss struck out due south. He could see the shelf in the distance, and could see that by running south he would rejoin the level path a good way farther along.

As he crossed a small stream, he saw animal prints again, and among them the prints of human feet. Many feet, and they were fresher than any of the animal prints. So fresh, in fact, that for all Glogmeriss knew they could be watching him right now. If he stumbled on them suddenly, they might panic, seeing a man as large as he was. And in this place what would they know of the Derku people? No raiders had ever come this far in search of captives, he was sure. That meant that they wouldn't necessarily hate him--but they wouldn't fear retribution from his tribe, either. No, the best course was for him to turn back and avoid them.

But a god was protecting him, and besides, he had been without the sound of a human voice for so many days. If he did not carry any of his javelins, but left them all slung on his back, they would know he meant no harm and they would not fear him. So there at the stream, he bent over, slipped off the rope holding his javelins, and untied them to bind them all together.

As he was working, he heard a sound and knew without looking that he had been found. Perhaps they HAD been watching him all along. His first thought was to pick up his javelins and prepare for battle. But he did not know how many they were, or whether they were all around him, and in the dense brush near the river he might be surrounded by so many that they could overwhelm him easily, even if he killed one or two. For a moment he thought, The god protects me, I could kill them all. But then he rejected that idea. He had killed nothing on this journey, not even for meat, eating only the grain he carried with him and such berries and fruits and roots and greens and mushrooms as he found along the way. Should he begin now, killing when he knew nothing about these people? Perhaps meeting them was what the god had brought him here to do.

So a slowly, carefully finished binding the javelins and then slung them up onto his shoulder, being careful never to hold the javelins in a way that might make his watcher or watchers think that he was making them ready for battle. Then, his hands empty and his weapons bound to his back, he splashed through the stream and followed the many footprints on the far side.

He could hear feet padding along behind him--more than one person, too, from the sound. They might be coming up behind him to kill him, but it didn't sound as if they were trying to overtake him, or to be stealthy, either. They must know that he could hear them. But perhaps they thought he was very stupid. He had to show them that he did not turn to fight them because he did not want to fight, and not because he was stupid or afraid.

To show them he was not afraid, he began to sing the song of the dog who danced with a man, which was funny and had a jaunty tune. And to show them he knew they were there, he bent over as he walked, scooped up a handful of damp soil, and flung it lightly over his shoulder.

The sound of sputtering outrage told him that the god had guided his lump of mud right to its target. He stopped and turned to find four men following him, one of whom was brushing dirt out of his face, cursing loudly. The others looked uncertain whether to be angry at Glogmeriss for flinging dirt at them or afraid of him because he was so large and strange and unafraid.

Glogmeriss didn't want them to be either afraid or angry. So he let a slow smile come to his face, not a smile of derision, but rather a friendly smile that said, I mean no harm. To reinforce this idea, he held his hands out wide, palms facing the strangers.

They understood him, and perhaps because of his smile began to see the humor in the situation. They smiled, too, and then, because the one who was hit with dirt was still complaining and trying to get it out of his eyes, they began to laugh at him. Glogmeriss laughed with them, but then walked slowly toward his victim and, carefully letting them all see what he was doing, took his waterbag from his waist and untied it a little, showing them that water dropped from it. They uttered something in an ugly-sounding language and the one with dirt in his eyes stopped, leaned his head back, and stoically allowed Glogmeriss to bathe his eyes with water.

When at last, dripping and chagrined, the man could see again, Glogmeriss flung an arm across his shoulder like a comrade, and then reached out for the man who seemed to be the leader. After a moment's hesitation, the man allowed Glogmeriss the easy embrace, and together they walked toward the main body of the tribe, the other two walking as closely as possible, behind and ahead, talking to Glogmeriss even though he made it plain that he did not understand.

When they reached the others they were busy building a cookfire. All who could, left their tasks and came to gawk at the giant stranger. While the men who had found him recounted the tale, others came and touched Glogmeriss, especially his strong arms and chest, and his loincloth as well, since none of the men wore any kind of clothing. Glogmeriss viewed this with disgust. It was one thing for little boys to run around naked, but he knew that men should keep their privates covered so they wouldn't get dirty. What woman would let her husband couple with her, if he let any kind of filth get on his javelin?

Of course, these men were all so ugly that no woman would want them anyway, and the women were so ugly that the only men who would want them would be these. Perhaps ugly people don't care about keeping themselves clean, thought Glogmeriss. But the women wore naprons made of woven grass, which looked softer than the beaten reeds that the Derku wove. So it wasn't that these people didn't know how to make cloth, or that the idea of wearing clothing had never occurred to them. The men were simply filthy and stupid, Glogmeriss decided. And the women, while not as filthy, must be just as stupid or they wouldn't let the men come near them.

Glogmeriss tried to explain to them that he was looking for the

Heaving Sea, and ask them where it was. But they couldn't understand any of the gestures and handsigns he tried, and his best efforts merely left them laughing to the point of helplessness. He gave up and made as if to leave, which immediately brought protests and an obvious invitation to dinner.

It was a welcome thought, and their chief seemed quite anxious for him to stay. A meal would only make him stronger for the rest of his journey.

He stayed for the meal, which was strange but good. And then, wooed by more pleas from the chief and many others, he agreed to sleep the night with them, though he halfway feared that in his sleep they planned to kill him or at least rob him. In the event, it turned out that they DID have plans for him, but it had nothing to do with killing. By morning the chief's prettiest daughter was Glogmeriss's bride, and even though she was as ugly as any of the others, she had done a good enough job of initiating him into the pleasures of men and women that he could overlook her thin lips and beakish nose. This was not supposed to happen on a manhood journey. He was expected to come home and marry one of the pretty girls from one of the other clans of the Derku people. Many a father had already been negotiating with Twerk or old Dheub with an eye toward getting Glogmeriss as a son-in-law. But what harm would it do if Glogmeriss had a bride for a few days with these people, and then slipped away and went home? No one among the Derku would ever meet any of these ugly people, and even if they did, who would care? You could do what you wanted with strangers. It wasn't as if they were people, like the Derku.

But the days came and went, and Glogmeriss could not bring himself to leave. He was still enjoying his nights with Zawada--as near as he could come to pronouncing her name, which had a strange click in the middle of it. And as he began to learn to understand something of their language, he harbored a hope that they could tell him about the Heaving Sea and, in the long run, save him time.

Days became weeks, and weeks became months, and Zawada's blood-days didn't come and so they knew she was pregnant, and then Glogmeriss didn't want to leave, because he had to see the child he had put into her. So he stayed, and learned to help with the work of this tribe. They found his size and prodigious strength very helpful, and Zawada was comically boastful about her husband's prowess--marrying him had brought her great prestige, even more than being the chief's daughter. And it gradually came to Glogmeriss's mind that if he stayed he would probably be chief of these people himself someday. At times when he thought of that, he felt a strange sadness, for what did it mean to be chief of these miserable ugly people, compared to the honor of being the most ordinary of the Derku people? How could being chief of these grub-eaters and gatherers compare to eating the common bread of the Derku and riding on a dragonboat through the flood or on raids? He enjoyed Zawada, he enjoyed the people of this tribe, but they were not his people, and he knew that he would leave. Eventually.

Zawada's belly was beginning to swell when the tribe suddenly gathered their tools and baskets and formed up to begin another trek. They didn't move back north, however, the direction they had come from when Glogmeriss found them. Rather their migration was due south, and soon, to his surprise, he found that they were hiking along the very shelf of land that had been his path in coming to this place.

It occurred to him that perhaps the god had spoken to the chief in the night, warning him to get Glogmeriss back on his abandoned journey. But no, the chief denied any dream. Rather he pointed to the sky and said it was time to go get--something. A word Glogmeriss had never heard before. But it was clearly some kind of food, because the adults nearby began laughing with anticipatory delight and pantomiming eating copious amounts of--something.

Off to the northeast, they passed along the shores of another small sea. Glogmeriss asked if the water was sweet and if it had fish in it, but Zawada told him, sadly, that the sea was spoiled. "It used to be good," she said. "The people drank from it and swam in it and trapped fish in it, but it got poisoned."

"How?" asked Glogmeriss.

"The god vomited into it."

"What god did that?"

"The great god," she said, looking mysterious and amused.

"How do you know he did?" asked Glogmeriss.

"We saw," she said. "There was a terrible storm, with winds so strong they tore babies from their mothers' arms and carried them away and they were never seen again. My own mother and father held me between them and I wasn't carried off--I was scarcely more than a baby then, and I remember how scared I was, to have my parents crushing me between them while the wind screamed through the trees."

"But a rainstorm would sweeten the water," said Glogmeriss. "Not make it salty."

"I told you," said Zawada. "The god vomited into it."

"But if you don't mean the rain, then what do you mean?"

To which her only answer was a mysterious smile and a giggle. "You'll see," she said.

And in the end, he did. Two days after leaving this second small sea behind, they rounded a bend and some of the men began to shinny up trees, looking off to the east as if they knew exactly what they'd see. "There it is!" they cried. "We can see it!" Glogmeriss lost no time in climbing up after them, but it took a while for him to know what it was they had seen. It wasn't till he climbed another tree the next morning, when they were closer and when the sun was shining in the east, that he realized that the vast plain opening out before them to the east wasn't a plain at all. It was water, shimmering strangely in the sunlight of morning. More water than Glogmeriss had ever imagined. And the reason the light shimmered that way was because the water was moving. It was the Heaving Sea.

He came down from tree in awe, only to find the whole tribe watching him. When they saw his face, they burst into hysterical laughter, including even Zawada. Only now did it occur to him that they had understood him perfectly well on his first day with them, when he described the Heaving Sea. They had known where he was headed, but they hadn't told him.

"There's the joke back on you!" cried the man in whose face Glogmeriss had thrown dirt on that first day. And now it seemed like perfect justice to Glogmeriss. He had played a joke, and they had played one back, an elaborate jest that required even his wife to keep the secret of the Heaving Sea from him.

Zawada's father, the chief, now explained that it was more than a joke. "Waiting to show you the Heaving Sea meant that you would stay and marry Zawada and give her giant babies. A dozen giants like you!"

Zawada grinned cheerfully. "If they don't kill me coming out, it'll be fine to have sons like yours will be!"

Next day's journey took them far enough that they didn't have to climb trees to see the Heaving Sea, and it was larger than Glogmeriss had ever imagined. He couldn't see the end of it. And it moved all the time. There were more surprises when they got to the shore that night, however. For the sea was noisy, a great roaring, and it kept throwing itself at the shore and then retreating,

heaving up and down. Yet the children were fearless--they ran right into the water and let the waves chase them to shore. The men and women soon joined them, for a little while, and Glogmeriss himself finally worked up the courage to let the water touch him, let the waves chase him. He tasted the water, and while it was saltier than the small seas to the northwest, it was nowhere near as salty as the Salt Sea.

"This is the god that poisoned the little seas," Zawad explained to him. "This is the god that vomited into them."

But Glogmeriss looked at how far the waves came onto the shore and laughed at her. "How could these heavings of the sea reach all the way to those small seas? It took days to get here from there." She grimaced at him. "What do you know, giant man? These waves are not the reason why this is called the Heaving Sea by those who call it that. These are like little butterfly flutters compared to the true heaving of the sea."

Glogmeriss didn't understand until later in the day, as he realized that the waves weren't reaching as high as they had earlier. The beach sand was wet much higher up the shore than the waves could get to now. Zawada was delighted to explain the tides to him, how the sea heaved upward and downward, twice a day or so. "The sea is calling to the moon," she said, but could not explain what that meant, except that the tides were linked to the passages of the moon rather than the passages of the sun.

As the tide ebbed, the tribe stopped playing and ran out onto the sand. With digging stones they began scooping madly at the sand. Now and then one of them would shout in triumph and hold up some ugly, stony, dripping object for admiration before dropping it into a basket. Glogmeriss examined them and knew at once that these things could not be stones--they were too regular, too symmetrical. It wasn't till one of the men showed him the knack of prying them open by hammering on a sharp wedgestone that he really understood, for inside the hard stony surface there was a soft, pliable animal that could draw its shell closed around it.

"That's how it lives under the water," explained the man. "It's watertight as a mud-covered basket, only all the way around. Tight all the way around. So it keeps the water out!"

Like the perfect seedboat, thought Glogmeriss. Only no boat of reeds could ever be made THAT watertight, not so it could be plunged underwater and stay dry inside.

That night they built a fire and roasted the clams and mussels and oysters on the ends of sticks. They were tough and rubbery and they tasted salty--but Glogmeriss soon discovered that the very saltiness was the reason this was such a treat, that and the juices they released when you first chewed on them. Zawada laughed at him for chewing his first bite so long. "Cut it off in smaller bits," she said, "and then chew it till it stops tasting good and then swallow it whole." The first time he tried, it took a bit of doing to swallow it without gagging, but he soon got used to it and it WAS delicious.

"Don't drink so much of your water," said Zawada.

"I'm thirsty," said Glogmeriss.

"Of course you are," she said. "But when we run out of fresh water, we have to leave. There's nothing to drink in this place. So drink only a little at a time, so we can stay another day."

The next morning he helped with the clam-digging, and his powerful shoulders and arms allowed him to excel at this task, just as with so many others. But he didn't have the appetite for roasting them, and wandered off alone while the others feasted on the shore. They did their digging in a narrow inlet of the sea, where a long thin finger of water surged inward at high tide and then retreated almost completely at low tide. The finger of the sea seemed to point straight toward the land of the Derku, and it made Glogmeriss think of home.

Why did I come here? Why did the god go to so much trouble to bring me? Why was I saved from the cats and the lightning and the flood? Was it just to see this great water and taste the salty meat of the clams? These are marvels, it's true, but no greater than the marvel of the castrated bull-ox that I rode, or the lightning fires, or the log that was my brother in the flood. Why would it please the god to bring me here?

He heard footsteps and knew at once that it was Zawada. He did not look up. Soon he felt her arms come around him from behind, her swelling breasts pressed against his back.

"Why do you look toward your home?" she asked softly. "Haven't I made you happy?"

"You've made me happy," he said.

"But you look sad."

He nodded.

"The gods trouble you," she said. "I know that look on your face. You never speak of it, but I know at such times you are thinking of the god who brought you here and wondering if she loved you or hated you."

He laughed aloud. "Do you see inside my skin, Zawada?" "Not your skin," she said. "But I could see inside your loincloth when you first arrived, which is why I told my father to let me be the one to marry you. I had to beat up my sister before she would let me be the one to share your sleeping mat that night. She has never forgiven me. But I wanted your babies."

Glogmeriss grunted. He had known about the sister's jealousy, but since she was ugly and he had never slept with her, her jealousy was never important to him.

"Maybe the god brought you here to see where she vomited." That again.

"It was in a terrible storm."

"You told me about the storm," said Glogmeriss, not wanting to hear it all again.

"When the storms are strong, the sea rises higher than usual. It heaved its way far up this channel. Much farther than this tongue of the sea reaches now. It flowed so far that it reached the first of the small seas and made it flow over and then it reached the second one and that, too, flowed over. But then the storm ceased and the water flowed back to where it was before, only so much salt water had gone into the small seas that they were poisoned."

"So long ago, and yet the salt remains?"

"Oh, I think the sea has vomited into them a couple more times sincethen. Never as strongly as that first time, though. You can see this channel--so much of the seawater flowed through here that it cut a channel in the sand. This finger of the sea is all that's left of it, but you can see the banks of it--like a dried-up river, you see? That was cut then, the ground used to be at the level of the rest of the valley there. The sea still reaches into that new channel, as if it remembered. Before, the shore used to be clear out there, where the waves are high. It's much better for clam-digging now, though, because this whole channel gets filled with clams and we can get them easily."

Glogmeriss felt something stirring inside him. Something in what she had just said was very, very important, but he didn't know what it was.

He cast his gaze off to the left, to the shelf of land that he had walked along all the way on his manhood journey, that this tribe had followed in coming here. The absolutely level path.

Absolutely level. And yet the path was not more than three or four man-heights above the level of the Heaving Sea, while back in the lands of the Derku, the shelf was so far above the level of the Salt Sea that it felt as though you were looking down from a mountain. The whole plain was enormously wide, and yet it went so deep before reaching the water of the Salt Sea that you could see for miles and miles, all the way across. It was deep, that plain, a valley, really. A deep gouge cut into the earth. And if this shelf of land was truly level, the Heaving Sea was far, far higher. He thought of the floods. Thought of the powerful current of the flooding river that had snagged him and swept him downward. And then he thought of a storm that lifted the water of the Heaving Sea and sent it crashing along this valley floor, cutting a new channel until it reached those smaller seas, filling them with saltwater, causing THEM to flood and spill over. Spill over where? Where did their water flow? He already knew--they emptied down into the Salt Sea. Down and down and down.

It will happen again, thought Glogmeriss. There will be another storm, and this time the channel will be cut deeper, and when the storm subsides the water will still flow, because now the channel will be below the level of the Heaving Sea at high tide. And at each high tide, more water will flow and the channel will get deeper and deeper, till it's deep enough that even at low tide the water will still flow through it, cutting the channel more and more, and the water will come faster and faster, and then the Heaving Sea will spill over into the great valley, faster and faster and faster. All this water then will spill out of the Heaving Sea and go down into the plain until the two seas are the same level. And once that happens, it will never go back.

The lands of the Derku are far below the level of the new sea, even if it's only half as high as the waters of the Heaving Sea are now. Our city will be covered. The whole land. And it won't be a trickle. It will be a great bursting of water, a huge wave of water, like the first gush of the floodwater down the Selud River from the Sweetwater Sea. Just like that, only the Heaving Sea is far larger than the Sweetwater Sea, and its water is angry and poisonous. "Yes," said Glogmeriss. "I see what you brought me here to show me."

"Don't be silly," said Zawada. "I brought you here to have you eat clams!"

"I wasn't talking to you," said Glogmeriss. He stood up and left her, walking down the finger of the sea, where the tide was rising again, bringing the water lunging back up the channel, pointing like a javelin toward the heart of the Derku people. Zawada followed behind him. He didn't mind.

Glogmeriss reached the waves of the rising tide and plunged in. He knelt down in the water and let a wave crash over him. The force of the water toppled him, twisted him until he couldn't tell which was was up and he thought he would drown under the water. But then the wave retreated again, leaving him in the shallow water on the shore. He crawled back out stayed there, the taste of salt on his lips, gasping for air, and then cried out, "Why are you doing this! Why are you doing this to my people!"

Zawada stood watching him, and others of the tribe came to join her, to find out what the strange giant man was doing in the sea. Angry, thought Glogmeriss. The god is angry with my people. And I have been brought here to see just what terrible punishment the god has prepared for them. "Why?" he cried again. "Why not just break through this channel and send the flood and bury the Derku people in poisonous water? Why must I be shown this first? So I can save myself by staying high out of the flood's way? Why should I be saved alive, and all my family, all my friends be destroyed? What is their crime that I am not also guilty of? If you brought me here to save me, then you failed, God, because I refuse to stay, I will go back to my people and warn them all, I'll tell them what you're planning. You can't save me alone. When the flood comes I'll be right there with the rest of them. So to save me, you must save them all. If you don't like THAT, then you should have drowned me just now when you had the chance!"

Glogmeriss rose dripping from the beach and began to walk, past the people, up toward the shelf of land that made the level highway back home to the Derku people. The tribe understood at once that he was leaving, and they began calling out to him, begging him to stay.

"I can't," he said. "Don't try to stop me. Even the god can't stop me."

They didn't try to stop him, not by force. But the chief ran after him, walked beside him--ran beside him, really, for that was the only way he could keep up with Glogmeriss's long-legged stride. "Friend, Son," said the chief. "Don't you know that you will be king of these people after me?"

"A people should have a king who is one of their own."

"But you ARE one of us now," said the chief. "The mightiest of us. You will make us a great people! The god has chosen you, do you think we can't see that? This is why the god brought you here, to lead us and make us great!"

"No," said Glogmeriss. "I'm a man of the Derku people." "Where are they? Far from here. And there is my daughter with your first child in her womb. What do they have in Derku lands that can compare to that?"

"They have the womb where I was formed," said Glogmeriss. "They have the man who put me there. They have the others who came from that woman and that man. They are my people."

"Then go back, but not today! Wait till you see your child born. Decide then!"

Glogmeriss stopped so abruptly that the chief almost fell over, trying to stop running and stay with him. "Listen to me, father of my wife. If you were up in the mountain hunting, and you looked down and saw a dozen huge cats heading toward the place where your people were living, would say to yourself, Oh, I suppose the god brought me here to save me? Or would you run down the mountain and warn them, and do all you could to fight off the cats and save your people?" "What is this story?" asked the chief. "There are no cats. You've seen no cats."

"I've seen the god heaving in his anger," said Glogmeriss. "I've seen how he looms over my people, ready to destroy them all. A flood that will tear their flimsy reed boats to pieces. A flood that will come in a single great wave and then will never go away. Do you think I shouldn't warn my mother and father, my brothers and sisters, the friends of my childhood?"

"I think you have new brothers and sisters, a new father and mother. The god isn't angry with US. The god isn't angry with you. We should stay together. Don't you WANT to stay with us and live and rule over us? You can be our king now, today. You can be king over me, I give you my place!"

"Keep your place," said Glogmeriss. "Yes, a part of me wants to stay. A part of me is afraid. But that is the part of me that is Glogmeriss, and still a boy. If I don't go home and warn my people

and show them how to save themselves from the god, then I will always be a boy, nothing but a boy, call me a king if you want, but I will be a boy-king, a coward, a child until the day I die. So I tell you now, it is the child who dies in this place, not the man. It was the child Glogmeriss who married Zawada. Tell her that a strange man named Naog killed her husband. Let her marry someone else, someone of her own tribe, and never think of Glogmeriss again." Glogmeriss kissed his father- in-law and embraced him. Then he turned away, and with his first step along the path leading back to the Derku people, he knew that he was truly Naog now, the man who would save the Derku people from the fury of the god. Kemal watched the lone man of the Engu clan as he walked away from the beach, as he conversed with his father-in-law, as he turned his face again away from the Gulf of Aden, toward the land of the doomed crocodile- worshippers whose god was no match for the forces about to be unleashed on them. This was the one, Kemal knew, for he had seen the wooden boat--more of a watertight cabin on a raft, actually, with none of this nonsense about taking animals two by two. This was the man of legends, but seeing his face, hearing his voice, Kemal was no closer to understanding him than he had been before. What can we see, using the TruSite II? Only what is visible. We may be able to range through time, to see the most intimate, the most terrible, the most horrifying, the most inspiring moments of human history, but we only see them, we only hear them, we are witnesses but we know nothing of the thing that matters most:

motive. Why didn't you stay with your new tribe, Naog? They heeded your warning, and camped always on higher ground during the monsoon season. They lived through the flood, all of them. And when you went home and no one listened to your warnings, why did you stay? What was it that made you remain among them, enduring their ridicule as you built your watertight seedboat? You could have left at any time--there were others who cut themselves loose from their birth tribe and wandered through the world until they found a new home. The Nile was waiting for you. The grasslands of Arabia. They were already there, calling to you, even as your own homeland became poisonous to you. Yet you remained among the Engu, and by doing so, you not only gave the world an unforgettable story, you also changed the course of history. What kind of being is it who can change the course of history, just because he follows his own unbending will? \*\*\*

It was on his third morning that Naog realized that he was not alone on his return journey. He awoke in his tree because he heard shuffling footsteps through the grass nearby. Or perhaps it was something else that woke him--some unhearable yearning that he nevertheless heard. He looked, and saw in the faint light of the thinnest crescent moon that a lone baboon was shambling along, lazy, staggering. No doubt an old male, thought Naog, who will soon be meat for some predator.

Then his eyes adjusted and he realized that this lone baboon was not as close as he had thought, that in fact it was much bigger, much TALLER than he had thought. It was not male, either, but female, and far from being a baboon, it was a human, a pregnant woman, and he knew her now and shuddered at his own thought of her becoming the meal for some cat, some crocodile, some pack of dogs.

Silently he unfastened himself from his sleeping tree and dropped to the ground. In moments he was beside her.

"Zawada," he said.

She didn't turn to look at him.

"Zawada, what are you doing?"

Now she stopped. "Walking," she said.

"You're asleep," he said. "You're in a dream."

"No, YOU'RE asleep," she said, giggling madly in her weariness.

"Why have you come? I left you."

"I know," she said.

"I'm returning to my own people. You have to stay with yours." But he knew even as he said it that she could not go back there, not unless he went with her. Physically she was unable to go on by herself--clearly she had eaten nothing and slept little in three days. Why she had not died already, taken by some beast, he could not guess. But if she was to return to her people, he would have to take her, and he did not want to go back there. It made him very angry, and so his voice burned when he spoke to her.

"I wanted to," she said. "I wanted to weep for a year and then make an image of you out of sticks and burn it."

"You should have," he said.

"Your son wouldn't let me." As she spoke, she touched her belly. "Son? Has some god told you who he is?"

"He came to me himself in a dream, and he said, 'Don't let my father go without me.' So I brought him to you."

"I don't want him, son OR daughter." But he knew even as he said it that it wasn't true.

She didn't know it, though. Her eyes welled with tears and she sank down into the grass. "Good, then," she said. "Go on with your journey. I'm sorry the god led me near you, so you had to be bothered." She sank back in the grass. Seeing the faint gleam of light reflected from her skin awoke feelings that Naog was now ashamed of, memories of how she had taught him the easing of a man's passion.

"I can't walk off and leave you."

"You already did," she said. "So do it again. I need to sleep now." "You'll be torn by animals and eaten." "Let them," she said. "You never chose me, Derku man, I chose YOU. I invited this baby into my body. Now if we die here in the grass, what is that to you? All you care about is not having to watch. So don't watch. Go. The sky is getting light. Run on ahead. If we die, we die. We're nothing to you anyway."

Her words made him ashamed. "I left you knowing you and the baby would be safe, at home. Now you're here and you aren't safe, and I can't walk away from you."

"So run," she said. "I was your wife, and this was your son, but in your heart we're already dead anyway."

"I didn't bring you because you'd have to learn the Derku language. It's much harder than your language."

"I would have had to learn it anyway, you fool," she said. "The baby inside me is a Derku man like you. How would I get him to understand me, if I didn't learn Derku talk?"

Naog wanted to laugh aloud at her hopeless ignorance. But then, how would she know? Naog had seen the children of captives and knew that in Derku lands they grew up speaking the Derku language, even when both parents were from another tribe that had not one word of Derku language in it. But Zawada had never seen the babies of strangers; her tribe captured no one, went on no raids, but rather lived at peace, moving from place to place, gathering whatever the earth or the sea had to offer them. How could she match even a small part of the great knowledge of the Derku, who brought the whole world within their city?

He wanted to laugh, but he did not laugh. Instead he watched over her as she slept, as the day waxed and waned. As the sun rose he carried her to the tree to sleep in the shade. Keeping his eye open for animals prowling near her, he gathered such leaves and seeds and roots as the ground offered the traveler at this time of year. Twice he came back and found her breath rasping and noisy; then he made her wake enough to drink a little of his water, but she was soon asleep, water glistening on her chin.

At last in the late afternoon, with the air was hot and still, he squatted down in the grass beside her and woke her for good, showing her the food. She ate ravenously, and when she was done, she embraced him and called him the best of the gods because he didn't leave her to die after all.

"I'm not a god," he said, baffled.

"All my people know you are a god, from a land of gods. So large, so powerful, so good. You came us so you could have a human baby. But this baby is only half human. How will he ever be happy, living among US, never knowing the gods?"

"You've seen the Heaving Sea, and you call ME a god?"

"Take me with you to the land of the Derku. Let me give birth to your baby there. I will leave it with your mother and your sisters, and I will go home. I know I don't belong among the gods, but my baby does."

In his heart, Naog wanted to say yes, you'll stay only till the baby is born, and then you'll go home. But he remembered her patience as he learned the language of her people. He remembered the sweet language of the night, and the way he had to laugh at how she tried to act like a grown woman when she was only a child, and yet she couldn't act like a child because she was, after all, now a woman. Because of me she is a woman, thought Naog, and because of her and her people I will come home a man. Do I tell her she must go away, even though I know that the others will think she's ugly as I thought she was ugly?

And she IS ugly, thought Naog. Our son, if he IS a son, will be ugly like her people, too. I will be ashamed of him. I will be ashamed of her.

Is a man ashamed of his firstborn son?

"Come home with me to the land of the Derku," said Naog. "We will tell them together about the Heaving Sea, and how one day soon it will leap over the low walls of sand and pour into this great plain in a flood that will cover the Derku lands forever. There will be a great migration. We will move, all of us, to the land my father found. The crocodiles live there also, along the banks of the Nile."

"Then you will truly be the greatest among the gods," she said, and the worship in her eyes made him proud and ill-at-ease, both at once. Yet how could he deny that the Derku were gods? Compared to her poor tribe, they would seem so. Thousands of people living in the midst of their own canals; the great fields of planted grain stretching far in every direction; the great wall of earth surrounding the Great Derku; the seedboats scattered like strange soft boulders; the children riding their dragonboats through the canals: a land of miracles to her. Where else in all the world had so many people learned to live together, making great wealth where once there had been only savannah and floodplain? We live like gods, compared to other people. We come like gods out of nowhere, to carry off captives the way death carries people off. Perhaps that is what the life after death is like--the REAL gods using us to dredge their canals. Perhaps that is what all of human life is for, to create slaves for the gods. And what if the gods themselves are also raided by some greater beings yet, carrying THEM off to raise grain in some unimaginable garden? Is there no end to the capturing?

There are many strange and ugly captives in Derku, thought Naog. Who will doubt me if I say that this woman is my captive? She doesn't

speak the language, and soon enough she would be used to the life. I would be kind to her, and would treat her son well--I would hardly be the first man to father a child on a captive woman. The thought made him blush with shame.

"Zawada, when you come to the Derku lands, you will come as my

wife," he said. "And you will not have to leave. Our son will know his mother as well as his father."

Her eyes glowed. "You are the greatest and kindest of the gods." "No," he said, angry now, because he knew very well just exactly how far from "great" and "kind" he really was, having just imagined bringing this sweet, stubborn, brave girl into captivity. "You must never call me a god again. Ever. There is only one god, do you understand me? And it is that god that lives inside the Heaving Sea, the one that brought me to see him and sent me back here to warn my people. Call no one else a god, or you can't stay with me." Her eyes went wide. "Is there room in the world for only one god?" "When did a crocodile ever bury a whole land under water forever?" Naog laughed scornfully. "All my life I have thought of the Great Derku as a terrible god, worthy of the worship of brave and terrible men. But the Great Derku is just a crocodile. It can be killed with a spear. Imagine stabbing the Heaving Sea. We can't even touch it. And yet the god can lift up that whole sea and pour it over the wall

into this plain. THAT isn't just a god. That is GOD."

She looked at him in awe; he wondered whether she understood. And then realized that she could not possibly have understood, because half of what he said was in the Derku language, since he didn't even know enough words in HER language to think of these thoughts, let alone say them.

Her body was young and strong, even with a baby inside it, and the next morning she was ready to travel. He did not run now, but even so they covered ground quickly, for she was a sturdy walker. He began teaching her the Derku language as they walked, and she learned well, though she made the words sound funny, as so many captives did, never able to let go of the sounds of their native tongue, never able to pronounce the new ones.

Finally he saw the mountains that separated the Derku lands from the Salty Sea, rising from the plain. "Those will be islands," said Naog, realizing it for the first time. "The highest ones. See?

They're higher than the shelf of land we're walking on."

Zawada nodded wisely, but he knew that she didn't really understand what he was talking about.

"Those are the Derku lands," said Naog. "See the canals and the fields?"

She looked, but seemed to see nothing unusual at all. "Forgive me," she said, "but all I see are streams and grassland."

"But that's what I meant," said Naog. "Except that the grasses grow

where we plant them, and all we plant is the grass whose seed we grind into meal. And the streams you see--they go where we want them to go. Vast circles surrounding the heart of the Derku lands. And there in the middle, do you see that hill?"

"I think so," she said.

"We build that hill every year, after the floodwater."

She laughed. "You tell me that you aren't gods, and yet you make hills and streams and meadows wherever you want them!" Naog set his face toward the Engu portion of the great city. "Come home with me," he said.

Since Zawada's people were so small, Naog had not realized that he had grown even taller during his manhood journey, but now as he led his ugly wife through the outskirts of the city, he realized that he was taller than everyone. It took him by surprise, and at first he was disturbed because it seemed to him that everyone had grown smaller. He even said as much to Zawada--"They're all so small"--but she laughed as if it were a joke. Nothing about the place or the people seemed small to HER.

At the edge of the Engu lands, Naog hailed the boys who were on watch. "Hai!"

"Hai!" they called back.

"I've come back from my journey!" he called.

It took a moment for them to answer. "What journey was this, tall man?"

"My manhood journey. Don't you know me? Can't you see that I'm Naog?"

The boys hooted at that. "How can you be naked when you have your napron on?"

"Naog is my manhood name," said Naog, quite annoyed now, for he had not expected to be treated with such disrespect on his return. "You probably know of my by my baby name. They called me Glogmeriss."

They hooted again. "You used to be trouble, and now you're naked!" cried the bold one. "And your wife is ugly, too!"

But now Naog was close enough that the boys could see how very tall he was. Their faces grew solemn.

"My father is Twerk," said Naog. "I return from my manhood journey with the greatest tale ever told. But more important than that, I have a message from the god who lives in the Heaving Sea. When I have given my message, people will include you in my story. They will say, 'Who were the five fools who joked about Naog's name, when he came to save us from the angry god?""

"Twerk is dead," said one of the boys.

"The Dragon took him," said another.

"He was head of the clan, and then the Great Derku began eating

human flesh again, and your father gave himself to the Dragon for the clan's sake."

"Are you truly his son?"

Naog felt a gnawing pain that he did not recognize. He would soon learn to call it grief, but it was not too different from rage. "Is this another jest of yours? I'll break your heads if it is." "By the blood of your father in the mouth of the beast, I swear that

it's true!" said the boy who had earlier been the boldest in his teasing. "If you're his son, then you're the son of a great man!" The emotion welled up inside him. "What does this mean?" cried Naog. "The Great Derku does not eat the flesh of men! Someone has murdered my father! He would never allow such a thing!" Whether he meant his father or the Great Derku who would never allow it even Naog did not know.

The boys ran off then, before he could strike out at them for being the tellers of such an unbearable tale. Zawada was the only one left, to pat at him, embrace him, try to soothe him with her voice. She abandoned the language of the Derku and spoke to him soothingly in her own language. But all Naog could hear was the news that his father had been fed to the Great Derku as a sacrifice for the clan. The old days were back again, and they had killed his father. His father, and not even a captive!

Others of the Engu, hearing what the boys were shouting about, brought him to his mother. Then he began to calm down, hearing her voice, the gentle reassurance of the old sound. She, at least, was unchanged. Except that she looked older, yes, and tired. "It was your father's own choice," she explained to him. "After floodwater this year the Great Derku came into the pen with a human baby in its jaws. It was a two-year-old boy of the Ko clan, and it happened he was the firstborn of his parents."

"This means only that Ko clan wasn't watchful enough," said Naog. "Perhaps," said his mother. "But the holy men saw it as a sign from the god. Just as we stopped giving human flesh to the Great Derku when he refused it, so now when he claimed a human victim, what else were we to think?"

"Captives, then. Why not captives?"

"It was your own father who said that if the Great Derku had taken a child from the families of the captives, then we would sacrifice captives. But he took a child from one of our clans. What kind of sacrifice is it, to offer strangers when the Great Derku demanded the meat of the Derku people?"

"Don't you see, Mother? Father was trying to keep them from sacrificing anybody at all, by making them choose something so painful that no one would do it."

She shook her head. "How do you know what my Twerk was trying to do? He was trying to save YOU."

"Me?"

"Your father was clan leader by then. The holy men said, 'Let each clan give the firstborn son of the clan leader.""

"But I was gone."

"Your father insisted on the ancient privilege, that a father may go in place of his son."

"So he died in my place, because I was gone."

"If you had been here, Glogmeriss, he would have done the same." He thought about this for a few moments, and then answered only, "My name is Naog now."

"We thought you were dead, Naked One, Stirrer of Troubles," said Mother.

"I found a wife."

"I saw her. Ugly."

"Brave and strong and smart," said Naog.

"Born to be a captive. I chose a different wife for you."

"Zawada is my wife."

Even though Naog had returned from his journey as a man and not a boy, he soon learned that even a man can be bent by the pressure of others. This far he did NOT bend: Zawada remained his wife. But he also took the wife his mother had chosen for him, a beautiful girl named Kormo. Naog was not sure what was worse about the new arrangement--that everyone else treated Kormo as Naog's real wife and Zawada as barely a wife at all, or that when Naog was hungry with passion, it was always Kormo he thought of. But he remembered Zawada at such times, how she bore him his first child, the boy Moiro; how she followed him with such fierce courage; how good she was to him when he was a stranger. And when he remembered, he followed his duty to her rather than his natural desire. This happened so often that Kormo complained about it. This made Naog feel somehow righteous, for the truth was that his first inclination had been right. Zawada should have stayed with her own tribe. She was unhappy most of the time, and kept to herself and her baby, and as years passed, her babies. She was never accepted by the other women of the Derku. Only the captive women became friends with her, which caused even more talk and criticism.

Years passed, yes, and where was Naog's great message, the one the god had gone to such great trouble to give him? He tried to tell it. First to the leaders of the Engu clan, the whole story of his journey, and how the Heaving Sea was far higher than the Salty Sea and would soon break through and cover all the land with water. They listened to him gravely, and then one by one they counseled with him that when the gods wish to speak to the Derku people, they will do as they did when the Great Derku ate a human baby. "Why would a god who wished to send a message to the Derku people choose a mere BOY as messenger?"

"Because I was the one who was taking the journey," he said. "What will you have us do? Abandon our lands? Leave our canals behind, and our boats?"

"The Nile has fresh water and a flood season, my father saw it."

"But the Nile also has strong tribes living up and down its shores. Here we are masters of the world. No, we're not leaving on the word of a boy."

They insisted that he tell no one else, but he didn't obey them. In fact he told anyone who would listen, but the result was the same. For his father's memory or for his mother's sake, or perhaps just because he was so tall and strong, people listened politely--but Naog knew at the end of each telling of his tale that nothing had changed. No one believed him. And when he wasn't there, they repeated his stories as if they were jokes, laughing about riding a castrated bull ox, about calling a tree branch his brother, and most of all about the idea of a great flood that would never go away. Poor Naog, they said. He clearly lost his mind on his manhood journey, coming home with impossible stories that he obviously believes and an ugly woman that he dotes on.

Zawada urged him to leave. "You know that the flood is coming," she said. "Why not take your family up and out of here? Go to the Nile ourselves, or return to my father's tribe."

But he wouldn't hear of it. "I would go if I could bring my people with me. But what kind of man am I, to leave behind my mother and my brothers and sisters, my clan and all my kin?"

"You would have left me behind," she said once. He didn't answer her. He also didn't go.

In the third year after his return, when he had three sons to take riding on his dragonboat, he began the strangest project anyone had ever seen. No one was surprised, though, that crazy Naog would do something like this. He began to take several captives with him upriver to a place where tall, heavy trees grew. There they would wear out stone axes cutting down trees, then shape them into logs and ride them down the river. Some people complained that the captives belonged to everybody and it was wrong for Naog to have their exclusive use for so many days, but Naog was such a large and strange man that no one wanted to push the matter.

One or two at a time, they came to see what Naog was doing with the logs. They found that he had taught his captives to notch them and lash them together into a huge square platform, a dozen strides on a side. Then they made a second platform crossways to the first and on top of it, lashing every log to ever other log, or so it seemed. Between the two layers he smeared pitch, and then on the top of the raft he built a dozen reed structures like the tops of seedboats.

Before floodwater he urged his neighbors to bring him their grain, and he would keep it all dry. A few of them did, and when the rivers rose during floodwater, everyone saw that his huge seedboat floated, and no water seeped up from below into the seedhouses. More to the point, Naog's wives and children also lived on the raft, dry all the time, sleeping easily through the night instead of having to remain constantly wakeful, watching to make sure the children didn't fall into the water.

The next year, Engu clan built several more platforms following Naog's pattern. They didn't always lash them as well as he had, and during the next flood several of their rafts came apart--but gradually, so they had time to move the seeds. Engu clan had far more seed make it through to planting season than any of the other tribes, and soon the men had to range farther and farther upriver, because all the nearer trees of suitable size had been harvested. Naog himself, though, wasn't satisfied. It was Zawada who pointed out that when the great flood came, the water wouldn't rise gradually as it did in the river floods. "It'll be like the waves against the shore, crashing with such force ... and these reed shelters will never hold against such a wave."

For several years Naog experimented with logs until at last he had the largest movable structure ever built by human hands. The raft was as long as ever, but somewhat narrower. Rising from notches between logs in the upper platform were sturdy vertical posts, and these were bridged and roofed with wood. But instead of using logs for the planking and the roofing, Naog and the captives who served him split the logs carefully into planks, and these were smeared inside and out with pitch, and then another wall and ceiling were built inside, sandwiching the tar between them. People were amused to see Naog's captives hoisting dripping baskets of water to the roof of this giant seedboat and pouring them out onto it. "What, does he think that if he waters these trees, they'll grow like grass?" Naog heard them, but he cared not at all, for when they spoke he was inside his boat, seeing that not a drop of water made it inside.

The doorway was the hardest part, because it, too, had to be able to be sealed against the flood. Many nights Naog lay awake worrying about it before building this last and largest and tightest seedboat. The answer came to him in a dream. It was a memory of the little crabs that lived in the sand on the shore of the Heaving Sea. They dug holes in the sand and then when the water washed over them, their holes filled in above their heads, keeping out the water. Naog awoke knowing that he must put the door in the roof of his seedboat, and arrange a way to lash it from the inside.

"How will you see to lash it?" said Zawada. "There's no light inside."

So Naog and his three captives learned to lash the door in place in utter darkness.

When they tested it, water leaked through the edges of the door. The solution was to smear more pitch, fresh pitch, around the edges of the openingand lay the door into it so that when they lashed it the seal was tight. It was very hard to open the door again after that, but they got it open from the inside--and when they could see again they found that not a drop of water had got inside. "No more trials," said Naog.

Their work then was to gather seeds--and more than seeds this time. Water, too. The seeds went into baskets with lids that were lashed down, and the water went into many, many flasks. Naog and his captives and their wives worked hard during every moment of daylight to make the waterbags and seedbaskets and fill them. The Engu didn't mind at all storing more and more of their grain in Naog's boat--after all, it was ludicrously watertight, so that it was sure to make it through the flood season in fine form. They didn't have to believe in his nonsense about a god in the Heaving Sea that was angry with the Derku people in order to recognize a good seedboat when they saw it.

His boat was nearly full when word spread that a group of new captives from the southeast were telling tales of a new river of saltwater that had flowed into the Salty Sea from the direction of the Heaving Sea. When Naog heard the news, he immediately climbed a tree so he could look toward the southeast. "Don't be silly," they said to him. "You can't see the Salty Shore from here, even if you climb the tallest tree."

"I was looking for the flood," said Naog. "Don't you see that the Heaving Sea must have broken through again, when a storm whipped the water into madness. Then the storm subsided, and the sea stopped flowing over the top. But the channel must be wider and longer and deeper now. Next time it won't end when the storm ends. Next time it will be the great flood."

"How do you know these things, Naog? You're a man like the rest of us. Just because you're taller doesn't mean you can see the future."

"The god is angry," said Naog. "The true god, not this silly crocodile god that you feed on human flesh." And now, in the urgency of knowing the imminence of the flood, he said what he had said to no one but Zawada. "Why do you think the true god is so angry with us? Because of the crocodile! Because we feed human flesh to the Dragon! The true god doesn't want offerings of human flesh. It's an abomination. It's as forbidden as the forbidden fruit. The crocodile god is not a god at all, it's just a wild animal, one that crawls on its belly, and yet we bow down to it. We bow down to the enemy of the true god!" Hearing him say this made the people angry. Some were so furious they wanted to feed him to the Great Derku at once, but Naog only laughed at them. "If the Great Derku is such a wonderful god, let HIM come and get me, instead of you taking me! But no, you don't believe for a moment that he CAN do it. Yet the TRUE god had the power to send me a castrated bull to ride, and a log to save me from a flood, and trees to catch the lightning so it wouldn't strike me. When has the Dragon ever had the power to do THAT?" His ridicule of the Great Derku infuriated them, and violence might have resulted, had Naog not had such physical presence, and had his father not been a noble sacrifice to the Dragon. Over the next weeks, though, it became clear that Naog was now regarded by all as something between an enemy and a stranger. No one came to speak to him, or to Zawada, either. Only Kormo continued to have contact with the rest of the Derku people.

"They want me to leave you," she told him. "They want me to come back to my family, because you are the enemy of the god." "And will you go?" he said.

She fixed her sternest gaze on him. "You are my family now," she said. "Even when you prefer this ugly woman to me, you are still my husband."

Naog's mother came to him once, to warn him. "They have decided tokill you. They're simply biding their time, waiting for the right moment."

"Waiting for the courage to fight me, you mean," said Naog.

"Tell them that a madness came upon you, but it's over," she said. "Tell them that it was the influence of this uply foreign wife of

yours, and then they'll kill her and not you."

Naog didn't bother to answer her.

His mother burst into tears. "Was this what I bore you for? I named you very well, Glogmeriss, my son of trouble and anguish!"

"Listen to me, Mother. The flood is coming. We may have very little warning when it actually comes, very little time to get into my seedboat. Stay near, and when you hear us calling--"

"I'm glad your father is dead rather than to see his firstborn son so gone in madness."

"Tell all the others, too, Mother. I'll take as many into my seedboat as will fit. But once the door in the roof is closed, I can't open it again. Anyone who isn't inside when we close it will never get inside, and they will die."

She burst into tears and left.

Not far from the seedboat was a high hill. As the rainy season neared, Naog took to sending one of his servants to the top of the hill several times a day, to watch toward the southeast. "What should we look for?" they asked. "I don't know," he answered. "A new river. A wall of water. A dark streak in the distance. It will be something that you've never seen before."

The sky filled with clouds, dark and threatening. The heart of the storm was to the south and east. Naog made sure that his wives and children and the wives and children of his servants didn't stray far from the seedboat. They freshened the water in the waterbags, to stay busy. A few raindrops fell, and then the rain stopped, and then a few more raindrops. But far to the south and east it was raining heavily. And the wind--the wind kept rising higher and higher, and it was out of the east. Naog could imagine it whipping the waves higher and farther into the deep channel that the last storm had opened. He imagined the water spilling over into the salty riverbed. He imagined it tearing deeper and deeper into the sand, more and more of it tearing away under the force of the torrent. Until finally it was no longer the force of the storm driving the water through the channel, but the weight of the whole sea, because at last it had been cut down below the level of low tide. And then the sea tearing deeper and deeper.

"Naog." It was the head of the Engu clan, and a dozen men with him. "The god is ready for you."

Naog looked at them as if they were foolish children. "This is the storm," he said. "Go home and bring your families to my seedboat, so they can come through the flood alive."

"This is no storm," said the head of the clan. "Hardly any rain has fallen."

The servant who was on watch came running, out of breath, his arms bleeding where he had skidded on the ground as he fell more than once in his haste. "Naog, master!" he cried. "It's plain to see--the Salty Shore is nearer. The Salty Sea is rising, and fast."

What a torrent of water it would take, to make the Salty Sea rise in its bed. Naog covered his face with his hands. "You're right," said Naog. "The god is ready for me. The true god. It was for this hour that I was born. As for YOUR god--the true god will drown him as surely as he will drown anyone who doesn't come to my seedboat." "Come with us now," said the head of the clan. But his voice was not so certain now.

To his servants and his wives, Naog said, "Inside the seedboat. When all are in, smear on the pitch, leaving only one side where I can slide down."

"You come too, husband," said Zawada.

"I can't," he said. "I have to give warning one last time."

"Too late!" cried the servant with the bleeding arms. "Come now."

"You go now," said Naog. "I'll be back soon. But if I'm not back,

seal the door and open it for no man, not even me."

"When will I know to do that?" he asked in anguish.

"Zawada will tell you," said Naog. "She'll know." Then he turned to the head of the clan. "Come with me," he said. "Let's give the warning." Then Naog strode off toward the bank of the canal where his mother and brothers and sisters kept their dragonboats. The men who had come to capture him followed him, unsure who had captured whom.

It was raining again, a steady rainfall whipped by an ever-stronger wind. Naog stood on the bank of the canal and shouted against the wind, crying out for his family to join him. "There's not much time!" he cried. "Hurry, come to my seedboat!"

"Don't listen to the enemy of the god!" cried the head of the clan. Naog looked down into the water of the canal. "Look, you fools! Can't you see that the canal is rising?"

"The canal always rises in a storm."

Naog knelt down and dipped his hand into the canal and tasted the water. "Salt," he said. "Salt!" he shouted. "This isn't rising because of rain in the mountains! The water is rising because the Salty Sea is filling with the water of the Heaving Sea. It's rising to cover us! Come with me now, or not at all! When the door of my seedboat closes, we'll open it for no one." Then he turned and loped off toward the seedboat.

By the time he got there, the water was spilling over the banks of the canals, and he had to splash through several shallow streams where there had been no streams before. Zawada was standing on top of the roof, and screamed at him to hurry as he clambered onto the top of it. He looked in the direction she had been watching, and saw what she had seen. In the distance, but not so very far away, a dark wall rushing toward them. A plug of earth must have broken loose, and a fist of the sea hundreds of feet high was slamming through the gap. It spread at once, of course, and as it spread the wave dropped until it was only fifteen or twenty feet high. But that was high enough. It would do.

"You fool!" cried Zawada. "Do you want to watch it or be saved from it?"

Naog followed Zawada down into the boat. Two of the servants smeared on a thick swatch of tar on the fourth side of the doorway. Then Naog, who was the only one tall enough to reach outside the hole, drew the door into place, snugging it down tight. At once it became perfectly dark inside the seedboat, and silent, too, except for the breathing. "This time for real," said Naog softly. He could hear the other men working at the lashings. They could feel the floor moving under them--the canals had spilled over so far now that the raft was rising and floating.

Suddenly they heard a noise. Someone was pounding on the wall of the

seedboat. And there was shouting. They couldn't hear the words, the walls were too thick. But they knew what was being said all the same. Save us. Let us in. Save us.

Kormo's voice was filled with anguish. "Naog, can't we--" "If we open it now we'll never close it again in time. We'd all die. They had every chance and every warning. My lashing is done." "Mine too," answered one of the servants.

The silence of the others said they were still working hard. "Everyone hold onto the side posts," said Naog. "There's so much room here. We could have taken on so many more."

The pounding outside was in earnest now. They were using axes to hack at the wood. Or at the lashings. And someone was on top of the seedboat now, many someones, trying to pry at the door.

"Now, O God, if you mean to save us at all, send the water now." "Done," said another of the servants. So three of the four corners were fully lashed.

Suddenly the boat lurched and rocked upward, then spun crazily in every direction at once. Everyone screamed, and few were able to keep their handhold, such was the force of the flood. They plunged to one side of the seedboat, a jumble of humans and spilling baskets and water bottles. Then they struck something--a tree? The side of a mountain?--and lurched in another direction entirely, and in the darkness it was impossible to tell anymore whether they were on the floor or the roof or one of the walls.

Did it go on for days, or merely hours? Finally the awful turbulence gave way to a spinning all in one plane. The flood was still rising; they were still caught in the twisting currents; but they were no longer caught in that wall of water, in the great wave that the god had sent. They were on top of the flood.

Gradually they sorted themselves out. Mothers found their children, husbands found their wives. Many were crying, but as the fear subsided they were able to find the ones who were genuinely in pain. But what could they do in the darkness to deal with bleeding injuries, or possible broken bones? They could only plead with the god to be merciful and let them know when it was safe to open the door.

After a while, though, it became plain that it wasn't safe NOT to open it. The air was musty and hot and they were beginning to pant. "I can't breathe," said Zawada. "Open the door," said Kormo. Naog spoke aloud to the god. "We have no air in here," he said. "I have to open the door. Make it safe. Let no other wave wash over us with the door open."

But when he went to open the door, he couldn't find it in the darkness. For a sickening moment he thought: What if we turned completely upside down, and the door is now under us? I never thought of that. We'll die in here.

Then he found it, and began fussing with the lashings. But it was hard in the darkness. They had tied so hurriedly, and he wasn't thinking all that well. But soon he heard the servants also at work, muttering softly, and one by one they got their lashings loose and Naog shoved upward on the door.

It took forever before the door budged, or so it seemed, but when at last it rocked upward, a bit of faint light and a rush of air came into the boat and everyone cried out at once in relief and gratitude. Naog pushed the door upward and then maneuvered it to lie across the opening at an angle, so that the heavy rain outside wouldn't inundate them. He stood there holding the door in place, even though the wind wanted to pick it up and blow it away--a slab of wood as heavy as that one was!--while in twos and threes they came to the opening and breathed, or lifted children to catch a breath of air. There was enough light to bind up some bleeding injuries, and to realize that no bones were broken after all. The rain went on forever, or so it seemed, the rain and the wind. And then it stopped, and they were able to come out onto the roof of the seedboat and look at the sunlight and stare at the distant horizon. There was no land at all, just water. "The whole earth is gone," said Kormo. "Just as you said.

"The Heaving Sea has taken over this place," said Naog. "But we'll come to try land. The current will take us there."

There was much debris floating on the water--torn-up trees and bushes, for the flood had scraped the whole face of the land. A few rotting bodies of animals. If anyone saw a human body floating by, they said nothing about it.

After days, a week, perhaps longer of floating without sight of land, they finally began skirting a shoreline. Once they saw the smoke of someone's fire--people who lived high above the great valley of the Salty Sea had been untouched by the flood. But there was no way to steer the boat toward shore. Like a true seedboat, it drifted unless something drew it another way. Naog cursed himself for his foolishness in not including dragonboats in the cargo of the boat. He and the other men and women might have tied lines to the seedboat and to themselves and paddled the boat to shore. As it was, they would last only as long as their water lasted.

It was long enough. The boat fetched up against a grassy shore. Naog sent several of the servants ashore and they used a rope to tie the boat to a tree. But it was useless--the current was still too strong, and the boat tore free. They almost lost the servants, stranding them on the shore, forever separated from their families, but they had the presence of mind to swim for the end of the rope. The next day they did better--more lines, all the men on shore, drawing the boat further into a cove that protected it from the current. They lost no time in unloading the precious cargo of seeds, and searching for a source of fresh water. Then they began the unaccustomed task of hauling all the baskets of grain by hand. There were no canals to ease the labor.

"Perhaps we can find a place to dig canals again," said Kormo. "No!" said Zawada vehemently. "We will never build such a place again. Do you want the god to send another flood?" "There will be no other flood," said Naog. "The Heaving Sea has had its victory. But we will also build no canals. We will keep no crocodile, or any other animal as our god. We will never sacrifice

forbidden fruit to any god, because the true god hates those who do that. And we will tell our story to anyone who will listen to it, so that others will learn how to avoid the wrath of the true god, the god of power."

Kemal watched as Naog and his people came to shore not far from Gibeil and set up farming in the El Qa' Valley in the shadows of the mountains of Sinai. The fact of the flood was well known, and many travelers came to see this vast new sea where once there had been dry land. More and more of them also came to the new village that Naog and his people built, and word of his story also spead. Kemal's work was done. He had found Atlantis. He had found Noah, and Gilgamesh. Many of the stories that had collected around those names came from other cultures and other times, but the core was true, and Kemal had found them and brought them back to the knowledge of humankind.

But what did it mean? Naog gave warning, but no one listened. His story remained in people's minds, but what difference did it make? As far as Kemal was concerned, all old-world civilizations after Atlantis were dependent on that first civilization. The IDEA of the city was already with the Egyptians and the Sumerians and the people of the Indus and even the Chinese, because the story of the Derku people, under one name or another, had spread far and wide--the Golden Age. People remembered well that once there was a great land that was blessed by the gods until the sea rose up and swallowed their land. People who lived in different landscapes tried to make sense of the story. To the island-hopping Greeks Atlantis became an island that sank into the sea. To the plains-dwelling Sumerians the flood was caused by rain, not by the sea leaping out of its bed to swallow the earth. Someone wondered how, if all the land was covered, the animals survived, and thus the account of animals two by two was added to the story of Naog. At some point, when people still remembered that the name meant "naked," a story was added about his sons covering his nakedness as he lay in a drunken stupor. All of this was decoration, however. People remembered both the Derku people and the one man who led his family through the flood. But they would have remembered Atlantis with or without Naog, Kemal knew that. What difference did his saga make, to anyone but himself

and his household? As others studied the culture of the Derku, Kemal remained focused on Naog himself. If anything, Naog's life was proof that one person makes no difference at all in history. He saw the flood coming, he warned his people about it when there was plenty of time, he showed them how to save themselves, and yet nothing changed outside his own immediate family group. That was the way history worked. Great forces sweep people along, and now and then somebody floats to the surface and becomes famous but it means nothing, it amounts to nothing.

Yet Kemal could not believe it. Naog may not have accomplished what he THOUGHT his goal was -- to save his people -- but he did accomplish something. He never lived to see the result of it, but because of his survival the Atlantis stories were tinged with something else. It was not just a golden age, not just a time of greatness and wealth and leisure and city life, a land of giants and gods. Naog's version of the story also penetrated the public consciousness and remained. The people were destroyed because the greatest of gods was offended by their sins. The list of sins shifted and changed over time, but certain ideas remained: That it was wrong to live in a city, where people get lifted up in the pride of their hearts and think that they are too powerful for the gods to destroy. That the one who seems to be crazy may in fact be the only one who sees the truth. That the greatest of gods is the one you can't see, the one who has power over the earth and the sea and the sky, all at once. And, above all, this: That it was wrong to sacrifice human beings to the gods.

It took thousands of years, and there were places where Naog's passionate doctrine did not penetrate until modern times, but the root of it was there in the day he came home and found that his father had been fed to the Dragon. Those who thought that it was right to offer human beings to the Dragon were all dead, and the one who had long proclaimed that it was wrong was still alive. The god had preserved him and killed all of them. Wherever the idea of Atlantis spread, some version of this story came with it, and in the end all the great civilizations that were descended from Atlantis learned not to offer the forbidden fruit to the gods.

In the Americas, though, no society grew up that owed a debt to Atlantis, for the same rising of the world ocean that closed the land bridge between Yemen and Djibouti also broke the land bridge between America and the old world. The story of Naog did not touch there, and it seemed to Kemal absolutely clear what the cost of that was. Because they had no memory of Atlantis, it took the people of the Americas thousands of years longer to develop civilization--the city. Egypt was already ancient when the Olmecs first built amid the swampy land of the bay of Campeche. And because they had no story of Naog, warning that the most powerful of gods rejected killing human beings, the old ethos of human sacrifice remained in full force, virtually unquestioned. The carnage of the Mexica--the Aztecs--took it to the extreme, but it was there already, throughout the Caribbean basin, a tradition of human blood being shed to feed the hunger of the gods.

Kemal could hardly say that the bloody warfare of the old world was much of an improvement over this. But it was different, and in his mind, at least, it was different specifically because of Naog. If he had not ridden out the flood to tell his story of the true God who forbade sacrifice, the old world would not have been the same. New civilizations might have risen more guickly, with no stories warning of the danger of city life. And those new civilizations might all have worshiped the same Dragon, or some other, as hungry for human flesh as the gods of the new world were hungry for human blood. On the day that Kemal became sure that his Noah had actually changed the world, he was satisfied. He said little and wrote nothing about his conclusion. This surprised even him, for in all the months and years that he had searched hungrily for Atlantis, and then for Noah, and then for the meaning of Noah's saga, Kemal had assumed that, like Schliemann, he would publish everything, he would tell the world the great truth that he had found. But to his surprise he discovered that he must not have searched so far for the sake of science, or for fame, or for any other motive than simply to know, for himself, that one person's life amounted to something. Naog changed the world, but then so did Zawada, and so did Kormo, and so did the servant who skinned his elbows running down the hill, and so did Naog's father and mother, and ... and in the end, so did they all. The great forces of history were real, after a fashion. But when you examined them closely, those great forces always came down to the dreams and hungers and judgments of individuals. The choices they made were real. They mattered.

Apparently that was all that Kemal had needed to know. The next day he could think of no reason to go to work. He resigned from his position at the head of the Atlantis project. Let others do the detail work. Kemal was well over thirty now, and he had found the answer to his great question, and it was time to get down to the business of living.

## BUT WE TRY NOT TO ACT LIKE IT Orson Scott Card

There was no line. Hiram Cloward commented on it to the pointy-faced man behind the counter. "There's no line."

"This is the complaint department. We pride ourselves on having few complaints." The pointy-faced man had a prim little smile that irritated Hiram. "What's the matter with your television?"

"It shows nothing but soaps, that's what's the matter. And asinine gothics."

"Well-- that's programming, sir, not mechanical at all."

"It's mechanical. I can't turn the damn set off."

"What's your name and social security number?"

"Hiram Cloward. 528-80-693883-7."

"Address?"

"ARF-487-U7b."

"That's singles, sir. Of course you can't turn off your set."

"You mean because I'm not married I can't turn off my television?"

"According to congressionally authorized scientific studies carried out over a three-year period from 1989 to 1991, it is imperative that persons living alone have the constant companionship of their television sets."

"I like solitude. I also like silence."

"But the Congress passed a law, sir, and we can't disobey the law--"

"Can't I talk to somebody intelligent?"

The pointy-faced man flared a moment, his eyes burning. But he instantly regained his composure, and said in measured tones, "As a matter of fact, as soon as any complainant becomes offensive or hostile, we immediately refer them to section A-6."

"What's that, the hit squad?"

"It's behind that door."

And Hiram followed the pointing finger to the glass door at the far end of the waiting room. Inside was an office, which was filled with comfortable, homey knickknacks, several chairs, a desk, and a man so offensively nordic that even Hitler would have resented him. "Hello," the Aryan said, warmly.

"Hi."

"Please, sit down."

Hiram sat, the courtesy and warmth making him feel even more resentful-- did they think they could fool him into believing he was not being grossly imposed upon?

"So you don't like something about your programming?" said the Aryan.

"Your programming, you mean. It sure as hell isn't mine. I don't know why Bell Television thinks it has the right to impose its idea of fun and entertainment on me twenty-four hours a day, but I'm fed up with it. It was bad enough when there was some variety, but for the last two months I've been getting nothing but soaps and gothics."

"It took you two months to notice?"

"I try to ignore the set. I like to read. You can bet that if I had more than my stinking little pension from our loving government, I could pay to have a room where there wasn't a TV so I could have some peace."

"I really can't help your financial situation. And the law's the law."

"Is that all I'm going to hear from you? The law? I could have heard that from the pointy-faced jerk out there."

"Mr. Cloward, looking at your records, I can certainly see that soaps and gothics are not appropriate for you."

"They aren't appropriate," Hiram said, "for anyone with an IQ over eight."

The Aryan nodded. "You feel that people who enjoy soaps and gothics aren't the intellectual equals of people who don't."

"Damn right. I have a Ph.D. in literature, for heaven's sake!"

The Aryan was all sympathy. "Of course you don't like soaps! I'm sure it's a mistake. We try not to make mistakes, but we're only human-- except the computers, of course." It was a joke, but Hiram didn't laugh. The Aryan kept up the small talk as he looked at the computer terminal that he could see and Hiram could not. "We may be the only television company in town, you know, but--"

"But you try not to act like it."

"Yes. Ha. Well, you must have heard our advertising."

"Constantly."

"Well, let's see now. Hiram Cloward, Ph.D. Nebraska 1981. English literature, twentieth century, with a minor in Russian literature. Dissertation on Dostoevski's influence on English-language novelists. A near-perfect class attendance record, and a reputation for arrogance and competence."

"How much do you know about me?"

"Only the standard consumer research data. But we do have a bit of a problem."

Hiram waited, but the Aryan merely punched a button, leaned back, and looked at Hiram. His eyes were kindly and warm and intense. It made Hiram uncomfortable.

"Mr. Cloward."

"Yes?"

"You are unemployed."

"Not willingly."

"Few people are willingly unemployed, Mr. Cloward. But you have no job. You also have no family. You also have no friends."

"That's consumer research? What, only people with friends buy Rice Krispies?"

"As a matter of fact, Rice Krispies are favored by solitary people. We have to know who is more likely to be receptive to advertising and we direct our programming accordingly."

Hiram remembered that he ate Rice Krispies for breakfast almost every morning. He vowed on the spot to switch to something else. Quaker Oats, for instance. Surely they were more gregarious. "You understand the importance of the Selective Programming Broadcast Act of 1985, yes?"

"Yes."

"It was deemed unfair by the Supreme Court for all programming to be geared to the majority. Minorities were being slighted. And so Bell Television was given the assignment of preparing an individually selected broadcast system so that each individual, in his own home, would have the programming perfect for him."

"I know all this."

"I must go over it again anyway, Mr. Cloward, because I'm going to have to help you understand why there can be no change in your programming."

Hiram stiffened in his chair, his hands flexing. "I knew you bastards wouldn't change."

"Mr. Cloward, we bastards would be delighted to change. But we are very closely regulated by the goverrunent to provide the most healthful programming for every American citizen. Now, I will continue my review."

"I'll just go home, if you don't mind."

"Mr. Cloward, we are directed to prepare programming for minorities as small as ten thousand people-- but no smaller. Even for minorities of ten thousand the programming is ridiculously expensive-- a program seen by so few costs far more per watching-minute to produce than one seen by thirty or forty million. However, you belong to a minority even smaller than ten thousand."

"That makes me feel so special."

"Furthermore, the Consumer Protection Broadcast Act of 1989 and the regulations of the Consumer Broadcast Agency since then have given us very strict guidelines. Mr. Cloward, we cannot show you any program with overt acts of violence."

"Why not?"

"Because you have tendencies toward hostility that are only exacerbated by viewing violence. Similarly, we cannot show you any programs with sex."

Cloward's face turned red.

"You have no sex life whatsoever, Mr. Cloward. Do you realize how dangerous that is? You don't even masturbate. The tension and hostility inside you must be tremendous."

Cloward leaped to his feet. There were limits to what a man had to put up with. He headed for the door.

"Mr. Cloward, I'm sorry." The Aryan followed him to the door. "I don't make these things up. Wouldn't you rather know why these decisions are reached?

Hiram stopped at the door, his hand on the knob. The Aryan was right. Better to know why than to hate them for it.

"How," Hiram asked. "How do they know what I do and do not do within the walls of my home?"

"We don't know, of course, but we're pretty sure. We've studied people for years. We know that people who have certain buying patterns and certain living patterns behave in certain ways. And, unfortunately, you have strong destructive tendencies. Repression and denial are your primary means of adaptation to stress-- that and, unfortunately, occasional acting out."

"What the hell does all that mean?"

"It means that you lie to yourself until you can't anymore, and then you attack somebody."

Hiram's face was packed with hot blood, throbbing. I must look like a tomato, he told himself, and deliberately calmed himself. I don't care, he thought. They're wrong anyway. Damn scientific tests.

"Aren't there any movies you could program for me?"

"I am sorry, no."

"Not all movies have sex and violence."

The Aryan smiled soothingly. "The movies that don't wouldn't interest you anyway."

"Then turn the damn thing off and let me read!"

"We can't do that."

"Can't you turn it down?"

"No."

"I am so sick of hearing all about Sarah Wynn and her danm love life!"

"But isn't Sarah Wynn attractive?" asked the Aryan.

That stopped Hiram cold. He dreamed about Sarah Wynn at night. He said nothing. He had no attraction to Sarah Wynn.

"Isn't she?" the Aryan insisted.

"Isn't who what?"

"Sarah Wynn."

"Who was talking about Sarah Wynn? What about documentaries?"

"Mr. Cloward, you would become extremely hostile if the news programs were broadcast to you. You know that."

"Walter Cronkite's dead. Maybe I'd like them better now."

"You don't care about the news of the real world, Mr. Cloward, do you?"

"No."

"Then you see where we are. Not one iota of our programming is really appropriate for you. But ninety percent of it is downright harmful to you. And we can't turn the television off, because of the Solitude Act. Do you see our dilemma?"

"Do you see mine?"

"Of course, Mr. Cloward. And I sympathize completely. Make some friends, Mr. Cloward, and we'll turn off your television."

And so the interview was over.

For two days Cloward brooded. All the time he did, Sarah Wynn was grieving over her three-days' husband who had just been killed in a car wreck on Wilshire Boulevard, wherever the hell that was. But now the body was scarcely cold and already her old suitors were back, trying to help her, trying to push their love on her. "Can't you let yourself depend on me, just a little?" asked Teddy, the handsome one with lots of money.

"I don't like depending on people," Sarah answered.

"You depended on George." George was the husband's name. The dead one.

"I know," she said, and cried for a moment. Sarah Wynn was good at crying. Hiram Cloward turned another page in The Brothers Karamazov.

"You need friends," Teddy insisted.

"Oh, Teddy, I know it," she said, weeping. "Will you be my friend?"

"Who writes this stuff?" Hiram Cloward asked aloud. Maybe the Aryan in the television company offices had been right. Make some friends. Get the damn set turned off whatever the cost.

He got up from his chair and went out into the corridor in the apartment building. Clearly posted on the walls were several announcements:

Chess club 5-9 wed

Encounter groups nightly at 7

Learn to knit 6:30 bring yarn and needles

Games games games in game room (basement)

Just want to chat? Friends of the Family 7:30 to 10:30 nightly

Friends of the Family? Hiram snorted. Family was his maudlin mother and her constant weeping about how hard life was and how no one in her right mind would ever be born a woman if anybody had any choice but there was no choice and marriage was a trap men sprung on women, giving them a few minutes of pleasure for a lifetime of drudgery, and I swear to God if it wasn't for my little baby Hiram I'd ditch that bastard for good, it's for your sake I don't leave, my little baby, because if I leave you'll grow up into a macho bastard like your beerbelly father.

And friends? What friends ever come around when good old Dad is boozing and belting the living crap out of everybody he can get his hands on?

I read. That's what I do. The Prince and the Pauper. Connecticut Yankee. Pride and Prejudice. Worlds within worlds within worlds, all so pretty and polite and funny as hell.

Friends of the Family. Worth a shot, anyway.

Hiram went to the elevator and descended eighteen floors to the Fun Floor. Friends of the Family were in quite a large room with alcohol at one end and soda pop at the other. Hiram was surprised to discover that the term soda pop had been revived. He walked to the cola sign and asked the woman for a Coke.

"How many cups of coffee have you had today?" she asked.

"Three."

"Then I'm so sorry, but I can't give you a soda pop with caffeine in it. May I suggest Sprite?"

"You may not," Hiram said, clenching his teeth. "We're too damn overprotected."

"Exactly how I feel," said a woman standing beside him, Sprite in hand. "They protect and protect and protect, and what good does it do? People still die, you know."

"I suspected as much," Hiram said, struggling for a smile, wondering if his humor sounded funny or merely sarcastic. Apparently funny. The woman laughed.

"Oh, you're a gem, you are," she said. "What do you do?"

"I'm a detached professor of literature at Princeton."

"But how can you live here and work there?"

He shrugged. "I don't work there. I said detached. When the new television teaching came in, my PQ was too low. I'm not a screen personality."

"So few of us are," she said sagely, nodding and smiling. "Oh, how I long for the good old days. When ugly men like David Brinkley could deliver the news."

"You remember Brinkley?"

"Actually, no," she said, laughing. "I just remember my mother talking about him." Hiram looked at her appreciatively. Nose not very straight, of course-- but that seemed to be the only thing keeping her off TV. Nice voice. Nice nice face. Body.

She put her hand on his thigh.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asked.

"Watching television," he grimaced.

"Really? What do you have?"

"Sarah Wynn."

She squealed in delight. "Oh, how wonderful! We must be kindred spirits then! I have Sarah Wynn, too!"

Hiram tried to smile.

"Can I come up to your apartment?"

Danger signal. Hand moving up thigh. Invitation to apartment. Sex.

"No."

"Why not?"

And Hiram remembered that the only way he could ever get rid of the television was to prove that he wasn't solitary. And fixing up his sex life-- i.e., having one--would go a long way toward changing their damn profiles. "Come, on," he said, and they left the Friends of the Family without further ado.

Inside the apartment she immediately took off her shoes and blouse and sat down on the old-fashioned sofa in front of the TV. "Oh," she said, "so many books. You really are a profes6or, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he said, vaguely sensing that the next move was up to him, and not having the faintest idea of what the next move was. He thought back to is only fumbling attempt at sex when he was (what?) thirteen? (no) fourteen and the girl was fifteen and was doing it on a lark. She had walked with him up the creekbed (back when there were creeks and open country) and suddenly she had stopped and unzipped his pants (back when there were zippers) but he was finished before she had hardly started and gave upinm disgust and took his pants and ran away. Her name was Diana. He went home without his pants and had no rational explanation and his mother had treated him with loathing and brought it up again and again for years afterward, how a man is a man no matter how you treat him and he'll still get it when he can, who cares about the poor girl. But Hiram was used to that kind of talk. It rolled off him. What haunted him was the uncontrolled shivering of his body, the ecstacy of it, and then the look of disgust on the girl's face. He had thought it was because-- well, never mind. Never mind, he thought. I don't think of this anymore.

"Come on," said the woman.

"What's your name?" Hiram asked.

She looked at the ceiling. "Agnes, for heaven's sake, come on."

He decided that taking off his shirt might be a good idea. She watched, then decided to help.

"No," he said.

"What?"

"Don't touch me."

"Oh for pete's sake. What's wrong? Impotent?"

Not at all. Not at all. Just uninterested. Is that all right?

"Look, I don't want to play around with a psycho case, all right? I've got better things to do. I make a hundred a whack, that's what I charge, that's standard, right?"

Standard what? Hiram nodded because he didn't dare ask what she was talking about.

"But you obviously, heaven knows how, buddy, you sure as hell obviously don't know what's going on in the world. Twenty bucks. Enough for the ten minutes you've screwed up for me. Right?"

"I don't have twenty," Hiram said.

Her eyes got tight. "A fairy and a deadbeat. What a pick. Look, buddy, next time you try a pickup, figure out what you want to do with her first, right?"

She picked up her shoes and blouse and left. Hiram stood there.

"Teddy, no," said Sarah Wynn.

"But I need you. I need you so desperately," said Teddy on the screen.

"It's only been a few days. How can I sleep with another man only a few days after George was killed? Only four days ago we-- oh, no, Teddy. Please."

"Then when? How soon? I love you so much."

Drivel, George thought in his analytical mind. But nevertheless obviously based on the Penelope story. No doubt her George, her Odysseus, would return, miraculously alive, ready to sweep her back into wedded bliss. But in the meantime, the suitors: enough suitors to sell fifteen thousand cars and a hundred thousand boxes of Tampax and four hundred thousand packages of Cap'n Crunch.

The nonanalytical part of his mind, however, was not the least bit concerned with Penelope. For some reason he was clasping and unclasping his hands in front of him. For some reason he was shaking. For some reason he fell to his knees at the couch, his hands clasping and unclasping around Crime and Punishment, as his eyes strained to cry but could not.

Sarah Wynn wept.

But she can cry easily, Hiram thought. It's not fair, that she should cry so easily. Spin flax, Penelope.

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The alarm went off, but Hiram was already awake. In front of him the television was singing about Dove with lanolin. The products haven't changed, Hiram. thought. Never change. They were advertising Dove with lanolin in the little market carts around the base of the cross while Jesus bled to death, no doubt. For softer skin.

He got up, got dressed, tried to read, couldn't, tried to remember what had happened last night to leave him so upset and nervous, but couldn't, and at last he decided to go back to the Aryan at the Bell Television offices.

"Mr. Cloward," said the Aryan.

"You're a psychiatrist, aren't you?" Hiram asked.

"Why, Mr. Cloward, I'm an A-6 complaint representative from Bell Television. What can I do for you?

"I can't stand Sarah Wynn anymore," Hiram said.

"That's a shame. Things are finally going to work out for her starting in about two weeks."

And in spite of himself, Hiram wanted to ask what was going to happen. It isn't fair for this nordic uberman to know what sweet little Sarah is going to be doing weeks before I do. But he fought down the feeling, ashamed that he was getting caught up in the damn soap.

"Help me," Hiram said.

"How can I help you?"

"You can change my life. You can get the television out of my apartment."

"Why, Mr. Cloward?" the Aryan asked. "It's the one thing in life that's absolutely free. Except that you get to watch commercials. And you know as well as I do that the commercials are downright entertaining. Why, there are people who actually choose to have double the commercials in their personal progranuning. We get a thousand requests a day for the latest McDonald's ad. You have no idea."

"I have a very good idea. I want to read. I want to be alone."

"On the contrary, Mr. Cloward, you long not to be alone. You desperately need a friend."

Anger. "And what makes you so damn sure of that?"

"Because, Mr. Cloward, your response is completely typical of your group. It's a group we're very concerned about. We don't have a budget to program for you-there are only about two thousand of you in the country-- but a budget wouldn't do us much good because we really don't know what kind of programming you want."

"I am not part of any group."

"Oh, you're so much a part of it that you could be called typical. Dominant mother, absent and/or hostile father, no long-term relationships with anybody. No sex life."

"I have a sex life."

"If you have in fact attempted any sexual activity it was undoubtedly with a prostitute and she expected too high a level of sophistication from you. You are easily ashamed, you couldn't cope, and so you have not had intercourse. Correct?"

"What are you! What are you trying to do to me!"

"I am a psychoanalyst, of course. Anybody whose complaints can't be handled by our bureaucratic authority figure out in front obviously needs help, not another bureaucrat. I want to help you. I'm your friend." And suddenly the anger was replaced by the utter incongruity of this nordic masterman wanting to help little Hiram Cloward. The unemployed professor laughed.

"Humor! Very healthy!" said the Aryan.

"What is this? I thought shrinks were supposed to be subtle."

"With some people-- notably paranoids, which you are not, and schizoids, which you are not either."

"And what am I?"

"I told you. Denial and repression strategies. Very unhealthy. Acting out-- less healthy yet. But you're extremely intelligent, able to do many things. I personally think it's a damn shame you can't teach."

"I'm an excellent teacher."

"Tests with randomly selected students showed that you had an extremely heavy emphasis on esoterica. Only people like you would really enjoy a class from a person like you. There aren't many people like you. You don't fit into many of the normal categories."

"And so I'm being persecuted."

"Don't try to pretend to be paranoid." The Aryan smiled. Hiram smiled back. This is insane. Lewis Carroll, where are you now that we really need you?

"If you're a shrink, then I should talk freely to you."

"If you like."

"I don't like."

"And why not?"

"Because you're so godutterlydamn Aryan, that's why."

The Aryan leaned forward with interest. "Does that bother you?"

"It makes me want to throw up."

"And why is that?"

The look of interest was too keen, too delightful. Hiram couldn't resist. "You don't know about my experiences in the war, then, is that it?"

"What war? There hasn't been a war recently enough--"

"I was very, very young. It was in Germany. My parents aren't really my parents, you know. They were in Germany with the American embassy. In Berlin in 1938, before the war broke out. My real parents were there, too-- German Jews, or half Jews, anyway. My real father-- but let that pass, you don't need my whole genealogy. Let's just say that when I was only eleven days old, totally unregistered, my real Jewish father took me to his friend, Mr. Cloward in the American embassy, whose wife had just had a miscarriage. 'Take my child,' he said.

"Why?' Cloward asked.

" 'Because my wife and I have a perfect, utterly foolproof plan to kill Hitler. But there is no way for us to survive it.' And so Cloward, my adopted father, took me in.

"And then, the next day, he read in the papers about how my real parents had been killed in an accident in the street. He investigated-- and discovered that just by chance, while my parents were on their way to carry out their foolproof plan, some brown shirts in the street had seen them. Someone pointed them out as Jews. They were bored-- so they attacked them. Had no idea they were saving Hitler's life, of course. These nordic mastermen started beating my mother, forcing my father to watch as they stripped her and raped her and then disemboweled her. My father was then subjected to experimental use of the latest model testicle-crusher until he bit off his own tongue in agony and bled to death. I don't like nordic types." Hiram sat back, his eyes full of tears and emotion, and realized that he had actually been able to cry-- not much, but it was hopeful.

"Mr. Cloward," said the Aryan, "you were born in Missouri in 1951. Your parents of record are your natural parents."

Hiram smiled. "But it was one hell of a Freudian fantasy, wasn't it? My mother raped, my father emasculated to death, myself divorced from my true heritage, etc., etc."

The Aryan smiled. "You should be a writer, Mr. Cloward."

"I'd rather read. Please, let me read."

"I can't stop you from reading."

"Turn off Sarah Wynn. Turn off the mansions from which young girls flee from the menace of a man who turns out to be friendly and loving. Turn off the commercials for cars and condoms."

"And leave you alone to wallow in cataleptic fantasies among your depressing Russian novels?"

Hiram shook his head. Am I begging? he wondered. Yes, he decided. "I'm begging. My Russian novels aren't depressing. They're exalting, uplifting, overwhelming."

"It's part of your sickness, Mr. Cloward, that you long to be overwhelmed."

"Every time I read Dostoevski, I feel fulfilled."

"You have read everything by Dostoevski twenty times over. And everything by Tolstoy a dozen times."

"Every time I read Dostoevski is the first time!"

"We can't leave you alone."

"I'll kill myself!" Hiram shouted. "I can't live like this much longer!"

"Then make friends," the Aryan said simply. Hiram gasped and panted, gathering his rage back under control. This is not happening. I am not angry. Put it away, put it back, get control, smile. Smile at the Aryan.

"You're my friend, right?" Hiram asked.

"If you'll let me," the Aryan answered.

"I'll let you," Hiram said. Then he got up and left the office.

On the way home he passed a church. He had often seen the church before. He had little interest in religion-- it had been too thoroughly dissected for him in the novels. What Twain had left alive, Dostoevski had withered and Pasternak had killed. But his mother was a passionate Presbyterian. He went into the church.

At the front of the building was a huge television screen. On it a very charismatic young man was speaking. The tones were subdued-- only those in the front could hear it. Those in the back seemed to be meditating. Cloward knelt at a bench to meditate, too.

But he couldn't take his eyes off the screen. The young man stepped aside, and an older man took his place, intoning something about Christ. Hiram could hear the word Christ, but no others.

The walls were decorated with crosses. Row on row of crosses. This was a Protestant church-- none of the crosses contained a figure of Jesus bleeding. But Hiram's imagination supplied him nonetheless. Jesus, his hands and wrists nailed to the cross, his feet pegged to the cross, his throat at the intersection of the beams.

Why the cross, after all? The intersection of two utterly opposite lines, perpendicular that can only touch at one point. The epitome of the life of a man, passing through eternity without a backward glance at those encountered along the way, each in his own, endlessly divergent direction. The cross. But not at all the symbol of today, Hiram decided. Today we are in spheres. Today we are curves, not lines, bending back on ourselves, touching everybody again and again, wrapped up inside little balls, none of us daring to be on the outside. Pull me in, we cry, pull me and keep me safe, don't let me fall out, don't let me fall off the edge of the world.

But the world has an edge now, and we can all see it, Hiram decided. We know where it is, and we can't bear to let anyone find his own way of staying on top.

Or do I want to stay on top?

The age of crosses is over. Now the age of spheres. Balls.

"We are your friends," said the old man on the screen. "We can help you."

There is a grandeur, Hiram answered silently, about muddling through alone.

"Why be alone when Jesus can take your burden?" said the man on the screen.

If I were alone, Hiram answered, there would be no burden to bear.

"Pick up your cross, fight the good fight," said the man on the screen.

If only, Hiram answered, I could find my cross to pick it up.

Then Hiram realized that he still could not hear the voice from the television. Instead he had been supplying his own sermon, out loud. Three people near him in the back of the church were watching him. He smiled sheepishly, ducked his head in apology, and left. He walked home whistling.

Sarah Wynn's voice greeted him. "Teddy. Teddy! What have we done? Look what we've done."

"It was beautiful," Teddy said. "I'm glad of it."

"Oh, Teddy! How can I ever forgive myself?" And Sarah wept.

Hiram stood transfixed, watching the screen. Penelope had given in. Penelope had left her flax and fornicated with a suitor! This is wrong, he thought.

"This is wrong," he said.

"I love you, Sarah," Teddy said.

"I can't bear it, Teddy," she answered. "I feel that in my heart I have murdered George! I have betrayed him!"

Penelope, is there no virtue in the world? Is there no Artemis, hunting? Just Aphrodite, bedding down every hour on the hour with every man, god, or sheep that promised forever and delivered a moment. The bargains are never fulfilled, never, Hiram thought.

At that moment on the screen, George walked in. "My dear," he exclaimed. "My dear Sarah! I've been wandering with amnesia for days! It was a hitchhiker who was burned to death in my car! I'm home!"

And Hiram screamed and screamed and screamed.

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The Aryan found out about it quickly, at the same time that he got an alarming report from the research teams analyzing the soaps. He shook his head, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Poor Mr. Cloward. Ah, what agony we do in the name of protecting people, the Aryan thought.

"I'm sorry," he said to Hiram. But Hiram paid him no attention. He just sat on the floor, watching the television set. As soon as the report had come in, of course, all the soaps-- especially Sarah Wynn's-- had gone off the air. Now the game shows were on, a temporary replacement until errors could be corrected.

"I'm so sorry," the Aryan said, but Hiram tried to shrug him away. A black woman had just traded the box for the money in the envelope. It was what Hiram would have done, and it paid off. Five thousand dollars instead of a donkey pulling a cart with a monkey in it. She had just avoided being zonked.

"Mr. Cloward, I thought the problem was with you. But it wasn't at all. I mean, you were marginal, all right. But we didn't realize what Sarah Wynn was doing to people."

Sarah schmarah, Hiram said silently, watching the screen. The black woman was bounding up and down in delight.

"It was entirely our fault. There are thousands of marginals just like you who were seriously damaged by Sarah Wynn. We had no idea how powerful the identification was. We had no idea."

Of course not, thought Hiram. You didn't read enough. You didn't know what the myths do to people. But now was the Big Deal of the Day, and Hiram shook his head to make the Aryan go away.

"Of course the Consumer Protection Agency will pay you a lifetime compensation. Three times your present salary and whatever treatment is possible."

At last Hiram's patience ended. "Go away!" he said. "I have to see if the black woman there is going to get the car!"

"I just can't decide," the black woman said.

"Door number three! " Hiram shouted. "Please, God, door number three!"

The Aryan watched Hiram silently.

"Door number two!" the black woman finally decided. Hiram groaned. The announcer smiled.

"Well," said the announcer. "is the car behind door number two? Let's just see!"

The curtain opened, and behind it was a man in a hillbilly costume strumming a beat-up looking banjo. The audience moaned. The man with the banjo sang "Home on the Range." The black woman sighed.

They opened the curtains, and there was the car behind door number three. "I knew it," Hiram said, bitterly. "They never listen to me. Door number three, I say, and they never do it."

"I told you, didn't I?" Hiram asked, weeping.

"Yes," the Aryan said.

"I knew it. I knew it all along. I was right." Hiram sobbed into his hands.

"Yeah," the Aryan answered, and then he left to sign all the necessary papers for the commitment. Now Cloward fit into a category. No one can exist outside one for long, the Aryan realized. We are creating a new man. Homo categoricus. The classified man.

But the papers didn't have to be signed after all. Instead Hiram went into the bathroom, filled the tub, and joined the largest category of all.

"Damn," the Aryan said, when he heard about it.

## CLAP HANDS AND SING Orson Scott Card

On the screen the crippled man screamed at the lady, insisting that she must not run away. He waved a certificate. "I'm a registered rapist, damnit!" he cried. "Don't run so fast! You have to make allowances for the handicapped!" He ran after her with an odd, left-heavy lope. His enormous prosthetic phallus swung crazily, like a clumsy propeller that couldn't quite get started. The audience laughed madly. Must be a funny, funny scene!

Old Charlie sat slumped in his chair, feeling as casual and permanent as glacial debris. I am here only by accident, but I'll never move. He did not switch off the television set. The audience roared again with laughter. Canned or live? After more than eight decades of watching television, Charlie couldn't tell anymore. Not that the canned laughter had got any more real: It was the real laughter that had gone tinny, premeditated. As if the laughs were timed to come now, no matter what, and the poor actors could strain to get off their gags in time, but always they were just this much early, that much late.

"It's late," the television said, and Charlie started awake, vaguely surprised to see that the program had changed: Now it was a demonstration of a convenient electric breast pump to store up natural mother's milk for those times when you just can't be with baby. "It's late."

"Hello, Jock," Charlie said.

"Don't sleep in front of the television again, Charlie."

"Leave me alone, swine," Charlie said. And then: "Okay, turn it off."

He hadn't finished giving the order when the television flickered and went white, then settled down into its perpetual springtime scene that meant off. But in the flicker Charlie thought he saw-- who? Name? From the distant past. A girl. Before the name came to him, there came another memory: a small hand resting lightly on his knee as they sat together, as light as a long-legged fly upon a stream. in his memory he did not turn to look at her; he was talking to others. But he knew just where she would be if he turned to look. Small, with mousy hair, and yet a face that was always the child Juliet. But that was not her name. Not Juliet, though she was Juliet's age in that memory. I am Charlie, he thought. She is--Rachel.

Rachel Carpenter. In the flicker on the screen hers was the face the random light had brought him, and so he remembered Rachel as he pulled his ancient

body from the chair; thought of Rachel as he peeled the clothing from his frail skeleton, delicately, lest some rough motion strip away the wrinkled skin like cellophane.

And Jock, who of course did not switch himself off with the television, recited:

"An aged man is a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick."

"Shut up," Charlie ordered.

"Unless Soul clap its hands."

"I said shut up!"

"And sing, and louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress."

"Are you finished?" Charlie asked. He knew Jock was finished. After all, Charlie had programmed him to recite it, to recite just that fragment every night when his shorts hit the floor.

He stood naked in the middle of the room and thought of Rachel, whom he had not thought of in years. It was a trick of being old, that the room he was in now so easily vanished, and in its place a memory could take hold. I've made my fortune from time machines, he thought, and now I discover that every aged person is his own time machine. For now he stood naked. No, that was a trick of memory; memory had these damnable tricks. He was not naked. He only felt naked, as Rachel sat in the car beside him. Her voice -- he had almost forgotten her voice -was soft. Even when she shouted, it got more whispery, so that if she shouted, it would have all the wind of the world in it and he wouldn't hear it at all, would only feel it cold on his naked skin. That was the voice she was using now, saying ves. I loved you when I was twelve, and when I was thirteen, and when I was fourteen, but when you got back from playing God in Sao Paulo, you didn't call me. All those letters, and then for three months you didn't call me and I knew that you thought I was just a child and I fell in love with -- Name? Name gone. Fell in love with a boy, and ever since then you've been treating me like... Like. No, she'd never say shit, not in that voice. And take some of the anger out, that's right. Here are the words... here they come: You could have had me, Charlie, but now all you can do is try to make me miserable. It's too late, the time's gone by, the time's over, so stop criticizing me. Leave me alone.

First to last, all in a capsule. The words are nothing, Charlie realized. A dozen women, not least his dear departed wife, had said exactly the same words to him since, and it had sounded just as maudlin, just as unpleasantly uninteresting every time. The difference was that when the others said it, Charlie felt himself insulated with a thousand layers of unconcern. But when Rachel said it to his

memory, he stood naked in the middle of his room, a cold wind drying the parchment of his ancient skin.

"What's wrong?" asked Jock.

Oh, yes, dear computer, a change in the routine of the habitbound old man, and you suspect what, a heart attack? Incipient death? Extreme disorientation?

"A name," Charlie said. "Rachel Carpenter."

"Living or dead?"

Charlie winced again, as he winced every time Jock asked that question; yet it was an important one, and far too often the answer these days was Dead. "I don't know."

"Living and dead, I have two thousand four hundred eighty in the company archives alone."

"She was twelve when I was-- twenty. Yes, twenty. And she lived then in Provo, Utah. Her father was a pianist. Maybe she became an actress when she grew up. She wanted to."

"Rachel Carpenter. Born 1959. Provo, Utah. Attended --- "

"Don't show off, Jock. Was she ever married?"

"Thrice."

"And don't imitate my mannerisms. Is she still alive?"

"Died ten years ago."

Of course. Dead, of course. He tried to imagine her-- where? "Where did she die?"

"Not pleasant."

"Tell me anyway. I'm feeling suicidal tonight."

"In a home for the mentally incapable."

It was not shocking; people often outlived their minds these days. But sad. For she had always been bright. Strange, perhaps, but her thoughts always led to something worth the sometimes-convoluted path. He smiled even before he remembered what he was smiling at. Yes. Seeing through your knees. She had been playing Helen Keller in The Miracle Worker, and she told him how she had finally come to understand blindness. "It isn't seeing the red insides of your eyelids, I knew that. I knew it isn't even seeing black. It's like trying to see where you never had eyes at all. Seeing through your knees. No matter how hard you try, there just isn't any vision there." And she had liked him because he hadn't laughed. "I told my brother, and he laughed," she said. But Charlie had not laughed.

Charlie's affection for her had begun then, with a twelve-year-old girl who could never stay on the normal, intelligible track, but rather had to stumble her own way through a confusing underbrush that was thick and bright with flowers. "I think God stopped paying attention long ago." she said. "Any more than Michelangelo would want to watch them whitewash the Sistine Chapel."

And he knew that he would do it even before he knew what it was that he would do. She had ended in an institution, and he, with the best medical care that money could buy, stood naked in his room and remembered when passion still lurked behind the lattices of chastity and was more likely to lead to poems than to coitus.

You overtold story, he said to the wizened man who despised him from the mirror. You are only tempted because you're bored. Making excuses because you're cruel. Lustful because your dim old dong is long past the exercise.

And he heard the old bastard answer silently, You will do it, because you can. Of all the people in the world, you can.

And he thought he saw Rachel look back at him, bright with finding herself beautiful at fourteen, laughing at the vast joke of knowing she was admired by the very man whom she, too, wanted. Laugh all you like, Charlie said to his vision of her. I was too kind to you then. I'm afraid I'll undo my youthful goodness now.

"I'm going back," he said aloud. "Find me a day."

"For what purpose?" Jock asked.

"My business."

"I have to know your purpose, or how can I find you a day?"

And so he had to name it. "I'm going to have her if I can."

Suddenly a small alarm sounded, and Jock's voice was replaced by another. "Warning. Illegal use of THIEF for possible present-altering manipulation of the past." Charlie smiled. "Investigation has found that the alteration is acceptable. Clear." And the program release: "Byzantium."

"You're a son of a bitch," said Jock.

"Find me a day. A day when the damage will be least-- when I can..."

"Twenty-eight October 1973."

That was after he got home from Sao Paulo, the contracts signed, already a capitalist before he was twenty-three. That was during the time when he had been afraid to call her, because she was only fourteen, for God's sake.

"What will it do to her, Jock?"

"How should I know?" Jock answered. "And what difference would it make to you?"

He looked in the mirror again. "A difference."

I won't do it, he told himself as he went to the THIEF that was his most ostentatious sign of wealth, a private THIEF in his own rooms. I won't do it, he decided again as he set the machine to wake him in twelve hours, whether he wished to return or not. Then he climbed into the couch and pulled the shroud over his head, despairing that even this, even doing it to her, was not beneath him. There was a time when he had automatically held back from doing a thing because he knew that it was wrong. Oh, for that time! he thought, but knew as he thought it that he was lying to himself. He had long since given up on right and wrong and settled for the much simpler standards of effective and ineffective, beneficial and detrimental.

He had gone in a THIEF before, had taken some of the standard trips into the past. Gone into the mind of an audience member at the first performance of Handel's Messiah and listened. The poor soul whose ears he used wouldn't remember a bit of it afterward. So the future would not be changed. That was safe, to sit in a hall and listen. He had been in the mind of a farmer resting under a tree on a country lane as Wordsworth walked by and had hailed the poet and asked his name, and Wordsworth had smiled and been distant and cold, delighting in the countryside more than in those whose tillage made it beautiful. But those were legal trips. Charlie had done nothing that could alter the course of history.

This time, though. This time he would change Rachel's life. Not his own, of course. That would be impossible. But Rachel would not be blacked from remembering what happened. She would remember, and it would turn her from the path she was meant to take. Perhaps only a little. Perhaps not importantly.

Perhaps just enough for her to dislike him a little sooner, or a little more. But too much to be legal, if he were caught.

He would not be caught. Not Charlie. Not the man who owned THIEF and therefore could have owned the world. It was all too bound up in secrecy. Too many agents had used his machines to attend the enemy's most private conferences. Too often the Attorney General had listened to the most perfect of wiretaps. Too often politicians who were willing to be in Charlie's debt had been given permission to lead their opponents into blunders that cost them votes. All far beyond what the law allowed; who would dare complain now if Charlie also bent the law to his own purpose?

No one but Charlie. I can't do this to Rachel, he thought. And then the THIEF carried him back and put him in his own mind, in his own body, on 28 October 1973, at ten o'clock, just as he was going to bed, weary because he had been wakened that morning by a six A.M. call from Brazil.

As always, there was the moment of resistance, and then peace as his self of that time slipped into unconsciousness. Old Charlie took over and saw, not the past, but the now.

A moment before, he was standing before a mirror, looking at his withered, hanging face; now he realizes that this gazing into a mirror before going to bed is a lifelong habit. I am Narcissus, he tells himself, an unbeautiful idolator at my own shrine. But now he is not unbeautiful. At twenty-two, his body still has the depth of young skin. His belly is soft, for he is not athletic, but still there is a litheness to him that he will never have again. And now the vaguely remembered needs that had impelled him to this find a physical basis; what had been a dim memory has him on fire.

He will not be sleeping tonight, not soon. He dresses again, finding with surprise the quaint print shirts that once had been in style. The wide-cuffed pants. The shoes with inch-and-a-half heels. Good God, I wore that! he thinks, and then wears it. No questions from his family; he goes quietly downstairs and out to his car. The garage reeks of gasoline. It is a smell as nostalgic as lilacs and candlewax.

He still knows the way to Rachel's house, though he is surprised at the buildings that have not yet been built, which roads have not yet been paved, which intersections still don't have the lights he knows they'll have soon, should surely have already. He looks at his wristwatch; it must be a habit of the body he is in, for he hasn't worn a wristwatch in decades. The arm is tanned from Brazilian beaches, and it has no age spots, no purple veins drawing roadmaps under the skin. The time is ten-thirty. She'll doubtless be in bed.

He almost stops himself. Few things are left in his private catalog of sin, but surely this is one. He looks into himself and tries to find the will to resist his own desire solely because its fulfillment will hurt another person. He is out of practice-- so far out of practice that he keeps losing track of the reason for resisting.

The lights are on, and her mother-- Mrs. Carpenter, dowdy and delightful, scatterbrained in the most attractive way-- her mother opens the door suspiciously until she recognizes him. "Charlie," she cries out.

"Is Rachel still up?"

"Give me a minute and she will be!"

And he waits, his stomach trembling with anticipation. I am not a virgin, he reminds himself, but this body does not know that. This body is alert, for it has not yet formed the habits of meaningless passion that Charlie knows far too well. At last she comes down the stairs. He hears her running on the hollow wooden steps, then stopping, coming slowly, denying the hurry. She turns the corner, looks at him.

She is in her bathrobe, a faded thing that he does not remember ever having seen her wear. Her hair is tousled, and her eyes show that she had been asleep.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"I wasn't really asleep. The first ten minutes don't count anyway."

He smiles. Tears come to his eyes. Yes, he says silently. This is Rachel, yes. The narrow face; the skin so translucent that he can see into it like jade; the slender arms that gesture shyly, with accidental grace.

"I couldn't wait to see you."

"You've been home three days. I thought you'd phone."

He smiles. In fact he will not phone her for months. But he says, "I hate the telephone. I want to talk to you. Can you come out for a drive?"

"I have to ask my mother."

"She'll say yes."

She does say yes. She jokes and says that she trusts Charlie. And the Charlie she knows was trustworthy. But not me, Charlie thinks. You are putting your diamonds into the hands of a thief.

"Is it cold?" Rachel asks.

"Not in the car." And so she doesn't take a coat. It's all right. The night breeze isn't bad.

As soon as the door closes behind them, Charlie begins. He puts his arm around her waist. She does not pull away or take it with indifference. He has never done this before, because she's only fourteen, just a child, but she leans against him as they walk, as if she had done this a hundred times before. As always, she takes him by surprise.

"I've missed you," he says.

She smiles, and there are tears in her eyes. "I've missed you, too," she says.

They talk of nothing. It's just as well. Charlie does not remember much about the trip to Brazil, does not remember anything of what he's done in the three days since getting back. No problem, for she seems to want to talk only of tonight. They drive to the Castle, and he tells her its history. He feels an irony about it as he explains. She, after all, is the reason he knows the history. A few years from now she will be part of a theater company that revives the Castle as a public amphitheater. But now it is falling into ruin, a monument to the old WPA, a great castle with turrets and benches made of native stone. It is on the property of the state mental hospital, and so hardly anyone knows it's there. They are alone as they leave the car and walk up the crumbling steps to the flagstone stage.

She is entranced. She stands in the middle of the stage, facing the benches. He watches as she raises her hand, speech waiting at the verge of her lips. He remembers something. Yes, that is the gesture she made when she bade her nurse farewell in Romeo and Juliet. No, not made. Will make, rather. The gesture must already be in her, waiting for this stage to draw it out.

She turns to him and smiles because the place is strange and odd and does not belong in Provo, but it does belong to her. She should have been born in the Renaissance, Charlie says softly. She hears him. He must have. spoken aloud. "You belong in an age when music was clean and soft and there was no makeup. No one would rival you then."

She only smiles at the conceit. "I missed you," she says.

He touches her cheek. She does not shy away. Her cheek presses into his hand, and he knows that she understands why he brought her here and what he means to do.

Her breasts are perfect but small, her buttocks are boyish and slender, and the only hair on her body is that which tumbles onto her shoulders, that which he

must brush out of her face to kiss her again. "I love you," she whispers. "All my life I love you."

And it is exactly as he would have had it in a dream, except that the flesh is tangible, the ecstasy is real, and the breeze turns colder as she shyly dresses again. They say nothing more as he takes her home. Her mother has fallen asleep on the living room couch, a jumble of the Daily Herald piled around her feet. Only then does he remember that for her there will be a tomorrow, and on that tomorrow Charlie will not call. For three months Charlie will not call, and she'll hate him.

He tries to soften it. He tries by saying, "Some things can happen only once." It is the sort of thing he might then have said. But she only puts her finger on his lips and says, "I'll never forget." Then she turns and walks toward her mother, to waken her. She turns and motions for Charlie to leave, then smiles again and waves. He waves back and goes out of the door and drives home. He lies awake in this bed that feels like childhood to him, and he wishes it could have gone on forever like this. It should have gone on like this, he thinks. She is no child. She was no child, he should have thought, for THIEF was already transporting him home.

"What's wrong, Charlie?" Jock asked.

Charlie awoke. it had been hours since THIEF brought him back. It was the middle of the night, and Charlie realized that he had been crying in his sleep. "Nothing," he said.

"You're crying, Charlie. I've never seen you cry before. "

"Go plug into a million volts, Jock. I had a dream."

"What dream?"

"I destroyed her."

"No, you didn't."

"It was a goddamned selfish thing to do."

"You'd do it again. But it didn't hurt her."

"She was only fourteen."

"No, she wasn't."

"I'm tired. I was asleep. Leave me alone."

"Charlie, remorse isn't your style."

Charlie pulled the blanket over his head, feeling petulant and wondering whether this childish act was another proof that he was retreating into senility after all.

"Charlie, let me tell you a bedtime story."

"I'll erase you."

"Once upon a time, ten years ago, an old woman named Rachel Carpenter petitioned for a day in her past. And it was a day with someone, and it was a day with you. So the routine circuits called me, as they always do when your name comes up, and I found her a day. She only wanted to visit, you see, only wanted to relive a good day. I was surprised, Charlie. I didn't know you ever had good days."

This program had been with lock too long. It knew too well how to get under his skin.

"And in fact there were no days as good as she thought," Jock continued. "Only anticipation and disappointment. That's all you ever gave anybody, Charlie. Anticipation and disappointment."

"I can count on you."

"This woman was in a home for the mentally incapable. And so I gave her a day. Only instead of a day of disappointment, or promises she knew would never be fulfilled, I gave her a day of answers. I gave her a night of answers, Charlie."

"You couldn't know that I'd have you do this. You couldn't have known it ten years ago."

"That's all right, Charlie. Play along with me. You're dreaming anyway, aren't you?"

"And don't wake me up."

"So an old woman went back into a young girl's body on twenty-eight October 1973, and the young girl never knew what had happened; so it didn't change her life, don't you see?"

"It's a lie."

"No, it isn't. I can't lie, Charlie. You programmed me not to lie. Do you think I would have let you go back and harm her?"

"She was the same. She was as I remembered her."

"Her body was."

"She hadn't changed. She wasn't an old woman, lock. She was a girl. She was a girl, jock."

And Charlie thought of an old woman dying in an institution, surrounded by yellow walls and pale gray sheets and curtains. He imagined young Rachel inside that withered form, imprisoned in a body that would not move, trapped in a mind that could never again take her along her bright, mysterious trails.

"I flashed her picture on the television," Jock said.

And yet, Charlie thought, how is it less bearable than that beautiful boy who wanted so badly to do the right thing that he did it all wrong, lost his chance, and now is caught in the sum of all his wrong turns? I got on the road they all wanted to take, and I reached the top, but it wasn't where I should have gone. I'm still that boy. I did not have to lie when I went home to her.

"I know you pretty well, Charlie," Jock said. "I knew that you'd be enough of a bastard to go back. And enough of a human being to do it right when you got there. She came back happy, Charlie. She came back satisfied."

His night with a beloved child was a lie then; it wasn't young Rachel any more than it was young Charlie. He looked for anger inside himself but couldn't find it. For a dead woman had given him a gift, and taken the one he offered, and it still tasted sweet.

"Time for sleep, Charlie. Go to sleep again. I just wanted you to know that there's no reason to feel any remorse for it. No reason to feel anything bad at all.

Charlie pulled the covers tight around his neck, unaware that he had begun that habit years ago, when the strange shadowy shapes hid in his closet and only the blanket could keep him safe. Pulled the covers high and tight, and closed his eyes, and felt her hand stroke him, felt her breast and hip and thigh, and heard her voice as breath against his cheek.

"O chestnut tree," Jock said, as he had been taught to say, "...great rooted blossomer,

"Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?

"0 body swayed to music, 0 brightening glance

"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

The audience applauded in his mind while he slipped into sleep, and he thought it remarkable that they sounded genuine, He pictured them smiling and nodding at the show. Smiling at the girl with her hand raised so; nodding at the man who paused forever, then came on stage.

## CLOSING THE TIMELID Orson Scott Card

Gemini lay back in his cushioned chair and slid the box over his head. It was pitch black inside, except the light coming from down around his shoulders.

"All right, I'm pulling us over," said Orion. Gemini braced himself. He heard the clicking of a switch (or someone's teeth clicking shut in surprise?) and the timelid closed down on him, shut out the light, and green and orange and another, nameless color beyond purple danced at the edges of his eyes.

And he stood, abruptly, in thick grass at the side of a road. A branch full of leaves brushed heavily against his back with the breeze. He moved forward, looking for--

The road, just as Orion had said. About a minute to wait, then.

Gemini slid awkwardly down the embankment, covering his hands with dirt. To his surprise it was moist and soft, chnging. He had expected it to be hard. That's what you get for believing pictures in the encyclopedia, he thought. And the ground gave gently under his feet.

He glanced behind him. Two furrows down the bank showed his path. I have a mark in this world after all, he thought. It'll make no difference, but there is a sign of me in this time when men could still leave signs.

Then dazzling lights far up the road. The truck was coming. Gemini sniffed the air. He couldn't smell anything-- and yet the books all stressed how smelly gasoline engines had been. Perhaps it was too far.

Then the lights swerved away. The curve. In a moment it would be here, turning just the wrong way on the curving mountain road until it would be too late. Gemini stepped out into the road, a shiver of anticipation running through him. Oh, he had been under the timehd several times before. Like everyone, he had seen the major events. Michelangelo doing the Sistine Chapel. Handel writing the Messiah (everyone strictly forbidden to hum any tunes). The premiere performance of Love's Labour's Lost. And a few offbeat things that his hobby of history had sent him to: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a politician; the meeting between Lorenzo d'Medici and the King of Naples; Jeanne d'Arc's death by fire-- grisly.

And now, at last, to experience in the past something he was utterly unable to live through in the present.

## Death.

And the truck careened around the corner, the lights sweeping the far embankment and then swerving in, brilliantly lighting Gemini for one instant before he leaped up and in, toward the glass (how horrified the face of the driver, how bright the lights, how harsh the metal) and then --

agony. Ah, agony in a tearing that made him feel, for the first time, every particle of his body as it screamed in pain. Bones shouting as they splintered like old wood under a sledgehammer. Flesh and fat slithering like jelly up and down and sideways. Blood skittering madly over the surface of the truck. Eyes popping open as the brain and skull crushed forward, demanding to be let through, let by, let fly. No no no no, cried Gemini inside the last fragment of his mind. No no no no no, make it stop!

And green and orange and more-than-purple dazzled the sides of his vision. A twist of his insides, a shudder of his mind, and he was back, snatched from death by the inexorable mathematics of the timelid. He felt his whole, unmarred body rushing back, felt every particle, yes, as clearly as when it had been hit by the truck, but now with pleasure-- pleasure so complete that he didn't even notice the mere orgasm his body added to the general symphony of joy.

The timelid lifted. The box was slid back. And Gemini lay gasping, sweating, yet laughing and crying and longing to sing.

What was it like? The others asked eagerly, crowding around. What is it like, what is it, is it like--

"It's like nothing. It's." Gemini had no words. "It's like everything God promised the righteous and Satan promised the sinners rolled into one." He tried to explain about the delicious agony, the joy passing all joys, the--

"Is it better than fairy dust?" asked one man, young and shy, and Gemini realized that the reason he was so retiring was that he was undoubtedly dusting tonight.

"After this," Gemini said, "dusting is no better than going to the bathroom."

Everyone laughed, chattered, volunteered to be next ("Orion knows how to throw a party"), as Gemini left the chair and the timelid and found Orion a few meters away at the controls.

"Did you like the ride?" Orion asked, smiling gently at his friend.

Gemini shook his head. "Never again," he said.

Orion looked disturbed for a moment, worried. "That bad for you?"

"Not bad. Strong. I'll never forget it, I've never felt so-- alive, Orion. Who would have thought it. Death being so--"

"Bright," Orion said, supplying the word. His hair hung loosely and clean over his forehead-- he shook it out of his eyes. "The second time is better. You have more time to appreciate the dying."

Gemini shook his head. "Once is enough for me. Life will never be bland again." He laughed. "Well, time for somebody else, yes?"

Harmony had already lain down on the chair. She had removed her clothing, much to the titillation of the other party-goers, saying, "I want nothing between me and the cold metal." Orion made her wait, though, while he corrected the setting. While he worked, Gemini thought of a question. "How many times have you done this, Orion?"

"Often enough," the man answered, studying the holographic model of the timeclip. And Gemini wondered then if death could not, perhaps, be as addictive as fairy dust, or cresting, or pitching in.

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Rod Bingley finally brought the truck to a halt, gasping back the shock and horror. The eyes were still resting there in the gore on the windshield. Only they seemed real. The rest was road-splashing, mud flipped by the weather and the tires.

Rod flung open the door and ran around the front of the truck, hoping to do-what? There was no hope that the man was alive. But perhaps some identification. A nuthouse freak, turned loose in weird white clothes to wander the mountain roads? But there was no hospital near here.

And there was no body on the front of his truck.

He ran his hand across the shiny metal, the clean windshield. A few bugs on the grill.

Had this dent in the metal been there before? Rod couldn't remember. He looked all around the truck. Not a sign of anything. Had he imagined it?

He must have. But it seemed so real. And he hadn't drunk anything, hadn't taken any uppers-- no trucker in his right mind ever took stay-awakes. He shook his head. He felt creepy. Watched. He glanced back over his shoulder. Nothing

but the trees bending slightly in the wind. Not even an animal. Some moths already gathering in the headlights. That's all.

Ashamed of himself for being afraid at nothing, he nevertheless jumped into the cab quickly and slammed the door shut behind him and locked it. The key turned in the starter. And he had to force himself to look up through that windshield. He half-expected to see those eyes again.

The windshield was clear. And because he had a deadline to meet, he pressed on. The road curved away infinitely before him.

He drove more quickly, determined to get back to civilization before he had another hallucination.

And as he rounded a curve, his lights sweeping the trees on the far side of the road, he thought he glimpsed a flash of white to the right, in the middle of the road.

The lights caught her just before the truck did, a beautiful girl, naked and voluptuous and eager. Madly eager, standing there, legs broadly apart, arms wide. She dipped, then jumped up as the truck caught her, even as Rod smashed his foot into the brake, swerved the truck to the side. Because he swerved she ended up, not centered, but caught on the left side, directly in front of Rod, one of her arms flapping crazily around the edge of the cab, the hand rapping on the glass of the side window. She, too, splashed.

Rod whimpered as the truck again came to a halt. The hand had dropped-loosely down to the woman's side, so it no longer blocked the door... Rod got out quickly, swung himself around the open door, and touched her.

Body warm. Hand real. He touched the buttock nearest him. It gave softly, sweetly, but under it Rod could feel that the pelvis was shattered. And then the body slopped free of the front of the truck, slid to the oil and gravel surface of the road-- and disappeared.

Rod took it calmly for a moment. She fell from the front of the truck, and then there was nothing there. Except a faint (and new, definitely new!) crack in the windshield, there was no sign of her.

Rodney screamed.

The sound echoed from the cliff on the other side of the chasm. The trees seemed to swell the sound, making it louder among the trunks. An owl hooted back.

And finally, Rod got back into the truck and drove again, slowly, but erratically, wondering what, please Cod tell me what the hell's the matter with my mind.

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Harmony rolled off the couch, panting and shuddering violently.

"Is it better than sex?" one of the men asked her, one who had doubtless tried, but failed, to get into her bed.

"It is sex," she answered. "But it's better than sex with you."

Everyone laughed. What a wonderful party. Who could top this? The would-be hosts and hostesses despaired, even as they clamored for a chance at the timelid.

But the crambox opened then, buzzing with the police override. "We're busted!" somebody shrieked gaily, and everyone laughed and clapped.

The policeman was young, and she seemed unused to the forceshield, walking awkwardly as she stepped into the middle of the happy room.

"Orion Overweed?" she asked, looking around.

"I," answered Orion, from where he sat at the controls, looking wary, Gemini beside him.

"Officer Mercy Manwool, Los Angeles Timesquad."

"Oh no," somebody muttered.

"You have no jurisdiction here," Orion said.

"We have a reciprocal enforcement agreement with the Canadian Chronospot Corporation. And we have reason to believe you are interfering with timetracks in the eighth decade of the twentieth century." She smiled curtly. "We have witnessed two suicides, and by making a careful check of your recent use of your private timelid, we have found several others. Apparently you have a new way to pass the time, Mr. Overweed."

Orion shrugged. "It's merely a passing fancy. But I am not interfering with timetracks."

She walked over to the controls and reached unerringly for the coldswitch. Orion immediately snagged her wrist with his hand. Gemini was surprised to see how the muscles of his forearm bulged with strength. Had he been playing some kind of sport? It would be just like Orion, of course, behaving like one of the lower orders.

"A warrant," Orion said.

She withdrew her arm. "I have an official complaint from the Timesquad's observation team. That is sufficient. I must interrupt your activity."

"According to law," Orion said, "you must show cause. Nothing we have done tonight will in any way change history."

"That truck is not robot-driven," she said, her voice growing strident. "There's a man in there. You are changing his life."

Orion only laughed. "Your observers haven't done their homework. I have. Look."

He turned to the control and played a speeded-up sequence, focused always on the shadow image of a truck speeding down a mountain road. The truck made turn after turn, and since the hologram was centered perpetually on the truck, it made the surrounding scenery dance past in a jerky rush, swinging left and right, up and down as the truck banked for turns or struck bumps.

And then, near the bottom of the chasm, between mountains, the truck got on a long, slow curve that led across the river on a slender bridge.

But the bridge wasn't there.

And the truck, unable to stop, skidded and swerved off the end of the truncated road, hung in the air over the chasm, then toppled, tumbled, banging against first this side, then that side of the ravine. It wedged between two outcroppings of rock more than ten meters above the water. The cab of the truck was crushed completely.

"He dies," Orion said. "Which means that anything we do with him before his death and after his last possible contact with another human being is legal. According to the code."

The policeman turned red with anger.

"I saw your little games with airplanes and sinking ships. But this is cruelty, Mr. Overweed."

"Cruelty to a dead man is, by definition, not cruelty. I don't change history. And Mr. Rodney Bingley is dead, has been for more than four centuries. I am doing no harm to any living man. And you owe me an apology."

Officer Mercy Manwool shook her head. "I think you're as bad as the Romans, who threw people into circuses to be torn by lions--"

"I know about the Romans," Orion said coldly, "and I know whom they threw. In this case, however, I am throwing my friends. And retrieving them very safely through the full retrieval and reassembly feature of the Hamburger Safety Device built inextricably into every timelid. And you owe me an apology."

She drew herself erect. "The Los Angeles Timesquad officially apologizes for making improper allegations about the activities of Orion Overweed."

Orion grinned. "Not exactly heartfelt, but I accept it. And while you're here, may I offer you a drink?"

"Nonalcoholic," she said instantly, and then looked away from him at Gemini, who was watching her with sad but intent eyes. Orion went for glasses and to try to find something nonalcoholic in the house.

"You performed superbly," Gemini said.

"And you, Gemini," she said softly (voicelessly), "were the first subject to travel."

Gemini shrugged. "Nobody said anything about my not taking part."

She turned her back on him. Orion came back with the drink. He laughed. "Coca-Cola," he said. "I had to import it all the way from Brazil. They still drink it there, you know. Original recipe." She took it and drank.

Orion sat back at the controls.

"Next!" he shouted, and a man and woman jumped on the couch together, laughing as the others slid the box over their heads.

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Rod had lost count. At first he had tried to count the curves. Then the white lines in the road, until a new asphalt surface covered them. Then stars. But the only number that stuck in his head was nine.

9.

NINE.

Oh God, he prayed silently, what is happening to me, what is happening to me, change this night, let me wake up, whatever is happening to me make it stop.

A gray-haired man was standing beside the road, urinating. Rod slowed to a crawl. Slowed until he was barely moving. Crept past the man so slowly that if he had even twitched Rod could have stopped the truck. But the gray-haired man only finished, dropped his, robe, and waved gaily to Rod. At that moment Rod heaved a sigh of relief and sped up.

Dropped his robe. The man was wearing a robe. Except for this gory night men did not wear robes. And at that moment he caught through his side mirror the white flash of the man throwing himself under the rear tires. Rod slammed on the brake and leaned his head against the steering wheel and wept loud, wracking sobs that shook the whole cab, that set the truck rocking slightly on its heavyduty springs.

For in every death Rod saw the face of his wife after the traffic accident (not my fault!) that had killed her instantly and yet left Rod to walk away from the wreck without a scratch on him.

I was not supposed to live, he thought at the time, and thought now. I was not supposed to live, and now God is telling me that I am a murderer with my wheels and my motor and my steering wheel.

And he looked up from the wheel.

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Orion was still laughing at Hector's account of how he fooled the truck driver into speeding up.

"He thought I was conking into the bushes at the side of the road!" he howled again, and Orion burst into a fresh peal of laughter at his friend.

"And then a backflip into the road, under his tires! How I wish I could see it!" Orion shouted. The other guests were laughing, too. Except Gemini and Officer Manwool.

"You can see it, of course," Manwool said softly.

Her words penetrated through the noise, and Orion shook his head. "Only on the holo. And that's not very good, not a good image at all."

"It'll do," she said.

And Gemini, behind Orion, murmured, "Why not, Orry?

The sound of the old term of endearment was starthing to Orion, but oddly comforting. Did Gemini, then, treasure those memories as Orion did? Orion turned slowly, looked into Gemini's sad, deep eyes. "Would you like to see it on the holo?" he asked.

Gemini only smiled. Or rather, twitched his lips into that momentary piece of a smile that Orion knew from so many years before (only forty years; but forty years was back into my childhood, when I was only thirty and Gemini was -- what? -- fifteen. Helot to my Spartan; Slav to my Hun) and Orion smiled back. His fingers danced over the controls.

Many of the guests gathered around, although others, bored with the coming and going in the timelid, however extravagant it might be as a party entertainment ("Enough energy to light all of Mexico for an hour," said the one with the giddy laugh who had already promised her body to four men and a woman and was now giving it to another who would not wait), occupied themselves with something decadent and delightful and distracting in the darker corners of the room.

The holo flashed on. The truck crept slowly down the road, its holographic image flickering.

"Why does it do that?" someone asked, and Orion answered mechanically, "There aren't as many chronons as there are photons, and they have a lot more area to cover."

And then the image of a man flickering by the side of the road. Everyone laughed as they realized it was Hector, conking away with all his heart. Then another laugh as he dropped his robe and waved. The truck sped up, and then a backflip by the manfigure, under the wheels. The body flopped under the doubled back tires, then lay hmp and shattered in the road as the truck came to a stop only a few meters ahead. A few moments later, the body disappeared.

"Brilliantly done, Hector!" Orion shouted again. "Better than you told it!" Everyone applauded in agreement, and Orion reached over to flip off the holo. But Officer Manwool stopped him.

"Don't turn it off, Mr. Overweed," she said. "Freeze it, and move the image."

Orion looked at her for a moment, then shrugged and did as she said. He expanded the view, so that the truck shrank. And then he suddenly stiffened, as did the guests close enough and interested enough to notice. Not more than ten meters in front of the truck was the ravine, where the broken bridge waited.

"He can see it," somebody gasped. And Officer Manwool slipped a lovecord around Orion's wrist, pulled it taut, and fastened the loose end to her workbelt.

"Orion Overweed you're under arrest. That man can see the ravine. He will not die. He was brought to a stop in plenty of time to notice the certain death ahead of him. He will live-- with a knowledge of whatever he saw tonight. And already you have altered the future, the present, and all the past from his time until the present."

And for the first time in all his life, Orion realized that he had reason to be afraid.

"But that's a capital offense," he said lamely.

"I only wish it included torture," Officer Manwool said heatedly, "the kind of torture you put that poor truck driver through!"

And then she started to pull Orion out of the room.

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Rod Bingley lifted his eyes from the steering wheel and stared uncomprehendingly at the road ahead. The truck's light illuminated the road clearly for many meters. And for five seconds or thirty minutes or some other length of time that was both brief and infinite he did not understand what it meant.

He got out of the cab and walked to the edge of the ravine, looking down. For a few minutes he felt relieved.

Then he walked back to the truck and counted the wounds in the cab. The dents on the grill and the smooth metal. Three cracks in the windshield.

He walked back to where the man had been urinating. Sure enough, though there was no urine, there was an indentation in the ground where the hot liquid had struck, speckles in the dirt where it had splashed.

And in the fresh asphalt, laid, surely, that morning (but then why no warning signs on the bridge? Perhaps the wind tonight blew them over), his tire tracks showed clearly. Except for a manwidth stretch where the left rear tires had left no print at all.

And Rodney remembered the dead, smashed faces, especially the bright and livid eyes among the blood and broken bone. They all looked like Rachel to him. Rachel who had wanted him to-- to what? Couldn't even remember the dreams anymore?

He got back into the cab and gripped the steering wheel. His head spun and ached, but he felt himself on the verge of a marvelous conclusion, a simple

answer to all of this. There was evidence, yes, even though the bodies were gone, there was evidence that he had hit those people. He had not imagined it.

They must, then, be (he stumbled over the word, even in his mind, laughed at himself as he concluded) angels. Jesus sent them, he knew it, as his mother had taught him, destroying angels teaching hun the death that he had brought to his wife while daring, himself, to walk away scatheless.

It was time to even up the debt.

He started the engine and drove, slowly, deliberately toward the end of the road. And as the front tires bumped off and a sickening moment passed when he feared that the truck would be too heavy for the driving wheels to push along the ground, he clasped his hands in front of his face and prayed, aloud: "Forward!"

And then the truck slid forward, tipped downward, hung in the air, and fell. His body pressed into the back of the truck. His clasped hands struck his face. He meant to say, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit," but instead he screamed, "No no no no no!" in an infinite negation of death that, after all, didn't do a bit of good once he was committed into the gentle, unyielding hands of the ravine. They clasped and enfolded him, pressed him tightly, closed his eyes and pillowed his head between the gas tank and the granite.

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"Wait," Gemini said.

"Why the hell should we?" Officer Manwool said, stopping at the door with Orion following docilely on the end of the lovecord. Orion, too, stopped, and looked at the policeman with the adoring expression all lovecord captives wore.

"Give the man a break," Gemini said.

"He doesn't deserve one," she said. "And neither do you."

"I say give the man a break. At least wait for the proof."

She snorted. "What more proof does he need, Gemini? A signed statement from Rodney Bingley that Orion Overweed is a bloody hitler?"

Gemini smiled and spread his hands. "We didn't actually see what Rodney did next, did we? Maybe he was struck by lightning two hours later, before he saw anybody-- I mean, you're required to show that damage did happen. And I don't feel any change to the present--"

"You know that changes aren't felt. They aren't even known, since we wouldn't remember anything other than how things actually happened!"

"At least," Gemini said, "watch what happens and see whom Rodney tells."

So she led Orion back to the controls, and at her instructions Orion lovingly started the holo moving again.

And they all watched as Rodney Bingley walked to the edge of the ravine, then walked back to the truck, drove it to the edge and over into the chasm, and died on the rocks.

As it happened, Hector hooted in joy. "He died after all! Orion didn't change a damned thing, not one damned thing!"

Manwool turned on him in disgust. "You make me sick," she said.

"The man's dead," Hector said in glee. "So get that stupid string off Orion or I'll sue for a writ of--"

"Go pucker in a corner," she said, and several of the women pretended to be shocked. Manwool loosened the lovecord and slid it off Orion's wrist. Immediately he turned on her, snarling. "Get out of here! Get out! Get out!"

He followed her to the door of the crambox. Gemini was not the only one who wondered if he would hit her. But Orion kept his control, and she left unharmed.

Orion stumbled back from the crambox rubbing his arms as if with soap, as if trying to scrape them clean from contact with the lovecord. "That thing ought to be outlawed. I actually loved her. I actually loved that stinking, bloody, son-of-abitching cop!" And he shuddered so violently that several of the guests laughed and the spell was broken.

Orion managed a smile and the guests went back to amusing themselves. With the sensitivity that even the insensitive and jaded sometimes exhibit, they left him alone with Gemini at the coritrols of the timelid.

Gemini reached out and brushed a strand of hair out of Orion's eyes. "Get a comb someday," he said. Orion smiled and gently stroked Gemini's hand. Gemini slowly removed his hand from Orion's reach. "Sorry, Orry," Gemini said, "but not anymore."

Orion pretended to shrug. "I know," he said. "Not even for old times' sake." He laughed softly. "That stupid string made me love her. They shouldn't even do that to criminals."

He played with the controls of the holo, which was still on. The image zoomed in; the cab of the truck grew larger and larger. The chronons were too scattered and the image began to blur and fade. Orion stopped it.

By ducking slightly and looking through a window into the cab, Orion and Gemini could see the exact place where the outcropping of rock crushed Rod Bingley's head against the gas tank. Details, of course, were indecipherable.

"I wonder," Orion finally said, "if it's any different."

"What's any different?" Gemini asked.

"Death. If it's any different when you don't wake up right afterward."

A silence.

Then the sound of Gemini's soft laughter.

"What's funny?" Orion asked.

"You," the younger man answered. "Only one thing left that you haven't tried, isn't there?"

"How could I do it?" Orion asked, half-seriously (only half?). "They'd only clone me back."

"Simple enough," Gemini said. "All you need is a friend who's willing to turn off the machine while you're on the far end. Nothing is left. And you can take care of the actual suicide yourself."

"Suicide," Orion said with a smile. "Trust you to use the policeman's term."

And that night, as the other guests slept off the alcohol in beds or other convenient places, Orion lay on the chair and pulled the box over his head. And with Gemini's last kiss on his cheek and Gemini's left hand on the controls, Orion said, "All right. Pull me over."

After a few minutes Gemini was alone in the room. He did not even pause to reflect before he went to the breaker box and shut off all the power for a critical few seconds. Then he returned, sat alone in the room with the disconnected machine and the empty chair. The crambox soon buzzed with the police override, and Mercy Manwool stepped out. She went straight to Gemini, embraced him. He kissed her, hard.

"Done?" she asked.

He nodded.

"The bastard didn't deserve to live," she said.

Gemini shook his head. "You didn't get your justice, my dear Mercy."

"Isn't he dead?"

"Oh yes, that. Well, it's what he wanted, you know. I told him what I planned. And he asked me to do it."

She looked at him angrily. "You would. And then tell me about it, so I wouldn't get any joy out of this at all." Gemini only shrugged.

Manwool turned away from him, walked to the timelid. She ran her fingers along the box. Then she detached her laser from her belt and slowly melted the timelid until it was a mass of hot plastic on a metal stand. The few metal components had even melted a little, bending to be just a little out of shape.

"Screw the past anyway," she said. "Why can't it stay where it belongs?"

## DEEP BREATHING EXERCISES Orson Scott Card

If Dale Yorgason weren't so easily distracted, he might never have noticed the breathing. But he was on his way upstairs to change clothes, noticed the headline on the paper, and got deflected; instead of climbing the stairs, he sat on them and began to read. He could not even concentrate on that, however. He began to hear all, the sounds of the house. Brian, their two-year-old son, was upstairs, breathing heavily in sleep. Colly, his wife, was in the kitchen, kneading bread and also breathing heavily.

Their breath was exactly in unison. Brian's rasping breath upstairs, thick with the mucus of a child's sleep; Colly's deep breaths as she labored with the dough. It set Dale to thinking, the newspapers forgotten. He wondered how often people did that-- breathed perfectly together for minutes on end. He began to wonder about coincidence.

And then, because he was easily distracted, he remembered that he had to change his clothes and went upstairs. When he came down in his jeans and sweatshirt, ready for a good game of outdoor basketball now that it was spring, Colly called to him. "I'm out of cinnamon, Dale!"

"I'll get it on the way home!"

"I need it now!" Colly called.

"We have two cars!" Dale yelled back, then closed the door. He briefly felt bad about not helping her out, but reminded himself that he was already running late and it wouldn't hurt her to take Brian with her and get outside the house; she never seemed to get out of the house anymore.

His team of friends from Allways Home Products, Inc., won the game, and he came home deliciously sweaty. No one was there. The bread dough had risen impossibly, was spread all over the counter and dropping in large chunks onto the floor. Colly had obviously been gone too long. He wondered what could have delayed her.

Then came the phone call from the police, and he did not have to wonder anymore. Colly had a habit of inadvertently running stop signs.

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The funeral was well attended because Dale had a large family and was well liked at the office. He sat between his own parents and Colly's parents. The speakers droned on, and Dale, easily distracted, kept thinking of the fact that of all the mourners there, only a few were there in private grief. Only a few had actually known Colly, who preferred to avoid office functions and social gatherings; who stayed home with Brian most of the time being a perfect housewife and reading books and being, in the end, solitary. Most of the people at the funeral had come for Dale's sake, to comfort him. Am I comforted? he asked himself. Not by my friends-- they had little to say, were awkward and embarrassed. Only his father had had the right instinct, just embracing him and then talking about everything except Dale's wife and son who were dead, so mangled in the incident that the coffin was never opened for anyone. There was talk of the fishing in Lake Superior this summer; talk of the bastards at Continental Hardware who thought that the 65-year retirement rule ought to apply to the president of the company; talk of nothing at all. But it was good enough. It distracted Dale from his grief.

Now, however, he wondered whether he had really been a good husband for Colly. Had she really been happy, cooped up in the house all day? He had tried to get her out, get to meet people, and she had resisted. But in the end, as he wondered whether he knew her at all, he could not find an answer, not one he was sure of. And Brian-- he had not known Brian at all. The boy was smart and quick, speaking in sentences when other children were still struggling with single words; but what had he and Dale ever had to talk about? All Brian's companionship had been with his mother; all Colly's companionship had been with Brian. In a way it was like their breathing-- the last time Dale had heard them breathe-- in unison, as if even the rhythms of their bodies were together. It pleased Dale somehow to think that they had drawn their last breath together, too, the unison continuing to the grave; now they would be lowered into the earth in perfect unison, sharing a coffin as they had shared every day since Brian's birth.

Dale's grief swept over him again, surprising him because he had thought he had cried as much as he possibly could, and now he discovered there were more tears waiting to flow. He was not sure whether he was crying because of the empty house he would come home to, or because he had always been somewhat closed off from his family; was the coffin, after all, just an expression of the way their relationship had always been? It was not a productive line of thought, and Dale let himself be distracted. He let himself notice that his parents were breathing together.

Their breaths were soft, hard to hear. But Dale heard, and looked at them, watched their chests rise and fall together. It unnerved him-- was unison breathing more common than he had thought? He listened for others, but Colly's parents were not breathing together, and certainly Dale's breaths were at his own rhythm. Then Dale's mother looked at him, smiled, and nodded to him in an

attempt at silent communication. Dale was not good at silent communication; meaningful pauses and knowing looks always left him baffled. They always made him want to check his fly. Another distraction, and he did not think of breathing again.

Until at the airport, when the plane was an hour late in arriving because of technical dffficulties in Los Angeles. There was not much to talk to his parents about; even his father's chatter failed him, and they sat in silence most of the time, as did most of the other passengers. Even a stewardess and the pilot sat near them, waiting silently for the plane to arrive.

It was in one of the deeper silences that Dale noticed that his father and the pilot were both swinging their crossed legs in unison. Then he listened, and realized there was a strong sound in the gate waiting area, a rhythmic soughing of many of the passengers inhaling and exhaling together. Dale's mother and father, the pilot, the stewardess, several other passengers, all were breathing together. It unnerved him. How could this be? Brian and Colly had been mother and son; Dale's parents had been together for years. But why should half the people in the waiting area breathe together?

He pointed it out to his father.

"Kind of strange, but I think you're right," his father said, rather delighted with the odd event. Dale's father loved odd events.

And then the rhythm broke, and the plane taxied close to the windows, and the crowd stirred and got ready to board, even though the actual boarding was surely half an hour off.

The plane broke apart at landing. About half the people in the airplane survived. However, the entire crew and several passengers, including Dale's parents, were killed when the plane hit the ground.

It was then that Dale realized that the breathing was not a result of coincidence, or the people's closeness during their lives. It was a messenger of death; they breathed together because they were going to draw their last breath together. He said nothing about this thought to anyone else, but whenever he got distracted from other things he tended to speculate on this. It was better than dwelling on the fact that he, a man to whom family had been very important, was now completely without family; that the only people with whom he was completely himself, completely at ease, were gone, and there was no more ease for him in the world. Much better to wonder whether his knowledge might be used to save lives. After all, he often thought, reasoning in a circular pattern that never seemed to end, if I notice this again, I should be able to alert someone, to warn someone, to save their lives. Yet if I were going to save their lives, would they then breathe in unison? If my parents had been warned, and changed flights, he

thought, they wouldn't have died, and therefore wouldn't have breathed together, and so I wouldn't have been able to warn them, and so they wouldn't have changed flights, and so they would have died, and so they would have breathed in unison, and so I would have noticed and warned them...

More than anything that had ever passed through his mind before, this thought engaged him, and he was not easily distracted from it. It began to hurt his work; he slowed down, made mistakes, because he concentrated only on breathing, listening constantly to the secretaries and other executives in his company, waiting for the fatal moment when they would breathe in unison.

He was eating alone in a restaurant when he heard it again. The sighs of breath came all together, from every table near him. It took him a few moments to be sure; then he leaped from the table and walked briskly outside. He did not stop to pay, for the breathing was still in unison at every table to the door of the restaurant.

The maitre d', predictably, was annoyed at his leaving without paying, and called out to him. Dale did not answer. "Wait! You didn't pay!" cried the man, following Dale out into the street.

Dale did not know how far he had to go for safety from whatever danger faced everyone in the restaurant; he ended up having no choice in the matter. The maitre d' stopped him on the sidewalk, only a few doors down from the restaurant, tried to pull him back toward the place, Dale resisting all the way.

"You can't leave without paying! What do you think you're doing?"

"I can't go back," Dale shouted. "I'll pay you! I'll pay you right here!" And he fumbled in his wallet for the money as a huge explosion knocked him and the maitre d' to the ground. Flame erupted from the restaurant, and people screamed as the building began crumbling from the force of the explosion. It was impossible that anyone still inside the building could be alive.

The maitre d', his eyes wide with horror, stood up as Dale did, and looked at him with dawning understanding. "You knew!" the maitre d' said. "You knew!"

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Dale was acquitted at the trial-- phone calls from a radical group and the purchase of a large quantity of explosives in several states led to indictment and conviction of someone else. But at the trial enough was said to convince Dale and several psychiatrists that something was seriously wrong with him. He was voluntarily committed to an institution, where Dr. Howard Rumming spent hours in conversation with Dale, trying to understand his madness, his fixation on breathing as a sign of coming death. "I'm sane in every other way, aren't I, Doctor?" Dale asked, again and again.

And repeatedly the doctor answered, "What is sanity? Who has it? How can I know?"

Dale soon found that the mental hospital was not an unpleasant place to be. It was a private institution, and a lot of money had gone into it; most of the people there were voluntary commitments, which meant that conditions had to remain excellent. It was one of the things that made Dale grateful for his father's wealth. In the hospital he was safe; the only contact with the outside world was on the television. Gradually, meeting people and becoming attached to them in the hospital, he began to relax, to lose his obsession with breathing, to stop listening quite so intently for the sound of inhalation and exhalation, the way that different people's breathing rhythms fit together. Gradually he began to be his old, distractable self.

"I'm nearly cured, Doctor," Dale announced one day in the middle of a game of backgammon.

The doctor sighed. "I know it, Dale. I have to admit it-- I'm disappointed. Not in your cure, you understand. It's just that you've been a breath of fresh air, you should pardon the expression." They both laughed a little. "I get so tired of middle-aged women with fashionable nervous breakdowns."

Dale was gammoned-- the dice were all against him. But he took it well, knowing that next time he was quite likely to win handily-- he usually did. Then he and Dr. Rumming got up from their table and walked toward the front of the recreation room, where the television program had been interrupted by a special news bulletin. The people around the television looked disturbed; news was never allowed on the hospital television, and only a bulletin like this could creep in. Dr. Rumming intended to turn it off immediately, but then heard the words being said.

"... from satellites fully capable of destroying every major city in the United States. The President was furnished with a list of fifty-four cities targeted by the orbiting missiles. One of these, said the communique, will be destroyed immediately to show that the threat is serious and will be carried out. Civil defense authorities have been notified, and citizens of the fifty-four cities will be on standby for immediate evacuation." There followed the normal parade of special reports and deep background, but the reporters were all afraid.

Dale's mind could not stay on the program, however, because he was distracted by something far more compelling. Every person in the room was breathing in perfect unison, including Dale. He tried to break out of the rhythm, and couldn't. It's just my fear, Dale thought. Just the broadcast, making me think that I hear the breathing.

A Denver newsman came on the air then, overriding the network broadcast. "Denver, ladies and gentlemen, is one of the targeted cities. The city has asked us to inform you that orderly evacuation is to begin immediately. Obey all traffic laws, and drive east from the city if you live in the following neighborhoods..."

Then the newsman stopped, and, breathing heavily, listened to something coming through his earphone.

The newsman was breathing in perfect unison with all the people in the room.

"Dale," Dr. Rumming said.

Dale only breathed, feeling death poised above him in the sky.

"Dale, can you hear the breathing?"

Dale heard the breathing.

The newsman spoke again. "Denver is definitely the target. The missiles have already been launched. Please leave immediately. Do not stop for any reason. It is estimated that we have less than-- less than three minutes. My God," he said, and got up from his chair, breathing heavily, running out of the range of the camera. No one turned any equipment off in the station-- the tube kept on showing the local news set, the empty chairs, the tables, the weather map.

"We can't get out in time," Dr. Rumming said to the inmates in the room. "We're near the center of Denver. Our only hope is to be on the floor. Try to get under tables and chairs as much as possible." The inmates, terrified, complied with the voice of authority.

"So much for my cure," Dale said, his voice trembling. Rumming managed a half-smile. They lay together in the middle of the floor, leaving the furniture for everyone else because they knew that the furniture would do no good at all.

"You definitely don't belong here," Rumming told him. "I never met a saner man in all my life."

Dale was distracted, however. Instead of his impending death he thought of Colly and Brian in their coffin. He imagined the earth being swept away in a huge wind, and the coffln being ashed immediately in the white explosion from the sky. The barrier is coming down at last, Dale thought, and I will be with them as completely as it is possible to be. He thought of Brian learning to walk, crying when he fell; he remembered Colly saying, "Don't pick him up every time he cries, or he'll just learn that crying gets results." And so for three days Dale had listened to Brian cry and cry, and never lifted a hand to help the boy. Brian learned to walk quite well, and quickly. But now, suddenly, Dale felt again that irresistible impulse to pick him up, to put his pathetically red and weeping face on his shoulder, to say, That's all right, Daddy's holding you.

"That's all right, Daddy's holding you," Dale said aloud, softly. Then there was a flash of white so bright that it could be seen as easily through the walls as through the window, for there were no walls, and all the breath was drawn out of their bodies at once, their voices robbed from them so suddenly that they all involuntarily shouted and then, forever, were silent. Their shout was taken up in a violent wind that swept the sound, wrung from every throat in perfect unison, upward into the clouds forming over what had once been Denver.

And in the last moment, as the shout was drawn from his lungs and the heat took his eyes out of his face, Dale realized that despite all his foreknowledge, the only life he had ever saved was that of a maitre d' hotel, whose life, to Dale, didn't mean a thing.

I was an innocent pedestrian. Only reason I got in this in the first place was I got a vertical way of thinking and Dogwalker thought I might be useful, which was true, and also he said I might enjoy myself, which was a prefabrication, since people done a lot more enjoying on me than I done on them.

When I say I think vertical, I mean to say I'm metaphysical, that is, simular, which is to say, I'm dead but my brain don't know it yet and my feet still move. I got popped at age nine just lying in my own bed when the goat next door shot at his lady and it went through the wall and into my head. Everybody went to look at them cause they made all the noise, so I was a quart low before anybody noticed I been poked.

They packed my head with supergoo and light pipe, but they didn't know which neutron was supposed to butt into the next so my alchemical brain got turned from rust to diamond. Goo Boy. The Crystal Kid.

From that bright electrical day I never grew another inch, anywhere. Bullet went nowhere near my gonadicals, just turned off the puberty switch in my head. Saint Paul said he was a eunuch for Jesus, but who am I a eunuch for?

Worst thing about it is here I am near thirty and I still have to take barkeepers to court before they'll sell me beer. And it ain't hardly worth it even though the judge prints out in my favor and the barkeep has to pay costs, because my corpse is so little I get toxed on six ounces and pass out pissing after twelve. I'm a lousy drinking buddy. Besides, anybody hangs out with me looks like a pederast.

No, I'm not trying to make you drippy-drop for me-- I'm used to it, OK? Maybe the homecoming queen never showed me True Love in a four-point spread, but I got this knack that certain people find real handy and so I always made out. I dress good and I ride the worm and I don't pay much income tax. Because I am the Password Man. Give me five minutes with anybody's curriculum vitae, which is to say their autopsychoscopy, and nine times out of ten I'll spit out their password and get you into their most nasty sticky sweet secret files. Actually it's usually more like three times out of ten, but that's still a lot better odds than having a computer spend a year trying to push out fifteen characters to make just the right P-word, specially since after the third wrong try they string your phone number, freeze the target files, and call the dongs.

Oh, do I make you sick? A cute little boy like me, engaged in critical unspecified dispopulative behaviors? I may be half glass and four feet high, but I can

simulate you better than your own mama, and the better I know you, the deeper my hooks. I not only know your password now, I can write a word on a paper, seal it up, and then you go home and change your password and then open up what I wrote and there it'll be, your new password, three times out of ten. I am \*vertical\*, and Dogwalker knowed it. Ten percent more supergoo and I wouldn't even be legally human, but I'm still under the line, which is more than I can say for a lot of people who are a hundred percent zoo inside their head.

Dogwalker comes to me one day at Carolina Circlce, where I'm playing pinball standing on a stool. He didn't say nothing, just gave me a shove, so naturally he got my elbow in his balls. I get a lot of twelve-year-olds trying to shove me around at the arcades, so I'm used to teaching them lessons. Jack the Giant Killer. Hero of the fourth graders. I usually go for the stomach, only Dogwalker wasn't a twelve-year-old, so my elbow hit low.

I knew the second I hit him that this wasn't no kid. I didn't know Dogwalker from God, but he gots the look, you know, like he been hungry before, and he don't care what he eats these days.

Only he got no ice and he got no slice, just sits there on the floor with his back up against the Eat Shi'ite game, holding his boodle and looking at me like I was a baby he had to diaper. "I hope you're Goo Boy, " he says, "cause if you ain't, I'm gonna give you back to your mama in three little tupperware bowls." He doesn't sound like he's making a threat, though. He sounds like he's chief weeper at his own funeral.

"You want to do business, use your mouth, not your hands," I says. Only I say it real apoplectic, which is the same as apologetic except you are also still pissed.

"Come with me," he says. "I got to go buy me a truss. You pay the tax out of your allowance."

So we went to Ivey's and stood around in children's wear while he made his pitch. "One P-word," he says, "only there can't be no mistake. If there's a mistake, a guy loses his job and maybe goes to jail."

So I told him no. Three chances in ten, that's the best I can do. No guarantees. My record speaks for itself, but nobody's perfect, and I ain't even close.

"Come on, " he says, "you got to have ways to make sure, right? If you can do three times out of ten, what if you find out more about the guy? What if you meet him?"

"OK, maybe fifty-fifty."

"Look, we can't go back for seconds. So maybe you can't get it. But do you know when you ain't got it? "

"Maybe half the time when I'm wrong, I know I'm wrong."

"So we got three out of four that you'll know whether you got it?"

"No," says I. "Cause half the time when I'm right, I don't know I'm right."

"Shee-it," he says. "This is like doing business with my baby brother."

"You can't afford me anyway," I says. "I pull two dimes minimum, and you barely got breakfast on your gold card."

"I'm offering a cut."

"I don't want a cut. I want cash."

"Sure thing," he says. He looks aroxind, real careful. As if they wired the sign that said Boys Briefs Sizes 10-12. "I got an inside man at Federal Coding," he says.

"That's nothing," I says. "I got a bug up the First Lady's ass, and forty hours on tape of her breaking wind."

I got a mouth: I know I got a mouth. I especially know it when he jams my face into a pile of shorts and says, "Suck on this, Goo Boy."

I hate it when people push me around. And I know ways to make them stop. This time all I had to do was cry. Real loud, like he was hurting me. Everybody looks when a kid starts crying. "I'll be good." I kept saying it. "Don't hurt me no more! I'll be good."

"Shut up," he says. "Everybody's looking."

"Don't you ever shove me around again," I says. "I'm at least ten years older than you, and a hell of a lot more than ten years smarter. Now I'm leaving this store, and if I see you coming after me, I'll start screaming about how you zipped down and showed me the pope, and you'll get yourself a child-molesting tag so they pick you up every time some kid gets jollied within a hundred miles of Greensboro." I've done it before, and it works, and Dogwalker was no dummy. Last thing he needed was extra reasons for the dongs to bring him in for questioning. So I figured he'd tell me to get poked and that'd be the last of it.

Instead he says, "Goo Boy, I'm sorry, I'm too quick with my hands."

Even the goat who shot me never said he was sorry. My first thought was, what kind of sister is he, abjectifying right out like that. Then I reckoned I'd stick around and see what kind of man it is who emulsifies himself in front of a nine-year-old-looking kid. Not that I figured him to be purely sorrowful. He still just wanted me to get the P-word for him, and he knew there wasn't nobody else to do it. But most street pugs aren't smart enough to tell the right lie under pressure. Right away I knew he wasn't your ordinary street hook or low arm, pugging cause they don't have the sense to stick with any kind of job. He had a deep face, which is to say his head was more than a hairball, by which I mean he had brains enough to put his hands in his pockets without seeking an audience with the pope. Right then was when I decided he was my kind of no-good lying son-of-a-bitch.

"What are you after at Federal Coding?" I asked him. "A record wipe?"

"Ten clean greens," he says. "Coded for unlimited international travel. The whole ID, just like a real person."

"The President has a green card," I says. "The Joint Chiefs have clean greens. But that's all. The U.S. Vice-President isn't even cleared for unlimited international travel."

"Yes he is," he says.

"Oh, yeah, you know everything."

"I need a P. My guy could do us reds and blues, but a clean green has to be done by a burr-oak rat two levels up. My guy knows how it's done."

"They won't just have it with a P-word," I says. "A guy who can make green cards, they're going to have his finger on it."

"I know how to get the finger," he says. "It takes the finger and the password."

"You take a guy's finger, he might report it. And even if you persuade him not to, somebody's gonna notice that it's gone."

"Latex," he says. "We'll get a mold. And don't start telling me how to do my part of the job. You get P-words, I get fingers. You in?"

"Cash," I says.

"Twenty percent," says he.

"Twenty percent of pus."

"The inside guy gets twenty, the girl who brings me the finger, she gets twenty, and I damn well get forty.

"You can't just sell these things on the street, you know."

"They're worth a meg apiece," says he, "to certain buyers." By which he meant Orkish Crime, of course. Sell ten, and my twenty percent grows up to be two megs. Not enough to be rich, but enough to retire from public life-- and maybe even pay for some high-level medicals to sprout hair on my face. I got to admit that sounded good to me.

So we went into business. For a few hours he tried to do it without telling me the baroque rat's name, just giving me data he got from his guy at Federal Coding. But that was real stupid, giving me secondhand face like that, considering he needed me to be a hundred percent sure, and pretty soon he realized that and brought me in all the way. He hated telling me anything, because he couldn't stand to let go. Once I knew stuff on my own, what was to stop me from trying to go into business for myself? But unless he had another way to get the P-word, he had to get it from me, and for me to do it right, I had to know everything I could. Dogwalker's got a brain, in his head, even if it is all biodegradable, and so he knows there's times when you got no choice but to trust somebody. When you just got to figure they'll do their best even when they're out of your sight.

He took me to his cheap condo on the old Guilford College campus, near the worm, which was real congenital for getting to Charlotte or Winston or Raleigh with no fuss. He didn't have no soft floor, just a bed, but it was a big one, so I didn't reckon he suffered. Maybe he bought it back in his old pimping days, I figured, back when he got his name, running a string of bitches with names like Spike and Bowser and Prince, real hydrant leg-lifters for the tweeze trade. I could see that he used to have money, and he didn't anymore. Lots of great clothes, tailor-tight fit, but shabby, out of sync. The really old ones, he tore all the wiring out, but you could still see where the diodes used to light up. We're talking neanderthal.

"Vanity, vanity, all is profanity," says I, while I'm holding out the sleeve of a camisa that used to light up like an airplane coming in for a landing.

"They're too comfortable to get rid of," he says. But there's a twist in his voice so I know he don't plan to fool nobody.

"Let this be a lesson to you," says I. "This is what happens when a walker don't walk."

"Walkers do steady work, " says he. "But me, when business was good, it felt bad, and when business was bad, it felt good. You walk cats, maybe you can take some pride in it. But you walk dogs, and you know they're getting hurt every time--"

"They got a built-in switch, they don't feel a thing. That's why the dongs don't touch you, walking dogs, cause nobody gets hurt."

"Yeah, so tell me, which is worse, somebody getting tweezed till they scream so some old honk can pop his pimple, or somebody getting half their brain replaced so when the old honk tweezes her she can't feel a thing? I had these women's bodies around me and I knew that they used to be people."

"You can be glass," says I, "and still be people."

He saw I was taking it personally. "Oh, hey," says he, "you're under the line."

"So are dogs," says I.

"Yeah well," says he. "You watch a girl come back and tell about some of the things they done to her, and she's laughing, you draw your own line."

I look around his shabby place. "Your choice," says I.

"I wanted to feel clean," says he. "That don't mean I got to stay poor."

"So you're setting up this grope so you can return to the old days of peace and propensity."

"Propensity," says he. "What the hell kind of word is that? Why do you keep using words like that?"

"Cause I know them," says I.

"Well you \*don't\* know them," says he, "because half the time you get them wrong."

I showed him my best little-boy grin. "I know," says I. What I don't tell him is that the fun comes from the fact that almost nobody ever knows I'm using them wrong. Dogwalker's no ordinary pimp. But then the ordinary pimp doesn't bench himself halfway through the game because of a sprained moral qualm, by which I mean that Dogwalker had some stray diagonals in his head, and I began to think it might be fun to see where they all hooked up.

Anyway, we got down to business. The target's name was Jesse H. Hunt, and I did a real job on him. The Crystal Kid really plugged in on this one. Dogwalker had about two pages of stuff-- date of birth, place of birth, sex at birth (no changes since), education, employment history. It was like getting an armload of

empty boxes. I just laughed at it. "You got a jack to the city library?" I asked him, and he shows me the wall outlet. I plugged right in, visual onto my pocket sony, with my own little crystal head for ee-i-ee-i-oh. Not every goo-head can think clear enough to do this, you know, put out clean type just by thinking the right stuff out my left ear interface port.

I showed Dogwalker a little bit about research. Took me ten minutes. I know my way right through the Greensboro Public Library. I have P-words for every single librarian and I'm so ept that they don't even guess I'm stepping upstream through their access channels. From the Public Library you can get all the way into North Carolina Records Division in Raleigh, and from there you can jumble into federal personnel records anywhere in the country. Which meant that by nightfall on that most portentous day we had hardcopy of every document in Jesse H. Hunt's whole life, from his birth certificate and first grade report card to his medical history and security clearance reports when he first worked for the feds.

Dogwalker knew enough to be impressed. "If you can do all that," he says, "you might as well pug his P-word straight out."

"No puedo, putz," says I as cheerful as can be. "Think of the fed as a castle. Personnel files are floating in the moat-- there's a few alligators but I swim real good. Hot data is deep in the dungeon. You can get in there, but you can't get out clean. And P-words-- P-words are kept up the queen's ass."

"No system is unbeatable," he says.

"Where'd you learn that, from graffiti in a toilet stall? if the P-word system was even a little bit breakable, Dogwalker, the gentlemen you plan to sell these cards to would already be inside looking out at us, and they wouldn't need to spend a meg to get clean greens from a street pug."

Trouble was that after impressing Dogwalker with all the stuff I could find out about Jesse H., I didn't know that much more than before. Oh, I could guess at some P-words, but that was all it was-- guessing. I couldn't even pick a P most likely to succeed. Jesse was one ordinary dull rat. Regulation good grades in school, regulation good evaluations on the job, probably gave his wife regulation lube jobs on a weekly schedule.

"You don't really think your girl's going to get his finger," says I with sickening scorn.

"You don't know the girl," says he. "If we needed his flipper she'd get molds in five sizes."

"You don't know this guy," says I. "This is the straightest opie in Mayberry. I don't see him cheating on his wife."

"Trust me," says Dogwalker. "She'll get his finger so smooth he won't, even know she took the mold."

I didn't believe him. I got a knack for knowing things about people, and Jesse H. wasn't faking. Unless he started faking when he was five, which is pretty unpopulated. He wasn't going to bounce the first pretty girl who made his zipper tight. Besides which he was smart. His career path showed that he was always in the right place. The right people always seemed to know his name. Which is to say he isn't the kind whose brain can't run if his jeans get hot. I said so.

"You're really a marching band," says Dogwalker. "You can't tell me his P-word, but you're obliquely sure that he's a limp or a wimp."

"Neither one," says I. "He's hard and straight. But a girl starts rubbing up to him, he isn't going to think it's because she heard that his crotch is cantilevered. He's going to figure she wants something and he'll give her string till he finds out what."

He just grinned at me. "I got me the best Password Man in the Triass, didn't I? I got me a miracle worker named Goo-Boy, didn't I? The ice-brain they call Crystal Kid. I got him, didn't I?"

"Maybe," says I.

"I got him or I kill him," he says, showing more teeth than a primate's supposed to have.

"You got me," says I. "But don't go thinking you can kill me."

He just laughs. "I got you and you're so good, you can bet I got me a girl who's at least as good at what she does."

"No such," says I.

"Tell me his P-word and then I'll be impressed."

"You want quick results? Then go ask him to give you his password himself."

Dogwalker isn't one of those guys who can hide it when he's mad. "I want quick results," he says. "And if I start thinking you can't deliver, I'll pull your tongue out of your head. Through your nose

"Oh, that's good," says I. "I always do my best thinking when I'm being physically threatened by a client. You really know how to bring out the best in me."

"I don't want to bring out the best," he says. "I just want to bring out his password."

"I got to meet him first," says I.

He leans over me so I can smell his musk, which is to say I'm very olfactory and so I can tell you he reeked of testosterone, by which I mean ladies could fill up with babies just from sniffing his sweat. "Meet him?" he asks me. "Why don't we just ask him to fill out a job application?"

"I've read all his job applications," says I.

"How's a glass-head like you'going to meet Mr. Fed? " says he. "I bet you're always getting invitations to the same parties as guys like him."

"I don't get invited to grown-up parties," says I. "But on the other hand, grownups don't pay much attention to sweet little kids like me."

He sighed. "You really have to meet him?"

"Unless fifty-fifty on a P-word is good enough odds for you."

All of a sudden he goes nova. Slaps a glass off the table and it breaks against the wall, and then he kicks the table over, and all the time I'm thinking about ways to get out of there unkilled. But it's me he's doing the show for, so there's no way I'm leaving, and he leans in close to me and screams in my face. "That's the last of your fifty-fifty and sixty-forty and three times in ten I want to hear about, Goo Boy, you hear me?"

And I'm talking real meek and sweet, cause this boy's twice my size and three times my weight and I don't exactly have no leverage. So I says to him, "I can't help talking in odds and percentages, Dogwalker, I'm vertical, remember? I've got glass channels in here, they spit out percentages as easy as other people sweat."

He slapped his hand against his own head. "This ain't exactly a sausage biscuit, either, but you know and I know that when you give me all them exact numbers it's all guesswork anyhow. You don't know the odds on this beakrat anymore than I do."

"I don't know the odds on him, Walker, but I know the odds on me. I'm sorry you don't like the way I sound so precise, but my crystal memory has every P-word I ever plumbed, which is to say I can give you exact to the third decimal percentages on when I hit it right on the first try after meeting the subject, and how many times I hit it right on the first try just from his curriculum vitae, and right now if I don't meet him and I go on just what I've got here you have a 48.838 percent chance I'll be right on my P-word first time and a 66.667 chance I'll be right with one out of three."

Well that took him down, which was fine I must say because he loosened up my sphincters with that glass-smashing table-tossing hot-breath-in-my-face routine he did. He stepped back and put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall. "Well I chose the right P-man, then, didn't I," he says, but he doesn't smile, no, he says the back-down words but his eyes don't back down, his eyes say don't try to flash my face because I see through you, I got most excellent inward shades all polarized to keep out your glitz and see you straight and clear. I never saw eyes like that before. Like he knew me. Nobody ever knew me, and I didn't think he really knew me either, but I didn't like him looking at me as if he thought he knew me cause the fact is I didn't know me all that well and it worried me to think he might know me better than I did, if you catch my drift.

"All I have to do is be a little lost boy in a store," I says.

"What if he isn't the kind who helps little lost boys?"

"Is he the kind who lets them cry?"

"I don't know. What if he is? What then? Think you can get away with meeting him a second time? "

"So the lost boy in the store won't work. I can crash my bicycle on his front lawn. I can try to sell him cable magazines."

But he was ahead of me already. "For the cable magazines he slams the door in your face, if he even comes to the door at all. For the bicycle crash, you're out of your little glass brain. I got my inside girl working on him right now, very complicated, because he's not the playing around kind, so she has to make this a real emotional come-on, like she's breaking up with a boyfriend and he's the only shoulder she can cry on, and his wife is so lucky to have a man like him. This much he can believe. But then suddenly he has this little boy crashing in his yard, and because he's paranoid, he begins to wonder if some weird rain isn't falling, right? I know he's paranoid because you don't get to his level in the fed without you know how to watch behind you and kill the enemy even before they know they're out to get you. So he even suspects, for one instant, that somebody's setting him up for something and what does he do?"

I knew what Dogwalker was getting at now, and he was right, and so I let him have his victory and I let the words he wanted march out all in a row. "He changes all his passwords, all his habits, and watches over his shoulder all the time." "And my little project turns into compost. No clean greens."

So I saw for the first time why this street boy, this ex-pimp, why he was the one to do this job. He wasn't vertical like me, and he didn't have the inside hook like his fed boy, and he didn't have bumps in his sweater so he couldn't do the girl part, but he had eyes in his elbows, ears in his knees, by which I mean he noticed everything there was to notice and then he thought of a few things that weren't even noticeable yet and noticed them. He earned his forty percent. And he earned part of my twenty, too.

Now while we waited around for the girl to fill Jesse's empty aching arms and get a finger off him, and while we were still working on how to get me to meet him slow and easy and sure, I spent a lot of time with Dogwalker. Not that he ever asked me, but I found myself looping his bus route every morning till he picked me up, or I'd be eating at Bojangle's when he came in to throw cajun chicken down into his ulcerated organs. I watched to make sure he didn't mind, cause I didn't want to piss this boy, having once beheld the majesty of his wrath, but if he wanted to shiver me he gave me no shiv.

Even after a few days, when the ghosts of the cold hard street started haunting us, he didn't shake me, and that includes when Bellbottom says to him, "Looks like you stopped walking dogs. Now you pimping little boys, right? Little catamites, we call you Catwalker now, that so? Or maybe you just keep him for private use, is that it? You be Boypoker now?" Well like I always said, someday somebody's going to kill Bellbottom just to flay him and use his skin for a convertible roof, but Dogwalker just waved and walked on by while I made little pissy bumps at Bell. Most people shake me right off when they start getting splashed on about liking little boys, but Doggy, he didn't say we were friends or nothing, but he didn't give me no Miami howdy, neither, which is to say I didn't find myself floating in the Bermuda Triangle with my ass pulled down around my ankles, by which I mean he wasn't ashamed to be seen with me on the street, which don't sound like a six-minute orgasm to you but to me it was like a breeze in August, I didn't ask for it and I don't trust it to last but as long as it's there I'm going to like it.

How I finally got to meet Jesse H. was dervish, the best I ever thought of. Which made me wonder why I never thought of it before, except that I never before had Dogwalker like a parrot saying "Stupid idea" every time I thought of something. By the time I finally got a plan that he didn't say "stupid idea," I was almost drowned in the deepest lightholes of my lucidity. I mean I was going at a hundred watts by the time I satisfied him.

First we found out who did babysitting for them when Jesse H. and Mrs. Jesse went out on the town (which for Nice People in G-boro means walking around the mall wishing there was something to do and then taking a piss in the public john). They had two regular teenage girls who usually came over and ignored their

children for a fee, but when these darlettes were other-wise engaged, which meant they had a contract to get squeezed and poked by some half-zipped boy in exchange for a hambuger and a vid, they called upon Mother Hubbard's Homecare Hotline. So I most carefully assinuated myself into Mother Hubbard's estimable organization by passing myself off as a lamentably prepubic fourteenyear-old, specializing in the northwest section of town and on into the county. All this took a week, but Walker was in no hurry. Take the time to do it right, he said, if we hurry somebody's going to notice the blur of motion and look our way and just by looking at us they'll undo us. A horizontal mind that boy had.

Came a most delicious night when the Hunts went out to play, and both their diddle-girls were busy being squeezed most delectably (and didn't we have a lovely time persuading two toddle-boys to do the squeezing that very night). This news came to Mr. and Mrs. Jesse at the very last minute, and they had no choice but to call Mother Hubbard's, and isn't it lovely that just a half hour before, sweet little Stevie Queen, being moi, called in and said that he was available for baby-stomping after all. Ein and ein made zwei, and there I was being dropped off by a Mother Hubbard driver at the door of the Jesse Hunt house, whereupon I not only got to look upon the beatific face of Mr. Fed himself, I also got to have my dear head patted by Mrs. Fed, and then had the privilege of preparing little snacks for fussy Fed Jr. and foul-mouthed Fedene, the five-year-old and the three-year-old, while Microfed, the one-year-old (not yet human and, if I am any judge of character, not likely to live long enough to become such) sprayed uric acid in my face while I was diapering him. A good time was had by all.

Because of my heroic efforts, the small creatures were in their truckle beds quite early, and being a most fastidious baby-tucker, I browsed the house looking for burglars and stumbling, quite by chance, upon the most useful information about the beakrat whose secret self-chosen name I was trying to learn. For one thing, he had set a watchful hair upon each of his bureau drawers, so that if I had been inclined to steal, he would know that unlawful access of his drawers had been attempted. I learned that he and his wife had separate containers of everything in the bathroom, even when they used the same brand of toothpaste, and it was he, not she, who took care of all their prophylactic activities (and not a moment too soon, thought I, for I had come to know their children). He was not the sort to use lubrificants or little pleasure-giving ribs, either. Only the regulation government-issue hard-as-concrete rubber rafts for him, which suggested to my most pernicious mind that he had almost as much fun between the sheets as me.

I learned all kinds of joyful information, all of it trivial, all of it vital. I never know which of the threads I grasp are going to make connections deep within the lumens of my brightest caves. But I never before had the chance to wander unmolested through a person's own house when searching for his P-word. I saw the notes his children brought home from school, the magazines his family received, and more and more I began to see that Jesse H. Hunt barely touched his family at any point. He stood like a waterbug on the surface of life, without

ever getting his feet wet. He could die, and if nobody tripped over the corpse it would be weeks before they noticed. And yet this was not because he did not care. It was because he was so very very careful. He examined everything but through the wrong end of the microscope, so that it all became very small and far away. I was a sad little boy by the end of that night, and I whispered to Microfed that he should practice pissing in male faces, because that's the only way he would ever sink a hook into his daddy's face.

"What if he wants to take you home?" Dogwalker asked me, and I said, "No way he would, nobody does that," but Dogwalker made sure I had a place to go'all the same, and sure enough, it was Doggy who got voltage and me who went limp. I ended up riding in a beak-rat buggy, a genuine made-in-America rattletrap station wagon, and he took me to the for-sale house where Mama Pimple was waiting crossly for me and made Mr. Hunt go away because he kept me out too late. Then when the door was closed Mama Pimple giggled her gig and chuckled her chuck, and Walker himself wandered out of the back room and said, "That's one less favor you owe me, Mama Pimple," and she said, "No, my dear boy-oh, that's one more favor you owe me" and then they kissed a deep passionate kiss if you can believe it. Did you imagine anybody ever kissed Mama Pimple that way? Dogwalker is a boyful of shocks.

"Did you get all you needed?" he asks me.

"I have P-words dancing upward," says I, "and I'll have a name for you tomorrow in my sleep."

"Hold onto it and don't tell me," says Dogwalker. "I don't want to hear a name until after we have his finger."

That magical day was only hours away, because the girl-- whose name I never knew and whose face I never saw-- was to cast her spell over Mr. Fed the very next day. As Dogwalker said, this was no job for lingeree. The girl did not dress pretty and pretended to be lacking in the social graces, but she was a good little clerical who was going through a most distressing period in her private life, because she had undergone a premature hysterectomy, poor lass, or so she told Mr. Fed, and here she was losing her womanhood and she had never really felt like a woman at all. But he was so kind to her, for weeks he had been so kind, and Dogwalker told me afterward how he locked the door of his office for just a few minutes, and held her and kissed her to make her feel womanly, and once his fingers had all made their little impressions on the thin electrified plastic microcoating all over her lovely naked back and breasts, she began to cry and most gratefully informed him that she did not want him to be unfaithful to his wife for her sake, that he had already given her such a much of a lovely gift by being so kind and understanding, and she felt better thinking that a man like him could bear to touch her knowing she was defemmed inside, and now she thought she had the confidence to go on. A very convincing act, and one calculated to get his

hot naked handprints with out giving him a crisis of conscience that might change his face and give him a whole new set of possible Ps.

The microsheet got all his fingers from several angles, and so Walker was able to dummy out a finger mask for our inside man within a single night. Right index. I looked at it most skeptically, I fear, because I had my doubts already dancing in the little lightpoints of my inmost mind. "Just one finger?"

"All we get is one shot," said Dogwalker. "One single try."

"But if he makes a mistake, if my first password isn't right, then he could use the middle finger on the second try."

"Tell me, my vertical pricket, whether you think Jesse H. Hunt is the sort of burr oak rat who makes mistakes?"

To which I had to answer that he was not, and yet I had my misgivings and my misgivings all had to do with needing a second finger, and yet I am vertical, not horizontal, which means that I can see the present as deep as you please but the future's not mine to see, que sera, sera.

From what Doggy told me, I tried to imagine Mr. Fed's reaction to this nubile flesh that he had pressed. If he had poked as well as peeked, I think it would have changed his P-word, but when she told him that she would not want to compromise his uncompromising virtue, it reinforced him as a most regular or even regulation fellow and his name remained pronouncedly the same, and his P-word also did not change.

"InvictusXYZrwr," quoth I, to Dogwalker, for that was his veritable password, I knew it with more certainty than I had ever had before.

"Where in hell did you come up with that?" says he.

"If I knew how I did it, Walker, I'd never miss at all," says I. "I don't even know if it's in the goo or in the zoo. All the facts go down, and it all gets mixed around, and up come all these dancing P-words, little pieces of P."

"Yeah, but you don't just make it up, what does it mean?"

"Invictus is an old poem in a frame stuck in his bureau drawer, which his mama gave him when he was still a little fed-to-be. XYZ is his idea of randomizing, and rwr is the first U.S. President that he admired. I don't know why he chose these words now. Six weeks ago he was using a different P-word with a lot of numbers in it, and six weeks from now he'll change again, but right now--"

"Sixty percent sure?" asked Doggy.

"I give no percents this time," says I. "I've never roamed through the bathroom of my subject before. But this or give me an assectomy, I've never been more sure."

Now that he had the P-word, the inside guy began to wear his magic finger every day, looking for chance to be alone in Mr. Fed's office. He had already created the preliminary files, like any routine green card requests, and buried them within his work area.

All he needed was to go in, sign on as Mr. Fed, and then if the system accepted his name and P-word and finger, he could call up the files, approve them, and be gone within a minute. But he had to have that minute.

And on that wonderful magical day he had it. Mr. Fed had a meeting and his secretary sprung a leak a day early, and in went Inside Man with a perfectly legitimate note to leave for Hunt. He sat before the terminal, typed name and P-word and laid down his phony finger, and the machine spread wide its lovely legs and bid him enter. He had the files processed in forty seconds, laying down his finger for each green, then signed off and went on out. No sign, no sound that anything was wrong. As sweet as summertime, as smooth as ice, and all we had to do was sit and wait for green cards to come in the mail.

"Who you going to sell them to?" says I.

"I offer them to no one till I have clean greens in my hand," says he. Because Dogwalker is careful. What happened was not because he was not careful.

Every day we walked to the ten places where the envelopes were supposed to come. We knew they wouldn't be there for a week-- the wheels of government grind exceeding slow, for good or ill. Every day we checked with Inside Man, whose name and face I have already given you, much good it will do, since both are no doubt different by now. He told us every time that all was the same, nothing was changed, and he was telling the truth, for the fed was most lugubrious and palatial and gave no leaks that anything was wrong. Even Mr. Hunt himself did not know that aught was amiss in his little kingdom.

Yet even with no sign that I could name, I was jumpy every morning and sleepless every night. "You walk like you got to use the toilet," says Walker to me, and it is verily so. Something is wrong, I say to myself, something is most deeply wrong, but I cannot find the name for it even though I know and so I say nothing or I lie to myself and try to invent a reason for my fear. "It's my big chance," says I. "To be twenty percent of rich."

"Rich," says he, "not just a fifth."

"Then you'll be double rich."

And he just grins at me, being the strong and silent type.

"But then-- why don't you sell nine," says I, "and keep the other green? Then you'll have the money to pay for it, and the green to go where you want in all the world."

But he just laughs at me and says, "Silly boy, my dear sweet pinheaded lightbrained little friend. If someone sees a pimp like me passing a green, he'll tell a fed, because he'll know there's been a mistake. Greens don't go to boys like me."

"But you won't be dressed like a pimp," says I, "and you won't stay in pimp hotels."

"I'm a low-class pimp," he says again, "and so however I dress that day, that's just the way pimps dress. And whatever hotel I go to, that's a low-class pimp hotel until I leave."

"Pimping isn't some disease," says I. "It isn't in your gonads and it isn't in your genes. If your daddy was a Kroc and your mama was an lacocca, you wouldn't be a pimp."

"The hell I wouldn't," says he. "I'd just be a high-class pimp, like my mama and my daddy. Who do you think gets green cards? You can't sell no virgins on the street."

I thought that he was wrong and I still do. If anybody could go from low to high in a week, it's Dogwalker. He could be anything and do anything, and that's the truth. Or almost anything. If he could do anything then his story would have a different ending. But it was not his fault. Unless you blame pigs because they can't fly. I was the vertical one, wasn't I? I should have named my suspicions and we wouldn't have passed those greens.

I held them in my hands, there in his little room, all ten of them when he spilled them on the bed. To celebrate he jumped up so high he smacked his head on the ceiling again and again, which made them ceiling tiles dance and flip over and spill dust all over the room. "I flashed just one, a single one," says he, "and a cool million was what he said, and then I said what if ten? And he laughs and says fill in the check yourself. "

"We should test them," says I.

"We can't test them," he says. "The only way to test it is to use it, and if you use it then your print and face are in its memory forever and so we could never sell it."

"Then sell one, and make sure it's clean."

"A package deal," he says. "If I sell one, and they think I got more by I'm holding out to raise the price, then I may not live to collect for the other nine, because I might have an accident and lose these little babies. I sell all ten tonight at once, and then I'm out of the green card business for life."

But more than ever that night I am afraid, he's out selling those greens to those sweet gentlebodies who are commonly referred to as Organic Crime, and there I am on his bed, shivering and dreaming because I know that something will go most deeply wrong but I still don't know what and I still don't know why. I keep telling myself, You're only afraid because nothing could ever go so right for you, you can't believe that anything could ever make you rich and safe. I say this stuff so much that I believe that I believe it, but I don't really, not down deep, and so I shiver again and finally I cry, because after all my body still believes I'm nine, and nine-year-olds have tear ducts very easy of access, no password required.

Well he comes in late that night, and I'm asleep he thinks. And so he walks quiet instead of dancing, but I can hear the dancing in his little sounds, I know he has the money all safely in the bank, and so when he leans over to make sure if I'm asleep, I say, "Could I borrow a hundred thou?"

So he slaps me and he laughs and dances and sings, and I try to go along you bet I do, I know I should be happy, but then at the end he says, "You just can't take it, can you? You just can't handle it," and then I cry all over again, and he just puts his arm around me like a movie dad and gives me play punhes on the head and says, "I'm gonna marry me a wife, I am, maybe even Mama Pimple herself, and we'll adopt you and have a little Spielberg family in Summerfield, with a riding mower on a real grass lawn."

"I'm older than you or Mama Pimple," says I, but he just laughs. Laughs and hugs me until he thinks that I'm all right. Don't go home, he says to me that night, but home I got to go, because I know I'll cry again, from fear or something anyway, and I don't want him to think his cure wasn't permanent. "No thanks," says I, but he just laughs at me. "Stay here and cry all you want to, Goo Boy, but don't go home tonight. I don't want to be alone tonight, and sure as hell you don't either." And so I slept between his sheets, like with a brother, him punching and tickling and pinching and telling dirty jokes about his whores, the most good and natural night I spent in all my life, with a true friend, which I know you don't believe, snickering and nickering and ickering your filthy little thoughts, there was no holes plugged that night because nobody was out to take pleasure from nobody else, just Dogwalker being happy and wanting me not to be so sad. And after he was asleep, I wanted so bad to know who it was he sold them to, so I could call them up and say, "Don't use those greens, cause they aren't clean. I don't know how, I don't know why, but the feds are onto this, I know they are, and if you use those cards they'll nail your fingers to your face."

But if I called would they believe me? They were careful too. Why else did it take a week? They had one of their nothing goons use a card to make sure it had no squeaks or leaks, and it came up clean. Only then did they give the cards to seven big boys, with two held in reserve. Even Organic Crime, the All-seeing Eye, passed those cards same as we did.

I think maybe Dogwalker was a little bit vertical too. I think he knew same as me that something was wrong with this. That's why he kept checking back with the inside man, cause he didn't trust how good it was. That's why he didn't spend any of his share. We'd sit there eating the same old schlock, out of his cut from some leg job or my piece from a data wipe, and every now and then held say, "Rich man's food sure tastes good." Or maybe even though he wasn't vertical he still thought maybe I was right when I thought something was wrong. Whatever he thought, though, it just kept getting worse and worse for me, until the morning when we went to see the inside man and the inside man was gone.

Gone clean. Gone like he never existed. His apartment for rent, cleaned out floor to ceiling. A phone call to the fed, and he was on vacation, which meant they had him, he wasn't just moved to another house with his newfound wealth. We stood there in his empty place, his shabby empty hovel that was ten times better than anywhere we ever lived, and Doggy says to me, real quiet, he says, "What was it? What did I do wrong? I thought I was like Hunt, I thought I never made a single mistake in this job, in this one job."

And that was it, right then I knew. Not a week before, not when it would do any good. Right then I finally knew it all, knew what Hunt had done. Jesse Hunt never made mistakes. But he was also so paranoid that he haired his bureau to see if the babysitter stole from him. So even though he would never arcidentally enter the wrong P-word, he was just the kind who would do it on purpose. "He double-fingered every time," I says to Dog. "He's so danm careful he does his password wrong the first time every time, and then comes in on his second finger."

"So one time he comes in on the first try, so what?" He says this because he doesn't know computers like I do, being half-glass myself.

"The system knew the pattern, that's what. Jesse H. is so precise he never changed a bit, so when we came in on the first try, that set off alarms. It's my fault, Dog, I knew how crazy paranoidical he is, I knew that something was wrong, but not till this minute I didn't know what it was. I should have known it when I got his password, I should have known, I'm sorry, you never should have

gotten me into this, I'm sorry, you should have listened to me when I told you something was wrong, I should have known, I'm sorry."

What I done to Doggy that I never meant to do. What I done to him! Anytime, I could have thought of it, it was all there inside my glassy little head, but no, I didn't think of it till after it was way too late. And maybe it's because I didn't want to think of it, maybe it's because I really wanted to be wrong about the green cards, but however it flew, I did what I do, which is to say I'm not the pontiff in his fancy chair, by which I mean I can't be smarter than myself.

Right away he called the gentlebens of Ossified Crime to warn them, but I was already plugged into the library sucking news as fast as I could and so I knew it wouldn't do no good, cause they got all seven of the big boys and their nitwit taster, too, locked up good and tight for card fraud.

And what they said on the phone to Dogwalker made things real clear. "We're dead," says Doggy.

"Give them time to cool," says I.

"They'll never cool," says he. "There's no chance they'll never forgive this even if they know the whole truth, because look at the names they gave the cards to, it's like they got them for their biggest boys on the borderline, the habibs who bribe presidents of little countries and rake off cash from octopods like Shell and ITT and every now and then kill somebody and walk away clean. Now they're sitting there in jail with the whole life story of the organization in their brains, so they don't care if we meant to do it or not. They're hurting, and the only way they know to make the hurt go away is to pass it on to somebody else. And that's us. They want to make us hurt, and hurt real bad, and for a long long time."

I never saw Dog so scared. That's the only reason we went to the feds ourselves. We didn't ever want to stool, but we needed their protection plan, it was our only hope. So we offered to testify how we did it, not even for immunity, just so they'd change our faces and put us in a safe jail somewhere to work off the sentence and come out alive, you know? That's all we wanted.

But the feds, they laughed at us. They had the inside guy, see, and he was going to get immunity for testifying. "We don't need you," they says to us, "and we don't care if you go to jail or not. It was the big guys we wanted."

"If you let us walk," says Doggy, "then they'll think we set them up."

"Make us laugh," says the feds. "Us work with street poots like you? They know that we don't stoop so low."

"They bought from us," says Doggy. "If we're big enough for them, we're big enough for the dongs."

"Do you believe this?" says one fed to his identical junior officer. "These jollies are begging us to take them into jail. Well listen tight, my jolly boys, maybe we don't want to add you to the taxpayers' expense account, did you think of that? Besides, all we'd give you is time, but on the street, those boys will give you time and a half, and it won't cost us a dime."

So what could we do? Doggy just looks like somebody sucked out six pints, he's so white. On the way out of the fedhouse, he says, "Now we're going to find out what it's like to die."

And I says to him, "Walker, they stuck no gun in your mouth yet, they shove no shiv in your eye. We still breathing, we got legs, so let's walk out of here."

"Walk!" he says. "You walk out of G-boro, glasshead, and you bump into trees."

"So what?" says I. "I can plug in and pull out all the data we want about how to live in the woods. Lots of empty land out there. Where do you think the marijuana grows?"

"I'm a city boy," he says. "I'm a city boy." Now we're standing out in front, and he's looking around. "In the city I got a chance-- I know the city."

"Maybe in New York or Dallas," says I, "but G-boro's just too small, not even half a million people, you can't lose yourself deep enough here."

"Yeah well," he says, still looking around. "It's none of your business now anyway, Goo Boy. They aren't blaming you, they're blaming me."

"But it's my fault," says I, "and I'm staying with you to tell them so."

"You think they're going to stop and listen?" says he.

"I'll let them shoot me up with speakeasy so they know I'm telling the truth."

"It's nobody's fault" says he. "And I don't give a twelve-inch poker whose fault it is anyway. You're clean, but if you stay'with me you'll get all muddy, too. I don't need you around, and you sure as hell don't need me. Job's over. Done. Get lost."

But I couldn't do that. The same way he couldn't go on walking dogs, I couldn't just run off and leave him to eat my mistake. "They know I was your P-word man," says I. "They'll be after me, too."

"Maybe for a while, Goo Boy. But you transfer your twenty percent into Bobby Joe's Face Shop, so they aren't looking for you to get a refund, and then stay quiet for a week and they'll forget all about you."

He's right but I don't dare. "I was in for twenty percent of rich," says I. "So I'm in for fifty percent of trouble."

All of a sudden he sees what he's looking for. "There they are, Goo Boy, the dorks they sent to hit me. In that Mercedes." I look but all I see are electrics. Then his hand is on my back and he gives me a shove that takes me right off the portico and into the bushes, and by the time I crawl out, Doggy's nowhere in sight. For about a minute I'm pissed about getting scratched up in the plants, until I realize he was getting me out of the way, so I wouldn't get shot down or hacked up or lased out, whatever it is they planned to do to him to get even.

I was safe enough, right? I should've walked away, I should've ducked right out of the city. I didn't even have to refund the money. I had enough to go clear out of the country and live the rest of my life where even Occipital Crime couldn't find me.

And I thought about it. I stayed the night in Mama Pimple's flophouse because I knew somebody would be watching my own place. All that night I thought about places I could go. Australia. New Zealand. Or even a foreign place, I could afford a good vocabulary crystal so picking up a new language would be easy.

But in the morning I couldn't do it. Mama Pimple didn't exactly ask me but she looked so worried and all I could say was, "He pushed me into the bushes and I don't know where he is."

And she just nods at me and goes back to fixing breakfast. Her hands are shaking she's so upset. Because she knows that Dogwalker doesn't stand a chance against Orphan Crime.

"I'm sorry," says I.

"What can you do?" she says. "When they want you, they get you. If the feds don't give you a new face, you can't hide."

"What if they didn't want him?" says I.

She laughs at me. "The story's all over the street. The arrests were in the news, and now everybody knows the big boys are looking for Walker. They want him so bad the whole street can smell it."

"What if they knew it wasn't his fault?" says I. "What if they knew it was an accident? A mistake?"

Then Mama Pimple squints at me-- not many people can tell when she's squinting, but I can-- and she says, "Only one boy can tell them that so they'll believe it."

"Sure, I know," says I.

"And if that boy walks in and says, Let me tell you why you don't want to hurt my friend Dogwalker--"

"Nobody said life was safe," I says. "Besides, what could they do to me that's worse than what already happened to me when I was nine?"

She comes over and just puts her hand on my head, just lets her hand lie there for a few minutes, and I know what I've got to do.

So I did it. Went to Fat Jack's and told him I wanted to talk to junior Mint about Dogwalker, and it wasn't thirty seconds before I was hustled on out into the alley and driven somewhere with my face mashed into the floor of the car so I couldn't tell where it was. Idiots didn't know that somebody as vertical as me can tell the number of wheel revolutions and the exact trajectory of every curve. I could've drawn a freehand map of where they took me. But if I let them know that, I'd never come home, and since there was a good chance I'd end up dosed with speak easy, I went ahead and erased the memory. Good thing I did-- that was the first thing they asked me as soon as they had the drug in me.

Gave me a grown-up dose, they did, so I practically told them my whole life story and my opinion of them and everybody and everything else, so the whole session took hours, felt like forever, but at the end they knew, they absolutely knew that Dogwalker was straight with them, and when it was over and I was coming up so I had some control over what I said, I asked them, I begged them, Let Dogwalker live. just let him go. He'll give back the money, and I'll give back mine, just let him go.

"OK," says the guy.

I didn't believe it.

"No, you can believe me, we'll let him go."

"You got him?"

"Picked him up before you even came in. It wasn't hard."

"And you didn't kill him?"

"Kill him? We had to get the money back first, didn't we, so we needed him alive till morning, and then you came in, and your little story changed our minds, it really did, you made us feel all sloppy and sorry for that poor old pimp."

For a few seconds there I actually believed that it was going to be all right. But then I knew from the way they looked, from the way they acted, I knew the same way I know about passwords.

They brought in Dogwalker and handed me a book. Dogwalker was very quiet and stiff and he didn't look like he recognized me at all. I didn't even have to look at the book to know what it was. They scooped out his brain and replaced it with glass, like me only way over the line, way way over, there was nothing of Dogwalker left inside his head, just glass pipe and goo. The book was a User's Manual, with all the instructions about how to program him and control him.

I looked at him and he was Dogwalker, the same face, the same hair, everything. Then he moved or talked and he was dead, he was somebody else living in Dogwalker's body. And I says to them, "Why? Why didn't you just kill him, if you were going to do this?"

"This one was too big," says the guy. "Everybody in G-boro knew what happened, everybody in the whole country, everybody in the world. Even if it was a mistake, we couldn't let it go. No hard feelings, Goo Boy. He is alive. And so are you. And you both stay that way, as long as you follow a few simple rules. Since he's over the line, he has to have an owner, and you're it. You can use him however you want-- rent out data storage, pimp him as a jig or a jaw-- but he stays with you always. Every day, he's on the street here in G-boro, so we can bring people here and show them what happens to boys who make mistakes. You can even keep your cut from the job, so you don't have to scramble at all if you don't want to. That's how much we like you, Goo Boy. But if he leaves this town or doesn't come out, even one single solitary day, you'll be very sorry for the last six hours of your life. Do you understand?"

I understood. I took him with me. I bought this place, these clothes, and that's how it's been ever since. That's why we go out on the street every day. I read the whole manual, and I figure there's maybe ten percent of Dogwalker left inside. The part that's Dogwalker can't ever get to the surface, can't even talk or move or anything like that, can't ever remernber or even consciously think. But maybe he can still wander around inside what used to be his head, maybe he can sample the data stored in all that goo. Maybe someday he'll even run across this story and he'll know what happened to him, and he'll know that I tried to save him.

In the meantime this is my last will and testament. See, I have us doing all kinds of research on Orgasmic Crime, so that someday I'll know enough to reach inside the system and unplug it. Unplug it all, and make those bastards lose everything the way they took everything away from Dogwalker. Trouble is, some places there ain't no way to look without leaving tracks. Goo is as goo do, I always say. I'll find out I'm not as good as I think I am when somebody comes along and puts a hot steel putz in my face. Knock my brains out when it comes. But there's this, lying in a few hundred places in the system. Three days after I don't lay down my code in a certain program in a certain place, this story pops into view. The fact you're reading this means I'm dead.

Or it means I paid them back, and so I quit suppressing this because I don't care anymore. So maybe this is my swan song, and maybe this is my victory song. You'll never know, will you, mate?

But you'll wonder. I like that. You wondering about us, whoever you are, you thinking about old Goo Boy and Dogwalker, you guessing whether the fangs who scooped Doggy's skull and turned him into self-propelled property paid for it down to the very last delicious little drop.

And in the meantime, I've got this goo machine to take care of. Only ten percent a man, he is, but then I'm only forty percent myself. All added up together we make only half a human. But that's the half that counts. That's the half that still wants things. The goo in me and the goo in him's all just light pipes and electricity. Data without desire. Lightspeed trash. But I have some desires left, just a few, and maybe so does Dogwalker, even fewer. And we'll get what we want. Every speck. Every sparkle. Believe it.

## EUMENIDES IN THE FOURTH FLOOR LAVATORY Orson Scott Card

Living in a fourth-floor walkup was part of his revenge, as if to say to Alice, "Throw me out of the house, will you? Then I'll live in squalor in a Bronx tenement, where the toilet is shared by four apartments! My shirts will go unironed, my tie will be perpetually awry. See what you've done to me?"

But when he told Alice about the apartment, she only laughed bitterly and said, "Not anymore, Howard. I won't play those games with you. You win every damn time."

She pretended not to care about him anymore, but Howard knew better. He knew people, knew what they wanted, and Alice wanted him. It was his strongest card in their relationship-- that she wanted him more than he wanted her. He thought of this often: at work in the offices of Humboldt and Breinhardt, Designers; at lunch in a cheap lunchroom (part of the punishment); on the subway home to his tenement (Alice had kept the Lincoln Continental). He thought and thought about how much she wanted him. But he kept remembering what she had said the day she threw him out: If you ever come near Rhiannon again I'll kill you. He could not remember why she had said that. Could not remember and did not try to remember because that line of thinking made him uncomfortable and one thing Howard insisted on being was comfortable with himself. Other people could spend hours and days of their lives chasing after some accommodation with themselves -- but Howard was accommodated. Well adjusted. At ease. I'm OK, I'm OK, I'm OK. Hell with you. "If you let them make you feel uncomfortable," Howard would often say, "you give them a handle on you and they can run your life." Howard could find other people's handles, but they could never find Howard's.

It was not yet winter but cold as hell at three A.M. when Howard got home from Stu's party. A must attend party, if you wished to get ahead at Humboldt and Breinhardt. Stu's ugly wife tried to be tempting, but Howard had played innocent and made her feel so uncomfortable that she dropped the matter. Howard paid careful attention to office gossip and knew that several earlier departures from the company had got caught with, so to speak, their pants down. Not that Howard's pants were an impenetrable barrier. He got Dolores from the front office into the bedroom and accused her of making life miserable for him. "In little ways," he insisted. "I know you don't mean to, but you've got to stop."

"What ways?" Dolores asked, incredulous yet (because she honestly tried to make other people happy) uncomfortable.

"Surely you knew how attracted I am to you."

"No. That hasn't-- that hasn't even crossed my mind."

Howard looked tongue-tied, embarrassed. He actually was neither. "Then-- well, then, I was-- I was wrong, I'm sorry, I thought you were doing it deliberately--"

"Doing what?

"Snub-- snubbing me-- never mind, it sounds adolescent, just little things, hell, Dolores, I had a stupid schoolboy crush--"

"Howard, I didn't even know I was hurting you."

"God, how insensitive," Howard said, sounding even more hurt.

"Oh, Howard, do I mean that much to you?"

Howard made a little whimpering noise that meant everything she wanted it to mean. She looked uncomfortable. She'd do anything to get back to feeling right with herself again. She was so uncomfortable that they spent a rather nice half hour making each other feel comfortable again. No one else in the office had been able to get to Dolores. But Howard could get to anybody.

He walked up the stairs to his apartment feeling very, very satisfied. Don't need you, Alice, he said to himself. Don't need nobody, and nobody's who I've got. He was still mumbling the little ditty to himself as he went into the communal bathroom and turned on the light.

He heard a gurgling sound from the toilet stall, a hissing sound. Had someone been in there with the light off? Howard went into the toilet stall and saw nobody. Then looked closer and saw a baby, probably about two months old, lying in the toilet bowl. Its nose and eyes were barely above the water; it looked terrified; its legs and hips and stomach were down the drain. Someone had obviously hoped to kill it by drowning-- it was inconceivable to Howard that anyone could be so moronic as to think it would fit down the drain.

For a moment he thought of leaving it there, with the big-city temptation to mind one's own business even when to do so would be an atrocity. Saving this baby would mean inconvenience: calling the police, taking care of the child in his apartment, perhaps even headlines, certainly a night of filling out reports. Howard was tired. Howard wanted to go to bed.

But he remembered Alice saying, "You aren't even human, Howard. You're a goddam selfish monster." I am not a monster, he answered silently, and reached down into the toilet bowl to pull the child out.

The baby was firmly jammed in-- whoever had tried to kill it had meant to catch it tight. Howard felt a brief surge of genuine indignation that anyone could think to solve his problems by killing an innocent child. But thinking of crimes committed on children was something Howard was determined not to do, and besides, at that moment he suddenly acquired other things to think about.

As the child clutched at Howard's arm, he noticed the baby's fingers were fused together into flipperlike flaps of bone and skin at the end of the arm. Yet the flippers gripped his arms with an unusual strength as, with two hands deep in the toilet bowl, Howard tried to pull the baby free.

At last, with a gush, the child came up and the water finished its flushing action. The legs, too, were fused into a single limb that was hideously twisted at the end. The child was male; the genitals, larger than normal, were skewed off to one side. And Howard noticed that where the feet should be were two more flippers, and near the tips were red spots that looked like putrefying sores. The child cried, a savage mewling that reminded Howard of a dog he had seen in its death throes.

(Howard refused to be reminded that it had been he who killed the dog by throwing it out in the street in front of a passing car, just to watch the driver swerve; the driver hadn't swerved.)

Even the hideously deformed have a right to live, Howard thought, but now, holding the child in his arms, he felt a revulsion that translated into sympathy for whoever, probably the parents, had tripd to kill the creature. The child shifted its grip on him, and where the flippers had been Howard felt a sharp, stinging pain that quickly turned to agony as it was exposed to the air. Several huge, gaping sores on his arm were already running with blood and pus.

It took a moment for Howard to connect the sores with the child, and by then the leg flippers were already pressed against his stomach, and the arm flippers already gripped his chest. The sores on the child's flippers were not sores; they were powerful suction devices that gripped Howard's skin so tightly that it ripped away when the contact was broken. He tried to pry the child off, but no sooner was one flipper free than it found a new place to hold even as Howard struggled to break the grip of another.

What had begun as an act of charity had now become an intense struggle. This was not a child, Howard realized. Children could not hang on so tightly, and the creature had teeth that snapped at his hands and arms whenever they came near enough. A human face, certainly, but not a human being. Howard threw himself against the wall, hoping to stun the creature so it would drop away. It only clung tighter, and the sores where it hung on him hurt more. But at last Howard pried and scraped it off by levering it against the edge of the toilet stall. It

dropped to the ground, and Howard backed quickly away, on fire with the pain of a dozen or more stinging wounds.

It had to be a nightmare. In the middle of the night, in a bathroom lighted by a single bulb, with a travesty of humanity writhing on the floor, Howard could not believe that it had any reality.

Could it be a mutation that had somehow lived? Yet the thing had far more purpose, far more control of its body than any human infant. The baby slithered across the floor as Howard, in pain from the wounds on his body, watched in a panic of indecision. The baby reached the wall and cast a flipper onto it. The suction held, and the baby began to inch its way straight up the wall. As it climbed, it defecated, a thin drool of green tracing down the wall behind it. Howard looked at the slime following the infant up the wall, looked at the puscovered sores on his arms.

What if the animal, whatever it was, did not die soon of its terrible deformity? What if it lived? What if it were found, taken to a hospital, cared for? What if it became an adult?

It reached the ceiling and made the turn, clinging tightly to the plaster, not falling off as it hung upside down and inched across toward the fight bulb.

The thing was trying to get directly over Howard, and the defecation was still dripping. Loathing overcame fear, and Howard reached up, took hold of the baby from the back, and, using his full weight, was finally able to pry it off the ceiling. It writhed and twisted in his hands, trying to get the suction-cups on him, but Howard resisted with all his strength and was able to get the baby, this time headfirst, into the toilet bowl. He held it there until the bubbles stopped and it was blue. Then he went back to his apartment for a knife. Whatever the creature was, it had to disappear from the face of the earth. It had to die, and there had to be no sign left that could hint that Howard had killed it.

He found the knife quickly, but paused for a few moments to put something on his wounds. They stung bitterly, but in a while they felt better. Howard took off his shirt; thought a moment and took off all his clothes, then put on his bathrobe and took a towel With him as he returned to the bathroom. He didn't want to get any blood on his clothes.

But when he got to the bathroom, the child was iaot in the toilet. Howard was alarmed. Had someone found it drowning? Had they, perhaps, seen him leaving the bathroom-- or worse, returning with his knife? He looked around the bathroom. There was nothing. He stepped back into the hall. No one. He stood a moment in the doorway, wondering what could have happened.

Then a weight dropped onto his head and shoulders from above, and he felt the suction flippers tugging at his face, at his head. He ahnost screamed. But he didn't want to arouse anyone. Somehow the child had not drowned after all, had crawled out of the toilet, and had waited over the door for Howard to return.

Once again the struggle resumed, and once again Howard pried the flippers away with the help of the toilet stall, though this time he was hampered by the fact that the child was behind and above him. It was exhausting work. He had to set down the knife so he could use both hands, and another dozen wounds stung bitterly by the time he had the child on the floor. As long as the child lay on its stomach, Howard could seize it from behind. He took it by the neck with one hand and picked up the knife with the other. He carried both to the toilet.

He had to flush twice to handle the flow of blood and pus. Howard wondered if the child was infected with some disease-- the white fluid was thick and at least as great in volume as the blood. Then he flushed seven more times to take the pieces of the creature down the drain. Even after death, the suction pads clung tightly to the porcelain; Howard pried them off with the knife.

Eventually, the child was completely gone. Howard was panting with the exertion, nauseated at the stench and horror of what he had done. He remembered the smell of his dog's guts after the car hit it, and he threw up everything he had eaten at the party. Got the party out of his system, felt cleaner; took a shower, felt cleaner still. When he was through, he made sure the bathroom showed no sign, of his ordeal.

Then he went to bed.

It wasn't easy to sleep. He was too keyed up. He couldn't take out of his mind the thought that he had committed murder (not murder, not murder, simply the elimination of something too foul to be alive). He tried thinking of a dozen, a hundred other things. Projects at work-- but the designs kept showing flippers. His children-- but their faces turned to the intense face of the struggling monster he had killed. Alice-- ah, but Alice was harder to think of than the creature.

At last he slept, and dreamed, and in his dream remembered his father, who had died when he was ten. Howard did not remember any of his standard reminiscences. No long walks with his father, no basketball in the driveway, no fishing trips. Those things had happened, but tonight, because of the struggle with the monster, Howard remembered darker things that he had long been able to keep hidden from himself.

"We can't afford to get you a ten-speed bike, Howie. Not until the strike is over."

"I know, Dad. You can't help it." Swallow bravely. "And I don't mind. When all the guys go riding around after school, I'll just stay home and get ahead on my homework."

"Lots of boys don't have ten-speed bikes, Howie."

Howie shrugged, and tumed away to hide the tears in his eyes. "Sure, lot of them. Hey, Dad, don't you worry about me. Howie can take care of himself."

Such courage. Such strength. He had got a ten-speed within a week. In his dream, Howard finally made a connection he had never been able to admit to himself before. His father had a rather elaborate ham radio setup in the garage. But about that time he had become tired of it, he said, and he sold it off and did a lot more work in the yard and looked bored as hell until the strike was over and he went back to work and got killed in an accident in the rolling mill.

Howard's dream ended madly, with him riding piggyback on his father's shoulders as the monster had ridden on him tonight-- and in his hand was a knife, and he was stabbing his father again and again in the throat.

He awoke in early morning light, before his alarm rang, sobbing weakly and whimpering, "I killed him, I killed him, I killed him."

And then he drifted upward out of sleep and saw the time. Six-thirty. "A dream," he said. And the dream had woken him early, too early, with a headache and sore eyes from crying. The pillow was soaked. "A hell of a lousy way to start the day," he mumbled. And, as was his habit, he got up and went to the window and opened the curtain.

On the glass, suction cups clinging tightly, was the child.

It was pressed close, as if by sucking very tightly it would be able to slither through the glass without breaking it. Far below were the honks of early morning traffic, the roar of passing trucks: but the child seemed oblivious to its height far above the street, with no ledge to break its fall. Indeed, there seemed little chance it would fall. The, eyes looked closely, piercingly at Howard.

Howard had been prepared to pretend that the night before had been another terribly realistic nightmare.

He stepped back from the glass, watched the child in fascination. It lifted a flipper, planted it higher, pulled itself up to a new position where it could stare at Howard eye to eye. And then, slowly and methodically, it began beating on the glass with its head.

The landlord was not generous with upkeep on the building. The glass with thin, and Howard knew that the child would not give up until it had broken through the glass so it could get to Howard.

He began to shake. His throat tightened. He was terribly afraid. Last night had been no dream. The fact that the child was here today was proof of that. Yet he had cut the child into small pieces. It could not possibly be alive. The glass shook and rattled with every blow the child's head struck.

The glass slivered in a starburst from where the child had hit it. The creature was coming in. And Howard picked up the room's one chair and threw it at the child, threw it at the window. Glass shattered and the sun dazzled on the fragments as they exploded outward like a glistening halo around the child and the chair.

Howard ran to the window, looked out, looked down and watched as the child landed brutally on the top of a large truck. The body seemed to smear as it hit, and fragments of the chair and shreds of glass danced around the child and bounced down into the street and the sidewalk.

The truck didn't stop moving; it carried the broken body and the shards of glass and the pool of blood on up the street, and Howard ran to the bed, knelt beside it, buried his face in the blanket, and tried to regain control of himself. He had been seen. The people in the street had looked up and seen him in the window. Last night he had gone to great lengths to avoid discovery, but today discovery was unpossible to avoid. He was ruined. And yet he could not, could never have let the child come into the room.

Footsteps on the stairs. Stamping up the corridor. Pounding on the door. "Open up! Hey in there!"

If I'm quiet long enough, they'll go away, he said to himself, knowing it was a lie. He must get up, must answer the door. But he could not bring himself to admit that he. ever had to leave the safety of his bed.

"Hey, you son-of-a-bitch--" The imprecations went on but Howard could not move until, suddenly, it occurred to him that the child could be under the bed, and as he thought of it he could feel the tip of the flipper touching his thigh, stroking and ready to fasten itself.

Howard leaped to his feet and rushed for the door. He flung it wide, for even if it was the police come to arrest him, they could protect him from the monster that was haunting him.

It was not a policeman at the door. It was the man on the first floor who collected rent. "You son-of-a-bitch irresponsible pig-kisser!" the man shouted, his

toupee only approximately in place. "That chair could have hit somebody! That window's expensive! Out! Get out of here, right now, I want you out of this place, I don't care how the hell drunk you are--"

"There was-- there was this thing on the window, this creature-"

The man looked at him coldly, but his eyes danced with anger. No, not anger. Fear. Howard realized the man was afraid of hun.

"This is a decent place," the man said softly. "You can take your creatures and your booze and your pink stinking elephants and that's a hundred bucks for the window, a hundred bucks right now, and you can get out of here in an hour, an hour, you hear? Or I'm calling the police, you hear?"

"I hear." He heard. The man left when Howard counted out five twenties. The man seemed careful to avoid touching Howard's hands, as if Howard had become, somehow, repulsive. Well, he had. To himself, if to no one else. He closed the door as soon as the man was gone. He packed the few belongings he had brought to the apartment in two suitcases and went downstairs and called a cab and rode to work. The cabby looked at him sourly, and wouldn't talk. It was fine with Howard, if only the driver hadn't kept looking at him through the mirror-nervously, as if he was afraid of what Howard might do or try. I won't try anything, Howard said to himself, I'm a decent man. Howard tipped the cabby well and then gave him twenty to take his bags to his house in Queens, where Alice could damn well keep them for a while. Howard was through with the tenement-- that one or any other.

Obviously it had been a nightmare, last night and this morning. The monster was only visible to him, Howard decided. Only the chair and the glass had fallen from the fourth floor, or the manager would have noticed.

Except that the baby had landed on the truck, and might have been real, and might be discovered in New Jersey or Pennsylvania later today.

Couldn't be real. He had killed it last night and it was whole again this morning. A nightmare. I didn't really kill anybody, he insisted. (Except the dog. Except Father, said a new, ugly voice in the back of his mind.)

Work. Draw lines on paper, answer phone calls, dictate letters, keep your mind off your nightmares, off your family, off the mess your life is turning into. "Hell of a good party last night." Yeah, it was, wasn't it? "How are you today, Howard?" Feel fine, Dolores, fine-- thanks to you. "Got the roughs on the IBM thing?" Nearly, nearly. Give me another twenty minutes. "Howard, you don't look well." Had a rough night. The party, you know. He kept drawing on the blotter on his desk instead of going to the drawing table and producing real work. He doodled out faces. Alice's face, looking stern and terrible. The face of Stu's ugly wife. Dolores's face, looking sweet and yielding and stupid. And Rhiannon's face.

But with his daughter Rhiannon, he couldn't stop with the face.

His hand started to tremble when he saw what he had drawn. He ripped the sheet off the blotter, crumpled it, and reached under the desk to drop it in the wastebasket. The basket lurched, and flippers snaked out to seize his hand in an iron gnp.

Howard screamed, tried to pull his hand away. The child came with it, the leg flippers grabbing Howard's right leg. The suction pad stung, bringing back the memory of all the pain last night. He scraped the child off against a filing cabinet, then ran for the door, which was already opening as several of his co-workers tumbled into his office demanding, "What is it! What's wrong! Why did you scream like that!"

Howard led them gingerly over to where the child should be. Nothing. just an overturned wastebasket, Howard's chair capsized on the floor. But Howard's window was open, and he could not remember opening it. "Howard, what is it? Are you tired, Howard? Whats wrong?"

I don't feel well. I don't feel well at all.

Dolores put her arm around him, led him out of the room. "Howard, I'm worried about you."

I'm worried, too.

"Can I take you home? I have my car in the garage downstairs. Can I take you home?"

Where's home? Don't have a home, Dolores.

Eumenides in the Fourth Floor Lavatory

"My home, then. I have an apartment, you need to lie down and rest. Let me take you home."

Dolores's apartment was decorated in early Holly Hobby, and when she put records on the stereo it was old Carpenters and recent Captain and Tennille. Dolores led him to the bed, gently undressed hun, and then, because he reached out to her, undressed herself and made love to him before she went back to work. She was naively eager. She whispered in his ear that he was only the second man she had ever loved, the first in five years. Her inept lovemaking was so sincere it made him want to cry.

When she was gone he did cry, because she thought she meant something to him and she did not.

Why am I crying? he asked himself. Why should I care? It's not my fault she let me get a handle on her...

Sitting on the dresser in a curiously adult posture was the child, carelessly playing with itself as it watched Howard intently. "No," Howard said, pulling himself up to the head of the bed. "You don't exist," he said. "No one's ever seen you but me." The child gave no sign of understanding. It just rolled over and began to slither down the front of the dresser.

Howard reached for his clothes, took them out of the bedroom. He put them on in the living room as he watched the door. Sure enough, the child crept along the carpet to the living room; but Howard was dressed by then, and he left.

He walked the streets for three hours. He was coldly rational at first. Logical. The creature does not eidst. There is no reason to believe in it.

But bit by bit his rationality was worn away by constant flickers of the creature at the edges of his vision. On a bench, peering over the back at him; in a shop window; staring from the cab of a milk truck. Howard walked faster and faster, not caring where he went, trying to keep some intelligent process going on in his mind, and failing utterly as he saw the child, saw it clearly, dangling from a traffic signal.

What made it even worse was that occasionally a passerby, violating the unwritten law that New Yorkers are forbidden to look at each other, would gaze at him, shudder, and look away. A short European-looking woman crossed herself. A group of teenagers looking for trouble weren't looking for him-- they grew silent, let him pass in silence, and in silence watched him out of sight.

They may not be able to see the child, Howard realized, but they see something.

And as he grew less and less coherent in the ramblings of his mind, memories began flashing on and off, his life passing before his eyes like a drowning man is supposed to see, only, he realized, if a drowning man saw this he would gulp at the water, breathe it deeply just to end the visions. They were memories he had been unable to find for years; memories he would never have wanted to find.

His poor, confused mother, who was so eager to be a good parent that she read everything, tried everything. Her precocious son Howard read it, too, and

understood it better. Nothing she tried ever worked. And he accused her several times of being too demanding, of not demanding enough; of not giving him enough love, of drowning him in phony affection; of trying to take over with his friends, of not liking his friends enough. Until he had badgered and tortured the woman until she was timid every time she spoke to him, careful and longwinded and she phrased everything in such a way that it wouldn't offend, and while now and then he made her feel wonderful by giving her a hug and saying, "Have I got a wonderful Mom," there were far more times when he put a patient look on his face and said, "That again, Mom? I thought we went over that years ago." A failure as a parent, that's what you are, he reminded her again and again, though not in so many words, and she nodded and believed and died inside with every contact they had. He got everything he wanted from her.

And Vaughn Robles, who was just a little bit smarter than Howard and Howard wanted very badly to be valedictoriim and so Vaughn and Howard became best friends and Vaughn would do anything for Howard and whenever Vaugim got a better grade than Howard he could not help but notice that Howard was hurt, that Howard wondered if he was really worth anything at all. "Am I really worth anything at all, Vaughn? No matter how well I do, there's always someone ahead Of me, and I guess it's just that before my father died he told me and told me, Howie, be better than your Dad. Be the top. And I promised him I'd be the top but hell, Vaughn, I'm just not cut out for it--" and once he even cried. Vaughn was proud of himself as he sat there and listened to Howard give the valedictory address at high school graduation. What were a few grades, compared to a true friendship? Howard got a scholarship and went away to college and he and Vaughn almost never saw each other again.

And the teacher he provoked into hitting him and losing his job; and the football player who snubbed him and Howard quietly spread the rumor that the fellow was gay and he was ostracized from the team and finally quit; and the beautiful girls he stole from their boyfriends just to prove that he could do it and the friendships he destroyed just because he didn't like being excluded and the marriages he wrecked and the coworkers he undercut and he walked along the street with tears streaming down his face, wondering where all these memories had come from and why, after such a long time in hiding, they had come out now. Yet he knew the answer. The answer was slipping behind doorways, climbing lightpoles as he passed, waving obscene flippers at him from the sidewalk almost under his feet.

And slowly, inexorably, the memories wound their way from the distant past through a hundred tawdry exploitations because he could find people's weak spots without even trying until finally memory came to the one place where he knew it could not, could not ever go.

He remembered Rhiannon.

Born fourteen years ago. Smiled early, walked early, almost never cried. A loving child from the, start, and therefore easy prey for Howard. Oh, Alice was a bitch in her own right-- Howard wasn't the only bad parent in the family. But it was Howard who manipulated Rhiannon most. "Daddy's feelings are hurt, Sweetheart," and Rhiannon's eyes would grow wide, and she'd be sorry, and whatever Daddy wanted, Rhiannon would do. But this was normal, this was part of the pattern, this would have fit easily into all his life before, except for last month.

And even now, after a day of grief at his own life, Howard could not face it. Could not but did. He unwillingly remembered walking by Rhiannon's almostclosed door, seeing just a flash of cloth moving quickly. He opened the door on impulse, just on impulse, as Rhiannon took off her brassiere and looked at herself in the mirror. Howard had never thought of his daughter with desire, not until that moment, but once the desire formed Howard had no strategy, no pattern in his mind to stop him from trying to get what he wanted. He was uncomfortable, and so he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him and Rhiannon knew no way to say no to her father. When Alice opened the door Rhiannon was crying softly, and Alice looked and after a moment Alice screamed and screamed and Howard got up from the bed and tried to smooth it all over but Rhiannon was still crying and Alice was still screaming, kicking at his crotch, beating him, raking at his fate, spitting at him, telling him he was a monster, a monster, until at last he was able to flee the room and the house and, until now, the memory.

He screamed now as he had not screamed then, and threw himself against a plate-glass window, weeping loudly as the blood gushed from a dozen glass cuts on his right arm, which had gone through the window. One large piece of glass stayed embedded in his forearm. He deliberately scraped his arm against the wall to drive the glass deeper. But the pain in his arm was no match for the pain in his mind, and he felt nothing.

They rushed him to the hospital, thinking to save his life, but the doctor was surprised to discover that for all the blood there were only superficial wounds, not dangerous.it all. "I don't know why you didn't reach a vein or an artery," the doctor said. "I think the glass went everywhere it could possibly go without causing any important damage."

After the medical doctor, of course, there was the psychiatrist, but there were many suicidals at the hospital and Howard was not the dangerous kind. "I was insane for a moment, Doctor, that's all. I don't want to die, I didn't want to die then, I'm all right now. You can send me home." And the psychiatrist let him go home. They bandaged his arm. They did not know that his real relief was that nowhere in the hospital did he see the small, naked, child-shaped creature. He had purged himself. He was free. Howard was taken home in an ambulance, and they wheeled him into the house and lifted him from the stretcher to the bed. Through it all Alice hardly a word except to direct them to the bedroom. Howard lay still on the bed as she stood over him, the two of them alone for the first time since he left the house a month ago.

"It was kind of you," Howard said softly, "to let me come back."

"They said there wasn't room enough to keep you, but you needed to be watched and taken care of for a few weeks. So lucky me, I get to watch you." Her voice was a low monotone, but the acid dripped from every word. It stung.

"You were right, Alice," Howard said.

"Right about what? That marrying you was the worst mistake of my life? No, Howard. Meeting you was my worst mistake."

Howard began to cry. Real tears that welled up from places in him that had once been deep but that now rested painfully close to the surface. "I've been a monster, Alice. I haven't had any control over myself. What I did to Rhiannon---Alice, I wanted to die, I wanted to die!"

Alice's face was twisted and bitter. "And I wanted you to, Howard. I have never been so disappointed as when the doctor called and said you'd be all right. You'll never be all right, Howard, you'll always be--"

"Let him be, Mother."

Rhiannon stood in the doorway.

"Don't come in, Rhiannon," Alice said.

Rhiannon came in. "Daddy, it's all right."

"What she means," Alice said, "is that we've checked her and she isn't pregnant. No little monster is going to be born."

Rhiannon didn't look at her mother, just gazed with wide eyes at her father. "You didn't need to-- hurt yourself, Daddy. I forgive you. People lose control sometimes. And it was as much my fault as yours, it really was, you don't need to feel bad, Father."

It was too much for Howard. He cried out, shouted his confession, how he had manipulated her all his life, how he was an utterly selfish and rotten parent, and when it was over Rhiannon came to her father and laid her head on his chest and said, softly, "Father, it's all right. We are who we are. We've done what we've done. But it's all right now. I forgive you."

When Rhiannon left, Alice said, "You don't deserve her."

I know.

"I was going to sleep on the couch, but that would be stupid. Wouldn't it, Howard?"

I deserve to be left alone, like a leper.

"You misunderstand, Howard. I need to stay here to make sure you don't do anything else. To yourself or to anyone."

Yes. Yes, please. I can't be trusted.

"Don't wallow in it, Howard. Don't enjoy it. Don't make yourself even more disgusting than you were before."

All right.

They were drifting off to sleep when Alice said, "Oh, when the doctor called he wondered if I knew what had caused those sores all over your arms and chest."

But Howard was asleep, and didn't hear her. Asleep with no dreams at all, the sleep of peace, the sleep of having been forgiven, of being clean. It hadn't taken that much, after all. Now that it was over, it was easy. He felt as if a great weight had been taken from him.

He felt as if something heavy was lying on his legs. He awoke, sweating even though the room was not hot. He heard breathing. And it was not Alice's lowpitched, slow breath, it was quick and high and hard, as if the breather had been exerting himself.

ltself.

Themselves.

One of them lay across his legs, the flippers plucking at the blanket. The other two lay on either side, their eyes wide and intent, creeping slowly toward where his face emerged from the sheets.

Howard was puzzled. "I thought you'd be gone," he said to the children. "You're supposed to be gone now."

Alice stirred at the sound of his voice, mumbled in her sleep.

He saw more of them sitting in the gloomy corners of the room, another writhing slowly along the top of the dresser, another inching up the wall toward the ceiling.

"I don't need you anymore," he said, his voice oddly high-pitched.

Alice started breathing irregularly, mumbling, "What? What?"

And Howard said nothing more, just lay there in the sheets, watching the creatures carefully but not daring to make a sound for fear Alice would wake up. He was terribly afraid she would wake up and not see the creatures, which would prove, once and for all, that he had lost his mind.

He was even more afraid, however, that when she awoke she would see them. That was the one unbearable thought, yet he thought it continuously as they relentlessly approached with nothing at all in their eyes, not even hate, not even anger, not even contempt. We are with you, they seemed to be saying, we will be with you from now on. We will be with you, Howard, forever.

And Alice rolled over and opened her eyes.

\*Just talk, Mick. Tell us everything. We'll listen.\*

Well to start with I know I was doing terrible things. If you're a halfway decent person, you don't go looking to kill people. Even if you can do it without touching them. Even if you can do it so as nobody even guesses they was murdered, you still got to try not to do it.

\*Who taught you that?\*

Nobody. I mean it wasn't in the books in the Baptist Sunday School-- they spent all their time telling us not to lie or break the sabbath or drink liquor. Never did mention killing. Near as I can figure, the Lord thought killing was pretty smart sometimes, like when Samson done it with a donkey's jaw. A thousand guys dead, but that was okay cause they was Philistines. And lighting foxes' tails on fire. Samson was a sicko, but he still got his pages in the Bible.

I figure Jesus was about the only guy got much space in the Bible telling people not to kill. And even then, there's that story about how the Lord struck down a guy and his wife cause they held back on their offerings to the Christian church. Oh, Lord, the TV preachers did go on about that. No, it wasn't cause I got religion that I figured out not to kill people.

You know what I think it was? I think it was Vondel Cone's elbow. At the Baptist Children's Home in Eden, North Carolina, we played basketball all the time. On a bumpy dirt court, but we figured it was part of the game, never knowing which way the ball would bounce. Those boys in the NBA, they play a sissy game on that flat smooth floor.

We played basketball because there wasn't a lot else to do. Only thing they ever had on TV was the preachers. We got it all cabled in-- Falwell from up in Lynchburg, Jim and Tammy from Charlotte, Jimmy Swaggart looking hot, Ernest Ainglee looking carpeted, Billy Graham looking like God's executive vice-president-- that was all our TV ever showed, so no wonder we lived on the basketball court all year.

Anyway, Vondel Cone wasn't particularly tall and he wasn't particularly good at shooting and on the court nobody was even halfway good at dribbling. But he had elbows. Other guys, when they hit you it was an accident. But when Vondel's elbow met up with your face, he like to pushed your nose out your ear. You can bet we all learned real quick to give him room. He got to take all the shots and get all the rebounds he wanted.

But we got even. We just didn't count his points. We'd call out the score, and any basket he made it was like it never happened. He'd scream and he'd argue and we'd all stand there and nod and agree so he wouldn't punch us out, and then as soon as the next basket was made, we'd call out the score-- still not counting Vondel's points. Drove that boy crazy. He screamed till his eyes bugged out, but nobody ever counted his cheating points.

Vondel died of leukemia at the age of fourteen. You see, I never did like that boy.

But I learned something from him. I learned how unfair it was for somebody to get his way just because he didn't care how much he hurt other people. And when I finally realized that I was just about the most hurtful person in the whole world, I knew then and there that it just wasn't right. I mean, even in the Old Testament, Moses said the punishment should fit the crime. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Even Steven, that's what Old Peleg said before I killed him of prostate cancer. It was when Peleg got took to the hospital that I left the Eden Baptist Children's Home. Cause I wasn't Vondel. I did care how much I hurt folks.

But that doesn't have nothing to do with anything. I don't know what all you want me to talk about.

\*Just talk, Mick. Tell us whatever you want.\*

Well I don't aim to tell you my whole life story. I mean I didn't really start to figure out anything till I got on that bus in Roanoke, and so I can pretty much start there I guess. I remember being careful not to get annoyed when the lady in front of me didn't have the right change for the bus. And I didn't get angry when the bus driver got all snotty and told the lady to get off. It just wasn't worth killing for. That's what I always tell myself when I get mad. It isn't worth killing for, and it helps me calm myself down. So anyway I reached past her and pushed a dollar bill through the slot.

"This is for both of us," I says.

"I don't make change," says he.

I could've just said "Fine" and left it at that, but he was being such a prick that I had to do something to make him see how ignorant he was. So I put another nickel in the slot and said, "That's thirty-five for me,

thirty-five for her, and thirty-five for the next guy gets on without no change."

So maybe I provoked him. I'm sorry for that, but I'm human, too, I figure. Anyway he was mad. "Don't you smart off with me, boy. I don't have to let you ride, fare or no fare."

Well, fact was he did, that's the law, and anyway I was white and my hair was short so his boss would probably do something if I complained. I could have told him what for and shut his mouth up tight. Except that if I did, I would have gotten too mad, and no man deserves to die just for being a prick. So I looked down at the floor and said, "Sorry, sir." I didn't say "Sorry sir" or anything snotty like that. I said it all quiet and sincere.

If he just dropped it, everything would have been fine, you know? I was mad, yes, but I'd gotten okay at bottling it in, just kind of holding it tight and then waiting for it to ooze away where it wouldn't hurt nobody. But just as I turned to head back toward a seat, he lurched that bus forward so hard that it flung me down and I only caught myself from hitting the floor by catching the handhold on a seatback and half-smashing the poor lady sitting there.

Some other people said, "Hey!" kind of mad, and I realize now that they was saying it to the driver, cause they was on my side. But at the time I thought they was mad at me, and that plus the scare of nearly falling and how mad I already was, well, I lost control of myself. I could just feel it in me, like sparklers in my blood veins, spinning around my whole body and then throwing off this pulse that went and hit that bus driver. He was behind me, so I didn't see it with my eyes. But I could feel that sparkiness connect up with him, and twist him around inside, and then finally it came loose from me, I didn't feel it no more. I wasn't mad no more. But I knew I'd done him already.

I even knew where. It was in his liver. I was a real expert on cancer by now. Hadn't I seen everybody I ever knew die of it? Hadn't I read every book in the Eden Public Library on cancer? You can live without kidneys, you can cut out a lung, you can take out a colon and live with a bag in your pants, but you can't live without a liver and they can't transplant it either. That man was dead. Two years at the most, I gave him. Two years, all because he was in a bad mood and lurched his bus to trip up a smart-mouth kid.

I felt like piss on a flat rock. On that day I had gone nearly eight months, since before Christmas, the whole year so far without hurting anybody. It was the best I'd ever done, and I thought I'd licked it. I stepped across the lady I smashed into and sat by the window, looking out, not seeing anything. All I could think was I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. Did he have a wife and kids? Well, they'd be a widow and orphans soon enough, because of me. I could feel him from clear over here. The sparkiness of his belly, making the cancer grow and keeping his body's own natural fire from burning it out. I wanted with all my heart to take it back, but I couldn't. And like so many times before, I thought to myself that if I had any guts I'd kill myself. I couldn't figure why I hadn't died of my own cancer already. I sure enough hated myself a lot worse than I ever hated anybody else.

The lady beside me starts to talk. "People like that are so annoying, aren't they?"

I didn't want to talk to anybody, so I just grunted and turned away.

"That was very kind of you to help me," she says.

That's when I realized she was the same lady who didn't have the right fare. "Nothing," I says.

"No, you didn't have to do that." She touched my jeans.

I turned to look at her. She was older, about twenty-five maybe, and her face looked kind of sweet. She was dressed nice enough that I could tell it wasn't cause she was poor that she didn't have bus fare. She also didn't take her hand off my knee, which made me nervous, because the bad thing I do is a lot stronger when I'm actually touching a person, and so I mostly don't touch folks and I don't feel safe when they touch me. The fastest I ever killed a man was when he felt me up in a bathroom at a rest stop on I-85. He was coughing blood when I left that place, I really tore him up that time, I still have nightmares about him gasping for breath there with his hand on me.

So anyway that's why I felt real nervous her touching me there on the bus, even though there was no harm in it. Or anyway that's half why I was nervous, and the other half was that her hand was real light on my leg and out of the corner of my eye I could see how her chest moved when she breathed, and after all I'm seventeen and normal in most ways. So when I wished she'd move her hand, I only half wished she'd move it back to her own lap.

That was up till she smiles at me and says, "Mick, I want to help you."

It took me a second to realize she spoke my name. I didn't know many people in Roanoke, and she sure wasn't one of them. Maybe she was one of Mr. Kaiser's customers, I thought. But they hardly ever knew my name. I kind of thought for a second, that maybe she had seen me working in the warehouse and asked Mr. Kaiser all about me or something. So I says, "Are you one of Mr. Kaiser's customers?"

"Mick Winger," she says. "You got your first name from a note pinned to your blanket when you were left at the door of the sewage plant in Eden. You chose your last name when you ran away from the Eden Baptist Children's Home, and you probably chose it because the first movie you ever saw was An Officer and a Gentleman. You were fifteen then, and now you're seventeen, and you've killed more people in your life than Al Capone."

I got nervous when she knew my whole name and how I got it, cause the only way she could know that stuff was if she'd been following me for years. But when she let on she knew I killed people, I forgot all about feeling mad or guilty or horny. I pulled the cord on the bus, practically crawled over her to get out, and in about three seconds I was off that bus and hit the ground running. I'd been afraid of it for years, somebody finding out about me. But it was all the more scary seeing how she must have known about me for so long. It made me feel like somebody'd been peeking in the bathroom window all my life and I only just now found out about it.

I ran for a long time, which isn't easy because of all the hills in Roanoke. I ran mostly downhill, though, into town, where I could dodge into buildings and out their back doors. I didn't know if she was following me, but she'd been following me for a long time, or someone had, and I never even guessed it, so how did I know if they was following me now or not?

And while I ran, I tried to figure where I could go now. I had to leave town, that was sure. I couldn't go back to the warehouse, not even to say good-bye, and that made me feel real bad, cause Mr. Kaiser would think I just ran off for no reason, like some kid who didn't care nothing about people counting on him. He might even worry about me, never coming to pick up my spare clothes from the room he let me sleep in.

Thinking about what Mr. Kaiser might think about me going was pretty strange. Leaving Roanoke wasn't going to be like leaving the orphanage, and then leaving Eden, and finally leaving North Carolina. I never had much to let go of in those places. But Mr. Kaiser had always been real straight with me, a nice steady old guy, never bossed me, never tried to take me down, even stuck up for me in a quiet kind of way by letting it be known that he didn't want nobody teasing me. Hired me a year and a half ago, even though I was lying about being sixteen and he must've known it. And in all that time, I never once got mad at work, or at least not so mad I couldn't stop myself from hurting people. I worked hard, built up muscles I never thought I'd have, and I also must've grown five inches, my pants kept getting so short. I sweated and I ached most days after work, but I earned

my pay and kept up with the older guys, and Mr. Kaiser never once made me feel like he took me on for charity, the way the orphanage people always did, like I should thank them for not letting me starve. Kaiser's Furniture Warehouse was the first peaceful place I ever spent time, the first place where nobody died who was my fault.

I knew all that before, but right till I started running I never realized how bad I'd feel about leaving Roanoke. Like somebody dying. It got so bad that for a while I couldn't hardly see which way I was going, not that I out-and-out cried or nothing.

Pretty soon I found myself walking down Jefferson Street, where it cuts through a woody hill before it widens out for car dealers and Burger Kings. There was cars passing me both ways, but I was thinking about other things now. Trying to figure why I never got mad at Mr. Kaiser. Other people treated me nice before, it wasn't like I got beat up every night or nobody ever gave me seconds or I had to eat dogfood or nothing. I remembered all those people at the orphanage, they was just trying to make me grow up Christian and educated. They just never learned how to be nice without also being nasty. Like Old Peleg, the black caretaker, he was a nice old coot and told us stories, and I never let nobody call him nigger even behind his back. But he was a racist himself, and I knew it on account of the time he caught me and Jody Capel practicing who could stop pissing the most times in a single go. We both done the same thing, didn't we? But he just sent me off and then started whaling on Jody, and Jody was yelling like he was dying, and I kept saying, "It ain't fair! I done it too! You're only beating on him cause he's black!" but he paid no mind, it was so crazy, I mean it wasn't like I wanted him to beat me too, but it made me so mad and before I knew it, I felt so sparky that I couldn't hold it in and I was hanging on him, trying to pull him away from Jody, so it hit him hard.

What could I say to him then? Going into the hospital, where he'd lie there with a tube in his arm and a tube in his nose sometimes. He told me stories when he could talk, and just squoze my hand when he couldn't. He used to have a belly on him, but I think I could have tossed him in the air like a baby before he died. And I did it to him, not that I meant to, I couldn't help myself, but that's the way it was. Even people I purely loved, they'd have mean days, and God help them if I happened to be there, because I was like God with a bad mood, that's what I was, God with no mercy, because I couldn't give them nothing, but I sure as hell could take away. Take it all away. They told me I shouldn't visit Old Peleg so much cause it was sick to keep going to watch him waste away. Mrs. Howard and Mr. Dennis both got tumors from trying to get me to stop going. So many people was dying of cancer in those days they came from the county and tested the water for chemicals. It wasn't no chemicals, I knew that, but I never did tell them, cause they'd just lock me up in the crazy house and you can bet that crazy

house would have a epidemic before I been there a week if that ever happened.

Truth was I didn't know, I just didn't know it was me doing it for the longest time. It's just people kept dying on me, everybody I ever loved. and it seemed like they always took sick after I'd been real mad at them once, and you know how little kids always feel guilty about yelling at somebody who dies right after. The counselor even told me that those feelings were perfectly natural, and of course it wasn't my fault, but I couldn't shake it. And finally I began to realize that other people didn't feel that sparky feeling like I did, and they couldn't tell how folks was feeling unless they looked or asked. I mean, I knew when my lady teachers was going to be on the rag before they did, and you can bet I stayed away from them the best I could on those crabby days. I could feel it, like they was giving off sparks. And there was other folks who had a way of sucking you to them, without saying a thing, without doing a thing, you just went into a room and couldn't take your eyes off them, you wanted to be close--I saw that other kids felt the same way, just automatically liked them, you know? But I could feel it like they was on fire, and suddenly I was cold and needed to warm myself. And I'd say something about it and people would look at me like I was crazy enough to lock right up, and I finally caught on that I was the only one that had those feelings.

Once I knew that, then all those deaths began to fit together. All those cancers, those days they lay in hospital beds turning into mummies before they was rightly dead, all the pain until they drugged them into zombies so they wouldn't tear their own guts out just trying to get to the place that hurt so bad. Torn up, cut up, drugged up, radiated, bald, skinny, praying for death, and I knew I did it. I began to tell the minute I did it. I began to know what kind of cancer it would be, and where, and how bad. And I was always right. Twenty-five people I knew of, and probably more I didn't.

And it got even worse when I ran away. I'd hitch rides because how else was I going to get anywheres? But I was always scared of the people who picked me up, and if they got weird or anything I sparked them. And cops who run me out of a place, they got it. Until I figured I was just Death himself, with his bent-up spear and a hood over his head, walking around and whoever came near hun bought the farm. That was me. I was the most terrible thing in the world, I was families broke up and children orphaned and mamas crying for their dead babies, I was everything that people hate most in all the world. I jumped off a overpass once to kill myself but I just sprained my ankle. Old Peleg always said I was like a cat, I wouldn't die lessen somebody skinned me, roasted the meat and ate it, then tanned the hide, made it into slippers, wore them slippers clean out, and then burned them and raked the ashes, that's when I'd finally die. And I figure he's right, cause I'm still alive and that's a plain miracle after the stuff I been through lately.

Anyway that's the kind of thing I was thinking, walking along Jefferson, when I noticed that a car had driven by going the other way and saw me and turned around and came back up behind me, pulled ahead of me and stopped. I was so spooked I thought it must be that lady finding me again, or maybe somebody with guns to shoot me all up like on "Miami Vice," and I was all set to take off up the hill till I saw it was just Mr. Kaiser.

He says, "I was heading the other way, Mick. Want a ride to work?"

I couldn't tell him what I was doing. "Not today, Mr. Kaiser," I says.

Well, he knew by my look or something, cause he says, "You quitting on me, Mick?"

I was just thinking, don't argue with me or nothing, Mr. Kaiser, just let me go, I don't want to hurt you, I'm so fired up with guilt and hating myself that I'm just death waiting to bust out and blast somebody, can't you see sparks falling off me like spray off a wet dog? I just says, "Mr. Kaiser, I don't want to talk right now, I really don't."

Right then was the moment for him to push. For him to lecture me about how I had to learn responsibility, and if I didn't talk things through how could anybody ever make things right, and life ain't a free ride so sometimes you got to do things you don't want to do, and I been nicer to you than you deserve, you're just what they warned me you'd be, shiftless and ungrateful and a bum in your soul.

But he didn't say none of that. He just says, "You had some bad luck? I can advance you against wages, I know you'll pay back."

"I don't owe no money," I says.

And he says, "Whatever you're running away from, come home with me and you'll be safe."

What could I say? You're the one who needs protecting, Mr. Kaiser, and I'm the one who'll probably kill you. So I didn't say nothing, until finally he just nodded and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "That's okay, Mick. If you ever need a place or a job, you just come on back to me. You find a place to settle down for a while, you write to me and I'll send you your stuff."

"You just give it to the next guy," I says.

"A son-of-a-bitch stinking mean old Jew like me?" he says. "I don't give nothing to nobody."

Well I couldn't help but laugh, cause that's what the foreman always called Mr. Kaiser whenever he thought the old guy couldn't hear him. And when I laughed, I felt myself cool off, just like as if I had been on fire and somebody poured cold water over my head.

"Take care of yourself, Mick," he says. He give me his card and a twenty and tucked it into my pocket when I told him no. Then he got back into his car and made one of his insane U-turns right across traffic and headed back the other way.

Well if he did nothing else he got my brain back in gear. There I was walking along the highway where anybody at all could see me, just like Mr. Kaiser did. At least till I was out of town I ought to stay out of sight as much as I could. So there I was between those two hills, pretty steep, and all covered with green, and I figured I could climb either one. But the slope on the other side of the road looked somehow better to me, it looked more like I just ought to go there, and I figured that was as good a reason to decide as any I ever heard of, and so I dodged my way across Jefferson Street and went right into the kudzu caves and clawed my way right up. It was dark under the leaves, but it wasn't much cooler than right out in the sun, particularly cause I was working so hard. It was a long way up, and just when I got to the top the ground started shaking. I thought it was an earthquake I was so edgy, till I heard the train whistle and then I knew it was one of those coal-hauling trains, so heavy it could shake ivy off a wall when it passed. I just stood there and listened to it, the sound coming from every direction all at once, there under the kudzu. I listened till it went on by, and then I stepped out of the leaves into a clearing.

And there she was, waiting for me, sitting under a tree.

I was too wore out to run, and too scared, coming on her sudden like that, just when I thought I was out of sight. It was just as if I'd been aiming straight at her, all the way up the hill, just as if she somehow tied a string to me and pulled me across the street and up the hill. And if she could do that, how could I run away from her, tell me that? Where could I go? I'd just turn some corner and there she'd be, waiting. So I says to her, "All right, what do you want?"

She just waved me on over. And I went, too, but not very close, cause I didn't know what she had in mind. "Sit down, Mick," says she. "We need to talk."

Now I'll tell you that I didn't want to sit, and I didn't want to talk, I just wanted to get out of there. And so I did, or at least I thought I did. I started walking straight away from her, I thought, but in three steps I realized that I wasn't walking away, I was walking around her. Like that planet thing in science class, the more I moved, the more I got nowhere. It was like she had more say over what my legs did than me.

So I sat down.

"You shouldn't have run off from me," she says.

What I mostly thought of now was to wonder if she was wearing anything under that shirt. And then I thought, what a stupid time to be thinking about that. But I still kept thinking about it.

"Do you promise to stay right there till I'm through talking?" she says.

When she moved, it was like her clothes got almost transparent for a second, but not quite. Couldn't take my eyes off her. I promised.

And then all of a sudden she was just a woman. Not ugly, but not all that pretty, neither, just looking at me with eyes like fire. I was scared again, and I wanted to leave, especially cause now I began to think she really was doing something to me. But I promised, so I stayed.

"That's how it began," she says.

"What's how what began?" says I.

"What you just felt. What I made you feel. That only works on people like you. Nobody else can feel it."

"Feel what?" says I. Now, I knew what she meant, but I didn't know for sure if she meant what I knew. I mean, it bothered me real bad that she could tell how I felt about her those few minutes there.

"Feel that," she says, and there it is again, all I can think about is her body. But it only lasted a few seconds, and then I knew for sure that she was doing it to me.

"Stop it," I says, and she says, "I already did." I ask her, "How do you do that?"

"Everybody can do it, just a little. A woman looks at a man, she's interested, and so the bioelectrical system heats up, causes some odors to change, and he smells them and notices her and he pays attention."

"Does it work the other way?"

"Men are always giving off those odors, Mick. Makes no difference. It isn't a man's stink that gives a woman her ideas. But like I said, Mick, that's what everybody can do. With some men, though, it isn't a woman's smell that draws his eye. It's the bio-electrical system itself. The smell is nothing. You can feel the heat of the fire. It's the same thing as when you kill people, Mick. If you couldn't kill people the way you do, you also couldn't feel it so strong when I give off magnetic pulses."

Of course I didn't understand all that the first time, and maybe I'm remembering it now with words she didn't teach me until later. At the time, though, I was scared, yes, because she knew, and because she could do things to me, but I was also excited, because she sounded like she had some answers, like she knew why it was that I killed people without meaning to.

But when I asked her to explain everything, she couldn't. "We're only just beginning to understand it ourselves, Mick. There's a Swedish scientist who is making some strides that way. We've sent some people over to meet with him. We've read his book, and maybe even some of us understand it. I've got to tell you, Mick, just because we can do this thing doesn't mean that we're particularly smart or anything. It doesn't get us through college any faster or anything. It just means that teachers who flunk us tend to die off a little younger."

"You're like me! You can do it too!"

She shook her head. "Not likely," she says. "If I'm really furious at somebody, if I really hate him, if I really try, and if I keep it up for weeks, I can maybe give him an ulcer. You're in a whole different league from me. You and your people."

"I got no people," I says.

"I'm here, Mick, because you got people. People who knew just exactly what you could do from the minute you were born. People who knew that if you didn't get a tit to suck you wouldn't just cry, you'd kill. Spraying out death from your cradle. So they planned it all from the beginning. Put you in an orphanage. Let other people, all those do-gooders, let them get sick and die, and then when you're old enough to have control over it, then they look you up, they tell you who you are, they bring you home to live with them."

"So you're my kin?" I ask her.

"Not so you'd notice," she says. "I'm here to warn you about your kin. We've been watching you for years, and now it's time to warn you."

"Now it's time? I spent fifteen years in that children's home killing everybody who ever cared about me, and if they'd just come along-- or you, or anybody, if you just said, Mick, you got to control your temper or you'll hurt people, if somebody just said to me, Mick, we're your people and we'll keep you safe, then maybe I wouldn't be so scared all the time, maybe I wouldn't go killing people so much, did you ever think of that?" Or maybe I didn't say all that, but that's what I was feeling, and so I said a lot, I chewed her up and down.

And then I saw how scared she was, because I was all sparky, and I realized I was just about to shed a load of death onto her, and so I kind of jumped back and yelled at her to leave me alone, and then she does the craziest thing, she reaches out toward me, and I scream at her, "Don't you touch me!" cause if she touches me I can't hold it in, it'll just go all through her and tear up her guts inside, but she just keeps reaching, leaning toward me, and so I kind of crawled over toward a tree, and I hung onto that tree, I just held on and let the tree kind of soak up all my sparkiness, almost like I was burning up the tree. Maybe I killed it, for all I know. Or maybe it was so big, I couldn't hurt it, but it took all the fire out of me, and then she did touch me, like nobody ever touched me, her arm across my back, and hand holding my shoulder, her face right up against my ear, and she says to me, "Mick, you didn't hurt me."

"Just leave me alone," says I.

"You're not like them," she says. "Don't you see that? They love the killing. They use the killing. Only they're not as strong as you. They have to be touching, for one thing, or close to it. They have to keep it up longer. They're stronger than I am, but not as strong as you. So they'll want you, that's for sure, Mick, but they'll also be scared of you, and you know what'll scare them most? That you didn't kill me, that you can control it like that."

"I can't always. That bus driver today."

"So you're not perfect. But you're trying. Trying not to kill people. Don't you see, Mick? You're not like them. They may be your blood family, but you don't belong with them, and they'll see that, and when they do--"

All I could think about was what she said, my blood family. "My mama and daddy, you telling me I'm going to meet them?"

"They're calling you now, and that's why I had to warn you."

"Calling me?"

"The way I called you up this hill. Only it wasn't just me, of course, it was a bunch of us."

"I just decided to come up here, to get off the road."

"You just decided to cross the highway and climb this hill, instead of the other one? Anyway, that's how it works. It's part of the human race for all time, only we never knew it. A bunch of people kind of harmonize their bio-electrical systems, to call for somebody to come home, and they come home, after a while. Or sometimes a whole nation unites to hate somebody. Like Iran and the Shah, or the Philippines and Marcos."

"They just kicked them out," I says.

"But they were already dying, weren't they? A whole nation, hating together, they make a constant interference with their enemy's bio-electrical system. A constant noise. All of them together, millions of people, they are finally able to match what you can do with one flash of anger."

I thought about that for a few minutes, and it came back to me-- all the times I thought how I wasn't even human. So maybe I was human, after all, but human like a guy with three arms is human, or one of those guys in the horror movies I saw, gigantic and lumpy and going around hacking up teenagers whenever they was about to get laid. And in all those movies they always try to kill the guy only they can't, he gets stabbed and shot and burned up and he still comes back, and that's like me, I must have tried to kill myself so many times only it never worked.

No. Wait a minute.

I got to get this straight, or you'll think I'm crazy or a liar. I didn't jump off that highway overpass like I said. I stood on one for a long time, watching the cars go by. Whenever a big old semi came along I'd say, this one, and I'd count, and at the right second I'd say, now. Only I never did jump. And then afterward I dreamed about jumping, and in all those dreams I'd just bounce off the truck and get up and limp away. Like the time I was a kid and sat in the bathroom with the little gardening shears, the spring-loaded kind that popped open, I sat there thinking about jamming it into my stomach right under the breastbone, and then letting go of the handle, it'd pop right open and make a bad wound and cut open my heart or something. I was there so long I fell asleep on the toilet, and later I dreamed about doing it but no blood ever came out, because I couldn't die. So I never tried to kill myself. But I thought about it all the time. I was like those monsters in those movies, just killing people but secretly hoping somebody would catch on to what was going on and kill me first.

And so I says to her, "Why didn't you just kill me?"

And there she was with her face close to mine and she says, just like it was love talk, she says, "I've had you in my rifle sights, Mick, and then I didn't do it. Because I saw something in you. I saw that maybe you were trying to control it. That maybe you didn't want to use your power to kill. And so I let you live, thinking that one day I'd be here like this, telling you what you are, and giving you a little hope."

I thought she meant I'd hope because of knowing my mama and daddy were alive and wanted me.

"I hoped for a long time, but I gave it up. I don't want to see my mama and daddy, if they could leave me there all those years. I don't want to see you, neither, if you didn't so much as warn me not to get mad at Old Peleg. I didn't want to kill Old Peleg, and I couldn't even help it! You didn't help me a bit!"

"We argued about it," she says. "We knew you were killing people while you tried to sort things out and get control. Puberty's the worst time, even worse than infancy, and we knew that if we didn't kill you a lot of people would die-- and mostly they'd be the people you loved best. That's the way it is for most kids your age, they get angriest at the people they love most, only you couldn't help killing them, and what does that do to your mind? What kind of person do you become? There was some who said we didn't have the right to leave you alive even to study you, because it would be like having a cure for cancer and then not using it on people just to see how fast they'd die. Like that experiment where the government left syphilis cases untreated just to see what the final stages of the disease were like, even though they could have cured those people at any time. But some of us told them. Mick isn't a disease, and a bullet isn't penicillin. I told them, Mick is something special. And they said, yes, he's special, he kills more than any of those other kids, and we shot them or ran them over with a truck or drowned them, and here we've got the worst one of all and you want to keep him alive."

And I was crying cause I wished they had killed me, but also because it was the first time I ever thought there was people arguing that I ought to be alive, and even though I didn't rightly understand then or even now why you didn't kill me, I got to tell you that knowing somebody knew what I was and still chose not to blast my head off, that done me in, I just bawled like a baby.

One thing led to another, there, my crying and her holding me, and pretty soon I figured out that she pretty much wanted to get laid right there. But that just made me sick, when I knew that. "How can you want to do that!" I says to her. "I can't get married! I can't have no kids! They'd be like me!"

She didn't argue with me or say nothing about birth control, and so I figured out later that I was right, she wanted to have a baby, and that told me plain that she was crazy as a loon. I got my pants pulled back up and my shirt on, and I wouldn't look at her getting dressed again, neither.

"I could make you do it," she says to me. "I could do that to you. The ability you have that lets you kill also makes you sensitive. I can make you lose your mind with desire for me."

"Then why don't you?" I says.

"Why don't you kill if you can help it?" she says.

"Cause nobody has the right," says I.

"That's right," she says.

"Anyway you're ten years older than me," I tell her.

"Fifteen, " she says. "Almost twice your age. But that don't mean nothing." Or I guess she actually said, "That doesn't mean nothing," or probably, "That doesn't mean anything." She talks better than I do but I can't always remember the fancy way. "That doesn't mean a thing," she says. "You'll go to your folks, and you can bet they'll have some pretty little girl waiting for you, and she'll know how to do it much better than me, she'll turn you on so your pants unzip themselves, cause that's what they want most from you. They want your babies. As many as they can get, because you're the strongest they've produced in all the years since Grandpa Jake realized that the cursing power went father to son, mother to daughter, and that he could breed for it like you breed dogs or horses. They'll breed you like a stud, but then when they find out that you don't like killing people and you don't want to play along and you aren't going to take orders from whoever's in charge there now, they'll kill you. That's why I came to warn you. We could feel them just starting to call you. We knew it was time. And I came to warn you."

Most of this didn't mean much to me yet. just the idea of having kinfolk was still so new I couldn't exactly get worried about whether they'd kill

me or put me out for stud or whatever. Mostly what I thought about was her, anyway. "I might have killed you, you know."

"Maybe I didn't care," she says. "And maybe I'm not so easy to kill."

"And maybe you ought to tell me your name," says I.

"Can't," she says.

"How come?" says I.

"Because if you decide to put in with them, and you know my name, then I am dead."

"I wouldn't let anybody hurt you," says I.

She didn't answer that. She just says to me, "Mick, you don't know my name, but you remember this. I have hopes for you, cause I know you're a good man and you never meant to kill nobody. I could've made you love me, and I didn't, because I want you to do what you do by your own choice. And most important of all, if you come with me, we have a chance to see if maybe your ability doesn't have a good side."

You think I hadn't thought of that before? When I saw Rambo shooting down all those little brown guys, I thought, I could do that, and without no gun, either. And if somebody took me hostage like the Achille Lauro thing, we wouldn't have to worry about the terrorists going unpunished. They'd all be rotting in a hospital in no time. "Are you with the government?" I ask her.

"No," she says.

So they didn't want me to be a soldier. I was kind of disappointed. I kind of thought I might be useful that way. But I couldn't volunteer or nothing, cause you don't walk into the recruiting office and say, I've killed a couple dozen people by giving sparks off my body, and I could do it to Castro and Qaddafi if you like. Cause if they believe you, then you're a murderer, and if they don't believe you, they lock you up in a nuthouse.

"Nobody's been calling me, anyway," I says. "If I didn't see you today, I wouldn't've gone nowhere. I would've stayed with Mr. Kaiser."

"Then why did you take all your money out of the bank?" she says. "And when you ran away from me, why did you run toward the highway where you can hitch a ride at least to Madison and then catch another on in to Eden?"

And I didn't have no answer for her then, cause I didn't know rightly why I took my money out of the bank lessen it was like she said, and I was planning to leave town. It was just an impulse, to close that account, I didn't think nothing of it, just stuffed three hundreds into my wallet and come to think of it I really was heading toward Eden, I just didn't think of it, I was just doing it. Just the way I climbed up that hill.

"They're stronger than we are," she says. "So we can't hold you here. You have to go anyway, you have to work this thing out. The most we could do was just get you on the bus next to me, and then call you up this hill."

"Then why don't you come with me?" I says.

"They'd kill me in two seconds, right in front of your eyes, and none of this cursing stuff, either, Mick. They'd just take my head off with a machete."

"Do they know you?"

"They know us," she says. "We're the only ones that know your people exist, so we're the only ones working to stop them. I won't lie to you, Mick. If you join them, you can find us, you'll learn how, it isn't hard, and you can do this stuff from farther away, you could really take us apart. But if you join us, the tables are turned."

"Well maybe I don't want to he on either side in this war," I says. "And maybe now I won't go to Eden, neither. Maybe I'll go up to Washington, D.C. and join the CIA."

"Maybe," she says.

"And don't try to stop me."

"I wouldn't try," she says.

"Damn straight," I says. And then I just walked on out, and this time I didn't walk in no circles, I just headed north, past her car, down the railroad right of way. And I caught a ride heading up toward D.C., and that was that.

Except that along about six o'clock in the evening I woke up and the car was stopping and I didn't know where I was, I must have slept all day, and the guy says to me, "Here you are, Eden, North Carolina."

And I about messed my pants. "Eden!" I says.

"It wasn't far out of my way," he says. "I'm heading for Burlington, and these country roads are nicer than the freeway, anyway. Don't mind if I never drive I-85 again, to tell the truth."

But that was the very guy who told me he had business in D.C., he was heading there from Bristol, had to see somebody from a government agency, and here he was in Eden. It made no sense at all, except for what that woman told me. Somebody was calling me, and if I wouldn't come, they'd just put me to sleep and call whoever was driving. And there I was. Eden, North Carolina. Scared to death, or at least scared a little, but also thinking, if what she said was true, my folks was coming, I was going to meet my folks.

Nothing much changed in the two years since I ran off from the orphanage. Nothing much ever changes in Eden, which isn't a real town anyway, just cobbled together from three little villages that combined to save money on city services. People still mostly think of them as three villages. There wasn't nobody who'd get too excited about seeing me, and there wasn't nobody I wanted to see. Nobody living, anyway. I had no idea how my folks might find me, or how I might find them, but in the meantime I went to see about the only people I ever much cared about. Hoping that they wouldn't rise up out of the grave to get even with me for killing them.

It was still full day that time of year, but it was whippy weather, the wind gusting and then holding still, a big row of thunderclouds off to the southwest, the sun sinking down to get behind them. The kind of afternoon that promises to cool you off, which suited me fine. I was still pretty dusty from my climb up the hill that morning, and I could use a little rain. Got a Coke at a fast food place and then walked on over to see Old Peleg.

He was buried in a little cemetery right by an old Baptist Church. Not Southern Baptist, Black Baptist, meaning that it didn't have no fancy building with classrooms and a rectory, just a stark-white block of a building with a little steeple and a lawn that looked like it'd been clipped by hand. Cemetery was just as neat-kept. Nobody around, and it was dim cause of the thunderclouds moving through, but I wasn't afraid of the graves there, I just went to Old Peleg's cross. Never knew his last name was Lindley. Didn't sound like a black man's name, but then when I thought about it I realized that no last name sounded like a black man's name, because Eden is still just old-fashioned enough that an old black man doesn't get called by his last name much. He grew up in a Jim Crow state, and never got around to insisting on being called Mr. Lindley. Old Peleg. Not that he ever hugged me or took me on long walks or gave me that tender loving care that makes people get all teary-eyed about how wonderful it is to have parents. He never tried to be my dad or nothing. And if I hung around him much, he always gave me work to do and made damn sure I did it right, and mostly we didn't talk about anything except the work we was doing, which made me wonder, standing there, why I wanted to cry and why I hated myself worse for killing Old Peleg than for any of the other dead people under the ground in that city.

I didn't see them and I didn't hear them coming and I didn't smell my mama's perfume. But I knew they was coming, because I felt the prickly air between us. I didn't turn around, but I knew just where they were, and just how far off, because they was lively. Shedding sparks like I never saw on any living soul except myself, just walking along giving off light. It was like seeing myself from the outside for the first time in my life. Even when she was making me get all hot for her, that lady in Roanoke wasn't as lively as them. They was just like me.

Funny thing was, that wrecked everything. I didn't want them to be like me. I hated my sparkiness, and there they were, showing it to me, making me see how a killer looks from the outside. It took a few seconds to realize that they was scared of me, too. I recognized how scaredness looks, from remembering how my own bio-electrical system got shaped and changed by fear. Course I didn't think of it as a bio-electrical system then, or maybe I did cause she'd already told me, but you know what I mean. They was afraid of me. And I knew that was because I was giving off all the sparks I shed when I feel so mad at myself that I could bust. I was standing there at Old Peleg's grave, hating myself, so naturally they saw me like I was ready to kill half a city. They didn't know that it was me I was hating. Naturally they figured I might be mad at them for leaving me at that orphanage seventeen years ago. Serve them right, too, if I gave them a good hard twist in the gut, but I don't do that, I honestly don't, not any more, not standing there by Old Peleg who I loved a lot more than these two strangers, I don't act out being a murderer when my shadow's falling across his grave.

So I calmed myself down as best I could and I turned around and there they was, my mama and my daddy. And I got to tell you I almost laughed. All those years I watched them TV preachers, and we used to laugh till our guts ached about how Tammy Bakker always wore makeup so thick she could be a nigger underneath (it was okay to say that cause Old Peleg himself said it first) and here was my mama, wearing just as much makeup and her hair sprayed so thick she could work construction without a hardhat. And smilling that same sticky phony smile, and crying the same gooey oozey black tears down her cheeks, and reaching out her hands just the right way so I halfway expected her to say, "Praise to Lord Jesus," and then she actually says it, "Praise to Lord Jesus, it's my boy," and comes up and lays a kiss on my cheek with so much spit in it that it dripped down my face.

I wiped the slobber with my sleeve and felt my daddy have this little flash of anger, and I knew that he thought I was judging my mama and he didn't like it. Well, I was, I got to admit. Her perfume was enough to knock me over, I swear she must've mugged an Avon lady. And there was my daddy in a fine blue suit like a businessman, his hair all blow-dried, so it was plain he knew just as well as I did the way real people are supposed to look. Probably he was plain embarrassed to be seen in public with Mama, so why didn't he ever just say, Mama, you wear too much makeup? That's what I thought, and it wasn't till later that I realized that when your woman is apt to give you cancer if you rile her up, you don't go telling her that her face looks like she slept in wet sawdust and she smells like a whore. White trash, that's what my mama was, sure as if she was still wearing the factory label.

"Sure am glad to see you, Son," says my daddy.

I didn't know what to say, tell the truth. I wasn't glad to see them, now that I saw them, because they wasn't exactly what a orphan boy dreams his folks is like. So I kind of grinned and looked back down at Old Peleg's grave.

"You don't seem too surprised to see us," he says.

I could've told him right then about the lady in Roanoke, but I didn't. Just didn't feel right to tell him. So I says, "I felt like somebody was calling me back here. And you two are the only people I met who's as sparky as me. If you all say you're my folks, then I figure it must be so."

Mama giggled and she says to him, "Listen, Jesse, he calls it 'sparky."

"The word we use is 'dusty,' Son," says Daddy. "We say a body's looking dusty when he's one of us."

"You were a very dusty baby," says Mama. "That's why we knew we couldn't keep you. Never seen such a dusty baby before. Papa Lem made us take you to the orphanage before you even sucked one time. You never sucked even once." And her mascara just flooded down her face.

"Now Deeny," says Daddy, "no need telling him everything right here."

Dusty. That was no sense at all. It didn't look like dust, it was flecks of light, so bright on me that sometimes I had to squint just to see my own hands through the dazzle. "It don't look like dust," I says.

And Daddy says, "Well what do you think it looks like?"

And I says, "Sparks. That's why I call it being sparky."

"Well that's what it looks like to us, too," says Daddy. "But we've been calling it 'dusty' all our lives, and so I figure it's easier for one boy to change than for f-- for lots of other folks."

Well, now, I learned a lot of things right then from what he said. First off, I knew he was lying when he said it looked like sparks to them. It didn't. It looked like what they called it. Dust. And that meant that I was seeing it a whole lot brighter than they could see it, and that was good for me to know, especially because it was plain that Daddy didn't want me to know it and so he pretended that he saw it the same way. He wanted me to think he was just as good at seeing as I was. Which meant that he sure wasn't. And I also learned that he didn't want me to know how many kinfolk I had, cause he started to say a number that started with F, and then caught himself and didn't say it. Fifty? Five hundred? The number wasn't half so important as the fact that he didn't want me to know it. They didn't trust me. Well, why should they? Like the lady said, I was better at this than they were, and they didn't know how mad I was about being abandoned, and the last thing they wanted to do was turn me loose killing folks. Especially themselves.

Well I stood there thinking about that stuff and pretty soon it makes them nervous and Mama says, "Now, Daddy, he can call it whatever he wants, don't go making him mad or something."

And Daddy laughs and says, "He isn't mad, are you, Son?"

Can't they see for themselves? Course not. Looks like dust to them, so they can't see it clear at all.

"You don't seem too happy to see us," says Daddy.

"Now, Jesse," says Mama, "don't go pushing. Papa Lem said don't you push the boy, you just make his acquaintance, you let him know why we had to push him out of the nest so young, so now you explain it, Daddy, just like Papa Lem said to."

For the first time right then it occurred to me that my own folks didn't want to come fetch me. They came because this Papa Lem made them do it. And

you can bet they hopped and said yes, knowing how Papa Lem used his-- but I'll get to Papa Lem in good time, and you said I ought to take this all in order, which I'm mostly trying to do.

Anyway Daddy explained it just like the lady in Roanoke, except he didn't

say a word about bio-electrical systems, he said that I was "plainly chosen" from the moment of my birth, that I was "one of the elect," which I remembered from Baptist Sunday School meant that I was one that God had saved, though I never heard of anybody who was saved the minute they was born and not even baptized or nothing. They saw how dusty I was and they knew I'd kill a lot of people before I got old enough to control it. I asked them if they did it a lot, putting a baby out to be raised by strangers.

"Oh, maybe a dozen times," says Daddy.

"And it always works out okay?" says I.

He got set to lie again, I could see it by ripples in the light. I didn't know lying could be so plain, which made me glad they saw dust instead of sparks. "Most times," he says.

"I'd like to meet one of them others," says I. "I figure we got a lot in common, growing up thinking our parents hated us, when the truth was they was scared of their own baby."

"Well they're mostly grown up and gone off," he says, but it's a lie, and most important of all was the fact that here I as much as said I thought they wasn't worth horse pucky as parents and the only thing Daddy can think of to say is why I can't see none of the other "orphans," which tells me that whatever he's lying to cover up must be real important.

But I didn't push him right then, I just looked back down at Old Peleg's grave and wondered if he ever told a lie in his life.

Daddy says, "I'm not surprised to find you here." I guess he was nervous, and had to change the subject. "He's one you dusted, isn't he?"

Dusted. That word made me so mad. What I done to Old Peleg wasn't dusting. And being mad must have changed me enough they could see the change. But they didn't know what it meant, cause Mama says to me, "Now, Son, I don't mean to criticize, but it isn't right to take pride in the gifts of God. That's why we came to find you, because we need to teach you why God chose you to be one of the elect, and you shouldn't glory in yourself because you could strike down your enemies. Rather you should give all glory to the Lord, praise his name, because we are his servants."

I like to puked, I was so mad at that. Glory! Old Peleg, who was worth ten times these two phony white people who tossed me out before I ever sucked tit, and they thought I should give the glory for his terrible agony and death to God? I didn't know God all that well, mostly because I thought of him as looking as pinched up and serious as Mrs. Bethel who taught Sunday School when I was little, until she died of leukemia, and I just never had a thing to say to God. But if God gave me that power to strike down Old Peleg, and God wanted the glory for it when I was done, then I did have a few words to say to God. Only I didn't believe it for a minute. Old Peleg believed in God, and the God he believed in didn't go striking an old black man dead because a dumb kid got pissed off at him.

But I'm getting off track in the story, because that was when my father touched me for the first time. His hand was shaking. And it had every right to shake, because I was so mad that a year ago he would've been bleeding from the colon before he took his hand away. But I'd got so I could keep from killing whoever touched me when I was mad, and the funny thing was that his hand shaking kind of changed how I felt anyway. I'd been thinking about how mad I was that they left me and how mad I was that they thought I'd be proud of killing people but now I realized how brave they was to come fetch me, cause how did they know I wouldn't kill them? But they came anyway. And that's something. Even if Papa Lem told them to do it, they came, and now I realized that it was real brave for Mama to come kiss me on the cheek right then, because if I was going to kill her, she touched me and gave me a chance to do it before she even tried to explain anything. Maybe it was her strategy to win me over or something, but it was still brave. And she also didn't approve of people being proud of murder, which was more points in her favor. And she had the guts to tell me so right to my face. So I chalked up some points for Mama. She might look like as sickening as Tammy Bakker, but she faced her killer son with more guts than Daddy had.

He touched my shoulder and they led me to their car. A Lincoln Town Car, Which they probably thought would impress me, but all I thought about was what it would've been like at the Children's Home if we'd had the price of that car, even fifteen years ago. Maybe a paved basketball court. Maybe some decent toys that wasn't broken-up hand-me-downs. Maybe some pants with

knees in them. I never felt so poor in my life as when I slid onto that fuzzy seat and heard the stereo start playing elevator music in my ear.

There was somebody else in the car. Which made sense. If I'd killed them or something, they'd need somebody else to drive the car,home, right? He wasn't much, when it came to being dusty or sparky or whatever. Just a little, and in rhythms of fear, too. And I could see why he was scared, cause he was holding a blindfold in his hands, and he says, "Mr. Yow, I'm afraid I got to put this on you."

Well, I didn't answer for a second, which made him more scared cause he thought I was mad, but mostly it took me that long to realize he meant me

when he said "Mr. Yow."

"That's our name, Son," says my daddy. "I'm Jesse Yow, and your mother is Minnie Rae Yow, and that makes you Mick Yow."

"Don't it figure," says I. I was joking, but they took it wrong, like as if I was making fun of their name. But I been Mick Winger so long that it just feels silly calling myself Yow, and the fact is it is a funny name. They said it like I should be proud of it, though, which makes me laugh, but to them it was the name of God's Chosen People, like the way the Jews called themselves Israelites in the Bible. I didn't know that then, but that's the way they said it, real proud. And they was ticked off when I made a joke, so I helped them feel better by letting Billy put on-- Billy's the name of the man in the car-- put on the blindfold.

It was a lot of country roads, and a lot of country talk. About kinfolk I never met, and how I'd love this person and that person, which sounded increasingly unlikely to me, if you know what I mean. A long-lost child is coming home and you put a blindfold on him. I knew we were going mostly east, cause of the times I could feel the sun coming in my window and on the back of my neck, but that was about it, and that wasn't much. They lied to me, they wouldn't show me nothing, they was scared of me. I mean, any way you look at it, they wasn't exactly killing the fatted calf for the prodigal son. I was definitely on probation. Or maybe even on trial. Which, I might point out, is exactly the way you been treating me, too, and I don't like it much better now than I did then, if you don't mind me putting some personal complaints into this. I mean, somewhere along the line somebody's going to have to decide whether to shoot me or let me go. because I can't control my temper forever locked up like a rat in a box, and the difference is a rat can't reach out of the box and blast you the way I can, so somewhere along the way somebody's going to have to figure out that you better either trust me or kill me. My personal preference is for trusting me, since I've given you more reason to trust me than you've given me to trust you so far.

But anyway I rode along in the car for more than an hour. We could have gotten to Winston or Greensboro or Danville by then, it was so long, and by the time we got there nobody was talking and from the snoring, Billy was even asleep.

I wasn't asleep, though. I was watching. Cause I don't see sparks with my eyes, I see it with something else, like as if my sparks see other folks' sparks, if you catch my drift, and so that blindfold might've kept me from seeing the road, but it sure didn't keep me from seeing the other folks in the car with me. I knew right where they were, and right what they were feeling. Now, I've always had a knack for telling things about people, even when I couldn't see nary a spark or nothing, but this was the first time I ever saw anybody who was sparky besides me. So I sat there watching how Mama and Daddy acted with each other even when they wasn't touching or saying a thing, just little drifts of anger or fear or- -well, I looked for love, but I didn't see it, and I know what it looks like, cause I've felt it. They were like two armies camped on opposite hills, waiting for the truce to end at dawn. Careful. Sending out little scouting parties.

Then the more I got used to understanding what my folks was thinking and feeling toward each other, the easier it got for me to read what Billy had going on inside him. It's like after you learn to read big letters, you can read little letters, too, and I wondered if maybe I could even learn to understand people who didn't have hardly any sparks at all. I mean that occurred to me, anyway, and since then I've found out that it's mostly true. Now that I've had some practice I can read a sparky person from a long ways off, and even regular folks I can do a little reading, even through walls and windows. But I found that out later. Like when you guys have been watching me through mirrors. I can also see your microphone wires in the walls.

Anyway it was during that car ride that I first started seeing what I could see with my eyes closed, the shape of people's bio-electrical system, the color and spin of it, the speed and the flow and the rhythm and whatever, I mean those are the words I use, cause there isn't exactly a lot of books I can read on the subject. Maybe that Swedish doctor has fancy words for it. I can only tell you how it feels to me. And in that hour I got to be good enough at it that I could tell Billy was seared, all right, but he wasn't all that scared of me, he was mostly scared of Mama and Daddy. Me he was jealous of, angry kind of. Scared a little, too, but mostly mad. I thought maybe he was mad cause I was coming in out of nowhere already sparkier than him, but then it occurred to me that he probably couldn't even tell how sparky I was, because to him it'd look like dust, and he wouldn't have enough of a knack at it to see much distinction between one person and another. It's like the more light you give off, the clearer you can see other people's light. So I was the one with the blindfold on, but I could see clearer than anybody else in that car.

We drove on gravel for about ten minutes, and then on a bumpy dirt road, and then suddenly on asphalt again, smooth as you please, for about a hundred yards, and then we stopped. I didn't wait for a by-your-leave, I had that blindfold off in half a second.

It was like a whole town of houses, but right among the trees, not a gap in the leaves overhead. Maybe fifty, sixty houses, some of them pretty big, but the trees made them half invisible, it being summer. Children running all over, scruffy dirty kids from diapered-up snot-nose brats to most-growed kids not all that much younger than me. They sure kept us cleaner in the Children's Home. And they was all sparky. Mostly like Billy, just a little, but it explained why they wasn't much washed. There isn't many a mama who'd stuff her kid in a tub if the kid can make her sick just by getting mad.

It must've been near eight-thirty at night, and even the little kids still wasn't in bed. They must let their kids play till they get wore out and drop down and fall asleep by themselves. It came to me that maybe I wasn't so bad off growing up in an orphanage. At least I knew manners and didn't whip it out and pee right in front of company, the way one little boy did, just looking at me while I got out of the car, whizzing away like he wasn't doing nothing strange. Like a dog marking trees. He needed to so he done it. If I ever did that at the Children's Home they'd've slapped me silly.

I know how to act with strangers when I'm hitching a ride, but not when I'm being company, cause orphans don't go calling much so I never had much experience. So I'd've been shy no matter what, even if there wasn't no such thing as sparkiness. Daddy was all set to take me to meet Papa Lem right off, but Mama saw how I wasn't cleaned up and maybe she guessed I hadn't been to the toilet in a while and so she hustled me into a house where they had a good shower and when I came out she had a cold ham sandwich waiting for me on the table. On a plate, and the plate was setting on a linen place mat, and there was a tall glass of milk there, so cold it was sweating on the outside of the glass. I mean, if an orphan kid ever dreamed of what it might be like to have a mama, that was the dream. Never mind that she didn't look like a model in the Sears catalog. I felt clean, the sandwich tasted good, and when I was done eating she even offered me a cookie.

It felt good, I'll admit that, but at the same time I felt cheated. It was just too damn late. I needed it to be like this when I was seven, not seventeen.

But she was trying, and it wasn't all her fault, so I ate the cookie and drank off the last of the milk and my watch said it was after nine. Outside it was dusk now, and most of the kids were finally gone off to bed, and Daddy comes in and says, "Papa Lem says he isn't getting any younger."

He was outside, in a big rocking chair sitting on the grass. You wouldn't call him fat, but he did have a belly on him. And you wouldn't call him old, but he was bald on top and his hair was wispy yellow and white. And you wouldn't call him ugly, but he had a soft mouth and I didn't like the way it twisted up when he talked.

Oh, hell, he was fat, old, and ugly, and I hated him from the first time I saw him. A squishy kind of guy. Not even as sparky as my daddy, neither, so

you didn't get to be in charge around here just by having more of whatever it was made us different. I wondered how close kin he was to me. If he's got children, and they look like him, they ought to drown them out of mercy.

"Mick Yow," he says to me, "Mick my dear boy, Mick my dear cousin."

"Good evening, sir," says I.

"Oh, and he's got manners," says he. "We were right to donate so much to the Children's Home. They took excellent care of you."

"You donated to the home?" says I. If they did, they sure didn't give much.

"A little," he says. "Enough to pay for your food, your room, your Christian education. But no luxuries. You couldn't grow up soft, Mick. You had to grow up lean and strong. And you had to know suffering, so you could be compassionate. The Lord God has given you a marvelous gift, a great helping of his grace, a heaping plateful of the power of God, and we had to make sure you were truly worthy to sit up to the table at the banquet of the Lord."

I almost looked around to see if there was a camera, he sounded so much like the preachers on TV.

And he says, "Mick, you have already passed the first test. You have forgiven your parents for leaving you to think you were an orphan. You have kept that holy commandment, Honor thy father and mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God hath given thee. You know that if you had raised a hand against them, the Lord would have struck you down. For verily I say unto you that there was two rifles pointed at you the whole time, and if your father and mother had walked away without you, you would have flopped down dead in that nigger cemetery, for God will not be mocked."

I couldn't tell if he was trying to provoke me or scare me or what, but either way, it was working.

"The Lord has chosen you for his servant, Mick, just like he's chosen all of us. The rest of the world doesn't understand this. But Grandpa Jake saw it. Long ago, back in 1820, he saw how everybody he hated had a way of dying without him lifting a finger. And for a time he thought that maybe he was like those old witches, who curse people and they wither up and die by the power of the devil. But he was a god-fearing man, and he had no truck with Satan. He was living in rough times, when a man was likely to kill in a quarrel, but Grandpa Jake never killed. Never even struck out with his fists. He was a peaceable man, and he kept his anger inside him, as the Lord commands in the New Testament. So surely he was not a servant of Satan!"

Papa Lem's voice rang through that little village, he was talking so loud, and I noticed there was a bunch of people all around. Not many kids now, all grown-ups, maybe there to hear Lem, but even more likely they was there to see me. Because it was like the lady in Roanoke said, there wasn't a one of them was half as sparky as me. I didn't know if they could all see that, but I could. Compared to normal folks they was all dusty enough, I suppose, but compared to me, or even to my mama and daddy, they was a pretty dim bunch.

"He studied the scriptures to find out what it meant that his enemies all suffered from tumors and bleeding and coughing and rot, and he came upon the verse of Genesis where the Lord said unto Abraham, 'I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee.' And he knew in his heart that the Lord had chosen him the way he chose Abraham. And when Isaac gave the blessing of God to Jacob, he said, 'Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.' The promises to the patriarchs were fulfilled in Grandpa Jake, for whoever cursed him was cursed by God."

When he said those words from the Bible, Papa Lem sounded like the voice of God himself, I've got to tell you. I felt exalted, knowing that it was God who gave such power to my family. It was to the whole family, the way Papa Lem told it, because the Lord promised Abraham that his children would be as many as there was stars in the sky, which is a lot more than Abraham knew about seeing how he didn't have no telescope. And that promise now applied to Grandpa Jake, just like the one that said "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." So Grandpa Jake set to studying the book of Genesis so he could fulfill those promises just like the patriarchs did. He saw how they went to a lot of trouble to make sure they only married kinfolk-- you know how Abraham married his brother's daughter, Sarah, and Isaac married his cousin Rebekah, and Jacob married his cousins Leah and Rachel. So Grandpa Jake left his first wife cause she was unworthy, meaning she probably wasn't particularly sparky, and he took up with his brother's daughter and when his brother threatened to kill him if he laid a hand on the girl, Grandpa Jake run off with her and his own brother died of a curse which is just exactly what happened to Sarah's father in the Bible. I mean Grandpa Jake worked it out just right. And he made sure all his sons married their first cousins, and so all of them had sparkiness twice over, just like breeding pointers with pointers and not mixing them with other breeds, so the strain stays pure.

There was all kinds of other stuff about Lot and his daughters, and if we

remained faithful then we would be the meek who inherit the Earth because we were the chosen people and the Lord would strike down everybody who stood in our way, but what it all came down to at the moment was this: You marry whoever the patriarch tells you to marry, and Papa Lem was the patriarch. He had my mama marry my daddy even though they never particularly liked each other, growing up cousins, because he could see that they was both specially chosen, which means to say they was both about the sparkiest there was. And when I was born, they knew it was like a confirmation of Papa Lem's decision, because the Lord had blessed them with a kid who gave off dust thicker than a dump truck on a dirt road.

One thing he asked me real particular was whether I ever been laid. He says to me, "Have you spilled your seed among the daughters of Ishmael and Esau?"

I knew what spilling seed was, cause we got lectures about that at the Children's Home. I wasn't sure who the daughters of Ishmael and Esau was, but since I never had a hot date, I figured I was pretty safe saying no. Still, I did consider a second, because what came to mind was the lady in Roanoke, stoking me up just by wanting me, and I was thinking about how close I'd come to not being a virgin after all. I wondered if the lady from Roanoke was a daughter of Esau.

Papa Lem picked up on my hesitation, and he wouldn't let it go. "Don't lie to me boy. I can see a lie." Well, since I could see a lie, I didn't doubt but what maybe he could too. But then again, I've had plenty of grown-ups tell me they could spot a lie-- but half the time they accused me of lying when I was telling the truth, and the other half they believed me when I was telling whoppers so big it'd take two big men to carry them upstairs. So maybe he could and maybe he couldn't. I figured I'd tell him just as much truth as I wanted. "I was just embarrassed to tell you I never had a girl," I says.

"Ah, the deceptions of the world," he says. "They make promiscuity seem so normal that a boy is ashamed to admit that he is chaste." Then he got a glint in his eye. "I know the children of Esau have been watching you, wanting to steal your birthright. Isn't that so?"

"I don't know who Esau is," says I.

The folks who was gathered around us started muttering about that.

I says, "I mean, I know who he was in the Bible, he was the brother of Jacob, the one who sold him his birthright for split pea soup."

"Jacob was the rightful heir, the true eldest son," says Papa Lem, "and

don't you forget it. Esau is the one who went away from his father, out into the wilderness, rejecting the things of God and embracing the lies and sins of the world. Esau is the one who married a strange woman, who was not of the people! Do you understand me?"

I understood pretty good by then. Somewhere along the line somebody got sick of living under the thumb of Papa Lem, or maybe the patriarch before him, and they split.

"Beware," says Papa Lem, "because the children of Esau and Ishmael still covet the blessings of Jacob. They want to corrupt the pure seed of Grandpa Jake. They have enough of the blessing of God to know that you're a remarkable boy, like Joseph who was sold into Egypt, and they will come to you with their whorish plans, the way Potiphar's wife came to Joseph, trying to persuade you to give them your pure and undefiled seed so that they can have the blessing that their fathers rejected."

I got to tell you that I didn't much like having him talk about my seed so much in front of mixed company, but that was nothing compared to what he did next. He waved his hand to a girl standing there in the crowd, and up she came. She wasn't half bad-looking, in a country sort of way. Her hair was mousy and she wasn't altogether clean and she stood with a two-bucket slouch, but her face wasn't bad and she looked to have her teeth. Sweet, but not my type, if you know what I mean.

Papa Lem introduced us. It was his daughter, which I might've guessed, and then he says to her, "Wilt thou go with this man?" And she looks at me and says, "I will go." And then she gave me this big smile, and all of a sudden it was happening again, just like it did with the lady in Roanoke, only twice as much, cause after all the lady in Roanoke wasn't hardly sparky. I was standing there and all I could think about was how I wanted all her clothes off her and to do with her right there in front of everybody and I didn't even care that all those people were watching, that's how strong it was.

And I liked it, I got to tell you. I mean you don't ignore a feeling like that. But another part of me was standing back and it says to me, "Mick Winger you damn fool, that girl's as homely as the bathroom sink, and all these people are watching her make an idiot out of you," and it was that part of me that got mad, because I didn't like her making me do something, and I didn't like it happening right out in front of everybody, and I specially didn't like Papa Lem sitting there looking at his own daughter and me like we was in a dirty magazine.

Thing is, when I get mad I get all sparky, and the madder I got, the more I could see how she was doing it, like she was a magnet, drawing me to her.

And as soon as I thought of it like us being magnets, I took all the sparkiness from being mad and I used it. Not to hurt her or nothing, because I didn't put it on her the way I did with the people I killed. I just kind of turned the path of her sparks plain upside down. She was spinning it just as fast as ever, but it went the other way, and the second that started, why, it was like she disappeared. I mean, I could see her all right, but I couldn't hardly notice her. I couldn't focus my eyes on her.

Papa Lem jumped right to his feet, and the other folks were gasping. Pretty quick that girl stopped sparking at me, you can bet, and there she was on her knees, throwing up. She must've had a real weak digestion, or else what I done was stronger than I thought. She was really pouring on the juice, I guess, and when I flung it back at her and turned her upside down, well, she couldn't hardly walk when they got her up. She was pretty hysterical, too, crying about how awful and ugly I was, which might've hurt my feelings except that I was scared to death.

Papa Lem was looking like the wrath of God. "You have rejected the holy sacrament of marriage! You have spurned the handmaid God prepared for you!"

Now you've got to know that I hadn't put everything together yet, or I wouldn't have been so afraid of him, but for all I knew right then he could kill me with a cancer. And it was a sure thing he could've had those people beat me to death or whatever he wanted, so maybe I was right to be scared. Anyway I had to think of a way to make him not be mad at me, and what I came up with must not've been too bad because it worked, didn't it?

I says to him, as calm as I can, "Papa Lem, she was not an acceptable handmaiden." I didn't watch all those TV preachers for nothing. I knew how to talk like the Bible. I says, "She was not blessed enough to be my wife. She wasn't even as blessed as my mama. You can't tell me that she's the best the Lord prepared for me."

And sure enough, he calmed right down. "I know that," he says. And he isn't talking like a preacher any more, it's me talking like a preacher and him talking all meek. "You think I don't know it? It's those children of Esau, that's what it is, Mick, you got to know that. We had five girls who were a lot dustier than her, but we had to put them out into other families, cause they were like you, so strong they would've killed their own parents without meaning to."

And I says, "Well, you brought me back, didn't you?"

And he says, "Well you were alive, Mick, and you got to admit that makes it easier."

"You mean those girls're all dead?" I says.

"The children of Esau," he says. "Shot three of them, strangled one, and we never found the body of the other. They never lived to be ten years old."

And I thought about how the lady in Roanoke told me she had me in her gunsights a few times.

But she let me live. Why? For my seed? Those girls would've had seed too, or whatever. But they killed those girls and let me live. I didn't know why. Hell, I still don't, not if you mean to keep me locked up like this for the rest of my life. I mean you might as well have blasted my head off when I was six, and then I can name you a dozen good folks who'd still be alive, so no thanks for the favor if you don't plan to let me go.

Anyway, I says to him, "I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

And he says to me, "Mick, I can see how you'd be disappointed, seeing how you're so blessed by the Lord. But I promise you that my daughter is indeed the best girl of marriageable age that we've got here. I wasn't trying to foist her off on you because she's my daughter-- it would be blasphemous for me to try it, and I'm a true servant of the Lord. The people here can testify for me, they can tell you that I'd never give you my own daughter unless she was the best we've got."

If she was the best they got then I had to figure the laws against inbreeding made pretty good sense. But I says to him, "Then maybe we ought to wait and see if there's somebody younger, too young to marry right now." I remembered the story of Jacob from Sunday School, and since they set such store by Jacob I figured it'd work. I says, "Remember that Jacob served seven years before he got to marry Rachel. I'm willing to wait."

That impressed hell out of him, you can bet. He says, "You truly have the prophetic spirit, Mick. I have no doubt that someday you'll be Papa in my place, when the Lord has gathered me unto my fathers. But I hope you'll also remember that Jacob married Rachel, but he first married the older daughter, Leah."

The ugly one, I thought, but I didn't say it. I just smiled and told him how I'd remember that, and there was plenty of time to talk about it tomorrow, because it was dark now and I was tired and a lot of things had happened to me today that I had to think over. I was really getting into the spirit of this Bible thing, and so I says to him, "Remember that before Jacob could dream of the ladder into heaven, he had to sleep."

Everybody laughed, but Papa Lem wasn't satisfied yet. He was willing to let

the marriage thing wait for a few days. But there was one thing that couldn't wait. He looks me in the eye and he says, "Mick, you got a choice to make. The Lord says those who aren't for me are against me. Joshua said choose ye this day whom ye will serve. And Moses said, 'I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

Well I don't think you can put it much plainer than that. I could choose to live there among the chosen people, surrounded by dirty kids and a slimy old man telling me who to marry and whether I could raise my own children, or I could choose to leave and get my brains blasted out or maybe just pick up a stiff dose of cancer. I wasn't altogether sure whether they'd do it quick or slow. I kind of figured they'd do it quick, though, so I'd have no chance to spill my seed among the daughters of Esau.

So I gave him my most solemn and hypocritical promise that I would serve the Lord and live among them all the days of my life. Like I told you, I didn't know whether he could tell if I was lying or not. But he nodded and smiled so it looked like he believed me. Trouble was, I knew he was lying, and so that meant he didn't believe me, and that meant I was in deep poo, as Mr. Kaiser's boy Greggy always said. In fact, he was pretty angry and pretty scared, too, even though he tried to hide it by smiling and keeping a lid on himself. But I knew that he knew that I had no intention of staying there with those crazy people who knocked up their cousins and stayed about as ignorant as I ever saw. Which meant that he was already planning to kill me, and sooner rather than later.

No, I better tell the truth here, cause I wasn't that smart. It wasn't till I was halfway to the house that I really wondered if he believed me, and it wasn't till Mama had me with a nice clean pair of pajamas up in a nice clean room, and she was about to take my jeans and shirt and underwear and make them nice and clean that it occurred to me that maybe I was going to wish I had more clothes on than pajamas that night. I really got kind of mad before she finally gave me back my clothes -- she was scared that if she didn't do what I said, I'd do something to her. And then I got to thinking that maybe I'd made things even worse by not giving her the clothes, because that might make them think that I was planning to skip out, and so maybe they weren't planning to kill me before but now they would, and so I probably just made things worse. Except when it came down to it, I'd rather be wrong about the one thing and at least have my clothes, than be wrong about the other thing and have to gallivant all over the country in pajamas. You don't get much mileage on country roads barefoot in pajamas, even in the summer.

As soon as Mama left and went on downstairs, I got dressed again, including

my shoes, and climbed in under the covers. I'd slept out in the open, so I didn't mind sleeping in my clothes. What drove me crazy was getting my shoes on the sheets. They would've yelled at me so bad at the Children's Home.

I laid there in the dark, trying to think what I was going to do. I pretty much knew how to get from this house out to the road, but what good would that do me? I didn't know where I was or where the road led or how far to go, and you don't cut cross country in North Carolina-- if you don't trip over something in the dark, you'll bump into some moonshine or marijuana operation and they'll blast your head off, not to mention the danger of getting your throat bit out by some tobacco farmer's mean old dog. So there I'd be running along a road that leads nowhere with them on my tail and if they wanted to run me down, I don't think fear of cancer would slow down your average four-wheeler.

I thought about maybe stealing a car, but I don't have the first idea how to hotwire anything. It wasn't one of the skills you pick up at the Children's Home. I knew the idea of it, somewhat, because I'd done some reading on electricity with the books Mr. Kaiser lent me so I could maybe try getting ready for the GED, but there wasn't a chapter in there on how to get a Lincoln running without a key. Didn't know how to drive, either. All the stuff you pick up from your dad or from your friends at school, I just never picked up at all.

Maybe I dozed off, maybe I didn't. But I suddenly noticed that I could see in the dark. Not see, of course. Feel the people moving around. Not far off at first, except like a blur, but I could feel the near ones, the other ones in the house. It was cause they was sparky, of course, but as I laid there feeling them drifting here and there, in the rhythms of sleep and dreams, or walking around, I began to realize that I'd been feeling people all along, only I didn't know it. They wasn't sparky, but I always knew where they were, like shadows drifting in the back of your mind. I didn't even know that I knew it, but they were there. It's like when Diz Riddle got him his glasses when he was ten years old and all of a sudden he just went around whooping and yelling about all the stuff he saw. He always used to see it before, but he didn't rightly know what half the stuff was. Like pictures on coins. He knew the coins was bumpy, but he didn't know they was pictures and writing and stuff. That's how this was.

I laid there and I could make a map in my brain where I could see a whole bunch of different people, and the more I tried, the better I could see. Pretty soon it wasn't just in that house. I could feel them in other houses, dimmer and fainter. But in my mind I didn't see no walls so I didn't know whether somebody was in the kitchen or in the bathroom, I had to think it out, and it was hard, it took all my concentration. The only guide I had was that I could see electric wires when the current was flowing through them, so wherever a light was on or a clock was running or something, I could feel this thin line, really thin, not like the shadows of people. It wasn't much, but it gave me some idea of where some of the walls might be.

If I could've just told who was who I might have made some guesses about what they was doing. Who was asleep and who was awake. But I couldn't even tell who was a kid and who was a grown-up, cause I couldn't see sizes, just brightness. Brightness was the only way I knew who was close and who was far.

I was pure lucky I got so much sleep during the day when that guy was giving me a ride from Roanoke to Eden. Well, that wasn't lucky, I guess, since I wished I hadn't gone to Eden at all, but at least having that long nap meant that I had a better shot at staying awake until things quieted down.

There was a clump of them in the next house. It was hard to sort them out, cause three of them was a lot brighter, so I thought they was closer, and it took a while to realize that it was probably Mama and Daddy and Papa Lem along with some others. Anyway it was a meeting, and it broke up after a while, and all except Papa Lem came over. I didn't know what the meeting was about, but I knew they was scared and mad. Mostly scared. Well, so was I. But I calmed myself down, the way I'd been practicing, so I didn't accidently kill nobody. That kind of practice made it so I could keep myself from getting too lively and sparky, so they'd think I was asleep. They didn't see as clear as I did, too, so that'd help. I thought maybe they'd all come up and get me, but no, they just all waited downstairs while one of them came up, and he didn't come in and get me, neither. All he did was go to the other rooms and wake up whoever was sleeping there and get them downstairs and out of the house.

Well, that scared me worse than ever. That made it plain what they had in, mind, all right. Didn't want me giving off sparks and killing somebody close by when they attacked me. Still, when I thought about it, I realized that it was also a good sign. They was scared of me, and rightly so. I could reach farther and strike harder than any of them. And they saw I could throw off what got tossed at me, when I flung back what Papa Lem's daughter tried to do to me. They didn't know how much I could do.

## Neither did I.

Finally all the people was out of the house except the ones downstairs. There was others outside the house, maybe watching, maybe not, but I figured I better not try to climb out the window. Then somebody started walking up the stairs again, alone. There wasn't nobody else to fetch down, so they could only be coming after me. It was just one person, but that didn't do me no good-- even one grown man who knows how to use a knife is better off than me. I still don't have my full growth on me, or at least I sure hope I don't, and the only fights I ever got in were slugging matches in the yard. For a minute I wished I'd took kung fu lessons instead of sitting around reading math and science books to make up for dropping out of school so young. A lot of good math and science was going to do me if I was dead.

The worst thing was I couldn't see him. Maybe they just moved all the children out of the house so they wouldn't make noise in the morning and wake me. Maybe they was just being nice. And this guy coming up the stairs might just be checking on me or bringing me clean clothes or something-- I couldn't tell. So how could I twist him up, when I didn't know if they was trying to kill me or what? But if he was trying to kill me, I'd wish I'd twisted him before he ever came into the room with me.

Well, that was one decision that got made for me. I laid there wondering what to do for so long that he got to the top of the stairs and came to my room and turned the knob and came in.

I tried to breathe slow and regular, like somebody asleep. Tried to keep from getting too sparky. If it was somebody checking on me, they'd go away.

He didn't go away. And he walked soft, too, so as not to wake me up. He was real scared. So scared that I finally knew there was no way he was there to tuck me in and kiss me good night.

So I tried to twist him, to send sparks at him. But I didn't have any sparks to send! I mean I wasn't mad or anything. I'd never tried to kill somebody on purpose before, it was always because I was already mad and I just lost control and it happened. Now I'd been calming myself down so much that I couldn't lose control. I had no sparks at all to send, just my normal shining shadow, and he was right there and I didn't have a second to lose so I rolled over. Toward him, which was maybe dumb, cause I might have run into his knife, but I didn't know yet for sure that he had a knife. All I was thinking was that I had to knock him down or push him or something.

The only person I knocked down was me. I bumped him and hit the floor. He also cut my back with the knife. Not much of a cut, he mostly just snagged my shirt, but if I was scared before, I was terrified now cause I knew he had a knife and I knew even more that I didn't. I scrambled back away from him. There was almost no light from the window, it was like being in a big closet, I couldn't see him, he couldn't see me. Except of course that I

could see him, or at least sense where he was, and now I was giving off sparks like crazy so unless he was weaker than I thought, he could see me too.

Well, he was weaker than I thought. He just kind of drifted, and I could hear him swishing the knife through the air in front of him. He had no idea where I was.

And all the time I was trying to get madder and madder, and it wasn't working. You can't get mad by trying. Maybe an actor can, but I'm no actor. So I was scared and sparking but I couldn't get that pulse to mess him up. The more I thought about it, the calmer I got.

It's like you've been carrying around a machine gun all your life, accidently blasting people you didn't really want to hurt and then the first time you really want to lay into somebody, it jams.

So I stopped trying to get mad. I just sat there realizing I was going to die, that after I finally got myself under control so I didn't kill people all the time anymore, now that I didn't really want to commit suicide, now I was going to get wasted. And they didn't even have the guts to come at me openly. Sneaking in the dark to cut my throat while I was asleep. And in the meeting where they decided to do it, my long lost but loving mama and daddy were right there. Heck, my dear sweet daddy was downstairs right now, waiting for this assassin to come down and tell him that I was dead. Would he cry for me then? Boo hoo my sweet little boy's all gone? Mick is in the cold cold ground?

I was mad. As simple as that. Stop thinking about being mad, and start thinking about the things that if you think about them, they'll make you mad. I was so sparky with fear that when I got mad, too, it was worse than it ever was before, built up worse, you know. Only when I let it fly, it didn't go for the guy up there swishing his knife back and forth in the dark. That pulse of fire in me went right down through the floor and straight to dear old Dad. I could hear him scream. He felt it, just like that. He felt it. And so did I. Because that wasn't what I meant to do. I only met him that day, but he was my father, and I did him worse than I ever did anybody before in my life. I didn't plan to do it. You don't plan to kill your father.

All of a sudden I was blinded by light. For a second I thought it was the other kind of light, sparks, them retaliating, twisting me. Then I realized it was my eyes being blinded, and it was the overhead light in the room that was on. The guy with the knife had finally realized that the only reason not to have the light on was so I wouldn't wake up, but now that I was awake he might as well see what he's doing. Lucky for me the light

blinded him just as much as it blinded me, or I'd have been poked before I saw what hit me. Instead I had time to scramble on back to the far corner of the room.

I wasn't no hero. But I was seriously thinking about running at him, attacking a guy with a knife. I would have been killed, but I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Then I thought of something else to do. I got the idea from the way I could feel the electric current in the wires running from the lightswitch through the wall. That was electricity, and the lady in Roanoke called my sparkiness bio-electricity. I ought to be able to do something with it, shouldn't I?

I thought first that maybe I could short-circuit something, but I didn't think I had that much electricity in me. I thought of maybe tapping into the house current to add to my own juice, but then I remembered that connecting up your body to house current is the same thing other folks call electrocution. I mean, maybe I can tap into house wiring, but if I was wrong, I'd be real dead.

But I could still do something. There was a table lamp right next to me. I pulled off the shade and threw it at the guy, who was still standing by the door, thinking about what the scream downstairs meant. Then I grabbed the lamp and turned it on, and then smashed the light bulb on the nightstand. Sparks. Then it was out.

I held the lamp in my hand, like a weapon, so he'd think I was going to beat off his knife with the lamp. And if my plan was a bust, I guess that's what I would've done. But while he was looking at me, getting ready to fight me knife against lamp, I kind of let the jagged end of the lamp rest on the bedspread. And then I used my sparkiness, the anger that was still in me. I couldn't fling it at the guy, or well I could have, but it would've been like the bus driver, a six-month case of lung cancer. By the time he died of that, I'd be six months worth of dead from multiple stab wounds to the neck and chest.

So I let my sparkiness build up and flow out along my arm, out along the lamp, like I was making my shadow grow. And it worked. The sparks just went right on down the lamp to the tip, and built up and built up, and all the time I was thinking about how Papa Lem was trying to kill me cause I thought his daughter was ugly and how he made me kill my daddy before I even knew him half a day and that charge built up.

It built up enough. Sparks started jumping across inside the broken light bulb, right there against the bedspread. Real sparks, the kind I could see,

not just feel. And in two seconds that bedspread was on fire. Then I yanked the lamp so the cord shot right out of the wall, and I threw it at the guy, and while he was dodging I scooped up the bedspread and ran at him. I wasn't sure whether I'd catch on fire or he would, but I figured held be too panicked and surprised to think of stabbing me through the bedspread, and sure enough he didn't, he dropped the knife and tried to beat off the bedspread. Which he didn't do too good, because I was still pushing it at him. Then he tried to get through the door, but I kicked his ankle with my shoe, and he fell down, stifl fighting off the blanket.

I got the knife and sliced right across the back of his thigh with it. Geez it was sharp. Or maybe I was so mad and scared that I cut him stronger than I ever thought I could, but it went clear to the bone. He was screaming from the fire and his leg was gushing blood and the fire was catching on the wallpaper and it occurred to me that they couldn't chase me too good if they was trying to put out a real dandy house fire.

It also occurred to me that I couldn't run away too good if I was dead inside that house fire. And thinking of maybe dying in the fire made me realize that the guy was burning to death and I did it to him, something every bit as terrible as cancer, and I didn't care, because I'd killed so many people that it was nothing to me now, when a guy like that was trying to kill me, I wasn't even sorry for his pain, cause he wasn't feeling nothing worse than Old Peleg felt, and in fact that even made me feel pretty good; because it was like getting even for Old Peleg's death, even though it was me killed them both. I mean how could I get even for Peleg dying by killing somebody else? Okay, maybe it makes sense in a way, cause it was their fault I was in the orphanage instead of growing up here. Or maybe it made sense because this guy deserved to die, and Peleg didn't, so maybe somebody who deserved it had to die a death as bad as Peleq's, or something. I don't know. I sure as hell wasn't thinking about that then. I just knew that I was hearing a guy scream himself to death and I didn't even want to help him or even try to help him or nothing. I wasn't enjoying it, either, I wasn't thinking, Burn you sucker! or anything like that, but I knew right then that I wasn't even human, I was just a monster, like I always thought, like in the slasher movies. This was straight from the slasher movies, somebody burning up and screaming, and there's the monster just standing there in the flames and he isn't burning.

And that's the truth. I wasn't burning. There was flames all around me, but it kind of shied back from me, because I was so full of sparks from hating myself so bad that it was like the flames couldn't get through to me. I've thought about that a lot since then. I mean, even that Swedish scientist doesn't know all about this bio-electrical stuff. Maybe when I get real sparky it makes it so other stuff can't hit me. Maybe that's how some generals in the Civil War used to ride around in the open-- or maybe that was that general in World War II, I can't remember-- and bullets didn't hit them or anything. Maybe if you're charged up enough, things just can't get to you. I don't know. I just know that by the time I finally decided to open the door and actually opened it, the whole room was burning and the door was burning and I just opened it and walked through. Course now I got a bandage on my hand to prove that I couldn't grab a hot doorknob without hurting myself a little, but I shouldn't've been able to stay alive in that room and I came out without even my hair singed.

I started down the hall, not knowing who was still in the house. I wasn't used to being able to see people by their sparkiness yet, so I didn't even think of checking, I just ran down the stairs carrying that bloody knife. But it didn't matter. They all ran away before I got there, all except Daddy. He was lying in the middle of the floor in the living room, doubled up, lying with his head in a pool of vomit and his butt in a pool of blood, shaking like he was dying of cold. I really done him. I really tore him up inside. I don't think he even saw me. But he was my daddy, and even a monster don't leave his daddy for the fire to get him. So I grabbed his arms to try to pull him out.

I forgot how sparky I was, worse than ever. The second I touched him the sparkiness just rushed out of me and all over him. It never went that way before, just completely surrounded him like he was a part of me, like he was completely drowning in my light. It wasn't what I meant to do at all. I just forgot. I was trying to save him and instead I gave him a hit like I never gave nobody before, and I couldn't stand it, I just screamed.

Then I dragged him out. He was all limp, but even if I killed him, even if I turned him to jelly inside, he wasn't going to burn, that's all I could think of, that and how I ought to walk back into that house myself and up the stairs and catch myself on fire and die.

But I didn't do it, as you might guess. There was people yelling Fire! and shouting Stay back! and I knew that I better get out of there. Daddy's body was lying on the grass in front of the house, and I took off around the back. I thought maybe I heard some gunshots, but it could've been popping and cracking of timbers in the fire, I don't know. I just ran around the house and along toward the road, and if there was people in my way they just got out of my way, because even the most dimwitted inbred pukebrained kid in that whole village would've seen my sparks, I was so hot.

I ran till the asphalt ended and I was running on the dirt road. There was clouds so the moon was hardly any light at all, and I kept stumbling off the road into the weeds. I fell once and when I was getting up I could see the fire behind me. The whole house was burning, and there was flames above it in the trees. Come to think of it there hadn't been all that much rain, and those trees were dry. A lot more than one house was going to burn tonight, I figured, and for a second I even thought maybe nobody'd chase me.

But that was about as stupid an idea as I ever had. I mean, if they wanted to kill me before because I said Papa Lem's girl was ugly, how do you think they felt about me now that I burned down their little hidden town? Once they realized I was gone, they'd be after me and I'd be lucky if they shot me quick.

I even thought about cutting off the road, dangerous or not, and hiding in the woods. But I decided to get as much distance as I could along the road till I saw headlights.

Just when I decided that, the road ended. Just bushes and trees. I went back, tried to find the road. It must have turned but I didn't know which way. I was tripping along like a blind man in the grass, trying to feel my way to the ruts of the dirt road, and of course that's when I saw headlights away off toward the burning houses-- there was at least three houses burning now. They knew the town was a total loss by now, they was probably just leaving enough folks to get all the children out and away to a safe place, while the men came after me. It's what I would've done, and to hell with cancer, they knew I couldn't stop them all before they did what they wanted to me. And here I couldn't even find the road to get away from them. By the time their headlights got close enough to show the road, it'd be too late to get away.

I was about to run back into the woods when all of a sudden a pair of headlights went on not twenty feet away, and pointed right at me. I damn near wet my pants. I thought, Mick Winger, you are a dead little boy right this second.

And then I heard her calling to me. "Get on over here, Mick, you idiot, don't stand there in the light, get on over here." It was the lady from Roanoke. I still couldn't see her cause of the lights, but I knew her voice, and I took off. The road didn't end, it just turned a little and she was parked right where the dirt road met up sideways with a gravel road. I got around to the door of the car she was driving, or truck or whatever it was-- a four-wheel-drive Blazer maybe, I know it had a four-wheel-drive shift lever in it-- anyway the door was locked and she was yelling at me to get in and I was yelling back that it was locked until finally she unlocked it and I climbed in. She backed up so fast and swung around onto the gravel in a spin that near threw me right out the door, since I hadn't closed it yet. Then she took off so fast going forward, spitting gravel behind her, that the door closed itself. "Fasten your seat belt," she says to me.

"Did you follow me here?" I says.

"No, I just happened to be here picnicking," she says. "Fasten your damn seat belt."

I did, but then I turned around in my seat and looked out the back. There was five or six sets of headlights, making the job to get from the dirt road onto the gravel road. We didn't have more than a mile on them.

"We've been looking for this place for years," she says. "We thought it was in Rockingham County, that's how far off we were."

"Where is it, then?" I says.

"Alamance County," she says.

And then I says, "I don't give a damn what county it is! I killed my own daddy back there!"

And she says to me, "Don't get mad now, don't get mad at me, I'm sorry, just calm down." That was all she could think of, how I might get mad and lose control and kill her, and I don't blame her, cause it was the hardest thing I ever did, keeping myself from busting out right there in the car, and it would've killed her, too. The pain in my hand was starting to get to me, too, from where I grabbed the doorknob. It was just building up and building up.

She was driving a lot faster than the headlights reached. We'd be going way too fast for a curve before she even saw it, and then she'd slam on the brakes and we'd skid and sometimes I couldn't believe we didn't just roll over and crash. But she always got out of it.

I couldn't face back anymore. I just sat there with my eyes closed, trying to get calm, and then I'd remember my daddy who I didn't even like but he was my daddy lying there in his blood and his puke, and I'd remember that guy who burned to death up in my room and even though I didn't care at the time, I sure cared now, I was so angry and scared and I hated myself so bad I couldn't hold it in, only I also couldn't let it out, and I kept wishing I could just die. Then I realized that the guys following us were close enough that I could feel them. Or no it wasn't that they was close. They was just so mad that I could see their sparks flying like never before. Well as long as I could see them I could let fly, couldn't I? I just flung out toward them. I don't know if I hit them. I don't know if my bio-electricity is something I can throw like that or what. But at least I shucked it off myself, and I didn't mess up the lady who was driving.

When we hit asphalt again, I found out that I didn't know what crazy driving was before. She peeled out and now she began to look at a curve ahead and then switch off the headlights until she was halfway through the curve, it was the craziest thing I ever saw, but it also made sense. They had to be following our lights, and when our lights went out they wouldn't know where we was for a minute. They also wouldn't know that the road curved ahead, and they might even crash up or at least they'd have to slow down. Of course, we had a real good chance of ending up eating trees ourselves, but she drove like she knew what she was doing.

We came to a straight section with a crossroads about a mile up. She switched off the lights again, and I thought maybe she was going to turn, but she didn't, just went on and on and on, straight into the pitch black. Now, that straight section was long, but it didn't go on forever, and I don't care how good a driver you are, you can't keep track of how far you've gone in the dark. just when I thought for sure we'd smash into something, she let off the gas and reached her hand out the window with a flashlight. We was still going pretty fast, but the flashlight was enough to make a reflector up ahead flash back at us, so she knew where the curve was, and it was farther off than I thought. She whipped us around that curve and then around another, using just a couple of blinks from the flashlight, before she switched on her headlights again.

I looked behind us to see if I could see anybody. "You lost them!" I says.

"Maybe," she says. "You tell me."

So I tried to feel where they might be, and sure enough, they was sparky enough that I could just barely tell where they was, away back. Split up, smeared out. "They're going every which way," I says.

"So we lost a few of them," she says. "They aren't going to give up, you know."

"I know," I says.

"You're the hottest thing going," she says.

"And you're a daughter of Esau," I says.

"Like hell I am," she says. "I'm a great-great-great-granddaughter of Jacob Yow, who happened to be bio-electrically talented. Like if you're tall and athletic, you can play basketball. That's all it is, just a natural talent. Only he went crazy and started inbreeding his whole family, and they've got these stupid ideas about being the chosen of God and all the time they're just murderers."

"Tell me about it," I says.

"You can't help it," she says. "You didn't have anybody to teach you. I'm not blaming you."

But I was blaming me.

She says, "Ignorant, that's what they are. Well, my grandpa didn't want to just keep reading the Bible and killing any revenuers or sheriffs or whatever who gave us trouble. He wanted to find out what we are. He also didn't want to marry the slut they picked out for him because he wasn't particularly dusty. So he left. They hunted him down and tried to kill him, but he got away, and he married. And he also studied and became a doctor and his kids grew up knowing that they had to find out what it is, this power. It's like the old stories of witches, women who get mad and suddenly your cows start dying. Maybe they didn't even know they were doing it. Summonings and love spells and come-hithers, everybody can do it a little, just like everybody can throw a ball and sometimes make a basket, but some people can do it better than others. And Papa Lem's people, they do it best of all, better and better, because they're breeding for it. We've got to stop them, don't you see? We've got to keep them from learning how to control it. Because now we know more about it. It's all tied up with the way the human body heals itself. In Sweden they've been changing the currents around to heal tumors. Cancer. The opposite of what you've been doing, but it's the same principle. Do you know what that means? If they could control it, Lem's people could be healers, not killers. Maybe all it takes is to do it with love, not anger."

"Did you kill them little girls in orphanages with love?" I says.

And she just drives, she doesn't say a thing, just drives. "Damn," she says, "it's raining."

The road was slick in two seconds. She slowed way down. It came down harder and harder. I looked behind us and there was headlights back there again. Way back, but I could still see them. "They're on us again," I says.

"I can't go any faster in the rain," she says.

"It's raining on them too," I says.

"Not with my luck."

And I says, "It'll put the fire out. Back where they live."

And she says, "It doesn't matter. They'll move. They know we found them, because we picked you up. So they'll move."

I apologized for causing trouble, and she says, "We couldn't let you die in there. I had to go there and save you if I could."

"Why?" I ask her. "Why not let me die?"

"Let me put it another way," she says. "If you decided to stay with them, I had to go in there and kill you."

And I says to her, "You're the queen of compassion, you know?" And I thought about it a little. "You're just like they are, you know?" I says. "You wanted to get pregnant just like they did. You wanted to breed me like a stud horse."

"If I wanted to breed you," she says, "I would have done it on the hill this morning. Yesterday morning. You would've done it. And I should've made you, because if you went with them, our only hope was to have a child of yours that we could raise to be a decent person. Only it turned out you're a decent person, so we didn't have to kill you. Now we can study you and learn about this from the strongest living example of the phenomenon" --I don't know how to pronounce that, but you know what I mean. Or what she meant, anyway.

And I says to her, "Maybe I don't want you to study me, did you think of that?"

And she says to me, "Maybe what you want don't amount to a goldfish fart." Or anyway that's what she meant.

That's about when they started shooting at us. Rain or no rain, they was pushing it so they got close enough to shoot, and they wasn't half bad at it, seeing as the first bullet we knew about went right through the back window and in between us and smacked a hole in the windshield. Which made all kinds of cracks in the glass so she couldn't see, which made her slow down more, which meant they was even closer.

Just then we whipped around a corner and our headlights lit up a bunch of guys getting out of a car with guns in their hands, and she says, "Finally." So I figured they was some of her people, there to take the heat off. But at that same second Lem's people must have shot out a tire or maybe she just got a little careless for a second cause after all she couldn't see too good through the windshield, but anyway she lost control and we skidded and flipped over, rolled over it felt like five times, all in slow motion, rolling and rolling, the doors popping open and breaking off, the windshield cracking and crumbling away, and there we hung in our seat belts, not talking or nothing, except maybe I was saying 0 my God or something and then we smacked into something and just stopped, which jerked us around inside the car and then it was all over.

I heard water rushing. A stream, I thought. We can wash up. Only it wasn't a stream, it was the gasoline pouring out of the tank. And then I heard gunshots from back up by the road. I didn't know who was fighting who, but if the wrong guys won they'd just love to catch us in a nice hot gasoline fire. Getting out wasn't going to be all that hard. The doors were gone so we didn't have to climb out a window or anything.

We were leaned over on the left side, so her door was mashed against the ground. I says to her, "We got to climb out my door." I had brains enough to hook one arm up over the lip of the car before I unbuckled my seat belt, and then I hoisted myself out and stayed perched up there on the side of the car, up in the air, so I could reach down and help her out.

Only she wasn't climbing out. I yelled at her and she didn't answer. I thought for a second she was dead, but then I saw that her sparks was still there. Funny, how I never saw she had any sparkiness before, because I didn't know to look for it, but now, even though it was dim, I could see it. Only it wasn't so dim, it was real busy, like she was trying to heal herself. The gurgling was still going on, and everything smelled like gasoline. There was still shooting going on. And even if nobody came down to start us on fire on purpose, I saw enough car crashes at the movies to know you didn't need a match to start a car on fire. I sure didn't want to be near the car if it caught, and I sure didn't want her in it. But I couldn't see how to climb down in and pull her out. I mean I'm not a weakling but I'm not Mr. Universe either.

It felt like I sat there for a whole minute before I realized I didn't have to pull her out my side of the car, I could pull her out the front cause the whole windshield was missing and the roof: was only mashed down a little, cause there was a rollbar in the car-- that was real smart, putting a rollbar in. I jumped off the car. It wasn't raining right here, but it had rained, so it was slippery and wet. Or maybe it was slippery from the gasoline, I don't know. I got around the front of the car and up to the windshield, and I scraped the bits of glass off with my shoe. Then I crawled partway in and reached under her and undid her seat belt, and tried to pull her out, but her legs was hung up under the steering wheel and it took forever, it was terrible, and all the time I kept listening for her to breathe, and she didn't breathe, and so I kept getting more seared and frustrated and all I was thinking about was how she had to live, she couldn't be dead, she just got through saving my life and now she was dead and she couldn't be and I was going to get her out of the car even if I had to break her legs to do it, only I didn't have to break her legs and she finally slid out and I dragged her away from the car. It didn't catch on fire, but I couldn't know it wasn't going to.

And anyway all I cared about then was her, not breathing, lying there limp on the grass with her neck all floppy and I was holding on to her crying and angry and scared and I had us both covered with sparks, like we was the same person, just completely covered, and I was crying and saying, Live! I couldn't even call her by name or nothing because I didn't know her name. I just know I was shaking like I had the chills and so was and she was breathing now and whimpering ike somebody just stepped on a puppy and the sparks just kept flowing around us both and I felt like somebody sucked everything out of me, like I was a wet towel and somebody wrung me out and flipped me into a corner, and then I don't remember until I woke up here.

\*What did it feel like? What you did to her?\*

It felt like when I covered her with light, it was like I was taking over doing what her own body should've done, it was like I was healing her. Maybe I got that idea because she said something about healing when she was driving the car, but she wasn't breathing when I dragged her out, and then she was breathing. So I want to know if I healed her. Because if she got healed when I covered her with my own light, then maybe I didn't kill my daddy either, because it was kind of like that, I think it was kind of like that, what happened when I dragged him out of the house.

I been talking a long time now, and you still told me nothing. Even if you think I'm just a killer and you want me dead, you can tell me about her. Is she alive?

\*Yes.\*

Well then how come I can't see her? How come she isn't here with the rest of you?

\*She had some surgery. It takes time to heal.\*

But did I help her? Or did I twist her? You got to tell me. Cause if I didn't help her then I hope I fail your test and you kill me cause I can't think of a good reason why I should be alive if all I can do is kill people.

\*You helped her, Mick. That last bullet caught her in the head. That's why she crashed.\*

## But she wasn't bleeding!

\*It was dark, Mick. You couldn't see. You had her blood all over you. But it doesn't matter now. We have the bullet out. As far as we can tell, there was no brain damage. There should have been. She should have been dead.\*

So I did help her.

\*Yes. But we don't know how. All kinds of stories, you know, about faith healing, that sort of thing. Laying on of hands. Maybe it's the kind of thing you did, merging the bio-magnetic field. A lot of things don't make any sense yet. There's no way we can see that the tiny amount of electricity in a human bio-electric system could influence somebody a hundred miles off, but they summoned you, and you came. We need to study you, Mick. We've never had anybody as powerful as you. Tell the truth, maybe there's never been anybody like you. Or maybe all the healings in the New Testament-- \*

I don't want to hear about no testaments. Papa Lem gave me about all the testaments I ever need to hear about.

\*Will you help us, Mick?\*

Help you how?

\*Let us study you.\*

Go ahead and study.

\*Maybe it won't be enough just to study how you heal people.\*

I'm not going to kill nobody for you. If you try to make me kill somebody I'll kill you first till you have to kill me just to save your own lives, do you understand me?

\*Calm down, Mick. Don't get angry. There's plenty of time to think about things. Actually we're glad that you don't want to kill anybody. If you enjoyed it, or even if you hadn't been able to control it and kept on indiscriminately killing anyone who enraged you, you wouldn't have lived to be seventeen. Because yes, we're scientists, or at least we're finally learning enough that we can start being scientists. But first we're human beings, and we're in the middle of a war, and children like you are the weapons. If they ever got someone like you to stay with them, work with them, you could seek us out and destroy us. That's what they wanted you to do.\*

That's right, that's one thing Papa Lem said, I don't know if I mentioned it before, but he said that the children of Israel were supposed to kill every man, woman, and child in Canaan, cause idolaters had to make way for the children of God.

\*Well, you see, that's why our branch of the family left. We didn't think it was such a terrific idea, wiping out the entire human race and replacing it with a bunch of murderous, incestuous religious fanatics. For the last twenty years, we've been able to keep them from getting somebody like you, because we've murdered the children that were so powerful they had to put them outside to be reared by others.\*

Except me.

\*It's a war. We didn't like killing children. But it's like bombing the place where your enemies are building a secret weapon. The lives of a few children-- no, that's a lie. It nearly split us apart ourselves, the arguments over that. Letting you live-- it was a terrible risk. I voted against it every time. And I don't apologize for that, Mick. Now that you know what they are, and you chose to leave, I'm glad I lost. But so many things could have gone wrong.\*

They won't put any more babies out to orphanages now, though. They're not that dumb.

\*But now we have you. Maybe we can learn how to block what they do. Or how to heal the people they attack. Or how to identify sparkiness, as you call it, from a distance. All kinds of possibilities. But sometime in the future, Mick, you may be the only weapon we have. Do you understand that?\*

I don't want to.

\*I know.\*

You wanted to kill me?

\*I wanted to protect people from you. It was safest. Mick, I really am glad it worked out this way.\*

I don't know whether to believe you, Mr. Kaiser. You're such a good liar. I thought you were so nice to me all that time because you were just a nice guy.

\*Oh, he is, Mick. He's a nice guy. Also a damn fine liar. We kind of needed both those attributes in the person we had looking out for you.\*

Well, anyway, that's over with.

\*What's over with?\*

Killing me. Isn't it?

\*That's up to you, Mick. If you ever start getting crazy on us, or killing people that aren't part of this war of ours-- \*

I won't do that!

\*But if you did, Mick. It's never too late to kill you.\*

Can I see her?

\*See who?\*

The lady from Roanoke! Isn't it about time you told me her name?

\*Come on. She can tell you herself.\*

The receptionist was surprised that he was back so soon.

"Why, Mr. Barth, how glad I am to see you," she said.

"Surprised, you mean," Barth answered. His voice rumbled from the rolls of fat under his chin.

"Delighted."

"How long has it been?" Barth asked.

"Three years. How time flies."

The receptionist smiled, but Barth saw the awe and revulsion on her face as she glanced over his immense body. In her job she saw fat people every day. But Barth knew he was unusual. He was proud of being unusual.

"Back to the fat farm," he said, laughing.

The effort of laughing made him short of breath, and he gasped for air as she pushed a button and said, "Mr. Barth is back."

He did not bother to look for a chair. No chair could hold him. He did lean against a wall, however. Standing was a labor he preferred to avoid.

Yet it was not shortness of breath or exhaustion at the slightest effort that had brought him back to Anderson's Fitness Center. He had often been fat before, and he rather relished the sensation of bulk, the impression he made as crowds parted for him. He pitied those who could only be slightly fat-- short people, who were not able to bear the weight. At well over two meters, Barth could get gloriously fat, stunningly fat. He owned thirty wardrobes and took delight in changing from one to another as his belly and buttocks and thighs grew. At times he felt that if he grew large enough, he could take over the world, be the world. At the dinner table he was a conqueror to rival Genghis Khan.

It was not his fatness, then, that had brought him in. It was that at last the fat was interfering with his other pleasures. The girl he had been with the night before had tried and tried, but he was incapable-- a sign that it was time to renew, refresh, reduce.

"I am a man of pleasure," he wheezed to the receptionist, whose name he never bothered to learn. She smiled back.

"Mr. Anderson will be here in a moment."

"Isn't it ironic," he said, "that a man such as I, who is capable of fulfilling every one of his desires, is never satisfied!" He gasped with laughter again. "Why haven't we ever slept together?" he asked.

She looked at him, irritation crossing her face. "You always ask that, Mr. Barth, on your way in. But you never ask it on your way out."

True enough. When he was on his way out of the Anderson Fitness Center, she never seemed as attractive as she had on his way in.

Anderson came in, effusively handsome, gushingly warm, taking Barth's fleshy hand in his and pumping it with enthusiasm.

"One of my best customers," he said.

"The usual," Barth said.

"Of course," Anderson answered. "But the price has gone up."

"If you ever go out of business," Barth said, following Anderson into the inner rooms, "give me plenty of warning. I only let myself go this much because I know you're here."

"Oh," Anderson chuckled. "We'll never go out of business."

"I have no doubt you could support your whole organization on what you charge me."

"You're paying for much more than the sitnple service we perform. You're also paying for privacy. Our, shall we say, lack of government intervention."

"How many of the bastards do you bribe?"

"Very few, very few. Partly because so many high officials also need our service."

"No doubt."

"It isn't just weight gains that bring people to us, you know. It's cancer and aging and accidental disfigurement. You'd be surprised to learn who has had our service." Barth doubted that he would. The couch was ready for him, immense and soft and angled so that it would be easy for him to get up again.

"Damn near got married this time," Barth said, by way of conversation.

Anderson turned to him in surprise.

"But you didn't?"

"Of course not. Started getting fat, and she couldn't cope."

"Did you tell her?"

"That I was getting fat? It was obvious."

"About us, I mean."

"I'm not a fool."

Anderson looked relieved. "Can't have rumors getting around among the thin and young, you know."

"Still, I think I'll look her up again, afterward. She did things to me a woman shouldn't be able to do. And I thought I was jaded."

Anderson placed a tight-fitting rubber cap over Barth's head.

"Think your key thought," Anderson reminded him. Key thought. At first that had been such a comfort, to make sure that not one iota of his memory would be lost. Now it was boring, almost juvenile. Key thought. Do you have your own Captain Aardvark secret decoder ring? Be the first on your block. The only thing Barth had been the first on his block to do was reach puberty. He had also been the first on his block to reach one hundred fifty kilos.

How many times have I been here? he wondered as the tingling in his scalp began. This is the eighth time. Eight times, and my fortune is larger than ever, the kind of wealth that takes on a life on its own. I can keep this up forever, he thought, with relish. Forever at the supper table with neither worries nor restraints.

"It's dangerous to gain so much weight," Lynette had said. "Heart attacks, you know." But the only things that Barth worried about were hemorrhoids and impotence. The former was a nuisance, but the latter made life unbearable and drove him back to Anderson.

Key thought. What else? Lynette, standing naked on the edge of the cliff with the wind blowing. She was courting death, and he admired her for it, almost hoped that she would find it. She despised safety precautions. Like clothing, they were restrictions to be cast aside. She had once talked him into playing tag with her on a construction site, racing along the girders in the darkness, until the police came and made them leave. That had been when Barth was still thin from his last time at Anderson's. But it was not Lynette on the girders that he held in his mind. It was Lynette, fragile and beautiful Lynette, daring the wind to snatch her from the cliff and break up her body on the rocks by the river.

Even that, Barth thought, would be a kind of pleasure. A new kind of pleasure, to taste a grief so magnificently, so admirably earned.

And then the tingling in his head stopped. Anderson came back in.

"Already?" Birth asked.

"We've streamlined the process." Anderson carefully peeled the cap from Barth's head, helped the immense man lift himself from the couch.

"I can't understand why it's illegal," Barth said. "Such a simple thing."

"Oh, there are reasons. Population control, that sort of thing. This is a kind of immortality, you know. But it's mostly the repugnance most people feel. They can't face the thought. You're a man of rare courage."

But it was not courage, Barth knew. It was pleasure.

He eagerly anticipated seeing, and they did not make him wait.

"Mr. Barth, meet Mr. Barth."

It nearly broke his heart to see his own body young and strong and beautiful again, as it never had been the first time through his life. It was unquestionably himself, however, that they led into the room. Except that the belly was firm, the thighs well muscled but slender enough that they did not meet, even at the crotch. They brought him in naked, of course. Barth insisted on it.

He tried to remember the last time. Then he had been the one coming from the learning room, emerging to see the immense fat man that all his memories told him was himself. Barth remembered that it had been a double pleasure, to see the mountain he had made of himself, yet to view it from inside this beautiful young body.

"Come here," Barth said, his own voice arousing echoes of the last time, when it had been the other Barth who had said it. And just as that other had done the last time, he touched the naked young Barth, stroked the smooth and lovely skin, and finally embraced him.

And the young Barth embraced him back, for that was the way of it. No one loved Barth as much as Barth did, thin or fat, young or old. Life was a celebration of Barth; the sight of himself was his strongest nostalgia.

"What did I think of?" Barth asked.

The young Barth smiled into his eyes. "Lynette," he said. "Naked on a cliff. The wind blowing. And the thought of her thrown to her death."

"Will you go back to her?" Barth asked his young seff eagerly.

"Perhaps. Or to someone like her." And Barth saw with delight that the mere thought of it had aroused his young self more than a little.

"He'll do," Barth said, and Anderson handed him the simple papers to sign-papers that would never be seen in a court of law. because they attested to Barth's own compliance in and initiation of an act that was second only to murder in the lawbooks of every state.

"That's it, then," Anderson said, turning from the fat Barth to the young, thin one. "You're Mr. Barth now, in control of his wealth and his life. Your clothing is in the next room."

"I know where it is," the young Barth said with a smile, and his footsteps were buoyant as he left the room. He would dress quickly and leave the Fitness Center briskly, hardly noticing the rather plain-looking receptionist, except to take note of her wistful look after him, a tall, slender, beautiful man who had, only moments before, been lying mindless in storage, waiting to be given a mind and a memory, waiting for a fat man to move out of the way so he could fill his space.

In the memory room Barth sat on the edge of the couch, looking at the door, and then realized, with surprise, that he had no idea what came next.

"My memories run out here," Barth said to Anderson. "The agreement was-what was the agreement?"

"The agreement was tender care of you until you passed away."

"Ah, yes."

"The agreement isn't worth a damn thing," Anderson said, smiling.

Barth looked at him with surprise. "What do you mean?"

"There are two options, Barth. A needle within the next fifteen minutes. Or employment."

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't think we'd waste time and effort feeding you the ridiculous amounts of food you require, did you?"

Barth felt himself sink inside. This was not what he had expected, though he had not honestly expected anything. Barth was not the kind to anticipate trouble. Life had never given him much trouble.

"A needle?"

"Cyanide, if you insist, though we'd rather be able to vivisect you and get as many useful body parts as we can. Your body's still fairly young. We can get incredible amounts of money for your pelvis and your glands-- but they have to be taken from you alive."

"What are you talking about? This isn't what we agreed."

"I agreed to nothing with you, my friend," Anderson said, smiling. "I agreed with Barth. And Barth just left the room."

"Call him back! I insist--"

"Barth doesn't give a damn what happens to you."

And he knew that it was true.

"You said something about employment."

"Indeed."

"What kind of employment?"

Anderson shook his head. "It all depends," he said.

"On what?"

"On what kind of work turns up. There are several assignments every year that must be performed by a living human being, for which no volunteer can be found. No person, not even a criminal, can be compelled to do them."

"And I?"

"Will do them. Or one of them, rather, since you rarely get a second job."

"How can you do this? I'm a human being!"

Anderson shook his head. "The law says that there is only one possible Barth in all the world. And you aren't it. You're just a number. And a letter. The letter H."

## "Why H?"

"Because you're such a disgusting glutton, my friend. Even our first customers haven't got past C yet."

Anderson left then, and Barth was alone in the room. Why hadn't he anticipated this? Of course, of course, he shouted to himself now. Of course they wouldn't keep him pleasantly alive. He wanted to get up and try to run. But walking was difficult for him; running would be impossible. He sat there, his belly pressing heavily on his thighs, which were spread wide by the fat. He stood, with great effort, and could only waddle because his legs were so far apart, so constrained in their movement.

This has happened every time, Barth thought. Every damn time I've walked out of this place, young and thin, I've left behind someone like me, and they've had their way, haven't they? His hands trembled badly.

He wondered what he had decided before and knew immediately that there was no decision to make at all. Some fat people might hate themselves and choose death for the sake of having a thin version of themselves live on. But not Barth. Barth could never choose to cause himself any pain. And to obliterate even an illegal, clandestine version of himself-- impossible. Whatever else he might be, he was still Barth. The man who walked out of the memory room a few minutes before had not taken over Barth's identity. He had only duplicated it. They've stolen my soul with mirrors, Barth told himself. I have to get it back.

"Anderson!" Barth shouted. "Anderson! I've made up my mind."

It was not Anderson who entered, of course. Barth would never see Anderson again. It would have been too tempting to try to kill him.

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"Get to work, H!" the old man shouted from the other side of the field.

Barth leaned on his hoe a moment more, then got back to work, scraping weeds from between the potato plants. The calluses on his hands had long since shaped themselves to fit the wooden handle, and his muscles knew how to perform the work without Barth's having to think about it at all. Yet that made the labor no easier. When he first realized that they meant him to be a potato farmer, he had asked, "Is this my assignment? Is this all?" And they had laughed and told him no. "This just preparation," they said, "to get you in shape." So for two years he had worked in the potato fields, and now he began to doubt that they would ever come back, that the potatoes would ever end.

The old man was watching, he knew. His gaze always burned worse than the sun. The old man was watching, and if Barth rested too long or too often, the old man would come to him, whip in hand, to scar him deeply, to hurt him, to the soul.

He dug into the ground, chopping at a stubborn plant whose root seemed to cling to the foundation of the world. "Come up, damn you," he muttered. He thought his arms were too weak to strike harder, but he struck harder anyway. The root split, and the impact shattered him to the bone.

He was naked and brown to the point of blackness from the sun. The flesh hung loosely on him in great folds, a memory of the mountain he had been. Under the loose skin, however, he was tight and hard. It might have given him pleasure, for every muscle had been earned by hard labor and the pain of the lash. But there was no pleasure in it. The price was too high.

I'll kill myself, he often thought and thought again now with his arms trembling with exhaustion. I'll kill myself so they can't use my body and can't use my soul.

But he would never kill himself. Even now, Barth was incapable of ending it.

The farm he worked on was unfenced, but the time he had gotten away he had walked and walked and walked for three days and had not once seen any sign of human habitation other than an occasional jeep track in the sagebrush-and-grass desert. Then they found him and brought him back, weary and despairing, and forced him to finish a day's work in the field before letting him rest. And even then the lash had bitten deep, the old man laying it on with a relish that spoke of sadism or a deep, personal hatred.

But why should the old man hate me? Barth wondered. I don't know him. He finally decided that it was because he had been so fat, so obviously soft, while the old man was wiry to the point of being gaunt, his face pinched by years of exposure to the sunlight. Yet the old man's hatred had not diminished as the months went by and the fat melted away in the sweat and sunlight of the potato field.

A sharp sting across his back, the sound of slapping leather on skin, and then an excruciating pain deep in his muscles. He had paused too long. The old man had come to him. The old man said nothing, just raised the lash again, ready to strike. Barth lifted the hoe out of the ground, to start work again. It occurred to him, as it had a hundred times before, that the hoe could reach as far as the whip, with as good effect. But, as a hundred times before, Barth looked into the old man's eyes, and what he saw there, while he did not understand it, was enough to stop him. He could not strike back. He could only endure.

The lash did not fall again. Instead he and the old man just looked at each other. The sun burned where blood was coming from his back. Flies buzzed near him. He did not bother to brush them away.

Finally the old man broke the silence.

"H," he said.

Barth did not answer, just waited.

"They've come for you. First job," said the old man.

First job. It took Barth a moment to realize the implications. The end of the potato fields. The end of the sunlight. The end of the old man with the whip. The end of the loneliness or, at least, of the boredom.

"Thank God," Barth said. His throat was dry.

"Go wash," the old man said.

Barth carned the hoe back to the shed. He remembered how heavy the hoe had seemed when he first arrived. How ten minutes in the sunlight had made him faint. Yet they had revived him in the field, and the old man had said, "Carry it back." So he had carried back the heavy, heavy hoe, feeling for all the world like Christ bearing his cross. Soon enough the others had gone, and the old man and he bad been alone together, but the ritual with the hoe never changed. They got to the shed, and the old man carefully took the hoe from him and locked it away, so that Barth couldn't get it in the night and kill him with it.

And then into the house, where Barth bathed painfully and the old man put an excruciating disinfectant on his back. Barth had long since given up on the idea of an anesthetic. It wasn't in the old man's nature to use an anesthetic.

Clean clothes. A few minutes' wait. And then the helicopter. A young, businesslike man emerged from it, looking unfamiliar in detail but very familiar in general. He was an echo of all the businesslike young men and women who had dealt with him before. The young man came to him, unsmilingly, and said, "H?" Barth nodded. It was the only name they used for him.

"You have an assignment."

"What is it?" Barth asked.

The young man did not answer. The old man, behind him, whispered, "They'll tell you soon enough. And then you'll wish you were back here, H. They'll tell you, and you'll pray for the potato fields."

But Barth doubted it. In two years there had not been a moment's pleasure. The food was hideous, and there was never enough. There were no women, and he was usually too tired to amuse himself. Just pain and labor and loneliness, all excruciating. He would leave that now. Anything would be better, anything at all.

"Whatever they assign you, though," the old man said, "it can't be any worse than my assignment."

Barth would have asked him what his assignment had been, but there was nothing in the old man's voice that invited the question, and there was nothing in their relationship in the past that would allow the question to he asked. Instead, they stood in silence as the young, man reached into the helicopter and helped a man get out. An immensely fat man, stark-naked and white as the flesh of a potato, looking petrified. The old man strode purposefully toward him.

"Hello, I," the old man said.

"My name's Barth," the fat man answered, petulantly. The old man struck him hard across the mouth, hard enough that the tender lip split and blood dripped from where his teeth had cut into the skin.

"I," said the old man. "Your name is I."

The fat man nodded pitiably, but Barth-- H-- felt no pity for him. Two years this time. Only two damnable years and he was already in this condition. Barth could vaguely remember being proud of the mountain he had made of himself. But now he felt only contempt. Only a desire to go to the fat man, to scream in his face, "Why did you do it! Why did you let it happen again!"

It would have meant nothing. To I, as to H, it was the first time, the first betrayal. There had been no others in his memory.

Barth watched as the old man put a hoe in the fat man's hands and drove him out into the field. Two more young men got out of the helicopter. Barth knew what they would do, could almost see them helping the old man for a few days, until I finally learned the hopelessness of resistance and delay. But Barth did not get to watch the replay of his own torture of two years before. The young man who had first emerged from the copter now led him to it, put him in a seat by a window, and sat beside him. The pilot speeded up the engines, and the copter began to rise.

"The bastard," Barth said, looking out the window at the old man as he slapped I across the face brutally.

The young man chuckled. Then he told Barth his assignment.

Barth clung to the window, looking out, feeling his life slip away from him even as the ground receded slowly. "I can't do it."

"There are worse assignments," the young man said.

Barth did not believe it.

"If I live," he said, "if I live, I want to come back here."

"Love it that much?"

"To kill him."

The young man looked at him blankly.

"The old man," Barth explained, then realized that the young man was ultimately uncapable of understanding anything. He looked back out the window. The old man looked very small next to the huge lump of white flesh beside him. Barth felt a terrible loathing for I. A terrible despair in knowing that nothing could possibly be learned, that again and again his selves would replay this hideous scenario.

Somewhere, the man who would be J was dancing, was playing polo, was seducing and perverting and being delighted by every woman and boy and, God knows, sheep that he could find; somewhere the man who would be J dined.

I bent immensely in the sunlight and tried, clumsily, to use the hoe. Then, losing his balance, he fell over into the dirt, writhing. The old man raised his whip.

The helicopter turned then, so that Barth could see nothing but sky from his window. He never saw the whip fall. But he imagined the whip falling, imagined and relished it, longed to feel the heaviness of the blow flowing from his own arm. Hit him again! he cried out inside himself. Hit him for me! And inside himself he made the whip fall a dozen times more.

"What are you thinkmg?" the young man asked, smiling, as if he knew the punch line of a joke.

"I was thinking," Barth said, "that the old man can't possibly hate him as much as I do."

Apparently that was the punch line. The young man laughed uproariously. Barth did not understand the joke, but somehow he was certain that he was the butt of it. He wanted to strike out but dared not.

Perhaps the young man saw the tension in Barth's body, or perhaps he merely wanted to explain. He stopped laughing but could not repress his smile, which penetrated Barth far more deeply than the laugh.

"But don't you see?" the young man asked. "Don't you know who the old man is?"

Barth didn't know.

"What do you think we did with A?" And the young man laughed again.

There are worse assignments than mine, Barth realized. And the worst of all would be to spend day after day, month after month, supervising that contemptible animal that he could not deny was himself.

The scar on his back bled a little, and the blood stuck to the seat when it dried.

Except for Donner Pass, everything on the road between San Francisco and Salt Lake City was boring. Stanley had driven the road a dozen deadly times until he was sure he knew Nevada by heart: an endless road winding among hills covered with sagebrush. "When God got through making scenery," Stanley often said, "there was a lot of land left over in Nevada, and God said, 'Aw, to hell with it,' and that's where Nevada's been ever since."

Today Stanley was relaxed, there was no rush for him to get back to Salt Lake, and so, to ease the boredom, he began playing freeway games.

He played Blue Angels first. On the upslope of the Sierra Nevadas he found two cars riding side by side at fifty miles an hour. He pulled his Datsun 260Z into formation beside them. At fifty miles an hour they cruised along, blocking all the lanes of the freeway. Traffic began piling up behind them.

The game was successful-- the other two drivers got into the spirit of the thing. When the middle car drifted forward, Stanley eased back to stay even with the driver on the right, so that they drove down the freeway in an arrowhead formation. They made diagonals, funnels; danced around each other for half an hour; and whenever one of them pulled slightly ahead, the frantically angry drivers behind them jockeyed behind the leading car.

Finally, Stanley tired of the game, despite the fun of the honks and flashing lights behind them. He honked twice, and waved jauntily to the driver beside him, then pressed on the accelerator and leaped forward at seventy miles an hour, soon dropping back to sixty as dozens of other cars, their drivers trying to make up for lost time (or trying to compensate for long confinement), passed by going much faster. Many paused to drive beside him, honking, glaring, and making obscene gestures. Stanley grinned at them all.

He got bored again east of Reno.

This time, he decided to play Follow. A yellow AM Hornet was just ahead of him on the highway, going fifty-eight to sixty miles per hour. A good speed. Stanley settled in behind the car, about three lengths behind, and followed. The driver was a woman, with dark hair that danced in the erratic wind that came through her open windows. Stanley wondered how long it would take her to notice that she was being followed. Two songs on the radio (Stanley's measure of time while traveling), and halfway through a commercial for hair spray-- and she began to pull away. Stanley prided himself on quick reflexes. She didn't even gain a car length; even when she reached seventy, he stayed behind her.

He hummed along with an old Billy Joel song even as the Reno radio station began to fade. He hunted for another station, but found only country and western, which he loathed. So in silence he followed as the woman in the Hornet slowed down.

She went thirty miles an hour, and still he didn't pass. Stanley chuckled. At this point, he was sure she was imagining the worst. A rapist, a thief, a kidnapper, determined to destroy her. She kept on looking in her rearview mirror.

"Don't worry, little lady," Stanley said, "I'm just a Salt Lake City boy who's having fun." She slowed down to twenty, and he stayed behind her; she sped up abruptly until she was going fifty, but her Hornet couldn't possibly out-accelerate his Z.

"I made forty thousand dollars for the company," he sang in the silence of his car, "and that's six thousand dollars for me."

The Hornet came up behind a truck that was having trouble getting up a hill. There was a passing lane, but the Hornet didn't use it at first, hoping, apparently, that Stanley would pass. Stanley didn't pass. So the Hornet pulled out, got even with the nose of the truck, then rode parallel with the truck all the rest of the way up the hill.

"Ah," Stanley said, "playing Blue Angels with the Pacific Intermountain Express." He followed her closely.

At the top of the hill, the passing lane ended. At the last possible moment the Hornet pulled in front of the truck-- and stayed only a few yards ahead of it. There was no room for Stanley, and now on a two-lane road a car was coming straight at him.

"What a bitch!" Stanley mumbled. In a split second, because when angry Stanley doesn't like ta give in, he decided that she wasn't going to outsmart him. He nosed into the space between the Hornet and the truck anyway.

There wasn't room. The truck driver leaned on his horn and braked; the woman, afraid, pulled forward. Stanley got out of the way just as the oncoming car, its driver a father with a wife and several rowdy children looking petrified at the accident that had nearly happened, passed on the left.

"Think you're smart, don't you, bitch? But Stanley Howard's feeling rich." Nonsense, nonsense, but it sounded good and he sang it in several keys as he followed the woman, who was now going a steady sixty-five, two car-lengths behind. The Homet had Utah plates-- she was going to be on that road a long time.

Stanley's mind wandered. From thoughts of Utah plates to a memory of eating at Alioto's and on to his critical decision that no matter how close you put Alioto's to the wharf, the fish there wasn't any better than the fish at Bratten's in Salt Lake. He decided that he would have to eat there soon, to make sure his impression was correct; he wondered whether he should bother taking Liz out again, since she so obviously wasn't interested; speculated on whether Genevieve would say yes if he asked her.

And the Hornet wasn't in front of him anymore.

He was only going forty-five, and the PIE truck was catching up to him on a straight section of the road. There were curves into a mountain pass up ahead--she must have gone faster when he wasn't noticing. But he sped up, sped even faster, and didn't see her. She must have pulled off somewhere, and Stanley chuckled to think of her panting, her heart beating fast, as she watched Stanley drive on by. What a relief that must have been, Stanley thought. Poor lady. What a nasty game. And he giggled with delight, silently, his chest and stomach shaking but making no sound.

He stopped for gas in Elko, had a package of cupcakes from the vending machine in the gas station, and was leaning on his car when he watched the Hornet go by. He waved, but the woman didn't see him, He did notice, however, that she pulled into an Amoco station not far up the road.

It was just a whim. I'm taking this too far, he thought, even as he waited in his car for her to pull out of the gas station. She pulled out. For just a moment Stanley hesitated, decided not to go on with the chase, then pulled out and drove along the main street of Elko a few blocks behind the Hornet. The woman stopped at a light. When it turned green, Stanley was right behind her. He saw her look in her rearview mirror again, stiffen; her eyes were afraid.

"Don't worry, lady," he said. "I'm not following you this time, just going my own sweet way home."

The woman abruptly, without signalling, pulled into a parking place. Stanley calmly drove on. "See?" he said. "Not following. Not following."

A few miles outside Elko, he pulled off the road. He knew why he was waiting. He denied it to himself. Just resting, he told himself. Just sitting here because I'm in no hurry to get back to Salt Lake City. But it was hot and uncomfortable, and with the car stopped, there wasn't the slightest breeze coming through the windows of the Z. This is stupid, he told himself. Why persecute the poor woman anymore? he asked himself. Why the hell am I still sitting here?

He was still sitting there when she passed him. She saw him. She sped up. Stanley put the car in gear, drove out into the road from the shoulder, caught up with her quickly, and settled in behind her. "I am a shithead," he announced to himself. "I am the meanest asshole on the highway. I ought to be shot." He meant it. But he stayed behind her, cursing himself all the way.

In the silence of his car (the noise of the wind did not count as sound; the engine noise was silent to his accustomed ears), he recited the speeds as they drove. "Fifty-five, sixty, sixty-five on a curve, are we out of our minds, young lady? Seventy-- ah, ho, now, look for a Nevada state trooper anywhere along here." They took curves at ridiculous speeds; she stopped abruptly occasionally; always Stanley's reflexes were quick, and he stayed a few car lengths behind her.

"I really am a nice person, young lady," he said to the woman in the car, who was pretty, he realized as he remembered the face he saw when she passed him back in Elko. "If you met me in Salt Lake City, you'd like me. I might ask you out for a date sometime. And if you aren't some tight-assed little Mormon girl, we might get it on. You know? I'm a nice person."

She was pretty, and as he drove along behind her ("What? Eighty-flve? I never thought a Hornet could go eighty-five"), he began to fantasize. He imagined her running out of gas, panicking because now, on some lonely stretch of road, she would be at the mercy of the crazy man following her. But in his fantasy, when he stopped it was she who had a gun, she who was in control of the situation. She held the gun on him, forced him to give her his car keys, and then she made him strip, took his clothes and stuffed them in the back of the Z, and took off in his car. "It's you that's dangerous, lady," he said. He replayed the fantasy several times, and each time she spent more time with him before she left him naked by the road with an out-of-gas Hornet and horny as hell.

Stanley realized the direction his fantasies had taken him. "I've been too lonely too long," he said. "Too lonely too long, and Liz won't unzip anything without a license." The word lonely made him laugh, thinking of tacky poetry. He sang: "Bury me not on the lone prairie where the coyotes howl and wind blows free."

For hours he followed the woman. By now he was sure she realized it was a game. By now she must know he meant no harm. He had done nothing to try to get her to pull over. He was just tagging along. "Like a friendly dog," he said. "Arf. Woof. Growrrr." And he fantasized again until suddenly the lights of Wendover were dazzling, and he realized it was dark. He switched on his lights. When he did, the Hornet sped up, its taillights bright for a moment, then ordinary among

the lights and signs saying that this was the last chance to lose money before getting to Utah.

Just inside Wendover, a police car was pulled to the side of the road, its lights flashing. Some poor sap caught speeding. Stanley expected the woman to be smart, to pull over behind the policeman, while Stanley moved on over the border, out of Nevada jurisdiction.

The Hornet, however, went right by the policeman, sped up, in fact, and Stanley was puzzled for a moment. Was the woman crazy? She must be scared out of her wits by now, and here was a chance for relief and rescue, and she ignored it. Of course, Stanley reasoned, as he followed the Hornet out of Wendover and down to the long straight stretch of the highway over the Salt Flats, of course she didn't stop. Poor lady was so conscious of having broken the law speeding that she was afraid of cops.

Crazy. People do crazy things under pressure, Stanley decided.

The highway stretched out straight in the blackness. No moon. Some starlight, but there were no landmarks on either side of the road, and so the cars barreled on as if in a tunnel, with only a hypnotic line to the left and headlights behind and taillights ahead.

How much gas would the tank of a Hornet hold? The Salt Flats went a long way before the first gas station, and what with daylight saving time it must be tenthirty, eleven o'clock, maybe only ten, but some of those gas stations would be closing up now. Stanley's Z could get home to Salt Lake with gas to spare after a fill-up in Elko, but the Hornet might run out of gas.

Stanley remembered his daydreams of the afternoon and now translated them into night, into her panic in the darkness, the gun flashing in his headlights. This lady was armed and dangerous. She was carrying drugs into Utah, and thought he was from the mob. She probably thought he was planning to get her on the lonely Salt Flats, miles from anywhere. She was probably checking the clip of her gun.

Eighty-flve, said the speedometer.

"Going pretty fast, lady," he said.

Ninety, said the speedometer.

Of course, Stanley realized. She is running out of gas. She wants to get going as fast as she can, outrun me, but at least have enough momentum to coast when she runs out.

Nonsense, thought Stanley. It's dark, and the poor lady, is scared out of her wits. I've got to stop this. This is dangerous. it's dark and it's dangerous and this stupid game has gone on for four hundred miles. I never meant it to go on this long.

Stanley passed the road signs that told him, habituated as he was to this drive, that the first big curve was coming up. A lot of people unfamiliar with the Salt Flats thought it went straight as an arrow all the way.

But there was a curve where there was no reason to have a curve, before the mountains, before anything. And in typical Utah Highway Department fashion, the Curve sign was posted right in the middle of the turn.

Instinctively, Stanley slowed down.

The woman in the Hornet did not.

In his headlights Stanley saw the Hornet slide off the road. He screeched on his brakes; as he went past, he saw the Hornet bounce on its nose, flip over and bounce on its tail, then topple back and land flat on the roof. For a moment the car lay there. Stanley got his car stopped, looked back over his shoulder. The Hornet erupted in flames.

Stanley stayed there for only a minute or so, gasping, shuddering. In horror. In horror, he insisted to himself, saying, "What have I done! My God, what have I done," but knowing even as he pretended to be appalled that he was having an orgasm, that the shuddering of his body was the most powerful ejaculation he had ever had, that he had been trying to get up the Hornet's ass all the way from Reno and finally, finally, he had come.

He drove on. He drove for twenty minutes and came to a gas station with a pay phone. He got out of the car stiffly, his pants sticky and wet, and fumbled in his sticky pocket for a sticky dime, which he put in the phone. He dialed the emergency number.

"I-- I passed a car on the Salt Flats. In flames. About fifteen miles before this Chevron station. Flames."

He hung up. He drove on. A few minutes later he saw a patrol car, lights whirling, speeding past going the other way. From Salt Lake City out into the desert. And still later he saw an ambulance and a fire truck go by. Stanley gripped the wheel tightly. They would know. They would see his skid marks. Someone would tell about the Z that was following the Hornet from Reno until the woman in the Hornet died in Utah.

But even as he worried, he knew that no one would know. He hadn't touched her. There wasn't a mark on his car.

The highway turned into a six-lane street with motels and shabby diners on either side. He went under the freeway, over the railroad tracks, and followed North Temple street up to Second Avenue, the school on the left, the Slow signs, everything normal, everything as he had left it, everything as it always had been when he came home from a long trip. To L Street, to the Chateau LeMans apartments; he parked in the underground garage, got out. All the doors opened to his key. His room was undisturbed.

What the hell do I expect? he asked himself. Sirens heading my way? Five detectives in my living room waiting to grill me?

The woman, the woman had died. He tried to feel terrible. But all that he could remember, all that was important in his mind, was the shuddering of his body, the feeling that the orgasm would never end. There was nothing. Nothing like that in the world.

He went to sleep quickly, slept easily. Murderer? he asked himself as he drifted off.

But the word was taken by his mind and driven into a part of his memory where Stanley could not retrieve it. Can't live with that. Can't live with that. And so he didn't.

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Stanley found himself avoiding looking at the paper the next morning, and so he forced himself to look. It wasn't front-page news. It was buried back in the local news section. Her name was Alix Humphreys. She was twenty-two and single, working as a secretary to some law firm. Her picture showed her as a young, attractive girl.

"The driver apparently fell asleep at the wheel, according to police investigators. The vehicle was going faster than eighty miles per hour when the mishap occurred."

Mishap.

Hell of a word for the flames.

Yet, Stanley went to work just as he always did, flirted with the secretaries just as he always did, and even drove his car, just as he always did, carefully and politely on the road. It wasn't long, however, before he began playing freeway games again. On. his way up to Logan, he played Follow, and a woman in a Honda Civic smashed headon into a pickup truck as she foolishly tried to pass a semi-truck at the crest of a hill in Sardine Canyon. The police reports didn't mention (and no one knew) that she was trying to get away from a Datsun 26OZ that had relentlessly followed her for eighty miles. Her name was Donna Weeks, and she had two children and a husband who had been expecting her back in Logan that evening. They couldn't get all her body out of the car.

On a hop over to Denver, a seventeen-year-old skier went out of control on a snowy road, her VW smashing into a mountain, bouncing off, and tumbling down a cliff. One of the skis on the back of her bug, incredibly enough, was unbroken. The other was splintered into kindling. Her head went through the windshield. Her body didn't.

The roads between Cameron trading post and Page, Arizona, were the worst in the world. It surprised no one when an eighteen-year-old blond model from Phoenix was killed when she smashed into the back of a van parked beside the road. She had been going more than a hundred nifles an hour, which her friends said did not surprise them, she had always sped, especially when driving at night. A child in the van was killed in his sleep, and the family was hospitalized. There was no mention of a Datsun with Utah plates.

And Stanley began to remember more often. There wasn't room in the secret places of his mind to hold all of this. He clipped their faces out of the paper. He dreamed of them at night. In his dreams they always threatened hun, always deserved the end they got. Every dream ended with orgasm. But never as strong a convulsion as the ecstacy when the collision came on the highway.

Check. And mate.

Aim, and fire.

Eighteen, seven, twenty-three, hike.

Games, all games, and the moment of truth.

"I'm sick." He sucked the end of his Bic four-color pen. "I need help."

The phone rang.

"Stan? It's Liz."

Hi, Liz.

"Stan, aren't you going to answer me?"

Go to hell, Liz.

"Stan, what kind of game is this? You don't call for nine months, and now you just sit there while I'm trying to talk to you?"

Come to bed, Liz.

"That is you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Well, why didn't you answer me? Stan, you scared me. That really scared me."

"I'm sorry."

"Stan, what happened? Why haven't you called?"

"I needed you too much." Melodramatic, melodramatic. But true.

"Stan, I know. I was being a bitch."

"No, no, not really. I was being too demanding."

"Stan, I miss you. I want to be with you."

"I miss you, too, Liz. I've really needed you these last few months."

She droned on as Stanley sang silently, "Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie, where the coyotes howl--"

"Tonight? My apartment?"

"You mean you'll let me past the sacred chain lock?"

"Stanley. Don't be mean. I miss you."

"I'll be there."

"I love you."

"Me, too."

After this many months, Stanley was not sure, not sure at all. But Liz was a straw to grasp at. "I drown," Stanley said. "I die. Morior. Moriar. Mortuus sum."

Back when he had been dating Liz, back when they had been together, Stanley hadn't played these freeway games. Stanley hadn't watched these women die. Stanley hadn't had to hide from himself in his sleep. "Caedo. Caedam. Cecidi."

Wrong, wrong. He had been dating Liz the first time. He had only stopped after-- after. Liz had nothing to do with it. Nothing would help. "Despero. Desperabo. Desperavi."

And because it was the last thing he wanted to do, he got up, got dressed, went out to his car, and drove out onto the freeway. He got behind a woman in a red Audi. And he followed her.

She was young, but she was a good driver. He tailed her from Sixth South to the place where the freeway forks, I-15 continuing south, I-80 veering east. She stayed in the right-hand lane until the last moment, then swerved across two lanes of traffic and got onto I-80. Stanley did not think of letting her go. He, too, cut across traffic. A bus honked loudly; there was a screeching of brakes; Stanley's Z was on two wheels and he lost control; a lightpost loomed, then passed.

And Stanley was on I-80, following a few hundred yards behind the Audi. He quickly closed the gap. This woman was smart, Stanley said to himself. "You're smart, lady. You won't let me get away with anything. Nobody today. Nobody. today." He meant to say nobody dies today, and he knew that was what he was really saying (hoping; denying), but he did not let himself say it. He spoke as if a microphone hung over his head, recording his words for posterity.

The Audi wove through traffic, averaging seventy-five. Stanley followed close behind. Occasionally, a gap in the traffic closed before he could use it; he found another. But he was a dozen cars behind when she cut off and took the last exit before I-80 plunged upward into Parley's Canyon. She was going south on I-215, and Stanley followed, though he had to brake violently to make the tight curve that led from one freeway to the other.

She drove rapidly down I-215 until it ended, turned into a narrow two-lane road winding along the foot of the mountain. As usual, a gravel truck was going thirty miles an hour, shambling along shedding stones like dandruff onto the road. The Audi pulled behind the gravel truck, and Stanley's Z pulled behind the Audi. The woman was smart. She didn't try to pass. Not on that road.

When they reached the intersection with the road going up Big Cottonwood Canyon to the ski resorts (closed now in the spring, so there was no traffic), she seemed to be planning to turn right, to take Fort Union Boulevard back to the freeway. Instead, she turned left. But Stanley had been anticipating the move, and he turned left, too. They were not far up the winding canyon road before it occurred to Stanley that this road led to nowhere. At Snowbird it was a dead end, a loop that turned around and headed back down. This woman, who had seemed so smart, was making a very stupid move.

And then he thought, I might catch her. He said, "I might catch you, girl. Better watch out."

What he would do if he caught her he wasn't sure. She must have a gun. She must be armed, or she wouldn't be daring him like this.

She took the curves at ridiculous speeds, and Stanley was pressed to the limit of his driving skills to stay up with her. This was the most difficult game of Follow he had ever played. But it might end too quickly-- on any of these curves she might smash up, might meet a car coming the other way. Be careful, he thought. Be careful, be careful, it's just a game, don't be afraid, don't panic.

Panic? The moment this woman had realized she was being followed, she had sped and dodged, leading him on a merry chase. None of the confusion the others had shown. This was a live one. When he caught her, she'd know what to do. She'd know. "Veniebam. Veniam. Venies." He laughed at his joke.

Then he stopped laughing abruptly, swung the wheel hard to the right, jamming on the brake. He had seen just a flash of red going up a side road. Just a flash, but it was enough. This bitch in the red Audi thought she'd fool him. Thought she could ditch into a side road and he'd go on by.

He skidded in the gravel of the shoulder, but regained control and charged up the narrow dirt road. The Audi was stopped a few hundred yards from the entrance.

Stopped.

At last.

He pulled in behind her, even had his fingers on the door handle. But she had not meant to stop, apparently. She had only meant to pull out of sight till he went by. He had been too smart for her. He had seen. And now she was caught on a terribly lonely mountain road, still moist from the melting snow, with only trees around, in weather too warm for skiers, too cold for hikers. She had thought to trick him, and now he had trapped her.

She drove off. He followed. On the bumpy dirt road, twenty miles an hour was uncomfortably fast. She went thirty. His shocks were being shot to hell, but this was one that wouldn't get away. She wouldn't get away from Stanley. Her Audi was voluptuous with promises. After interminable jolting progress up the side canyon, the mountains suddenly opened out into a small valley. The road, for a while, was flat, though certainly not straight. And the Audi sped up to forty incredible miles an hour. She wasn't giving up. And she was a damned good driver. But Stanley was a damned good driver, too. "I should quit now," he said to the invisible microphone in his car. But he didn't quit. He didn't quit and he didn't quit.

The road quit.

He came around a tree-lined curve and suddenly there was no road, just a gap in the trees and, a few hundred yards away, the other side of a ravine. To the right, out of the corner of his eye, he saw where the road made a hairpin turn, saw the Audi stopped there, saw, he thought, a face looking at him in horror. And because of that face he turned to look, tried to look over his shoulder, desperate to see the face, desperate not to watch as the trees bent gracefully toward him and the rocks rose up and enlarged and engorged, and he impaled himself, himself and his Datsun 260Z, on a rock that arched upward and shuddered as he swallowed its tip.

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She sat in the Audi, shaking, her body heaving in great sobs of relief and shock at what had happened. Relief and shock, yes. But by now she knew that the shuddering was more than that. It was also ecstacy.

This has to stop, she cried out silently to herself. Four, four, four. "Four is enough," she said, beating on the steering wheel. Then she got control of herself, and the orgasm passed except for the trembling in her thighs and occasional cramps, and she jockeyed the car until it was turned around, and she headed back down the canyon to Salt Lake City, where she was already an hour late.

## HEAL THYSELF Orson Scott Card

There's a limit to how much you can shield your children from the harsh realities of life. But you can't blame parents who try. Especially when it's something you have to go out of your way to discuss. My parents assure me that they would have talked about it someday, but it's not like the birds and the bees-there's not a certain age when you have to know. They were letting it slide. I was a curious kid. I had already asked questions that could have led there. They dodged. They waffled. I understand.

But then my childhood friend, Elizio, died of complications from his leukemia vaccination. I had been given mine on the same day, right after him, after jostling in line for twenty-minutes with the rest of our class of ten-year-olds. Nobody else got sick. We didn't know anything was wrong with Elizio, either, not for months. And then the radiation and the chemotherapy; primitive holdovers from an era when medicine was almost indistinguishable from the tortures of the Inquisition. Nothing worked. Elizio died. He was eleven by then. A slow passage into the grave. And I demanded to know why.

They started to talk about God, but I told them I knew about heaven and I wasn't worried about Elizio's soul. I wanted to know why there wasn't some better way to prevent diseases than infecting us with semi-killed pseudoviruses mixed with antigen stimulants. Was this the best the human race could do? Didn't God give us brains so we could solve these things? Oh, I was full of righteous wrath.

That was when they told me that it was time for me to take a trip to the North American Wild Animal Park What did that have to do with my question? It will all become clear, they said. But I should see with my own eyes. Thus they turned from telling me nothing to telling me everything. Were they wise? I know this much: I was angry at the universe, a deep anger that was born of fear. My dear friend Elizio had been taken from me because our medicine was so primitive. Therefore anyone could die. My parents. My little sisters. My own children someday. Nothing was secure. And it pissed me off. The way I felt, the way I was acting, I think they believed that nothing but a complete answer, a visual experience, could restore my sense that this was, if not a perfect world, then at least the best one possible.

We left Saltillo that weekend, taking the high-speed train that connected Monterrey to Los Angeles. We got off in El Paso, the southern gateway to the park During the half-hour trip, I tried to make sense of the brochures about the park, all the pictures, the guidebooks. But it was dear to me, even at the age of eleven, that something was being left out. That I was getting the child's version of what the park contained. All that the brochures described was a vast tract of savannas, filled with wild animals living in their natural habitat, though it was an odd mixture of African, South American, European, and American fauna that they pictured. Of course, to protect the animals against the dangers of straying and the far greater menace of poaching, the park was fenced about with an impenetrable barrier-not illustrated in the brochures-of fences, ditches, wires, walls. The thing that made no sense at all, however, was the warning about absolute biosecurity All observations of the park inside the boundaries were to take place from within completely biosealed buses, and anyone who tried to circumvent the bioseal would be ejected from the park and prosecuted. They did not say what would happen to anyone who succeeded in getting out into the open air.

Biosealed buses suggested a serious biohazard. And yet there was nothing in the brochures to indicate what that biohazard might be. It's not as if herds of bison could sneak onto the buses if you cracked the seal.

The answer to this mystery was no doubt the answer to my question about why Elizio died, and I impatiently demanded that my parents explain.

They urged me to be patient, and then took me right past the regular buses and on to a nondescript door with the words --in small letters-- "Special Tours."

"What's so special?" I asked.

They ignored me. The clerk seemed to know without explanation exactly what my parents wanted. Then I understood that my parents must have called ahead.

It was a private tour. And not on a bus. We were taken down an elevator into a deep basement, and then put aboard a train on which we rode for more than an hour-longer than the trip from Saltillo to El Paso, though I suspect we were going much slower. Underground, who can tell?

We came up another elevator, and, like the underground train, this one had no trappings of tourism. This was a place where people worked; gawking was only a secondary concern.

We were led by a slightly impatient-looking woman to a smallish room with windows on four sides and dozens of sets of binoculars in a couple of boxes. There were also chairs, some stacked, some scattered about almost randomly. As if someone hadn't bothered to straighten up after a meeting.

"Are they close?" asked Mother.

"We're here because the water is nearby," said the woman. "If they aren't close now, they will be soon."

"Where's the water?" asked Father.

The woman pointed vaguely in a direction. It's clear she didn't want us there. But Mother and Father had the gift of patience. They were here for me, and bore the disdain of the scientist. If that's what she was.

The woman went away.

My parents picked up binoculars and searched. I also picked out a set and tried to figure out how to focus it.

"It senses your vision automatically," Father explained. "Just look, and it will come into focus."

"Bacana," I said. I looked.

There was a lot of dry grassy land, interspersed with drier, sagebrushy land. In one direction were some trees. That must be where the water was.

"Spotted them yet?" Mother asked.

"To the left of the trees?" asked Father.

"There too?"

"Where did you see them?"

"In the shade of that rock"

I searched and finally found what they were looking at.

Men and women. Long-haired. Filthy. Naked.

My straitlaced parents brought me here to see naked people?

Then I looked again, more closely. They weren't exactly people after all.

"Neanderthals," I said.

"Homo neanderthalensis," said Father.

"They've been extinct forever!"

"For about twenty thousand years, most conservative guess," said Father. "Maybe longer."

"But there they are," I said.

"There was a long debate," said Father. "About how the Neanderthals died out."

"I thought that Homo sapiens wiped them out."

"It wasn't so simple. There was plain evidence of communities of sapiens and neanderthalensis living in close proximity for centuries. It wasn't just a case of 'kill-the-monsters.' So there were several theories. One was that the two species interbred, but Neanderthal traits were discouraged to such a degree that they faded out. Like round eyes in China."

"How could they interbreed?" I asked. I was proud of my scientific erudition, as only eleven-year-olds can be. "Look at how different they are from humans."

"Not so different," said Mother. "They had rudimentary language. Not the complicated grammar we have now basically just imperative verbs and labeling nouns. But they could call out to each other across a large expanse and give warning. They could greet each other by name."

"I was talking about how they look."

"But I was talking about brain function," said Mother, "which is much more to the point, don't you think?"

"Another theory" said Father, "was that Homo sapiens evolved from the Neanderthals. That one was discredited and then revived several times. It turns out that was the closest theory to being right."

"You know, none of this explains why there are Neanderthals out here in the North American Wild Animal Park."

"You surprise me, Son," said my father. "I thought you would have leaped to at least some conclusion. Instead you seem to be passively awaiting our explanation."

I hated it when Father patronized me. He knew that, so he did it whenever he wanted to goad me into thinking. It always worked. I hated that, too.

"You brought me here because of the way I reacted to Elizio's death," I said. "And because you're famous scientists yourselves, you got to pull strings and get me a special tour. Not everybody sees this, right?"

"Actually, anybody can, but few want to," said Father.

"And the biohazard stuff-that suggests some kind of disease agent. What you said about the evolved-from-Neanderthals scenario being close to correct suggests ... there's some disease loose in the wild here that causes regular people to turn into cavemen?"

Father smiled wanly at Mother. "Smart boy," he said.

I looked at Mother. She was crying.

"Just tell me," I demanded. "No more guessing games."

Father sighed, put his arm around Mother, and began to talk It didn't take long to explain.

"The greatest breakthrough in the medical treatment of disease was the germ theory, but it took an astonishingly long time for doctors to realize that almost all human ailments were caused by infectious agents. A few were genetic-such as cystic fibrosis and sickle-cell anemia but those all seemed to be recessive genes that conferred a benefit when you had one of them, and killed you only if you had two. All the others--heart disease, dementia, schizophrenia, strokes, nontraumatic cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, most cancers, even some crimes-all were actually diseases. What disguised them from researchers for so long was the fact that these diseases were passed along in the womb, across the placenta, mostly by disease agents composed of proteins smaller than DNA. Some were passed along in the ovum. So we had no way to compare a clean, healthy organism with an infected one until we finished mapping the human genetic code and realized that these diseases weren't there. When we finally tracked them down as loose proteins in the cells, we--"

"We?" I asked.

"I speak of our forebears, of course," said Father. "Our predecessors."

"You aren't in medical research."

"Our colleagues in science," said Father. "We've come a long way to have you quibble about my choice of pronouns. And anthropology is the science of which medicine is merely a subset."

I had a snappy retort about how nobody ever asks if there's an anthropologist in the house, but I kept it to myself, mostly because I didn't want to win points here, I wanted to hear the story.

"How do you inoculate an organism against in utero infection?" asked Mother

rhetorically. "How do you cleanse an ovum that has already been infected?"

"What we developed," Father began, then interrupted himself. "What was developed."

"What emerged from the development process," said Mother helpfully.

"Was," said Father, "an elegant little counterinfection. Learning from the way these protein bits worked, the researchers came up with a protein complex that hijacked the cell's DNA just the way these infectious agents did. Only, instead of destroying the host cell, our little counterinfection caused the human DNA to check aggressively inside the cell for proteins that didn't belong there. There are already mechanisms that do bits and parts of that, but this one worked damn near perfectly. Nothing was in that cell that didn't belong there. It even detected and threw out the wrong-handed proteins that caused spongiform encephalopathies."

"Now you're showing off, my love," said Mother.

"It was perfect," said Father. "And best of all, self-replicating yet nondestructive. Once you introduced it into a mother, it was in every egg in her body after a matter of days. Any child she bore would have this protection within it."

"It was perfect," said Mother. "The early tests showed that it not only prevented diseases, it cured all but the most advanced cases. It was the ultimate panacea."

"But they hadn't tested it for very long," said Father.

"There was enormous pressure," said Mother. "Not from outside, from inside the research community. When you have a cure for everything, how can you withhold it from the human race for ten years of longitudinal studies, while people die or have their lives wrecked by diseases that could be prevented with a simple inoculation?"

"It had side effects," I said, guessing the end.

"Technically, no," said Father. "It did exactly what it was supposed to do. It eradicated diseases with smaller-than-bacteria agents. Period. Nothing else. The only reason that they didn't immediately spread the counterinfection throughout the world to save as many lives as possible was because of the one foreseeable hitch. Can you think of it? It's obvious, really."

I thought. I wish I could say I came up with it quickly, but my parents were nothing if not patient. And I did come up with it after a few false tries, which I can't remember now. The correct answer: "Aging is a disease. You get this counterinfection, you don't die."

"We were concerned about a population explosion," said Mother. "Even if people completely stopped having children, we weren't sure that the existing ecosphere could sustain a population in which all the existing children grew up to be adults while none of the adults died off to make room for them. Imagine all the children entering the workforce, while the older generation, newly vigorous and extremely unlikely to die, refused to retire. It was a nightmare. So, by the mercy of God, the counterinfection was restricted to a large longitudinal study centered on Manhattan, a smallish college town in Kansas."

"There was a quarantine of sorts," said Father. "The participants accepted the rules-no physical contact with anyone outside the city during the two years of the stud: In exchange, nobody dies of any kind of disease. They jumped at it."

"The counterinfection got loose!" I said.

"No. Everybody kept to the rules. This was science, not the movies," said Father. "But in the Manhattan Project, as we inevitably called it, for the first time the test included infants, newborns, children born after the study began, children conceived after the study began. We were so interested in the result with the aging population that it had never crossed our minds that ... well, it did cure aging. The people who have it would never die of old age. The trouble was, the children were born--"

"As Neanderthals," I said, making the obvious guess.

"And over time," said Father, "as cells were replaced, the adult bodies also tried to reshape themselves. It was fatal for them. You can't take an existing body and make it into something else like that. You had a few years of perfect health, and then your bones destroyed themselves in the frantic effort to grow into new shapes. The little ones, the ones who were changed in the womb, only they survived."

"And that's who I'm seeing out there," I said.

Father nodded. "It took fifteen years to find a way to sterilize them all without our counterinfection undoing the sterilization. By then there were so many, of them that to keep them all in their natural habitat required a vast reserve. It really wasn't all that hard to get the citizens of this area to evacuate. Nobody wanted to be anywhere near Manhattan, Kansas. So once again, Homo neanderthalensis has a plot of ground here on Earth. Homo neanderthalensis, the most intelligent toolmaking species ever to evolve naturally."

"But how could the counteragent cause us to revert to an earlier stage of evolution?" I asked.

"You weren't listening," said Father.

I thought for a moment. "Homo neanderthalensis isn't an earlier stage," I said. "There was no more evolution after that."

"Only a disease," said Father.

It seemed too incredible to me, as an eleven-year-old who prided himself on understanding the world. "Human intelligence is an infection?"

"Passed from mother to child through the ovum," said Mother. "By a disease agent that alters the DNA in order to replicate itself. We should have realized it from the fact that in utero development recapitulates evolution, but there is no stage in which the fetus passes through a habiline form. We did not evolve past it. The DNA is hijacked and we are born prematurely, grossly deformed by the disease. Neotenic, erectstanding, language-mad, lacking in sense of smell, too feeble to survive on our own even as adults, in need of clothing and shelter and community to a degree that the Neanderthals never were. But ... smart."

"So now," said Father, "do you understand why medical science has to rely on inoculation to fight off cancer, so that a small percentage-far smaller than ever before in human history, but not zero-a small percentage dies? Elizio died because the only alternative we've found is for this race of perfectly healthy, immortal, dim-wilted beings to inherit the Earth."

I stood there for a long time in silence, watching the Neanderthals, trying to see how their behavior was different from ours. In the years since then, I have come to realize that there was no important difference. Being smarter hasn't made us act any differently from the Neanderthals. We make better tools. We have a longer, more thorough collective memory in the form of libraries. We can talk much more fluently about the things we do. But we still do basically the same things. We are Neanderthals, at heart.

But I did not understand this at the time. I was, after all, only eleven. I had a much more practical -- and heartless -- question.

"Why do we keep this park at all?" I asked. "I mean, they're going to live forever. And all the time they're alive, they pose a danger of this counterinfection getting loose outside the fence. Why haven't they all been killed and their bodies nuked or something so that the counteragent is eliminated?"

Mother looked appalled at my ruthlessness, but Father only patted her arm and said, "Of course he thought of that, my love."

"But so young, to be so-"

"Practical?" prompted Father. "There was a long debate over exactly this issue, and it resurfaced from time to time, though not for decades now: The ones who argued for keeping the park talked about the necessity of studying our ancestors, and some people talked about the rights of these citizens who, after all, can't help their medical condition and have committed no crime, but it was all a smoke screen. The real reason we didn't destroy them all, as you suggested, was because we didn't have the heart."

"They were our children," said Mother, crying again.

"At first," said Father. "And later, when they weren't children anymore, we still couldn't kill them. Because they had become our ancient parents."

Now, though, I have come to think that while they were both right, the answer is even deeper. We didn't kill them, and we continue not to kill them, despite the reality of all those dangers, because they are not "they" at all. There, but for the fact that we happen to be the tiniest bit ill, go we.

I had troubling dreams for months afterward. I had mood swings, alternating between aggression and despair. At times, my parents wished they had just answered my questions about Elizio by taking me to the priest and getting me on the roster of altar boys.

But they were not wrong to take me there, any more than they had been wrong not to tell me up till then. I needed to know before my education was complete. Those who do not know, who continue through adulthood oblivious, in a sense remain children, forever naive. Within the fence of the North American Wild Animal Park is the Garden of Eden, and the people there eat freely of the Tree of Life. Here, outside, in this world of thorns, we dwell in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, madly eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, as much of it as we can get before we die.

You cannot straddle the boundary. If you bring children into the world on this side of the fence, you must take them to eat the fruit of the tree not too young, not before they're able to bear it. But don't wait too long, either. Let them see, before you die, that death is truly the gift of a merciful God. "You have weapons that could stop them," said Crofe, and suddenly the needle felt heavy on my belt.

"I can't use them," I said. "Not even the needle. And definitely not the splinters."

Crofe did not seem surprised, but the others did, and I was angry that Crofe would put me in such a position. He knew the law. But now Stone was looking at me darkly, his bow on his lap, and Fole openly grumbled in his deep, giant's voice. "We're friends, right? Friends, they say."

"It's the law," I said. "I can't use these weapons except in proper self-defense."

"Their arrows are coming as close to you as to us," Stone said.

"As long as I'm with you, the law assumes that they're attacking you and not me. If I used my weapons, it would seem like I was taking sides. It would be putting the corporation on your side against their side. It would mean the end of the corporation's involvement with you."

"Fine with me," Fole murmured. "Fat lot of good it's done us."

I didn't mention that I would also be executed. The Ylymyny have little use for people who fear death.

In the distance someone screamed. I looked around-- none of them seemed worried. But in a moment Da came into the circle of stones, panting. "They found the slanting road, " he whispered. "Nothing we could do. Killed one, that's all."

Crofe stood and uttered a high-pitched cry, a staccato burst of sound that echoed from the crags around us. Then he nodded to the others, and Fole reached over and seized my arm. "Come on," he whispered. But I hung back, not wanting to be shuffled out without any idea of what was going on.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Crofe grinned, his black teeth startling (after all these months) against his light-brown skin. "We're going to try to live through this. Lead them

into a trap. Away off south there's a narrow pass where a hundred of my men wait for us to bring them game." As he spoke, four more men came into the circle of stones, and Crofe turned to them.

"Gokoke?" he asked. The others shrugged.

Crofe glowered. "We don't leave Gokoke." They nodded, and the four who had just come went back silently into the paths of the rock. Now Fole became more insistent, and Stone softly whined, "We must go, Crofe."

"Not without Gokoke."

There was a mournful wail that sounded as if it came from all around. Which was echo and which was original sound? Impossible to tell. Crofe bowed his head, squatted, covered his eyes ritually with his hands, and chanted softly. The others did likewise; Fole even released my arm so he could cover his face. It occurred to me that though their piety was impressive, covering one's eyes during a battle might well be a counterevolutionary behavior. Every now and then the old anthropologist in me surfaces, and I get clinical.

I wasn't clinical, however, when a Golyny soldier leaped from the rocks into the circle. He was armed with two long knives, and he was already springing into action. I noticed that he headed directly for Crofe. I also noticed that none of the Ylymyny made the slightest move to defend him.

What could I do? It was forbidden for me to kill; yet Crofe was the most influential of the warlords of the Ylymyny. I couldn't let him die. His friendship was our best toehold in trading with the people of the islands. And besides, I don't like watching a person being murdered while his eyes are covered in a religious rite, however asinine the rite might be. Which is why I certainly bent the law, if I didn't break it: my toe found the Golyny's groin just as the knife began its downward slash toward Crofe's neck.

The Golyny groaned; the knife forgotten, he clutched at himself, then reached out to attack me. To my surprise, the others continued their chanting, as if unaware that I was protecting them, at not inconsiderable risk to myself.

I could have killed the Golyny in a moment, but I didn't dare. instead, for an endless three or four minutes I battled with him, disarming him quickly but unable to strike him a blow that would knock him unconscious without running the risk of accidentally killing him. I broke his arm; he ignored the pain, it seemed, and continued to attack-- continued, in fact, to use the broken arm. What kind of people are these? I wondered as I blocked a vicious kick with an equally vicious blow from my heavy boot. Don't they feel pain?

And at last the chanting ended, and in a moment Fole had broken the Golyny soldier's neck with one blow. "Jass!" he hissed, nursing his hand from the pain, "what a neck!"

"Why the hell didn't somebody help me before?" I demanded. I was ignored. Obviously an offworlder wouldn't understand. Now the four that had gone off to bring back Gokoke returned, their hands red with already drying blood. They held out their hands; Crofe, Fole, Stone, and Da licked the blood just slightly, swallowing with expressions of grief on their faces. Then Crofe clicked twice in his throat, and again Fole was pulling me out of the circle of stones. This time, however, all were coming. Crofe was in the lead, tumbling madly along a path that a mountain goat would have rejected as being too dangerous. I tried to tell Fole that it would be easier for me if he'd let go of my arm; at the first sound, Stone whirled around ahead of us, slapped my face with all his force, and I silently swallowed my own blood as we continued down the path.

Suddenly the path ended on the crown of a rocky outcrop that seemed to be at the end of the world.

Far below the lip of the smooth rock, the vast plain of Ylymyn Island spread to every horizon. The blue at the edges hinted at ocean, but I knew the sea was too far away to be seen. Clouds drifted here and there between us and the plain; patches of jungle many kilometers across seemed like threads and blots on the farmland and dazzling white cities. And all of it gave us a view that reminded me too much of what I had seen looking from the spacecraft while we orbited this planet not that many months ago.

We paused only a moment on the dome; immediately they scrambled over the edge, seeming to plunge from our vantage point into midair. I, too, leaped over the edge-- I had no choice, with Fole's unrelenting grip. As I slid down the ever-steeper slope of rock, I could see nothing below me to break my fall. I almost screamed; held the scream back because if by some faint chance we were not committing mass suicide, a scream would surely bring the Golyny.

And then the rock dropped away under me and I did fall, for one endless meter until I stopped, trembling, on a ledge scarcely a meter wide. The others were already there-- Fole had taken me more slowly, I supposed, because of my inexperience. Forcing myself to glance over the edge, I could see that this peak did not continue as a smooth, endless wall right down to the flat plain. There were other peaks that seemed like foothills to us, but I knew they were mountains in their own right. It was little comfort to

know that if I fell it would be only a few hundred meters, and not five or six kilometers after all.

Crofe started off at a run, and we followed. Soon the ledge that had seemed narrow at a meter in width narrowed to less than a third of that; yet they scarcely seemed to slow down as Fole dragged me crabwise along the front of the cliff.

Abruptly we came to a large, level area, which gave way to a narrow saddle between our peak and another much lower one that stood scarcely forty meters away. The top of it was rocky and irregular-- perhaps, once we crossed the saddle, we could hide there and elude pursuit.

Crofe did not lead this time. Instead, Da ran lightly across the saddle, making it quickly to the other side. He immediately turned and scanned the rocks above us, then waved. Fole followed, dragging me. I would never have crossed the saddle alone. With Fole pulling me, I had scarcely the time to think about the drop off to either side of the slender path.

And then I watched from the rocks as the others came across. Crofe was last, and just as he stepped out onto the saddle, the rocks above came alive with Golyny.

They were silent (I had battle-trained with loud weapons; my only war had been filled with screams and explosions; this silent warfare was, therefore, all the more terrifying), and the men around me quickly drew bows to fire; Golyny dropped, but so did Crofe, an arrow neatly piercing his head from behind.

Was he dead? He had to be. But he fell straddling the narrow ridge, so that he did not plummet down to the rocks below. Another arrow entered his back near his spine. And then, before the enemy could fire again, Fole was out on the ridge, had hoisted Crofe on his shoulders, and brought him back. Even at that, the only shots the enemy got off seemed aimed not at Fole but at Crofe.

We retreated into the rocks, except for two bowmen who stayed to guard the saddle. We were safe enough-- it would take hours for the Golyny to find another way up to this peak. And so our attention was focused on Crofe.

His eyes were open, and he still breathed. But he stared straight ahead, making no effort to talk. Stone held his shoulders as Da pushed the arrow deeper into his head. The point emerged, bloody, from Crofe's forehead.

Da leaned over and took the arrowhead in his teeth. He pulled, and the flint came loose. He spat it out and then withdrew the shaft of the arrow

backward through the wound. Through all this, Crofe made no sound. And when the operation had finished, Crofe died.

This time there was no ritual of closed eyes and chanting. Instead, the men around me openly wept-- openly, but silently. Sobs wracked their bodies; tears leaped from their eyes; their faces contorted in an agony of grief. But there was no sound, not even heavy breathing.

The grief was not something to be ignored. And though I did not know them at all well, Crofe was the one I had known best. Not intimately, certainly not as a friend, because the barriers were too great. But I had seen him dealing with his people, and whatever culture you come from, there's no hiding a man of power. Crofe had that power. In the assemblies when we had first petitioned for the right to trade, Crofe had forced (arguing, it seemed, alone, though later I realized that he had many powerful allies that he preferred to marshal silently) the men and women there to make no restrictions, to leave no prohibitions, and to see instead what the corporation had to sell. It was a foot in the door. But Crofe had taken me aside alone and informed me that nothing was to be brought to the Ylymyny without his knowledge or approval. And now he was dead on a routine scouting mission, and I could not help but be amazed that the Ylymyny, in other ways an incredibly shrewd people, should allow their wisest leaders to waste themselves on meaningless forays in the borderlands and high mountains.

And for some reason I found myself also grieved at Crofe's death. The corporation, of course, would continue to progress in its dealings with the Ylymyny-- would, indeed, have an easier time of it now. But Crofe was a worthy bargaining partner. And he and I had loved the game of bargaining, however many barriers our mutual strangeness kept between us.

I watched as his soldiers stripped his corpse. They buried the clothing under rocks. And then they hacked at the skin with their knives, opening up the man's bowels and splitting the intestines from end to end. The stench was powerful; I barely avoided vomiting. They worked intently, finding every scrap of material that had been passing through the bowel and putting it in a small leather bag. When the intestine was as clean as stone knives could scrape it, they closed the bag, and Da tied it around his neck on a string. Then, tears still streaming down his face, he turned to the others, looking at them all, one by one.

"I will go to the mountain," he whispered.

The others nodded; some wept harder.

"I will give his soul to the sky," Da whispered, and now the others came

forward, touched the bag and whispered, "I, too. I, also. I vow."

Hearing the faint noise, the two archers guarding the saddle came to our sanctuary among the stones and were about to add their vows to those of the others when Da held up his hand and forbade them.

"Stay and hold off pursuit. They are sure to know."

Sadly, the two nodded, moved back to their positions. And Fole once again gripped my arm as we moved silently away from the crest of the peak.

"Where are we going?" I whispered.

"To honor Crofe's soul." Stone turned and answered me.

"What about the ambush?"

"We are now about matters more important than that."

The Ylymyny worshiped the sky-- or some thing akin to worship, at least. That much I knew from my scanty research into their religious beliefs in the city on the plain, where I had first landed.

"Stone," I said, "will the enemy know what we're doing?"

"Of course," he whispered back. "They may be infidels, but they know what honor binds the righteous to do. They'll try to trap us on the way, destroy us, and stop us from doing honor to the dead."

And then Da hissed for us to be quiet, and we soundlessly scrambled down the cliffs and slopes. Above us we heard a scream; we ignored it. And soon I was lost in the mechanical effort of finding footholds, handholds, strength to keep going with these soldiers who were in much better condition than I.

Finally we reached the end of the paths and stopped. We were gathered on a rather gentle slope that ended, all the way around, in a steep cliff. And we had curved enough to see, above and behind us, that a large group of Golyny were making their way down the path we had just taken.

I did not look over the edge, at first, until I saw them unwinding their ropes and joining them, end to end, to make a much longer line. Then I walked toward the edge and looked down. Only a few hundred meters below, a valley opened up in the mountainside, a flood of level ground in front of a high-walled canyon that bit deep into the cliff. From there it would be a gentle descent into the plain. We would be safe. But first, there was the matter of getting down the cliff. This time, I couldn't see any hope of it unless we each dangled on the end of a rope, something that I had no experience with. And even then, what was to stop the enemy from climbing down after us?

Fole solved the dilemma, however. He sat down a few meters back from the edge, in a place where his feet could brace against stone, and he pulled gloves on his hands. Then he took the rope with only a few meters of slack, looped it behind his back, and gripped the end of the rope in his left hand, holding the rest of the line tight against his body with his right.

He would be a stable enough root for the top end of the climbing line; and if he were killed or under attack, he would simply drop the line, and the enemy would have no way to pursue.

He was also doomed to be killed.

I should have said something to him, perhaps, but there was no time. Da was quickly giving me my only lesson in descending a rope, and I had to learn well or die from my first mistake. And then Da, carrying the bag of Crofe's excrement, was over the edge, sitting on the rope as it slid by his buttocks, holding his own weight precariously and yet firmly enough as he descended rapidly to the bottom.

Fole bore the weight stolidly, hardly seeming to strain. And then the rope went slack, and immediately Stone was forcing me to pass the rope under my buttocks, holding the rope in gloved hands on either side. Then he pushed me backward over the cliff, and I took a step into nothingness, and I gasped in terror as I fell far too swiftly, swinging to and fro as if on a pendulum, the rock wall skimming back and forth in front of my face-- until the rope turned, and I faced instead the plain, which still looked incredibly far below me. And now I did vomit, though I had not eaten yet that day; the acid was painful in my throat and mouth; and I forgot the terror of falling long enough to grip the rope tightly and slow my descent, though it burned my gloves and the rope was an agony of tearing along my buttocks.

The ground loomed closer, and I could see Da waiting, beckoning impatiently. And so I forced myself to ignore the pain of a faster descent, and fell more rapidly, so that when I hit the ground I was jolted, and sprawled into the grasses.

I lay panting in disbelief that I had made it, relief that I no longer hung like a spider in the air. But I could not rest, it seemed-- Da took me by the arm and dragged me away from the rope that was now flailing with the next man's descent.

I rolled onto my back and watched, fascinated, as the man came quickly down the rope. Now that my ordeal was over, I could see a beauty in a single man on a twine daring gravity to do its worst-- the poetical kind of experience that has long been forgotten on my gentle homeworld of Garden, where all the cliffs have been turned to gentle slopes, and where oceans gently lap at sand instead of tearing at rock, and where men are as gentle as the world they live in. I am gentle, in fact, which caused me much distress at the beginning of my military training, but which allowed me to survive a war and come out of the army with few scars that could not heal.

And as I lay thinking of the contrast between my upbringing and the harsh life on this world, Stone reached the bottom and the next man started down.

When the soldier was only halfway down, another climbed onto the rope at the top. It took me a moment to realize what was happening; then as it occurred to me that the Golyny must have nearly reached them, Da and Stone pulled me back against the cliff wall, where falling bodies would not land on me.

The first soldier reached the bottom; I saw it was the one named Pan, a brutal-looking man who had wept most piteously at Crofe's death. The other soldier was only a dozen meters from the ground when suddenly the rope shuddered and he dropped. He hit the ground in a tangle of arms and legs; I started to run out to help him, but I was held back. The others were all looking up, and in a moment I saw why. The giant Fole, made small by distance, leaped off the cliff, pulling with him two of the Golyny. A third enemy fell a moment later-- he must have lost his balance in the struggle on the cliff.

Fole hit the ground shudderingly, his body cruelly torn by the impact, the Golyny also a jumble of broken bones. Again I tried to go out to try to accomplish something; again I was held back; and again I found they knew their world better than I, with my offworld instincts, could hope to know it. Stones hit the ground sharply, scattering all around us. One of them hit the soldier who already was dying from his relatively shorter fall; it broke his skull, and he died.

We waited in the shadow of the cliff until nearly dark; then Da and Pan rushed out and dragged in the body of the soldier. Stones were already falling around them when they came back; some ricocheted back into the area where Stone and I waited; one hit me in the arm, making a bruise which ached for some time afterward.

After dark, Da and Stone and Pan and I all went out, and hunted for the

body of Fole, and dragged him back into the shelter of the cliff.

Then they lit a fire, and slit the throats of the corpses, and tipped them downhill so the blood would flow. They wiped their hands in the sluggish stream and licked their palms as they had for Gokoke. And then they covered their eyes and duplicated the chant.

As they went through the funerary rites, I looked out toward the plain. From above, this area had seemed level with the rest of the plain; in fact, it was much higher than the plain, and I could see the faint lights of the city fires here and there above the jungle. Near us, however, there were no lights. I wondered how far we were from the outpost at the base of the cliffs where we had left our horses; I also wondered why in hell I had ever consented to come along on this expedition. "An ordinary tour," Crofe had called it, and I had not realized that my understanding of their language was so insufficient. Nor had I believed that the war between the Golyny and the Ylymyny was such a serious matter. After all, it had been going on for more than three centuries; how could blood stay so hot, so long?

"You look at the plain," said Stone, beside me, his voice a hiss. It struck me that we had been together at the base of the cliff for hours, and this was the first word that had been spoken, except for the chanting. In the cities the Ylymyny were yarn-spinners and chatterers and gossipers. Here they scarcely broke the silence.

"I'm wondering how many days it will take us to reach the city."

Stone glowered. "The city?"

I was surprised that he seemed surprised. "Where else?"

"We've taken a vow," Stone said, and I could detect the note of loathing in his voice that I had come to expect from him whenever I said something wrong. "We must take Crofe's soul to the sky."

I didn't really understand. "Where's that? How do you reach the sky?"

Stone's chest heaved with the effort of keeping his patience. "The Sky," he said, and then I did a double take, realizing that the word I was translating was also a name, the name of the highest mountain on Ylymyn Island.

"You can't be serious," I said. "That's back the way we came."

"There are other ways, and we will take them."

"So will the Golyny!"

"Do you think that we don't have any honor?" cried Stone, and the sound roused Da and brought him to us.

"What is it?" Da whispered, and stillness settled in around us again.

"This offworld scum accuses us of cowardice," Stone hissed. Da fingered the bag around his neck. "Do you?" he asked.

"Nothing of the kind, " I answered. "I don't know what I'm saying to offend him. I just supposed that it would be pointless to try to climb the highest mountain on your island. There are only four of us, and the Golyny will surely be ahead of us, waiting, won't they?"

"Of course," Da said. "It will be difficult. But we are Crofe's friends."

"Can't we get help? From the hundred men, for instance, who were waiting for the ambush?"

Da looked surprised, and Stone was openly angry. "We were there when he died. They were not," Da answered.

"Are you a coward?" Stone asked softly, and I realized that to Stone, at least, cowardice was not something to be loathed, it was something to be cast out, to be exorcised, to be killed. His hand held a knife, and I felt myself on the edge of a dilemma. If I denied cowardice while under threat of death, wouldn't that be cowardice? Was this a lady or the tiger choice? I stood my ground. "If you are all there is to be afraid of, no, I'm not," I said.

Stone looked at me in surprise for a moment, then smiled grimly and put his knife back in his sheath. Pan came to us then, and Da took the opportunity to hold a council.

It was short; it involved the choice of routes, and I knew little of geography and nothing of the terrain. At the end of it, though, I had more questions than ever. "Why are we doing this for Crofe, when we didn't do anything like it for Fole or Gokoke?"

"Because Crofe is Ice," he answered, and I stored the non sequitur away to puzzle over later.

"And what will we do when we reach the Sky?"

Stone stirred from his seeming slumber and hissed, "We don't talk of such

things!"

Da hissed back, "It is possible that none but he will reach the Sky, and in that case, he must know what to do."

"If he's the one there, we can count on having failed," Stone answered angrily.

Da ignored him and turned to me. "In this bag I hold his last passage, that which would have become him had he lived, his future self." I nodded. "This must be emptied on the high altar, so Jass will know that Ice has been returned to him where he can make it whole."

"That's it? Just empty it on the high altar?"

"The difficulty," said Da, "is not in the rite. It is in the getting there. And you must also bid farewell to Crofe's soul, and break a piece of ice from the mountain, and suck it until it melts; and you must shed your own blood on the altar. But most important is to get there. To the topmost top of the highest mountain in the world."

I did not tell him that far to the north, on the one continental landmass, there rose mountains that would dwarf Sky; instead I nodded and turned to sleep on the grass, my clinical anthropologist's mind churning to classify these magical behaviors. The homeopathy was obvious; the meaning of ice was more obscure; and the use of unpassed excrement as the "last passage" from the body was, to my knowledge, unparalleled. But, as an old professor had far too often remarked, "There is no behavior so peculiar that somewhere, members in good standing of the human race will not perform it." The bag around Da's neck reeked. I slept.

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The four of us (had there been ten only yesterday morning?) set out before dawn, sidling up the slope toward the mouth of the canyon. We knew that the enemy was above us; we knew that others would already have circled far ahead, to intercept us later. We were burdened with rations intended for only a few days, and a few weapons and the rope. I wished for more, but said nothing.

The day was uneventful. We simply stayed in the bottom of the canyon, beside the rivulet that poured down toward the plain. It was obvious that the stream ran more powerfully at other times: boulders the size of large buildings were scattered along the canyon bottom, and no vegetation but grass was able to grow below the watermarks on the canyon walls, though here and there above them a tree struggled for existence in the rock.

And so the next day passed, and the next, until the canyon widened into a shallow valley, and we at last reached a place where the rivulet came from under a crack in the rock, and a hilltop that we climbed showed that we were now on the top of the island, with other low hills all around, deceptively gentle-looking, considering that they were hidden behind the peaks of one of the most savage mountain ranges I had seen.

Only a few peaks were higher than we were, and one of them was the Sky. Its only remarkable feature was its height. Many other mountains were more dramatic; many others craggier or more pointed at the peak. Indeed, the Sky was more a giant hill-- from our distance, at least-- and its ascent would not be difficult, I thought.

I said as much to Da, who only smiled grimly and said, "Easier, at least, than reaching it alive." And I remembered the Golyny, and the fact that somewhere ahead of us they would be waiting. The canyon we had climbed was easy enough-- why hadn't they harassed us on the way up?

"If it rains tonight, you will see," Stone answered.

And it did rain that night, and I did see. Or rather I heard, since the night was dark. We camped in the lee of the hill, but the rain drenched us despite the rocky outcropping we huddled under. And then I realized that the rain was falling so heavily that respectable streams were flowing down the hill we camped against-- and it was no more than forty meters from crown to base. The rain was heavier than I had ever seen before, and now I heard the distant roaring that told me why the Golyny had not bothered to harm us. The huge river was now flowing down the canyon, fed by a thousand streams like those flowing by our camp.

"What if it had rained while we were climbing? I asked.

"The Sky would not hinder us on our errand," Da answered, and I found little comfort in that. Who would have guessed that a simple three-day expedition into the mountains would leave me trapped with such superstition, depending on them for my survival even as they were depending on some unintelligible and certainly nonexistent god.

In the morning I woke at first light to find that the others were already awake and armed to the teeth, ready for battle. I hurried to stretch my sore muscles and get ready for the trip. Then I realized what their armaments might mean.

"Are they here?"

But no one answered me, and as soon as it was clear I was ready, they moved forward, keeping to the shelter of the hills, spying out what lay ahead before rounding a bend. There were no trees here, only the quick-living grass that died in a day and was replaced by its seed in the morning. There was no shelter but the rock; and no shade, either, but at this elevation, shade was not necessary. It was not easy to breathe with the oxygen low, but at least at this elevation the day was not hot, despite the fact that Ylymyn Island was regularly one of the hottest places on this forsaken little planet.

For two days we made our way toward the Sky, and seemed to make no progress-- it was still distant, on the horizon. Worse, however, than the length of our journey was the fact that we had to be unrelentingly on the alert, though we saw no sign of the Golyny. I once asked (in a whisper) whether they might have given up pursuit. Stone only sneered, and Da shook his head. It was Pan who whispered to me that night that the Golyny hated nothing so much as the righteousness of the Ylymyny, knowing as they did that it was only the gods that had made the Ylymyny the greatest people on earth, and that only their piety had won the gods so thoroughly to their side. "There are some," Pan said, "who, when righteousness defeats them, squat before the gods and properly offer their souls, and join us. But there are others who can only hate the good, and attack mindlessly against the righteous. The Golyny are that kind. All decent people would kill Golyny to preserve the peace of the righteous."

And then he glanced pointedly at my splinters and at my needle. And I as pointedly glanced at the bag of excrement around Da's neck. "What the law requires of good men, good men do," I said, sounding platitudinous to myself, but apparently making the right impression on Pan. His eyes widened, and he nodded in respect. Perhaps I overdid it, but it gratified me to see that he understood that just as certain rites must be performed in his society, certain acts are taboo in mine, and among those acts is involvement in the small wars of nations on primitive planets. That his compulsions were based on mindless superstition while mine were based on long years of experience in xenocontact was a distinction I hardly expected him to grasp, and so I said nothing about it. The result was that he treated me with more respect; with awe, in fact. And, noticing that, Stone asked me quietly as we walked the next day, "What have you done to the young soldier?"

"Put the fear of god into him."

I had meant to be funny. Odd, how a man can be careful in all his pronouncements, and then forget everything he knows as a joke comes to mind and he impulsively tells it. Stone was furious; it took Da's strength and Pan's, too, to keep him from attacking me, which would surely have been fatal to him-- rope-climbing I didn't know, but the ways of murder are not strange to me, though I don't pursue them for pleasure. At last I was able to explain that I hadn't understood the implications of my statement in their language, that I was transliterating and certain words had different meanings and so on and so on. We were still discussing this when a flight of arrows ended the conversation and drove all of us to cover except Pan, who had an arrow in him and died there in the open while we watched.

It was difficult to avoid feeling that his death had been somehow my fault; and as Da and Stone discussed the matter and confessed that they had no choice this time but to leave the body, committing a sin to allow the greater good of fulfilling the vow to Crofe. I realized that omitting the rites of death for Pan grieved me almost as much as his death. I have no particular belief in immortality; the notion that the dead linger to watch what happens to their remains is silly to me. Nevertheless, there is, I believe, a difference between knowing that a person is dead and emotionally unconstructing the system of relationships that had included the person. Pan, obscure as the young man was, ugly and brutal as his face had been, was nevertheless the man I liked best of my surviving companions.

And thinking of that, it occurred to me that of the ten that had set out only a week before, only three of us remained; I, who could not use a weapon while in the company of the others, and they, who had to travel more slowly and so risk their lives even more because of me.

"Leave me behind," I said. "Once I'm alone, I can defend myself as I will, and you can move faster."

Stone's eyes leaped at the suggestion, but Da firmly shook his head. "Never. Crofe charged us all that we would keep you with us."

"He didn't know the situation we'd be in."

"Crofe knew," Da whispered. "A man dies in two days here without wisdom. And you have no wisdom."

If he meant knowledge of what might be edible in this particular environment, he was right enough; and when I saw that Da had no intention of leaving me, I decided to continue with them. Better to move on than do nothing. But before we left our temporary shelter (with Pan's corpse slowly desiccating behind us) I taught Stone and Da how to use the splinters and the needle, in case I was killed. Then no law would be broken, as long as they returned the weapons to the corporation. For once Stone seemed to approve of something I had done.

Now we moved even more slowly, more stealthily, and yet the Sky seemed to

loom closer now, at last; we were in the foothills. Each hill we approached hid the Sky behind its crest sooner. And the sense of waiting death became overpowering.

At night I took my turn watching, with Pan gone. Technically it was a violation-- I was aiding them in their war effort. But it was also survival, since the Golyny had little use for offworlders-- SCM Corporation had already made four attempts to get a foothold with them, and they would not hear of it. It was maddening to have the ability to save lives and for the sake of larger purposes have to refrain from using that ability.

My watch ended, and I woke Da. But instead of letting me sleep, he silently woke Stone as well, and in the darkness we moved as silently as possible away from our camp. This time we were not heading for the mountain--instead, we were paralleling it, traveling by starlight (which is almost no light at all), and I guessed that Da intended us to pass by our would-be killers and perhaps ascend the mountain by another route.

Whether we passed them or not, I didn't know. At dawn, however, when there was light enough to see the ground, Da began running, and Stone and I followed. The walking had been bad, but I had gradually grown inured to it; the running brought out every latent protest in my muscles. It was not easy loping over even ground, either. It was a shattering run over rocks, down small ravines, darting over hills and across streams. I was exhausted by noon, ready for our brief stop. But we took no stop. Da did spare a sentence for me: "We're ahead of them and must stay ahead."

As we ran, however, an idea came to me, one that seemed pathetically obvious once I had thought of it. I was not allowed to summon any help to further a war effort-- but surely getting to the top of the mountain was no war effort. Our lander would never descend into enemy fire, but now that we were in the open, the lander could come, could pick us up, could carry us to the top of the mountain before the enemy suspected we were there.

I suggested that. Stone only spat on the ground (a vile thing, in this world, where for some obscure reason water is worshipped, though it is plentiful everywhere except the Great Desert far to the north of Ylymyn), while Da shook his head. "Spirits fly to the Sky; men climb to it," he said, and once again religion had stymied me. Superstitions were going to kill us yet, meaningless rules that should surely change in the face of such dire need.

But at nightfall we were at the foot of a difficult cliff. I saw at a glance that this was not the easy ascent that the mountain had seemed from the distance. Stone looked surprised, too, as he surveyed the cliff. "This ascent is not right," he said softly.

Da nodded. "I know it. This is the west face, which no one climbs."

"Is it impossible?" I asked.

"Who knows?" Da answered. "The other ways are so much easier, no one has ever tried this one. So we go this way, where they don't look for us, and somewhere we move to the north or south, to take an easier way when they don't expect us."

Then Da began to climb. I protested, "The sun's already set."

"Good," he answered. "Then they won't see us climbing."

And so began our climb to the Sky. It was difficult, and for once they did not press on ahead and then wait impatiently for me to come. They were hampered as I was by darkness and strangeness, and the night made us equals at last. It was an empty equality, however. Three times that night Da whispered that he had reached a place in the cliff impossible to scale, and I had to back up, trying to find the holds I had left a moment before. Descending a mountain is harder than ascending it. Climbing you have eyes, and it is your fingers that reach ahead of you. Descending only your toes can hunt, and I was wearing heavy boots. We had wakened early, long before dawn, and we climbed until dawn again began to light the sky. I was exhausted, and Stone and Da also seemed to droop with the effort. But as the light gathered, we came to a shoulder of the mountain, a place where for hundreds of meters the slope was no more than fifteen or twenty degrees, and we threw ourselves to the ground and slept.

I woke because of the stinging of my hands, which in the noon sun I saw were caked with blood that still, here and there, oozed to the surface. Da and Stone still slept. Their hands were not so injured as mine; they were more used to heavy work with their hands. Even the weights I had lifted had been equipped with cushioned handles.

I sat up and looked around. We were still alone on our shoulder of the mountain, and I gazed down the distance we had climbed. We had accomplished much in the darkness, and I marveled at the achievement of it; the hills we had run through the day before were small and far, and I guessed that we might be as much as a third of the way to the peak.

Thinking that, I looked toward the mountain, and immediately kicked Da to waken him.

Da, bleary-eyed, looked where I nodded, and saw the failure of our night's work. Though none of the Golyny were near us, it was plain that from their

crags and promontories they could see us. They were not ahead of us on the west slope, but rather they stood as if to guard every traverse that might take us to the safer, easier routes. And who knew-- perhaps the Golyny had explored the west face and knew that no man could climb it.

Da sighed, and Stone silently shook his head and broke out the last of the food, which we had been eating sparingly for days longer than it should have lasted.

"What now?" I whispered (odd how the habits, once begun, cannot be broken), and Da answered, "Nothing now. Just ahead. Up the west face. Better unknown dangers than known ones."

I looked back down into the valleys and hills below us. Stone spat again. "Offworlder," he said, "even if we could forsake our vow, they are waiting at the bottom of the cliff by now to kill us as we come down."

"Then let me call my lander. When the prohibition was made, no one knew of flying machines."

Da chuckled. "We have always known of flying machines. We simply had none. But we also knew that such machines could not carry a penitent or a suitor or a vowkeeper to the Sky."

I clutched at straws. "When we reach there, what then?"

"Then we shall have died with the vow kept."

"Can't I call the lander then, to take us off the mountain?"

They looked at each other, and then Da nodded to me. I immediately hunted in the pockets of my coat for the radio; I could not hope to reach the city from here, but in less than an hour the orbiting starship would be overhead, and would relay my message. I tried calling the starship right then, in case it was already over the horizon. It was not, and so we headed again for the crags.

Now the climb was worse, because of our weariness from the night before rather than from any greater difficulty in the rocks themselves. My fingers ached; the skin on my palms stung with each contact with the rock. Yet we pressed ahead, and the west face was not unclimbable; even at our slow pace, we soon left the shoulder of the rock far behind us. Indeed, there were many places where we scrambled on natural stairways of rock; other places where ledges let us rest; until we reached an overhang that blocked us completely. There was no tool in this metalless world that could have helped us to ignore gravity and climb spiderlike upside down to the lip of the overhang. We had no choice but to traverse, and now I realized how wise our enemies' plan had been. We would have to move to left or right, to north or south, and they would be waiting.

But, given no choice, we took the only alternative there was. We took the route under the overhang that slanted upward-- toward the south. And now Stone took the lead, coldly explaining that Da bore Crofe's soul, and they had vowed to Crofe to keep me alive; therefore he was most expendable. Da nodded gravely, and I did not protest. I like life, and around any turn or over any obstacle, an arrow might be waiting.

Another surprise: here and there in the shelter of the rock the cold air had preserved a bit of snow. There was no snowcap visible from below, of course; but this was summer, and only this high an altitude could have preserved snow at all in such a climate.

It was nearing nightfall, and I suggested we sleep for the night. Da agreed, and so we huddled against the wall of the mountain, the overhang above us, and two meters away a dropoff into nothing. I lay there looking at a single star that winked above my head, and it is a measure of how tired I was that it was not until morning that I realized the significance of that.

Tomorrow, Da assured me, we would either reach the Sky or be killed trying-- we were that close. And so as I talked to the starship on its third pass since I had asked for the lander in the early afternoon, I briefly explained when we would be there.

This time, however, they had Tack, the manager of our corporation's operations on this world, patched in from his radio in the city. And he began to berate me for my stupidity. "What the hell kind of way is this to fulfill your corporate responsibilities!" crackled his voice. "Running off to fulfill some stinking little superstition with a bunch of stone-age savages and trying to get killed in the process!" He went on like that for some time-- almost five minutes-- before I overrode him and informed the starship that under the terms of my contract with the corporation they were obliged to give me support as requested, up to and including an evacuation from the top of a mountain, and the manager could take his objections and--

They heard, and they agreed to comply, and I lay there trying to cool my anger. Tack didn't understand, couldn't understand. He hadn't been this far with me, hadn't seen Fole's set face as he volunteered to die so the rest could descend the cliff; hadn't watched the agony of indecision as Da and Stone decided to leave Pan; hadn't any way of knowing why I was going to reach the top of the Sky for Crofe's sake--

Not for Crofe's sake, dammit; for mine, for ours. Crofe was dead, and they couldn't help him at all by smearing his excrement on a rock. And suddenly, remembering what would be done when we reached the top of the mountain-- if we did-- I laughed. All this, to rub a dead man's shit on a stone--

And Stone seized me by the throat and made as if to cast me off the mountain. Da and I struggled, and I looked in Stone's eyes and saw my death there. "Your vow," Da whispered sharply, and Stone at last relented, slid away from me.

"What did you say in your deviltalk!" he demanded, and I realized that I had spoken Empire to the starship, then paused a moment and laughed. So I explained, more politely than Tack had, what Tack had said.

Da glared Stone into silence when I was through, and then sat contemplatively for a long time before he spoke.

"It's true, I suppose," he said, "that we're superstitious."

I said nothing. Stone said nothing only by exercising his utmost self-control.

"But true and false have nothing to do with love and hate. I love Crofe, and I will do what I vowed to do, what he would have done for another Ice; what, perhaps, he might have done for me even though I am not Ice."

And then, with the question settled that easily (and therefore not settled-- indeed, not even understood at all), we slept, and I thought nothing of the star that winked directly overhead.

Morning was dismal, with clouds below us rolling in from the south. It would be a storm; and Da warned me that there might be mist as the clouds rose and tumbled around the mountains. We had to hurry.

We had not traveled far, however, when the ledge above us and the one we walked on broadened, separated, opened out into the gentle slope that everywhere but on the west face led to the peak of the Sky. And there, gathered below us, were three or four dozen Golyny, just waking. We had not been seen, but there was no conceivable way to walk ten steps out of the last shelter of the ledge without being noticed; and even though the slope was gentle, it was still four or five hundred meters up the slope to the peak, Da assured me.

"What can we do?" I whispered. "They'll kill us easily."

And indecision played on Da's face, expressing much, even though he was silent.

We watched as the Golyny opened their food and ate it; watched as some of them wrestled or pulled sticks. They looked like any other men, rowdy in the absence of women and when there was no serious work to do. Their laughter was like any other men's laughter, and their games looked to be fun. I forgot myself, and found myself silently betting on one wrestler or another, silently picturing myself in the games, and knowing how I would go about winning. And so an hour passed, and we were no closer to the peak.

Stone looked grim; Da looked desperate; and I have no idea how I looked, though I suspect that because of my involvement with the Golyny games I appeared disinterested to my companions. Perhaps that was why at last Stone took me roughly by the sleeve and spun me toward him.

"A game, isn't it! That's all it is to you!"

Shaken out of my contemplation, I did not understand what was happening.

"Crofe was the greatest man in a hundred generations!" Stone hissed. "And you care nothing for bringing him to heaven!"

"Stone," Da hissed.

"This scum acts as if Crofe were not his friend!"

"I hardly knew him," I said honestly but unwisely.

"What does that have to do with friendship!" Stone said angrily. "He saved your life a dozen times, made us take you in and accept you as human beings, though you followed no law!"

I follow a law, I would have said, except that in our exhaustion and Stone's grief at the failure of our mission, we had raised our voices, and already the Golyny were arming, were rushing toward us, were silently nocking arrows to bows and coming for the kill.

How is it possible that stupidity should end our lives when our enemies' cleverest stratagems had not, I thought in despair; but at that moment the part of my mind that occasionally makes itself useful by putting intelligent thoughts where they can be used reminded me of the star I had seen as I lay under the overhang last night. A star-- and I had seen it directly overhead where the overhang had to be. Which meant there was a hole in the overhang, perhaps a chimney that could be climbed.

I quickly told Da and Stone, and now, the argument forgotten in our desperate situation, Stone wordlessly took his bow and all his and Da's arrows and sat to wait for the enemy to come.

"Go," he said, "and climb to the peak if you can."

It hurt, for some reason, that the man who hated me should take it for granted that he would die in order to save my life. Not that I fooled myself that he valued my life, but still, I would live for a few moments more because he was about to die. And, inexplicably, I felt an emotion, briefly, that can only be described as love. And that love embraced also Da and Pan, and I realized that while Crofe was only a businessman that I had enjoyed dealing with, these others were, after all, friends. The realization that I felt emotion toward these barbarians (yes, that is a patronizing attitude, but I have never known even an anthropologist whose words or acts did not confess that he felt contempt for those he dealt with), that I loved them, was shocking yet somehow gratifying; the knowledge that they kept me alive only out of duty to a dead man and a superstition was expectable, but somehow reason for anguish.

All this took less than a moment, however, there on the ledge, and then I turned with Da and raced back along the ledge toward where we had spent the night. It had seemed like only a short way; I kept slowing for fear we would miss the spot in our hurry. But when we reached it, I recognized it easily, and yes, there was indeed a chimney in the rock, a narrow one that was almost perfectly vertical, but one that could possibly lead us near the top of the Sky; a path to the peak that the enemy would not be looking for.

We stripped off our extra gear: the rope, which had not been used since Fole died to let us descend it, the blankets, the weapons, the canvas. I kept only my splinters and needle-- they must be on my body when I died (though I was momentarily conceiving that I might win through with Da and survive all this, already the lander would be hovering high above the peak) --to prove that I had not broken the law; otherwise my name would be stricken from the ELB records in dishonor, and all my comrades and fellow frontliners would know I had failed in one of the most basic trusts.

A roar of triumph was carried along the rock, and we knew that Stone was dead, his position overrun, and we had at best ten minutes before they were upon us. Da began kicking our gear off the edge of the cliff, and I helped. A keen eye could still tell that here we had disturbed the ground more than elsewhere; but it was, we hoped, enough to confuse them for just a little longer.

And then we began to climb the chimney. Da insisted that I climb first; he

hoisted me into the crack, and I shimmied upward, bracing my back against one wall and my hands and feet against the other. Then I stopped, and using my leg as a handhold, he, too, clambered into the split in the rock.

Then we climbed, and the chimney was longer than we had thought, the sky more distant. Our progress was slow, and every motion kicked down rocks that clattered onto the ledge. We had not counted on that-- the Golyny would notice the falling rocks, would see where we were, and we were not yet high enough to be impossible for arrows to reach.

And even as I realized that, it came true. We saw the flash of clothing passing under the chimney; though I could make out no detail, I could tell even in the silence that we had been found. We struggled upward. What else could we do?

And the first arrow came up the shaft. Shooting vertically is not easy-much must be unlearned. But the archer was good. And the third arrow struck Da, angling upward into his calf.

"Can you go on?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered, and I climbed higher, with him following, seeming to be unslowed by the wound.

But the archer was not through, and the seventh rushing sound ended, not in a clatter, but in the dull sound of stone striking flesh. Involuntarily Da uttered a cry. Where I was I could see no wound, of course.

"Are you hit?"

"Yes," heanswered. "In the groin. An artery, I believe. I'm losing blood too quickly."

"Can you go on?"

"No."

And using the last of his strength to hold himself in place with his legs alone (which must have been agony to his wounds), he took the bag of Crofe's excrement from his neck and hung it carefully on my foot. In our cramped situation, nothing else was possible.

"I charge you," he said in pain, "to take it to the altar."

"It might fall," I said honestly.

"It will not if you vow to take it to the altar."

And because Da was dying from an arrow that might have struck me, and also because of Stone's death and Pan's and Fole's and, yes, Crofe's, I vowed that I would do it. And when I had said that, Da let go and plunged down the shaft.

I climbed as quickly as I could, knowing that the arrows might easily come again, as in fact they did. But I was higher all the time, and even the best archer couldn't reach me.

I was only a dozen meters from the top, carefully balancing the bag of excrement from my foot as I climbed (every motion more painful than the last), when it occurred to me that Da was dead, and everyone else as well. What was to stop me now from dropping the bag, climbing to the top, signaling the lander to me, and climbing safely aboard? To preserve the contents of a man's bowels and risk my life to perform a meaningless rite with it was absurd. No damage could be done by my failure to perform the task. No one would know, in fact, that I had vowed to do it. Indeed, completing the vow could easily be construed as unwarranted interference in planetary affairs.

Why didn't I drop the bag? There are those who claim that I was insane, believing the religion (these are they who claim that I believe it still); but that is not true. I knew rationally that dead men do not watch the acts of the living, that vows made to the dead are not binding, that my first obligation was to myself and the corporation, and certainly not to Da or Crofe.

But regardless of my rational process, even as I thought of dropping the bag I felt the utter wrongness of it. I could not do it and still remain myself. This is mystical, perhaps, but there was nowhere in my mind that I could fail to fulfill my oath and still live. I have broken my word frequently for convenience-- I am, after all, a modern man. But in this case, at that time, despite my strong desire for survival, I could not tip my foot downward and let the bag drop.

And after that moment of indecision, I did not waver.

I reached the top utterly exhausted, but sat on the brink of the chimney and reached down to remove the bag from my foot. The leaning forward after so much exertion in an inexorably vertical position made me lightheaded; the bag almost slipped from my grasp, almost fell; I caught it at the end of my toe and pulled it, trembling, to my lap. It was light, surprisingly light. I set it on the ground and pulled myself out of the chimney, crawled wearily a meter or two away from the edge of the cliff, and then looked ahead of me. There was the peak, not a hundred meters away. On it I could easily see an altar hewn out of stone. The design was not familiar to me, but it could serve the purpose, and it was the only artifact in sight.

But between me. and the peak was a gentle downward slope before the upward slope began again, leading to the altar. The slopes were all gentle here, but I realized that a thin coat of ice covered all the rocks; indeed, covered the rock only a few meters on from me. I didn't understand why at the time; afterward the men in the lander told me that for half an hour, while I was in the chimney on the west face, a mist had rolled over the top of the peak, and when it had left, only a few minutes before I surfaced, it had left the film of ice.

But ice was part of my vow, part of the rite, and I scraped some up, broke some off with the handle of my needle, and put it in my mouth.

It was dirty with the grit of the rock, but it was cold and it was water and I felt better for having tasted it. And I felt nothing but relief at having completed part of my vow-- it did not seem incongruous at the time that I should be engaging in magic.

Then I struggled to my feet and began to walk clumsily across the space between me and the peak, holding the bag in my hands and slipping frequently on the icy rocks.

I heard shouting below me. I looked down and saw the Golyny on the south slope, hundreds of meters away. They would not be able to reach the peak before me. I took some comfort in that even as the arrows began to hunt for my range.

They found it, and when I tried to move to the north to avoid their fire, I discovered that the Golyny on that side had been alerted by the noise, and they, too, were firing at me.

I had thought I was traveling as fast as I could already; now I began to run toward the peak. Yet running made me slip more, and I scarcely made any faster progress than I had before. It occurs to me now that perhaps it was just that irregular pattern of running quickly and then falling, rising and running again, and falling again, that saved my life; surely it confused the archers.

A shadow passed over me twice as I made the last run to the peak; perhaps I realized that it was the lander, perhaps not. I could have, even then, opted for a rescue. Instead, I fell again and dropped the bag, watched it slide a dozen meters down the south slope, where the Golyny were only a few dozen meters away and closing in (although they, too, were slowed by the

ice).

And so I descended into the arrows and retrieved the bag. I was struck in the thigh and in the side; they burned with pain, and I almost fainted then, from the sheer surprise of it. Somehow primitive weapons seem wrong; they shouldn't be able to do damage to a modem man. The shock of the pain they bring is therefore all the greater. Yet I did not faint. I got up and struggled back up the slope, and now I was only a little way from the altar, it was just ahead, it was within a few steps, and at last I fell on it, my wounds throwing blood onto the ground and onto the altar itself. Vaguely I realized that another part of the rite had thus been completed, and as the lander came to rest behind me, I took the bag, opened it, scooped out the still-damp contents, and smeared them on the altar.

Three corporation men reached me then, and, obeying the law, the first thing they did was check my belt for the needle and the splinters. Only when they were certain that they had not been used did they turn to the Golyny and flip their own splinters downhill. They exploded in front of the enemy, and they screamed in terror and fell back, tumbling and running down the rocks. None had been killed, though I now treasure the wish that at least one of them might have slipped and broken his neck. It was enough, though, that they saw that demonstration of power; the corporation had never given the Golyny a taste of modern warfare until then.

If my needle had been fired, or if a splinter had been missing, the corporation men would, of course, have killed me on the spot. Law is law. As it was, however, they lifted me and carried me from the altar toward the lander. But I did not forget. "Farewell, Crofe, " I said, and then, as delirium took over, they tell me I also bade good-bye to all the others, to every one of them, a hundred times over, as the lander took me from the peak back to the city, back to safety.

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In two weeks I was recovered enough to receive visitors, and my first visitor was Pru, the titular head of the assembly of Ylymyn. He was very kind. He quietly told me that after I had been back for three days, the corporation finally let slip what I had told them when I requested rescue; the Ylymyny had sent a very large (and therefore safe) party to discover more. They found the mutilated bodies of Fole and the soldier who had fallen just before him; discovered the dried and frozen corpse of Pan; found no trace of Da or Stone; but then reached the altar and saw the bloodstains upon it, and the fresh excrement stains, and that was why Pru had come to me to squat before me and ask me one question.

"Ask," I said.

"Did you bid farewell to Crofe?"

I did not wonder how they knew it was Crofe we had climbed the peak to honor-0 obviously, only Crofe was "Ice" and therefore worthy of the rite.

"I did," I said.

Tears came into the old man's eyes, and his jaw trembled, and he took my hand as he squatted by the bed, his tears falling upon my skin.

"Did you," he asked, and his voice broke, and then he began again, "did you grant him companions? "

I did not have to ask what he meant; that was how well I understood them by then. "I also bade farewell to the others," and I named them, and he wept louder and kissed my hand and then chanted with his eyes covered for quite some time. When he was done, he reached up and touched my eyes.

"May your eyes always see behind the forest and the mountain," he said, and then he touched my lips, and my ears, and my navel, and my groin, and he said other words. And then he left. And I slept again.

In three weeks Tack came to visit me and found me awake and unable to make any more excuses not to see him. I had expected him to be stern at best. Instead, he beamed and held out a hand, which I took gratefully. I was not to be tried after all.

"My man," he said, "my good man, I couldn't wait any longer. Whenever I've tried to see you, they've told me you were asleep or busy or whatnot, but dammit, man, there's only so much waiting a man can take when he's ready to bust with pride."

He was overdoing it, of course, as he overdid everything, but the message was clear and pleasant enough. I was to be honored, not disgraced; I was to receive a decoration, in fact, and a substantial raise in pay. I was to be made chief of liaison for the whole planet; I was, if he had the power, to be appointed god.

In fact, he said, the natives had already done so.

"Appointed me god?" I asked.

"They've been holding festivals and prayer meetings and whatall for a week. I don't know what you told old Pru, but you are golden property to them. If you told them all to march into the ocean, I swear they'd do it. Don't you realize what an opportunity this is? You could have screwed it up on the mountain, you know that. One false move and that would have been it. But you turned a potential disaster-- and one not entirely of your making, I know that-- you turned that disaster into the best damn contact point with a xenosociety I've ever seen. Do you realize what this means? You've got to get busy right away, as soon as you can, get the contracts signed and the work begun while there's still this groundswell of affection for you. Shades of the White Messiah the Indians thought Cortes was-- but that's history, and you've made history this time, I promise." And on he went until at last, unable to bear it anymore, I tried-- indeed, I'm still trying-- to explain to him that what had happened on the mountain was not for the corporation.

"Nonsense," he said. "Couldn't have done anything better for the corporation if you'd stayed up a week trying to think of it."

I tried again. I told him about the men who had died, what I owed to them.

"Sentiment. Sentiment's good in a man. Nothing to risk your life over, but you were tired."

And I tried again, fool that I was, and explained about the vow, and about my feelings as I decided to carry the thing through to its conclusion. And at last Tack fell silent and thought about what I had said, and left the room.

That was when the visits with the psychologists began, and while they found me, of course, perfectly competent mentally (trust Tack to overreact, and they knew it), when I requested that I be transferred from the planet, they found a loophole that let me go without breaking contract or losing pay. But the word was out throughout the corporation that I had gone native on Worthing, that I had actually performed an arcane rite involving blood, ice, a mountain peak, and a dead man's half-digested dinner. I could bear the rumors of madness. It is the laughter that is unbearable, because those who cannot dream of the climb to the mountain, who did not know the men who died for me and for Crofe-- how can they help but laugh?

And how can I help but hate them?

Which is why I request again my retirement from the corporation. I will accept half retirement, if that is necessary. I'll accept no retirement, in fact, if the record can only stay clear. I will not accept a retirement that lists me as mentally incompetent. I will not accept a retirement that forces me to live anywhere but on Ylymyn Island.

I know that it is forbidden, but these are unusual circumstances. I will

certainly be accepted there; I will acquit myself with dignity; I wish only to live out my life with people who understand honor perhaps better than any others I have known of.

It is absurd, I know. You will deny my request, I know, as you have a hundred times before. But I hoped that if you knew my story, knew as best I could tell it the whys behind my determination to leave the corporation, that perhaps you would understand why I have not been able to forget that Pru told me, "Now you are Ice, too; and now your soul shall be set free in the Sky." It is not the hope of a life after death-- I have no such hope. It is the hope that at my death honorable men will go to some trouble to bid me farewell.

Indeed, it is no hope at all, but rather a certainty. I, like every modern man, have clung since childhood to a code, to a law that struggled to give a purpose to life. All the laws are rational; all achieve a purpose.

But on Ylymyn, where the laws were irrational and the purposes meaningless, I found another thing, the thing behind the law, the thing that is itself worth clinging to regardless of the law, the thing that takes even mad laws and makes them holy. And by all that's holy, let me go back and cling to it again.

## I PUT MY BLUE GENES ON Orson Scott Card

It had taken three weeks to get there-- longer than any man in living memory had been in space, and there were four of us crammed into the little Hunter III skipship. It gave us a hearty appreciation for the pioneers, who had had to crawl across space at a tenth of the speed of light. No wonder only three colonies ever got founded. Everybody else must have eaten each other alive after the first month in space.

Harold had taken a swing at Amauri the last day, and if we hadn't hit the homing signal I would have ordered the ship turned around to go home to N£ncamais, which was mother and apple pie to everybody but me-- I'm from Pennsylvania. But we got the homing signal and set the computer to scanning the old maps, and after a few hours found ourselves in stationary orbit over Prescott, Arizona.

At least that's what the geologer said, and computers can't lie. It didn't look like what the old books said Arizona should look like.

But there was the homing signal, broadcasting in Old English: "God bless America, come in, safe landing guaranteed." The computer assured us that in Old English the word guarantee was not obscene, but rather had something to do with a statement being particularly trustworthy-- we had a chuckle over that one.

But we were excited, too. When great-great-great-great to the umpteenth power grandpa and grandma upped their balloons from old Terra Firma eight hundred years ago, it had been to escape the ravages of microbiological warfare that was just beginning (a few germs in a sneak attack on Madagascar, quickly spreading to epidemic proportions, and South Africa holding the world ransom for the antidote; quick retaliation with virulent cancer; you guess the rest). And even from a couple of miles out in space, it was pretty obvious that the war hadn't stopped there. And yet there was this homing signal.

"Obviamente autom tica," Amauri observed.

"Que m quina, que n*f* o pofa em tantos anos, bichinha! N*f* o acredito!" retorted Harold, and I was afraid I might have a rerun of the day before.

"English," I said. "Might as well get used to it. We'll have to speak it for a few days, at least."

Vladimir sighed. "Merda."

I laughed. "All right, you can keep your scatological comments in lingua deporto."

"Are you so sure there's anybody alive down there?" Vladimir asked.

What could I say? That I felt it in my bones? So I just threw a sponge at him, which scattered drinking water all over the cabin, and for a few minutes we had a waterfight. I know, discipline, discipline. But we're not a land army up here, and what the hell. I'd rather have my crew acting like crazy children than like crazy grown-ups.

Actually, I didn't believe that at the level of technology our ancestors had reached in 1992 they could build a machine that would keep running until 2810. Somebody had to be alive down there-- or else they'd gotten smart. Again, the surface of old Terra didn't give many signs that anybody had gotten smart.

So somebody was alive down there. And that was exactly what we had been sent to find out.

They complained when I ordered monkeysuits.

"That's old Mother Earth down there!" Harold argued. For a halibut with an ike of 150 he sure could act like a baiano sometimes.

"Show me the cities," I answered. "Show me the millions of people running around taking the sun in their rawhide summer outfits."

"And there may be germs," Amauri added, in his snottiest voice, and immediately I had another argument going between two men brown enough to know better.

"We will follow," I said in my nasty captain's voice, "standard planetary procedure, whether it's Mother Earth or mother--"

And at that moment the monotonous homing signal changed.

"Please respond, please identify, please respond, or we'll blast your asses out of the sky."

We responded. And soon afterward found ourselves in monkeysuits wandering around in thick pea soup up to our navels (if we could have located our navels without a map, surrounded as they were with lifesaving devices) waiting for somebody to open a door. A door opened and we picked ourselves up off a very hard floor. Some of the pea soup had fallen down the hatch with us. A gas came into the sterile chamber where we waited, and pretty soon the pea soup settled down and turned into mud.

"Mariajoseijesus!" Amauri muttered. "Aquela merda vivia!"

"English," I muttered into the monkey mouth, "and clean up your language."

"That crap was alive," Amauri said, rephrasing and cleaning up his language.

"And now it isn't, but we are." It was hard to be patient.

For all we knew, what passed for humanity here liked eating spacemen. Or sacrificing them to some local deity. We passed a nervous four hours in that cubicle. And I had already laid about five hopeless escape plans when a door opened, and a person appeared.

He was dressed in a white farmersuit, or at least close to it. He was very short, but smiled pleasantly and beckoned. Proof positive. Living human beings. Mission successful. Now we know there was no cause for rejoicing, but at that moment we rejoiced. Backslapping, embracing our little host (afraid of crushing him for a moment), and then into the labyrinth of U.S. MB Warfare Post 004.

They were all very small-- not more than 140 centimeters tall-- and the first thought that struck me was how much humanity had grown since then. The stars must agree with us, I thought.

Till quiet, methodical Vladimir, looking as always, white as a ghost, pointedly turned a doorknob and touched a lightswitch (it actually was mechanical). They were both above eye level for our little friends. So it wasn't us colonists who had grown-- it was our cousins from old Gaea who had shrunk.

We tried to catch them up on history, but all they cared about was their own politics. "Are you American?" they kept asking.

"I'm from Pennsylvania," I said, "but these humble-butts are from N£ncamais.

They didn't understand.

"N£ncamais. It means 'never again.' In lingua deporto."

Again puzzled. But they asked another question.

"Where did your colony come from?" One-track minds.

"Pennsylvania was settled by Americans from Hawaii. We lay no bets as to why they named the damned planet Pennsylvania--"

One of the little people piped up, "That's obvious. Cradle of liberty. And them?"

"From Brazil," I said.

They conferred quietly on that one, and then apparently decided that while Brazilian ancestry wasn't a capital offense, it didn't exactly confer human status. From then on, they made no attempt to talk to my crew, just watched them carefully, and talked to me.

Me they loved.

"God bless America," they said.

I felt agreeable. "God bless America," I answered.

Then, again in unison, they made an obscene suggestion as to what I should do with the Russians. I glanced at my compatriots and fellow travelers and shrugged. I repeated the little folks' wish for the Russian's sexual bliss.

Fact time. I won't bore by repeating all the clever questioning and probing that elicited the following information. Partly because it didn't take any questioning. They seemed to have been rehearsing for years what they would say to any visitors from outer space, particularly the descendants of the long-lost colonists. It went this way:

Germ warfare had began in earnest about three years after we left. Three very cleverly designed cancer viruses had been loosed on the world, apparently by no one at all, since both the Russians and the Americans denied it and the Chinese were all dead. That was when the scientists knuckled down and set to work.

Recombinant DNA had been a rough enough science when my ancestors took off for the stars-- and we hadn't developed it much since then. When you're developing raw planets you have better things to do with your time. But under the pressure of warfare, the science of do-it-yourself genetics had a field day on planet Earth.

"We are constantly developing new strains of viruses and bacteria," they said. "And constantly we are bombarded by the Russians' latest weapons." They were hard-pressed. There weren't many of them in that particular MB Warfare Post, and the enemy's assaults were clever. And finally the picture became clear. To all of us at once. It was Harold who said, "Fossa-me, mfe! You mean for eight hundred years you bunnies've been down here?"

They didn't answer until I asked the question-- more politely, too, since I had noticed a certain set to those inscrutable jaws when Harold called them bunnies. Well, they were bunnies, white as white could be, but it was tasteless for Harold to call them that, particularly in front of Vladimir, who had more than a slight tendency toward white skin himself.

"Have you Americans been trapped down here ever since the war began?" I asked, trying to put awe into my voice, and succeeding. Horror isn't that far removed from awe, anyway.

They beamed with what I took for pride. And I was beginning to be able to interpret some of their facial expressions. As long as I had good words for America, I was all right.

"Yes, Captain Kane Kanea, we and our ancestors have been here from the beginning."

"Doesn't it get a little cramped?"

"Not for American soldiers, Captain. For the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness we would sacrifice anything. "I didn't ask how much liberty and happiness-pursuing were possible in a hole in the rock. Our hero went on: "We fight on that millions may live, free, able to breathe the clean air of America unoppressed by the lashes of Communism."

And then they broke into a few choice hymns about purple mountains and yellow waves with a rousing chorus of God blessing America. It all ended with a mighty shout: "Better dead than red." When it was over we asked them if we could sleep, since according to our ship's time it was well past bedding-down hour.

They put us in a rather small room with three cots in it that were far too short for us. Didn't matter. We couldn't possibly be comfortable in our monkeysuits anyway.

Harold wanted to talk in lingua deporto as soon as we were alone, but I managed to convince him without even using my monkeysuit's discipliner button that we didn't want them to think we were trying to keep any secrets. We all took it for granted that they were monitoring us.

And so our conversation was the sort of conversation that one doesn't mind having overheard by a bunch of crazy patriots.

Amauri: "I am amazed at their great love for America, persisting so many centuries." Translation: "What the hell got these guys so nuts about something as dead as the ancient U.S. empire?"

Me: "Perhaps it is due to such unwavering loyalty to the flag, God, country, and liberty" (I admit I was laying it on thick, but better to be safe, etc.) "that they have been able to survive so long." Translation: "Maybe being crazy fanatics is all that's kept them alive in this hole."

Harold: "I wonder how long we can stay in this bastion of democracy before we must reluctantly go back to our colony of the glorious American dream." Translation: "What are the odds they don't let us go? After all, they're so loony they might think we're spies or something."

Vladimir: "I only hope we can learn from them. Their science is infinitely beyond anything we have hitherto developed with our poor resources." Translation: "We're not going anywhere until I have a chance to do my job and check out the local flora and fauna. Eight hundred years of recombining DNA has got to have something we can take back home to N£ncamais."

And so the conversation went until we were sick of the flowers and perfume that kept dropping out of our mouths. Then we went to sleep.

The next day was guided tour day, Russian attack day, and damn near goodbye to the crew of the good ship Pollywog.

The guided tour kept us up hill and down dale for most of the morning. Vladimir was running the tricking computer from his monkeysuit. Mine was too busy analyzing the implications of all their comments while Amauri was absorbing the science and Harold was trying to figure out how to pick his nose with mittens on. Harold was along for the ride-- a weapons expert, just in case. Thank God.

We began to be able to tell one little person from another. George Washington Steiner was our usual guide. The big boss, who had talked to us through most of the history lesson the day before, was Andrew Jackson Wallichinsky. And the guy who led the singing was Richard Nixon Dixon. The computer told us those were names of beloved American presidents, with surnames added.

And my monkeysuit's analysis also told us that the music leader was the real big boss, while Andy Jack Wallichinsky was merely the director of scientific research. Seems that the politicians ran the brains, instead of vice versa.

Our guide, G.W. Steiner, was very proud of his assignment. He showed us everything. I mean, even with the monkeysuit keeping three-fourths of the gravity

away from me, my feet were sore by lunchtime (a quick sip of recycled xixi and coc¢). And it was impressive. Again, I give it unto you in abbreviated form:

Even though the installation was technically airtight, in fact the enemy viruses and bacteria could get in quite readily. It seems that early in the twenty-first century the Russians had stopped making any kind of radio broadcasts. (I know, that sounds like a non sequitur. Patience, patience.) At first the Americans in 004 had thought they had won. And then, suddenly, a new onslaught of another disease. At this time the 004 researchers had never been personally hit by any diseases-- the airtight system was working fine. But their commander at that time, Rodney Fletcher, had been very suspicious.

"He thought it was a commie trick," said George Washington Steiner. I began to see the roots of superpatriotism in 004's history.

So Rodney Fletcher set the scientists to working on strengthening the base personnel's antibody system. They plugged away at it for two weeks and came up with three new strains of bacteria that selectively devoured practically anything that wasn't supposed to be in the human body, just in time, too, because then that new disease hit. It wasn't stopped by the airtight system, because instead of being a virus, it was just two little amino acids and a molecule of lactose, put together just so. It fit right through the filters. It sailed right through the antibiotics. It entered right into the lungs of every man, woman, and child in 004. And if Rodney Fletcher hadn't been a paranoid, they all would have died. As it was, only about half lived.

Those two amino acids and the lactose molecule had the ability to fit right into that spot on a human DNA and then make the DNA replicate that way. Just one little change-- and pretty soon nerves just stopped working.

Those two amino acids and the lactose molecule system worked just well enough to slow down the disease's progress until a plug could be found that fit even better into that spot on the DNA, keeping the Russians' little devices out. (Can they be called viruses? Can they be called alive? I'll leave it to the godcallers and the philosophers to decide that.)

Trouble was, the plugs also caused all the soldiers' babies to grow up to be very short with a propensity for having their teeth fall out and their eyes go blind at the age of thirty. G.W. Steiner was very proud of the fact that they had managed to correct for the eyes after four generations. He smiled and for the first time we really noticed that his teeth weren't like ours.

"We make them out of certain bacteria that gets very hard when a particular virus is exposed to it. My own great-great-grandmother invented it," Steiner said. "We're always coming up with new and useful tools."

I asked to see how they did this trick, which brings us full circle to what we saw on the guided tour that day. We saw the laboratories where eleven researchers were playing clever little games with DNA. I didn't understand any of it, but my monkeysuit assured me that the computer was getting it all.

We also saw the weapons delivery system. It was very clever. It consisted of setting a culture dish full of a particular nasty weapon in a little box, closing the door to the box, and then pressing a button that opened another door to the box that led outside.

"We let the wind take it from there," said Steiner. "We figure it takes about a year for a new weapon to reach Russia. But by then it's grown to a point that it's irresistible."

I asked him what the bacteria lived on. He laughed. "Anything," he said. It turns out that their basic breeding stock is a bacterium that can photosynthesize and dissolve any form of iron, both at the same time. "Whatever else we change about a particular weapon, we don't change that," Steiner said. "Our weapons can travel anywhere without hosts. Quarantines don't do any good."

Harold had an idea. I was proud of him. "If these little germs can dissolve steel, George, why the heU aren't they in here dissolving this whole installation? "

Steiner looked like he had just been hoping we'd ask that question.

"When we developed our basic breeder stock, we also developed a mold that inhibits the bacteria from reproducing and eating. The mold only grows on metal and the spores die if they're away from both mold and metal for more than oneseventy-seventh of a second. That means that the mold grows all the way around this installation-- and nowhere else. My fourteenth great-uncle William Westmoreland Hannamaker developed the mold."

"Why," I asked, "do you keep mentioning your blood relationship to these inventors? Surely after eight hundred years here everybody's related?"

I thought I was asking a simple question. But G.W. Steiner looked at me coldly and turned away, leading us to the next room.

We found bacteria that processed other bacteria that processed still other bacteria that turned human excrement into very tasty, nutritious food. We took their word for the tasty. I know, we were still eating recycled us through the tubes in our suit. But at least we knew where ours had been.

They had bacteria that without benefit of sunlight processed carbon dioxide and water back into oxygen and starch. So much for photosynthesis.

And we got a list of what shelf after shelf of weapons could do to an unprepared human body. If somebody ever broke all those jars on N£ncamais or Pennsylvania or Kiev, everybody would simply disappear, completely devoured and incorporated into the life-systems of bacteria and viruses and trained amino-acid sets.

No sooner did I think of that, than I said it. Only I didn't get any farther than the word Kiev.

"Kiev? One of the colonies is named Kiev?"

I shrugged. "There are only three planets colonized. Kiev, Pennsylvania, and N£ncamais."

"Russian ancestry?"

Oops, I thought. Oops is an all-purpose word standing for every bit of profanity, blasphemy, and pornographic and scatological exculpation I could think of.

The guided tour ended right then.

Back in our bedroom, we became aware that we had somehow dissolved our hospitality. After a while, Harold realized that it was my fault.

"Captain, by damn, if you hadn't told them about Kiev we wouldn't be locked in here like this."

I agreed, hoping to pacify him, but he didn't calm down until I used the discipliner button in my monkeysuit.

Then we consulted the computers.

Mine reported that in all we had been told, two areas had been completely left out: While it was obvious that in the past the little people had done extensive work on human DNA, there had been no hint of any work going on in that field today. And though we had been told of all kinds of weapons that had been flung among the Russians on the other side of the world, there had been no hint of any kind of limited effect antipersonnel weapon here.

"Oh," Harold said. "There's nothing to stop us from walking out of here anytime we can knock the door down. And I can knock the door down anytime I want to," he said, playing with the buttons on his monkeysuit. I urged him to wait until all the reports were done.

Amauri informed us that he had gleaned enough information from their talk and his monkeyeyes that we could go home with the entire science of DNA recombination hidden away in our computer.

And then Vladimir's suit played out a holomap of Post 004.

The bright green, infinitesimally thin lines marked walls, doors, passages. We immediately recognized the corridors we had walked in throughout the morning, located the laboratories, found where we were imprisoned. And then we noticed a rather larger area in the middle of the holomap that seemed empty.

"Did you see a room like that? " I asked. The others shook their heads. Vladimir asked the holomap if we had been in it. The suit answered in its whispery monkeyvoice: "No. I have only delineated the unpenetrated perimeter and noted apertures that perhaps give entry."

"So they didn't let us in there, " Harold said. "I knew the bastards were hiding something."

"And let's make a guess," I said. "That room either has something to do with antipersonnel weapons, or it has something to do with human DNA research."

We sat and pondered the revelations we had just had, and realized they didn't add up to much. Finally Vladimir spoke up. Trust a half-bunny to come up with the idea where three browns couldn't. just goes to show you that a racial theory is a bunch of waggywoggle.

"Antipersonnel hell," Vladimir said. "They don't need antipersonnel. All they have to do is open a little hole in our suits and let the germs come through."

"Our suits close immediately," Amauri said, but then corrected himself. "I guess it doesn't take long for a virus to get through, does it?"

Harold didn't get it. "Let one of those bunnies try to lay a knife on me, and I'll split him from ass to armpit."

We ignored him.

"What makes you think there are germs in here? Our suits don't measure that," I pointed out.

Vladimir had already thought of that. "Remember what they said. About the Russians getting those little amino-acid monsters in here."

Amauri snorted. "Russians."

"Yeah, right," Vladimir said, "but keep the voice down, viado."

Amauri turned red, started to say, "Quem, que c<sup>^</sup> chama de viado!" --but l pushed the discipliner button. No time for any of that crap.

"Watch your language, Vladimir. We got enough problems."

"Sorry, Amauri, Captain," Vladimir said. "I'm a little wispy, you know?"

"So's everybody."

Vladimir took a breath and went on. "Once those bugs got in here, 004 must have been pretty thoroughly permeable. The, uh, Russians must've kept pumping more variations on the same into Post 004."

"So why aren't they all dead?"

"What I think is that a lot of these people have been killed-- but the survivors are ones whose bodies took readily to those plugs they came up with. The plugs are regular parts of their body chemistry now. They'd have to be, wouldn't they? They told us they were passed on in the DNA transmitted to the next generation."

I got it. So did Amauri, who said, "So they've had seven or eight centuries to select for adaptability."

"Why not?" Vladimir asked. "Didn't you notice? Eleven researchers on developing new weapons. And only two on developing new defenses. They can't be too worried."

Amauri shook his head. "Oh, Mother Earth. Whatever got into you?"

"Just caught a cold," Vladimir said, and then laughed. "A virus. Called humanity."

We sat around looking at the holomap for a while. I found four different routes from where we were to the secret area-- if we wanted to get there. I also found three routes to the exit. I pointed them out to the others.

"Yeah," Harold said. "Trouble is, who knows if those doors really lead into that unknown area? I mean, what the hell, three of the four doors might lead to the broom closets or service station."

A good point.

We just sat there, wondering whether we should head for the Pollywog or try to find out what was in the hidden area, when the Russian attack made up our

minds for us. There was a tremendous bang. The floor shook, as if some immense dog had just picked up Post 004 and given it a good shaking. When it stopped the lights flickered and went out.

"Golden opportunity," I said into the monkeymouth. The others agreed. So we flashed on the lights from our suits and pointed them at the door. Harold suddenly felt very important. He went to the door and ran his magic flipper finger all the way around the door. Then he stepped back and flicked a lever on his suit.

"Better turn your backs," he said. "This can flash pretty bright."

Even looking at the back wall the explosion blinded me for a few seconds. The world looked a little green when I turned around. The door was in shreds on the floor, and the doorjamb didn't look too healthy.

"Nice job, Harold," I said.

"Gra€as a deus," he answered, and I had to laugh. Odd how little religious phrases refused to die, even with an irreverent filho de punta like Harold.

Then I remembered that I was in charge of ordergiving. So I gave.

The second door we tried led into the rooms we wanted to see. But just as we got in, the lights came on.

"Damn. They've got the station back in order," Amauri said. But Vladimir just pointed down the corridor.

The pea soup had gotten in. It was oozing sluggishly toward us.

"Whatever the Russians did, it must have opened up a big hole in the station." Vladimir pointed his laser finger at the mess. Even on full power, it only made a little spot steam. The rest just kept coming.

"Anyone for swimming?" I asked. No one was. So I hustled them all into the notso-hidden room.

There were some little people in there, cowering in the darkness. Harold wrapped them in cocoons and stuck them in a corner. So we had time to look around.

There wasn't that much to see, really. Standard lab equipment, and then thirtytwo boxes, about a meter square. They were under sunlamps. We looked inside.

The animals were semisolid looking. I didn't touch one right then, but the sluggish way it sent out pseudopodia, I concluded that the one I was watching, at

least, had a rather crusty skin-- with jelly inside. They were all a light brown-even lighter than Vladimir's skin. But there were little green spots here and there. I wondered if they photosynthesized.

"Look what they're floating in," Amauri said, and I realized that it was pea soup.

"They've developed a giant amoeba that lives on all other microorganisms, I guess," Vladimir said. "Maybe they've trained it to carry bombs. Against the Russians."

At that moment Harold began firing his arsenal, and I noticed that the little people were gathered at the door to the lab looking agitated. A few at the front were looking dead.

Harold probably would have killed all of them, except that we were still standing next to a box with a giant amoeba in it. When he screamed, we looked and saw the creature fastened against his leg. Even as we watched, Harold fell, the bottom half of his leg dropping away as the amoeba continued eating up his thigh.

We watched just long enough for the little people to grab hold of us in sufficient numbers that resistance would have been ridiculous. Besides, we couldn't take our eyes off Harold.

At about the groin, the amoeba stopped eating. It didn't matter. Harold was dead anyway-- we didn't know what disease got him, but as soon as his suit had cracked he started vomiting into his suit. There were pustules all over his face. In short, Vladimir's guess about the virus content of Post 004 had been pretty accurate.

And now the amoeba formed itself into a pentagon. Five very smooth sides, the creature sitting in a clump on the gaping wound that had once been a pelvis. Suddenly, with a brief convulsion, all the sides bisected, forming sharp angles, so that now there were ten sides to the creature. A hairline crack appeared down the middle. And then, like jelly sliced in the middle and finally deciding to split, the two halves slumped away on either side. They quickly formed into two new pentagons, and then they relaxed into pseudopodia again, and continued devouring Harold.

"Well," Amauri said. "They do have an antipersonnel weapon."

When he spoke, the spell of stillness was broken, and the little people had us spread on tables with sharp-pointed objects pointed at us. If any one of those punctured a suit even for a moment, we would be dead. We held very still.

Richard Nixon Dixon, the top halibut, interrogated us himself. It all started with a lot of questions about the Russians, when we had visited them, why we had decided to serve them instead of the Americans, etc. We kept insisting that they were full of crap.

But when they threatened to open a window into Vladimir's suit, I decided enough was enough.

"Tell 'em! " I shouted into the monkeymouth, and Vladimir said, "All right," and the little people leaned back to listen.

"There are no Russians," Vladimir said.

The little people got ready to carve holes.

"No, wait, it's true! After we got your homing signal, before we landed, we made seven orbital passes over the entire planet. There is absolutely no human life anywhere but here!"

"Conimie lies," Richard Nixon Dixon said.

"God's own truth!" I shouted. "Don't touch him, man! He's telling the truth! The only thing out there over this whole damn planet is that pea soup! It covers every inch of land and every inch of water, except a few holes at the poles."

Dixon began to feel a little confused, and the little people murmured. I guess I sounded sincere.

"If there aren't any people," Dixon said, "where do the Russian attacks come from?"

Vladimir answered that one. For a bunny, he was quick on the uptake. "Spontaneous recombination! You and the Russians got new strains of every microbe developing like crazy. All the people, all the animals, all the plants were killed. And only the microbes lived. But you've been introducing new strains constantly, tough competitors for all those beasts out there. The ones that couldn't adapt died. And now that's all that's left-- the ones who adapt. Constantly."

Andrew Jackson Wallichinsky, the head researcher, nodded. "It sounds plausible."

"If there's anything we've learned about commies in the last thousand years," Richard Nixon Dixon said, "it's that you can't trust 'em any farther than you can spit." "Well," Andy lack said, "it's easy enough to test them."

Dixon nodded. "Go ahead."

So three of the little people went to the boxes and each came, back with an amoeba. In a minute it was clear that they planned to set them on us. Amauri screamed. Vladimir turned white. I would have screamed but I was busy trying to swallow my tongue.

"Relax," Andy Jack said. "They won't hurt you."

"Acredito!" I shouted. "Like it didn't hurt Harold!"

"Harold was killing people. These won't harm you. Unless you were lying."

Great, I thought. Like the ancient test for witches. Throw them in the water, if they drown they're innocent, if they float they're guilty so kill 'em.

But maybe Andy Jack was telling the truth and they wouldn't hurt us. And if we refused to let them put those buggers on us they'd "know" we had been lying and punch holes in our monkeysuits.

So I told the little people to put one on me only. They didn't need to test us all.

And then I put my tongue between my teeth, ready to bite down hard and inhale the blood when the damn thing started eating me. Somehow I thought I'd feel better about going honeyduck if I helped myself along.

They set the thing on my shoulder. It didn't penetrate my monkeysuit. Instead it just oozed up toward my head.

It slid over my faceplate and the world went dark.

"Kane Kanea," said a faint vibration in the faceplate.

"Meu deus," I muttered.

The amoeba could, talk. But I didn't have to speak to answer it. A question would come through the vibration of the faceplate. And then I would lie there and-- it knew my answer. Easy as pie. I was so scared I urinated twice during the interview. But my imperturbable monkeysuit cleaned it all up and got it ready for breakfast, just like normal.

And at last the interview was over. The amoeba slithered off my faceplate and returned to the waiting arms of one of the little people, who carried it back to

Andy Jack and Ricky Nick. The two men put their hands on the thing and then looked at us in surprise.

"You're telling the truth. There are no Russians."

Vladimir shrugged. "Why would we lie?"

Andy Jack started toward me, carrying the writhing monster that had interviewed me.

"I'll kill myself before I let that thing touch me again."

Andy Jack stopped in surprise. "You're still afraid of that?"

"It's intelligent," I said. "It read my mind."

Vladimir looked startled, and Amauri muttered something. But Andy Jack only smiled. "Nothing mysterious about that. It can read and interpret the electromagnetic fields of your brain, coupled with the amitron flux in your thyroid gland."

"What is it?" Vladimir asked.

Andy Jack looked very proud. "This one is my son."

We waited for the punch line. It didn't come. And suddenly we realized that we had found what we had been looking for-- the result of the little people's research into recombinant human DNA.

"We've been working on these for years. Finally we got it right about four years ago," Andy Jack said. "They were our last line of defense. But now that we know the Russians are dead-- well, there's no reason for them to stay in their nests."

And the man reached down and laid the amoeba into the pea soup that was now about sixty centimeters deep on the floor. Immediately it flattened out on the surface until it was about a meter in diameter. I remembered the whispering voice through my faceplate.

"It's too flexible to have a brain," Vladimir said.

"It doesn't have one," Andy Jack answered. "The brain functions are distributed throughout the body. If it were cut in forty pieces, each piece would have enough memory and enough mindfunction to continue to live. It's indestructible. And when several of them get together, they set up a sympathetic field. They become very bright, then."

"Head of the class and everything, I'm sure," Vladimir said. He couldn't hide the loathing in his voice. Me, I was trying not to be sick.

So this is the next stage of evolution, I thought. Man screws up the planet till it's fit for nothing but microbes-- and then changes himself so that he can live on a diet of bacteria and viruses.

"It's really the perfect step in evolution," Andy lack said. "This fellow can adapt to new species of parasitic bacteria and viruses almost by reflex. Control the makeup of his own DNA consciously. Manipulate the DNA of other organisms by absorbing them through the semipermeable membranes of specialized cells, altering them, and setting them free again."

"Somehow it doesn't make me want to feed it or change its diapers."

Andy lack laughed lightly. "Since they reproduce by fission, they're never infant. Oh, if the piece were too small, it would take a while to get back to adult competence again. But otherwise, in the normal run of things, it's always an adult."

Then Andy Jack reached down, let his son wrap itself around his arm, and then walked back to where Richard Nixon Dixon stood watching. Andy Jack put the arm that held the amoeba around Dixon's shoulder.

"By the way, sir," Andy Jack said. "With the Russians dead, the damned war is over, sir."

Dixon looked startled. "And?"

"We don't need a commander anymore."

Before Dixon could answer, the amoeba had eaten through his neck and he was quite dead. Rather an abrupt coup, I thought, and looked at the other little people for a reaction. No one seemed to mind. Apparently their superpatriotic militarism was only skin deep. I felt vaguely relieved. Maybe they had something in common with me after all.

They decided to let us go, and we were glad enough to take them up on the offer. On the way out, they showed us what had caused the explosion in the last "Russian" attack. The mold that protected the steel surface of the installation had mutated slightly in one place, allowing the steel-eating bacteria to enter into a symbiotic relationship. It just happened that the mutation occurred at the place where the hydrogen storage tanks rested against the wall. When a hole opened, one of the first amino-acid sets that came through with the pea soup was one that combines radically with raw hydrogen. The effect was a three-second population explosion. It knocked out a huge chunk of Post 004.

We were glad, when we got back to our skipship, that we had left dear old Pollywog floating some forty meters off the ground. Even so, there had been some damage. One of the airborne microbes had a penchant for lodging in hairline cracks and reproducing rapidly, widening microscopic gaps in the structure of the ship. Nevertheless, Amauri judged us fit for takeoff.

We didn't kiss anybody good-bye.

So now I've let you in on the true story of our visit to Mother Earth back in 2810. The parallel with our current situation should be obvious. If we let Pennsylvania get soaked into this spongy little war between Kiev and N£ncamais, we'll deserve what we get. Because those damned antimatter convertors will do things that make germ warfare look as pleasant as sniffing pinkweeds.

And if anythmg human survives the war, it sure as hell won't look like anything we call human now.

And maybe that doesn't matter to anybody these days. But it matters to me. I don't like the idea of amoebas for grandchildren, and having an antimatter greatnephew thrills me less. I've been human all my life, and I like it.

So I say, turn on our repressors and sit out the damned war. Wait until they've disappeared each other, and then go about the business of keeping humanity alive-- and human.

So much for the political tract. If you vote for war, though, I can promise you there'll be more than one skipship heading for the wild black yonder. We've colonized before, and we can do it again. In case no one gets the hint, that's a call for volunteers, if, as, and when. Over.

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Not over. On the first printing of this program, I got a lot of inquiries as to why we didn't report all this when we got back home. The answer's simple. On N£ncamais it's a capital crime to alter a ship's log. But we had to.

As soon as we got into space from Mother Earth, Vladimir had the computer present all its findings, all its data, and all its conclusions about recombinant DNA. And then he erased it all.

I probably would have stopped him if I'd known what he was doing in advance. But once it was done, Amauri and I realized that he was right. That kind of merda didn't belong in the universe. And then we systematically covered our tracks. We erased all reference to Post 004, eradicated any hint of a homing signal. All we left in the computer was the recording of our overflight, showing nothing but pea soup from sea to soupy sea. It was tricky, but we also added a serious malfunction of the EVA lifesupport gear on the way home-- which cost us the life of our dear friend and comrade, Harold.

And then we recorded in the ship's log, "Planet unfit for human occupancy. No human life found."

Hell. It wasn't even a lie.

## IN THE DOGHOUSE Orson Scott Card with Jay A. Perry

As Mklikluln awoke, he felt the same depression that he had felt as he went to sleep ninety-seven years ago. And though he knew it would only make his depression worse, he immediately scanned backward as his ship decelerated, hunting for the star that had been the sun. He couldn't find it. Which meant that even with acceleration and deceleration time, the light from the nova-- or supenova-- had not yet reached the system he was heading for.

Sentimentality be damned, he thought savagely as he turned his attention to the readouts on the upcoming system. So the ice cliffs will melt, and the sourland will turn to huge, planet-spanning lakes. So the atmosphere will fly away in the intense heat. Who cares? Humanity was safe.

As safe as bodiless minds can be, resting in their own supporting mindfields somewhere in space, waiting for the instantaneous message that here is a planet with bodies available, here is a home for the millions for whom there had been no spaceships, here we can once again--

Once again what?

No matter how far we search, Mklikluln reminded himself, we have no hope of finding those graceful, symmetrical, hexagonally delicate bodies we left behind to bum.

Of course, Mklikluln still had his, but only for a while.

Thirteen true planetary bodies, two of which co-orbited as binaries in the third position. Ignoring the gas giants and the crusty pebbles outside the habitable range, Mklikluin got increasingly more complex readouts on the binary and the single in the fourth orbit, a red midget.

The red was dead, the smaller binary even worse, but the blue-green larger binary was ideal. Not because it matched the conditions on Mklikluln's home world-- that would be impossible. But because it had life. And not only life--intelligent life.

Or at least fairly bright life. Energy output in the sub- and supravisible spectra exceeded reflection from the star (No, I must try to think of it as the sun) by a significant degree. Energy clearly came from a breakdown of carbon compounds, just what current theory (current? ninety-seven-year-old) had assumed would be

the logical energy base of a developing world in this temperature range. The professors would be most gratified.

And after several months of maneuvering his craft, he was in stationary orbit around the larger binary. He began monitoring communications on the supravisible wavelengths. He learned the language quickly, though of course he couldn't have produced it with his own body, and sighed a little when he realized that, the aliens, like his own people, called their little star "the sun," their minor binary "the moon," and their own humble, overhot planet "earth" (terra, mund, etc.). The array of languages was impressive-- to think that people would go to all the trouble of thinking out hundreds of completely different ways of communicating for the sheer love of the logical exercise was amazing-- what minds they must have!

For a moment he fleetingly thought of taking over for his people's use the bipedal bodies of the dominant intelligent race; but law was law, and his people would commit mass suicide if they realized-- as they would surely realize-- that they had gained their bodies at the expense of another intelligent race. One could think of such bipedals as being ahnost human, right down to the whimsical sense of humor that so reminded Mklikluln of his wife (Ah, Glundnindn, and you the pilot who volunteered to plunge into the sun, scooping out the sample that killed you, but saved us!); but he refused to mourn.

The dominant race was out. Similar bipedals were too small in population, too feared or misunderstood by the dominant race. Other animals with appropriate populations didn't have body functions that could easily support intelligence without major revisions-- and many were too weak to survive unaided, too short of lifespan to allow civilization.

And so he narrowed down the choices to two quadrupeds, of very different sorts, of course, but well within the limits of choice: both had full access to the domiciles of the dominant race; both had adequate body structure to support intellect; both had potential means of communicating; both had sufficient population to hold all the encapsulated minds waiting in the space between the stars.

Mkhkluln did the mental equivalent of flipping a coin-- would have flipped a coin, in fact, except that he had neither hand nor coin nor adequate gravity for flipping.

The choice made-- for the noisy one of greater intelligence that already had the love of most members of the master race-- he set about making plans on how to introduce the transceivers that would call his people. (The dominant race must not know what is happening; and it can't be done without the cooperation of the dominant race.)

Mklikluln's six points vibrated just a little as he thought.

Abu was underpaid, underfed, underweight, and within about twelve minutes of the end of his lifespan. He was concentrating on the first problem, however, as the fourth developed.

"Why am I being paid less than Faisel, who sits on his duff by the gate while I walk back and forth in front of the cells all day?" he righteously said-- under his breath, of course, in case his supervisor should overhear him. "Am I not as good a Muslim? Am I not as smart? Am I not as loyal to the Party?"

And as he was immersed in righteous indignation at man's inhumanity, not so much to mankind as to Abu ibn Assur, a great roaring sound tore through the desert prison, followed by a terrible, hot, dry, sand-stabbing wind. Abu screamed and covered his eyes-- too late, however, and the sand ripped them open, and the hot air dried them out.

That was why he didn't see the hole in the outside wall of cell 23, which held a political prisoner condemned to die the next morning for having murdered his wife-- normally not a political crime, except when the wife was also the daughter of somebody who could make phone calls and get people put in prison.

That was why he didn't see hig supervisor come in, discover cell 23 empty, and then aim his submachine gun at Abu as the first step to setting up the hapless guard as the official scapegoat for this fiasco. Abu did, however, hear and feel the discharge of the gun, and wondered vaguely what had happened as he died.

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Mklikluln stretched the new arms and legs (the fourness of the body, the twosidedness, the overwhelming sexuality of it all were amazing, all were delightful) and walked around his little spacecraft. And the fiveness and tenness of the fingers and toes! (What we could have done with fingers and toes! except that we might not have developed thoughttalk, then, and would have been tied to the vibration of air as are these people.) Inside the ship he could see his own body melting as the hot air of the Kansas farmland raised the temperature above the melting point of ice.

He had broken the law himself, but could see no way around it. Necessary as his act had been, and careful as he had been to steal the body of a man doomed anyway to die, he knew that his own people would try him, convict him, and execute him for depriving an intelligent being of life. But in the meantime, it was a new body and a whole range of sensations. He moved the tongue over the teeth. He made the buzzing in his throat that was used for communication. He tried to speak.

It was impossible. Or so it seemed, as the tongue and lips and jaw tried to make the Arabic sounds the reflex pathways were accustomed to, while MklikluIn tried to speak in the language that had dominated the airwaves.

He kept practicing as he carefully melted down his ship (though it was transparent to most electromagnetic spectra, it might still cause comment if found) and by the time he made his way into the nearby city, he was able to communicate fairly well. Well enough, anyway, to contract with the Kansas City Development Corporation for the manufacture of the machine he had devised; with Farber, Farber, and Maynard to secure patents on every detail of the machinery; and with Sidney's carpentry shop to manufacture the doghouses.

He sold enough diamonds to pay for the first 2,000 finished models. And then he hit the road, humming the language he had learned from the radio. "It's the real thing, Coke is," he sang to himself. "Mr. Transmission will put in commission the worst transmissions in town."

The sun set as he checked into a motel outside Manhattan, Kansas. "How many?" asked the clerk.

"One," said Mklikluln.

"Name?"

"Robert," he said, using a name he had randomly chosen from among the many thousands mentioned on the airwaves. "Robert Redford."

"Ha-ha," said the clerk. "I bet you get teased about that a lot."

"Yeah. But I get in to see a lot of important people."

The clerk laughed. Mklikluln smiled. Speaking was fun. For one thing, you could lie. An art his people had never learned to cultivate.

"Profession?"

"Salesman."

"Really, Mr. Redford? What do you sell?"

Mklikluln shrugged, practicing looking mildly embarrassed. "Doghouses," he said.

Royce Jacobsen pulled open the front door of his swelteringly hot house and sighed. A salesman.

"We don't want any," he said.

"Yes you do," said the man, smiling.

Royce was a little startled. Salesmen usually didn't argue with potential customers-- they usually whined. And those that did argue rarely did it with such calm self-assurance. The man was an ass, Royce decided. He looked it the sample case. On the side were the letters spelling out: "Doghouses Unlimited."

"We don't got a dog," Royce said.

"But you do have a very warm house, I believe," the salesman said.

"Yeah. Hotter'n Hades, as the preachers say. Ha." The laugh would have been bigger than one Ha, but Royce was hot and tired and it was only a salesman.

"But you have an air conditioner."

"Yeah," Royce said. "What I don't have is a permit for more than a hundred bucks worth of power from the damnpowercompany. So if I run the air conditioner more than one day a month, I get the refrigerator shut down, or the stove, or some other such thing."

The salesman looked sympathetic.

"It's guys like me," Royce went on, "who always get the short end of the stick. You can bet your boots that the mayor gets all the air conditioning he wants. You can bet your boots and your overalls, as the farmers say, ha ha, that the president of the damnpowercompany takes three hot showers a day and three cold showers a night and leaves his windows open in the winter, too, you can bet on it."

"Right," said the salesman. "The power companies own this whole country. They own the whole world, you know? Think it's any different in England? In Japan? They got the gas, and so they get the gold."

"Yeah," Royce agreed. "You're my kind of guy. You come right in.. House is hot as Hades, as the preachers say, ha ha ha, but it sure beats standing in the sun."

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They sat on a beat-up looking couch and Royce explained exactly what was wrong with the damnpowercompany and what he thought of the damnpowercompany's executives and in what part of their anatomy they should shove their quotas, bills, rates, and periods of maximum and minimum use. "I'm sick to death of having to take a shower at 2:00 am!" Royce should.

"Then do something about it!" the salesman rejoindered.

"Sure. Like what?"

"Like buy a doghouse from me."

Royce thought that was funny. He laughed for a good long while.

But then the salesman started talking very quietly, showing him pictures and diagrams and cost analysis papers that proved-- what?

"That the solar energy utilizer built into this doghouse can power your entire house, all day every day, with four times as much power as you could use if you turned on all your home appliances all day every day, for exactly zero once you pay me this simple one-time fee."

Royce shook his head, though he coveted the doghouse. "Can't. Illegal. I think they passed a law against solar energy thingies back in '85 or '86, to protect the power companies."

The salesman laughed. "How much protection do the power companies need?"

"Sure," Royce answered, "it's me that needs protection. But the meter reader-- if I stop using power, he'll report me, they'll investigate--"

"That's why we don't put your whole house on it. We just put the big power users on it, and gradually take more off the regular current until you're paying what, maybe fifteen dollars a month. Right? Only instead of fifteen dollars a month and cooking over a fire and sweating to death in a hot house, you've got the air conditioner running all day, the heater running all day in the winter, showers whenever you want them, and you can open the refrigerator as often as you like."

Royce still wasn't sure.

"What've you got to lose?" the salesman asked.

"My sweat," Royce answered. "You hear that? My sweat. Ha ha ha ha."

"That's why we build them into doghouses -- so that nobody'll suspect anything."

"Sure, why not?" Royce asked. "Do it. I'm game. I didn't vote for the damncongressman who voted in that stupid law anyway."

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The air conditioner hummed as the guests came in. Royce and his wife, Junie, ushered them into the living room. The television was on in the family room and the osterizer was running in the kitchen. Royce carelessly flipped on a light. One of the women gasped. A man whispered to his wife. Royce and Junie carelessly began their conversation-- as Royce left the door open.

A guest noticed it-- Mr. Detweiler from the bowling team. He said, "Hey!" and leaped from the chair toward the door.

Royce stopped him, saying, "Never mind, never mind, I'll get it in a minute. Here, have some peanuts." And the guests all watched the door in agony as Royce passed the peanuts around, then (finally!) went to the door to close it.

"Beautiful day outside," Royce said, holding the door open a few minutes longer.

Somebody in the living room mentioned a name of the deity. Somebody else countered wiih a one word discussion of defecation. Royce was satisfied that the point had been made. He shut the door.

"Oh, by the way," he said. "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. His name is Robert Redford."

Gasp, gasp, of course you're joking, Robert Redford, what a laugh, sure.

"Actually, his name is Robert Redford, but he isn't, of course, the all time greatest star of stage, screen, and the Friday Night Movie, as the disc jockeys say, ha ha. He is, in short, my friends, a doghouse salesman."

Mklikluln came in then, and shook hands all around.

"He looks like an Arab," a woman whispered.

"Or a Jew," her husband whispered back. "Who can tell?"

Royce beamed at Mklikluln and patted him on the back. "Redford here is the best salesman I ever met."

"Must be, if he sold you a doghouse, and you not even got a dog," said Mr. Detweiler of the bowling league, who could sound patronizing because he was the only one in the bowling league who had ever had a perfect game.

"Neverthemore, as the raven said, ha ha ha, I want you all to see my doghouse." And so Royce led the way past a kitchen where all the lights were on, where the refrigerator was standing open ("Royce, the fridge is open!" "Oh, I guess one of the kids left it that way." "I'd kill one of my kids that did something like that!"), where the stove and microwave and osterizer and hot water were all running at once. Some of the women looked faint.

And as the guests tried to rush through the back door all at once, to conserve energy, Royce said, "Slow down, slow down, what's the panic, the house on fire? Ha ha ha." But the guests still hurried through.

On the way out to the doghouse, which was located in the dead center of the backyard, Detweiler took Royce aside.

"Hey, Royce, old buddy. Who's your touch with the damnpowercompany? How'd you get your quota upped?"

Royce only smiled, shaking his head. "Quota's the same as ever, Detweiler." And then, raising his voice just a bit so that everybody in the backyard could hear, he said, "I only pay fifteen bucks a month for power as it is."

"Woof woof," said a small dog chained to the hook on the doghouse.

"Where'd the dog come from?" Royce whispered to Mklikluln.

"Neighbor was going to drown 'im," Mklikluln answered. "Besides, if you don't have a dog the power company's going to get suspicious. It's cover."

Royce nodded wisely. "Good idea, Redford. I just hope this party's a good idea. What if somebody talks?"

"Nobody will," Mklikluln said confidently.

And then Mklikluln began showing the guests the finer points of the doghouse.

When they finally left, Mklikluln had twenty-three appointments during the next two weeks, checks made out to Doghouses Unlimited for \$221.23, including taxes, and many new friends. Even Mr. Detweiler left smiling, his check in Mklikluln's hand, even though the puppy had pooped on his shoe.

"Here's your commission," Mklikluln said as he wrote out a check for three hundred dollars to Royce Jacobsen. "It's more than we agreed, but, you earned it," he said.

"I feel a little funny about this," Royce said. "Like I'm conspiring to break the law or something."

"Nonsense," Mklikluln said. "Think of it as a Tupperware party."

"Sure," Royce said after a moment's thought. "It's not as if I actually did any selling myself, right?"

Within a week, however, Detweiler, Royce, and four other citizens of Manhattan, Kansas, were on their way to various distant cities of the United States, Doghouses Unlimited briefcases in their hands.

And within a month, Mklikluln had a staff of three hundred in seven cities, building doghouses and installing them. And into every doghouse went a frisky little puppy. Mklikluln did some figuring. In about a year, he decided. One year and I can call my people.

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"What's happened to power consumption in Manhattan, Kansas?" asked Bill Wilson, up-and-coming young executive in the statistical analysis section of Central Kansas Power, otherwise known as the damnpowercompany.

"It's gotten lower," answered Kay Block, relic of outdated affirmative action programs in Central Kansas Power, who had reached the level of records examiner before the ERA was repealed to make our bathrooms safe for mankind.

Bill Wilson sneered, as if to say, "That much I knew, woman." And Kay Block simpered, as if to say, "Ah, the boy has an IQ after all, eh?"

But they got along well enough, and within an hour they had the alarming statistic that power consumption in the city of Manhattan, Kansas, was down by forty percent.

"What was consumption in the previous trimester?

"Normal. Everything normal."

"Forty percent is ridiculous," Bill fulminated.

"Don't fulminate at me," Kay said, irritated at her boss for raising his voice. "Go yell at the people who unplugged their refrigerators!"

"No," Bill said. "You go yell at people who unplugged their refrigerators. Something's gone wrong there, and if it isn't crooked meter readers, it's people who've figured out a way to jimmy the billing system. "

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After two weeks of investigation, Kay Block sat in the administration building of Kansas State University (9-2 last football season, coming that close to copping the Plains Conference pennant for '98) refusing to admit that her investigation had turned up a big fat zero. A random inspection of thirty-eight meters showed no tampering at all. A complete audit of the local branch office's books showed no doctoring at all. And a complete examination of KSU's power consumption figures showed absolutely nothing. No change in consumption-- no change in billing system-- and yet a sharp drop in electricity use.

"The drop in power use may be localized," Kay suggested to the white-haired woman from the school who was babysitting her through the process. "The stadium surely uses as much light as ever-- so the drop must be somewhere else, like in the science labs."

The white-haired woman shook her head. "That may be so, but the figures you see are the figures we've got."

Kay sighed and looked out the window. Down from the window was the roof of the new Plant Science Building. She looked at it as her mind struggled vainly to find something meaningful in the data she had. Somebody was cheating-- but how?

There was a doghouse on the roof of the Plant Science Building.

"What's a doghouse doing on the roof of that building?" asked Kay.

"I would assume," said the white-haired woman, "for a dog to live in."

"On the roof?"

The white-haired woman smiled. "Fresh air, perhaps," she said.

Kay looked at the doghouse awhile longer, telling herself that the only reason she was suspicious was because she was hunting for anything unusual that could explain the anomalies in the Manhattan, Kansas, power usage pattern.

"I want to see that doghouse," she said.

"Why?" asked the white-haired lady. "Surely you don't think a generator could hide in a doghouse! Or solar-power equipment! Why, those things take whole buildings!"

Kay looked carefully at the white-haired woman and decided that she protested a bit too much. "I insist on seeing the doghouse," she said again.

The white-haired woman smiled again. "Whatever you want, Miss Block. Lef me call the custodian so he can unlock the door to the roof."

After the phone call they went down the stairs to the main floor of the administration building, across the lawns, and then up the stairs to the roof of the Plant Science Building. "What's the matter, no elevators?" Kay asked sourly as she panted from the exertion of climbing the stairs.

"Sorry," the white-haired woman said. "We don't build elevators into buildings anymore. They use too much power. Only the power company can afford elevators these days."

The custodian was at the door of the roof, looking very apologetic.

"Sorry if old Rover's been causin' trouble ladies. I keep him up on the roof nowadays, ever since the break-in attempt through the roof door last spring. Nobody's tried to jimmy the door since."

"Arf, " said a frisky, cheerful looking mix between an elephant and a Labrador retriever (just a quick guess, of course) that bounded up to them.

"Howdy, Rover old boy," said the custodian. "Don't bite nobody."

"Arf," the dog answered, trying to wiggle out of his skin and looking as if he might succeed. "Gurrarf."

Kay examined the roof door from the outside. "I don't see any signs of anyone jimmying at the door," she said.

"Course not," said the custodian. "The burglars was seen from the administration building before they could get to the door."

"Oh," said Kay. "Then why did you need to put a dog up here?"

"Cause what if the burglars hadn't been seen?" the custodian said, his tone implying that only a moron would have asked such a question.

Kay looked at the doghouse. It looked like every other doghouse in the world. It looked like cartoons of doghouses, in fact, it was so ordinary. Simple arched

door. Pitched roof with gables and eaves. All it lacked was a water dish and piles of doggy-do and old bones. No doggy-do?

"What a talented dog," Kay commented. "He doesn't even go to the bathroom."

"Uh," answered the custodian, "he's really housebroken. He just won't go until I take him down from here to the lawn, will ya Rover?"

Kay surveyed the wall of the roof-access building they had come through. "Odd. He doesn't even mark the walls."

"I told you. He's really housebroken. He wouldn't think of mucking up the roof here."

"Arf," said the dog as it urinated on the door and then defecated in a neat pile at Kay's feet. "Woof woof, " he said proudly.

"All that training," Kay said, "and it's all gone to waste."

Whether the custodian's answer was merely describing what the dog had done or had a more emphatic purpose was irrelevant. Obviously the doghouse was not normally used for a dog. And if that was true, what was a doghouse doing on the roof of the Plant Science Building?

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The damnpowercompany brought civil actions against the city of Manhattan, Kansas, and a court injunction insisted that all doghouses be disconnected from all electric wiring systems. The city promptly brought countersuit against the damnpowercompany (a very popular move) and appealed the court injunction.

The damnpowercompany shut off all the power in Manhattan, Kansas.

Nobody in Manhattan, Kansas, noticed, except the branch office of the damnpowercompany, which now found itself the only building in the city without electricity.

The "Doghouse War" got quite a bit of notoriety. Feature articles appeared in magazines about Doghouses Unlimited and its elusive founder, Robert Redford, who refused to be interviewed and in fact could not be found. All five networks did specials on the cheap energy source. Statistics were gathered showing that not only did seven percent of the American public have doghouses, but also that 99.8 percent of the American public wanted to have doghouses. The 0.2 percent represented, presumably, power company stockholders and executives. Most politicians could add, or had aides who could, and the prospect of elections coming up in less than a year made the result clear.

The antisolar power law was repealed.

The power companies' stock plummeted on the stock market.

The world's most unnoticed depression began.

With alarming rapidity an economy based on expensive energy fell apart. The OPEC monolith immediately broke up, and within five months petroleum had fallen to 38 cents a barrel. Its only value was in plastics and as a lubricant, and the oil producing nations had been overproducing for those needs.

The reason the depression wasn't much noticed was because Doghouses Unlimited easily met the demand for their product. Scenting a chance for profit, the government slapped a huge export tax on the doghouses. Doghouses Unlimited retaliated by publishing the complete plans for the doghouse and declaring that foreign companies would not be sued for manufacturing it.

The U.S. government just as quickly removed the huge tax, whereupon Doghouses Unlimited announced that the plans it had published were not complete, and continued to corner the market around the world.

As government after government, through subterfuge, bribery, or, in a few cases, popular revolt, were forced to allow Doghouses Unlimited into their countries, Robert Redford (the doghouse one) became even more of a household word than Robert Redford (the old-time actor). Folk legends which had formerly been ascribed to Kuan Yu, Paul Bunyan, or Gautama Buddha became, gradually, attached to Robert Doghouse Redford.

And, at last, every family in the world that wanted one had a cheap energy source, an unlimited energy source, and everybody was happy. So happy that they shared their newfound plenty with all God's creatures, feeding birds in the winter, leaving bowls of milk for stray cats, and putting dogs in the doghouses.

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Mklikluln rested his chin in his hands and reflected on the irony that he had, quite inadvertently, saved the world for the bipedal dominant race, solely as a byproduct of his campaign to get a good home for every dog. But good results are good results, and humanity-- either his own or the bipedals-- couldn't condemn him completely for his murder of an Arab political prisoner the year before.

"What will happen when you come?" he asked his people, though of course none of them could hear him. "I've saved the world-- but when these creatures, bright as they are, come in contact with our infinitely superior intelligence, won't it destroy them? Won't they suffer in humiliation to realize that we are so much more powerful than they; that we can span galactic distances at the speed of light, communicate telepathically, separate our minds and allow our bodies to die while we float in space unscathed, and then, at the beck of a simple machine, come instantaneously and inhabit the bodies of animals completely different from our former bodies?" He worried-- but his responsibility to his own people was clear. If this bipedal race was so proud they could not cope with inferiority, that was not Mklikluln's problem.

He opened the top drawer of his desk in the San Diego headquarters of Doghouses Unlimited, his latest refuge from the interview seekers, and pushed a button on a small box.

From the box, a powerful burst of electromagnetic energy went out to the eighty million doghouses in southern California. Each doghouse relayed the same signal in an unending chain that gradually spread all over the world-- wherever doghouses could be found.

When the last doghouse was linked to the network, all the doghouses simultaneously transmitted something else entirely. A signal that only sneered at lightspeed and that crossed light-years almost instantaneously. A signal that called millions of encapsulated minds that slept in their mindfields until they heard the call, woke, and followed the signal back to its source, again at speeds far faster than poor pedestrian light.

They gathered around the larger binary in the third orbit from their new sun, and listened as Mklikluln gave a full report. They were delighted with his work, and commended him highly, before convicting him of murder of an Arabian political prisoner and ordering him to commit suicide. He felt very proud, for the commendation they, had given him was rarely awarded, and he smiled as he shot himself.

And then the minds slipped downward toward the doghouses that still called to them.

"Argworfgyardworfl," said Royce's dog as it bounded excitedly through the backyard.

"Dog's gone crazy," Royce said, but his two sons laughed and ran around with the dog as it looped the yard a dozen times, only to fall exhausted in front of the doghouse.

"Griffwigrofrf," the dog said again, panting happily. It trotted up to Royce and nuzzled him.

"Cute little bugger," Royce said.

The dog walked over to a pile of newspapers waiting for a paper drive, pulled the top newspaper off the stack, and began staring at the page.

"I'll be humdingered," said Royce to Junie, who was bringing out the food for their backyard picnic supper. "Dog looks like he's readin' the paper."

"Here, Robby!" shouted Royce's oldest son, Jim. "Here, Robby! Chase a stick."

The dog, having learned how to read and write from the newspaper, chased the stick, brought it back, and instead of surrendering it to Jim's outstretched hand, began to write with it in the dirt.

"Hello, man," wrote the dog. "Perhaps you are surprised to see me writing."

"Well," said Royce, looking at what the dog had written. "Here, Junie, will you look at that. This is some dog, eh?" And he patted the dog's head and sat down to eat. "Now I wonder, is there anybody who'd pay to see a dog do that?"

"We mean no harm to your planet," wrote the dog.

"Jim," said Junie, slapping spoonfuls of potato salad onto paper plates, "you make sure that dog doesn't start scratching around in the petunias."

"C'mere, Robby," said Jim. "Time to tie you up."

"Wrowrf," the dog answered, looking a bit perturbed and backing away from the chain.

"Daddy," said Jim, "the dog won't come when I call anymore."

Impatiently, Royce got up from his chair, his mouth full of chicken salad sandwich. "Doggonit, Jim, if you don't control the dog we'll just have to get rid of it. We only got it for you kids anyway!" And Royce grabbed the dog by the collar and dragged it to where Jimmy held the other end of the chain.

Clip.

"Now you learn to obey, dog, cause if you don't I don't care what tricks you can do, I'll sell ya."

"Owrf."

"Right. Now you remember that."

The dog watched them with sad, almost frightened eyes all through dinner. Royce began to feel a little guilty, and gave the dog a leftover ham.

That night Royce and Junie seriously discussed whether to show off the dog's ability to write, and decided against it, since the kids loved the dog and it was cruel to use animals to perform tricks. They were, after all, very enlightened people.

And the next morning they discovered that it was a good thing they'd decided that way-- because all anyone could talk about was their dog's newfound ability to write, or unscrew garden hoses, or lay and start an entire fire from a cold empty fireplace to a bonfire. "I got the most talented dog in the world," crowed Detweiler, only to retire into grim silence as everyone else in the bowling team bragged about his own dog.

"Mine goes to the bathroom in the toilet now, and flushes it, too!" one boasted.

"And mine can fold an entire laundry, after washing her little paws so nothing gets dirty."

The newspapers were full of the story, too, and it became clear that the sudden intelligence of dogs was a nationwide-- a worldwide-- phenomenon. Aside from a few superstitious New Guineans, who burned their dogs to death as witches, and some Chinese who didn't let their dogs' strange behavior stop them from their scheduled appointment with the dinnerpot, most people were pleased and proud of the change in their pets.

"Worth twice as much to me now," boasted Bill Wilson, formerly an up-andcoming executive with the damnpowercompany. "Not only fetches the birds, but plucks 'em and cleans "em and puts 'em in the oven."

And Kay Block smiled and went home to her mastiff, which kept her good company and which she loved very, very much.

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"In the five years since the sudden rise in dog intelligence," said Dr. Wheelwright to his class of graduate students in animal intelligence, "we have learned a tremendous amount about how intelligence arises in animals. The very suddenness of it has caused us to take a second look at evolution. Apparently mutations can be much more complete than we had supposed, at least in the higher functions. Naturally, we will spend much of this semester studying the research on dog intelligence, but for a brief overview:

"At the present time it is believed that dog intelligence surpasses that of the dolphin, though it still falls far short of man's. However, while the dolphin's

intelligence is nearly useless to us, the dog can be trained as a valuable, simple household servant, and at last it seems that man is no longer alone on his planet. To which animal such a rise in intelligence will happen next, we cannot say, any more than we can be certain that such a change will happen to any other animal."

Question from the class.

"Oh, well, I'm afraid it's like the big bang theory. We can guess and guess at the cause of certain phenomena, but since we can't repeat the event in a laboratory, we will never be quite sure. However, the best guess at present is that some critical mass of total dog population in a certain ratio to the total mass of dog brain was reached that pushed the entire species over the edge into a higher order of intelligence. This change, however, did not affect all dogs equally--primarily it affected dogs in civilized areas, leading many to speculate on the possibility that continued exposure to man was a contributing factor. However, the very fact that many dogs, mostly in uncivilized parts of the world, were not affected destroys completely the idea that cosmic radiation or some other influence from outer space was responsible for the change. In the first place, any such influence would have been detected by the astronomers constantly watching every wavelength of the night sky, and in the second place, such an influence would have affected all dogs equally."

Another question from a student.

"Who knows? But I doubt it. Dogs, being incapable of speech, though many have learned to write simple sentences in an apparently mnemonic fashion somewhere between the blind repetition of parrots and the more calculating repetition at high speeds by dolphins-- um, how did I get into this sentence? I can't get out!"

Student laughter.

"Dogs, I was saying, are incapable of another advance in intelligence, particularly an advance bringing them to equal intellect with man, because they cannot communicate verbally and because they lack hands. They are undoubtedly at their evolutionary peak. It is only fortunate that so many circumstances combined to place man in the situation he has reached. And we can only suppose that somewhere, on some other planet, some other species might have an even more fortunate combination leading to even higher intelligence. But let us hope not!" said the professor, scratching the ears of his dog, B.F. Skinner. "Right, B.F.? Because man may not be able to cope with the presence of a more intelligent race!"

Student laughter.

"Owrowrf," said B.F. Skinner, who had once been called Hihiwnkn on a planet where white hexagons had telepathically conquered time and space; hexagons who had only been brought to this pass by a solar process they had not quite learned how to control. What he wished he could say was, "Don't worry, professor. Humanity will never be fazed by a higher intelligence. It's too damn proud to notice."

But instead he growled a little, lapped some water from a bowl, and lay down in a corner of the lecture room as the professor droned on.

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It snowed in September in Kansas in the autumn of the year 2000, and Jim (Don't call me Jimmy anymore, I'm grown up) was out playing with his dog Robby as the first flakes fell.

Robby had been uprooting crabgrass with his teeth and paws, a habit much encouraged by Royce and junie, when Jim yelled, "Snow!" and a flake landed on the grass in front of the dog. The flake melted immediately, but Robby watched for another, and another, and another. And he saw the whiteness of the flakes, and the delicate six-sided figures so spare and strange and familiar and beautiful, and he wept.

"Mommy!" Jim called out. "It looks like Robby's crying!"

"It's just water in his eyes," Junie called back from the kitchen, where she stood washing radishes in front of an open window. "Dogs don't cry."

But the snow fell deep all over the city that night, and many dogs stood in the snow watching it fall, sharing an unspoken reverie.

"Can't we?" again and again the thought came from a hundred, a thousand minds.

"No, no, no," came the despairing answer. For without fingers of some kind, how could they ever build the machines that would let them encapsulate again and leave this planet?

And in their despair, they cursed for the millionth time that fool Mklikluln, Who had got them into this.

"Death was too good for the bastard," they agreed, and in a worldwide vote they removed the commendation they had voted him. And then they all went back to having puppies and teaching them everything they knew. The puppies had it easier. They had never known their ancestral home, and to them snowflakes were merely fun, and winter was merely cold. And instead of standing out in the snow, they curled up in the warmth of their doghouses and slept. The gatekeeper recognized him and the gate fell away. The Shepherd put his ax and his crook into the bag at his belt and stepped out onto the bridge. As always he felt a rush of vertigo as he walked the narrow arch over the foaming acid of the moat. Then he was across and striding down the road to the village.

A child was playing with a dog on a grassy hillside. The Shepherd looked up at him, his fine dark face made bright by his eyes. The boy shrank back, and the Shepherd heard a woman's voice cry out, "Back here, Derry, you fool!" The Shepherd walked on down the road as the boy retreated among the hayricks on the far slope. The Shepherd could hear the scolding: "Play near the castle again, and he'll make kingsmeat of you."

Kingsmeat, thought the Shepherd. How the king does get hungry. The word had come down through the quick grapevine-- steward to cook to captain to guard to shepherd and then he was dressed and out the door only minutes after the king had muttered, "For supper, what is your taste?" and the queen had fluttered all her arms and said, "Not stew again, I hope," and the king had murmured as he picked up the computer printouts of the day, "Breast in butter," and so now the Shepherd was out to harvest from the flock.

The village was still in the distance when the Shepherd began to pass the people. He remembered the time, back when the king had first made his tastes known, when there had been many attempts to evade the villagers' duties to the king. Now they only watched, perhaps hiding the unblemished members of the flock, sometimes thrusting them forward to end the suspense; but mostly the Shepherd saw the old legless, eyeless, or armless men and women who hobbled about their duties with those limbs that were still intact.

Those with fingers thatched or wove; those with eyes led those whose hands were their only contact with the world; those with arms rode the backs of those with legs; and all of them took their only solace in sad and sagging beds, producing, after a suitable interval, children whose miraculous wholeness made them gods to a surprised and wondering mother, made them hated reminders to a father whose tongue had fallen from his mouth, or whose toes had somehow been mislaid, or whose buttocks were a scar, his legs a useless reminder of hams long since dropped off.

"Ah, such beauty," a woman murmured, pumping the bellows at the bread-oven

fire. There was a sour grunt from the legless hag who shoveled in the loaves and turned them with a wooden shovel. It was true, of course, for the Shepherd was never touched, no indeed. (No indeed, came the echo from the midnight fires of Unholy Night, when dark tales frightened children half out of their wits, dark tales that the shrunken grown-ups knew were true, were inevitable, were tomorrow.) The Shepherd had long dark hair, and his mouth was firm but kind, and his eyes flashed sunlight even in the dark, it seemed, while his hands were soft from bathing, large and strong and dark and smooth and fearful.

And the Shepherd walked into the village to a house he had noted the last time he came. He went to the door and immediately heard a sigh from every other house, and silence from the one that he had picked.

He raised his hand before the door and it opened, as it had been built to do: for all things that opened served the Shepherd's will, or at least served the bright metal ball the king had implanted in his hand. Inside the house it was dark, but not too dark to see the white eyes of an old man who lay in a hammock, legs dangling bonelessly. The man could see his future in the Shepherd's eyes-- or so he thought, at least, until the Shepherd walked past him into the kitchen.

There a young woman, no older than fifteen, stood in front of a cupboard, her hands clenched to do violence. But the Shepherd only shook his head and raised his hand, and the cupboard answered him and opened however much she

pushed against it, revealing a murmuring baby wrapped in sound-smothering blankets. The Shepherd only smiled and shook his head. His smile was kind and beautiful, and the woman wanted to die.

He stroked her cheek and she sighed softly, moaned softly, and then he reached into his bag and pulled out his shepherd's crook and leaned the little disc against her temple and she smiled. Her eyes were dead but her lips were alive and her teeth showed. He laid her on the floor, carefully opened her blouse, and then took his ax from his bag.

He ran his finger around the long, narrow cylinder and a tiny light shone at one end. Then he touched the ax's glowing tip to the underside of her breast and drew a wide circle. Behind the ax a tiny red line followed, and the Shepherd took hold of the breast and it came away in his hand. Laying it aside, he stroked the ax lengthwise and the light changed to a dull blue. He passed the ax over the red wound, and the blood gelled and dried and the wound began to heal.

He placed the breast into his bag and repeated the process on the other side. Tbrough it the woman watched in disinterested amusement, the smile

still playing at her lips. She would smile like that for days before the peace wore off.

When the second breast was in his bag, the Shepherd put away the ax and the crook and carefully buttoned the woman's blouse. He helped her to her feet, and again passed his deft and gentle hand across her cheek. Like a baby rooting she turned her lips toward his fingers, but he withdrew his hand.

As he left, the woman took the baby from the cupboard and embraced it, cooing softly. The baby nuzzled against the strangely harsh bosom and the woman smiled and sang a lullaby.

The Shepherd walked through the streets, the bag at his belt jostling with his steps. The people watched the bag, wondering what it held. But before the Shepherd was out of the village the word had spread, and the looks were no longer at the bag but rather at the Shepherd's face. He looked neither to the left nor to the right, but he felt their gazes and his eyes grew soft and sad.

And then he was back at the moat, across the narrow bridge, through the gate, and into the high dark corridors of the castle.

He took the bag to the cook, who looked at him sourly. The Shepherd only smiled at him and took his crook from the bag. In a moment the cook was docile, and calmly he began to cut the red flesh into thin slices, which he lightly floured and then placed in a pan of simmering butter. The smell was strong and sweet, and the flecks of milk sizzled in the pan.

The Shepherd stayed in the kitchen, watching, as the cook prepared the king's meal. Then he followed to the door of the dining hall as the steward entered the king's presence with the steaming slices on a tray. The king and queen ate silently, with severe but gracious rituals of shared servings and gifts of finest morsels.

And at the end of the meal the king murmured a word to the steward, who beckoned both the cook and the Shepherd into the hall.

The cook, the steward, and the Shepherd knelt before the king, who reached out three arms to touch their heads. Through long practice they accepted his touch without recoiling, without even blinking, for they knew such things displeased him. After all, it was a great gift that they could serve the king: their services kept them from giving kingsmeat from their own flesh, or from decorating with their skin the tapestried walls of the castle or the long train of a hunting-cape.

The king's armpits still touched the heads of the three servants when a

shudder ran through the castle and a low warning tone began to drone.

The king and queen left the table and with deliberate dignity moved to the consoles and sat. There they pressed buttons, setting in motion all the unseeable defenses of the castle.

After an hour of exhausting concentration they recognized defeat and pulled their arms back from the now-useless tasks they had been doing. The fields of force that had long held the thin walls of the castle to their delicate height now lapsed, the walls fell, and a shining metal ship settled silently in the middle of the ruins.

The side of the skyship opened and out of it came four men, weapons in their hands and anger in their eyes. Seeing them, the king and queen looked sadly at each other and then pulled the ritual knives from their resting place behind their heads and simultaneously plunged them between one another's eyes. They died instantly, and the twenty-two-year conquest of Abbey Colony was at an end.

Dead, the king and queen looked like sad squids lying flat and empty on a fisherman's deck, not at all like conquerors of planets and eaters of men. The men from the skyship walked to the corpses and made certain they were dead. Then they looked around and realized for the first time that they were not alone.

For the Shepherd, the steward, and the cook stood in the ruins of the palace, their eyes wide with unbelief.

One of the men from the ship reached out a hand.

"How can you be alive?" he asked.

They did not answer, not knowing really what the question meant.

"How have you survived here, when --- "

And then there were no words, for they looked beyond the palace, across the moat to the crowd of colonists and sons of colonists who stood watching them. And seeing them there without arms and legs and eyes and breasts and lips, the men from the ship emptied their hands of weapons and filled their palms with tears and then crossed the bridge to grieve among the delivered ones' rejoicing.

There was no time for explanations, nor was there a need. The colonists crept and hobbled and, occasionally, walked across the bridge to the ruined palace and formed a circle around the bodies of the king and queen. Then

they set to work, and within an hour the corpses were lying in the pit that had been the foundation of the castle, covered with urine and feces and stinking already of decay.

Then the colonists turned to the servants of the king and queen.

The men from the ship had been chosen on a distant world for their judgment, speed, and skill, and before the mob had found its common mind, before they had begun to move, there was a forcefence around the steward, the cook, and the gatekeeper, and the guards. Even around the Shepherd, and though the crowd mumbled its resentment, one of the men from the ship patiently explained in soothing tones that whatever crimes were done would be punished in due time, according to Imperial justice.

The fence stayed up for a week as the men from the ship worked to put the colony in order, struggling to interest the people in the fields that once again belonged completely to them. At last they gave up, realizing that justice could not wait. They took the machinery of the court out of the ship, gathered the people together, and began the trial.

The colonists waited as the men from the ship taped a metal plate behind each person's right ear. Even the servants in their prison and the men from the ship were fitted with them, and then the trial began, each person testifying directly from his memory into the minds of every other person.

The court first heard the testimony of the men from the ship. The people closed their eyes and saw men in a huge starship, pushing buttons and speaking rapidly into computers. Finally expressions of relief, and four men entering a skyship to go down.

The people saw that it was not their world, for here there were no survivors. Instead there was just a castle, just a king and queen, and when they were dead, just fallow fields and the ruins of a village abandoned many years before.

They saw the same scene again and again. Only Abbey Colony had any human beings left alive.

Then they watched as bodies of kings and queens on other worlds were cut open. A chamber within the queen split wide, and there in a writhing mass of life lived a thousand tiny fetuses, many-armed and bleeding in the cold air outside the womb. Thirty years of gestation, and then two by two they would have continued to conquer and rape other worlds in an unstoppable epidemic across the galaxy. But in the womb, it was stopped, and the fetuses were sprayed with a chemical and soon they lay still and dried into shriveled balls of gray skin.

The testimony of the men from the ship ended, and the court probed the memories of the colonists:

A screaming from the sky, and a blast of light, and then the king and queen descending without machinery. But the devices follow quickly, and the people are beaten by invisible whips and forced into a pen that they watched grow from nothing into a dark, tiny room that they barely fit into, standing.

Heavy air, impossible to breathe. A woman fainting, then a man, and the screams and cries deafening. Sweat until bodies are dry, heat until bodies are cold, and then a trembling through the room.

A door, and then the king, huger than any had thought, his many arms revolting. Vomit on your back from the man behind, then your own vomit, and your bladder empties in fear. The arms reach, and screams are all around, screams in all throats, screams until all voices are silenced. Then one man plucked writhing from the crowd, the door closed again, darkness back, and the stench and heat and terror greater than before.

Silence. And in the distance a drawn-out cry of agony.

Silence. Hours. And then the open door again, the king again, the scream again.

The third time the king is in the door and out of the crowd walks one who is not screaming, whose shirt is caked with stale vomit but who is not vomiting, whose eyes are calm and whose lips are at peace and whose eyes shine. The Shepherd, though known then by another name.

He walks to the king and reaches out his hand, and he is not seized. He is led, and he walks out, and the door closes.

Silence. Hours. And still no scream.

And then the pen is gone, into the nothing it seemed to come from, and the air is clear and the sun is shining and the grass is green. There is only one change: the castle, rising high and delicately and madly in an upward tumble of spires and domes. A moat of acid around it. A slender bridge.

And then back to the village, all of them. The houses are intact, and it is almost possible to forget.

Until the Shepherd walks through the village streets. He is still called by the old name-- what was the name? And the people speak to him, ask him what is in the castle, what do the king and queen want, why were we imprisoned, why are we free.

But the Shepherd only points to a baker. The man steps out, the Shepherd touches him on the temple with his crook, and the man smiles and walks toward the castle.

Four strong men likewise sent on their way, and a boy, and another man, and then the people begin to murmur and shrink back from the Shepherd. His face is still beautiful, but they remember the scream they heard in the pen. They do not want to go to the castle. They do not trust the empty smiles of those who go.

And then the Shepherd comes again, and again, and limbs are lost from living men and women. There are plans. There are attacks. But always the Shepherd's crook or the Shepherd's unseen whip stops them. Always they return crippled to their houses. And they wait. And they hate.

And there are many who wish they had died in the first terrified moments of the attack. But never once does the Shepherd kill.

The testimony of the people ended, and the court let them pause before the trial went on. They needed time to dry their eyes of the tears their memories shed. They needed time to clear their throats of the thickness of silent cries.

And then they closed their eyes again and watched the testimony of the Shepherd. This time there were not many different views; they all watched through one pair of eyes:

The pen again, crowds huddled in terror. The door opens, as before. Only this time all of them walk toward the king in the door, and all of them hold out a hand, and all of them feel a cold tentacle wrap around and lead them from the pen.

The castle grows closer, and they feel the fear of it. But also there is a quietness, a peace that is pressed down on the terror, a peace that holds the face calm and the heart to its normal beat.

The castle. A narrow bridge, and acid in a moat. A gate opens. The bridge is crossed with a moment of vertigo when the king seems about to push, about to throw his prey into the moat. And then the vast dining hall, and the queen at the console, shaping the world according to the pattern that will bring her children to life.

You stand alone at the head of the table, and the king and queen sit on high stools and watch you. You look at the table and see enough to realize why the others screamed. You feel a scream rise in your throat, knowing that you, and then all the others, will be torn like that, will be half-devoured, will be left in a pile of gristle and bone until all are gone.

And then you press down the fear, and you watch.

The king and queen raise and lower their arms, undulating them in syncopated patterns. They seem to be conversing. Is there meaning in the movements?

You will find out. You also extend an arm, and try to imitate the patterns that you see.

They stop moving and watch you.

You pause for a moment, unsure. Then you undulate your arms again.

They move in a flurry of arms and soft sounds. You also imitate the soft sounds.

And then they come for you. You steel yourself, vow that you will not scream, knowing that you will not be able to stop yourself.

A cold arm touches you and you grow faint. And then you are led from the room, away from the table, and it grows dark.

They keep you for weeks. Amusement. You are kept alive to entertain them when they grow weary of their work. But as you imitate them you begin to learn, and they begin to teach you, and soon a sort of stammering language emerges, they speaking slowly with their loose arms and soft voices, you with only two arms trying to imitate, then initiate words. The strain of it is killing, but at last you tell them what you want to tell them, what you must tell them before they become bored and look at you again as meat.

You teach them how to keep a herd.

And so they make you a shepherd, with only one duty: to give them meat in a never-ending supply. You have told them you can feed them and never run out of manflesh, and they are intrigued.

They go to their surgical supplies and give you a crook so there will be no pain or struggle, and an ax for the butchery and healing, and on a piece of decaying flesh they show you how to use them. In your hand they implant the key that commands every hinge in the village. And then you go into the colony and proceed to murder your fellowmen bit by bit in order to keep them all alive.

You do not speak. You hide from their hatred in silence. You long for death, but it does not come, because it cannot come. If you died, the colony would die, and so to save their lives you continue a life not worth living.

And then the castle falls and you are finished and you hide the ax and crook in a certain place in the earth and wait for them all to kill you.

The trial ended.

The people pulled the plates from behind their ears, and blinked unbelieving at the afternoon sunlight. They looked at the beautiful face of the Shepherd and their faces wore unreadable expressions.

"The verdict of the court," a man from the ship read as the others moved through the crowd collecting witness plates, "is that the man called Shepherd is guilty of gross atrocities. However, these atrocities were the sole means of keeping alive those very persons against whom the atrocities were perpetrated. Therefore, the man called Shepherd is cleared of all charges. He is not to be put to death, and instead shall be honored by the people of Abbey Colony at least once a year and helped to live as long as science and prudence can keep a man alive."

It was the verdict of the court, and despite their twenty-two years of isolation the people of Abbey Colony would never disobey Imperial law.

Weeks later the work of the men from the ship was finished. They returned to the sky. The people governed themselves as they had before.

Somewhere between stars three of the men in the ship gathered after supper. "A shepherd, of all things," said one.

"A bloody good one, though," said another.

The fourth man seemed to be asleep. He was not, however, and suddenly he sat up and cried out, "My God, what have we done!"

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Over the years Abbey Colony thrived, and a new generation grew up strong and uncrippled. They told their children's children the story of their long enslavement, and freedom was treasured; freedom and strength and wholeness and life.

And every year, as the court had commanded, they went to a certain house in the village carrying gifts of grain and milk and meat. They lined up outside the door, and one by one entered to do honor to the Shepherd.

They walked by the table where he was propped so he could see them. Each came in and looked into the beautiful face with the gentle lips and the soft eyes. There were no large strong hands now, however. Only a head and a neck and a spine and ribs and a loose sac of flesh that pulsed with life. The people looked over his naked body and saw the scars. Here had been a leg and a hip, right? Yes, and here he had once had genitals, and here shoulders and arms.

How does he live? asked the little ones, wondering.

We keep him alive, the older ones answered. The verdict of the court, they said year after year. We'll keep him as long as science and prudence can keep a man alive.

Then they set down their gifts and left, and at the end of the day the Shepherd was moved back to his hammock, where year after year he looked out the window at the weathers of the sky. They would, perhaps, have cut out his tongue, but since he never spoke, they didn't think of it. They would, perhaps, have cut out his eyes, but they wanted him to see them smile.

## MEMORIES OF MY HEAD Orson Scott Card

Even with the evidence before you, I'm sure you will not believe my account of my own suicide. Or rather, you'll believe that I wrote it, but not that I wrote it after the fact. You'll assume that I wrote this letter in advance, perhaps not yet sure that I would squeeze the shotgun between my knees, then balance a ruler against the trigger, pressing downward with a surprisingly steady hand until the hammer fell, the powder exploded, and a tumult of small shot at close range blew my head off, embedding brain, bone, skin, and a few carbonized strands of hair in the ceiling and wall behind me. But I assure you that I did not write in anticipation, or as an oblique threat, or for any other purpose than to report to you, after I did it, why the deed was done.

You must already have found my raggedly decapitated body seated at my rolltop desk in the darkest corner of the basement where my only source of light is the old pole lamp that no longer went with the decor when the living room was redecorated. But picture me, not as you found me, still and lifeless, but rather as I am at this moment, with my left hand neatly holding the paper. My right hand moves smoothly across the page, reaching up now and then to dip the quill in the blood that has pooled in the ragged mass of muscle, veins, and stumpy bone between my shoulders.

Why do I, being dead, bother to write to you now? If I didn't choose to write before I killed myself, perhaps I should have abided by that decision after death; but it was not until I had actually carried out my plan that I finally had something to say to you. And having something to say, writing became my only choice, since ordinary diction is beyond one who lacks larynx, mouth, lips, tongue, and teeth. All my tools of articulation have been shredded and embedded in the plasterboard. I have achieved utter speechlessness.

Do you marvel that I continue to move my arms and hands after my head is gone? I'm not surprised: My brain has been disconnected from my body for many years. All my actions long since became habits. Stimuli would pass from nerves to spinal cord and rise no further. You would greet me in the morning or lob your comments at me for hours in the night and I would utter my customary responses, without these exchanges provoking a single thought in my mind. I scarcely remember being alive for the last years -- or, rather, I remember being alive, but can't distinguish one day from another, one Christmas from any other Christmas, one word you said from any other word you might have said. Your voice has become a drone, and as for my own voice, I haven't listened to a thing I said since the last time I humiliated myself before you, causing you to curl your lip in distaste and turn over the next three cards in your solitaire game. Nor can I remember which of the many lip-curlings and card-turnings in my memory was the particular one that coincided with my last self-debasement before you. Now my habitual body continues as it has for all these years, writing this memoir of my suicide as one last, complex, involuntary twitching of the muscles in my arm and hand and fingers.

I'm sure you have detected the inconsistency. You have always been able to evade my desperate attempts at conveying meaning. You simply wait until you can catch some seeming contradiction in my words, then use it as a pretext to refuse to listen to anything else I say because I am not being logical, and therefore am not rational, and you refuse to speak to someone who is not being rational. The inconsistency you have noticed is: If I am completely a creature of habit, how is it that I committed suicide in the first place, since that is a new and therefore non-customary behavior?

But you see, this is no inconsistency at all. You have schooled me in all the arts of self-destruction. Just as the left hand will sympathetically learn some measure of a skill practiced only with the right, so I have made such a strong habit of subsuming my own identity in yours that it was almost a reflex finally to perform the physical annihilation of myself.

Indeed, it is merely the culmination of long custom that when I made the most powerful statement of my life, my most dazzling performance, my finest hundredth of a second, in that very moment I lost my eyes and so will not be able to witness the response of my audience. I write to you, but you will not write or speak to me, or if you do, I shall not have eyes to read or ears to hear you. Will you scream? (Will someone else find me, and will that person scream? But it must be you.) I imagine disgust, perhaps. Kneeling, retching on the old rug that was all we could afford to use in my basement corner.

And later, who will peel the ceiling plaster? Rip out the wallboard? And when the wall has been stripped down to the studs, what will be done with those large slabs of drywall that have been plowed with shot and sown with bits of my brain and skull?. Will there be fragments of drywall buried with me in my grave? Will they even be displayed in the open coffin, neatly broken up and piled where my head used to be? It would be appropriate, I think, since a significant percentage of my corpse is there, not attached to the rest of my body. And if some fragment of your precious house were buried with me, perhaps you would come occasionally to shed some tears on my grave.

I find that in death I am not free of worries. Being speechless means I cannot correct misinterpretations. What if someone says, "It wasn't suicide: The gun fell and discharged accidentally"? Or what if murder is supposed? Will some passing vagrant be apprehended? Suppose he heard the shot and came running, and then was found, holding the shotgun and gibbering at his own blood-covered hands; or, worse, going through my clothes and stealing the hundred-dollar bill I

always carry on my person. (You remember how I always joked that I kept it, as busfare in case I ever decided to leave you, until you forbade me to say it one more time or you would not be responsible for what you did to me. I have kept my silence on that subject ever since -- have you noticed? -- for I want you always to be responsible for what you do.)

The poor vagrant could not have administered first aid to me -- I'm quite sure that nowhere in the Boy Scout Handbook would he have read so much as a paragraph on caring for a person whose head has been torn away so thoroughly that there's not enough neck left to hold a tourniquet. And since the poor fellow couldn't help me, why shouldn't he help himself? I don't begrudge him the hundred dollars -- I hereby bequeath him all the money and other valuables he can find on my person. You can't charge him with stealing what I freely give to him. I also hereby affirm that he did not kill me, and did not dip my drawing pen into the blood in the stump of my throat and then hold my hand, forming the letters that appear on the paper you are reading. You are also witness of this, for you recognize my handwriting. No one should be punished for my death who was not involved in causing it.

But my worst fear is not sympathetic dread for some unknown body-finding stranger, but rather that no one will discover me at all. Having fired the gun, I have now had sufficient time to write all these pages. Admittedly I have been writing with a large hand and much space between the lines, since in writing blindly I must be careful not to run words and lines together. But this does not change the fact that considerable time has elapsed since the unmissable sound of a shotgun firing. Surely some neighbor must have heard; surely the police have been summoned and even now are hurrying to investigate the anxious reports of a gunshot in our picturebook home. For all I know the sirens even now are sounding down the street, and curious neighbors have gathered on their lawns to see what sort of burden the police carry forth. But even when I wait for a few moments, my pen hovering over the page, I feel no vibration of heavy footfalls on the stairs. No hands reach under my armpits to pull me away from the page. Therefore I conclude that there has been no phone call. No one has come, no one will come, unless you come, until you come.

Wouldn't it be ironic if you chose this day to leave me? Had I only waited until your customary homecoming hour, you would not have come, and instead of transplanting a cold rod of iron into my lap I could have walked through the house for the first time as if it were somewhat my own. As the night grew later and later, I would have become more certain you were not returning; how daring I would have been then! I might have kicked the shoes in their neat little rows on the closet floor. I might have jumbled up my drawers without dreading your lecture when you discovered it. I might have read the newspaper in the holy of holies, and when I needed to get up to answer a call of nature, I could have left the newspaper spread open on the coffee table instead of folding it neatly just as it came from the paperboy and when I came back there it would be, wide open, just

as I left it, without a tapping foot and a scowl and a rosary of complaints about people who are unfit to live with civilized persons.

But you have not left me. I know it. You will return tonight. This will simply be one of the nights that you were detained at the office and if I were a productive human being I would know that there are times when one cannot simply drop one's work and come home because the clock has struck such an arbitrary hour as five. You will come in at seven or eight, after dark, and you will find the cat is not indoors, and you will begin to seethe with anger that I have left the cat outside long past its hour of exercise on the patio. But I couldn't very well kill myself with the cat in here, could I? How could I write you such a clear and eloquent missive as this, my sweet, with your beloved feline companion climbing all over my shoulders trying to lick at the blood that even now I use as ink? No, the cat had to remain outdoors, as you will see; I actually had a valid reason for having violated the rules of civilized living.

Cat or no cat, all the blood is gone and now I am using my ballpoint pen. Of course, I can't actually see whether the pen is out of ink. I remember the pen running out of ink, but it is the memory of many pens running out of ink many times, and I can't recall how recent was the most recent case of running-out-of-ink, and whether the most recent case of pen-buying was before or after it.

In fact it is the issue of memory that most troubles me. How is it that, headless, I remember anything at all? I understand that my fingers might know how to form the alphabet by reflex, but how is it that I remember how to spell these words, how has so much language survived within me, how can I cling to these thoughts long enough to write them down? Why do I have the shadowy memory of all that I am doing now, as if I had done it all before in some distant past?

I removed my head as brutally as possible, yet memory persists. This is especially ironic for, if I remember correctly, memory is what I most hoped to kill. Memory is a parasite that dwells within me, a mutant creature that has climbed up my spine and now perches atop my ragged neck, taunting me as it spins a sticky thread out of its own belly like a spider, then weaves it into shapes that harden in the air and become bone. I am being cheated; human bodies are not supposed to be able to regrow body parts that are any more complex than fingernails or hair, and here I can feel with my fingers that the bone has changed. My vertebrae are once again complete, and now the base of my skull has begun to form again.

How quickly? Too fast! And inside the bone grow softer things, the terrible small creature that once inhabited my head and refuses even now to die. This little knob at the top of my spine is a new limbic node; I recognize it, for when I squeeze it lightly with my fingers I feel strange passions, half-forgotten passions. Soon, though, such animality will be out of reach, for the tissues will swell

outward to form a cerebellum, a folded gray cerebrum; and then the skull will close around it, sheathed in wrinkled flesh and scanty hair.

My undoing is undone, and far too quickly. What if my head is fully restored to my shoulders before you come home? Then you will find me in the basement with a bloody mess and no rational explanation for it. I can imagine you speaking of it to your friends. You can't leave me alone for a single hour, you poor thing, it's just a constant burden living with someone who is constantly making messes and then lying about them. Imagine, you'll say to them, a whole letter, so many pages, explaining how I killed myself -- it would be funny if it weren't so sad.

You will expose me to the scorn of your friends; but that changes nothing. Truth is truth, even when it is ridiculed. Still, why should I provide entertainment for those wretched soulless creatures who live only to laugh at one whose shoelatchets they are not fit to unlace? If you cannot find me headless, I refuse to let you know what I have done at all. You will not read this account until some later day, after I finally succeed in dying and am embalmed. You'll find these pages taped on the bottom side of a drawer in my desk, where you will have looked, not because you hoped for some last word from me, but because you are searching for the hundred-dollar bill, which I will tape inside it.

And as for the blood and brains and bone embedded in the plasterboard, even that will not trouble you. I will scrub; I will sand; I will paint. You will come home to find the basement full of fumes and you will wear your martyr's face and take the paint away and send me to my room as if I were a child caught writing on the walls. You will have no notion of the agony I suffered in your absence, of the blood I shed solely in the hope of getting free of you. You will think this was a day like any other day. But I will know that on this day, this one day like the marker between B.C. and A.D., I found the courage to carry out an abrupt and terrible plan that I did not first submit for your approval.

Or has this, too, happened before? Will I, in the maze of memory, be unable to recall which of many head-explodings was the particular one that led me to write this message to you? Will I find, when I open the drawer, that on its underside there is already a thick sheaf of papers tied there around a single hundred-dollar bill? There is nothing new under the sun, said old Solomon in Ecclesiastes. Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. Nothing like that nonsense from King Lemuel at the end of Proverbs: Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

Let her own works praise her in the gates, ha! I say let her own head festoon the walls.

Tim Bushey was no athlete, and if at thirty-one middle age wasn't there yet, it was coming, he could feel its fingers on his spine. So when he did his hour of exercise a day, he didn't push himself, didn't pound his way through the miles, didn't stress his knees. Often he relaxed into a brisk walk so he could look around and see the neighborhoods he was passing through.

In winter he walked in mid-afternoon, the warmest time of the day. In summer he was up before dawn, walking before the air got as hot and wet as a crock pot. In winter he saw the school buses deliver children to the street corners. In summer, he saw the papers getting delivered.

So it was five-thirty on a hot summer morning when he saw the paperboy on a bicycle, pedaling over the railroad tracks and up Yanceyville Road toward Glenside. Most of the people delivering papers worked out of cars, pitching the papers out the far window. But there were a few kids on bikes here and there. So what was so odd about him that Tim couldn't keep his eyes off the kid? He noticed a couple of things as the kid chugged up the hill. First, he wasn't on a mountain bike or a street racer. It wasn't even one of those banana-seat bikes that were still popular when Tim was a kid. He was riding one of those stodgy old one-speed bikes that were the cycling equivalent of a '55 Buick, rounded and lumpy and heavy as a burden of sin. Yet the bike looked brand-new. And the boy himself was strange, wearing blue jeans with the cuffs rolled up and a short-sleeved shirt in a print that looked like ... no, it absolutely was. The kid was wearing clothes straight out of "Leave It to Beaver." And his hair had that tapered buzzcut that left just one little wave to be combed up off the forehead in front. It was like watching one of those out-of-date educational films in grade school. This kid was clearly caught in a time warp. Still, it wouldn't have turned Tim out of his planned route -- the circuit of Elm, Pisgah Church, Yanceyville, and Cone -- if it hadn't been for the bag of papers saddled over the rack on the back of the bike. Printed on the canvas it said, "The Greensboro Daily News." Now, if there was one thing Tim was sure of, it was the fact that Greensboro was a one-newspaper town, unless you counted the weekly "Rhinoceros Times," and sure, maybe somebody had clung to an old canvas paper delivery bag with the "Daily News" logo -- but that bag looked new.

It's not as if Tim had any schedule to keep, any urgent

appointments. So he turned around and jogged after the kid, and when the brand-new ancient bicycle turned right on Glenside, Tim was not all that far behind him. He lost sight of him after Glenside made its sweeping left turn to the north, but Tim was still close enough to hear, in the still morning air, the faint sound of a rolled-up newspaper hitting the gravel of a country driveway.

He found the driveway on the inside of a leftward curve. The streetlight showed the paper lying there, but Tim couldn't see the masthead or even the headline without jogging onto the gravel, his shoes making such a racket that he half-expected to see lights go on inside the house.

He bent over and looked. The rubber band had broken and the paper had unrolled itself, so now it lay flat in the driveway. Dominating the front page was a familiar picture. The headline under it said:

Babe Ruth, Baseball's

Home Run King, Dies Cancer of Throat Claims Life

Of Noted Major League Star

I thought he died years ago, Tim thought.

Then he noticed another headline:

Inflation Curb Signed By Truman

President Says Bill Inadequate

Truman? Tim looked at the masthead. It wasn't the "News and Record," it was the "Greensboro Daily News." And under the masthead it said: Tuesday Morning, August 17, 1948 ... price: five cents.

What kind of joke was this, and who was it being played on? Not Tim -- nobody could have known he'd come down Yanceyville Road today, or that he'd follow the paperboy to this driveway.

A footstep on gravel. Tim looked up. An old woman stood at the head of the driveway, gazing at him. Tim stood, blushing, caught. She said nothing.

"Sorry," said Tim. "I didn't open it, the rubber band must have broken when it hit the gravel, I --"

He looked down, meant to reach down, pick up the paper, carry it to her. But there was no paper there. Nothing. Right at his feet, where he had just seen the face of George Herman "Babe" Ruth, there was only gravel and moist dirt and dewy grass.

He looked at the woman again. Still she said nothing.

"I ..." Tim couldn't think of a thing to say. Good morning, ma'am. I've been hallucinating on your driveway. Have a nice day. "Look, I'm sorry."

She smiled faintly. "That's OK. I never get it into the house anymore these days."

Then she walked back onto the porch and into the house, leaving him

alone on the driveway.

It was stupid, but Tim couldn't help looking around for a moment just to see where the paper might have gone. It had seemed so real. But real things don't just disappear.

He couldn't linger in the driveway any longer. An elderly woman might easily get frightened at having a stranger on her property in the wee hours and call the police. Tim walked back to the road and headed back the way he had come. Only he couldn't walk, he had to break into a jog and then into a run, until it was a headlong gallop down the hill and around the curve toward Yanceyville Road. Why was he so afraid? The only explanation was that he had hallucinated it, and it wasn't as if you could run away from hallucinations. You carried those around in your own head. And they were nothing new to him. He'd been living on the edge of madness every since the accident. That's why he didn't go to work, didn't even have a job anymore -- the compassionate leave had long since expired, replaced by a vague promise of "come back anytime, you know there's always a job here for you."

But he couldn't go back to work, could only leave the house to go jogging or to the grocery store or an occasional visit to Atticus to get something to read, and even then in the back of his mind he didn't really care about his errand, he was only leaving because when he came back, he'd see things.

One of Diana's toys would be in a different place. Not just inches from where it had been, but in a different room. As if she'd picked up her stuffed Elmo in the family room and carried it into the kitchen and dropped it right there on the floor because Selena had picked her up and put her in the high chair for lunch and yes, there were the child-size spoon, the Tupperware glass, the Sesame Street plate, freshly rinsed and set beside the sink and still wet.

Only it wasn't really a hallucination, was it? Because the toy was real enough, and the dishes. He would pick up the toy and put it away. He would slip the dishes into the dishwasher, put in the soap, close the door. He would be very, very certain that he had not set the delay timer on the dishwasher. All he did was close the door, that's all.

And then later in the day he'd go to the bathroom or walk out to get the mail and when he came back in the kitchen the dishwasher would be running. He could open the door and the dishes would be clean, the steam would fog his glasses, the heat would wash over him, and he knew that couldn't be a hallucination. Could it?

Somehow when he loaded the dishwasher he must have turned on the timer even though he thought he was careful not to. Somehow before his walk or his errand he must have picked up Diana's Elmo and dropped it in the kitchen and taken out the toddler dishes and rinsed them and set them by the sink. Only he hallucinated not doing

any such thing.

Tim was no psychologist, but he didn't need to pay a shrink to tell him what was happening. It was his grief at losing both his wife and daughter on the same terrible day, that ordinary drive to the store that put them in the path of the high school kids racing each other in the Weaver 500, two cars jockeying for position, swerving out of their lanes, one of them losing control, Selena trying to dodge, spinning, both of them hitting her, tearing the car apart between them, ripping the life out of mother and daughter in a few terrible seconds. Tim at the office, not even knowing, thinking they'd be there when he came home from work, not guessing his life was over. And yet he went on living, tricking himself into seeing evidence that they still lived with him. Selena and Baby Di, the Queen Dee, the little D-beast, depending on what mood the two-year-old was in. They'd just stepped out of the room. They were upstairs, they were in the back yard, if he took just a few steps he'd see them. When he thought about it, of course, he knew it wasn't true, they were dead, gone, their life together was over before it was half begun. But for that moment when he first walked into the room and saw the evidence with his own eyes, he had that deep contentment of knowing that he had missed them by only a moment. Now the madness had finally lurched outside of the house, outside of his lost and broken family, and shown him a newspaper from before he was born, delivered by a boy from another time, on the driveway of a stranger's house. It wasn't just grief anymore. He was bonkers.

He went home and stood outside the front door for maybe five minutes, afraid to go in. What was he going to see? Now that he could conjure newspapers and paperboys out of nothing, what would his grief-broken mind show him when he opened the door? And a worse question was: What if it showed him what he most wanted to see? Selena standing in the kitchen, talking on the phone, smiling to him over the mouthpiece as she cut the crusts off the bread so that Queen Dee would eat her sandwiches. Diana coming to him, reaching up, grabbing his fingers, saying, "Hand, hand!" and dragging him to play with her in the family room. If madness was so perfect and beautiful as that, could he ever bear

to leave it behind and return to the endless ache of sanity? If he opened the door, would he leave the world of the living behind, and dwell forever in the land of the beloved dead?

When at last he went inside there was no one in the house and nothing had moved. He was still a little bit sane and he was still alone, trapped in the world he and Selena had so carefully designed: Insurance enough to pay off the mortgage. Insurance enough that if either parent died, the other could afford to stay home with Diana until she was old enough for school, so she didn't have to be raised by strangers in daycare. Insurance that provided for every possibility except one: That Diana would die right along with one of her parents, leaving the other parent with a mortgage-free house, money enough to live for years and years without a job. Without a life.

Twice he had gone through the house, picking up all of Diana's toys and boxing them, taking Selena's clothes out of the closet to give away to Goodwill. Twice the boxes had sat there, the piles of clothes, for days and days. As one by one the toys reappeared in their places in the family room or Diana's bedroom. As Selena's dresser drawers filled up again, her hangers once again held dresses, blouses, pants, and the closet floor again was covered with a jumble of shoes. He didn't remember putting them back, though he knew he must have done it. He didn't even remember deciding not to take the boxes and piles out of the house. He just never got around to it.

He stood in the entryway of his empty house and wanted to die. And then he remembered what the old woman had said.

"That's OK. I never get it into the house anymore these days." He had never said the word "newspaper," had he? So if he hallucinated it and she saw nothing there in the driveway, what was it that she never got into the house?

He was back out the door in a moment, car keys in hand. It was barely dawn as he pulled back into that gravel driveway and walked to the front door and knocked.

She came to the door at once, as if she had been waiting for him. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's so early."

"I was up," she said. "I thought you might come back."

"You just have to tell me one thing."

She laughed faintly. "Yes. I saw it, too. I always see it. I used to pick it up from the driveway, carry it into the house, lay it out on the table for him. Only it's fading now. After all these years. I never quite get to touch it anymore. That's all right." She laughed again. "I'm fading too."

She stepped back, beckoned him inside.

"I'm Tim Bushey," he said.

"Orange juice?" she said. "V-8? I don't keep coffee in the house, because I love it but it takes away what little sleep I have left. Being old is a pain in the neck, I'll tell you that, Mr. Bushey." "Tim."

"Oh my manners. If you're Tim, then I'm Wanda. Wanda Silva." "Orange juice sounds fine, Wanda."

They sat at her kitchen table. Whatever time warp the newspaper came from, it didn't affect Wanda's house. The kitchen was new, or at least newer than the 1940s. The little Hitachi TV on the counter and

the microwave on a rolling cart were proof enough of that. She noticed what he was looking at. "My boys take care of me," she said. "Good jobs, all three of them, and even though not a one still lives in North Carolina, they all visit, they call, they write. I get along great with their wives. The grandkids are brilliant and cute and healthy. I couldn't be happier, really." She laughed. "So why does Tonio Silva haunt my house?" He made a guess. "Your late husband?"

"It's more complicated than that. Tonio was my first husband. Met him in a war materials factory in Huntsville and married him and after the war we came home to Greensboro because I didn't want to leave my roots and he didn't have any back in Philly, or so he said. But Tonio and I didn't have any children. He couldn't. Died of testicular cancer right after the election of '48. I married again about three years later. Barry Lear. A sweet, dull man. Father of my three boys. Account executive who traveled all the time and even when he was home he was barely here."

She sighed. "Oh, why am I telling you this?"

"Because I saw the newspaper."

"Because when you saw the newspaper, you were embarrassed but you were not surprised, not shocked when it disappeared. You've been seeing things yourself lately, haven't you?"

So he told her what he'd told no other person, about Selena and Baby Di, about how he kept just missing them. By the end she was nodding.

"Oh, I knew it," she said. "That's why you could see the paper. Because the wall between worlds is as thin for you as it is for me."

"I'm not crazy?" he asked, laughing nervously.

"How should I know?" she said. "But we both saw that paper. And it's not just us. My kids, too. See, the -- what do we call it? Haunting? Evidences? -- it didn't start till they were grown up and gone. Barry Lear was busy having his stroke and getting downright eager to shed his old body, and I was taking care of him best I could, and all of a sudden I start hearing the radio playing music that my first husband and I used to dance to, big band sounds. And those newspapers, that paperboy, just like it was 1948, the year we were happiest, the summer when I got pregnant, before the baby miscarried and our hearts broke and just before Christmas he found out about the cancer. As if he could feel Barry getting set to leave my life, and Tonio was coming back."

"And your kids know?"

"You have to understand, Barry provided for us, he never hit anybody or yelled. But he was a completely absent father, even when he was home. The kids were so hungry for a dad, even grown up and moved away they still wanted one, so when they came home for their father's funeral, all three of them saw the same things I was seeing. And when I told them it was happening before Barry died, that it was Tonio, the man who wasn't their father but wanted so badly to be, the man who would have been there for them no matter what, if God hadn't taken him so young -- well, they adopted him. They call him their ghost."

She smiled but tears ran down her cheeks. "That's what he came home for, Tonio, I mean. For my boys. He couldn't do it while Barry was here, but as Barry faded, he could come. And now the boys return, they see his coffee cup in the dish drain, they smell his hair oil in the bathroom, they see the newspapers, hear the radio. And they sit there in the living room and they talk. To me, yes, of course, but also to him, telling him about their lives, believing -- knowing -- that he's listening to them. That he really cares, he loves them, and the only reason they can't see him is because he just stepped out, they only just missed him, he's bound to be in the next room, he can hear every word they say."

Tim nodded. Yes, that's how it was. Just how it was.

"But he's fading now." She nodded. "They don't need him so much. The hole in their lives is filled now." She nodded again. "And in mine. The love of my life. We had unfinished business, you see. Things not done."

"So why did I see it? The paperboy, the newspaper -- I never knew Tonio, I'm not one of your sons."

"Because you live like I do, on the edge of the other side, seeing in. Because you have unfinished business, too."

"But I can never finish it now," he said.

"Can't you?" she answered. "I married Barry. I had my boys. Then Tonio came back and gave them the last thing they needed. You, now. You could marry, you know. Have more children. Fill that house with life and love again. Your wife and baby, they'll step back, like Tonio did. But they won't be gone. Someday maybe you'll be alone again. Big empty house. And they'll come back. Don't you think? Selena -- such a lovely name -- and your baby Diana. Just in the next room. Around you all the time. Reminding you when you were young. Only by then Diana might not need to be a baby anymore. It won't be toys she leaves around, it'll be schoolbooks. Hairbrushes. And the long hairs you find on your pillow won't be Selena's color anymore. It'll be grey. Or white."

He hadn't told her about still finding Selena's hair. She simply knew.

"You can go on with your life without letting go," said Wanda. "Because you don't really lose them. They're just out of reach. I look around Greensboro and I wonder, how many other houses are like mine? Haunted by love, by unfinished love. And sometimes I think, Tonio isn't haunting us, we're the ones who are haunting him. Calling him back. And because he loves us, he comes. Until we don't really need him anymore."

They talked a little more, and Tim went home, and everything was different, and everything was gloriously the same. It wasn't madness anymore. They really were just out of reach, he really had just missed them. They were still in the house with him, still in his life.

And, knowing that, believing it now, he could go on. He visited Wanda a couple of times a week. Got to know each of her sons on their visits. Became friends with them. When Wanda passed away, he sat with the family at the funeral.

Tim went back to work, not at the company where he and Selena had met, but in a new place, with new people. Eventually he married, they had children, and just as Wanda had said, Selena and Diana faded, but never completely. There would be a book left open somewhere, one that nobody in the house was reading. There would be a whiff of a strange perfume, the sound of someone humming a tune that hadn't been current for years.

Right along with his new family, he knew that Diana was growing up, in a house full of siblings who knew about her, loved the stories of her childhood that he told, and who came to him, one by one, as the years passed, to tell him privately that once or twice in their childhood, they had seen her, the older sister who came to them during a nightmare and comforted them, who whispered love to them when friends at school had broken their hearts, whose gentle hand on their shoulder had calmed them and given them courage.

And the smiling mother who wasn't their mother but there she was in the doorway, just once, just a fleeting glimpse. Selena, looking at the children she had never given birth to but who were still hers, partly hers, because they were his, and he would always be a part of her even though he loved another woman now and shared his life with her.

Sometime, somewhere down the road, his life would draw to a close and he would see them again, face to face, his family, his first family, waiting for him as Tonio had waited for Wanda all those years. He could wait. There was no hurry. They were only moments out of reach. The first contact was peaceful, almost uneventful: sudden landings near government buildings all over the world, brief discussions in the native languages, followed by treaties allowing the aliens to build certain buildings in certain places in exchange for certain favors-- nothing spectacular. The technological improvements that the aliens brought helped make life better for everyone, but they were improvements that were already well within the reach of human engineers within the next decade or two. And the greatest gift of all was found to be a disappointment-- space travel. The aliens did not have faster-than-light travel. Instead, they had conclusive proof that faster-than-light travel was utterly impossible. They had infinite patience and incredibly long lives to sustain them in their snail's-pace crawl among the stars, but humans would be dead before even the shortest space flight was fairly begun.

And after only a little while, the presence of aliens was regarded as quite the normal thing. They insisted that they had no further gifts to bring, and simply exercised their treaty rights to build and visit the buildings they had made.

The buildings were all different from each other, but had one thing in common: by the standards of the local populace, the new alien buildings were all clearly recognizable as churches.

Mosques. Cathedrals. Shrines. Synagogues. Temples. All unmistakably churches.

But no congregation was invited, though any person who came to such a place was welcomed by whatever aliens happened to be there at the time, who engaged in charming discussion totally related to the person's own interests. Farmers conversed about farming, engineers about engineering, housewives about motherhood, dreamers about dreams, travelers about travels, astronomers about the stars. Those who came and talked went away feeling good. Feeling that someone did, indeed, attach importance to their lives-- had come trillions of kilometers through incredible boredom (five hundred years in space, they said!) just to see them.

And gradually life settled into a peaceful routine. Scientists, it is true, kept on discovering, and engineers kept on building according to those discoveries, and so changes did come. But knowing now that there was no great scientific revolution just around the corner, no tremendous discovery that would open up the stars, men and women settled down, by and large, to the business of being happy.

It wasn't as hard as people had supposed.

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Willard Crane was an old man, but a content one. His wife was dead, but he did not resent the brief interregnum in his life in which he was solitary again, a thing he had not been since he came home from the Vietnam War with half a foot missing and found his girl waiting for him anyway, foot or no foot. They had lived all their married lives in a house in the Avenues of Salt Lake City, which, when they moved there, had been a shabby, dilapidated relic of a previous century, but which now was a splendid preservation of a noble era in architecture. Willard was in that comfortable area between heavy wealth and heavier poverty; enough money to satisfy normal aspirations, but not enough money to tempt him to extravagance.

Every day he walked from 7th Avenue and L Street to the cemetery, not far away, where practically everyone had been buried. It was there, in the middle of the cemetery, that the alien building stood-- an obvious mimic of old Mormon temple architecture, meaning it was a monstrosity of conflicting periods that somehow, perhaps through intense sincerity, managed to be beautiful anyway.

And there he sat among the gravestones, watching as occasional people wandered into and out of the sanctuary where the aliens came, visited, left.

Happiness is boring as hell, he decided one day. And so, to provoke a little delightful variety, he decided to pick a fight with somebody. Unfortunately, everyone he knew at all well was too nice to fight. And so he decided that he had a bone to pick with the aliens.

When you're old, you can get away with anything.

He went to the alien temple and walked inside.

On the walls were murals, paintings, maps; on the floor, pedestals with statues; it seemed more a museum than anything else. There were few places to sit, and he saw no sign of aliens. Which wouldn't be a disaster; just deciding on a good argument had been variety enough, noting with pride the fine quality of the work the aliens had chosen to display.

But there was an alien there, after all.

"Good morning, Mr. Crane," said the alien.

"How the hell you know my name?"

"You perch on a tombstone every morning and watch as people come in and go out. We found you fascinating. We asked around." The alien's voicebox was very well programmed-- a warm, friendly, interested voice. And Willard was too old and jaded with novelty to get much excited about the way the alien slithered along the floor and slopped on the bench next to him like a large, self-moving piece of seaweed.

"We wished you would come in."

"I'm in."

"And why?"

Now that the question was put, his reaso seemed trivial to him; but he decided to play the game all'the way through. Why not, after all? "I have a bone to pick with you."

"Heavens," said the alien, with mock horror.

"I have some questions that have never been answered to my satisfaction."

"Then I trust we'll have some answers."

"All right then." But what were his questions? "You'll have to forgive me if my mind gets screwed around. The brain dies first, as you know."

"We know."

"Why'd you build a temple here? How come you build churches?"

"Why, Mr. Crane, we've answered that a thousand times. We like churches. We find them the most graceful and beautiful of all human architecture."

"I don't believe you," Willard said. "You're dodging my question. So let me put it another way. How come you have the time to sit around and talk to half-assed imbeciles like me? Haven't you got anything better to do?"

"Human beings are unusually good company. It's a most pleasant way to pass the time which does, after many years, weigh rather heavily on our, um, hands." And the alien tried to gesture with his pseudopodia, which was amusing, and Willard laughed. "Slippery bastards, aren't you?" he inquired, and the alien chuckled. "So let me put it this way, and no dodging, or I'll know you have something to hide. You're pretty much like us, right? You have the same gadgets, but you can travel in space because you don't croak after a hundred years like we do; whatever, you do pretty much the same kinds of things we do. And yet-yet--"

"There's always an 'and yet," the alien sighed.

"And yet. You come all the way out here, which ain't exactly Main Street, Milky Way, and all you do is build these churches all over the place and sit around and jaw with whoever the hell comes in. Makes no sense, sir, none at all."

The alien oozed gently toward him. "Can you keep a secret?"

"My old lady thought she was the only woman I ever slept with in my life. Some secrets I can keep."

"Then here is one to keep. We come, Mr. Crane, to worship."

"Worship who?"

"Worship, among others, you."

Willard laughed long and loud, but the alien looked (as only aliens can) terribly earnest and sincere.

"Listen, you mean to tell me that you worship people?"

"Oh, yes. It is the dream of everyone who dares to dream on my home planet to come here and meet a human being or two and then live on the memory forever."

And suddenly it wasn't funny to Willard anymore. He looked around-- human art in prominent display, the whole format, the choice of churches. "You aren't joking."

"No, Mr. Crane. We've wandered the galaxy for several million years, all told, meeting new races and renewing acquaintance with old. Evolution is a tedious old highway-- carbon-based life always leads to certain patterns and certain forms, despite the fact that we seem hideously different to you--"

"Not too bad, Mister, a little ugly, but not too bad--"

"All the-- people like us that you've seen-- well, we don't come from the same planet, though it has been assumed so by your scientists. Actually, we come from thousands of planets. Separate, independent evolution, leading inexorably to us. Absolutely, or nearly absolutely, uniform throughout the galaxy. We are the natural endproduct of evolution."

"So we're the oddballs."

"You might say so. Because somewhere along the line, Mr. Crane, deep in your past, your planet's evolution went astray from the normal. It created something utterly new."

"Sex?"

"We all have sex, Mr. Crane. Without it, how in the world could the race improve? No, what was new on your planet, Mr. Crane, was death."

The word was not an easy one for Willard to hear. His wife had, after all, meant a great deal to him. And he meant even more to himself. Death already loomed in dizzy spells and shortened breath and weariness that refused to turn into sleep.

"Death?"

"We don't die, Mr. Crane. We reproduce by splitting off whole sections of ourselves with identical DNA-- you know about DNA?"

"I went to college."

"And with us, of course, as with all other life in the universe, intelligence is carried on the DNA, not in the brain. One of the byproducts of death, the brain is. We don't have it. We split, and the individual, complete with all memories, lives on in the children, who are made up of the actual flesh of my flesh, you see? I will never die."

"Well, bully for you," Willard said, feeling strangely cheated, and wondering why he hadn't guessed.

"And so we came here and found people whose life had a finish; who began as unformed creatures without memory and, after an incredibly brief span, died."

"And for that you worship us? I might as well go worshiping bugs that die a few minutes after they're born."

The alien chuckled, and Willard resented it.

"Is that why you come here? To gloat?"

"What else would we worship, Mr. Crane? While we don't discount the possibility of invisible gods, we really never have invented any. We never died, so why dream of immortality? Here we found a people who knew how to worship, and for the first time we found awakened in us a desire to do homage to superior beings."

And Willard noticed his heartbeat, realized that it would stop while the alien had no heart, had nothing that would ever end. "Superior, hell."

"We," said the alien, "remember everything, from the first stirrings of intellect to the present. When we are 'born,' so to speak, we have no need of teachers. We have never learned to write-- merely to exchange RNA. We have never learned to create beauty to outlast our lives because nothing outlasts our lives. We live to see all our works crumble. Here, Mr. Crane, we have found a race that builds for the sheer joy of building, that creates beauty, that writes books, that invents the lives of never-known people to delight others who know they are being lied to, a race that devises immortal gods to worship and celebrates its own mortality with immense pomp and glory. Death is the foundation of all that is great about humanity, Mr. Crane."

"Like hell it is," said Willard. "I'm about to die, and there's nothing great about it."

"You don't really believe that, Mr. Crane," the alien said. "None of you do. Your lives are built around death, glorifying it. Postponing it as long as possible, to be sure, but glorifying it. In the earliest literature, the death of the hero is the moment of greatest climax. The most potent myth."

"Those poems weren't written by old men with flabby bodies and hearts that only beat when they feel like it."

"Nonsense. Everything you do smacks of death. Your poems have beginnings and endings, and structures that limit the work. Your paintings have edges, marking off where the beauty begins and ends. Your sculptures isolate a moment in time. Your music starts and finishes. All that you do is mortal-it is all born. It all dies. And yet you struggle against mortality and have overcome it, building up tremendous stores of shared knowledge through your finite books and your finite words. You put frames on everything."

"Mass insanity, then. But it explains nothing about why you worship. You must come here to mock us."

"Not to mock you. To envy you."

"Then die. I assume that your protoplasm or whatever is vulnerable."

"You don't understand. A human being can die-- after he has reproduced-and all that he knew and all that he has will live on after him. But if I die, I cannot reproduce. My knowledge dies with me. An awesome responsibility. We cannot assume it. I am all the paintings and writings and songs of a million generations. To die would be the death of a civilization. You have cast yourselves free of life and achieved greatness.

"And that's why you come here."

"If ever there were gods. If ever there was power in the universe. You are those gods. You have that power."

"We have no power."

"Mr. Crane, you are beautiful."

And the old man shook his head, stood with difficulty, and doddered out of the temple and walked away slowly among the graves.

"You tell them the truth," said the alien to no one in particular (to future generations of himself who would need the memory of the words having been spoken), "and it only makes it worse."

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It was only seven months later, and the weather was no longer spring, but now blustered with the icy wind of late autumn. The trees in the cemetery were no longer colorful; they were stripped of all but the last few brown leaves. And into the cemetery walked Willard Crane again, his arms half enclosed by the metal crutches that gave him, in his old age, four points of balance instead of the precarious two that had served him for more than ninety years. A few snowflakes were drifting lazily down, except when the wind snatched them and spun them in crazy dances that had neither rhythm nor direction.

Willard laboriously climbed the steps of the temple.

Inside, an alien was waiting.

"I'm Willard Crane," the old man said.

"And I'm an alien. You spoke to me-- or my parent, however you wish to phrase it-- several months ago."

"Yes."

"We knew you'd come back."

"Did you? I vowed I never would."

"But we know you. You are well known to us all, Mr. Crane. There are billions of gods on Earth for us to worship, but you are the noblest of them all."

"I am?"

"Because only you have thought to do us the kindest gift. Only you are willing to let us watch your death."

And a tear leaped from the old man's eye as he blinked heavily.

"Is that why I came?"

"Isn't it?"

"I thought I came to damn your souls to hell, that's why I came, you bastards, coming to taunt me in the final hours of my life."

"You came to us."

"I wanted to show you how ugly death is."

"Please. Do."

And, seemingly eager to oblige them, Willard's heart stopped and he, in brief agony, slumped to the floor in the temple.

The aliens all slithered in, all gathered around closely, watching him rattle for breath.

"I will not die!" he savagely whispered, each breath an agony, his face fierce with the heroism of struggle.

And then his body shuddered and he was still.

The aliens knelt there for hours in silent worship as the body became cold. And then, at last, because they had learned this from their gods-- that words must be said to be remembered-- one of them spoke:

"Beautiful," he said tenderly. "Oh Lord my God," he said worshipfully.

And they were gnawed within by the grief of knowing that this greatest gift of all gifts was forever out of their reach.

## PRIOR RESTRAINT Orson Scott Card

I met Doc Murphy in a writing class taught by a mad Frenchman at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. I had just quit my job as a coat-and-tie editor at a conservative family magazine, and I was having a little trouble getting used to being a slob student again. Of a shaggy lot, Doc was the shaggiest. And I was prepared to be annoyed by him and ignore his opinions. But his opinions were not to be ignored. At first because of what he did to me. And then, at last, because of what had been done to him. It has shaped me; his past looms over me whenever I sit down to write.

Armand the teacher, who had not improved on his French accent by replacing it with Bostonian, looked puzzled as he held up my story before the class. "This is commercially viable," he said. "It is also crap. What else can I say?"

It was Doc who said it. Nail in one hand, hammer in the other, he crucified me and the story. Considering that I had already decided not to pay attention to him, and considering how arrogant I was in the lofty position of being the one student who had actually sold a novel, it is surprising to me that I listened to him. But underneath the almost angry attack on my work was something else: A basic respect, I think, for what a good writer should be. And for that small hint in my work that a good writer might be hiding somewhere in me.

So I listened. And I learned. And gradually, as the Frenchman got crazier and crazier, I turned to Doc to learn how to write. Shaggy though he was, he had a far crisper mind than anyone I had ever known in a business suit.

We began to meet outside class. My wife had left me two years before, so I had plenty of free time and a pretty large rented house to sprawl in; we drank or read or talked, in front of a fire or over Doc's convincing veal parmesan or out chopping down an insidious vine that wanted to take over the world starting in my backyard. For the first time since Denae had gone I felt at home in my house --Doc seemed to know by instinct what parts of the house held the wrong memories, and he soon balanced them by making me feel comfortable in them again.

Or uncomfortable. Doc didn't always say nice things.

"I can see why your wife left you," he said once.

"You don't think I'm good in bed, either?" (This was a joke -- neither Doc nor I had any unusual sexual predilections.)

"You have a neanderthal way of dealing with people, that's all. If they aren't going where you want them to go, club 'em a good one and drag 'em away."

It was irritating. I didn't like thinking about my wife. We had only been married three years, and not good years either, but in my own way I had loved her and I missed her a great deal and I hadn't wanted her to go when she left. I didn't like having my nose rubbed in it. "I don't recall clubbing you."

He just smiled. And, of course, I immediately thought back over the conversation and realized that he was right. I hated his goddam smile.

"OK," I said, "you're the one with long hair in the land of the last surviving crew cuts. Tell me why you like 'Swap' Morris."

"I don't like Morris. I think Morris is a whore selling someone else's freedom to win votes."

And I was confused, then. I had been excoriating good old "Swap" Morris, Davis County Commissioner, for having fired the head librarian in the county because she had dared to stock a "pornographic" book despite his objections. Morris showed every sign of being illiterate, fascist, and extremely popular, and I would gladly have hit the horse at his lynching.

"So you don't like Morris either -- what did I say wrong?"

"Censorship is never excusable for any reason, says you."

"You like censorship?"

And then the half-serious banter turned completely serious. Suddenly he wouldn't look at me. Suddenly he only had eyes for the fire, and I saw the flames dancing in tears resting on his lower eyelids, and I realized again that with Doc I was out of my depth completely.

"No," he said. "No, I don't like it."

And then a lot of silence until he finally drank two full glasses of wine, just like that, and went out to drive home; he lived up Emigration Canyon at the end of a winding, narrow road, and I was afraid he was too drunk, but he only said to me at the door, "I'm not drunk. It takes half a gallon of wine just to get up to normal after an hour with you, you're so damn sober."

One weekend he even took me to work with him.

Doc made his living in Nevada. We left Salt Lake City on Friday afternoon and drove to Wendover, the first town over the border. I expected him to he an employee of the casino we stopped at. But he didn't punch in, just left his name with a guy; and then he sat in a corner with me and waited.

"Don't you have to work?" I asked.

"I'm working," he said.

"I used to work just the same way, but I got fired."

"I've got to wait my turn for a table. I told you I made my living with poker."

And it finally dawned on me that he was a freelance professional -- a player -- a cardshark.

There were four guys named Doc there that night. Doc Murphy was the third one called to a table. He played quietly, and lost steadily but lightly for two hours. Then, suddenly, in four hands he made back everything he had lost and added nearly fifteen hundred dollars to it. Then he made his apologies after a decent number of losing hands and we drove back to Salt Lake.

"Usually I have to play again on Saturday night," he told me. Then he grinned. "Tonight I was lucky. There was an idiot who thought he knew poker."

I remembered the old saw: Never eat at a place called Mom's, never play poker with a man named Doc, and never sleep with a woman who's got more troubles than you. Pure truth. Doc memorized the deck, knew all the odds by heart, and it was a rare poker face that Doc couldn't eventually see through.

At the end of the quarter, though, it finally dawned on me that in all the time we were in class together, I had never seen one of his own stories. He hadn't written a damn thing. And there was his grade on the bulletin board -- A.

I talked to Amiand.

"Oh, Doc writes," he assured me. "Better than you do, and you got an A. God knows how, you don't have the talent for it."

"Why doesn't he turn it in for the rest of the class to read?"

Armand shrugged. "Why should he? Pearls before swine."

Still it irritated me. After watching Doc disembowel more than one writer, I didn't think it was fair that his own work was never put on the chopping block.

The next quarter he turned up in a graduate seminar with me, and I asked him. He laughed and told me to forget it. I laughed back and told him I wouldn't. I wanted to read his stuff. So the next week he gave me a three-page manuscript. It was an unfinished fragment of a story about a man who honestly thought his wife had left him even though he went home to find her there every night. It was some of the best writing I've ever read in my life. No matter how you measure it. The stuff was clear enough and exciting enough that any moron who likes Harold Robbins could have enjoyed it. But the style was rich enough and the matter of it deep enough even in a few pages that it made most other "great" writers look like chicken farmers. I reread the fragment five times just to make sure I got it all. The first time I had thought it was metaphorically about me. The third time I knew it was about God. The fifth time I knew it was about everything that mattered, and I wanted to read more.

"Where's the rest?" I asked.

He shrugged. "That's it," he said.

"It doesn't feel finished."

"It isn't."

"Well, finish it! Doc, you could sell this anywhere, even the New Yorker. For them you probably don't even have to finish it."

"Even the New Yorker. Golly."

"I can't believe you think you're too good for anybody, Doc. Finish it. I want to know how it ends."

He shook his head. "That's all there is. That's all there ever will be."

And that was the end of the discussion.

But from time to time he'd show me another fragment. Always better than the one before. And in the meantime we became closer, not because he was such a good writer -- I'm not so self-effacing I like hanging around with people who can write me under the table -- but because he was Doc Murphy. We found every decent place to get a beer in Salt Lake City -- not a particularly time-consuming activity. We saw three good movies and another dozen that were so bad they were fun to watch. He taught me to play poker well enough that I broke even every weekend. He put up with my succession of girlfriends and prophesied that I would probably end up married again. "You're just weak willed enough to try to make a go of it," he cheerfully told me.

At last, when I had long since given up asking, he told me why he never finished anything.

I was two and a half beers down, and he was drinking a hideous mix of Tab and tomato juice that he drank whenever he wanted to punish himself for his sins, on the theory that it was even worse than the Hindu practice of drinking your own piss. I had just got a story back from a magazine I had been sure would buy it. I was thinking of giving it up. He laughed at me.

"I'm serious," I said.

"Nobody who's any good at all needs to give up writing."

"Look who's talking. The king of the determined writers."

He looked angry. "You're a paraplegic making fun of a one-legged man," he said.

"I'm sick of it."

"Quit then. Makes no difference. Leave the field to the hacks. You're probably a hack, too."

Doc hadn't been drinking anything to make him surly, not drunk-surly, anyway. "Hey, Doc, I'm asking for encouragement."

"If you need encouragement, you don't deserve it. There's only one way a good writer can be stopped."

"Don't tell me you have a selective writer's block. Against endings."

"Writer's block? Jesus, I've never been blocked in my life. Blocks are what happen when you're not good enough to write the thing you know you have to write."

I was getting angry. "And you, of course, are always good enough."

He leaned forward, looked at me in the eyes. "I'm the best writer in the English language."

"I'll give you this much. You're the best who never finished anything."

"I finish everything," he said. "I finish everything, beloved friend, and then I burn all but the first three pages. I finish a story a week, sometimes. I've written three complete novels, four plays. I even did a screenplay. It would've made millions of dollars and been a classic." "Says who?"

"Says -- never mind who says. il was bought, it was cast, it was ready for filming. It had a budget of thirty million. The studio believed in it. Only intelligent thing I've ever heard of them doing."

I couldn't believe it. "You're joking."

"If I'm joking, who's laughing? It's true."

I'd never seen him look so poisoned, so pained. It was true, if I knew Doc Murphy, and I think I did. Do. "Why?" I asked.

"The Censorship Board."

"What? There's no such thing in America."

He laughed. "Not full-time anyway."

"Who the hell is the Censorship Board?"

He told me.

When I was twenty-two I lived on a rural road in Oregon, he said, outside of Portland. Mailboxes out on the road. I was writing, I was a playwright, I thought there'd be a career in that; I was just starting to try fiction. I went out one morning after the mailman had gone by. It was drizzling slightly. But I didn't much care. There was an envelope there from my Hollywood agent. It was a contract. Not an option -- a sale. A hundred thousand dollars. It had just occurred to me that I was getting wet and I ought to go in when two men came out of the bushes -- yeah, I know, I guess they go for dramatic entrances. They were in business suits. God, I hate men who wear business suits. The one guy just held out his hand. He said, "Give it to me now and save yourself a lot of trouble." Give it to him? I told him what I thought of his suggestion. They looked like the mafia, or like a comic parody of the mafia, actually.

They were about the same height, and they seemed almost to be the same person, right down to a duplicate glint of fierceness in the eyes; but then I realized that my first impression had been deceptive. One was blond, one darkhaired; the blond had a slightly receding chin that gave his face a meek look from the nose down; the dark one had once had a bad skin problem and his neck was treeish, giving him an air of stupidity, as if a face had been pasted on the front of the neck with no room for a head at all. Not mafia at all. Ordinary people. Except the eyes. That glint in the eyes was not false, and that was what had made me see them wrong at first. Those eyes had seen people weep, and had cared, and had hurt them again anyway. It's a look that human eyes should never have.

"It's just the contract, for Christ's sake," I told them, but the dark one with acne scars only told me again to hand it over.

By now, though, my first fear had passed; they weren't armed, and so I might be able to get rid of them without violence. I started back to the house. They followed me.

"What do you want my contract for?" I asked.

"That film will never be made," says Meek, the blond one with the missing chin. "We won't allow it to be made."

I'm thinking who writes their dialogue for them, do they crib it from Fenimore Cooper? "Their hundred thousand dollars says they want to try. I want them to."

"You'll never get the money, Murphy. And this contract and that screenplay will pass out of existence within the next four days. I promise you that."

I ask him, "What are you, a critic?"

"Close enough."

By now I was inside the door and they were on the other side of the threshold. I should have closed the door, probably, but I'm a gambler. I had to stay in this time because I had to know what kind of hand they had. "Plan to take it by force?" I asked.

"By inevitability," Tree says. And then he says, "You see, Mr. Murphy, you're a dangerous man; with your IBM Self-Correcting Selectric II typewriter that has a sluggish return so that you sometimes get letters printed a few spaces in from the end. With your father who once said to you, 'Billy, to tell you the honest-to-God truth, I don't know if I'm your father or not. I wasn't the only guy your Mom had been seeing when I married her, so I really don't give a damn if you live or die."

He had it right down. Word for word, what my father told me when I was four years old. I'd never told anybody. And he had it word for word.

CIA, Jesus. That's pathetic.

No, they weren't CIA. They just wanted to make sure that I didn't write. Or rather, that I didn't publish.

I told them I wasn't interested in their suggestions. And I was right -- they weren't muscle types. I closed the door and they just went away.

And then the next day as I was driving my old Galaxy along the road, under the speed limit, a boy on a bicycle came right out in front of me. I didn't even have a chance to brake. One second he wasn't there, and the next second he was. I hit him. The bicycle went under the car, but he mostly came up the top. His foot stuck in the bumper, jammed in by the bike. The rest of him slid up over the hood, pulling his hip apart and separating his spine in three places. The hood ornament disemboweled him and the blood flowed up the windshield like a heavy rainstorm, so that I couldn't see anything except his face, which was pressed up against the glass with the eyes open. He died on the spot, of course. And I wanted to.

He had been playing Martians or something with his brother. The brother was standing there near the road with a plastic ray gun in his hand and a stupid look on his face. His mother came out of the house screaming. I was screaming too. There were two neighbors who saw the whole thing. One of them called the cops and ambulance. The other one tried to control the mother and keep her from killing me. I don't remember where I was going. All I remember is that the car had taken an unusually long time starting that morning. Another minute and a half, I think -- a long time, to start a car. If it had started up just like usual, I wouldn't have hit the kid. I kept thinking that -- it was all just a coincidence that I happened to be coming by just at that moment. A half-second sooner and he would have seen me and swerved. A half-second later and I would have seen him. just coincidence. The only reason the boy's father didn't kill me when he came home ten minutes later was because I was crying so damn hard. It never went to court because the neighbors testified that I hadn't a chance to stop, and the police investigator determined that I hadn't been speeding. Not even negligence. Just terrible, terrible chance.

I read the article in the paper. The boy was only nine, but he was taking special classes at school and was very bright, a good kid, ran a paper route and always took care of his brothers and sisters. A real tear-jerker for the consumption of the subscribers. I thought of killing myself. And then the men in the business suits came back. They had four copies of my script, my screenplay. Four copies is all I had ever made -- the original was in my file.

"You see, Mr. Murphy, we have every copy of the screenplay. You will give us the original."

I wasn't in the mood for this. I started closing the door.

"You have so much taste," I said. I didn't care how they got the script, not then. I just wanted to find a way to sleep until when I woke up the boy would still he alive.

They pushed the door open and came in. "You see, Mr. Murphy, until we altered your car yesterday, your path and the boy's never did intersect. We had to try four times to get the timing right, but we finally made it. It's the nice thing about time travel. If you blow it, you can always go back and get it right the next time."

I couldn't believe anyone would want to take credit for the boy's death. "What for?" I asked.

And they told me. Seems the boy was even more talented than anyone thought. He was going to grow up and be a writer. A journalist and critic. And he was going to cause a lot of problems for a particular government some forty years down the line. He was especially going to write three books that would change the whole way of thinking of a large number of people. The wrong way.

"We're all writers ourselves," Meek says to me. "It shouldn't surprise you that we take our writing very seriously. More seriously than you do. Writers, the good writers, can change people. And some of the changes aren't very good. By killing that boy yesterday, you see, you stopped a bloody civil war some sixty years from now. We've already checked and there are some unpleasant side effects, but nothing that can't be coped with. Saved seven million lives. You shouldn't feel bad about it."

I remembered the things they had known about me. Things that nobody could have known. I felt stupid because I began to believe they might be for real. I felt afraid because they were calm when they talked of the boy's death. I asked, "Where do I come in? Why me?"

"Oh, it's simple. You're a very good writer. Destined to be the best of your age. Fiction. And this screenplay. In three hundred years they're going to compare you to Shakespeare and the poor old bard will lose. The trouble is, Murphy, you're a godawful hedonist and a pessimist to boot, and if we can just keep you from publishing anything, the whole artistic mood of two centuries win be brightened considerably. Not to mention the prevention of a famine in seventy years. History makes strange connections, Murphy, and you're at the heart of a lot of suffering. If you never publish, the world will be a much better place for everyone."

You weren't there, you didn't hear them. You didn't see them, sitting on my couch, legs crossed, nodding, gesturing like they were saying the most natural thing in the world. From them I learned how to write genuine insanity. Not somebody frothing at the mouth; just somebody sitting there like a good friend, saying impossible things, cruel things, and smiling and getting excited and -- Jesus, you don't know. Because I believed them. They knew, you see. And they

were too insane, even a madman could have come up with a better hoax than that. And I'm making it sound as if I believed them logically, but I didn't, I don't think I can persuade you, either, but trust me -- if I know when a man is bluffing or telling the truth, and I do, these two were not bluffing. A child had died, and they knew how many times I had turned the key in the ignition. And there was truth in those terrible eyes when Meek said, 'If you willingly refrain from publishing, you will be allowed to live. If you refuse, then you will die within three days. Another writer will kill you -- accidently, of course. We only have authority to work through authors."

I asked them why. The answer made me laugh. It seems they were from the Authors' Guild. "It's a matter of responsibility. If you refuse to take responsibility for the future consequences of your acts, we'll have to give the responsibility to somebody else."

And so I asked them why they didn't just kill me in the first place instead of wasting time talking to me.

It was Tree who answered, and the bastard was crying, and he says to me, "Because we love you. We love everything you write. We've learned everything we know about writing from you. And we'll lose it if you die."

They tried to console me by telling me what good company I was in. Thomas Hardy -- they made him give up novels and stick to poetry which nobody read and so it was safe. Meek tells me, "Hemingway decided to kill himself instead of waiting for us to do it. And there are some others who only had to refrain from writing a particular book. It hurt them, but Fitzgerald was still able to have a decent career with the other books he could write, and Perelman gave it to us in laughs, since he couldn't be allowed to write his real work. We only bother with great writers. Bad writers aren't a threat to anybody."

We struck a sort of bargain. I could go on writing. But after I had finished everything, I had to burn it. All but the first three pages. "If you finish it at all," says Meek, "we'll have a copy of it here. There's a library here that -- uh, I guess the easiest way to I say it is that it exists outside time. You'll be published, in a way. Just not in your own time. Not for about eight hundred years. But at least you can write. There are others who have to keep their pens completely still. It breaks our hearts, you know."

I knew all about broken hearts, yes sir, I knew all about it. I burned all but the first three pages.

There's only one reason for a writer to quit writing, and that's when the Censorship Board gets to him. Anybody else who quits. is just a gold-plated jackass. "Swap" Morris doesn't even know what real censorship is. It doesn't happen in libraries. It happens on the hoods of cars. So go on, become a real estate broker, sell insurance, follow Santa Claus and clean up the reindeer poo, I don't give a damn. But if you give up something that I will never have, I'm through with you. There's nothing in you for me.

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So I write. And Doc reads it and tears it to pieces; everything except this. This he'll never see. This he'd probably kill me for, but what the hell? It'll never get published. No, no, I'm too vain. You're reading it, aren't you? See how I put my ego on the line? If I'm really a good enough writer, if my work is important enough to change the world, then a couple of guys in business suits will come make me a proposition. I can't refuse, and you won't read this at all, but you are reading it, aren't you? Why am I doing this to myself? Maybe I'm hoping they'll come and give me an excuse to quit writing now, before I find out that I've already written as well as I'm ever going, to. But here I thumb my nose at those goddamn future critics and they ignore me, they tell exactly what my work is worth.

Or maybe not. Maybe I really am good, but my work just happens to have a positive effect, happens not to make any unpleasant waves in the future. Maybe I'm one of the lucky ones who ran accomplish something powerful that doesn't need to be censored to protect the future.

Maybe pigs have wings.

It came to him suddenly, a moment of blackness as he sat working late at his desk. It was as quick as an eye-blink, but before the darkness the papers on his desk had seemed terribly important, and afterward he stared at them blankly, wondering what they were and then realizing that he didn't really give a damn what they were and he ought to be going home now.

Ought definitely to be going home now. And C. Mark Tapworth of CMT Enterprises, Inc., arose from his desk without finishing all the work that was on it, the first time he had done such a thing in the twelve years it had taken him to bring the company from nothing to a multi-million-dollar-a-year business. Vaguely it occurred to him that he was not acting normally, but he didn't really care, it didn't really matter to him a bit whether any more people bought-- bought--

And for a few seconds C. Mark Tapworth could not remember what it was that his company made.

It frightened him. It reminded him that his father and his uncles had all died of strokes. It reminded him of his mother's senility at the fairly young age of sixty-eight. It reminded him of something he had always known and never quite believed, that he was mortal and that all the works of all his days would trivialize gradually until his death, at which time his life would be his only act, the forgotten stone whose fall had set off ripples in the lake that would in time reach the shore having made, after all, no difference.

I'm tired, he decided. Maryjo is right. I need a rest.

But he was not the resting kind, not until that moment standing by his desk when again the blackness came, this time a jog in his mind and he remembered nothing, saw nothing, heard nothing, was falling interminably through nothingness.

Then, mercifully, the world returned to him and he stood trembling, regretting now the many, many nights he had stayed far too late, the many hours he had not spent with Maryjo, had left her alone in their large but childless house; and he imagined her waiting for him forever, a lonely woman dwarfed by the huge living room, waiting patiently for a husband who would, who must, who always had come home.

Is it my heart? Or a stroke? he wondered. Whatever it was, it was enough that he saw the end of the world lurking in the darkness that had visited him, and like

the prophet returning from the mount-- things that once had mattered overmuch mattered not at all, and things he had long postponed now silently importuned him. He felt a terrible urgency that there was something he must do before--

Before what? He would not let himself answer. He just walked out through the large room full of ambitious younger men and women trying to impress him by working later than he; noticed but did not care that they were visibly relieved at their reprieve from another endless night. He walked out into the night and got in his car and drove home through a thin mist of rain that made the world retreat a comfortable distance from the windows of his car.

The children must be upstairs, he realized. No one ran to greet him at the door. The children, a boy and a girl half his height and twice his energy, were admirable creatures who ran down stairs as if they were skiing, who could no more hold completely still than a hummingbird in midair. He could hear their footsteps upstairs, running lightly across the floor. They hadn't come to greet him at the door because their lives, after all, had more important things in them than mere fathers. He smiled, set down his attach, case, and went to the kitchen.

Maryjo looked harried, upset. He recognized the signals instantly-- she had cried earlier today.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, because she always said Nothing. He knew that in a moment she would tell him. She always told him everything, which had sometimes made him impatient. Now as she moved silently back and forth from counter to counter, from cupboard to stove, making another perfect dinner, he realized that she was not going to tell him. It made him uncomfortable. He began to try to guess.

"You work too hard," he said. "I've offered to get a maid or a cook. We can certainly afford them."

Maryjo only smiled thinly. "I don't want anyone else mucking around in the kitchen," she said. "I thought we dropped that subject years ago. Did you-- did you have a hard day at the office?"

Mark almost told her about his strange lapses of memory, but caught himself. This would have to be led up to gradually. Maryjo would not be able to cope with it, not in the state she was already in. "Not too hard. Finished up early."

"I know," she said. "I'm glad."

She didn't sound glad. It irritated him a little. Hurt his feelings. But instead of going off to nurse his wounds, he merely noticed his emotions as if he were a

dispassionate observer. He saw himself; important self-made man, yet at home a little boy who can be hurt, not even by a word, but by a short pause of indecision. Sensitive, sensitive, and he was amused at himself: for a moment he almost saw himself standing a few inches away, could observe even the bemused expression on his own face.

"Excuse me," Maryjo said, and she opened a cupboard door as he stepped out of the way. She pulled out a pressure cooker. "We're out of potato flakes," she said. "Have to do it the primitive way." She dropped the peeled potatoes into the pan.

"The children are awfully quiet today, " he said. "Do you know what they're doing?"

Maryjo looked at him with a bewildered expression.

"They didn't come meet me at the door. Not that I mind. They're busy with their own concerns, I know."

"Mark," Maryjo said.

"All right, you see right through me so easily. But I was only a little hurt. I want to look through today's mail." He wandered out of the kitchen. He was vaguely aware that behind him Maryjo had started to cry again. He did not let it worry him much. She cried easily and often.

He wandered into the living room, and the furniture surprised him. He had expected to see the green sofa and chair that he had bought from Deseret Industries, and the size of the living room and the tasteful antiques looked utterly wrong. Then his mind did a quick turn and he remembered that the old green sofa and chair were fifteen years ago, when he and Maryjo had first married. Why did I expect to see them? he wondered, and he worried again; worried also because he had come into the living room expecting to find the mail, even though for years Maryjo had put it on his desk every day.

He went into his study and picked up the mail and started sorting through it until he noticed out of the comer of his eye that something large and dark and massive was blocking the lower half of one of the windows. He looked. It was a coffin, a rather plain one, sitting on a rolling table from a mortuary.

"Maryjo," he called. "Maryjo."

She came into the study, looking afraid. "Yes?"

"Why is there a coffin in my study?" he asked.

"Coffin?" she asked.

"By the window, Maryjo. How did it get here?"

She looked disturbed. "Please don't touch it," she said.

"Why not?"

"I can't stand seeing you touch it. I told them they could leave it here for a few hours. But now it looks like it has to stay all night." The idea of the coffin staying in the house any longer was obviously repugnant to her.

"Who left it here? And why us? It's not as if we're in the market. Or do they sell these at parties now, like Tupperware?"

"The bishop called and asked me-- asked me to let the mortuary people leave it here for the funeral tomorrow. He said nobody could get away to unlock the church and so could we take it here for a few hours--"

It occurred to him that the mortuary would not have parted with a funeral-bound coffin unless it were full.

"Marylo, is there a body in this?"

She nodded, and a tear slipped over her lower eyelid. He was aghast. He let himself show it. "Tbey left a corpse in a coffin here in the house with you all day? With the kids?"

She buried her face in her hands and ran from the room, ran upstairs.

Mark did not follow her. He stood there and regarded the coffin with distaste. At least they had the good sense to close it. But a coffin! He went to the telephone at his desk, dialed the bishop's number.

"He isn't here." The bishop's wife sounded irritated at his call.

"He has to get this body out of my office and out of my house tonight. This is a terrible imposition."

"I don't know where to reach him. He's a doctor, you know, Brother Tapworth. He's at the hospital. Operating. There's no way I can contact him for something like this."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

She got surprisingly emotional about it. "Do what you want! Push the coffin out in the street if you want! It'll just be one more hurt to the poor man!"

"Which brings me to another question. Who is he, and why isn't his family--"

"He doesn't have a family, Brother Tapworth. And he doesn't have any money. I'm sure he regrets dying in our ward, but we just thought that even thougk he had no friends in the world someone might offer him a little kindness on his way out of it."

Her intensity was irresistible, and Mark recognized the hopelessness of getting rid of the box that night. "As long as it's gone tomorrow," he said. A few amenities, and the conversation ended. Mark sat in his chair staring angrily at the coffin. He had come home worried about his health. And found a coffin to greet him when he came. Well, at least it explained why poor Maryjo had been so upset. He heard the children quarreling upstairs. Well, let Maryjo handle it. Their problems would take her mind off this box, anyway.

And so he sat and stared at the coffin for two hours, and had no dinner, and did not particularly notice when Maryjo came downstairs and took the burnt potatoes out of the pressure cooker and threw the entire dinner away and lay down on the sofa in the living room and wept. He watched the patterns of the grain of the coffin, as subtle as flames, winding along the wood. He remembered having taken naps at the age of five in a makeshift bedroom behind a plywood partition in his parents' small home. The wood grain there had been his way of passing the empty sleepless hours. In those days he had been able to see shapes: clouds and faces and battles and monsters. But on the coffin, the wood grain looked more complex and yet far more simple. A road map leading upward to the lid. An engineering drawing describing the decomposition of the body. A graph at the foot of the patient's bed, saying nothing to the patient but speaking death into the trained physician's mind. Mark wondered, briefly, about the bishop, who was even now operating on someone who might very well end up in just such a box as this.

And finally his eyes hurt and he looked at the clock and felt guilty about having spent so long closed off in his study on one of his few nights home early from the office. He meant to get up and find Maryjo and take her up to bed. But instead he got up and went to the coffin and ran his hands along the wood. It felt like glass, because the varnish was so thick and smooth. It was as if the living wood had to be kept away, protected from the touch of a hand. But the wood was not alive, was it? It was being put into the ground also to decompose. The varnish might keep it alive longer. He thought whimsically of what it would be like to varnish a corpse, to preserve it. The Egyptians would have nothing on us then, he thought.

"Don't," said a husky voice from the door. It was Maryjo, her eyes red-rimmed, her face looking slept in.

"Don't what?" Mark asked her. She didn't answer, just glanced down at his hands. To his surprise, Mark noticed that his thumbs were under the lip of the coffin lid, as if to lift it.

"I wasn't going to open it," he said.

"Come upstairs," Maryjo said.

"Are the children asleep?"

He had asked the question innocently, but her face was immediately twisted with pain and grief and anger.

"Children?" she asked. "What is this? And why tonight?"

He leaned against the coffin in suprise. The wheeled table moved slightly.

"We don't have any children," she said.

And Mark remembered with horror that she was right. On the second miscarriage, the doctor had tied her tubes because any further pregnancies would risk her life. There were no children, none at all, and it had devastated her for years; it was only through Mark's great patience and utter dependability that she had been able to stay out of the hospital. Yet when he came home tonight-he tried to remember what he had heard when he came home. Surely he had heard the children runmng back and forth upstairs. Surely--

"I haven't been well," he said.

"If it was a joke, it was sick."

"It wasn't a joke-- it was--" But again he couldn't, at least didn't tell her about the strange memory lapses at the office, even though this was even more proof that something was wrong. He had never had any children in his home, their brothers and sisters had all been discreetly warned not to bring children around poor Maryjo, who was quite distraught to be-- the Old Testament word? --barren.

And he had talked about having children all evening.

"Honey, I'm sorry," he said, trying to put his wholeheart into the apology.

"So am I," she answered, and went upstairs.

Surely she isn't angry at me, Mark thought. Surely she realizes something is wrong. Surely she'll forgive me.

But as he climbed the stairs after her, taking off his shirt as he did, he again heard the voice of a child.

"I want a drink, Mommy." The voice was plaintive, with the sort of whine only possible to a child who is comfortable and sure of love. Mark turned at the landing in time to see Maryjo passing the top of the stairs on the way to the children's bedroom, a glass of water in her hand. He thought nothing of it. The children always wanted extra attention at bedtime.

The children. The children, of course there were children. This was the urgency he had felt in the office, the reason he had to get home. They had always wanted children and so there were children. C. Mark Tapworth always got what he set his heart on.

"Asleep at last," Maryjo said wearily when she came into the room.

Despite her weariness, however, she kissed him good night in the way that told him she wanted to make love. He had never worried much about sex. Let the readers of Reader's Digest worry about how to make their sex lives fuller and richer, he always said. As for him, sex was good, but not the best thing in his life; just one of the ways that he and Maryjo responded to each other. Yet tonight he was disturbed, worried. Not because he could not perform, for he had never been troubled by even temporary impotence except when he had a fever and didn't feel like sex anyway. What bothered him was that he didn't exactly care.

He didn't not care, either. He was just going through the motions as he had a thousand times before, and this time, suddenly, it all seemed so silly, so redolent of petting in the backseat of a car. He felt embarrassed that he should get so excited over a little stroking. So he was almost relieved when one of the children cried out. Usually he would say to ignore the cry, would insist on continuing the lovemaking. But this time he pulled away, put on a robe, went into the other room to quiet the child down.

There was no other room.

Not in this house. He had, in his mind, been heading for their hopeful room filled with crib, changing table, dresser, mobiles, cheerful wallpaper-- but that room had been years ago, in the small house in Sandy, not here in the home in Federal Heights with its magnificent view of Salt Lake City, its beautiful shape and decoration that spoke of taste and shouted of wealth and whispered faintly of loneliness and grief. He leaned against a wall. There were no children. There were no children. He could still hear the child's cry ringing in his mind.

MaryJo stood in the doorway to their bedroom, naked but holding her nightgown in front of her. "Mark," she said. "I'm afraid."

"So am I," he answered.

But she asked him no questions, and he put on his pajamas and they went to bed and as he lay there in darkness listening to his wife's faintly rasping breath he realized that it didn't really matter as much as it ought. He was losing his mind, but he didn't much care. He thought of praying about it, but he had given up praying years ago, though of course it wouldn't do to let anyone else know about his loss of faith, not in a city where it's good business to be an active Mormon. There'd be no help from God on this one, he knew. And not much help from Maryjo, either, for instead of being strong as she usually was in an emergency, this time she would be, as she said, afraid.

"Well, so am I," Mark said to himself. He reached over and stroked his wife's shadowy cheek, realized that there were some creases near the eye, understood that what made her afraid was not his specific ailment, odd as it was, but the fact that it was a hint of aging, of senility, of imminent separation. He remembered the box downstairs, like death appointed to watch for him until at last he consented to go. He briefly resented them for bringing death to his home, for so indecently imposing on them; and then he ceased to care at all. Not about the box, not about his strange lapses of memory, not about anything.

I am at peace, he realized as he drifted off to sleep. I am at peace, and it's not all that pleasant.

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"Mark," said Maryjo, shaking him awake. "Mark, you overslept."

Mark opened his eyes, mumbled something so the shaking would stop, then rolled over to go back to sleep.

"Mark," Maryjo insisted.

"I'm tired," he said in protest.

"I know you are," she said. "So I didn't wake you any sooner. But they just called. There's something of an emergency or something--"

"They can't flush the toilet without someone holding their hands."

"I wish you wouldn't be crude, Mark," Maryjo said. "I sent the children off to school without letting them wake you by kissing you good-bye. They were very upset."

"Good children."

"Mark, they're expecting you at the office."

Mark closed his eyes and spoke in measured tones. "You can tell them and tell them I'll come in when I damn well feel like it and if they can't cope with problem themselves I'll fire them all as incompetents."

Maryjo was silent for a moment. "Mark, I can't say that."

"Word for word. I'm tired. I need a rest. My mind is doing funny things to me." And with that Mark remembered all the illusions of the day before, including the illusion of having children.

"There aren't any children," he said.

Her eyes grew wide. "What do you mean?"

He almost shouted at her, demanded to know what was going on, why she didn't just tell him the truth for a moment. But the lethargy and disinterest clamped down and he said nothing, just rolled back over and looked at the curtains as they drifted in and out with the air conditioning. Soon Maryjo left him, and he heard the sound of machinery starting up downstairs. The washer, the dryer, the dishwasher, the garbage disposer: it seemed that all the machines were going at once. He had never heard the sounds before-- Maryjo never ran them in the evenings or on weekends, when he was home.

At noon he finally got up, but he didn't feel like showering and shaving, though any other day he would have felt dirty and uncomfortable until those rituals were done with. He just put on his robe and went downstairs. He planned to go in to breakfast, but instead he went into his study and opened the lid of the coffin.

It took him a bit of preparation, of course. There was some pacing back and forth before the coffin, and much stroking of the wood, but finally he put his thumbs under the lid and lifted.

The corpse looked stiff and awkward. A man, not particularly old, not particularly young. Hair of a determinedly average color. Except for the grayness of the skin color the body looked completely natural and so utterly average that Mark felt sure he might have seen the man a million times without remembering he had seen him at all. Yet he was unmistakably dead, not because of the cheap satin lining the coffin rather slackly, but because of the hunch of the shoulders, the jut of the chin. The man was not comfortable.

He smelled of embalming fluid.

Mark was holding the lid open with one hand, leaning on the coffin with the other. He was trembling. Yet he felt no excitement, no fear. The trembling was coming from his body, not from anything he could find within his thoughts. The trembling was because it was cold.

There was a soft sound or absence of sound at the door. He turned around abruptly. The lid dropped closed behind him. Maryjo was standing in the door, wearing a frilly housedress, her eyes wide with horror.

In that moment years fell away and to Mark she was twenty, a shy and somewhat awkward girl who was forever being surprised by the way the world actually worked. He waited for her to say, "But Mark, you cheated him." She had said it only once, but ever since then he had heard the words in his mind whenever he was closing a deal. It was the closest thing to a conscience he had in his business dealings. It was enough to get him a reputation as a very honest man.

"Mark," she said softly, as if struggling to keep control of herself, "Mark, I couldn't go on without you." She sounded as if she were afraid something terrible was going to happen to him, and her hands were shaking. He, took a step toward her. She lifted her hands, came to him, clung to him, and cried in a high whimper into his shoulder, "I couldn't. I just couldn't."

"You don't have to," he said, puzzled.

"I'm just not," she said between gentle sobs, "the kind of person who can live alone."

"But even if I, even if something happened to me, Maryjo, you'd have the--" He was going to say the children. Something was wrong with that, though, wasn't there? They loved no one better in the world than their children; no parents had ever been happier than they had been when their two were born. Yet he couldn't say it.

"I'd have what?" Maryjo asked. "Oh, Mark, I'd have nothing."

And then Mark remembered again (what's happening to me!) that they were childless, that to Maryjo, who was old-fashioned enough to regard motherhood as the main purpose for her existence, the fact that they had no hope of children was God's condemnation of her. The only thing that had pulled her through after the operation was Mark, was her fussing over his meaningless and sometimes invented problems at the office or telling him endlessly the events of her lonely days. It was as if he were her anchor to reality, and only he kept her from going adrift in the eddies of her own fears. No wonder the poor girl (for at such times Mark could not think of her as completely adult) was distraught as she thought of Mark's death, and the damned coffin in the house did no good at all.

But I'm in no position to cope with this, Mark thought. I'm falling apart, I'm not only forgetting things, I'm remembering things that didn't happen. And what if I died? What if I suddenly had a stroke like my father had and died on the way to the hospital? What would happen to Maryjo?

She'd never lack for money. Between the business and the insurance, even the house would be paid off, with enough money to live like a queen on the interest. But would the insurance company arrange for someone to hold her patiently while she cried out her fears? Would they provide someone for her to waken in the middle of the night because of the nameless terrors that haunted her?

Her sobs turned into frantic hiccoughs and her fingers dug more deeply into his back through the soft fabric of his robe. See how she clings to me, he thought. She'll never let me go, he thought, and then the blackness came again and again he was falling backward into nothing and again he did not care about anything. Did not even know there was anything to care about.

Except for the fingers pressing into his back and the weight he held in his arms. I do not mind losing the world, he thought. I do not mind losing even my memories of the past. But these fingers. This woman. I cannot lay this burden down because there is no one who can pick it up again. If I mislay her she is lost.

And yet he longed for the darkness, resented her need that held him. Surely there is a way out of this, he thought. Surely a balance between two hungers that leaves both satisfied. But still the hands held him. All the world was silent and the silence was peace except for the sharp, insistent fingers and he cried out in frustration and the sound was still ringing in the room when he opened his eyes and saw Maryjo standing against a wall, leaning against the wall, looking at him in terror.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"I'm losing," he answered. But he could not remember what he had thought to win.

And at that moment a door slammed in the house and Amy came running with little loud feet through the kitchen and into the study, flinging herself on her mother and bellowing about the day at school and the dog that chased her for the second time and how the teacher told her she was the best reader in the second grade but Darrel had spilled milk on her and could she have a sandwich because she had dropped hers and stepped on it accidentally at lunch.

Maryjo looked at Mark cheerfully and winked and laughed. "Sounds like Amy's had a busy day, doesn't it, Mark?"

Mark could not smile. He just nodded as Maryjo straightened Amy's disheveled clothing and led her toward the kitchen.

"Maryjo," Mark said. "There's something I have to talk to you about."

"Can it wait?" Maryjo asked, not even pausing. Mark heard the cupboard door opening, heard the lid come off the peanut butter jar, heard Amy giggle and say, "Mommy, not so thick."

Mark didn't understand why he was so confused and terrified. Amy had had a sandwich after school ever smce she had started going-- even as an infant she had had seven meals a day, and never gained an ounce of fat. It wasn't what was happening in the kitchen that was bothering him, couldn't be. Yet he could not stop himself from crying out, "Maryjo! Maryjo, come here!

"Is Daddy mad?" he heard Amy ask softly.

"No," Maryjo answered, and she bustled back into the room and impatiently said, "What's wrong, dear?"

"I just need-- just need to have you in here for a minute."

"Really, Mark, that's not your style, is it? Amy needs to have a lot of attention right after school, it's the way she is. I wish you wouldn't stay home from work with nothing to do, Mark, you become quite impossible around the house." She smiled to show that she was only half serious and left again to go back to Amy.

For a moment Mark felt a terrible stab of jealousy that Maryjo was far more sensitive to Amy's needs than to his.

But that jealousy passed quickly, like the memory of the pain of Maryjo's fingers pressing into his back, and with a tremendous feeling of relief Mark didn't care about anything at all, and he turned around to the coffin, which fascinated him, and he opened the lid again and looked inside. It was as if the poor man had no face at all, Mark realized. As if death stole faces from people and made them anonymous even to themselves.

He ran his fingers back and forth across the satin and it felt cool and inviting. The rest of the room, the rest of the world receded into deep background. Only Mark and the coffin and the corpse remained and Mark felt very tired and very hot, as if life itself were a terrible friction making heat within him, and he took off his robe and pajamas and awkwardly climbed on a chair and stepped over the edge into the coffin and knelt and then lay down. There was no other corpse to share the slight space with him; nothing between his body, and the cold satin, and as he lay on it it didn't get any warmer because at last the friction was slowing, was cooling, and he reached up and pulled down the lid and the world was dark and silent and there was no odor and no taste and no feel but the cold of the sheets.

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"Why is the lid closed?" asked little Amy, holding her mother's hand.

"Because it's not the body we must remember," Marylo said softly, with careful control, "but the way Daddy always was. We must remember him happy and laughing and loving us."

Amy looked puzzled. "But I remember he spanked me."

Maryjo nodded, smiling, something she had not done recently. "It's all right to remember that, too," Maryjo said, and then she took her daughter from the coffin back into the living room, where Amy, not realizing yet the terrible loss she had sustained, laughed and climbed on Grandpa.

David, his face serious and tear-stained because he did understand, came and put his hand in his mother's hand and held tightly to her. "We'll be fine," he said.

"Yes," Maryjo answered. "I think so."

And her mother whispered in her ear, "I don't know how you can stand it so bravely, my dear."

Tears came to Maryjo's eyes. "I'm not brave at all," she whispered back. "But the children. They depend on me so much. I can't let go when they're leaning on me."

"How terrible it would be, " her mother said, nodding wisely, "if you had no children."

Inside the coffin, his last need fulfilled, Mark Tapworth heard it all, but could not hold it in his mind, for in his mind there was space or time for only one thought: consent. Everlasting consent to his life, to his death, to the world, and to the everlasting absence of the world. For now there were children.

## SAVING GRACE Orson Scott Card

And he looked into her eyes, and lo! when her gaze fell upon him he did verity turn to stone, for her visage was wondrous ugly. Praise the Lord.

Mother came home depressed as hell with a bag full of groceries and a headache fit to turn her hair turn to snakes. Billy, he knew when Mommy was like that, he could tell as soon as she grumped through the living room. But if she was full of hellfire, he had the light of heaven, and so he said, "Don't be sad, Mother, Jesus loves you."

Mother put the margarine into the fridge and wiped the graham cracker crumbs off the table and dumped them in the sink even though the disposal hadn't worked for years. "Billy," she said quietly, "you been saved again?"

"I only was just going to look inside."

"Ought to sue those bastards. Burn down their tent or something. Why can't they do their show from a studio like everybody else?"

"I felt my sins just weighing me down and then he reached out and Jesus come into my heart and I had to be baptized."

At the word baptized, Mommy slammed the kitchen counter. The mixing bowl bounced. "Not again, you damn near got pneumonia the last time!"

"This time I dried my hair."

"It isn't sanitary!"

"I was the first one in. Everybody was crying."

"Well, you just listen! I tell you not to go there, and I mean it! You look at me when I'm talking to you, young man."

Her irresistible fingers lifted up his chip. Billy felt like he was living in a Bible story. He could almost hear Bucky Fay himself telling the tale: And he looked into her eyes, and lo! when her gaze fell upon him he did verily turn to stone, and he could not move though he sorely feared that he might wet his pants, for her visage was wondrous ugly. Praise the Lord.

"Now you promise me you won't go into that tent anymore, ever, because you

got no resistance at all, you just come straight home, you hear me?"

He could not move until at last she despaired and looked away, and then he found his voice and said, "What else am I supposed to do after school?"

Today was different from all the other times they had this argument: this time his mother leaned on the counter and sobbed into the waffle mix. Billy came and put his arm around her and leaned his head on her hip. She turned and held him close and said, "If that son-of-a-bitch hadn't left me you might've had some brothers and sisters to come home to." They made waffles together, and while Billy pried pieces of overcooked waffle out of the waffle iron with a bent table knife, he vowed that he would not cause his mother such distress again. The revival tent could flap its wings and lift up its microwave dish to take part in the largess of heaven, but Billy would look the other way for his mother's sake, for she had suffered enough.

Yet he couldn't keep his thoughts away from the tent, because when they were telling what was coming up soon they had said that Bucky Fay was coming. Bucky Fay, the healer of channel 49, who had been known to exorcise that demon cancer and cast out kidney stones in the name of the Lord; Bucky Fay, who looked to Billy like the picture Mommy kept hidden in the back of her top drawer, the picture of his father, the son-of-a-bitch. Billy wanted to see the man with the healing hands, see him in the flesh.

"Mommy," he said. On TV the skinny people were praising Diet Pepsi.

"Mm?" Mommy didn't look up.

"I wish my foot was all twisted up so I couldn't walk."

Now she looked up. "My Lord, what for!"

"So Jesus could turn it around."

"Billy, that's disgusting."

"When the miracle goes through you, Mommy, it knocks you on the head and then you fall down and get all better. A little girl with no arm got a new arm from God. They said so."

"Child, they've turned you superstitious."

"I wish I had a club foot, so Jesus would do a miracle on me."

God moves in mysterious ways, but this time he was pretty direct. Of all

the half-assed wishes that got made and prayers that got said, Billy's got answered. Billy's mother was brooding about how the boy was going off the deep end. She decided she had to get him out doing things that normal kids do. The movie playing at the local family-oriented moviehouse was the latest go-round of Pollyanna. They went and watched and Billy learned a lesson. Billy saw how good this little girl was, and how preachers liked her, and first thing you know he was up on the roof, figuring out how to fall off just right so you smash your legs but don't break your back.

Never did get it right. Broke his back, clean as could be, spinal cord severed just below the shoulders, and there he was in a wheelchair, wearing diapers and pissing into a plastic bag. In the hospital he watched TV, a religious station that had God's chosen servants on all day, praising and praying and saving. And they had Bucky Fay himself, praise the Lord, Bucky Fay himself making the deaf to hear and the arthritic to move around and the audience to be generous, and there sat Billy, more excited than he had ever been before, because now he was ripe and ready for a miracle.

"Not a chance in the world," his mother said. "By God I'm going to get you uncrazy, and the last place I'm going to take you is anywhere in earshot of those lying cheating hypocritical so-called healers."

But there's not many people in the world can say no more than two or three times to a paralyzed kid in a wheelchair, especially if he's crying, and besides, Mommy thought, maybe there's something to faith. Lord knows the boy's got that, even if he doesn't have a single nerve in his legs. And if there's even a chance of maybe giving him back some of his body, what harm can it do?

Once inside the tent, of course, she thought of other things. What if it is a fraud, which of course it is, and what happens when the boy finds out? What then? So she whispered to him, "Billy, now don't go expecting too much."

"I'm not." Just a miracle, that's all. They do them all the time, Mommy.

"I just don't want you to be disappointed when nothing happens."

"I won't be disappointed, Mommy." No. He'll fix me right up.

And then the nice lady leaned over and asked, "You here to be healed?"

Billy only nodded, recognizing her as Bucky Fay's helper lady who always said "Oh, my sweet Lord Jesus you're so kind" when people got healed, said it in a way that made your spine tingle. She was wearing a lot of makeup. Billy could see she had a moustache with makeup really packed onto it. He

wondered if she was really secretly a man as she wheeled him up to the front. But why would a man wear a dress? He was wondering about that as she got him in place, lined up with the other wheelchair people on the front row.

A man came along and knelt down in front of him. Billy got ready to pray, but the man just talked normal, so Billy opened his eyes. "Now this one's going on TV," the man said, "and for the TV show we need you to be real careful, son. Don't say anything unless Bucky asks you a direct question, and then you just tell him real quick. Like when he asks you how come you got in a wheelchair, what'll you tell him?"

"I'll say-- I'll say--"

"Now don't go freezing up on him, or it'll look real bad. This is on TV, remember. Now you just tell me how come you got in a wheelchair."

"So I could get healed by the power of Jesus."

The man looked at him a moment, and then he said, "Sure. I guess you'll do just fine. Now when it's all over, and you're healed, I'll be right there, holding you by the arm. Now don't say Thank the Lord right off. You wait till I squeeze your arm, and then you say it. Okay?"

"Okay."

"For the TV, you know."

"Yeah."

"Don't be nervous."

"I won't."

The man went away but he was back in just a second looking worried. "You can feel things in your arms, can't you?"

Billy lifted his arms and waved them up and down. "My arms are just fine." The man nodded and went away again.

There was nothing to do but watch, then, and Billy watched, but he didn't see much. On the TV, all you could see was Bucky Fay, but here the camera guys kept getting in front of him, and people were going back and forth all during the praising time and the support this ministry time so Billy could hardly keep track of what was going on. Till the man who talked to him came over to him again, and this time a younger guy was with him, and they

lifted Billy out of his chair and carried him over toward where the lights were so bright, and the cameras were turned toward him, and Bucky Fay was saying, "And now who is first, thanks be to the Lord? Are you that righteous young man who the devil has cursed to be a homophiliac? Come here, boy! God's going to give you a blood transfusion from the hemoglobin of the Holy Spirit!"

Billy didn't know what to do. If he said anything before Bucky Fay asked him a question, the man would be mad, but what good would it do if Bucky Fay ordered up the wrong miracle? But then he saw how the man who had talked to him turned his face away from the camera and mouthed, "Paralyzed," and Bucky Fay caught it and went right on, saying "Do you think the Saviour is worried? Paralyzed you are, too, completely helpless, and yet when the miracle comes into your body, do you think the Holy Spirit needs the doctor's diagnosis? No, praise the Lord, the Holy Spirit goes all through you, hunting down every place where the devil has hurt you, where the devil that great serpent has poisoned you, where the devil that mighty dragon has thought he could destroy you-- boy, are you saved?"

It was a direct question. "Uh huh."

"Has the Lord come to you in the waters of baptism and washed away your sins and made you clean?"

Billy wasn't sure what that all meant, but after a second the man squeezed his arm, and so Billy said, "Thank the Lord."

"What the baptism did to the outside of your body, the miracle will do to the inside of your body. Do you believe that Jesus can heal you?"

Billy nodded.

"Oh, be not ashamed, little child. Speak so all the millions of our television friends can hear you. Can Jesus heal you?"

"Yes! I know he can!"

Bucky Fay smiled, and his face went holy; he spat on his hands, clapped twice, and then slapped Billy in the forehead, splashing spit all over his face, just that very second the two men holding him sort of half-dropped him, and as he clutched forward with his hands he realized that all those times when people seemed to be overcome by the Holy Spirit, they were just getting dropped, but that was probably part of the miracle. They got him down on the floor and Bucky Fay went on talking about the Lord knowing the pure in heart, and then the two men picked him up and this time stood him on his legs. Billy couldn't feel a thing, but he did know that he was standing. They were helping him balance, but his weight was on his legs, and the miracle had worked. He almost praised God right then, but he remembered in time, and waited.

"I bet you feel a little weak, don't you," said Bucky Fay.

Was that a direct question? Billy wasn't sure, so he just nodded his head.

"When the Holy Spirit went through the Apostle Paul, didn't he lie upon the ground? Already you are able to stand upon your legs, and after a good night's sleep, when your body has strengthened itself after being inhabited by the Spirit of the Lord, you'll be restored to your whole self, good as new!"

Then the man squeezed Billy's arm. "Praise the Lord," Billy said. But that was wrong-- it was supposed to be thank the Lord, and so he said it even louder, "Thank the Lord."

And now with the cameras on him, the two men holding him worked the real miracle, for they turned him and leaned him forward, and pulled him along back to the wheelchair. As they pulled him, they rocked him back and forth, and under him Billy could hear his shoes scuffing the ground, left, right, left, right, just as if he was walking. But he wasn't walking. He couldn't feel a thing. And then he knew. All those miracles, all those walkIng people-- they had men beside them, leaning them left, leaning them right, making their legs fall forward, just like dolls, just like dummies, real dummies. And Billy cried. They got the camera real close to him then, to show the tears streaking down his face. The crowd applauded and praised.

"He's new at walking," Bucky Fay shouted into the microphone. "He isn't used to so much exercise. Let that boy ride in his chair again until he has a chance to build up his strength. But praise the Lord! We know that the miracle is done, Jesus has given this boy his legs and healed his hemophobia, too!" As the woman wheeled him down the aisle, the people reached out to touch him, said kind and happy things to him, and he cried. His mother was crying for joy. She embraced him and said, "You walked," and Billy cried harder. Out in the car he told her the truth. She looked off toward the brightly lit door of that flamboyant, that seductive tent, and she said, "God damn him to burn in hell forever." But Billy was quite, quite sure that God would do no such thing.

Not that Billy doubted God. No, God had all power, God was a granter of prayers. God was even fair-minded, after his fashion. But Billy knew now that when God set himself to balance things in the world, he did it sneaky. He did it tricky. He did it ass-backward, so that anybody who wanted to could see his works in the world and still doubt God. After all, what good

was faith if God went around leaving plain evidence of his goodness in the world? No, not God. His goodness would be kept a profound secret, Billy knew that. Just a secret God kept to himself.

And sure enough, when God set out to even things up for Billy, he didn't do the obvious thing. He didn't let the nerves heal, he didn't send the miracle of feeling, the blessing of pain into Billy's empty legs. Instead God, who probably had a bet on with Satan about this one, gave Billy another gift entirely, an unlooked-for blessing that would break his heart.

Mother was wheeling Billy around the park. It was a fine summer day, which means that the humidity was so high that fish could live for days out of the water. Billy was dripping sweat, and he knew that when he got home he'd have a hell of a diaper rash, and Mother would say, "Oh you poor dear," and Billy would grieve because it didn't even itch. The river was flowing low and there were big rocks uncovered by the shore. Billy sat there watching the kids climb around on the rocks. His mother saw what he was watching and tried to take him away so he wouldn't get depressed about how he couldn't climb, but Billy wouldn't let her. He just stayed and watched. He picked out one kid in particular, a pretty-faced body with a muscled chest, about two years older than Billy. He watched everything that boy did, and pretended that he was doing it. That was a good thing to do, Billy would rather do that than anything, watch this boy play for him on the rocks.

But all the time there was this idiot girl watching Billy. She was on the grass, far back from the shore, where all the cripples have to stay. She walked like an inchworm almost, each step a major event, as if she was a big doll with a little driver inside working the controls, and the driver wasn't very good at it yet. Billy tried to watch the golden body of the pretty-faced boy, but this spastic girl kept lurching around at the edges of his eyes.

"Make that retard go away," Billy whispered.

"What?" asked Mother.

"I don't want to look at that retard girl."

"Then don't look at her."

"Make her go away. She keeps looking at me."

Mother patted Billy's shoulder. "Other people got rights, Billy. I can't make her go away from the park. You want me to take you somewhere else?"

"No." Not while the golden boy was standing tall on the rocks, extending

himself to snatch Frisbies out of the air without falling. Like God catching lightning and laughing in delight.

The spastic girl came closer and closer, in her sidewise way. And Billy grew more and more determined not to pay the slightest heed to her. It was obvious, though, that she was coming to him, that she meant to reach him, and as he sat there he grew afraid. What would she do? His greatest fear was of someone snatching his urine bag from between his legs and holding it up, the catheter tugging away at him, and everybody laughing and laughing. That was what he hated worst, living his life like a tire with a slow leak. He knew that she would grab between his legs for the urine bag under his lap robe, and probably spill it all over, she was such a spastic. But he said nothing of his fear, just waited, holding onto his lap, watching the golden boy jump from the high rock into the river in, order to splash the kids were perched on the lesser rocks.

Then the spastic girl touched him. Thumped her club of a hand into his arm and moaned loudly. Billy cried out, "Oh, God!" The girl shuddered and fell to the ground, weeping.

All at once every single person in the park ran over and leaned around, jostling and looking. Billy held tight to his lap robe, lest someone pull it away. The spastic girl's parents were all apology, she'd never done anything like that, she usually just kept to herself, we're so sorry, so terribly sorry. They lifted the girl to her feet, tried to lead her away, but she shrugged them off violently. She shuddered again, and formed her mouth elaborately to make a word. Her parents watched her lips intently, but when the words came, they were clear. "I am better," she said.

Carefully she took a step, not toward her parents, but toward Billy. The step was not a lurch controlled by a clumsy little puppeteer. It slow and uncertain, but it was a human step. "He healed me," she said.

Step after step, each more deft than the last, and Billy forgot all about his lap robe. She was healed, she was whole. She had touched him and now was cured.

"Praise God," someone in the crowd said.

"It's just like on TV," someone else said.

"Saw it with my own two eyes."

And the girl fell to her knees beside Billy and kissed his hand and wept and wept.

They started coming after that, as word spread. Just a shy-looking man at the front door, a pesky fat lady with a skinny brother, a mother with two mongoloid children. All the freaks in Billy's town, all the sufferers, all the desperate seemed to find the way to his house. "No," Billy told Mother again and again. "I don't want to see nobody."

"But it's a little baby," Mother said. "He's so sweet. He's been through so much pain."

They came in, one by one, and demanded or begged or praytd or just timidly whispered to him, "Heal me." Then Billy would sit there, trembling, as they reached out and touched him. When they knew that they were healed, and they always were, they cried and kissed and praised and thanked and offered money. Billy always refused the money and said precious little else. "Aren't you going to give the glory to God?" asked one lady, whose son Billy healed of leukemia. But Billy just looked at his lap robe until she went away.

The first reporters came from the grocery store papers, the ones that always know about the UFOs. They kept asking him to prophesy the future, until Billy told Mother not to let them come in anymore. Mother tried to keep them out, but they even pretended to be cripples in order to get past the door. They wrote stories about the "crippled healer" and kept quoting Billy as saying things that he never said. They also published his address.

Hundreds of people came every day now, a constant stream all day. One lady with a gimp leg said, "Praise the Lord, it was worth the hundred dollars."

"What hundred dollars?" asked Billy.

"The hundred dollars I give your mother. I give the doctors a thousand bucks and the government give them ten thousand more and they never done a damn thing for me."

Billy called Mother. She came in. "This woman says she gave you a hundred dollars."

"I didn't ask for the money," Mother said.

"Give it back," Billy said.

Mother took the money out of her apron and gave it back. The woman clucked about how she didn't mind either way and left.

"I ain't no Bucky Fay," Billy said.

"Of course you ain't," Mother said. "When people touch you, they get better."

"No money, from nobody."

"That's real smart," Mother said. "I lost my job last week, Billy. I'm home all day just keeping them away from you. How are we going to live?"

Billy just sat there, trying to think about it. "Don't let them in anymore," he said. "Lock the doors and go to work."

Mother started to cry. "Billy, I can't stand it if you don't let them in. All those babies; all those twisted-up people, all those cancers and the fear of death in their faces, I can't stand it except that somehow, by some miracle, when they come in your room and touch you, they come out whole. I don't know how to turn them away. Jesus gave you a gift I didn't think existed in the world, but it didn't belong to you, Billy. It belongs to them."

"I touch myself every day," Billy whispered, "and I never get better."

From then on Mother only took half of whatever people offered, and only after they were healed, so people wouldn't get the idea that the healing depended on the money. That way she was able to scrape up enough to keep the roof over their heads and food on the table. "There's a lot less thankful money than bribe money in the world," she said to Billy. Billy just ate, being careful not to spill hot soup on his lap, because he'd never know if he scalded himself.

Then one day the TV cameras came, and the movie cameras, and set up on the lawn and in, the street outside.

"What the hell are you doing?" demanded Billy's mother.

"Bucky Fay's coming to meet the crippled healer," said the movie man. "We want to have this for Bucky Fay's show."

"If you try to bring one little camera inside our house I'll have the police on you."

"The public's got a right to know," said the man, pointing the camera at her.

"The public's got a right to kiss my ass," said Mother, and she went back into the house and told everybody to go away and come back tomorrow, they were locking up the house for the day. Mother and Billy watched through the lacy curtains while Bucky Fay got out of his limousine and waved at the cameras and the people crowded around in the street.

"Don't let him in, Mother," said Billy.

Bucky Fay knocked on the door.

"Don't answer," said Billy.

Bucky Fay knocked and knocked. Then he gestured to the cameramen and they

all went back to their vans and all of Bucky Fay's helpers went back to their cars and the police held the crowd far away, and Bucky Fay started talking.

"Billy," said Bucky Fay, "I don't aim to hurt you. You're a true healer, I just want to shake your hand."

"Don't let him touch me again," said Billy. Mother shook her head.

"If you let me help you, you can heal hundreds and hundreds more people, all around the world, and bring millions of TV viewers to Jesus."

"The boy don't want you," Mother said.

"Why are you afraid of me? I didn't give you your gift, God did."

"Go away!" Billy shouted.

There was silence for a moment outside the door. Then Bucky Fay's voice came again, softer, and it sounded like he was holding back a sob. "Billy, why do you think I come to you? I am the worst son-of-a-bitch I know, and I come for you to heal me."

That was not a thing that Billy had ever thought to hear from Bucky Fay.

Bucky Fay was talking soft now, so it was sometimes hard to understand him. "In the name of Jesus, boy, do you think I woke up one morning and said to myself, 'Bucky Fay, go out and be a healer and you'll get rich'? Think I said that? No sir. I had a gift once. Like yours, I had a gift. I found it one day when I was swimming at the water hole with my big brother Jeddy. Jeddy, he was a show-off, he was always tempting Death to come for him, and that day he dove right down from the highest branch and plunked his head smack in the softest, stickiest mud on the bottom of Pachuckamunkey River.

Took fifteen minutes just to get his head loose. They brought him to shore and he was dead, his face all covered with mud. And I screamed and cried out loud, 'God, you ain't got no right!' and then I touched my brother, and smacked him on the head, I said, 'God damn you, Jeddy, you pin-headed jackass, you ain't dead, get up and walk!' And that was when I discovered I had the gift. Because Jeddy reached up and wiped the mud off his eyes and rolled over and puked the black Pachukey water all over grass there. 'Thank you Jesus,' I said. In those days I could lay hands on mules with bent legs and they'd go straight. A baby with measles, and his spots would go. I had a good heart then. I healed colored people, and in those days even the doctors wouldn't go so far as that. But then they offered me money, and I took it, and they asked me to preach even though I didn't know a damn thing, and so I preached, and pretty soon I found myself in a jet airplane that I owned flying over an airstrip that I owned heading for a TV station that I owned and I said to myself, Bucky Fay, you haven't healed a soul in twenty years. A few folks have gotten better because of their own faith. but you lost the gift. You threw it away for the sake of money." On the other side of the door Bucky Fay wailed in anguish. "Oh, God in heaven, let me in this door or I will die!"

Billy nodded, tears in his eyes, and Mother opened the door. Bucky Fay was on his knees leaning against the door so he nearly fell into the room. He didn't even stand up to walk over to Billy, just crawled most of the way and then said, "Billy, the light of God is in your eyes. Heal me of my affliction! My disease is love of money! My disease is forgetting the Lord God of heaven! Heal me and let me have my gift back again, and I will never stray, not ever so long as I live!"

Billy reached out his hand. Slow and trembling, Bucky Fay gently took that hand and kissed it, and touched it to the tears hot and wet on his cheeks. "You have given me," he said, "you have given me this day a gift that I never thought to have again. I am whole!" He got up, kissed Billy on both cheeks, then stepped back. "Oh, my child, I will pray for you. With all my heart I will pray that God will remove your paralysis from your legs. For I believe he gave you your paralysis to teach you compassion for the cripple, just as he gave me temptation to teach me compassion for the sinner. God bless you, Billy, Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah," said Billy softly. He was crying too-- couldn't help it, he felt so good. He had longed for vengeance, and instead he had forgiven, and he felt holy.

That is, until he realized that the TV cameras had come in right behind Bucky Fay, and were taking a close-up of Billy's tear-stained face, of Mother wringing her hands and weeping. Bucky Fay walked out the door, his clenched fist high above his head, and the crowd outside greeted him with a cheer. "Hallelujah!" shouted Bucky. "Jesus has made me whole!"

It played real well on the religious station. Bucky Fay's repentance-- oh, how the crowds in the studio audience gasped at his confession. How the people wept at the moment when Billy reached out his hand. It was a fine show. And at the end, Bucky Fay wept again. "Oh, my friends who have trusted me, you have seen the mighty change in my heart. From now on I will wear the one suit that you see me wearing now. I have forsaken my diamond cuff links and my Lear jet and my golf course in Louisiana. I am so ashamed of what I was before God healed me with the hands of that little crippled boy. I tell all of you-- send me no more money! Don't send me a single dime to post office box eight three nine, Christian City, Louisiana 70539. I am not fit to have your money. Contribute your tithes and offerings to worthier men than I. Send me nothing!--"

Then he knelt and bowed his head for a moment, and then looked up again, out into the audience, into the cameras, tears flowing down his face. "Unless. Unless you forgive me. Unless you believe that Jesus has changed me before your very eyes."

Mother switched off the TV savagely.

"After seeing all those other people get better," Billy whispered, "I thought he might've gotten better, too."

Mother shook her head and looked away. "What he got isn't a disease." Then she bent over the wheelchair and hugged him. "I feel so bad, Billy!"

"I don't feel bad," Billy said. "Jesus cured the blind people and the deaf people and the crippled people and the lepers. But as far as I remember, the Bible don't say he ever cured even one son-ofa-bitch."

She was still hugging him, which he didn't mind even though he near smothered in her bosom. Now she chuckled. It was all right, if Mother chuckled about it. "Guess you're right about that," Mother said. "Even Jesus did no better."

For a while they had a rest, because the people who believed went to Bucky Fay and the doubters figured that Billy was no better. The newspaper and TV people stopped coming around, too, because Billy never put on a show for them and never said anything that people would pay money to read. Then, after a while, the sick people started coming back, just a few a week at first, and then more and more. They were uncertain, skeptical. They hadn't heard of Billy on TV lately, hadn't read about him either, and he lived in such a poor neighborhood, with no signs or anything. More than once a car with out-of-state plates drove back and forth in front of the house before it stopped and someone came in. The ones who came were those who had lost all other hope, who were willing to try anything, even something as unlikely as this. They had heard a rumor, someone had a cousin whose best friend was healed. They always felt like such damn fools visiting this crippled kid, but it was better than sitting home waiting for death.

So they came, more and more of them. Mother had to quit her job again. All day Billy waited in his bedroom for them to come in. They always looked so distant, guarding themselves against another disillusionment. Billy, too, was afraid, waiting for the day when someone would place a baby in his arms and the child would die, the healing power gone out of him. But it didn't happen, day after day it didn't happen, and the people kept coming fearful and departing in joy.

Mother and Billy lived pretty poorly, since they only took money that came from gratitude instead of money meant to buy. But Billy had a decent life, if you don't mind being paralyzed and stuck home all the time, and Mother didn't mind too much either, since there was always the sight of the blind seeing and the crippled walking and those withered-up children coming out whole and strong.

Then one day after quite a few years there came a young woman who wasn't sick. She was healthy and tall and nice-looking, in a kitcheny kind of way. She had rolled-up sleeves and hands that looked like they'd met dishwater before, and she walked right into the house and said, "Make room, I'm moving in."

"Now, girl, " said Mother, "we got a small house and no room to put you up. I think you got the wrong idea of what kind of Christian charity we offer here."

"Yes, Ma'am. I know just what you do. Because I am the little girl who touched Billy that day by the riverside and started all your misery."

"Now, girl, you know that didn't start our misery."

"I've never forgotten. I grew up and went through two husbands and had no children and no memory of real love except for what I saw in the face of a crippled boy at the riverside, and I thought, 'He needs me, and I need him.' So here I am, I'm here to help, tell me what to do and step aside."

Her name was Madeleine and she stayed from then on. She wasn't noisy and she wasn't bossy, she just worked her share and got along. It was hard to know for sure why it was so, but with Madeleine there, even with no money and no legs, Billy's life was good. They sang a lot of songs, Mother and Billy and Madeleine, sang and played games and talked about a lot of things, when the visitors gave them time. And only once in all those years did Madeleine ever talk to Billy about religion. And then it was just a question.

"Billy," asked Madeleine, "are you God?"

Billy shook his head. "God ain't no cripple."

## ST. AMY'S TALE Orson Scott Card

Mother could kill with her hands. Father could fly. These are miracles. But they were not miracles then. Mother Elouise taught me that there were no miracles then.

I am the child of Wreckers, born while the angel was in them. This is why I am called Saint Amy, though I perceive nothing in me that should make me holier than any other old woman. Yet Mother Elouise denied the angel in her, too, and it was no less there.

Sift your fingers through the soil, all you who read my words. Take your spades of iron and your picks of stone. Dig deep. You will find no ancient works of man hidden there. For the Wreckers passed through the world, and all the vanity was consumed in fire; all the pride broke in pieces when it was smitten by God's shining hand.

Elouise leaned on the rim of the computer keyboard. All around her the machinery was alive, the screens displaying information. Elouise felt nothing but weariness. She was leaning because, for a moment, she had felt a frightening vertigo. As if the world underneath the airplane had dissolved and slipped away into a rapidly receding star and she would never be able to land.

True enough, she thought. I'll never be able to land, not in the world I knew.

"Getting sentimental about the old computers?"

Elouise, startled, turned in her chair and faced her husband, Charlie. At that moment the airplane lurched, but like sailors accustomed to the shifting of the sea, they adjusted unconsciously and did not notice the imbalance.

"Is it noon already?" she asked.

"It's the mortal equivalent of noon. I'm too tired to fly this thing anymore, and it's a good thing Bill's at the controls."

"Hungry?"

Charlie shook his head. "But Amy probably is," he said.

"Voyeur," said Elouise.

Charlie liked to watch Elouise nurse their daughter. But despite her accusation, Elouise knew there was nothing sexual in it. Charlie liked the idea of Elouise

being Amy's mother. He liked the way Amy's sucking resembled the sucking of a calf or a lamb or a puppy. He had said, "It's the best thing we kept from the

animals. The best thing we didn't throw away."

"Better than sex?" Elouise had asked. And Charlie had only smiled.

Amy was playing with a rag doll in the only large clear space in the airplane, near the exit door. "Mommy Mommy Mamommy Mommyo," Amy said. The child stood and reached to be picked up. Then she saw Charlie. "Daddy Addy Addy."

"Hi," Charlie said.

"Hi," Amy answered. "Ha-ee." She had only just learned to close the diphthong, and she exaggerated it. Amy played with the buttons on Elouise's shirt, trying to undo them.

"Greedy," Elouise said, laughing.

Charlie unbuttoned the shirt for her, and Amy seized on the nipple after only one false grab. She sucked noisily, tapping her hand gently against Elouise's breast as she ate.

"I'm glad we're so near finished," Elouise said. "She's too old to be nursing now."

"That's right. Throw the little bird out of the nest."

"Go to bed," Elouise said.

Amy recognized the phrase. She pulled away. "La-lo," she said.

"That's right. Daddy's going to sleep," Elouise said.

Elouise watched as Charlie stripped off most of his clothing and lay down on the pad. He smiled once, then turned over, and was immediately asleep. He was in tune with his body. Elouise knew that he would awaken in exactly six hours, when it was time for him to take the controls again.

Amy's sucking was a subtle pleasure now, though it had been agonizing the first few months, and painful again when Amy's first teeth had come in and she had learned to her delight that by nipping she could make her mother scream. But better to nurse her than ever have her eat the predigested pap that was served as food on the airplane. Elouise thought wryly that it was even worse than the microwaved veal cordon bleu that they used to inflict on commercial passengers. Only eight years ago. And they had calibrated their fuel so exactly that when they took the last draft of fuel from the last of their storage tanks, the tank registered empty; they would burn the last of the processed petroleum, instead of putting it back into the earth. All their caches were gone now, and they would be at the tender mercies of the world that they themselves had created.

Still, there was work to do; the final work, in the final checks. Elouise held Amy with one arm while she used her free hand slowly to key in the last program that her role as commander required her to use. Elouise Private, she typed. Teacher teacher I declare I see someone's underwear, she typed. On the screen appeared the warning she had put there: "You may think you're lucky finding this program, but unless you know the magic words, an alarm is going to go off all over this airplane and you'll be had. No way out of it, sucker. Love, Elouise."

Elouise, of course, knew the magic words. Einstein sucks, she typed. The screen went

blank, and the alarm did not go off.

Malfunction? she queried. "None," answered the computer.

Tamper? she queried, and the computer answered, "None."

Nonreport? she queried, and the computer flashed, "AFscanP7bb55."

Elouise had not really been dozing. But still she was startled, and she lurched forward, disturbing Amy, who really had fallen asleep. "No no no," said Amy, and Elouise forced herself to be patient; she soothed her -daughter back to sleep before pursuing whatever it was that her guardian program had caught. Whatever it was? Oh, she knew what it was. It was treachery. The one thing she had been sure her group, her airplane would never have. Other groups of Rectifiers-wreckers, they called themselves, having adopted their enemies' name for them - other groups had had their spies or their faint hearts, but not Bill or Heather or Ugly-Bugly.

Specify, she typed.

The computer was specific.

Over northern Virginia, as the airplane followed its careful route to find and destroy everything made of metal, glass, and plastic; somewhere over northern Virginia, the airplanes path bent slightly to the south, and on the return, at the same place, the airplane's path bent slightly to the north, so that a strip of northern Virginia two kilometers long and a few dozen meters wide could contain some nonbiodegradable artifact, hidden from the airplane, and if Elouise had not queried this program,

she would never have known it.

But she should have known it. When the plane's course bent, alarms should have sounded. Someone had penetrated the first line of defense. But Bill could not have done that, nor could Heather, really-they didn't have the sophistication to break up a bubble program. Ugly-Bugly?

She knew it wasn't faithful old Ugly-Bugly. No, not her.

The computer voluntarily flashed, "Override M577b, commandmo4, intwis CtTttT." It was an apology. Someone aboard ship had found the alarm override program and the overrides for the alarm overrides. Not my fault, the computer was saying.

Elouise hesitated for a moment. She looked down at her daughter and moved a curl of red hair away from Amy's eye. Elouise's hand trembled. But she was a woman of ice, yes, all frozen where compassion made other women warm. She prided herself on that, on having frozen the last warm places in her-frozen so goddamn rigid that it was only a moment's hesitation. And then she reached out and asked for the access code used to perform the treachery, asked for the name of the traitor.

The computer was even less compassionate than Elouise. It hesitated not at all.

The computer did not underline; the letters on the screen were no larger than normal. Yet Elouise felt the words as a shout, and she answered them silently with a scream.

Charles Evan Hardy, b24ag61-richlandWA.

It was Charlie who was the traitor-Charlie, her sweet, soft, hard-bodied husband, Charlie who secretly was trying to undo the end of the world.

God has destroyed the world before. Once in a flood, when Noah rode it out in the Ark. And once the tower of the world's pride was destroyed in the confusion of tongues. The other times, if there were any other times, those times are all forgotten.

The world will probably be destroyed again, unless we repent. And don't think you can hide from the angels. They start out as ordinary people, and you never know which ones. Suddenly God puts the power of destruction in their hands, and they destroy. And just as suddenly, when all the destruction is done, the angel leaves them, and they're ordinary people. Just my mother and my father.

I can't remember Father Charlie's face. I was too young.

Mother Elouise told me often about Father Charlie. He was born far to the west in a land where water only comes to the crops in ditches, almost never from the sky. It was a land unblessed by God. Men lived there, they believed, only by the strength of their own hands. Men made their ditches and forgot about God and became scientists. Father Charlie became a scientist. He worked on tiny animals, breaking their heart of hearts and combining it in new ways. Hearts were broken too often where he worked, and one of the little animals escaped and killed people until they lay in great heaps like fish in the ship's hold.

But this was not the destruction of the world.

Oh, they were giants in those days, and they forgot the Lord, but when their people lay in piles of moldering flesh and brittling bone, they remembered they were weak.

Mother Elouise said, "Charlie came weeping." This is how Father Charlie became an angel. He saw what the giants had done, by thinking they were greater than God. At first he sinned in his grief. Once he cut his own throat. They put Mother Elouise's blood in him to save his life. This is how they met: In the forest where he had gone to die privately, Father Charlie woke up from a sleep he thought would be forever to see a woman lying next to him in the tent and a doctor bending over them both. When he saw that this woman gave her blood to him whole and unstintingly, he forgot his wish to die. He loved her forever. Mother Elouise said he loved her right up to the day she killed him.

When they were finished, they had a sort of ceremony, a sort of party. "A benediction," said Bill, solemnly sipping at the gin. "Amen and amen."

"My shift," Charlie said, stepping into the cockpit. Then he noticed that everyone was there and that they were drinking the last of the gin, the bottle that had been saved for the end. "Well, happy us," Charlie said, smiling.

Bill got up from the controls of the 787. "Any preferences on where we set down?" he asked. Charlie took his place.

The others looked at one another. UglyBugly shrugged. "God, who ever thought about it?"

"Come on, we're all futurists," Heather said. "You must know where you want to live."

"Two thousand years from now," UglyBugly said. "I want to live in the world the way it'll be two thousand years from now."

"Ugly-Bugly opts for resurrection," Bill said. "I, however, long for the bosom of Abraham."

"Virginia," said Elouise. They turned to face her. Heather laughed.

"Resurrection," Bill intoned, "the bosom of Abraham, and Virginia. You have no poetry, Elouise."

"I've written down the coordinates of the place where we are supposed-to land," Elouise said. She handed them to Charlie. He did not avoid her gaze. She watched him read the paper. He showed no sign of recognition. For a moment she hoped that it had all been a mistake, but no. She would not let herself be misled by her desires.

"Why Virginia?" Heather asked.

Charlie looked up. "It's central."

"It's east coast," Heather said.

"It's central in the high survival area. There isn't much of a living to be had in the western mountains or on the plains. It's not so far south as to be in hunter gatherer country and not so far north as to be unsurvivable for a high proportion of the people. Barring a hard winter. "

"All very good reasons," Elouise said. "Fly us there, Charlie."

Did his hands tremble as he touched the controls? Elouise watched very carefully, but he did not tremble. Indeed, he was the only one who did not. Ugly-Bugly suddenly began to cry, tears coming from her good eye and streaming down her good cheek. Thank God she doesn't cry out of the other side, Elouise thought; then she was angry at herself, for she had thought Ugly-Bugly's deformed face didn't bother her anymore. Elouise was angry at herself, but it only made her cold inside, determined that there would be no failure. Her mission would be complete. No allowances made for personal cost.

Elouise suddenly started out of her contemplative mood to find that the two other women had left the cockpit-their sleep shift, though it was doubtful they would sleep. Charlie silently flew the plane, while Bill sat in the copilot's seat, pouring himself the last drop from the bottle. He was looking at Elouise.

"Cheers," Elouise said to him.

He smiled sadly back at her. "Amen," he said. Then he leaned back and sang softly:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.

Praise him, ye creatures here below.

Praise him, who slew the wicked host.

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Then he reached for Elouise's hand. She was surprised, but let him take it. He bent to her and kissed her palm tenderly. "For many have entertained angels unaware," he said to her. A few moments later he was asleep. Charlie and Elouise sat in silence. The plane flew on south as darkness overtook them from the east. At first their silence was almost affectionate. But as Elouise sat and sat, saying nothing, she felt the silence grow cold and terrible, and for the first time she realized that when the airplane landed, Charlie would be her-Charlie, who had been half her life for these last few years, whom she had never lied to and who had never lied to herwould be her enemy.

у

I have watched the little children do a dance called Charlie-El. They sing a little song to it, and if I remember the words, it goes like this:

I am made of bones and glass.

Let me pass, let me pass.

1 am made of brick and steel. Take my heel, take my heel.

1 was killed just yesterday.

Kneel and pray, kneel and pray. Dig a hole where I can sleep. Dig it deep, dig it deep.

Will I go to heaven or hell? Charlie-El. Charlie-El.

I think they are already nonsense words to the children. But the poem first got passed word of mouth around Richmond when I was little, and living in Father Michael's house. The children do not try to answer their song. They just sing it and do a very clever little dance while they sing. They always end the song with all the children falling down on the ground, \_\_\_\_\_ laughing. That is the best way for the song to end.

Charlie brought the airplane straight down into a field, great hot winds pushing against the ground as if to shove it back from the plane. The field caught fire, but when the plane had settled upon its three wheels, foam streaked out from the belly of the machine and overtook the flames. Elouise watched from the cockpit, thinking, Wherever the foam has touched, nothing will grow for years. It seemed symmetrical to her. Even in the last moments of the last machine, it must poison the earth. Elouise held Amy on her lap and thought of trying to explain it to the child. But Elouise knew Amy would not understand or remember.

"Last one dressed is a sissy-wissy," said Ugly-Bugly in her husky, ancientsounding voice. They had dressed and undressed in front of each other for years now, but today as the old plastic-polluted clothing came off and the homespun went on, they felt and acted like school kids on their first day in coed gym. Amy caught the spirit of it and kept yelling at the top of her lungs. No one thought to quiet her. There was no need. This was a celebration. But Elouise, long accustomed to self-examination, forced herself to realize that there was a strain to her frolicking. She did not believe it, not really. Today was not a happy day, and it was not just from knowing the confrontation that lay ahead. There was something so final about the death of the last of the

engines of mankind. Surely something could be-but she forced the thought from her, forced the coldness in her to overtake that sentiment. Surely she could not be seduced by the beauty of the airplane. Surely she must remember that it was not the machines but what they inevitably did to mankind that was evil.

They looked and felt a little awkward, almost silly, as they left the plane and stood around in the blackened field. They had not yet lost their feel for stylish clothing, and the homespun was so lumpy and awkward and rough. It didn't look right on any of them.

Amy clung to her doll, awed by the strange scenery. In her life she had been out of the airplane only once, and that was when she was an infant. She watched as the trees moved unpredictably. She winced at the wind in her eyes. She touched her cheek, where her hair moved back and forth in the breeze, and hunted through her vocabulary for a word to name the strange invisible touch of her skin. "Mommy," she said. "Uh! Uh!"

Elouise understood. "Wind," she said. The sounds were still too hard for Amy, and the child did not attempt to say the word. Wind, thought Elouise, and immediately thought of Charlie. Her best memory of Charlie was in the wind. It was during his death-wish time, not long after his suicide. He had insisted on climbing a mountain, and she knew that he meant to fall. So she had climbed with him, even though there was a storm coming up. Charlie was angry all the way. She remembered a terrible hour clinging to the face of a cliff, held only by small bits of metal forced into cracks in the rock. She had insisted on remaining tied to Charlie. "If one of us fell, it would only drag the other down, too," he kept saying. "I know," she kept answering. And so Charlie had not fallen, and they made love for the first time in a shallow cave, with the wind howling outside and occasional sprays of rain coming in to dampen them. They refused to be dampened. Wind. Damn.

And Elouise felt herself go cold and unemotional, and they stood on the edge of the field in the shade of the first trees. Elouise had left the Rectifier near the plane, set on 360 degrees. In a few minutes the Rectifier would go off, and they had to watch, to witness the end of their work.

Suddenly Bill shouted, laughed, held up his wrist. "My watch!" he cried. "Hurry," Charlie said. "There's time."

Bill unbuckled his watch and ran toward the Rectifier. He tossed the watch. It landed within a few meters of the small machine. Then Bill returned to the group, jogging and shaking his head. "Jesus, what a moron! Three years wiping out everything east of the Mississippi, and I almost save a digital chronograph."

"Dixie Instruments?" Heather asked. "Yeah."

"That's not high technology," she said, and they all laughed. Then they fell silent, and Elouise wondered whether they were all

thinking the same thing: that jokes about brand names would be dead within a generation, if they were not already dead. They watched the Rectifier in silence, waiting for the timer to finish its delay. Suddenly there was a shining in the air, a dazzling not-light that made them squint. They had seen this many times before, from the air and from the ground, but this was the last time, and so they saw it as if it were the first.

The airplane corroded as if a thousand years were passing in seconds. But it wasn't a true corrosion. There was no rust-only dissolution as molecules separated and seeped down into the loosened earth. Glass became sand; plastic corrupted to oil; the metal also drifted down into the ground and came to rest in a vein at the bottom of the Rectifier field. Whatever else the metal might look like to a future geologist, it wouldn't look like an artifact. It would look like iron. And with so many similar pockets of iron and copper and aluminum and tin spread all over the once-civilized world, it was not likely that they would suspect human interference. Elouise was amused, thinking of the treatises that would someday be written, about the two states of workable metals-the ore state and the puremetal vein. She hoped it would retard their progress a little.

The airplane shivered into nothing, and the Rectifier also died in the field. A few minutes after the Rectifier disappeared, the field also faded.

"Amen and amen," said Bill, maudlin again.

"All clean now."

Elouise only smiled. She said nothing of the other Rectifier, which was in her knapsack. Let the others think all the work was done.

Amy poked her finger in Charlie's eye. Charlie swore and set her down. Amy started to cry, and Charlie knelt by her and hugged her. Amy's arms went tightly around his neck. "Give Daddy a kiss," Elouise said.

"Well, time to go," Ugly-Bugly's voice rasped. "Why the hell did you pick this particular spot?"

Elouise cocked her head. "Ask Charlie."

Charlie flushed. Elouise watched him grimly. "Elouise and I once came here," he said. "Before Rectification began. Nostalgia, you know." He smiled shyly, and the others laughed. Except Elouise. She was helping Amy to urinate. She felt the weight of the small Rectifier in her knapsack and did not tell anyone the truth: that she had never been in Virginia before in her life.

"Good a spot as any," Heather said. "Well, bye."

Well, bye. That was all, that was the end of it, and Heather walked away to the west, toward the Shenandoah Valley.

"See ya," Bill said.

"Like hell," Ugly-Bugly added.

Impulsively Ugly-Bugly hugged Elouise; and Bill cried, and then they took off northeast, toward the Potomac, where they would doubtlessly find a community growing up along the clean and fish-filled river.

Just Charlie, Amy, and Elouise left in the empty, blackened field where the airplane had died. Elouise tried to feel some great pain at the separation from the others, but she could not. They had been together every day for years now, going from supply dump to supply dump, wrecking cities and towns, destroying and using up the artificial world. But had they been friends? If it had not been for their task, they would never have been friends. They were not the same kind of people.

And then Elouise was ashamed of her feelings. Not her kind of people? Because Heather liked what grass did to her and had never owned a car or had a driver's license in her life? Because Ugly-Bugly had a face hideously deformed by cancer surgery? Because Bill always worked Jesus into the conversation, even though half the time he was an atheist? Because they just weren't in the same social circles? There were no social circles now. Just people trying to survive in a bitter world they weren't bred for. There were only two classes now: those who would make it and those who wouldn't.

Which class am I? thought Elouise.

"Where should we go?" Charlie asked.

Elouise picked Amy up and handed her to Charlie. "Where's the capsule, Charlie?"

Charlie took Amy and said, "Hey, Amy, baby, I'll bet we find some farming community between here and the Rappahannock."

"Doesn't matter if you tell me, Charlie. The instruments found it before we landed. You did

a damn good job on the computer program." She didn't have to say, Not good enough.

Charlie only smiled crookedly. "Here I was hoping you were forgetful." He reached out to touch her knapsack. She pulled abruptly away. He lost his smile. "Don't you know me?" he asked softly.

He would never try to take the Rectifier from her by force. But still. This was the last of the artifacts they were talking about. Was anyone really predictable at such a time? Elouise was not sure. She had thought she knew him well before, yet the time capsule existed to prove that her understanding of Charlie was far from complete.

"I know you, Charlie," she said, "but not as well as I thought. Does it matter? Don't try to stop me."

"I hope you're not too angry," he said.

Elouise couldn't think of anything to say to that. Anyone could be fooled by a traitor, but only I am fool enough to marry one. She turned from him and walked into the forest. He took Amy and followed.

All the way through the underbrush Elouise kept expecting him to say something. A threat, for instance: You'll have to kill me to destroy that time capsule. Or a plea: You have to leave it, Elouise, please, please. Or reason, or argument, or anger, or something.

But instead it was just his silent footfalls behind her. Just his occasional play talk with Amy. Just his singing as he put Amy to sleep on his shoulder.

The capsule had been hidden well. There was no surface sign that men had ever been here. Yet, from the Rectifier's emphatic response, it was obvious that the time capsule was quite large. There must have been heavy, earthmoving equipment. Or was it all done by hand?

"When did you ever find the time?" Elouise asked when they reached the spot.

"Long lunch hours," he said.

She set down her knapsack and then stood there, looking at him.

Like a condemned man who insists on keeping his composure, Charlie smiled wryly and said, "Get on with it, please."

After Father Charlie died, Mother Elouise brought me here to Richmond. She didn't tell anyone that she was a Wrecker. The angel had already left her, and she wanted to blend into the town, be an ordinary person in the world she and her fellow angels had created.

Yet she was incapable of blending in. Once the angel touches you, you cannot go back, even when the angel's work is done. She first attracted attention by talking against the stockade. There was once a stockade around the town of Richmond, when there were only a thousand people here. The reason was simple: People still weren't used to the hard way life was without the old machines. They had not yet learned to depend on the miracle of Christ. They still trusted in their hands, yet their hands could work no more magic. So there were tribes in the winter that didn't know how to find

game, that had no reserves of grain, that had no shelter adequate to hold the head of a fire.

"Bring them all in," said Mother Elouise. "There's room for all. There's food for all. Teach them how to build ships and make tools and sail and farm, and we'll all be richer for it."

But Father Michael and Uncle Avram knew more than Mother Elouise. Father Michael had been a Catholic priest before the destruction, and Uncle Avram had been a professor at a university. They had been nobody. But when the angels of destruction finished their work, the angels of life began to work in the hearts of men. Father Michael threw off his old allegiance to Rome and taught Christ simple, from his memory of the Holy Book. Uncle Avram plunged into his memory of ancient metallurgy and taught the people who gathered at Richmond how to make iron hard enough to use for tools. And weapons.

Father Michael forbade the making of guns and forbade that anyone teach children what guns were. But for hunting there had to be arrows, and what will kill a deer will also kill a man.

Many people agreed with Mother Elouise about the stockade. But then in the worst of winter a tribe came from the mountains and threw fire against the stockade and against the ships that kept trade alive along the whole coast. The archers of Richmond killed most of them, and people said to Mother Elouise, "Now you must agree we need the stockade."

Mother Elouise said, "Would they have come with fire if there had been no wall?"

How can anyone judge the greatest need? .lust as the angel of death had come to plant the seeds of a better life, so that angle of life had to be hard and endure death so the many could live. Father Michael and Uncle Avram held to the laws of Christ simple, for did not the Holy Book say, "Love your enemies, and smite them only when they attack you; chase them not out into the forest, but let them live as long as they leave you alone"?

I remember that winter. I remember watching while they buried the dead tribesmen. Their bodies had stiffened quickly, but Mother Elouise brought me to see them and said, "This is death, remember it, remember it." What did Mother

Elouise know? Death is our passage from flesh into the living wind, until Christ brings us forth into flesh again. Mother Elouise will find Father Charlie again, and every wound will be made whole.

Elouise knelt by the Rectifier and carefully set it to go off in half an hour, destroying itself and the time capsule buried thirty meters under the ground. Charlie stood near her, watching, his face nearly expressionless; only a faint smile broke his perfect repose. Amy was in his arms, laughing and trying to reach up to pinch his nose.

"This Rectifier responds only to me," Elouise said quietly. "Alive. If you try to move it, it will go off early and kill us all."

"I won't move it," Charlie said.

And Elouise was finished. She stood up and reached for Amy. Amy reached back, holding out her arms to her mother. "Mommy," she said.

Because I couldn't remember Father Charlie's face, Mother Elouise thought I had forgotten everything about him, but that is not true. I remember very clearly one picture of him, but he is not in the picture.

This is very hard for me to explain. I see a small clearing in the trees, with Mother Elouise standing in front of me. I see her at my eye level, which tells me that I am being held. I cannot see Father Charlie, but I know that he is holding me. I can feel his arms around me, but I cannot see his face.

This vision has come to me often. It is not like other dreams. It is very clear, and I am always very afraid, and I don't know why. They are talking, but I do not understand their words. Mother Elouise reaches for me, but Father Charlie will not let me go. I feel afraid that Father Charlie will not let me go with Mother Elouise. But why should I be afraid? I love Father Charlie, and I never want to leave him. Still I reach out, reach out, reach out, and still the arms hold me and I cannot go.

Mother Elouise is crying. I see her face twisted in pain. I want to comfort her. "Mommy is hurt," I say again and again.

And then, suddenly, at the end of this vision I am in my mother's arms and we are running, running up a hill, into the trees. I am looking

back over her shoulder. I see Father Charlie then. I see him, but I do not see him. I know exactly where he is, in my vision. I could tell you his height. I could tell you where his left foot is and where his right foot is, but still I can't see him. He has no face, no color; he is just a man-shaped emptiness in the clearing, and then the trees are in the way and he is gone.

Elouise stopped only a little way into the woods. She turned around, as if to go back to Charlie. But she would not go back. If she returned to him, it would be to disconnect the Rectifier. There would be no other reason to do it.

"Charlie, you son of a bitch!" she shouted.

There was no answer. She stood, waiting. Surely he could come to her. He would see that she would never go back, never turn off the machine. Once he realized it was inevitable, he would come running from the machine, into the forest, back to the clearing where the 787 had landed. Why would he want to give his life so meaninglessly? What was in the time capsule, after all? Just history-that's what he said, wasn't it? Just history, just films and metal plates engraved with words and microdots and other ways of preserving the story of mankind. "How can they learn from our mistakes, unless we tell them what they were?" Charlie had asked.

Sweet, simple, naive Charlie. It is one thing to preserve a hatred for the killing machines and the soul-destroying machines and the garbagemaking machines. It was another to leave behind detailed, accurate, unquestionable descriptions. History was not a way of preventing the repetition of mistakes. It was a way of guaranteeing them. Wasn't it?

She turned and walked on, not very quickly, out of the range of the Rectifier, carrying Amy and listening, all the way, for the sound of Charlie running after her.

What was Mother Elouise like? She was a woman of contradictions. Even with me, she would work for hours teaching me to read, helping me make tablets out of river clay and write on them with a shaped stick. And then, when I had written the words she taught me, she would weep and say, "Lies, all lies," Sometimes she would break the tablets I had made. But whenever part of her words was broken, she would make me write it again.

She called the collection of words The Book of the Golden Age. I have named it The Book of the Lies of the Angel Elouise, for it is important for us to know that the greatest truths we have seem like lies to those who have been touched by the angel.

She told many stories to me, and often I asked her why they must be written down. "For Father Charlie," she would always say.

"Is he coming back, then?" I would ask.

But she shook her head, and finally one time she said, "It is not for Father Charlie to read. It is because Father Charlie wanted it written."

"Then why didn't he write it himself?" I asked.

And Mother Elouise grew very cold with me, and all she would say was, "Father Charlie bought these stories. He paid more for them than I am willing to pay to have them left unwritten." I wondered then whether Father Charlie was rich, but other things she said told me that he wasn't. So I do not understand except that Mother Elouise did not want to tell the stories, and Father Charlie, though he was not there, constrained her to tell them. There are many of Mother Elouise's lies that

I love, but I will say now which of them she said 3 were most important:

## 3

1. In the Golden Age for ten times a thousand years men lived in peace and love and joy, 9 and no one did evil one to another. They shared -r all things in common, and no man was hungry while another was full, and no man had a home while another stood in the rain, and no wife wept for her husband, killed before his time.

2. The great serpent seems to come with great power. He has many names: Satan, Hitler, Lucifer, Nimrod, Napoleon. He seems to be beautiful, and he promises power to his friends and death to his enemies. He says he will right all wrongs. But really he is weak, until people believe in him and give him the power of a their bodies. If you refuse to believe in the 3 serpent, if no one serves him, he will go away.

3. There are many cycles of the world. In every cycle the great serpent has arisen and the world has been destroyed to make way for the return of the Golden Age. Christ comes again in every cycle, also. One day when He comes men will believe in Christ and doubt the great serpent, and that time the Golden Age will never end, and God will dwell among men forever. And all the angels will say. "Come not to heaven but to Earth, for Earth is heaven now."

These are the most important lies of Mother Elouise. Believe them all, and remember them, for they are true.

All the way to the airplane clearing, Elouise deliberately broke branches and let them dangle so that Charlie would have no trouble finding a straight path out of the range of the Rectifier, even if he left his flight to the last second. She was sure Charlie would follow her. Charlie would bend to her as he had always bent, resilient and accommodating. He loved Elouise, and Amy he loved even more. What was in the metal under his feet that would weigh in the balance against his love for them?

So Elouise broke the last branch and stepped into the clearing and then sat down and let Amy play in the unburnt grass at the edge while she waited. It is Charlie who will bend, she said to herself, for I will never bend on this. Later 1 will make it up to him, but he must know that on this I will never bend.

The cold place in her grew larger and colder until she burned inside, waiting for the sound of feet crashing through the underbrush. The damnable birds kept singing, so that she could not hear the footsteps.

Mother Elouise never hit me, or anyone else so far as I knew. She fought only with her words and silent acts, though she could have killed easily with her hands. I saw her physical power only once. We were in the forest, to gather firewood. We stumbled upon a wild hog. Apparently it felt cornered, though we were weaponless; perhaps it was just mean. I have not studied the ways of wild hogs. It charged, not Mother Elouise, but me. I was five at the time, and terrified, I ran to Mother Elouise, tried to cling to her, but she threw me out of the way and went into a crouch. I was screaming She paid no attention to me. The hog continued rushing, but seeing I was down and Mother Elouise erect, it changed its path. When it came near, she leaped to the side. It was not nimble enough to turn to face her. As it lumbered past, Mother Elouise kicked it just behind the head. The kick broke the hog's neck so violently that its head dropped and the hog rolled over and over, and when it was through rolling, it was already dead.

Mother Elouise did not have to die.

She died in the winter when I was seven. I should tell you how life was then, in Richmond We were only two thousand souls by then, not the large city of ten thousand we are now. We had only six finished ships trading the coast, and they had not yet gone so far north as Manhattan, though we had run one voyage all the way to Savannah in the south. Richmond

already ruled and protected from the Potomac to Dismal Swamp. But it was a very hard winter, and the town's leaders insisted on hoarding all the stored grain and fruits and vegetables and meat for our protected towns, and let the distant tribes trade or travel where they would, they would get no food from Richmond.

It was then that my mother, who claimed she did not believe in God, and Uncle Avram, who was a Jew, and Father Michael, who was a priest, all argued the same side of the question. It's better to feed them than to kill them, they all said. But when the tribes from west of the mountains and north of the Potomac came into Richmond lands, pleading for help, the leaders of Richmond turned them away and closed the gates of the towns. An army marched then, to put the fear of God, as they said, into the hearts of the tribesmen. They did not know which side God was on.

Father Michael argued and Uncle Avram stormed and fumed, but Mother Elouise silently went to the gate at moonrise one night and alone overpowered the guards. Silently she gagged them and bound them and opened the gates to the hungry tribesmen. They came through weaponless, as she had insisted. They quietly went to the storehouses and carried off as much food as they could. They were found only as the last few fled. No one was killed.

But there was an uproar, a cry of treason, a trial, and an execution. They decided on beheading, because they thought it would be

quick and merciful. They had never seen a beheading.

It was Jack Woods who used the ax. He practiced all afternoon with pumpkins. Pumpkins have no bones.

In the evening they all gathered to watch, some because they hated Mother Elouise, some because they loved her, and the rest because they could not stay away. I went also, and Father Michael held my head and would not let me see. But I heard.

Father Michael prayed for Mother Elouise. Mother Elouise damned his and everyone else's soul to hell. She said, "If you kill me for bringing life, you will only bring death on your own heads."

"That's true," said the men around her. "We will all die. But you will die first."

"Then I'm the luckier," said Mother Elouise. It was the last of her lies, for she was telling the truth, and yet she did not believe it herself, for I heard her weep. With her last breaths she wept and cried out, "Charlie! Charlie!" There are those who claim she saw a vision of Charlie waiting for her on the right hand of God, but I doubt it. She would have said so. I think she only wished to see him. Or wished for his forgiveness. It doesn't matter. The angel had long since left her, and she was alone.

Jack swung the ax and it fell, more with a smack than a thud. He had missed her neck and struck deep in her back and shoulder. She screamed. He struck again and this time silenced her. But he did not break through her spine until the third blow. Then he turned away splattered with blood, and vomited and wept and pleaded with Father Michael to forgive him.

Amy stood a few meters away from Elouise, who sat on the grass of the clearing, looking toward a broken branch on the nearest tree. Amy called, "Mommy! Mommy!" Then she bounced up and down, bending and unbending her knees. "Dal Da!" she cried. "La la la la la." She was dancing and wanted her mother to dance and sing, too. But Elouise only looked toward the tree, waiting for Charlie to appear. Any minute, she thought. He will be angry. He will be ashamed, she thought. But he will be alive.

In the distance, however, the air all at once was shining. Elouise could see it clearing because they were not far from the edge of the Rectifier field. It shimmered in the trees, where it caused no harm to plants. Any vertebrates within the field, any animals that lived by electricity passing along nerves, were instantly dead, their brains stilled. Birds dropped from tree limbs. Only insects droned on.

The Rectifier field lasted only minutes.

Amy watched the shining air. It was as if the empty sky itself were dancing with her. She was transfixed. She would soon forget the airplane, and already her father's face was disappearing from her memories. But she would remember the shining. She would see it forever in her

dreams, a vast thickening of the air, dancing and vibrating up and down, up and down. In her dreams it would always be the same, a terrible shining light that would grow and grow and grow and press against her in her bed. And always with it would come the sound of a voice she loved, saying, "Jesus. Jesus. Jesus." This dream would come so clearly when she was twelve that she would tell it to her adopted father, the priest named Michael. He told her that it was the voice of an angel, speaking the name of the source of all light. "You must not fear the light," he said. "You must embrace it." It satisfied her.

But at the moment she first heard the voice, in fact and not in dream, she had no trouble recognizing it, it was the voice of her mother, Elouise, saying, "Jesus." It was full of grief that only a child could fail to understand. Amy did not understand. She only tried to repeat the word, "Deeah-zah."

"God," said Elouise, rocking back and forth, her face turned up toward a heaven she was sure was unoccupied.

"Dog," Amy repeated, "Dog dog doggie." In vain she looked around for the fourfooted beast.

"Charlie!" Elouise screamed as the Rectifier field faded.

"Daddy," Amy cried, and because of her mother's tears she also wept. Elouise took her daughter in her arms and held her, rocking back and forth. Elouise discovered that there were some things that could not be frozen in her. Some things that must burn: Sunlight. And lightning. And everlasting, inextinguishable regret.

My mother, Mother Elouise, often told me about my father. She described Father Charlie in detail, so I would not forget. She refused to let me forget anything. "It's what Father Charlie died for," she told me, over and over. "He died so you would remember. You cannot forget."

So I still remember, even today, every word she told me about him. His hair was red, as mine was. His body was lean and hard. His smile was quick, like mine, and he had gentle hands. When his hair was long or sweaty, it kinked tightly at his forehead, ears, and neck. Ibis touch was so delicate he could cut in half an animal so tiny it could not be seen without a machine; so sensitive that he could fly-an art that Mother Elouise said was a not a miracle, since it could be done by many giants of the Golden Age, and they took with them many others who could not fly alone. This was Charlie's gift. Mother Elouise said. She also told me that I loved him dearly. But for all the words that she taught me, I still have no picture of my father in my mind. It is as if the words drove out the vision, as so often happens.

Yet I still hold that one memory of my father, so deeply hidden that I can neither lose it nor fully find it again. Sometimes I wake up weeping. Sometimes I wake up with my arms in

the air, curved just so, and I remember that I was dreaming of embracing that large man who loved me. My arms remember how it feels to hold Father Charlie tight around the neck and cling to him as he carries his child. And when I cannot sleep, and the pillow seems to be always the wrong shape, it is because I am hunting for the shape of Father Charlie's shoulder, which my heart remembers, though my mind cannot.

God put angels into Mother Elouise and Father Charlie, and they destroyed the world, for the cup of God's indignation was full, and all the works of men become dust, but out of dust God makes men, and out of men and women, angels.

## THE CHANGED MAN AND THE KING OF WORDS Orson Scott Card

Once there was a man who loved his son more than life. Once there was a boy who loved his father more than death.

They are not the same story, not really. But I can't tell you one without telling you the other.

The man was Dr. Alvin Bevis, and the boy was his son, Joseph, and the only woman that either of them loved was Connie, who in 1977 married Alvin, with hope and joy, and in 1978 gave birth to Joe on the brink of death and adored them both accordingly. It was an affectionate family. This made it almost certain that they would come to grief.

Connie could have no more children after Joe. She shouldn't even have had him. Her doctor called her a damn fool for refusing to abort him in the fourth month when the problems began. "He'll be born retarded. You'll die in labor." To which she answered, "I'll have one child, or I won't believe that I ever lived." In her seventh month they took Joe out of her, womb and all. He was scrawny and little, and the doctor told her to expect him to be mentally deficient and physically uncoordinated. Connie nodded and ignored him. She was lucky. She had Joe, alive, and silently she said to any who pitied her, I am more a woman than any of you barren ones who still have to worry about the phases of the moon.

Neither Alvin nor Connie ever believed Joe would be retarded. And soon enough it was clear that he wasn't. He walked at eight months. He talked at twelve months. He had his alphabet at eighteen months. He could read at a second-grade level by the time he was three. He was inquisitive, demanding, independent, disobedient, and exquisitely beautiful, with a shock of coppercolored hair and a face as smooth and deep as a cold-water pool.

His parents watched him devour learning and were sometimes hard pressed to feed him with what he needed. He will be a great man, they both whispered to each other in the secret conversations of night. It made them proud; it made them afraid to know that his learning and his safety had, by chance or the grand design of things, been entrusted to them.

Out of all the variety the Bevises offered their son in the first few years of his life, Joe became obsessed with stories. He would bring books and insist that Connie or Alvin read to him, but if it was not a storybook, he quickly ran and got another, until at last they were reading a story. Then, he sat imprisoned by the chain of events as the tale unfolded, saying nothing until the story was over.

Again and again "Once upon a time," or "There once was a," or "One day the king sent out a proclamation," until Alvin and Connie had every storybook in the house practically memorized. Fairy tales were Joe's favorites, but as time passed, he graduated to movies and contemporary stories and even history.

The problem was not the thirst for tales, however. The conflict began because Joe had to live out his stories. He would get up in the morning and announce that Mommy was Mama Bear, Daddy was Papa Bear, and he was Baby Bear. When he was angry, he would be Goldilocks and run away. Other monungs Daddy would be Rumpelstiltskin, Mommy would be the Farmer's Daughter, and Joe would be the King. Joe was Hansel, Mommy was Gretel, and Alvin was the Wicked witch.

"Why can't I be Hansel's and Gretel's father?" Alvin asked. He resented being the Wicked Witch. Not that he thought it meant anything. He told himself it merely annoyed him to have his son constantly assigning him dialogue and action for the day's activities. Alvin never knew from one hour to the next who he was going to be in his own home.

After a time, mild annoyance gave way to open irritation; if it was a phase Joe was going through, it ought surely to have ended by now. Alvin finally suggested that the boy be taken to a child psychologist. The doctor said it was a phase.

"Which means that sooner or later he'll get over it?" Alvin asked. "Or that you just can't figure out what's going on?"

"Both," said the psychologist cheerfully. "You'll just have to live with it."

But Alvin did not like living with it. He wanted his son to call him Daddy. He was the father, after all. Why should he have to put up with his child, no matter how bright the boy was, assigning him silly roles to play whenever he came home? Alvin put his foot down. He refused to answer to any name but Father. And after a little anger and a lot of repeated attempts, Joe finally stopped trying to get his father to play a part. Indeed, as far as Alvin knew, Joe entirely stopped acting out stories.

It was not so, of course. Joe simply acted them out with Connie after Alvin had gone for the day to cut up DNA and put it back together creatively. That was how Joe learned to hide things from his father. He wasn't lying; he was just biding his time. Joe was sure that if only he found good enough stories, Daddy would play again.

So when Daddy was home, Joe did not act out stories. Instead he and his father played number and word games, studied elementary Spanish as an introduction to Latin, plinked out simple programs on the Atari, and laughed and romped until Mommy came in and told her boys to calm down before the roof fell in on them. This is being a father, Alvin told himself. I am a good father. And it was true. It was true, even though every now and then Joe would ask his mother hopefully, "Do you think that Daddy will want to be in this story?"

"Daddy just doesn't like to pretend. He likes your stories, but not acting them out."

In 1983 Joe turned five and entered school; that same year Dr. Bevis created a bacterium that lived on acid precipitation and neutralized it. In 1987 Joe left school, because he knew more than any of his teachers; at precisely that time Dr. Bevis began eanung royalties on commercial breeding of his bacterium for spot cleanup in acidized bodies of water. The university suddenly became terrified that he might retire and live on his income and take his name away from the school. So he was given a laboratory and twenty assistants and secretaries and an administrative assistant, and from then on Dr. Bevis could pretty well do what he liked with his time.

What he liked was to make sure the research was still going on as carefully and methodically as was proper and in directions that he approved of. Then he went home and became the faculty of one for his son's very private academy.

It was an idyllic time for Alvin.

It was hell for Joe.

Joe loved his father, mind you. Joe played at learning, and they had a wonderful time reading The Praise of Polly in the original Latin, duplicating great experiments and then devising experiments of their own -- too many things to list. Enough to say that Alvin had never had a graduate student so quick to grasp new ideas, so eager to devise newer ones of his own. How could Alvin have known that Joe was starving to death before his eyes?

For with Father home, Joe and Mother could not play.

Before Alvin had taken him out of school Joe used to read books with his mother. All day at home she would read Jane Eyre and Joe would read it in school, hiding it behind copies of Friends and Neighbors. Homer. Chaucer. Shakespeare. Twain. Mitchell. Galsworthy. Elswyth Thane. And then in those precious hours after school let out and before Alvin came home from work they would be Ashley and Scarlett, Tibby and Julian, Huck and Jim, Walter and Griselde, Odysseus and Circe. Joe no longer assigned the parts the way he did when he was little. They both knew what book they were reading and they would live within the milieu of that book. Each had to guess from the other's behavior what role had been chosen that particular day; it was a triumphant moment when at last Connie would dare to venture Joe's name for the day, or Joe call Mother by hers. In all the years of playing the games never once did they choose to be the same person; never once did they fail to figure out what role the other played.

Now Alvin was home, and that game was over. No more stolen moments of reading during school. Father frowned on stories. History, yes; lies and poses, no. And so, while Alvin thought that joy had finally come, for Joe and Connie joy was dead.

Their life became one of allusion, dropping phrases to each other out of books, playing subtle characters without ever allowing themselves to utter the other's name. So perfectly did they perform that Alvin never knew what was happening. Just now and then he'd realize that something was going on that he didn't understand.

"What sort of weather is this for January?" Alvin said one day looking out the window at heavy rain.

"Fine," said Joe, and then, thinking of "The Merchant's Tale," he smiled at his mother. "In May we climb trees."

"What?" Alvin asked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I just like tree climbing."

"It all depends," said Connie, "on whether the sun dazzles your eyes."

When Connie left the room, Joe asked an innocuous question about teleology, and Alvin put the previous exchange completely out of his mind.

Or rather tried to put it out of his mind. He was no fool. Though Joe and Connie were very subtle, Alvin gradually realized he did not speak the native language of his own home. He was well enough read to catch a reference or two. Turning into swine. Sprinkling dust. "Frankly, I don't give a damn." Remarks that didn't quite fit into the conversation, phrases that seemed strangely resonant. And as he grew more aware of his wife's and his son's private language, the more isolated he felt. His lessons with Joe began to seem not exciting but hollow, as if they were both acting a role. Taking parts in a story. The story of the loving father-teacher and the dutiful, brilliant student-son. It had been the best time of Alvin's life, better than any life he had created in the lab, but that was when he had believed it. Now it was just a play. His son's real life was somewhere else.

I didn't like playing the parts he gave me, years ago, Alvin thought. Does he like playing the part that I have given him?

"You've gone as far as I can take you," Alvin said at breakfast, one day, "in everything, except biology of course. So I'll guide your studies in biology, and for

everything else I'm hiring advanced graduate students in various fields at the university. A different one each day."

Joe's eyes went deep and distant. "You won't be my teacher anymore?"

"Can't teach you what I don't know," Alvin said. And he went back to the lab. Went back and with delicate cruelty tore apart a dozen cells and made them into something other than themselves, whether they would or not.

Back at home, Joe and Connie looked at each other in puzzlement. Joe was thirteen. He was getting tall and felt shy and awkward before his mother. They had been three years without stories together. With Father there, they had played at being prisoners, passing messages under the guard's very nose. Now there was no guard, and without the need for secrecy there was no message anymore. Joe took to going outside and reading or playing obsessively at the computer; more doors were locked in the Bevis home than had ever been locked before.

Joe dreamed terrifying, gentle nightmares, dreamed of the same thing, over and over; the setting was different, but always the story was the same. He dreamed of being on a boat, and the gunwale began to crumble wherever he touched it, and he tried to warn his parents, but they wouldn't listen, they leaned, it broke away under their hands, and they fell into the sea, drowning. He dreamed that he was bound up in a web, tied like a spider's victim, but the spider never, never, never came to taste of him, left him there to desiccate in helpless bondage, though he cried out and struggled. How could he explain such dreams to his parents? He remembered Joseph in Genesis, who spoke too much of dreams; remembered Cassandra; remembered locaste, who thought to slay her child for fear of oracles. I am caught up in a story, Joe thought, from which I cannot escape. Each change is a fall; each fall tears me from myself. If I cannot be the people of the tales, who am I then?

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Life was normal enough for all that. Breakfast lunch dinner, sleep wake sleep, work earn spend own, use break fix. All the cycles of ordinary life played out despite the shadow of inevitable ends. One day Alvin and his son were in a bookstore, the Gryphon, which had the complete Penguin Classics. Alvin was browsing through the titles to see what might be of some use when he noticed Joe was no longer following him.

His son, all the slender five feet nine inches of him, was standing half the store away bent in avid concentration over something on the counter. Alvin felt a terrible yearning for his son. He was so beautiful and yet somehow in these dozen and one years of Joe's life, Alvin had lost him. Now Joe was nearing manhood and very soon it would be too late. When did he cease to be mine? Alvin wondered. When did he become so much his mother's son? Why must he be as beautiful as she and yet have the mind he has? He is Apollo, Alvin said to himself.

And in that moment he knew what he had lost. By calling his son Apollo he had told himself what he had taken from his son. A connection between stories the child acted out and his knowledge of who he was. The connection was so real it was almost tangible and yet Alvin could not put it into words, could not bear the knowledge and so and so.

Just as he was sure he had the truth of things it slipped away. Without words his memory could not hold it, lost the understanding the moment it. came. I knew it all and I have already forgotten. Angry at himself, Alvin strode to his son and realized that Joe was not doing anything intelligent at all. He had a deck of tarot cards spread before him. He was doing a reading.

"Cross my palm with silver," said Alvin. He thought he was making a joke but his anger spoke too loudly in his voice. Joe looked up with shame on his face. Alvin cringed inside himself. Just by speaking to you I wound you. Alvin wanted to apologize but he had no strategy for that so he tried to affirm that it had been a joke by making another. "Discovering the secrets of the universe?"

Joe half-smiled and quickly gathered up the cards and put them away.

"No," Alvin said, "No, you were interested: you don't have to put them away."

"It's just nonsense," Joe said.

You're lying, Alvin thought.

"All the meanings are so vague they could fit just about anything." Joe laughed mirthlessly.

"You looked pretty interested."

"I was just you know wondering how to program a computer for this wondering whether I could do a program that would make it make some sense. Not just the random fall of the cards you know. A way to make it respond to who a person really is. Cut through all the--"

"Yes?"

"Just wondering."

"Cut through all the ... ?"

"Stories we tell ourselves. All the lies that we believe about ourselves. About who we really are."

Something didn't ring true in the boy's words, Alvin knew. Something was wrong. And because in Alvin's world nothing could long exist unexplained he decided the boy seemed awkward because his father had made him ashamed of his own curiosity. I am ashamed that I have made you ashamed, Alvin thought. So I will buy you the cards.

"I'll buy the cards. And the book you were looking at."

"No Dad," said Joe.

"No it's all right. Why not? Play around with the computer. See if you can turn this nonsense into something. What the bell, you might come up with some good graphics and sell the program for a bundle." Alvin laughed. So did Joe. Even Joe's laugh was a lie.

What Alvin didn't know was this: Joe was not ashamed. Joe was merely afraid. For he had laid out the cards as the book instructed, but he had not needed the explanations, had not needed the names of the faces. He had known their names at once, had known their faces. It was Creon who held the sword and the scales. Ophelia, naked wreathed in green, with man and falcon, bull and lion around. Ophelia who danced in her madness. And I was once the boy with the starflower in the sixth cup, giving to my child-mother, when gifts were possible between us. The cards were not dice, they were names, and he laid them out in stories drawing them in order from the deck in a pattern that he knew was largely the story of his life. All the names that he had borne were in these cards, and all the shapes of past and future dwelt here, waiting to be dealt. It was this that frightened him. He had been deprived of stories for so long, his own story of father, mother, son was so fragile now that he was madly grasping at anything; Father mocked, but Joe looked at the story of the cards, and he believed. I do not want to take these home. It puts myself wrapped in a silk in my own hands. "Please don't," he said to his father.

But Alvin, who knew better, bought them anyway, hoping to please his son.

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Joe stayed away from the cards for a whole day. He had only touched them the once; surely he need not toy with this fear again. It was irrational, mere wish fulfillment, Joe told himself. The cards mean nothing. They are not to be feared. I can touch them and learn no truth from them. And yet all his rationalism, all his certainty that the cards were meaningless, were, he knew, merely lies he was telling to persuade himself to try the cards again, and this time seriously.

"What did you bring those home for?" Mother asked in the other room.

Father said nothing. Joe knew from the silence that Father did not want to make any explanation that might be overheard.

"They're silly," said Mother. "I thought you were a scientist and a skeptic. I thought you didn't believe in things like this."

"It was just a lark," Father hed. "I bought them for Joe to phnk ground with. He's thinking of doing a computer program to make the cards respond somehow to people's personalities. The boy has a right to play now and then."

And in the family room, where the toy computer sat mute on the shelf, Joe tried not to think of Odysseus walking away from the eight cups, treading the lip of the ocean's basin, his back turned to the wine. Forty-eight kilobytes and two little disks. This isn't computer enough for what I mean to do, Joe thought. I will not do it, of course. But with Father's computer from his office upstairs, with the hard disk and the right type of interface, perhaps there is space and time enough for all the operations. Of course I will not do it. I do not care to do it. I do not dare to do it.

At two in the morning he got up from his bed, where he could not sleep, went downstairs, and began to program the graphics of the tarot deck upon the screen. But in each picture he made changes, for he knew that the artist, gifted as he was, had made mistakes. Had not understood that the Page of Cups was a buffoon with a giant phallus, from which flowed the sea. Had not known that the Queen of Swords was a statue and it was her throne that was alive, an angel groaning in agony at the stone burden she had to bear. The child at the Gate of Ten Stars was being eaten by the old man's dogs. The man hanging upside down with crossed legs and peace upon his face, he wore no halo; his hair was afire. And the Queen of Pentacles had just given birth to a bloody star, whose father was not the King of Pentacles, that poor cuckold.

And as the pictures and their stories came to him, he began to hear the echoes of all the other stories he had read. Cassandra, Queen of Swords, flung her bladed words, and people batted them out of the air like flies, when if they had only caught them and used them, they would not have met the future unarmed. For a moment Odysseus bound to the mast was the Hanged Man; in the right circumstances. Macbeth could show up in the ever-trusting Page of Cups, or crush himself under the ambitious Queen of Pentacles, Queen of Coins if she crossed him. The cards held tales of power, tales of pain, in the invisible threads that bound them to one another. Invisible threads, but Joe knew they were there, and he had to make the pictures right, make the program right, so that he could find true stories when he read the cards. Through the night he labored until each picture was right: the job was only begun when he fell asleep at last. His parents were worried on finding him there in the moniing, but they hadn't the heart to waken him. When he awoke, he was alone in the house, and he began again immediately, drawing the cards on the TV screen, storing them in the computer's memory; as for his own memory, he needed no help to recall them all, for he knew their names and their stories and was beginning to understand how their names changed every time they came together.

By evening it was done, along with a brief randomizer program that dealt the cards. The pictures were right. The names were right. But this time when the computer spread the cards before him -- This is you, this covers you, this crosses you -- it was meaningless. The computer could not do what hands could do. It could not understand and unconsciously deal the cards. It was not a randomizer program that was needed at all, for the shuffling of the tarot was not done by chance.

"May I tinker a little with your computer?" Joe asked.

"The hard disk?" Father looked doubtful. "I don't want you to open it, Joe. I don't want to try to come up with another ten thousand dollars this week if something goes wrong." Behind his words was a worry: This business with the tarot cards has gone far enough, and I'm sorry I bought them for you, and I don't want you to use the computer, especially if it would make this obsession any stronger.

"Just an interface, Father. You don't use the parallel port anyway, and I can put it back afterward."

"The Atari and the hard disk aren't even compatible."

"I know," said Joe.

But in the end there really couldn't be much argument. Joe knew computers better than Alvin did, and they both knew that what Joe took apart, Joe could put together. It took days of tinkering with hardware and plinking at the program. During that time Joe did nothing else. In the beginning he tried to distract himself. At lunch he told Mother about books they ought to read; at dinner he spoke to Father about Newton and Einstein until Alvin had to remind him that he was a biologist, not a mathematician. No one was fooled by these attempts at breaking the obsession. The tarot program drew Joe back after every meal, after every interruption, until at last he began to refuse meals and ignore the interruptions entirely.

"You have to eat. You can't die for this silly game," said Mother.

Joe said nothing. She set a sandwich by him, and he ate some of it.

"Joe, this had gone far enough. Get yourself under control," said Father.

Joe didn't look up. "I'm under control," he said, and he went on working.

After six days Alvin came and stood between Joe and the television set. "This nonsense will end now," Alvin said. "You are behaving like a boy with serious problems. The most obvious cure is to disconnect the computer, which I will do if you do not stop working on this absurd program at once. We try to give you freedom, Joe, but when you do this to us and to yourself, then--"

"That's all right," said Joe. "I've mostly finished it anyway." He got up and went to bed and slept for fourteen hours.

Alvin was relieved. "I thought he was losing his mind."

Connie was more worried than ever. "What do you think he'll do if it doesn't work?"

"Work? How could it work? Work at what? Cross my palm with silver and I'll tell your future."

"Haven't you been listening to him?"

"He hasn't said a word in days."

"He believes in what he's doing. He thinks his program will tell the truth."

Alvin laughed. "Maybe your doctor, what's-his-name, maybe he was right. Maybe there was brain damage after all."

Connie looked at him in horror. "God, Alvin."

"A joke, for Christ's sake."

"It wasn't funny."

They didn't talk about it, but in the middle of the night, at different times, each of them got up and went into Joe's room to look at him in his sleep.

Who are you? Connie asked silently. What are you going to do if this project of yours is a failure? What are you going to do if it succeeds?

Alvin, however, just nodded. He refused to be worried. Phases and stages of life. Children go through times of madness as they grow.

Be a lunatic thirteen-year-old, Joe, if you must. You'll return to reality soon enough. You're my son, and I know that you'll prefer reality in the long run.

The next evening Joe insisted that his father help him test the program. "It won't work on me," Alvin said. "I don't believe in it. It's like faith healing and taking vitamin C for colds. It never works on skeptics."

Connie stood small near the refrigerator. Alvin noticed the way she seemed to retreat from the conversation.

"Did you try it?" Alvin asked her.

She nodded.

"Mom did it four times for me," Joe said gravely.

"Couldn't get it right the first time?" Father asked. It was a joke.

"Got it right every time," Joe said.

Alvin looked at Connie. She met his gaze at first, but then looked away in -what? Fear? Shame? Embarrassment? Alvin couldn't tell. But he sensed that something painful had happened while he was at work. "Should I do it?" Alvin asked her.

"No," Connie whispered.

"Please," Joe said. "How can I test it if you won't help? I can't tell if it's right or wrong unless I know the people doing it."

"What kind of fortuneteller are you?" Alvin asked. "You're supposed to be able to tell the future of strangers."

"I don't tell the future," Joe said. "The program just tells the truth."

"Ah, truth!" said Alvin. "Truth about what?"

"Who you really are."

"Am I in disguise?"

"It tells your names. It tells your story. Ask Mother if it doesn't."

"Joe," Alvin said, "I'll play this little game with you. But don't expect me to regard it as true. I'll do almost anything for you, Joe, but I won't lie for you." "I know."

"Just so you understand."

"I understand."

Alvin sat down at the keyboard. From the kitchen came a sound like the whine a cringing hound makes, back in its throat. It was Connie, and she was terrified. Her fear, whatever caused it, Was contagious. Alvin shuddered and then ridiculed himself for letting this upset him. He was in control, and it was absurd to be afraid. He wouldn't be snowed by his own son.

"What do I do?"

"Just type things in."

"What things?"

"Whatever comes to mind."

"Words? Numbers? How do I know what to write if you don't tell me?"

"It doesn't matter what you write. Just so you write whatever you feel like writing."

I don't feel like writing anything, Alvin thought. I don't feel like humoring this nonsense another moment. But he could not say so, not to Joe; he had to be the patient father, giving this absurdity a fair chance. He began to come up with numbers, with words. But after a few moments there was no randomness, no free association in his choice. It was not in Alvin's nature to let chance guide his choices. Instead he began reciting on the keyboard the long strings of geneticcode information on his most recent bacterial subjects, fragments of names, fragments of numeric data, progressing in order through the DNA. He knew as he did it that he was cheating his son, that Joe wanted something of himself. But he told himself, What could be more a part of me than something I made?

"Enough?" he asked Joe.

Joe shrugged. "Do you think it is?"

"I could have done five words and you would have been satisfied?"

"If you think you're through, you're through," Joe said quietly.

"Oh, you're very good at this," Alvin said. "Even the hocus-pocus."

"You're through then?"

"Yes."

Joe started the program running. He leaned back and waited. He could sense his father's impatience, and he found himself relishing the wait. The whining and clicking of the disk drive. And then the cards began appearing on the screen. This is you. This covers you. This crosses you. This is above you, below you, before you, behind you. Your foundation and your house, your death and your name. Joe waited for what had come before, what had come so predictably, the stories that had flooded in upon him when he read for his mother and for himself a dozentimes before. But the stories did not come. Because the cards were the same. Over and over again, the King of Swords.

Joe looked at it and understood at once. Father had lied. Father had consciously controlled his input, had ordered it in some way that told the cards that they were being forced. The program had not failed. Father simply would not be read. The King of Swords, by himself, was power, as all the Kings were power. The King of Pentacles was the power of money, the power of the bribe. The King of Wands was the power of life, the power to make new. The King of Cups was the power of negation and obliteration, the power of murder and sleep. And the King of Swords was the power of words that others would believe. Swords could say, "I will kill you," and be believed, and so be obeyed. Swords could say, "I love you," and be believed, and so be adored. Swords could lie. And all his father had given him was lies. What Alvin didn't know was that even the choice of lies told the truth.

"Edmund," said Joe. Edmund was the lying bastard in King Lear.

"What?" asked Father.

"We are only what nature makes us. And nothing more."

"You're getting this from the cards?"

Joe looked at his father, expressing nothing.

"It's all the same card," said Alvin.

"I know," said Joe.

"What's this supposed to be?"

"A waste of time," said Joe. Then he got up and walked out of the room.

Alvin sat there, looking at the little tarot cards laid out on the screen. As he watched, the display changed, each card in turn being surrounded by a thin line and then blown up large, nearly filling the screen. The King of Swords every time. With the point of his sword coming out of his mouth, and his hands clutching at his groin. Surely, Alvin thought, that was not what was drawn on the Waite deck.

Connie stood near the kitchen doorway, leaning on the refrigerator. "And that's all?" she asked.

"Should there be more?" Alvin asked.

"God," she said.

"What happened with you?"

"Nothing," she said, walking calmly out of the room. Alvin heard her rush up the stairs. And he wondered how things got out of control like this.

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Alvin could not make up his mind how to feel about his son's project. It was silly, and Alvin wanted nothing to do with it, wished he'd never bought the cards for him. For days on end Alvin would stay at the laboratory until late at night and rush back again in the morning without so much as eating breakfast with his family. Then, exhausted from lack of sleep, he would get up late, come downstairs, and pretend for the whole day that nothing unusual was going on. On such days he discussed Joe's readings with him, or his own genetic experiments; sometimes, when the artificial cheer had been maintained long enough to be believed, Alvin would even discuss Joe's tarot program. It was at such times that Alvin offered to provide Joe with introductions, to get him better computers to work with, to advise him on the strategy of development and publication. Afterward Alvin always regretted having helped Joe, because what Joe was doing was a shameful waste of a brilliant mind. It also did not make Joe love him any more.

Yet as time passed, Alvin realized that other people were taking Joe seriously. A group of psychologists administered batteries of tests to hundreds of subjects who had also put random data into Joe's program. When Joe interpreted the tarot readouts for these people, the correlation was statistically significant. Joe himself rejected those results, because the psychological tests were probably invalid measurements themselves. More important to him was the months of work in clinics, doing readings with people the doctors knew intimately. Even the most skeptical of the participating psychologists had to admit that Joe knew things about people that he could not possibly know. And most of the psychologists said openly that Joe not only confirmed much that they already knew but also provided brilliant new insights. "It's like stepping into my patient's mind," one of them told Alvin.

"My son is brilliant, Dr. Fryer, and I want him to succeed, but surely this mumbo jumbo can't be more than luck."

Dr. Fryer only smiled and took a sip of wine. "Joe tells me that you have never submitted to the test yourself."

Alvin ahnost argued, but it was true. He never had submitted, even though he went through the motions. "I've seen it in action," Alvin said.

"Have you? Have you seen his results with someone you know well?"

Alvin shook his head, then smiled. "I figured that since I didn't believe in it, it wouldn't work around me."

"It isn't magic."

"It isn't science, either," said Alvin.

"No, you're right. Not science at all. But just because it isn't science doesn't mean it isn't true."

"Either it's science or it isn't."

"What a clear world you live in," said Dr. Fryer. "All the lines neatly drawn. We've run double-blind tests on his program, Dr. Bevis. Without knowing it, he has analyzed data taken from the same patient on different days, under different circumstances: the patient has even been given different instructions in some of the samples so that it wasn't random. And you know what happened?"

Alvin knew but did not say so.

"Not only did his program read substantially the same for all the different random inputs for the same patient, but the program also spotted the ringers. Easily. And then it turned out that the ringers were a consistent result for the woman who wrote the test we happened to use for the non-random input. Even when it shouldn't have worked, it worked."

"Very impressive," said Alvin, sounding as unimpressed as he could.

"It is impressive."

"I don't know about that," said Alvin. "So the cards are consistent. How do we know that they mean anything, or that what they mean is true?"

"Hasn't it occurred to you that your son is why it's true?

Alvin tapped his spoon on the tablecloth, providing a muffled rhythm.

"Your son's computer program objectifies random input. But only your son can read it. To me that says that it's his mind that makes his method work, not his program. If we could figure out what's going on inside your son's head, Dr. Bevis, then his method would be science. Until then it's an art. But whether it is art or science, he tells the truth."

"Forgive me for what might seem a slight to your profession," said Alvin, "but how in God's name do you know whether what he says is true?"

Dr. Fryer smiled and cocked his head. "Because I can't conceive of it being wrong. We can't test his interpretations the way we tested his program. I've tried to find objective tests. For instance, whether his findings agree with my notes. But my notes mean nothing, because until your son reads my patients, I really don't understand them. And after he reads them, I can't conceive of any other view of them. Before you dismiss me as hopelessly subjective, remember please, Dr. Bevis, that I have every reason to fear and fight against your son's work. It undoes everything that I have believed in. It undermines my own life's work. And Joe is just like you. He doesn't think psychology is a science, either. Forgive me for what might seem a slight to your son, but he is troubled and cold and difficult to work with. I don't like him much. So why do I believe him?"

"That's your problem, isn't it?"

"On the contrary, Dr. Bevis. Everyone who's seen what Joe does, believes it. Except for you. I think that most definitely makes it your problem."

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Dr. Fryer was wrong. Not everyone believed Joe.

"No," said Connie.

"No what?" asked Alvin. It was breakfast. Joe hadn't come downstairs yet. Alvin and Connie hadn't said a word since "Here's the eggs" and "Thanks."

Connie was drawing paths with her fork through the yolk stains on her plate. "Don't do another reading with Joe."

"I wasn't planning on it."

"Dr. Fryer told you to believe it, didn't he?" She put her fork down.

"But I didn't believe Dr. Fryer."

Connie got up from the table and began washing the dishes. Alvin watched her as she rattled the plates to make as much noise as possible. Nothing was normal anymore. Connie was angry as she washed the dishes. There was a dishwasher, but she was scrubbing everything by hand. Nothing was as it should be. Alvin tried to figure out why he felt such dread.

"You will do a reading with Joe," said Connie, "because you don't believe Dr. Fryer. You always insist on verifying everything for yourself. If you believe, you must question your belief. If you doubt, you doubt your own disbelief. Am I not right?"

"No." Yes.

"And I'm telling you this once to have faith in your doubt. There is no truth whatever in his God-damned tarot."

In all these years of marriage; Alvin could not remember Connie using such coarse language. But then she hadn't said god-damn; she had said God-damned, with all the theological overtones.

"I mean," she went on, filling the silence. "I mean how can anyone take this seriously? The card he calls Strength -- a woman closing a lion's mouth, yes, fine, but then he makes up a God-damned story about it, how the lion wanted her baby and she fed it to him." She looked at Alvin with fear. "It's sick, isn't it?"

"He said that?"

"And the Devil, forcing the lovers to stay together. He's supposed to be the flrstborn child, chaining Adam and Eve together. That's why locaste and Laios tried to kill Oedipus. Because they hated each other, and the baby would force them to stay together. But then they stayed together anyway because of shame at what they had done to an innocent child. And then they told everyone that asinine lie about the oracle and her prophecy."

"He's read too many books."

Connie trembled. "If he does a reading of you, I'm afraid of what will happen."

"If he feeds me crap like that, Connie, I'll just bite my lip. No fights, I promise."

She touched his chest. Not his shirt, his chest. It felt as ff her finger burned right through the cloth. "I'm not worried that you'll fight," she said. "I'm afraid that you'll believe him."

"Why would I believe him?"

"We don't live in the Tower, Alvin!"

"Of course we don't."

"I'm not locaste, Alvin!"

"Of course you aren't."

"Don't believe him. Don't believe anything he says."

"Connie, don't get so upset." Again: "Why would I believe him?"

She shook her head and walked out of the room, The water was still running in the sink. She hadn't said a word. But her answer rang in the room as if she had spoken: "Because it's true."

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Alvin tried to sort it out for hours. Oedipus and locaste. Adam, Eve, and the Devil. The mother feeding her baby to the lion. As Dr. Fryer had said, it isn't the cards, it isn't the program, it's Joe. Joe and the stories in his head. Is there a story in the world that Joe hasn't read? All the tales that man has told himself, all the visions of the world, and Joe knew them. Knew and believed them. Joe the repository of all the world's lies, and now he was telling the lies back, and they believed him, every one of them believed him.

No matter how hard Alvin tried to treat this nonsense with the contempt it deserved, one thing kept coming back to him. Joe's program had known that Alvin was lying, that Alvin was playing games, not telling the truth. Joe's program was valid at least that far. If his method can pass that negative test, how can I call myself a scientist if I disbelieve it before I've given it the positive test as well?

That night while Joe was watching M\*A\*S\*H reruns, Alvin came into the family room to talk to him. It always startled Alvin to see his son watching normal television shows, especially old ones from Alvin's own youth. The same boy who had read Ulysses and made sense of it without reading a single commentary, and he was laughing out loud at the television.

It was only after he had sat beside his son and watched for a while that Alvin realized that Joe was not laughing at the places where the laugh track did. He was not laughing at the jokes. He was laughing at Hawkeye himself.

"What was so funny?" asked Alvin.

"Hawkeye," said Joe.

"He was being serious."

"I know," said Joe. "But he's so sure he's right, and everybody believes him. Don't you think that's funny?"

As a matter of fact, no, I don't. "I want to give it another try, Joe," said Alvin.

Even though it was an abrupt change of subject, Joe understood at once, as if he had long been waiting for his father to speak. They got into the car, and Alvin drove them to the university. The computer people immediately made one of the full-color terminals available. This time Alvin allowed himself to be truly random, not thinking at all about what he was choosing, avoiding any meaning as he typed. When he was sick of typing, he looked at Joe for permission to be through. Joe shrugged. Alvin entered one more set of letters and then said, "Done."

Joe entered a single command that told the computer to start analyzing the input, and father and son sat together to watch the story unfold.

After a seemingly eternal wait, in which neither of them said a word, a picture of a card appeared on the screen.

"This is you," said Joe. It was the King of Swords.

"What does it mean?" asked Alvin.

"Very little by itself."

"Why is the sword coming out of his mouth?"

"Because he kills by the words of his mouth."

Father nodded. "And why is he holding his crotch?"

"I don't know."

"I thought you knew," said Father.

"I don't know until I see the other cards." Joe pressed the return key, and a new card almost completely covered the old one. A thin blue line appeared around it, and then it was blown up to fill the screen. It was judgment, an angel blowing a trumpet, awakening the dead, who were gray with corruption, standing in their graves. "This covers you," said Joe.

"What does it mean?"

"It's how you spend your life. Judging the dead."

"Like God? You're saying I think I'm God?"

"It's what you do, Father, " said Joe. "You judge everything. You're a scientist. I can't help what the cards say."

"I study life."

"You break life down into its pieces. Then you make your judgment. Only when it's all in fragments like the flesh of the dead."

Alvin tried to hear anger or bitterness in Joe's voice, but Joe was calm, matterof-fact, for all the world like a doctor with a good bedside manner. Or like a historian telling the simple truth.

Joe pressed the key, and on the small display another card appeared, again on top of the first two, but horizontally. "This crosses you," said Joe. And the card was outlined in blue, and zoomed close. It was the Devil.

"What does it mean, crossing me?"

"Your enemy, your obstacle. The son of Laios and locaste."

Alvin remembered that Connie had mentioned locaste. "How similar is this to what you told Connie?" he asked.

Joe looked at himimpassively. "How can I know after only three cards?"

Alvin waved him to go on.

A card above. "This crowns you." The Two of Wands, a man holding the world in his hands, staring off into the distance, with two small saplings growing out of the stone parapet beside him. "The crown is what you think you are, the story you tell yourself about yourself. Lifegiver, the God of Genesis, the Prince whose kiss awakens Sleeping Beauty and Snow White."

A card below. "This is beneath you, what you most fear to become." A man lying on the ground, ten swords piercing him in a row. He did not bleed.

"I've never lain awake at night afraid that someone would stab me to death."

Joe looked at him placidly. "But, Father, I told you, swords are words as often as not. What you fear is death at the hands of storytellers. According to the cards, you're the sort of man who would have killed the messenger who brought bad news."

According to the cards, or according to you? But Alvin held his anger and said nothing.

A card to the right. "This is behind you, the story of your past." A man in a sword-studded boat, poling the craft upstream, a woman and child sitting bowed in front of him. "Hansel and Gretel sent into the sea in a leaky boat."

"It doesn't look like a brother and sister," said Alvin. "It looks like a mother and child."

"Ah, " said Joe. A card to the left. "This is before you, where you know your course will lead." A sarcophagus with a knight sculpted in stone upon it, a bird resting on his head.

Death, thought Alvin. Always a safe prediction. And yet not safe at all. The cards themselves seemed malevolent. They all depicted situations that cried out with agony or fear. That was the gimmick, Alvin decided. Potent enough pictures will seem to be important whether they really mean anything or not. Heavy with meaning like a pregnant woman, they can be made to bear anything.

"It isn't death," said Joe.

Alvin was startled to have his thoughts so appropriately interrupted.

"It's a monument after you're dead. With your words engraved on it and above it. Blind Homer. Jesus. Mahomet. To have your words read like scripture."

And for the first time Alvin was genuinely frightened by what his son had found. Not that this future frightened him. Hadn't he forbidden himself to hope for it, he wanted it so much? No, what he feared was the way he felt himself say, silently, Yes, yes, this is True. I will not be flattered into belief, he said to himself. But underneath every layer of doubt that he built between himself and the cards he believed. Whatever Joe told him, he would believe, and so he denied belief now, not because of disbelief but because he was afraid. Perhaps that was why he had doubted from the start.

Next the computer placed a card in the lower right-hand corner. "This is your house." It was the Tower, broken by lightning, a man and a woman falling from it, surrounded by tears of flame.

A card directly above it. "This answers you." A man under a tree, beside a stream, with a hand coming from a small cloud, giving him a cup. "Elijah by the brook, and the ravens feed him."

And above that a man walking away from a stack of eight cups, with a pole and traveling cloak. The pole is a wand, with leaves growing from it. The cups are arranged so that a space is left where a ninth cup had been. "This saves you."

And then, at the top of the vertical file of four cards, Death. "This ends it." A bishop, a woman, and a child kneeling before Death on a horse. The horse is trampling the corpse of a man who had been a king. Beside the man lie his crown and a golden sword. In the distance a ship is foundering in a swift river. The sun is rising between pillars in the east. And Death holds a leafy wand in his hand, with a sheaf of wheat bound to it at the top. A banner of life over the corpse of the king. "This ends it," said Joe definitively.

Alvin waited, looking at the cards, waiting for Joe to explain it. But Joe did not explain. He just gazed at the monitor and then suddenly got to his feet. "Thank you, Father," he said. "It's all clear now.

"To you it's clear," Alvin said.

"Yes," said Joe. "Thank you very much for not lying this time." Then Joe made as if to leave.

"Hey, wait," Alvin said. "Aren't you going to explain it to me?"

"No," said Joe.

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

Alvin was not about to admit to anyone, least of all himself, that he did believe. "I still want to know. I'm curious. Can't I be curious?"

Joe studied his father's face. "I told Mother, and she hasn't spoken a natural word to me since."

So it was not just Alvin's imagination. The tarot program had driven a wedge between Connie and Joe. Held been right. "I'll speak a natural word or two every day, I promise," Alvin said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Joe said.

"Son," Alvin said. "Dr. Fryer told me that the stories you tell, the way you put things together, is the closest thing to truth about people that he's ever heard. Even if I don't believe it, don't I have the right to hear the truth?"

"I don't know if it is the truth. Or if there is such a thing."

"There is. The way things are, that's truth."

"But how are things, with people? What causes me to feel the way I do or act the way I do? Hormones? Parents? Social patterns? All the causes or purposes of all our acts are just stories we tell ourselves, stories we believe or disbelieve, changing all the time. But still we live, still we act, and all those acts have some kind of cause. The patterns all fit together into a web that connects everyone who's ever lived with everyone else. And every new person changes the web, adds to it, changes the connections, makes it all different. That's what I find with this program, how you believe you fit into the web."

"Not how I really fit?"

Joe shrugged. "How can I know? How can I measure it? I discover the stories that you believe most secretly, the stories that control your acts. But the very telling of the story changes the way you believe. Moves some things into the open, changes who you are. I undo my work by doing it."

"Then undo your work with me, and tell me the truth."

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm in your story."

Alvin spoke then more honestly than he ever meant to. "Then for God's sake tell me the story, because I don't know who the hell you are."

Joe walked back to his chair and sat down. "I am Goneril and Regan, because you made me act out the lie that you needed to hear. I am Oedipus, because you pinned my ankles together and left me exposed on the hillside to save your own future."

"I have loved you more than life."

"You were always afraid of me, Father. Like Lear, afraid that I wouldn't care for you when I was still vigorous and you were enfeebled by age. Like Laios, terrified that my power would overshadow you. So you took control; you put me out of my place."

"I gave years to educating you--"

"Educating me in order to make me forever your shadow, your student. When the only thing that I really loved was the one thing that would free me from you -all the stories."

"Damnable stupid fictions."

"No more stupid than the fiction you believe. Your story of little cells and DNA, your story that there is such a thing as reality that can be objectively perceived. God, what an idea, to see with inhuman eyes, without interpretation. That's exactly how stones see, without interpretation, because without interpretation there isn't any sight."

"I think I know that much at least," Alvin said, trying to feel as contemptuous as he sounded. "I never said I was objective."

"Scientific was the word. What could be verified was scientific. That was all that you would ever let me study, what could be verified. The trouble is, Father, that nothing in the world that matters at all is verifiable. What makes us who we are is forever tenuous, fragile, the web of a spider eaten and remade every day. I can never see out of your eyes. Yet I can never see any other way than through the eyes of every storyteller who ever taught me how to see. That was what you did to me, Father. You forbade me to hear any storyteller but you. It was your reality I had to surrender to. Your fiction I had to believe."

Alvin felt his past slipping out from under him. "If I had known those games of make-believe were so important to you, I wouldn't have--"

"You knew they were that important to me," Joe said coldly. "Why else would you have bothered to forbid me? But my mother dipped me into the water, all but my heel, and I got all the power you tried to keep from me. You see, Mother was not Griselde. She wouldn't kill her children for her husband's sake. When you exiled me, you exiled her. We lived the stories together as long as we were free."

"What do you mean?"

"Until you came home to teach me. We were free until then. We acted out all the stories that we could, without you."

It conjured for Alvin the ridiculous image of Connie playing Goldilocks and the Three Bears day after day for years. He laughed in spite of himself, laughed sharply, for only a moment. Joe took the laugh all wrong. Or perhaps took it exactly right. He took his father by the wrist and gripped him so tightly that Alvin grew afraid. Joe was stronger than Alvin had thought. "Grendel feels the touch of Beowulf on his hand," Joe whispered, "and he thinks, Perhaps I should have stayed at home tonight. Perhaps I am not hungry after all."

Alvin tried for a moment to pull his arm away but could not. What have I done to you, Joe? he shouted inside himself. Then he relaxed his arm and surrendered to the tale. "Tell me my story from the cards," he said. "Please."

Without letting go of his father's arm, Joe began. "You are Lear, and your kingdom is great. Your whole life is shaped so that you will live forever in stone, in memory. Your dream is to create life. You thought I would be such life, as malleable as the little worlds you make from DNA. But from the moment I was born you were afraid of me. I couldn't be taken apart and recombined like all your little animals. And you were afraid that I would steal the swords from your sepulchre. You were afraid that you would live on as Joseph Bevis's father, instead of me forever being Alvin Bevis's son."

"I was jealous of my child," said Alvin, trying to sound skeptical.

"Like the father rat that devours his babies because he knows that someday they will challenge his supremacy, yes. It's the oldest pattern in the world, a tale older than teeth."

"Go on, this is quite fascinating." I refuse to care.

"All the storytellers know how this tale ends. Every time a father tries to change the future by controlling his children, it ends the same. Either the children lie, like Goneril and Regan, and pretend to be what he made them, or the children tell the truth, like Cordelia, and the father casts them out. I tried to tell the truth, but then together Mother and I lied to you. It was so much easier, and it kept me alive. She was Grim the Fisher, and she saved me alive."

locaste and Laios and Oedipus. "I see where this is Alvin said. "I thought you were bright enough not to believe in that Freudian nonsense about the Oedipus complex."

"Freud thought he was telling the story of all mankind when he was only telling his own. Just because the story of Oedipus isn't true for everyone doesn't mean that it isn't true for me. But don't worry, Father. I don't have to kill you in the forest in order to take possession of your throne."

"I'm not worried." It was a lie. It was a truthful understatement.

"Laios died only because he would not let his son pass along the road."

"Pass along any road you please."

"And I am the Devil. You and Mother were in Eden until I came. Because of me you were cast out. And now you're in hell."

"How neatly it all fits."

"For you to achieve your dream, you had to kill me with your story. When I lay there with your blades in my back, only then could you be sure that your sepulchre was safe. When you exiled me in a boat I could not live in, only then could you be safe, you thought. But I am the Horn Child, and the boat bore me quickly across the sea to my true kingdom."

"This isn't anything coming from the computer," said Alvin. "This is just you being a normal resentful teenager. Just a phase that everyone goes through."

Joe's grip on Alvin's arm only tightened. "I didn't die, I didn't wither, I have my power now, and you're not safe. Your house is broken, and you and Mother are being thrown from it to your destruction, and you know it. Why did you come to me, except that you knew you were being destroyed?"

Again Alvin tried to find a way to fend off Joe's story with ridicule. This time he could not. Joe had pierced through shield and armor and cloven him, neck to heart. "In the name of God, Joe, how do we end it all?" He barely kept from shouting.

Joe relaxed his grip on Alvin's arm at last. The blood began to flow again, painfully; Alvin fancied he could measure it passing through his calibrated arteries.

"Two ways," said Joe. "There is one way you can save yourself."

Alvin looked at the cards on the screen. "Exile."

"Just leave. Just go away for a while. Let us alone for a while. Let me pass you by, stop trying to rule, stop trying to force your story on me, and then after a while we can see what's changed."

"Oh, excellent. A son divorcing his father. Not too likely."

"Or death. As the deliverer. As the fulfillment of your dream. If you die now, you defeat me. As Laios destroyed Oedipus at last."

Alvin stood up to leave. "This is rank melodrama. Nobody's going to die because of this."

"Then why can't you stop trembling?" asked Joe.

"Because I'm angry, that's why," Alvin said. "I'm angry at the way you choose to look at me. I love you more than any other father I know loves his son, and this is the way you choose to view it. How sharper than a serpent's tooth---"

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child. Away, away!"

"Lear, isn't it? You gave me the script, and now I'm saying the goddamn lines."

Joe smiled a strange, sphinxlike smile. "It's a good exit line, though, isn't it?"

"Joe, I'm not going to leave, and I'm not going to drop dead, either. You've told me a lot. Like you said, not the truth, not reality, but the way you see things. That helps, to know how you see things."

Joe shook his head in despair. "Father, you don't understand. It was you who put those cards up on the screen. Not I. My reading is completely different. Completely different, but no better."

"If I'm the King of Swords, who are you?"

"The Hanged Man," Joe said.

Alvin shook his head. "What an ugly world you choose to live in."

"Not neat and pretty like yours, not bound about by rules the way yours is. Laws and principles, theories and hypotheses, may they cover your eyes and keep you happy."

"Joe, I think you need help," said Alvin.

"Don't we all," said Joe.

"So do I. A family counselor maybe. I think we need outside help."

"I've told you what you can do."

"I'm not going to run away from this, Joe, no matter how much you want me to."

"You already have. You've been running away for months. These are your cards, Father, not mine."

"Joe, I want to help you out of this -- unhappiness."

Joe frowned. "Father, don't you understand? The Hanged Man is smiling. The Hanged Man has won."

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Alvin did not go home. He couldn't face Connie right now, did not want to try to explain what he felt about what Joe had told him. So he went to the laboratory and lost himself for a time in reading records of what was happening with the different subject organisms. Some good results. If it all held up, Alvin Bevis would have taken mankind a long way toward being able to read the DNA chain. There was a Nobel in it. More important still, there was real change. I will have changed the world, he thought. And then there came into his mind the picture of the man holding the world in his hands, looking off into the distance. The Two of Wands. His dream. Joe was right about that. Right about Alvin's longing for a monument to last forever.

And in a moment of unusual clarity Alvin saw that Joe was right about everything. Wasn't Alvin even now doing just what the cards called for him to do to save himself, going into hiding with the Eight of Cups? His house was breaking down, all was being undone, and he was setting out on a long journey that would lead him to solitude. Greatness, but solitude.

There was one card that Joe hadn't worked into his story, however. The Four of Cups. "This answers you," he had said. The hand of God conung from a cloud. Elijah by the brook. If God were to whisper to me, what would He say?

He would say, Alvin thought, that there is something profoundly wrong, something circular in all that Joe has done. He has synthesized things that no other mind in the world could have brought together meaningfully. He is, as Dr. Fryer said, touching on the borders of Truth. But, by God, there is something wrong something he has overlooked. Not a mistake, exactly. Simply a place where Joe has not put two true things together in his own life: Stories make us who we are: the tarot program identifies- the stories we believe: by hearing the tale of the tarot, we have changed who we are: therefore--

Therefore, no one knows how much of Joe's tarot story is believed because it is true, and how much becomes true because it is believed. Joe is not a scientist. Joe is a tale-teller. But the gifted, powerful teller of tales soon lives in the world he has created, for as more and more people believe him, his tales become true.

We do not have to be the family of Laios. I do not have to play at being Lear. I can say no to this story, and make it false. Not that Joe could tell any other story, because this is the one that he believes. But I can change what he believes by changing what the cards say, and I can change what the cards say by being someone else.

King of Swords. Imposing my will on others, making them live in the world that my words created. And now my son, too, doing the same. But I can change, and so can he, and then perhaps his brilliance, his insights can shape a better world than the sick one he is making us live in.

And as he grew more excited, Alvin felt himself fill with light, as if the cup had poured into him from the cloud. He believed, in fact, that he had already changed. That he was already something other than what Joe said he was.

The telephone rang. Rang twice, three times, before Alvin reached out to answer it. It was Connie.

"Alvin?" she asked in a small voice.

"Connie," he said.

"Alvin, Joe called me." She sounded lost, distant.

"Did he? Don't worry, Connie, everything's going to be fine."

"Oh, I know," Connie said. "I finally figured it out. It's the thing that Helen never figured out. It's the thing that locaste never had the guts to do. Enid knew it, though, Enid could do it. I love you, Alvin." She hung up.

Alvin sat with his hand on the phone for thirty seconds. That's how long it took him to realize that Connie sounded sleepy. That Connie was trying to change the cards, too. By killing herself.

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All the way home in the car, Alvin was afraid that he was going crazy. He kept warning himself to drive carefully, not to take chances. He wouldn't be able to save Connie if he had an accident on the way. And then there would come a voice that sounded like Joe's, whispering, That's the story you tell yourself, but the truth is you're driving slowly and carefully, hoping she will die so everything will be simple again. it's the best solution. Connie has solved it all, and you're being slow so she can succeed, but telling yourself you're being careful so you can live with yourself after she's dead.

No, said Alvin again and again, pushing on the accelerator, weaving through the traffic, then forcing himself to slow down, not to kill himself to save two seconds. Sleeping pills weren't that fast. And maybe he was wrong; maybe she hadn't taken pills. Or maybe he was thinking that in order to slow himself down so that Connie would die and everything would be simple again--

Shut up, he told himself. Just get there, he told himself.

He got there, fumbled with the key, and burst inside. "Connie!" he shouted.

Joe was standing in the archway between the kitchen and the family room.

"It's all right," Joe said. "I got here when she was on the phone to you. I forced her to vomit, and most of the pills hadn't even dissolved yet."

"She's awake?"

"More or less."

Joe stepped aside, and Alvin walked into the family room. Connie sat on a chair, looking catatonic. But as he came nearer, she turned away, which at once hurt him and relieved him. At least she was not hopelessly insane. So it was not too late for change.

"Joe," Alvin said, still looking at Connie. "I've been thinking. About the reading."

Joe stood behind him, saying nothing.

"I believe it. You told the truth. The whole thing, just as you said."

Still Joe did not answer. Well, what can he say, anyway? Alvin asked himself. Nothing. At least he's listening. "Joe, you told the truth. I really screwed up the family. I've had to have the whole thing my way, and it really screwed things up. Do you hear me, Connie? I'm telling both of you, I agree with Joe about the past. But not the future. There's nothing magical about those cards. They don't tell the future. They just tell the outcome of the pattern, the way things will end if the pattern isn't changed. But we can change it, don't you see? That's what Connie was trying to do with the pills, change the way things turn out. Well, I'm the one who can really change, by changing me. Can you see that? I'm changed already. As if I drank from the cup that came to me out of the cloud, Joe. I don't have to control things the way I did. It's all going to be better now. We can build up from, up from--"

The ashes, those were the next words. But they were the wrong words, Alvin could sense that. All his words were wrong. It had seemed true in the lab, when he thought of it; now it sounded dishonest. Desperate. Ashes in his mouth. He turned around to Joe. His son was not listening silently. Joe's face was contorted with rage, his hands trembling, tears streaming down his cheeks.

As soon as Alvin looked at him, Joe screamed at him. "You can't just let it be, can you! You have to do it again and again and again, don't you!"

Oh, I see, Alvin thought. By wanting to change things, I was just making them more the same. Trying to control the world they live in. I didn't think it through well enough. God played a dirty trick on me, giving me that cup from the cloud.

"I'm sorry," Alvin said.

"No!" Joe shouted. "There's nothing you can say!"

"You're right," Alvin said, trying to calm Joe. "I should just have--"

"Don't say anything!" Joe screamed, his face red.

"I won't, I won't," said Alvin. "I won't say another -- "

"Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!"

"I'm just agreeing with you, that's--"

Joe lunged forward and screamed it in his father's face. "God damn you, don't talk at all!"

"I see," said Alvin, suddenly realizing. "I see -- as long as I try to put it in words, I'm forcing my view of things on the rest of you, and if I--"

There were no words left for Joe to say. He had tried every word he knew that might silence his father, but none would. Where words fail, there remains the act. The only thing close at hand was a heavy glass dish on the side table. Joe did not mean to grab it, did not mean to strike his father across the head with it. He only meant his father to be still. But all his incantations had failed, and still his father spoke, still his father stood in the way, refusing to let him pass, and so he smashed him across the head with the glass dish.

But it was the dish that broke, not his father's head. And the fragment of glass in Joe's hand kept right on going after the blow, followed through with the stroke, and the sharp edge of the glass cut neatly through the fleshy, bloody, windy part of Alvin's throat. All the way through, severing the carotid artery, the veins, and above all the trachea, so that no more air flowed through Alvin's larynx. Alvin was wordless as he fell backward, spraying blood from his throat, clutching at the pieces of glass imbedded in the side of his face.

"Uh-oh," said Connie in a high and childish voice.

Alvin lay on his back on the floor, his head propped up on the front edge of the couch. He felt a terrible throbbing in his throat and a strange silence in his ears where the blood no longer flowed. He had not known how noisy the blood in the

head could be, until now, and now he could not tell anyone. He could only lie there, not moving, not turning his head, watching.

He watched as Connie stared at his throat and slowly tore at her hair; he watched as Joe carefully and methodically pushed the bloody piece of glass into his right eye and then into his left. I see now, said Alvin silently. Sorry I didn't understand before. You found the answer to the riddle that devoured us, my Oedipus. I'm just not good at riddles, I'm afraid.

## THE ORIGINIST Orson Scott Card

Leyel Forksa sat before his lector display, reading through an array of recently published scholarly papers. A holograph of two pages of text hovered in the air before him. The display was rather larger than most people needed their pages to be, since Leyel's eyes were no younger than the rest of him. When he came to the end he did not press the PAGE key to continue, the article. Instead he pressed NEXT.

The two pages he had been reading slid backward about a centimeter, joining a dozen previously discarded articles, all standing in the air over the lector. With a soft beep, a new pair of pages appeared in front of the old ones.

Deet spoke up from where she sat eating breakfast. "You're only giving the poor soul two pages before you consign him to the wastebin?"

"I'm consigning him to oblivion," Leyel answered cheerfully. "No, I'm consigning him to hell."

"What? Have you rediscovered religion in your old age?"

"I'm creating one. It has no heaven, but it has a terrible everlasting hell for young scholars who think they can make their reputation by attacking my work."

"Ah, you have a theology," said Deet. "Your work is holy writ, and to attack it is blasphemy."

"I welcome intelligent attacks. But this young tube-headed professor from-- yes, of course, Minus University--"

"Old Minus U?"

"He thinks he can refute me, destroy me, lay me in the dust, and all he has bothered to cite are studies published within the last thousand years."

"The principle of millennial depth is still widely used --- "

"The principle of millennial depth is the confession of modern scholars that they are not willing to spend as much effort on research as they do on academic politics. I shattered the principle of millennial depth thirty years ago. I proved that it was--"

"Stupid and outmoded. But my dearest darling sweetheart Leyel, you did it by spending part of the immeasurably vast Forska fortune to search for inaccessible and forgotten archives in every section of the Empire."

"Neglected and decaying. I had to reconstruct half of them."

"It would take a thousand universities' library budgets to match what you spent on research for 'Human Origin on the Null Planet.""

"But once I spent the money, all those archives were open. They have been open for three decades. The serious scholars all use them, since millennial depth yields nothing but predigested, preexcreted muck. They search among the turds of rats who have devoured elephants, hoping to find ivory."

"So colorful an image. My breakfast tastes much better now." She slid her tray irrto the cleaning slot and glared at him. "Why are you so snappish? You used to read me sections from their silly little papers and we'd laugh. Lately you're just nasty."

Leyel sighed. "Maybe it's because I once dreamed of changing the galaxy, and every day's mail brings more evidence that the galaxy refuses to change."

"Nonsense. Hari Seldon has promised that the Empire will fall any day now."

There. She had said Hari's name. Even though she had too much tact to speak openly of what bothered him, she was hinting that Leyel's bad humor was because he was still waiting for Hari Seldon's answer. Maybe so-- Leyel wouldn't deny it. It was annoying that it had taken Hari so long to respond. Leyel had expected a call the day Hari got his application. At least within the week. But he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of admitting that the waiting bothered him. "The Empire will be killed by its own refusal to change. I rest my case."

"Well, I hope you have a wonderful morning growling and grumbling about the stupidity of everyone in origin studies-- except your esteemed self."

"Why are you teasing me about my vanity today? I've always been vain."

"I consider it one of your most endearing traits."

"At least I make an effort to live up to my own opinion of myself."

"That's nothing. You even live up to my opinion of you." She kissed the bald spot on the top of his head as she breezed by, heading for the bathroom.

Level turned his attention to the new essay at the front of the lector display. It was a name he didn't recognize. Fully prepared to find pretentious writing and

puerile thought, he was surprised to find himself becoming quite absorbed. This woman had been following a trail of primate studies-- a field so long neglected that there simply were no papers within the range of millennial depth. Already he knew she was his kind of scholar. She even mentioned the fact that she was using archives opened by the Forska Research Foundation. Leyel was not above being pleased at this tacit expression of gratitude.

It seemed that the woman-- a Dr. Thoren Magolissian-- had been following Leyel's lead, searching for the principles of human origin rather than wasting time on the irrelevant search for one particular planet. She had uncovered a trove of primate research from three millennia ago, which was based on chimpanzee and gorilla studies dating back to seven thousand years ago. The earliest of these had referred to original research so old it may have been conducted before the founding of the Empire-- but those most ancient reports had not yet been located. They probably didn't exist any more. Texts abandoned for more than five thousand years were very hard to restore; texts older than eight thousand years were simply unreadable. It was tragic, how many texts had been "stored" by librarians who never checked them, never refreshed or recopied them. Presiding over vast archives that had lost every scrap of readable information. All neatly catalogued, of course, so you knew exactly what it was that humanity had lost forever.

## Never mind.

Magolissian's article. What startled Leyel was her conclusion that primitive language capability seemed to be inherent in the primate mind. Even in primates incapable of speech, other symbols could easily be learned-- at least for simple nouns and verbs- and the nonhuman primates could come up with sentences and ideas that had never been spoken to them. This meant that mere production of language, per se, was prehuman, or at least not the deterining factor of humanness.

It was a dazzling thought. It meant that the difference between humans and nonhumans-- the real origin of humans in recognizably human form-- was postlinguistic. Of course this came as a direct contradiction of one of Leyel's own assertions in an early paper-- he had said that "since language is what separates human from beast, historical linguistics may provide the key to human origins" -but this was the sort of contradiction he welcomed. He wished he could shout at the other fellow, make him look at Magolissian's article. See? This is how to do it! Challenge my assumption, not my conclusion, and do it with new evidence instead of trying to twist the old stuff. Cast a light in the darkness, don't just churn up the same old sediment at the bottom of the river.

Before he could get into the main body of the article, however, the house computer informed him that someone was at the door of the apartment. It was a message that crawled along the bottom of the lector display. Level pressed the key that brought the message to the front, in letters large enough to read. For the thousandth time he wished that sometime in the decamillennia of human history, somebody had invented a computer capable of speech.

"Who is it?" Leyel typed.

A moment's wait, while the house computer interrogated the visitor.

The answer appeared on the lector: "Secure courier with a message for Leyel Forska."

The very fact that the courier had got past house security meant that it was genuine-- and important. Level typed again. "From?"

Another pause. "Hari Seldon of the Encyclopedia Galactica Foundation."

Leyel was out of his chair in a moment. He got to the door even before the house computer could open it, and without a word took the message in his hands. Fumbling a bit, he pressed the top and bottom of the black glass lozenge to prove by fingerprint that it was he, by body temperature and pulse that he was alive to receive it. Then, when the courier and her bodyguards were gone, he dropped the message into the chamber of his lector and watched the page appear in the air before him.

At the top was a three-dimensional version of the logo of Hari's Encyclopedia Foundation. Soon to be my insignia as well, thought Leyel. Hari Seldon and I, the two greatest scholars of our time, joined together in a project whose scope surpasses anything ever attempted by any man or group of men. The gathering together of all the knowledge of the Empire in a systematic, easily accessible way, to preserve it through the coming time of anarchy so that a new civilization can quickly rise out of the ashes of the old. Hari had the vision to foresee the need. And I, Leyel Forska, have the understanding of all the old archives that will make the Encyclopedia Galactica possible.

Leyel started reading with a confidence born of experience; had he ever really desired anything and been denied?

My dear friend:

I was surprised and honored to see an application from you and insisted on writing your answer personally. It is gratifying beyond measure that you believe in the Foundation enough to apply to take part. I can truthfully tell you that we have received no application from any other scholar of your distinction and accomplishment. Of course, thought Leyel. There is no other scholar of my stature, except Hari himself, and perhaps Deet, once her current work is published. At least we have no equals by the standards that Hari and I have always recognized as valid. Hari created the science of psychohistory. I transformed and revitalized the field of originism.

And yet the tone of Hari's letter was wrong. It sounded like-- flattery. That was it. Hari was softening the coming blow. Leyel knew before reading it what the next paragraph would say.

Nevertheless, Leyel, I must reply in the negative. The Foundation on Terminus is designed to collect and preserve knowledge. Your life's work has been devoted to expanding it. You are the opposite of the sort of researcher we need. Far better for you to remain on Trantor and continue your inestimably valuable studies, while lesser men and women exile themselves on Terminus.

## Your servant, Hari

Did Hari imagine Leyel to be so vain he would read these flattering words and preen himself contentedly? Did he think Leyel would believe that this was the real reason his application was being denied? Could Hari Seldon misknow a man so badly?

Impossible. Hari Seldon, of all people in the Empire, knew how to know other people. True, his great work in psychohistory dealt with large masses of people, with populations and probabilities. But Hari's fascination with populations had grown out of his interest in and understanding of individuals. Besides, he and Hari had been friends since Hari first arrived on Trantor. Hadn't a grant from Leyel's own research fund financed most of Hari's original research? Hadn't they held long conversations in the early days, tossing ideas back and forth, each helping the other hone his thoughts? They may not have seen each other much in the last-- what, five years? Six? --but they were adults, not children. They didn't need constant visits in order to remain friends. And this was not the letter a true friend would send to Leyel Forska. Even if, doubtful as it might seem, Hari Seldon really meant to turn him down, he would not suppose for a moment that Leyel would be content with a letter like this.

Surely Hari would have known that it would be like a taunt to Leyel Forska. "Lesser men and women," indeed! The Foundation on Terminus was so valuable to Hari Seldon that he had been willing to risk death on charges of treason in order to launch the project. It was unlikely in the extreme that he would populate Terminus with second-raters. No, this was the form letter sent to placate prominent scholars who were judged unfit for the Foundation. Hari would have known Leyel would immediately recognize it as such. There was only one possible conclusion. "Hari could not have written this letter," Leyel said.

"Of course he could," Deet told him, blunt as always. She had come out of the bathroom in her dressing gown and read the letter over his shoulder.

"If you think so then I truly am hurt," said Leyel. He got up, poured a cup of peshat, and began to sip it. He studiously avoided looking at Deet.

"Don't pout, Leyel. Think of the problems Hari is facing. He has so little time, so much to do. A hundred thousand people to transport to Terminus, most of the resources of the Imperial Library to duplicate--"

"He already had those people --- "

"All in six months, since his trial ended. No wonder we haven't seen him, socially or professionally, in years. A decade!"

"You're saying that he no longer knows me? Unthinkable."

"I'm saying that he knows you very well. He knew you would recognize his message as a form letter. He also knew that you would understand at once what this meant."

"Well, then, my dear, he overestimated me. I do not understand what it means, unless it means he did not send it himself."

"Then you're getting old, and I'm ashamed of you. I shall deny we are married and pretend you are my idiot uncle whom I allow to live with me out of charity. I'll tell the children they were illegitimate. They'll be very sad to learn they won't inherit a bit of the Forska estate."

He threw a crumb of toast at her. "You are a cruel and disloyal wench, and I regret raising you out of poverty and obscurity. I only did it for pity, you know."

This was an old tease of theirs. She had commanded a decent fortune in her own right, though of course Leyel's dwarfed it. And, technically, he was her uncle, since her stepmother was Leyel's older half sister Zenna. It was all very complicated. Zenna had been bom to Leyel's mother when she was married to sonieone else-- before she married Leyel's father. So while Zenna was well dowered, she had no part in the Forska fortune. Leyel's father, amused at the situation, once remarked, "Poor Zenna. Lucky you. My semen flows with gold." Such are the ironies that come with great fortune. Poor people don't have to make such terrible distinctions between their children. Deet's father, however, assumed that a Forska was a Forska, and so, several years after Deet had married Leyel, he decided that it wasn't enough for his daughter to be married to uncountable wealth, he ought to do the same favor for himself. He said, of course, that he loved Zenna to distraction, and cared nothing for fortune, but only Zenna believed him. Therefore she married him. Thus Leyel's half sister became Deet's stepmother, which made Leyel his wife's stepuncle-- and his own stepuncle-- in-law. A dynastic tangle that greatly amused Leyel and Deet.

Leyel of course compensated for Zenna's lack of inheritance with a lifetime stipend that amounted to ten times her husband's income each year. It had the happy effect of keeping Deet's old father in love with Zenna.

Today, though, Leyel was only half teasing Deet. There were times when he needed her to confirm him, to uphold him. As often as not she contradicted him instead. Sometimes this led him to rethink his position and emerge with a better understanding-- thesis, antithesis, synthesis, the dialectic of marriage, the result of being espoused to one's intellectual equal. But sometimes her challenge was painful, unsatisfying, infuriating.

Oblivious to his underlying anger, she went on. "Hari assumed that you would take his form letter for what it is-- a definite, final no. He isn't hedging he's not engaging in some bureaucratic deviousness, he isn't playing politics with you. He isn't stringing you along in hopes of getting more financial support from you-- if that were it you know he'd simply ask."

"I already know what he isn't doing."

"What he is doing is turning you down with finality. An answer from which there is no appeal. He gave you credit for having the wit to understand that."

"How convenient for you if I believe that."

Now, at last, she realized he was angry. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can stay here on Trantor and continue your work with all your bureaucratic friends."

Her face went cold and hard. "I told you. I am quite happy to go to Terminus with you."

"Am I supposed to believe that, even now? Your research in community formation within the Imperial bureaucracy cannot possibly continue on Terminus."

"I've already done the most important research. What I'm doing with the Imperial Library staff is a test."

"Not even a scientific one, since there's no control group."

She looked annoyed. "I'm the one who told you that."

It was true. Leyel had never even heard of control groups until she taught him the whole concept of experimentation. She had found it in some very old child-development studies from the 3100s G.E. "Yes, I was just agreeing with you," he said lamely.

"The point is, I can write my book as well on Terminus as anywhere else. And yes, Leyel, you are supposed to believe that I'm happy to go with you, because I said it, and therefore it's so."

"I believe that you believe it. I also believe that in your heart you are very glad that I was turned down, and you don't want me to pursue this matter any further so there'll be no chance of your having to go to the godforsaken end of the universe."

Those had been her words, months ago, when he first proposed applying to join the Seldon Foundation. "We'd have to go to the godforsaken end of the universe!" She remembered now as well as he did. "You'll hold that against me forever, won't you! I think I deserve to be forgiven my first reaction. I did consent to go, didn't I?"

"Consent, yes. But you never wanted to."

"Well, Leyel, that's true enough. I never wanted to. Is that your idea of what our marriage means? That I'm to subsume myself in you so deeply that even your desires become my own? I thought it was enough that from time to time we consent to sacrifice for each other. I never expected you to want to leave the Forska estates and come to Trantor when I needed to do my research here. I only asked you to do it-- whether you wanted to or not-- because I wanted it. I recognized and respected your sacrifice. I am very angry to discover that my sacrifice is despised."

"Your sacrifice remains unmade. We are still on Trantor."

"Then by all means, go to Hari Seldon, plead with him, humiliate yourself, and then realize that what I told you is true. He doesn't want you to join his Foundation and he will not allow you to go to Terminus."

"Are you so certain of that?"

"No, I'm not certain. It merely seems likely."

"I will go to Terminus, if he'll have me. I hope I don't have to go alone."

He regretted the words as soon as he said them. She froze as if she had been slapped, a look of horror on her face. Then she turned and ran from the room. A few moments later, he heard the chime announcing that the door of their apartment had opened. She was gone.

No doubt to talk things over with one of her friends. Women have no sense of discretion. They cannot keep domestic squabbles to themselves. She will tell them all the awful things I said, and they'll cluck and tell her it's what she must expect from a husband, husbands demand that their wives make all the sacrifices, you poor thing, poor poor Deet. Well, Leyel didn't begrudge her this barnyard of sympathetic hens. It was part of human nature, he knew, for women to form a perpetual conspiracy against the men in their lives. That was why women have always been so certain that men also formed a conspiracy against them.

How ironic, he thought. Men have no such solace. Men do not bind themselves so easily into communities. A man is always aware of the possibility of betrayal, of conflicting loyalties. Therefore when a man does commit himself truly, it is a rare and sacred bond, not to be cheapened by discussing it with others. Even a marriage, even a good marriage like theirs-- his commitment might be absolute, but he could never trust hers so completely.

Leyel had buried himself within the marriage, helping and serving and loving Deet with all his heart. She was wrong, completely wrong about his coming to Trantor. He hadn't come as a sacrifice, against his will, solely because she wanted to come. On the contrary: because she wanted so much to come, he also wanted to come, changing even his desires to coincide with hers. She commanded his very heart, because it was impossible for him not to desire anything that would bring her happiness.

But she, no, she could not do that for him. If she went to Terminus, it would be as a noble sacrifice. She would never let him forget that she hadn't wanted to. To him, their marriage was his very soul. To Deet, their marriage was just a friendship with sex. Her soul belonged as much to these other women as to him. By dividing her loyalties, she fragmented them; none were strong enough to sway her deepest desires. Thus he discovered what he supposed all faithful men eventually discover-- that no human relationship is ever anything but tentative. There is no such thing as an unbreakable bond between people. Like the particles in the nucleus of the atom. They are bound by the strongest forces in the universe, and yet they can be shattered, they can break.

Nothing can last. Nothing is, finally, what it once seemed to be. Deet and he had had a perfect marriage until there came a stress that exposed its imperfection. Anyone who thinks he has a perfect marriage, a perfect friendship,

a perfect trust of any kind, he only believes this because the stress that will break it has not yet come. He might die with the illusion of happiness, but all he has proven is that sometimes death comes before betrayal. If you live long enough, betrayal will inevitably come.

Such were the dark thoughts that filled Leyel's mind as he made his way through the maze of the city of Trantor. Leyel did not seal himself inside a private car when he went about in the planet-wide city. He refused the trappings of wealth; he insisted on experiencing the life of Trantor as an ordinary man. Thus his bodyguards were under strict instructions to remain discreet, interfering with no pedestrians except those carrying weapons, as revealed by a subtle and instantaneous scan.

It was much more expensive to travel through the city this way, of course-every time he stepped out the door of his simple apartment, nearly a hundred high-paid bribeproof employees went into action. A weaponproof car would have been much cheaper. But Leyel was determined not to be imprisoned by his wealth.

So he walked through the corridors of the city, riding cabs and tubes, standing in lines like anyone else. He felt the great city throbbing with life around him. Yet such was his dark and melancholy mood today that the very life of the city filled him with a sense of betrayal and loss. Even you, great Trantor, the Imperial City, even you will be betrayed by the people who made you. Your empire will desert you, and you will become a pathetic remnant of yourself, plated with the metal of a thousand worlds and asteroids as a reminder that once the whole galaxy promised to serve you forever, and now you are abandoned. Hari Seldon had seen it. Hari Seldon understood the changeability of humankind. He knew that the great empire would fall, and so-- unlike the government, which depended on things remaining the same forever-- Hari Seldon could actually take steps to ameliorate the Empire's fall, to prepare on Terminus a womb for the rebirth of human greatness. Hari was creating the future. It was unthinkable that he could mean to cut Leyel Forska out of it.

The Foundation, now that it had legal existence and Imperial funding, had quickly grown into a busy complex of offices in the four-thousand-year-old Putassuran Building. Because the Putassuran was originally built to house the Admiralty shortly after the great victory whose name it bore, it had an air of triumph, of monumental optimism about it-- rows of soaring arches, a vaulted atrium with floating bubbles of light rising and dancing in channeled columns of air. In recent centuries the building had served as a site for informal public concerts and lectures, with the offices used to house the Museum Authority. It had come empty only a year before Hari Seldon was granted the right to form his Foundation, but it seemed as though it had been built for this very purpose. Everyone was hurrying this way and that, always seeming to be on urgent business, and yet also happy to be part of a noble cause. There had been no noble causes in the Empire for a long, long time.

Level quickly threaded his way through the maze that protected the Foundation's director from casual interruption. Other men and women, no doubt, had tried to see Hari Seldon and failed, put off by this functionary or that. Hari Seldon is a very busy man. Perhaps if you make an appointment for later. Seeing him today is out of the question. He's in meetings all afternoon and evening. Do call before coming next time.

But none of this happened to Leyel Forska. All he had to do was say, "Tell Mr. Seldon that Mr. Forska wishes to continue a conversation." However much awe they might have of Hari Seldon, however they might intend to obey his orders not to be disturbed, they all knew that Leyel Forska was the universal exception. Even Linge Chen would be called out of a meeting of the Commission of Public Safety to speak with Forska, especially if Leyel went to the trouble of coming in person.

The ease with which he gained entry to see Hari, the excitement and optimism of the people, of the building itself, had encouraged Leyel so much that he was not at all prepared for Hari's first words.

"Leyel, I'm surprised to see you. I thought you would understand that my message was final."

It was the worst thing that Hari could possibly have said. Had Deet been right after all? Leyel studied Hari's face for a moment, trying to see some sign of change. Was all that had passed between them through the years forgotten now? Had Hari's friendship never been real? No. Looking at Hari's face, a bit more lined and wrinkled now, Leyel saw still he same earnestness, the same plain honesty that had always been there. So instead of expressing the rage and disappointment that he felt, Leyel answered carefully, leaving the way open for Hari to change his mind. "I understood that your message was deceptive, and therefore could not be final."

Hari looked a little angry. "Deceptive?"

"I know which men and women you've been taking into your Foundation. They are not second-raters."

"Compared to you they are," said Hari. "They're academics, which means they're clerks. Sorters and interpreters of information."

"So am I. So are all scholars today. Even your inestimable theories arose from sorting through a trillion bytes of data and interpreting it."

Hari shook his head. "I didn't just sort through data. I had an idea in my head. So did you. Few others do. You and I are expanding human knowledge. Most of the rest are only digging it up in one place and piling it in another. That's what the Encyclopedia Galactica is. A new pile."

"Nevertheless, Hari, you know and I know that this is not the real reason you turned me down. And don't tell me that it's because Leyel Forska's presence on Terminus would call undue attention to the project. You already have so much attention from the government that you can hardly breathe."

"You are unpleasantly persistent, Leyel. I don't like even having this conversation."

"That's too bad, Hari. I want to be part of your project. I would contribute to it more than any other person who might join it. I'm the one who plunged back into the oldest and most valuable archives and exposed the shameful amount of data loss that had arisen from neglect. I'm the one who launched the computerized extrapolation of shattered documents that your Encyclopedia--"

"Absolutely depends on. Our work would be impossible without your accomplishments."

"And yet you turned me down, and with a crudely flattering note."

"I didn't mean to give offense, Leyel."

"You also didn't mean to tell the truth. But you will tell me, Hari, or I'll simply go to Terminus anyway."

"The Commission of Public Safety has given my Foundation absolute control over who may or may not come to Terminus."

"Hari. You know perfectly well that all I have to do is hint to some lower-level functionary that I want to go to Terminus. Chen will hear of it within minutes, and within an hour he'll grant me an exception to your charter. If I did that, and if you fought it, you'd lose your charter. You know that. If you want me not to go to Terminus, it isn't enough to forbid me. You must persuade me that I ought not to be there."

Hari closed his eyes and sighed. "I don't think you're willing to be persuaded, Leyel. Go if you must."

For a moment Leyel wondered if Hari was giving in. But no, that was impossible, not so easily. "Oh, yes, Hari, but then I'd find myself cut off from everybody else on Terminus except my own serving people. Fobbed off with useless assignments. Cut out of the real meetings." "That goes without saying," said Hari. "You are not part of the Foundation, you will not be, you cannot be. And if you try to use your wealth and influence to force your way in, you will succeed only in annoying the Foundation, not in joining it. Do you understand me?"

Only too well, thought Leyel in shame. Leyel knew perfectly well the limitations of power, and it was beneath him to have tried to bluster his way into getting something that could only be given freely. "Forgive me, Hari. I wouldn't have tried to force you. You know I don't do that sort of thing."

"I know you've never done it since we've been friends, Leyel. I was afraid that I was learning something new about you." Hari sighed. He turned away for a long moment, then turned back with a different look on his face, a different kind of energy in his voice. Leyel knew that look, that vigor. It meant Hari was taking him more deeply into his confidence. "Leyel, you have to understand, I'm not just creating an encyclopedia on Terminus."

Immediately Leyel grew worried. It had taken a great deal of Leyel's influence to persuade the government not to have Hari Seldon summarily exiled when he first started disseminating copies of his treatises about the impending fall of the Empire. They were sure Seldon was plotting treason, and had even put him on trial, where Seldon finally persuaded them that all he wanted to do was create the Encyclopedia Galactica, the repository of all the wisdom of the Empire. Even now, if Seldon confessed some ulterior motive, the government would move against him. It was to be assumed that the Pubs-- Public Safety Office-- were recording this entire conversation. Even Leyel's influence couldn't stop them if they had a confession from Hari's own mouth.

"No, Leyel, don't be nervous. My meaning is plain enough. For the Encyclopedia Galactica to succeed, I have to create a thriving city of scholars on Terminus. A colony full of men and women with fragile egos and unstemmable ambition, all of them trained in vicious political infighting at the most dangerous and terrible schools of bureaucratic combat in the Empire-- the universities."

"Are you actually telling me you won't let me join your Foundation because I never attended one of those pathetic universities? My self-education is worth ten times their lockstep force-fed pseudolearning."

"Don't make your anti-university speech to me, Leyel. I'm saying that one of my most important concerns in staffing the Foundation is compatibility. I won't bring anyone to Terminus unless I believe he-- or she-- would be happy there."

The emphasis Hari put on the word she suddenly made everything clearer. "This isn't about me at all, is it?" Leyel said. "It's about Deet." Hari said nothing.

"You know she doesn't want to go. You know she prefers to remain on Trantor. And that's why you aren't taking me! Is that it?"

Reluctantly, Hari conceded the point. "It does have something to do with Deet, yes."

"Don't you know how much the Foundation means to me?" demanded Leyel. "Don't you know how much I'd give up to be part of your work?"

Hari sat there in silence for a moment. Then he murmured, "Even Deet?"

Leyel almost blurted out an answer. Yes, of course, even Deet, anything for this great work.

But Hari's measured gaze stopped him. One thing Leyel had known since they first met at a conference back in their youth was that Hari would not stand for another man's self-deception. They had sat next to each other at a presentation by a demographer who had a considerable reputation at the time. Leyel watched as Hari destroyed the poor man's thesis with a few well-aimed questions. The demographer was furious. Obviously he had not seen the flaws in his own argument-- but now that they had been shown to him, he refused to admit that they were flaws at all.

Afterward, Hari had said to Leyel, "I've done him a favor."

"How, by giving him someone to hate?" said Leyel.

"No. Before, he believed his own unwarranted conclusions. He had deceived himself. Now he doesn't believe them."

"But he still propounds them."

"So now he's more of a liar and less of a fool. I have improved his private integrity. His public morality I leave up to him."

Leyel remembered this and knew that if he told Hari he could give up Deet for any reason, even to join the Foundation, it would be worse than a lie. It would be foolishness.

"It's a terrible thing you've done," said Leyel. "You know that Deet is part of myself. I can't give her up to join your Foundation. But now for the rest of our lives together I'll know that I could have gone, if not for her. You've given me wormwood and gall to drink, Hari."

Hari nodded slowly. "I hoped that when you read my note you'd realize I didn't want to tell you more. I hoped you wouldn't come to me and ask. I can't lie to you, Leyel. I wouldn't if I could. But I did withhold information, as much as possible. To spare us both problems."

"It didn't work."

"It isn't Deet's fault, Leyel. It's who she is. She belongs on Trantor, not on Terminus. And you belong with her. It's a fact, not a decision. We'll never discuss this again."

"No," said Leyel.

They sat there for a long minute, gazing steadily at each other. Leyel wondered if he and Hari would ever speak again. No. Never again. I don't ever want to see you again, Hari Seldon. You've made me regret the one unregrettable decision of my life-- Deet. You've made me wish, somewhere in my heart, that I'd never married her. Which is like making me wish I'd never been born.

Leyel got up from his chair and left the room without a word. When he got outside, he turned to the reception room in general, where several people were waiting to see Seldon. "Which of you are mine?" he asked.

Two women and one man stood up immediately.

"Fetch me a secure car and a driver."

Without a glance at each other, one of them left on the errand. The others fell in step beside Leyel. Subtlety and discretion were over for the moment. Leyel had no wish to mingle with the people of Trantor now. He only wanted to go home.

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Hari Seldon left his office by the back way and soon found his way to Chandrakar Matt's cubicle in the Department of Library Relations. Chanda looked up and waved, then effortlessly slid her chair back until it was in the exact position required. Hari picked up a chair from the neighboring cubicle and, again without showing any particular care, set it exactly where it had to be.

Immediately the computer installed inside Chanda's lector recognized the configuration. It recorded Hari's costume of the day from three angles and superimposed the information on a long-stored holoimage of Chanda and Hari conversing pleasantly. Then, once Hari was seated, it began displaying the hologram. The hologram exactly matched the positions of the real Hari and Chanda, so that infrared sensors would show no discrepancy between image and fact. The only thing different was the faces-- the movement of lips, blinking of

eyes, the expressions. Instead of matching the words Hari and Chanda were actually saying, they matched the words being pushed into the air outside the cubicle-- a harmless, randomly chosen series of remarks that took into account recent events so that no one would suspect that it was a canned conversation.

It was one of Hari's few opportunities for candid conversation that the Pubs would not overhear, and he and Chanda protected it darefully. They never spoke long enough or often, enough that the Pubs would wonder at their devotion to such empty conversations. Much of their communication was subliminal-- a sentence would stand for a paragraph, a word for a sentence, a gesture for a word. But when the conversation was done, Chanda knew where to go from there, what to do next; and Hari was reassured that his most important work was going on behind the smokescreen of the Foundation.

"For a moment I thought he might actually leave her."

"Don't underestimate the lure of the Encyclopedia."

"I fear I've wrought too well, Chanda. Do you think someday the Encyclopedia Galactica might actually exist?"

"It's a good idea. Good people are inspired by it. It wouldn't serve its purpose if they weren't. What should I tell Deet?"

"Nothing, Chanda. The fact that Leyel is staying that's enough for her."

"If he changes his mind, will you actually let him go to Terminus?"

"If he changes his mind, then he must go, because if he would leave Deet, he's not the man for us."

"Why not just tell him? Invite him?"

"He must become part of the Second Foundation without realizing it. He must do it by natural inclination, not by a summons from me, and above all not by his own ambition."

"Your standards are so high, Hari, it's no wonder so few measure up. Most people in the Second Foundation don't even know that's what it is. They think they're librarians. Bureaucrats. They think Deet is an anthropologist who works among them in order to study them."

"Not so. They once thought that, but now they think of Deet as one of them. As one of the best of them. She's defining what it means to be a librarian. She's making them proud of the name."

"Aren't you ever troubled, Hari, by the fact that in the practice of your art--"

"My science."

"Your meddlesome magical craft, you old wizard, you don't fool me with all ypur talk of science. I've seen the scripts of the holographs you're preparing for the vault on Terminus."

"That's all a pose."

"I can just imagine you saying those words. Looking perfectly satisfied with yourself. 'If you care to smoke, I wouldn't mind... Pause for chuckle... Why should I? I'm not really here.' Pure showmanship."

Hari waved off the idea. The computer quickly found a bit of dialogue to fit his gesture, so the false scene would not seem false. "No, I'm not troubled by the fact that in the practice of my science I change the lives of human beings. Knowledge has always changed people's lives. The only difference is that I know I'm changing them-- and the changes I introduce are planned, they're under control. Did the man who invented the first artificial light-- what was it, animal fat with a wick? A light-emitting diode? --did he realize what it would do to humankind, to be given power over night?"

As always, Chanda deflated him the moment he started congratulating himself. "In the first place, it was almost certainly a woman, and in the second place, she knew exactly what she was doing. It allowed her to find her way through the house at night. Now she could put her nursing baby in another bed, in another room, so she could get some sleep at night without fear of rolling over and smothering the child."

Hari smiled. "If artificial light was invented by a woman, it was certainly a prostitute, to extend her hours of work."

Chanda grinned. She did not laugh-- it was too hard for the computer to come up with jokes to explain laughter. "We'll watch Leyel carefully, Hari. How will we know when he's ready, so we can begin to count on him for protection and leadership?"

"When you already count on him, then he's ready. When his commitment and loyalty are firm, when the goals of the Second Foundation are already in his heart, when he acts them out in his life, then he's ready."

There was a finality in Hari's tone. The conversation was nearly over.

"By the way, Hari, you were right. No one has even questioned the omission of any important psychohistorical data from the Foundation library on Terminus."

"Of course not. Academics never look outside their own discipline. That's another reason why I'm glad Leyel isn't going. He would notice that the only psychologist we're sending is Bor Alurin. Then I'd have to explain more to him than I want. Give my love to Deet, Chanda. Tell her that her test case is going very well. She'll end up with a husband and a community of scientists of the mind."

"Artists. Wizards. Demigods."

"Stubborn misguided women who don't know science when they're doing it. All in the Imperial Library. Till next time, Chanda."

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If Deet had asked him about his interview with Hari, if she had commiserated with him about Hari's refusal, his resentment of her might have been uncontainable, he might have lashed out at her and said something that could never be forgiven. Instead, she was perfectly herself, so excited about her work and so beautiful, even with her face showing all the sag and wrinkling of her sixty years, that all Leyel could do was fall in love with her again, as he had so many times in their years together.

"It's working beyond anything I hoped for, Leyel. I'm beginning to hear stories that I created months and years ago, coming back as epic legends. You remember the time I retrieved and extrapolated the accounts of the uprising at Misercordia only three days before the Admiralty needed them?"

"Your finest hour. Admiral Divart still talks about how they used the old battle plots as a strategic guideline and put down the Tellekers' strike in a single three-day operation without loss of a ship."

"You have a mind like a trap, even if you are old."

"Sadly, all I can remember is the, past."

"Dunce, that's all anyone can remember."

He prompted her to go on with her account of today's triumph. "It's an epic legend now?"

"It came back to me without my name on it, and bigger than life. As a reference. Rinjy was talking with some young librarians from one of the inner provinces who were on the standard interlibrary tour, and one of them said something about how you could stay in the Imperial Library on Trantor all your life and never see the real world at all." Leyel hooted. "Just the thing to say to Rinjy!"

"Exactly. Got her dander up, of course, but the important thing is, she immediately told them the story of how a librarian, all on her own, saw the similarity between the Misercordia uprising and the Tellekers' strike. She knew no one at the Admiralty would listen to her unless she brought them all the information at once. So she delved back into the ancient records and found them in deplorable shape-- the original data had been stored in glass, but that was forty-two centuries ago, and no one had refreshed the data. None of the secondary sources actually showed the battle plots or ship courses-- Misercordia had mostly been written about by biographers, not military historians--"

"Of course. It was Pol Yuensau's first battle, but he was just a pilot, not a commander--"

"I know you remember, my intrusive pet. The point is what Rinjy said about this mythical librarian."

"You."

"I was standing right there. I don't think Rinjy knew it was me, or she would have said something-- she wasn't even in the same division with me then, you know. What matters is that Rinjy heard a version of the story and by the time she told it, it was transformed into a magic hero tale. The prophetic librarian of Trantor."

"What does that prove? You are a magic hero."

"The way she told it, I did it all on my own initiative--"

"You did. You were assigned to do document extrapolation, and you just happened to start with Misercordia."

"But in Rinjy's version, I had already seen its usefulness with the Tellekers' strike. She said the librarian sent it to the Admiralty and only then did they realize it was the key to bloodless victory."

"Librarian saves the Empire."

"Exactly."

"But you did."

"But I didn't mean to. And Admiralty requested the information-- the only really extraordinary thing was that I had already finished two weeks of document restoration--"

"Which you did brilliantly."

"Using programs you had helped design, thank you very much, O Wise One, as you indirectly praise yourself. It was sheer coincidence that I could give them exactly what they wanted within five minutes of their asking. But now it's a hero story within the community of librarians. In the Imperial Library itself, and now spreading outward to all the other libraries."

"This is so anecdotal, Deet. I don't see how you can publish this."

"Oh, I don't intend to. Except perhaps in the introduction. What matters to me is that it proves my theory. "

"It has no statistical validity."

"It proves it to me. I know that my theories of community formation are true. That the vigor of a community depends on the allegiance of its members, and the allegiance can be created and enhanced by the dissemination of epic stories."

"She speaks the language of academia. I should be writing this down, so you don't have to think up all those words again."

"Stories that make the community seem more important, more central to human life. Because Rinjy could tell this story, it made her more proud to be a librarian, which increased her allegiance to the community and gave the community more power within her."

"You are possessing their souls."

"And they've got mine. Together our souls are possessing each other."

There was the rub. Deet's role in the library had begun as applied research-joining the library staff in order to confirm her theory of community formation. But that task was impossible to accomplish without in fact becoming a committed part of the library community. It was Deet's dedication to serious science that had brought them together. Now that very dedication was stealing her away. It would hurt her more to leave the library than it would to lose Leyel.

Not true. Not true at all, he told himself sternly. Self-pity leads to self-deception. Exactly the opposite is true-- it would hurt her more to lose Leyel than to leave her community of librarians. That's why she consented to go to Terminus in the

first place. But could he blame her for being glad that she didn't have to choose? Glad that she could have both?

Yet even as he beat down the worst of the thoughts arising from his disappointment, he couldn't keep some of the nastiness from coming out in his conversation. "How will you know when your experiment is over?"

She frowned. "It'll never be over, Leyel. They're all really librarians-- I don't pick them up by the tails like mice and put them back in their cages when the experiment's done. At some point I'll simply stop, that's all, and write my book."

"Will you?"

"Write the book? I've written books before, I think I can do it again."

"I meant, will you stop?"

"When, now? Is this some test of my love for you, Leyel? Are you jealous of my friendships with Rinjy and Animet and Fin and Urik?"

No! Don't accuse me of such childish, selfish feelings!

But before he could snap back his denial, he knew that his denial would be false.

"Sometimes I am, yes, Deet. Sometimes I think you're happier with them."

And because he had spoken honestly, what could have become a bitter quarrel remained a conversation. "But I am, Leyel, " she answered, just as frankly. "It's because when I'm with them, I'm creating something new, I'm creating something with them. It's exciting, invigorating. I'm discovering new things every day, in every word they say, every smile, every tear someone sheds, every sign that being one of us is the most important thing in their lives."

"I can't compete with that."

"No, you can't, Leyel. But you complete it. Because it would all mean nothing, it would be more frustrating than exhilarating if I couldn't come back to you every day and tell you what happened. You always understand what it means, you're always excited for me, you validate my experience."

"I'm your audience. Like a parent."

"Yes, old man. Like a husband. Like a child. Like the person I love most in all the world. You are my root. I make a brave show out there, all branches and

bright leaves in the sunlight, but I come here to suck the water of life from your soil."

"Leyel Forska, the font of capillarity. You are the tree, and I am the dirt."

"Which happens to be full of fertilizer." She kissed him. A kiss reminiscent of younger days. An invitation, which he gladly accepted.

A softened section of floor served them as an impromptu bed. At the end, he lay beside her, his arm across her waist, his head on her shoulder, his lips brushing the skin of her breast. He remembered when her breasts were small and firm, perched on her chest like small monuments to her potential. Now when she lay on her back they were a ruin, eroded by age so they flowed off her chest to either side, resting wearily on her arms.

"You are a magnificent woman," he whispered, his lips tickling her skin.

Their slack and flabby bodies were now capable of greater passion than when they were taut and strong. Before, they were all potential. That's what we love in youthful bodies, the teasing potential. Now hers is a body of accomplishment. Three fine children were the blossoms, then the fruit of this tree, gone off and taken root somewhere else. The tension of youth could now give way to a relaxation of the flesh. There were no more promises in their lovemaking. Only fulfillment.

She murmured softly in his ear, "That was a ritual, by the way. Community maintenance."

"So I'm just another experiment?"

"A fairly successful one. I'm testing to see if this little community can last until one of us drops."

"What if you drop first? Who'll write the paper then?"

"You will. But you'll sign my name to it. I want the Imperial medal for it. Posthumously. Glue it to my memorial stone."

"I'll wear it myself. If you're selfish enough to leave all the real work to me, you don't deserve anything better than a cheap replica."

She slapped his back. "You are a nasty selfish old man, then. The real thing or nothing."

He felt the sting of her slap as if he deserved it. A nasty selfish old man. If she only knew how right she was. There had been a moment in Hari's office when

he'd almost said the words that would deny all that there was between them. The words that would cut her out of his life. Go to Terminus without her! I would be more myself if they took my heart, my liver, my brain.

How could I have thought I wanted to go to Terminus, anyway? To be surrounded by academics of the sort I most despise, struggling with them to get the encyclopedia properly designed. They'd each fight for their petty little province, never catching the vision of the whole, never understanding that the encyclopedia would be valueless if it were compartmentalized. It would be a life in hell, and in the end he'd lose, because the academic mind was incapable of growth or change.

It was here on Trantor that he could still accomplish something. Perhaps even solve the question of human origin, at least to his own satisfaction-- and perhaps he could do it soon enough that he could get his discovery included in the Encyclopedia Galactica before the Empire began to break down at the edges, cutting Terminus off from the rest of the Galaxy.

It was like a shock of static electricity passing through his brain; he even saw an afterglow of light around the edges of his vision, as if a spark had jumped some synaptic gap.

"What a sham," he said.

"Who, you? Me?"

"Hari Seldon. All this talk about his Foundation to create the Encyclopedia, Galactica."

"Careful, Leyel." It was almost impossible that the Pubs could have found a way to listen to what went on in Leyel Forska's own apartments. Almost.

"He told me twenty years ago. It was one of his first psychohistorical projections. The Empire will crumble at the edges first. He projected it would happen within the next generation. The figures were crude then. He must have it down to the year now. Maybe even the month. Of course he put his Foundation on Terminus. A place so remote that when the edges of the Empire fray, it will be among the first threads lost. Cut off from Trantor. Forgotten at once!"

"What good would that do, Leyel? They'd never hear of any new discoveries then."

"What you said about us. A tree. Our children like the fruit of that tree."

"I never said that."

"I thought it, then. He is dropping his Foundation out on Terminus like the fruit of Empire. To grow into a new Empire by and by."

"You frighten me, Leyel. If the Pubs ever heard you say that --- "

"That crafty old fox. That sly, deceptive-- he never actually lied to me, but of course he couldn't send me there. If the Forska fortune was tied up with Terminus, the Empire would never lose track of the place. The edges might fray elsewhere, but never there. Putting me on Terminus would be the undoing of the real project." It was such a relief. Of course Hari couldn't tell him, not with the Pubs listening, but it had nothing to do with him or Deet. It wouldn't have to be a barrier between them after all. It was just one of the penalties of being the keeper of the Forska fortune.

"Do you really think so?" asked Deet.

"I was a fool not to see it before. But Hari was a fool too if he thought I wouldn't guess it."

"Maybe he expects you to guess everything."

"Oh, nobody could ever come up with everything Hari's doing. He has more twists and turns in his brain than a hyperpath through core space. No matter how you labor to pick your way through, you'll always find Hari at the end of it, nodding happily and congratulating you on coming this far. He's ahead of us all. He's already planned everything, and the rest of us are doomed to follow in his footsteps."

"Is it doom?"

"Once I thought Hari Seldon was God. Now I know he's much less powerful than that. He's merely Fate."

"No, Leyel. Don't say that."

"Not even Fate. Just our guide through it. He sees the future, and points the way."

"Rubbish." She slid out from under him, got up, pulled her robe from its hook on the wall. "My old bones get cold when I lie about naked."

Leyel's legs were trembling, but not with cold. "The future is his, and the present is yours, but the past belongs to me. I don't know how far into the future his probability curves have taken him, but I can match him, step for step, century for century into the past."

"Don't tell me you're going to solve the question of origin. You're the one who proved it wasn't worth solving."

"I proved that it wasn't important or even possible to find the planet of origin. But I also said that we could still discover the natural laws that accounted for the origin of man. Whatever forces created us as human beings must still be present in the universe."

"I did read what you wrote, you know. You said it would be the labor of the next millennium to find the answer."

"Just now. Lying here, just now, I saw it, just out of reach. Something about your work and Hari's work, and the tree."

"The tree was about me needing you, Leyel. It wasn't about the origin of humanity."

"It's gone. Whatever I saw for a moment there, it's gone. But I can find it again. It's there in your work, and Hari's Foundation, and the fall of the Empire, and the damned pear tree."

"I never said it was a pear tree."

"I used to play in the pear orchard on the grounds Of the estate in Holdwater. To me the word 'tree' always means a pear tree. One of the deep-worn ruts in my brain."

"I'm relieved. I was afraid you were reminded of pears by the shape of these ancient breasts when I bend over."

"Open your robe again. Let me see if I think of pears. "

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Leyel paid for Hari Seldon's funeral. It was not lavish. Leyel had meant it to be. The moment he heard of Hari's death-- not a surprise, since Hari's first brutal stroke had left him half-paralyzed in a wheelchair-- he set his staff to work on a memorial service appropriate to honor the greatest scientific mind of the millennium. But word arrived, in the form of a visit from Commissioner Rom Divart, that any sort of public services would be...

"Shall we say, inappropriate?"

"The man was the greatest genius I've ever heard of! He virtually invented a branch of science that clarified things that-- he made a science out of the sort of thing that soothsayers and-- and-- economists used to do!"

Rom laughed at Leyel's little joke, of course, because he and Leyel had been friends forever. Rom was the only friend of Leyel's childhood who had never sucked up to him or resented him or stayed cool toward him because of the Forska fortune. This was, of course, because the Divart holdings were, if anything, slightly greater. They had played together unencumbered by strangeness or jealousy or awe.

They even shared a tutor for two terrible, glorious years, from the time Rom's father was murdered until the execution of Rom's grandfather, which caused so much outrage among the nobility that the mad Emperor was stripped of power and the Imperium put under the control of the Commission of Public Safety. Then, as the youthful head of one of the great families, Rom had embarked on his long and fruitful career in politics.

Rom said later that for those two years it was Leyel who taught him that there was still some good in the world; that Leyel's friendship was the only reason Rom hadn't killed himself. Leyel always thought this was pure theatrics. Rom was a born actor. That's why he so excelled at making stunning entrances and playing unforgettable scenes on the grandest stage of all-- the politics of the Imperium. Someday he would no doubt exit as dramatically as his father and grandfather had.

But he was not all show. Rom never forgot the friend of his childhood. Leyel knew it, and knew also that Rom's coming to deliver this message from the Commission of Public Safety probably meant that Rom had fought to make the message as mild as it was. So Leyel blustered a bit, then made his little joke. It was his way of surrendering gracefully.

What Leyel didn't realize, right up until the day of the funeral, was exactly how dangerous his friendship with Hari Seldon had been, and how stupid it was for him to associate himself with Hari's name now that the old man was dead. Linge Chen, the Chief Commissioner, had not risen to the position of greatest power in the Empire without being fiercely suspicious of potential rivals and brutally efficient about eliminating them. Hari had maneuvered Chen into a position such that it was more dangerous to kill the old man than to give him his Foundation on Terminus. But now Hari was dead, and apparently Chen was watching to see who mourned.

Leyel did-- Leyel and the few members of Hari's staff who had stayed behind on Trantor to maintain contact with Terminus up to the moment of Hari's death. Leyel should have known better. Even alive, Hari wouldn't have cared who came to his funeral. And now, dead, he cared even less. Leyel didn't believe his friend lived on in some ethereal plane, watching carefully and taking attendance at the services. No, Leyel simply felt he had to be there, felt he had to speak. Not for Hari, really. For himself. To continue to be himself, Leyel had to make some kind of public gesture toward Hari Seldon and all he had stood for.

Who heard? Not many. Deet, who thought his eulogy was too mild by half. Hari's staff, who were quite aware of the danger and winced at each of Leyel's list of Hari's accomplishments. Naming them-- and emphasizing that only Seldon had the vision to do these great works-- was, inherently a criticism of the level of intelligence and integrity in the Empire. The Pubs were listening, too. They noted that Leyel clearly agreed with Hari Seldon about the certainty of the Empire's fall-- that in fact as a galactic empire it had probably already fallen, since its authority was no longer coextensive with the Galaxy.

If almost anyone else had said such things, to such a small audience, it would have been ignored, except to keep him from getting any job requiring a security clearance. But when the head of the Forska family came out openly to affirm the correctness of the views of a man who had been tried before the Commission of Public Safety-- that posed a greater danger to the Commission than Hari Seldon.

For, as head of the Forska family, if Leyel Forska wanted, he could be one of the great players on the political stage, could have a seat on the Commission along with Rom Divart and Linge Chen. Of course, that would also have meant constantly watching for assassins-- either to avoid them or to hire them-- and trying to win the allegiance of various military strongmen in the far-flung reaches of the Galaxy. Leyel's grandfather had spent his life in such pursuits, but Leyel's father had declined, and Leyel himself had thoroughly immersed himself in science and never so much as inquired about politics.

Until now. Until he made the profoundly political act of paying for Hari Seldon's funeral and then speaking at it. What would he do next? There were a thousand would-be warlords who would spring to revolt if a Forska promised what would-be emperors so desperately needed: a noble sponsor, a mask of legitimacy, and money.

Did Linge Chen really believe that Leyel meant to enter politics at his advanced age? Did he really think Leyel posed a threat?

Probably not. If he had believed it, he would surely have had Leyel killed, and no doubt all his children as well, leaving only one of his minor grandchildren, whom Chen would carefully control through the guardians he would appoint, thereby acquiring control of the Forska fortune as well as his own.

Instead, Chen only believed that Leyel might cause trouble. So he took what were, for him, mild steps.

That was why Rom came to visit Leyel again, a week after the funeral.

Leyel was delighted to see him. "Not on somber business this time, I hope," he said. "But such bad luck-- Deet's at the library again, she practically lives there now, but she'd want to-"

"Leyel." Rom touched Leyel's lips with his fingers.

So it was somber business after all. Worse than somber. Rom recited what had to be a memorized speech.

"The Commission of Public Safety has become concerned that in your declining years--"

Leyel opened his mouth to protest, but again Rom touched his lips to silence him.

"That in your declining years, the burdens of the Forska estates are distracting you from your exceptionally important scientific work. So great is the Empire's need for the new discoveries and understanding your work will surely bring us, that the Commission of Public Safety has created the office of Forska Trustee to oversee all the Forska estates and holdings. You will, of course, have unlimited access to these funds for your scientific work here on Trantor, and funding will continue for all the archives and libraries you have endowed. Naturally, the Commission has no desire for you to thank us for what is, after all, our duty to one of our noblest citizens, but if your well-known courtesy required you to make a brief public statement of gratitude it would not be inappropriate."

Leyel was no fool. He knew how things worked. He was being stripped of his fortune and being placed under arrest on Trantor. There was no point in protest or remonstrance, no point even in trying to make Rom feel guilty for having brought him such a bitter message. Indeed, Rom himself might be in great danger-- if Leyel so much as hinted that he expected Rom to come to his support, his dear friend might also fall. So Leyel nodded gravely, and then carefully framed his words of reply.

"Please tell the Commissioners how grateful I am for their concern on my behalf. It has been a long long time since anyone went to the trouble of easing my burdens. I accept their kind offer. I am especially glad because this means that now I can pursue my studies unencumbered."

Rom visibly relaxed. Leyel wasn't going to cause trouble. "My dear friend, I will sleep better knowing that you are always here on Trantor, working freely in the library or taking your leisure in the parks."

So at least they weren't going to confine him to his apartment. No doubt they would never let him off-planet, buit it wouldn't hurt to ask. "Perhaps I'll even have time now to visit my grandchildren now and then."

"Oh, Leyel, you and I are both too old to enjoy hyperspace any more. Leave that for the youngsters-- they can come visit you whenever they want. And sometimes they can stay home, while their parents come to see you."

Thus Leyel learned that if any of his children came to visit him, their children would be held hostage, and vice versa. Leyel himself would never leave Trantor again.

"So much the better," said Leyel. "I'll have time to write several books I've been meaning to publish."

"The Empire waits eagerly for every scientific treatise you publish." There was a slight emphasis on the word "scientific." "But I hope you won't bore us with one of those tedious autobiographies."

Leyel agreed to the restriction easily enough. "I promise, Rom. You know better than anyone else exactly how boring my life has always been."

"Come now. My life's the boring one, Leyel, all this government claptrap and bureaucratic bushwa. You've been at the forefront of scholarship and learning. Indeed, my friend, the Commission hopes you'll honor us by giving us first look at every word that comes out of your scriptor."

"Only if you promise to read it carefully and point out any mistakes I might make." No doubt the Commission intended only to censor his work to remove political material-- which Leyel had never included anyway. But Leyel had already resolved never to publish anything again, at least as long as Linge Chen was Chief Commissioner. The safest thing Leyel could do now was to disappear, to let Chen forget him entirely-- it would be egregiously stupid to send occasional articles to Chen, thus reminding him that Leyel was still around.

But Rom wasn't through yet. "I must extend that request to Deet's work as well. We really want first look at it-- do tell her so."

"Deet?" For the first time Leyel almost let his fury show. Why should Deet be punished because of Leyel's indiscretion? "Oh, she'll be too shy for that, Rom-she doesn't think her work is important enough to deserve any attention from men as busy as the Commissioners. They'll think you only want to see her work because she's my wife-- she's always annoyed when people patronize her."

"You must insist, then, Leyel," said Rom. "I assure you, her studies of the functions of the Imperial bureaucracy have long been interesting to the Commission for their own sake."

Ah. Of course. Chen would never have allowed a report on the workings of government to appear without making sure it wasn't dangerous. Censorship of Deet's writings wouldn't be Leyel's fault after all. Or at least not entirely.

"I'll tell her that, Rom. She'll be flattered. But won't you stay and tell her yourself? I can bring you a cup of peshat, we ran talk about old times--"

Leyel would have been surprised if Rom had stayed. No, this interview had been at least as hard on Rom as it had been on him. The very fact that Rom had been forced into being the Commission's messenger to his childhood friend was a humiliating reminder that the Chens were in the ascendant over the Divarts. But as Rom bowed and left, it occuffed to Leyel that Chen might have made a mistake. Humiliating Rom this way, forcing him to place his dearest friend under arrest like this-- it might be the straw to break the camel's back. After all, though no one had ever been able to find out who hired the assassin who killed Rom's father, and no one had ever learned who denounced Rom's grandfather, leading to his execution by the paranoid Emperor Wassiniwak, it didn't take a genius to realize that the House of Chen had profited most from both events.

"I wish I could stay," said Rom. "But duty calls. Still, you can be sure I'll think of you often. Of course, I doubt I'll think of you as you are now, you old wreck. I'll remember you as a boy, when we used to tweak our tutor-- remember the time we recoded his lector, so that for a whole week explicit pornography kept coming up on the display whenever the door of his room opened?"

Leyel couldn't help laughing. "You never forget anything, do you!"

"The poor fool. He never figured out that it was us! Old times. Why couldn't we have stayed young forever?" He embraced Leyel and then swiftly left.

Linge Chen, you fool, you have reached too far. Your days are numbered. None of the Pubs who were listening in on their conversation could possibly know that Rom and Leyel had never teased their tutor-- and that they had never done anything to his lector. It was just Rom's way of letting Leyel know that they were still allies, still keeping secrets together-- and that someone who had authority over both of them was going to be in for a few nasty surprises.

It gave Leyel chills, thinking about what might come of all this. He loved Rom Divart with all his heart, but he also knew that Rom was capable of biding his time and then killing swiftly, efficiently, coldly. Linge Chen had just started his latest six-year term of office, but Leyel knew he'd never finish it. And the next Chief Commissioner would not be a Chen.

Soon, though, the enormity of what had been done to him began to sink in. He had always thought that his fortune meant little to him-- that he would be the same man with or without the Forska estates. But now he began to realize that it

wasn't true, that he'd been lying to himself all along. He had known since childhood how despicable rich and powerful men could be-- his father had made sure he saw and understood how cruel men became, when their money persuaded them they had a right to use others however they wished. So Leyel had learned to despise his own birthright, and, starting with his father, had pretended to others that he could make his way through the world solely by wit and diligence, that he would have been exactly the same man if he had grown up in a common family, with a common education. He had done such a good job of acting as if he didn't care about his wealth that he came to believe it himself.

Now he realized that Forska estates had been an invisible part of himself all along, as if they were extensions of his body, as if he could flex a muscle and cargo ships would fly, he could blink and mines would be sunk deep into the earth, he could sigh and all over the Galaxy there would be a wind of change that would keep blowing until everything was exactly as he wanted it. Now all those invisible limbs and senses had been amputated. Now he was crippled-- he had only as many arms and legs and eyes as any other human being.

At last he was what he had always pretended to be. An ordinary, powerless man. He hated it.

For the first hours after Rom left, Leyel pretended he could take all this in stride. He sat at the lector and spun through the pages smoothly-- without anythifig,on the pages registering in his memory. He kept wishing Deet were there so he could laugh with her about how little this hurt him; then he would be glad that Deet was not there, because one sympathetic touch of her hand would push him over the edge, make it impossible to contain his emotion.

Finally he could not help himself. Thinking of Deet, of their children and grandchildren, of all that had been lost to them because he had made an empty gesture to a dead friend, he threw himself to the softened floor and wept bitterly. Let Chen listen to recordings of what the spy beam shows of this! Let him savor his victory! I'll destroy him somehow, my staff is still loyal to me, I'll put together an army, I'll hire assassins of my own, I'll make contact with Admiral Sipp, and then Chen will be the one to sob, crying out for mercy as I disfigure him the way he has mutilated me--

## Fool.

Leyel rolled over onto his back, dried his face on his sleeve, then lay there, eyes closed, calming himself. No vengeance. No politics. That was Rom's business, not Leyel's. Too late for him to enter the game now-- and who would help him, anyway, now that he had already lost his power? There was nothing to be done.

Leyel didn't really want to do anything, anyway. Hadn't they guaranteed that his archives and libraries would continue to be funded? Hadn't they guaranteed him

unlimited research funds? And wasn't that all he had cared about anyway? He had long since turned over all the Forska operations to his subordinates-- Chen's trustee would simply do the same job. And Leyel's children wouldn't suffer much- he had raised them with the same values that he had grown up with, and so they all pursued careers unrelated to the Forska holdings. They were true children of their father and mother-- they wouldn't have any self-respect if they didn't earn their own way in the world. No doubt they'd be disappointed by having their inheritance snatched away. But they wouldn't be destroyed.

I am not ruined. All the lies that Rom told are really true, only they didn't realize it. All that matters in my life, I still have. I really don't care about my fortune. It's just the way I lost it that made me so furious. I can go on and be the same person I always was. This will even give me an opportunity to see who my true friends are-- to see who still honors me for my scientific achievements, and who despises me for my poverty.

By the time Deet got home from the library-- late, as was usual these days--Leyel was hard at work, reading back through all the research and speculation on protohuman behavior, trying to see ff there was anything other than half-assed guesswork and pompous babble. He was so engrossed in his reading that he spent the first fifteen minutes after she got home telling her of the hilarious stupidities he had found in the day's reading and then sharing a wonderful, impossible thought he had had.

"What if the human species isn't the only branch to evolve on our family tree? What if there's some other primate species that looks exactly like us, but can't interbreed with us, that functions in a completely different way, and we don't even know it, we all think everybody's just like us, but here and there all over the Empire there are whole towns, cities, maybe even worlds of people who secretly aren't human at all."

"But Leyel, my overwrought husband, if they look just like us and act just like us, then they are human."

"But they don't act exactly like us. There's a difference. A completely different set of rules and assumptions. Only they don't know that we're different, and we don't know that they're different. Or even if we suspect it, we're never sure. Just two different species, living side by side and never guessing it."

She kissed him. "You poor fool, that isn't speculation, it already exists. You have just described the relationship between males and females. Two completely different species, completely unintelligible to each other, living side by side and thinking they're really the same. The fascinating thing, Leyel, is that the two species persist in marrying each other and having babies, sometimes of one species, sometimes of the other, and the whole time they can't understand why

they can't understand each other."

He laughed and embraced her. "You're right, as always, Deet. If I could once understand women, then perhaps I'd know what it is that makes men human."

"Nothing could possibly make men human," she answered. "Every time they're just about to get it right, they end up tripping over the damned Y chromosome and turning back into beasts." She nuzzled his neck.

It was then, with Deet in his arms, that he whispered to her what had happened when Rom visited that day. She said nothing, but held him tightly for the longest time. Then they had a very late supper and went about their nightly routines as if nothing had changed.

Not until they were in bed, not until Deet was softly snoring beside him, did it finally occur to Leyel that Deet was facing a test of her own. Would she still love him, now that he was merely Leyel Forska, scientist on a pension, and not Lord Forska, master of worlds? Of course she would intend to. But just as Leyel had never been aware of how much he depended on his wealth to define himself, so also she might not have realized how much of what she loved about him was his vast power; for even though he didn't flaunt it, it had always been there, like a solid platform underfoot, hardly noticed except now, when it was gone, when their footing was unsure.

Even before this, she had been slipping away into the connunity of women in the library. She would drift away even faster now, not even noticing it as Leyel became less and less important to her. No need for anything as dramatic as divorce. Just a little gap between them, an empty space that might as well be a chasm, might as well be the abyss. My fortune was a part of me, and now that it's gone, I'm no longer the same man she loved. She won't even know that she doesn't love me any more. She'll just get busier and busier in her work, and in five or ten years when I die of old age, she'll grieve-- and then suddenly she'll realize that she isn't half as devastated as she thought she'd be. In fact, she won't be devastated at all. And she'll get on with her life and won't even remember what it was like to be married to me. I'll disappear from all human memory then, except perhaps for a few scientific papers and the libraries.

I'm like the information that was lost in all those neglected archives. Disappearing bit by bit, unnoticed, until all that's left is just a little bit of noise in people's memories. Then, finally, nothing. Blank.

Self-pitying fool. That's what happens to everyone, in the long run. Even Hari Seldon-- someday he'll be forgotten, sooner rather than later, if Chen has his way. We all die. We're all lost in the passage of time. The only thing that lives on after us is the new shape we've given to the communities we lived in. There are

things that are known because I said them, and even though people have forgotten who said it, they'll go on knowing. Like the story Rinjy was telling-- she had forgotten, if she ever knew it, that Deet was the librarian in the original tale. But still she remembered the tale. The community of librarians was different because Deet had been among them. They would be a little different, a little braver, a little stronger, because of Deet. She had left traces of herself in the world.

And then, again, there came that flash of insight, that sudden understanding of the answer to a question that had long been troubling him.

But in the moment that Leyel realized that he held the answer, the answer slipped away. He couldn't remember it. You're asleep, he said silently. You only dreamed that you understood the origin of humanity. That's the way it is in dreams-- the truth is always so beautiful, but you can never hold on to it.

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"How is he taking it, Deet?"

"Hard to say. Well, I think. He was never much of a wanderer anyway."

"Come now, it can't be that simple."

"No. No, it isn't."

"Tell me."

"The social things-- those were easy. We rarely went anyway, but now people don't invite us; we're politically dangerous. And the few things we had scheduled got canceled or, um, postponed. You know-- we'll call you as soon as we have a new date."

"He doesn't mind this?"

"He likes that part. He always hated those things. But they've canceled his speeches. And the lecture series on human ecology."

"A blow."

"He pretends not to mind. But he's brooding."

"Tell me."

"Works all day, but he doesn't read it to me any more, doesn't make me sit down at the lector the minute I get home. I think he isn't writing anything." "Doing nothing?"

"No. Reading. That's all."

"Maybe he just needs to do research."

"You don't know Leyel. He thinks by writing. Or talking. He isn't doing either."

"Doesn't talk to you?"

"He answers. I try to talk about things here at the library, his answers are--what? Glum. Sullen."

"He resents your work?"

"That's not possible. Leyel has always been as enthusiastic about my work as about his own. And he won't talk about his own work, either. I ask him, and he says nothing."

"Not surprising."

"So it's all right?"

"No. It's just not surprising."

"What is it? Can't you tell me?"

"What good is telling you? It's what we call ILS-- Identity Loss Syndrome. It's identical to the passive strategy for dealing with loss of body parts."

"ILS. What happens in ILS?"

"Deet, come, on, you're a scientist. What do you expect? You've just described Leyel's behavior, I tell you that it's called ILS, you want to know what ILS is, and what am I going to do?"

"Describe Leyel's behavior back to me. What an idiot I am."

"Good, at least you can laugh."

"Can't you tell me what to expect?"

"Complete withdrawal from you, from everybody. Eventually he becomes completely antisocial and starts to strike out. Does something self-destructive-like making public statements against Chen, that'd do it." "No!"

"Or else he severs his old connections, gets away from you, and reconstructs himself in a different set of communities."

"This would make him happy?"

"Sure. Useless to the Second Foundation, but happy. It would also turn you into a nasty-tempered old crone, not that you aren't one already, mind you."

"Oh, you think Leyel's the only thing keeping me human?"

"Pretty much, yes. He's your safety valve."

"Not lately."

"I know." .

"Have I been so awful?"

"Nothing that we can't bear. Deet, if we're going to be fit to govern the human race someday, shouldn't we first learn to be good to each other?"

"Well, I'm glad to provide you all with an opportunity to test your patience."

"You should be glad. We're doing a fine job so far, wouldn't you say?"

"Please. You were teasing me about the prognosis, weren't you?"

"Partly. Everything I said was true, but you know as well as I do that there are as many different ways out of a B-B syndrome as there are people who have them."

"Behavioral cause, behavioral effect. No little hormone shot, then?"

"Deet. He doesn't know who he is."

"Can't I help him?"

"Yes."

"What? What can I do?"

"This is only a guess, since I haven't talked to him."

"Of course."

"You aren't home much."

"I can't stand it there, with him brooding all the time."

"Fine. Get him out with you."

"He won't go."

"Push him."

"We barely talk. I don't know if I even have any leverage over him."

"Deet. You're the one who wrote, 'Communities that make few or no demands on their members cannot command allegiance. All else being equal, members who feel most needed have the strongest allegiance."

"You memorized that?"

"Psychohistory is the psychology of populations, but populations can only be quantified as communities. Seldon's work on statistical probabilities only worked to predict the future within a generation or two until you first published your community theories. That's because statistics can't deal with cause and effect. Stats tell you what's happening, never why, never the result. Within a generation or two, the present statistics evaporate, they're meaningless, you have whole new populations with new configurations. Your community theory gave us a way of predicting which communities would survive, which would grow, which would fade. A way of looking across long stretches of time and space."

"Hari never told me he was using community theory in any important way."

"How could he tell you that? He had to walk a tightrope-- publishing enough to get psychohistory taken seriously, but not so much that anybody outside the Second Foundation could ever duplicate or continue his work. Your work was a key-- but he couldn't say so."

"Are you just saying this to make me feel better?"

"Sure. That's why I'm saying it. But it's also true-- since lying to you wouldn't make you feel better, would it? Statistics are like taking cross sections of the trunk of a tree. It can tell you a lot about its history. You can figure how healthy it is, how much volume the whole tree has, how much is root and how much is branch. But what it can't tell you is where the tree will branch, and which branches will become major, which minor, and which will rot and fall off and die." "But you can't quantify communities, can you? They're just stories and rituals that bind people together--"

"You'd be surprised what we can quantify. We're very good at what we do, Deet. Just as you are. Just as Leyel is."

"Is his work important? After all, human origin is only a historical question."

"Nonsense, and you know it. Leyel has stripped away the historical issues and he's searching for the scientific ones. The principles by which human life, as we understand it, is differentiated from nonhuman. If he finds that-- don't you see, Deet? The human race is re-creating itself all the time, on every world, in every family, in every individual. We're born animals, and we teach each other how to be human. Somehow. It matters that we find out how. It matters to psychohistory. It matters to the Second Foundation. It matters to the human race."

"So you aren't just being kind to Leyel."

"Yes, we are. You are, too. Good people are kind."

"Is that all? Leyel is just one man who's having trouble?

"We need him. He isn't important just to you. He's important to us."

"Oh. Oh."

"Why are you crying?"

"I was so afraid-- that I was being selfish-- being so worried about him. Taking up your time like this."

"Well, if that doesn't-- I thought you were beyond surprising me."

"Our problems were just-- our problems. But now they're not."

"Is that so important to you? Tell me, Deet-- do you really value this community so much?"

"Yes."

"More than Leyel?"

"No! But enough-- that I felt guilty for caring so much about him."

"Go home, Deet. Just go home."

"What?"

"That's where you'd rather be. It's been showing up in your behavior for two months, ever since Hari's death. You've been nasty and snappish, and now I know why. You resent us for keeping you away from Leyel."

"No, it was my choice, I--"

"Of course it was your choice! It was your sacrifice for the good of the Second Foundation. So now I'm telling you-- healing Leyel is more important to Hari's plan than keeping up with your day-to-day responsibilities here."

"You're not removing me from my position, are you?"

"No. I'm just telling you to ease up. And get Leyel out of the apartment. Do you understand me? Demand it! Reengage him with you, or we've all lost him."

"Take him where?"

"I don't know. Theater. Athletic events. Dancing."

"We don't do those things."

"Well, what do you do?"

"Research. And then talk about it."

"Fine. Bring him here to the library. Do research with him. Talk about it."

"But he'll meet people here. He'd certainly meet you."

"Good. Good. I like that. Yes, let him come here."

"But I thought we had to keep the Second Foundation a secret from him until he's ready to take part."

"I didn't say you should introduce me as First Speaker."

"No, no, of course you didn't. What am I thinking of? Of course he can meet you, he can meet everybody."

"Deet, listen to me."

"Yes, I'm listening."

"It's all right to love him, Deet."

"I know that."

"I mean, it's all right to love him more than you love us. More than you love any of us. More than you love all of us. There you are, crying again."

"I'm so--"

"Relieved."

"How do you understand me so well?"

"I only know what you show me and what you tell me. It's all we ever know about each other. The only thing that helps is that nobody can ever lie for long about who they really are. Not even to themselves."

\*\*\*

For two months Leyel followed up on Magolissian's paper by trying to find some connection between language studies and human origins. Of course, this meant weeks of wading through old, useless point-of-origin studies, which kept indicating that Trantor was the focal point of language throughout the history of the Empire, even though nobody seriously put forth Trantor as the planet of origin. Once again, though, Leyel rejected the search for a particular planet; he wanted to find out regularities, iiot unique events.

Leyel hoped for a clue in the fairly recent work-- only two thousand years old-of Dagawell Kispitorian. Kispitorian came from the most isolated area of a planet called Artashat, where there were traditions that the original settlers came from an earlier world named Armenia, now uncharted. Kispitorian grew up among mountain people who claimed that long ago, they spoke a completely different language. In fact, the title of Kispitorian's most interesting book was No Man Understood Us; many of the folk tales of these people began with the formula "Back in the days when no man understood us..."

Kispitorian had never been able to shake off this tradition of his upbringing, and as he pursued the field of dialect formation and evolution, he kept coming across evidence that at one time the human species spoke not one but many languages. It had always been taken for granted that Galactic Standard was the up-to-date version of the language of the planet of origin-- that while a few human groups might have developed dialects, civilization was impossible without mutually intelligible speech. But Kispitorian had begun to suspect that Galactic Standard did not become the universal human language until \*after\* the formation of the Empire-- that, in fact, one of the first labors of the Imperium was to stamp out all other competing languages. The mountain people of Artakshat believed that their language had been stolen from them. Kispitorian eventually devoted his life to proving they were right.

He worked first with names, long recognized as the most conservative aspect of language. He found that there were many separate naming traditions, and it was not until about the year 6000 G.E. that all were finally amalgamated into one Empire-wide stream. What was interesting was that the farther back he went, the more complexity he found.

Because certain worlds tended to have unified traditions, and so the simplest explanation of this was the one he first put forth-- that humans left their home world with a unified language, but the normal forces of language separation caused each new planet to develop its own offshoot, until many dialects became mutually unintelligible. Thus, different languages would not have developed until humanity moved out into space; this was one of the reasons why the Galactic Empire was necessary to restore the primeval unity of the species.

Kispitorian called his first and most influential book Tower of Confusion, using the widespread legend of the Tower of Babble as an illustration. He supposed that this story might have originated in that pre-Empire period, probably among the rootless traders roaming from planet to planet, who had to deal on a practical level with the fact that no two worlds spoke the same language. These traders had preserved a tradition that when humanity lived on one planet, they all spoke the same language. They explained the linguistic confusion of their own time by recounting the tale of a great leader who built the first "tower," or starship, to raise mankind up into heaven. According to the story, "God" punished these upstart people by confusing their tongues, which forced them to disperse among the different worlds. The story presented the confusion of tongues as the cause of the dispersal instead of its result, but cause-reversal was a commonly recognized feature of myth. Clearly this legend preserved a historical fact.

So far, Kispitorian's work was perfectly acceptable to most scientists. But in his forties he began to go off on wild tangents. Using controversial algorithms-- on calculators with a suspiciously high level of processing power-- he began to tear apart Galactic Standard itself, showing that many words revealed completely separate phonetic traditions, incompatible with the mainstream of the language. They could not comfortably have evolved within a population that regularly spoke either Standard or its primary Ancestor language. Furthermore, there were many words with clearly related meanings that showed they had once diverged according to standard linguistic patterns and then were brought together later, with different meanings or implications. But the time scale implied by the degree of change was far too great to be accounted for in the period between humanity's first settlement of space and the formation of the Empire. Obviously, claimed Kispitorian, there had been many different languages on the planet of origin; Galactic Standard was the first universal human language. Throughout all human

history, separation of language had been a fact of life; only the Empire had had the pervasive power to unify speech.

After that, Kispitorian was written off as a fool, of course-- his own Tower of Babble interpretation was now used against him as if an interesting illustration had now become a central argument. He very narrowly escaped execution as a separatist, in fact, since there was an unmistakable tone of regret in his writing about the loss of linguistic diversity. The Imperium did succeed in cutting off all his funding and jailing him for a while because he had been using a calculator with an illegal level of memory and processing power. Leyel suspected that Kispitorian got off easy at that-- working with language as he did, getting the results he got, he might well have developed a calculator so intelligent that it could understand and produce human speech, which, if discovered, would have meant either the death penalty or a lynching.

No matter now. Kispitorian insisted to the end that his work was pure science, making no value judgments on whether the Empire's linguistic unity was a Good Thing or not. He was merely reporting that the natural condition of humanity was to speak many different languages. And Leyel believed that he was right.

Leyel could not help but feel that by combining Kispitorian's language studies with Magolissian's work with language-using primates he could come up with something important. But what was the connection? The primates had never developed their own languages-- they only learned nouns and verbs presented to them by humans. So they could hardly have developed diversity of language. What connection could there be? Why would diversity ever have developed? Could it have something to do with why humans became human?

The primates used only a tiny subset of Standard. For that matter, so did most people-- most of the two million words in Standard were used only by a few professionals who actually needed them, while the common vocabulary of humans throughout the Galaxy consisted of a few thousand words.

Oddly, though, it was that small subset of Standard that was the most susceptible to change. Highly esoteric scientific or technical papers written in 2000 G.E. were still easily readable. Slangy, colloquial passages in fiction, especially in dialogue, became almost unintelligible within five hundred years. The language shared by the most different communities was the language that changed the most. But over time, that mainstream language always changed together. It made no sense, then, for there ever to be linguistic diversity. Language changed most when it was most unified. Therefore when people were most divided, their language should remain most similar.

Never mind, Leyel. You're out of your discipline. Any competent linguist would know the answer to that.

But Leyel knew that wasn't likely to be true. People immersed in one discipline rarely questioned the axioms of their profession. Linguists all took for granted the fact that the language of an isolated population is invariably more archaic, less susceptible to change. Did they understand why?

Level got up from his chair. His eyes were tired from staring into the lector. His knees and back ached from staying so long in the same position. He wanted to lie down, but knew that if he did, he'd fall asleep. The curse of getting old-- he could fall asleep so easily, yet could never stay asleep long enough to feel well rested. He didn't want to sleep now, though. He wanted to think.

No, that wasn't it. He wanted to talk. That's how his best and clearest ideas always came, under the pressure of conversation, when someone else's questions and arguments forced him to think sharply. To make connections, invent explanations. In a contest with another person, his adrenaline flowed, his brain made connections that would never otherwise be made.

Where was Deet? In years past, he would have been talking this through with Deet all day. All week. She would know as much about his research as he did, and would constantly say "Have you thought of this?" or "How can you possibly think that!" And he would have been making the same challenges to her work. In the old days.

But these weren't the old days. She didn't need him any more-- she had her friends on the library staff. Nothing wrong with that, probably. After all, she wasn't thinking now, she was putting old thoughts into practice. She needed them, not him. But he still needed her. Did she ever think of that? I might as well have gone to Terminus-- damn Hari for refusing to let me go. I stayed for Deet's sake, and yet I don't have her after all, not when I need her. How dare Hari decide what was right for Leyel Forska!

Only Hari hadn't decided, had he? He would have let Leyel go without Deet. And Leyel hadn't stayed with Deet so she could help him, with his research. He had stayed with her because... because...

He couldn't remember why. Love, of course. But he couldn't think why that had been so important to him. It wasn't important to her. Her idea of love these days was to urge him to come to the library. "You can do your research there. We could be together more during the days."

The message was clear. The only way Leyel could remain part of Deet's life was if he became part of her new "family" at the library. Well, she could forget that idea. If she chose to get swallowed up in that place, fine. If she chose to leave him for a bunch of indexers and cataloguers-- fine. Fine.

No. It wasn't fine. He wanted to talk to her. Right now, at this moment, he wanted to tell her what he was thinking, wanted her to question him and argue with him until she made him come up with an answer, or lots of answers. He needed her to see what he wasn't seeing. He needed her a lot more than they needed her.

He was out amid the thick pedestrian traffic of Maslo Boulevard before he realized that this was the first time since Hari's funeral that he'd ventured beyond the immediate neighborhood of his apartment. It was the first time in months that he'd had anyplace to go. That's what I'm doing here, he thought. I just need a change of scenery, a sense of destination. That's the only reason I'm heading to the library. All that emotional nonsense back in the apartment, that was just my unconscious strategy for making myself get out among people again.

Leyel was almost cheerful when he got to the Imperial Library. He had been there many times over the years, but always for receptions or other public events-- having his own high-capacity lector meant that he could get access to all the library's records by cable. Other people-- students, professors from poorer schools, lay readers-- they actually had to come here to read. But that meant that they knew their way around the building. Except for finding the major lecture halls and reception rooms, Leyel hadn't the faintest idea where anything was.

For the first time it dawned on him how very large the Imperial Library was. Deet had mentioned the numbers many times-- a staff of more than five thousand, including machinists, carpenters, cooks, security, a virtual city in itself-- but only now did Leyel realize that this meant that many people here had never met each other. Who could possibly know five thousand people by name? He couldn't just walk up and ask for Deet by name. What was the department Deet worked in? She had changed so often, moving through the bureaucracy.

Everyone he saw was a patron-- people at lectors, people at catalogues, even people reading books and magazines printed on paper. Where were the librarians? The few staff members moving through the aisles turned out not to be librarians at all-- they were volunteer docents, helping newcomers learn how to use the lectors and catalogues. They knew as little about library staff as he did.

He finally found a room full of real librarians, sitting at calculators preparing the daily access and circulation reports. When he tried to speak to one, she merely waved a hand at him. He thought she was telling him to go away until he realized that her hand remained in the air, a finger pointing to the front of the room. Leyel moved toward the elevated desk where a fat, sleepy-looking middle-aged woman was lazily paging through long columns of figures, which stood in the air before her in military formation.

"Sorry to interrupt you," he said softly.

She was resting her cheek on her hand. She didn't even look at him when he spoke. But she answered. "I pray for interruptions."

Only then did he notice that her eyes were framed with laugh lines, that her mouth even in repose turned upward into a faint smile.

"I'm looking for someone. My wife, in fact. Deet Forska."

Her smile widened. She sat up. "You're the beloved Leyel."

It was an absurd thing for a stranger to say, but it pleased him nonetheless to realize that Deett must have spoken of him. Of course everyone would have known that Deet's husband was the Leyel Forska. But this woman hadn't said it that way, had she? Not as the Leyel Forska, the celebrity. No, here he was known as "the beloved Leyel." Even if this woman meant to tease him, Deet must have let it be known that she had some affection for him. He couldn't help but smile. With relief. He hadn't known that he feared the loss of her love so much, but now he wanted to laugh aloud, to move, to dance with pleasure.

"I imagine I am," said Leyel.

"I'm Zay Wax. Deet must have mentioned me, we have lunch every day."

No, she hadn't. She hardly mentioned anybody at the library, come to think of it. These two had lunch every day, and Leyel had never heard of her. "Yes, of course," said Leyel. "I'm glad to meet you."

"And I'm relieved to see that your feet actually touch the ground."

"Now and then."

"She works up in Indexing these days." Zay cleared her display.

"Is that on Trantor?"

Zay laughed. She typed in a few instructions and her display now filled with a map of the library complex. It was a complex pile of rooms and corridors, almost impossible to grasp. "This shows only this wing of the main building. Indexing is these four floors."

Four layers near the middle of the display turned to a brighter color.

"And here's where you are right now."

A small room on the first floor turned white. Looking at the labyrinth between the two lighted sections, Leyel had to laugh aloud. "Can't you just give me a ticket to guide me?"

"Our tickets only lead you to places where patrons are allowed. But this isn't really hard, Lord Forska. After all, you're a genius, aren't you?"

"Not at the interior geography of buildings, whatever lies Deet might have told you."

"You just go out this door and straight down the corridor to the elevators-- can't miss them. Go up to fifteen. When you get out, turn as if you were continuing down the same corridor, and after a while you go through an archway that says 'Indexing." Then you lean back your head and bellow 'Deet' as loud as you can. Do that a few times and either she'll come or security will arrest you."

"That's what I was going to do if I didn't find somebody to guide me."

"I was hoping you'd ask me." Zay stood up and spoke loudly to the busy librarians. "The cat's going away. The mice can play."

"About time," one of them said. They all laughed. But they kept working.

"Follow me, Lord Forska."

"Leyel, please."

"Oh, you're such a flirt." When she stood, she was even shorter and fatter than she had looked sitting down. "Follow me."

They conversed cheerfully about nothing much on the way down the corridor. Inside the elevator, they hooked their feet under the rail as the gravitic repulsion kicked in. Leyel was so used to weightlessness after all these years of using elevators on Trantor that he never noticed. But Zay let her arms float in the air and sighed noisily. "I love riding the elevator," she said. For the first time Leyel realized that weightlessness must be a great relief to someone carrying as many extra kilograms as Zay Wax. When the elevator stopped, Zay made a great show of staggering out as if under a great burden. "My idea of heaven is to live forever in gravitic repulsion."

"You can get gravitic repulsion for your apartment, if you live on the top floor."

"Maybe you can," said Zay. "But I have to live on a librarian's salary."

Leyel was mortified. He had always been careful not to flaunt his wealth, but then, he had rarely talked at any length with people who couldn't afford gravitic repulsion. "Sorry, " he said. "I don't think I could either, thege days."

"Yes, I heard you squandered your fortune on a real bang-up funeral."

Startled that she would speak so openly of it, he tried to answer in the same joking tone. "I suppose you could look at it that way."

"I say it was worth it," she said. She looked slyly up at him. "I knew Hari, you know. Losing him cost humanity more than if Trantor's sun went nova."

"Maybe," said Leyel. The conversation was getting out of hand. Time to be cautious.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not a snitch for the Pubs. Here's the Golden Archway into Indexing. The Land of Subtle Conceptual Connections."

Through the arch, it was as though they had passed into a completely different building. The style and trim were the same as before, with deeply lustrous fabrics on the walls and ceiling and floor made of the same smooth sound-absorbing plastic, glowing faintly with white light. But now-- all pretense at symmetry was gone. The ceiling was at different heights, almost at random; on the left and right there might be doors or archways, stairs or ramps, an alcove or a huge hall filled with columns, shelves of books and works of art surrounding tables where indexers worked with a half-dozen scriptors and lectors at once.

"The form fits the function," said Zay.

"I'm afraid I'm rubbernecking like a first-time visitor to Trantor."

"It's a strange place. But the architect was the daughter of an indexer, so she knew that standard, orderly, symmetrical interior maps are the enemy of freely connective thought. The finest touch-- and the most expensive too, I'm afraid-- is the fact that from day to day the layout is rearranged."

"Rearranged! The rooms move?"

"A series of random routines in the master calculator. There are rules, but the program isn't afraid to waste space, either. Some days only one room is changed, moved off to some completely different place in the Indexing area. Other days, everything is changed. The only constant is the archway leading in. I really wasn't joking when I said you should come here and bellow."

"But-- the indexers must spend the whole moming just finding their stations."

"Not at all. Any indexer can work from any station."

"Ah. So they just call up the job they were working on the day before."

"No. They merely pick up on the job that is already in progress on the station they happen to choose that day."

"Chaos!" said Leyel.

"Exactly. How do you think a good hyperindex is made? If one person alone indexes a book, then the only connections that book will make are the ones that person knows about. Instead, each indexer is forced to skim through what his predecessor did the day before. Inevitably he'll add some new connections that the other indexer didn't think of. The environment, the work pattern, everything is designed to break down habits of thought, to make everything surprising, everything new."

"To keep everybody off balance."

"Exactly. Your mind works quickly when you're running along the edge of the precipice."

"By that reckoning, acrobats should all be geniuses."

"Nonsense. The whole labor of acrobats is to learn their routines so perfectly they never lose balance. An acrobat who improvises is soon dead. But indexers, when they lose their balance, they fall into wonderful discoveries. That's why the indexes of the Imperial Library are the only ones worth having. They startle and challenge as you read. All the others are just-- clerical lists."

"Deet never mentioned this."

"Indexers rarely discuss what they're doing. You can't really explain it anyway."

"How long has Deet been an indexer?"

"Not long really. She's still a novice. But I hear she's very, very good."

"Where is she?"

Zay grinned. Then she tipped her head back and bellowed. "Deet!"

The sound seemed to be swallowed up at once in the labyrinth. There was no answer.

"Not nearby, I guess," said Zay. "We'll have to probe a little deeper."

"Couldn't we just ask somebody where she is?"

"Who would know?"

It took two more floors and three more shouts before they heard a faint answering cry. "Over here!"

They followed the sound. Deet kept calling out, so they could find her.

"I got the flower room today, Zay! Violets!"

The indexers they passed along the way all looked up-- some smiled, some frowned.

"Doesn't it interfere with things? " asked Leyel. "All this shouting?"

"Indexers need interruption. It breaks up the chain of thought. When they look back down, they have to rethink what they were doing."

Deet, not so far away now, called again. "The smell is so intoxicating. Imagine-the same room twice in a month!"

"Are indexers often hospitalized?" Leyel asked quietly.

"For what?"

"Stress."

"There's no stress on this job," said Zay. "Just play. We come up here as a reward for working in other parts of the library."

"I see. This is the time when librarians actually get to read the books in the library."

"We all chose this career because we love books for their own sake. Even the old inefficient corruptible paper ones. Indexing is like-- writing in the margins."

The notion was startling. "Writing in someone else's book?"

"It used to be done all the time, Leyel. How can you possibly engage in dialogue with the author without writing your answers and arguments in the margins? Here she is." Zay preceded him under a low arch and down a few steps.

"I heard a man's voice with you, Zay," said Deet.

"Mine," said Leyel. He turned a comer and saw her there. After such a long journey to reach her, he thought for a dizzying moment that he didn't recognize her. That the library had randomized the librarians as well as the rooms, and he had happened upon a woman who merely resembled his long-familiar wife; he would have to reacquaint himself with her from the beginning.

"I thought so, " said Deet. She got up from her station and embraced him. Even this startled him, though she usually embraced him upon meeting. It's only the setting that's different, he told himself. I'm only surprised because usually she greets me like this at home, in familiar surroundings. And usually it's Deet arriving, not me.

Or was there, after all, a greater warmth in her greeting here? As if she loved him more in this place than at home? Or, perhaps, as if the new Deet were simply a warmer, more comfortable person?

I thought that she was comfortable with me.

Leyel felt uneasy, shy with her. "If I'd known my coming would cause so much trouble," he began. Why did he need so badly to apologize?

"What trouble?" asked Zay.

"Shouting. Interrupting."

"Listen to him, Deet. He thinks the world has stopped because of a couple of shouts."

In the distance they could hear a man bellowing someone's name.

"Happens all the time," said Zay. "I'd better get back. Some lordling from Mahagonny is probably fuming because I haven't granted his request for access to the Imperial account books."

"Nice to meet you," said Leyel.

"Good luck finding your way back," said Deet.

"Easy this time," said Zay. She paused only once on her way through the door, not to speak, but to slide a metallic wafer along an almost unnoticeable slot in the doorframe, above eye level. She turned back and winked at Deet. Then she was gone.

Leyel didn't ask what she had done-- if it were his business, something would have been said. But he suspected that Zay had either turned on or turned off a recording system. Unsure of whether they had privacy here from the library staff, Leyel merely stood for a moment, looking around. Deet's room really was filled with violets, real ones, growing out of cracks and apertures in the floor and walls. The smell was clear but not overpowering. "What is this room for?"

"For me. Today, anyway. I'm so glad you came."

"You never told me about this place."

"I didn't know about it until I was assigned to this section. Nobody talks about Indexing. We never tell outsiders. The architect died three thousand years ago. Only our own machinists understand how it works. It's like---"

"Fairyland."

"Exactly."

"A place where all the rules of the universe are suspended."

"Not all. We still stick with good old gravity. Inertia. That sort of thing."

"This place is right for you, Deet. This room."

"Most people go years without getting the flower room. It isn't always violets, you know. Sometimes climbing roses. Sometimes periwinkle. They say there's really a dozen flower rooms, but never more than one at a time is accessible. It's been violets for me both times, though."

Leyel couldn't help himself. He laughed. It was funny. It was delightful. What did this have to do with a library? And yet what a marvelous thing to have hidden away in the heart of this somber place. He sat down on a chair. Violets grew out of the top of the chairback, so that flowers brushed his shoulders.

"You finally got tired of staying in the apartment all day?" asked Deet.

Of course she would wonder why he finally came out, after all her invitations had been so long ignored. Yet he wasn't sure ff he could speak frankly. "I needed to talk with you." He glanced back at the slot Zay had used in the doorframe. "Alone," he said.

Was that a look of dread that crossed her face?

"We're alone," Deet said quietly. "Zay saw to that. Truly alone, as we can't be even in the apartment." It took Leyel a moment to realize what she was asserting. He dared not even speak the word. So he mouthed his question: Pubs? "They never bother with the library in their normal spying. Even if they set up something special for you, there's now an interference field blocking out our conversation. Chances are, though, that they won't bother to monitor you again until you leave here."

She seemed edgy. Impatient. As if she didn't like having this conversation. As if she wanted him to get on with it, or maybe just get it over with.

"If you don't mind," he said. "I haven't interrupted you here before, I thought that just this once--"

"Of course," she said. But she was still tense. As if she feared what he might say.

So he explained to her all his thoughts about language. All that he had gleaned from Kispitorian's and Magolissian's work. She seemed to relax almost as soon as it became clear he was talking about his research. What did she dread, he wondered. Was she afraid I came to talk about our relationship? She hardly needed to fear that. He had no intention of making things more difficult by whining about things that could not be helped.

When he was through explaining the ideas that had come to him, she nodded carefully-- as she had done a thousand times before, after he explained an idea or argument. "I don't know," she finally said. As so many times before, she was reluctant to commit herself to an immediate response.

And, as he had often done, he insisted. "But what do you think?"

She pursed her lips. "Just offhand-- I've never tried a serious linguistic application of community theory, beyond jargon formation, so this is just my first thought-- but try this. Maybe small isolated populations guard their language-jealously, because it's part of who they are. Maybe language is the most powerful ritual of all, so that people who have the same language are one in a way that people who can't understand each other's speech never are. We'd never know, would we, since everybody for ten thousand years has spoken Standard."

"So it isn't the size of the population, then, so much as--"

"How much they care about their language. How much it defines them as a community. A large population starts to think that everybody talks like them. They want to distinguish themselves, form a separate identity. Then they start developing jargons and slangs to separate themselves from others. Isn't that what happens to common speech? Children try to find ways of talking that their parents don't use. Professionals talk in private vocabularies so laymen won't know the passwords. All rituals for community definition."

Leyel nodded gravely, but he had one obvious doubt.

Obvious enough that Deet knew it, too. "Yes, yes, I know, Leyel. I immediately interpreted your question in terms of my own discipline. Like physicists who think that everything can be explained by physics."

Leyel laughed. "I thought of that, but what you said makes sense. And it would explain why the natural tendency of communities is to diversify language. We want a common tongue, a language of open discourse. But we also want private languages. Except a completely private language would be useless-- whom would we talk to? So wherever a community forms, it creates at least a few linguistic barriers to outsiders, a few shibboleths that only insiders will know."

"And the more allegiance a person has to a community, the more fluent he'll become in that language, and the more he'll speak it."

"Yes, it makes sense," said Leyel. "So easy. You see how much I need you?"

He knew that his words were a mild rebuke-- why weren't you home when I needed you-- but he couldn't resist saying it. Sitting here with Deet, even in this strange and redolent place, felt right and comfortable. How could she have withdrawn from him? To him, her presence was what made a place home. To her, this place was home whether he was there or not.

He tried to put it in words-- in abstract words, so it wouldn't sting. "I think the greatest tragedy is when one person has more allegiance to his community than any of the other members."

Deet only half smiled and raised her eyebrows. She didn't know what he was getting at.

"He speaks the community language all the time," said Leyel. "Only nobody else ever speaks it to him, or not enough anyway. And the more he speaks it, the more he alienates the others and drives them away, until he's alone. Can you imagine anything more sad? Somebody who's filled up with a language, hungry to speak, to hear it spoken, and yet there's no one left who understands a word of it."

She nodded, her eyes searching him. Does she understand what I'm saying? He waited for her to speak. He had said all he dared to say.

"But imagine this," she finally said. "What if he left that little place where no one understood him, and went over a hill to a new place, and all of a sudden he heard a hundred voices, a thousand, speaking the words he had treasured all those lonely years. And then he realized that he had never really known the language at all. The words had hundreds of meanings and nuances he had never guessed. Because each speaker changed the language a little just by speaking. And when he spoke at last, his own voice sounded like music in his ears, and the others listened with delight, with rapture, his music was like the water of life pouring from a fountain, and he knew that he had never been home before."

Leyel couldn't remember hearing Deet sound so-- rhapsodic, that was it, she herself was singing. She is the person she was talking about. In this place, her voice is different, that's what she meant. At home with me, she's been alone. Here in the library she's found others who speak her secret language. It isn't that she didn't want our marriage to succeed. She hoped for it, but I never understood her. These people did. Do. She's home here, that's what she's telling me.

"I understand," he said.

"Do you?" She looked searchingly into his face.

"I think so. It's all right."

She gave him a quizzical look.

"I mean, it's fine. It's good. This place. It's fine."

She looked relieved, but not completely. "You shouldn't be so sad about it, Leyel. This is a happy place. And you could do everything here that you ever did at home."

Except love you as the other part of me, and have you love me as the other part of you. "Yes, I'm sure."

"No, I mean it. What you're working on-- I can see that you're getting close to something. Why not work on it here, where we can talk about it?"

Leyel shrugged.

"You are getting close, aren't you?"

"How do I know? I'm thrashing around like a drowning man in the ocean at night. Maybe I'm close to shore, and maybe I'm just swimming farther out to sea."

"Well, what do you have? Didn't we get closer just now?"

"No. This language thing-- if it's just an aspect of community theory, it can't be the answer to human origin."

"Why not?"

"Because many primates have communities. A lot of other animals. Herding animals, for instance. Even schools of fish. Bees. Ants. Every multicelled organism is a community, for that matter. So if linguistic diversion grows out of community, then it's inherent in prehuman animals and therefore isn't part of the definition of humanity."

"Oh. I guess not."

"Right."

She looked disappointed. As if she had really hoped they would find the answer to the origin question right there, that very day.

Leyel stood up. "Oh well. Thanks for your help."

"I don't think I helped."

"Oh, you did. You showed me I was going up a dead-end road. You saved me a lot of wasted thought. That's progress, in science, to know which answers aren't true."

His words had a double meaning, of course. She had also shown him that their marriage was a dead-end road. Maybe she understood him. Maybe not. It didn't matter-- he had understood her. That little story about a lonely person finally discovering a place where she could be at home-- how could he miss the point of that?

"Leyel," she said. "Why not put your question to the indexers?"

"Do you think the library researchers could find answers where I haven't?"

"Not the research department. Indexing,"

"What do you mean?"

"Write down your questions. All the avenues you've pursued. Linguistic diversity. Primate language. And the other questions, the old ones. Archaeological, historical approaches. Biological. Kinship patterns. Customs. Everything you can think of. Just put it together as questions. And then we'll have them index it."

"Index my questions?"

"It's what we do-- we read things and think of other things that might be related somehow, and we connect them. We don't say what the connection means, but we know that it means something, that the connection is real. We won't give you answers, Leyel, but if you follow the index, it might help you to think of connections. Do you see what I mean?"

"I never thought of that. Do you think a couple of indexers might have the time to work on it?"

"Not a couple of us. All of us."

"Oh, that's absurd, Deet. I wouldn't even ask it."

"I would. We aren't supervised up here, Leyel. We don't meet quotas. Our job is to read and think. Usually we have a few hundred projects going, but for a day we could easily work on the same document."

"It would be a waste. I can't publish anything, Deet."

"It doesn't have to be published. Don't you understand? Nobody but us knows what we do here. We can take it as an unpublished document and work on it just the same. It won't ever have to go online for the library as a whole."

Leyel shook his head. "And then if they lead me to the answer-- what, will we publish it with two hundred bylines?"

"It'll be your paper, Leyel. We're just indexers, not authors. You'll still have to make the connections. Let us try. Let us be part of this."

Suddenly Leyel understood why she was so insistent on this. Getting him involved with the library was her way of pretending she was still part of his life. She could believe she hadn't left him, if he became part of her new community.

Didn't she know how unbearable that would be? To see her here, so happy without him? To come here as just one friend among many, when once they had been-- or he had thought they were-- one indivisible soul? How could he possibly do such a thing?

And yet she wanted it, he could see it in the way she was looking at him, so girlish, so pleading that it made him think of when they were first in love, on another world-- she would look at him like that whenever he insisted that he had to leave. Whenever she thought she might be losing him.

Doesn't she know who has lost whom?

Never mind. What did it matter if she didn't understand? If it would make her happy to have him pretend to be part of her new home, part of these hbrarians---if she wanted him to submit his life's work to the ministrations of these absurd indexers, then why not? What would it cost him? Maybe the process of writing

down all his questions in some coherent order would help him. And maybe she was right-- maybe a Trantorian index would help him solve the origin question.

Maybe if he came here, he could still be a small part of her life. It wouldn't be like marriage. But since that was impossible, then at least he could have enough of her here that he could remain himself, remain the person that he had become because of loving her for all these years.

"Fine," he said. "I'll write it up and bring it in."

"I really think we can help."

"Yes," he said, pretending to more certainty than he felt. "Maybe." He started for the door.

"Do you have to leave already?"

He nodded.

"Are you sure you can find your way out?"

"Unless the rooms have moved."

"No, only at night."

"Then I'll find my way out just fine." He took a few steps toward her, then stopped.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. "I thought you were going to kiss me goodbye." Then she puckered up like a three-year-old child.

He laughed. He kissed her-- like a three-year-old-- and then he left.

For two days he brooded. Saw her off in the morning, then tried to read, to watch the vids, anything. Nothing held his attention. He took walks. He even went topside once, to see the sky overhead-- it was night, thick with stars. None of it engaged him. Nothing held. One of the vid programs had a moment, just briefly, a scene on a semiarid world, where a strange plant grew that dried out at maturity, broke off at the root, and then let the wind blow it around, scattering seeds. For a moment he felt a dizzying empathy with the plant as it tumbled by--am I as dry as that, hurtling through dead land? But no, he knew even that wasn't

true, because the tumbleweed had life enough left in it to scatter seeds. Leyel had no seed left. That was scattered years ago.

On the third morning he looked at himself in the mirror and laughed grimly. "Is this how people feel before they kill themselves?" he asked. Of course not-- he knew that he was being melodramatic. He felt no desire to die.

But then it occurred to him that if this feeling of uselessness kept on, if he never found anything to engage himself, then he might as well be dead, mightn't he, because his being alive wouldn't accomplish much more than keeping his clothes warm.

He sat down at the scriptor and began witing down questions. Then, under each question, he would explain how he had already pursued that particular avenue and why it didn't yield the answer to the origin question. More questions would come up then-- and he was right, the mere process of summarizing his own fruitless research made answers seem tantalizingly close. It was a good exercise. And even if he never found an answer, this list of questions might be of help to someone with a clearer intellect-- or better information-- decades or centuries or millennia from now.

Deet came home and went to bed with Leyel still typing away. She knew the look he had when he was fully engaged in writing-- she did nothing to disturb him. He noticed her enough to realize that she was carefully leaving him alone. Then he settled back into writing.

The next morning she awoke to find him lying in bed beside her, still dressed. A personal message capsule lay on the floor in the doorway from the bedroom. He had finished his questions. She bent over, picked it up, took it with her to the library.

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"His questions aren't academic after all, Deet."

"I told you they weren't."

"Hari was right. For all that he seemed to be a dilettante, with his money and his rejection of the universities, he's a man of substance."

"Will the Second Foundation benefit, then, if he comes up with an answer to his question?"

"I don't know, Deet. Hari was the fortune-teller. Presumably mankind is already human, so it isn't as if we have to start the process over."

"Do you think not?"

"What, should we find some uninhabited planet and put some newborns on it and let them grow up feral, and then come back in a thousand years and try to turn them human?"

"I have a better idea. Let's take ten thousand worlds filled with people who live their lives like animals, always hungry, always quick with their teeth and their claws, and let's strip away the veneer of civilization to expose to them what they really are. And then, when they see themselves clearly, let's come back and teach them how to be really human this time, instead of only having bits and flashes of humanity."

"All right. Let's do that."

"I knew you'd see it my way."

"Just make sure your husband finds out how the trick is done. Then we have all the time in the world to set it up and pull it off."

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When the index was done, Deet brought Leyel with her to the library when she went to work in the morning. She did not take him to Indexing but rather installed him in a private research room lined with vids-- only instead of giving the illusion of windows looking out onto an outside scene, the screens filled all the walls from floor to ceiling, so it seemed that he was on a pinnacle high above the scene, without walls or even a railing to keep him from falling off. It gave him flashes of vertigo when he looked around-- only the door broke the illusion. For a moment he thought of asking for a different room. But then he remembered Indexing, and realized that maybe he'd do better work if he too felt a bit off balance all the time.

At first the indexing seemed obvious. He brought the first page of his questions to the lector display and began to read. The lector would track his pupils, so that whenever he paused to gaze at a word, other references would begin to pop up in the space beside the page he was reading. Then he'd glance at one of the references. When it was uninteresting or obvious, he'd skip to the next reference, and the first one would slide back on the display, out of the way, but still there if he changed his mind and wanted it.

If a reference engaged him, then when he reached the last line of the part of it on display, it would expand to full-page size and slide over to stand in front of the main text. Then, if this new material had been indexed, it would trigger new references, and so on, leading him farther and farther away from the original document until he finally decided to go back and pick up where he left off. So far, this was what any index could be expected to do. It was only as he moved farther into reading his own questions that he began to realize the quirkiness of this index. Usually, index references were tied to important words, so that if you just wanted to stop and think without bringing up a bunch of references you didn't want, all you had to do was keep your gaze focused in an area of placeholder words, empty phrases like "If this were all that could be..." Anyone who made it a habit to read indexed works soon learned this trick and used it till it became reflex.

But when Leyel stopped on such empty phrases, references came up anyway. And instead of having a clear relationship to the text, sometimes the references were perverse or comic or argumentative. For instance, he paused in the middle of reading his argument that archaeological searches for "primitiveness" were useless in the search for origins because all "primitive" cultures represented a decline from a star-going culture. He had written the phrase "All this primitivism is useful only because it predicts what we might become if we're careless and don't preserve our fragile links with civilization." By habit his eyes focused on the empty words "what we might become if." Nobody could index a phrase like that.

Yet they had. Several references appeared. And so instead of staying within his reverie, he was distracted, drawn to what the indexers had tied to such an absurd phrase.

One of the references was a nursery rhyme that he had forgotten he knew:

Wrinkly Grandma Posey Rockets all are rosy. Lift off, drift off, All fall down.

Why in the world had the indexer put that in? The first thought that came to Leyel's mind was himself and some of the servants' children, holding hands and walking in a circle, round and round till they came to the last words, whereupon they threw themselves to the ground and laughed insanely. The sort of game that only little children could possibly think was fun.

Since his eyes lingered on the poem, it moved to the main document display and new references appeared. One was a scholarly article on the evolution of the poem, speculating that it might have arisen during the early days of starflight on the planet of origin, when rockets may have been used to escape from a planet's gravity well. Was that why this poem had been indexed to his article? Because it was tied to the planet of origin?

No, that was too obvious. Another article about the poem was more helpful. It rejected the early-days-of-rockets idea, because the earliest versions of the poem never used the word "rocket." The oldest extant version went like this:

Wrinkle down a rosy, Pock-a fock-a posy, Lash us, dash us, All fall down.

Obviously, said the commentator, these were mostly nonsense words-- the later versions had arisen because children had insisted on trying to make sense of them.

And it occurred to Leyel that perhaps this was why the indexer had linked this poem to his phrase-- because the poem had once been nonsense, but we insisted on making sense out of it.

Was this a comment on Leyel's whole search for origins? Did the indexer think it was useless?

No-- the poem had been tied to the empty phrase "what we might become if." Maybe the indexer was saying that human beings are like this poem-- our lives make no sense, but we insist on making sense out of them. Didn't Deet say something like that once, when she was talking about the role of storytelling in community formation? The universe resists causality, she said. But human intelligence demands it. So we tell stories to impose causal relationships among the unconnected events of the world around us.

That includes ourselves, doesn't it? Our own lives are nonsense, but we impose a story on them, we sort our memories into cause-and-effect chains, forcing them to make sense even though they don't. Then we take the sum of our stories and call it our "self." This poem shows us the process-- from randomness to meaning-- and then we think our meanings are "true."

But somehow all the children had come to agree on the new version of the poem. By the year 2000 G.E., only the final and current version existed in all the worlds, and it had remained constant ever since. How was it that all the children on every world came to agree on the same version? How did the change spread? Did ten thousand kids on ten thousand worlds happen to make up the same changes?

It had to be word of mouth. Some kid somewhere made a few changes, and his version spread. A few years, and all the children in his neighborhood use the new version, and then all the kids in his city, on his planet. It could happen very quickly, in fact, because each generation of children lasts only a few years--seven-year-olds might take the new version as a joke, but repeat it often enough that five-year-olds think it's the true version of the poem, and within a few years there's nobody left among the children who remembers the old way.

A thousand years is long enough for the new version of the poem to spread. Or for five or a dozen new versions to collide and get absorbed into each other and then spread back, changed, to worlds that had revised the poem once or twice already.

And as Leyel sat there, thinking these thoughts, he conjured up an image in his mind of a network of children, bound to each other by the threads of this poem, extending from planet to planet throughout the Empire, and then back through time, from one generation of children to the previous one, a three-dimensional fabric that bound all children together from the beginning.

And yet as each child grew up, he cut himself free from the fabric of that poem. No longer would he hear the words "Wrinkly Grandma Posey" and immediately join hands with the child next to him. He wasn't part of the song any more.

But his own children were. And then his grandchildren. All joining hands with each other, changing from circle to circle, in a never-ending human chain reaching back to some long-forgotten ritual on one of the worlds of mankind--maybe, maybe on the planet of origin itself.

The vision was so clear, so overpowering, that when he finally noticed the lector display it was as sudden and startling as waking up. He had to sit there, breathing shallowly, until he calmed himself, until his heart stopped beating so fast.

He had found some part of his answer, though he didn't understand it yet. That fabric connecting all the children, that was part of what made us human, though he didn't know why. This strange and perverse indexing of a meaningless phrase had brought him a new way of looking at the problem. Not that the universal culture of children was a new idea, just that he had never thought of it as having anything to do with the origin question.

Was this what the indexer meant by including this poem? Had the indexer also seen this vision?

Maybe, but probably not. It might have been nothing more than the idea of becoming something that made the indexer think of transformation-- becoming old, like wrinkly Grandma Posey? Or it might have been a general thought about the spread of humanity through the stars, away from the planet of origin, that made the indexer remember how the poem seemed to tell of rockets that rise up, from a planet, drift for a while, then come down to settle on a planet. Who knows what the poem meant to the indexer? Who knows why it occurred to her to link it with his document on that particular phrase?

Then Leyel realized that in his imagination, he was thinking of Deet making that particular connection. There was no reason to think it was her work, except that

in his mind she was all the indexers. She had joined them, become one of them, and so when indexing work was being done, she was part of it. That's what it meant to be part of a community-- all its works became, to a degree, your works. All that the indexers did, Deet was a part of it, and therefore Deet had done it.

Again the image of a fabric came to mind, only this time it was a topologically impossible fabric, twisted into itself so that no matter what part of the edge of it you held, you held the entire edge, and the middle, too. It was all one thing, and each part held the whole within it.

But if that was true, then when Deet came to join the library, so did Leyel, because she contained Leyel within her. So in coming here, she had not left him at all. Instead, she had woven him into a new fabric, so that instead of losing something he was gaining. He was part of all this, because she was, and so if he lost her it would only be because he rejected her.

Leyel covered his eyes with his hands. How did his meandering thoughts about the origin question lead him to thinking about his marriage? Here he thought he was on the verge of profound understanding, and then he fell back into selfabsorption.

He cleared away all the references to "Wrinkly Grandma Posey" or "Wrinkle Down a Rosy" or whatever it was, then returned to reading his original document, trying to confine his thoughts to the subject at hand.

Yet it was a losing battle. He could not escape from the seductive distraction of the index. He'd be reading about tool use and technology, and how it could not be the dividing line between human and animal because there were animals that made tools and taught their use to others.

Then, suddenly, the index would have him reading an ancient terror tale about a man who wanted to be the greatest genius of all time, and he believed that the only thing preventing him from achieving greatness was the hours he lost in sleep. So he invented a machine to sleep for him, and it worked very well until he realized that the machine was having all his dreams. Then he demanded that his machine tell him what it was dreaming.

The machine poured forth the most astonishing, brilliant thoughts ever imagined by any man-- far wiser than anything this man had ever written during his waking hours. The man took a hammer and smashed the machine, so that he could have his dreams back. But even when he started sleeping again, he was never able to come close to the clarity of thought that the machine had had.

Of course he could never publish what the machine had written-- it would be unthinkable to put forth the product of a machine as ff it were the work of a man. After the man died-- in despair-- people found the printed text of what the machine had written, and thought the man had written it and hidden it away. They published it, and he was widely acclaimed as the greatest genius who had ever lived.

This was universally regarded as an obscenely horrifying tale because it had a machine stealing part of a man's mind and using it to destroy him, a common theme. But why did the indexer refer to it in the midst of a discussion of tool-making?

Wondering about that led Leyel to think that this story itself was a kind of tool, just like the machine the man in the story had made. The storyteller gave his dreams to the story, and then when people heard it or read it, his dreams-- his nightmares-- came out to live in their memories. Clear and sharp and terrible and true, those dreams they received. And yet if he tried to tell them the same truths, directly, not in the form of a story, people would think his ideas were silly and small.

And then Leyel remembered what Deet had said about how people absorb stories from their communities and take them into themselves and use these stories to form their own spiritual autobiography. They remember doing what the heroes of the stories did, and so they continue to act out each hero's character in their own lives, or, failing that, they measure themselves against the standard the story set for them. Stories become the human conscience, the human mirror.

Again, as so many other times, he ended these ruminations with his hands pressed over his eyes, trying to shut out-- or lock in? --images of fabrics and mirrors, worlds and atoms, until finally, finally, he opened his eyes and saw Deet and Zay sitting in front of him.

No, leaning over him. He was on a low bed, and they knelt beside him.

"Am I ill?" he asked.

"I hope not," said Deet. "We found you on the floor. You're exhausted, Leyel. I've been telling you-- you have to eat, you have to get a normal amount of sleep. You're not young enough to keep up this work schedule."

"I've barely started."

Zay laughed lightly. "Listen to him, Deet. I told you he was so caught up in this that he didn't even know what day it was."

"You've been doing this for three weeks, Leyel. For the last week you haven't even come home. I bring you food, and you won't eat. People talk to you, and you forget that you're in a conversation, you just drift off into some sort of--

trance. Leyel, I wish I'd never brought you here, I wish I'd never suggested indexing-"

"No!" Leyel cried. He struggled to sit up.

At first Deet tried to push him back down, insisting he should rest. It was Zay who helped him sit. "Let the man talk," she said. "Just because you're his wife doesn't mean you can stop him from talking."

"The index is wonderful," said Leyel. "Like a tunnel opened up into my own mind. I keep seeing light just that far out of reach, and then I wake up and it's just me alone on a pinnacle except for the pages up on the lector. I keep losing it--"

"No, Leyel, we keep losing you. The index is poisoning you, it's taking over your mind--"

"Don't be absurd, Deet. You're the one who suggested this, and you're right. The index keeps surprising me, making me think in new ways. There are some answers already."

"Answers?" asked Zay.

"I don't know how well I can explain it. What makes us human. It has to do with communities and stories and tools and-- it has to do with you and me, Deet."

"I should hope we're human," she said. Teasing him, but also urging him on.

"We lived together all those years, and we formed a community-- with our children, till they left, and then just us. But we were like animals."

"Only sometimes," she said.

"I mean like herding animals, or primate tribes, or any community that's bound together only by the rituals and patterns of the present moment. We had our customs, our habits. Our private language of words and gestures, our dances, all the things that flocks of geese and hives of bees can do."

"Very primitive."

"Yes, that's right, don't you see? That's a community that dies with each generation. When we, die, Deet, it will all be gone with us. Other people will marry, but none of them will know our dances and songs and language and--"

"Our children will."

"No, that's my point. They knew us, they even think they know us, but they were never part of the community of our marriage. Nobody is. Nobody can be. That's why, when I thought you were leaving me for this--"

"When did you think that I--"

"Hush, Deet," said Zay. "Let the man babble."

"When I thought you were leaving me, I felt like I was dead, like I was losing everything, because if you weren't part of our marriage, then there was nothing left. You see?"

"I don't see what that has to do with human origins, Leyel. I only know that I would never leave you, and I can't believe that you could think--"

"Don't distract him, Deet."

"It's the children. All the children. They play Wrinkly Grandma Posey, and then they grow up and don't play anymore, so the actual community of these particular five or six children doesn't exist any more-- but other kids are still doing the dance. Chanting the poem. For ten thousand years!"

"This makes us human? Nursery rhymes?"

"They're all part of the same community! Across all the empty space between the stars, there are still connections, they're still somehow the same kids. Ten thousand years, ten thousand worlds, quintillions of children, and they all knew the poem, they all did the dance. Story and ritual-- it doesn't die with the tribe, it doesn't stop at the border. Children who never met face-to-face, who lived so far apart that the light from one star still hasn't reached the other, they belonged to the same community. We're human because we conquered time and space. We conquered the barrier of perpetual ignorance between one person and another. We found a way to slip my memories into your head, and yours into mine."

"But these are the ideas you already rejected, Leyel. Language and community and--"

"No! No, not just language, not just tribes of chimpanzees chattering at each other. Stories, epic tales that define a community, mythic tales that teach us how the world works, we use them to create each other. We became a different species, we became human, because we found a way to extend gestation beyond the womb, a way to give each child ten thousand parents that he'll never meet face-to-face."

Then, at last, Leyel fell silerit, trapped by the inadequacy of his words. They couldn't tell what he had seen in his mind. ff they didn't already understand, they never would.

"Yes," said Zay. "I think indexing your paper was a very good idea."

Leyel sighed and lay back down on the bed. "I shouldn't have tried."

"On the contrary, you've succeeded," said Zay.

Deet shook her head. Leyel knew why-- Deet was trying to signal Zay that she shouldn't attempt to soothe Leyel with false praise.

"Don't hush me, Deet. I know what I'm saying. I may not know Leyel as well as you do, but I know truth when I hear it. In a way, I think Hari knew it instinctively. That's why he insisted on all his silly holodisplays, forcing the poor citizens of Terminus to put up with his pontificating every few years. It was his way of continuing to create them, of remaining alive within them. Making them feel like their lives had purpose behind them. Mythic and epic story, both at once. They'll all carry a bit of Hari Seldon within them just the way that children carry their parents with them to the grave."

At first Leyel could only hear the idea that Hari would have approved of his ideas of human origin. Then he began to realize that there was much more to what Zay had said than simple affirmation.

"You knew Hari Seldon?"

"A little," said Zay.

"Either tell him or don't," said Deet. "You can't take him this far in, and not bring him the rest of the way."

"I knew Hari the way you know Deet," said Zay.

"No," said Leyel. "He would have mentioned you."

"Would he? He never mentioned his students."

"He had thousands of students."

"I know, Leyel. I saw them come and fill his lecture halls and listen to the halfbaked fragments of psychohistory that he taught them. But then he'd come away, here to the library, into a room where the Pubs never go, where he could speak words that the Pubs would never hear, and there he'd teach his real students. Here is the only place where the science of psychohistory lives on, where Deet's ideas about the formation of community actually have application, where your own visions of the origin of humanity will shape our calculations for the next thousand years."

Leyel was dumbfounded. "In the Imperial Library? Hari had his own college in the library?"

"Where else? He had to leave us at the end, when it was time to go public with his predictions of the Empire's fall. Then the Pubs started watching him in earnest, and in order to keep them from finding us, he couldn't come back here again. It was the most terrible thing that ever happened to us. As if he died, for us, years before his body died. He was part of us, Leyel, the way you and Deet are part of each other. She knows. She joined us before he left."

It stung. To have had such a great secret, and not to have been included. "Why Deet, and not me?"

"Don't you know, Leyel? Our little community's survival was the most important thing. As long as you were Leyel Forska, master of one of the greatest fortunes in history, you couldn't possibly be part of this-- it would have provoked too much comment, too much attention. Deet could come, because Commissioner Chen wouldn't care that much what she did-- he never takes spouses seriously, just one of the ways he proves himself to be a fool."

"But Hari always meant for you to be one of us," said Deet. "His worst fear was that you'd go off half-cocked and force your way into the First Foundation, when all along he wanted you in this one. The Second Foundation."

Leyel remembered his last interview with Hari. He tried to remember-- did Hari ever lie to him? He told him that Deet couldn't go to Terminus-- but now that took on a completely different meaning. The old fox! He never lied at all, but he never told the truth, either.

Zay went on. "It was tricky, striking the right balance, encouraging you to provoke Chen just enough that he'd strip away your fortune and then forget you, but not so much that he'd have you imprisoned or killed."

"You were making that happen?"

"No, no, Leyel. It was going to happen anyway, because you're who you are and Chen is who he is. But there was a range of possibility, somewhere between having you and Deet tortured to death on the one hand, and on the other hand having you and Rom conspire to assassinate Chen and take control of the Empire. Either of those extremes would have made it impossible for you to be part of the Second Foundation. Hari was convinced-- and so is Deet, and so am I-- that you belong with us. Not dead. Not in politics. Here." It was outrageous, that they should make such choices for him, without telling him. How could Deet have kept it secret all this time? And yet they were I so obviously correct. If Hari had told him about this Second Foundation, Leyel would have been eager, proud to join it. Yet Leyel couldn't have been told, couldn't have joined them-- until Chen no longer perceived him as a threat.

"What makes you think Chen will ever forget me?"

"Oh, he's forgotten you, all right. In fact, I'd guess that by tonight he'll have forgotten everything he ever knew."

"What do you mean?"

"How do you think we've dared to speak so openly today, after keeping silence for so long? After all, we aren't in Indexing now."

Leyel felt a thrill of fear run through him. "They can hear us?"

"If they were listening. At the moment, though, the Pubs are very busy helping Rom Divart solidify his control of the Commission of Public Safety. And if Chen hasn't been taken to the radiation chamber, he soon will be."

Leyel couldn't help himself. The news was too glorious-- he sprang up from his bed, almost danced at the news. "Rom's doing it! After all these years-- overthrowing the old spider!"

"It's more important than mere justice or revenge," said Zay. "We're absolutely certain that a significant number of governors and prefects and military commanders will refuse to recognize the overlordship of the Commission of Public Safety. It will take Rom Divart the rest of his life just to put down the most dangerous of the rebels. In order to concentrate his forces on the great rebels and pretenders close to Trantor, he'll grant an unprecedented degree of independence to many, many worlds on the periphery. To all intents and purposes, those outer worlds will no longer be part of the Empire. Imperial authority will not touch them, and their taxes will no longer flow inward to Trantor. The Empire is no longer Galactic. The death of Commissioner Chen-- today-- will mark the beginning of the fall of the Galactic Empire, though no one but us will notice what it means for decades, even centuries to come."

"So soon after Hari's death. Already his predictions are coming true."

"Oh, it isn't just coincidence," said Zay. "One of our agents was able to influence Chen just enough to ensure that he sent Rom Divart in person to strip you of your fortune. That was what pushed Rom over the edge and made him carry out this coup. Chen would have fallen-- or died-- sometime in the next year and a half no matter what we did. But I'll admit we took a certain pleasure in using Hari's death as a trigger to bring him down a little early, and under circumstances that allowed us to bring you into the library."

"We also used it as a test," said Deet. "We're trying to find ways of influencing individuals without their knowing it. It's still very crude and haphazard, but in this case we were able to influence Chen with great success. We had to do it-- your life was at stake, and so was the chance of your joining us."

"I feel like a puppet," said Leyel.

"Chen was the puppet," said Zay. "You were the prize."

"That's all nonsense," said Deet. "Hari loved you, I love you. You're a great man. The Second Foundation had to have you. And everything you've said and stood for all your life made it clear that you were hungry to be part of our work. Aren't you?"

"Yes," said Leyel. Then he laughed. "The index!"

"What's so funny?" asked Zay, looking a little miffed. "We worked very hard on it."

"And it was wonderful, transforming, hypnotic. To take all these people and put them together as if they were a single mind, far wiser in its intuition than anyone could ever be alone. The most intensely unified, the most powerful human community that's ever existed. If it's our capacity for storytelling that makes us human, then perhaps our capacity for indexing will make us something better than human."

Deet patted Zay's hand. "Pay no attention to him, Zay. This is clearly the mad enthusiasm of a proselyte."

Zay raised an eyebrow. "I'm still waiting for him to explain why the index made him laugh."

Level obliged her. "Because all the time, I kept thinking-- how could librarians have done this? Mere librarians! And now I discover that these librarians are all of Hari Seldon's prize students. My questions were indexed by psychohistorians!"

"Not exclusively. Most of us are librarians. Or machinists, or custodians, or whatever-- the psychologists and psychohistorians are rather a thin current in the stream of the library. At first they were seen as outsiders. Researchers. Users of the library, not members of it. That's what Deet's work has been for these last few years-- trying to bind us all together into one community. She came here as a researcher too, remember? Yet now she has made everyone's allegiance to the

library more important than any other loyalty. It's working beautifully too, Leyel, you'll see. Deet is a marvel."

"We're all creating it together," said Deet. "It helps that the couple of hundred people I'm trying to bring in are so knowledgeable and understanding of the human mind. They understand exactly what I'm doing and then try to help me make it work. And it isn't fully successful yet. As years go by, we have to see the psychology group teaching and accepting the children of librarians and machinists and medical officers, in full equality with their own, so that the psychologists don't become a ruling caste. And then intermarriage between the groups. Maybe in a hundred years we'll have a truly cohesive community. This is a democratic city-state we're building, not an academic department or a social club."

Leyel was off on his own tangent. It was almost unbearable for him to realize that there were hundreds of people who knew Hari's work, while Leyel didn't. "You have to teach me!" Leyel said. "Everything that Hari taught you, all the things that have been kept from me--"

"Oh, eventually, Leyel," said Zay. "At present, though, we're much more interested in what you have to teach us. Already, I'm sure, a transcription of the things you said when you first woke up is being spread through the library."

"It was recorded?" asked Leyel.

"We didn't know if you were going to go catatonic on us at any moment, Leyel. You have no idea how you've been worrying us. Of course we recorded it-- they might have been your last words."

"They won't be. I don't feel tired at all."

"Then you're not as bright as we thought. Your body is dangerously weak. You've been abusing yourself terribly. You're not a young man, and we insist that you stay away from your lectot for a couple of days."

"What, are you now my doctor?"

"Leyel," Deet said, touching him on his shoulder the way she always did when he needed calming. "You have been examined by doctors. And you've got to realize-- Zay is First Speaker."

"Does that mean she's commander?"

"This isn't the Empire," said Zay, "and I'm not Chen. All that it means to be First Speaker is that I speak first when we meet together. And then, at the end, I bring together all that has been said and express the consensus of the group." "That's right," said Deet. "Everybody thinks you ought to rest."

"Everybody knows about me?" asked Leyel.

"Of course," said Zay. "With Hari dead you're the most original thinker we have. Our work needs you. Naturally we care about you. Besides, Deet loves you so much, and we love Deet so much, we feel like we're all a little bit in love with you ourselves."

She laughed, and so did Leyel, and so did Deet. Leyel noticed, though, that when he asked whether they all knew of him, she had answered that they cared about him and loved him. Only when Zay said this did he realize that she had answered the question he really meant to ask.

"And while you're recuperating," Zay continued, "Indexing will have a go at your new theory--"

"Not a theory, just a proposal, just a thought--"

"--and a few psychohistorians will see whether it can he quantified, perhaps by some variation on the formulas we've been using with Deet's laws of community development. Maybe we can turn origin studies into a real science yet."

"Maybe," Leyel said.

"Feel all right about this?" asked Zay.

"I'm not sure. Mostly. I'm very excited, but I'm also a little angry at how I've been left out, but mostly I'm-- I'm so relieved."

"Good. You're in a hopeless muddle. You'll do your best work if we can keep you off balance forever." With that, Zay led him back to the bed, helped him lie down, and then left the room.

Alone with Deet, Leyel had nothing to say. He just held her hand and looked up into her face, his heart too full to say anything with words. All the news about Hari's byzantine plans and a Second Foundation full of psychohistorians and Rom Divart taking over the government-- that receded into the background. What mattered was this: Deet's hand in his, her eyes looking into his, and her heart, her self, her soul so closely bound to his that he couldn't tell and didn't care where he left off and she began-- How could he ever have imagined that she was leaving him? They had created each other through all these years of marriage. Deet was the most splendid accomplishment of his life, and he was the most valued creation of hers. We are each other's parent, each other's child. We might accomplish great works that will live on in this other community, the library, the Second Foundation. But the greatest work of all is the one that will die with us, the one that no one else will ever know of, because they remain perpetually outside. We can't even explain it to them. They don't have the language to understand us. We can only speak it to each other.

## UNACCOMPANIED SONATA Orson Scott Card

When Christian Haroldsen was six months old, preliminary tests showed a predisposition toward rhythm and a keen awareness of pitch. There were other tests, of course, and many possible routes still open to him. But rhythm and pitch were the governing signs of his own private zodiac, and already the reinforcement began. Mr. and Mrs. Haroldsen were provided with tapes of many kinds of sound and instructed to play them constantly, whether Christian was awake or asleep.

When Christian Haroldsen was two years old, his seventh battery of tests pinpointed the path he would inevitably follow. His creativity was exceptional; his curiosity, insatiable; his understanding of music, so intense that on top of all the tests was written "Prodigy."

Prodigy was the word that took him from his parents' home to a house in deep deciduous forests where winter was savage and violent and summer, a brief, desperate eruption of green. He grew up, cared for by unsinging servants, and the only music he was allowed to hear was bird song and

wind song and the crackling of winter wood; thunder and the faint cry of golden leaves as they broke free and tumbled to the earth; rain on the roof and the drip of water from icicles; the chatter of squirrels and the deep silence of snow falling on a moonless night.

These sounds were Christian's only conscious music. He grew up with the symphonies of his early years only distant and impossible-to-retrieve memories. And so he learned to hear music in unmusical things-for he had to find music, even when there was none to find.

He found that colors made sounds in his mind: Sunlight in summer was a blaring chord; moonlight in winter a thin, mournful wail; new green in spring, a low murmur in almost (but not quite) random rhythms; the flash of a red fox in the leaves, a gasp of sudden startlement.

And he learned to play all those sounds on his Instrument. In the world were violins, trumpets, and clarinets, as there had been for centuries. Christian knew nothing of that. Only his Instrument was available. It was enough.

Christian lived in one room in his house, which he had to himself most of the time. He had a bed (not too soft), a chair and table, a silent machine that cleaned him and his clothing, and an electric light.

The other room contained only his Instrument. It was a console with many keys and strips and levers and bars, and when he touched any part of it; a sound came out. Every key made a different sound; every point on the strips made a different pitch; every lever modified the tone; every bar altered the structure of the sound.

When he first came to the house, Christian played (as children will) with the Instrument, making strange and funny noises. It was his only playmate; he

learned it well, could produce any sound he wanted to. At first he delighted in loud, blaring tones. Later he began to learn the pleasure of silences and rhythms. And soon he began to play with soft and loud and to play two sounds at once and to change those two sounds together to make a new sound and to play again a sequence of sounds he had played before.

Gradually, the sounds of the forest outside his house found their way into the music he played. He learned to make winds sing through his instrument; he learned to make summer one of the songs he could play at will. Green with its infinite variations was his most subtle harmony; the birds cried out from his Instrument with all the passion of Christian's Ioneliness.

And the word spread to the licensed Listeners:

"There's a new sound north of here, east of here: Christian Haroldsen, and he'll tear out your heart with his songs."

The Listeners came, a few to whom variety was everything first, then those to whom novelty and vogue mattered most, and at last those who valued beauty and passion above everything else. They came and stayed out in Christian's woods and listened as his music was played through perfect speakers on the roof of his house. When the music stopped and Christian came out of his house, he could see the Listeners moving away. He asked and was told why they came; he marveled that the things he did for love on his Instrument could be of interest to other people.

He felt, strangely, even more lonely to know that he could sing to the Listeners and yet never be able to hear their songs.

"But they have no songs," said the woman who came to bring him food every day. "They are Listeners. You are a Maker. You have songs, and they listen." "Why?" asked Christian, innocently.

The woman looked puzzled. "Because that's what they want most to do. They've been tested, and they are happiest as Listeners. You are happiest as a Maker. Aren't you happy?"

"Yes," Christian answered, and he was telling the truth. His life was perfect, and he wouldn't change anything, not even the sweet sadness of the backs of the Listeners as they walked away at the end of his songs.

Christian was seven years old.

FIRST MOVEMENT

For the third time the short man with glasses and a strangely inappropriate mustache dared to wait in the underbrush for Christian to come out. For the third time he was overcome by the beauty of the song that had just ended, a mournful symphony that made the short man with glasses feel the pressure of the leaves above him, even though it was summer and they had months left before they would fall. The fall was still inevitable, said Christian's song; through all their life the leaves hold within them the power to die, and that must color their life. The short man with glasses wept-but when the song ended and the other Listeners moved away, he hid in the brush and waited.

This time his wait was rewarded. Christian came out of his house, walked among the trees, and came toward where the short man with glasses waited. The man admired the easy, unpostured way that Christian walked. The composer looked to be about thirty, yet there was something childish in the way he looked around him, the way his walk was aimless and prone to stop so he would just touch (and not break) a fallen twig with his bare toes.

"Christian," said the short man with glasses.

Christian turned, startled. In all these years, no Listerner had ever spoken to him. It was forbidden. Christian knew the law.

"It's forbidden," Christian said.

"Here," the short man with glasses said, holding out a small black object. "What is it?"

The short man grimaced. "Just take it. Push the button and it plays."

"Plays?"

"Music."

Christian's eyes opened wide. "But that's forbidden. I can't have my creativity polluted by hearing other musicians work. That would make me imitative and derivative, instead of original."

"Reciting," the man said. "You're just reciting that. This is Bach's music." There was reverence in his voice.

"I can't," Christian said.

And then the short man shook his head. "You don't know. You don't know what you're missing. But I heard it in your song when I came here years ago, Christian. You want this."

"It's forbidden," Christian answered, for to him the very fact that a man who knew an act was forbidden still wanted to perform it was astounding, and he couldn't get past the novelty of it to realize that some action was expected of him.

There were footsteps, and words being spoken in the distance, and the short man's face became frightened. He ran at Christian, forced the recorder into his hands, then took off toward the gate of the preserve.

Christian took the recorder and held it in a spot of sunlight coming through the leaves. It gleamed dully. "Bach," Christian said. Then, "Who the hell is Bach?" But he didn't throw the recorder down. Nor did he give the recorder to the woman who came to ask him what the short man with glasses had stayed for. "He stayed for at least ten minutes.-

"I only saw him for thirty seconds," Christian answered.

"And?"

"He wanted me to hear some other music. He had a recorder."

"Did he give it to you?"

"No," Christian said. "Doesn't he still have it?"

"He must have dropped it in the woods."

"He said it was Bach."

"It's forbidden. That's all you need to know. If you should find the recorder, Christian, you know the law."

"I'll give it to you."

She looked at him carefully. "You know what would happen if you listened to such a thing."

Christian nodded.

"Very well. We'll be looking for it, too. I'll see you tomorrow, Christian. And next time somebody stays after, don't talk to him. Just come back in and lock the doors."

"I'll do that," Christian said.

There was a summer rainstorm that night, wind and rain and thunder, and Christian found that he could not sleep. Not because of the music of the weatherhe'd slept through a thousand such storms. It was the recorder that lay against the wall behind the Instrument. Christian had lived for nearly thirty years surrounded only by this wild, beautiful place and the music he himself made. But now...

Now he could not stop wondering. Who was Bach? Who is Bach? What is his music? How is it different from mine? Has he discovered things that I don't know? What is his music? What is his music?

Wondering. Until dawn, when the storm was abating and the wind had died. Christian got out of his bed, where he had not slept but only tossed back and forth all night, and took the recorder from its hiding place and played it.

At first it sounded strange, like noise; odd sounds that had nothing to do with the sounds of Christian's life. But the patterns were clear, and by the end of the recording, which was not even a half-hour long, Christian had mastered the idea of fugue, and the sound of the harpsichord preyed on his mind.

Yet he knew that if he let these things show up in his music, he would be discovered. So he did not try a fugue. He did not attempt to imitate the harpsichord's sound.

And every night he listened to the recording, learning more and more until finally the Watcher came.

The Watcher was blind, and a dog led him. He came to

the door, and because he was a Watcher, the door opened for him without his even knocking.

"Christian Haroldsen," where is the recorder?" the Watcher asked.

"Recorder?" Christian asked, then knew it was hopeless. So he took the machine and gave it to the Watcher.

"Oh, Christian," said the Watcher, and his voice was mild and sorrowful. "Why didn't you turn it in without listening to it?"

"I meant to," Christian said. "But how did you know?"

"Because suddenly there are no fugues in your work. Suddenly your songs have lost the only Bach-like thing about them. And you've stopped experimenting with new sounds. What were you trying to avoid?"

"This," Christian said, and he sat down and on his first try duplicated the sound of the harpsichord.

"Yet you've never tried to do that until now, have you?"

"I thought you'd notice."

"Fugues and harpsichord, the two things you noticed first-and the only things you didn't absorb into your music. All your other songs for these last weeks have been tinted and colored and influenced by Bach. Except that there was no fugue, and there was no harpsichord. You have broken the law. You were put here because you were a genius, creating new things with only nature for your

inspiration. Now, of course, you're derivative, and truly new creation is impossible for you. You'll have to leave."

"I know," Christian said, afraid, yet not really understanding what life outside his house would be like.

"We'll train you for the kinds of jobs you can pursue now. You won't starve. You won't die of boredom. But because you broke the law, one thing is forbidden to you now"

"Music:,

"Not all music. There is music of a sort, Christian, that the common people, the ones who aren't Listeners, can

have. Radio and television and record music. But live music and new musicthose are forbidden to you. You may not sing. You may not play an instrument. You may not tap out a rhythm."

"Why not?"

The Watcher shook his head. "The world is too perfect, too at peace, too happy, for us to permit a misfit who broke the law to go about spreading discontent. And if you make more music, Christian, you will be punished drastically. Drastically." Christian nodded, and when the Watcher told him to come, he came, leaving behind the house and the woods and his Instrument. At first he took it calmly, as the inevitable punishment for his infraction; but he had little concept of punishment, or of what exile from his Instrument would mean.

Within five hours he was shouting and striking out at anyone who came near him, because his fingers craved the touch of the Instrument's keys and levers and strips and bars, and he could not have them, and now he knew that he had never been lonely before.

It took six months before he was ready for normal life. And when he left the Retraining Center (a small building, because it was so rarely used), he looked tired and years older, and he didn't smile at anyone. He became a delivery truck driver, because the tests said that this was a job that would least grieve him and least remind him of his loss and most engage his few remaining aptitudes and interests.

He delivered doughnuts to grocery stores.

And at night he discovered the mysteries of alcohol; and the alcohol and the doughnuts and the truck and his dreams were enough that he was, in his way, content. He had no anger in him. He could live the rest of his life, without bitterness.

He delivered fresh doughnuts and took the stale ones away with him. SECOND MOVEMENT

"With a name like Joe," Joe always said, "I had to open a bar and grill, just so I could put up a sign saying `Joe's Bar and Grill: " And he laughed and laughed, because, after all, Joe's Bar and Grill was a funny name these days.

But Joe was a good bartender, and the Watchers had put him in the right kind of place. Not in a big city but in a small town; a town just off the freeway, where truck drivers often came; a town not far from a large city, so that interesting

things were nearby to be talked about and worried about and bitched about and loved.

Joe's Bar and Grill was, therefore, a nice place to come, and many people came there. Not fashionable people, and not drunks, but lonely people and friendly people in just the right mixture. "My clients are like a good drink. Just enough of this and that to make a new flavor that tastes better than any of the ingredients." Oh, Joe was a poet; he was a poet of alcohol, and like many another person these days, he often said, "My father was a lawyer, and in the old days I would have probably ended up a lawyer, too. And I never would have known what I was missing."

Joe was right. And he was a damn good bartender, and he didn't wish he were anything else, so he was happy.

One night, however, a new man came in, a man with a doughnut delivery truck and a doughnut brand name on his uniform. Joe noticed him because silence clung to the man like a smell-wherever he walked, people sensed it, and though they scarcely looked at him, they lowered their voices or stopped talking at all, and they got reflective and looked at the walls and the mirror behind the bar. The doughnut deliveryman sat in a corner and had a watered down drink that meant he intended to stay a long time and didn't want his alcohol intake to be so rapid that he was forced to leave early.

Joe noticed things about people, and he noticed that this

man kept looking off in the dark corner where the piano stood. It was an old, outof-tune monstrosity from the old days (for this had been a bar for a long time), and Joe wondered why the man was fascinated by it. True, a lot of Joe's customers had been interested, but they had always walked over and plunked on the keys, trying to find a melody, failing with the out-of-tune keys, and finally giving up. This man, however, seemed almost afraid of the piano, and didn't go near it.

At closing time, the man was still there, and, on a whim, instead of making the man leave, Joe turned off the piped in music, turned off most of the lights, and went over and lifted the lid and exposed the gray keys.

The deliveryman came over to the piano. Chris, his name tag said. He sat and touched a single key. The sound was not pretty. But the man touched all the keys one by one and then touched them in different orders, and all the time Joe watched, wondering why the man was so intense about it.

"Chris," Joe said.

Chris looked up at him.

"Do you know any songs?"

Chris's face went funny.

"I mean, some of those old-time songs, not those fancy ass-twitchers on the radio, but songs. `In a Little Spanish Town: My mother sang that one to me." And Joe began to sing, "In a little Spanish town, 'twas on a night like this. Stars were peek-a-booing down, 'twas on a night like this."

Chris began to play as Joe's weak and toneless baritone. went on with the song. But his playing wasn't an accompaniment, not anything Joe could call an accompaniment. It was, instead, an opponent to his melody, an enemy to it, and the sounds coming out of the piano were strange and unharmonious and, by God, beautiful. Joe stopped singing and listened. For two hours he listened, and when it was over he soberly poured the man a drink and poured one for himself and clinked glasses with Chris the doughnut deliveryman who could take that rotten old piano and make the

damn thing sing.

Three nights later, Chris came back, looking harried and afraid. But this time Joe knew what would happen (had to happen), and instead of waiting until closing time, Joe turned off the piped-in music ten minutes early. Chris looked up at him pleadingly. Joe misunderstood-he went over and lifted the lid to the keyboard and smiled. Chris walked stiffly, perhaps reluctantly, to the stool and sat.

"Hey, Joe," one of the last five customers shouted, "closing early?" Joe didn't answer. Just watched as Chris began to play. No preliminaries this time; no scales and wanderings over the keys. Just power, and the piano was played as pianos aren't meant to be played; the bad notes, the out-of-tune notes, were fit into the music so that they sounded right, and Chris's fingers, ignoring the strictures of the twelve-tone scale, played, it seemed to Joe, in the cracks. None of the customers left until Chris finished an hour and a half later. They all shared that final drink and went home, shaken by the experience.

The next night Chris came again, and the next, and the next. Whatever private battle had kept him away for the first few days after his first night of playing, he had apparently won it or lost it. None of Joe's business. What Joe cared about was the fact that when Chris played the piano, it did things to him that music had never done, and he wanted it.

The customers apparently wanted it, too. Near closing time people began showing up, apparently just to hear Chris play. Joe began starting the piano music earlier and earlier, and he had to discontinue the free drinks after the playing, because there were so many people it would have put him out of business.

It went on for two long, strange months. The delivery van pulled up outside, and people stood aside for Chris to enter. No one said anything to him. No one said anything at all, but everyone waited until he began to play the piano.

He drank nothing at all. Just played. And between songs the hundreds of people in Joe's Bar and Grill ate and drank.

But the merriment was gone. The laughter and the chatter and the camaraderie were missing, and after a while Joe grew tired of the music and wanted to have his bar back the way it was. He toyed with the idea of getting rid of the piano, but the customers would have been angry at him. He thought of asking Chris not to come any more, but he could not bring himself to speak to the strange, silent man.

And so finally he did what he knew he should have done in the first place. He called the Watchers.

They came in the middle of a performance, a blind Watcher with a dog on a leash, and an earless Watcher who walked unsteadily, holding on to things for balance. They came in the middle of a song and did not wait for it to end. They

walked to the piano and closed the lid gently, and Chris withdrew his fingers and looked at the closed lid.

"Oh, Christian," said the man with the seeing-eye dog.

"I'm sorry," Christian answered. "I tried not to."

"Oh, Christian, how can I bear doing to you what must be done?" "Do it," Christian said.

And so the man with no ears took a laser knife from his coat pocket and cut off Christian's fingers and thumbs, right where they rooted into his hands. The laser cauterized and sterilized the wound even as it cut, but still some blood spattered on Christian's uniform. And, his hands now meaningless palms and useless knuckles, Christian stood and walked out of Joe's Bar and Grill. The people made way for him again, and they listened intently as the blind Watcher said, "That was a man who broke the law and was forbidden to be a Maker. He broke the law a second time, and the law insists that he be stopped from breaking down the system that makes all of you so happy."

The people understood. It grieved them; it made them

uncomfortable for a few hours, but once they toad returned home to their exactly right homes and got back to their exactly right jobs, the sheer contentment of their lives overwhelmed their momentary sorrow for Chris. After all, Chris had broken the law. And it was the law that kept them all safe and happy.

Even Joe. Even Joe soon forgot Chris and his music. He knew he had done the right thing. He couldn't figure out, though, why a man like Chris would have broken the law in the first place, or what law he would have broken. There wasn't a law in the world that wasn't designed to make people happy-and there wasn't a law Joe could think of that he was even mildly interested in breaking.

Yet. Once, Joe went to the piano and lifted the lid and played every key on the piano. And when he had done that he put his head down on the piano and cried, because he knew that when Chris lost that piano, lost even his fingers so he could never play again-it was like Joe's losing his bar. And if Joe ever lost is bar, his life wouldn't be worth living.

As for Chris, someone else began coming to the bar driving the same doughnut delivery van, and no one ever saw Chris again in that part of the world. THIRD MOVEMENT

"Oh, what a beautiful morning! " sang the road-crew man who had seen Oklahoma! four times in his home town.

"Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham!" sang the road-crew man who had learned to sing when his family got together with guitars.

"Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom!" sang the road-crew man who believed.

But the road-crew man without hands, who held the sings telling the traffic to Stop or Go Slow, listened but

never sang.

"Whyn't you never sing?" asked the man who liked Rogers and Hammerstein; asked all of them, at one time or another.

And the man they called Sugar just shrugged. "Don't feel like singin'," he'd say, when he said anything at all.

"Why they call him Sugar?" a new guy once asked. "He don't look sweet to me." And the man who believed said, "His initials are CH. Like the sugar, C & H, you know." And the new guy laughed. A stupid joke, but the kind of gag that makes life easier on the road building crew.

Not that life was that hard. For these men, too, had been tested, and they were in the job that made them happiest. They took pride in the pain of sunburn and pulled muscles, and the road growing long and thin behind them was the most beautiful thing in the world. And so they sang all day at their work, knowing that they could not possibly be happier than they were this day.

Except Sugar.

Then Guillermo came. A short Mexican who spoke with an accent, Guillermo told everyone who asked, "I may come from Sonora, but my heart belongs in Milano! " And when anyone asked why (and often when no one asked anything), he'd explain: "I'm an Italian tenor in a Mexican body," and he proved it by singing every note that Puccini and Verdi ever wrote. "Caruso was nothing," Guillermo boasted. "Listen to this! "

Guillermo had records, and he sang along with them, and at work on the road crew he'd join in with any man's song and harmonize with it or sing an obbligato high above the melody, a soaring tenor that took the roof off his head and filled the clouds. "I can sing," Guillermo would say, and soon the other road-crew men answered, "Damn right, Guillermo! Sing it again!"

But one night Guillermo was honest and told the truth. "Ah, my friends, I'm no singer."

"What do you mean? Of course you are!" came the unanimous answer.

"Nonsense!" Guillermo cried, his voice theatrical. "If I am this great singer, why do you never see me going off to record songs? Hey? This is a great singer? Nonsense! Great singers they raise to be great singers. I'm just a man who loves to sing but has no talent! I'm a man who loves to work on the road crew with men like you and sing his guts out, but in the opera I could never be! Never! "

He did not say it sadly. He said it fervently, confidently. "Here is where I belong! I can sing to you who like to hear me sing! I can harmonize with you when I feel a harmony in my heart. But don't be thinking that Guillermo is a great singer, because he's not!"

It was an evening of honesty, and every man there explained why it was he was happy on the road crew and didn't wish to be anywhere else. Everyone, that is, except Sugar.

"Come on, Sugar. Aren't you happy here?"

Sugar smiled. "I'm happy. I like it here. This is good work for me. And I love to hear you sing."

"Then why don't you sing with us?"

Sugar shook his head. "I'm not a singer."

But Guillermo looked at him knowingly. "Not a singer, ha! Not a singer. A man without hands who refuses to sing is not a man who is not a singer. Hey?" "What the hell did that mean?" asked the man who sang folk songs.

"It means that this man you call Sugar, he's a fraud. Not a singer! Look at his hands. All his fingers gone! Who is it who cuts off men's fingers?"

The road crew didn't try to guess. There were many ways a man could lose fingers, and none of them were anyone's business.

"He loses his fingers because he breaks the law and the Watchers cut them off! That's how a man loses fingers. What was he doing with his fingers that the Watchers

wanted him to stop? He was breaking the law, wasn't he?"

"Stop," Sugar said.

"If you want," Guillermo said, but the others would not respect Sugar's privacy. "Tell us," they said.

Sugar left the room.

"Tell us," and Guillermo told them. That Sugar must have been a Maker who broke the law and was forbidden to make music any more. The very thought that a Makereven a lawbreaker-was working on the road crew with them filled the men with awe. Makers were rare, and they were the most esteemed of men and women.

"But why his fingers?"

"Because," Guillermo said, "he must have tried to make music again afterward. And when you break the law a second time, the power to break it a third time is taken away from you." Guillermo spoke seriously, and so to the road-crew men Sugar's story sounded as majestic and terrible as an opera. They crowded into Sugar's room and found the man staring at the wall.

"Sugar, is it true?" asked the man who loved Rogers and Hammerstein.

"Were you a Maker?" asked the man who believed.

"Yes," Sugar said.

"But Sugar," the man who believed said, "God can't mean for a man to stop making music, even if he broke the law."

Sugar smiled. "No one asked God."

"Sugar," Guillermo finally said, "There are nine of us on the crew, nine of us, and we're miles from any other human beings. You know us, Sugar. We swear on our mother's graves, every one of us, that we'll never tell a soul. Why should we? You're one of us. But sing, dammit man, sing! "

"I can't," Sugar said.

"It isn't what God intended," said the man who believed. "We're all doing what we love best, and here you are, loving

music and not able to sing a note. Sing for us! Sing with us! And only you and us and God will know!"

They all promised. They all pleaded.

And the next day as the man who loved Rogers and Hammerstein sang "Love, Look Away," Sugar began to hum. As the man who believed sang "God of Our Fathers," Sugar sang softly along. And as the man who loved folk songs sang, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," Sugar joined in with a strange, piping voice, and all

the men laughed and cheered and welcomed Sugar's voice to the songs. Inevitably Sugar began inventing. First harmonies, of course, strange harmonies that made Guillermo frown and then, after a while, grin as he joined in, sensing as best he could what Sugar was doing to the music. And after harmonies, Sugar began singing his own melodies, with his own words. He made them repetitive, the words simple and the melodies simpler still. And yet he shaped them into odd shapes and built them into songs that had never been heard of before, that sounded wrong and yet were absolutely right. It was not long before the man who loved Rogers and Hammerstein and the man who sang folk songs and the man who believed were learning Sugar's songs and singing them joyously or mournfully or angrily or gaily as they worked along the road.

Even Guillermo learned the songs, and his strong tenor was changed by them until his voice, which had, after all, been ordinary, became something unusual' and fine. Guillermor finally said to Sugar one day, "Hey, Sugar, your music is all wrong, man. But I like the way it feels in my nose! Hey, you know? I like the way it feels in my mouth! "

Some of the songs were hymns: "Keep me hungry, Lord; ' Sugar sang, and the road crew sang it too.

Some of the songs were love songs: "Put your hands in someone else's pockets," Sugar sang angrily; "I hear your voice in the morning," Sugar sang tenderly; "Is it summer yet?" Sugar sang sadly; and the road crew sang them, too.

Over the months, the road crew changed, one man

leaving on Wednesday and a new man taking his place on Thursday, as different skills were needed in different places. Sugar was silent when each newcomer arrived, until the man had given his word and the secret was sure to be kept. What finally destroyed Sugar was the fact that his songs were so unforgettable. The men who left would sing the songs with their new crews, and those crews would learn them and teach them to others. Crew men taught the songs in bars and on the road; people learned them guickly and loved them; and one day a blind Watcher heard the songs and knew, instantly, who had first sung them. They were Christian Haroldsen's music, because in those melodies, simple as they were, the wind of the north woods still whistled and the fall of leaves still hung oppressively over every note and-and the Watcher sighed. He took a specialized tool from his file of tools and boarded an airplane and flew to the city closest to where a certain road crew worked. And the blind Watcher took a company car with a company driver up the road, and at the end of it, where the road was just beginning to swallow a strip of wilderness, he got out of the car and heard singing. Heard a piping voice singing a song that made even an eveless man weep.

"Christian," the Watcher said, and the song stopped.

"You," said Christian.

"Christian, even after you lost your fingers?"

The other men didn't understand-all the other men, that is, except Guillermo. "Watcher," said Guillermo. "Watcher, he done no harm."

The Watcher smiled wryly. "No one said he did. But he broke the law. You, Guillermo, how would you like to work as a servant in a rich man's house? How would you like to be a bank teller?"

"Don't take me from the road crew, man," Guillermo said.

"It's the law that finds where people will be happy. But

Christian Haroldsen broke the law. And he's gone around ever since, making people hear music they were never meant to hear."

Guillermo knew he had lost the battle before it began, but he couldn't stop himself. "Don't hurt him, man. I was meant to hear his music. Swear to God, it's made me happier."

The Watcher shook his head sadly. "Be honest, Guillermo. You're an honest man. His music's made you miserable, hasn't it? You've got everything you could want in life, and yet his music makes you sad. All the time, sad."

Guillermo tried to argue, but he was honest, and he looked into his own heart. And he knew that the music was full of grief. Even the happy songs mourned for something; even the angry songs wept; even the love songs seemed to say that everything dies and contentment is the most fleeting of things. Guillermo looked in his own heart, and all Sugar's music stared back up at him; and Guillermo wept.

"Just don't hurt him, please," Guillermo murmured as he cried.

"I won't," the blind Watcher said. Then he walked to Christian, who stood passively waiting, and he held the special tool up to Christian's throat. Christian gasped.

"No," Christian said, but the word only formed with his lips and tongue. No sound came out. Just a hiss of air. No.

"Yes," the Watcher said.

The road crew watched silently as the Watcher led Christian away. They did not sing for days. But then Guillermo forgot his grief one day and sang an aria from La Boheme, and the songs went on from there. Now and then they sang one of Sugar's songs, because the songs could not be forgotten.

In the city, the blind Watcher furnished Christian with a pad of paper and a pen. Christian immediately gripped the pencil in the crease of his palm and wrote: "What do I do

now?"

The blind Watcher laughed. "Have we got a job for you! Oh, Christian, have we got a job for you! "

APPLAUSE

In all the world there were only two dozen Watchers. They were secretive men who supervised a system that needed little supervision because it actually made nearly everybody happy. It was a good system, but like even the most perfect of machines, here and there it broke down. Here and there someone acted madly and damaged himself, and to protect everyone and the person himself, a Watcher had to notice the madness and go to fix it.

For many years the best of the Watchers was a man with no fingers, a man with no voice. He would come silently, wearing the uniform that named him with the only name he needed-Authority: And he would find the kindest, easiest, yet most thorough way of solving the problem and curing the madness and preserving the system that made the world, for the first time in history, a very good place to live. For practically everyone. For there were still a few people-one or two each year who were caught in a circle of their own devising, who could neither adjust to the system nor bear to harm it, people who kept breaking the law despite their knowledge that it would destroy them.

Eventually, when the gentle mainings and deprivations did not cure their madness and set them back into the system, they were given uniforms, and they, too, went out. Watching.

The keys of power were placed in the hands of those who had most cause to hate the system they had to preserve. Were they sorrowful?

"I am," Christian answered in the moments when he dared to ask himself that question.

In sorrow he did his duty. In sorrow he grew old. And finally the other Watchers, who reverenced the silent man (for they knew he had once sung magnificent songs), told him he was free. "You've served your time," said the Watcher with no legs, and he smiled.

Christian raised an eyebrow, as if to say, "And?"

"So wander."

Christian wandered. He took off his uniform, but lacking neither money nor time he found few doors closed to him. He wandered where in his former lives he had once lived. A road in the mountains. A city where he had once known the loading entrance of every restaurant and coffee shop and grocery store. And, at last, a place in the woods where a house was falling apart in the weather because it had not been used in forty years.

Christian was old. The thunder roared, and it only made him realize that it was about to rain. All the old songs. All the old songs, he mourned inside himself, more because he couldn't remember them than because he thought his life had been particularly sad.

As he sat in a coffee shop in a nearby town to stay out of the rain, he heard four teenagers who played the guitar very badly singing a song that he knew. It was a song he had invented while the asphalt poured on a hot summer day. The teenagers were not musicians and certainly were not Makers. But they sang the song from their hearts, and even though the words were happy, the song made everyone who heard it cry.

Christian wrote on the pad he always carried, and showed his question to the boys. "Where did that song come from?"

"It's a Sugar song," the leader of the group answered. "It's a song by Sugar." Christian raised an eyebrow, making a shrugging motion.

"Sugar was a guy who worked on a road crew and made up songs. He's dead now, though," the boy answered.

Christian smiled. Then he wrote (and the boys waited

impatiently for this speechless old man to go away): "Aren't you happy? Why sing sad songs?"

The boys were at a loss for an answer. The leader spoke up, though, and said, "Sure, I'm happy. I've got a good job, a girl I like, and man, I couldn't ask for more. I got my guitar. I got my songs. And my friends."

And another boy said, "These songs aren't sad, mister. Sure, they make people cry, but they aren't sad."

"Yeah," said another. "It's just that they were written by a man who knows." Christian scribbled on his paper. "Knows what?"

"He just knows. Just knows, that's all:'

And then the teenagers turned back to their clumsy guitars and their young untrained voices, and Christian walked to the door to leave because the rain had stopped and because he knew when to leave the stage. He turned and bowed just a little toward the singers. They didn't notice him, but their voices were all the applause he needed. He left the ovation and went outside where the leaves were just turning color and would soon, with a slight inaudible sound, break free and fall to the earth.

For a moment he thought he heard himself singing. But it was just the last of the wind, coasting madly through the wires over the street. It was a frenzied song, and Christian thought he had recognized his voice.