

TOO SOON WE GROW OLD

The first awakening was awful, and she enjoyed it.

She was naked and terribly cold. She was in a plastic coffin from whose walls grew wrinkled plastic arms with gnarled plastic hands that did things to her. Most of the things hurt dreadfully—but they were all physical hurts. Her soul was conscious only of an almost terrifying sense of relief. Until you have had your neck and shoulders rubbed out for the first time, you can have no conception of how tightly bunched they were. Tension can only be fully appreciated in its release. To her mind came a vivid association from long decades past: her first orgasm. A shudder passed over her body.

A voice spoke, in a language unknown to her. Even allowing for the sound-deadening coffin walls, it sounded distant.

Eyes appeared over hers, through a transparent panel she had failed to see since it had showed only a ceiling the same color as the coffin's interior. She refocused. The face was masked and capped in white, the eyes pouched in wrinkles. He said something incomprehensible, apparently in reply to the first voice.

"Hi, Doc," she shouted, finding her voice oddly squeaky in the high-helium atmosphere of the cryogenic capsule. *"I made it!"* She found that she was grinning.

He started, and moved from view. One of the plastic hands did something to her left bicep, and she felt her hurts slipping away—but not her joy. *I knew I could beat it*, she thought just before consciousness faded, and then she dreamed of the day her victory had begun.

She was not at all sure just why she had consented to the interview. She had rejected them for over twenty years, on an impulse so consistent that it had never seemed to call for examination. To understand why she had granted this one would, it seemed to her, call for twenty years' worth of spade-work—it was simpler to posit that impulse had merely changed its sign, from negative to positive.

Yet, although she relied implicitly on the automatic pilot which had made the decision for her, she found apprehension mounting within her as the appointed day led her inexorably to the appointed time. An hour before the interviewer was due, she found herself examining a capsule of an obscure and quite illegal tranquilizer, one which had not even filtered down to street level yet. It was called Alpha, according to her source, and he claimed it was preternaturally effective. But she hesitated—he had said something about it tending to suppress *all* the censors, something about it being a kind of mild truth drug. She turned the capsule end on end in her palm, three times.

The hell with it, she decided. *This is the true measure of my wealth: I can even afford to be honest with an interviewer.* The realization elated her. *Besides*, she afterthought, *I can always buy the network if I have to.*

She washed the capsule down with twice-distilled water.

The lights were not as blinding as she had expected. In fact, none of the external irritations she had anticipated materialized—not even the obtrusive presence of a cameraman. The holocamera was *not* entirely automatic, for newstaping is an art (with a powerful union)—but its operator was nearly a hundred miles away in the network's headquarters, present only by inference. She was simply sitting in her own

familiar living room, conversing with a perfect stranger whose profession it was to seem an old and understanding friend. Although she had never seen his show—she never watched 3V—she decided he was one of the best in his field. Or was that the drug? In any case, they went from Ms. Hammond and Mr. Hold to Diana and Owen in what was, for her, a remarkably short time. As she realized this, alarm made one last attempt to take over her controls, but failed.

"... clearly done a number of remarkable things with your half-century, Diana," Hold was saying with obvious sincerity. "Today it is no longer inconceivable for a woman to become wealthy by her own efforts in the economic marketplace—but you began your fantastic career in an age when as a rule, only men had such opportunities. In fact, you've done as much as, perhaps more than anyone to bring our society out of that restrictive phase."

The words warmed her. "Oh," she said lightly. "It's not a difficult trick to become terribly rich. 'All it takes is a lifetime of devotion.'"

"I'm familiar with the quote," Hold agreed. "All the same, it must have been an incredibly difficult, demanding task to carve yourself a navigable path where none existed. And so perhaps the foremost question in my mind is, why?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why did you choose the life you have led? What was your motivation for this lifetime of devotion?"

"Because," she said almost automatically, "given the nature of the world I found myself in, it seemed the most sensible, the most mature... the most grownup thing to do."

"I'm not sure I understand," Hold said, and he *was* the best in his field, because he had the rare gift of listening totally, of conveying by his utter attention to her every gesture and nuance his eagerness to *understand*. Since everyone knows that to understand is to forgive all, no one who genuinely wishes to understand can be an enemy—can they?—and so she found herself explaining to another the agony that had been her childhood.

"... and so with Father dead and five girls to raise, Mother entered the business world. She had to—Father's insurance company flatly refused to pay. They claimed it was clearly a suicide, and three judges agreed. There was still a sizable estate, of course, but after the deduction of lawyers' fees and nonrefundable losing bids on three judges, it wasn't enough to provide for all six of us for very long. So Mother converted it all to capital and tried to become a business woman, about the time I was twelve. In today's world she might have succeeded—but she was terribly ignorant and naive. Father's inherited wealth had sheltered her as effectively as it had him. The only people who paid her any attention, let alone respect, were the sharks, and they had picked her clean by the time I was twenty. That was... let me see... 1965 or 66.

"And so it was up to me, the eldest. Mother had gotten clever in the final extremity: no one ever called her death anything but accidental. But even so, the inheritance I received was almost nominal.

"But it was enough, for me and for my sisters."

"Clearly," Hold agreed. "Then you would say your initial motivation was to provide for yourself and your sisters."

"More for them than for myself," she said, and was gratified to hear herself say so. "Mother had passed on to me her own overwhelming sense of responsibility. As matter of fact, my own strongest interest was in music. But I knew I could never provide five siblings on a musician's wages, and so I put all that away and buckled down."

"You must be deeply happy, then," he said, "to have so thoroughly realized your life's ambition."

And she surprised herself. "No. No, I can't say that I am."

His face, his posture, his body-language all expressed his puzzlement.

"Perhaps," she said slowly, hearing the words only as they came from her mouth, "perhaps one's life ambition oughtn't to be something that can be achieved. Because what do you do *then*? Perhaps one's life ambition should be something that will always need to be worked at."

"But surely you're a long way from retirement?"

"Medically, yes," she agreed. "My doctors tell me I can look forward to at least twenty more years of excellent health. Surely I can contrive to push mountains of money back and forth for that long. But *why*? I have already achieved total security. If I were to seal myself up in my bathroom, my fortune would continue to grow—it has passed the critical point for *self-sustaining* reaction. And all my sisters are now independent, one way or another.

"I have been... uneasy, for months now, discontent in a way I could not explain to myself. But I see it now: I've achieved all I set out to do. No wonder I've been so..." She broke off and lapsed into deep thought, utterly unaware of the holocamera.

"But surely," Hold began again, "there are other goals you can turn your attention to now."

"What goals?" she asked, honestly curious.

"Er... well, the classic ones, of course," he said. "That is... well, to make the world a better place..."

"Owen," she said. "I confess that after half a century of living, I haven't the faintest notion of how to make the world a better place. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Well, then, to leave something better behind for..."

"For posterity?" she finished. "Look at me. *I'm fifty-four years old.*"

Hold was silent.

"In fact, that may be the single craziest thing about this society," she said, her voice rising, "We're best prepared to bear children, biologically, in our teens—and we're best able to raise them, socially and economically, in our middle and later years. For the first time in my life, my responsibilities have eased to the point where I can consider children of my own—and now I'm too old to *have* them." The camera unobtrusively tracked her as she rose and paced around the spacious living room. "I've been a surrogate mother for years, and now I'll never be a *real* one."

"But, Diana," Hold cut her off, "surely parenthood is not the only form of immortality available to someone of your..."

"You don't understand," she cried. "I don't want immortality, even by proxy. I want *children*. Babies, of my own, to cherish and teach and raise. All my life I've sublimated my maternal drive, to feed and clothe and house my sisters. Now that's ended—and it was never really enough to begin with. Oh, why didn't..." She flung

out an arm, and the very theatricality of the gesture reminded her all at once that she was being recorded. She dropped the arm and turned away from the camera in confusion. "Owen... Mr. Hold, I must ask you to leave now. I'm sorry but this interview was a mistake."

With a total absence of dismay, Hold rose fluidly from the powered armchair and faced her squarely. Perhaps it was coincidental that this presented his best profile to the camera. "You know yourself better now, Diana," he said. "That may sting, but I hardly think it can be a mistake."

"If you're trapped in a canyon, aren't you better off not knowing?" she asked bitterly.

"Subconsciously you knew all along," he countered.

"At least now you're facing the knowledge. What you *know* can't be cured, you know you can endure."

She examined her fingertips. "Perhaps you're right," she said at last. "Good day, Mr. Hold."

"Good-bye, Diana."

He collapsed the camera and left, looking rather smug.

A long time later, seated on a couch which had cost the equivalent of her father's total worth at the time of his death, she said to the empty air, "... but I never have been a quitter."

And after the sun had come up, she called her local Cold Sleep center, made an appointment to speak with its director, and then called her attorney.

The second awakening was much better, and she did not enjoy it nearly as much.

Objectively, she should have. She no longer hurt anywhere that she could detect, and the bed—she corrected herself—the artifact on which she was half-sitting was the next best thing to an upholstered womb for comfort. She was alone in an apparently soundproof hospital room, in which the lighting was soft and indirect. She was neither hungry nor unhungry, neither weary nor restless.

But she was uneasy, as though in the back halls of her mind there faintly yammered an alarm bell she could not locate, an alarm clock she could not shut off. It was an unreasoned conviction that *something is wrong*. Unreasoned—was it therefore unreasonable?

That called for a second opinion.

Before she had given herself up to cryogenic sleep, she had firmly instructed herself not to be childishly startled by unfamiliar gadgetry when she woke. All the same, she was startled to learn that her nurse-call buzzer was (a) cordless, (b) conveniently accessible, and (c) nonspring-loaded, so that it could be thumbed without effort. It was not the technology that was startling—she realized that such technology had existed in her own time—it was the thoughtful compassion which had opted to use technology for patient-comfort. *Maybe they've repealed Murphy's Law*, she thought wildly, and giggled. *Now there's a dangerous vision for you..*

She was even more profoundly startled to learn that the *other* end of the process had been equally improved: her summons was answered at once. A tall, quite aged man with a mane of white hair swept aside the curtain at the far corner (the room couldn't be soundproof, then. Could it?) and stepped into the room. His clothing

startled her again. She was somewhat used to the notion of purely ornamental, rather than functional, clothing—but to her mind, "ornament" involved not-quite-concealing the genitals. Embarrassed, and therefore furious with herself, she transferred her gaze to his face, and felt her emotional turmoil fade, leaving only that original undefined unease like a single rotting stump protruding from a vast tranquil lake.

His mouth was couched in strong wrinkles that spoke of frequent laughter and tears, and his eyes were a clear warm blue beneath magnificent white eyebrows. She was... not captured... held by those eyes; to meet them was to be stroked by strong, healing hands, hands that gently probed and learned and comforted. They made her smile involuntarily, and his answering smile was a kind of benediction, a closing of a circuit between them.

And then those eyes seemed to see the rotting stump; the great white brow frowned mightily. "What's the matter, Diana!"

She could not frame the words; they simply spilled out. "*How much time has passed?*"

Comprehension seemed to dawn, yet the frown deepened. "Even more than you stipulated," he said carefully.

She knew, somehow, that he would not lie, and tried to relax. It did not entirely work. *I've achieved what I set out to*, she thought, *but there's a catch of some kind somewhere. Now how do I know that?* Then she thought, *More important, how did he know that?*

"Who are you?" she asked.

He was perceptive enough to guess which question she had asked with those words. "I am Caleb," he said. "You've evidently guessed that I'm to be your Orientator."

"I'm fairly good at anticipating the obvious," she said proudly. "It was inevitable that someone would have to fill me in on current conventions, show me how to recognize the ladies' room and so forth."

He laughed aloud. "I'm afraid that by 'anticipating the obvious,' you mean straight-line extrapolation of what you were already accustomed to. That's going to cause you problems."

"Explain," she said, wondering if she should take offense at his laughter.

"Well, for a start, I can't show you how to find a ladies' room."

"Eh?"

"I can show you how to find a public toilet."

She registered confusion.

He smiled tolerantly. "Come now—you're obviously quite intelligent. What does your term imply that mine does not?"

She thought a moment. "Oh." She reddened. "*Oh.*" She went on thinking, and he waited patiently. "I suppose that makes sense. Earth must be too crowded by now to duplicate facilities without good reason."

He laughed aloud again, and this time she tried to take offense. Since Caleb was not offering any, she failed. "There you go again. You'll simply have to stop assuming that this is your world with tailfins on it. It isn't, you know."

"Will you explain my error?" she asked, battling her own irritation.

"It's not that we needed to stop excreting in secret—it's that we *stopped* needing to

do so."

She thought that over very carefully indeed, and again Caleb waited with infinite patience. He clearly understood that she wanted to work out as much of it as possible for herself—in order to deny that this strange new world was quite terrifying.

"Another question," she said finally. "When was the last war?"

His smile was more than approving—it was congratulatory, quite personally pleased. "Well," he said, "last night a few thousand of us had one hell of an argument over next year's crop program. Some of the younger folk got quite exasperated. But if you mean physical violence, deliberate damage... well, I'm a historian, so I could give you the precise date. But if you were to step out into the hall and ask someone, you'd probably get a blank stare. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "You're telling me that we've... that the race has actually..." She paused, found the word. "Actually grown up."

"We like to think that we're adjusting well to adolescence," he said. "Of course, that implies the same sort of extrapolation you've been trying to use—but that's the best *we* can do, too."

"You are wondrously tactful, Caleb," she said. "But dammit, my whole life till now has been based on extrapolation."

"Oh, on a short time-scale it works just fine," Caleb agreed. "But over a long range, it works only as hindsight. It's a matter of locating the really significant data from which to extrapolate. An extrapolator in the early 1900s might have been aware that a man named Ford had invented a mechanical horse—but how could that observer have guessed how *much* significance that should have in his projections? All the seeds of today were present in your world, and you were almost certainly aware of them. But if I hand you a thousand seeds, most of which are strange new hybrids, how are you to know which will be weeds and which mighty trees?"

"I understand," she said, "but I must admit I find the idea disturbing."

"Of course," he said gently. "We all like to think ourselves such imaginative navigators that no new twist in the river can startle us. The one thing that every Awakened Sleeper finds *most* surprising is the depth of his own surprise. The fun in all stories is trying to guess what happens next, and we like to feel that if we fail, it's either because we didn't try hard enough or because the author cheated. God is a much more talented author than that—thank God."

"I suppose you're right," she agreed. "All right, what were the seeds—the data I overlooked?"

"The biggest part was, as far as I can tell, right under your nose. The spiritual renaissance in North America was already well under way in your time."

Her jaw dropped in honest astonishment. "Do you mean to tell me that all that divine mumbo-jumbo, all those crackpot holy men, actually produced anything?"

"The very success of such transparent charlatans proved that they were filling a deep and urgent need. When the so-called 'science' of psychology collapsed under the weight of its own flawed postulates, its more sincere followers perforce turned their attention toward spirituality. Over the ensuing decades, this culminated in the creation of the first self-consistent code of ethics—one that didn't depend on a

white-bearded know-it-all with thunderbolts up his sleeve to enforce it. It didn't have to be enforced. When completed, it was as self-evidently superior to anything that had gone before as the assembly line was in its time. It sold itself. Behaviorally-determined helplessness may be a dandy rationalization—but it isn't any *fun*.

"At more or less the same time, there was a widespread boom in use of a new drug called Alpha... why are you frowning?"

"I'm familiar with Alpha," she said sourly. "Salvation by drug addiction—that sounds just great."

"You misunderstand," he said gently. "It's not that the drug is addictive. Happens it's not. It's Truth that's addictive."

"Go on," she said, plainly not convinced.

"An interest in spirituality, combined with volitional control of rationalization, led inevitably to the first clear distinguishing between pleasure and joy. Then came the first rigorous definition of sharing, and the rest followed logically, Shared joy is increased; shared pain lessened. Axiomatic."

"But I knew that," she cried, and caught herself.

"If so," he said with gentle sadness, "then—as I have just said—you did not know how much significance to assign the awareness. What clearer proof is there than your presence here—than the inescapable fact that you used a much greater proportion of the world's resources than you deserved, specifically to remove yourself from all possibility of sharing with anyone you knew?"

"Wait a damn minute," she snapped. "*I earned* my fortune, and furthermore..."

"It is impossible," he interrupted, "to *earn* more than you can use—you can only acquire it."

"... and *furthermore*" she insisted, "I risked my life and health on the wild gamble that your age would Awaken me, specifically so that I *could* share—share my life and my experience with children."

"Whose children?" he asked softly.

She blew up. "You garrulous old fool, what in the HELL was the point in considering that until it was a physical possibility? How do I know whose children? Perhaps I'll have myself artificially inseminated, perhaps I'll have me a virgin birth, what business is it of yours whose children?"

"Am I not my sister's keeper?" he asked, unmoved by the violence of her rage. "Admit it, Diana: you *have* considered the matter, even if only subconsciously. And those flip, off-the-top-of-your-head suggestions are all you've come up with. Sharing the job of parenthood might just be one of the most exciting challenges of your life—but what you really want is only to re-create a game you already know how to win: raising images of yourself by yourself."

Implied insult could enrage her but when she felt herself directly attacked she invariably became calm and cold. The anger left her features, and her voice was "only" impersonal. "You make it sound easy. Being father and mother both."

"Easy?" he said softly. "It cannot be done—save poorly, when there is no alternative. 'Poorly,' of course, is a relative term. Fate gave you that very burden to shoulder, and you did magnificently—from the records I have, it appears that none of your sisters turned out significantly more neurotic than you."

"Except Mary," she said bitterly.

"There is no reason to believe that you could have prevented her tragedy," he said. "I repeat: given what you had to work with, you did splendidly. But if you persist in trying to repeat the task with no more than you had to work with then, you will end in sorrow."

"It would be challenging," she said.

"If it's challenge you want," he said in exasperation, "then why don't you try the one that occupies our attention these days?"

"And that is?"

"Raising the sanest children that it is within our power to raise. It's the major thrust of current social concern, and the only ethical approach to procreation. How else are we to grow up than by growing ourselves up?"

"And how do you do that?" she asked, intrigued in spite of herself.

He tugged at the ends of his snow-white hair. "Well, some of it I can't explain to you until you've learned to talk—in our speech, I mean. I like this old tongue, but it's next to impossible to think coherently in it. But one of the basic concepts you already know.

"I reviewed a copy of that final interview you gave, to that man with the unbearably cute name. Owen B. Hold, that was it, of *Lo And Behold*. It's a rather famous tape, you know: you made a big splash in the media when you opted for Cold Sleep. Richard Corey has always been a popular image.

"And in that interview you raised one of the central problems of your age: the biological incongruity by which humans lost the capacity for reproduction at just about the time they were acquiring the experiential wisdom to raise children properly. People were forced to raise children, if at all, during the most agonizingly confused time in their lives, and by the time they *had* achieved any stability or 'common' sense, they tended to drop dead.

"Technology gave us the first phase of the solution: rejuvenation treatments were developed which restored fertility and vigor to the aged. The second phase came when the race abandoned technology—that is, clumsy and dangerous technological means of birth control—and learned how to make conception an act of the will. The ability was always there, locked in that eighty-five percent of the human brain for which your era could find no use. Its development was a function of increased self-knowledge.

"The two breakthroughs, combined, solved the problem, by encouraging humans not to reproduce until they were truly prepared to. The effects of this change were profound."

He broke off, then, for she was clearly no longer listening. *That's it*, she thought dizzily, *that's the final confirmation, he's just told me I can do it, so why am I still sure there's a catch to it somewhere? There's too much happening at once, I can't think straight, but something's wrong and I don't know what it is.* "Have you supermen figured out what a hunch is?" she said aloud.

Apparently Caleb had the rare gift of moving without attracting attention, for he was now in a far corner of the room. He seemed to have caused the wall to extrude something like a small radar screen; his eye movements told her he was studying some display she could not see. When he spoke, his voice was grim. "That was

known in your time. A hunch is a projection based on data you didn't know you possessed. Like the one that's been bothering you since I came into this room—the one that's been mystifying me for the same period."

She shook her head. "I've had this hunch since before I could possibly have had *any* data—from the moment I regained consciousness in this room."

"Except while actually in cryogenic stasis," he said, "no one is *ever* unconscious."

She started to argue, and then remembered the time she had been involved in a traffic accident on her way through South Carolina. She had spent a week in a coma, and awakened to find that she was speaking in a pronounced Southern drawl which mirrored that of her nurses. "Perhaps you're right," she conceded. "But what data could I have?"

He gestured to the screen. "This device monitors the room, so that if you should be found in the midst of some medical crisis, the Healers can study its beginnings. I've run it back, and I've found the problem."

A sudden increase in anxiety told her that Caleb was right. "*Well?*"

"A man with a habit of talking to himself did so as he was wheeling you in here from surgery and tuning your bed to you. This might not have mattered—save that he, too, is a recently Awakened Sleeper, who still thinks and speaks in his old tongue. Since that tongue is Old English, his mutterings upset your subconscious—and forced my hand. I hadn't wanted to go into this on your first post-Awakening conversation, Diana—but now I have no choice."

She tried to tense her shoulders, but the bed would not permit it. She settled for clamping her teeth together. "Let's get on with it."

"I'm afraid you *can't* have children—yet. Possibly never."

"But you said..."

"That even more time had passed than you stipulated, yes. Your instructions were to Awaken you as soon as it became medically possible for a woman of your age to bear optimally healthy children in safety. That condition obtains, and has for some time."

"And you're telling me I *cant*, even though it's medically possible." Her lip curled in a sneer. "I thought this Brave New World was too good to be true. Go on, Caleb—tell me more about your little Utopian tyranny."

"You misunderstand."

"I'll bet. So procreation is an 'act of the will,' eh? Just not mine."

"Diana, Diana! Yes, procreation is everyone's personal responsibility. But it requires *two* acts of the will."

"What?"

"I am not saying that you are forbidden to procreate. I'm saying that you won't find a male—or a clinic—willing to cooperate with you at this time."

"*Why not?*"

"Because," he said with genuine compassion, "you're not old enough."

Before shock gave way to true sleep, she became aware of Caleb again, realized that he had never left her side. He was holding her hand, stroking it as gently as a man removing ashes from a third-degree burn.

It was an enormous effort to speak, but she managed. "Will... will I..."

Caleb bent closer.

"Will I ever be old enough?" she whispered.

A faint smile came to his thin, old lips. "Perhaps," he said softly. "Barring accident, you will live at least another seventy years, years of youthful vigor. But I must warn you that, by our standards, you are a backward child."

"Hell with... hell with that. Only thing you've... got I haven't... shealthier background."

"That is true."

"Jus'... watch me. Never was a quitter."

"I know," he said, his smile widening. "Your file told me that. That's why I overruled my colleagues, and Awoke you. I think that you will find joy, Diana. It's right in front of you. It always was." He paused. "Didn't you say something in that interview about having always wanted to study music?"

"Maybe I'll... have time to try it now."

He radiated approval. "Excellent. A life's ambition ought to be something that will always need to be worked at."

Peace washed over her, in something too gentle to be called a wave. She felt sleep reaching for her. But as her vision faded, curiosity birthed one last question.

"How many... how many thousands of years... has it been?"

His grin was something that could be heard and felt.

"Less than a century."