

COUNT THE CLOCK
THAT TELLS THE TIME

By Harlan Ellison

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
 When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;
 When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard;
 Then of the beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go . . .

William Shakespeare,

The XIIIth Sonnet

Waking in the cool and cloudy absolute dead middle of a Saturday afternoon one day, Ian Ross felt lost and vaguely frightened. Lying there in his bed, he was disoriented, and it took

him a moment to remember when it was and where he was. Where he was: in the bed where he had awakened every day of his 35-year-old life. When it was: the Saturday he had resolved to spend doing something. But as he lay there he realized he had come to life in the early hours just after dawn, it had

looked as though it would rain, the sky seen through the high French windows, and he had turned over and gone back to sleep. Now the clock-radio on the bedside table told him it was the absolute dead middle of the afternoon; and the world outside his windows was cool and cloudy. "Where does the time go?" he said.

He was alone, as always: there was no one to hear him or to answer. So he continued lying there, wasting time, feeling vaguely frightened. As though something important were passing him by.

A fly buzzed him,, circled, buzzed him again. It had been annoying him for some time. He tried to ignore the intruder and stared off across Loch Tummel to the amazing flesh tones of the October trees, preparing themselves for Winter's disingenuous attentions and the utter absence of tourism. The silver birches were already a blazing gold, the larches and ash trees still blending off from green to rust; in a few weeks the Norway spruces and the other conifers would darken until they seemed mere shadows against the, slate sky.

Perthshire was most beautiful at this time of year. He had taken the time to learn to pronounce the names-Schiehallion, Killiecrankie,

Pitlochry, Aberfeldy-and had come here to sit. The dream. The one he had always held: silent, close to him, unspoken, in his idle thoughts. The dream of going toScotland . For what reason he could not say. But this was the place that had always called, and he had come.

For the first time in his life, Ian Ross had done something. Thirty-seven years old, rooted to a tiny apartment in Chicago, virtually friendless, working five days a week at a drafting table in a firm of industrial designers, watching television till sign-off, tidying the two and a half rooms till every picture hung from the walls in perfect true with the junctures of walls and ceiling, entering each checkbook notation in the little ledger with a fine-point ink pen, unable to remember what had happened last Thursday that made it different from last Wednesday, seeing himself reflected in the window of the cafeteria slowly eating the \$2.95 Christmas Dinner Special, a solitary man, somehow never making the change of the seasons save to understand only by his skin that it was warmer or colder, never tasting joy because he could never remember having been told what it was, reading books about things and subject matter, topics not people, because he knew so few people and knew none of them, drawing straight lines, feeling deserted but never knowing where to put his hands to relieve that feeling: a transient man, passing down the same streets every day and perceiving only dimly that there were streets beyond those streets, drinking water and apple

juice, and water, replying when he was addressed directly, looking around sometimes when he was addressed to see if it was, in fact, himself to whom the speaker was speaking, buying gray socks and white undershorts, staring out the windows of his apartment at the Chicago snow, staring for hours at the invisible sky, feeling the demon wind off Lake Michigan rattling the window glass in its frame and thinking this year he would reputty and this year failing to reputty, combing his hair as he always had, cooking his

own meals, alone with the memories of his mother and father who had died within a year of each other and both from cancer, never having been able to speak more than a few awkward sentences to any woman but his mother . . . Ian Ross had lived his life like the dust that lay in a film across the unseen top of the tall wardrobe cabinet in his bedroom; colorless, unnoticed, inarticulate, neither giving nor taking.

Until one day he had said. "Where does the time go?" And in the months following those words he had come to realize he had not, in any remotely valuable manner, lived his life. He had wasted it. Months after the first words came, unbidden and tremulous, he admitted to himself that he had wasted his life.

He resolved to actualize at least the one dream. To go to Scotland . Perhaps to live. To rent or even buy a crofter's cottage on the edge of a moor or overlooking one of the lochs he had dreamed about. He had all the insurance money still put by; he hadn't touched a cent of

it. And there, in that far, chill place in the north he would live . . . walking the hills with a dog by his side, smoking a pipe that trailed a fragrant pennant of blue-white smoke, hands thrust deep into the pocket of a fleece-lined jacket. He would live there. That was the dream.

And from King's Cross Station he had taken the 2130 sleeper to Edinburgh, and he had walked the Royal Mile and gazed in wonder at Edinburgh Castle high on the bluff overlooking that bountiful city, and finally he had rented a car and had driven north out the Queens ferry Road, across the bridge that spanned the Firth of Forth, on up the A-90 till he reached Pitlochry. Then a left, a random left, but not so random that he did not know it would come out overlooking the Queens View, said to be the most beautiful view in the world, certainly in Scotland; and he had driven the twisting, narrow road till he was deep in the hills of Perth.

And there he had pulled off the road, gotten out of the car, leaving the door open, and walked away down the October hills ,to finally sit staring at the Loch , green and blue and silent as the mirror of his memory.

Where only the buzzing fly reminded him of the past.

He had been 35 when he said. "Where does the time go?" And he was 37 as he sat on the hill.

And it was there that the dream died.

He stared at the hills, at the valley that ran

off to left and right, at the sparkling water of the Loch , and knew he had wasted his time again. He had resolved to do something; but he had done nothing. Again.

There was no place for him here.

He was out of phase with all around him. He was an alien object. A beer can thrown into the grass. A broken wall untended and falling back into the earth from which it had been wrenched stone by stone.

He felt lonely, starved, incapable of clenching his hands or clearing his throat. A ruin from another world, set down in foreign soil, drinking air that was not his to drink. There were no tears, no pains in his body, no deep and trembling sighs. In a moment, with a fly buzzing, the dream died for him. He had not been saved; had, in fact, come in an instant to understand that he had been a child to think it could ever

change. What do you want to be when you grow up? Nothing. As I have always been nothing.

The sky began to bleach out.

The achingly beautiful golds and oranges and yellows began to drift toward sepia. The blue of the loch slid softly toward chalkiness, like an ineptly prepared painting left too long in direct sunlight. The sounds of birds and forest creatures and insects faded, the gain turned down slowly. The sun gradually cooled for Ian Ross. The sky began to bleach out toward a gray-white newsprint colorlessness. The fly was gone. It was cold now; very cold now.

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Shadows began to superimpose themselves over the dusty mezzotint of the bloodless day:

A city of towers and minarets, as seen through shallow, disturbed water; a mountain range of glaciers with snow untracked and j endless as an ocean; an ocean, with massive, . serpent-necked creatures gliding through the jade deeps; a parade of ragged children bearing crosses hewn from tree branches; a great walled fortress in the middle of a parched wasteland, the yellow earth split like strokes of lightning all around the structure; a motorway with hundreds of cars speeding past so quickly they seemed to be stroboscopic lines of colored light: a battlefield with men in flowing robes and riding great-chested stallions, the sunlight dancing off curved swords and helmets; a tornado careening through a small town of slat back stores and houses, lifting entire buildings from their foundations and flinging them into the sky; a river of lava burst through a fissure in the ground and boiled toward a shadowy indication of an amusement park, with throngs of holiday tourists moving in clots from one attraction to another.

Ian Ross sat, frozen, on the hillside. The world was dying around him. No . . . it was vanishing, fading out, dematerializing. As if all the sand had run out of the hourglass around him; as if he were the only permanent, fixed, and immutable object in a metamorphosing universe suddenly cut loose from its time anchor.

The world faded out around Ian Ross: the shadows boiled and seethed and slithered past him, caught in a cyclonic wind-tunnel and swept away past him, leaving him in darkness.

He sat now, still, quiet, too isolated to be frightened.

He thought perhaps clouds had covered the sun.

There was no sun.

He thought perhaps it had been an eclipse, that his deep concentration of his hopeless state had kept him from noticing.

There was no sun.

No sky. The ground beneath him was gone. He sat, merely sat, but on nothing, surrounded by nothing, seeing and feeling nothing save a vague chill. It was cold now, very cold now.

After a long time he decided to stand and did stand: there was nothing beneath or above him. He stood in darkness.

He could remember everything that had ever happened to him in his life. Every moment of it, with absolute clarity. It was something he had never experienced before. His memory had been no better or worse than anyone else's, but he had forgotten all the details, many years in which nothing had happened, during which he had wasted time-almost as a mute witness at the dull rendition of his life.

But now, as he walked through the limbo that was all he had been left of the world, he recalled everything perfectly. The look of terror on his mother's face when he had sliced through the

tendons of his left hand with the lid from the tin can of pink lemonade: he had been four years old. The feel of his new Thom McAn shoes that had always been too tight from the moment they had been bought but that he had been forced to wear to school every day, even though they rubbed him raw at the back of his heels: he had been seven years old. The Four Freshmen standing and singing for the graduation dance. He had been alone. He had bought one ticket to support the school event. He had been 16. The taste of egg roll at Choy's, the first time. He had been 24. The woman he had met at the library, in the section where they kept the books on animals. She had used a white lace handkerchief to dry her temples. It had smelled of perfume. He had been 30. He remembered all the sharp edges of every moment from his past. It was remarkable. In this nowhere.

And he walked through gray spaces, with the shadows of other times and other places swirling past. The sound of rushing wind, as though the emptiness through which he moved was being constantly filled and emptied, endlessly, without measure or substance.

Had he known what emotions to call on for release, he would have done so. But he was numb in his skin. Not merely chilled, as this empty place was chilled, but somehow inured to feeling from the edge of

his perceptions to the center of his soul. Sharp, clear, drawn back from the absolute past, he remembered a day when he had been 11, when his mother had suggested that for his birthday they make a

small party to which he would invite a few friends. And so (he remembered with diamond bright perfection), he had invited six boys and girls. They had never come. He sat alone in the house that Saturday, all his comic books laid out in case the cake and party favors and pin the-tail-on-the-donkey did not hold their attention sufficiently. Never came. It grew dark. He sat alone, with his mother occasionally walking through the living room to make some consoling remark. But he was alone, and he knew there was only one reason for it: they had all forgotten. It was simply that he was a waste of time of those actually living their lives. Invisible, by token of being unimportant. A thing unnoticed: on a street, who notices the mailbox, the fire hydrant, the crosswalk lines? He was an invisible, useless thing.

He had never permitted another party to be thrown for him.

He remembered that Saturday now. And found the emotion, 26 years late, to react to this terrible banishment of the world. He began to tremble uncontrollably, and he sat down where there was nothing to sit down on, and he rubbed his hands together, feeling the tremors in his knuckles and the ends of his fingers. Then he felt the constriction in his throat, he turned his head this way and that, looking for a nameless exit from self-pity and loneliness; and then he cried. Lightly, softly, because he had no experience at it.

A crippled old woman came out of the gray

mist of nowhere and stood watching him. His eyes were closed, or he would have seen her coming.

After a while, he snuffled, opened his eyes, and saw her standing in front of him. He stared at her. She was standing. At a level somewhat below him, as though the invisible ground of this nonexistent place was on a lower plane than that on which he sat.

"That won't help much," she said. She wasn't surly, but neither was there much succor in her tone.

He looked at her and immediately stopped crying.

"Probably just got sucked in here," she said. It was not quite a question, though it had something of query in it. She knew and was going carefully.

He continued to look at her, hoping she could tell him what had happened to him. And to her? She was here, too.

"Could be worse," she said, crossing her arms and shifting her weight off her twisted left leg. "I could've been a Saracen or a ribbon clerk or even one of those hairy pre-humans." He didn't respond. He didn't know what she was talking about. She smiled wryly, remembering. "First person I met was some kind of a retard, little boy about 15 or so. Must have spent what there'd been of his life in some padded cell or a hospital bed, something like that. He just sat there and stared at me, drooled a little, couldn't tell me a thing. I was scared out of my mind, ran around like a chicken with

its head cut off. Wasn't till a long time after that before I met someone who spoke English."

He tried to speak and found his throat was dry. His voice came out in a croak. He swallowed and wet his lips. "Are there many other, uh, other people . . . we're not all alone . . . ?"

"Lots of others. Hundreds, thousands. God only knows; maybe whole countries full of people here. No animals, though. They don't waste it the way we do."

"Waste it? What?"

"Time, son. Precious, lovely time. That's all there is, just time. Sweet, flowing time. Animals don't know about time."

As she spoke, a slipping shadow of some wild scene whirled past and through them. It was a great city in flames. It seemed more substantial than the vagrant wisps of countryside or sea scenes that had been ribboning past them as they spoke. The wooden buildings and city towers seemed almost solid enough to crush anything in their path. Flames leaped toward the gray, dead-skin sky; enormous tongues of crackling flame that ate the city's gut and chewed the phantom image, leaving ash. (But even the dead ashes had more life than the grayness through which the vision swirled.)

Ian Ross ducked, frightened. Then it was gone.

"Don't worry about it, son," the old woman said. "Looked a lot like London during the Big Fire. First the Plague, then the Fire. I've seen its

like before. Can't hurt you. None of it can hurt you."

He tried to stand, found himself still weak. "But what is it?"

She shrugged. "No one's ever been able to tell me for sure. Bet there's some around in here who can, though. One day I'll run into one of them. If I find out and we ever meet again I'll be sure to let you know.

Bound to happen." But her face grew infinitely sad and there was desolation in her expression. "Maybe. Maybe we'll meet again. Never happens, but it might. Never saw that retarded boy again. But it might happen."

She started to walk away, hobbling awkwardly. Ian got to his feet with difficulty, but as quickly as he could. "Hey wait! Where are you going? Please, lady don't leave me here all alone. I'm scared to be here all alone. I'm scared to be here by myself."

She stopped and turned, tilting oddly on her bad leg. "Got to keep moving. Keep going, you know? If you stay in one place, you don't get anywhere: there's a way out . . . you've just got to keep moving till you find it." She started again, saying, over her shoulder, "I guess I won't be seeing you again: I don't think it's likely."

He ran after her and grabbed her arm. She seemed very startled. As if no one had ever touched her in this place during all the time she had been here.

"Listen, you've got to tell me some things, whatever you know. I'm awfully scared, don't you understand? You have to have some understanding."

She looked at him carefully. "All right, as much as I can, then you'll let me go?"

He nodded.

"I don't know what happened to me . . . or to you. Did it all fade away and just disappear, and everything that was left was this, just this gray nothing?"

He nodded.

She sighed. "How old are you, son?"

"I'm 37. My name is Ian-"

She waved his name away with an impatient gesture. "That doesn't matter. I can see you don't know any better than I do. So I don't have the time to waste on you. You'll learn that, too. Just keep walking, just keep looking for a way out."

He made fists. "That doesn't tell me anything! What was that burning city, what are these shadows that go past all the time?" As if to mark his question a vagrant filmy phantom caravan of cassowary-like animals drifted through them.

She shrugged and sighed. "I think it's history. I'm not sure . . . I'm guessing, you understand. But I think it's all the bits and pieces of the past, going through on its way somewhere."

He waited. She shrugged again, and her silence indicated-with a kind of helpless appeal to be let go that she could tell him nothing further.

He nodded resignedly. "All right. Thank you."

She turned with her bad leg trembling: she had stood with her weight on it for too long. And she started to walk off into the gray limbo. When she was almost out of sight, he found himself able to speak again, and he said . . . too softly to reach her . . . "Goodbye, lady. Thank you."

He wondered how old she was. How long she had been here. If he would one time far from now be like her. If it was all over and if he would wander in shadows forever.

He wondered if people died here.

Before he met Catherine, a long time before he met her, he met the lunatic who told him where he was, what had happened to him, and why it had happened.

They saw each other standing on opposite sides of a particularly vivid phantom of the Battle of

Waterloo. The battle raged past them, and through the clash and slaughter of Napoleon's and Wellington's forces they waved to each other.

When the sliding vision had rushed by, leaving emptiness between them, the lunatic rushed forward, clapping his hands as if preparing himself for a long, arduous, but pleasurable chore. He was of indeterminate age but clearly past his middle years. His hair was long and wild, he wore a pair of rimless antique spectacles, and his suit was turn-of the eighteenth-century. "Well, well, well," he

called, across the narrowing space between

them, "so good to see you, sir!"

Ian Ross was startled. In the timeless time he had wandered through this limbo, he had encountered coolies and Berbers and Thracian traders and silent Goths . . . an endless stream of hurrying humanity that would neither speak nor stop. This man was something different. Immediately, Ian knew he was insane. But he wanted to talk!

The older man reached Ian and extended his hand. "Cowper, sir. Justinian Cowper. Alchemist, metaphysician, consultant to the forces of time and space, ah yes, time! Do I perceive in you, sir, one only recently come to our little Valhalla, one in need of illumination? Certainly! Definitely. I can see that is the case."

Ian began to say something, almost anything, in response, but the wildly gesticulating old man pressed on without drawing a breath. "This most recent manifestation, the one we were both privileged to witness was, I'm certain you're aware, the pivotal moment at Waterloo in which the Little Corporal had his fat chewed good and proper. Fascinating piece of recent history, wouldn't you say?"

Recent history? Ian started to ask him how long he had been in this gray place, but the old man barely paused before a fresh torrent of words spilled out.

"Stunningly reminiscent of that marvelous scene in Stendahl's Charterhouse of Parma in which Fabrizio, young, innocent, fresh to that environ, found himself walking across a large

meadow on which men were running in all directions, noise, shouts, confusion . . . and he knew not what was happening, and not till several chapters later do we learn-ah, marvelous!-that it was, in fact, the

Battle of Waterloo through which he moved, totally unaware of history in the shaping all around him. He was there, while not there. Precisely our situation, wouldn't you say?"

He had run out of breath. He stopped, and Ian plunged into the gap. "That's what I'd like to know, Mr. Cowper: What's happened to me? I've lost everything, but I can remember everything, too. I know I should be going crazy or frightened, and I am scared, but not out of my mind with it . . . I seem to accept this, whatever it is. I-I don't know how to take it, but I know I'm not feeling it yet. And I've been here a long time!"

The old man slipped his arm around Ian's back and began walking with him, two gentlemen strolling in confidence on a summer afternoon by the edge of a cool park. "Quite correct, sir, quite correct. Dissociative behavior; mark of the man unable to accept his destiny. Accept it, sir. I urge you; and fascination follows. Perhaps even obsession, but we must run that risk, mustn't we?"

Ian wrenched away from him, turned to face him. "Look, mister, I don't want to hear all that craziness! I want to know where I am and how I get out of here. And if you can't tell me, then leave me alone!"

"Nothing easier, my good man. Explanation

is the least of it. Observation of phenomena, ah, that's the key. You can follow? Well, then: we are victims of the law of conservation of time. Precisely and exactly linked to the law of the conservation of matter; matter, which can neither be created nor destroyed. Time exists without end. But there is an ineluctable entropic balance, absolutely necessary to maintain order in the universe. Keeps events discrete, you see. As matter approaches universal distribution, there is a counterbalancing, how shall I put it, a counterbalancing 'leaching out' of time. Unused time is not wasted in places where nothing happens. It goes somewhere. It goes here, to be precise. In measurable units-which I've decided, after considerable thought, to call 'chronons'."

He paused, perhaps hoping Ian would compliment him on his choice of nomenclature. Ian put a hand to his forehead: his brain was swimming.

"That's insane. It doesn't make sense."

"Makes perfectly good sense. I assure you. I was a top savant in my time; what I've told you is the only theory that fits the facts. Time unused is not wasted; it is leached out, drained through the normal space-time continuum and recycled. All this history you see shooting past us is that part of the time-flow that was wasted. Entropic balance. I assure you."

"But what am I doing here?"

"You force me to hurt your feelings, sir."

"What am I doing here?!"

"You wasted your life. Wasted time. All

around you, throughout your life, unused chronons were being leached out, drawn away from the contiguous universe, until their pull on you was irresistible. Then you went on through, pulled loose like a piece of wood in a rushing torrent, a bit of chaff whirled away on the wind. Like Fabrizio, you were never really there. You wandered through, never seeing, never participating and so there was nothing to moor you solidly in your own time."

"But how long will I stay here?"

The old man looked sad and spoke kindly for the first time: "Forever. You never used your time, so you have nothing to rely on as anchorage in normal space."

"But everyone here thinks there's a way out. I know it! They keep walking, trying to find an exit."

"Fools. There is no way back."

"But you don't seem to be the sort of person who wasted his life. Some of the others I've seen, yes. I can see that; but you?"

The old man's eyes grew misty. He spoke with difficulty. "Yes, I belong here . . ."

Then he turned and, like one in a dream, lost, wandered away. Lunatic, observing phenomena. And then gone in the grayness of time gorged limbo. Part of a glacial period slid past Ian Ross and he resumed his walk without destination.

And after a long, long time that was timeless but filled with an abundance of time, he met Catherine.

He saw her as a spot of darkness against the gray limbo. She was quite a distance away, and he walked on for a while, watching the dark blotch against gray, and then decided to change direction. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered: he was alone with his memories, replaying again and again.

The sinking of the Titanic wafted through him.

She did not move, even though he was approaching on a direct line.

When he was quite close he could see that she was sitting cross-legged on nothingness; she was asleep. Her head was propped in one hand, the bracing arm supported by her knee. Asleep.

He came right up to her and stood there simply watching. He smiled. She was like a bird, he thought, with her head tucked under her wing. Not really, but that was how he saw her. Though her cupped hand covered half her face he could make out a sweet face, very pale skin, a mole on her throat; her hair was brown, cut quite short. Her eyes were closed; he decided they would be blue.

The Greek Senate, the Age of Pericles, men in a crowd-property owners-screaming at Lycurgus's exhortations in behalf of socialism. The shadow of it sailed past not very far away.

Ian stood staring, and after a while he sat down opposite her. He leaned back on his arms and watched. He hummed an old tune the name of which he did not know.

Finally, she opened her brown eyes and stared at him.

At first momentary terror, startlement, chagrin, curiosity. Then she took umbrage. "How long have you been there?"

"My name is Ian Ross." he said.

"I don't care what your name is!" she said angrily. "I asked you how long you've been sitting there watching me."

"I don't know. A while."

"I don't like being watched; you're being very rude."

He got to his feet without answering and began walking away. Oh well.

She ran after him. "Hey, wait!"

He kept walking. He didn't have to be bothered like that. She caught up with him and ran around to stand in front of him. "I suppose you just think you can walk off like that!"

"Yes. I can. I'm sorry I bothered you. Please get out of my way if you don't want me around."

"I didn't say that."

"You said I was being rude. I am never rude; I'm a very well-mannered person, and you were just being insulting."

He walked around her. She ran after him.

"All right, okay, maybe I was a little out of sorts. I was asleep, after all."

He stopped. She stood in front of him. Now it was her move. "My name is Catherine Molnar. How do you do?"

"Not too well, that's how."

"Have you been here long?"

"Longer than I wanted to be here, that's for sure."

"Can you explain what's happened to me?"

He thought about it. Walking with someone would be a nice change. "Let me ask you something." Ian Ross said, beginning to stroll off toward the phantom image of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon wafting past them. "Did you waste a lot of time, sitting around, not doing much, maybe watching television a lot?"

They were lying down side by side because they were tired. Nothing more than that. The Battle of Ardennes, First World War, was all around them. Not a sound. Just movement. Mist, fog, turretless tanks, shattered trees all around them. Some corpses left lying in the middle of no-man's land. They had been together for a space of time . . . it was three hours, it was six weeks, it was a month of Sundays, it was a year to remember, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times: who could measure it? There were no signposts, no town criers, no grandfather clocks, no change of seasons, who could measure it?

They had begun to talk freely. He told her again that his name was Ian Ross, and she said Catherine.. Catherine Molnar again. She confirmed his guess that her life had been empty. "Plain," she said. "I was plain. I am plain. No, don't bother to say you think I have nice cheekbones or a trim figure; it won't change a thing. If you want plain, I've got it."

He didn't say she had nice cheekbones or a trim figure. But he didn't think she was plain.

The Battle of the Ardennes was swirling away now.

She suggested they make love. _j

Ian Ross got to his feet quickly and walked away.

She watched him for a while, keeping him in sight. Then she got up, dusted off her hands though there was nothing on them, an act of memory, and followed him. Quite a long time later, after trailing him but not trying to catch up to him, she ran to match his pace and finally, gasping for breath, reached him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Nothing to be sorry about."

"I offended you."

"No, you didn't. I just felt like walking."

"Stop it, Ian. I did. I offended you."

He stopped and spun on her. "Do you think I'm a virgin? I'm not a virgin."

His vehemence pulled her back from the edge of boldness. "No, of course you're not. I never thought such a thing." Then she said. "Well . . . I am."

"Sorry," he said, because he didn't know the right thing to say, if there was a right thing.

"Not your fault," she said. Which was the right thing to say.

From nothing to nothing. Thirty-four years old, the properly desperate age for unmarried, unmotherhooded, unloved, Catherine Molnar. Janesville, Wisconsin. Straightening the trinkets in her jewelry box, ironing her clothes, removing and refolding the sweaters in her

drawers, hanging the slacks with the slacks, skirts with the skirts, blouses with the blouses, coats with the coats, all in order in the closet, reading every word in Time and Reader's Digest, learning seven new words every day, never using seven new words every day, mopping the floors in the three-room apartment, putting aside one full evening to pay the bills and spelling out Wisconsin completely, never the WI abbreviation on the return envelopes, listening to talk radio, calling for the correct time to set the clocks, spooning out the droppings from the kitty box, repasting photos in the album of scenes with round-faced people, pinching back the buds on the coleus, calling Aunt Beatrice every Tuesday at seven o'clock, talking brightly to the waitress in the orange and-blue uniform at the chicken pie shop, repainting fingernails carefully so the moon on each nail is showing, heating morning water for herself alone for the cup of herbal tea, setting the table with a cloth napkin and a placemat, doing dishes, going to the office and straightening the bills of lading precisely. From nothing to nothing. Thirty-four.

They lay side by side but they were not tired. There was more to it than that.

"I hate men who can't think past the pillow," she said, touching his hair.

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's just something I practiced, to say after the first time I slept with a man. I always felt there should be something original to say,

instead of all the things I read in novels."

"I think it's a very clever phrase." Even now, he found it hard to touch her. He lay with hands at his sides.

She changed the subject. "I was never able to get very far playing the piano. I have absolutely no give between the thumb and first finger. And that's essential, you know. You have to have a long reach, a good spread, I think they call it, to play Chopin. A tenth: that's two notes over an octave. A full octave, a perfect octave, those are just technical terms. Octave is good enough. I don't have that."

"I like piano playing," he said, realizing how silly and dull he must sound and frightened (very suddenly) that she would find him so, that she would leave him. Then he remembered where they were and he smiled. Where could she go? Where could he go?

"I always hated the fellows at parties who could play the piano . . . all the girls clustered around those people. Except these days it's not so much piano; not too many people have pianos in their homes anymore. The kids grow up and go away and nobody takes lessons and the kids don't buy pianos. They get those electric guitars."

"Acoustical guitars."

"Yes, those. I don't think it would be much better for fellows like me who don't play, even if it's acoustical guitars."

"They got up and walked again.

Once they discussed how they had wasted

their lives, how they had sat there with hands folded as time filled space around them, swept through, was drained off, and their own "chronons" (he had told her about the lunatic; she said it sounded like Benjamin Franklin; he said the man hadn't looked like Benjamin Franklin, but maybe, it might have been) had been leached of all potency.

Once they discussed the guillotine executions in the Paris of the Revolution, because it was keeping pace with them. Once they chased the Devonian and almost caught it. Once they were privileged to enjoy themselves in the center of an Arctic snowstorm that held around them for a measure of measureless time. Once they saw nothing for an eternity but were truly chilled-unlike the Arctic snowstorm that had had no effect on them-by the winds that blew past them. And once he turned to her and said, "I love you, Catherine."

But when she looked at him with a gentle smile, he noticed for the first time that her eyes seemed to be getting gray and pale.

Then, not too soon after, she said she loved him, too.

But she could see mist through the flesh of his hands when he- reached out to touch her face.

They walked with their arms around each other, having found each other. They said many times, and agreed it was so, that they were in love and being together was the most important thing in that endless world of gray spaces, even if they never found their way back.

And they began to use their time together, setting small goals for each "day" upon awakening. We will walk that far; we will play word games in which you have to begin the name of a female movie star from the last letter of a male

movie star's name that I have to begin off the a last letter of a female movie star; we will ex-' change shirt and blouse and see how it feels for a while; we will sing every camp song we can remember. They began to enjoy their time together. They began to live.

And sometimes his voice faded out, and she could see him moving his lips but there was no sound.

And sometimes when the mist cleared she was invisible from the ankles down and her body moved as through thick soup.

And as they used their time, they became alien in that place where wasted time had gone to rest.

And they began to fade. As the world had leached out for Ian Ross in Scotland, and for Catherine Molnar in Wisconsin, they began to vanish from limbo. Matter could neither be created nor destroyed, but it could be disassembled and sent where it was needed for entropic balance.

He saw her pale skin become transparent.

She saw his hands as clear as glass.

And they thought: too late. It comes too late.

Invisible motes of their selves were drawn off and were sent away from that gray place. Were sent where needed to maintain balance. One and one and one, separated on the wind and

blown to the farthest corners of the tapestry that was time and space. And could never be recalled. And could never be rejoined.

So they touched, there in that vast limbo of wasted time, for the last time, and shadows existed for an instant, and then were gone; he first, leaving her behind for the merest instant of terrible loneliness and loss, and then she, without shadow, pulled apart and scattered, followed. Separation without hope of return.

There was the faintest keening whine of matter fleeing.

There was the soundless echo of a diminishing moan.

The universe was poised to accept restored order.

And then balance was regained; as if they had never been.

Great events hushed in mist swirled past. Ptolemy crowned King of Egypt, the Battle of Teutoburger Forest, Jesus crucified, the founding of Constantinople, the Vandals plundering Rome, the massacre of the Omayyad family, the Court of the Fujiwaras in Japan. Jerusalem falling to Saladin . . . and on and on . . . great events . . . empty time . . . and the timeless population trudged past endlessly . . . unaware that finally, at last, hopelessly and too late . . . two of their nameless order had found the way out.