

ENGINE SUMMER
by John Crowley

Flyleaf:

In the world of the far future, this continent's population has been reduced to a handful. The survivors have evolved over centuries into self-absorbed, isolated communities with different cultures. Rush that Speaks is born into the Truthful Speakers community. His mission, his religion, is to learn to become a saint -- one who tells his life story in such a way that those who listen see reflected in it their own situation and the humanity that joins them all.

But Rush's search for sainthood becomes as well a search into the far past, into the age-long series of accidents and catastrophes that have made his world. He falls in love with Once a Day, born into the secretive sect Whisper cord, who indeed preserve ancient secrets. Following her deeper and deeper into old mysteries, Rush journeys far and learns much -- and grows closer to sainthood, a sainthood he could never have imagined . . .

John Crowley burst only recently into the science fiction field with his first novel, The Deep. "Extraordinary" -- Ursula Le Guin; "One of the best new novels of the year" -- Locus and Lin Carter. After seeing his second novel, Beasts, Kirkus said: "He should become a major name in the field." John Crowley lives alone in Lenox, Massachusetts.

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First Edition

For Lance Bird, who also thinks that the
snake's-hands in a story can be the best part.

. . . a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables, you yourself would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.
Another said: I bet that is also a parable.
The first said: You have won.
The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.
The first said: No, in reality; in parable you have lost.

-- Franz Kafka
From "Parables and Paradoxes" by
Franz Kafka. Reprinted by permission
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ENGINE SUMMER

THE FIRST CRYSTAL

Many Lives

First facet:

Asleep?
No. Awake. I was told to close my eyes. And wait, he said, till you're asked to open them.
Oh. You can open them now . . . What do you see?
You.
Am I . . . ?
You're like . . . a girl I know. Taller. Are all the angels tall?
What else do you see?
This grass we sit on. Is it grass?
Like grass.
I see the sky. Through your roof of glass, oh, angel, can it be?
It is.

I'm here, then. Here. He was right, that I could come here Angel! I see the clouds below us!

Yes.

I've found you, then. I've found the greatest thing that was lost.

_Yes. We were lost and you found us. We were blind, and you made us see. Now. You can only -- stay -- a short time, so . . . _

What is it you want from me?

Your story.

That's all I am, now, isn't it: my story. Well, I'll tell it. But it's long. How can I tell it all?

Begin at the beginning; go on till you reach the end. Then stop.

The beginning. . . . If I am only a story now, I must have a beginning. Shall I begin by being born? Is that a beginning? I could begin with that silver glove you wear; that silver glove, and the ball . . . Yes, I will start with Little Belaire, and how I first heard of the glove and ball; and that way the beginning will be the ending too. I would have to start with Little Belaire anyway, because I started with Little Belaire, and I hope I end there. I am in Little Belaire somehow always. I was created there, its center is my center; when I say "me" I mean Little Belaire mostly. I can't describe it to you, because it changed, as I changed; changed with me as I changed. But you'll see Little Belaire if I tell you about me -- or at least some of the ways it can be.

I was born in my Mbaba's room. My Mbaba is my mother's mother, and it was with her mostly that I spent my baby years, as the custom is. I remember Mbaba's room better than any other of Little Belaire's thousand places; it was one that never changed, whose boundaries stayed the same, though it seemed to move from place to place as I grew up, because the walls and rooms around it were always being changed. It wasn't one of the oldest rooms, the old warren built by St. Andy that is the center of Little Belaire (tiny rooms of porous-looking square-cut gray angelstone, the old rooms where all secrets are kept); nor yet was it one of the airy, nonexistent rooms of the outside, with light translucent walls that change every day and fade into the woods till Little Belaire ends without a sign and the world begins. Mbaba's was on the Morning side, not far from Path, with walls of wood and a dirt floor covered with rugs, and many beetles and once a blacksnake that stayed nine days. And skylights that made it gleam in the mornings as though moist and fade slowly in the evening before the lamps were lit. You can see Mbaba's room from the outside, because it has a little dome, and on its sides red-painted vents that wave in the wind.

It was afternoon, in late November, when I was born. Already nearly everyone had revolved back into the close warm insides of Little Belaire, and went out rarely; smoke and food had been laid up for the winter season. In my Mbaba's room my mother sat with my Mbaba and Laugh Aloud, a gossip and a famous doctor too. They were eating walnuts and drinking red raspberry soda when I started to be born. That's the story I have been told.

The gossip named me Rush that Speaks. I was named for the rush that grows in water, that on winter days like the day I was born seems to speak when the wind goes through its dead hollow stem.

My cord is Palm cord, the cord of St. Roy and St. Dean. A lot of Palm cord people have names about words and speaking. My mother's name was Speak a Word; my Mbaba's name was So Spoken. There are hand names too -- the cord is Palm, after all -- like Seven Hands and Thumb. Since I have always been Palm, the Little Belaire I can tell you of is Palm's and is like my cord. But ask someone of Leaf cord or Bone cord and he'd tell you about a different place.

The silver ball and glove. I was seven, and it was a day in November; I remember, because this was also the first day I was taken to see a gossip, as that happens in the time of year when you were born, when you're seven.

Inside Mbaba's room, the vents in the little dome made a soft clack-clack-clack above my head. I watched Mbaba climb down the rope ladder that hung from a door set in the dome; she was coming back from feeding the

birds. A sparrow flew in with her, fluttering noisily against the skylights and dropping white droppings on the rug below. It was cold this day I am telling you of, and Mbaba looked out from a thick shaggy shawl that ended in clicking tassels, though her feet wore only rings.

My mother had told me that Mbaba was growing solitary, the way old people do; and it was true that as I grew up, Mbaba came to spend most of her time in this room. But she wasn't ever really alone. Because around the walls were Palm cord's carved chests, of which Mbaba was the keeper. The carved chests are like -- like honeycombs. What they are most like is Little Belaire itself: interrelated, full of secrets, full of stories. Each of the hundred drawers is marked with signs and carved in a different shape, depending on what's in it: each drawer was designed to hold just what it holds in the chest and to tell things about it: how it came here, what it has done, and what stories it can tell. Mbaba was never alone, because of all the souvenirs in the drawers of Palm cord's carved chests.

I lay naked under the thick rugs on Mbaba's bed, watching and listening. Mbaba, talking to herself, went around the room; she pressed one long finger to her collapsed toothless mouth, as though trying to remember something. She gave it up and came to busy herself about the pipe. The pipe in Mbaba's room is old and very beautiful, made of green glass, shaped like an onion, and hung on chains from the dome above. There are four stems hung around it in loops, woven in bright colors like snakes; and there is a metal bowl at the top in the shape of St. Bea's head, her mouth wide open to accept the chips of St. Bea's-bread.

Mbaba struck a match and held it lit in one hand while with the other she filled St. Bea's mouth with blue-green chips of bread from her barrel. She touched the match to the bread, took down one of the long stems, and inhaled; a dark bubble ascended from the bottom of the pipe to the top above the liquid level, where it burst and let out its smoke. Above the metal mouth ropes of thick, rose-colored smoke twined up around the chains, ascending to the dome; all around Mbaba was a rosy mist, the smoke coming from her nostrils and mouth. The smell of St. Bea's-bread is a good smell, dry and spicy, toasted, warm, a smell with a lot of insides. It doesn't taste like it smells; it tastes . . . like everything. Like anything. All at once. It tastes like other things to eat: dried fruit sometimes, or sour grass, or hazelnuts. And charred wood too, and dandelions; grasshopper's legs; earth, autumn mornings, snow. And thinking of it then and smelling it made me jump out of bed with the rug around me and run across the cold floor to where Mbaba motioned to me, grinning. I wriggled down next to her; she grunted as she took down a stem of the pipe for me. And so we two, me and my mother's mother, sat and smoked and talked.

"When we wandered," Mbaba said, and a bubble of laughter rose inside me because she was going to tell when-we-wandered. It could have been any story on this morning, because Mbaba knew as many stories as there were things in the carved chests, but this is the one she told:

"When we wandered, and this was a great long time ago, before any now alive were thought of or their cords thought of or even Little Belaire itself thought of, St. Andy got lost. St. Andy got lost seven times when we wandered, and this was one of the times. He got lost because he had to pull St. Roy's wagon and the treasures of Big Belaire that were kept in it, and the whole of our history. On this time I'm speaking of, St. Andy wandered alone, pulling the wagon, until he came to an encampment. There were fires burning where people sat to warm themselves. St. Andy's wagon was a source of great amazement to them, even though they couldn't figure out how to get a lot of the drawers open. St. Andy would have liked to sit down and warm himself too, and maybe have a bite to eat, but he was kept busy by the people of the place showing off the ingenious wagon. Finally he said, 'If you'll let me sit down and thaw out a little, I can work a miracle or two and entertain you.' Well, they let St. Andy sit, but didn't offer him any food or drink. St. Andy got tired of waiting for them to offer and decided to put everybody in good

spirits with a miracle.

"This was the first miracle he did. He took from a drawer of the wagon a silver glove that whistled when you wore it, and a ball that whistled the same note. St. Andy showed them both off, and the people were interested, I imagine. But then St. Andy threw the whistling silver ball as hard as he could off into the darkness. They could hear it clattering in the trees. St. Andy stood holding out his hand with the glove on it. And pretty soon back comes the ball and lands in St. Andy's hand again, as gently as a bird. Everyone was astonished. St. Andy threw the ball again and again as the people whistled and clapped. But the ball took a long time to get back each time, and soon the whistling and clapping stopped, and finally people said, 'Well, we're very bored with this miracle, let's have a different one.' St. Andy thought there were a lot of tricks you could do with the silver ball and glove, but he didn't know how any were done; the men were prodding him with sticks and making remarks, so St. Andy put aside the ball and glove and said, 'I'll show you another miracle. I'll show you a man eat raw meat who has no teeth.' And he opened his mouth to show them he was toothless as a melon, just like me.

"They agreed that might be interesting, but said they had no raw meat, only cooked meat. St. Andy was very hungry and said that would be fine. They brought the meat and set it before him -- and he suddenly threw open his mouth to show a full set of perfect luminous white teeth. He chomped and tore the meat with his mouth open, gnashing the amazing teeth so all could see and hear.

"After he had eaten his fill, he stood up to leave while everyone was still impressed. They weren't too overcome not to take the silver ball and glove for themselves, so I can't prove to you that part of the story is true. But for the rest, see here":

And, as often at the end of a story, Mbaba got up and went to the carved chests, her eyes flitting over the drawers, touching the signs with her fingers till she found the right one. From it she drew out a wooden case carved in the shape of a mouth; and from the mouth case, her eyes sparkling, Mbaba drew out St. Andy's perfect, luminous white teeth.

"False teeth," she said. "Fits all." And she popped them in her mouth, fit them in with her tongue, and opened wide for me to see. I was screaming with laughter. She looked like she had a huge mouthful of something, and when she opened her mouth it was -- teeth! "That's how he did it, that's how," she said, "with these very teeth, which are as old as anything and still good as new."

That was at my birth-time, in my seventh year; almost ten years ago now.
What is it?

Nothing. Go on now.

What was it I said that startled you?

Go on.

Well . . . Seventh years. Every seventh year, you visit a gossip who knows your cord well, to have the System looked at for you, and learn what state you're in. I don't know why it happens every seventh year, except that there are a lot of things we count off by sevens. And it seems--from the two sevens I've lived through -- that seventh years are the ones where you are, somehow, most yourself. There are other times you could consult a gossip; for the untying of a knot, or anytime you don't understand yourself. But everyone goes in their first seventh year, and every seventh year thereafter -- fourteen, twenty-one, twenty-eight -- and the first seventh year is a rose year as well.

But to explain about the rose year, I have to tell you about the Four Pots, and Dr. Boots's List who makes them, and before that about the League, and the Storm which ended the angels' world . . . maybe my story doesn't really have any beginning after all.

Second facet:

The gossip Mbaba took me to was an old woman named Painted Red, who was a friend of Mbaba's from youth. Painted Red was, Mbaba remembered, of Water cord when she was young, and her name had been Wind, before she learned to read the System and gossip.

"She hasn't always known our cord," Mbaba said as she got me ready to go. Her breath was faintly visible in the cold. "Only in the last few years has she studied it."

"Not since I was born?"

"Well, yes, since before that," Mbaba said. "But that's not really so many years, you know." We were ready. "She's very wise, though, they all say, and knows Palm well, and all its quirks."

"What are its quirks?"

"You!" she said, and tugged my ears. "You should know, of anyone."

"She lives near Path," Mbaba said as we went along, "because she likes to feel the feet of those going by."

St. Roy -- I mean Little St. Roy, of course, not Great St. Roy -- said that Path is drawn on your feet. Little Belaire is built outward from a center in the old warren where it began, built outward in interlocking rooms great and small, like a honeycomb, but not regular like a honeycomb. It goes over hills and a stream, and there are stairs and narrow places, and every room is different in size and shape and how you go in and out of it, from big rooms with pillars of log to tiny rooms all glittering with mirrors, and a thousand other kinds, old and changeless at the center and new and constantly changing farther out. Path begins at the center and runs in a long spiral through the old warren and the big middle rooms and so on to the outside and out into the aspen grove near Buckle cord's door on the Afternoon side. There is no other way through Little Belaire to the outside except Path, and no one who wasn't born in Little Belaire, probably, could ever find his way to the center. Path looks no different from what is not Path: it's drawn on your feet. It's just a name for the only way there is all through the rooms which open into each other everywhere, which you could wander through forever if you didn't know where Path ran.

Painted Red's room was deep in toward the center. There in the ancient small stone rooms, cool in summer and warm and snug in winter, the gossips sit and feel their cords run out linking and tying like a web all through Little Belaire. It was dim; there was no skylight as Mbaba had, but a pale green lens full of bubbles set into the roof. Mbaba spoke from outside, her hand on my shoulder. "Painted Red," she said. Someone within laughed, or coughed, and Mbaba drew me in.

This was the oldest place I had ever been in. The walls were of the gray blocks we call angeistone. Here and there a block was turned on edge, and the oval piercings that (they say) go through every such block's insides made four small windows in the wall. Through these I could glimpse the little falls of the stream, lit by the slabs of glass that are set in the roof above it.

Mbaba sat me down, and I tried not to fidget, aware and expectant. When she came forth from a farther room, Painted Red looked first to Mbaba and laughed low, her hands making welcoming movements that set her bracelets clicking. She was older than Mbaba, and wore a huge pair of spectacles that glittered as she nodded to Mbaba's greeting. She sat opposite me, drew up her naked feet, and rested her arms on her knees. She didn't speak to me, but her eyes behind the quick glasses studied me as she listened to Mbaba talk. When she spoke herself, her voice was rich and slow as running oils, thick with inflection I only partly undertood.

While they talked, Painted Red drew from a small pouch some flakes of

St. Bea's-bread, which she rolled into a blue paper to make a fat cigar. She took a long match from her pocket and motioned for me to come sit by her. I went slowly, Mbaba's hands encouraging me. Painted Red gave me the match, and watched me as I struck it on the rough wall and held it with both hands to light her cigar. Her cheeks hollowed and a rosy cloud ascended as she inhaled noisily. The frank and friendly curiosity of her look made me smile and blush at the same time. When she had smoked, she said, "Hello, you're a graceful fellow, I'm in a mood to talk to you. Don't expect me to reveal too much of myself, though I'm sympathetic and can be helpful. Be at ease with me; I know it's strange here, but soon we'll be easy together, and then friends . . .

No, of course she said nothing like that, but it was all in what she did say, in her greeting, for she spoke truthfully, and was very, very good at it; so good that, speaking, she couldn't hide from my knowledge of what she meant. Of course my knowledge then was very slight; when she talked with Mbaba, they both said things I couldn't hear.

"You are not," Painted Red said, "a truthful speaker."

"No," I said.

"Well, you will be soon." She put her hand on my shoulder and raised her curling brows at me. "I will call you Rush, as your Mbaba does, if I may; your name Rush that Speaks is too much a mouthful for me." I laughed at that: too much a mouthful! She said a word to Mbaba that meant she and I must be alone, and when Mbaba was gone, she stubbed out the flat end of her crackling cigar and motioned me to come with her into the small farther room.

There she took from a chest a small narrow box that just fit in her lined palm. "Your Mbaba tells me good things about you, Rush," she said. She opened the box. Inside were four small round pots with snug lids, each a different color: a black one, a silver one, a bonewhite one, and one the pure blue of a sunset winter sky. "She says you like stories."

"Yes."

"I know a huge number." Her face was gently grave but her eyes were sly behind the glittering glasses. "All true." We both laughed at that; her laugh made me shiver with the weight and fullness of it, light and low though it was. I knew then that Painted Red was very holy; possibly she was a saint.

Why do you say holy?

Holy. Blink told me once that in ancient times they said a thing was holy if it made you hold your tongue. We said a thing was holy if it made you laugh. That's all.

Painted Red now chose the little black pot, opened it, and rubbed her thumb in the rose colored stuff that it contained; then she rubbed her thumb on my lips. I licked it off. It had no taste at all. She took from another place in her chests a set of nesting black boxes and tubes with tiny lenses, and these she assembled in her larger room beneath the big lens, setting the tubes to point at a white space on the wall. She drew a string that closed the pupil of the green lens in the ceiling until its light fell in a tiny bright spot onto a mirror which she placed at the back of the boxes. The light from the lens was reflected through the tube; a circle of pale green shone on the wall.

She opened carefully a long box and, after some thought, drew out one of the many thin squares of glass it contained. I could see as she held it to the light that it was inscribed with a pattern, and when she slipped it into place, there was suddenly the same pattern projected onto the wall, greatly enlarged and as clear as though drawn there.

"Is it the Filing System?" I asked in a whisper.

"It is."

Years later, Blink told me the full name of the Filing System, and I made him say it over and over till I could say it too, and then I went on saying it, like a nonsense rhyme. Sometimes at night I say it over to myself till I fall asleep: Condensed Filing System for WasserDozier Multiparametric Parasocietal Personality Inventories, Ninth Edition. Blink tried to explain what all that meant, but I forget now what he said; and even the gossips who

sit and look at it all day call it only the Filing System. It's from the Filing System that the cords are derived, though the angels who created the System knew nothing of cords, and the System is hundreds of years older than the cords which the gossips found there. "In ancient times," Blink told me, "it wasn't supposed to yield knowledge, only to keep facts straight; but the angels who thought it up had created more than that, and although whatever facts the System was to have kept straight are lost now, this new knowledge of the cords was found in it, which its makers didn't know how to see there. It's often so."

I looked at the wall where the figures glowed that meant my cord, and a great cord it is, with two great saints in it. "My cord has two saints in it," I said.

"You're very clever," said Painted Red. "Perhaps you can tell me more." She spoke kindly, but I was abashed then, having spoken up before this thing I knew so little about. She waited politely a moment for me to speak again, and laughed gently at my silence; and then, turning to the System, after a long moment she began to talk, partly to me, partly to herself, about our cord and its ways and how Palm cord goes on with the business of life; and as she talked she put her hand over mine where I sat beside her on her couch. There was nothing in the room to see except the bright pattern on the wall, nothing to hear but Painted Red's soft voice. When my lips began to grow oddly numb and loose, I hardly noticed. What I did notice was that Painted Red's questions, and then my answers, began to take on bodies somehow. When she talked about something, it wasn't only being talked about but called into being. When she asked me about my mother, my mother was there, or I was with her, on the roofs where the beehives are, and she was telling me to put my ear against the hive and hear the low constant murmur of the wintering bees inside. When Painted Red asked me about my dreams, I seemed to dream them all over again, to fly again and cry out in terror and vertigo when I fell. I never stopped knowing that Painted Red was beside me talking, or that I was answering; but -- it was the rosecolored stuff that did it, of course, but I wasn't aware even of that -- though I knew that I hadn't left her side and that her hand was still on mine, still I went journeying up and down my life.

It seemed to take as long as my life had, too; but gradually the solid-seeming incidents of my life became thinner and more tenuous, less real than the face of Painted Red beside me; and I returned, a little surprised, yawning a huge yawn and feeling I had slept a whole night's refreshing sleep, to the little room where the pattern still burned on the wall.

"Rush that Speaks," Painted Red said to me gently. "You are Palm for sure, and doubly Palm."

I said nothing to that, because in my growing up I had learned it was regarded as something secret, not to be spoken of, and possibly shameful, that my father Seven Hands was Palm cord as my mother was. It doesn't happen often that both your parents are of the same cord; it's almost as rare as when they are sister and brother. The gossips warn against it; it makes, they say, for knots.

"When will Seven Hands leave?" she said.

"I don't know," I said, not surprised that she knew Seven Hands's secret; she seemed to know everything. I wasn't surprised either that she knew it was my greatest sorrow. "Soon, he says, is all."

"And you want him not to go."

Again I said nothing, afraid of what would show in my speech. Seven Hands was my best friend, though I saw little enough of him; and when in the middle of some game or story he would fall silent, and sigh, and talk about how big the world is, a fear would take hold of me. The fear was that the world -- outside Little Belaire -- was big; it was vast, and unknown; and I wanted not to lose Seven Hands in it.

"Why does he want to go?" I asked.

"Perhaps for the untying of a knot." She rose up, her joints cracking, and took from the long box another thin square of glass. She put this before

the mirror in the box with the first and drew out the tube a little to make the picture clear. And suddenly it was all changed. The fine-lined pattern was altered, colored, darkened, obscured.

She looked at it in her dreamy, attentive way. "Rush," she said, "lives come in many shapes, did you know that? There are lives that are like stairs, and lives that are like circles. There are lives that start Here and end There, and lives that start Here and end the same. There are lives full of stuff, and lives that will hold nothing."

"What shape is mine?"

"Don't know," she said simply. "But not the same as the man Seven Hands's. That's certain. Tell me: when you are grown up, and a truthful speaker, what will you do?"

I lowered my head, because it seemed presumptuous; as it wouldn't if I were to say that I wanted to make glass, or keep bees, or even gossip. "I'd like to find things," I said. "I'd like to find all our things that are lost, and bring them back."

"Well," she said. "Well. There are some things that are lost, you know, that may be better unfound." But I heard her say too: don't lose your thought, Rush, it's a good one. "Did you tell Seven Hands about it?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said that things that get lost -- get lost for good -- all end up in the City in the Sky."

She laughed at that; or perhaps not at that but at something she saw in the tangled figure on the wall. "Palm cord," she said, and was absorbed for a long time. "Do this, Rush that Speaks," she said then. "Ask Seven Hands if he will take you with him when he leaves."

My heart leaped. "Will he?"

"No," she said. "I don't think so. But we'll see what happens. Yes. It's best." And she pointed to the figure on the board. "There's a path out of that. Its name is Little Knot, and the path isn't so long . . ."

She had seen enough; she seemed to rouse herself from a kind of sleep. She rose, picked out the two squares of glass and wiped them clean; then she took out the little mirror and wiped that clean too, and put them all away. As she did so, I saw that drawn on the end of the long box was the palm sign that signifies my cord. So the entire box was my cord. I hadn't seen my cord at all, but only a fraction of a part of the ways it can be. "How," I said, pointing to the box, "how does it. . ."

"It would take you till you are as old as me," she said, "to know how does it do it, if that's what you mean." She stowed it all, without haste, and returned to me. "But think," she said. "They are all of glass, like the two you saw, thin and clear."

"So you could put three at once in the tube," I said, "and the light would shine through all three, and you could see how it changes, how it . . ."

Painted Red clapped her hands, smiling at me. "Or seven, or ten, however many you're clever enough to read at once." She knelt down near me and looked at me closely. "They all have names, Rush, and each has its knowledge to add about you as you are Palm. Each added to the rest changes the whole and makes a difference. The Filing System is very wise, Rush, far wiser than I am."

"What are the names?" I asked, knowing I would not be told.

"Well," she said, "there will be time to learn that, if you want to learn it. Listen, Rush: How would you like to come see me, often? There are a few other children who come often. I tell stories, and we talk, and I show them things. Does that sound like fun?"

Fun! She had just seen that I was Palm cord, and that in this room I was in the presence of knowledge far beyond me. "Yes," I managed to say, hoping the little truthful speaking I had would let her know how I felt.

Her spectacled face was crinkled in smiles. "Good," she said. "When you've spoken to Seven Hands, and done -- listen to me now -- done exactly as he asks you or tells you, and when you are done with it, come and see me. I

don't think it will be long." She ran her hand through my hair. "Go now, Rush that Speaks. Untangle yourself. Then come back." She could see my wonder and confusion and excitement, and her laugh rolled out into the room, saying a thousand things and distilling a thousand years of holiness.

When I went out, Mbaba was gone. That was all right; Painted Red's rooms were near Path, and though there were places in Little Belaire I have never been, there was nowhere there that I was lost, because Path was drawn on my feet.

Third facet:

There are places in Little Belaire where you're likely to find people of a certain cord. By the stream and out by the willows on the Morning side you'll find Water cord, that's easy; but Water cord is an easy cord, they always do what you expect they will. Palm cord isn't as predictable, but of course I knew where to look, and I found Seven Hands among friends in one of the old arched rooms with dirt floors that were built toward the Afternoon side for meeting rooms hundreds of years ago when we still had meetings. Light fell from great slabs of glass that faced the afternoon sun, and smoke arose into the sun like thunderclouds from the noisy little group that sat in the warmth talking.

They were all Palm. It wasn't that people of other cords weren't allowed among them, but other cords get tired quickly of Palm cord's endless talk, which is full of qualifications and snake's-hands and complicated jokes other people don't find very funny. They go on: like I go on.

I was shy to speak up before all of them, and I asked Seven Hands if I could talk to him alone. He looked at me and grinned, but I guess I spoke so seriously that he got up with a grunt and went off with me around one of the big beams that supported the glass of the roof. He was still grinning; nothing embarrasses Palm cord more than intrigue, and secrets, and being asked about themselves and not about the world in general. So I asked him flatly:

"When you leave Belaire," I said, with a lump in my throat and all the little truthful speaking I knew in my words, "will you take me with you?"

"Well, big man," he said. He called me big man, which I knew was a joke, but I enjoyed it anyway. He pulled his skirts around him and sat down with his back against a pillar. He had a way of hanging his long arms over his knees when he sat, and holding the thumb of one hand in his other hand; and I did it too, in imitation of him.

He looked at me, nodding thoughtfully, waiting I think for me to ask again so that he could determine a little more of why I asked this of him; but I said nothing more. It had seemed important to Painted Red that I ask, even though she thought he wouldn't take me; so I only waited.

"I'll tell you," he said at last. "It'll probably be a long time till I go. Really go. There are -- well, a lot of preparations to make. So. Maybe, when I'm ready to go, you'll be ready too."

There was something in what he said beyond what he said. I was truthful speaker enough to hear it, but not enough to know what it was. He reached over and slapped my thigh lightly. "I'll tell you what, though," he said. "If you're ever to go, you've got to make preparations too. Listen: we'll start by taking a little trip together."

"A trip?"

"Yes. A little hike. In preparation, sort of. Have you ever seen Road?"

"No."

"Would you like to?"

I said nothing, made a few shruggings that could mean I would like to if

that was what was required of me.

"You ask Mbaba," said Seven Hands, "and if she says it's all right, and she will, we'll go tomorrow if it doesn't rain or something. I'll come find you early."

Painted Red had said I must do exactly as Seven Hands asked me; she'd said she didn't suppose he'd take me with him, but he hadn't said he wouldn't. I should have been pleased at that, and pleased he'd invited me to make his preparations with him; but still I felt troubled and uneasy. That's what it's like having a knot with someone. Nothing -- not even the simplest feelings -- seem to cross between you without somehow getting tangled.

Anyway, that's how it came to be that the next day I was in the middle of a bridge that goes across the river called That River, the bridge made of red rusted iron bars only, the only bridge there is since the one with the road that could be walked on fell down before I was born. There had been a frost the night before, and the cold wind was bitter over That River.

We went carefully from bar to bar across the bridge, looking down -- or trying not to look down -- through the gaps between the bars at the black, angry water. The ancient metal creaked and whined in a wind that was picking up. I followed Seven Hands, my hands taking hold where his did; our hands and clothes were covered with red rust, thick and grimy, and mine were dead cold from the iron.

Then there was a break. Seven Hands stopped ahead of me and looked. Soon the bridge would be no use: here, a beam had fallen out at last, and soon the whole bridge must follow. The wind whipped Seven Hands's long hair into his face and waved his long knotted sleeves as he looked up and down, thinking, and all the time the bridge was swaying and creaking and the black water was rushing by below. Seven Hands looked at me, grinning, rubbed his hands together and blew on them, poised himself and jumped.

I think I cried out. But Seven Hands had thrown his arms around the upright, and clung; he moved his hand to a better place slap on the cold metal, and pulled himself around to face me, his chest heaving and his face smeared with rust.

"Come on, Rush, come on," he said between pants, but I just stood there looking at him. He straddled the beam then, and hooked his feet under it. "Sit down," he said, so I did. I was shorter, so my feet couldn't get a grip. Seven Hands reached out his long arms toward me, his big hands motioning me to lean to him. I grabbed his wrists, hard with bone and tendon, and when he gave me the signal, pushed off. I kept my eyes on the beam and not on the water, and swung out over air, and felt a snap in my shoulders, and then up; one leg reached and slipped off the beam, and then I was struggling on and felt my balance return, and with my face pressed against Seven Hands's chest I held on tight till I knew for sure I was there, and even then I kept my hold on his wrists. I heard him laughing. His big face was close to my face, exulting, and I was laughing too between pants, and at last slowly let go of his wrists and sat there on my own.

"Preparations," he said. "You see? If you're going to go somewhere, you have to believe you can get there. Somehow, some way."

We got to the end of the bridge and let ourselves down its struts, and sat for a while not speaking but looking back up at the bridge we had beaten; and suddenly I wanted more than anything to go with him when he truly left, and share all his adventures.

"You will take me," I said, "if I'm grown up enough? When will it be?"

"Well, big man, well." Again I heard the shadow behind his speech, almost a regret; but I knew now that it wasn't for me. He stood up. "We have to get to Road while it's still day, if we want to see it," he said.

We were some time climbing upward, through woods filled with fallen leaves frosted and aged-looking, till the woods thinned and we climbed gray-lichened foreheads of stone onto stony uplands. The sky hung low, solid and gray above us; as we climbed, we seemed to come closer to it. When we had come out onto the crest of the hill, we could see that above the gray, spiky

distant hills, a thin crack of blue sky lit the hem of the clouds with silver. Seven Hands pointed to a line of evergreens ahead. "Beyond there," he said, "we'll see Road."

The wind was boring an icy spot in my windward cheek and beginning to tear the solid fabric overhead as we broke through the line of evergreens and came out onto a rocky height that overlooked a valley. Above the hills across the valley, the sky was all pink and blue as the clouds moved fast away; as they rushed over our heads they left the sky high, infinitely high and deeply blue -- what winds must be there! Soon the late sun reached where we stood, lighting the valley before us; and lighting, too, Road.

For there was Road. It followed the Valley, but curiously; it dug itself through the valley's gentle folds with an imperious, impossible straight sweep away that was the hugest thing I had ever seen. There were so many wonders about it: how can I tell you I saw them all at once?

First of all it wasn't one road, but two. Two roads, each wide enough for twenty men to stand easily across it. And matched to race away like two racing gray squirrels, and as gray as that. They ran together as far as you could follow, not varying their width or the distance between them, eye to eye to -- where?

Miles down the valley it turned a somersault, curling in and out of itself, running up and down bridges and ramps, making of itself what looked, from where we stood, like an immense leaf of clover, just, it seemed for the fun of it, like a vast child doing a thundering, earthshaking cartwheel.

As far off as I could see, it ran smack into a high hill where it must stop; and here was the last wonder -- it didn't stop. Its two parts each found a perfect, high-arched cave or cleft to run into. And then no doubt out the other side and on and on, leaping and curling in bows and straightening the lumpy, bumpy earth with its angel-made straight lines.

"Where does it go?" I asked.

"Everywhere," Seven Hands said simply, letting himself down to a squat. "From This Coast to the Other Coast, and when it reaches the Other Coast it turns and comes back again to This Coast by a different way, and back again. And crosses and recrosses a thousand times, and doubles back and radiates out like a spider's web in a thousand ways."

"Is it all like this?"

"Like this or bigger."

"More than two?"

"No. Always two. One to go this way on, one to go that way on. Bigger across, and curling around like you see there, but in huge flowers. And mixing it up in Cities, with bridges on its back and tunnels under its belly. So I've heard. One day I'll see."

"What was it . . . for?"

"To kill people with," Seven Hands said, simply as before. "That's what the saints said. The cars used to go on it, you see. At night you could have seen them from here, all lit; I know they were all lit, with white lights in front and red in back, so that the road to go this way on would be white, and the road to go that way on would be all red."

"And how did Road kill them?"

"Oh, Road didn't kill them. The cars killed them. People were inside them, and there was only room in them to sit with arms and legs just so, so they were easy to break; the whole thing could sort of fold up and break you like a nutcracker."

"They went fast, you see, faster than bats but not so carefully, and so they collided all the time. St. Clay said he heard from Great St. Roy -- and St. Roy had seen Road in the last days when there were millions of these cars, like ants along a path, like shoals of minnows -- St. Roy said that Road killed in a year as many people as there are in Little Belaire, twice over."

I started out over that proud, dove-gray thing. Nearby, its stone could be seen to be cracked by weeds, and the ditch that separated its parts was filled with saplings growing tall. You could stand in the middle of one half

and be aimed right at the Other Coast, the angels knew how far away; you could pass things that the truthful speakers have forgotten for hundreds of years, and come to the Other Coast at last, and then cross to the other side and be pointed home, and never once leave Road. And yet it killed people.

Now the whole sky was clear, and the wind that filled up the air to its blue height was dying away. Seven Hands got up and started down the steep slope toward Road, and I followed him. "Why didn't they just stop, then," I asked, "and just walk along it? Or just -- just look at it?"

"They did, eventually, when everything went off," said Seven Hands, finding footing. "But in the ancient days, they didn't mind much; they weren't afraid; they were angels. And besides, there were millions of them; they didn't mind a few thousand killed."

We reached its edge and walked out to the middle of its near part, and faced the huge knot in it miles away, and the Other Coast far farther than that. "We came along Road," Seven Hands said, stamping lightly on its smooth surface. "St. &a and St. Andy came along it in the saints' days, and left Road just here. And went to rebuild Big Belaire. But you knew all that."

I knew some of it. I hadn't known this was the place, or this the Road we had left. "Tell me," I said.

"Well," he said, "help me make a fire." We gathered sticks and kindling and made a fire in the middle of Road, and Seven Hands took matches from his sleeve and lit it. When it was a small bright blaze we sat near it, and bound our hands in our sleeves, and pulled over our hoods, and Seven Hands began to talk.

"There were nearly a thousand of us. We had wandered, oh, I don't know, a hundred years, a hundred and a half, and had never forgotten the Co-op Great Belaire or truthful speaking in all those years after the Storm had passed; we had stayed together; others had joined us. And now we had come here. It was spring then; we had stopped for the night, and sat here on Road and put up tents and unloaded things, and St. Bea and St. Andy opened the old wagon, and there were fires lit; well, imagine a thousand and their fires here.

"St. Bea talked late with St. Andy that night. They talked about the children there, and the old people; they spoke over and over the things they knew from Big Belaire and from the old times, and how it might be that the wagons would be lost and with them many memories of those times. Already a lot had been forgotten. And I suppose they looked out at Road, which they had come along, as we do now. And, St. Andy said, that was when St. Bea got the idea. You know what the idea was."

"Little Belaire."

"She said: 'It's spring now. And this part of the country is very nice, and fertile, and very scenic too.' And she wondered if maybe they hadn't wandered far enough, far enough from the angel's death and ruin, who had never hurt this land around here much; and mightn't it be time to stop? There would be no danger of St. Andy getting lost for good with the precious wagon. It had been a long time since the Storm had passed, the going-off of the world the angels made; perhaps all those sins had been forgiven, perhaps long ago. They had learned a lot, St. Bea thought, and maybe it was time to stop learning and start living a little.

"But St. Andy didn't know. He knew how to keep moving. He said: 'We fly the angels. The League is no friend of ours. There are a lot of people who don't love us at all.' And St. Bea said: 'The angels are dead and gone. For the others,' she said, 'we can plan against them.'

"And she drew in the ashes by the fire the circle that is Little Belaire today, with its secret door and its Path no one knows but the speakers, and she said: 'We'll build it all of angelstone, and it will have no windows, and will all be joined, just like Big Belaire was.'

"Well, she convinced St. Andy. 'She's a very persuasive woman,' he used to say. And so they called the gossips together around their fire, and toward morning it had been decided to rebuild the Co-op as well as they could, here, in this country the angels had left alone except for Road, which ran through

it almost without stopping.

"And so that day the truthful speakers left Road and never took it again."

Now the sun was low, and the wind had died away almost as suddenly as it had risen. It was colder than it had been. I pulled my hooded cloak more tightly around me. "You'll take it, though," I said. "One day."

"Yes, big man," he said softly. "One day."

And when he said it -- I don't know how, whether because we had shared this adventure, or because of the story he had told, or because now for the first time he knew it to be true himself -- I saw that Seven Hands wouldn't leave Little Belaire and follow Road where it led. That had been the knot between us, that I had believed him when he said it, and resented and admired him for having decided to do it; and he, who knew in his heart of hearts that he never would, had disliked me for believing him capable of it when he wasn't. He had spoken truthfully of all this to me even as he told me of his plans to go and his dreams of what he would see; but till now I hadn't been able to hear it. With something like an audible whisper, the knot came untied in me, and left me sad. "One day," I said. Beneath his hood his face was grave, and sad too; for I had in those two words just told him what I had learned.

Around us, and stretching away and behind, Road seemed to glow faintly in the quick-fading light, as though it spent an old radiance of its own. The sky was huge over the valley. I wondered then if there were truly cities in the sky; and if there were, could they see us here -- two little men and their fire, whose thread of smoke rose straight up on the spot where St. Bea stopped, white smoke mixed now with the rose smoke of her Bread that we lit and passed; two men in the middle of the vast road where millions had raced. It was evening, it was November. There were two, there had been millions. Did the angels in their city in the sky weep to think of it?

No.

No. The angels don't weep.

The angels weep, but for themselves. And never saw you there.

Fourth facet:

It was another day till I went along Path alone to Painted Red's room. I left Mbaba still asleep, and ate an apple as I hurried along the still-dim way. If you could have hung in the air above like an angel and looked in, you would have seen me run around Little Belaire in a long, slow spiral, save for one short cut that had me stepping over sleeping bodies.

When I came within sound of the stream, people were awake and dressing; I passed a room where six sat smoking, laughing and talking. Little Belaire was waking up. On ladders men opened skylights and smelled the sharp morning air, climbed down again. I was walking against many who were going to the outside. It was warmer than it had been the day Seven Hands and I went to see Road, and people would stay in the sunny outer rooms today, and at evening bring back with them something they would need for the winter, like a set of Rings or tools or a big pipe that had been hung up in the outer rooms for summer. Some would make expeditions to gather the last of the year's nuts in the woods; or they would meet each other in the outside rooms to weave and talk, if they were Leaf cord. Or climb to the top of Belaire and do sealing-work for the winter, if they were Buckle cord. Or discuss the affairs of their cord, if they were Whisper, or the affairs of others' cords, if they were Water, or the affairs of the world if they were Palm; and gossip about all the things they remembered and knew about and had heard of from the saints

back when we wandered and before that back to Big Belaire and before to ancient times, so none of it would be forgotten.

There are always a thousand things to see and stop for along Path, snake's-hands to explore and people to listen to. In a snake's-hand near Painted Red's room I found some friends playing whose-knee, and I waited for a turn to play . . .

Stop a moment. When you said it before, a snake's-hand was something in talk. Now it's a place. And tell me about whose-knee, too, since you're stopped.

All right. I told you about Path: Path is like a snake, it curls around the whole of Little Belaire with its head in the middle and the tip of its tail by Buckle cord's door, but only someone who knows Little Belaire can see where it runs. To someone else, it would seem to run off in all directions. So when you run along Path, and here is something that looks to be Path, but you find it is only rooms interlocking in a little maze that has no exits but back to Path -- that's a snake's-hand. It runs off the snake of Path like a set of little fingers. It's also called a snake's-hand because a snake has no hands, and likewise there is only one Path. But a snake's-hand is also more: my story is a Path, too, I hope; and so it must have its snake's-hands. Sometimes the snake's-hands in a story are the best part, if the story is a long one.

Whose-knee. I've never been that good at whose-knee, but like every kid in Belaire I carried my ball and tweezers everywhere; it's part of every kid's equipment. My ball was a cherry stone tightly wrapped in some string; the tweezers are a rush almost as long as your forearm that's split almost all the way down and pegged just right so you can pick up a ball. You can play it a lot of different ways, with one ball or several, with two people or with as many sitting in a circle as you can reach with your tweezers. Whatever way you play, the ball is balanced on your knee -- you draw up your knees like this -- and another person picks the ball off your knee with his tweezers and places it on someone else's knee. The different ways to play are different ways of calling whose knee will be played, and who will move.

It has to be played very fast -- that's the fun of it -- and if you drop a ball or move out of turn three times, you have to ask to stay in, and the others can say Yes or No. .

How do you win?

Win?

How do you beat the others?

Beat them? You're not fighting, you're playing a game. You just try to keep the ball in motion and stay out of the way of other people; and keep your ball on your knee, too. It takes a lot of concentration, and you can't laugh too much, though it can get very funny. Buckle cord plays it very well; they all wear very intent, serious faces and the tweezers fly around, snicksnicksnick. Also Buckle cord people all seem to have flat, broad knees.

Anyway, a place in this circle became empty, and I sat down. The girl opposite me, whose knee I would play, looked up at me once with eyes startlingly blue; startling because her hair was deeply black and thick, and her eyebrows too; they curved down and almost met above her nose. She only glanced at me, to make certain it was I whose knee she was playing, and set her ball.

"Whose knee?" they said, and we began. Little yelps of anxiety or triumph: "Miss! He has two." The girl opposite me played with a kind of abstracted intentness, as though utterly aware of a game, but a game she was playing in a dream. Her down-turned full mouth was partly open; her tiny teeth were white.

"Whose knee?" we said. "Big Bee moves Whisper cord," the leader said, and a lanky, laughing Leaf cord boy, after only the quickest glance around the circle, moved the ball of the girl opposite me. Whisper cord: yes, I would have chosen her too. Not only for her abstraction, her appearance of not being wholly present; not only that she seemed -- to me, anyway -- the center of this circle without having to claim that. Something else: some whisper. When

it came my turn to move her, she suddenly raised her impossible blue eyes to me. The ball dropped.

"Miss!"

She retrieved the ball, not looking again at me. I tried to play well, now, but I stumbled over myself, missed my cord when it was called. I was soon out.

And all that, about the game, was a snake's-hand in my story; but just as there are snake's-hands that look like parts of Path, so there are parts of Path that look like snake's-hands. When I stood up, so did she; behind us others were calling out the words that meant they had claim on our places. When I came onto Path, she was ahead of me, going toward Painted Red's room; I followed at a distance. At a turning, she stopped and waited for me.

"Why are you following me?" she said. Her down-turned eyebrows gave her a permanent angry sulk that was only occasionally the way she felt, but I knew nothing of that then.

"I wasn't. I was going to a gossip named Painted Red . . ."

"So am I." She gazed at me without much curiosity. "Aren't you a little young?"

That was annoying. She was no older than I. "Painted Red doesn't think so."

She crossed her pale arms, thin and downed with dark hair. "Come on, then," she said, as though I needed her protection, and she reluctantly had to give it. Her name, she said when I asked it, was Once a Day; she didn't bother to ask mine.

Painted Red was still asleep when we came into the larger of her two rooms; we sat down amid the others gathered there, who looked at me and asked my name. We waited, trying to be quiet, but that was hard, and soon we heard her moving around in her other room. She looked out sleepily, blinking without her spectacles, and disappeared again. When she finally came out we had stopped trying to be quiet, and she sat down in the middle of the hubbub and calmly rolled herself a blue cigar. Someone lit it for her, and she inhaled deeply, looking around and feeling better. She smiled at us, and patted the cheek of the girl who lit her smoke. And my first morning with Painted Red began.

"When we wandered," she said, and began the story about St. Gary and the fly that I had heard Mbaba tell. She brought us a basket of apples, and as we ate them she told the story in her Water way, full of false beginnings and little ironies which if you stopped to think about you lost the thread; and the story was not quite the story I knew. When, at the end of the story, St. Gary let the fly go, nobody laughed. It seemed to have become, in Painted Red's telling, a riddle or something meant to be solved; and yet at the same time you felt that the answer lay within the story -- that it wasn't a riddle but an answer, an answer to a question you didn't know you'd asked.

Big Bee, the Leaf cord boy, his mouth full of apple, asked Painted Red why she had told us that story. Leaf cord doesn't like mysteries.

"Because a saint told it," Painted Red said. "And why are the saints saints?" She looked around at us, smiling and waiting for an answer.

"Because," someone said, "we remember the stories of their lives."

"How do we remember the stories of their lives?"

"Because -- because they told them in a way that couldn't be forgotten."

"In what way?"

"They spoke truthfully," a Water cord girl named Rain Day said.

"And what is it to speak truthfully?" Painted Red asked her.

She began to answer like Water cord, saying, "There was the Coop Great Belaire," and, "But there was a beginning almost before that," and how in ancient times most people had no homes they lived in all their lives. Except for the people in the Co-op Great Belaire. There, in its thousand rooms, people lived a little as they do now in Little Belaire. "But they were angels, too," she said. "Their co-op was high, they rode in elevators, they talked on phones. . . ."

"Yes," Painted Red said. "Phones. It seemed, in those days, that the more the angels had to ride on, and talk over distances with, and get together by, the more separate they became. The more they made the world smaller, the greater the distance between them. I don't know how the people of the Co-op Great Belaire escaped this fate, but the children who grew up there, if they left, would find nowhere else to be as happy as they had been there, and they would bring their own children back with them to live there. And so it went on over many lifetimes.

"Now," she said, raising one finger as gossips do, "now in those days everyone talked to everyone else by the phones. Every room in the Co-op had a phone, every person had his own to call and be called on. A phone is only your voice, carried by cords over distance, just as a tremor is carried over the whole length of a taut string if you pluck one end. The people of the Co-op, as they grew closer together, began to learn about this engine: that to talk to someone with a phone is not like talking to him face to face. You can say things to a phone you wouldn't say to a person, say things you don't mean; you can lie, you can exaggerate, you can be misunderstood, because you're talking to an engine and not a man. They saw that if they didn't learn to use the phones right, the Co-op couldn't exist, except as a million others did, just places to put people. So they learned."

We weren't silent as she told us this; each of us knew a piece of this story and wanted to put it in, and some were contradicted by others. Only Once a Day said nothing: but no one expected her to. Rain Day told how there were gossips then too, old women who knew everyone and everything, and who had advice on all matters; but not listened to as carefully as now. Somebody else said that there were locks to every door at first, and every set of rooms was the same in size and shape, but by the time St. Roy led them all away, there were no locked doors, and all the inside of the Co-op had been changed to great and tiny rooms, like Belaire today. Painted Red listened to each of us, and nodded, and folded in what we said with little motions of her head and hands to what she was explaining, seeming not to care how long it took.

"What they learned," she went on, "was to speak on the phones in such a way that your hearer couldn't help but understand what you meant, and in such a way that you, speaking, had no choice but to express what you meant. They learned to make speech -- transparent, like glass, so that through the words the face is seen truly.

"They said about themselves that they were truthful speakers. In those days people who thought alike were a church. And so they were the Truthful Speakers' Church.

"The truthful speakers said: We really mean what we say and we say what we really mean. That was a motto. They were also against a lot of things, as churches were; but nobody now can remember what they were.

"The Co-op Great Belaire survived for a long time, raised its children and learned speaking. But of course the day came when first the lights and finally, at last, the phones went off. And Great St. Roy led them out onto Road. And we wandered. That's when the saints were, who took the speech begun in the Co-op and finished it, when we wandered and while the warren was building, in the stories they told of their lives, which we remember and tell.

"And I have to tell you now: before there was truthful speaking, and you talked on the phones with others, and a confusion resulted, and someone was hurt or two people set against each other, the gossips would say, 'There must have been a knot in the cord.' A knot in the cord! That makes me laugh." And she did laugh, her big liquid laugh, and we laughed with her.

Once a Day wasn't laughing. She was looking at me, steadily, not curiously; just looking.

Fifth facet:

There were times during those winters that I sat with Painted Red when I thought that to be a gossip must be the most wonderful and strangest way to live. In those ancient rooms near the center of Belaire all our wisdom originates, born in the gossip's mind as she sits to watch the Filing System or think on the saints. Things come together, and the saint or the System reveals a new thing not thought before to be there, but which once born spirals out like Path along the cords, being changed by them as it goes. As I got older, the stories of the saints which Painted Red told absorbed me more and more; when one day I stayed after everyone else had gone, hoping to hear more, Painted Red said to me: "Remember, Rush, there's no one who would not rather be happy than be a saint." I nodded, but I didn't know what she meant. It seemed to me that anyone who was a saint would have to be happy. I wanted to be a saint, though I told no one, and the thought gave me nothing but joy.

But perhaps to others I might not have looked happy, a shy, slight kid, a Palm cord kid too much in love with knowledge, with a secret desire that made me inattentive and silent; maybe it was that desire that left me with what seems an odd set of memories of those years. Leaf cord remembers expeditions, achievements, summers they went naked and winters they built snow warrens. Buckle cord remembers skills and Thread cord remembers puzzles and Water cord remembers people: everyone's memories are of things, it seems, but mine aren't, not really; they are memories of things unspeakable, that I only remember because there are no words to put them in that could be forgotten. And remembering Painted Red, I know now I don't want to be a saint -- I'd rather be happy. Do you know what I mean at all?

I think I do a little. And I know someone who would know what you mean, well.

He's Palm cord, probably. Except there are no cords here . . .

Yes. In a way. I think he would be Palm cord.

Are you crying? Why?

No. Go on. Was that all your education was, the stories about the saints?

Oh no. There were other things. Painted Red told us stories about ancient times, long and fabulous stories impossible to remember all of, unless your memory is like a gossip's. The longest I remember her telling was called Money, and it went on for days and covered great stretches of time, and was full of angles. It was hard to believe it was all true, but it was told by a truthful speaker, and there was proof, though not very impressive for all the fantastic comings and goings and great powers of the stuff. It was just an oblong piece of paper, worn and limp like skin, with tiny figures all over it, and leaves I think, and a face in the leaves. It looked magical for sure, but not something to die for, as Painted Red insisted so many had.

But mostly, what Painted Red said wasn't as important as the speaking of it; she would talk to us often about nothing really, and gradually and with a skill I only see in looking back and couldn't ever explain to you, she made us truthful speakers. We were honest when we were young and came to see her, there's no other way for kids to be, even when they're not telling the truth; but when we went out from Painted Red's room at the end of a year or two years or five years, however long Painted Red thought each of us needed, then we were truthful speakers: in the ancient way, which we could not have explained but always thereafter did, we Really Meant what we Said and we Said what we Really Meant.

Even Once a Day, St. Olive's dark child, Whisper cord keeper of secrets -- even she learned, almost against her will, to speak truthfully. She could not then lie to me, not truly. If she could have -- if she weren't a truthful speaker -- then it may be my life would not now be utterly bound up in hers, and her story my story.

The day the Money story was finished, Once a Day came up beside me as I

was going along Path and slipped her arm in mine. I was too astonished to speak; she had done it as though she always did it, though in fact she had hardly spoken to me since the first day.

"Do you think Painted Red is wise?" she asked me.

I said, of course, that I thought she was very wise; perhaps the wisest person in the world.

"She knows a lot," Once a Day said. "She doesn't know everything."

"What doesn't she know?"

"There are secrets."

"Tell me."

She glanced sidelong at me, smiling slightly, but said nothing more. Then at a turn of Path she drew me into a curtained room there. It was dark, and crowded with things I couldn't make out; someone asleep was snoring softly. "Do you think she knows all about Money?"

I didn't answer. For some reason my heart had started to beat fast. Once a Day, watching my face, took from a pocket an object that seemed to glow in the darkness. She held it up before me.

"This is Money too," she said. "Painted Red didn't say anything about this Money."

It was a small disc of silver. On its surface was a head, not drawn but cut so that it seemed to be coming forth from the glittering surface; its eyes caught the little light in the room and seemed to study me. She turned it in her hands and showed me the other side; a hawk with open wings. She took my hand and placed the disc in it. It was warm from her flesh. "If I give you Money," she said, "you must do what I say." She closed my fingers around it. "You've taken it now," she said. Painted Red had said people had once given others Money to do their bidding. I felt as though I were participating in a sin as old as the earth. But I didn't want to refuse the Money in my hand. "What," I said, and found my throat almost too dry to speak, "what do you want me to do?"

She laughed, as though a joke had been told or a trick played. Without answering, she ran out. Under my thumb I could feel the face on the Money she had given me, its features and the upswept brush of its hair.

The next days she didn't come to Painted Red's; I glimpsed her with grownups of her cord, on errands of their own, and if she saw me she didn't acknowledge it; and when one day she slipped late among us in Painted Red's room she said nothing to me. It was as if nothing at all had happened between us; perhaps, as she saw it, nothing had. I rubbed the Money in my pocket and thought of nothing but her. What was the word Painted Red used? An ancient word -- I was pot.

The way people revolve back into the crowded warm interior of the warren in winter is matched by the way they come out as it gets warm again, slowly, the old ones staying in wrapped up till late in the spring, but the kids running out before the snow melts and catching crocuses and colds. I spent days in the woods, exploring with Seven Hands, gathering with Speak a Word, my mother, but often by myself; and one raw evening, carefully screened by a winter deadfall, I saw something that might unlock Once a Day to me.

I found her wrapped in red playing Rings with another girl of her cord. I couldn't tell her what I wanted with someone else present, so I sat and watched and waited. A game of Rings can take days, depending on what cord is playing it; Whisper cord uses it to tell the future in a way I never understood, and Once a Day had even further rules which the other girl got mad at, and at last left. I was alone with her.

She tossed the linked rings across the figured board, pouting, and gathered them up again. "It's hot in here."

"Outside it's nice," I said.

"Is it?" she said, half-watching her aimless throws.

"I could show you something you'd like. Out in the woods."

"What?"

"It's a secret. If I take you, you have to not tell anybody."

Well, they're lovers and collectors of secrets, and she questioned me further, but I wasn't telling, and at last she stood up and told me to take her.

The woods were budding pale green, and the streams were swollen with spring, the ground soft and growing. Thin clouds whipped away in the cold sky, but the sun was warm as afternoon went on, and we carried our shaggies over our shoulders, stumbling through ancient dead leaves and wet roots deep in the woods. On wet black branches new leaves glowed like glass and shook off water from the morning's rain as we pushed through them. "Here," I whispered when we had come to the place.

"What?"

"Climb up. I'll help you."

She climbed, clumsy-graceful, up the great fallen logs that spring had forced a few new shoots from. Her thighs tensed with effort, which made hollows in her flanks; her smooth pale legs were smeared with bark-rot, and there a tiny ruby scratch. At the top we crowded together into a narrow crotch that let us see, down in a cave protected by the tangled roots, a family of foxes. The mother and her cubs were just discernible, and no doubt invisible from everywhere but the one place where we stood. And as we watched, we saw the bright-tailed male return with a dead animal swaying from his jaws.

We watched in silence the wiggling cubs at their mother's belly, taking a few blind halting steps and turning to nuzzle her again. I was pressed close to Once a Day, who in order to see better had thrown an arm around my neck and lay against my back with her cheek pressed to mine. I could tell by her rapt silence that she was impressed with my secret. One of my legs was going to sleep, but I wanted her never to move.

"How many are there?" she whispered.

"Three."

"And she has them all at once?"

"Like twins."

"Twins?"

"When a woman has two babies at the same time."

"I've never heard of that."

"Mbaba told me it happens. Sometimes."

She pushed away from me at last, and climbed down. At the bottom she watched me descend; she shook her hair from her eyes as I jumped from the last big log, and walked toward me, commanding me with her eyes to do the same; we met, and she took my face in her hands, smiling, and kissed me. I think I surprised her by how fiercely I responded, and she pushed me away at last, holding me at arm's length, and, still smiling, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I'll show you a secret now," she said.

"What?"

"Come on." She took my hand and led me back through the greening wood to where the twenty-three towers of Little Belaire were growing among the trees.

She took me quickly along Path where it led to the deepest center of old warren. "Where?" I asked as we ran. She pointed but said nothing, only flicking her head back in a flash of smile. Soon all the walls around us were of angelstone, and the lights were few, the doors small. It was warm here too; we were walking above the tanks and the stones that warm Little Belaire. There was a turn where she paused, uncertain; then she pushed through an ancient curtain, and we were inside a tiny stone-walled bare room, gloomy and warm, with a single small skylight in one corner. Through it the afternoon made a diamond shape on the rough wall.

My eyes grew big: on a chest near one wall stood a leg. Once a Day turned to me and laughed very small. It wasn't, I realized after a moment, a real leg, but a false one, yellow and waxy like dead flesh, with corroded metal parts and ancient straps. I stared at it.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"It's a leg," she said, and took my hand in hers and squeezed it. I wanted to ask whose it was, but only stood with my hand growing wet in hers.

"Come here," she said, and tugged me to the other side of the room where above us a thing hung on the wall. She pointed at it. "You must never, never tell anyone you came in here and saw this," she said to me in an urgent, commanding whisper. "It's a very secret thing in my cord. I'm going to tell you about it even if I shouldn't." Her blue eyes were grave, and I nodded gravely too.

The thing on the wall was made of plastic. It was like a tiny house with a high-peaked roof; but it was flat, with only a little shelf that struck out in front of it. It had two doors, one on each side. Three people lived in the house, one of whom -- I watched with hair rising on my neck -- at that moment was backing into the right-hand doorway with tiny jerking motions, while the other two came jerking out the left-hand door. The one disappearing inside was an old woman, bent and hooded and gnarled, leaning on a stick; the two who began to appear were children, with their arms around one another.

"How do they move?" I said.

"That's the secret," Once a Day said.

In the space between the two little doors was pasted a strange pink and blue picture; it showed a great mountain (you could tell because tiny people were shown standing below looking up at it) that was four heads, four men's heads; four heads as big as mountains -- four heads that were a mountain -- with great grave faces and one with, it seemed, spectacles.

"This one," Once a Day said, pointing to the old woman whose hooked nose could just be seen inside the door, "hides when the sun shines. And these two" -- pointing to the children -- "come out." She looked up at the bright skylight. "You see? And when the weather changes, they move. It's ancient as anything. There are lots of secrets."

"Those four," I said. "Who are they?"

"Those are the four dead men. And are they mad."

We stared at the four stony faces, with the sky behind them falsely pink and blue. "It's their own fault," Once a Day said.

It was warm in the room, and a prickly heat was all over me, but in spite of it I shivered. The false leg. The thing on the wall that moved when it was light and dark, that only Whisper cord knew the secret of. And her small hot hand in mine.

A cloud went over the sun just then, and the diamond of sun disappeared from the wall. I watched the tiny children and the old woman, but they didn't move.

Sixth facet:

How am I to tell you all of this? How? In order to tell you any single thing I must tell you everything first; every story depends on all the stories being known beforehand.

You can tell it; it can be told. Isn't that what it is to be a saint? To tell all stories in the single story of your own life?

I'm not a saint.

You are the only saint. Go on: I'll help if I can. Before nightfall it will be told; before moonrise at least.

I wanted to say: Whisper cord lay coiled within the cords of Belaire like an old promise never quite broken, or a piece of dreaming left in your mind all day till night comes and you dream again. But to say that I must tell you about cords. About the Long League of women, and how it came to be and came to be dissolved. About St. Olive and how she came to Belaire, and found Whisper cord. About Dr. Boots's List, and the dead men; about how I come to be here now telling this.

Cords. Your cord is you more surely than your name or the face that looks out at you from mirrors, though both of those, face and name, belong to the cord you belong to. There are many cords in Little Belaire, nobody knows exactly how many because there is a dispute among the gossips about cords which some say aren't cords but only parts of other cords. You grow into being in your cord; the more you become yourself, the more you become the cord you are. Until -- if you aren't ordinary -- you reach a time when your own cord expands and begins to swallow up others, and you grow out of being in a single cord at all. I said Painted Red had been Water cord, and her name was Wind; now she was larger than that and she had no cord that could be named, though in her way of speaking, in the motions of her hands, the manner of her life, in small things, she was still Water.

Water and Buckle and Leaf; Palm and Bones and Ice; St. Gene's tiny Thread cord, and Brink's cord if it exists. And the rest. And Whisper. And was it because of her secrets that I loved Once a Day, or because of Once a Day that I came to love secrets?

She liked night more than day, earth more than sky -- I was the reverse. She like inside better than outside, mirrors better than windows, clothes better than being naked. Sometimes I thought she liked sleeping better than being awake.

In that summer and the winter that followed it, and the next summer, we came to own Little Belaire. That's how it's put. When you're a baby you live with your mother, and move with her if she moves. Very soon you go to live with your Mbaba, especially if your mother's busy, as mine was with the bees; Mbabas have more time for children, and perhaps more patience, and especially more stories. From your Mbaba's room you make expeditions, as I did up to the roofs where the beehives are or along the learnable snake of Path -- but always you return to where you feel most safe. But it's all yours, you see -- inside to outside -- and as you grow up you learn to own it. You sleep where you're tired, and eat and smoke where you're hungry; any room is yours if you're in it. When later on I went to live with Dr. Boots's List I saw that their cats live the way we lived as children: wherever you are is yours, and if it's soft you stay, and maybe sleep, and watch people.

We had our favorite places -- tangles of rooms with a lot of comings and goings and people with news, quiet snake's-hands in the warm old warren where there were chests that seemed to belong to no one, full of rags of old clothes and other oddities. She liked to dress up and play at being people, saints and angels, heroes of the Long League, people in stories I didn't know.

"I must be St. Olive," she said, holding up to the light of a skylight a bracelet of blue stones she had found in a chest, "and you must be Little St. Roy and wait for my coming."

"How do I wait?"

"Just wait. Years and years." She dressed herself in a long sad cloak and moved away with stately steps. "Far away the League is meeting. They haven't met since the Storm passed long, long before. Now they meet again. Here we are, meeting." She sat slowly and put her hand to her brow; then she glanced up at me and spoke more naturally. "While we meet, you hear about it," she said. "Go on."

"How?"

"Visitors. Visitors come and tell you."

"What visitors?"

"This was hundreds of years ago. There were visitors."

"All right." I adopted a listening position. An imaginary visitor told me that the women of the Long League were meeting again. "What are they deciding?" I asked him.

"He doesn't know," Once a Day said, "because he's a man. But his women have gone to the meeting, bringing their babies and helping the old ones, all the women."

"But not the women of Belaire."

"No. No." She raised a hand. "They just wait. All of you wait, to hear

what the League has decided."

I waited more while the League met. "Somehow you know," Once a Day said, "that someone is to come, to come to Little Belaire from that meeting, though it might be years, and bring news . . ."

"How do I know?"

"Because you're Little St. Roy," she said, losing patience with me. "And he knew."

She rose up, and taking tiny slow steps to lengthen the journey, came toward me. "Here is Olive, coming from the meeting." She progressed slowly, her eyes fixing mine where I waited for years in the warren, knowing she was to come.

"It's night," she said, her steps so slow and small she tottered, "When you least expect it, and then . . . Olive is there." She drew herself up, looked around surprised to find herself here. "Oh," she said. "Little Belaire."

"Yes," I said. "Are you Olive?"

"I'm the one you waited for."

"Oh," I said. "Well." She looked at me expectantly, and I tried to think what Little St. Roy would say. "What's new? With the League?"

"The League," Olive said solemnly, "is dead. I've come to tell you that. And I have a lot of secrets only you can hear, because you waited and were faithful. Secrets the League kept from the speakers, because we were enemies." She knelt next to me and put her mouth to my ear. "Now I tell them." But she only made a wordless buzzing noise in my ear.

"Now," she said, getting up.

"Wait. Tell me the secrets."

"I did."

"Really."

She shook her head, slowly. "_Now_," she said, commanding, "we must go and live together in your little room ever after." She took the cloak from her sharp shoulders, let it fall; she knelt beside me, smiling, and pressed me backward till I lay down. She lay down next to me, her downy cheek next to mine and her leg thrown over mine. "Ever after," she said.

"Why were the Long League aid the speakers enemies?" I asked Seven Hands. "What secrets did they keep from us?"

He was at work making glass--the glass of Little Belaire is famous, traders still come to deal for it -- and all morning had been mixing beechwood ash and fine sand with bits of angel-made glass from all over; now he threw in a broken bottle green as summer and said, "I don't know about secrets. And the speakers were never the League's enemies, though the League thought it to be so. It goes back to the last days of the angels, when the Storm came. That Storm was like any storm, on a day when the air is still and hot and yellowish, and big clouds are high and far away in the west; and as the storm comes closer it comes faster, or seems to, and suddenly there is rain in the mountains, and a cold wind, and it is on top of you. The Storm that ended the angels was like that: even when they were strongest the Storm was coming on, perhaps it had always been coming on, from the beginning. But few seemed to see it, except the League of women, who prepared themselves.

"And so when the Storm at last came in a thousand ways, multiplying, it seemed very sudden. But the League wasn't surprised."

He trod on the bellows that made his fire roar. "The Storm took years to pass; and when everything was going off and the millions were left alone without help, and great death and vast suffering, multiplying as the Storm multiplied, were visited on every part of the land, it was to the Long League fell the task of helping, and saving what and who could be saved, and cutting away the rest; repairing the angel's collapse where it could be repaired, and burying it forever where it could not. And for this huge task the League broke its old silence, and all the women acknowledged one another, because you see

it had always been secret before. And for years the Long League of women saved and buried, till the world was different. Till it was like it is now."

His molten glass was ready, and he took up his long pipe and fixed a ball of it, turning and turning it with great care.

"Did everyone do what the League told them? Why?"

"I don't know. Because they were the only ones who were prepared. Because they had a new way to live, to replace the angel's way. Because people had to listen to somebody." He began to blow, his face red and his cheeks impossibly round. The green ball grew into a balloon. When it was the right size, working quickly he snipped off the end of it, and began to spin the pipe in his hands. What had been a balloon widened, flattened into a dish, seeming at every moment about to fall from the pipe.

"But the speakers didn't listen."

"No. During those years, we were wandering, and building Belaire. The women of Belaire had never been of the League, had never acknowledged that the League included them, though the League was said to be a league of all women everywhere. But our women were indifferent to almost everything but their speech and their histories and their saints. That angered and frustrated the women of the League, I guess, angered them because they needed all the help they could get and frustrated them because they were sure that the League knew what was best for the world."

"Did they?" Seven Hands's dish had become a plate, faintly green and striated with its cooling.

"Maybe they did. I guess our women thought it was only none of our business.

"What's odd though," he said, as he took the plate of glass from the pipe, "is that in hiding the terrible learning of the angels from everyone, so that the world had to become different, the League was left alone with it. They, who hated the angels most, were in the end the only ones who knew what the angels knew."

"Like what?"

He held his circle of glass, flecked with bubbles and green, like the stirred surface of a tiny pond, up before his face. "Don't ask me," he said. "Ask women."

Mbaba asked me: "Is it your Whisper cord girl who makes you ask all this?" I didn't answer. Of all the cords, Whisper is the one that stays most to itself. Knots happen with others.

"Well," Mbaba said. "I don't know any secrets Little St. Roy knew. I think he told all he knew. Little SP. Roy wanted to be a gossip, you know, but in the end he said he wasn't smart enough. All his life he spent with them, though, serving them and carrying for them, and running Path with their messages. And listening to them talk. Little St. Roy said he was like an idea in the gossips' minds, and ran through Belaire with pails full of water and a head full of notions.

"Later when he lived with Olive he told hard stories. But he always had, though maybe he didn't think so, nobody knows.

"In those days the Filing System was just being learned, and Olive came to learn it as well as any; Little St. Roy said, 'Remember, Olive, it's time to stop when hunting for your identity turns into hunting it down.'

"He said, about Olive, that when she was dark she was very, very dark, and when she was light, she was lighter than air. I don't know what that meant. Maybe Whisper cord does."

When I asked Painted Red, she said: "I don't know what angel's secrets Olive might have brought. They aren't in the story I know. There is a cat in it, and a Light. That's all.

"It was a night in the middle of October," she went on, "when Little St. Roy was sitting near the outside to watch the full moon. The big many-paned skylight that these days is deep in was in those days nearer to the outside, and was the best place to sit and see the moon. He was busy watching for the full moon when, just as Little Moon came over, tiny and white, presaging Big

Moon, a noise startled him, and he looked up to see before him a huge yellow cat. Little St. Roy said he felt the hair on his nape rise as he watched the cat regarding him frankly. And as the cat regarded him there came floating through the door from the outside a ball of light.

"A round ball of white light, as big as a head, floating at about a man's height, gently as a milkweed seed. It floated to a stop above the cat's head, and then there was a gust of wind and the Light drifted till it hung over Little St. Roy's head. Now, like all his cord, Little St. Roy could see things that no one else saw, and he looked at these signs and waited for what was to happen, which he guessed: and as he sat unmoving, a person followed the globe of light: a tall, lean woman, beak-nosed, her gray hair cut off short.

"'Oh,' she said when she saw Little St. Roy. 'I'm here.'

"'Yes,' said Roy, for he knew now who she was: that she was she whom he had waited for. 'At last.'

"Her huge cat had sunk slowly to the floor and placed his head on his paws, and she went and sat with him, gathering her cloak around her. 'Well,' she said, 'now you must take me within, and call together everyone who should hear what I've come to tell.'

"'Please,' Roy said. 'In a minute I could take you deep within, and I know everyone who should hear your message, who first, who last; but . . . ' Well, the woman waited. The great moon now lit the room and eclipsed her Light. St. Roy spoke at last: 'It's been a long time since the League's meeting, since we learned that someone, or some news would come. It was I who learned that, and told Little Belaire about it, and waited for this day. And what I ask now is just for all that. I would like to know first what the news is. Now, before the others.'

"The woman looked at him a long time, and then laughed gently. 'It was always the story,' she said, 'that the Long League was much feared here, and its news ignored. Has it changed?'

"St. Roy smiled too. 'There are old things,' he said, 'and there are new things. I think the Long League must be changed now too.'

"No,' she said. 'No. There is no new thing with the League any longer. That's what I've come to tell you, as others have gone to tell all the old enemies of the League -- everywhere we made enemies in the old, old days -- to all of them women have gone to tell them: the League is done. It's all done now. For a long time our strength has withered, as any great strength must and should; and nothing has come up to challenge its strength and make it grow again. The world is different now. What it matters that we all came together to say this I don't know; but perhaps that last acknowledgment is the greatest success. Anyway. That's what I've come for. Just to tell you. The Long League of great memory is dead. My name is Olive, and I've come with this news, and if you'll have me, to stay and help.'

"Then the only noise in the room was the cat's and the moon's."

Painted Red took the claws of her spectacles from behind her ears and wiped them carefully. "What secrets she brought to Roy that Whisper cord inherits, I can't say," she said. "I know this though about Whisper cord: that for them a secret isn't something they won't tell. For them, a secret is something that can't be told."

Seventh facet:

There's a time in some years, after the first frosts, when the sun gets hot again, and summer returns for a time. Winter is coming; you know that from the way the mornings smell, the way the leaves, half-turned to color, are dry and poised to drop. But summer goes on, a small false summer, all the more

precious for being small and false. In Little Belaire, we called this time -- for some reason nobody now knows -- engine summer.

Maybe because summer seemed endless; but in that season of that year it seemed Once a Day and I could never be parted either, any more than Buckle cord could untangle sun from a crystal, no matter what unhappiness we might cause each other, no matter even if we wanted to be parted. When we weren't together we were looking for each other. It isn't strange that you think love, which is so much like a season, will never end; because sometimes you think a season will never end -- no matter that you tell yourself you know it will.

In engine summer we went with an old breadman of Bones cord named In a Corner to gather in St. Bea's-bread. He allowed us to come as a favor to Once a Day's Mbaba, whom he had known long; a favor, because we were too young to be much help. We slept with him in his room near the outside, waking when dawn light came through his translucent walls of yellow. A misty engine summer morning, which would turn dry and hot and fine. Once a Day, shivering and yawning at once, stood pressed to me for warmth as we waited in the white dawn for everyone to gather, many carrying long poles with big hooks at their tips. After some head-counting and consultation, we moved away into the woods, following the stream up into the misty, sun-shot forest.

We would reach the stand of bread-trees at sundown, In a Corner thought, at the time when they were largest. "At night when it's cool, they grow smaller," he said. "Like morning glories; except that instead of closing up, they shrink. That's only one of the funny things about them."

"What are the other funny things?" Once a Day asked.

"You'll see," said In a Corner. "This afternoon, tonight. Tomorrow. You'll see all the funny things."

There was no path to follow to the stand; the other breadmen had spread out so that only occasionally did we see one or two moving beside us through the woods. Many besides the speakers smoke St. Bea's-bread, but it remains our secret where it lives, and we were careful not to stamp a path to that place. When we had harvested it and prepared it, then others would come to Belaire to trade for it; which was fun and I guess to everyone's advantage.

We came out of the forest late in the afternoon, came out from under big sighing pines into a wide field of silvery grass stirred by wind. The other breadmen were stretched out in a long line to our right and left, sometimes hidden up to their shoulders, making dark furrows in the grass. There was a high wave in the ground, and on top of it some of the breadmen already stood, waving and shouting to us. "From the top you can see them," In a Corner said; "you hurry on." And we did, racing to the top of the ridge where tall concrete posts stood at intervals like guardians.

"Look," Once a Day said, standing by a concrete post, "oh, look."

Down in a little river valley, sun struck the water, bright as silver. And struck, too, the stand of St. Bea's-bread, which lived there and (I think) nowhere else in this world.

Did you ever blow soap bubbles? When you blow softly, and the soap is sticky, you can grow a great pile of bubbles, large and small, from the cup of the pipe. Well: imagine a pile of bubbles as large as a tree, the big bubbles on the bottom as large as yourself, the small ones at the top smaller than your head, than your hand, trailing off in an undulating tip; a great irregular pile of spheres, seeming as insubstantial as bubbles, but the weight of them great enough to press down the bottom bubbles into elliptical sacks. And imagine them not clear and glassy like soap bubbles, but translucent, the upper sunside of them a pale rose color, the undersides shading into bluegreen at the bottom. And then imagine as many of these piles of bubbles as fir trees in a grove, all leaning gently, bulging and bouncing as in a solemn dance, the ground around them stained colors by the afternoon sun striking through their translucence. That's what Little Belaire lives on.

We ran down to where they stood, across great fractured plazas of concrete, past ruined roofless buildings laid out angelwise in neat squares with the neat lines of weed-split roads between them, and into the stand

itself. "They really are bubbles," Once a Day said, laughing, amazed. "Nothing. Nothing at all." They were membranes, dry and scored into cells like a snake's skin, and inside, nothing but air. The odor as we stood among them was spicy and dusty and sweet.

The breadmen were all gathering in the rosy light the bubble-trees made. They smiled to each other, slapped each other's backs, pulled and pinched at the skin of the bottom bubbles, coarse and thick, and shaded their eyes to look up at the pale, fine tops. It had been a good summer, humid and hot, and there would be no skimping next winter. The hooked sticks they carried were laid in a heap for the next day, and coils of thin rope were handed out from a big sack. Then we all dispersed -- Once a Day and I following In a Corner -- to circle the whole stand, and work inward till we met in the center.

In a Corner would choose a short length of rope and tie it very tightly around the feathery neck of a stem beneath the bottom bubbles. The stems were chest-high to Once a Day and me, and there were many of them supporting each tree.

"Except they're not supporting them, not really," said In a Corner. "That's another funny thing about them. The stems don't support the bubbles as much as they keep them from flying away. See, when the sun heats up the air inside, the whole tree grows huge, like now; and gets lighter. Hot air is lighter than cold air. And if they weren't tied down by the stems --"

"They'd float away," said Once a Day.

"Float right away," In a Corner said. His tough old hands drew the cord tight, tying off the stem. We were deep in now, moving slowly toward the center; all around us the blue-green undersides bulged and swayed in the slightest breezes. It was exhilarating; it made you want to jump and shout. "Lighter than air," Once a Day said laughing. "Lighter than air!"

In the center of the stand was a clearing, and in the center of the clearing were the ruins of low buildings and tall metal towers bent and rusted, some fallen to their knees; all faced a great pit in their midst, and in this pit, as though designed to fit there, there sat a squat, complex mass of black metal, high and riveted, from which struts shot out to grip the broad concrete lip of the pit -- a great spider climbing from a hole. Machinery of unfathomable design protruded everywhere from its hump. The buildings and towers seemed to have fallen asleep in attendance on it.

"Is it the planter?" I asked.

"It is," In a Corner said. He coiled the last of his rope over his shoulder and motioned us to follow; Once a Day held back till I took her hand, and she pressed close behind me as we walked up to it.

"It went to the stars," I said.

"It did. And came back again." It and a hundred more like it, gone to the stars; and when they returned, after how many centuries, full of knowledge of the most outlandish kind -- nobody was left to receive them. Of any left on earth, they were the only ones who still knew their purposes; and without men to receive it, their knowledge was locked within them. And they sat, with endless patience, but no one came, because they were all on the road or dead or gone. And at last the planters died where they sat, rusted, decayed; their memories disintegrated, their angel-made minds became dust.

"And how odd to think," In a Corner said, "that they were called planters because they were to have been the first of a system of machines that planted men on other stars. Instead, here it sits, having become a planter in truth: it planted the little balloon-tree from elsewhere here, on this earth, and is its planter, like an old black pot an mbaba plants marigolds in."

Up close, it was huge; it rose up, flat black, and glowered down at us. The couplings and devices that held it in place were of a strength that was hard to really believe in: metal that thick, that rustless, a hold that perfectly crafted, that tenacious. In its center what might have been a door had broken open; and from that door there foamed like a mouthful of great grapes the misshapen bubbles of the first of the trees, mother of them all. From this mother-plant, blue-green shoots had been sent out, and had found a

way down through the struts and plates of the planter and then gone underground, like roots; and then had surfaced again, In a Corner said, as the other stems in the stand. "It's all one plant," he said, "if it is a plant at all."

Our work for that day was finished, and while the sun set we gathered wood and built fires on the concrete plazas beyond the bread.

"I don't know where it comes from," In a Corner said, laying the logs Once a Day and I brought in a circle that would keep us warm all night. "But I think things, about that place. It's a cold place, I think, and much larger than this one; these trees never grow so large there, and living things move slowly or not at all."

We looked out over the bread, which had already diminished as the chill of evening came on. "Why do you think that?" I said.

"Because from boyhood I have been smoking it. Because it has grown me up to be a man, and my eyes and my blood and my brain are partly made of its stuff, now. And I think I know: I think it has told me."

They say that the planters were far wiser than any human. I wonder: if this planter returned from who knows where and found that no one would ever learn what it knew, could it have let out its load on purpose, hoping (could it hope?) that someday men would learn a little, as In a Corner had? I suppose not. . . . In a Corner from his pouch drew a handful of last year's bread with knobby fingers.

It was all blue-green, without the rose color of the spheres; it shone with a strange interior light as he sifted it into the bowl of the big gourd pipe he carried hung around his neck. "It used to be thought, you know, not good to smoke it all the time. And later that if you did smoke it all the time, it must be piped through water, as in the great pipes. But you young ones pay no attention. And I think you know best. It won't harm you: hasn't harmed anyone. But it changes you. If you spend your life a man, and eat not only men's food, but this."

The reason it was thought, in the old days, to be bad, was because of St. Bea, of course. It was after the first hard winter at Little Belaïre that she found the stand of bubbles, which smelled so nice when the sun warmed them; and St. Bea was hungry. And it wasn't even that eating the bread made her die, or even sicken; but when St. Andy found her, weeks later, still beneath the trees, her clothes had all gone to rags, she ate of the bread when she was hungry, and had forgotten him and the speakers and the new Co-op that was her own idea. And though she lived for some time after that, she never said another three words together that made sense to St. Andy.

_That pipe you smoked from, in your Mbaba's room . . . _

Yes. For a long time after it was learned to smoke it, hundreds of years ago, the pipes' mouths were made in the shape of St. Bea's head, her mouth open to receive it.

Her bread hissed and bubbled as In a Corner put match to it, hollowing his cheeks around the old chewed stem. The first rosy cloud billowed up. He gave the pipe to Once a Day, and she inhaled, and a thin rosy mist came out from her lungs, through her nose and mouth, and I shuddered with a sudden wonder at this odd consumption -- odd though I'd seen it and done it almost all my life.

The first stars were winking on in the near blue sky. A breeze made the bowl of the pipe glow, and snatched away the smoke. One star, perhaps one we could see from here, was its home. But no matter how high the wind took it, it would never go there again.

Next morning was heavy with clouds, and the rafts came up the river from the south. All day the breadmen worked, pulling away the vast clusters from the strangled stems with their hooked sticks, and lifting them (on this cloudy day they weren't lighter than air, but almost as light) and maneuvering them to the rafts with shouts and directions, and tying them to the rafts with hooks and ropes through their skins. Once a Day and I weren't much help, but we ran and pushed and pulled with the rest as hard as we could, for they had

all to be taken today, or they would collapse like tents and be unmovable.

When the last of them had been floated away to where Buckle cord burned maple for charcoal to dry it, and where it would be shattered then and sifted and packed to haul, and the whole glade stood naked, only the blue-green stems left, and the men from the rafts were left to cover those stems with sacks for the winter, and others were winding plastic and cloths around the planter to keep the mother-tree safe from snow, well, then the harvest was over; and Once a Day and I had helped; and we rode back on the next-to-last raft.

Exhausted, she laid her head in my lap, and we wrapped ourselves in a shaggy cloak someone gave us, for the wind was cold; blown leaves floated on the river's glaze surface.

"Winter's coming," I said.

"No," she said sleepily. "No, it's not."

"It has to sometime."

"No."

"Well, if winter . . ."

"Hush," she said.

Eighth facet:

In a winter of rain, long after this, after my year with a saint, after my letter from Dr. Boots, a winter that I spent alone and often asleep, there was a trick I learned my mind can do: sometimes, halfway between waking and sleep, it would grow young again. How can I explain it? As though, for a brief moment, I would be a younger self; or as though a whole moment of my past would be given back to me, complete, no part of it missing, and so suddenly that often I wouldn't know which moment it was; before I could learn, I would fall asleep, or the effort of concentration would bring me awake and it would be lost.

Well, this was interesting, and I had time to practice it -- in fact I had nothing else at all to do -- and there were times I could do it for some time together, all my being reliving a past time, except for a small watching eye to marvel at it. I thought I was at the end of my life in that endless winter, and it seemed right that I should be allowed to review, in bits and glances, my short life, which seemed so long to me: like Mbaba going through the contents of her carved chests. I had no choice about when I find myself; I could be two or ten. I could be on the roofs in summer, my head thumping with heat under a hat and a veil, tending the bees with my mother. I could be deep in, in winter, in the stuffy warmth, learning Rings with Once a Day, my head full of that winter's notions, with that winter's flavor: because each season of each year -- could it be each day, each morning and evening? -- has its own taste, distinct, entirely forgotten, till you taste it again.

I could be listening to Painted Red weave the stories of the saints in her rich roomy voice, and beginning to see how all those stories were in some way one story: a simple story about being alive, and being a man; a story that, simple as it was, couldn't itself be told.

And once I closed my eyes, and waited, and didn't move, and found myself in my tenth spring, sitting with the others at Buckle cord's door, looking out at the flowering trees that littered with petals the way that led to the south, and watching come up that way, stark in their black clothes against the pink and white spring, a band of travelers, come to trade for bread. Around me the translucence of Buckle cord's walls pale yellow in the sun; beneath me the dirt of the floor, laid with bright rugs; beside me in their figured cloaks Water cord's traders and the pale sacks of bread. And next to me, just then slipping her hand from mine, Once a Day. I came awake in winter, wide-eyed,

cold, my heart beating; and listened to the cold rain falling.

For many weeks that spring Once a Day had talked of nothing but the traders of Dr. Boots's List, who were to come; when she wasn't talking of them she was silent. The traders of the List came every year in the spring, they were almost our only visitors, and their arrival was a great event, but to Whisper cord they were more than visitors. "They're my cousins," Once a Day said, a word I didn't understand; when I asked her what she meant, she couldn't explain, except that it tied her closely to them.

"How can that be?" I said. "They aren't truthful speakers. They aren't your cord. You don't even know their names. Not one name."

"My cord is Olive's," she said, "and Olive was of the League. So is Dr. Boots's List. That's what 'cousins' means."

"The League is over and dead," I said. "Olive said so."

"Don't talk," she said, "about what you don't know."

There were a dozen or more coming up the way now, mostly men in wide low black hats ringed around with flowers. As they came closer we could hear their singing: or perhaps not singing, for there weren't any words, and no tune either, only a low humming in different tones and volumes, a burr here and a rumble there, changing as one left off or another started, each with his own sound. The old men and women of Water cord went down the hill to meet them, and the younger after to take their burdens, intricately tied packs and cases and bundles. There were greetings all around, quiet and formal, and the black-hatted men and tall women came up through Buckle cord's door into the pretty rooms they make near the outside, where I waited with Once a Day and the others come out to greet them. The bells they wore jingled and they talked in odd burring accents and old blurred speech, and their bundles were laid aside till fruit sodas and winter nuts were brought. Once a Day wouldn't take her eyes from them, though if one in his survey of those sitting there happened to look at her she looked away; I hadn't before seen the smile she smiled at them.

From a distance, black and bearded, they had seemed severe, but when they were close it was otherwise; their long straight robes were minutely decorated in gold and colors, and caught in complex folds for show, and their bells were tied on at surprising places that made you laugh when they rang. In their jingling, slow-smiling midst, you felt them to be people of immense ease and comfort, with grace and energy enough to sit forever. They reminded me of Painted Red telling about St. Olive's cat.

Bread from the fall gathering was handed around by the Water cord traders to the visitors, whose bells and bracelets sounded as they passed the glittering handful of flakes from hand to hand to be felt and sniffed and looked at. Old In a Corner threw handfuls of it into the great brass mouth of St. Bea -- almost as large as life -- that topped a huge amber glass pipe, moved here to the outside on a tripod the day before in expectation of guests. It was hundreds of years old, and one of Buckle cord's chief treasures, even though it had no story about it except how old it was, so Palm cord wouldn't have thought it such a wonder.

One of the traders came and lowered himself gracefully to sit next to Once a Day. He was a brown, wrinkled man like a nut, his wrists and hands gnarled and rooty, but his smile was broad and his eyes alert and smiling too as he looked down at Once a Day, who looked away from him, overcome. When he looked away, she looked up at him; when he looked down at her, she looked away. Then she undid from her wrist the bracelet of blue stones she had found in an old chest and claimed as her own.

She held it up to him, and he took it lightly in his yellow-nailed fingers. "This is nice," he said. He turned it, and held it to the light; he smiled. "What do you want to trade for it? What do you want?"

"Nothing," she said.

He lifted his eyebrows at her, passing the bracelet from hand to hand; then he smiled, and clasped the bracelet around his own wrist, and without a word, giving it a brief shake to settle it among the others he wore, attended

to the trading again. Once a Day, with a secret smile, took up in her hand a corner of his black robe that lay near her, and held it.

Through the afternoon the men and women of the List opened their cases, laid out their goods, and the Bread was measured out. They had brought Four Pots, each set of four in its own case; it was the black one of these, which contained a rose-colored stuff, that had made me dream with Painted Red, and the others are for other uses; the List calls them "medicine's daughters," and they alone know the secret of them. They had implements and odd pieces of angel silver, which they called "stainless steel." They had boxes and jars filled with sweet herbs and dried spices, sugar made from beets, and flea powder for cats; for Buckle cord, old things to fix, edged tools, angel-made nuts with their own bolts attached; for Palm cord, ancient found things, keys, whistles, and a ball of glass inside which a tiny house was snowed on.

For these we traded glass bowls and other glass, spectacles bound in plastic, papers for smoking, rose, yellow, and blue, honeycomb, turtle-shell polished to look like plastic, and yards and yards of translucent plastic ribbon on which were hundreds of square pictures, good for belts. And of course Bread, in sacks, as valuable to them as the medicines they brought were to us. In two or three rooms the trading went on filled with sweet smoke, a murmur of talk, and the deepening color from the yellow walls; so many wanted to trade, or just to see the visitors and hear them, that I had to give up my place, but Once a Day kept hers near the brown man who wore her bracelet.

The visitors slept that night with Whisper cord, in twos and threes in rooms far from Path and near the outside--these were ancient precautions, just forms now, but still observed -- and late at night, if you passed the rooms where they were, you saw them deep in talk, or laughing together. And I did pass by, not daring to enter their circles though no one had said I was forbidden, and loitered outside, trying to overhear what passed between them.

In the first dawn I awoke alone, crying out because I saw a sudden face looking down at me, but there was no one there. As though summoned, and too much still asleep to ignore the summons, I followed Path quickly toward Buckle cord's door, running from dim pool to dim pool of blue light which poured from skylights above; no one was awake. But when I came near Buckle cord's door there were other shapes coming onto Path, and I hid and watched.

Dr. Boots's List was leaving, guided out by a woman of Whisper cord, their big packs on their shoulders altering their shapes in the dimness. The door was shown them, a square of blue dawn growing brighter, and the woman withdrew without farewell. They waited a moment till they had all collected, and started toward the door; and someone small darted out from Path to overtake them.

I stepped out from where I hid and took Once a Day's arm, somehow not surprised now though I hadn't for a moment suspected it. "Wait," I said.

"Let me go," she said.

"Tell me why."

"No."

"Will you come back?"

"Don't ask me."

"Tell me you'll come back. Promise. Or I'll follow you. I'll tell Seven Hands, and In a Corner, and your Mbaba, and we'll follow you and bring you back." I spoke in a frantic, rapid whisper, only half-aware of what I said. I hadn't released her, and now she took hold of my arm that held her, and so we stood joined, staring at each other's half-seen faces.

"I gave you Money," she said, quiet but intent. The Money was in my sleeve; I was never without it "I gave you Money and you must do what I say." She took my hand from her. "Don't follow me. Don't tell anyone where I've gone, not today, not tomorrow, not till i'm far away. Don't think about me any more. By the Money I gave you."

I was stilled, hopeless and afraid; and she turned away. The last of Dr. Boots's List, the brown, rooty man, glanced back at her as she hurried to catch him.

"In the spring," I said. "You'll come back."

"This is spring," she said, not looking back; and she was gone. I went to the door and watched them, cloaked and hatted in the misty dawn, go single-file away to the south; and Once a Day in a blue dress, her black hair flying, running to catch them; and I thought, before the mist, or tears, made them invisible, I saw one take her hand.

I hid that day, for there was no one I could go to who wouldn't question me, no one I could talk to that my speech wouldn't betray me to. Almost, almost, in an agony of doubt, I went to Seven Hands; but I didn't. She wouldn't be missed unless I raised the alarm, for she could be anywhere, and safe anywhere, in the tangle of Belaire; but I didn't know if it was best. I knew nothing, and so I left the decision to her. I thought: it's been arranged; Whisper cord arranged it; grownups decided on it. I didn't know if this was true, but I tried to believe it; and I hid.

Seeking places where I would be alone, I dug deeper into the old warren, and came, late, to the room Once a Day had led me to the spring before, the room that on its walls of angelstone bore the little house where the two children and the old woman went in and out their little doors according to the weather, and the false leg stood in a corner.

How could it be that I hadn't known? We had been like two fingers of the same hand; we were truthful speakers; yet I hadn't known, any more than I understood now. Perhaps, I thought, it hadn't been till that very moment, that dawn, that she had decided; but I couldn't believe that. She had known, and planned it, and thought about it, thought -- it must be -- about nothing else for days; and yet I hadn't known.

I thought about what she had said: cousins; and how she, who was Whisper, was of the League even as Dr. Boots's List was, however distantly. I thought that whatever secrets Olive had brought from the League that Whisper cord knew, Dr. Boots's List must know more, just as they knew medicine and traveled, as the old League had; I thought about what Painted Red had said, that for Whisper cord a secret isn't something you won't tell, but something which can't be told.

I thought about all that, but none of it combined to make a sense I understood. I studied the little plastic house on the wall. On its ledge there now stood the old woman, alone; the two children hid.

The old woman comes out when it's dark, she said, and the two children when the sun shines. And when the weather changes, they change. And four dead men. Are they mad, she said.

But overhead the sun shone, and spring was full.

I understood nothing at all, and cried a long time in the dim little room, hiding, left alone with the house and the leg and every untold secret.

It was a barometer.

What?

A barometer. The little house on the wall; it was a barometer. A thing which tells about the weather. An engine, is all.

Yes. About the weather. But don't you see . . .

Wait. This crystal is finished.

The Laughter of the Legless Man

First facet:

What is it?

A crystal. A crystal with eight sides: you see? I've replaced it with another. We can go on now.

I don't understand. Why did we stop?

The crystals record. what you say. Everything you've said was -- was cut, or impressed, on the facets of this crystal; I can't explain how. Then it can be recaptured, with another engine, and we can hear again exactly what you said; the very words, as you spoke them.

Like the Books that Blink had.

_Yes. In a way. . . . _

But why would you want such a thing? I'm only a thing like that now myself; I know that, though I feel myself to be truly here. I'm a sort of crystal only, or -- or a fly trapped in a block of plastic. .

What?

A fly. Inside a block of plastic. That was a thing Blink had. . Tell me. Who is it that I am?

Rush that Speaks.

That's not an answer.

It's the only one that's true now.

It's very confusing. I feel myself to be me, and only me; but that can't be so.

Go on with your story; it's less confusing. It's best just to tell the story, beginning to end -- that's something we know about you. Will you tell about Blink?

Blink.

If Blink was a saint, then I'm not; if Blink wasn't a saint, then perhaps it's true that I could be one. Transparent: that's what Painted Red said the saints were, or tried to be; and that's what I am now, isn't it?

She said: "The saints found that truthful speaking was more than just being understood; the important thing was that the better you spoke, the more other people saw themselves in you, as in a mirror. Or better: the more they saw themselves through you, as though you had become transparent."

It was the end of my second seventh year, and I had come to have the System read for me again; and before she began work with her lenses and squares of glass we sat talking, eating apples which reminded me of the first day I had come to learn with her.

"Why are there no saints now?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "perhaps there are. Saints aren't known to be saints, you know, till long after they're dead, and people see that their stories have lived. So if there are saints now, we don't know it."

"But there haven't been saints. Not for many lives."

"That's true," she said. "Little St. Roy and St. Olive were the last; and St. Gene, if he's a saint, as Thread cord thinks. But there are quiet times, you know, centuries long they can be, where the task is only to learn what the busy times discovered; and then there will come a time of new discovery. People in motion."

"Seven Hands thinks one is beginning now."

"Does he?"

"He talks about leaving Belaire, 'going to meet it and not wait,' he Says."

"Yes?"

I knew by the way she spoke that she doubted Seven Hands truly knew of a new thing, or meant to go out and discover it. "And Once a Day left," I said.

"Who is that?" Painted Red said. "Ah, the Whisper cord girl . . ." She looked at me closely. "Do you suppose she left to learn to be a saint?"

"I don't know."

"Will you follow where she went?"

"I don't know," I said. "No."

When Once a Day had at last been found to be missing, I was questioned. I said I knew she had gone with the List, and of her own accord, but not why, or whether she would return; and they saw that this was the truth. The news went quickly all through Belaire, and there were reproaches, and a meeting was nearly held; messages flew along Path, and gossips met, but no one could determine whether the grownups of Whisper cord had known beforehand what Once a Day would do, or not, or if the List had asked her to come, or how it had come about. It ought to be, among truthful speakers, that such mysteries couldn't occur, but they can. Little St. Roy said: "Truthful speaking would be a simple way to tell the truth, if the whole truth were simple, and could be told."

When the traders of the List came next spring, she wasn't among them. Waiting for them to come, I had imagined a lot of things: that she would return, but would be changed beyond recognition, unable to speak truthfully; that she would not be changed at all, would greet me as she always had, and share with me all the wonders she had seen; that she would be sorry she had run away, and ask us humbly to take her back; that she would have sickened and died amid the alien surroundings of the List, and they would bring back her white, sad corpse amid them. But she didn't come back at all; and they would only say that she was well, and happy enough, and they forgot what else, nothing important, and could the trading begin?

We counted our children, that spring, after they had gone.

Every spring I waited for her, but she didn't return. Every year, waiting for the List to come, waiting for her, became part of waiting for spring. It made the need for spring more urgent, the boredom of winter's end more maddening; made the signs -- snow torrents, birds returning -- spur me more terribly. She, who was so autumnal, so indoor, came to mean spring to me.

"You won't follow her," Painted Red said. "Then where will you go?"

"Well, I don't know," I said. "Not exactly."

"For someone who's to be a saint," she said, "you don't know a lot of things." She smiled. "That's a good sign."

That Painted Red knew, though I had not told her or anyone, that I meant to leave Little Belaire and learn to live a life that could be told in stories -- that I meant to be a saint -- didn't surprise me. I had told her. There was nothing now that I knew or wanted or thought that I could keep from telling her: for I spoke truthfully, and it was she who had taught me.

"A life," she said, folding her hands and regarding the first slide of the System which shone on her wall, "is circumstances. Circumstances are encirclings, they're circles. The circle of a saint's life, all its circumstances, is contained in the story of his life as he tells it; and the story of his life is contained in our remembering it. The story of his life is a circumstance in ours. So the circle of his life is contained in the circle of our lives, like circles of ripples rising in water."

She rose, leaving the marks of her skirts on the hard dirt floor. From the long box that was Palm cord, she drew out a second square of glass and put it in place with the other. The board changed; colors mixed and became other colors; masses changed shape, became newly related to other masses.

"Do you see?" she said. "The saints are like the slides of the System. Their interpenetration is what reveals, not the slides themselves."

"It's like the saints," I said, "because they made their lives

transparent, like the slides; and their lives can be placed before our own, in our remembering their stories, and reveal things to us about ourselves. Not the stories or the lives themselves, but their --"

"Interpenetration, yes," Painted Red said. "They're saints not because of what they did, especially, but because in the telling of it, what they did became transparent, and your own life could be seen through it, illuminated.

"Without the Co-op Great Belaire there would be no truthful speaking. Without truthful speaking there could be no transparent life. And in transparent life, the saints hoped that one day we might be free from death: not immortal, as the angels tried to become, but free from death, our lives transparent even as we live them: not through a means, you see, like the Filing System or even truthful speaking, but transparent in their circumstances: so that instead of telling a story that makes a life transparent, we will ourselves be transparent, and not hear or remember a saint's life, but live it: live many lives in the moment between birth and dying."

"How could that come about?" I said, unable to grasp it, or even imagine it.

"Well," she said, "If I knew, perhaps I would be a great saint. Perhaps if you discover it . . . But tell me this, Rush that Speaks: how anyway is truthful speaking itself done?"

I must know that; I was a truthful speaker, the craft could never be taken from me; and yet . . . How: Painted Red's question reverberated within me, as a thing held up between two mirrors multiplies itself endlessly; as though my mind were crossing as my eyes can cross. I laughed, helpless. "I don't know," I said. "I don't know how it's done."

She laughed with me. She leaned forward, as though to impart a secret, and almost whispered to me: "Well, well, you know, Rush, I don't know either!"

Still chuckling, she picked up the long box which contained Palm cord's slides, to continue her preparations. A thought struck her as her fingers moved over the tabs. "You asked me once, Rush," she said, "what the names of these slides are, and how they go together."

"Yes."

"Do you still want to know?"

"I do."

"It's the day for it," she said, regarding me for a long time with a tenderness that was like a farewell. "The one you see," she said, "the first slide, is Fourth Finder, Palm cord's slide: you see, in the center, where the lines meet, a figure like the palm of a hand? And the other placed over it is called Little First Slot. Together, they make Little Knot." She took a third slide from the box and placed it behind the others. "Little Knot and Hands make Little, Knot Unraveled." She put two more with them. "Little Knot Unraveled and the two Stair slides make Great Knot." Carefully she drew out and inserted the thin, thin pieces of glass. "Great Knot and First Trap make Little Trap. Little Trap and the Expedition make Little Second Gate, or Great Trap Unlocked in Leaf cord. Little Second Gate and the Ball Court make Gate."

The figures on the wall had grown tangled and dark, infinitely intertwining. When one slide seemed to make a pattern of the previous ones, the next distorted the pattern. And now I could see nothing in it. Painted Red's hands lingered over the rest of the slides in her box. "It's thought," she said, "that Gate and the second and great Slot slides, together with the Broken Heart and the Shaken Fragments slides, all make Great Knot Unraveled. But no one can read that much; no one who can begin to understand Gate can even begin to read that much." She touched the lens tube to sharpen the figures; sharpness came and went amid the overlaid figures as she moved the tube. She came and sat by me again. "The gossips know, now, after many years of searching, that it can't be read past Gate, not packed all together; and if Great Knot Unraveled is the whole set, then Great Knot Unraveled can never be read."

"Does that mean," I asked, "that it's no longer any use? Since you know

that? It doesn't, does it?"

"Oh no," she said. "No, no. It will be a long time before we have learned everything there is to learn even from Little Knot. But . . . well. It seemed, when the System was first being truly searched, in St. Olive's time, it seemed that . . . it seemed there was a promise, that one day it would be seen all together, and answer all questions. Now we know it won't, not ever. When that was first understood, there were gossips who broke up their Systems, and some who left Belaire; that was a sad time."

She pushed her spectacles back along her nose. "For me: well, I know there are enough byways, and snake's-hands, and things to be learned from the System to last many lifetimes. And work enough to do with its wisdom among the cords, in their knots and troubles." She looked at Gate, and its lights were reflected from her spectacles. "And the whole answer is there, you know, Rush, though I can't read it; it knows everything, about people, though I never will. That's enough to keep me in its presence."

She was silent a long time, and seemed to grow older. Then: "When will you leave?" she asked me.

"In the spring," I said. "I think I'll be ready then."

"A saint," she said. "You know, Rush, the first time you came to see me, seven years ago, you had a different thought. You were going to go out and find all our things that were lost, and bring them back to us."

"Yes."

"Is your Whisper cord girl one of those things that was lost?"

I said nothing. Painted Red had not looked at me, only at Gate. "Well, perhaps after all it's not a different thought, not really . . ." She struck her knees with her palms. "No," she said. "No, I won't read for you this year. I think, if you mean to do this, it could hurt as much as help. Do you mind?"

"If you think it's right."

"I do," she said. She had me help her up. "I do." Could it be that I had -- almost instantly -- grown taller than she, or had she somehow just as quickly shrunk? She took my shoulders in her strong hands. "When you go," she said, "never forget us and our needs. Whatever you find, if it's useful to us, save it; make the knowledge you got here into a box to carry it, it can be used for that. And however far away you go, come back with what you find to us."

And so she embraced me, and I left her, and ran away down the puzzle of Path that I knew by heart, through rooms and passages that seemed also to have grown smaller suddenly. I wondered about the reading of the System, and what it might have shown for me and my endeavor, what possibilities, what failures; and I felt a cord cut that had tied my childhood to Little Belaire, and a little lost, and a little free. She must have known best, though: if she knew nothing else (and she did, much else) she knew when and when not to tell what the System revealed.

But forget Little Belaire! She could not have thought I could forget it. The longer I'm away, the more it grows in my mind, the stream that runs through it speaking, its bugs and birds and berrybushes, the mystery at the heart of it hidden perhaps in the Filing System or the saved things of the Carved Chests; and now, now after I have lived in a tree and gotten a letter from Dr. Boots and been dark and light and lived as an avenger and been taken apart and put back together any number of ways, though now I think sometimes that that place in the woods is imaginary and I am not a truthful speaker at all, do not really mean what I say or say what I really mean, and have invented all of it: still, even if it's a dream, it's a dream dictated by a voice that speaks truthfully: a voice that cannot lie.

Second facet:

You did, though, really set out to find Once a Day again. Didn't you?
I don't know. Perhaps I did. I didn't know it.

When I was a kid, I wanted to find our things that were lost; as I grew up, and heard the stories of the saints, and listened to Seven Hands talk, I had another ambition: I wanted to be a saint. I wanted to have strange adventures, which I could tell of; and learn forgotten secrets, secrets stronger than the ones Once a Day kept from me; and make sense of the world in the stories I told.

Painted Red suspected that what I really wanted to do was follow Once a Day; that perhaps she was the lost thing I most wanted to find.

And she told me that what saints attempt to do is to become transparent.

How could I know, that spring, what it was I most wanted, or what would become of me? And how was I to know that all of those things were true, that they would all happen to me, every single one?

Well, I didn't. What I thought was this: that despite what Painted Red had said about saints nowadays, somewhere in the world there must be a saint, a saint like the saint I wanted to become; and that what I ought to do first was to find such a saint, and sit down before him, and study him, and learn from him how to go about being what I couldn't imagine being: transparent.

Seven Hands and I had made many expeditions together, sometimes spending a week outside Belaire, just seeing what we could see. I had learned to climb rocks, to make fires with wet wood, tell directions, and to walk all day without worrying that I didn't know just where I was walking to. Preparations, Seven Hands called these; and as my resolve to leave Little Belaire grew stronger, I made these preparations more eagerly, with greater attention. And Seven Hands came to know -- though we never spoke of it -- that the preparations we made were in the end mine, and not his.

I had a shaggy blue shirt, and bread and a pipe and some dried fruit and nuts; I had a string hammock, light and strong, that Seven Hands had made for me, and a sheet of plastic to hang above it to make a tent. I had Four Pots and some other doses; I had my new spectacles that My Eyes had made for me. They were yellow, and turned the white May morning into deepest summer; I took them off and put them on again for entertainment, looking now and then up into the trees for saints.

In the trees?

Because the saints always lived apart from us, and often in houses built into trees. I don't know why. I thought, one day, I would live in a tree as those old saints had; I would choose a great low-branching oak or maple, like some I passed. I loved already the saint I knew I would be, saw with strange clarity that old man, could almost, though not quite, hear the compelling stories he would tell. . . . When the sun was high, I crept into a little woods that bordered a marshy stream where wild cows sometimes could be seen drinking, and smoked. Then there was nothing to do but keep on. With only a morning of my adventure passed so far, it began to seem impossibly long; and I decided I would lighten that load.

Of the Four Pots, it is the silver one that lightens a load. It contains many small black granules like cinders, of different sizes; I knew this because I had seen Mbaba open it and swallow one. I knew also that to lighten the load of a journey, you must know clearly before you lighten your load just where you are going, how you will get there, and when you intend to arrive. I knew the way to That River, and that it would take me till nearly sunset to find it and the bridge of iron that Seven Hands and I had crossed; so I cracked open the pot and -- a little uncertain and a little afraid of what was about to happen to me (for I had never done this before) -- I selected a small one of the black granules and swallowed it.

A little bit later my footsteps slowed as I approached an enormous maple that shaded the way. The sound of the wind in its branches grew slow also, and low, like a moan, and then slower, till it was too low to be heard. The sound

of the birds slowed, and the movement of the leaves; the sunlight dimmed to a blue darkness that was still daylight, like the light of an eclipse; one branch of leaves absorbed my attention, and then one leaf; I had leisure between one footstep and the next to study it quite intensely, while the sunlight on it didn't change and the low call of a bird extended note by note infinitely. I was waiting with enormous patience for my raised right foot to fall, which it seemed it would never do, when the leaf and the birdcall and the soundless moan of the wind went away, the footfall struck and I found myself standing before That River, downstream from the iron bridge, watching the sun go down. I laughed, amazed. Lighten my load! I had traveled the whole of an afternoon, miles, and hadn't noticed it. I suddenly understood the chuckle of old men when they look, a little startled, at some day-long task they have completed after taking one of these black cinders to lighten the load.

I looked back the way I had come, the trees turning their leaves in the evening breeze, and regretted missing the journey. You lighten a load, I saw then, which you have carried a hundred times before; or to go a journey you must make but would rather not. It wasn't for new journeys or new saints. There's a lesson, I thought, and spun the little pot so that it skipped across the brown swollen river and sank.

Across That River the sun still lit the tops of the hills, but down amid the weeds and roots at the water's edge it was growing dark and a little cold. A frog plunked. I put my hands in my armpits and watched the current go by; I was tired -- I really had come a long way -- and I wondered if I had put match to more than I could smoke. There was a gurgle and splash of water then, and out on the river a man strode by. Strode: the water came up to his chest, and his shoulders made the vigorous motions of a man striding; a wake flowed out behind him. He shot on past me without seeing me in the shadows; he was moving quickly on the current.

Amazing! Without exactly knowing why, I ran along the riverbank following him, stumbling on roots and plunging my feet in mud. I lost sight of him, then glimpsed him through the trees floating away serenely, a fair pigtail and his wet white shirt flapping. I was some time crashing through the willows and vines at the river's edge, the mud sucking at my boots, till I saw him again, standing up as ordinary as any man, on a wooden wharf built out over the water, laughing with a woman who was toweling him vigorously as he squeezed water from his pigtail. Just as they turned to see what was clambering through the bushes, I lost my footing and slithered like an otter into the muddy river.

They helped me out, laughing and wondering how I came to be there, and it was a moment -- a spluttering moment -- till I realized they were truthful speakers. They took me up onto their wharf, which connected by a set of stairs to a house built into the bank of the river. And tied up to the wharf, riding high out of the water without his weight on it, was what had allowed him to walk the river: two big cylinders of light metal, with a seat attached between them, and handholds, and broad foot pedals to make it go. He was Buckle cord, I knew then. I was going to tell him about my amazement at seeing him on the river, but just then a boy burst through the door that led out of the house, stopping when he saw me. He was a couple of years younger than me, tanned already, and his hair sun-streaked. He carried a stick and was naked except for a blue band around his neck.

I was thinking how I might explain myself to him, but at that moment a boy came out the door behind him, stopping when he saw me. He was tanned, and his hair sun-streaked; he carried a stick and was naked except for a red band around his neck.

They were the only twins I have ever seen. It was hard not to stare at them as I wrung out my wet clothes. They stared at me too, not that there was anything remarkable about me; they stared with a look I didn't understand then, but know now is the look of people who don't see strangers often.

"This is Budding," said the man, "and that is Blooming." I couldn't help

laughing, and he laughed too. "My name is Sewn Up, and she is No Moon. Come in and get dry." Buckle cord, as I supposed; and the woman must be Leaf; the two boys were harder to tell, maybe because there were two of them.

Inside the house, the sunset over the water glinted and glittered on the ceiling and across the dark, rug-hung walls so that it felt as though we were under water too. The gurgle of the river made me sleepy, and sitting with the water-walker and his family made me feel like a fish visiting fish friends. Sewn Up talked as he lowered and filled a glass pipe; his voice was a good one, with odd insides that made me laugh, and made No Moon laugh even more. I asked him why he didn't live in Little Belaire.

"Well," he said, motioning to the two boys with a spoonful of bread, "they liked the water, and the stream that runs through Little Belaire wasn't enough water for them. Their Mbaba said they moped a lot, so I said if they liked water, they should come back and stay here; and if they liked people -- other people besides us, anyway -- they should stay at Little Belaire. Well, they get along best with each other, so here they stay."

"We were born here," Blooming said, and Budding said, "This is our spot."

"I took them back, you see, for a while," No Moon said; "it's their home, in a way, as it was mine and still is. But they like it here."

"Aren't they going to be truthful speakers?"

"Well, if we're truthful speakers, so will they be, won't they? There are two truthful speakers in the river house and no river in Little Belaire, so it all works out fine."

And it was better for them, too, Sewn Up said; people would always make much of them, there were people who came a great distance just to see them, and he didn't want it to go to their heads; he had pointed out to them that there was nothing really so remarkable about them. They said nothing to this, only smiled the same smile; they knew there was something very remarkable about them, and so did we.

There was a thick, dry smell of smoke in the cool room, easier to breathe almost than air. When Sewn Up talked, puffs of smoke mimicked his words from his nose and mouth. "Odd you should find it odd to leave Little Belaire," he said, sprinkling new bread onto the blue ashes. "It seems you've made the same choice yourself, and younger than we were by quite a bit."

"Oh no," I started to say, but thought that, yes, I had, and had no intention of returning, not for years and years; yet I had been feeling sorry for Budding and Blooming, who couldn't stay there in the best place in the world all the time. "I'm just, well, ranging; I'll go back, one day. It'd be terrible if I couldn't ever go back." And terrible it did seem to me for the first time.

"Well," No Moon said rising, "stay here anyway as long as you want. We have room."

So when I could think of no more news of the warren to give them, and the lights No Moon lit were growing low, I followed the two boys up a winding flight of stairs to a room with glass windows all around, open to the clear night which Little Moon sped across. But sleepy as I was, it was a long time before we were quiet under our shaggy blankets. I lay amazed and listened to Budding finish Blooming's words and then Blooming Budding's, as though they were one person. Giggling and laughing at things I didn't understand, they rolled over each other like otters; they had looked tan in the sun, but in the pale night light they were white against the dark covers.

They had treasures to show me, tucked away at the bottom of the bed and in boxes, an empty turtle shell, a twitch-nose mouse in a nest of grass. And, taken carefully from its hiding place in the wall, their best thing. It was a little cube of clear plastic; inside the plastic, poised for flight, a fly. A real fly. A cube of plastic with, who could tell how, a fly right in the middle of it! We turned it in the moonlight, our faces close together. "Where did it come from?" I asked. "Is there a story? Where did you get it?"

"The saint gave it to us," said one, and the other was drawing out

something else for me to see, but I stopped him at hearing that.

"A saint gave you that? What saint?"

"The one we know," said Budding.

"You know a saint?"

"The one who gave us this," said Blooming.

"Why did he give it to you? What is it?"

"I don't know," said one. "It's a lesson, he said. The fly thinks he's in the air, because he can see out all around, and can't see anything that holds him back. But still he can't move. And let that be a lesson, he said."

"It was just a present," said the other one.

"Can I see him?" I asked, and they must have been surprised at the urgency in my voice. "Is he far away?"

"Yes," said one.

"No," said the other. "He's not too far. Walk all morning. We can take you. He might not like you."

"He likes you."

The two of them looked at each other and laughed. "Maybe that's because," said Budding, and "there are two of us," said Blooming, and they stood with their arms around each other, grinning at me.

With true Leaf cord politeness, they let me choose where I would sleep, but I lay awake a long time, listening to the gurgle of the brown river, with a saint to see tomorrow, already, so soon!

Third facet:

In the morning, Sewn Up ferried us across That River on his contraption, laughing and making jokes: I've never seen anyone as happy to be up in the morning as he, except maybe myself on this morning, off to meet a real saint. Budding and Blooming wore thick shirts against the morning chill and the mist that lay thickly over the river and its fragrant tributaries, and I shivered. No Moon had given me more bread, and a nice plastic bottle full of grape soda she'd put up in the winter, and a kiss.

"I'll go to the warren in the fall," she said. "I'll tell them I saw you, and that you were well."

I thought of a thousand messages she might bring for me -- gone only a day! -- but I kept quiet and only nodded, an adventurer's uncaring nod, and climbed behind Sewn Up.

The twins and I followed a rushing tributary of the river for some time till it ran quietly between its wooded banks; when the sun was high and hot and the mist gone, we came to an inlet where a little dish of a boat was tied up among the saplings at the water's edge. It was something angel-made of white plastic, and (like so many things in the world) put to a use the angels surely never intended; certainly, with its odd ridges and projections and strange shape, it had not been made for a boat. So hot and still it had become that Budding and Blooming threw their warm shirts into the bottom of the dish, and I sat on them and watched the twins pole along. Some white water-flowers came away with the boat from the inlet, and the twins pulled them out of the water to wear for hats; naked, they poled upstream, the leaf shadows flowing over them, wearing flowers in their hair.

When the stream became shallow and poured fast over shadowed rocks, we tied up the boat and followed the stream up its narrowing rocky bed. The breath of it was cold in the warming woods, still fed by snow melting in far-off mountains. When we had tramped through the new ferns at its side for a long way, Budding and Blooming signaled me to be quiet, and we climbed the bank. Past the trees that bordered the stream was a small sunny pasture full

of small white flowers; and on a slope amid them lay the saint.

He was fast asleep. His hands were crossed over his bosom, and he snored; his feet, clad in big boots, stuck up. His white hair lay all around him on the ground, and his beard spread out around his small brown face so that he looked like a milkweed seed. We crept up on him, and Budding whispered something in Blooming's ear that made him laugh. That woke up the saint, who sat up suddenly, looking around confused. Seeing us, he sneezed loudly, got up grumbling, and stumbled off toward the woods across the pasture. Budding cried out and started chasing him as though he were a bird we'd raised; Blooming followed after, and I hung behind, embarrassed at how they approached him.

When they had been some time crashing around in the woods into which the saint had gone, they came back to me panting.

"He's in a tree," said Blooming.

"We'll never find him now," said Budding, licking his finger and wiping a long scratch on his thigh.

"Why didn't you just leave him alone?" I asked. "He would have waked up, we could have waited."

"Blooming laughed," said Budding, "and he woke up . . ."

"Budding made me laugh," said Blooming, "and he ran off."

"He saw you, is why," said Budding. "He's not scared of us."

I wished I could have approached him alone; now I could never get into his good graces. The twins didn't really care about saints; they chased a grasshopper now with the same enthusiasm they had chased the little old man. They sat for a while poking each other and whispering together, and then came to the log I was sitting on.

"We're sorry about the saint running off," said Blooming. "But you saw him anyway, and now you know what one looks like. Let's go home."

He spoke kindly, because he could see I was disappointed; but he said too that even if we left now it would be long after dark when we got back, day was going.

"I'm going to stay," I said.

They looked at me blankly.

"Maybe he'll come down from his tree in the morning," I said, "and I can talk to him, and apologize for waking him and all. I'll do that."

"Well," said one of them, "I suppose, if you want to. But we brought you here. Do you know how to get back?"

With a sudden decision that startled me as much as I hoped it would startle them, I said: "I'm not coming back." I'm not coming back, twins, so go chase your grasshoppers. "I guess I'll just stay here, and wait for him, and stay and live with him, and I guess be a saint."

The twins thought about that for a while, sitting down again and looking from me into the woods and at each other. Then Budding came and gravely kissed my cheek; and Blooming took the cue and kissed the other cheek. They brought my pack to me from where I had left it at the pasture's edge and put it by me. And without another word they turned back to the brook and disappeared in the aspens at its edge.

One thing about Leaf cord, they're very down to earth, but if an occasion comes up, they'll rise to it.

Evening gathered as I sat, and a stack of new midges danced in the still air of the little pasture. The more I thought about my decision the more sensible it seemed to me; but the more I thought how sensible it was, the less I felt like getting up and going into the woods that breathed at the edge of the pasture to look for the saint.

I practiced what I would say in apology to him -- no more than "Hello there" or the like, but I practiced till I felt it had enough weight to be convincing. (You practice just by meaning it harder.) But in the end, what got me into the woods were the twins' kisses burning on my cheeks, and the thought of how I would feel if I went back -- if, that is, I could find my way back at all. Of course they're Leaf cord, it wouldn't matter to them, they'd just be glad to see me -- and somehow that made it worse.

So I got up in the growing gloom and went into the woods, quietly so as not to disturb him should he be around. It was almost dark already in the woods, and grew darker as I went deeper in, and a breeze whispered and creaked in it warningly, and soon it was impossible to take steps without tripping. I had come on an enormous old oak as wide as a wall, which it seemed the woods must have started with, and sat down amid its sheltering roots.

Too dark now to string my hammock, but there was a star caught in the web of leaves, and the air was still; I could spend this night here. It was no good thinking of the water house, or of Belaire, if I wanted to be a saint as much as I said, but it was hard not to think of them as I sat with knees drawn up. I rolled some smoke, carefully picking up the crumbs I dropped. I had enough for several days, and there were always roots and berries that Seven Hands had taught me about, though there would be no berries ripe yet; and if I really got hungry I could kill some little animal and toast it over a fire and eat the meat, as they did in ancient times. And, I thought, if he's a real saint, he won't let me starve to death, right in his own woods.

And if I did starve: perhaps something like that was what was in store for me. It would be sad, but maybe in future times people would learn from it; perhaps I would become a part of this saint's story, and so never die -- was that what Painted Red had meant? I thought of Once a Day, and how she might someday come to hear the story; she would know, then -- know something. I sat and looked at the blue glimpses of heaven revealed by the moving leaves and thought about being dead.

"If you're going to sit there all night," said a small voice over my head, "you might go and get me some water." I jumped back from the dead and looked upward into the darkness. I could just make out the whiteness of his beard in the dark leaves of the oak I had been leaning on. I couldn't remember what it was I had planned to say. The beard disappeared, and a dark object was thrown at me, and I ducked as it clattered near me. It was a plastic bucket. I stood holding it and staring up at the tree.

"Well?" said the small voice.

I picked my way out of the woods and down the hill, and filled the bucket from the black water of the brook, and came back with it, stumbling through the woods. When I stood again at the foot of the oak, a rope fell from its branches with a hook on the end. I attached the bucket and watched it hauled up into the darkness.

"You've gone and spilled most of it."

"It's dark."

"Well. You'll have to go again."

The bucket came down again and I went to refill it, trying to be careful. The face didn't reappear. I stood looking up into the oak till my neck hurt; I heard some splashing and knocking but the saint didn't speak again.

In the first light of morning, when I woke stiff and chilled, and looked upward, it was all clear: what had been a massy darkness in the tree was a little house built in the broad arms of the oak with great care, of woven branches and pieces of angel-made this and that, with small windows and a smokestack that leaned out away from the branches. A rope ran from a window to a convenient branch, and from it hung two long shirts.

It hadn't once occurred to me, you know, that perhaps the twins were mistaken, and their little old man wasn't a saint at all; I had just assumed that somehow they knew. And looking up now at his tree house, I had no need for doubt. It was just such houses that the saints lived in so many lives ago, when we wandered; St. Gary's great beech and the oak of St. Maureen, and the tree whose stump is still marked in Little Belaire's woods, where St. Andy went to live after St. Bea died. "Saints in the trees!" I said aloud, as old people do when something astonishes them.

Should I call out to him? I didn't know his name; and now in the daylight, despite the errand I had run for him, it was clear to me that he didn't want me there, squatting at the foot of his tree. No doubt he was

sitting in his little house waiting for me to go away. In my excitement at having so soon in my journey come upon a real saint from whom I could learn, I hadn't considered his feelings in the matter at all -- and I Palm cord, too! I felt a hot flush of shame, and went quietly away from his oak, though not so far that I couldn't observe him. I sat on a patch of moss there, and smoked some, and waited.

In not too long a time I saw his door open, and from it fell a rope ladder ingeniously made, and slowly but confidently the saint climbed down. He seemed to be speaking to someone not present, agreeing, disagreeing with gestures; he carried a brush and a ragged towel.

Gone for a bath. And there was the rope ladder to his house, still moving from the last step he had taken from it.

Did I dare? I would only take a brief peek while he was gone; I would go only to the top of the ladder and look in. But when I got to the doorway and looked in, I forgot that resolve and climbed inside.

And where to begin to describe what I saw once I had got myself inside! The walls of wattle were chinked with mud and moss, and a big limb of the oak, running up through the house at an angle, made a low arch that divided the house in two; the floor was uneven, and stepped up and down to fit itself to the branches it was built into. The ceiling was low, and peaked at odd angles, and everywhere, hung from the ceiling, on shelves built into the wall, in cubbyholes in the corners, on tables and chests, were things I knew nothing about but knew were treasures: things angel-made, by skills long gone from the world, their purposes still potent in them if only you knew enough to discover them. There were more old mysteries and angelstuff crammed into that little house, it seemed, than in all of Belaire itself.

So absorbed was I in all this that I failed to hear the saint returning till the house creaked and moved with his climbing up the ladder. There was nowhere to hide; I picked up my pack quickly and slung it over my shoulder, just leaving, and stood fearful and embarrassed as his head -- at first astonished, then displeased -- appeared in the doorway.

He gave his attention to getting in the door, and when he stood inside -- shorter than I was -- he considered me. I was too embarrassed to speak. He caught a thought then, and came to me smiling, holding out his hand to me.

"Good-by," he said politely, and I shook his brown hand. He turned away then and stood in the low arch made by the limb with his back to me, waiting for me to be gone. But I couldn't bring myself to leave. His hands behind his back clasped and unclasped impatiently. Inspired, I reached into my pack and pulled out the bottle of grape soda that No Moon had given me; and when he peeked around to see if I had gone, I showed it to him, smiling, still afraid to speak. His gaze stopped on the bottle for a moment, and when he looked away he began to rock back and forth on his big boots. I waited. At last he edged away from the arch, ducked down beneath a cluttered table, and drew out an old glass, lumpy and full of bubbles. Without looking at me, he put the glass on the table, and I brought the bottle to him. He looked up then suddenly, smiling as broadly as his small face could. "My name is Blink," he said. "What's yours?"

"My name is Rush that Speaks." I put the bottle on the table, and we both watched a bit of sun from the window stab through its purple heart. St. Blink broke the seal and the bubbles crowded to the top. He poured out a foaming, hissing glassful, recapping it tight quickly to keep the bubbles in. He picked up the glass and drank two long noisy gulps. A moment later a small musical belch escaped him, and he smiled at me fondly. "Did you know," he said, sitting down slowly in a creaking chair of bent wood and rushes and turning the glass in the sun, "that in very ancient times, to keep summer fruits, they would boil them down into a thick paste, like honey, very sweet, and eat them that way?"

There was another chair there like the one he sat in, and gingerly I lowered myself into it. "No," I said, and felt a strange lump in my throat. "No, I didn't know that; but now I do."

"Yes," he said. He looked at me curiously, nodding his head and sipping his soda. I allowed my arms to rest on the arms of the chair. I knew -- though I was afraid, as yet, to let myself wholly believe it -- that! had come to a place I had long sought, and could stay.

Fourth facet:

And I thought, as that summer went on and I was not sent away, when I would come through the woods with water and see the tree house amid its speaking leaves, that perhaps Blink had found me just as I had found him: someone whom he had long waited for. I would smile at our luck even through the complicated task of getting myself up, and then the water up, and then the water inside and into Jug.

Jug on its table stood as high as my chin; made of plastic, bright yellow, sleek and edgeless. It had a top that fit snugly, which had once been clear but was now cloudy. Water from its little tap, though it had been standing all day, tasted as fresh and cool as though you drank it from the stream. Painted or somehow sealed on its front was a picture of a man, or a creature like a man, with thick square running legs and arms thrown wide. One fat hand held a glass from which orange liquid splashed; the other hand thrust up one clublike finger. His head, orange as the liquid in his glass, was immense for his body, a huge sphere, and bore an expression of wild glee, of unimaginable shrieking joy. That was Jug.

I asked if it was one of Blink's souvenirs from the city. He had made a trip to the city when he was young, and he would tell stories about it at night. "I took it to carry the rest of the things I found," he said, "because it was light and big. I strapped it to my shoulders." And he would tell about the silent city, more silent than anywhere, because almost nothing lived there to make noise. In ancient times there had been not only the men but the populations that lived on men, birds and rats and insects; they all disappeared when the men left. He had walked through the silence, and climbed into buildings, and took Jug to carry the things he found.

When he told stories of the city and the things he had found there, I thought Blink might be Bones cord, or even Buckle, though Buckle cord has no saints at all in it. But I wasn't satisfied with this. When I saw him with his specs on, at the table working at his crostic-words, absorbed in their mystery, and beautiful in his absorption, brushing away a fly and crossing and uncrossing his big feet in perplexity, I was sure he was of St. Gene's tiny Thread cord. But still it wouldn't do.

Why didn't you ask him?

Ask him what?

What cord he was.

Well, if I didn't know, how was he to know?

But you knew what cord you were.

Yes. And if I had known St. Blink in the warren, with his friends and his occupations and the places he chose to live, I would have known what cord he was, too. Your cord, you see, isn't something you discover just by examining yourself, the way you look into a mirror and discover you have red hair. In Little Belaire, you are in a cord, and a cord is -- well, a cord, like a piece of string, not like a name you bear. That makes it clearer, doesn't it?

Well. Just go on. What was it you said he was doing, so absorbed, that made you think he was Thread cord?

He was at his crostic-words.

When St. Ervin came to learn to be a saint from St. Maureen in her oak

tree, he was never once allowed up into the house she had built there, never once, though he stayed for years. She would dispute with him sometimes, and tell him to go away and leave her alone; he wouldn't go, he insisted on staying, he brought presents and she threw them away, he hid and she discovered him and ran him off with a stick, well, the story is very long, but the end is that when St. Maureen was dying and St. Ervin came to her as she lay too weak to run him off, and wept that he could not now ever be a saint, she said, "Well, Ervin, that's a story; go tell that." And died.

When I had been a few days in the tree house, I told Blink, in some embarrassment, why I had come, and like St. Maureen, he only said, "You want to be a saint? A saint? Then why are you here? Why don't you be about it?"

"I thought," I said, head down, "that maybe I could stay here with you, and listen and watch, and see how you became a saint, and learn to do the same."

"Me?" he squeaked in consternation. "Me? Why, I'm not a saint! Whatever could have given you that idea? Me a saint! Boy, didn't they teach you to speak truthfully in the warren? And couldn't you have heard it in all I said? Do I sound to you like St. Roy?"

"Yes," I said truthfully.

Abashed, he turned to look at his crostic-words. "No, no," he said after a little thought. "I'll tell you what. A saint will tell you stories of his life, and . . ."

"And so do you, about going to the city, and all the things you found there."

"There's a difference. The stories I tell are not of my life, but of our life, our life as men. It's the difference between wisdom and knowledge. I'll admit to knowledge, even to a lot of it, if it makes you happy to have found me; useless knowledge though it is. But wisdom -- i'm no angel, I know this much, that wisdom need not come from knowledge, and sometimes can't at all. If it's knowledge you want, well, I haven't had anybody to tell about it for years, so I'm glad you've come; if it's wisdom, then you'd better be about it any way you can find; I'll be no help."

"Would it be possible to have knowledge and still be a saint?"

He hummed a bit over that. "I suppose," he said; "but being a saint wouldn't have anything to do with how much knowledge you had. It would be like, you can be tall, or fat, or have blue eyes, and be a saint -- you see?"

"Well," I said, relieved, "maybe then I could start with getting knowledge, and take my chances with being wise as I go along."

"It's all right with me," said my saint. "What would you like to know?"

"First of all," I said, "what is it that you're doing?"

"This? This is my crostic-words. Look."

On the table where the morning sun could light it lay a thin sheet of glass. Below it was a paper, covered minutely with what I knew was printing; this took up most of the paper, except for one block, a box divided into smaller boxes, some black and some white. On the glass that covered the paper, Blink had made tiny black marks -- letters, he called them -- over the white boxes. The paper was crumbled and yellow, and over a part of it a brown stain ran.

"When I was a boy in Little Belaire," he said, bending over it and brushing away a spider that sat like a letter above one white box, "I found this paper in a chest of Bones cord's. Nobody, though, could tell me what it was, what the story was. One gossip said she thought it was a puzzle, you know, like St. Gene's puzzles, but different. Another said it was a game, like Rings, but different. Now, I wouldn't say it was only for this that I left Belaire to wander, but I thought I'd find out how it was a puzzle or a game, and how to solve it or play it. And I did, mostly, though that was sixty years ago, and it's not finished yet."

He ducked his head beneath the table and searched among the belongings he kept there. "I talked with a lot of people, went a long way. The first thing I found out was that to figure out my paper I had to learn to read

writing. That was good advice, but for a long time no one I met knew how to do it." He drew out a wooden box and opened it. Inside were dark, thick blocks that I had seen before. "That's Book," I said.

"Those are books," said St. Blink.

"There's a lot there," I said.

"I've been places," he said, lifting the top Book, "where books filled buildings as large almost as Little Belaire, floor to ceiling." He lifted the cover to reveal the paper sewn up inside, which released the peculiar smell of Book, musty, papery, distinct. "The book," he said slowly like a sleepwalker, drawing his finger under the largest writing, "about a thousand things." His fingers wandered over the rest of the page, while he said "something something something" under his breath, and came to rest on a line of red writing at the bottom. "Time, life, books," he said thoughtfully, and lowered the lid over it again.

"There are people," he said, tapping the gray block, "and I found some of them eventually, who spend their whole lives with this, peeking into the secrets of the angels. They're turned around, you see, and look backwards always; and though all I wanted to do was to solve my puzzle, the more I learned to read writing, the more I got turned around myself. It's endless, the angels' writing, they wrote down everything, down to the tiniest detail of how they did everything. And it's all in books to be found."

"You mean if we could read writing, we could do all those things again that they did? Fly?"

"Well. They had a phrase, they said, 'Necessity is the mother of invention'; and I can imagine that there could come a time again when some inner necessity makes us begin all that again. But I can more easily imagine that all that is done with, put away in these books, like toys that don't amuse you any longer but which are too much a part of your childhood to pitch out.

"Those old men, you know," he said, putting away all the Book and sliding it back into place under the table, "they wouldn't dream of actually trying to follow the instructions in any of the million instruction books. That it was once all like that is sufficient for them. That it could ever be like that again -- well, it's like smiling over the sadnesses of your youth, and being glad they're all quite past."

He bent again over his ancient puzzle. He sighed. He wet a finger and wiped a mar on the glass. "You put letters in the boxes," he said, "according to instructions written here. But the instructions are the puzzle: they are clues only, to words which, when broken up into letters, will fill the empty boxes. When every clue has been deciphered, and the word it hints at guessed, and all the letters rearranged rightly and put in their proper boxes, the letters in the boxes will spell out a message. They will make sense as you read them across."

That may not have been exactly what he said, because I didn't ever really understand how it worked. But I understood why he had spent so many years at it: to have been hidden so well, what at last appeared in the boxes must be of vast importance. I looked down at what composed the message, filled with gaps like an old man's mouth. "What does it say?"

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He was right, that it was a puzzle or a game; you were wrong to think it must be important, to be so well hidden. It was one of thousands like it;

the angels solved them or played them in a few minutes, or an hour, and tossed them away._

Angels. . . . If I could believe only a part of what St. Blink told me, the hundred years or so before the Storm must have been the most exciting to be alive in since there have been men. I spent a lot of time daydreaming about those times, and what it would really have been like. The stories to furnish my daydreams poured out of Blink like water; I think he had been like me when he was young, and still was in a way, though he snorted when I talked about how wonderful it must have been. "Wonderful," he said. "Do you know that one of the biggest causes of death in those days was people killing themselves?"

"How, killing themselves?"

"With weapons, like the ones I told you about; with poisons and drugs; by throwing themselves from high buildings; by employing oh any number of engines that the angels made for other reasons."

"And they did that deliberately?"

"Deliberately."

"Why?"

"For as many reasons as you have to say the time they lived in was wonderful."

Well, there was no convincing me, of course; I would still sit and dream away the hot sleepy afternoons, thinking of the angels in their final agony, their incredible dreaming restless pride that covered the world with Road and flung Little Moon out to hang in the night sky and ended forcing them to leap to their deaths from high buildings still unsatisfied (though I thought perhaps Blink was wrong, and it was only that they thought they could fly).

Oh, the world was full in those days; it seemed so much more alive than these quiet times when a new thing could take many lifetimes to finish its long birth labors and the world stay the same for generations. In those days a thousand things began and ended in a single lifetime, great forces clashed and were swallowed up in other forces riding over them. It was like some monstrous race between destruction and perfection; as soon as some piece of the world was conquered, after vast effort by millions, as when they built Road, the conquest would turn on the conquerors, as Road killed thousands in their cars; and in the same way, the mechanical dreams the angels made with great labor and inconceivable ingenuity, dreams broadcast on the air like milkweed seeds, all day long, passing invisibly through the air, through walls, through stone walls, through the very bodies of the angels themselves as they sat to await them, and appearing then before every angel simultaneously to warn or to instruct, one dream dreamed by all so that all could act in concert, until it was discovered that the dreams passing through their bodies were poisonous to them somehow, don't ask me how, and millions were sickening and dying young and unable to bear children, but unable to stop the dreaming even when the dreams themselves warned them that the dreams were poisoning them, unable or afraid to wake and find themselves alone, until the Long League awakened the women and the women ceased to dream: and all this happening in one man's lifetime.

And it all went faster as the Storm came on, that is the Storm coming on was the race drawing to its end; the solutions grew stranger and more desperate, and the disasters greater, and in the teeth of them the angels dreamed their wildest dreams, that we would live forever or nearly, that we would leave the earth, the spoiled earth, entirely and float in cities suspended between the earth and the moon forever, a dream they could not achieve because of the Wars starting and the millions of them falling out in a million different ways and all at each other's throats. And the Long League growing secretly everywhere as the desperate solutions fell to ruins or exploded in the faces of their makers, the Long League in secret struggle with the angels, who hardly knew of its existence in their midst till the League was the only power left when the Law and the Gummint had exhausted themselves with the Wars and in the struggle to keep the world man's; and for that matter the truthful speakers beginning the speech over the thousand phones of the

Co-op Great Belaire; and while the million lights were going out, and the mechanical dreams fading and leaving the angels alone in the terrible dark, the Planters, thousand-armed and -eyed and wiser than any human being, searched other skies and suns at the angel's bidding, and brought home the trees of bread and who knows what else now lost; and nobody able to comprehend everything going on all at once, and no wonder either; and then the Storm, as Seven Hands said, which anybody could have seen, and it all began to stop, and kept stopping till all those millions were standing in the old woodlands which they had never been in before and looking around in wonder at the old world as though it were as strange as their dreams had truly been.

Blink said: "It was as though a great sphere of many-colored glass had been floated above the world by the unimaginable effort and power of the angels, so beautiful and strange and so needful of service to keep afloat that for them there was nothing else, and the world was forgotten by them as they watched it float. Now the sphere is gone, smashed in the Storm, and we are left with the old world as it always was, save for a few wounds that can never be healed. But littered all around this old ordinary world, scattered through the years by that smashing, lost in the strangest places and put to the oddest uses, are bits and pieces of that great sphere; bits to hold up to the sun and look through and marvel at -- but which can never be put back together again."

We lay stretched out in the late-summer yellow meadow and watched the solemn clouds go by. There had been a chill that dried out the woods and left them dusty and odorous, rustling and tinted brown, but summer kept on: engine summer.

"Blink," I said, "are there cities in the sky?"

He scratched behind his ear and settled back with his hands behind his head. "The angels' cities in the sky. That's what Little St. Roy called clouds like those. But there's a story. It's said that at the time of the Storm the angels built cities covered with domes of glass, which by some means could float like clouds. I don't know. I don't doubt they could. And they used to say that one day, after thousands of years perhaps, the angels would come back; the cities would land, and the angels would come out and see all that had been going on while they floated. Well. Hmmm . . . Nobody, no angel's returned. . . . I don't know. . . . Maybe they got it mixed up with Little Moon, which really was a city in the sky. where angels did live, though all there are dead now, caught in the Storm they were with no way to get home -- still there, I guess. Who knows? The milkweed's breaking, see there?"

The brown seed floated near him, which looked so much like him; I thought that if I could get close enough to it, it would have a long nose, little features, like Blink's. It rolled across his wrinkled white shirt and got off again, going elsewhere. The air would choose.

"Bits and pieces," Blink said sleepily. "Bits and pieces."

He slept. I watched the clouds, peopling their valleys and canyons with angels.

Fifth facet:

Bits and pieces: a silver ball and glove. An angel picture of St. Gary's Uncle Plunkett. A house in which two children and an old woman told about the weather, and the stone dead men in between. A false leg; a clear sphere with nothing at all inside it except all of Dr. Boots; a fly caught in plastic; a city in the sky. No, it can't be put back together, he was right about that, and I never wanted to put it back together; but it seemed that each of these things in turn gave me a message, a sign, pointed a finger toward the next, and that somehow, at the end of the series, I would find something precious

which was lost -- perhaps only knowledge, but something which I wanted above all else to find.

You have found it.

Have I? Who is this I? Didn't Mongolfier tell me that it wasn't I at all that would come here, that what would come here was no more than a reflection, an unvanishing dream, no more I than the angel picture of Uncle Plunkett, made by no human hand, was Plunkett himself? Then why do you say I have found anything at all?

Because no one else found the silver ball and glove -- this silver ball and glove. No one else searched for it. No one else followed the series from beginning to end -- and then took the last step. Perhaps anyone else could have -- but no one did. So it is you that found us. You that I speak to now: you alone who speaks to me. Now: were you going to tell about Plunkett?

I . . . yes. Yes: I was going to tell how I saw the picture, and what Blink said. . . . Do you know this story better than I do?

Go on. It's not for my sake you tell it.

I had asked Blink about the little house Once a Day showed me, and the four stone dead men. "I know about four stone heads," he said, "four heads that are a mountain; but they aren't the four dead men in the story I know. Perhaps the four stone heads picture the four dead men; or perhaps it's a joke of Whisper cord's. What was it she said of them? 'Are they mad.' Well. Who can follow Whisper? But there is a story:

"At the time of the Storm, when at last the lights and phones of the Co-op went off for good, and Great St. Roy led us away to wander, there was a boy, Gary, among us, who would become St. Gary. St. Gary had been raised by his aunt, who was a speaker, and by his uncle, who was named Plunkett. Plunkett's work, secret in nature, was one of those last plans of the angels spoiled by the Storm: a plan for immortality. The secret slipped out through Plunkett's wife, who revealed to Gary that although his uncle was dead and buried, which she didn't dispute, he was also alive in an underground place near Clevelen, far west, near the place the Co-op had been.

"So St. Gary turned back from the speaker's flight to return to Clevelen to see if he could find his supposed uncle still alive, though as he went west he passed the grave where he had seen his uncle laid. After a long search, Gary did find the place Plunkett's wife had told him of; and by that time so had others, some desperate to learn what the angels knew of immortality, others wishing to destroy the work as they were intent on destroying all that the angels had done.

"What they had found, and now kept constant watch over and had fierce disputes about, were five clear spheres without any openings and with, it appeared, nothing at all inside them. Attached to four of these five were angel-pictures, gray and shiny, of four faces. One of them was St. Gary's Uncle Plunkett.

"There was a lot of resistance among the others there to St. Gary taking his uncle away with him. For some time he argued with them, defending Plunkett from those who wanted to smash the spheres, if they were smashable, and from those who wanted to open them, or operate them, if that could be done. Then the Long League intervened there. Women of the League came, and said they would decide the matter -- as they were just then deciding so many matters -- and that no one should touch the spheres or investigate them further but they. St. Gary wouldn't agree; and by stealth one night he made away with the sphere that was in some sense Plunkett, and fled.

"For many years and through many hazards, Gary kept Uncle Plunkett with him, though the speakers laughed at him and the sphere that was so obviously empty. He became a great saint in his old age, and lived in a beech near the camp the speakers had then near New Neyork in the days of the Long League's power; and he lived with Plunkett all that time. And if Plunkett ever said a word, nobody heard it.

"After Gary's death, Uncle Plunkett went into St. Andy's wagon with other stuff, precious and useless; and like so many other things, the silver

ball and glove they tell about, the spectacles to see at night with, the dream machine, it was lost eventually, or perhaps sold, no one remembers, as no one then cared much. The Long League indeed did care: rumors came that they were searching for the last of the four dead men, some said to destroy it as they had the others, or to keep it out of the hands of their enemies as others said, but the speakers had little to do with these disputes. And then no more was heard about it."

I had questions, but to all of them Blink only shrugged and shook his head: why were there five spheres, and only four pictures? If the five spheres were all alike, why was it said there were only four dead men? How could they be what they were said to be, alive? "Ask the angels, ask the Long League," he said. "They alone know. All I know is Gary's story; if Whisper cord knows more, it's their secret -- but somehow I think they don't, and their four dead men are only a game, like the three dreams of Olive, the seven wandering stars, the nine last words of Little St. Roy. There is, though, one thing; one tangible thing, and by a path I won't describe to you, I come to have it. Look. .

And like Mbaba going to her chests to prove a story of when-we-wandered, Blink got up and searched among his belongings, and from a cranny in the wall he took out the cracked angel-picture of Uncle Plunkett which Gary had found attached to the clear sphere, and taken away with him when he took Plunkett. In the picture, Plunkett wore a shirt with buttons and had almost no hair, only a gray burr all over his head. Under his shaven chin he held a card with writing on it. He wasn't looking right out, but a bit to one side, as though he had heard someone call to him. The crack in the picture made white seams across his face like the scars of a terrible wound; he was smiling a big smile, and his teeth shone like the fitsall teeth. For some reason the picture made me shiver violently.

"Maybe," I said at last, "they had it all wrong. Maybe the spheres were something else altogether, and there never really were four dead men; they'd got it mixed up with some other story, or got it wrong somehow. Probably."

Blink smiled at me and patted my cheek. "Probably," he said. "Let's go look for mushrooms."

I didn't think that a man as old as Blink would spend the winter in a place as exposed as his house in the oak, but though autumn came on faster now he showed no signs of moving. He pottered around working in Book or staring glumly at the glass which covered his crostic-words, as nights grew colder and cold mist filled the house in the mornings so that we sat wrapped to our ears late in the Three Bears, as Blink called the sewn-together shaggies and skins we kept warm in. We wrapped up early in them too, and smoked and talked through the long evening while we watched his little charcoal fire go out. "That fire," I said, "won't be much help soon."

"No," he said. "Good thing we won't need it."

The woods became transparent. From the windows of the house you could see now all the way out to the pasture and nearly to where the brook ran chillily between its frosted rocks. Blink and I worked at making the house secure: we chinked cracks with mud and moss, hung the walls with thick rugs he had stored all summer. We closed up the fire's mouth and blocked its chimney. We made a new front door to fit over the old one, and bickered over how the two could best be fitted together to keep out the cold. On a day when the stillness and the curdled darkness of the clouds all day suggested a heavy frost, Blink drew out from where they were stored several thick sheets of plastic, unclouded, great treasures; a thickness went over the outside of each small window, and another on the inside. When this was done, he arranged the two bed-chairs so they faced the windows. "Is Jug filled right up to the top?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then I guess we're ready."

In a little brazier he lit twigs and started small lumps of charcoal going; while these caught, he found a small jar made of angel-silver, tightly sealed, and opened it. From it he took a big pinch of black powder, looked at it, frowning, and shook some back in. The rest he scattered on the glowing charcoal. It didn't smoke, but the smell was pronounced, a dense and penetrating odor like no other I have ever smelled. We made some last preparations; Blink carefully resealed the jar and put it by him; he looked around, finger to his lips, satisfied that all was ready. I had begun to feel deliciously warm and sleepy, but alert as well, as though I could go to sleep and stay awake at the same time. That seemed to be Blink's idea too, and we crept into the Three Bears, made even warmer with silver cloths Blink had attached around them, made ourselves comfortable, and sat there for three months.

On the evening of that first day we talked little; we grew silent and still as though asleep, but watching the clear cold sunset fade behind the fuzz of black trees on the mountains beyond the pasture. Later, that month's full moon lit the bald, still earth and we listened to the cracks and snaps of its freezing. Clouds gathered, moving fast over the moon's white face. By morning the year's first snow was falling, dusting the ground with a fine cold powder which the bitter wind blew around like dust.

Jug kept water as warm in winter as it had kept it cool in summer. Once a day perhaps, I would fill a pipe with St. Bea's-bread, all flaky with cold. At full moon time, St. Blink would climb complaining from his Bear, and light charcoal, and burn more of the black powder. When there was a warm spell, we would sometimes crawl out and open the two front doors and climb down the ladder, moving with careful gravity like two ancient invalids; and then back up in a short time utterly exhausted, though having seen a great deal.

We slept a strange, utter sleep, coming out only past noon as winter truly took hold, and passing back in again as evening came; many days passed without comment, only glimpsed between one doze and another. Snow choked the woods deeply; we sat all day once absorbed in the progress of a fox across the trackless pasture, and watched the doings of jays and sparrows, falling asleep when they did. Two chipmunks of the oak at last found a way into the tree house, and would run cheerfully over us, breathing our heated breath; they slept in Blink's lap for three days of blind violent storms that sheathed the forest in ice, which seemed to make music in the fine blue morning that followed, music too blinding to look at. The chipmunks slept. We slept, dust and loose bits of moss and spines of leaves blown up around our feet by drafts. We had become a part of Blink's beloved sleeping oak, hearing its branches creak and snap in wind, grieving when a great weight of ice broke one fine limb. Snow fell from its branches to thud on our roof, and then slide from our roof to the ground. I blinked less often, I came to notice; and when I blinked, often I slept. My left hand lay on my right for half a month.

On a white afternoon sometime in that endless season, a warm day when Blink had struggled out to take powder from the jug to steam us into our deep hibernation again, I asked, "Where does it come from?"

"Where does what come from?" he asked, looking around to see if I meant some beast.

"The powder," I said. "And how does it do that?" Already it had begun to do it; the penetrating smell was in the air, sharp and metallic, like the warm breath from a brass throat, and I felt my haunches wiggle more comfortably into the seat I had sat in so long.

"Ask the angels how it does what it does," he said. "They'd tell you, but you wouldn't understand. Can't you tell how it does it? Listen to it work; you've got time." With great care he worked himself back into his chair as I tried to listen to the powder work. I could begin to tell what he meant; and I knew that by winter's end I would know how it did what it did, though I wouldn't be able to explain it to anyone who hadn't spent a winter with it.

"And where it comes from," Blink was saying, finding a way to sit he liked well enough to stay in, "well . . . that's a tale . . ."

I said we slept a lot; but awake, I felt strangely clear and smart, as though everything were taking its time to reveal itself to me with slow precision, to surprise me that it contained more than I'd thought it had: not only the hunting fox's every movement, but St. Blink's long tangled histories, unfolding meantime, twisting but patent, as the peach-colored brook was patent at sunset running through the black and white pasture.

He went on, talking about the powder, and about other powders and medicines the angels had made; about how the angels, not content with altering the world for their convenience, had altered men too to fit the altered world, paving and remaking their deepest insides as they had the surface of the earth. About medicine's daughters: he said, "Medicine is to medicine's daughters as a dry stick is to a tree. Medicine is like paint; medicine's daughters are like the change of color in a crystal. Medicine changes you, fights your diseases, drowns your sorrows; medicine's daughters make you a suggestion that you change yourself -- a suggestion that you can't refuse. A medicine lasts as long as a meal; medicine's daughters leave you changed long after they've disappeared from your body."

Four of medicine's daughters are contained in the Four Pots, the first to cause you to throw off nearly every disease, and the last, the bone-white pot and its white contents, was made to solve a strange problem that was caused by the first. "The angels learned to heal the things that kill men young," Blink said, "and hoped therefore that they might live forever. They were wrong in that, but so successful at keeping men alive that it seemed that soon there would be in the world far too many healthy people, as good as immortal, unable to be killed by anything but their own stupidity. flowing from the wombs of women like ants from an anthill, and no food and no room for them all. Think of the fear and revulsion you feel when you kick into a nest of ants and see them swarm: men felt that for their kind, and the Law and the Gummint most of all, who most of all bore the burden of keeping the world man's.

"And so. by a means we have forgotten, a means like medicine's daughters but far more subtle even, they made themselves childless. It took some generations, but at last they made this childlessness permanent: it would be passed on then, from mother to child. And they made the medicine's daughter which is in the fourth of the Four Pots to start up again the inside goings-on which their means stopped. When it's taken, a woman can for a while conceive: but her child will be childless, until she too makes the choice to take the medicine's daughter. It's as though we were born without eyes, as though our eyes were not stuck in our heads but passed down from mother to child like a treasure, and every child had the choice to take them up or not.

"And it would have worked out, perhaps, if the Storm hadn't come; men would have chosen their numbers as they chose to build Road and put up a false moon next to the real one. But the Storm did come; and who can say it wasn't hastened by this terrible choice of theirs? And in the winters that came after, in the Wars and catastrophes, millions died by all the old means the angels thought they had removed forever from the world, and few were born by this new means of theirs.

"And we are left now, we few, unable to reverse what they did; carrying a part of ourselves outside ourselves, in the white pot; left with their choice still."

There was a winter when I was five or six, when I had gone looking for my mother, Speak a Word, and come upon her in a curtained place; I had come up quietly, and she didn't see me, for she was intent on what the old gossip Laugh Aloud was saying to her, which I couldn't hear. I saw then that Seven Hands was with them, and so I came no closer -- this was when my knot with him was most tangled. I knelt there and watched them in the winter light. Laugh Aloud had the box of pots open before her, and with one finger she moved the white one across the table to my mother. My mother's nose was shiny with sweat, and she had an odd, fixed smile on her face. She picked up and put down again the fourth pot.

"No," she said. "Not this year."

Seven Hands said nothing. Did he wish it? Did it matter? He said nothing, for the angel's choice was only for Speak a Word. "Not this year," she said, and looked only at Laugh Aloud, who pursed her lips and nodded. She placed the pot in its fourth place in the holder, and returned the holder to its box. The top of the box closed with a little noise.

At my dream of that noise, I woke.

"The angels," Blink was saying, "with their phones and their cars and their Road, they used to say: 'It's a small world. Getting smaller every day.'" He shook his head. "A small world."

He went on, after we had smoked, talking of winter. Of the winters of the Wars, and this black powder that had kept the fighters against the angels alive, and how he came to have it now; and the winter the Long League was made manifest; and the winter Great St. Roy locked the door of the Co-op Great Belaire, and the speakers began their long, hunted wanderings, and about his lost leg; about the rest of the world, beyond the oceans, from which no word came any more . . .

"His lost leg?" I said.

"From cold," said St. Blink. "Frozen, and rotting from it, and had to be cut off. In years before, the angels' science could have replaced it, made him a whole new one, a real one; but he had to be content with a false one."

Patent as sunset water . . . "Which is in the warren now," I said.

"So it is." Interminably the snow continued its silent, blind descent. "You cry, Roy said, just after, and brood, and think you might as well be dead. But you get an artificial one, even if it's not like the angels could make, it's wood but it works; and you force yourself to get up and walk, feeling foolish with it as much as hurt. But you set to, and one day you can keep up. You can't dance, maybe, and it's a long time before you make love again, but you get along. You learn to live with it. You even laugh; for sure Roy did. But still he always had one less leg. No matter how good it got.

"And what Roy thought, who saw the Storm, was that from then on we would all be as he was -- all legless men. Whether it was the choice of childlessness, or further back, in the angels' decision to hammer the world into a shape convenient for men, no matter what the cost -- whatever it was, we lost that terrible race.

"And it left us legless men." Twilight would be forever today, starting almost as morning ended and sliding imperceptibly into moonless night. "And we can laugh. We have our systems, and our wisdom. But still only one leg. It doesn't get better, a lost leg, like a cold. We learn to live with it. We try."

He shifted, ever so slightly. "Well, these are winter stories . . . See how gray the light is today, the world's as sleepy as I am. Little Belaire's closed up now, they're all close inside, and the old stories told . . . and spring comes, when it comes."

And we slept again, not having moved. The days went by full of blown snow, the sun's trip quick and cold and veiled. No stars, no moon for days: the fox: the birds.

Sixth facet:

There was a day, after gray rain had melted the last hillocks of black-peppered snow, and many birds had come home, and the woods were filled with new smells as with a stretch and a yawn, that Blink and I crept down the ladder and stood in the new air burdened with odors, looking around blinking and trying to stand up straight.

At the last full moon Blink, after judging the weather and counting something twice on his fingers, had put away his jar of black powder; but the first warm days found us still sleeping out the last of our long sleep, staying in bed as you do on a fine morning when you know you should be up, but perversely roll and toss under your untidy blankets until the sun is high. Now we wandered slowly in the woods, greeting the others who had come from hibernation, a snail and a basking turtle, a woodchuck so lean he seemed to be wearing someone else's baggy clothes, and the trees too; and as Blink and I stopped to watch the woodchuck sniff the air I was filled with gratitude that I had made it, made it through another winter through which many had not, a winter that was over now, a winter which is half of life. Life is winter and summer, a day is half asleep and half awake, my kind is man and they have lived and died; and I have come through another winter to stand here now on the winter-turned earth and smell the wet woods. I thought of Once a Day, I saw her vividly on travels far away. St. Roy had lost a leg to winter, but had lived to see spring. I sat down with the weight of all this, and looked up at Blink, ancient and lined, whom the winter despite his powder had weakened and aged, and knew there were those in Belaire who hadn't lived. I knew that what the powder Blink burned had done was to _stop:_ stop all this that I felt now rush over me intolerably. It had started again as the powder wore off, and it was enormous. I sighed to breathe it out but could not; and wept suddenly, big panting sobs where I sat on the bursting earth.

At Little Belaire they would be making new rooms from old in honor of spring. Buckle cord would be shifting walls and opening doors all along Path, new dirt would be walked into hard floors, sun would be let in. Belaire opens like a new insect in the warmth, and Leaf cord trims and decorates and invites people to watch it unfold. Insulation is taken down, rooms swept of leaves and winter, favorite chairs lugged along Path to favorite bits of sun; and a new word that makes all the cords hum with thought and laughter.

"And you want to go home to it," said St. Blink.

"What? Go home? Why do you say that?"

"You don't answer when I speak to you, you can't hear what I say. You've been staring out the window all morning when there is a way out of the house, and things to do too, I don't just mean hauling and fixing, there are things abroad now to see and flowers blooming. And you sit instead indoors."

"It's not really indoors here."

"You know what I mean. You itch all over, but there's no place to scratch."

"Well, I can't go back," I said. "Of course."

"Of course."

There would be the bees swarming and the expeditions out beyond Little Mountain to see the new bread, and Mbaba's birds returning; and soon the travelers from the List coming, and perhaps she among them this time, and so much to tell her.

"I suppose," I said, "there are other places in the world."

"Yes," Blink said, "I suppose there are; other places, and just as nice."

I got up from my window and hustled down the ladder, almost angry with him. Because he was right: I went out to sit in the blooming meadow and let myself think Yes, I want to go home, now, in spring, now, I want to go home; my throat was hard and painful with it. I wanted to go home so badly for such a long time that day that I was only a little surprised when my wanting summoned from the leafy trees by the brook two pale boys, lankier than they had been, one with a red and one with a blue band around his neck. Among other more important things, I had forgotten, during the winter, which was which.

They climbed the bank in their dawdling way, stopping to poke into bushes for animals; when one saw me he waved, and I waved back. It was as though they had been waiting all winter just around the turn of the brook for

the first hot day of spring.

"Hello," said, I think, Budding. "Are you a saint yet?"

"No," I said. "Not yet."

"Well," said the other, coming up behind, "they'd like to see you back in Little Belaire."

"No Moon went in the fall," said the first, "and again in the spring; your mother misses you."

His brother hunkered down on the meadow and ran his hand through his lank blond hair to find a leaf. "Maybe," he said, "if you had a whole year, and you're not a saint yet, you should go home and start again later."

"Maybe," said the other.

"Maybe," I said, thinking of my mother, and of the little that No Moon could tell her, and how easily I had left and how little I had thought of hers or anyone's feelings. A hot wave of shame and impatience made me jump up with clenched fists. "Yes. Yes, I should," I said. "Maybe I should . . ."

"Where's the saint?" the twins said, almost in unison.

The saint. I turned from the twins and looked back toward the woods, where from the cover of the hawthorns a brown face ringed with white hair peeped out at us like some shy wild thing, and disappeared into the shadows when he saw that I saw him. I stood halfway between the woods and a fallen log where the twins sat absorbed in something they had found. "Wait!" I shouted to the twins, who looked up, surprised. They were in no hurry.

I remembered the spring before, when I had crashed through these trees in search of him; it had been just a wood then, like any wood. Now, like a face you've learned to love, it had grown so familiar that the first wood was gone forever, and I knew this one only, which had a path through it, secret like Path, by the split birches, around the dense evergreens and down the bank to the mossy, ferny places and the black fallen trees where mushrooms grew, up the slate outcropping splashed now with clinging green, and up the sloping, brambly ground to where the old oaks grew, and to the oldest oak. To Blink, who sat at its foot, looking down it seemed in sorrow.

I crept up slowly to him and sat by him without speaking. He didn't look up at me, but now I saw that it wasn't sorrow that made him look down, but something in the grass at his feet which he watched intently: a black ant of the largest kind. It struggled through the bending grasses, its feelers waving unceasingly.

"Lost," Blink said. "Can't find his nest, lost the path. Nothing worse than that can happen to an ant. For an ant, being lost is a tragedy."

"What is that? Tragedy."

"Tragedy, it's an ancient word; it meant a description of a terrible thing that had happened to someone; something that, given circumstances and some fault in you, could happen to you, or to anybody. It was like truthful speaking, because it showed that we share the same nature, a nature we can't change and so cease to suffer. If this ant ever finds his nest again, and could tell about his experience and the suffering he felt, they'd have a tragedy. But he's unable, even if he does get back. In a way, no ant has ever before been in the tragedy of being lost; this one's the first, because ants have no way of telling about such things, and so being forewarned. Do you see?"

"I think I do."

He raised his eyes from the ground and regarded me calmly. "Well. I think my stories are all told, Rush, the important ones; and now that those two look-alikes have come back, you'll be going home, I suppose."

Old Blink! I had learned truthful speaking in that winter with him, and the weight and tenderness in his words made no answer possible. I only knelt by him and waited. He said nothing more, though; only watched the ant struggling through the grass like a man in the dark.

"Tell me what I should do," I said at last.

"No, no," he said, as though to himself. "No. . . . I guess, you know, all your foolish talk about me being a saint did affect me a little. Enough so

that I wanted to tell you a story you would remember, and could repeat. But it's no story, is it, only 'and then, and then, and then' endlessly. . . . A saint, no. If I were a saint, I wouldn't tell you, now, what you should do. And since I'm not a saint, I can't."

I thought of Seven Hands, and the day we had gone to see Road. He'd said: "If you're going to go somewhere, you have to believe you can get there. Somehow, some way." I thought of Sewn Up and No Moon, living at the river house but tied to the warren by strong cords. I thought of Once a Day. No: though Belaire tugged at me, I couldn't go home again. Not yet.

"Blink," I said. "You said, about the four dead men, that if I wanted to know more, I should ask the Long League, or the angels."

"Both gone."

"Dr. Boots's List is a child of the League. And knows things the League knew."

"So they say of themselves."

"Well," I said, and took a breath. "I'll go ask them, then."

He sat silent, blinking at me as though he had just then noticed me kneeling by him, and wondered how I had got there.

"Maybe," I said, "i'm not to be a saint. Maybe not. But there are still stories to learn, and tell." I reached down with a finger and made a path through the grass for the ant, who stopped his labors, bewildered. I wondered if I would weep. I had wanted to be a saint.

"I know the way there," Blink said. "Or I knew it once."

I looked up. His brown face was creased in the beginnings of smile-wrinkles. He hadn't wanted to tell me what to do; but I had chosen as he would have chosen for me. "I wonder, though, if they'll tell you what you want to know."

"There was a girl," I said, "a Whisper cord girl, who years ago left Belaire, and went to live with them. if I could find her, she'd tell me."

"Would she?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know.

"Well," Blink said, "if you listen now, I'll tell you how to reach them. That's the first thing."

I couldn't think, at the same time, of Little Belaire, of Once a Day, and of the directions Blink would give me, so I held up my hand for a moment, palm toward Blink, as gossips do before they hear a tale, and made myself as much as I could an empty bowl; and Blink told me then how I must go from here to where the List lived; and he told it in such a way that I couldn't forget it: because in a way he was a saint, he was: my saint.

We rose, and linked arms, and walked out into the blinding meadow strewn with new flowers. The twins came to their saint, who patted them and giggled, become again the little old man they knew. We sat and talked, and his eyebrows danced up and down and his tiny hands slapped his knees. The twins supplied news from the warren, what little they knew. He listened, and yawned in the heat; finally he lay down, his feet up, on the slope. "Yes, it goes on there as always. . . . No new thing, and if there were you wouldn't know of it . . . well. And then, and then, and then. Another spring, and getting hot too. . . . Quick enough it comes and goes . . ." He was asleep, hands behind his head, breathing quietly in the warming south wind.

We went away quietly. I gathered my pack, but left the fine string hammock for Blink: a small enough gift.

"We'll be at the river house tonight," Budding said; and Blooming said, "Then you'll get home tomorrow."

"No," I said. "I'm not going home. But I'll go with you as far as the river. I'll find Road there."

"I thought you weren't going to be a saint," Budding said.

"I don't know about saints." We had reached the edge of the little brook. "But I decided to leave home, and I think I ought to stay left." I looked back as we went into the woods and caught a glimpse of Blink, asleep in the meadow. I wondered if I'd ever see him again.

I wonder if I ever did.

Seventh facet:

I stood next dawn at a great joint of Road, kicking apart the pink embers of the night's fire. Southward, Road fell away to woodlands gleaming in a clear morning, westward it led into lands still night. Above my head, spanning all of Road, was a great green panel supported on rustless pillars, that creaked and swayed in the rising wind. It was lettered, meaninglessly to me, except for two arrows of stained white: one pointing south, one west. I packed my little camp and went south.

In the afternoon I came into the wooded country I had seen. Road entered the forest; and the forest too entered Road. The forest stepped down steep inclines in great trees, and gracefully out onto Road in saplings and weedy trees which tore up the gray surface as spring breaks ice on a river. The liquid slide of the big trees' shade was over it, and when I waded a stream that had cut a deep wound across it, I saw that among the stones in the stream were pieces of Road. And will it all one day be washed away? I thought of Blink talking about the bits of the great angel sphere.

I was in the forest seven days without it thinning or breaking, only growing deeper and older (though not as old as Road). It was an ancient place, and nice to be in -- nice to follow Road through, anyway. Night made it different; it made you think that a thousand years ago there had been no forest here; there might have been houses, or towns, and now there were only trees, huge and indifferent, the undergrowth thick and impassible except by animals. Only Road here was for man any more; and Road would be conquered in the end. The fire I built made a great vague hole in the dark, and kept animals away, though I heard noises; and the nations of the insects made their songs all night. I slept lightly through them, waking and dozing, my dreams like waking and my waking like a dream, all filled with those ceaseless engines.

It was as though I had been taken in, by the forest, and forgotten that I had ever been elsewhere. I continued to be afraid at night, but that seemed proper; in the day I walked, turning my head side to side to see only trees. I even stopped talking to myself (which truthful speakers do all the time, alone) and just watched, as the forest watched me. I had become part of it. So much so that when between waking and sleeping in a moonless night I heard two large animals pass near me, and one come close on padded feet, I only waited, absolutely still like any small prey, alert but somehow unable to wake fully and shout or run. And they passed. And next morning I was hardly sure they had been there. I sat smoking in the morning, wondering if I should be grateful I had escaped; the forest had so far convinced me that I was the only man in the world that it was not until I heard human voices singing that I realized it was a man who had passed me in the night.

The birds talked to each other and even the sunlight seemed to make a noise as it fell unceasingly, but the human voices were another kind of noise, which sorted itself from the forest's as soon as I heard it. For a reason I remember but can't quite express, I hid when I heard it was coming closer, coming from the way I had come. From within the great ferns at Road's side I watched; and along the broad gray of Road came, not men but one, then two, then three enormous cats. I had seen cats before, shy feral faces in the woods, and one or two who lived at Belaire and caught mice and moles. These cats were not of that kind; it wasn't only that they were huge -- if they had stood on their hind feet like men, they would have been nearly my height -- but that their soft, padding motion was purposeful and their lamplike eyes so

observant, so calmly smart. I had heard of one cat like them: the cat that came to Belaire with Olive.

They sensed me, and without altering their steady padding came toward the place I hid; I was afraid for a moment, but they were not threatening, only interested. And now down the road those singing came into sight: ten or so, in black, with wide black hats that shaded their faces. When they saw that the cats saw something in the ferns that interested them, the singing died away, and, as interested as the cats, they came toward me. I stood up and stepped out onto Road. They were more surprised than I was, because of course it was they I was looking for, though I hadn't expected to find them so soon.

I greeted them as they gathered around me, and smiled. One said: "He's a warren boy."

"How did you find our camp?" another said.

"I didn't know I had."

"What do you want with us? Why have you come here?"

The urgency and hostility in their voices made it hard to say, hard to say anything at all; I stammered. The first who had spoken, tall and long-limbed, strode over to me and took my arm, holding tight and looking hard into my face. "What are you?" he said, low and insistent. "Spy? Trader? We want nothing more from you. Did you follow us here? Are there others hidden in the woods?"

They all stood close around me, their faces secret and blank. "I've come," I said, "to -- to see you. Visitors to Little Belaire aren't treated this way. I didn't follow you, I was ahead of you. I don't mean any harm to you, and I'm alone. Very much alone." It was amazing to see them pause and puzzle over this, and look darkly at me; because of course I had spoken truthfully. And with the force of a blow I realized that none of those I faced did. Perhaps Once a Day, supposing I found her, no longer would; nobody that I would meet, for hundreds of miles around, spoke truthfully. My throat tightened, and I started to sweat in the cool morning.

Another man, whose beard was grizzled gray and whose movements were as graceful as the cat's beside him, came up to me. "You have your secrets, there," he said. "You guard yourselves. We have our secrets. This camp is one of them. We're surprised, mostly."

"Well," I said, "I don't know where this camp is you talk about, and if I went on now, I'd never be able to find it again. If you want, I'll do that."

We had nothing further to say, then. They wanted to go on to this camp, and I didn't want to lose them; they didn't want to take me to it, but didn't know how to part from me. I was a real wonder.

The cats had started to go on, having grown bored with me, and some others drifted after them as though summoned. The question of me wasn't resolved, but the cats seemed to make up everyone's mind. The big man took my arm again, more gently, though his look was still black, and we started down Road after the cats. (There would be a lot of arguments and hesitations resolved that way among the List, I would come to find; the cats decided.)

Soon a spur of Road fell away from Road itself, and led downward in a sharp curve, broken in places and seeming about to lose itself in woods; and only when, at the bottom, it straightened itself and joined Road again, but Road going in another direction, under a bridge hung with ivy as with a long garment, did I realize we had gone around one of the great somersaults I had seen Road do so many years ago. Through the trees we could see its broad back humped as it made its big circles; no doubt the whole forest was seamed with Road, if you knew where it ran. Where does it go? I'd asked Seven Hands. Everywhere, he'd said.

We left Road then, and went through what seemed impassible woods, though there were hidden paths, and came to a small stone clearing, and nestled in the woods at the edge of the clearing was their camp: a low, flat-roofed building, angel-made with wide windows filled in now with logs. Before it were two ranks of decayed metal piles, almost man-high, that had once been engines of some kind, of which I could make nothing.

Before the door sat a bony, black-hatted old man, who waved to us slowly with a stick. The cats had found him already, and sat in the sun by him switching their tails and licking. The tall man who held me showed me to the old one. "He stays outside," he said, and looked at me; I shrugged and nodded as though that would be all right with me, and they went through the door.

I smiled at the old man from where I stood on the stone clearing, and he smiled back, seeming not in the least surprised or apprehensive, though he was clearly the guard and the doorkeeper. I noticed leaning against the building's side a huge square cake of plastic, sleek as Blink's Jug, dirty and cracked, but its red and yellow colors undimmed, that bore a picture of a shell. The sun was getting hot; finally I ventured over to sit with the old man in the shade of the building.

We exchanged further smiles. He was no more doorkeeper than the rotting rows of angel engines before us. I said: "Years ago . . ."

"Yes, oh yes," he said, nodding reflectively and looking upward.

"Years ago, there was a girl, who came to you from Little Belaire. A young girl, named Once a Day."

"Swimming," he said.

I didn't know what to say to that. Perhaps he was senile. I sat for a while, and then began again. "This girl," I said, "came here, I mean perhaps not here, but came to live with you. . . . Well. I'll ask the others."

"Not back yet," said the old man. "Is she back yet?"

"Back yet . . ."

"She went off to the pool in the woods, a while ago. That's the one you mean?"

"I don't know, I . . ."

He looked at me as though I were behaving oddly. "She went out to meet you last night," he said, "when Brom knew you were close. Isn't that right? And came back early, early this morning, after greeting you. Then she slept. Now she's at the pool. I think."

He thought I had come with the rest, from far away. And that I must have seen her. . . . And I had: between wake and sleeping, two had passed me. A man, and another, who must have been a cat. I jumped up, startling the old man. "Where is this pool?" I said loudly. He pointed with his stick toward an opening in the woods that showed a path. I ran off.

How huge the world is, and how few in it, and she passed me in the darkness in the forest and I hadn't known. I was hurrying through the woods as though to a long-lost friend, but thought suddenly that perhaps I shouldn't rush on her: she may not be the person I knew at all, might not know me at all, why am I here anyway, and yet I rushed on as fast as I could. The path went straight up a mossy rocky ridge; on the other side I could hear water falling. I climbed, slipping on the moss, and scrambled to the top, and looked down.

A deep rippled pool of water that leaves floated across. A little falls that poured into it chiming and splashing; the rocks were wet and shiny all around it, black and green and bronze. And at the water's edge, a girl knelt to drink, her hands under the clear water and her breasts touching its surface. Beside her, drinking too, was a great white cat marked black in no pattern. He had heard me; he raised his huge head to look, the water running down his white chin. She saw him look, and rose to look too, wiping her mouth and her breasts. Her face made something like a smile, quick, with open mouth, and then was still, alert as the cat's, watching me climb carefully down the rocks to the pool's edge opposite her.

But this is not she, I thought; the girl I had known had not had breasts, her dark aureoles were like small closed mouths, like unopened buds. This one's thick hair was black, and her eyes startlingly blue, her down-turned eyebrows made an angry sulk; but it wasn't she. Six springs had passed; there was a light beard on my face. I wasn't I.

"Once a Day," I said, at the edge of the pool, my hands on its wet rocks as hers were. Her eyes never left mine, and she made again the smile I had

seen from above, but now, close to her, I could hear her quick exhalation as she made it; and when the cat beside her made it too, I saw that it was a cat's smile, a smile to bare teeth and to hiss.

I could think of nothing to say that she would hear. The cat had made himself clear, and she had made herself as the cat. I tore off the pants and shirt I wore and stepped down into the icy water. She watched me, unmoving; in two long strokes I reached and touched the rocks where she sat. When I grasped the rocks near her feet, and began to say a word about cold water, she rose and stepped back, as though afraid I would touch her. The cat, when I drew my numb body out and water streamed from me, turned and loped away silently. And then she, deserted and pursued, without a word turned on her toes and ran from me.

I called after her, and almost followed, but felt suddenly that that would be the worst thing I could do. I sat where she had sat and watched her wet footprints on the stone dry up and disappear. I listened: the woods had stopped making noise at her passage; she hadn't run far. There was nothing I could do but talk.

I don't remember now what I said, but I said my name, and said it again; I told her how far I had come, and how amazed I was that she had passed me in the night; "come more miles than I thought I could hold," I said, "and I don't have any other gift for you than that, but as many more as you want . . ." I said that I thought of her often, thought of her in the spring, had thought of her this spring after a winter in a tree and the thought had made me weep; but, but, I said, I haven't chased you, haven't followed you, no, by the Money you gave me I said I wouldn't and I didn't, only there were stories I wanted to hear, secrets I learned, from a saint, Once a Day, from a saint I lived with, that I wanted to hear more about; it's your own fault, I said, for setting me on a path I've walked ever since, and you might at least say my name to me now so that I know you are the girl I remember, because . . .

She stood before me. She had put on a coat of softest black covered with stars, black as her hair. "Rush that Speaks," she said, looking deeply into me, but like a sleepwalker, seeing something else. "How did you think about me when I wasn't there?"

She spoke truthfully, I thought, I hoped, but her speech was masked, masked with a blank face like a cat's or like the blank secret faces of the ones who had found me in the woods. "You never thought of me?"

The cat came from the woods, warily, and passed us. "Brom," she said, not as though to call to it but only to say its name. It glanced once at us as it passed, and started up a path toward the camp. She watched it for a moment, and then followed. She glanced back at me, her arms crossed, and said, "Come on, then," and all the years between now and the first day I had seen her folded up for a moment and went away, because it was just that way she had said it to me when I had followed her to Painted Red's room when we were seven, as though I needed her protection, and she must, reluctantly, give it.

She didn't ask how I came to be here, so I told her.

"Are you a prisoner?" she said.

"I think so," I said.

"All right," she said.

Something more than years had happened to Once a Day, more than a mask put over her speech. The girl who had kissed me for showing her a family of foxes, and lain down with me as Olive had with Little St. Roy, was gone, gone entirely. And I didn't care at all, at all, so long as I could follow this girl I had found, this black-robed starred girl, forever.

Eighth facet:

At evening I sat alert among them, though they were easeful, resting their backs against the walls of their camp in the gathering dusk. For what they were discussing, they didn't seem fierce enough.

"We could tie him to a tree," said one of them, moving his hands in a circle as though tying me up, "and then hit him with sticks till he's dead."

"Yes?" said the older one, the one with gray in his beard. "And what if he doesn't hold still while all this tying and hitting is going on?"

"I wouldn't," I said.

"We'd hold him," the first said. "Use your head."

Once a Day sat apart from me, with Brom, looking from face to face as the others spoke, not concerned in it, it seemed. I would never be able to run from them in their forest.

"If we had a knife," said another, yawning, "we could cut his tongue out. He wouldn't be able to talk then."

"Are you going to be the one to cut it out?" Once a Day said, and when he didn't answer, she shook her head in some contempt.

"We don't have a knife, anyway," he said, not much cast down.

They were afraid, you see, that I'd go back and tell everyone where their camp was, and that they would be invaded or stolen from; there were thieves still; they had no reason to trust me. They just didn't know what to do.

"If we were nice to him," Once a Day said. "And gave him things."

"Yes, yes," said a voice, someone lost now in darkness, "and one day he's dark, and then what does any kindness mean?"

"He's not like that," she said in a little voice. And no more was said for a long time. I jumped when someone near the door got up suddenly; it was the old doorkeeper, who went inside and came out a moment later pushing before him a white ball of light, cold and bright, which when he released it floated like a milkweed seed and shone softly over the men and women seated there. My mind was set on my fate, but when he released the Light and it floated, I thought of Olive and the full moon; I looked at Brom, and the other cats there, who regarded me with the same frank candor that was in the faces of those discussing hitting me till I died. And in Little St. Roy's ear Olive whispered her terrible secrets.

"I have an idea," I said, trying to keep the quaver out of my voice. "Suppose I didn't leave." They all looked at me with the same graceful indulgence they granted one another. "Suppose I just stayed on with you and never went back. I could help out; I could carry things. Then I'd grow old, and die naturally, and the secret would be safe." They were silent, not thoughtful particularly; it was as though they hadn't heard. "I'm strong, and I know a lot. I know stories. I don't want to leave."

They looked at me, and at the Light that moved slightly when the breeze pushed it. Finally one young man leaned forward. "I know a story," he said. And he told it.

So I spent that evening between Brom and Once a Day, not sleeping, though they were asleep in a moment. Nothing further had been said about hitting me or cutting me; nothing further at all had been said, except the story, which I smiled at with the rest, though I hadn't understood any of it.

And not long after I had at last fallen asleep, before dawn, she woke me. "The cats are walking," she said, her face dim and strange; I forgot, for a moment, who she was. I stumbled up, shivering, and smoked a little with her, and drank something hot she gave me in a cup; it tasted of dried flowers. Whatever it was, it stopped the shivers, that and a long cape of black she gave me, giggling when she saw me dressed in it. The others were laughing too, to see me in this disguise. In the long night while my fear passed, I learned something: that the truthful speakers have little need to be brave, because they always know where others stand. It had been only that these people couldn't speak that way that had made me afraid of them when, in fact, they would do no harm to me. I had been afraid of men for the first time in my

life, and I saw that it would happen often from now on -- fear, confusion, uncertainty -- and I would just have to be brave. Odd to find it out, old as I was, for the first time. And to think of the warren, where old people died peacefully, never having learned it.

The cats were walking: it was time to go. There was some discussion over who was to carry what of the things that had been packed the day before; I shouldered a big shiny black pack whose rustle told me it was full of dried bread, enough to last many through a year. It seemed right that I should carry it. And we set off along still-dark Road, in a long line, the cats dim in the distance and the sky beginning to glow to the left through the forest.

When the sun was high and the cats had had enough walking, we found a place to stop for the rest of the day, to sleep and dawdle through the afternoon with them, till evening when they were restless to move again. In a mountain meadow where tall feathery grasses grew up between dark pines and birches, Once a Day and I lay on our stomachs with our heads close and drew out sedges from their casings and chewed the sweet ends.

"When I was a little kid," I said, "I thought I would leave Belaire to go find things of ours that had been lost, and to bring them back to put in their places in the carved chests . . ."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing."

"Oh."

"I found a saint, though; a saint in a tree. And I thought I would stay and live with him, and learn to be a saint too. And I did."

"Are you a saint?"

"No."

"Well," she said, smiling, with the grass between her teeth, "that's a story."

I laughed. It was the first time since I had found her again that Once a Day had been the girl I had known in the warren.

"And he told you to come here to find us," she said.

"No. There was a story, a story you started, about four dead men . . ." A cloud passed over her face, and she looked away. "And my saint said the League knew that story. But that's not why I came."

"Why?"

"I came to find you." I hadn't known that, not truly, till I had seen her at the pool; but all the other reasons were no reason at all, after that. I drew another sedge squeaking from its fibrous case. Why are they made like this, I wondered, in segments that fit together? I bit down on its sweetness. "I used to think, in Belaire, that maybe you had gone to live with the List, and it hadn't suited you, and that one spring they'd bring you home dead. From homesickness. I saw how you would look, pale and sad."

"I did die," she said. "It was easy."

The puzzlement in my face must have been funny to see, because she laughed her low, pleased laugh; pushing herself forward on her elbows, she brought her face close to mine, and plucked the grass from between my teeth, and kissed me with eyes and mouth open. "It's nice you thought of me," she said then. "I'm sorry you were dark."

I didn't know what that meant. "You thought of me," I said. "You must have."

"Maybe," she said. "But then I forgot how."

The cat Brom beside her made an immense sharp-toothed yawn, his rough tongue arching up in his mouth and his eyes crossing; she pillowed her head on her hands, as the cat did. "Nice," she said; and slept.

That journey lasted many days, mornings and evenings of long walking and hot, vacant middles when we slept. Walking, the List sang their endless tuneless song, which at first I could hear no sense in, but which came to seem full of interest; I began to hear who was good at it, and waited for the entrance of their voices. Their singing was a way to lighten a load, I saw; it was like the second of the Four Pots I had used: it stretched time out so

endlessly that it vanished, and the miles fell behind us without our noticing them. It was only when, one dawn, we came out upon a great spiderweb of Road, where huge concrete necks and shoulders supported the empty skulls of high ruined buildings from which the glass and plastic had been stripped hundreds of years before, that they stopped singing; they were nearing home, awaking from the dream of motion.

They didn't stop when the sun was high, but hurried on, pointing out to one another the landmarks they saw, ruins great or small in the forest; and, at a wide sweeping curve of Road, cheering, they caught sight of their home. Once a Day pointed. I could see, far off, a black square; a square so dark black it made a neat hole in the noonday.

"What is it?" I said.

"Way-wall," she said. "Come on!"

We left Road on a spur of concrete, and came out suddenly onto one of those wide naked plazas, vast and cracked, windy, useless, as though the angels had wanted to show how much of the world they could cover with stone at once. Buildings stood around the stone place, some ruined, others whole; one was the odd blue and orange that are the colors of the first of the Four Pots, and had a little steeple. The largest building, in the center, was made of huge arched ribs rising out of the ground to a great height; and taking up most of its flat face was the square of utter blackness. The ivy that covered the building like a messy beard didn't grow on this blackness, and no daylight shone on it; it seemed to be a place that wasn't there; my eyes tried to cross in looking at it.

There were others, people and cats, coming out of the buildings toward us, greeting and shouting; one was an old woman, taller by a head than I, striding ahead of the others, a huge tiger cat rubbing herself against her skirts. Her long arms used a staff, but she walked as though she didn't need it; she motioned Once a Day to her and wrapped her in her long arms with a laugh. Once a Day hugged her and said a name like a sigh: Thinsinura. The old woman's eyes fell on me, and she raised her staff to indicate me. "And where did you find him?" she said to Once a Day tucked under her arm. "Or did Olive Grayhair send him to us, to tell us we're all dead?" Once a Day snuggled laughing within her arms and said nothing.

"I came to stay," I said.

"What? What?"

"I came to stay," I said loudly. "And Olive's dead many lives herself."

She laughed at that. "You're carrying," she said. "Bread, is it? Come, put it down; we'll taste it. If I were dark now, I'd question you. Staying is one thing, but . . . anyway, welcome to Service City." She raised her stick and swept it around to indicate the buildings that stood on the stone plaza. "Well. Come, warren boy; we'll think awhile, and see."

She put an arm around me as strong as the bearded man's who had taken me in the forest, and we walked together toward the black hole in the wall that Once a Day had called way-wall. Zhinsinura's long strides took us directly toward it, and though I tried to make us turn away, she gripped me and we kept on till it loomed above us, making me dizzy with its unseeable no-place. I had a moment to feel limitless fear, that if we walked into it we would be lost in its blackness, blind, and we struck it. Or didn't strike: there was a moment that felt like a cracked knuckle all through me -- and we were inside, not in darkness but in the hugest indoors I had ever been in, vast, glittering with light; as though there were a raindrop on my glasses, there was an odd shimmer and sense of refraction everywhere and nowhere. I looked back at the black wall I had passed through and was looking outside. The light that lit this place fell through that wall. Way-wall!

And the place that black wall lit, the house that housed Dr. Boots's List: I stood still in wonder at it. Zhinsinura walked away with Once a Day across the black and white tiles that made the vast floor, and their heels clacked and their voices echoed, for the place went up, up, up to the metal ribs that made the roof's curve. In that huge echoey space, so different from

the warren's hivelike insides, there were enough people it seemed to fill a city. At the back of the place a great shelf jutted out and made a second floor, reached by a wide sweep of stairs cable-flown from the ceiling; people sat on the shelf's lip and on the stairs with legs dangling and called down to those below; the travelers piled up their goods and sat on them, talking to friends who embraced them, and children ran with drink for them across the tiles. Clouds of bread-smoke arose from groups visiting, and the big cats sniffed the air and mewed. The whole place hummed and buzzed with the purr of the List's ancient speech (though some fell silent as they turned to see me) and none seemed surprised in the slightest to have stepped through Night and fallen into a treasure house of the angels.

For that's what it was. Once a Day ran across the floor to me, skipping away from friends who reached out hands to her, and came to take me in amid it all.

All along the long, long sides of that place were bins and chests and cases, angel-made; some were waist-high to me and made of glossy white plastic, others were tall, with hinged doors of glass and made all, all of angel silver -- there were so many of these there that the dull glow of them seemed to lower the heat in the place and make it cool. Some of the open low bins had mirrors above them, slanted in such a way as to make what was inside seem twice as much as it really was -- only the angels would have thought of that.

Once a Day ran from one of these cases to another, showing me things kept in them which she had told me about while we walked -- "and here's this that I told you about and here's that that I told you about," and her eyes were wide and bright and she was light and I loved her intensely. She took me by the hand to see the huge pictures fixed all along the sides above the bins; though they were so large I couldn't have missed them, she felt I must be shown, and stood pointing them out. The colors of them seemed as bright as the day the angels made them: one was carrots, beets, and beans; another had eggs and white bottles; one was a cow, with a smile like a man's, which was ridiculous. As she stood solemnly pointing to the cow, she saw someone, and said softly, "Zher."

It was a name. A boy, pale blond and with a pink tint of sunburn on his shoulders and nose, sat in a circle of people, mostly older, who seemed to keep a distance from him, though they smiled at him, and occasionally one reached out to stroke his arm or touch him. Once a Day went over to them. The boy Zher looked up at her, who was known to him, and at me, who was a stranger, and his look was the same. Once a Day went through the circle and knelt before the boy; he looked at her, his eyes searching her but seeming to look for nothing. She touched his face and hands, and kissed his cheek, and without a word came back and sat with me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Zher," she said. "Just this year come of age, and got his first letter from Dr. Boots today."

"What's that?"

"It's a letter. And it's from Dr. Boots."

"Why is he naked?"

"Because he wants to be."

Zher smiled a little, and then more; a laugh seemed to be within him, and those around him smiled too, and looked at each other and at him, and he did laugh, and they laughed with him. Somewhere someone dropped something with a clang, and the cats' ears all rose, and Zher's head snapped around with eyes wide.

"Have you had this letter from Dr. Boots?" I asked.

"Yes. Every May month since I was his age; the first, the summer after I came; and just before I went out to the camp, and met you, this year."

"Was it like that for you when you got your letter?"

"Yes. Just the same. I felt that way."

"Were you silent? Do you have to be?"

"You don't have to be. You just are, especially after the first. You don't have anything to say. It's all done. It's all like it will be. Talking, after that, is just -- just for fun. Just something to do."

"When you talk to me -- is it like that?"

She brushed her black hair with her hand and said nothing, and I didn't dare talk more about it. Evening was falling in the room; the blue daytime shimmer turning dusty gold.

"Doesn't he look beautiful?" she said.

"Yes."

"Beautiful."

"Yes."

As the sun set, the singing began, low and quiet, touched off by the purring of some cat, Brom or Zhinsinura's tiger, and taken up by one group of them, and then by another, a low sweet chuckle and drone and growl, each voice finding room in the medley to purr; and, as night came on, left off, voice by voice, Once a Day's high sad sound nearly the last, until they were all silent. And the Lights were let out.

Perhaps the angels knew a way to make the cool globes dark in the day; the List just keeps them in black bags, and lets them out at night. There were many there, but still in that great place there were pockets and vague places of darkness. No one around Zher moved to bring a Light near him, and in the gloom I could see his fair body glowing as though a lamp were lit within him.

THE THIRD CRYSTAL

A Letter from Dr. Boots

First facet:

. . . and wait till I've inserted it.

What? Shall I begin again?

No. It's all right. Here is the second crystal: see how tiny: yet it's all there. Blink and Budding and Blooming, all that part.

How many more? The sun is setting. Look: the clouds below us are all pink and yellow.

The third is the last, usually.

Angel . . . tell me this now . . .

No. Not yet. Tell me: what happened next day, at Service City?

Well, that night we slept; she took me up the wide flight of stairs that led to the big platform which covered the back part of the place -- the mezzanine, they called it (the List knew such words, words that rang like ancient coins flung down angelstone -- mezzanine). There, rooms had been made with curtains and low walls, and it reminded me a little of home. Once a Day found us an empty nook piled with pillows, and we lay together there, she talking all the while as though to pull me into her List's arms by strength of stories, until she was yawning too much to talk. She was so happy to be there,

and so glad I was with her to see it, that it made me ache with some unnamable feeling -- oh, Dr. Boots, you make them -- no, you let them make themselves -- so happy, so seldom!

Dr. Boots's List can do a thing that I never could, that Once a Day had learned in her years with them: they sleep like cats. They cat nap. Once a Day would sleep for a time, and be up for as long, and sleep some more and be up again. All through that night I felt her get up and go and come back to watch me, impatient for me to get done my long sleep; but I was in the middle of thick dreams, the dreams a sleeper in a strange house has, and couldn't wake. When I did, it was with a cry that woke me from some adventure; I lay staring, trying to remember where I was. I stumbled out through the curtains and found myself on the very edge of the mezzanine, looking out over the vast hall lit by a clear morning turned faintly blue by way-wall. Once a Day stood by it, bent over with her hands on her knees, by a little muscled brown man who sat holding up a ball of clear blue glass, turning it so the light shot through it; he bit on a tiny wooden pipe from which rose a fine white smoke.

When I reached them, stumbling past groups that fell silent when I smiled at them, I saw that on the brown man's wrist was the bracelet of blue stones which Once a Day had given to him on the day of the trading at Little Belaire. His name was Houd, but when he said it it was as soft and long and unspeakable as a cat's sigh. Others gathered around us, and I was made much of; they stared as frankly as cats at my pigtail and my spectacles and marveled at my ignorance of Dr. Boots and the List; and I couldn't understand much of their talk, though I knew the words. Outside in the morning, Brom the black and white cat walked across the wide stone, and Once a Day and the others turned to watch me do what I had to do, being new to waywall: I tried to walk out there. It doesn't work that way; I could get close to it (always from it a hot breath blew, smelling of metal somehow) but -- it doesn't work that way. I looked around at them, and they were all smiling the same smile.

"It doesn't work that way," Houd said around his pipe, and Once a Day came and pulled me away. "It's only one way," she said laughing. "Don't you see? Only one way."

She took my hand and we went across the black and white squares of the floor and out the heavy glass doors ranged all along the back of the place, and around to the front through the real morning light, and then ran together headlong across the stone, with Brom beside us, and we must drown in its limitless blackness, but of course didn't, and we were inside again, panting and hugging. "One way," she said, "only one way! I learned that, I learned that; it's all only one way, don't you see?" And the brown man Houd seemed to watch me to see if I had heard in her words all that she said; and I knew I hadn't.

There was one other thing that one new to way-wall has to do: I tried putting my arm through and then drawing it back out. I never tried it again.

In Little Belaire we said a month the same way we said a minute or a mile: to the angels they meant exact things, so that every month and minute and mile were the same length. To us, they just mean a lot or a little, depending. The List is the same, about minutes and miles, but they know how long a month is. They count it off in a number of days, thirty or so to the month, twelve months to the year, and you are back at the beginning again; and for a reason they explained to me but which I can't remember, to every fourth year they add one winter day that has no number.

To me, the name of a month is the name of a season. I've been in years with two Marches and no April, or where October came in the middle of September; but I loved the List's calendar, because it didn't only count the days for some reason you might want them counted, it told too about the twelve seasons of the year.

The building at Service City that had the orange roof and the little white steeple was called by them Twenty-eight Flavors, and it was there they

made most of the medicines and doses for which they're famous. Once a Day took me there, and we sat at two seats that enclosed a little table, private in the dimness (Twenty-eight Flavors had once had big windows of glass, but most had been broken and filled with sticks and plastic). There were many tables there like the one we sat at, angel-made with a false wood grain and not even marred in how-many-centuries. On the table was a beautiful box such as the List makes for precious things, and with a reverent care Once a Day took off its cover.

"The calendar," she said.

Inside the box were shiny square tiles, a pile of them face up, and another face down, about this size: two hands would just have covered their faces. The one showing, the one on top of the pile that was face up, was a picture, and below the picture were ranks of squares, a little like Blink's crostic-words. The picture showed two children, younger than Once a Day had been in our first June, in a meadow impossibly full of pale blue flowers, which they picked with faces quiet and absorbed. He wore short pants, she a tiny dress of the same blue as the flowers they picked.

Once a Day touched a black word below the picture. "June," she said. There was a small stone, made sticky with pine gum, in a square below the picture; she plucked it off and moved it to the next square. Ten days in June. The bell which hung before the way-wall house sounded four times, clear in the dimness, and we went to the great room for evening.

When twenty days had passed, and the stone had made its way through all the squares, we sat again in Twenty-eight Flavors. There were others there that day to watch, and they stood in the heat as Zhinsinura's big hands moved the June tile to the face-down pile and showed the next. When it was revealed, they all made a satisfied sound, like aaaah.

That picture let me know, and laugh to know, that however strange and old the angels were, still they were men, and knew what men know, if they could make this. The same two children, she still in her blue dress, lay on green grass darker than June's, older with length of hot days, and looked into a sky my great changeable clouds were piled up in, cities in the sky. But what made me laugh: the grass and they were at the top of the picture, and looked down into the clouds which floated below: and that's how it feels, in summer, to watch clouds.

"July," Once a Day said. The evening bell rang.

In July I went with her on expeditions to gather things, plants and rocks and soils and funguses the List uses for their medicines; and when we grew tired of searching, we lay to watch clouds.

"What are dark and light?" I asked. "Why do you say someone is dark, and another time that he's light?"

She said nothing, only pillowed her head on her hands and closed her eyes.

"Is it a game?" I asked. "I remember Little St. Roy said, about Olive, that when she was dark she was very, very dark, and when she was light she was lighter than air."

She laughed at that, her flat stomach shaking. "I heard that," she said.

"What did he mean?"

She lay silent for a time, and then rose on one elbow to look at me.

"When will you go back to Little Belaire?" she said.

The name in her mouth sounded odd; it was the first time I had heard her say it here, and it sounded like a place impossibly remote. "I won't," I said. "I promised I wouldn't."

"Oh, they've forgotten that. If you left, no one would mind; no one would ask you where you went."

"Would you mind?" I said, for I hadn't heard in her speech that she would, or that she wouldn't; had seemed to hear only that there was no minding in her, which couldn't be so. For a moment my heart felt cold, or hot, and I quickly said: "Anyway I don't want my tongue cut out."

"Tongue?" she said, and then laughed. "Oh, they were dark. Now . . ." And she looked away from me, closing her mouth, as though she had told a

riddle wrongly, so that its answer was revealed. But nothing had been revealed to me.

"It was a joke of Roy's," Once a Day said. "A joke is all; an old joke. Look, look, we're falling!"

Below us -- yes, below -- the sky was tumbled full of clouds. By some magic we stuck to the grass, we were even cross-legged and calm, but we were falling endlessly into cities, faces, monstrous white animals, holding hands to hold onto the roof of the world: strange, when the clouds roll close below you and the sky is grass.

And July's tile turned at the time table made seven in one pile, five in the other.

The calendar's two children lay in deep shade; the boy was asleep, a straw hat over his face and a long yellow straw in his mouth, his small bare feet wide apart. She in her blue dress sat beside him looking over a field of the same yellow straw to a red angel's tower with a conical top; and the gray clouds of a summer storm grew far off. August.

We had a shade house we shared for summer, under two maples that grew together on a hill, and we could see far off too, though all the angels' works were gone, and Once a Day wore no blue dress; no dress at all. The edges of our house changed as day went on, and the brown bodies of our guests moved with the shade.

"Four doors along the spine," Houd said. One of his skinny legs he dangled over his knee, and a wide hat shadowed his face, from which his wooden pipe protruded. "And press with all your might against them, you wouldn't be able to open them. That's my opinion."

"That's because they are open," Once a Day said, yawning. "The heat makes me sleepy."

"Just as hard to shut them," Houd said.

"No," she said. "They blow open; as doors are blown open one by one down a corridor by wind; and that's the end of that; they're open."

"You're light to think so," Houd said, and Once a Day yawned again and stretched out her little tawny body on the matted grass so her breasts were nearly flat; she smiled me a sleepy smile.

"Sun's come around," someone said. "Everybody move one place."
Shade.

At evening one let out a light he had brought, but the air drew it away toward Service City, and one by one they followed it there. We lay together as the moon rose and remade our shade house all different.

"Do you think," she said then, moving away from me by a series of slow changes of posture, "that there are four doors along your spine? And how do you think they open?"

"I don't know," I said, following her.

"Neither do I."

There was a faint rumble of thunder, like someone huge, over the horizon, grumbling in his sleep; and as we lay together our moon house too gradually moved away from under us, leaving us splashed with still, cold light.

And September's tile shown at the time table made eight in one pile, four in the other.

"I know her," I said when I saw it, "and now I know those two as well."

"How could you know them?" she asked.

"Because you showed them to me. Look: there's the old one, who comes out when it's dark; and see? she waits now, inside, in this month, and the two children are out . . ."

"No, you're wrong."

"And in the next months she'll be out, and they'll be hid."

"They won't," she said. "They're just two, like any two . . ."

"Dark and light," I said, "just as you said, don't you remember . . ."

"No!" she shouted, to silence me.

The tile we looked at showed a golden engine-summer day. The two

children walked together with shining faces; slung over his shoulder by a strap was some Book, and she carried proudly a bright September apple. In all this it was like every other tile, he and she, she in her dress of blue, in a day just the color of the month it pictured, as though squeezed from the month as from a fruit. But in this month only, there was somebody else: the children walked smiling toward a tiny red house with a peaked roof, in whose door could just be seen a small and aged woman.

And yes, it would grow dark, though it was nice now; the old woman would come out, and the two children must retire to wherever they could, to wait out the dark months, isn't that right? The angels, even in their covered cities without weather, would not have forgotten that, that in warm perfect engine summer the old woman waited . . .

"No!" she said, and ran from me.

"I want to understand," I said, when I found her amid her pillows on the mezzanine. "You have to speak truthfully to me. There was the house on the wall you showed me, where St. Roy's leg was kept. The children came out when it was light, and the old woman when it was dark. In between were the four dead men, who never changed. It was about the weather. So are the tiles."

"Yes. About the weather."

"Yes. But, when we saw it, a cloud passed overhead, and the old woman didn't come out; and the last time I saw it, on the day you left, it was spring, and yet the old woman stood there. .

She lay face down away from me, her head on her arms like a cat; now she turned her face to see me. "Then," she said, "was it about the weather?"

"I don't know. What else was it about? Why can't I hear it in what you say?"

She turned her face away again. "The tiles are about the weather. The angels made them to tell the months, and they are very true. That's all."

"Then why did you run from me?"

She said nothing, and though she lay still I felt her run from me further. I wanted to pursue her where she ran, and I took her shoulders in my hands as though to stop her, restrain her: but she had fled.

There's a certain kind of dream, the kind where you set off to do an urgent errand, or a task, and directions are given you, but as you go on the places you have been sent to are not the places you intended to go, and the nature of the task changes; the person you set out to find becomes the one who sent you; the thing you were to do turns into a place, and the place into a box of treasure or a horrid rumor; and the goal can never be reached because it's never the same goal; and yet you search on, never surprised by these changes, only persistent, only endlessly trying to do the changing thing set before you.

Until you wake, and there is no search after all.

"Once a Day," I said, and laid my cheek against her hair, which hid her face; "Once a Day, tell me there's no winter; tell me winter never comes, and I'll believe you."

Second facet:

On a blowing, rain-swept day which I would have called the first day of November but which the calendar called the twentieth of September, I went to Twenty-eight Flavors, summoned by Zhinsinura. She sat at the time table with September's tile before her.

"Did you wonder who they are?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"Just two," she said. "Like any two in this month. The other is an old woman, to whom in this month they go for counsel." She smiled at me. Her big solemn head was made bigger by her wide gray hair, and her eyes were many-pouched and always sad; but her smile was quick and real. "And how do you get on, now, warren boy?"

"Fine," I said, and would have said nothing more, but that Zhinsinura wouldn't hear in my speech just what I meant, what was fine and what not. "Can you tell me, though, what a letter from Dr. Boots is?"

There were others there, working and sitting, some I knew. I had got used to being stared at around Service City; I would have preferred now to be alone with Zhinsinura, but that's not the List's way. The others looked at me with great interest.

"It's a letter," she said. "And it's from Dr. Boots."

I felt their eyes on me. I looked down at Zhinsinura's long hands feeling the smooth edges of the tile. "There's something," I said carefully, "a thing, that I don't know."

"Always, I should hope."

"That's what she seems to mean. Your dark and light, you know, it's not an easy thing to understand. I thought I'd seen a path, that it was about winter coming; but that was only another riddle; and she seems to say the riddles are answers."

"Every riddle is its own answer," said Zhinsinura. "That's easy. But how could a riddle know its own answer? Don't think I mock you. I don't mean to, a bit. It is a secret thing. The truthful speakers haven't much believed in such secrets, is all. You ask for her secret, though you may not know that's what you're about; and she can't tell you without learning it herself. And she wants not to learn that secret."

"How can you have a secret you don't know?"

The others there looked away now. They didn't like this conversation, not the younger ones; the older weren't listening any more; but Zhinsinura only laced her fingers together and leaned toward me smiling. "Well, how do you speak truthfully?" she asked. "Let's both tell a secret."

"That's not a secret," I said. "It's something you learn so well you forget you know it."

"Well then," she said, opening her hands, "there it is."

Painted Red had said: for Whisper cord a secret isn't something you won't tell, but something that can't be told. "There's something," I said slowly, like someone stupid, "I don't know. I want to know it. There must be a way to learn it, because you all know it. If it can't be told, I'll learn it any way there is."

Zhinsinura's steady eyes seemed hooded and pouched from so much seeing. "Do you know what you ask?" she said gently. "You know, a thing about secrets is that once you learn one, you know it for good. It's your secret. You don't go back out and stand outside again not knowing. There's no way back Out."

"Like way-wall," I said.

"Way-wall?" she said smiling. "There's no such thing."

Everybody laughed gently, as though an old joke had been told at just the right time. Their laughter woke the tiger cat named Fa'afa, who was always near Zhinsinura. She touched its head and it rested again.

"You know," she said, "the League had no love for the truthful speakers. Perhaps it was that their women wouldn't join the League in the very ancient times, or then help out after the Storm when they might have, but only kept to themselves. Then perhaps it was the League's pride, that you all had survived without their help. It was only long after women had gone to others to tell them the League was dissolved that Olive went to the warren. The League thought never to make peace with you; and there were some, to the League's shame, who tried to prevent Olive. Well. All that is old.

"But we have grown old differently, in all those lifetimes since then. I know how differently: I visited your warren often, oh, so long ago it's

neither light nor dark now. There was a boy there -- well, a boy, an old, old man now if he's lived -- who asked me to stay there with him, with you all. I wanted to, though I was afraid; in the end he was more sensible; but I think we both knew we would end up in a corner. And even so, I think the harder way is to come here from there. Your girl could because she is a cousin; you . . . well. I don't say it to frighten you."

She looked away, raising her long bony arm to shake down her bracelets. The evening bell rang. She thought; then said: "Yes, there is a thing you don't know. Yes, there is a way to learn it, though not this time of year; and it's too soon for you, anyway. Stay; listen and learn; and don't ask for what's not given you." She moved the sticky stone from the twentieth to the twenty-first day. "You say she ties riddles for you. Well, I'll tie you another. I'm not afraid to tell it because _ay_, though it's not a riddle at all you'll think it's one; and _bee_, if you're going to stay here I think it will have to be by your way and not ours; and _see_, it's the day and the time for it anyway.

"This is the riddle: you can tie a string around your finger to remember something, until you forget there's a string tied around your finger. Then you will have forgotten doubly, and for good. This calendar is the string tied around our finger -- and the letter from Dr. Boots is how we forget it, doubly and for good.

"You can look for a path through that. I know your famous Path. If you want to find it here, think this: _path_ is only a name for a place where you find yourself. Where you're going on it is only a story. Where you've been on it is only another. Some of the stories are pleasant ones; some are not. That's dark and light."

I sat with my head bowed before her and the September tile between us and listened; and I might have understood, too, if I had ever in all my growing up been told a story that wasn't true.

"Did she send you away?" Once a Day asked. She sat amid baskets of apples that were being brought in through the way-wall, helping the children sort from them the bad ones, which would spoil the others.

"No," I said. "I don't think she did."

She polished on her starred robe and held up for me an orange apple that blushed red like a cheek. "I'm glad," she said.

I had been wrong about her speech. There was no mask put over it to hide from me; only an opacity filling it up, from within, filling up its transparency as fog fills up transparent autumn mornings. Yet overhead the sky is blue. Zhinsinura had offered me every way not to enter into their secrets; what she didn't know was that I had already gone in, by the pool in the forest, no, long before then, in a game of whose-knee in Little Belaire that seemed now as long ago as a time when angels flew; and I had always known there was no way out. I had never truly looked behind me to see.

She was right, you know, I think, about way-wall: that there's no such thing.

Yes?

I mean it wasn't a thing, like a door; only a condition. A condition of the air in the doorway, air altered, as ice is only altered water.

Was it?

_I think it had been done long before, in order to heat the place. You said a hot breath blew from it. I think it was just an engine, to make heat .

..

Maybe so. And the little house on the wall, in the warren, was only a bombom, a barom, a thing to tell the weather. Is it all only and merely and just? Why is it you know so much and understand nothing at all?

I'm sorry.

No; no. It's only that this is the hard part of the story, the part that was hardest to live through, the part hardest to tell rightly; and if you

don't understand it, the story won't make sense. You must try to imagine me there, angel; you must imagine me, because if you don't imagine me I won't exist. None of it will exist.

Yes. Go on.

In October Twenty-eight Flavors was an argument of odors. There was a long counter there, wood-grained like the tables, behind which rose a great mirror, black-flecked and dull: and on it were drawn in white two people, a man with an apron and a tall hat, and a boy to whom he offered what looked like a giant version of the Four Pots. It was in Twenty-eight Flavors that the List kept and made their medicines. From the ceiling hung brown roots strung in loops, and on the plastic were heaps of wrinkled leaves and the crushed buds of flowers; in the great stainless-steel ovens and sinks behind the mirror, things were baked and washed and mixed: the kitchen, they called it. Brown Houd, who knew much of such things, went among them with a confusion in his cup, looking and grinning.

A confusion?

They made confusions from leaves and such, boiling them with water. There were confusions to wake you up, others to put you to sleep. There were confusions that made you strong or weak, stupid or smart, warm or cool. "It confuses the dark and light," Houd said, "and gives you a pause: for a while you think only about the confusion, and not about everything."

"Everything?"

"That's Relativity," he said.

In that crowded house were also hung the long golden leaves to dry, which Houd and others there smoked in little pipes, racks and racks of it, smelling as it looked, dry and golden. It hung near the calendar, whose October tile of the two children raking orange leaves to burn was changed by Houd to November's: those two walking arm-in-arm, scared perhaps, past leafless trees through which black crows cawed. One curled brown leaf was tossed past them, on a curved black line that meant Wind.

I think Houd was a child of November, like me. Often he would sit much of the day on a huge stump on the edge of the stone plaza Service City occupied, well wrapped up, and there he could be visited. The white smoke from his pipe was like the smoke from the orange leaves the calendar children burned, but the leaves that piled up around his stump were gray, and he himself was the color of November: nut-brown and whorled like wood.

"It's not like your bread," he said to me; "it won't do you any good to inhale it; inhale it enough and it'll kill you, so the angels said, who smoked it by the bale. . . . I only tell you that because it does taste good, once you get used to it." He offered the pipe to Once a Day, who refused it with a grimace, and to me. It was an acrid, harsh taste, that fit the day, autumnal and burnt and brown.

He sniffed the air and put the pipe back between the teeth that liked it. "You know things now that you won't know again in the year. It's in this month, they say, that you can see the City."

"The City," someone said, in a low tone of delighted horror, and the children said, "Tell it, tell the City."

"Say on a day like this," Houd said, raising his yellow palm to us, "in a big sky like that deep with clouds that turn in the wind, a wind you can almost see, that you know will bring cold rain again soon. See there? Where that gray knot of cloud is like a tabby face? It could yawn -- it could yawn now -- and out of it would come, of a color like it of gray stone and frozen earth, the City. The City that the angels plucked out of the earth like a root. It'd be far away and high, floating, but still you would see the high square towers on it like crystals growing on a rock; and below, the whole plug of earth that came away with it, and tree roots feathering the top and bridges hanging torn away, and tunnels from which roads run out to nothing. And the clouds would wind and stream around it, that might be its own ancient smoke, and half-hide it; until it grew closer (if it weren't quickly swallowed up again to leave you wondering), close enough for you to see the glitter of its

uncountable glass, and the bits of rock and earth that fall ceaselessly from its base; and you would see that the vast wind turns it, makes it revolve ever in the sky like a great wheel.

"And in its square streets where nothing lives the dead men walk, made too of stone or worse; and, stuck in life like death, and dreaming, make no motion.

"That would make you shudder."

"Just the story does," said Once a Day, and clutched herself.

"That's like this month," Houd said. "It's the world's shudder that winter is coming."

Just the story does . . . Little St. Roy called the clouds Cities in the Sky; and Houd called the City a cloud, and put the four dead men there to make the children shudder, a November shudder. And long ago Seven Hands had said all lost things end up in the City in the Sky, to make Mbaba laugh when her spectacles were lost. Somewhere a burnt sun was beginning to set; the sky and the afternoon were smoky with it.

"Then winter does come," I said.

"Oh, winter comes," Houd said. "But only when it comes." He puffed his pipe and grinned. "That's Relativity," he said; and everybody laughed, of course, except me, of course.

The great forest which circled around the stone plaza where Service City sat, two fingers of a gigantic hand about to pinch Service City out like a bug, didn't seem to grow and thin insubstantial in winter as Belaire's woods did. It was much greater than that woods, and seemed to grow, as Belaire's did not, at a great rate: the ivied buildings seemed now more settled into the forest even than when I had come in the spring. You could still see Road through the black trees; but it wouldn't be so forever.

The forest was strong; the world was slow but strong. As Service City fell back into the forest, so Road was drowned in brooks and broken by winter weather. And so too, I thought, was Belaire drawn in; the bridges around it fell, and its paths to the great world were blocked, slowly for sure, but for sure. All our men's places were stained and whelmed by the world and winter; the leaves piled up behind Service City and littered its stone plaza, they found their way into Blink's tree house; and on the roofs of Little Belaire they were bound up in hoarfrost with bird droppings and last year's nests.

Yet at Belaire the ancient war of man with the world was if not still fought at least remembered. Maybe it was because Dr. Boots's List lived not in a gentle river valley but in a great and impatient forest, but it seemed they had forgotten such things; they no longer struggled to hold back the world, nor even much remembered how the angels had fought and won and lost against it. But there it is: the whole tangle of their lives was based on something they were trying to forget.

For the doctor was there, indoors for winter, along those walls; she could climb the stairs to the mezzanine, way-wall admitted her, and she looked out all the eyes which I looked into, though I didn't see her.

They should have seemed childlike, the List, with their changeable sadnesses and enthusiasms, their dark and light, their endless, pointless small bickerings. But they weren't childlike; they seemed old -- not aged, but like grownups, with histories, with old knowledge, old manners, a careful, circumspect way -- and how could that be, I wondered, that they could change like children and play like kittens, that yesterday and tomorrow could be real for them only as a dream is real, and yet seem circumspect?

Like a dream, yes . . . I thought winter would make Once a Day sad, you know, dark; but she was the same, or never the same the same, and whatever the game or trick of dark and light was it was a thing which happened day to day, moment to moment, and not by seasons. In the mezzanine we made private places for ourselves where we spent the long, long twilights; sometimes the sadness of them would make her sad -- no, in the sadness of them she would happen to

be sad -- and we would let out a Light early to pretend it was already night. Her summer-tawny body grew pale again, and the light hair that downed her limbs dark. And we dreamed together amid the crowd there. I thought it was for shame, a shame like their old manners, that she never spoke of these things elsewhere, and never wanted them spoken of, as though they hadn't happened. But it wasn't shame. It was that she wanted to mark nothing: wanted to make each time the only time, as pastless as a dream. There were no words: she wanted none.

And then I woke. And now I only know I dreamed, and am awake.

Third facet:

The big snows fell in that month in which the calendar children, bundled up, made a faced pile of snow with twigs for arms and a hat like the hats the men of the List wear. On a day in the month that followed, February, we lay on the mezzanine and watched snow fall, turning to rain; through the veil of it the black trees seemed to proceed slowly toward us, though they came no closer. Once a Day lay against Brom, carefully biting her nails to the length she liked them and filing them smooth on the rough stone of the wall. Around us we heard tiny winter stories told, stories of doors in the forest, tiny doors at the top of worn steps, a light inside; they open a crack, and eyes look out.

This was the time of the List's long laziness; if it could be said they ever waited for anything, you could say they did little in this time except wait for spring. It was now that most of their children were born, the time carefully calculated; below, a group was cooing over a new child, a girl I supposed by the way they made much of it. Two older children stood at an open bin of the long white bins in an endless game of changing clothes; one stepped out of a black, shimmering belt and changed it for the other's frayed wig and false fur. They dangled jewels and stained ribbons, arm-clocks and rags of shirts, each twirling for the other's criticism and grudging admiration. I watched them, enjoying their moments of pale nakedness; their voices rose up to where we sat, low and indistinct.

"The door in the elbow," the sleepy storyteller near us said, "the door open a crack, through which winter comes, blowing on the heart."

I thought of Blink, bundled and sleepy, saying it's a small world.

And yes, you see: circumspect, as I said, and careful for themselves: for they won't disappear, the List would never choose that, though it sometimes seemed to me that disappearance was what they aimed at in the end -- no, but they will be wholly taken in, because they have forgotten, doubly and for good, the ancient struggle of man against the world, forgotten doubly and for good the string once tied around all men's fingers; and in the forest, like shellfish in a secret shellfish bed, they will move only for the current's sake, and keep their counsel as close as cats, endlessly counting off the twelve seasons of the year while the forest and the water and the winter eat up the angels' works and Road and perhaps even Little Belaire.

"The shortest month is February," Once a Day said, testing her filed nails against her cheek for smoothness; "or the longest too."

The floor below belonged as much to the cats who walked it as to the people they walked among. I said there were cats who lived at Little Belaire; but the List seemed to live with their cats and not the reverse. They were deferred to. Houd had told me that the cats of the List were not of the same family at all as the cats I had known; these great, pacific, wise animals were descended from a race the angels invented, so to speak; a race they made out of the old race of cats, altering them by the same means we men had been

altered, and for the same reason -- convenience. And in the thousand generations that came after, they had been altered further by careful selection of mates. They hunted little, but ate the food made for them in the kitchens of Twenty-eight Flavors; almost never did I hear them make that eerie, tormented cry I had used to hear, like a lost baby, in the woods near Little Belaïre. I said the List were grownups: but now looking down at the floor where the cats walked I thought it was the cats who were the grownups, and the people their children. And as children learn their manners from watching grownups, so the List learned theirs from cats.

I was proud of this small insight; I had no notion how close I was to the truth, and therefore I was as far away as ever.

Zhinsinura came through the way-wall, and others after her, dressed in their raggedies -- winter warm-clothes piled on however to keep the cold out.

"We're going to the forest," she called up to us. "You come."

"Why?" asked Once a Day.

"A cat's lost. Help find her."

The cat's name was Puff, a very old and tired orange female with a big scruffy mane, blind in one eye. She'd been gone two days, Zhinsinura said as we struggled into warm-clothes, which wouldn't have worried anyone if it was Brom or Fa'afa, but Puff in the winter . . . She hurried our dressing.

It was wet, black, and hopeless in the forest, a thin rain still falling, and I didn't know how they thought they would find anything but mud and old snowbanks to fall in, but they kept on through the day just as though they had a path. We spread out, and soon lost sight of each other, and I found myself struggling along beside someone I didn't know, bound up to his eyes in gray. He slashed at the dirty snow with a stick, breathing wet clouds from his nose.

"Help me here," I said, my foot caught in something beneath the snow.

"Dog days," he said.

We pulled me loose. "What did you say?"

"Dog days." He waved his stick, indicating the forest. "February's the lean month for them. They're said, when they find nothing at all to eat, to run around in a circle till the weakest drops, and then he's it. I don't know. I guess that's fair. But usually they find something."

Like Puff, I thought, old and cold as she was. The story at Little Belaïre was that all the dogs had long ago been eaten or killed, but in this forest . . . "Dog days," he said again, his eyes shifting from side to side above the gray scarves covering his mouth. We stopped to get our bearings. The relentless drip seemed to fill my ears, making it hard to hear other sounds. The high trees' tops were lost in fog, and their black trunks seemed rotten with wetness. The forest crackled suddenly quite near us, and we spun around: two of our number came out of the trees toward us, dressed in black like the day. We called out and kept on; and now my eyes were shifting around like my gray friend's.

For a long time we tore through a thicket of harsh bushes, clawed at by springing limbs and tripped up by roots. Beyond it the ground fell away sharply into a sort of depression in the ground, whose lowest part was filled with dark water edged with papery ice. As we came out on the edge of this bowl, he saw one thing on its far side, and I saw another.

He saw Puff, off to the left, struggling up through the snow to reach the crest on the other side.

I saw Once a Day, off to the right, also climbing, trying to reach Puff.

We both pointed and said, "Look!" at the same time. Once a Day must have been to the cat's blind side, because the cat kept on, desperately, up to her chin in snow; and just then we heard what she was running from. The noise tore through the fog, a sharp, snarling yelp made again and again that made me freeze in terror. Once a Day stopped too, but Puff kept on; the woods crackled and thrashed to the left, and there burst from cover an animal. The man next to me bared his teeth and hissed out in fear, and the animal -- a dirtyyellow, skinny, big-headed thing -- stopped and with great snaps of his head looked

from Once a Day to Puff who was disappearing over the ridge. The woods behind him spoke, and a red one charged out; he didn't stop at all, but hunched his skinny back up through the snow. The yellow one followed. Bursting from the woods, a spotted one slipped into the water and slogged out again, climbing after the others.

Once a Day had got to the top and over, beating the snowbound dogs, and the man with me was halfway to the pool's edge, shouting and waving his stick, before I unfroze and slid after him. As we circled the pool, stepping up to our knees in black water and muck, two more dogs came yelping from the woods, and stopped when they saw us. They backed and ran to and from us as we tried to climb the bank, we not daring to turn our backs on them, shouting at them as they shouted at us. Two men now came from the woods following Once a Day's footprints, and my stick friend tore the gray scarf away from his face and waved to them, and the dogs, seeing them, ran off in another direction.

Heavy with water, sobbing painful cold breaths, we got to the top. Puff, Once a Day, and the dogs were gone. The snow, stirred and footprinted, melted out in hillocks along the wet black ground; and across the snow, starting at my feet and running crazily away in drops, was a long stripe of blood.

Cat's blood: I grasped at that. Puff's blood. Poor Puff, but old after all, still too bad, anyway it's cat's blood. . . . The two in black passed me, hurrying on, pointing out the signs of the trail to each other. I still stood stricken. Stick came up next to me, his sodden boots squishing.

"Dog days," he said; "a lean month, and nothing's that large, if they're together they'll try it . . ."

"No," I said.

He went off, following the others, his head nodding rapidly side to side. "If she stayed with the cat," I heard him say, "they'd take them both, oh yes, drag them to the woods, you hear the silence now, you see what that would mean . . ."

No, no, no, he's not kept his head, I thought, starting after him, then turning back to look again at the snow, not kept his head about the cat's blood that it was, why does he go on like that?

"Dogs are dogs are dogs are dogs at least," said Stick.

"Why don't you just look?" I shouted at him, my feet numbly plucking mud. "Why don't you just be quiet about it and look?"

"Wood smoke," said Stick, stopping still.

I smelled it and saw it at once: a dark smudge in the woods, browner than the gray day. He ran on toward it, calling out to the others; I only stood, still trying to speak truthfully to myself, scared, not knowing what a fire in the forest would mean anyway. Stick turned and waved to me, and disappeared in a clump of trees.

There was a path through the clump of trees, and at the end of the path a cabin of logs built against an old angelstone wall; ashy smoke rose up through a hole in the roof of wattles. The yellow dog, the first one Stick and I had seen at the pond, paced back and forth before the door until he saw us, and backed away and ran as we came close. From another direction the two in black came up to the cabin, and disappeared into the darkness inside, as though walking through way-wall; they seemed to be laughing. Stick went in. I came up last, and heard them talking inside.

I went in.

In the flare of firelight and smoke, the black-cloaked people sat laughing softly, relaxing in the warmth. Zhinsinura was laughing too; beside her old Puff lay asleep; and within her arms Once a Day lay, her eyes bright in the firelight, smiling. I crept to her, my fear still a hard knot in my stomach, to touch her, to know for real it was she.

"You're all right," I said, and the others laughed.

"Yes," she said. "The doctor was there."

"What doctor? What doctor?"

She only shook her head, smiling.

"How, what happened? How did this fire get here? How, what . . ."

Zhinsinura put her hand firmly on my wrist. "Hush," she said. "It's nice now."

The others had fallen silent, and for a moment Puff awoke and eyed me with her one eye. I saw that I wouldn't learn now, probably would never learn, what had happened, whose blood was on the snow, because it was then not now; it was nice now. I was not to ask for what I wasn't given. I sat slowly, thinking: if it had been I among the dogs, I wouldn't have found this nice place, because I would have looked for it.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, it is nice now; with the fire and all, yes."

"_He_ was dark," said Stick, whose face I could see across the fire grinning widely. "Dark even to shouting." He laced his hands comfortably behind his head and showed more teeth. "Dog days," he said, pleased.

And that's how I found out what dark and light are.

You didn't tell about February's tile.

I don't remember it well. I remember that it was "crazed," you know, heat or something had made it a web of fine cracks. I remember that it was black, mostly, like the month. They stood on a bridge, I think, over a cold river; there was something huge out on the river. I don't remember.

In March's pale tile the hem of her blue dress curled with the same curl that marked the dead leaf's path in November: the curved line that meant Wind. They stood in the wind atop a brown hill that looked to be the top of the world -- nothing could be seen around them but a big sky, pale and purplish. The wind that blew behind them tangled their curls and held their kites high up, so high they seemed tiny.

In the still-roofed part of one of Service City's ruined buildings, amid piles and bundles of the List's things stored there, Once a Day found her kite. We sat amid the clutter and listened to Zher as she tied, with infinite absorption, a new tail for it. Her eyes were cast down, and her mouth seemed to obey the same commands that her hands were following: closing firmly to tighten a string, opening then pursing to find the next rag; when she made a knot, her tongue peeked out.

"When the moon is full in March," said Zher, "the hare goes crazy." His eyes grew wide and fierce. "He stamps his feet." Zher's leg kicked the ground with a thump. "He balls his fists and can't stand it, can't stand it." He stared around him, his leg twitching to kick again. "When another comes, he shouts out, 'No room, no room!' even if there's plenty."

Once a Day laughed at his craziness, and then returned to her work. Of any there at Service City I found her absorption most beautiful, because I loved her, but they were all like her in it. On each thing they did their attention was complete. It was as though the thing to be done directed the doer, as though the task were master.

Of course there weren't many things the List did. One of them was to fly kites in March. There were many in that building, broken and whole, hung between a pile of plastic boots and gray capes and a stand of furled umbrellas. On the right day, chill and blowing, a day like a stiff new broom for winter, they would all be scattered across a brown hilltop with their hats tied on and their raggedies snatched at and billowing, and all their bright-tailed kites aloft. Or then again maybe they wouldn't.

Anyway. On a day still and odorous, with pale things sprouting in the forest, the kite tile was moved, and there were three in one pile and nine in the other; the ones who stood to see it turned made their small sound of satisfaction as April was revealed.

A silvery, sidewise-falling shower struck splashes from puddles. The puddles, silver-edged, reflected a soft green that was indistinct, rain-shrouded, all around. In this tile only was the girl not in blue; she and he were identical in shiny yellow coats, and her calves curved gently rising from the wide mouths of yellow boots. Her umbrella, though, was blue; and though it rained in other months, it was only in April that the List took out

their umbrellas to water them.

On a showery day I watched them through the way-wall, strolling across the wide stone with their umbrellas in bloom. Some were patched, some bent and with missing struts, some stretched wrong on the frame and looking like bats' wings. Houd was among them; his gray and green barred umbrella was larger than the others and had a strangely carved grip, and he grinned at me just as though he could see me through the way-wall as I could see him.

They began to come in when the bell sounded five times, not for evening but in the middle of the day. They shook water from their hats and from the flapping umbrellas -- not allowed taut indoors, for some reason -- and they smelled of the warm wet day, and brought in green things, ferns and shoots and blossoms sparkling with drops. As they collected around the floor, Zhinsinura, who had had a high seat brought out for her, watched them as the cats did, and her gaze was the same, a mild and accustomed curiosity. She sat them down without words, her big hands lightly guiding them; children were shushed and the milling subsided as people found seats facing her, arranging themselves with the List's patience for such things. After a time two rough half-circles had been drawn up, one closer in all of women and girl children, and an outer one of men and boys.

Once a Day went past me, brushing the clean rain from her face, smiled at me and went to sit with the women. I would have liked to sit by her, but this was the day the List remembers the Long League and Mother Tom, and on such a day the men know their place, sit back and hold their tongues.

Beyond the way-wall, the rain grew strong for a moment, like a fit of sobbing, then lessened. We were silent. Zhinsinura began speaking, and the cats grew curious.

Fourth facet:

"In the last month of winter," she began, almost as though she were talking only to the cat at her feet, "which is the first of spring, the ice on the river, which had been solid and could bear weight, broke up and floated away in great clashing chunks, which makes a pretty sight.

"The ice asked: How is it that the river could accomplish such a thing? And the river might answer: Ice set itself a task it could not finish, and all that was left undone remained the river; and for the undoing of what you did do, well, it wasn't I at all but time and changes, and I am left.

"I say the river might answer so, but it doesn't answer, there being no ice left to answer to.

"If we were to tell a story about ancient times, we would say that the men were angels who could fly: they were the ice's brittle, still surface. The river flowing quick unseen beneath we would name the women and their League. And as for time and changes, well, they have always been the same, without another name.

"Now the men in those times said to the women, 'See: we have thrown Little Moon into the sky, our planters have escaped the sun, and we must struggle to further these works forever. Men have things to do, and must use their time properly; any of you who can do so may help in these tasks. But while we build a new moon and get it put up next to the old one, you are still controlled by the old moon; you can't use your time properly; that is your greatest weakness.'

"And Mother Tom said to the League: 'That is your only strength. Spring is coming, and the ice must break on every river. Time is in need of you, and, dark or light, will put you to its use.'"

She reached behind her chair and took up a tall box which she set before

her. The front of the box was made to look like a sort of archway; and when Zhinsinura turned something at the back of the box vigorously, the archway brightened, and it seemed we looked into a garden where a fruit tree flowered, and where a huge, fat woman waved. She waved: I mean it wasn't a picture of her waving, she waved, her hand rose, made a hello, and returned to her side; then it rose again, waved again, came down again, then rose again and waved. While she waved, Zhinsinura spoke, her hands resting lightly on the box.

"Mother Tom said: 'I'm part man, part cat, part dream, and All Woman.'

"Mother Tom had had an Operation, you see. She had been a man, and then been turned into a woman. And very well, too, these were the days of every possibility and contrivance. Her female parts were real, as real as her man's parts had been; she named her female parts Janice, after a woman murdered on Road, from whom they had been taken. She said, 'Janice would be glad, if she knew.' The doctors then could just replace one set of parts with another, easy as that, and in their angel way thought that was the end of it; but Mother Tom's female parts began to grow a person outward from them, a woman, that dark by light outgrew the old man Mother Tom had been. Mother Tom said, 'Janice is changing my mind.' Mother Tom weighed as much as any two women, and had a voice like a loon, and wanted to be a Woman entirely, even to being in the women's League.

"The angels had a joke, in those days, about the League. When the League meets, they said, women with breasts like pigeons fold their hands before them and speak to other women from between bowls of cut flowers. They all wear flowered hats, and they speak only foolishness." Zhinsinura took a nut, and a cracker for it, from within her deep pocket. "It was a good joke," she said, "but the angels didn't know why it was funny.

"I have wept," she said, "to think of their struggles to use their time properly; and I have thought of them weeping. Mother Tom wept often after those meetings, when once again the women had struggled more with one another than with the angels; wept when she heard in her dreams their voices, abused and frightened and angry and silly and above all Feminine. 'Feminine!' Mother Tom would weep. 'Feminine!' She was beginning to learn, I guess, what she had let herself in for, and was glad to know it. 'I wouldn't be a man again for all the planters in the universe,' she said, 'or all the Money in the bank or all the cities in the sky.'

"Mother Tom confused the League, and for a long time she was not allowed among them, but she wouldn't stop talking, whenever she was let to, and as the years went by her story grew longer: about what was to come, as much as she could see; about men, for she had been one; about dark and light, though what was there to say? The women began to listen, some of them; and understand; but sometimes they would only look away, and smile, and not listen, and wait for it to be nice again.

"'Nice!' Mother Tom would shriek. 'Nice!' For as she grew older, and as more and more of the League's women listened to her, the less Mother Tom wept and the more she shouted.

"The angels made a mistake, then. They had always thought the League was funny, and they thought Mother Tom was funnier still. But Mother Tom knew men, and kept on talking, and grew older and louder, and the more listened to the older and louder she got; until men were like someone who had a bird in his hand that is struggling to escape: squeeze tight, and the bird dies; don't squeeze tight, and the bird escapes. The angels squeezed tight, and the bird escaped. It was ever their way."

Zhinsinura broke and ate her nut with calm absorption. "You see," she said, "the angels at long last got the joke: that as long as women struggled to use their time properly and join the terrific enterprises of the angels, there was nothing to fear, but as soon as the women shut up, as Mother Tom told them to shut up, then the angels' enterprises were in terrible danger. So what they did was to send some two or three to Mother Tom's garden, this garden, and kill her. Mother Tom was near eighty then. And they killed her.

"If you were to tell a story about ancient times," she went on, "you

would say that the day the angels killed Mother Tom in her garden was that day in winter which is the shortest, the day on which winter begins in earnest, but the day too after which the days, however slowly, begin to lengthen toward spring. Because, in her long life, Mother Tom had finally got herself understood by the women she loved, the angels for a long time thought the bird was dead. The ice grew thick -- but the river was deeper; the ice was silent, and the river spoke only to itself, all unheard.

"The river spoke about Mother Tom. It was in those days that this picture was made, to remember her by, and a thousand like it, which women kept. They said of Mother Tom: when she was dark she was very, very dark, and when she was light she was lighter than air.

"About the things Mother Tom had said. About what was to come, which their men came home every night from planning for and struggling with and failing against and using their time properly to defeat: and they remembered Mother Tom's advice, when the men talked: shut up.

"About gardens and clothes and the difficulties of food and how the lights kept going out. About their children and which was most beautiful, and Money stories, and what to do when the lights went out for good. About the latest of the angels' wonders and how it seemed that soon there would be nothing impossible and their men could give them everything they wanted.

"Everything they wanted." Zhinsinura passed her hand over her eyes and touched the box in which Mother Tom waved endlessly. "I would have been dark, dark, dark, then; am dark to think it. How hard, how hard! To be time's tool when those who think themselves time's masters tell endless, useless tales to bind it, tales which even if the women understood they could never contradict. To watch your kind like a sick cat eat and be not satisfied, to gorge and cough up worms. And still shut up. And never know, any more than any tool can, when the need for you will come -- or if perhaps you have been wrong, and your task is not after all simply the satisfaction of that endless angel hunger, is not after all Everything you Wanted. It wasn't Mother Tom, no, and she had known it wouldn't be -- it was that long fire that made time's tool, endlessly shaping it in the flame of dark and light until its task was ready.

"To the angels, the Storm was the darkest time since our kind began: for what does ice know about spring? And though the League was full-grown then, and all their stories learned by heart when they gathered here for the first time after the fall of the Law and the Gummint, here on this floor in Service City and in a thousand places like it; and though they remembered Mother Tom, and knew now what she meant, and knew somewhat what to do to begin to help -- though they knew all this, yet they were not light then. For remember, children, remember: for all that the women of the League knew better, for all their dark and light, they too were angels themselves. Never forget that, for it is their greatest glory. I have felt them meeting here then, in those days: and I know that whatever skills they had, it was terror, dark, and panic that they felt; and that whatever they created later, they knew that their task just then was mostly to watch the angels die. For with a sound like weeping and laughter, the ice had parted in the sun."

The women before Zhinsinura, some of them, had listened intently, chins in hands; others had been preoccupied with hushing children, or nudging cats away, or changing their places for better ones. The children played at distracting each other, as children do when serious things are said. For it was an old, old story, after all, and heard hundreds of times; this was only the day in April when the List chose to tell it all together. I had listened perhaps more intently than any of them.

Mother Tom in her garden raised her hand, waved, lowered her hand.

"We who are the League's child," said Zhinsinura, "and who remember Mother Tom -- we who feel those ancient women still to be here, here, where they guarded and dispensed the food that once burdened the thousand shelves long since gone; where they made medicines to save lives now long over; to where they returned from their journeys with stories and angels' things which remain here still; where their plans were laid, and where the old agreements

were come to which made the world the way it is today; and where in the end that struggle was resigned -- we don't forget, though we regret nothing, as no one in old age regrets the death of a parent long ago.

"If you were to tell a story of the days in which the League grew to be the Long League of famous memory, you would say that a cat is curious when it's not comfortable. That their curiosity found the secrets of medicine's daughters and all the angels' medicines, we are grateful. That it uncovered the four dead men, most horrid of all the angels' secrets, and destroyed them, we shudder at: and praise their courage. That it learned Dr. Boots and so came to know dark and light as we do, well, what is there to say? But the League as it was is gone; the curiosity is satisfied; the struggle over. Dark or light, the world is lighter than it was."

She shook her head, smiling, and brushed shell crumbs from her lap. "Yet think of it," she said, smiling wider and looking out over them, who caught her smile, "only think of it long enough to feel how odd it is, children, how odd in the end, far, far more odd than either happy or sad. May comes now, and that communion: the oddest of all. I want no one's secret: only think a moment that we are here now, and that that was then, and it has come to this, and how odd, odd, odd it is!"

On the faces around me, as Zhinsinura asked, it seemed to dawn on them: the one thing I had known and they had not, seemingly. There was even a ripple of laughter that rose here and caught there, grew deep among the men and died away as our evening song did. Their laughter at the oddness of it was the first time they had seemed like ordinary people -- I mean like truthful speakers -- since I had come there.

In their laughter, it seemed, that day came to an end. The rain would go on till night, or through the night; in the silver glimmer of it the afternoon was already dark. Zhinsinura still sat, with Mother Tom before her, and broke nuts to eat, while the rest of us stretched and moved, walked and talked again.

I made my way to where Once a Day sat before the box inside which Mother Tom stood waving. It had grown dimmer in that garden, and Mother Tom's eternal wave moved more slowly. Because Once a Day still watched it, I watched it.

"What did she mean," I asked, "when she said 'May comes, and that communion'?"

"She meant our letters from Dr. Boots," Once a Day said, her eyes not leaving the box.

There was a flowering tree in the garden, and now, close to it, I could see that there was a tiny cat curled up at her big feet. Mother Tom's hand rose, and a petal began to drift from the tree. Her hand rose high and waved; the petal reached the ground; Mother Tom smiled, and the cat at her feet closed its eyes peacefully. Mother Tom lowered her hand; her smile faded as her hand came to rest against her side. Then the whole garden seemed to give a minute shake. Mother Tom's face became set and grim and apprehensive, the cat's eyes were suddenly open and alert. Her hand rose, in the same way; her face lightened to a smile, the cat's eyes began to close -- and another petal fell from the tree, exactly then.

When she was dark, they said, she was very, very dark, and when she was light she was lighter than air.

She waved, and waved again. Each time, her face would be dark and apprehensive, then lighten to a smile; each time as she smiled the cat would close its eyes. And each time another petal would drift in rocking lightness to the ground.

"If we watch long enough," I said, "there will be no more petals. The tree will fruit."

"No," said Once a Day. "No, it won't."

There was a puzzle that St. Gene made: he took a strip of paper, and half-twisted it, and sealed it in a loop. Now, he said, trace the outside of the loop with your finger. But don't trace the inside. But the beginning of the inside always came before the end of the outside; the loop always began

again before it came to an end.

"That's a riddle," I said. "You promised me, last month, you wouldn't set me riddles any more."

"I don't remember riddles," she said.

Mother Tom waved. The cat slept. The petal fell. With a sudden suffocating sense of having discovered myself to be in a small, closed place for ever and ever, I understood: all the petals that fell were one petal. Mother Tom's wave was one wave. Winter never comes.

Fifth facet:

"When do you go?" I asked her.

May had rebuilt our shade house on the hill; the grass we had beaten down there had sprung up golden-green again.

"Soon," she said. "They'll come to tell me."

They had been going away, one by one, down toward the river, and returning, naked many of them, from Dr. Boots, the old looking like children and the young ancient. The letter was got by each, and their secrets grew strong and sure, and intersected me everywhere. I turned to them, one by one, to the friends I had made, and found they had disappeared, though they looked at me still; and the greeting died on my lips. Even the youngest children, though left out as I was, seemed more still, and played games I didn't know with cats who seemed restless and watchful. And though it was the List that had become-become disembodied, in a way, yet it seemed that it was I who was not there, who was only a flicker of memory and misunderstanding amid the solid weight of their magic.

"What if," I said to her, "what if you didn't go, this year?"

"What do you mean?" she said, not as though she truly wanted to know, but as though I had said something without any meaning at all, which hardly interested her. A thick wave of despair came over me. She could never, even Whisper cord as she was, have asked me that question in Little Belaire: what do you mean?

"I mean what I say," I said softly. "I really mean what I say."

She looked at me, the blue of her eyes as blank and opaque as the sky behind us. She looked away, at the hoppers that hopped in the damp grass; at Brom, who chased them, daintily for one so huge. She couldn't hear. I would have to say it all in words.

"I don't want you to go and get this letter," I said.

Through the year I had lived with her, she had come slowly to be someone I knew; not the girl I had once known, but, month by month, someone I knew. I hadn't asked for what wasn't given me; yet she had given me herself. And I knew that when she got her letter she would be abstracted from me again as surely as if she fled from here to Little Moon. "Listen to me now," I said, and took her thin wrist. "We could go away. You said they wouldn't care, and surely now of any time they would care least. We could go tonight."

"Go where?" She smiled at me as though I were telling some fantastic tale, one of their jokes.

"We could go back to Little Belaire." I meant: to Belaire, where we were born, Belaire and the saints and the Filing System and the gossips who untie knots instead of tying them tighter as the old ones here do, Belaire where every story has a proof and all the secrets have names at least; I meant We could go home.

"It wasn't my home," she said, and my heart leaped, for I heard she had heard me. "It wasn't my home, only a place I found myself in."

"But, then, anywhere, anywhere you like, only . . ."

"Don't," she said gently, looking at the grass, at the glitter of the hoppers. She meant: don't darken me now, not now of any time.

Far off, we saw someone coming toward us, in a sleeveless black coat and a wide hat. Houd. He stopped some way off and watched us for a moment. Then he raised the stick he walked with, summoning her, and turned and walked away.

"I'm to go now," she said, and rose.

"Do you know I lose you by it?" I said, but she didn't answer, only started after Houd toward Service City.

I put my head on my knees and looked at the grass between my feet. Each blade of grass, tiny bud, tinier bug, was clear, clearer than I had ever seen them before. I wondered at that.

No! I leaped up, and Brom stopped playing to watch me. I caught up with her as she started across the wide, sun-heated stone plaza. Winter had cracked it, adding minute wrinkles to its face as years add them to a human face.

"Once a Day," I said to her back, "I'm going away. I don't know where, but I'm going. In a year, I'll come back. But promise me: promise you'll think about me. Think about me, always. Think about . . . think about Belaire, and the foxes, about the Money, think about how I came and found you, think about . . ."

"I don't remember foxes," she said, not turning to me.

"I'll come back and ask you again. Will you think about me?"

"How can I think about you if you're not here?"

I grasped her shoulder, suddenly furious. "You can! Stop it! Speak to me, speak to me, I can't bear it if you don't. . . . All right, all right," for she was closing her face against me, turning away, taking my hand from her as though it were some accidental obstruction, a dead branch, an old coat, "only listen: no matter what you say, I know you can hear me: I'll go away now, and we can both think, and I'll come back. In the spring."

"This is spring," she said, and walked away across the plaza. I watched her, vivid, white, and living for a moment against the immense absent blackness of way-wall; and then gone. Blink: gone. As though she hadn't been.

And what if, I thought, my heart a cold stone, what if she had spoken truthfully to me, what if she had heard in all I said that I could no more go away from here for a year -- for a month, for a day -- than Brom could speak or St. Blink tell a lie?

I don't remember the rest of that day, what I did with myself. Perhaps I stayed where I had been left, on that stone. But at evening, before I could see her return, I went to Twenty-eight Flavors to find Thinsinura.

She stood with other old ones at the long counter, pondering with them a great piece of smooth slate which had been carefully coated with beeswax, so that signs could be made on it. After some thought, she brought forward one woman and gave her a pointed stick; as the others smiled and nodded, she bent and made a sign on the wax. Zhinsinura hugged her then, and she departed with one or two others.

"I want to go too," I said, and Zhinsinura turned her hooded eyes on me. "I've passed all your tests. I haven't asked for what wasn't given me: but I ask now for that."

She held up her hand for the others to wait, and took me by the shoulder to the time table, where we could talk alone. "No tests were set you," she said. "But I will ask you this: why did you come here?"

There were a lot of answers to that, though only one that mattered now. "There was a story," I said, "about four dead men. A wise man I knew told me that you here might know the ending to it. I suppose he was wrong. It doesn't matter now."

"The four dead men are dead," she said, chin in her hand. "The League destroyed them, the four clear spheres with nothing at all inside them; they destroyed all but one, which is lost for good, as good as destroyed . . ."

"There were five."

She smiled. "Yes. So there were, five." In her hooded eyes were answers to that mystery; the last test was not to ask for them.

"I don't care now. I only want to stay, here, with her. I can't, unless I know what you know, unless I understand. . . ."

"What if it doesn't help? I think you truthful speakers put too much faith in knowing and understanding and such things."

"No. Please. It's not even understanding I want. She . . . I want, I want to be, her. I want to be her. I don't want to be me any more. It doesn't help. Nothing I know helps a bit. I don't know if being her is better than being me, but I don't care any more. I give up. Help me. I have no more reservations."

Zhinsinura listened. She chewed a finger and thought. We were alone now in the place, except for the cat Fa'afa, who wasn't interested. I looked down at May's tile between us: the children (who had not grown older in a year) stood in a wooden house with a wide door, a house filled with cut yellow grass in piles -- the sun shone from it and lit their cheeks and placid downcast eyes. Hands on their knees, they looked down at a cat, a tiny tabby lying on her side, at whose nipples sucked three, four, five kittens. More than any cat mother and her children I had ever seen, it looked like the family of foxes I had found for Once a Day. Would I forget them too?

Zhinsinura leaned toward me and stroked my cheek; I felt her rings catch at my beard. "I love Boots," she said quietly. "I'm as old as anyone I ever heard of, and I would not have had it any other way. I love Boots; so I will grant your request; and I hope you will be done by as I have been. But remember: there is no hoping for it to do anything. It will do as it does, and is not accountable: not Boots, not me or your young girl, not even, as you will see, you.

"But that's too many words already. They won't help." She rose, and led me to the counter where the slate slab covered with wax lay. "Be alone tonight," she said. "Come early tomorrow and find me. I'll take you. You'll have your letter from Dr. Boots." She gave me the pointed stick. "Now sign the List."

All their marks were there; Once a Day's was there. I had no mark, so carefully and clumsily I scratched on the List the palm sign of my cord.

I was alone that night, though I didn't sleep. I lay thinking that however much it had been Once a Day that had brought me to this, it must anyway have lain on the path I had walked from the beginning. I had seen the four dead men, and Once a Day had whispered Olive's inaudible secrets in my ear; I had gone out to be a saint to solve those mysteries, and learned that winter is half of life, though I could come no closer to Once a Day's heart than that -- could come no closer ever, unless I took this last step. I thought of Zher, as I had seen him the first day I had come to Service City, and thought that now Once a Day sat among the old ones as he had, as though a lamp were lit within her. Tomorrow I would be as she was. And my only regret, now, is that I didn't pack my old pack that night and leave Service City forever.

I came early to Zhinsinura, shivering and yawning with morning chill and expectation, and followed her through the forest to the river's edge. There was a log raft there lashed with plastic closeline; a man and a woman my parents' age sat within it waiting. He and I, when Zhinsinura was seated, untied the boat and poled it with poles worn and smooth out onto the May-quick river.

Silent but for the spank of the river on the raft's sides and the chuckle of the forest, we followed the current. Zhinsinura smoked tobacco, and continually changed the pipe from place to place between her teeth. "About the letter," she said once, "we have only an old joke. The angels said every letter has three parts: the Salutation, the Body, and the Complimentary Close." I listened to the roll of the ancient words and said nothing. The gullied banks were tumbled with ruined places, mostly become forest now, revealed only by an angelmade angle or straight line in the moss. We glided past them, passing through drooping willows as through thin draperies, and after a time came up against a wharf in the river, swung the raft around and

tied it up.

A path from the wharf led up to a -- what was their word -- glade: a kept place of young willows and soft grass, which the sun reached into. Some of the List were there and watched us approach, but gave no sign; some were naked. In the center of the glade stood a small house of angeistone, which over time had sunk and was now partly buried in the soft earth; a narrow path led down to its low door. Zhinsinura took aside the two we had come with; they nodded together, looked at me smiling, and sat to wait. As she had before waywall, Zhinsinura took my shoulder in a firm grip and led me down into the darkness within the little house.

There was but one small window. For a moment the dimness was spangled with the sunlight still in my eyes. I saw that the small square place was empty; then I saw that it was not. There stood there a box, or pedestal, as clear as glass or clearer; inside it, silver and black balls or knobs were suspended in rows as though in water. And on top of the box was a clear sphere, the size of a man's head, with nothing at all inside it.

"The fifth," I whispered.

"Boots," she said. She was drawing on her hand a silver glove, a silver glove that glowed like ice. "Sit," she said. I sat; I didn't think my knees would hold me anyway; Zhinsinura with her gloved hand pretended to turn one of the knobs within the box. The knob turned. The clear sphere, with a small noise like a shocked, indrawn breath, changed instantly to black: black so black it appeared no longer a sphere, a black circle cut out of the world.

"Now close your eyes," Zhinsinura said; "It's best to close your eyes." I did; but not before I saw that with her silver glove she was pretending to turn another of the knobs within the box; and that the black circle was rising from the pedestal, moving like a Light; and that it came toward me.

And then there came the time that I must tell you of, but can't; the time when Boots was there, and I was not. When I was not in Rush that Speaks, and Boots was; when Boots lived; when she was Rush and I was not; when I was not at all. I remember nothing of it -- I wasn't there -- and though Rush was stained with Boots's being, stained and colored with it forever, he remembers nothing, forgot all even as I returned to him: because though Boots has many lives she has no memory. I know only the last thing Boots did: and that was to close her eyes. And then she left him. It was in that moment, when Boots left, that I got my letter: my letter was myself.

"Open your eyes," said Zhinsinura.

That -- "open your eyes" -- entered in at the doors of Rush. I was not, and that entered nothing; but still as quick as ever it found and ran along the old path which such things had taken countless times before. Only this time, as though it were a Light, it was able to see the path, infinitely long, which it took. The path was Rush: the walls and snake's-hands were his stuff, the countless steps and twists and false ways and rooms were him, chest full of Rush, it was all Rush: all along, Rush was handholds, ways, stairs, a path for that to get deep in. And I -- I was nothing; but when Zhinsinura said that, "open your eyes," I uncurled outward from some tiny center of not-being and built Rush to receive it: the path those words took and the place the path led through spun out both together. The words watched me watch myself make a place that held a path which the words took through the place to where I built it. A place like spheres, like the trees of bread, but all within each other, spheres of bright complexity made only of making, each sphere fitting within a larger just in time to let "open your eyes" escape into the smaller, until the words and I had made up Rush to hold us both; and we all three, in a silent swift coupling, laced all our ways together. And I opened my eyes.

The black sphere was retreating from my face, returning to the pedestal to perch. Zhinsinura with the silver glove pretended to turn knobs. The sphere settled; Zhinsinura turned a knob. The sphere was clear again. Boots slept.

Zhinsinura said, "Can you go? We'll go now."

The whole great place I had built to hold Open Your Eyes vanished like a cloud, and just a little more quickly than I had built it, I built a new Rush

with a new path to receive these new words. And I knew then (unmoving, unable to, hands gripped around my updrawn knees, mouth wide as my eyes were wide) that I had built oh how many million before, and lost each, changed from each, they were less real than clouds, I was less changeless than a banner in the wind, and I knew that I would build a million others, each as different as this one was from . . . what? How had I been, a moment before? What was the huge thing I had only just learned? Gone . . . I tried to grasp at something to Be, some house to Be in, and could not; and Dread came chasing out through all the spangled spheres of Rush, and I felt myself building a house for it to live in, and as soon forgetting I had ever lived in any other thing than Dread. I struggled to rebuild, remember, but struggle only enriched Dread's house, and I was only Rush here now afraid.

But sunlight happened then, for Zhinsinura led me out.

And the house of Dread was less than memory because Sun took up all my room.

I almost wept and almost laughed to think how I must build a house not just for every word but for every thing at all that has a name. A Willow happened, and Walking on the Grass; a Person I Knew happened. Each time I turned my head a thousand things ordered their paths and chattered with each other about whose would be next, and each time I turned a thousand Rushes were made and fell away tinkling, sighing, whispering, crashing.

I stopped, stock still. Zhinsinura's tug on my hand made me recoil. I must be careful. Surely, in this rush, something, something is bound to lose its way. I must be careful not to draw Path wrong for any name to lose itself on. Wait, wait, I pleaded; but they wouldn't wait, and how had I ever been able to build fast enough for Everything? I was tense as stone with effort, and Dread was all I knew how to accommodate: but at Dread's door I stopped: something was rising in me, something was rising to meet all that I could not meet.

What rose was, I will say, Boots. I will say that though Boots had left, she had also stayed. I will say that Boots rose, and that out of her house deep within me she spoke and said: Forget. Forget you were ever other than the perfect house you are forever building, and whether it is a house of dark or light it will build itself. As for any name that enters there, it couldn't lose itself; for if the house is whole, why then isn't Path drawn just as wholly on its feet?

I will say Boots said this, I will say that this was what her letter said; I will say even that at her words the stone tension went out of me, I fluttered like a banner in the wind, and wept and smiled at once. I will say so: but the secret, oh the secret is that Boots has nothing, nothing, nothing at all to say.

Sixth facet:

Time, I think, is like walking backward away from something: say, from a kiss. First there is the kiss; then you step back, and the eyes fill up your vision, then the eyes are framed in the face as you step further away; the face then is part of a body, and then the body is framed in a doorway, then the doorway framed in the trees beside it. The path grows longer and the door smaller, the trees fill up your sight and the door is lost, then the path is lost in the woods and the woods lost in the hills. Yet somewhere in the center still is the kiss. That's what time is like.

I know that at my center now is the time I was not there and Dr. Boots was. That's the kiss. The letter came, not then, but in the first step I took away: when I returned, as though new-born, to the place I had always lived:

Rush and this world. Yet Boots is there, at the center; sometimes, in a moment that makes my heart beat slow and hard, or a dream shatter, or a present moment fall to bits, I can remember -- taste, more nearly -- what it was to have been Boots. I think that if I had lived on at Service City, and every year repeated that kiss, I would have come to be as much Boots as myself, to share Rush with Boots -- as all the List shared themselves with her. And even as it was I knew, as I sat on the pier waiting for the raft to return, that I would carry Boots forever.

I say waited: I did for a moment try waiting, but couldn't for long; I became instead a pier man, who waited for nothing. I had no meanwhile.

"Can someone pole?" Zhinsinura said to some others who sat there with me. "He can't."

Slipping through the brown current the raft came to the pier; it struck, wet wood on stone, and swung about. The two on board stood up with its motion and looked at me from beneath their wide hats; one flung a white rope to me, and I stared at it where it lay without taking it. I heard them laugh, and I laughed too, but then forgot why in the task of watching the long poles laid up with a great wood sound. I sighed a huge sigh, as though I had just done sobbing; a sigh for the vast richness of it all.

They put me on the boat, and Zhinsinura came on; and the turning of it upstream turned the world in my eyes dizzily.

I suppose it was they, the two in the boat, who brought Zhinsinura the news about Once a Day. I think I can remember them talking with her, and they all three turning to look at me. If I heard them say her name, I could not then build a house large enough to hold it; and watched instead the ripple of the water by the boat, the sun's countless bright eyes in the leaves overhead. I couldn't have known, wouldn't have guessed, that to be absent for a time, to be for a time inhabited by a creature simpler, less confused, more simply wise than I, could so alter me, could so alter the world that I am made of: but with growing joy I learned. I learned, as the raft moved and I slid through the day, as the day slid through me, to let the task be master: which is only not to choose to do anything but what has chosen me to be done. Without any suffering every cat knows how, every living thing but man, who must learn it. Letting the task be master is a hard task for men, hardest of all for the angel's children, however distantly descended. But it could be learned: learned is the only way it could be learned, for I am a man. Far away and long ago the angels struggled in great anguish with the world, struggled unceasingly; but I would learn, yes, in the long engine summer of the world I would learn to live with it, I would. It was after all so simple, so harrowingly simple. I felt my sweet taskmasters multiply, and from my eyes the salt tears fell, even as they do now from yours.

Zhinsinura crossed the raft and sat by me. Unable to speak to express my gratitude to her, I only laid my head in her lap. She stroked my hair. "Once a Day," she said, "has gone this morning with some who are gone trading, to the west. She wasn't chosen to go; she chose herself. She said to Houd: I won't return until Rush is gone, and gone for good."

Doubly and for good. There are houses outside houses over time, far, far harder to live in than the million small ones within them; just then I was enjoying a little one about the intersecting ripples of the water skiers in the river shallows.

"If I had known this," Zhinsinura said, and then no more; for what is there to say? Then: "Rush," she said, "you must stay as long as you have to; but we want her to come home, sometime."

How wise of her to say it to him then! For I was light, and she knew it; and though I felt for sure a distant dark house begin to assemble itself around all I did, I was light then, and watched the water skiers. I sighed, and perhaps it was for a vast and hopeless burden in this way lifted from Rush's back, and from Once a Day's back too. I thought, content, how sad it would be never to be able to go home again. I think I slept.

I'm very tired, now, angel. I have to rest.

Rest.

Take out your crystal, there's nothing, nothing more to tell.

Only the end. That won't be long.

The moon has risen. It's crescent now. It was full when I chose to come here. Is that how long I've been here?

No. Longer.

The clouds are thick. I suppose, below, they can't see the moon. . . .
Oh, angel, take it out, stop, I can't any more.

THE FOURTH CRYSTAL

The Sky Is Grass

First facet:

. . . and begin again with another, the fourth.

Perhaps you shouldn't waste them. We didn't finish the last.

It's all right. Can you go on now?

Did you tell me why you need such things, these crystals I mean? If you did I've forgotten.

_Only to see . . . to see how strong you are. I mean whether the story will change, depending on who . . . _

Depending on who I am.

Depending on who tells it.

Has it changed?

Yes. in small ways. I don't think . . . I don't think any other loved Once a Day as much as you, I mean as much as in this story. And I never heard of the fly caught in plastic before.

Will you tell me about him, the one who I am? Is it a man?

It is.

Do you love him?

Yes.

I wonder why I thought so? Because you remind me of her? . No, well, I'm not to know, am I? Well. I'll go on.

I'd tell you about how I passed the time at Service City with Once a Day gone, except that I remember almost nothing of it, and that's not surprising. I remember only how it seemed at once empty and full. And I remember the cats: changing places around the floor, arguing and forgetting arguments, stepping down (by steps that were clearer to me than words) into rest, and from rest into sleep, and from sleep into deeper sleep. Watching them made me sleep too.

And then I left. I don't remember how I chose a day, or if I was dark or light; or how I chose a direction, except that it wasn't west. I do remember, in July, sitting on a rock far from Service City and making friends with a cow.

My beard was longer; I hadn't clipped it short in the warren's way. Beside me was my camp: a big square of something not cloth but like cloth,

which Zhinsinura had given me out of the List's treasures. It was silver on one side and black on the other, and wrapped in it, though it was as fine as their finest cloaks, I was warm, and dry on wet ground. In my pack was bread, enough to last a year almost if I was careful, in a dry pouch the List makes; and Four Pots and some other doses; and a handful of fine blue papers made by hands I knew of Buckle cord; and matches, that fizzled out as often as not, not as good as my people make. And on my silver camp next to my pack Brom sat, watching the cow warily and ready to run.

Would you have thought Brom would have followed Once a Day? I would have. But he followed me. Or I followed him: it's easier that way with a cat, and I had no place to go; he was the adventurer. We ended here, in July, in grasslands, good for walking in, where there were mice and rabbits for Brom to chase, and cows seen far off. I wore a wide black hat. In all the time I had lived at Service City, I hadn't worn a man's hat, but the day I left Houd took this one off his head and put it on mine. It fit. It wasn't as though I had earned it, though I hadn't worn one because I felt I hadn't earned it. It fit, is all.

The cow had seemingly lost her kid. Her great teated breast was swollen, and she made lamenting sounds because of it. Because I had camped there quietly for a few days, or because of Dr. Boots, the cow came close to me. I didn't move, but sat and smoked, and Brom hissed and she moved away. She came back and went away again in a little dance. Well, I thought, there's no way I can suck for you, friend. She came close enough finally for me to touch, though she threw off my hand when I tried. She had amazing eyes: great, liquid, and brown, like a beautiful woman's in a way that was almost comical, and long silky lashes.

After a day of this (Dr. Boots's endless patience!) I learned, and the cow allowed me, to stroke and squeeze her teats so the milk ran out. Once I started, she stood calm as a stone and let me, must even have sighed (can they sigh?) for relief at it. The milk ran out in quick, thin streams. As she was running dry, I took off my indestructible hat and laid it on the ground below her, and the last of the milk made a little pool in the bottom of it, and with some misgivings I tasted it. Warm, thick, and white it tasted; I wondered if I would remember the taste from when I was a baby, but I didn't, or perhaps I did, since I liked it. On my way to the brook to wash my hat I thought that if she stayed around, it would make a nice change from bread and water, and I supposed it wouldn't hurt me; it tasted good, and that's the best sign.

She did stay, and Brom stopped hissing when she came close, though I can't say they ever became friends. When I moved (I mean when Brom moved, and I followed) she followed me. I named her Fido, which Blink had said was a name the angels gave their animals in ancient times. Traveling with the two of them was a little tedious, but have I said I was patient? If I lost them, I would stop and sit, and in an afternoon or a day they would both have returned to me.

You would think I would be dark, darkest then of any time. It's not so. I was happy. It was summer, and a fine hot dry one; the sea of grass was endless, and ran silver in little winds, as though fish darted through its pools. For companion I had another cat, Brom, and a cow for milk; for amusement I had Rush. In the hours when Fido ate grass and Brom hunted or slept, I would walk along his paths, which Boots had showed me. I liked him. There seemed to be endless insides to him, nooks and odd places where he attached to the world and to words, to other people, to the things he knew and liked and didn't like.

It was only later, in the winter, that I grew afraid of him.

When October or so (without the List's calendar, I was back to my old judgments) made the grass sea brown and rain fell in banners across it, I began to look for a place to spend the winter. It was the first thing I had chosen to do since I left Service City; I thought perhaps I had forgotten how. Anyway, the place really found me: all I did was to find Road, and walk it for some days, and then go off on a little spur that (I knew) would lead back to

Road again; and found myself looking into his face.

He was a head only, about three times my height, and his thick neck sat on a small square of stone cracked and weedy; all around the woods grew rank and full of falling leaves. Perhaps he had once been painted, but now he was a dull white save for dark streaks of rust that ran from his eye-places like grimy tears. Since he grinned from great ear to great ear, it seemed he wept from some unbearable joy.

It was for sure a head; there were two bulging eyes, and a ball of a nose; the grinning mouth had once been an open space, the lower lip ran broad and flat like a counter, and the rusted metal plates that filled it were like a mouthful of bad teeth. Only, for a head, it was absurdly, perfectly globular. Standing before it, I had the impression I had seen it before, but even now I can't remember where.

There was a door of metal in the back, rusted as thin as paper, and I broke through it. Inside it was dark and close, with the smell of a place closed for who knew how long, and of small animals that had found a way in; they fled from Brom and me, who took possession. With the door open, I could see what sort of place we had: it had been, of all things, a kitchen. It looked like a miniature of the one in Twenty-eight Flavors. And for what, here, in the middle of nothing, where only Road ran? Maybe the angels had wanted to show they could build one of their kitchens anywhere. . . . A ceiling cut the place in half, at about nose level, and there was a door in it, and by piling up things I clambered up through it. Very dark, but I could make out the curve of the skull, which I stood inside, and the concave eye sockets. After a lot of tripping through ancient mess and new nests, I found a length of something metal, pipe perhaps, and with it I whacked out both great round pupils and let in light.

It took a day or two to pitch out all the ancient junk, and find the floor was sound and the skull leakless. I built a stair for Brom and me to climb up into the skull, and fixed the door in the neck, and made shutters for the eyes, to close at night. I have some skill in ancient ways, you know, and I knew enough to spend some days gathering in what dry grass and other eatables I could for Fido when winter came. (Of course I gathered in too little.) It surprised me that though for sure the time must be past when any child she had would be grown, still as long as I plucked her milk ran.

Downstairs in the tubs of angel silver I could make fires; there was even a hood of angel silver over them, and a hole to the outside, so it wasn't too smoky; the heat rose up, and up above I made a bed of boughs and leaves and pine needles, covered with my black and silver. And so I had my hat hung up there as winter began.

If you had been there, if you'd stood at the bottom of the woods and looked up through the leafless trees slick with rain (it seemed to rain every day now), you would have seen the head we lived in, bone-white in the drizzle, grinning idiotically with rusted teeth; and looking down at you (but not at you; at nothing; at no one) would have been Brom, in his left eye, and me, in his right, peeking out. I had a lot of time, as I sat, to think about what my head could possibly have been for. I was alone for all that winter there, and many explanations occurred to me. Once I scared myself dark by coming to the sudden conclusion that what I lived in wasn't something the angels had made but one of the angels themselves, buried up to his neck in stone in this desolate place, dead grinning weeping with a kitchen in his mouth and me in his brain -- it was all I could do to keep from running out in terror.

Well, I got over it. I had to. I had no place else to go.

It was in this winter that I took up avenging for a living. In a way, everyone who lives now is an avenger; certainly the List with its treasure house of angel stuff, and the warren with its chests; Blink was an avenger if you count knowledge. But there are some whose sole occupation it is: like Teeplee.

There was a day when I thought I would see if I could find some glass to replace the wooden shutters I had made for my eyes, or perhaps even some nice clear plastic. I had passed a great ruin coming to the head, and I took the day to go there and see if I couldn't find something I could use. It was a warm December day, clear and brown and cheerful; I had just passed my birth-time; I had turned seventeen.

The ruin had been one of those places the angels made countless thousands of something in, a place huge enough to raise its head or heads above the woods that grew around it. One tall wall stood alone, like a cutout, all its windows empty; strange, but though the sunlight passed more easily now through all those windows, it seemed only more blind. Big trees had gotten fingers and toes inside the walls of other fallen buildings, though they had left the wide stone plaza (which all must have) mostly alone; spiky brown grass grew over the odd hillocks made of fallen walls. It was no more still there, I suppose, than any place; jays screamed at me, and chipmunks whistled; but it seemed stiller. You could see where paths had crossed between the buildings at proper angles; the broadest of these led up to the largest and least ruined of the buildings, and I went up to its wide dark mouth. I almost went in, but stopped to blink in the darkness -- and saw that the place had no floor. I stood on the edge of a drop several times my height. Far down, something scurried; one of the animals that had found living room there. The tiny sound echoed hugely.

The dusty shafts of light from the empty windows didn't illuminate the dark tangle below, but I made out that there were ways to climb down. I had got some way down when I wondered if I could get back up, and stopped. I kicked something off the ledge I stood on, and listened to it clatter down in the depths; I sat and brushed away something that had fallen on my shoulder.

I turned. What had fallen on my shoulder was a glove, and inside the glove was a hand. I cried out, but couldn't stand, because the ledge was too narrow. The hand was attached to a whole long body topped with a pale face, whose curly-browed eyes looked down into mine bright with suspicion.

"Now," he said, and his grip tightened on my shoulder. The glove his hand was in was shiny black plastic, with a big stiff cuff from which plastic fringe dangled. On the cuff was printed or painted a dim white star. I didn't know whether to be afraid or astonished: head to foot he was cloaked in a thick, shiny stuff caught in a hood with string; it was broad-striped in red and white, except over his shoulder where there was a square of bright blue crossed by even rows of perfect white stars. From out of the red and white hood snaked his long neck, so long it bent in the middle as though broken; his hair was a fine stubble of metal color, cropped nearly off. In spite of myself, I smiled; and though his grip didn't lessen, he smiled too. His teeth were even, whole, and perfect; and as green as grass.

"Avvenger?" he said.

"I don't know," I said, though the word sounded familiar to me. "I was looking for some glass. I thought I might find some I could use here, some glass or clear plastic. .

"Avvenger," he said, nodding and grinning greenly. He released my shoulder and drew his hand out of its glove. The hand was pale and sparkled with rings; he held it out to me and said "Shake." I thought he meant to help me stand up, but when I took his hand he just -- shook it, quickly up and down, and let go. Was this a warning or a greeting or what? He was still smiling, but the green teeth made it hard to tell the reason, for some reason. He slipped past me, gathering in his barred skirts, and began to climb down quickly on handholds I hadn't noticed, then turned and waved at me to follow him.

He wasn't easy to follow. He went like a spider or a squirrel down the wall and over the vast nameless piles of rust and collapse. Now and then a great window far above threw a block of December light over him, and his gorgeous robe shone for a moment and went out, like a barred lamp. And I remembered: "I'm not an avvenger," I said. Then, louder, to be heard over the

multiple echoes of our clambering, I shouted, "I thought all the avengers were dead."

At that he stopped and turned to me, standing half in, half out of a window's light. "Dead?" he said. "Did you say dead? You did? Do you see this National thing here?" He flung the robe wide in the light. "This National thing here has been dead since it was made, and is still as good as new; and I suppose that long after I'm myself as dead as it is, somebody's body will be wrapped in its old glory. So don't say dead. Just follow me."

Second facet:

"Avengers," Teeplee said, "are like buzzers."

The room he had at last led me to, down in the bowels of the ruin, was small and lit by a harsh lamp. On the way here I had glimpsed a human face in a dark doorway, and a human back just retreating into another; and under the table we sat at, a child rummaged silently through things, learning his trade, I suppose, for the room was so full of old stuff that it was like sitting inside a carved chest, except that none of these things seemed to have any order at all.

Teeplee had told me -- besides his name--that the others there were his family, and all the children there were his. All! "My gang," he called them. As I said, I had remembered: avengers were men who, in the days of the League's power, wouldn't submit to the League, and went around taking what they could of the angels' ruin, and using it and swapping it and living as much in the angels' way as they could; and their chiefest treasures were women who could bear in the old way, without intercession, over and over like cats. Naturally, men who thought women of any kind were treasures were the League's enemies, and they were mostly hunted down; so sitting with Teeplee in his den of angel-stuff I felt as though it were hundreds of years ago.

"Buzzers?" I said.

"You know, buzzers. Big, wide-winged, bald-headed birds that live on dead things." He drew himself up grandly in his cloak. "Buzzers are National," he said. "They're the National bird."

"I don't know what National is," I said, "except that it was something about the angels . . ."

"Well, there it is," Teeplee said, pointing a long finger at me. "Haven't you ever seen angels? All bald-headed, or as near as they could get; just like buzzers."

For a moment I thought he meant he really had seen angels, but of course he meant pictures; and yes, I had seen one, the gray picture of Uncle Plunkett, bald as a buzzer.

He began going through piles of stuff in this room and the next, looking for the glass or plastic I wanted. "What an avenger is," he said as he looked -- and I began to see that there was a kind of squirrely order to the place -- "is someone, like me, who lives on what the angels made that doesn't spoil. 'Doesn't spoil' means it's not 'throw-away.' See, the angels once thought it would be good to have things you would just use once and then throw away. I forget why they thought so. But after a while they saw if they kept that up they'd soon have thrown away everything in the world, so they changed their minds and made things you would only have one of, that would last forever. By the time they were good at that, it was all over, but the things still don't spoil. . . . Hey, how about these?"

He showed me a box full of bottle bottoms, green and brown.

"I thought something bigger," I said.

He put them away, not disappointed. "Now I said, 'lives on,'" he said.

"That means maybe you dress in it, like this National thing, or you swap it for things to eat, or give it to women for presents and like that, or maybe" -- he leaned close to me grinning -- "maybe you eat it. Find the angels' food, and eat it yourself."

He was looking so triumphant I had to laugh. "Isn't it a little stale?"

"I said, 'doesn't spoil,'" Teeplee said seriously. "I said, 'Avengers are like buzzers'; I said, 'Buzzers live on dead things.' You see, boy -- say here, look at this."

He had come up with some convex black plastic, warped and scratched. "I thought maybe something clearer," I said. He threw it down with a clatter and went on searching.

"You see," he said, "the idea of making things that don't spoil is to make them dead to start with, so they don't need to ever die. There's dead metal, that's angel silver, that won't rust or pit or tarnish; and dead cloths like this; and plastics like dead wood that won't dry-rot or get wormy or split. And strangest of all: the angels could make dead food. Food that never gets stale, never rots, never spoils. I eat it."

"I have food like that. I smoke it."

"No, no! Not that evil pink stuff! I mean food, food you eat. Look here." He stood on tiptoe and took down from a high shelf a closed pot of metal, with a dull plastic glow about it. "Metal," he said, "that won't rust, and a jacket of plastic over that. Now watch and listen." There was a ring attached to the top, and Teeplee worked his finger under it and pulled. I expected the ring to come off, but instead there was a hiss like an indrawn breath and the whole top came off in a graceful spiral. "Look," he said, and showed me what was inside: it looked like sawdust, or small chips of wood. "Potato," he said. "Not now, I mean, not just yet; but mix this with water, and you'd be surprised: a mashed-up potato is just what it is, and as good as new."

"As good as new? What does it taste like?"

"Well. Dead. But like food. Throw it in water and you've got something like a mashed-up potato that the angels made, boy, a potato that's a thousand years old." He looked reverently within the pot and shook the stuff; it made a dry, sandy sound. "Now even a rock," he said, "even a mountain changes in a thousand years. But the angels could make this potato that's dead to begin with, so it couldn't change. They could make a potato that's immortal."

He sat, suddenly lost in thought or wonder. "No glass today. Come back in two, three days, we'll see." He set the child to guide me out. "But remember," he said as I left, "it'll cost you."

I came back; I came back often. That was a long winter, and Teeplee was good to have for company. I talked about a dark house; I talked about forgetting over time. And it's strange: alone in my head, I would sometimes seem on the edge of losing myself altogether, but with old Teeplee I was comfortable -- maybe because there's no one so different from everything I had grown up with than an avenger.

What I mean about losing myself: when I was alone, still there seemed to be someone there to talk to. I would wake in my cold head (the fire long since out) and lie wrapped in my black and silver, and start a conversation with this other, and he would answer, and we would lie there long and bicker like two gossips trying to tell the same story two different ways.

What we talked about was Boots. At the heart of the story was her letter, but I had forgotten it, had forgotten that her letter was Forget. I would get up at last, and get milk from the cow and sit and smoke, and maybe then clamber back into my cold bed, and all the while chat endlessly with this other about something we couldn't remember to forget.

I really had wanted to be her, I explained; I meant that. I still do. I'm not to blame; no one is accountable, I said, not Boots, not her, not even me; I chose, don't you see, and what is there to say? But he said: then why

are you here now and not there? You must not have tried hard enough. I know you're wrong, I replied; I can't remember why, but that's not it, it's just the opposite of that; anyway, I did try, I did. . . . Not hard enough, he said. And we would try to turn our backs on each other; that doesn't work.

What frightened me was that I had failed in the attempt to become her, and that in the attempt I had stopped being me. My earliest selves frightened me when they returned to me in the moments before sleep (have I told you I learned to summon them? Yes) and I felt that rather than learning anything, anything at all, I had instead suffered a grievous, an unhealable wound; that, try as I might, I could no longer really mean what I said, nor say what I really meant. And a hiss of fear would go all through me. I would stare out my eyes and wonder if it wasn't warm enough to go see what Teeplee was about today.

So we would spend the day together, wrapped to our chins in indestructible angel-stuff -- he in his barred robe, I in my black cloak and my hat -- and clamber over the old messes, and talk about ancient things until our hands and feet got numb; and in the crackling freeze, trudge back to his hole in the ruin to unload our treasures and talk about who should take what. Since I went mostly for the walk and the company, he always got the best things, though I would put up a show of bargaining so as not to hurt his feelings. He would deal hard for dead, useless contraptions, and only abandon them after long thought and much insistence that they could be put to some use.

Sometimes we would be gone two or three days, if Teeplee had discovered a good big stretch of Housing as he called it; sometimes he would bring along one of his boys, but never a wife. ("This is men's work," he would say, with his chin out.)

He knew a lot of angel lore, Teeplee, though I never knew how much of it to believe. I asked him why all the Housing I had ever seen was the same: each little tumbledown place the same, each with its room for a kitchen and a stone place for washing. Didn't any of the angels think of a different way of putting things together? He said that if what I had seen had surprised me, I should have traveled as far as he had, and seen it everywhere, Housing stretching as far as the eye could see was how he put it, and yes, everywhere fitted out exactly as the angels always did, so they could travel thousands of miles, from Coast to Coast, and have another box just like the one they had come from. He said some even trundled one around with them wherever they went, like a snail shell, just in case they ended up somewhere where everything was not just as they required. Think of them, he said, rushing over vast distances you won't travel even if you have many lives, and everywhere finding Housing exactly the same, and wanting it that way too.

Now, how could he know that? Maybe there was some other explanation altogether. Maybe it was a Law.

One rimy day, in a huge place of great fallen blocks sunken by their own weight into the earth -- it looked as though the earth had taken a big, a too big, mouthful of the angels' works -- I found a good thing: a big box of glittering screws, as good as new. "As good as new," Teeplee said trembling with cold and envy. All the way back, he kept asking if I hadn't lost them, if maybe it wouldn't be safer if he carried them, and so on; and when we were once again in the stuffy warmth of his hideout, and I put them on the table between us. Teeplee ungloved one hand and dipped it into the rustling bits; he felt their clean-cut spiral edges, stuck a thumbnail in their slots. "A screw," he said; "now a screw isn't like a nail, isn't like tying something on with string, boy. A screw, a screw has" -- he balled his fist -- "a screw has authority." Then, as though the answer were of no real importance to him: "What do you want for them?"

"Well," I said, "I could use a pair of gloves."

He quickly gloved his bare hand. "Sure," he said. "Of course you'd want warm, good ones, not like these things." He raised his black plastic fingers and wiggled them. Why was there a star painted on each cuff?

"They look good to me," I said. "Indestructible."

"You say 'gloves,'" he said. "I've seen gloves compared to which these are bare hands." He looked at me sidewise. "Not a pair." He raised his hand to forestall some criticism I might have, and went to search in his other room.

He returned with something wrapped in a grimy rag. "There are gloves," he said, "and there are gloves." He unwrapped the rag, and laid on the table before me a silver glove that glowed like ice.

Will you believe, angel, that until I saw it there -- like a hand more than a glove, like the bright shadow of a hand -- I had forgotten that it was with such a glove that Zhinsinura had manipulated Boots, had forgotten entirely that it was a glove like the glove stolen from St. Andy which had replaced me with Boots? It's so: not until I saw Teeplee's glove on his cracked table, did I remember that other -- no, more: when I saw it, that moment was delivered to me again, whole, in all its wonder and terror: I saw the small room, the clear sphere and its pedestal; I saw Zhinsinura slipping on her glove, and heard her say Close your eyes. Too many wonders almost immediately succeeded that one: I had forgotten entirely.

"I've seen a glove like that," I said, when the moment had -- not faded, no -- but passed.

"Seeing is one thing," Teeplee said. "Having is another."

"And I know a story of one like it, a story about this one, maybe." There was a place -- a single small place, a point even -- where everything in my life intersected every other. I felt my mind cross like my eyes can cross.

"About these screws," Teeplee said.

"Yes, yes," I said. "Take them." He did, slowly, surprised at my indifference, wondering if maybe he'd made a bad bargain for them. "Where did you find it?" I asked.

"Well, well, there it is."

"Was there, with it, anywhere near it, a ball -- a silver ball, well, maybe not silver, but this color?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Maybe there was. Will you go there again? I could go with you."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "What about this ball?"

"I don't know what about it," I said, laughing at his confusion, and at my own. "I don't know. I wish I did. I only know I'd give everything I have to get it, not that that's very much."

He scratched his bald buzzer's head and looked down glumly at the glove. "It isn't even a pair," he said.

So I had this thing then to think about. For a long time I wouldn't put it on; it lay, stainless and impossible, amid my things, and no matter how I folded it took the shape of a living hand, though it was fine and nearly weightless to hold. When at last I did draw it on -- it slid voraciously over my fingers and up my wrist, as though hungry for a human hand after long years -- I took it off again almost immediately. I think I was afraid of what my hand within it might do. From then on I only looked at it and thought about it -- thought in circles.

There were other things, too, to occupy the nights. The other would argue that it only made me want her more, and I would concede that; anyway, my reconstructions of our pale twilight dreams were feeble, we had marked too few. Sometimes I would lie with my skirts up working furiously with the useless thing and find myself at the same time shedding cold tears just as useless.

You really shouldn't laugh.

Third facet:

There came a day when I understood winter was forever; though there would be days when it didn't freeze and days when the sun shone, they would always be followed by cold and rain again.

That day had begun fair, but afternoon dragged the clouds back over and they began again their ceaseless weeping. Toward evening the drizzle subsided to a snuffle, but the clouds hung low and baggy with further business to do. I sat smoking, letting pile up on the inside of the concave eyeball a little pile of rose-colored ash which the wet wind played with. No, no spring this year; the wood was slimy with despair and chilled to the marrow. Not quite dead, not frozen; there had been little snow all winter. But hopeless.

Be thankful, he told me, that she wasn't there to go back to. She knew you wouldn't come back from Boots being as she was, only a poor cripple, not the one and not the other; not yourself whom she first loved, yet nothing other either.

I don't understand, I told him. I have understood nothing, and now I have nothing left. I overthrew my deepest wisdom for her sake, made myself a clear pool for her reflection. And now there's only empty sky.

Well, don't you see? he said. You tried to become transparent, and all the while she was working to be opaque.

Like way-wall, I said.

She must become opaque: you must become transparent. There's no force on earth left stronger than love, but .

Opaque, I said. Yes.

Transparent, he said.

Never a moment when I revealed to her I had seen something in her but she changed it at that moment to hide further from me.

She wanted not to know it herself, he said. There's no blame in that.

It was as though I went after her into a cave, marking my way with a long string; and just when I came to the end of the string, and so couldn't follow any further, Dr. Boots snatched the string from my hand.

It was only one way, anyway, he said. So there's no way out.

We agree, he said, on that.

Well then, I said, I think it's time to lighten that load.

I went to the pack that held everything I had and took from it the case that held the Four Pots. I took it back to the window, unsealed it and opened it. The first pot was blue and contained stuff colored orange -- the two colors of the house called Twenty-eight Flavors; it was medicine's daughters for every sickness. The second pot was black and contained the rose-colored stuff that had dreamed me out of a knot with Seven Hands. The third was silver, and contained the black granules that lighten a load. The fourth was bone-white, and contained the white angel's choice I had seen Speak a Word refuse (no, she said, not this year). I picked up the cigar I had left burning on the edge of the window; I held it deep within two fingers, closing my eyes against the rising smoke, and thought about them. I thought of Houd standing before that mirror which showed a tall-hatted man giving giant pots to a boy. "It confuses the dark and light," he'd said, "and for a while you think only about the confusion, and not about everything."

"Everything?" I asked.

"That's Relativity," he said.

Well, Relativity, then, whatever that is; we'll try a confusion. I opened the silver and the black pots; from the one I took a granule of black, like a cinder, and swallowed it. I wet my thumb and pressed it across the rose surface of the other, and then wiped the thumb inside my lip. And then went on smoking, building a pile of ash in the window, which the wind, grown harder, blew off into the wet.

There was just enough room inside my head for the game, though people standing in back to watch filled up the window-eyes and made it dark. The players sat cheek to cheek in a circle with knees drawn up. They played with only one ball, and though there was a lot of chatter, there was no argument about how to begin: the ball began on my mother's knee.

"Whose knee?" they said, and the gossip Laugh Aloud moved the ball to Mbaba's knee. "As for the silver ball and glove," Mbaba said, "they're gone; but for the rest, see here": and she opened her mouth to show a perfect set of teeth, as green as grass.

"Whose knee?" they said, and the ball moved to Painted Red's knee, and from hers to Seven Hands's, who said, "One day, big man, one day," and back to Painted Red, who was saying, "A knot in the cord -- that makes me laugh." The ball in her long, sure tweezers paused in air. "Whose knee?" they said, and the ball went to Once a Day's knee. She raised her impossible blue eyes and said, "Ever after."

"Ask women," said Seven Hands, and moved the ball to In a Corner, who said, smoking softly, "Lighter than air, lighter than air."

"An old joke of Roy's," said Once a Day, and moved me to Painted Red. "Many lives," she said, "many lives in the moment between birth and dying."

"This is spring," said Once a Day, and with an unsure hand she moved tweezers toward the ball on Painted Red's knee. Zhinsinura shook her head slowly as the tweezers came close.

"How many lives does a cat have?" she asked.

"Nine," said Painted Red.

"Miss," said Houd, who wore a bracelet of blue stones; and with his yellow-nailed hand he put the dropped ball on his own knee.

"Whose knee?" they all said, and tweezers came for the ball. "Great Knot and First Trap make Little Trap, Little Trap and the Expedition make Little Second Gate, or Great Trap Unlocked in Leaf cord," said Painted Red, and the ball began to fly again from knee to knee.

"The fly sees out all around," said Budding, and moved me to Blooming's knee.

"And sees nothing that holds him back," said Budding; "and still he can't move."

"And let that be a lesson," said Blooming, and moved me to Blink's knee. "We're all legless men," Blink said, yawning. "It doesn't get better, a lost leg, like a cold."

"Are you a saint yet?" said Budding, and Blooming moved me back to Once a Day's sharp knee, and Blink said, "Bits and pieces," and moved me to the knee of another girl, a girl in a starred black robe with a great cat beside her, watching. "How can you think about me," she said, "when I'm not there?"

"Miss! Two misses," said the cat. The ball was retrieved and went to Zher's knee. Once a Day said softly: "Beautiful."

"After all," said Painted Red as they paused, "it's only a game."

"Whose knee?"

The ball started fast around. "The object," said Houd, "is to never discover you're playing it."

"To someday," said Painted Red, "become transparent; and in transparent life to be free from death."

"To learn to live with it," said Blink. "We learn to live with it; we try. We have our systems and our wisdom . . ."

"How is truthful speaking done?" asked Zhinsinura. "Let's both tell a secret."

"I don't remember riddles," said Once a Day.

"The Salutation, the Body, and the Complimentary Close. You can find a path through that."

"A path," said Painted Red.

"Is only a name," said Zhinsinura.

"Is drawn on your feet," said Mbaba.

"For the place where you are," said Zhinsinura.

"When-we-wandered," said Mbaba.

"Where you've been on it," said Zhinsinura, "is only a story."

"And then, and then, and then," said Blink.

"Some of the stories are pleasant ones . . ."

"That's Relativity," said Houd.

". . . and some are not. That's dark and light."

"_He_ was dark," said Stick, and picked up the ball with tweezers of wet black wood. The ball slipped and bobbed within the twiggy tweezers. He could get no grip. And they had been doing so well.

"How many lives does a cat have?" asked Puff. "Quick."

"Many lives," said Painted Red, "many lives in the moment between birth and dying." Stick just managed to wiggle the ball to her knee, and everyone said _aaaah_.

"Whose knee?" they all said. "Dr. Boots's knee," said Once a Day softly; "this is spring."

"And truthful speaking is . . ."

"Transparent," said Painted Red.

"And dark and light is . . ."

"Opaque," said Zhinsinura.

The ball they played with was a hazelnut. Zhinsinura's tweezers that reached for it were like a nutcracker. "Opaque, transparent," said the ball. "Like way-wall."

"Miss," said Once a Day, a little sadly, but as though she'd expected it.

Zhinsinura, smiling, picked up the ball in her fingers. "Way-wall?" she said. "There's no such thing." She inserted the nut in her cracker.

"Three misses," Teeplee said. "Game's over." Zhinsinura calmly cracked the nut.

I looked up at that sound. Above me, a thin crack ran the width of the skull, making fingers.

The cigar in my hand had gone out. Brom lay asleep, but not in the bed where he usually lay. Through the door in the floor I could see the fire burning low and shadowy. Outside the sound of the evening was heavy, and I realized what it was -- rain. The crack in the skull widened with a little noise, and I jumped up with a cry, which woke the doctor but not Brom.

What doctor?

"That's not right, though," I said. "It wasn't really three misses."

"Yes," the doctor said. She wasn't old, though her hair was white and the hands which held my black and silver cloth around her were lined. She moved, and the bed crackled beneath her. She looked at me with wide still eyes.

"Because," I said, "I do know how truthful speaking's done."

"Yes," the doctor said.

"It's done the same as dark and light."

"Yes," the doctor said.

"Yes," I said, "because when you speak truthfully, what you're doing is telling whoever can hear you about the dark and light, just then. The better you tell an old story, the more you are talking about right now."

"Yes," the doctor said.

"So I have always been dark and light. I never had to learn it, because I didn't know it."

"Yes," she said.

"And never stopped saying what I really meant or really meaning what I said, because how could I do otherwise?"

"Yes."

"Then there's no difference. They're the same."

"Yes."

"And is that what it means, then, that there's no such thing as way-wall?"

"Yes."

"So. All right. Two misses, then."

"Yes."

"The game goes on."

"Yes."

"So. All right. But," I said, sitting down, "if they're the same, then what's the difference?"

"Yes," the doctor said.

A loud crack overhead made me duck. I looked up. The split in my head was widening horribly. Rain seeped in, staining the white gray. Brom looked upward, and then at me. I went to my pack, tossed in the Four Pots, and found my specs. I put them on. "I think," I said, "that it's time to be going."

The doctor watched me as I came close to where she lay in the bed. "This will cover us, it's big enough," I said, and drew off the black and silver which covered her.

In the gloom I thought there was a cat with her in the bed; but of course she was the cat. She turned herself with careful grace and went on fours out of the bed and across the floor. Her tabby legs and thighs were like those of Fa'afa of the List; her hands helped her across the floor to look out the window. There she sat with knees up and her hands on the window ledge. Her tail swept around to cover her clawed feet. Above us the skull crunched and split; a fine white powder fell.

"Anyway," I said, my voice catching, "we have to go."

She looked from me to the rain, and then to the door in the floor. Soundlessly she padded to it and disappeared through it. Brom followed her. I shouldered my pack, and gathered up the black and silver, put on my hat. I glanced up: the skull was crazed.

They were waiting at the outside door, with the thoughtful reluctance of cats before rain. Brom would have to decide for himself; I moved hesitantly to the doctor and knelt before her. The wet wind from the door made her shiver, but when she saw I wore the silver glove -- I don't know how I came to have it on -- she grew calm and raised her arms slowly to slip them around my neck. With a soft cry that I don't remember, was it Yes or No, I put one arm beneath her and lifted her to carry. And we stepped out into the night and the rain.

The leaves oozed under my feet as I stumbled down the incline away from the head. Gusts of rainy wind blew across the way, and I nearly stumbled with my burden. Behind me, I thought I heard the head I had abandoned crumble to pieces; I tried to look back, but it was all darkness and woods, and the doctor's hands held me. I could feel her breath on me, gentle and warm, as though she were asleep and though my grip on her tightened at every stumble and lurch, she was easy; she even seemed to nestle against me under the robe which covered us.

When I came to broad naked Road I stopped. I looked both ways, but it was all wind and rain and stone and dim black-boned trees. "I think," I said, already panting, "I think I know a place where we might go."

"Yes," the doctor said, muffled by the black, She sighed; I sighed; and we started north.

That was a long walk. It had taken after all, some months to come this far south from home: the walk to Blink's woods, and south to Service City, and a summer after that, always going south; and this burden was heavy. "And what with the rain," I sobbed, my lungs aching, "what with spring not coming . . ." When at last drizzly dawn came, and I stood on a bare hill pied with snow and looked down into the wide valley of That River from whose hidden length white steam rose like winter breath, my arms and hands had been locked so long that I knew the hardest part would be letting go.

"Somewhere," I said to her, "down in those hills across That River is a wood; and in that wood, if you know it, is a path. The path gets clearer as you walk it, until it widens under the trees, and you see a door. The door

will grow clearer as you come closer to it, until you are standing before it; and then you can step in, and look: a girl with blue eyes as opaque as sky is playing Rings, and looks up when you enter. But I can't go any further."

I sagged to my knees and let down my weight. Slowly, trembling, I uncurled my hands as my muscles snapped back on themselves with vengeance. I drew back the cloth and looked at what I had brought, and wondered if it had been worth it to carry this stuff so far.

There was a nice plastic jug and a funnel, which I had caught rain water in -- scarce, they are. There was a spade blade, not too rusted, and a length of white close-line. There was some Book, mostly moldered, which I had thought to give to Blink if I ever saw him again. Angel silver bits and pieces -- one of them Teeplee had called a dog collar; I thought that might be useful. And -- heaviest of all -- a machine, rusted where it wasn't plastic-coated, that looked something like a mechanical version of Blink's crostic-words: it had rows of little tabs with letters on them, and other inexplicable parts. Teeplee called it a spelling machine, with some contempt. I had kept it to see if I might learn to spell from it.

"It's all just too heavy to carry, though," I said. "Just too heavy."

"So your avenging days are over?" Teeplee said. "I thought the speakers never threw away anything."

My heart slowed. The hilltop and the valley patched with fog seemed to thin, as though I could press upon it only a little harder with my senses and see through it. I did press: what I saw was the road leading into Teeplee's ruin, and the old avenger himself in his stars and stripes. I had walked through the night and reached, not home, carrying the doctor, but this place, carrying a load of junk. Probably, behind me, my head was still whole. It didn't matter: I wasn't going back.

"No, not over," I said. My voice sounded thin and uncertain in this reality. "But they have a lot of stuff there already."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Home," I said, "now that spring's coming." And it was: the rain had foretold it and I hadn't known: but now where I knelt before that quiet pile it was quite clear: in the wet bushes around me each drop of water on each twig had within it an eye of green, and the wind that combed the dull grass showed tender new shoots starting. Of course Boots would never have told such a secret, would never whisper that spring was for sure until I had forgotten it was possible at all. That's dark and light, I thought; this is spring; it's nice now. I let go then of the doctor: and letting go felt like falling, falling gently backward into a waiting pair of hands I would never see but could not doubt were there.

"How about this, though?" Teeplee said, and from within his robe he took out something small, a piece of winter ice, no, something else. "I took a trip," he said.

It wasn't a ball at all; it looked like one of the knobs that hung suspended as though in water within Boots's pedestal. I raised the silver glove on my hand. "Give it to me," I said.

"It'll cost you," Teeplee said.

"Everything I have," I said. He made as though to hand me the thing, but released it; perhaps he dropped it, but it didn't drop: my glove began to sound, a strange whistle came from it yet not from it, and the ball came floating to it and landed in my palm as gently as a bird.

And joined, they made a double note, a note that some engine here, in the City, heard, isn't that right? Yes, some angel ear that had been waiting for how many centuries to hear it: and when it was heard, Mongolfier began to prepare.

"This stuff isn't much," Teeplee said, nudging my treasures with a toe. "Not for a good thing like that ball. That's a good thing, and in perfect condition."

"All right," I said; and I found and took from my sleeve a bright piece of ancient Money, the piece with which I had been _bot_. I held it for a

moment, feeling under my thumb the upswept hair of the angel's face cut on it, but it no longer mattered to me. I had found what was lost and could take it to the warren and put it in its place again, and tell the long, the strange story of how I had come by it: and anyway, giving it to Teeplee in exchange for St. Andy's ball couldn't free me, for it's the same with Money as with anything, as with every other thing men do: it's all only one way.

Fourth facet:

It was nearly summer when I stood for real on the hilltop that overlooks the valley Little Belaire lives in, for there really is such a place; it was more tricked out with details than in my confusion, and of course green, but I recognized it. It was just the time that I had left, three years before.

I had thought at first just to run down the hill as fast as I could and find the path to Buckle cord's door; but something stopped me there. I laid out my camp, as I had for every night along the way, and sat. Night came, and a moon near full; day again. I thought: when I go down the hill I will be as Olive was, arriving suddenly from far away, a great cat beside me with frank yellow eyes, and a terrible secret to tell.

I didn't tell you that at my first camp after I had left Teeplee's, Brom found me. He frightened me by sneaking up to the fire, and then I laughed aloud to see him. But after he'd smelled my breath, just to make sure I was I, and looked over the camp, he only lay on his feet with a sigh and went to sleep. A cat.

It was Brom who first saw my visitor. Another day had passed; I was still unable to make up my mind to go down the hill and across That River, and lay on my back looking up at the gold-green new leaves thinking of nothing, when I heard Brom making that noise -- ak-ak-ak-ak -- that some cats make at birds or for no reason at the sky. I rolled over to see what made him snicker -- a hawk, perhaps, hanging high up -- and sat up with a cry.

Someone was letting himself down out of the clouded sky on a huge white umbrella.

It was a great half-globe of translucent white. Ropes ran from its edges, holding it taut over a ball of air; and in the ropes a man hung like a fly caught in a web, holding on, his feet moving idly as he descended. I leaped up and ran, following his long descent as it changed with the wind. As it came closer, it seemed to grow larger, an immense, undulating dome; I could see clearly the man in the ropes. He waved to me, and then gave all his attention to manipulating his thing by tugging on the ropes so that it would fall on the hillside meadow and not in the trees. I ran after him. He hurtled to the ground, moving fast and not gently at all, and it seemed certain he would strike the ground with tremendous force, despite his umbrella, which now looked like a very bad idea and not workable at all. I held my breath as his feet struck the meadow. He flung himself over just then, thinking, I suppose, to break his fall that way; and down after him came the dome, just cloth after all, collapsing and then billowing away outward in the breeze.

It tried, with great lassitude, to rise again on the breeze, but the man was on his feet, being walked away by it, struggling to untie himself from it, fighting with a fierce single-mindedness to stop it; got himself free, and began to haul his thing in with violent tugs as it rippled and rose across the ground like a compact fog. I came with a stone and threw it on top to pin it. It was easy then; he piled it up anyhow and turned to face me.

"Mongolfier," he said, and I didn't know what to say to that.

He was a pale, unsmiling man, with lank black hair that fell always over his eyes. Top to toe he was dressed in tight brown, a snug manypocketed coat

and pants, and strange glossy boots that reached to his knees, tightly thonged with yards of lacing. I smiled, and nodded, and made to come closer -- at which he drew back, never looking away from me with eyes dark and wide, eyes such as I have seen only in wild things that have suffered some terrible hurt.

Just then Brom came warily out of the bushes behind me; and seeing him, the man cried out. He backed up, seemed about to fall over -- there was a pack on his back as large as himself -- and fumbled desperately for something in a holder at his side. He whipped it out: it was a hand-sized engine of some sort, with a grip and a black metal finger which he pointed at Brom. He stood stock still with the thing, staring. Only when Brom, sensing his fear, crept behind me and sat warily peeking out did he pocket his thing, and then without taking his eyes from Brom, he squatted, so that the bottom of his huge pack touched the ground. He pressed a black spot on his belt, and stood up. The pack remained standing in the meadow.

"Mongolfier," he said again. There were no straps at all attached to the pack, which was an irregular shape covered up in what looked like my own black and silver cloth, which clung closely around it as though wet, or as though wind pressed on it from all sides at once.

"How did you do that," I said, "with the pack?"

He held his hand up to silence me. With the other hand he reached into one of his many pockets and pulled out another small black machine. This one he fitted over one of his ears, fiddling with it to make it stay; it looked like a great black false ear. Which is just what it was. He made a "come here" motion with his hand, eyes cocked to the false ear, but when I stepped up to him he jumped away.

"You're jumpier than a cow I used to have," I said; at that he ducked his head and listened at his ear. He screwed up his eyes and bit his lip.

"More jumping," he said slowly, like a sleepwalker, and we stared at each other in confusion. He waved at me to come on again, and I was about to step toward him again when I understood what he was about. We didn't speak the same. He understood nothing of what I said, nor would I understand anything he said. But the false ear apparently could; it whispered to him what I said, and then he spoke back to me in my way, as well as he could. If that were so, it would be a long time before I could ask him what he had been doing up in the sky, so I sat down slowly, and started to talk.

He sat down too, after a while, and listened -- to his ear, not to me, nodding sometimes, sometimes throwing up his hands in confusion; he clenched his fist in front of his mouth till the knuckles went white. He understood pretty quickly some hard things I said, but when I said, "Nice weather," he looked baffled. Late in the day, we were talking back and forth pretty well; he chose his words carefully and made sense as often as not. His eyes were never still, but darted always to the source of small noises, birds and bugs; a butterfly made him jump to his feet when it came near. Here he sat with me, not surprised at all by me, making me speak to him as though we had a long-standing agreement to meet here and do that, but every ordinary thing scared him. The only thing that distracted him from his fear was listening and speaking, which he struggled with fiercely.

Finally he waved me silent. He drew up his shod knees and closed his hands around them. "Yes," he said. "Now I must tell you why I am here."

"Good," I said. "You might tell me how, too."

He gritted his teeth with impatience, and I waved him calm. "I've come," he said, "to get back property of ours, which I think you have."

The strange thing was that "property" wasn't a word I had used to him. I don't think I've said it twice in my life. "What property?"

From another of his pockets he drew out a fine silver glove, dull in the sunlight. "A glove," he said, "like this one; and more important, another thing, a small thing, like a, like a . . ."

"Ball," I said. It was my turn to be afraid. "Could you," I said, and swallowed the fear, "could you answer a question for me?"

"Three," he said, holding up three fingers. "Three questions."

"Why three?"

"Traditional."

"All right. Three," I said. I counted them off in the List's way: "_Ay_": what is this ball and glove, and what does it have to do with the dead men, like Uncle Plunkett? and "_bee_": how did you know I had it? and "_see_": where did you come from?"

When he heard my questions, eyes toward his false ear, he began to nod; he looked at me, and for the first time since he had fallen, began to smile, a strange, dark smile that was more remote than his tightly closed face had been. "Very well," he said. "I answer them starting with the last -- also traditional. I have come" -- he pointed skyward -- "from there. From a City there, some call it Laputa. I knew you had our property because of the sound it makes -- not the sound you hear, but another, far subtler sound, which an engine in the City detected. And it has everything to do with the man Daniel Plunkett whom you call dead, and whom I have brought on my back from the City. That's that." And he pointed to the black shape which squatted amid the grasses of the meadow.

"You're an angel, then," I said, "to tell me such things." He stopped smiling to listen, and then made his gesture of not understanding. "I don't think," I said after a long time, "that three questions are enough."

He set himself, nodding, as though to begin a great task. He made a start three different ways, and each time stopped, strangled up; it was as though each word were a piece of him, drawn up out of his insides with pain. He told me there were not cities in the sky, only this one called Laputa, which the angels had built when the last days were at hand; it was a great half sphere a mile wide at its base, and all transparent -- a fine lacework of triangular panes, he had a word for them which meant they were joined in such a way as to bear their own weight, and the panes not glass at all but something -- nothing, rather -- a thing or a condition that allowed light through but was not itself anything, but through which nothing could escape --

"Like way-wall," I said, and he looked at me, but didn't say there was no such thing. He tried to explain how the air inside was heated, and the air outside colder, and got confused, and I said I know: just because of that, the whole was lighter than air.

"Yes," he said. "Lighter than air." And so it rose into the sky, the whole mile of it, and, supported by its perfect simplicity, had floated ever since, while generations of angels had been born and lived and died there. He talked of engines and machines, and I wondered at first why they would choose to fill up their City with such stuff, until I saw he meant their machines were still perfect: still did what they were made to do. I looked at his false ear, and then at the pack in the meadow; he saw my look. "Yes," he said. "Even that still works."

He told me how after the Storm the angels had returned to find the four dead men, the greatest of their works, and how they found three of them destroyed by the League, and one lost; and they had followed that lost one, Plunkett, as the League had, but they found it first, and carried it away to the City in the Sky. Only, he said, there was a part missing: a ball, and the glove made to work it, which . . . which . . . And he stopped, and had to begin again another way, to explain Plunkett to me. It took a long time, because he must stop to think, and chew his knuckles, and slap his boots with impatience; and his tension affected me, and I interrupted with questions until he shouted at me to be quiet.

We began to understand each other when I told him I had seen a picture of Plunkett. He breathed deeply and told me: the sphere that was Plunkett was like that picture: but instead of being of his face, it was of his self. Instead of looking at his picture and seeing what his face looked like, you must take the sphere on your own head, and for as long as you wore that sphere, like a mask, for so long you would not be there and Plunkett would be: Plunkett would live again in you, you would look out Plunkett's eyes, no,

Plunkett would look out yours. The sphere was solid with Plunkett, and only waited for someone to be in; like, like the meaning of a word waiting for a word to be the meaning of .

"Like a letter," I said. He nodded slowly, not sure what I meant. "And the ball and glove?"

"To erase the sphere," he said. The sphere was a container only; now it contained Plunkett, but with the ball and glove he could empty it, Plunkett would be no more, the sphere would be as empty as a mirror no one looks into, and then could mirror someone else instead. The dead man would be dead.

"Doubly and for good," I said. "Is that what happened to the others?"

"I think so."

"Except the fifth."

"There were only four," he said.

"There were five," I said.

He stood and went to the pack. He had slipped on his silver glove, and with it drew away the black stuff that clung around his pack. There stood a clear box or pedestal, with rows of black and silver knobs suspended in it as though in water, and on top a clear sphere the size of a man's head with, it seemed, nothing at all inside it. "There were four," he said. "There was an experiment, with an animal. They did that because they didn't know if taking such a, such a picture of a man would kill him, or injure him; if it killed the animal, well, that didn't matter, but they would know not to do it with a man. But the experiment was a success. And they did it with four people." He sat again, and drew up his knees. "So the fifth you talk about: it was the experiment. It was a cat, a cat named Boots."

Evening had come. The valley below was dark, and tree shadows reached across the sloping meadow, but we were still in light: he in his brown, clutching his knees, and I, and the thing which was Plunkett though Plunkett was dead.

"I have been that cat," I said.

His fear looked out his eyes; his pale face was drawn. "And I," he said, "have been Daniel Plunkett."

"And then returned."

"And then returned," he said.

"Angel," I said, "why have you come here?"

"I've answered your questions," he said. "Now you must answer one for me." He set himself, adjusted his ear, and asked: "How would you like to live forever, or nearly?"

Fifth facet:

All night till moonrise I tried to answer him. I tried to tell him how I had seen the four dead men made of stone, and shivered in the warmth; how it had been to solve that mystery that I had followed Once a Day to Service City and been Boots: how the four dead men had always been the crossing place in my life where I turned further into darkness. And all night he tried to explain, and talked of processes and pictures and how painless and harmless it had been proved to be. We both talked, and despite his angel's ear, neither understood.

"You ask me," I said, "to be your dead man in Plunkett's stead. Even if I understood why you needed such a one, I couldn't choose to be one. Don't you see?"

"But I would take nothing from you," he said, trembling with effort. "No more -- no more than a frosted glass takes anything from you when you print it with your thumb!"

"I don't know," I said. "Boots was there, when I was not. Alive as ever."

She didn't mind, I don't think; but I think a man would. I think of a fly, stuck in a cube of plastic, able to see all around, but not able to move. It frightens me."

"Fly?" he said to his ear. "Fly?" He couldn't make it make sense. I rolled smoke for myself, and saw that my hands trembled. "Fly," he said desperately. I struck a match but the head flew off, sizzling, and struck Brom, who jumped up with a howl, and what with it all, the fly and the flame and Brom and me so stupid, he plucked the false ear from his head, flung it on the ground, and burst into tears.

What is it?

It's just . . . well, you make him sound comical. He wasn't. He was brave and fine and the best man of his time. When he came down, you know, he didn't know what he would find; he knew only the City -- and the world Plunkett had lived in. For all Mongolfier knew, the land below him would swallow him like a mouth. Except for pictures, he'd never seen an animal. And yet he jumped from his home to change our lives. He wasn't comical.

I only meant to show my wonderment. I have no words for his sufferings; before them I felt thin and old, as you do before an angry child. I couldn't follow what he said, and it made him weep, is all I meant.

If he could have spoken your way, he could have made it clear.

He would have told you that when the angels raised the City, it wasn't out of despair, or to flee the ruin they had created.' they were proud of it, it was the last hope and greatest engine of man, and in it would be preserved the knowledge that led to its creation, preserved from the mass of men who wished insanely to destroy Everything they Wanted. Plunkett was the most complex and precious of all their works, and when they first used it, it was as they had used all the other things they had saved: to remember, in its use, the learning and skill that had made it.

But in its use they learned something unexpected, something terrible and wonderful: they learned what it is to be a man. As you learned from Boots what it is to be alive, they learned from Plunkett what it is to be a man: and it wasn't what they had thought, at all.

You see, you think all men who lived in Plunkett's time were angels, and could fly, and were consumed with fierce passions to alter the world and make it man's, without remorse, without patience, without fear. it's not so. The mass of men then were no more angels than you are. Unable to understand the angels' world, ignorant of how to do any wonders at all, they only suffered from the angels' hunger, suffered blindly in the wreckage of the angels' world. Plunkett was such a one. Zhinsinura said that even the League's women were angels: the angels learned from Plunkett that even they were men.

And the first of them to look out Plunkett's eyes and learn it, when he returned, never spoke again.

You make me afraid for this one who I am. How hard, how hard . . . Harder than Boots, it must be, far harder.

Yes: because though Boots has no memory, you have. And Plunkett had: they came away from him remembering everything, his shame, his hurt, his confusion, Everything he Wanted. Boots's letter was Forget: Plunkett's letter was Remember.

They said it made for madness, then, that it had been a mistake, that it shouldn't be used again. But it was used again. The bravest learned to bear Plunkett, and to speak of it. And while in the warren they told stories of the saints, and grew old in speaking; and as the List remembered the League, and grew old in Boots; so we grew old in Plunkett. All we knew was learning to live with his suffering: our suffering. We forgot our plans; the years came to the hundreds; our pride vanished, we studied Plunkett only, our hope became dread, our escape exile.

But why didn't you stop? Come back again? The City could return, couldn't it, if they'd seen they were mistaken?

_No. The world they left was Plunkett's world: it was all they knew of earth. Plunkett taught them that the rule of men had not been sufficient; and

if that were so, then the world beneath them must have died, and the men with it. It was the only possibility._

But it's not so. It got different, is all. You could come back; there's no hard feelings. You must come back. It's home.

Home. . . . Do you know how large the world is? I do. The winds blow always westerly around it, and the City is moved with them, and in a lifetime goes around to the place where it began. I was born over sea: when I was grown, still the sea was beneath us. When we pass through storms, they aren't the storms that fall on earth; we know them at their birthplaces; we pass through them and are not shaken. Do you know, when it snows here, the snow flies upward; lightning comes close enough to touch, and comes not from the sky but upward from the earth. It has never made me afraid.

Far off, when the clouds part, we see earth; vague and lovely and possible, I suppose the way you look at distant mountains, and wonder, but never visit. No: this is my home. It was Mongolfier's. For its sake, dark with Plunkett's fear and suffering, he jumped down to earth, to find you, who would heal us; you, who had found the ball and glove that could free us from Plunkett; you who would dry our old tears.

_If he could have spoken your way, he would have said this to you. . . .

._

How is it you can speak my way, and he couldn't?

You've taught us. We are truthful speakers too now, Rush.

And you? Are you, angel? Do you know what it is to be . . . another, to return from not being, to tumble back through all your ways, as though you fell from a height, and see, and see. . . . Do you?

No. I only know what they've said: that the cruelest was to have been Plunkett; that heavy as you are, to put you down is joyful in the end, that after the days of silence, it's easy; that I could learn to live with you, as none ever could with Plunkett. Plunkett made us brave, they say, and you have made us happy. But I haven't, yet; I'm afraid to bear your weight.

And Mongolfier could? Did I make him easier?

No. He never dared, after Plunkett. He brought you here. They told him: he saw it work: but never dared.

You make me ashamed. Ashamed, with all that, of why in the end I did agree to let him take me, or whatever it was he wanted to take, with him.

Why?

It was just, well: ever since I was a kid I've somewhere in me believed in a City in the Sky. Not as Blink did, as a perhaps, or as the List did, as a story, or as Little St. Roy did, as a pretty thought, but that it was real. As real as clouds. And an angel had dropped from there, and said he'd take me. And however much he said that I, mortal I, would feel no change, that I would be left sitting in the meadow just as I was while he went off with -- with something like a slide of the Filing System, if he could have thought to say that: still, I thought maybe I would get to see it, what it was like; that dome, those clouds. That's all.

But I slept, first. I was exhausted by our struggle. I wrapped up in my black and silver and watched the moon for a while; Brom lay next to me roaring. Mongolfier wouldn't sleep; he sat straight up, with his back against a tree, and watched.

I dreamed that night of the warren, of running on Path toward the inside, through great and little rooms where chests were kept and gossips studied cords, circling in a spiral nearer to the center past people smoking and kids playing, into narrow passages of angelstone in the dim small deep insides. I awoke without reaching the center, and thinking that after all I had never known where exactly the center of Belaire was, to see Mongolfier still sitting, paler with his vigil and with his, his Gun, as he called it, in his lap, waiting.

"All right," I said. "All right." I rubbed my eyes and sat up. He got up, stiff with tension, and held out his hand for the silver ball and glove. I searched in my pack for them; they called to me softly from beneath the

raggedies piled on top of them. "Now," he said, when he had them, his voice hoarse with no sleep, but calm for the first time since I'd met him. He led me down through the pasture to where Plunkett stood amid the meadow flowers. "Sit, sit," he said, "and close your eyes."

I sat, but wouldn't close my eyes. I watched silver fog rising out of the valley of That River. I watched Mongolfier at the engine: he drew on my glove, and with it brought the ball close to the pedestal on which Plunkett sat, and then released it: as though thrown, it buried itself within the glassy box, lining up with the others there. Its whistle ceased as it entered. He pretended, with his gloved hand, to turn that ball, that knob, and it turned. The sphere on top of the pedestal, clearer than glass, grew clouded, as though filling with smoke; Mongolfier turned the knob until the sphere was black: as black as way-wall: a black no-place in the morning.

"Plunkett is dead," he said. "Close your eyes." With the other glove, the glove he had brought, he pretended to turn a black knob, and the sphere rose off its pedestal. "Close your eyes," he said again, worried, glancing from me to his machine.

"All right," I said, but didn't. I put my hat on. I took it off again. The black sphere came slowly before my face. I had a moment to feel the limitless fear I had felt before way-wall as it filled up my sight: and then I closed my eyes.

And opened them here.

_Yes. And you must close them now again, the story's told. . . . _

Wait. Put down the glove. I'm afraid.

Afraid?

Afraid for him, for me. What do I do, angel, alone, stuck like the fly, when I'm not here telling this?

Nothing. If you dream, they are the dreams you wake from having already forgotten. But I don't think you dream: no, nothing, probably.

It seems I'm still in that meadow, and that I, I mean my story, just got here to be told. But that can't be so. I've told all this before.

Yes.

Why don't I remember?

_You aren't here, Rush. There isn't anything here of you but -- but something like a slide of the Filing System, that can only reveal you by -- _ Interpenetration.

_Interpenetration, yes. With another. Who is gone now, while you're here, who will return when you are gone. But nothing spoken to you while you are here can affect you, any more than the picture of Plunkett could smile back at you if you smiled at it; when you are in yet another, you will be surprised again to find yourself here, surprised that a moment ago you sat in the meadow with Mongolfier; and you'll marvel at the dome, the clouds, and tell your story again. What it is to be you when you aren't here but on your pedestal, we don't know; we only know that sometimes you come from that sleep asleep, sometimes awake . . . _

How many times? How many?

_ . . . and each time ask that. When our son . . . when my son is grown, Rush, and takes you on himself, if he dares, you will have been awakened here three hundred times, in twice as many years._

No. No, angel. .

Many lives, Rush. Painted Red said.

But she's gone. They're all gone. And I . . . what did I do, then, angel, in my life? Did I grow old? Did I ever go down the hill? And Once a Day. . . oh, angel, what became of me?

I don't know. There are those who, having been you, have guessed; have dreamed or imagined how you returned to Belaire, the saint you became. Mongolfier said he watched you, after the old copter had come for him, watched you marvel at it, watched you watch it fly off with him.' that's all we know. We know nothing else, Rush, but what you tell us. it's all you here now, Rush.

And do I each time learn this? And then forget? As though I were Mother Tom in her box, like the strip of paper looped by St. Gene?

Yes.

Then free me now, angel. Let me sleep, if I can't die. Free me, quickly, while I can still bear all this. .

Yes. Sleep now, brave man; sleep again, Rush; close your eyes, close your eyes. Forget.

Only. . . wait, wait. Listen: the one who I am, you must be gentle with him, angel, when he returns, remember. Here, take my hand, take his hand. Yes. Don't let go. Promise.

Yes. I promise.

Stay with him.

Ever after. I promise. Now close your eyes.