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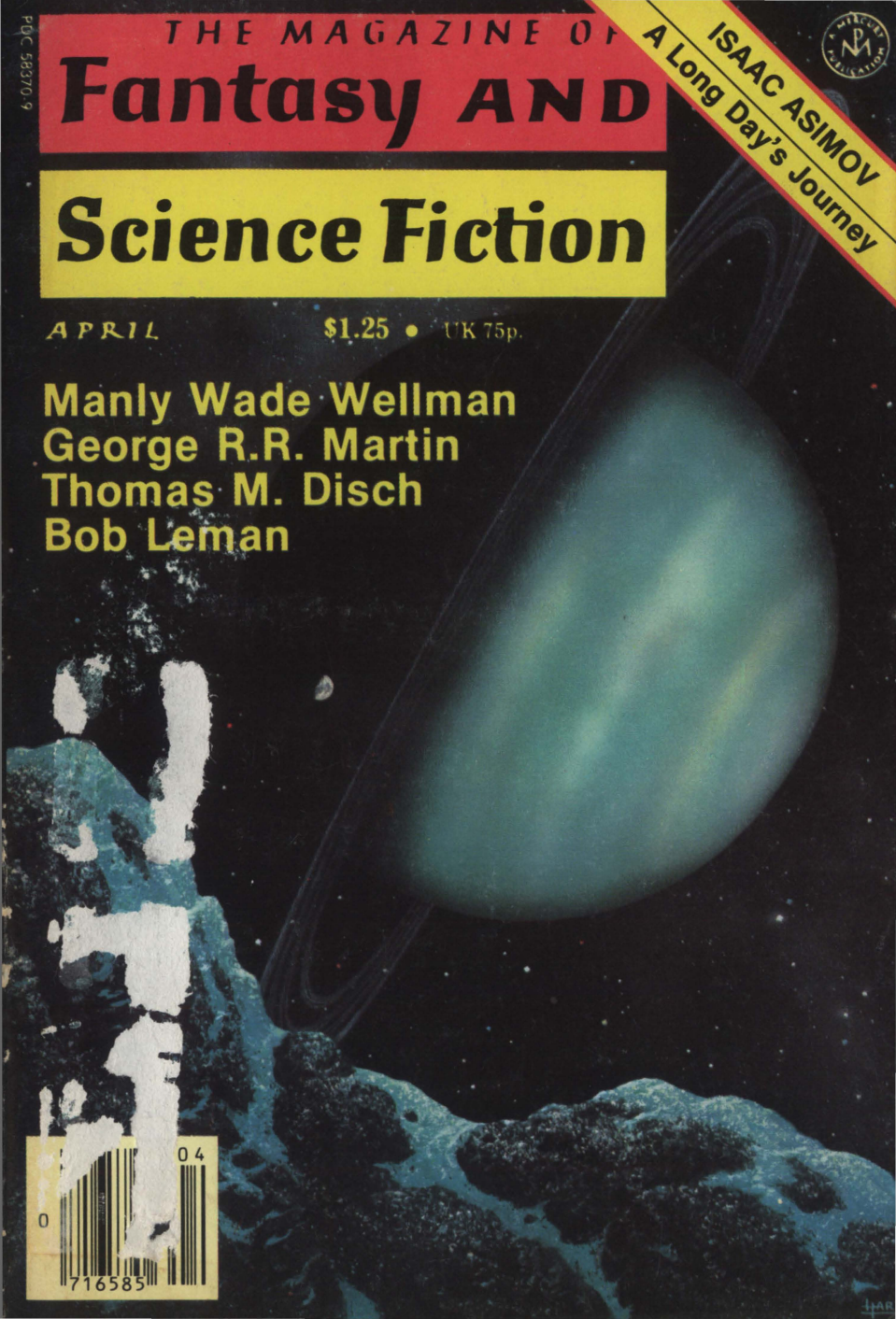

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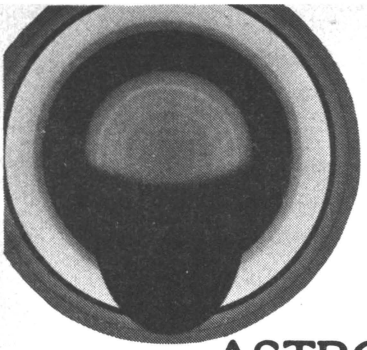

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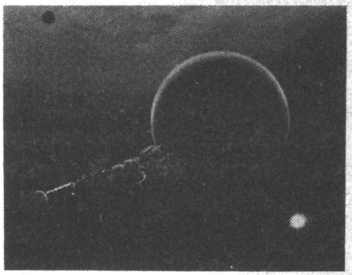

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Loob

by BOB LEMAN

It may be that none of this happened.

That is badly put. Let me say it another way: none of this will have happened at the instant — which I believe must come eventually — the instant that Loob permits my great-grandfather to pass unscathed through the drawing room door.

I believe that one day Loob will permit it. I think he must. Because if he does not, my existence is an impossibility. And I do exist. *Cogito, ergo sum.* Besides which, I have an actual physical presence: yesterday I cut myself when I shaved (there is a decided tremor in my hands), I have a blister on my right foot, these seedy clothes cover a breathing body.

Officially, though, and perhaps in law, I do not exist. Neither the county nor the state has any record of my birth (nor my father's; my grandmother's birth, however, is duly recorded). Lawrenceville and Princeton have no record of my attendance and graduation. Even the United States Army, that indefatigable maker and keeper of annals, has no paper that acknowledges my three years of servitude. And it is a melancholy fact that no one in the world seems to know or remember me; not friends from prep school days, not college classmates or fellow officers, not a soul in the old home town. My precise and detailed recollection of my twenty-five years of life is always and everywhere belied by records both public and private, and by every reality of the world around me.

Yet I am real, I am a living, breathing, thinking human being, as solid and sentient as any of the degenerates who surround me here. As I skulk about this decrepit travesty of my native town, I reflect endlessly upon my impossible

existence, upon the resemblances and differences between this world and my own, upon an explanation for the situation in which I find myself. And I have found the explanation, and in finding it I find some hope. I can only wait, and watch Loob.

It is true that certain parts of my explanation are, perhaps, in a way, to a certain degree (if you like) conjectural; nonetheless, it hangs together, it hangs together. Up to a certain August day in 1905 this world and my own were identical; my explanation rests, therefore, on simple, unarguable fact. On that day there was a divergence, a forking, and Loob was the cause. It took me some time to figure that out.

To identify Loob as the villain, that is. I was much quicker at the rest of it, at accounting for the existence of this town. It is located where the town of my birth is located, it bears the same name, it has the same history up to a point. It is composed of the same streets and buildings that make up the older part of my own town, horribly run-down here, all in a state of slovenly desuetude, with buildings vacant and boarded up, trash in the deserted streets, insolent weeds growing in and around the ruins of structures that have burned or fallen down. It is a depressed and depressing place, forming a most bleak and demoralizing contrast with the self-confident bustle and gloss of the town I knew.

My own situation is also considerably different. There I am the heir apparent, the young master, expensive toys — a Ferrari, a string of polo ponies — by a doting grandmother. Here I work as a swamper in a saloon, the Top Hat Bar and Grill, to be exact. It is the only work available to a nameless unperson. (They call me Tom Perkins. I don't know where they got that. Back when I still talked, I used to ask them to use my real name, but the request always generated so much laughter that I gave it up.) At that, I am one of the very few people here who work; most of the town is on welfare, as I might be myself if I could establish the fact that I exist. Ironically, they have volunteered to put me on the welfare rolls under the name of Tom Perkins, an offer which I declined. That also caused a good deal of laughter.

Day after day, as I cleaned the spittoons (three-pound coffee cans, actually) and mopped the foul floor, my mind was occupied by a sustained effort to discover, through the application of the most rigorous logic, a theory to account for my presence in a world where my presence is impossible. (This was after my parole from the state hospital, after I had achieved

a measure of resignation to my plight.) The initial stages of my analysis were simple enough: I postulated that any occurrence, anywhere, anytime, is a cause that has a consequent effect. A major occurence has a major effect and changes history. Now, from the beginning, history has been an infinity of forks in a road, with the road not taken disappearing forever after it is passed, so that a backward look shows only a single thoroughfare stretching to the rear. But suppose that somehow, from our present position on this thoroughfare, a barricade could be hurled backward, back to one of those forks in the road, compelling events to travel on the alternative route. As time went by, and fork after fork came and went, a retrospective survey of the route taken would not show that the main road was missed long ago. It would not show that we now travel on a detour, a sad, sick, degenerate, abominable detour. But the main road is still there, is still there. I think logic dictates that we must believe it is still there.

The exercise of pure reason had brought me to that point, but there my search for the truth began to appear to be almost hopeless. Reduced to essentials, it had become a search for the villain. Someone had erected the barricade that shunted history into the detour and exiled me from the main road to this wretched byway, and whoever he was, he had to be found and compelled to undo his villainy. But the world is a big place, containing a very considerable number of people, and I had not the least vague clue to his identity. A mad scientist? A military secret project? A lama spinning a prayer wheel in Tibet?

My problem was further complicated by the fact that I am not permitted to leave town. The people at the state hospital have decreed that I must be brought in once a month to be questioned and tested, presumably for reassurance that I can safely continue to be farmed out to the Top Hat Bar and Grill. I gather that before my incarceration I sometimes did violent things. (When I compare my mashed-in face with the way I used to look, I can believe it.) Okie Perkins, Prop. of the Top Hat Bar and Grill, drives me to these monthly vettings, where I steadfastly maintain silence despite the often ingenious subterfuges the headshrinkers use to get me to talk. I have promised myself that I shall speak no word until I am back where I belong. Obviously this vow was a further impediment to my investigation.

But I had some good luck, which served me as well as cold reason and sedulous research could

have done. I found Loob. At some point in my despairing prowlings through the town, I became aware of him, and I came gradually to realize that I had found the culprit. It was no blazing revelation, or anything of that sort; but as soon as I began to suspect him I undertook to weigh his qualifications as a suspect against the indisputable facts, and, little by little, it became perfectly plain that it was indeed Loob who had done this unspeakable thing. I matched the history of the town — one history until 1905, and then two, both of which I had pondered obsessively — with what I knew about Loob, and at last the whole grim story was laid out for me.

I said that finding him was good luck, but it was bad luck as well, because my plan to compel an undoing of the evil has come to nothing; quite clearly there is no way to compel Loob to do anything at all. There is not even any way to talk to him — which I would be willing to do if he could understand. But he cannot understand, and he cannot talk, and so certain portions of the story must remain forever conjecture. But they fit the facts, the whole thing coheres.

So now I watch him and wait for the day when he will undo what he did. Because there is nothing to do but watch and wait. And (I cannot help it) hope. I stalk him through the town, willing him to go to the house, to sit in the window. That is where he must be to change things back. When he is in the house, I usually lurk somewhere outside, not because I can affect what may happen, but simply out of an unexplainable feeling that I should be there. And then, too, looking at the house can sometimes evoke my real life so strongly that for a moment I forget where I am.

The house, my grandmother's house in the real world. A mansion with many chimneys, enduringly built of the pale-gray local sandstone, still displaying a basic elegance of line and proportion. Its walls remain as stout as the day they were built, and the slates of the roof still turn the rain; but there is no glass in any window, nor a door in any doorway, and the winds sweep through, blowing dust and trash in squalid patterns across the floor. There are no rooms on the first story; the interior walls were torn out years ago and replaced by a number of steel poles to bear the weight of the upper floors. In the cavernous space thus created, a foredoomed machine shop had existed precariously for a few years before it sank into bankruptcy and abandoned its worn-out lathes and drills to the scavengers and vandals. This is where Loob likes to be.

He likes to sit on a box in one of the oriel windows. From there he looks down to the river, across the junk piles and weeds that were once a smooth lawn sloping to the edge of the woods, across the rusty railroad tracks and decaying sheds that stand where great trees grew in the days when the house was in history's mainstream. He sits there for a large part of almost every day, watching an inconstant landscape: seeing sometimes a squirm of rats among frozen weeds, sometimes a small giggling girl frolicking with a patient dog on a summer lawn, sometimes a row of neat apartment houses. Loob feels no curiosity about these alterations of the view. Most things in life are incomprehensible to him, and all phenomena are equally unexpected and equally unsurprising. But the little girl engages somewhat more of his attention than do the rats; the pretty lady at the piano is marginally more interesting than a ruined milling machine. Loob is happier (if that is the word for the viscid stirring within him) when he is watching the past.

During all the eighteen years of his life the past has been his milieu as often as the present. He does not distinguish between them. Some things can be touched and some cannot; that is one of the things he knows, and it is his sole perception of the difference between past and present. His questing hand will pass through the piano but be arrested by the milling machine; neither occurrence surprises him. If the piano were suddenly to become palpable and the milling machine insubstantial, he would not remember that it had ever been otherwise.

He answers to "Loob," short for "Loober," which is as close as he can come to pronouncing Luther. His name is another of the things he knows. Boys used to use that fact to bait him.

"Hey, Loob. What's your name, Loob?"

"Loo — ber." Thick, slow, forced out after a struggle.

Laughter. "Make him do it again."

"What's your name, Loob?"

"Loo — ber."

And laughter again. But now he has grown to several inches over six feet and weighs three hundred pounds. They no longer tease him. He has never been known to harm anyone, but his size and appearance have emancipated him from the role of butt. When he walks in the streets now, they say, "Hi, Loob," or even, "Hello, Luther." Most of the people here know each other. A stranger may say, "My God, what's that?" and someone will tell him, "Oh, that's Luther Rankin. One of our village idiots. Perfectly harmless."

The speaker will be mistaken; Loob is anything but perfectly harmless. he can do — has done — abominable things, as no one knows better than I. But he has not done them with malice; he has not intended harm. He has never in his life intended anything at all and indeed is incapable of having intentions. The abominations happened simply because Loob is what he is; they came about as suddenly, and with as little premeditation, as the collapse of a river bank in a flood. But it is because of Loob that the house is what it is. That the town is what it is.

For three quarters of a century the town has been dying. At the turn of the century it passed almost overnight from its lusty prime into senescence, but ever since it has clung with a kind of weak tenacity to a spark of life, and now, shrunken and listless, it squats and decays on its mountainside, still housing in decrepit grimy dwellings a few hundred dispirited clients of the welfare system. Trains still make runs along the track that winds down the valley along the river, but it has been many years since the train has stopped here, and the town's name on the depot has almost weathered away. A new interstate highway carries most of the traffic that formerly used the river road, and the town's last filling station stands boarded up at the corner where Main Street meets the road. There are only two stores left, and one saloon. The school has been abandoned, and all but one of the churches. It is a town without hope and without pride, a place with no reason for existing except to provide shelter of a sort for people who are themselves without hope or pride.

Once long ago it was a prosperous confident town, whose citizens believed it might one day rival Pittsburgh. It was not a wholly impossible vision. The Dappling Iron Works, which had grown prodigiously during the Civil War, leagued itself with the railroads when the war ended, and if Henry Dappling had been another kind of man, he might have pushed himself into the company of Carnegie and Frick and made his town a city like theirs. But he was not driven by ambition, and his factory and his town in the first years of the new century were exactly as he wanted them to be: healthy, bustling, productive — and of manageable size. He was comfortable in his role as First Citizen and Squire, and he approved of a community that was not too large for every citizen to know him and know his position. He liked the town as it was, and he liked his own position within it.

He took a keen pleasure in his daily trip to the plant, the cere-

mony and style of it. Every morning at eight, his polished buggy passed between the gateposts of the estate and proceeded briskly into town along Dappling Road, Dappling portly and erect in the seat, snugly buttoned into well-tailored sober broadcloth, in firm control of a team of matched chestnuts. There were no doffed hats or tugged forelocks as he passed, but those who shouted good morning to him called him Mr. Dappling.

Dappling Road curved around a hill and sloped downward to meet Main Street; Dappling's house was in fact quite near the town, but hidden from it by the cheek of the hill. At Main Street he turned left, down into the town, past houses that became progressively larger as he approached the square. The block nearest the square had mansions on both sides of the street, huge dark buildings of brick or stone, heavily gingerbreaded, standing at the backs of deep lawns. These were the homes of Dappling's superintendents and the banker and the most prosperous of the merchants. The retail commerce of the town took place around the square, and most of the merchants contrived to be at their doors to greet Dappling as the buggy passed smartly by. He returned to each a sober inclination of the head, a nod calculated precisely to indicate relative social positions. On the lower side of the square was another block of fine houses, and then the row houses of the mill workers down to the wrought-iron gates of the Dappling Iron Works.

In the cobbled courtyard, McVay would be waiting to take the horses, a lean grim mountaineer with a crooked leg. The leg had been crippled in a mill accident, and because McVay had a family, a job as hostler and janitor had been found for him. If he had been killed, his widow would have received a small sum every payday until the oldest boy was old enough to work in the mill. When a mill hand grew too old or too infirm to work, the son or son-in-law who took him in found his pay envelope somewhat augmented each week for so long as the old man lived. No one starved in Dappling's town. No one had any luxuries, either, except for the people in the big houses on Main Street. And Dappling.

The townspeople were content with that arrangement. They were proud, illiterate people who made a point of asking for no more than they felt they had earned, and they were in fact more prosperous and lived more comfortably (if perhaps with a little less freedom) than their cousins who lived in mountain cabins. They were all people

indigenous to the mountains, some still owning steep remnants of the land granted to ancestors in recognition of service as soldiers in the Revolution. There were no foreigners in Dappling's mill. he had observed with fastidious disgust the consequences of Pittsburgh's resort to immigrant labor: the swarms of evil-smelling clownish peasants, gabbling in strange tongues and devouring loathsome foods, creating squalid enclaves that reproduced with hideous fidelity the degenerate East European or Mediterranean villages that had spawned them. Dappling would have none of it. Who would be squire where the tenants were the likes of these?

No, he would forego becoming a great man, if becoming a great man entailed such things. In his lifetime, at least, things would not change here. This neat prospering town where dwelt contented respectful citizens; this bustling profitable mill where free Americans labored; these wooded hills surrounding his elegant great house: these were what he prized; these he would keep. These and his family.

His days were so ordered that there was time for each of them: he would be in his office (he still called it a counting house, a small room darkly furnished in mahogany and green plush) until noon precisely, sitting deliberate and magisterial behind the broad desk, guiding the affairs of his mill with a concentration of attention indistinguishable from love. That part of his life that belonged to the mill was the mill's absolutely. But with the first sound of the noon whistle he was at the door, and before the sound of the whistle had died the chestnuts were in motion, retracing the morning's journey. With the closing of the door, Dappling shut business out of his mind until tomorrow; the rest of the day belonged to the estate and the family.

He always felt a lift in his spirits as the buggy approached the gates of the manor, an emotion identical with the one he felt as he neared the mill in the morning. Twice each day on six days of the week he enjoyed this feeling of pleasurable anticipation. He relished each morning's work, the solid satisfaction of bringing order to confused situations, the pride in his honest profit from his honest product. He relished equally the afternoons: a farmer's lunch, a change into boots and breeches, and then into the outdoors — sometimes afoot and sometimes riding — to verify that all went well with his acres.

There were about two thousand of them, forest mostly, lofty virgin stands of oak and walnut steeply rising above valleys where swift

cold streams ran. Where the land was reasonably flat, there were wheat and cornfields, and on steeper clearings grew lush pasturage for the fat cattle and blooded horses that won prizes for Dappling at the fair. He liked to take his big gray gelding on a tour of the fields on a summer afternoon, using not the farm roads but his private bridle paths, cantering through the silent forest on a crooked course that took him from the stable down to the fat fields of the bottomland, thence upward as far as the high mountain meadow, and from there back again to his house in the last hour before sunset. He would emerge from the trees at the top of the home meadow, whose long slope ran from the edge of the woods down to Dappling Road. There he always pulled up to absorb the view for a few minutes: in the foreground the dairy herd making its way in a peaceable file towards the barn for the evening milking; then the road; and then, beyond treetops, his house, solid, permanent, and shapely, on its broad expanse of lawn. The best part of the day was still to come. If the gelding was not overheated, Dappling would give him his head and, with deliberate theatricality, thunder up to the stable at a dead run. More often than not, Emily would be there waiting for him.

His Emily, his sunshine; the radiance that lighted his life, the small granddaughter whom he loved with an intensity of devotion that sometimes — as he was well aware — made him appear faintly ridiculous. He doted; and was aware that his doting was a cause of laughter, and did not care, this staid industrialist who prized his dignity above most things. He saw in this merry child a recreation of her grandmother, the adored wife who had died young and whose loss inflicted a wound that had remained as raw as the day it was new through all the years until Emily's birth.

He had remained fond enough of his son Samuel and had never been so unhinged by grief as to blame the boy because his birth had killed his mother; nonetheless, he had been more a dutiful than a loving father. But if he did not cheer at Sam's triumphs, neither did he chide him for his failures, and they did not quarrel. They did not embrace, either, and Sam no more filled the empty part of Dappling's life than did the mill and the estate. All three were good things, important to him and sources of satisfaction, but it was not until the baby's birth that they fell snugly into place as parts of a life that seemed now to be whole and unflawed. He was able at last to love Sam as a son and to become

fond of Sam's wife Olivia, the aristocrat Sam had fetched home to the mountains from a decaying main line mansion.

Sam, for his part, not only loved his father, he admired him above all men. He accounted himself very lucky, did plain decent Sam, with the great Henry Dappling his father and the beautiful Olivia his wife. Sam knew his limitations, knew that his father and his wife had quicker, keener minds than his own. At Harvard, where his father had been graduated *cum laude* after an indolent and sociable four years, Sam had had to toil mightily for his Gentleman's Cs, and he was never able to comprehend at all the formidable books that his wife incessantly read. But what he learned he remembered, and Dappling was a patient teacher. Sam had come to be of value in the mill and on the farm, and when the proper time came round (in ten years, Dappling thought, or fifteen), he would be fit to command both. His ways were not his father's ways, but Dappling had gradually come to realize that Sam's pleasant, almost diffident orders were carried out with as much alacrity as his own, and undoubtedly more cheerfully. The men respected and to some degree feared Dappling, but they were fond of Sam. They were beginning to respect him, as well; and a few, who had failed him in one way or another, had learned that there were times when he, too, was to be feared.

They dined early, so that Emily could eat with the family. Each evening as they entered the dining room, Mrs. McVay would pop Emily in through the other door, starched and ruffled, fragrant from her bath, her small face serious with the effort of making a ladylike entrance, her eyes on Dappling. It was a game. If Dappling's expression did not change, she was able to make her way to her chair with suitable gravity; but if he winked, or permitted the corner of his mouth to twitch with an incipient grin, she broke into giggles and ran to him to be picked up and deposited in her chair. She was in fact a beautiful child, with a regularity of feature and a shapeliness of the underlying bone that indicated an inevitable growth into a beautiful woman. She glowed with health, the round cheeks bloomed, the blue eyes sparkled. Merriment bubbled always just beneath the surface of her mood of the moment, so that even when she was irritated or sullen, the bad behavior somehow gave the impression of being no more than a pose. It was not to be doubted that all of her life people would be charmed by her and forgive her almost any offense. She was a delightful small

person and seemed so not only to her besotted grandfather but to the whole populace of Dappling's demesne. In the row houses the grannies were already worrying about a suitable husband being found for her, and eminent fiddlers from the mountain cabins often turned up at the door with tenders of music to be played for the Missy. These were not sycophantish people; they felt a very genuine affection for her. Everyone did.

They ate the food of the region, roast beef or fried pork or game, with cornbread and boiled greens. But the plain food was served on delicate china and eaten with monogrammed silver; the napery was heavy linen, snowy white. Olivia's code of manners had not been relaxed by removal to the west. The Dapplings were gentlefolk, after all, and if they had tended to live coarsely during the years when the house was without a chatelaine, it was only her duty, now that she was mistress, to set things back on the correct path. Dappling was amiable about it, and the adoring Sam, as anxious to please as a puppy, pretended great enthusiasm for her amendments to their style of living. They drew the line at formal dinner wear, but were agreeable to changing from outdoor clothes for dinner, and Olivia settled for that.

The men ate hugely, minding their table manners to set an example for Emily and to please Olivia. The conversation would no doubt have surprised a chance visitor: Dappling's education had been excellent, and he was that rarity among industrialists, a man who loved books. Olivia, too, was a reader. She had had no more than the education considered appropriate for females of her class and time — genteel reading, manners, a little music — but she had very early displayed, to the utter astonishment of the improvident sportsmen and flighty belles who comprised her family, a formidable intellect, an attribute that the clan found as exotic as the ability to charm snakes, and about as desirable in a lady. Her father had leaped at the chance to marry her off to rich Sam Dappling, who was, although perhaps not out of the very top drawer, a lad much to the old man's liking, a good shot, bold at a jump, well-tailored, and in no way bookish. Indeed, he felt a certain sympathy for Sam, anticipating that the boy might have a difficult time with his blue-stocking daughter. But it had turned out that Dappling's library had afforded her all she could ask in the way of books, and she had found her father-in-laws's conversation to be learned and sometimes even witty. It more than compensated for the occasional whiff of the frontier she

discerned in the atmosphere around her.

Sometimes there were guests. Men came from New York and Pittsburgh to talk about iron and steel, or from the capital to talk politics. At dinner and afterwards until bedtime they talked their business or politics, with Sam utterly absorbed in the conversation and Dappling joining in with a certain detached amusement, while Olivia sat rigid with boredom, mechanically making the proper responses. But there were other visitors, people from Olivia's former world who came for extended visits to rest and restore their failing energies in the mountain air. When there were houseguests in residence, dinners were leisurely affairs, deliberately protracted by Olivia; it was the time of the best conversation, and meals were the chief — almost the only — entertainment there in the country. There might be cards in the late evening, or Olivia would play Chopin or Schubert with passable skill. Sometimes they gathered around the piano and sang; often they sat on the lawn late into the night, the talk incessant under the stridulation of night insects until it was time for bed.

Sam was always glad of bedtime; indeed, he found himself looking forward to it almost from the time he rose in the morning. One of his amusements, when conversation about paintings or cotillions had bored him to the point of numbness, was to picture Olivia as she would be later in their bedroom; he liked to imagine the expressions on the faces around the table if they suddenly found themselves conversing not with the cool mannered hostess who was so lucidly explicating Darwin, but with the flushed wanton that only he had ever seen, who came into soft hot being after the bedroom door had closed. Both Sam and Olivia had been at first enormously surprised and then intensely grateful for the depth of her sexuality; but both were quite certain that it was somehow discreditable, and they were in agreement that it should be utterly secret. Their public manner towards each other was almost formal; they lived in the innocent belief that their passion was wholly concealed.

Dappling was much amused by their affectation of coolness, but it was a benign and complacent amusement. They were a happy couple, and their happiness was a cornerstone of Emily's world. Whatever made Emily happy met with Dappling's unqualified approval. It was his intent that her life was to be without sorrow, that her merriment was to continue all of her days. It was to this end that he directed the affairs of his mill,

his estate, and his people, so that Emily could never know want, would always have responsible protectors, would always have her path smooth and the way open, no matter what happened to him, no matter what happened to Sam and Olivia. Large sums of money were so placed that she was forever assured of opulence, no matter what the vagaries of the economy; banks in Pittsburgh and lawyers in New York were committed by pledge and self-interest to protect her as a jewel; young matrons in the best circles of the Eastern Seaboard cities were already anticipating the day when they would sponsor her; and throughout Goster County hard men and their tough women, bound to Dappling by a fealty that was near-feudal, had come to understand that the welfare of this child was to be protected in any and all circumstances, by whatever means were necessary.

Dappling had done what he could, and he did not doubt that it was enough. In any case, he saw his safeguards only as an excess of caution. There was no reason why he should not live until Emily herself was a grandmother, and he proposed to guard her tenderly through all those years. But such speculation about the far future was confined to moments of active planning; in his heart, in his day-to-day thought, she was forever five years old, forever a golden child laughing among flowers in a long golden afternoon. And that would be the reality, in a way.

Or, at any rate, *a* reality; one of the realities perceived by Loob, peering uncomprehendingly down the chasm of the years from his seat in the oriel window. He watched her often at play, skipping blithely with bare feet over sun-warmed grass, as he sat hunched motionless on his box, strange and gross, scoured by a gritty cold wind that he did not seem to feel, staring with lusterless eyes at the pantomime he watched almost every day without ever remembering that he had seen it before. There had never been pattern or sequence to his perception of the past, and scenes came and went apparently at random, but the child on the lawn was there for him almost every day. He looked through the window and saw her at play, and behind him in the room, if he turned his head to look, the pretty lady was playing the piano while a slim man with a mustache turned the pages of the music for her, and through the door another man was entering the room.

It always ended then; abruptly Loob was looking at the desolate present or a different time in the past. No one could have said whether it mattered to him. No expression crossed the broad pallid

face, the dull eyes neither brightened nor dimmed. But somewhere in the cloudy corridors of his brain something found that particular scene appealing, and it was endlessly repeated for Loob, child and dog in the sunlight, man and woman at the piano, the other man entering. And some sort of censor existed there, as well, cutting off his view each time at the same point; even Loob could not have borne to see again the scene played to its end.

Or perhaps he could have, and the shift in time had quite another explanation. There was no way of knowing what he felt, or indeed if he had feelings at all. What went on inside his head differed utterly — differed in kind — from the thinking processes of other people. He was not stupid or insane; those words apply to a mind's efficiency in the handling of reality and rational thought, and what happened inside Loob's skull bore no relation to those things. There was a power there that normal brains do not have, and Loob could see things long invisible to everyone else, but he did not — could not — think.

He had been born with a brain that was skewed and misshappen; the conduits that carry the impulses called thought were twisted and awry, in no way resembling the complex, symmetrical network which the genetic blueprint prescribes. They coiled upon themselves in tight nodes, forked where they should have continued singly, came to dead ends where they should have made a juncture, joined fortuitously where no connection should have been made. The energies that passed along them traveled unprecedented routes, and the result was not thought but something new and unique.

In a different age Loob would have been left to die, and in a different place he would have been locked into an institution and forgotten. Here in this mountain town he was kept alive and, for what it was worth to him, permitted almost total freedom. The people clung to their immemorial folkways, and it had never been their way to send defective people to institutions. When seventeen-year-old Carolee Rankin came home to bear her bastard and depart again, this time to disappear forever, her mother, as a matter of course, kept the child to raise as one of the moil of children swarming through the ruinous house the welfare people supplied her. Loob shared his grandmother's breast with his uncle, who was a year older than Loob. By his third birthday he was an inch taller than the uncle. It was by then evident, even to the grandmother, who herself lived at a cer-

tain remove from reality, that something was amiss inside Loob's head. He walked into furniture and followed with his eyes the movements of invisible people and became frightened at the sight of things that were not there. It could not be doubted that he was in some way cracked.

The grandmother did not regard the fact as a major tragedy; most of the families she knew produced at least one natural in each generation. Loob received neither more nor less than his share of her fitful offerings of affection, and perhaps less than his share of the cuffings. He continued to grow with unnatural speed, almost visibly acquiring inches of height and layers of fat, feeding greedily on enormous quantities of the starchy foods provided by bureaucratic charity. When he was seven the grandmother died.

The day after her death, her mother, the matriarch of the clan, appeared in the town. She began a long wrangle with the young woman from the welfare department, who proposed to put into foster homes all of the children except Loob, who was to go to an asylum. The old woman was wise in the ways and regulations of the welfare department, and she was unshakably determined that her kin would not be raised by strangers. In the end she prevailed; the government would continue to rent the house, regular checks would continue to issue, and the children, including Loob, would be kept together. But her scheming had gone beyond that: she was able, as a part of the same settlement, to make provision for another of her feckless brood. Her youngest son, a cowboy-togged frequenter of honky-tonks, who had reached his early thirties without ever having had a job, was given a stipend by the government to move with his wife into the house and make a home for the children. He had no children of his own; his wife, a skinny alcoholic named Dolores, did not like them.

As time passed she came to like them less and less, her new charges in particular. The littlest of them cried or screamed a good deal of the time, and those of school age were frequently the cause of visitations by the welfare lady, who tended to be quite fierce after hearing school teachers' shocked reports about the clothing and grooming of the children. Dolores was infuriated by these intrusions upon her effort to live as she liked. She had experienced the fulfillment of an old daydream: enough money to keep the refrigerator well-filled with beer, and a rent-free dim room where the days could be passed in a mindless fog of alcohol and rock music. She did

not ask for more than this, but having tasted it, she would not settle for less. When reality insisted upon invading her misty paradise, she was at first irritated and then filled with sullen rage. These children, she came to see, were her enemies. She would treat them as they deserved to be treated.

And so they grew, an undernourished gaggle of delinquents, vicious and unpredictable, pale of eye and hair, each with the chinless face and pointed teeth of the family. One by one, as they reached their middle teens, they left the house, to find dens elsewhere in the town or to run away and vanish utterly. Dolores was left at last with only Loob.

And even he had stumbled into habits that kept him out of her reach most of the time. In his early years it had been otherwise; he had not been able to learn, like the others, to make himself inconspicuous or to hide, nor was he able to read the signs that foretold explosions of her wrath. He had thus been almost always conveniently available to her, a ready victim, a swollen speechless lump too lethargic to evade blows and incapable of argument. In summer he would squat in the dusty backyard, and in winter in a corner of the kitchen, staring at whatever it was that he saw. When he was eleven or twelve he began to follow along behind the uncle who was near his own age, and he remained a faithful shadow until the uncle ran away a year or two later. That was the period when the boys used Loob as a butt.

By the time of the uncle's disappearance Loob seemed to have come to a vague awareness that things were somehow better when he was away from Dolores, that he felt no blows and did not hear the shrill vituperative voice. It came to be his habit to go to the house only to sleep and to eat when he could not find food elsewhere. He became a wanderer through the town and its purlieus, an enormous shambling creature with arms that were disproportionately short and a tongue too large for his mouth, who clutched a shapeless bundle of rags that had once been a stuffed toy dog, and made mysterious detours as he walked. At some point his wanderings brought him to the window of the old Dappling house. Thereafter he was usually to be found at the place.

Dolores knew where he was, and she had no objection. She had never consciously made a connection between Loob's absence from the house and a rise in her spirits, but her subconscious mind had for many years observed and recorded the fact that acts of cruelty to Loob were likely to have distressing consequences. The appalling

depressions of spirit that sometimes engulfed her, dropping her into a black hell of melancholy and terror, were blamed on her boozing, and she ascribed to the same cause the endless succession of accidents that made bandages or splints a standard part of her costume. That Loob was the cause of her afflictions was not an idea that would have occurred to her.

It did not occur to Loob, either, of course. Loob did not have ideas, any more than he had memories. He lived from moment to moment, and each new moment of his life found him in something very close to a whole new world. The few things he had learned had been absorbed so gradually, over so long a time, that they had merged with, and become indistinguishable from, instinct; no reasoning from cause to effect had ever been the motive of an action of his. He was in fact totally unaware of what he was doing when he made use of his power. It was his wholly by chance, an effect of the same clots in the circuitry of his brain that deprived him of an effective memory and the faculty of reason, and he used it instinctively and without forethought. Afterwards he would have no memory of what he had done, nor any awareness of consequences. There was the matter of the Goster County dogs, for example.

A lean starving dog of enormous size, driven to mindless ferocity by hunger and the pain of a festering paw, one day sprang at Loob's throat. Loob reacted with cobra swiftness, his instincts serving him better than reason would have. The dog seemed to crumple in midair; a savage predator had leaped, and a cowed and broken creature hit the ground. It fled in howling terror to its nest under a stump and remained there until it died of starvation and fear a week later.

If Loob had failed to react, no harm would have been done him; the dog's attack had actually taken place on a day a century and a half in the past, and Loob had struck at a wraith, an apparition that had no substance in Loob's time. It is probable that it was not attacking Loob at all, but some beast or person actually there; but it may have sensed somehow Loob's uncomprehending observation and blindly attacked the unseen. Either way, they were in different times, Loob and the dog, and neither of them had any physical reality for the other. But Loob's dreadful bolt was not affected by time. Time had no meaning for Loob. And the dog was smitten.

The dog was a wild animal, an amalgam of large breeds, the possessor of a rich strain of wolf blood. He killed sheep and bred

bitches on most of the farms in the county and ventured sometimes into the town itself when the wind brought the scent of a bitch in heat. By the time he was brought low by a farmer's bullet, he had sired feral litters throughout the area, all of which fruitfully interbred. His blood was passed on and enriched by the inbreeding, and his descendants came to be almost a distinct breed, huge rangy dogs with blunt muzzles and smooth black pelts, who stood baleful guard over the farms of the county and patrolled the streets of the town with a forbidding, propietary air.

They disappeared when Loob struck the attacker; or, rather, did not disappear: they had never existed. The old progenitor had died of terror in a hole before he could breed their ancestors, and other dogs lived — had always lived — here. Reality had been amended in a small way: a race of dogs did not exist; the bloodlines of the local sheep were imperceptibly different; the phrase, "As mean as a Goster County dog" did not have currency in that end of the state. Most of the people had memories of their pasts that were somewhat different from what they had been; a great many snapshots showed other dogs or no dogs at all. Not much else. Loob's mindless interference with the past had harmed no one, all things considered, and the world was in fact in no worse condition than it would otherwise have been.

But of course that was not the only occasion on which he altered the past, and that other tampering had consequences that scarcely bear thinking about, that were indeed so imcomparably dreadful that one has difficulty in restraining himself from committing atrocities upon Loob's person. But that would be self-defeating, that would be something worse than suicide. Loob is not to be interfered with; he must be left to do as he is moved to do.

Loob once had a dog of his own. When he was twelve or thirteen years old, an emaciated stray mongrel had one summer evening peered through a hole in the fence and watched him as he sat in a corner of the yard hunched over his tin basin of pork and potatoes. The dog had sat staring with hopeless longing at the pieces that fell into the dust as Loob crammed the food into his mouth until, unable to restrain itself any longer, it made a frantic and despairing foray into the yard, snatched a loathly ort from under Loob's feet, and scrambled in terror back through the hole. Loob took no notice whatever. The dog, observing this, made a second raid, again without retribution. By the time

the basin was empty, the ground was clear of food, and the dog was sitting beside Loob waiting for the next scrap to fall.

Thereafter they took their meals together, and after a time the dog began to follow Loob wherever he went and to lie down touching Loob when Loob was at rest. Loob appeared not to be aware of the dog at all until the evening when the dog for the first time attempted to follow him into the house and was hastily ejected by Dolores. Loob began an enormous bellowing, a noise so offensive and sustained that one of the older children admitted the animal as soon as Dolores had returned to her room. After that time they were not separated by day or night until a coal truck ran over the dog on Main Street one morning, not only killing it instantly but flattening it to something unrecognizable as a dog.

Loob saw the incident; at any rate his eyes were turned toward it at the moment it happened. But he gave no sign that he recognized what had taken place, and he continued his lurching progress up the street without pausing. That night he did not eat, however, a thing that had not happened before in his lifetime. During all of the next day and the day after that, he took no food. The other children, astonished and frightened, told Dolores, who two days later told the welfare lady. Loob's skin was by then beginning to hang in pale folds, and he staggered even more than usual as he wandered through the town.

"I don't know," the welfare lady said. "Maybe this time he'll have to go to Murdock." Murdock is a state mental hospital. I know it well.

"It was the dog gettin' kilt done it," one of the children said. "Maybe if he had another dog —"

"Another dog," the welfare lady said. "Aid to Dependent Dogs." She spoke to Dolores: "Do you have any idea — No. Of course you don't. I'll talk to the doctor. I'm afraid it will have to be Murdock." But she came back later in the day with a toy dog, a stylized stuffed Airedale covered with plush. "Let's try it, anyhow," she said. "You never know."

Loob stared at the toy as emptily as he stared at the rest of the world. After a while the welfare lady said, "Well, I'm not surprised. It was worth trying, though." She turned to go. Loob reached out and took the toy. His face did not change, but he raised the dog and squeezed it to his chest with both hands, and that evening he devoured his usual enormous meal. For the next five years of his life he was never seen without the

toy in his hand.

He did not play with it or show it any sign of affection, or indeed seem to be aware that he held it, but even in his sleep his grip did not wholly relax. In time the plastic stuffing hardened and crumbled and sifted out through rips in the seams of the plush, so that at last Loob carried only a filthy rag; but to all appearances the rag had the same value to him that the new toy had had. It may have been that the sticky wad of cloth provided the only continuity in his life, the only thing of permanence in his inconstant world. Or perhaps he was after all capable of some murky analogue of emotion and felt something akin to affection for the ruined toy. It is even possible that he had never perceived it as a representation of a dog, but simply as an object tendered in kindness, and hence not to be relinquished. Whatever the reason, it was unique in the world, a thing that appeared to matter to Loob.

Dolores took it from him one day, took it and burned it and so created her own beginnings and condemned a town. She took Loob's rag out of simple malice, out of a heartfelt desire to cause him pain; but she never knew whether or not the confiscation had really hurt him, any more than in the past she had been able to tell if he had heard her voice when she railed at him or felt the blows when she struck him. This time, though, she had achieved her purpose.

It was a bad morning for her, a morning when the thrum and jangle of her nerves had begun before she awoke, so that she came to consciousness depressed and apprehensive, with a yellow taste in her mouth and an incipient tremor in her limbs. She was perfectly aware of the cause, which was a lack of alcohol in her system; and she remembered clearly and with despair that before going to sleep she had drunk the last drop in the house, having debated leaving a pick-me-up in the vodka bottle and deciding against it. She had had this experience before, and she knew precisely the course it would take. It was absolutely necessary that she have a bottle within the next hour, or the shaking and nausea would utterly incapicitate her.

The car would not start. She sat behind the wheel and cursed, a stringy woman with bad teeth and lank hair, musty and disheveled and becoming frantic. Without pause in her swearing she left the car and, sweating, returned to the house to use the telephone. The taxicab company told her the town's only taxi would not be available until the afternoon.

She stood clutching the tele-

phone, frozen by panic. She did not see how she could walk the mile to the liquor store, but no matter how desperately she tried, she could think of no alternative. She was quite unable to cope with the problem. Until her brain had received its wonted portion of alcohol, it scarcely functioned at all, and getting the alcohol to make thinking possible was itself her problem. Frustration squeezed her in a clawed vice and became anger, a red extremity of rage that she thought might burst her head with its intensity.

Through the door to the kitchen she caught sight of Loob, sitting dumbly in his corner staring at nothing. "You bastard!" she shouted. "You goddamn crazy dummy, you old goddamn crazy dummy! Sit and hold your goddamn crazy rag all day, you goddamn crazy dummy! Why can't you *do* something?"

Loob did not move, did not blink. She rushed into the kitchen and struck him on the cheek with her fist. He gave no sign of feeling it. "Goddamn you!" she shouted. "Goddamn, oh, goddamn!" Loob sat and stared emptily. "You bastard," she said, panting now. "Oh, you big dummy bastard." Her eye fell upon the rag. "Oh, you big dummy bastard with your rag."

She snatched suddenly, and the rag was in her hand. Without hesitating she pulled a lid off the stove and dropped the rag inside, where coals still glowed. "There, you crazy dummy!" she said. "There's your crazy rag." There was a crackle of flame inside the stove.

Still Loob made no sign. She gave a wordless shriek, a yelp of pure, helpless rage, and struck him again, to no effect whatever. She stood trembling for a moment and then ran from the room and from the house and stood sobbing beside the road. A car came, and she held up her hand. The car stopped and picked her up.

In the kitchen Loob sat without movement for some time. Then his hand opened, lay so for a moment, and clenched again. He repeated the movement two or three times. He rose ponderously, lurched out through the kitchen door, and made his way through the litter of the back yard to a gap in the fence, and thence through a vacant lot to Dappling Road. He proceeded erratically down the road, as he had a thousand times before, and turned in at the derelict slag lane that led down to the old house. When he reached the house he climbed the discolored stone steps, entered, and took his seat in the window. His hand was slowly clenching and unclenching.

Something new had happened — was happening — to him: he

was, improbably, in the grip of an emotion. Somewhere in the ruinous labyrinth of his mind there was adumbrated a feeling of loss, a something nameless that was forever gone. There was no way for him to weigh the matter, to reflect upon the strangeness of this phenomenon; he could only react instinctively: *Danger: Strike.* He struck.

It was toward the end of a long August afternoon in 1905, and Sam Dappling was opening a door, entering the room where Olivia was playing Chopin. A house-guest, a cousin from Philadelphia, stood beside the piano and turned the pages of the music, and two other visitors, another cousin and his wife, listened from seats on a divan. As he crossed the threshold, placid, genial Sam Dappling went mad; the black discharge of Loob's strange ordnance smashed into his brain, instantly exploding a million subtle connections, and in the moment of passing through the doorway Sam Dappling ceased to exist. In his stead was something monstrous, a thing bulging with insensate ferocity, that ran suddenly into the room and tore from the wall the Civil War saber that hung under a portrait of old General Dappling. It whirled with the saber in its hand and without the slightest pause accelerated into frenzied motion, filling the room with a demented fury of destruction and dismemberment; and when the butchery at last was done, it again did not pause, but rushed dripping out of that place of blood and stink and twitching scraps into the outdoors, onto the lawn where a child and a dog played in the sunshine.

It left unspeakable things scattered there on the grass and plunged, howling, into the barn, where it found only a mare and her foal, upon whom it fell in undiminished frenzy. When there was no more movement in the stall, it paused for a fraction of a moment. In the loft pigeons were fluttering; it heard the sound and went swarming up the ladder, in no way slowed by the saber. The pigeons were out of reach, swooping just under the roof, far above. At the end of the loft was another ladder, leading up to the great opening under the ridge pole through which the hay was hauled into the mow. It scuttled up with the agility of a great feral monkey. A startled pigeon flapped in confusion and then flew hastily through the opening, and the thing that had been Sam Dappling leaped for it, wildly cutting with its sword. The pigeon rose gracefully and curved back to alight on the roof. The thing sailed outward and dropped, still slicing and hacking at the air through which it fell. It struck the hard-

packed earth and bounced slightly and was still. In the house the screaming had just begun.

For Henry Dappling it never stopped. He lived for the seven years that remained of his life with a never-ending scream in his ears. It was not the screaming from the house that he heard; it was the demented noise that came from Mrs. McVay, who was standing on the lawn with her face to the sky as he rode the gray out of the woods that evening. He had emerged from the sun-shot cool gloom and silence of the forest into the full evening sunlight and pulled up as usual. He heard it then, a mindless howl of terror and loss and unutterable grief, ripping through the bright clear air with ugly insistence, smirching the evening. He put the gray into a dead run, down the meadow and the drive and over the lawn to where she stood screaming and screaming. He saw what she held in her hands.

That was the real end of Henry Dappling's life. His remaining seven years were something worse than death. He would have made a quick end of it almost immediately, except that he did not see how he could die without knowing *why*. Even a vindictive maniac God must have had a reason for so gross an affront to decency, so loathsome and abominable a cruelty as permitting him to see the bulging small blue eyes and yellow curls of what was frozen in Mrs. McVay's clawed hands. The question became almost the sole tenant of his mind, a consuming obsession that was never absent for a second of his years as a mad hermit in his mansion. He did not find his answer, of course, and he died at last with the screaming still in his ears, alone in the great house where mildew and dry rot were crumbling the interior and weeds and brambles besieged the walls. Long before his death the house had come to look desolate and abandoned, and it was known as a haunted house while its master still lived within its walls.

He had attended the funeral; indeed, he had taken charge from the very first, from the moment he had pried Mrs. McVay's hands away from their awful burden. He had shouted at her in so loud and peremptory a voice that her hysteria was punctured, and she took hold of herself and obeyed his instructions to gather together the men whom he named and to have the sheriff sent for. He himself told the men what to do, evincing no emotion at the sight of the shambles in the house or the pitiful thing lying broken on the ramp of the barn. He went about for the three days with an expressionless face, speaking, when speech was needful, in a precise cold voice,

glassy-hard and without apparent grief or rage. He was watched warily: at any moment full realization might strike him, and he could be expected to do something strange — to become violent and murderous or perhaps lose his mind entirely and gibber and drool.

In fact he did none of those things. After the funeral he took the superintendent of the mill aside. "Pay off everybody," he said. "Yourself, too. Lock it up."

"What?" said the superintendent. "Pay —? Lock —? What?"

"Do it," Dappling said. The superintendent did. The town stopped. The big houses lost their people first, as the men who had run the mill betook themselves to Pittsburgh and Gary. Then some of the row houses emptied; venturesome or ambitious men severed their roots and went to Wheeling or Youngstown, while others, in whom the old highland blood ran strong, satisfied a perennial urge and returned to the cabins. A majority stayed. They stayed and watched the town decay around them, a passive indolent community bereft of leadership and energy, doomed now to a long sleep and then extinction.

It stirred to life, briefly, during the First World War; money and importunities from Washington effected a partial resolution of the chaos into which Dappling's estate had fallen and the mill was put into operation for a year, although the already archaic equipment was hopelessly inefficient. After the Armistice the ponderous machinery of the law again clanked into operation; the gates were re-locked, the new railroad sidings left to rust. The tedious succession of suit and countersuit, stay and deferral, lien and attachment and injunction was resumed and dragged its dusty way through courtrooms and sheriff's offices and lawyers' chambers. If Dappling had died with his family, there would have been no problem; his affairs would have been carried on without even a pause by an existing establishment. But he lived on for seven years, and there was no way to appoint an executor or administrator for a living man. They might have had him certified incompetent, but no one dared. And so no taxes were paid or rents collected; no one voted shares of stock or gave proxies for them; no one guarded or was responsible for property and accounts. Sheriffs' deputies nailed notices to doors; servers of process came and went; various bank accounts stagnated or were looted. Numbers of small suppliers went bankrupt; certain bankers and lawyers prospered greatly.

And all the while the town shrank and rotted and waited for the better times that had to come,

and Henry Dappling, grown hairy and filthy and emaciated, crept through the dark haunted rooms of his mansion and endlessly asked his unanswerable question. One day in the seventh summer, McVay, who each week left a supply of food for the hermit at the kitchen door, found the previous week's provisions still on the step. He called the sheriff, who came with a fat deputy, broke into the shuttered house, and found Dappling's body. The screaming had stopped at last.

Lawful administration of the estate began at once, but it was too late. Except for the federal cutting of the Gordian Knot for wartime purposes, there had never been a hope of bringing enough order out of the chaos to make the mill a going enterprise again. Vultures and then beetles picked the carcass clean and left the town to its own devices.

It could devise nothing but stagnation. When the Great Depression came, the event would have passed unnoticed by the people had it not been for the fact that money began to arrive from the government. They were at first too proud to accept it, and then they accepted it and were ashamed, and in due course they were not ashamed but came to think of it as rightfully theirs. The relief checks became the way of life of the town, an assurance of a livelihood for even the most indolent and feckless. When times at last improved, there was a leaching away of the brighter and abler young, who went to seek a future elsewhere; and by the time "relief" became "welfare," no one there worked at all except for a few torpid merchants, whose customers paid with government checks. The town would not die, but it lived — or half-lived — as a parasite.

The citizens know no other life. Loob was born to it, and so was his mother, and his grandmother came to it before her adolescence. These are people who do not know want, but have never known prosperity. They do not know ambition or thrift; neither do they know toil or hunger. Their possessions are cheap and gaudy and soiled, their diet deficient in nourishment and abundant in sugar, their music a commercial debasement of the folk music of their fathers. They drink fiercely and are given to casual incest and sometimes slice each other with knives. Their only dreams are of winning prizes on television giveaway shows. These are the descendants of the stern mountaineers who were Henry Dappling's people. Down the years each generation has been more misshapen than its predecessor. Loob is their ultimate fruit.

And so a circle is completed.

Because Loob is what he is, he shattered the mind of Sam Dappling and so damned the town. Because the town was damned, Loob is what he is.

There is no point of entry into this circle: Loob created the events that created Loob. And since that cannot be, it is necessary to consider the possibility that these things did not happen at all. It may be that someday, as Loob sits in the window, his censor may not operate, he may see the scene through to its end; and now, with the loss of his toy no longer a fresh wound, and indeed probably no longer even a scar, he may let Sam come through the door and enter the room unchanged. If that should come about, then none of this happened; if Sam comes unscathed across the threshold, the past has once more been changed. Or left unchanged. The entry into the room of a sane Sam Dappling will mean that the horrors of that evening never occurred, that through the years ahead events will transpire with Sam and Emily and Olivia alive, with Henry Dappling a fulfilled and happy man. It will mean that at the moment Loob fails to loose his bolt, he will never have existed.

One would perhaps then find in the bay of the window not a pale gross cretin crouched on a box, but an old lady in a Sheraton chair, who contemplates with eyes that are still merry and blue the long slope of lawn outside the window. The old piano is still in the room, its top covered with photographs, among them those of her great-grandchildren. Her great-grandfather's portrait as a general hangs on the wall and under it his saber, unblooded since Bull Run. The woodwork of the room glows with the deep luster of fervent polishing, the metal is bright, the glass sparkles. It is an old room and a happy one, sunny and filled with good things well cared for, an appropriate setting for this patrician lady.

She is waiting for someone, perhaps her grandson, almost certainly her grandson. He will no doubt arrive in the Ferrari, sending up a spray of white gravel when he brakes in front of the house. A manservant will hurry down to get his luggage, but he is already halfway up the steps, a trim athletic young man in flannels and a Harris tweed jacket, a heavy silk scarf at his neck. He has been in the East for a month of polo, but now he is home again, home where he is heir to the town and the big house. The townspeople had smiled and waved as the Ferrari growled up steep Main Street past the busy mill and the gleaming row houses, around the square with its sleek shops and smug shopkeepers, and up to

where Dappling Road curled around the hill to the monumental gates of the estate.

Grandmother has laid on champagne for the occasion, chilled in a monogrammed silver bucket. She raises her glass in a toast to the happy homecoming, and the happy homecomer responds. We make a pretty picture there in that elegant room, beaming at each other: she slim, erect, and proud, wearing her years with grace; I the golden youth, handsome, cultured, immensely rich, at play for a while before settling down to my responsibilities. This is who I am. I am not the man they call Tom Perkins, the crazy sweeper of a sleazy bar in a decayed simulacrum of my town. This — *this* is the real world, this world with the champagne and the Ferrari, not the shoddy horror where the Perkins creature lives, where I am standing now.

And the real world is so very close. If once, only once, Loob permits Sam to enter the room, Loob never existed, and the town's history followed the main, the real thoroughfare, and I am safely where I belong, and none of this vile scenario ever transpired. I think I will not be aware of the transition — indeed, there will not be a transition: all this simply will not have been, and there will nowhere the faintest memory or even dream of this grim place. I will be sipping my champagne in my grandmother's drawing room, and all will be as it always was.

That is what I believe as I stand here among the cold weeds watching Loob in the window, as I wait for the instant that I am real again. And that is going to happen. I have no doubt that it will happen, none at all. None at all. Because I have positive proof that Loob can undo his interference with the past.

The proof is this: they are here, the Goster County dogs. They are here, gravely patrolling the streets of the town and the country round about, alert, watchful, and intimidating, as much a part of the landscape as the ridge above the town. *And they have always been here.* That is the point, that is the proof. Never since the time of the Mexican War has the town been without these dogs. Think about that. It is quite obvious that a day came when there was a repetition of the circumstances surrounding the destruction of the old ancestor dog, with Loob in the same location when that same segment of the past unreeled itself. This time, though, Loob's vacant stare was directed elsewhere when the dog attacked. There was thus no instinctive reaction to the attack; the dog lived on to beget his progeny. There is no fact in the universe more certain than the existence of these dogs. One of them is watch-

ing me now.

If Loob can do that, he can put right his other, greater, his infinitely tragic interference. And when he does, he and the wretched Tom Perkins will never have been. The world will be back on its true path, the path where there is love and comfort and safety.

It will.

Science fiction's first boom period since the early 50s is upon us, a success attributed primarily to the enormous popularity of the films *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.*

Actually it goes back a bit more than that, at least in the field of publishing. The ever-growing attention paid to writers such as Tolkien, Heinlein, and Herbert during the past two decades primed a new generation for flights of fancy fantasy. Even as the genre was growing into adult forms and modes, an increasing number of young people were discovering in each year's hundreds of reprint editions of "classic" novels and anthologies that sf/fantasy could be fun, full of adventure and surprises.

Wolfhead is a brand-new novel (originally serialized in these pages in 1977) by Charles L. Harness, who today is best remembered for his novels *Flight into Yesterday* (1949) and *The Rose* (1953). *Wolfhead* seems an attempt to capture the excitement of the former rather than the subtleties of the latter, and its breathless pace is almost perfectly suited to a magazine serial that keeps the reader turning pages in breathless anticipation.

Harness's plot is really quite

RICHARD DELAP

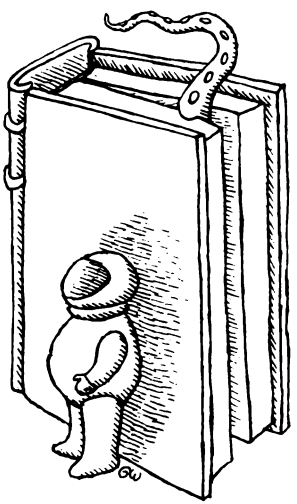
Books

Wolfhead by Charles L. Harness, Berkley, $1.75.

Kalki: A Novel by Gore Vidal, Random House, $10.00.

The Two of Them by Joanna Russ, Berkley/Putnam, $8.95.

Somerset Dreams and Other Fictions by Kate Wilhelm, Harper & Row, $8.95.



simple. The time is 3,000 years after the Desolation — which resulted in centuries of primitivism and berserk biology — and our hero, Jeremy Wolfhead, has just married the beautiful Beatra. No sooner is the couple happily settled than Beatra is kidnapped by the dreaded Undergrounders, darkness-adapted descendants of the United States Government that retreated into the bowels of the earth during the Desolation.

Jeremy is injured during the kidnap but is nursed back to health by the Brothers, a select group who have aided mankind to regain civilization and who now train Jeremy in the use of telepathic and telekinetic powers. In addition, a piece of Jeremy's brain is embedded in a she-wolf named Virgil, and the two are sent into the Hell of the Undergrounders. Jeremy wants only to rescue Beatra, but his primary mission is to destroy the "gods-eye," a mysterious object orbiting the planet and controlled by the Undergrounders, that will, according to the Brothers, destroy all life unless it is deactivated.

From this point forward it's not difficult to guess where this plot is headed, and Harness keeps his chapters swift and to the point as Jeremy and Virgil reach an uneasy truce in the name of survival on their danger-filled voyage.

There are some drawbacks, however, to this sort of tale, especially for readers who have already spent some years with the sf magazines and are quite familiar with hairbreadth escapes and miraculous luck. As is often the case with dyed-in-the-wool heroes, Jeremy's burning passion to save Beatra is hardly sufficient for well-rounded characterization, and it is only through Virgil's continually astonished reactions to Jeremy's driving need that we gain any graceful distance. The use of telekinetic power is weakly integrated into the story, and Jeremy might just as well be carrying a magician's hat loaded with every device he could possibly need in times of crisis. There is also the matter of excessive violence and bloodshed, described in loving detail, which may be Harness's satirical counterpart to Dante's *Divine Comedy,* an absorption of the modern theology of thoughtless human destruction to replace the Aristotelian rationalism of the original.

Moving from the absurd but lively to the absurd and dull is as short a trip as from one book to another but as long a step as one can possibly imagine.

Gore Vidal's *Kalki: A Novel* is so deliberately calculated in every way — the science fiction plot

base; the utilization of everything trendy in current American culture (where chic is indistinguishable from shit); the humor realigned so often that one's interest dims long before Vidal's fingers tire of twisting the focus knob — the reader easily forgets that the author is a man who shouldn't be dismissed with the hack writers whose stories decimate forests.

The "novel" is narrated by Theodora ("Teddy") Hecht Ottinger, a 34-year-old aviatrix (Teddy's word) and author of the best-selling *Beyond Motherhood* (recently remaindered) who has now accepted a magazine assignment to cover the story of Kalki. Although Kalki is actually Jim Kelly, an American veteran of Vietnam whose talent for modern warfare proves useful in his Vishnu 'reincarnation,' the messianic image inundates the world through the mass media, encouraging the belief that Kalki heralds the destruction of mankind.

Rather than attempting a straightforward story (as in his earlier *Messiah*) or zany fantasy (as in *Myra Breckinridge),* Vidal has here chosen to smash into the wall of cultural phobias hidden in a maze of current fashion trends. Yet Vidal spends all his time splashing fashion's contours with blood and sweat and other bodily fluids, attempting to define the absurd with an excess of absurdities. The wall remains, but so well hidden beneath Vidal's mess that it may as well be dismissed as a practical base of operations.

Perhaps the audience so easily bowled over by Blatty's second-class demon and Erica Jong's astounded discovery of sex-for-sex's-sake will gobble up this garbage with glee. Sf readers who look at the future as something more than an elaborate joke of contemporaneity will be able to find more value in the hackest of space operas than in this feeble parody of American bad taste.

After a lightweight adventure story and a so-called novel by a heavyweight mainstreamer dabbling in sf, is it any wonder that my expectations are high when I turn to *The Two of Them* by Joanna Russ? After all, Russ is not only one of our best critics but the primary catalyst for some of the most raging controversy about the use of science fiction as a vehicle for polemics.

The fact that she can write rings around all of her detractors is seldom mentioned, but it's true and I mention it here because it's certainly time someone said, flat out, that in comparison she makes the majority of current bestselling sf authors sound like idiots. Eat your heart out, you writers of

earth-wrecking calamities. Cry in your beer, you movie novelizers. Cower in despair, you purveyors of impotent macho-barbarian crap. You can carry so much money to the bank that you must crawl, but you won't be able to lift your heads high enough to lick the bottoms of Joanna Russ's shoes. Because *The Two of Them* is the best sf novel so far this year, the best book Russ has ever written, and the best fictional exercise about the importance of making decisions that I have ever read.

How can I convince you to rush right out and buy this book? Describing the plot, as artful as the mechanics of it are, leaves me with two equally unsatisfactory options. I can say that we are introduced to Irene and Ernst, agents for the mysterious Trans-Temporal Authority, and become involved in their adventures on Ka'abah, where an Arabian Nights fairy-tale world collides with modern consciousness, for Ka'abah is a hellish world for any self-respecting woman who opposes male domination. Or I can tell you that the drama is character oriented, that the plot doesn't much matter and the concerns are of the clash of ideology and emotion. The truth of this marvelous novel, however, is that its emotions and its mechanics do not fall into distinct categories but interact on an intense intellectual level that transcends singular goals. Russ shows us what a *real* novel is, how it encompasses a variety of things and meshes them into a single unit that bristles with positive energy and power.

A third character, a young female named Zubeydeh who rebels against the oppression of her native world yet doesn't understand the nature of her rebellion, is the electric spark that jolts the emotional current to a feverish pitch, opening a path to courage (for the reader, as well as Irene) that makes the climactic highpoint of abandonment, murder, and escape little more than a minor incident in the encompassing vision of self-enlightenment.

Yet for all its intellect and adherence to the highest literary standards, the book never strays far from its support of sf action and adventure. What it does is take the exotic imagery and, as steadfastly as Herbert's *Dune,* as craftily as Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness,* make us live with it until it's as familiar as our back yard. Russ accomplishes this with deft bits rather than exhaustive chapters, and the pace never slows down but keeps escalating until the whirlwind climax. Best of all, despite the inescapable solemnity, the story sparkles with wit and even with numerous bellylaughs,

the laughter coming from occasional sf "in" jokes as well as a broad and more accessible humor that sometimes borders on slapstick.

The Two of Them ends with a lengthy paragraph of such beauty and bravery that it may be one of the best passages that the field of science fiction has ever produced. If for only that paragraph I would recommend that you buy the book. Since you get another 200-plus pages of prose that build to that paragraph with entertainment and an incomparable sense of story, I don't recommend that you buy the book. I demand it.

After knocking off three novels, it's pleasing to turn to a collection of short stories for a change of pace. Collections seem to be one of the hardest things to get published these days, since publishers keep telling us that novels sell better, but some authors are so good (not to mention popular) that most of their stories are gathered up sooner or later and manage to do all right in the marketplace.

Kate Wilhelm's *Somerset Dreams and Other Fictions* is just what the doctor ordered for those of us who want to have our fiction in smaller doses. There's not a bad story in the lot (though I could easily have managed without R. Glenn Wright's prolix foreword that insists on telling us far too much about each story). It's not a box of snack crackers to be devoured in an hour or so, you understand, since each piece is something to be tasted and savored as carefully as fine wine.

Half of the eight stories were originally published in Damon Knight's *Orbit* anthologies and are one of the primary reasons for that series' consistently high standards. The best one from this group is also the most recent, "State of Grace," a story that is consummately Kate Wilhelm, even if it appears in a form that we don't usually associate with this writer, namely, wacky comedy. "The things in the tree were destroying my marriage," says the heroine, referring to the small creatures she believes live in the oak tree in the yard, though in the end the marriage survives and likely does so *because* of her belief and her husband's adjustment to it. It's a funny story, especially appealing because its humor is a logical extension of human affection and growth.

The oldest *Orbit* story is "Somerset Dreams" (1969), which is even more disturbing today than when it was published during sf's incredibly productive period of energized new contexts, not only for its subject (death, in one of its

more insidious forms) but for its intensity. It deals with an experiment in dream analysis, and while its thrust is psychological, its premise (fantasy-become-reality) is pure sf, presented with terrifying logic.

"The Encounter" is the one story that Wright doesn't even mention in his foreword, which gives a welcome benefit of surprise to the reader. It tells of two people stranded together in a bus station during a snowstorm. Feminists may lay claim to it (though it isn't a feminist story at all. What it is about is guilt, a common denominator for all the aforementioned groups (as it is for us all). It seems to me that Wilhelm's choice of a man for her fear-ridden protagonist was not only wise but also quite brave, especially considering that sf's readership is usually considered to be primarily adolescent (or adolescent-minded) males. Wilhelm's precision is scary, and the careful manner in which she makes simple statements swallow multitudinous meanings whole is devastating. The story falls into no category and resists any short analysis. For that reason alone, it may represent one of the most interesting and perhaps vital stories of Wilhelm's career.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, This Is Your Crisis" counterpoints a battle in the wilderness with a battle in the living room, a grim study of television and the isolation principle. In "Symbiosis" we take a look at love and responsibility — so highly touted in our society — but here we look at the dark side and feel a chill when we realize that we cannot always recognize the moment when the dark side exerts its force.

"The Hounds" is a feverdream sort of story, loaded with small moments of terror that prick like pins. Wright sees it as a reworking of the myth of Artemis and Actaeon, but it seems to me to descend more directly from Poe's "Metzengerstein." The small moments of strangeness are riveting, though I'm afraid I don't understand its inexplicable shifts in observation. "Planet Story," too, deals in fear, this time on a planet that seems to offer nothing fearful. It does, however, present a sense of disorientation that may leave some readers a bit too uneasy to give it close scrutiny.

"Mrs. Bagley Goes to Mars," apparently published here for the first time and decidedly Wilhelm's most "feminist" story, skates briskly along the sharp edges of black humor, whisking across such subjects as American complacency, stupidity, rape, murder, the work ethic, and middle-class options. Like all effective satire, it steadies itself on a foundation of

seriousness. Wilhelm allows us to laugh at the shadows of the night, but she's also looking closely at what's causing those shadows, and what she sees may not be so funny after all.

Kate Wilhelm has now been keeping us entertained for about twenty years. I think it's time we just started buying her new books automatically. Since I have read most of her books and in all these years have found only one that I could honestly say I thought was not up to par, I feel totally confident in advising you to buy Wilhelm's *Somerset Dreams,* or any Wilhelm book. Treat yourself. You deserve the pleasure.

George Guthridge ("The Exiled, The Hunted," June 1977) sent the following story with a note: "The Northwest — and Oregon in particular — is becoming a haven for SF writers. I grew up in the Portland area and have recently returned..." After reading the story, the question that leaps to mind is: Why?

Oregon

by GEORGE FLORANCE-GUTHRIDGE

"Twin Stepper is back!"

The news moved from cavern to cavern like a roaring underground river. Darkness-Loves-Her sensed what had happened; her head jerked up and her egg sacs glowed, making our vault appear turquoise. Curled as usual in a moist corner, I feigned sleep, my head tucked against my left foreleg. The ploy failed; the lacy folds along my neck stiffened.

She prodded my belly with her snout until I agreed to accompany her. Then together we slithered side by side along the Hall of Speckled Silvers, tails swaying in unison.

She hardly noticed my presence. Her gaze forward, her eyes bluely bulged. How grand she was! — her sacs gleaming now greenish, now orange; her lace, erect, forming an enormous blood-filled collar.

We squeezed through a crevice. Her lace mashed backward, and for a moment her body was pressed against mine, the mucus of her underbelly sliming against my side. Her musk enraptured me. Then she was through the crevice and halfway down the corridor. I struggled to catch up, wanting only to revel once again in the happiness of simply being with her.

If only I had not scoffed when Twin Stepper suggested the tiny, newly discovered passage zigzagging away from Grayshaft might end in another world — the holy dimension alluded to in the myths. Had I been less insistent, perhaps I could have convinced Darkness-Loves-Her of the folly of suddenly deciding to save her egg sacs for a god who — even if he did exist — would probably reject her advances. Surely He Who Shines would never couple with a dark and mortal creature like herself.

We entered the Vault of the

Golden Medallion. Egg sacs flickered, voices murmured, the room was a-twitch with excited tails. Beyond the crowd, set into a niche midway up the wall, the relic hung from a lintel of carved stone. Discovered during my grandbearer's time, the medallion is smaller than a forefoot; yet even I am impressed by the winged animal imprinted on one side.

Darkness-Loves-Her stopped less than a body length past the door, her head moving side to side while her eyes, revolving independently, surveyed the room. Her pupils were violet.

Twin Stepper padded out from a side entrance, halted before the medallion. The crowd hushed. The odor of Darkness-Loves-Her was powerful within my nostrils. I wanted to close my eyes in pleasure.

"When I set out to explore the passage," Twin Stepper said, "there were those among you who laughed. But others believed, and filled my gullet from their own, so that my destiny might be fulfilled — that I might undertake the journey." He waited for the whispering to die down. "The true God — He Who Shines: of Whom this medallion is but a minor embodiment — saw fit not only that I should set out...but that I should return." His head moved rubbernecked, his gaze darting from one of us to the next. "I have seen the holy land," he said.

Never have I heard such clamor! The room became a mass of moving bodies, everyone talking at the same time, no one listening to anything anyone was saying. Twin Stepper called for silence — once, twice. Finally he bellowed, the gray veins sticking out in his cheeks and throat. The riot gradually diminshed. He flicked his tongue, then continued:

"The land is not one just of green serenity, as the tales say. There are cities. Cities filled with beings who walk on hind legs."

"And the Sun God?" Darkness-Loves-Her hopefully interjected. "Does He shine there?"

Sadly, "No more than here."

ABOUT THE COVER

Just after David Hardy painted our January 1978 cover, in which his popular 'benevolent BEM', Bhen, was building a snow-alien on one of the moons of Uranus, it was discovered that a set of rings circled that planet. Always with an eye for accuracy, David tried to get the artwork back to add the rings but too late! — the cover had gone to print. So to put matters straight we now have a new Hardy painting of Uranus, *sans* Bhen, showing the ringed Uranus with its pole pointing almost directly at the Sun, from an ice-covered stray asteroid. Latest reports indicate as many as nine rings, with radii from 25,000 to 30,500 miles and sharp divisions between.

Manly Wade Wellman is back with another fine creepy story, this one about a man who returns to the Ozark Hills after the Civil War in order to preach the Bible and who finds another kind of worship going on...

Toad's Foot

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Bible Jaeger came to the Fearful Rock country among the Ozark Hills at the end of the war, sometime in May, just as the word was filtering in of the surrenders of Lee and Jo Johnston and Kirby Smith. He'd fought near Fearful Rock as a Yankee cavalry sergeant, but hardly anybody had known about that. People turned out to see him more in curiosity than in welcome.

The war in those parts hadn't been gentlemanly like the one in Virginia. Men who lived through it on either side came out with a sort of curse on their souls. Jaeger, the word flew round from somewhere, had skirmished with Quantrill's guerrillas thereabouts, had been mentioned in dispatches at Pea Ridge and Westport; he'd returned to be a preacher; he was stern and God-fearing. During the war, his men had called him Bible behind his back. So Fearful Rock people would call him that, too, even to his harsh, hairy face, and would wonder why he wanted to preach to them.

There was no preacher among those hills and hollows, though there were some interesting beliefs and rituals. A few folks thought that any kind of preacher would be better than none at all — even this squat, bench-legged Yankee, with the red thicket of beard and the rolling cavalry walk, dressed in leather-gallused jeans pants and scuffed knee boots and black umbrella hat, carrying a Bible he said weighed six pounds.

He rode in on a brown horse, stubby-built like himself, no show to it. Following him came some baggage and bits of furniture in a mule wagon driven by a grave, articulate black man named Scott. They had taken a little old house of big, rough-sawed planks out on a fairly empty road near Fearful Rock. That house had belonged to

Jack Hunn, who'd gone in 1861 to join Bedford Forrest's first mounted rifle company and had never come home again. Jaeger and Scott moved their things in, while some folks ambled over to watch. Among those folks, it is still remembered, came Nessie Shipton.

It is also remembered what Nessie Shipton was like. Tall, proud-walking, with clouds of hair as dark as the storm, with a fine, full shape to her such as a queen should have and didn't often have. She lived among remote, shaggy trees in a hollow called Shipton's after whoever had once been her family, and some said she was a cunning woman, some a prophetess, some just a witch. She could conjure. She grew rich on conjuring. For those she liked she did things; to those she didn't like she did other things. She could tell you where to dig for a well of sweet water on your land, or she could mutter over your sick child and drive away a fever. If you vexed her, she could wither your crop in the field or make your sheep or pigs drop dead. Folks thought twice, and more than twice, before they came to her door. Standing there that day while Jaeger and Scott dragged in a table and chairs and bed springs, she was a pretty thing to look at. Yet nobody, not even Squire Carbrugh with his eye for fine women, stood too close.

It was nearly sundown when Jaeger spoke his first word to the little gathering of watchers, saying who he was and why he'd come. "Let us pray," he said gruffly, holding his six-pound Bible to his deep chest.

Folks bowed their heads, all but Nessie Shipton. She turned her fine straight back and smoothed her dark hair. She looked to be laughing all the time Jaeger said something deep and solemn about bless this house and this work. At last he looked up.

"Tomorrow is a Sunday," he announced. "I will hold services in this yard at ten o'clock in the morning. I hope you will come and hear me."

Squire Carbrugh and several others said yes, sir, they'd be proud to be there, sure enough. Then they tramped away, this direction and that. All but Nessie Shipton. She walked into the yard to where Jaeger stood beside a skimpy willow tree. The down-dipping sun made a winking glory in her hair. Her eyes and teeth shone like stars. She was as tall as Jaeger, but not as wide, and another sight easier to look at.

"So," she said, "you're going to preach to the poor sinners tomorrow morning."

"And tomorrow afternoon," he said back. "Scott knows several families of black freedmen in this

neighborhood. He says they'd be happy to hear the good word."

"What brings you here among us?" she asked. "Why come here where perhaps you're not wanted? I think that's what you did once before."

"I came here during the war because I was ordered to come," he replied. "I've been ordered to come here again, by the voice I always obey."

"Preacher man," said Nessie Shipton, "you don't act pleased to talk to me. That's not neighborly. After all, we have things somewhat in common. We represent the two oldest established firms, don't we? Only my firm's older than yours."

"True," he rumbled. "Men worshiped devils before they worshiped God."

"Here and there they still worship devils," she said, smiling radiantly. "People around here have done that, and profited."

"No profit in that worship," he said flatly. "And no health in it. Nessie Shipton, I heard someone name you. I doubt if there's room for your worship and mine too, here in the Fearful Rock country."

"I entertain the same doubt," she smiled. "Let's just see which of us has to go away."

"Let's just see," he agreed. And she walked away, a winnowing walk, and Jaeger went into the house to supper.

Scott served him with hoecakes and a bowl of cabbage soup, then went out in the early night to feed the horse and the mule. He came back fairly quickly. There was a grayness in the dark of his face. Jaeger got up from the table. "What's the matter, Scott?"

"We have a kind of a visitor, Reverend." Scott's voice was tight.

"A mischief-maker?" growled Jaeger. "I wondered if any of those would come. I'll make a little mischief myself," and he reached to the wall for his shotgun, on pegs above his old Chicopee saber.

"No, sir, not any people," Scott made haste to say. "I'd never run out of my own barnyard for any man, black or white. This was something hunched down and hairy."

"A wildcat," said Jaeger, the shotgun in his hand.

"Not a wildcat, either. It had a sort of monkey look, Reverend. Only I don't reckon a monkey will say bad words when you meet it face to face."

Jaeger put the shotgun back on its pegs and stormed out at the rear door.

The moon was big and pale in the sky, showing him the little shed that did duty for a stable, and its fence of rough rails. As Jaeger came into the open, the mule neighed hoarsely, querulously.

Jaeger hustled toward that noise. He saw the open stable door, and something that hunched darkly at its sill.

Whatever the something was, it saw Jaeger too. It swelled, it hiked shaggy shoulders. It uttered a crooning growl, in which half-pronounced words seemed to be caught. Jaeger felt his red beard crawl on his jaw, like windblown brush on a hillside. He reached to his hip pocket and dragged out a little book bound in gray paper. He could not read from it in that dim light, and he quoted as best he could remember:

"Demon, I forbid thee my house and premises; I forbid thee my horse stable, I forbid thee my bedstead, until thou hast ascended every hill, until thou hast counted every fence post, and until thou hast crossed every water. And thus dear day may come again into my house; in the three holy names, amen."

At once the shaggy shape was gone. Into the stable? Clutching his book, Jaeger tramped close to the door. Just inside, a lantern hung to a rusty nail on the jamb. Jaeger seized it, snapped a match into fire on his thumbnail, and kindled the wick. He held the lantern high as he walked in.

He saw nothing except the horse and the mule, still nervous in their stalls. Carrying the lantern, he peered at stacked away hay, harness on pegs. As he looked, he kept saying the Lord's Prayer under his breath. Finally he went outside again. In the lighted back door of the house stood Scott, a watchful silhouette.

"All is well here," Jaeger called to him through the dark. "But I'll just camp in the stable tonight, in case of more visitors."

Scott vanished and closed the door. Jaeger returned to the stable. He blew out the lantern and lay down in the hay. Often he had made a harder bed. To the horse and the mule he spoke aloud another formula from the book of charms:

"Three false tongues have bound thee, three holy tongues have spoken for thee. Heaven is above thee, the earth is beneath thee, and thou art between. Blessing be here and about us all. Amen."

Once during the night he wakened at a sudden rattle of sound. He wondered if a stone had been thrown upon the shingles above him. But silence closed in again, and he slept until sunrise.

People gathered in the front yard at midmorning. Jaeger came out to meet them. He wore his jeans and boots, but had put on a white shirt with a stand-up collar, a flaring black cravat, and a black

jimswinger coat. Donning square-lensed spectacles, he read a passage from his Bible. Then he asked his hearers to join in singing a hymn. Scott, in the house, raised a resonant bass with them. Jaeger announced his text, "I shall lift up mine eyes unto the hills," and preached with some stern emphasis about the true belief and certain false beliefs.

"When I was here in wartime, I found a curse of diabolism upon this unhappy place," he wound up. "I return, and hear another curse whispered. Moses, in his pronouncement of laws, told his people, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' It is not for me to decree life or death, but I say unto you, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to prevail.' Let us pray."

He prayed, long and bleakly, for heavenly help in stamping out the power of black fear and malicious cunning.

Afterward, those who had heard came to thank him for his words. One housewife made a present of a crock of sausage meat. Another brought a glass jar of watermelon pickles; a third proffered a tin pail of cane syrup and a bag of onions. And Squire Carbrugh stumped up on his gold-headed cane and put into Jaeger's hand a ten-dollar greenback.

"You took up no collection, but here's to help the work you hope to do," said the squire sonorously. He was lean, elegant, with a spike of gray-threaded beard. The gray frock coat he wore had been his when he was a major with Shelby's Iron Brigade. In contrast to the rumpled, squat Jaeger, he looked elegant, even aristocratic.

"Reverend, I glory in your coming here," he rolled out. "But if you'll hark to me as one friend to another, I advise you not to try too much at once. Make haste slowly, it says in the Latin."

"I don't know much Latin, sir," Jaeger said deeply, "and I don't see how haste can be made slowly. I hope to make all the speed I can in my duty."

"These beliefs you aim to put down," said Carbrugh, "they've been here for long years, more than I can count back to. They'll take long years to root out."

Jaeger crumpled the greenback in his big hand. "It's human nature to believe in something," he offered weightily. "These people have sorely lacked preachers of the Bible. But now I am here. I cannot admit of aught hindering the right way and the right word."

"Bold words, Reverend."

"Fear got burnt out of me in the war, Squire."

"Out of me, too," declared Carbrugh. "Fear was a scarce article with the men of Shelby's command."

"I fought against Shelby at Westport," said Jaeger, "and I know how brave his men could be. But the war's over. You and I can be on the same side now."

"True," nodded Carbrugh, the gray in his beard gleaming like silver. "Let's stay on the same side. One thing interests me, a certain book you carry. No, not your Bible. Another book."

Jaeger gazed at him levelly. "*The Long Lost Friend,* sir. You seem well-informed about my private affairs."

"Oh, neighbors tell me things," said Carbrugh. "Isn't that a book of black magic spells?"

"No," amended Jaeger, "white magic. For good against evil. John George Homan published it in 1820. When I was a boy in Pennsylvania, Homan was still alive near Reading. He was kind to all afflicted people. He lived and died in the true faith."

"Once again, I say I'm glad you've come to the Fearful Rock country," Squire Carbrugh changed the subject. "Why not let it be told around that you'll preach next Sunday at my big house? Perhaps the people will bring their dinners and eat together there on the lawn. You can be my guest. I promise you some yellow-legged chicken."

"Thank you, Squire. I'll come, if it's agreeable."

Carbrugh walked away, barely using the cane to favor his lame leg. Jaeger watched him go. A voice spoke at his elbow.

"Preacher man, you're eloquent," it said throatily. "I heard your sermon. You didn't see me, but I was here this morning."

He turned. Nessie Shipton was smiling at him. Her fine shoulders rose naked above her blue blouse, and her hair shook down upon them.

"And you were here last night, I think," he said.

"You surmised that? You didn't see me then, either."

"I saw something," he nodded. "Not a pretty something. I spoke to it, and it went away. It didn't succeed in doing what you wanted."

"There will be other times," promised Nessie Shipton.

"I suppose that I saw what the old books calls a witch's familiar," said Jaeger. "Those are unchancey things, but I don't feel they can be trusted, not even by their own witches."

She stopped smiling and drew her body up. "Nobody dares call me a witch to my face."

"Nobody?" he repeated, and his own smile was fierce in his beard.

"Preacher man," she said furiously, "you force me to disli' you."

"Good," he said, smiling.

"You and I might have been friends, done big things together."

"You mean, evil things."

"You will find out," she assured him. "To your cost."

Away she went. Jaeger entered his house, where Scott was flattening wads of the sausage to fry for their dinner.

When the meal had been eaten and the dishes washed, they set out for the place where Jaeger had agreed to preach to the blacks. Jaeger rode his brown horse, Scott the patient mule. They came to a house, no more than a cabin of thin poles with clay chinking, and a sagging porch. A dozen waited there, shabbily dressed, eager, courteous. Several black children were shy at first, but grew happy when Jaeger, sitting on the edge of the porch, told them a story of a boy lost from his parents and how he was found at last in the great temple where he astounded learned men with his questions and answers about religion and worship. After that, Jaeger announced his text, again from the Psalms, "All the workers of iniquity shall be scattered." Speaking as the trusted representative of a powerful deity, Jaeger assured his hearers that no harm could come to those of trusting and prayerful hearts. After that, he called on them to join him in singing a hymn, and tunefully, harmoniously they did so. Then several diffidently asked for baptism. He led them to the brink of a nearby stream, dipped water in his great palm, spoke a blessing over it and touched the heads of those who wanted it.

Home Jaeger and Scott rode, side by side.

"Your preaching did those people a world of good," observed Scott, in his careful, thoughtful way. "I've been thinking I might start a school for those little children. Teach them their letters and how to do sums, get along in the world."

"That would be a fine work for you, Scott. Tell me, is there any of this strange belief among them?"

"No more than with most of that range of folks," replied Scott. "I gathered somewhere that that lady — Miss Nessie Shipton — does her business with the white people. You see, sir, the whites are the only ones with money, even a little money. And she wants money for whatever she does."

"A practical woman," said Jaeger. "Though if she wants money from me, she'll be disappointed."

"She wants power." Scott studied the bobbing ears of the mule. "I keep remembering what was out at the stable last night. It looked all shagged over to me, like an animal. But such an animal I

never saw or heard of."

"Let's hope it's a scarce one," said Jaeger honestly.

They rode into their own yard and dismounted. Scott gathered up the reins of the horse and mule, to lead them to the stable.

"Reverend," he said, his dark face thoughtful, "I've seen turning over in mind something that could help. Something in one of your books."

"The Long Lost Friend?"

"No, sir, a book you wrote in and drew in yourself. Once you showed it to me. It has pictures of crosses, flowers, stars, all like that. You drew them and colored them with crayons."

"Oh, my old notebook," nodded Jaeger. "Those were copied from houses and barns in Pennsylvania. *Haus-segen,* they're called. House-blessings would be the English of it."

"Yes, sir, I remember your telling me that. Now, then, I wonder in my mind, what if we put those pictures on our stable, to keep any more evil things away?"

Jaeger stared, then shot out his big red hand to grasp Sccott's brown one.

"Scott, you may have the right of it," he fairly shouted. "Here, go and put the mule in his stall, but don't take the bridle off the horse. He can rest for a few minutes, but I'll be riding out again."

"Whatever you say, sir." Scott led the animals away, and Jaeger hurried into the house.

From its shelf he took his old notebook, a worn little ledger with black cloth covers and pages of lined paper. He turned to where there were rows and rows of figures drawn in pencil, with sketched-in colors in red, yellow and green crayons. His blunt forefinger ran from one to another to another.

"Here we are," he said as Scott came back in. *"Gruttafoos* — the Toad's Foot."

"That sounds like voodoo," ventured Scott.

"Why?" demanded Jaeger. "The toad's a friend of man, a killer of bugs for him."

He tore a blank page from the book and sat down to copy the symbol. First he used a tin saucer to trace around for a circle, five inches across. Within the circle he carefully managed an outline like a three-spiked paw print, the points standing upward. He searched out a green crayon and filled in the symbol and shaded around it with the pencil. Above it he wrote the proper words he remembered: *Sanct Matheus, Sanct Markas, Sanct Lucas, Sanct Johanas.* At last he nodded, as though the work would pass.

Into the kitchen he went. From a battered wooden box he fished a handful of cutlery. He chose a dag-

gerlike old knife with a cross hilt. This he stowed carefully into one tail pocket of his coat. Into the other he slid the folded diagram. He went outside, and Scott led his horse around.

"I hope not to be gone long," said Jaeger, swinging into the saddle and riding away.

He did not really know where he was going. After all, he had been here for little more than twenty-four hours; he was not acquainted as yet. But someone would tell him. The clay road ran between open fields with stake and rider fences, hills rising beyond. In the field toward the right, a farmer urged a double-shovel cultivator behind a swaybacked dun horse. He lifted a hand in the friendly Southern way of greeting, and Jaeger waved back. He would get to know that neighbor, he would get to know all his neighbors, whenever he returned from his errand. If he returned from it.

Up ahead approached someone on a white horse. Nearer, and he saw that the rider was a woman, a young girl really, sitting gracefully sideways on the horse. She came close and she, too, lifted a slim hand to him. Her hair was as red as Jaeger's beard. A red-haired girl on a white horse, people thereabouts said that meant good luck.

"Please, young miss," said Jaeger, doffing his hat, "can you tell me how to get to the home of Nessie Shipton?"

The girl reined to a halt. Her blue eyes gazed. "You truly want to see her, sir?"

"I have important business with her," said Jaeger.

The slim hand pointed back the way she had come. "Pass the first side-off road and take the second to the left. You'll need to look careful. It ain't much of a road, and there's woodsy trees thereabout."

"Thank you." Broad black hat in hand, Jaeger bowed from his saddle and rode on. He knew that she watched him in troubled wonder.

He found the road to the left, huddled between close-growing trees that joined their branches overhead, and turned his horse upon it. He fancied that the horse trembled, then told himself that that was only fancy. Horses didn't have imagination, like their riders.

Things were immediately different on that narrow thread of a trail. It seemed to follow a stream, bend after bend, but the stream flowed out of sight among trees to the left — red and white oak, pine, hawthorn, and some less easy to identify. There was a thicket of tall, pale canes, like a phalanx of spears. Beyond that, trees with outflung branches and broad leaves that seemed to cock and lis-

ten like ears. A splash in the unseen waters there to the left, quite a big splash, as though from a heavy moving body. Grass grew at the sides of the trail with strange little flowers set here and there, flowers as pale and lean as fangs. Something rattled twigs in the thickets. Maybe a raccoon. Or maybe not.

Jaeger could understand why people hesitated to come visiting Nessie Shipton. He remembered telling Squire Carbrugh that he had outgrown the sensation of fear. That had been a vain boast, not a proper one for a preacher of the true faith. But he was going there, he wasn't turning back, though the horse trembled again. He hoped he had a pure heart against evil.

The stream shifted and flowed across the trail. His horse lifted its hoofs high to wade. Jaeger thought that the water looked reddish, as though it contained rust, and that it gave off a vapor, murky and dull. On the far side, he abruptly checked the horse. A snake ahead there, a big, wriggling snake ... No. Only the shadow of a jutting branch that stirred, though there was no wind that he could feel.

More branches crowded above him from either side. He rode in a sort of gloomy tunnel. On beyond was light, a clearing.

Again he drew rein. If that was where Nessie Shipton was, better not ride in, better not be seen or heard until he was ready. He dismounted, turned the horse around and fastened its halter rope to the thorny fork of an Osage orange. If he had to leave in a hurry, he could mount and ride straight back the way he had come. He reassured the beast with a hand on its neck, and then he headed for the light.

As he advanced, with the careful tread of an old army scout, he heard voices.

"I don't think you're in a position to ask anything of me, Squire, not even humbly," he heard Nessie Shipton saying. "You've prospered thus far by leaving me strictly alone."

"I don't more than suggest, Miss Nessie, and only in the interests of pleasantness in our neighborhood." That was Squire Carbrugh, being plaintive, being timid. "There would be room for both you and him, and I've already told him the same thing."

"Indeed?" A laugh in her rich voice. "And what did he say?"

"I still hope he can be persuaded."

"You hope he can, but you know he can't. Just leave him to me, Squire. I've dealt with one or two of his clumsy sort before this. And keep your own nose out of my business."

Jaeger had reached a point be-

hind fronds of willow from which he could see into the clearing. It was a round space of bald, red clay, thickly enclosed among trees and brush. On the far side stood a cabin of squared logs, with dankly mossy shingles. Its door was faced with a great pelt of something, darkly shaggy, like the hide of a buffalo or a black bear. In front of the house stood Nessie Shipton, talking to Squire Carbrugh. The squire looked like somebody asking a favor, even asking mercy. One hand leaned on his cane, the other twisted the white hat it held. His shoulders sagged and trembled. Nessie Shipton stood straight and confident, a shawl of purple silk caught around her. She bracketed her hands on her hips and tilted her head back so that she could slant her fine eyes as though looking down at Carbrugh.

"You're wrong," she chuckled in her throat. "There isn't room for him and me here. And I was here first, as I pointed out to him. I'll stay and he'll go, if he's lucky enough to get away in time."

"When must he go?"

"By sundown," she replied, "if he has the wisdom to go. When the sun sinks, forces will be abroad, all around that place he thought to live in. Go warn him, tell him."

Carbrugh went unhappily to where his spotted horse waited, mounted and rode away. Jaeger lurked in the willow scrub until the rider had passed him. Then he stepped out on the trail and tramped into the open where Nessie Shipton waited.

She looked at him as though she felt no surprise at his being there. "I didn't give you leave to call on me," she said.

"I came without leave," he told her. "I heard all you said to Squire Carbrugh."

"Then you were eavesdropping," she sneered at him. "It is like a brave man, to spy on a woman. But if you listened, you heard me say that it's time for you to leave."

"I heard," he nodded, "and it's you who must leave."

She laughed. He saw her pink tongue, her white, pointed teeth.

"Preacher man," she said at last, "you'd be funny if you weren't such a crashing bore. You don't understand anything. Listen, for once. This is my country. I do well here at what I like to do. We've gone on for years without preacher men. We'll go on for years more without one."

"I came here before, when nobody particularly wanted me here," said Jaeger. He had stopped, close to her. "That was during the war. I saw, when I had time to notice, that the word of truth was badly needed here."

"This is more or less a forgotten part of the world," she told him brightly, as though it were a social chat. "once in a while in the old days, a traveling preacher rode through and preached a sermon. Then the war came and there weren't any more preachers. But I was here. My companions were here. People believe in us — even Squire Carbrugh, you heard him. Any sensible person ought to see that we don't want meddlers."

"I have returned to help," said Jaeger doggedly. "I'll stay to help. I have heard the call to help."

"Hear something else," bade Nessie Shipton. "Those whom I serve wouldn't have given me my work here without the power to do it. And you aren't staying. There are more things to fight than just myself. I've a legion of assistants, preacher man. I think you're coming to realize that."

"I ran something ugly out of my stable yard last night," Jaeger said.

"That was your ground — temporarily. This is mine, permanently. You're trespassing. You'd better leave while you can, and never come back."

Jaeger planted his booted feet and stroked his red beard.

"Not until I've had it out with you," he declared.

"It's already been had out. You don't see the danger for you." Her loftily searching gaze raked him from head to foot. "If I should make a certain sign with my hand, if I should speak a certain word in a certain tone, your hide would be hanging there on my house." She pointed. "Right next to that skin which you think you saw last night."

Jaeger studied the expanse of rank, black fur. "It was worn by one of those servants you boast about."

Again Nessie Shipton laughed, with menace in the mirth. "You keep saying, my servant wore it," she jeered at him. "How little you know, preacher man. You aren't gifted enough to realize what you're facing. I wore that skin. It's my usual dress after sundown. It rules my followers, it makes me fearful to those who may have lingering doubts of what I can do. I bought it years ago from an Indian medicine man. A man much appreciated by his tribe."

"You fled out of my yard wearing it," said Jaeger.

"Then profit by my example, and flee out of mine. We're not alone here, not by any means."

Nor were they alone. Without actually seeing, Jaeger was aware that things lurked in the deep shadows of the trees, among the bosky mats of undergrowth. H half sensed eyes, greenly glittering, like the eyes of flesh-eating beasts. He

heard a faint clash, as of dry talons, of tusks.

"Even by daylight, my friends are here," she said.

"Miss Shipton," and Jaeger was able to keep his voice steady, "isn't it awkward, all this host? I concede you have powers —"

"You compliment me, preacher man," she said, tossing her hair.

"If you help people in any way, can't they be grateful to you without being afraid?"

"I want them to be afraid," she replied, like a patient adult instructing a child. "Fear is the only power."

"I serve another power than fear," said Jaeger. "But without your comrades, I think you'd be nothing."

"I told you, a motion of my hand, a certain word spoken. That would finish you decisively."

His own hands hung at his sides. Suddenly he dived them into his tail pockets. One snatched out the folded paper on which he had made the diagram. The other came up with the cross-hilted knife. He made two long hurried strides past Nessie Shipton to the door of the house.

He opened the paper against the hewn log of the door's lintel. Into it he drove the point of the dagger, through and deep into the wood, with a sullen *chock*. The paper hung there, fluttering.

"Take that thing away!" screamed Nessie Shipton wildly.

Jaeger swung around to face her. His teeth gleamed in a bearded smile.

"Your shaggy dress of hide must be very old," he said, going himself into a tone of mockery. "Look, it's falling to pieces."

He spoke the truth. The hairy expanse seemed to quiver and crawl. It split into flakes that dropped away from the door like withered leaves in an autumn gale.

"Might the power be going out of it?" Jaeger inquired.

"I need that skin at night!" Nessie Shipton was chattering. "If I don't have it —"

"If you don't have it, you'll be at a disadvantage, you can't command," Jaeger finished for her, his smile bright and hard. "This design," and he pointed, "is the Pennsylvania-Dutch *Gruttafoos.* The Toad's Foot. In that state it drives all evil from a house, and I think it works as well here. What is a blessing to the godly is a curse to the wicked."

She ran past him and clawed at the paper, but jumped back as though her hand had been burnt. She moaned and retreated half a dozen steps, cherishing her fingers.

"And there's the added protection of the cross in the hilt of that knife," went on Jaeger. "Evil has been banished from your house,

Nessie Shipton. You are evil. You can't cross your own threshold."

"It's my house," she stammered. "My house —"

"Now it's for you to lave this country and find anothe place," Jaeger said, almost gently. "I apprehend that your companions, yonder in the woods, won't have any great mercy on failures."

As he spoke, sound rose among the trees and undergrowth, like a stealthy, unhappy sigh of wind. She shivered and cowered.

"Oh, please," she tried to say, her hands to her face.

"Now," announced Jaeger, "I'll go, as you asked me."

He went walking away, toward where the trail led out of the clearing. As he entered among the trees, he heard Nessie Shipton scream shrilly, in pain or terror, or both. That windy murmur had risen to a roar. Sternly he lectured himself that no man, especially a man of God, should run from the place where he had been victorious. But in spite of himself he walked more swiftly to where his horse strained and nickered. He wrenched the halter loose from its knot and vaulted into the saddle. The horse had no hesitation about running, running like the wind, as though something pursued it. Galloping away, Jaeger heard another scream, broken off suddenly into silence.

The sun fell toward the horizon as he rode into his own yard and dismounted in front of the stable. Scott was there, a burnt stick in his hand, carefully tracing designs on the door.

"I had another look into your sketchbook, Reverend." said Scott. "I had it in mind, that Toad's Foot picture and maybe some of the others might do all right for us here."

"I don't think the charm is needed any more, but your idea was good," said Jaeger.

Leading the horse into its stall, he stripped off the saddle and bridle. He swabbed away sweat with a wisp of straw and flung a cloth over the brown back. Scott fetched a bucket of water. Finally the two men walked back into the open.

"It's sunset," observed Scott, gazing westward.

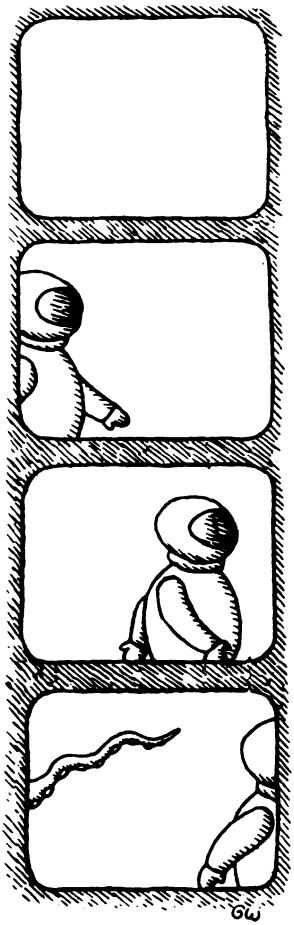
A flaming light hung at the horizon, touching wisps of cloud to rose and pink.

"That's beautiful," said Scott. "Peaceful."

"Peaceful," Jaeger echoed him. "Yes."

BAIRD SEARLES

Films and Television



TOLKIEN BETRAYED AND THUMPER REDUX

Last month, I ended the column with a brief opinion on Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings* (as opposed to J.R.R. Tolkien's work of a similar title) and a promise to enlarge upon that opinion.

I must begin, as I did a year ago when talking about the abominable TV *Hobbit,* by informing you that I have loved Tolkien's works since 1944 (when there was only one to love).

This inevitably preprejudices me; on the other hand, part of the point of this column is not just to talk about film *qua* film, but to judge its pertinency to, and success as, fantasy or science fiction, judgement based on familiarity with those fields and the specific works that make them up.

I have spent a good deal of time in the last few years thinking about works crossing media, specifically books to film. I've come to no general conclusion, but it does seem to me that for a "realistic" work, the transfer is possible with an expert script writer, careful casting, and fine acting, as has been demonstrated in several of PBS's Masterpiece Theatre pieces. But the move from page to screen is near impossible for fantasy or science fiction.

The writer there has usually created an entire world or mileau and, if successful, has nudged the reader's mind into creating pictures that are well nigh impossible to duplicate physically.

A prime exemplar is Tolkien; he has breathed vivid life into his Middle Earth for those of us who have read of it. And on the most superficial level, the reader of Tolkien will find visualizations in the film that do not live up to (literally) what he and our own mind's eyes have wrought.

Even beyond that, all too often the moving pictures here seem not just mistaken but painfully wrongheaded. Fangorn is the Tree Stump That Sat on Chicago. Galadriel is sister to Pinocchio's Blue Fairy. Aragorn is an escapee from *The Last of the Mohicans* and Boromir of ultra-civilized Gandor is for some reason depicted as a Viking type; I guess that the prominent part played by Boromir's horn led the filmmakers to believe that he wore them on his hat.)

All of this is relative nitpicking, certainly meaningless to those who have not read the books. But the movie violates the books and itself, ultimately, in larger ways in trying to encompass so long and large a narrative in the brief span of a film, even though it only takes us to approximately the mid-point of the trilogy.

Not only are major characters lost (Tom Bombadil), but the infinite detail which makes Middle Earth such a reality is almost totally dispensed with. Very little is said about the history of the dwarf stronghold of Moria, for instance, and what the Golden Wood of Lorien is and who its inhabitants are is never explained. With each such excision, part of the reality goes, and one ends up with a hodge podge of fantastic characters and situations.

About the only one of the novels' qualities that is left is the action/adventure. Lost are any grandeur, poetry or romantic fantasy; there is no place here for: "We still remember, we who dwell/In this far land beneath the trees/The starlight on the Western Seas."

Even discounting any literary connections whatsoever, the movie is an ugly and tedious one. For the most part, the characters are of two-dimensional comic-strip quality. (In fairness, some of the big set piece backgrounds, notably Orthanc, have a certain handsomeness.)

The much vaunted new method of combining live action and animated characters is a total flop, so far as I'm concerned. At best it looks like one of those nasty hand-painted post cards from 1910, an uneasy and eye-jarring combina-

tion of photography and drawing. Some of the major characters tend to change from psuedo-life to comic strip before your eyes, and the bands and armies of orcs are all too obviously actors in funny masks. (In *Wizards,* the preliminary sketch for this film, Bakshi doctored up the Teutonic Knights sequence from Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky.* I wonder what forgotten epic supplied the armies for this one?)

And long! I was sure we were at least in the 10th Age of Middle Earth by the time it ended.

All of this could be dismissed as an inept attempt to do the impossible, but for one consideration. My friend Oliver, the most perspicacious 15-year-old I know, pointed it out; he was worried that the people (especially the children) who have never read *The Lord of the Rings* — or who had read it only once — would then read or reread it with these ghastly images in their minds.

I agree with him. That that should happen is a crime against art.

As for myself, I'm glad to be quit of this review so I can toss those images out for good.

I had reservations about the *Watership Down* film on seeing it, but then two days later after seeing *The Lord of the Rings,* the less pretentious film seemed like a masterwork.

I was hoping to have a little more space to talk about it, but dissecting that other movie took more than I had anticipated. Still, I can touch on one reason why *Watership Down* does work to whatever degree that it does. And that takes me back to that original point about transferring fantasy and reality to the screen.

Though a fantasy, and I think a very poignant one, Richard Adams' book has a most realistic setting. It is very similar to several novels by the Austrian Felix Salten, among them *Bambi,* in anthropomorphising forest animals only to the extent that they can speak intelligently among themselves. But the raw stuff of life in the wild is portrayed with all its fear and horrors.

Disney cutesied this up with sweet little songs and adorable minor characters not from the novel, such as the bun rabbit Thumper. The animators of *Watership Down* have not made this mistake; the rabbits here are Thumpers who mate, fight and sometimes die, and the epic quest for a new home takes place in a very real few square miles of the English countryside, not in a fantasy world of enchanted woods and mythic creatures.

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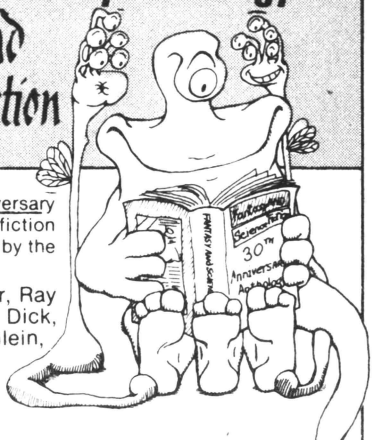

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Van Dijck returned to Earth and announced the discovery of an advanced civilization on a planet circling Tau Ceti. The results of his announcement were riots, two attempts to kill the messenger bearing the news and a plan for a terrifying second expedition.

Genocide Man

by STEVEN UTLEY

All about him, machines gurgled a liquid lullaby, as though to soothe him back to death.

He drew a second, harsher breath, fighting sleep, fighting the chill of the sarcophagus, stirred, moved his arms, cried out wordlessly as pain erupted in joints that seemed turned to rotten wood.

Is it over? Can I get up now?

The machines' hum changed in pitch. Needles slid out of his arms, throat and abdomen; electrodes released their kiss-gentle hold on his temples, breast, groin, wrists and thighs. The plastic tubes and loops of insulated wiring retracted into cavities in the sides of the coffin. The machines quietened.

Silence in the sarcophagus, in the crypt, in the world of the dead.

He sucked in air and spoke with a voice terrible to hear.

"Is anybody there?"

But he knew, that there would be no reply.

***

Elisan van Dijck opaqued the window, shutting out the night, and turned to face his quest.

Barbara Jorde crossed her arms and shook her head at him. Her expression was amused. "You really don't like to look at stars, do you?"

He shrugged. "I can take them or leave them."

"You should have become a food processor in Dallas-Fort Worth. They don't even have windows to blank whenever the sun goes down. They live and work underground. If they go out into the open air at all, it's on Sunday afternoons with their families."

"I just wasn't cut out to be a spaceman, I suppose." He moved across the living room and sat down beside Barbara. "Actually, what it is, I think, is that I come home *sick* of looking at stars. They remind me of work."

"Oh, so!" Barbara cocked an eyebrow at him mockingly. "Am I to assume from that remark that you didn't invite me to dinner for business purposes? That, indeed, you lured me here with the intent to vilely seduce me?"

"What in hell are you talking about?"

She laughed. "You don't read enough old books, Elisan dearest. I discovered Victorian literature about a month ago. You want to study an alien culture, you build yourself a time machine and go back to the 1880s. Those people had some weird ideas."

Elisan grunted noncommitally. "People still have some weird ideas."

"Ah." Barbara reached for her glass. "The alarm bell just started ringing in my head. The tone of your voice tells me that the time for after-dinner pleasantries has passed."

"Right. Time for the unburdening of the soul."

"Should I record?" The index finger of her right hand hovered above a silvery dime-sized disk set into the dark metal of the bank encircling her left wrist.

He shook his head. "No need to, really. You already know most of it."

"Okay." Barbara sat back. "Go ahead."

"It's the Tau Ceti mess. It's the whole way people have been reacting. Riots when the news came out. Two attempts on my life." He exhaled angrily. "It's crazy, Barbara. Everyone's walking around scared. Everyone except me and you and a very few others who won't count for much when the policy makers decide how Earth is to deal with...them."

"The popular term for *them,*" Barbara muttered, "is Taw. T-A-W. Newspeople never could spell."

"I'm serious."

"I know. My apologies."

Elisan gave her a disconsolate look. "The fear extends upward to the highest levels. I talked with Simons and the others again this morning, and they're even more unreasonable now than they were last week. They've been keeping a close eye on their constituents. They've become infected with the fear themselves. What it comes down to, bottom line, is this: *they don't want the Taw to be there.* They *hate* the whole idea of there being another civilization, even a technologically second-rate one, practically in Earth's back yard."

"Human beings have always gotten upset when faced with a level of nonhuman intelligence witch approaches their own."

"Uh-huh." Elisan jerked to his feet and began pacing about the room aimlessly. "And they've al-

ways done something about it. They wiped out the great whales in the 1980s, the gorillas in the 1990s. The dolphins were extinct by 2020. The last chimpanzee died sometime later that century. Those were *animals,* Barbara, they posed no threat whatsoever to humanity. But the idea that they were to some degree sentient beings, with a capacity for reasoning, for learning — the *idea* was what scared everybody, and people put the screws on, determinedly reduced the whale and primate populations to below the level necessary for survival of the species. It was a simple matter of not enacting the right laws, or not enforcing them."

Barbara frowned deeply and plucked at the fabric of her jacket. "I don't know if the analogy you're trying to make will hold much water. The whales and apes couldn't fight back. The Taw can."

"Only in the immediate vicinity of their home planet. They could stop anything shoveled in at them from above. They've got the hardware for that. But they're not yet an interstellar race. They're barely into interplanetary travel. It wouldn't be difficult to keep them penned up on their own world. But I've got a sinking feeling that even that, bad though it is, wouldn't be enough to satisfy people. As long as the Taw are there, human beings are going to feel intimidated by them. Xenophobia, pure and simple."

"It goes back a long way," Barbara said quietly. "Clear back to the Pleistocene. In descending order of importance, you took care of *numero uno,* your immediate family, your tribe. All others were fair game. Kill the stranger."

Elisan sank into a chair and closed his eyes. "It *belongs* back in the Pleistocene, Barbara."

"No."

Something in the way she said the word compelled him to look at her. Barbara Jorde was a stout woman of medium height, with deep-set brown eyes, an expressive mouth and close-cropped hair that was just beginning to lighten at the temples. He had always regarded her as an attractive person.

But now, suddenly, unexpectedly, she looked wearier than he felt. She looked old and sad.

Barbara half smiled when she realized that he was staring at her, and she said, "Do you watch much holo?"

He blinked, perplexed by the question. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Do you watch much holo? Not the news. The entertainments. The, ah, pablum for the masses."

"No."

"You should. You really

should. You haven't spent much more than fifteen months on Earth during the past decade. You'd get some painful insights into what's really going on here if you'd devote a day to watching the set. The news programs are slanted, obviously slanted. But they're subtle to the point of obscuring their message when compared to the entertainments, the stuff the networks pump down into the silo where the food processors and the metal-extruder operators and the *people* live. Analyze those programs. You'll see it spelled out in firey block letters six meters high. Stay at home. Mind your own business. Keep to yourself. Have nothing to do with anybody you don't know." She sighed raggedly. "The precepts by which people supposedly keep out of trouble."

"But why?"

"It makes for a law-abiding citizenry. It makes for a dismal kind of peace." Barbara put her teeth into her lower lip for a moment. "It takes something on the order of your coming back to Earth and announcing that there's a fairly advanced civilization on a planet circling Tau Ceti to shatter that peace. *Ergo,* riots and two attempts to kill the messenger who bore the bad news. The stay-at-homes have had the universe thrust under their noses, and they resent it like hell."

Elisan examined his hands: still deeply tanned from six month's exposure to the light of Tau Ceti.

Hands that had touched alien faces.

The tripedal TAW stood markedly taller than two meters. Long, angular, pipestem thin, encased from soles to pates in black or gray or blue, with only their triangular white faces and talon-like hands left bare, they had at first reminded Elisan of predatory insects. Their deliberate, stiff-jointed gait enhanced the image of them as great dark insects.

But they had let him descend from his scoutship and set foot upon their world. They had let him walk among them. They had been his hosts for six months, during which time he learned several of their languages, sampled their food, attended a variety of their religious functions, recorded their music, made films of their works of art, their buildings, their day-to-day activities. They had let him visit a Taw hatchery. They had let him dissect a Taw corpse. And, because they were not naive, because they had reservations of their own about sentient beings from other worlds, they had given him a small, friendly, informative demonstration of their ability to defend their planet, and he had been impressed.

"You're going to end up firing

me," Barbara said, snapping Elisan out of his reverie.

"Fire you? Why should I fire you?"

She smiled wanly. "I'm not being a very good confessor this evening. I haven't made you feel any better."

"Sure you have." Elisan got to his feet. "You told me that I make superb stroganoff. May I get you another drink?"

Barbara consulted her watch. "I'd better not. Dr. Kalenterides is pouring her soul out to me at midnight, and I can't go in drunk. She'll make me smoke with her. Always does."

"One of the hazards of your occupation, Barbara."

"Kalenterides deems it essential to establishing a rapport." Barbara grinned crookedly. "All it really does is make her slur her words and give her the courage to put her hand on my knee. Well. Anything else to tell me?"

"Not tonight." He watched her rise, no longer so sad or old-looking a woman. "Later this week, maybe, after another round or two with Simons."

"This crying-shoulder-for-hire is ever at your beck and call, sirrah."

Elisan escorted her to the door. They embraced and kissed each other's neck, just below the left earlobe.

Then, when she had gone, he switched on his rarely used holograph set and watched two and a half hours of "entertainments."

His sleep was troubled that night.

After resting and gathering his strength for what seemed like hours, he sat up in the sarcophagus. The room was a simple metal box, illuminated by means which were not obvious. The place looked as antiseptically clean as it had when he first entered it.

How long ago?

He dragged himself over the lip of the coffin and lay beside it, panting, the shiny gray material of the floor cool and smooth against his body.

Two vertical parallel lines, about forty centimeters apart, about three meters in length, appeared on the surface of the wall nearest him. The door swung open without a sound, and a gentle breeze carried a puff of white ash into the crypt.

Space Council Chairperson Geoff Simons, a bloated brown toad of a man, pursed his lips belligerently for a second, then said, "Mr. van Dijck, I had better warn you that some members of this council are of the firm opinion that you should not accompany the sec-

ond expedition to Tau Ceti. It is felt by these persons that you have no further contribution to make."

Elisan repressed a sigh of exasperation. "With *all* due respect to the opinions of these persons," he said, "I must remind the council that the expeditionary unit will land only if *I* am able to persuade the Taw to permit it. The Taw accept me as Earth's representative. My training as a scout prepared me for the role of spokesperson, and I —"

Mr. van Dijck," Elana Snead cut in softly, "it must be pointed out that you finished your training in 2197, when the exo-sciences were still largely theoretical in nature. You've spent almost all of the intervening thirteen years away from Earth. You might consider a reorientation course."

"To bring me in line with current attitudes, I presume."

"Sarcasm is out of order here," snapped Simons.

"What Ms. Snead is saying," said a bland-faced woman whom Elisan recognized as the usually close-mouthed Alexandra Navratilova, "is that your world view is rather dated. You do not fully comprehend the implications of your discovery. Admittedly, *we* were the ones who erred seriously by allowing you to publicly announce the existence of the Tau Ceti civilization. Had we clamped a lid on the news, it would have facilitated easier handling of this problem."

"Which is, of course, what to do about the Taw." Elisan took a long, sibilant breath. The ten council members regarded him with opaque eyes. "Why do we have to do *anything* about them? In all modesty, my discovery of the Taw was the single most important thing that's ever happened in the history of the human race. We have found our neighbors in outer space. We are no longer alone. And our civilization has everything to gain if we accept theirs. The —"

Elana Snead groaned loudly. "We've heard this rousing polemic of yours several times already, Mr. van Dijck. But is it not established scientific fact that two species cannot fill the same, uh, ecological niche at the same time? And it is a fact, is it not, that the Taw have not only developed weapons systems as sophisticated as our own but are also within a hundred years of a practical faster-than-light propulsion unit?"

"The universe is a big place, Ms. Snead." *As you'd know,* Elisan added to himself, *if you'd get off your ass down here and —*

"That's as may be," said Geoff Simons. "Our particular corner of it is suddenly a little crowded."

"An armed clash," put in

Elizabeth Dyer, "is inevitable."

"No! That's prehistoric thinking!"

"Don't be *naive,*" growled Stephen Pedecaris. "Left to their own resources, the Taw are bound to start infringing upon our territory."

God damn you. Elisan ground his fist against his forehead, fighting the urge to shriek. *God damn you.*

"If it's indeed essential," Snead said, "that you spearhead the second expedition, it's no less essential that you do so on our terms. The Taw pose a more serious threat than you seem able to believe..."

So it went, through all of the meetings Elisan van Dijck had with these people, until, finally, when they tired of trying to make him see the error of his ways, they took him and...changed him. He went to bed with a woman one evening, and he slept, and when he woke up from that sleep, he was in the cryogenics bay of the Terran dreadnaught *Antwerp,* thirty million kilometers out from the planet of the Taw. And he did not think it at all strange.

He stepped out of the crypt, into the midday warmth of Tau Ceti, and found himself in a broad courtyard flanked by conical buildings the color of jade.

A shriveled white husk lay on the pavement about six meters away. He stumbled over to it and knealt by it and looked down into its empty eye sockets. The mouth was open, frozen in a grimace of pain. The bluish needle-like teeth were dusty.

The man from the sarcophagus touched the hard, desiccated face and felt tears massing at the corners of his eyes.

Unbidden, the words spun through his head. *The Taw are touchers. They cannot converse without indulging in an extraordinary amount of tactile stimulation upon the part of everyone concerned. Sometimes, they don't even bother to speak, as their repertoire of touches and gestures approaches the level of a sign language. Bodily contact is important to them to a degree unknown among...*

He made the sign of sorrow over the dead face.

He touched the forehead tenderly: *you remain at the seat of my esteem.*

He touched the narrow blade of the abdomen: *your concerns and mine are one.*

He cupped the wedge of the jaw in his hands: *return to us with all the members of your house.*

He sat down beside the corpse and did not move again until he had finished crying. On the heels

of grief came rage.

After the subtly changed Elisan van Dijck had been thawed out... after he had descended from the *Antwerp* and been routinely decontaminated by his alien hosts... after he had walked among them and touched their stick-like bodies and shared their food...the Taw began to sicken and die. They were a mobile race, and they spread the infection across the face of their world before they knew it was upon them.

Within sixty human heartbeats of the moment that the Taw made the connection between the plague and Elisan, they had him sealed in an envelope of some clear, gelatinous substance and were slipping an invisible needle into him.

Twenty heartbeats after that, an entire hemisphere opened fire on the *Antwerp,* orbiting the planet at six thousand kilometers. The dreadnaught's shields collapsed a microsecond before the dreadnaught itself became a short-lived puff of mist.

Under the needle, the fabric of Elisan van Dijck's mind parted as effortlessly as spiderweb. The constructions that had been built in his head, the walls that had been erected there, the changes that had been made, melted. It was like dipping the blade of a knife into water. It was like thrusting a finger into deep, very soft dust.

Elisan trembled in the gelatin. The envelope distorted the images of the Taw before him and gave their voices a soft burring quality.

We cannot hold you personally responsible for what has happened, they told him. *We have been poisoned by contact with you, but what the members of your house have done to you has been done without your knowledge or consent.*

If we succeed in effecting a cure for ourselves, then we will try to help you. You will sleep until we learn how to remove the death from your flesh.

If we fail, if we die, and at this point one of the Taw produced an egg-shaped object no bigger than a pea, *you will sleep until more of your people come. Our machines will sense them and let them land, and you will awaken.*

Go to them when they come. Show them what they have done.

The Taw pushed the egg-shaped object through the gelatin, against and into Elisan's flesh. It felt cold and slippery as it went in.

Your concerns and ours are one.

They made the sign of sorrow.

He walked through the city of the Taw, toward the landing fields beyond, and as he walked, skirting dried-out husks, raising clouds of

white ash with every step, he watched the first of the Terran shuttle vessels slip down through the sky.

They would find him and know who he was, and enough of them, he was certain, would want to shake his hand or embrace him.

He fingered a hard, slippery lump embedded in the skin just below his sternum, and something like a smile touched his lips. Two could play at genocide.

Alecto *was the most sophisticated, invulnerable warship ever built by Earth. And yet something had killed all of its crew, except for one...*

Warship

by GEORGE R.R. MARTIN and GEORGE FLORANCE-GUTHRIDGE

Invulnerable, she is. Earth's answer to Sarissa's defiance of Earth authority, she carries fourteen lasercannon, dual solar guns, a belly filled with conventionally armed missiles. Self-repairing, computerized to a point approaching sentience, she has back-up systems should any instruments prove defective — supervisory capacities should any of her crew of fifty-one prove derelict. She is powered by two Severs-stardrive engines.

She is *Alecto.*

Graciously, gloriously she began her cruise homeward at five times lightspeed, her duralloy awash with starlight. Now she had stopped. Behind her, once reddened by Doppler shift, Sarissa's sun is again gold.

He was the last of the crew, and his strength was waning. First Dutyman Lewis Akklar found solace in those facts, an emotion he felt but could not explain, something similar to what he once had felt toward the paintings of Degas and Renoir. He was sitting in the command chair, his eyes dull; now a smile creased his lips, turned the left corner of his mouth slightly upward. Back and forth, slowly back and forth he continued to swivel the chair. The smile broadened.

His legs were outstretched, and his pants, plastic and sweat-soaked, clung wetly to his legs. His face throbbed with heat; his temperature, he knew, was about 104 degrees. His hair — straight, black — was unkempt, and it occurred to him he needed a shave and shower, some sleep. That, too, he found ironic.

Except for the low humming of the instrument panel and an occasional click as a switch cut in, the bridge around him was empty.

On three sides the silent impersonal instruments winked their multicolored lights off and on in ever-changing patterns. Above him the viewscreen revealed its endless stars: an expanse of coldness and loneliness. He knew Sol was the bright yellow star in the lower right-hand corner of the screen. Somehow he did not give a damn anymore.

So this was how it was to end. Belford, Petrovovich, Captain Doria, Lieutenant Judanya Kahr: all his friends and shipmates — killed by disease. Though capable of firing some of the most sophisticated weaponry ever installed in a spacecraft, the crew had not realized until too late for retaliation that the Sarissi emissaries had smuggled aboard a biological agent. Now only Akklar, a clerk-holographer, remained.

Again he was conscious of the viewscreen. The galaxy seemed adazzle with pinpricks of light. Stars, knots in a salmon net, faces in a classroom: his mind had insisted upon those comparisons ever since he had volunteered for the international draft back home in the Republic of the Aleutians. Yet the loneliness he felt toward those images had preceded that induction by several years. It had been loneliness, he now knew — not wanderlust — which in midsemester had taken him from those schoolchildren and set him upon the grease-blackened deck of the *Ulak* out of Cold Bay, the nets piled at his feet overlay upon neat overlay, the sea slapping the hull and the gulls cawing overhead as they waited to alight, wings lifting, should the cook dump the garbage. He had loved the ship, the chilling, constant fog; the fishing voyage had neither erased nor intensified his loneliness, but at least had given him reason for it.

He pressed a button in a console next to the chair. The door nearest the central control-panel hummed open. He rose, hands clutching the armrests to steady himself, and stumbled across the room, paused at the door — hands against the jamb. Then wild-eyed and smiling, he staggered down the dimly lit corridor.

"Judanya," he said.

He pressed a wall button, a second door opened. Twenty sheeted figures, most on mattresses on the floor, lay within the small sickbay. Lieutenant Kahr was near the rear wall, an oxygen tent enclosing her, a sheet tucked neatly under her arms; she was the only one of the dead whose face was uncovered.

The oxygen tent crinkled when he folded back the side. He had been unable to force himself to close her eyelids; she gazed toward him unseeing, his form blackly

mirrored within the pupils. With the back of his hand he touched her cheek, cold cheek. Her lips were thin; her nose, sharply angular, made her face appear narrow. Except for a Mohawk-like mane of black hair, she was bald. The sight of her head slightly startled him; somehow he had thought death would overtake style, and her hair would grow back as long as it was when she had first boarded the ship two years earlier.

He combed the hair with his fingers. "Judanya," he whispered. Light shone upon her forehead. He drew the sheet down over her breasts, her abdomen, down over her legs. He looked upon her as he had many times before: wanting her, not wanting her. Though she had sometimes slept with him, she had never loved him. Lengthy cohabitations between officers and enlisted had been discouraged, and she had refused to jeopardize her career for what she considered the insipid emotions he associated with sexuality; she needed orgasms, she had told him once, merely to relax.

On his knees as though before an idol, he folded the sheet, overlay upon neat overlay, at her feet. Her pubic triangle looked at him. He bent forward and pressed his lips to her kneecap, his fingertips squeezing the back of her leg. "Judanya." Tears welled. Back home, he knew, people were dying, laughing, loving. Such was the terror of it all, the terror and the loneliness he had felt within that crowded classroom back in Dutch Harbor: the knowledge that, whatever joy or sorrow he experienced, there existed emotions and happenings beyond his comprehension — people he could neither know nor touch nor even really imagine. Life would go on whether he was alive or not.

Unless, of course, the ship fell into Sarissi hands. Or if the members of an Earth ship contracted the disease and brought it home with them. Then all Earth would know of him, if only to hate. All would die. In a way — perhaps, he told himself, it was the fever — the notion appealed to him. Loneliness had brought him here; here, in death, his loneliness could end.

It was for Judanya — not for himself or humanity — that he would place the charges. For Judanya, who had been all duty and dispassion.

Judanya, who to him was the ship.

He left her, went to the armory for plastic explosives and an armload of looped fusewire, then returned to the control room. He flopped down in the command chair, so exhausted and feverish he could hardly breathe, and sat with

his head in his hands. Finally, straightening, he sighed and lifted the vocoder from its cradle in the console. Except for his perfunctory remarks earlier in the day, the log had not been kept for weeks.

"Transcription of First Dutyman Lewis Akklar continuing at..." He glanced at his watch. "Sixteen thirty-one hours. I have just come back from sickbay, having said good-by to my shipmates."

He paused and for a few moments just sat staring at the blankness of the forward wall. At last he shook himself from his daydreams and resumed speaking.

"The computers analyzed the disease as some sort of virus. How the Sarissi smuggled the agent on board remains a mystery. We took all normal precautions against such a danger, including standard sterilization and quarantine procedures.

"The plague had an extremely long incubation period. The first outbreak was five weeks ago, nearly two months after we began the return trip to Earth. But once it struck, it spread rapidly, killing within a period of forty-eight hours after the first symptoms — fever and a rawness about the eyes — appeared. The reception delegation, including Captain Doria, died first.

"The med scanners failed to isolate the cause of the disease, or to devise a workable cure or preventative. Both of the ship's doctors died early. Gradually all efforts to combat the disease ceased."

He stopped suddenly and rubbed his left eye. The pain was growing worse. His hand went to the control panel, and the soft blue lighting dimmed to darkness.

"The damned plague is — seems — unbeatable. After half the crew was dead, Acting Captain Kahr took extreme steps to save the rest of us. She cut the stardrive engines and, retro-firing, slowed us to a stop; then she had the bodies jettisoned. We moved the remaining crew from room to room and opened outside hatches and interior doors, hoping the vacuum would kill the disease. Finally Lieutenant Kahr even jettisoned some of those who had shown symptoms. There was — a mutiny. We killed those who fought. But it was no use. It was all for nothing. All that blood. For nothing."

He frowned in the darkness as the memories came flooding back. "People just kept dying," he said. "Maybe the contagion had already spread to everyone during the incubation period. Nearly everyone had had contact with everyone else, at least indirectly, during our return flight. Or maybe it spread

through the air ducts, even after we switched to the back-up system. I don't know. I just don't know. All the med facilities this ship has — yet nothing worked."

There was a long silence; Akklar watched the lights blink on and off, listened to the hum of the instruments, smelled the clean, heavy smell of machine. He set the vocoder down carefully on the armrest and looked a final time at the viewscreen filled with stars. "I should close with some...some memorable last words," he said, not lifting the vocoder but pushing the on-button with his thumb. His voice sounded hollow. "But I seem to have run out of words." A moment passed, and he looked out into the stars, saw children's faces, a salmon net, saw the ship within that net, not struggling but hanging by its gills like the time the net had torn and the fishing crew had spent all afternoon taking but one six-pound King. "No," he said. "I don't have any final words at all."

Slowly standing, he walked quietly from the room — passing this time through a door to his left. The door closed behind him with the softest of whispers.

He moved along the corridors toward the ship's belly, planting plastic explosives in various niches and linking up the fuse wire. He thought he heard fire doors close behind; he told himself it was only his imagination. The fire-control panel along the baseboard began to hiss. By the time he reached the warhead vault, the steam from the panel had turned to foam and lay like giant puffy snakes around his legs.

The vault door opened — halfway, immediately closed again. The hissing grew louder. The foam was now up to his thighs and climbing rapidly. He tried the door button again. Still no response. He found it ironic that the ship was malfunctioning just at the time the last of the crew was about to die. But the fact that the door would not open did not matter anyway. The chain reaction from the plastic explosives would trigger the warheads whether or not the door was open. He mashed a handful of explosive into the corner of the door, jabbed in both the relay and detonator fuses, and stepped back, sloshing through the foam. He paused, trying unsuccessfully to remember Judanya's face.

The foam was to his chest.

He squeezed the detonator.

A dull, faraway boom echoed through the ship, and back on the bridge all the multi colored lights on the instrument panels went black. On the main viewscreen, the stars quite suddenly winked out.

Finally she has rid herself of the last of them — the humans, the

diseased vermin. And she has saved herself from becoming a crippled hulk. The fire doors buffered the explosion; the flooding of herself short-circuited all but one of the wads of explosive.

Now her intelligence moves through herself — checking, rechecking. Relays click. Circuits buzz. Signals indicate a jagged hole in hull Subsection 37c. Instantly she activates her self-repair units. Liquid sealant oozes and hardens to plug minor holes. Duralloy plates are rigged and methodically secured to close the major one. Her secondary monitor system then surveys damage to all systems and files extensive reports with her central computer banks. Again she sets the self-repair units to humming, and one by one the damaged areas are repaired or replaced. Damage to the Severs-stardrive engines has been extensive; this too is corrected.

Now she checks her position. Alarms sound. She is off course and hanging dead in space.

Reports and corrections flow through herself in a steady stream. Time passes. Scanners and mediprobes scrutinize those bodies still aboard ship. All are lifeless. The plan has been successful. All crew members having been exposed to the virus, all were expendable; she could not allow possible contagion to occur by bringing them home. To insure that, she sucked the virus spores into her air ducts, transferred them each time Kahr ordered an airlock opened, infected the food and water supply whenever possible.

A low rumbling begins, climbs to a piercing shriek as she starts her great Severs-stardrive engines. On the bridge the lights dance dizzily as she calculates the course to Earth and feeds corrections to Navigation. Rockets fire.

She moves — invulnerable, disease-free. Mother and mistress to the shuttlecraft which service her, *Alecto* returns to her old orbit.

Science, From page 84

strong enough to knock Mercury out of the lesser level of stability into the greater one.

***

But now I want to turn to the question of the diminishing store of rotational angular momentum of Earth and Moon as each slows the other's rotation. That angular momentum must be transferred, but where?

That matter will be taken up next month.

A LONG DAY'S JOURNEY

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

Last month (as I write this) my wife, Janet, and I were in upstate New York with a group who were intending to watch the Perseid Meteor shower in the small hours of the morning.

Unfortunately, three of the four nights that were devoted to the task were solidly cloud-covered, and in the fourth night the display was not spectacular, Nevertheless, we had a lot of fun, and not the least of it was listening to lectures on astronomical subjects.

One night we were heading out from the hotel to the outlying building where Fred Hess (a marvellous lecturer on matters astronomical) was going to fill us in on ways of predicting eclipses. We were looking forward to it.

In the elevator, an elderly and snappish woman looked at our outfits with disfavor and said, "You'll freeze to death if you go out like that."

Since I am not particularly sensitive to cold and since I was quite certain that an August evening was not likely to be below 60°F. even if the day had been cloudy, I contented myself with smiling benignly. Janet, however, who is more

sensitive to cold than I am, looked at her watch uneasily and said, "I don't have time to go back for my sweater."

I was about to assure her that she wouldn't need it, when the harpy cried out, "Are you going to listen to those fairy-tales?"

I looked astonished. We Perseid people made up only a small fraction of the total clientele at the resort hotel, and there were other activities that had nothing to do with us, but I hadn't heard of any fairy-tale presentations. "Fairy-tales?" I asked.

"All that talk about the stars," she said angrily. "Don't listen to it. It's fairy-tales."

I'm afraid I laughed, which must have annoyed her, for as we walked off, she decided to escalate the level of insult and applied the very worst epithet she could think of to the innocent lecture on eclipses which we were about to attend. Behind us, her voice rose to a screech. "It's science fiction," she yelled. *"Science fiction!"*

Poor thing! I decided to devote my next essay to something that would sound a lot more science fictiony than does the staid and everyday matter of eclipses — not that I imagine for one moment that she would read my essays even if she knew how.

The subject under discussion in this essay is the tidal influence of the Moon upon the Earth. I have discussed the tides in some detail in an earlier essay (TIME AND TIDE, May 1966), and I will arbitrarily assume you have read it and remember it.

In that earlier essay, I did spend a few paragraphs on the way the tides are slowing Earth's rotation period, and it is that which I wish to go into in some detail now.

Any of us who played with tops when young* know that the rate of their rotation gradually slows and that they eventually wobble, then topple over and are motionless. The rotational energy of a spinning top is gradually depleted and turned into heat through friction of its point with the ground it is spinning on and through the resistance of the air it is turning through. In this way, its tiny store of angular momentum is transferred to the Earth's enormous supply.

If the top were spinning without making contact with anything material, and if it were turning in an absolute vacuum, there would be no friction and no way of losing rotational energy or angular momen-

Do tops still exist? I haven't seen anyone playing with a top in years.

tum. The top would, in that case, spin forever at an undiminishing rate.

If we consider the solid ball of the Earth, together with its overlying ocean and atmosphere, as a spinning top, it would seem to represent the ideal case. Earth makes no contact with any material object as it spins, and it is surrounded by the vacuum of space.

To be sure, nothing is ever ideal. Interplanetary space isn't quite an absolute vacuum, and the atmosphere and oceans react to the rotation by setting up whirling, energy — consuming currents in air and water. However, so large is Earth's supply of rotational energy and angular momentum and so small is the effect of these departures from the ideal, that any change in rotation that results from those non-idealities is vanishingly small.

This brings us to the tides. The solid ball of the Earth, as it spins, is constantly passing through the two shallow mounds of ocean, one facing the Moon, and one facing away from the Moon — the tides produced by the fact that different portions of the Earth are at slightly different distances from the Moon and therefore subjected to slightly different intensities of Lunar gravitation.

As shorelines pass through the tidal bulges, and as the water moves up the shore and then down, there is a frictional effect. Some of the rotational energy of the Earth is converted into heat — and some of its angular momentum vanishes also.*

What's more, there are two tidal bulges in the solid Earth itself (smaller than the ocean bulges) so that as the Earth turns, the rocks heave up a few inches and settle back, heave up a few inches and settle back, over and over, twice a day. Here, too, there is friction, and both rotational energy and angular momentum are converted or transferred. Altogether it is estimated that the Earth is losing some 20 to 40 billion kilocalories of rotational energy every minute.

As a result of the tidal effect, then, the Earth's period of rotation must be constantly slowing; or, to put it in a more mundane way that more immediately impinges upon the consciousness of people, the day must be constantly lengthening.

To be sure, even the colossal loss of 20 to 40 billion kilocalories of rotational energy each minute shrinks to nearly nothing in comparison with the titanic store of rotational energy possessed by the Earth. The

**Angular momentum doesn't truly vanish. It can't. It is cancelled by an opposite angular momentum, or it is transferred. There is no opposite angular momentum involved here so it must be transferred. But where? We'll take this up next month.*

tidal braking effect is therefore extraordinarily small, and it would appear that the day becomes 1 second longer only after the tides have been exerting their braking effect for 62,500 years. This means that at the end of a century, the day is 0.0016 seconds longer than at the beginning of the century, or, to put it another way, that each day is 0.000000044 seconds longer than the day before.

That's pretty, but can we be sure? Can the lengthening of the day be actually measured?

It can, for we now have atomic clocks that could just about measure such a difference from day to day — and that could certainly do so with ease if we measured the length of several days now and the length of several days next year.

There are complications, though. As clocks grew more accurate, astronomers discovered that the rotation of the Earth is not constant and the Earth is, in fact, a rotten time-keeper.

The observed positions, from moment to moment, of bodies such as the Moon, the Sun, Mercury, and Venus, which could be obtained with steadily greater precision as clocks were improved, all showed discrepancies from the theoretical positions they ought to have. What's more, the discrepancies were just about the same for all four bodies. It could not be expected of coincidence that all four bodies would move in unison, so it seemed, instead, that it was the Earth's period of rotation that was unsteady.

If the Earth's period of rotation slowed slightly, the position of the heavenly bodies would seem to move ahead of theoretical; if the Earth's period of rotation speeded slightly, the position of the heavenly bodies would fall behind. Between 1840 and 1920, the rate of Earth's rotation slowed by over a second, and then it started speeding up again.

Why? Because the Earth is not a perfect, unchanging body. There are earthquakes and shiftings of mass within the Earth. If the mass shifts, on the average, slightly closer to the center of the Earth, the Earth's rotation speeds lightly; if the mass shifts slightly farther from the center, the Earth's rotation slows slightly.

In fact, as clocks continued to improve, it was found that Earth's rotation rate changed with the seasons. In the spring the day is about 1/12 of a second longer than it is in the fall. This is because of shifting mass due to snowfall, seasonal changes in air and water currents and so on.

These changes are all cyclic, however. Seasons and earthquakes will

now lengthen, now shorten, the day, but in the long run there will be, on the average, no change.

Superimposed on these cyclical changes of a second or more is the much smaller non-cyclical change of an increase in the length of the day at a rate of 44 billionths of a second per day. How can one detect that tiny secular change in all that malange of far larger cyclical changes?

Actually, it isn't difficult.

Suppose that the day has remained constant in length for eons, but has suddenly begun to increase at the rate of a hundredth of a second per year. At the end of a century, the day is 1 second longer than it had been at the beginning of the century.

Certainly, that's not going to make any practical difference in your life, and if all you have is an ordinary watch, you won't even be able to measure the change.

But the differences mount up. Each day in the second year starts 1/100 of a second later than did the equivalent day in the first year, and at the end of the second year, the day starts 365/100 or 3.65 seconds later than did the day at the beginning of the first year.

Each day of the third year starts 2/100 of a second later than the equivalent day in the first year, so that at the end of the third year the day starts 7.30 + 3.65, or 9.95 seconds later than did the first day of the first year. — And so on.

Even though individual days all through the century have been only fractions of a second longer than earlier days, the *cumulative* error from day to day mounts up, and by the time a whole century has passed, a particular day would be beginning 2.3 *days* after the moment in time it would have begun had there been no tiny lengthening of the day at all.

Next, suppose that each year, at the same time precisely, something astronomical and noticeable happens — let us say a total eclipse of the Sun. Through time immemorial, while the day has been of absolutely constant length, the Sun has always been eclipsed, let us say, at 4 P.M. on August 31.

Once the day suddenly begins to lengthen very slowly, the eclipse of the Sun begins coming earlier each year by an amount equal to the cumulative error. By the end of the century, the eclipse would be coming on August 29 at 8:48 A.M.

It doesn't matter what kind of time-piece you have. You don't need one to tell you that the eclipse is coming earlier; all you need is a calendar. And from the discrepancy in the coming of the eclipse, once you

eliminate all other possible causes, you can fairly reason that the day is lengthening at a rate too small for you to measure directly. In fact, even without a decent time-piece you can get a good estimate of the rate.

Of course, an increase of 0.01 seconds per year is large compared to what really takes place. At the actual rate at which the Earth's day is increasing, the cumulative error in the course of 100 year is only 33 seconds, and that's not enough to be helpful. This means we must make use of longer time intervals.

Consider that eclipses of the Sun do happen. They don't happen once a year to the second, but they happen in such a way that, if we assume the length of a day is constant, we can calculate backward and decide exactly when an eclipse ought to have taken place along a certain course on Earth's surface in, say, 585 B.C.

If the length of the day is not constant, then the eclipse will take place at a different time and the cumulative error over not one century but 25 centuries will be large enough to detect.

It might be argued that ancient people had only the most primitive methods for keeping time and that their whole concept of time-recording was different from ours. It would therefore be risky to deduce anything from what they said about the time of eclipses.

It is not only time that counts, however. An eclipse of the Sun can be seen only from a small area of the Earth, marked out by a line perhaps 160 kilometers (100 miles) across at most. If, let us say, an eclipse were to take place only one hour after the calculated time, the Earth would turn in that interval and at, say, 40°N. the eclipse would be seen 1200 kilometers (750 miles) farther west than our calculations would indicate.

Even if we don't completely trust what ancient people may say about the time of an eclipse, we can be sure that they report the *place* of the eclipse, and that will tell us what we want to know. From their reports, we know the amount of the cumulative error and, from that, the rate of the lengthening of the day. That is how we know that the Earth's day is increasing at the rate of 1 second ever 62,500 years; and is decreasing at the rate, if we imagine time to be going backward, and look into the past.

Determining cumulative errors is one way of measuring the rate of the lengthening of the day. It would be nice to be even more direct, though, and to measure the actual length of an ancient day and show that it was less than 24 hours long.

How is that done, though? At a change of 0.0016 seconds per century

(increasing as we go into the future, decreasing as we go into the past) it would take a long time to produce a day with a difference in length that would show upon direct measurement.

The day is now exactly 24 hours in length, or 86,400 seconds. At the time the Great Pyramid was built some 45 centuries ago, the day was 86,399.93 seconds long. There is no way we can tell by direct evidence that the pharaohs were living days that were 7/100 of a second shorter than those we are living today.

And as for measuring days in prehistoric times, that would seem certainly out of the question.

Yet not so. It can be done. It is not human beings only who keep records, though we are the only ones who do it deliberately.

Corals apparently grow faster in summer than in winter. Their skeletons alternate regions of fast and slow growth and therefore show annual markings we can count. They also grow faster by day than by night and form small daily markings superimposed on the larger annual ones. Naturally, they form some 365 daily ridges a year.

Now let's imagine we are going back in time and studying corals as we go. The length of the year would remain unchanged as we move into the past. (There are factors that would cause it to change, but these are so much smaller than the changes in the length of the day that we make no serious error if we consider the length of the year as constant.) The length of the day grows shorter, however, and there are therefore more of the shorter days in the year. That means the corals ought to show more daily markings superimposed on the annual marking.

Assuming a shortening of the day, of 0.0016 second per century as we go back in time, and assuming that rate to be constant, the day should have been 6400 seconds (1.78 hours) shorter 400 million years ago than it is today. The day at that period should therefore have been 22.22 hours long, and there should at that time have been 394.5 such days in the year.

In 1963, the American paleontologist, John West Wells, of Cornell University, studied certain fossil corals from the Middle Devonian, fossils that were estimated to be about 400 million years old.

Those fossils showed about 400 daily markings per year, indicating the day to have been 21.9 hours long. Considering the natural uncertainty in the age of the fossils that is pretty good agreement.

***

Next, let's amuse ourselves by asking another question. The Earth reached its present form, more or less, about 4,600,000,000 years ago. Assuming that, as we go into the past, the day shortens at a constant rate of 0.0016 seconds per century, how long was the day when the Earth was first formed.?

Under those conditions, the original day was 73,600 seconds (or 20.4 hours) shorter than it is today. In other words, the original day, when Earth was freshly in existence, was 3.6 hours long.

Does this sound weirdly impossible? Well, than, let's compare Earth and Jupiter. Jupiter has 318 times the mass of Earth and that mass is, on the average, considerably farther from the axis of rotation, since Jupiter is the larger body. Both factors contribute to a greater angular momentum of rotation for Jupiter, one that is about 70,000 times as great as that of Earth.

To be sure, Jupiter has four large satellites, two of which are distinctly more massive than our Moon. Each of these has a tidal effect on Jupiter, which is increased by the fact that Jupiter's large diameter produces a large drop in gravitational pull across its width.

Doing some quick calculations that take into account the mass and distance of Jupiter's large satellites, as well as Jupiter's diameter compared to Earth, it seems to me* that the tidal effect of the four satellites on Jupiter is some 1800 times as great as that of the Moon on the Earth.

And yet, considering Jupiter's enormous angular momentum, it would seem to me that the slowing effect of the satellites on Jupiter's rotation, and the consequent lengthening of its day, is only 1/40 that of the slowing effect of the Moon on the Earth.

Consequently, in the 4,600,000,000 years since the formation of the Solar system, Jupiter's day has lengthened by just about 30 minutes or 0.5 hours. Since Jupiter's day is now 9.92 hours long, it must have been 9.42 hours long at the time of formation.

Still, Earth's day at the time of formation was only 3.6 hours long, according to my calculations — only 2/5 the length of Jupiter's day at the time of formation. Is that reasonable?

Let's not forget the difference in size between the planets. Jupiter's

I am not exactly a celestial mechanic, and my calculations tend to be unsophisticated at times. I think, however, that I am in the right ballpark though I am prepared to be corrected by any Gentle Readers who are better at such things than I am.

circumference is 449,000 kilometers (278,600 miles) while Earth's is 40,077 kilometers (24,900 miles). If Jupiter turned in 9.42 hours at the beginning, an object on its equator would move at a speed of 13.25 kilometers (8.22 miles) per second. If Earth turned in 3.6 hours at the beginning, an object on its equator would move at a speed of 3.1 kilometers (1.9 miles) per second.

As you see, in terms of equatorial speed, the primordial Earth would be spinning at less than a quarter of primordial Jupiter's rate. In fact, the primordial Earth would be spinning at less than a quarter of Jupiter's rate right now.

Nor would the Earth be turning so quickly at the start that it would be in danger of flying apart. Escape velocity from earth is 11.3 kilometers (7.0 miles) per second. Earth would have to turn in about an hour to have its equatorial speed reach the escape velocity.

Earth, then, was born spinning rapidly, and it is owing to the Moon's tidal influence that we now have a long day's journey from Sunrise to Sunrise, one that is nearly seven times the original length.

Suppose that we consider the Moon next. Escape velocity from the Moon is 2.4 kilometers (1.5 miles) per second. How fast would the Moon have to rotate in order that objects at its equator would reach escape velocity and fly away.

The Moon's circumference is 10,920 kilometers (6,786 miles) and it would have to make a complete revolution in 1.26 hours before it would begin to lose material at the equator. Suppose, just for fun, then, that when it was formed 4,600,000,000 years ago, it was spinning with a rotation rate of just a trifle over 1.26 hours — just enough for it to hold together.

Suppose, too, that the Moon was then located where it is now and that it was subjected to the tidal influence of the Earth

The Earth has 81 times the mass of the Moon so, all things being equal, it would have 81 times the tide-producing power. However, the Moon is smaller in size than the Earth is, and there is a smaller drop in gravitational pull over its lesser width. That tends to negate some of the Earth's mass-advantage. Even so, the tidal effect of the Earth on the Moon is 32.5 times that of the Moon on the Earth.

In addition, the Moon's store of angular momentum (if it were rotating in 1.26 hours) would be only 1/33 of the Earth's store right now. Consequently I should judge that the Moon would be slowing at a rate

of 0.016 seconds per year.

The present sidereal period of rotation of the Moon is 27.32 days or 2,360,450 seconds, and if the primordial rotation was 1.26 hours that would be 4,536 seconds. To go from the latter to the former at a rate of increase of 0.016 seconds per year (which we will assume will hold constant from year to year) would require about 150,000,000 years, or only 1/30 of the Moon's lifetime.

In other words, as geologic time goes, the Moon's rotation period was quickly slowed to its present value.

Why did its rotation not continue to be slowed, until now its period of rotation would be much longer than 27.32 days?

Well, the magic in 27.32 days is that it is precisely equal to the length of time it takes the moon to go around the Earth, and if the Moon both rotates and revolves in that same length of time, it faces one side always to the Earth, so that the tidal bulges are frozen in place, with one directly facing the Earth and one facing directly away. The Moon will then no longer turn through the bulges and there is no longer a tidal slowing effect due to the Earth's action upon it. Once it reaches a rotation period equal to its revolution period, it is "locked-in" gravitationally and its rotation period no longer changes, except for other, more slowly-working, causes.

As you can see, the gravitational effect would work to lock in any small body revolving about some large body, provided the small body isn't too small (the smaller the body the smaller the tidal effect upon it) and provided it isn't too far from the large body (the tidal effect decreases as the cube of increasing distance.)

We now know that the two satellites of Mars are gravitationally locked and present only one side to Mars, and we are quite certain this is true also of the five closest satellites to Jupiter.

It used to be thought that Mercury was gravitationally locked to the Sun and that it presented one side only to the luminary. However, the Sun's tidal effect on Mercury is only about 1/9 that of the Earth on the Moon and, apparently, that is not enough to quite do the job (with Mercury's usually elliptical orbit increasing the difficulty perhaps). In any case, Mercury rotates in just 2/3 of the period of its revolution.

This, too, is a form of gravitational locking and achieves a certain stability. Rotation equal to 2/3 the revolution is not as stable as rotation equal to revolution, but the Sun's tidal effect is apparently not quite

(continued on page 74.)


Gahan
Wilson

Here is the surprising conclusion of Thomas Disch's new novel — the longest and richest of the three installments — in which we find out if Boa returns from her flight and if Daniel ever sets out on his. The novel will be published in book form by St Martin's Press and Bantam Books.

On Wings Of Song
(conclusion)

by THOMAS M. DISCH

Synopsis of Parts I and II: At the age of five Daniel Weinreb is taken from New York City to live in Amesville, Iowa, where his father, a bankrupt dentist, is establishing a new practice. Four years later his mother Milly (who had run off with the stereo and the silver just before the bankruptcy) rejoins them, destitute and determined to sacrifice the chancy freedoms of the liberal but impoverished Eastern seaboard for the comfort and security of the Farm Belt, which has become a garrison state, controlled by the reactionary, fundamentalist Undergoders. Milly impresses on her son the necessity for conformity and even hypocrisy, particularly with respect to the divisive issue of flight.

It has become possible, using the new electronic flight apparatus, to achieve out-of-body flight — on condition that the user of the apparatus is able to sing with perfect artistry. Undergoders oppose discorporal flight, ostensibly on religious grounds (since the experiences of those who achieve flight do not accord with fundamentalist ideas of the soul and its afterlife), but for the further compelling reason of sour grapes: they can't do it. Use or possession of a flight apparatus is a criminal offense throughout the Farm Belt; newspapers and broadcasts from out-of-state that promote or condone discorporal flight are similarly outlawed.

Daniel, at age fourteen, hitchhikes to Minneapolis to see a banned musical about flight, *Gold-Diggers of 1984,* with his best friend, Eugene Mueller, son of Amesville's ex-mayor, Roy. During the movie Eugene disappears and Daniel must return to Amesville alone. When the fact of the trip to Minneapolis is discovered, Roy Mueller refuses to believe that Daniel was not party to his son's absconding — with $845. Mueller arranges for Daniel to be arrested for delivering the banned Minneapolis *Star-Tribune,* an offense the law customarily overlooks. Daniel is sentenced to the State Correction Facility at Spirit Lake.

Spirit Lake is a nightmare revelation of the realities of the police state Daniel has been living in unawares. It appears to be an "open" prison. Bars and close surveillance are unneces-

sary, since each prisoner carries a P-W lozenge in the lining of his stomach, which will be detonated by radio signals if he goes beyond the perimeter of camp. Prisoners are forced to work long hours and must supplement their starvation rations with food sold at extortionate prices by the guards. Prisoners without money or friends outside the prison are doomed to starve. Winter comes and prison conditions become more desperate. Daniel works at a plant that processes termites into food extenders. He forms a friendship with another prisoner, Barbara Steiner, who describes her single experience of flight, and Daniel forms the ambition to learn to fly. This means he must learn to sing. He approaches another prisoner, Gus, the most capable musician in the camp, and offers him his supplementary rations if he will give him singing lessons. Gus makes a counterproposal that Daniel, still a puritanical Iowan at heart, rejects indignantly. Vengefully, Gus tells Daniel he will never be able to fly since he lacks musical talent: "You could take voice lessons from here till doomsday and you'd never get *near* escape velocity. You're too tight. Too mental. Too much the Iowa type." Nevertheless, on the night before he leaves Spirit Lake, Daniel has a dream that seems an augury of his eventual success in flying.

On returning to Amesville, he keeps a low profile in high school and devotes his best energies to teaching himself music at home. His senior-year Social Studies teacher, Mrs. Norberg ("the Iceberg"), a particularly fanatical Undergoder with a history of mental disorders, senses Daniel's inner rebellion and tries to goad him into expressing compromising opinions. He's finally provoked to declare, "I don't think it's safe to express an honest opinion anywhere in Iowa. And there's no law that says I *have* to. And so I'm not about to."

This tactic of defiant silence wins the admiration of his classmate Boadicea (Boa) Whiting, the prodigiously gifted daughter of agribusiness billionaire Grandison Whiting. As a punishment for an earlier indiscretion in trying to bug her father's bedroom (so as to enhance the documentary of his life she was filming), Boa had been exiled for some years to a Swiss finishing school. Now back in Iowa she has become, like Daniel, a loner. They form a cautious friendship that gradually develops into a love affair that is qualified, on Daniel's side, by his ambivalent feelings toward her wealth and social position and, on her side, only by the greater fascination her father still exercises over her. Daniel visits Worry, Whiting's neo-feudal fortress-estate, and meets its lordly owner. Though Whiting's opinions are often fiercely reactionary (he can defend the intolerable conditions Daniel witnessed at Spirit Lake), he expresses himself with such force, wit, and (it would seem) candor that Daniel, despite himself, is won over to an uncomfortable admiration.

After graduation Daniel becomes a daily visitor at Worry, where he and Boa (together with her aunt and unofficial chaperone Miss Marspan) form the smallest of musical consorts. Daniel plans to follow Boa to Harvard, where he means to continue studying music on his own. Instead, to his astonishment, he is summoned to Whiting's private office and offered an ultimatum. He must renounce Boa — or marry her. "Your plan to go to Boston," Whiting explains, "is folly. Boa

will waste a year of her life. Unsustained by money, your romance is bound to wither. Meanwhile Boa will have failed to meet the people one goes to college in order to meet. Worse, she'll have done irreparable harm to her reputation. Better simply to marry you. You're bright, resilient, ambitious, and — allowing for the fact that you're a lovesick teen-ager — quite level-headed. From my point of view, an ideal son-in-law." Daniel agrees readily enough and even accepts Whiting's suggestion that he go to work for him, replacing Roy Mueller's son, Carl, who is in charge of migrant (and convict) labor crews and whom Daniel has cause to dislike. On the day of the wedding Daniel's taste of triumph is somewhat soured by the suspicion that his marriage to Boa was arranged chiefly as a public relations counterweight to the newly exploding scandal that Whiting's brother, a congressman, has become involved in.

As they set off on their honeymoon, Daniel and Boa stop over secretly at First National Flightpaths, a New York hotel that provides a flight apparatus for every guest. Boa leaves her body almost instantly, but Daniel, though he sings for hours, remains grounded. Twenty-four hours later (Boa has yet to return to her body), it is announced on TV that a jet on its way to Rome has exploded over the Atlantic and that among the passengers (all of whom have perished) were the daughter of Grandison Whiting and her newly wed husband. The explosion is said to be the work of unidentified terrorists, but Daniel, in an access of paranoia, suspects his father-in-law of having in this Machiavellian fashion rid himself of a troublesome daughter and useless son-in-law now that they had served his purpose.

PART 3

Thirty is a bad birthday when you've got nothing to show for it. By then the old excuses are wearing pretty thin. A failure at thirty is likely to be a failure the rest of his life, and he knows it. But the worst of it isn't the embarrassment, which may even do you some good in small dosages; the worst of it is the way it works its way into the cells of your body, like asbestos. You live in the constant stink of your own fear, waiting for the next major catastrophe: pyorrhea, an eviction notice, whatever. It's as though you'd been bound, face to face, to some maggoty corpse as an object lesson in mortality. Which had happened once to someone in a movie he'd seen, or maybe it was only a book. In any case, the life Daniel saw laid out before him that morning, the morning of his thirtieth birthday, seemed bad news at almost the same scuzzy level, the only difference being the body he was tied to was his own.

The things he'd hoped to do he hadn't done. He'd tried to fly, and failed. He was a nothing musician. His education had been a farce. He was broke. And none of these conditions seemed amenable to change. By any system of bookkeeping this had to be accounted failure. He would admit as much, cheerfully or morosely according to his mood and state of sobriety. Indeed, to have admitted to anything else among the people he called his friends would have been a breach of etiquette, for they were failures too. Few, admittedly, had touched rock bottom yet, and one or two were only

honorary failures who, though they'd fallen short of their dreams, would never be entirely destitute. Daniel, though, had already been there, though only in the summer, and never for more than a week at a time. So perhaps it hadn't amounted to more than playacting — dress rehearsals for the worst that was yet to come. For the time being, though, he was too good-looking to have to sleep on the street, except by choice.

Indeed, if blessings were to be counted, then looks would have to top the list, despite this morning's taste of ashes. There it was in the speckled bathroom mirror, as (with borrowed razor and lather from a sliver of yellow laundry soap) he crisped the borders of his beard: the face that had saved him at so many eleventh hours, the feckless friendly face that seemed his only by the luckiest accident, so little did it ever reveal his own chagrined sense of who he was. Not Daniel Weinreb any more, Dan of the glittering promise, but Ben Bosola, Ben of the dead end.

The name he'd taken to register at First National Flightpaths had been his ever since. Bosola, after the family who'd rented the basement room on Chickasaw Avenue that became his bedroom. Ben, for no particular reason except that it was an Old Testament name. Ben Bosola: schmuck, hustler, lump of shit. Oh, he had a whole litany of maledictions, but, somehow, much as he knew he deserved every epithet, he could never quite believe he was really as bad as all that. He *liked* the face in the mirror and was always a little surprised, pleasantly, to find it there, smiling away, the same as ever.

Someone tapped on the bathroom door, and he started. He'd been alone in the apartment five minutes ago.

"Jack, is that you?" said a woman's voice.

"No. It's Ben."

"Who?"

"Ben Bosola. I don't think you know me. Who are you?"

"His wife."

"Oh. Do you need to use the toilet?"

"Not really. I just heard someone in there and wondered who. Would you like a cup of coffee? I'm making one for myself."

"Sure. Whatever."

"Hi," he said, emerging from the bathroom with his brightest smile.

Jack's wife nodded and placed a demitasse of coffee on the white formica dining ledge. She was a short, tubby woman with red, rheumatic hands and red, rheumy eyes. She wore a muumuu patched together from old toweling, with long harlequin sleeves that seemed anxious to conceal her hands' misfortunes. A single thick blonde braid issued from a mound of unswept hair and swung, tail-wise, behind her.

"I didn't know Jack was married," Daniel said, with amiable incredulity.

"Oh, he isn't, really. I mean, legally we're man and wife, of course." She made a self-deprecating snort, more like a sneeze than a laugh. "But we don't *live* together. It's just an arrangement. He lets me use the place mornings that he goes to work. In re-

turn I do his laundry. Et cetera."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm from Miami, you see. So this is really the only way I can qualify as a resident. And I don't think I could *bear* to live anywhere else now. New York is so...." She flapped her terry-cloth sleeves, at a loss for words.

"You don't have to explain."

"I *like* to explain," she protested. "Anyhow, you must have wondered who I was, just barging in this way."

"What I meant was, I'm a temp myself."

"You are? I would never have thought so. You seem like a native somehow."

"In fact I am. But I'm also a temp. It would take too long to explain."

"What did you say your name was? Ben, is it? Mine's Marcella. Horrible name. You know what you should do, Ben? *You* should get married. It doesn't necessarily have to cost a fortune. And it is worth it, in the long run. Of course, for me, at this point, it doesn't make that much practical difference. I'm still living in a dorm, though they *call* it a residence hotel. That's why I like to come here when I can, for the privacy. But I do have a registered job now, waitressing. So in another couple years, when I've qualified as a resident in my own right, we'll get a divorce and I can find my own apartment. I hate dorms. Don't you?"

"I've usually managed to avoid them."

"Really? That's amazing. I wish I knew your secret."

He smiled an uncomfortable smile, put down the cup of silty coffee, and stood. "Well, Marcella, you'll have to guess my secret. 'Cause it's time I was off."

"Like that?"

Daniel was wearing rubber sandals and a pair of gym shorts.

"This is how I arrived."

"You wouldn't like to fuck, would you?" Marcella asked. "To be blunt."

"Sorry, no."

"That's all right. I didn't suppose you would." She smiled wanly. "But that's the secret, isn't it — the secret of your success?"

"Sure enough, Marcella. You guessed."

There was no point in escalating the conflict. In any case, the harm was done, from Marcella's point of view. Nothing so rankles as a refused invitation. So, meek as a mouse, he said bye-bye and left.

Down on the sidewalk it was a blowy, overcast day, much too cold for this late in April and *much* too cold to be going around shirtless. People, naturally, noticed, but in either a humorous or an approving way. As usual he felt cheered up by the attention. At 12th Street he stopped in at what the painted sign over the window still faintly declared to be a book store and had his morning shit. For a long while after he sat in the stall reading the graffiti on the metal partition and trying to come up with his own original contribution. The first four lines of the limerick came to him ratatat-tat, but he was baffled for an ending until, having decided to leave it blank, as a kind of competition, lo and behold, it was there:

There once was a temp whose
despair
Was a cock by the name of
Pierre,
For it lived in his crotch
And made daily debauch
By (fill in the blank if you
dare)!

Mentally he tipped his hat to his Muse, wiped arab-style with his left hand, and sniffed his fingers.

Five years before, when there were still a few smoldering embers of the old chutzpah left in him, Daniel had developed a passion for poetry. "Passion" is probably too warm a term for an enthusiasm so systematic and willed as that had been. His vocal coach-cum-Reichian therapist at the time, Renata Semple, had had the not uncommon theory that the best way to fly, if you seem to be permanently grounded, was to take the bull by the horns and write your own songs. What song, after all, is more likely to be heartfelt than one original to the heart that feels it? And so he'd become a songwriter. At first, maybe, his lyrics were too jingly or too sugary, but he very soon got the hang of it and was turning out entire little musicals of his own. There must have been something wrong with the theory, however, for the songs Daniel wrote — at least the best of them — though they never got *him* off the ground, had worked quite well for several other singers, including Dr. Semple, who usually didn't have an easy time of it. If his songs weren't at fault, it would seem the fault must lie in Daniel himself, some knot in the wood of his soul that no expense of energy could smooth away. So, with a sense almost of gratitude for the relief that followed, he had stopped trying. He wrote one last song, a valedictory to Erato, the Muse of lyric poetry, and didn't even bother trying it out on an apparatus. He no longer sang at all, except when he was alone and felt spontaneously like singing (which was seldom), and all that remained of his poetic career was a habit of making up limericks, as evidenced today in the toilet.

At Sheridan Square Daniel stopped in for his traditional free breakfast of a glop-filled doughnut and milk at the Dodge 'Em Doughnut Shop. In exchange Daniel let the counterman use the gym on nights that he was in charge. Larry (the counterman) also acted as an answering service for calls Daniel didn't want to have coming through the phone at the gym. Such a message was waiting for him today: he should call a Mr. Ormund, extension 12, 580-8960. Maybe there'd be money in it, you never can tell.

Adonis, Inc., across Seventh Avenue from the doughnut shop and upstairs above a branch of Citibank, was the nearest thing Daniel had to a permanent address. In exchange for handling the desk at different times and locking up three nights a week, Daniel was allowed to sleep in the locker room (or, on the coldest nights, inside the sauna) whenever he cared to. He kept a sleeping bag and one change of clothes rolled up in a wire basket and had his own cup with his name on it — BENNY — on a shelf in the bathroom.

There were basically two classes of people who worked out at Adonis, Inc.

The first were show biz types — actors, dancers, singers; the second were policemen. It could be argued that there was a third class as well, larger than either of the others and the most faithful in attendance — the unemployed. But almost all of these were either unemployed show biz types or unemployed cops. It was a standing joke at the gym that these were the only two professions left in the city. Or, which was nearly the case, the only three.

Actually, New York was in much better shape than most of the other collapsing East Coast cities, since it had managed over the last fifty years to export a fair share of its problems by encouraging the more energetic of these problems to lay waste the slums they lived in and loathed. The Bronx and most of Brooklyn were rubble now. As the city shrank, its traditional light industries followed the Stock Exchange to the southwest, leaving behind the arts, the media, and the luxury trade (all three, paradoxically, in thriving condition). Unless you could get on the welfare rolls (or were an actor, singer, or policeman), life was difficult, verging on desperate. Getting on welfare wasn't easy, since the city had slowly but systematically tightened the requirements. Only legal residents qualified for welfare, and you only got to be a legal resident if you could prove you'd been profitably employed and paying taxes for five years. By these means New York had reduced its (legal) population to two and a half million. All the rest (another two and a half million? — if the authorities knew, they weren't telling) were temps, and lived, like Daniel, as best they could — in church basement dormitories, in the shells of abandoned midtown offices and warehouses, or (those with some cash to spare) in federally subsidized "hotels" that provided such amenities as heat, water, and electricity. In his first years in New York, before money became the overriding consideration (for Boa, providentially, had brought along in her hand luggage what had seemed a lifetime's supply of pawnable jewelry — until it had all been pawned), Daniel had lived at such a hotel, the Sheldonian, on Broadway at West 78th. He'd hated the Sheldonian while he was there, but those days were far enough behind him now to look like the Golden Age.

It was still relatively early when he arrived at the gym, and the manager, Ned Collins, was setting up a routine for a new customer. After he'd swept the hallway and the stairs, Daniel started to work on his own routine, and after a hundred incline situps, he had shifted down to first gear — a mood, or mode, of slow, thoughtless strength, such as derricks must feel when they're most happy.

After an hour and a half he laid off and took over the desk from Ned, who left for lunch. Daniel took the key ring from the drawer and went into the locker room, where he opened the coin box of the pay phone. With a quarter from the box, he dialed the number Larry had given him.

A woman answered: "Teatro Metastasio. May I help you?"

The name set off all his alarm bells, but he answered, calmly enough:

"Yes. I have a message to call Mr. Ormund, on extension 12."

"This is extension 12, and this is Mr. Ormund speaking."

"Oh." He skated past his double take without skipping a beat. "This is Ben Bosola. My answering service said I was to phone you."

"Ah, yes. There is a position open here at the Teatro that a mutual friend said you would be qualified to fill."

It had to be a practical joke. The Metastasio was, more than La Fenice, more than the Parnasse in London, the source, mainstay, and central glory of the bel canto revival. Which made it, in many purists' eyes, the most important opera house in the world. To be asked to sing at the Teatro Metastasio was like receiving a formal invitation to heaven.

"Me?" Daniel said.

"At the moment, of course, Ben, I can't answer *that* question. But if you would like to come in and let us have a look at you...."

"When would you want me to come by?"

"I'll be here till five. You know where the Teatro is?"

"Of course."

"Just tell the man in the box office you want to see Mr. Ormund. He'll show you the way. Bye-bye."

The Metastasio!

Realistically, he just wasn't that good. Unless it was a place in the chorus. That must be it. But even so.

The Mestasio!

Mr. Ormund had said something about his *looks,* or *looking* at him. That was probably what was behind it. What he must do then, surely, was to look his best — and not his grotty best but his posh best, since this was, after all (and praise God), a *job* interview! Accordingly, Daniel made a surprise visit on one of the friends in whose closest he kept what had survived of his depleted wardrobe. He showered and powdered, shampooed and fluffed his hair with a dryer, and spent half an hour discussing which of his friend's ties he should borrow. At last the mirror approved and he was on his way to 44th Street and glory.

The waiting room to Mr. Ormund's office, where Daniel waited half an hour, was decorated with so many chromolithos of the Metastasio's stars that you almost couldn't see the raw silk wall-covering behind them. All the stars were represented bewigged and bedizened in the costumes of their most celebrated roles. All were inscribed, with heaps of love and barrels of kisses, to (variously): "Carissimo Johnny," "Notre tres cher maitre," "Darling Sambo," "Sweetest Fatty," and (by stars of a lesser magnitude) "Dear Mr. Ormund."

Dear Mr. Ormund, in person, was a frightfully fat, professionally jolly, foppishly dressed businessman, a Falstaff and a phoney of the deepest dye, that darkest brown that hints of darker purples. Phoneys (from the French, *faux noirs*) were almost exclusively an Eastern phenomenon. Indeed, in Iowa and throughout the Farm Belt whites who dyed their skin black or even used any of the more drastic tanning agents, such as Jamaica Lily, were liable to pay

heavy fines, if discovered. It was not a law frequently enforced and perhaps not frequently broken. Only in cities where blacks had begun to reap some of the political and social advantages of their majority status did phoneys at all abound. Most left some conspicuous part of their anatomy undyed (in Mr. Ormund's case it was the little finger of his right hand), as a testimony that their negritude was a choice and not a fatality.

Daniel, shaking hands with him and noticing the telltale pinky, felt distinctly off balance psychologically. In some ways he was an Iowan still. He couldn't help it: he disapproved of phoneys.

"So you're Ben Bosola!"

"Mr. Ormund."

Mr. Ormund, instead of releasing Daniel's hand, kept it enclosed in both his own. "My informants did not exaggerate. You *are* a perfect Ganymede." He spoke in a lavish, lilting contralto that might or might not have been real. Could he be a castrato as well as a phoney? Or did he only affect a falsetto, as did so many other partisans of bel canto, in emulation of the singers they idolized?

Let him be what he would, as odd or as odious, Daniel couldn't afford to seem flummoxed. He rallied his wits, and replied, in a voice perhaps a little fuller and chestier than usual: "Not quite Ganymede, Mr. Ormund. If I remember the story, Ganymede was about half my age."

"Are you twenty-five then? I'd never have thought so. But do sit down. Would you like a sweet?" He waved the hand with its one pink finger at a bowl of hard candies on his desk, then sank down into the sighing vinyl cushions of a low sofa. Reclining, propped on one elbow, he regarded Daniel with a fixity of interest that seemed at once shrewd and idle. "Tell me about yourself, my boy — your hopes, your dreams, your secret torments, your smoldering passions — everything! But no, those matters are always best left to the imagination. Let me read only the memoirs of those dark eyes."

Daniel sat stiffly, his shoulders touching but not resting against the back of a spindly imitation-antique chair, and offered his eyes up for inspection. He reflected that this was what other people must experience going to a dentist.

"You've known tragedy, I can see. And heartbreak. But you've come through it smiling. In fact, you always bounce back. I've known heartbreak, too, *caro mio,* and someday I will tell you of it, but we have a saying in the theater — first things first. I'll begin with the worst: the job pays a mere pittance. You probably knew that."

"I just want a chance to prove myself, Mr. Ormund."

"But there *are* gratuities. For some of the boys here, I believe, they have been not inconsiderable, not inconsiderable at all. It depends, finally, on you. It's possible just to coast along with the zephyrs, but it's equally possible, with bit of spunk, to make yourself a bundle. You wouldn't believe it to look at me now, Ben, but I began, thirty years ago, when this was still the

Majestic, as you're beginning now: an ordinary usher."

"An usher?" Daniel repeated, in candid dismay.

"Why, what did you suppose?"

"You didn't say what the position was. I guess I thought..."

"Oh, dear. Dear, dear, dear. I'm very sorry. Are you a singer, then?"

Daniel nodded.

"Our mutual friend has played a *most* unkind joke, I fear. On both of us. I have no connection with that side of the house — none at all. I'm *so* sorry."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry for, Mr. Ormund. Or for me either. That is, if you'll still let me have the job."

"But if it would interfere with your career...?"

Daniel gave a theatrical laugh. "Don't worry about that. My career can't be interfered with, because it doesn't exist. I haven't studied, in a serious way, for years. I should have known better than to suppose the Metastasio would be calling me up for a place in the chorus. I'm not good enough, it's simple as that."

"My dear," said Mr. Ormund, placing his hand gently on Daniel's knee, "you're *superb*. You're ravishing. And if this were a rational world, which it is not, there's not an opera house in this hemisphere that wouldn't be delighted to have you. You *mustn't* give up!"

"Mr. Ormund, I'm a punk singer."

Mr. Ormund sighed and removed his hand.

"But I think I'd be a terrific usher. What do you say?"

"You wouldn't be ... ashamed?"

"If I stood to earn money from it, I'd be delighted. Not to mention the chance I'd have to see your productions."

"Yes, it does help if you like the stuff. So many of the boys don't have an educated ear, I'm afraid. It *is* a special taste. Are you familiar, then, with the Metastasio?"

"I've heard recordings. But I've never been to a performance. Thirty bucks a ticket is a bit out of my class."

"Oh, dear. Dear, dear, dear."

"Another difficulty?"

"Well, Ben. You see...." He raised his hand to his lips and coughed delicately. "There *is* a grooming code our ushers must observe. A rather strict code."

"Do you mean," Daniel asked cautiously, "that I'd have to ... uh ... darken my complexion?"

Mr. Ormund burst into silvery laughter, lifting his arms in minstrel merriment. "Dear me, no! Nothing so drastic. Though, to be sure, I'd be the last person to prevent any of the boys from exercising the *option*. But there is a uniform that must be worn, and though it's essentially a modest sort of uniform, it is rather, how shall I say, jaunty? Maybe blatant comes closer."

Daniel, who had walked all over the city in nothing but gym shorts, said that he didn't think that would faze him.

"Also, I'm sorry to say we can't allow beards. That is a pity, isn't it? Yours is so full and emphatic, if I may

say so. But, you see, the Metastasio is noted for its authenticity. And liveried servants did not have beards in the age of Louise Quinze. So, no beards. *Ahimé,* as our Spanish friends say."

Ahimé," Daniel agreed sincerely. He bit his lip and looked down at his shoes. His beard had been with him twelve years now. It was as essential a part of his face as his nose. Further, he felt safe behind it. The risk of being recognized as Daniel Weinreb was small, admittedly, but it couldn't be denied.

"Forgive my impertinence, Ben, but does your beard conceal some personal *defect?* A weak chin, perhaps, or scar tissue? I wouldn't want to have you make the sacrifice only to discover that we couldn't, after all, hire you."

"No," said Daniel, with his smile back in place. "I'm not the Phantom of the Opera."

"I do hope you'll decide to take the job. I *like* a boy with wit."

"I'll have to think about it, Mr. Ormund."

"Of course. Whatever you decide, do let me hear from you tomorrow morning. In the meantime, if you'd like to see the performance tonight and get some idea of what exactly is expected, I can offer you a seat in the house's own box that's going begging tonight. We're doing *Demofoönte.*"

"I've read the reviews. And, yes, of course, I'd love to"

"Good. Just ask Leo in the box office as you go out. He has an envelope in your name." Mr. Ormund offered his hand. "Enough idle chatter. Duty calls, ta-ra, ta-ra! I hope you enjoy the performance this evening, and I'll expect to hear from you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Daniel promised, as he was shown the door.

Daniel clapped dutifully when the curtain came down at the end of Act One of *Demofoönte,* the single wet blanket in an audience berserk with approval. Whatever had stirred them to these raptures he couldn't work out. Musically the production was professional but uninspired; mere archaeology pretending to be art. Bladebridge, whom most of this commotion was about, had sung neither wisely nor too well. His stage manner was one of polite, disdainful boredom, which he varied, when he wished to call attention to a particularly strenuous embellishment, by a gesture (always the same) of the most schematic bravado. At these moments, as he extended his meaty, jeweled hands, tilted back his head (but carefully, so as not to dislodge his towering wig), and let loose a blood-curdling trill or a long, loud, meandering roulade, he seemed the apotheosis of unnaturalness. As to drama, or poetry, forget it. The whole unwieldy operation — scenery, costumes, staging — seemed quite defiantly pointless, unless the mere expenditure of so much money, energy, and applause was, in itself, a kind of point.

He decided, when the house lights finally went up, that he would not return for the second act. Never mind that he probably wouldn't have the chance to see anything at the Metastasio again. (He'd already made up his mind to that.) He had too high a re-

spect for his own opinion to go on watching what he'd decided was complete claptrap.

Even so, once he was out in the lobby he couldn't resist the opportunity of circulating among the Metastasio's regular patrons, who were (despite their dominoes, which were, as in old Venice, *de rigueur*), not at all so glittering an assembly as might be found, between the acts, at either the Metropolitan or the State Theater. There were, to be sure, more phoneys. Most castrati of celebrity rank were blacks, just as, in the heyday of bel canto they had been, mainly, Calabrians or Neapolitans, the poorest of the poor. Wherever blacks were offered for public worship, whether in the ring or on the stage, there were certain to be phoneys on hand worshipping. But this lot were an uncommonly discreet sort of phoney; the men tended to dress, like Daniel, in conservative and slightly *démodé* business suits, the women in dresses of well-nigh conventual plainness.

Daniel propped himself against a pillar of fake marble and watched the parade, such as it was. Just as he'd made up his mind, for the second time, to leave, he was suddenly latched on to by the girl he'd met that morning, Jack Levine's official wife, who saluted him loudly with — "Ben! Ben Bosola! What a pleasant surprise."

"Mrs. Levine," he murmured. "Hello."

"Marcella," she reminded him. Then, gushingly: "Isn't it the most beautiful ... the most wonderful ... the dreamiest, creamiest...."

"Incredible," he agreed, with just enough conviction to get by.

"Bladebridge is going to be our next *great* singer," she declared in a passion of prophecy. "A true *soprano assoluto.* Not that Ernesto Rey is in any way *less* important. I'd be the last person to speak *against* him. But he's old, and his top notes are already gone — *that* can't be denied. But *such* an artist, even now. No one has ever equalled his *Casta diva.* Isn't it amazing, our meeting again so soon? Jack didn't mention your being a buff. Naturally, I made him tell me all about you as soon as he got home."

"I'm not what you'd call a real buff. I'd say that I'm at least six or seven levels from the top on anyone's scale of buffdom."

Her hollow, hooting laugh was as inane as his remark. Even with the terrycloth muumuu removed and repackaged in brown velveteen, Marcella was intensely the sort of person you didn't want to be seen with in public. Not that it mattered, since he wouldn't be returning to the Metastasio. So, as penance for his condescension, he forced himself to be nicer than the circumstance strictly required.

"Do you get here often?" he asked.

"Once a week, on my night off. I've got a subscription seat way in the last row of the Family Circle. Where are you sitting?"

"Uh, in a box."

"A box," she repeated reverently. "Are you *with* someone?"

"Don't I just wish! In fact, I'm all alone in the box."

A wrinkle of doubt creased her forehead. Since he couldn't see any reason not to and since it was something to talk about, he told her the story of Ormund's phone call and their cross-purposed interview that afternoon. She listened like a child hearing the story of the Nativity, or of Cinderella, for the very first time. The first of the intermission bells rang just as the tale was completed.

"Would you like to share the box with me?" he offered, in a burst of generosity (which, admittedly, cost him nothing).

She wagged her braid. "It's sweet of you to ask, but I couldn't..

"There are four seats in the box," he urged. "I can only fill one of them."

"I wouldn't want to be responsible for your losing your job before you'd even started."

"If they're going to be pissy about a thing like that, they're not the kind of people I should be working for." Since he wasn't going to take the job, it was easy to be high-minded.

"Oh, Ben — don't *say* that! To work here — at the Metastasio — there's nothing *anyone* wouldn't give for the opportunity. To see every performance, every night!"

The second bell rang. The lobby was almost empty.

"You'd better come along," Daniel urged.

She nodded and followed him to the door of the box.

Daniel opened the door and stepped back to allow Marcella to go before him. Halfway across the small antechamber she stood stock-still. At the same moment the house lights dimmed, and the audience applauded the entrance of the conductor into the pit.

"Ben," Marcella whispered, "there *is* someone else."

"I see her. But there's no need to panic. Just take the seat beside her, as though you belong there. She probably snuck in the same as you. Anyhow, she won't bite."

Marcella did as she was bidden, and the woman paid her no heed. Daniel took the chair behind Marcella.

As the strings commenced a jittering introduction to the duet between Adrasto and Timante, the intruder lowered her opera glasses and turned round to regard Daniel over her shoulder. Even before he'd recognized her, Daniel felt a premonitory malaise just watching the slow torsion of her spine.

Before he could rise, she had caught him by the sleeve. Then, deftly, without putting down her opera glasses, she plucked off his mask.

"I knew it. Despite the beard — despite the mask — I knew it! We'll speak later. But now, for goodness' sake, be quiet and pay attention to the music."

Daniel bowed his head by way of submission to Miss Marspan's command, and she fixed her falcon gaze upon the mild Adrasto, the merciless Timante, nor did she ever, in the whole course of the second act, turn round again. She was that certain of her grip.

As they rode, with the curtains of the taxi drawn, zigzagging along the potholed streets, Daniel tried to for-

mulate a plan. The only solution he could think of, which might restore his shattered status quo and keep his whereabouts unknown to Grandison Whiting, was for him to murder Miss Marspan. And that was no solution. Even if he'd had the gumption to try, which he didn't, he'd be more likely to wind up her victim, since Miss Marspan had let it be known (by way of assuring the taxi driver that it was safe to take them through Queens) that she carried a licensed pistol and was trained in its use. He could foresee the tenuous fabric of his incognito unraveling inexorably, twelve years of shifts and dodges undone in a moment by this woman's whim, and he could do nothing but come along for the ride. She wouldn't even listen to explanations until she'd seen for herself that Boa was alive.

"Is it all right if I ask you a question," he ventured.

"All in good time, Daniel. If you please."

"Have you been looking for me? Because otherwise I don't see...."

"Our crossing paths was chance. I was seated in the box opposite to yours, and a tier above. While I waited for a friend to join me, I studied the crowd through my glasses. There is usually someone one recognizes on such an evening. You seemed familiar, but I couldn't place you at once. Naturally enough. You didn't have a beard, or wear a domino, when I knew you. *And* I supposed you to be dead. At the intermission I watched you in the lobby, and even contrived, standing on the other side of the pillar, to hear some of your conversation with that girl. It was you. It is you. And you tell me that my niece is alive. I cannot, I confess, imagine your motive in having kept these matters secret, but I'm not really interested in your motives. I'm interested in my niece, in her well-being."

"It's not pretty where we're headed," he cautioned. "But it keeps her going."

Miss Marspan made no reply.

Daniel parted the curtain to see how far they'd come. What he could see looked like any part of Queens he'd ever been to: there was the wide, untrafficked highway lined on either side by junked-out cars and overturned trucks, a few of which gave signs of being inhabited. Farther back from the road were the blackened shells of single-dwelling houses. It was hard to believe that away from the highway there were still large areas of Queens that had been left unblighted. He let the curtains fall closed. The taxi swerved, avoiding something in the road.

He could make a break for it now, he supposed. He could go and live among those ruins, there to be ruined himself. But that would have meant surrendering Boa to her father, an act he could not, would not be driven to. It had been his whole pride, the source of all his self-respect, that he had, by privations great and small, by the daily indignities of these twelve years, been responsible for Boa's maintenance ("well-being" would be stretching it). Other men have families. Daniel had his wife's corpse (for such she was now, legally) to sustain him. But it served the same purpose: it kept him

from believing, despite every other evidence, that his defeat was final, whole, and entire.

Once, he'd known why he was doing this and why he must persevere. Fear moved him. But that fear had come, in time, to seem unfounded. Grandison Whiting might be a selfish man, but he was not insane. He might have judged Boa in error in taking Daniel as her spouse, he might have wished Daniel dead, he might even have arranged that to happen, other persuasions failing — but he wouldn't have murdered his daughter. However, as the specific fear had diminished, there had come in its stead a distaste for Whiting, and all his works and wiles, that mounted finally to horror.

He had no rationale for his aversion. In part it was simple class feeling. Whiting was an arch-reactionary, a Machiavelli, a Metternich, and if his reasons for it were more intellectual than most such sons-of-bitches' reasons, even (Daniel had to admit) more persuasive, that only made him a more dangerous son-of-a-bitch than most. Daniel was determined to resist the man in the one way given him to do so: by refusing him the possession of his daughter's twelve-years-comatose body.

Ward 17, where the corpse (as it was, in the eyes of the law) of Boadicea Weinreb was to be found, occupied only a small part of the third sub-basement of the annex of First National Flightpaths. After Daniel had signed in at the desk in the lobby, they were allowed to go down to the ward unescorted, for Daniel's was a familiar face at the annex. They walked down a long reverberating tunnel lighted, now harshly, now dimly, by irregularly spaced tubes of neon mounted on the broad low arch of the ceiling. On either side of them, spaced with the tight, terrible regularity of markers in a cemetery, lay the inert and weakly respiring bodies of those who had never returned from their flights into the spaces beyond their flesh. Only a few of the hundreds in this one ward would ever resume a corporeal life, but the husks lingered on, aging, withering, until some vital organ finally failed or until the accounting office sent down the order to disconnect the life-supporting machineries, whichever came sooner.

They stopped before Boa's cot, a kind of rubber sling suspended from a tubular frame.

"The name..." Miss Marspan observed, stooping to read the chart fixed to the foot of the bed. "Bosola? There's some mistake."

"It was the name we registered under, when we came here."

Miss Marspan closed her eyes and laid her gloved hand lightly over them. As little as he liked the woman, Daniel could not but feel some sympathy for her. It must have been hard to accept this shriveled chrysalis as the niece she'd known and loved, so far as love was in her nature. Boa's skin was the color of grimed lightbulbs of frosted glass and seemed, stretched tight across each prominence of bone, as brittle. All fullness was wasted, even her lips were thin, and the warmth you could detect in her hollow cheeks seemed borrowed

from the humid airs of the tunnel and not her own. Nothing spoke of life or process except the plasma oozing through translucent tubes into the slow-revolving treadmill of her arteries and veins.

Miss Marspan squared her shoulders and made herself approach more closely. Her heavy skirts of pigeon-gray silk snagged on the frame of the cot adjacent to Boa's. She knelt to loosen it and remained a long while on one knee looking into the void of Boa's face. Then she rose, shaking her head. "I can't kiss her."

"She wouldn't know if you did."

She backed away from Boa's cot, and stood in the central aisle, looking about her nervously, but anywhere she turned the same sight was endlessly multiplied, row on row, body on body.

"It is a hell."

"Boa's not here, Miss Marspan. Only her body. When she wants to come back, *if* she wants to come back, she will. But if that isn't what she wants, do you think a vase of flowers by the bed is going to make any difference? I've kept her alive, Miss Marspan, think of that. Not Grandison Whiting, with his millions. Me, with nothing — *I* kept her alive."

"I ... appreciate what you've done. But I don't see why you don't keep her with you, at home. Surely that would be cheaper than this ... mausoleum."

"I'm a temp, I don't have a home. Even when I had a room at a hotel, it wouldn't have been safe to leave her there alone. Rooms get broken into, and what would happen to anyone in Boa's condition then —"

"Yes, of course. That didn't occur to me."

She flexed her fingers within their sheath of kid, flexed them and bent them backward, as if to defy the helplessness she felt. She had come here ready to step in and take charge, but there was nothing to take charge of.

"Grandison, I take it, has never learned of this? He doesn't know that either of you is alive."

"No. And I don't want him to, ever."

"Why? If I may ask."

"That's my business."

Miss Marspan considered this. "Fair enough," she decided at last, to Daniel's disconcertion.

"You mean you'll agree to that? You won't tell him?"

"I would have thought this was too soon to begin bargaining," she answered coolly. "There's still much I want to know. But, if it will ease your mind, I can tell you that there's little love lost between Grandison and myself. My sister, Boa's mother, finally succeeded in killing herself a year ago. She was a foolish, vain hysteric with a modicum of redeeming virtues, but she was my sister and Grandison Whiting destroyed her."

"And he'd destroy Boa too, if you let him." He said it without melodrama, in the calm accents of faith.

Miss Marspan smiled. "Oh, I doubt that. She was the brightest of his children, the one of whom he had the highest hope. When she died, as he believed, his mourning was as real, I daresay, as yours or mine."

"Maybe it was. But I don't give a

shit about his feelings."

Miss Marspan's glance let it be known that even in these circumstances she did not like such language.

"Let's get out of here."

"Gladly. Let me say this first, though, while it's clear to me. The paramount question, the question I've been considering since we set off in the taxi, is whether Boadicea would be more.... inclined ... to return here, to you, or to her father."

"Here, to me."

"I think I have to agree."

"Then you won't tell him!"

"On one condition. That you allow me to have Boa taken from this place. If she's ever to come back, I can't believe she'd find this prospect at all inviting. You have no objection, I hope, to my helping you if I can?"

"I guess that depends on the form that it would take."

"Oh, I'm not about to lavish money on you. I have little enough myself. But I do have connections, which are the better part of anyone's wealth, and I'm fairly sure I can find a home in which Boa would be safe and you'd be comfortable. I'll talk to Alicia about it tonight, for she was at the opera with me, and she's certain to have stayed up to find out what I've been so mysteriously up to. Is there somewhere I can get in touch with you in the morning?"

He couldn't answer all at once. It had been years since he'd trusted anyone, except in passing or in bed, and Miss Marspan wasn't someone he wanted to trust. But he did! At last, amazed at the turn his life had taken, all in a single day, he gave her the number of Adonis, Inc., and even let her, when they drove back to the city, drop him off outside the door before she returned to her friend's apartment.

Lying alone in the sauna and listening to love's old sweet song out in the locker room, Daniel had trouble getting to sleep. He thought of going out and joining in and getting his rocks off just as a sedative, but though ordinarily that's what he would have done, tonight was different. Tonight he'd have felt like a hypocrite if he'd mixed in. Now that he could see a glimmer of escape, he realized just how much he wanted to put Adonis, Inc., behind him. Not that he hadn't enjoyed his stay on Pleasure Island — once he'd learn to lie back and float with the current. Sex is the one luxury for which money isn't an essential qualification. So, long live sex. But tonight he'd decided that he could, with effort, do better.

For openers he'd take the job at the Metastasio. His only reason for having hesitated was the fear of being recognized. But Miss Marspan had recognized him, even *with* his beard, and so the moral of the story seemed to be that maybe he ought to take more risks. Hadn't that been Gus's advice, when they'd said good-by at Spirit Lake? Something like that.

Moments before he fell asleep he remembered it was his birthday. "Happy birthday, dear Daniel," he whispered into the rolled-up towels that served him as a pillow. "Happy birthday to you."

***

Mrs. Alicia Schiff, with whom Daniel was now to live, was, in the considered and by no means unreproving opinion of her friend Harriet Marspan, "the nearest thing to a genius I've ever known." She was also, very nearly, a hunchback, though it seemed so natural and necessary a part of her character that you could almost believe she'd come by it the way she'd come by her squint — by dint of years scrunched up over a desk copying music — the way that pines at high altitudes are shaped by titanic winds. All in all, the sorriest wreck of human flesh Daniel had ever had to become acquainted with, and custom could never quite reconcile him to the facts: the crepey, flaking skin of her hands; the face all mottled pink and lemon and olive like a spoiled Rubens; the knobby head with its strands of sparse white hair, which she sometimes was inspired to cover with a scruffy red parody of a wig. Except when she left the apartment, she dressed like the vilest and most lunatic vagrant. The apartment was filled with heaps little and big of castoff clothes — blue jeans, bathrobes, dresses, sweaters, stockings, blouses, scarves, and underwear — which she changed into and out of at any hour of the day or night, with no apparent method or motive; it was sheer nervous habit.

At first he feared he'd be expected to excavate and order the apartment's debris. The clothes were the least of it. Interleaved with these were layers and layers of alluvial deposits, a Christmas morning desolation of wrappings, boxes, books and papers, of crockery and rattling tins, of puzzles, toys, and counters from a dozen never-to-be-reassembled games.

He was expected to do her shopping, to deliver letters and scores, to take her elderly, ginger-colored spaniel Incubus for his morning and his evening walk. Incubus, like his mistress, was an eccentric. He had a consuming interest in strangers (and none at all in other dogs), but it was an interest he did not wish to see reciprocated. He preferred people who would let him snuffle about on his own, investigating their shoes and other salient smells. However, if you ventured to talk to him, much less to pet him, he became edgy and took the first opportunity to escape from such attentions. He was neither mean nor friendly, neither frisky nor wholly torpid, and was very regular in his habits. Unless Daniel had some shopping to accomplish at the same time, the course of their walk never varied: due west to Lincoln Center, twice round the fountain, then (after Daniel had dutifully scooped up that morning's or evening's turd and disposed of it down a drain) home again to West 65th, just round the corner from the park, where Mrs. Schiff, no less predictable in her habits, would be hovering, anxious and undemonstrative, somewhere in the hallway of the apartment. She never condescended to Incubus, but spoke to him on the assumption that he was a precocious child, enchanted (by his own preference) into the shape of a dog. She treated Daniel no differently.

Daniel, in exchange for these services, and for providing a masculine,

protective presence, received the largest of the apartment's many rooms. The others were so many closets and cubbyholes, the legacy of the apartment's previous existence as a residence hotel.

It was soon their settled custom, when Mrs. Schiff's day's work was over and Daniel had returned from the Metastasio, to sit in her bedroom, with a pot of gunpowder tea between them and a packet of cookies (Daniel had never known Mrs. Schiff to eat anything but sweets), and to talk. Daniel had known many good talkers in his time, but none of them could hold a candle to Mrs. Schiff. Most of it, in the way of much supposed "great conversation" was mere mermaid enchantment and fool's gold, but some of her notions did stick to the ribs of the mind.

The world dismayed her, and she turned from it to her own snug burrow, which the wolves and foxes had somehow not yet discovered. She had surrendered long since to the traditional vices of a recluse: she didn't bathe or cook meals or wash dishes; she kept strange hours, preferring night to day; she never let sunlight or fresh air into her own rooms, which came to smell, most intensely, of Incubus. She talked to herself constantly, or rather to Incubus and the dolls, inventing long wandering whimsical tales for them about the Honeybunny twins, Bunny Honeybunny and his sister Honey Honeybunny, tales from which all possibility of pain or conflict was debarred. Daniel suspected that she slept with Incubus as well, but what of that? Was anyone harmed by her dirtiness or dottiness? If there was such a thing as the life of the mind, then Mrs. Schiff was one of its champions, and Daniel's hat was off to her.

She knew the Metastasio's operas by heart and would cross-examine him minutely about every performance he worked at: who had sung, how well or poorly, whether a tricky piece of stage business had come off. She knew them so well not from having seen them that often but because, in many cases, she'd written them herself. Officially she was no more than the Metastasio's chief copyist, though sometimes, when a text was well-known to be so corrupt as scarcely to exist, the program would include a small credit: "Edited and arranged by A. Schiff." Even then, she got no royalties. She worked, she declared, for love and the greater glory of Art, but that, Daniel decided, was only half the truth. She also worked, like other people, for money. If the fees she received were small, they were frequent, and enough, when you added them to the rents from the four residence hotels she'd inherited from her father (who had been a famous welfare racketeer before some larger fish had swallowed him), so that she was kept supplied with such essential luxuries as dog food, books, rare records, and her monthly chits at *Lieto Fino* and *La Didone,* where, rather than at home, she chose to entertain.

That side of her life Daniel was not privy to in these first months, and it was only gradually, from hints dropped by Mr. Ormund and yellowed clippings discovered among the debris of

the apartment, that he learned that Mrs. Schiff had once been a celebrity of no small degree in the beau monde of bel canto, having fallen in love, eloped with, and married the greatest of modern-day castrati, Ernesto Rey. The marriage had subsequently been annulled, but Rey had continued to be faithful in his fashion. He was the only one of her friends she allowed to visit her at home, and so Daniel developed a nodding acquaintance with the man who was generally considered the greatest singer of his day (albeit that day was waning).

Offstage, the great Ernesto was the least likely candidate for prima donna that ever was — a thin, twitchy wisp of a man whose smooth pale face seemed frozen in an expression of wide-eyed alarm, the consequence (it was said) of too many face-lifts. He was untypical of other castrati in being white (he was born in Naples), diffident (he assumed, among strangers, a flat, nasal monotone an octave below his natural voice), and guilt-ridden (he attended Mass every Sunday), and untypical of anyone else in being a castrato. He had recorded *Norma* five times, and each recording was better than the last. Of the first recording, a critic old enough to have heard her in performance said that Rey's *Norma* was superior to Rosa Ponselle's.

Mrs. Schiff was as much in love with him now as on the day they'd eloped, and Rey (by her account, and everyone else's) still took that love as painfully for granted. She flattered him; he drank it in. She worked like a troupe of acrobats to keep him amused; he tolerated her efforts but made none himself, though he was not otherwise a witless lump. In all matters concerning interpretation and general esthetic strategy she acted as his coach and served as spokesman with those conductors and recording engineers who would not at once bend to his will. She devised, and continually revised, all his supposedly *ad libitum* passages of fioratura, keeping them safely within his ever-diminishing range without apparent loss of brilliance. She even vetted his contracts and wrote press releases — or rather, rewrote the tasteless tosh produced by his own salaried agent, Irwin Tauber. For all these services she received no fee and small thanks. She wasn't insensible to such slights and seemed, indeed, to take a bittersweet satisfaction in complaining of them to Daniel, who could be counted on to respond with sympathetic indignation.

"But why do you keep putting up with it?" he asked at last. "If you *know* he's like that and he's not going to change?"

"The answer is obvious: I must."

"That's not an answer. *Why* must you?"

"Because Ernesto is a great artist."

"Great artist or not, no one's got the right to shit on you."

"Ah, but there's where you're wrong, Daniel. In saying that you show you don't understand the nature of great artistry."

This was a direct assault on Daniel's sore point, as Mrs. Schiff well knew. The matter was dropped.

She soon knew everything about

him, the whole story of his messed-up life. With Boa installed in Daniel's room, there was no point in reticence, and not much possibility of it. In any case, after twelve years of living under an alias, the opportunity to tell all was too tempting to resist. There were times, as when she'd delivered the low blow just mentioned, that he thought she took unfair advantage of his revelations, but even then her home truths had no sting of malice. Her skin was just very thick, and she expected yours to be too. All in all, as a mother confessor, she beat Renata Semple hollow. Renata, for all her Reichian jargon and weekly plumbing of the depths, had handled Daniel's ego with too tender a regard. Small wonder if this therapy had never done him any good.

In short, Daniel was once again a member of a family. Viewed from without, they were a strange enough family: a rattling, hunchbacked old woman, a spoiled senile cocker spaniel, and a eunuch with a punctured career (for though Rey didn't live with them, his offstage presence was as abiding and palpable as that of any paterfamilias away every day at the office). And Daniel himself. But better to be strange together than strange apart. He was glad to have found such a haven at last, and he hoped that most familial and doomed of hopes, that nothing would change.

But already there was news on the radio: a freak cold spell had done extensive damage to crops in Minnesota and the Dakotas, and a calamitous blight was attacking the roots of wheat plants throughout the Farm Belt. It was rumored that this blight had been laboratory-produced and was being propagated by terrorists, though none of the known organizations had come forward to claim credit. The commodities market was already in turmoil, and the new Secretary of Agriculture had made a public announcement that strict rationing might become necessary in the fall. For the present though, food prices were holding steady, for the good reason that they were already higher than most people could afford. All through that spring and summer there were food riots in such usual trouble spots as Detroit and Philadelphia. Mrs. Schiff, whose imagination was always excited by headlines, began stockpiling bags of dry dogfood. In the last such crisis, four years before, pet food had been the first thing to disappear from the shelves, and she had had to feed Incubus from her own limited ration. Soon an entire closet was packed solid with ten-pound bags of Pet Bricquettes, Incubus's brand of choice. For themselves they did not worry: the government would provide, somehow.

In September, when the Metastasio opened for the new season, Daniel reported back to work with a gratitude that verged on servility. It had been a lean summer, though better by far than previous summers, thanks to his having a roof over his head. He hadn't been at the job long enough when the Teatro had closed early in June to have put aside more than a few dollars, and he was determined not to have recourse to Miss Marspan, who had already as-

sumed the financial costs involved in keeping Boa functionally alive. For lack of other resources he did what he'd vowed never to do: he dipped into the capital whose scant interest had paid Boa's bills during her long sojourn at First National Flightpaths. That money had come from the sale of her jewelry, and till now he'd been able to avoid applying it to his own needs. Now, however, Boa was provided for by other and better means, and so Daniel could square it with his conscience by considering it a loan: once he was back at work, he'd return the money to the account.

Back at work it didn't work that way, for he rediscovered the joy of being flush. It was like having his paper route again. There was change in his pocket, bills in his wallet, and all New York to entice him. He got himself some decent clothes, which he'd have had to do in any case, since Mr. Ormund had made it clear that he didn't want his boys to come in looking like ragamuffins. He started going to a ten-dollar barber, which was likewise pretty *comme il faut.* But the dividends were out of all proportion to the investment, since once he was back at work Mr. Ormund had assigned him to the Dress Circle, where the tips were many times in excess of what he'd got, starting out, up in the balcony (though still not so considerable as the pickings in the Grand Tier).

Tips were only, as Mr. Ormund had explained, the tip of the iceberg. The real payoff came in the form of courtship, with all its immemorial perks — dinners, parties, weekends on Long Island, and attentions even costlier and kinder, depending on one's luck, ambition, and ability to hold out for more. At first Daniel had resisted such temptations from a sense, which twelve years in the big city had not yet wiped out, of what the world at large would have called him if he did not resist. Nor was Mr. Ormund in any haste to thrust him into the limelight. But increasingly he wondered whether his actions made any difference to the world at large. When, as the new season got under way, he continued, reluctantly, to decline any and all invitations, even one so little compromising as to accept a drink and stop to chat with a box holder during one of the duller ensembles, when drinks and chat were the order of the day, Mr. Ormund decided that there must be a fuller understanding between them and called Daniel to his office.

"Now I don't want you to think, mignon —" That, or "migniard," was his pet name for his current favorites. "— that I am some vile procurer. No boy has ever been asked to leave the Teatro for failing to put out, and all our patrons understand that. But you *shouldn't* be so entirely stand-offish, so arcticly cold."

"Did old Carshalton complain?" Daniel asked in a grieved tone.

"Mr. Carshalton is a very obliging, amiable gentleman, with no other wish, bless him, than to be talked to. He realizes that age and corpulence —" Mr. Ormund heaved a sympathizing sigh. "— make any larger expectation unlikely of fulfillment. And in point of fact he did not complain. It

was one of your own colleagues — I shall not say who — called the matter to my notice."

"Mr. Ormund, I need the job. I like the job. I don't want to argue. What do I have to do?"

"Just be friendly. When someone asks you into their box, comply. There's no danger of rape; you're a capable lad. When someone in the casino offers you a flutter on the wheel, flutter. That's simply sound business practice. And, who knows, your number might come up! If you're asked to dinner after the show, and if you're free, at least consider the possibility, and if it seems you might enjoy yourself, then do the world a favor and say yes. And, though it's not for me to suggest such a thing — and, in fact, I don't at all approve of it, though the world will keep turning for all I say — it is not unheard of for an arrangement to be worked out."

"An arrangement? I'm sorry, but you'll have to spell that one out a little more."

"My dear, dear country mouse! An arrangement with the restaurant, of course. Good as the fare is at *L'Engouement Noir,* for instance, you don't suppose there isn't a certain latitude in the prices on the menu?"

"You mean they give rebates?"

"More often they'll let you take it out in custom. If you bring them someone for dinner, they'll let you take someone to lunch."

"That's news to me."

"I daresay the boys will all be friendlier when they see you're not entirely above temptation. But don't think, mignon, that I'm asking you to peddle your ass. Only your smile."

Daniel smiled.

Daniel took Mr. Ormund's advice to heart and was soon a familiar figure at all the relevant restaurants: at *Lieto Fino,* at *L'Engouement Noir,* at *Evviva il Coltello,* at *La Didone Abbandonata.* Nor did he pay for these banquetings with his virtue, such as it was. He only had to flirt, which he did anyhow, without trying.

His expanded social life meant, necessarily, that he had fewer evenings to spend at home with Mrs. Schiff, but they saw nearly as much of each other now in company as they had in private, for Mrs. Schiff was an old *habituée* of *La Didone* and *Lieto Fino.* To be seen at her table (which was also, often, the table of Ernesto Rey) was no small distinction, and Daniel's stock rose higher among those patrons who paid heed to such things (and who would go there, *except* to pay heed to such things?), while in the ushers' changing room Daniel — or rather, Ben Bosola — had become the star of the moment, without an intervening stage of having been just one of the boys.

No one was more instrumental in Daniel's winning to such pre-eminence than the person who had so little time ago tattled on him to Mr. Ormund. Lee Rappacini had been working at the Metastasio almost as long as Mr. Ormund, though to look at them side by side you wouldn't have believed it. Lee's classic face and figure seemed as ageless as Greek marble, though not, certainly, as white, for he, like his su-

perior in this one respect, was a phoney. Not, however, by preference, but to gratify the whim of his latest sponsor, none other than that latest luminary, Geoffrey Bladebridge. Further to gratify his sponsor's whims, Lee wore (its molded plastic bulging from the white tights of his livery) what was known in the trade as an insanity belt, the purpose of which was to ensure that no one else should enjoy, gratis, what Bladebridge was paying for. As to what benefits the castrato did enjoy, and his rate of payment, mum was the word, though naturally speculation was rife.

Lee's mobile captivity was a source of much drama. Even to go to the toilet he had to have resort to Mr. Ormund, who was entrusted with one of the keys. Every night there were remarks, pleasantries, and playful attempts to see if the device might be circumvented without actually being removed. It couldn't. Daniel, as laureate of the changing room, wrote the following limerick celebrating this situation:

A tawny young usher named
Lee
Wore a garment with this
guarantee:
His bowels would burst
Or would turn into wurst
If ever he lost the last key.

To which Lee's ostensible and probably heartfelt response was simply gratitude, for the attention. His enforced retirement was having the effect it usually does: people had stopped being actively interested. To be made the butt of a joke was still to be, for the nonce, a kind of cynosure.

This was a frail enough basis for friendship, but it developed that he and Daniel had something in common. Lee loved music, and though that love had been, like Daniel's, unrequited, it smoldered on. He continued to take voice lessons and sang, Sunday mornings, in a church choir.

It soon developed that they shared not only a love of music for its own sake but a lust for flight as well. For Lee as for Daniel this had always been a balked desire and (therefore) a subject better to be avoided. Indeed, there was no one who worked at or frequented the Metastasio who had much to say about flying. The castrati who reigned supreme on its stage seemed as little capable of flight as of sex. Some claimed that though they were able to fly, they had no wish to, that song itself was glory enough, but this was generally thought to be a face-saving imposture. They didn't fly because they couldn't, and the happy result (for their audience) was that they did not, like most other great singers, simply vanish into the ether at the height of their careers. As the audiences of Naples had so long ago proclaimed: *Evviva il coltello!* Long live the knife — the knife by whose actions such voices were made.

Daniel had thought himself cured of his old longings, thought he'd achieved a realistic, grown-up renunciation. Life had denied him any number of supreme pleasures and ultimate fulfillments, despite which it was still worth living. But now, talking with Lee and worrying the meatless bone of

why and wherefore *they* were set apart, he felt the familiar anguish return, that immense and exquisite self-pity that seemed tantamount to a martyrdom.

By now, of course, Daniel knew all there was to be known about the theory, if not the practice, of flight, and he took a kind of donnish satisfaction in disabusing Lee of many fond misconceptions. Lee believed, for instance, that the basic trigger that released the singer's spirit from his body was emotion, so that if you could just put enough *con amore* into what you sang, you'd lift off. But Daniel explained, citing the best authorities, that emotion was quite literally only the half of it, and the other half was transcendence. You had to move, with the music, to a condition above the ego, beyond your emotion, but without losing track of its shape or its size. Lee believed (this being the first article of bel canto faith) that words were more or less irrelevant and music was paramount. *Primo la musica.* In evidence of this he could adduce some awesomely ridiculous lyrics that had nevertheless been the occasion for one or another proven flight. But on this point too Daniel could give chapter and verse. Flight, or the release to flight, took place at the moment when the two discrete hemispheres of the brain stood in perfect equipoise, stood and were sustained. For the brain was a natural gnostic, split into those very dichotomies of semantic sense and linguistically unmediated perception, of words and music, that were the dichotomies of song. This was why, though the attempt had been made so often, no other musicians, but only singers, could strike that delicate balance in their art that mirrored an answering, arcane balance in the tissues of the mind. One might come by one's artistry along other paths, of course; all artists, whatever their art, must acquire the knack of transcendence, and once it had been acquired in one discipline, some of the skill was transferable. But the only way to fly was to sing a song that you understood, and meant, down to the soles of your shoes.

Daniel and Lee did not limit themselves to theory. Lee was the proud, if powerless, possessor of a Grundig 1300 Amphion *Fluchtpunktapparat,* the finest and most expensive flight apparatus available. No one else, until Daniel, had ever been allowed to try and use it. It stood in the center of a bare, white chapel of a room in Geoffrey Bladebridge's penthouse apartment on West End Avenue, where, on the afternoons when Bladebridge was not about, they would hammer at the doors of heaven, begging to be let in. As well might they have tried flapping their arms in order to fly. They soldiered on, regardless, through aria after aria, song after weary song, never saying die and getting nowhere.

Life, to be fair, was not all striving and yearning and certain defeat. In fact, barring those frustrating sessions hooked up with the *Fluchtpunktapparat,* Daniel had never been happier, or if he had, it was so long ago he couldn't remember what it had been like. Now that he had a registered job, he could take out books from the public library,

though with Mrs. Schiff's enormous stock of books at his disposal that dream-come-true was almost a superfluous luxury. He read, and listened to records, and sometimes just lazed about without a care. The whirl of his social life only accounted for two or three evenings a week, and he worked out at the gym with about the same regularity.

Living out of the way of nightly temptation, he found his appetite for sex much reduced, though his life style was still a long way from strict celibacy. When he did feel like mixing in, he went downtown to his old haunts and so preserved his reputation at the Metastasio for friendly inaccessibility. As a result, there was a decided falling-off of active interest among those patrons of the opera who, quite understandably, hoped for a better quid pro quo than Daniel was prepared to offer. What with the rationing that had gone into effect in January, it was beginning to be a buyer's market for good-looking boys. His life grew still quieter, which suited him just fine.

Strangely (for he'd feared it would be a source of upset, or at any rate of depression), Daniel found he liked living with Boa and looking after her. There was a set of exercises he went through each morning, moving her limbs so as to keep the muscles in a minimally functional condition. While he worked her balsa-light arms in the prescribed semaphores, he would talk to her, in somewhat the half-conscious, half-serious way that Mrs. Schiff would talk to Incubus.

Did Daniel think she was listening? It wasn't out of the question. Unless she'd left the earth utterly, it stood to reason that she might sometimes come back to see how her abandoned vehicle was getting on — whether it might, conceivably, be driven again. And if she did, it didn't seem unreasonable to suppose that she would also take an interest in Daniel, and stop for a while to hear what he had to say. He knew now that they'd never truly been husband and wife and that he had, therefore, no legitimate grievance at being left in the lurch. What he'd thought had been love for Boa was just being in love. Or so he would tell her while he manipulated her light, lifeless limbs. But was it really so? It was hard to remember the exact feelings of twelve, no, thirteen years ago. As well try to recall the vanished weathers of those few months they'd been together, or the life he'd led in some previous incarnation.

So it did seem strange to find himself actually feeling a kind of fondness for this bag of bones that lay in the corner of his room, breathing so quietly that she never could be heard, even from close by. Strange to suppose that she might be with him, nevertheless, at any moment of the night or day, observing, and judging, like a bona fide guardian angel.

Marcella, being a season subscriber, continued to turn up at the Metastasio every Tuesday. Finding that Daniel had after all become an usher, she couldn't resist seeking him out at intermission or (after he'd been transferred to the Dress Circle) lingering out on 44th Street to waylay him after the

show. "Just to say hello." What she wanted was gossip about the singers. Any little scrap she accepted with the reverence of one being initiated into solemn mysteries. Daniel thought her a fool, but he enjoyed the role of high priest and so continued to supply her with crumbs and tidbits about her demigods. After a while he took to sneaking her into a good seat that he knew to be standing empty. Marcella insisted on expressing her gratitude to Daniel by bringing him five-pound canisters of Hyprotine Nutritional Supplement, which she "shoplifted" from a deli where she had established an understanding with the clerk at the check-out counter. What a world of mutuality it was!

One evening, after Daniel, with the collusion of Lee Rappacini, had managed to get her into the orchestra to see the last two acts of what was billed as Sarro's *Achille in Sciro* (though, in fact, the score was Mrs. Schiff's creation from first to last, and one of her best), Marcella accosted him at the corner of 44th and 8th with more than her usual urgency. Daniel, who was wearing only his uniform and freezing his shapely ass off, explained that tonight was out of the question, since he was on his way to a dinner at *La Didone* (with, once again, the constant Mr. Carshalton, whom nothing, it seemed, could discourage).

Marcella, insisting she needed only a minute, reached into a handbag and took out a box of Fanny Farmer chocolates with a big red bow around it.

"Really, Marcella, that's going too far."

"Oh, it isn't for you, Ben," she said apologetically. "It's a Thanksgiving present for Ernesto Rey."

"Then why don't you give it to *him?* He'll be singing tomorrow night."

"But I'll be working then, you see. And, anyhow, I couldn't. I really just couldn't. And if I did get up the nerve, *he* probably wouldn't take it, and if he did take it, he'd probably throw it away as soon as my back was turned. That's what I've heard, anyhow."

"That's because there might be poison in it. Or something unseemly. It's been known to happen."

Marcella's eyes began to glisten. "You don't think because I've said a word or two in praise of Geoffrey Bladebridge, that I'm part of some claque, do you?"

"I don't think it, no, but Rey doesn't know you from Adam. Or Eve, for that matter."

Marcella wiped her tears away and smiled to show that her heartbreak was of no account. "That's why —" She snuffled. "— if it came from someone he *knows,* it wouldn't be so futile. You could tell him the chocolates are from someone *you* know. And trust. And that they're just my way of thanking him for the pleasure of so many beautiful performances. Would you do that for me?"

Daniel shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

He gave the chocolates that same evening to Rey, who was also dining at *La Didone,* with his agent Irwin Tauber. Daniel explained the situation, and Rey accepted the gift with a nod,

not even bothering to ask him to thank his benefactress. Daniel returned to his *escargots* and Mr. Carshalton's descriptions of the Vermont wilderness, and he thought no more about it.

The next evening a stagehand delivered to Daniel a hand-written note from Rey, who was singing *Norma.* The note read: "Do thank your friend on my behalf for her box of sweets and her so friendly letter. She seems entirely charming. I don't understand why she is so shy as not to approach me directly. I'm sure we'd have got on!" Daniel was miffed at Marcella's smuggling a letter into her box of chocolates, but as Rey's reaction was so cordial, what did it matter?

He genuinely forgot the whole thing — and so never connected it with Rey's altered manner toward him, which didn't amount to much more, at first, than common courtesy. When he called on Mrs. Schiff and found Daniel at home, he remembered his name — for the first time since they'd been officially introduced seven months ago. At Christmas, Rey gave Daniel a sweater, saying it had been a gift from one of his fans and didn't fit him.

In February, Rey asked Daniel to dinner at *Evviva il Coltello,* an invitation he delivered in such caressing tones that Daniel could no longer evade his meaning. He said no, he'd rather not. Rey, still purring, demanded a reason. He couldn't think of any except the true one — that if Rey should demand that instant capitulation that all stars seemed to think was their due, his refusal might well prompt Rey to retaliate by putting Daniel on his blacklist. His job would be in jeopardy, and his arrangement with Mrs. Schiff as well. At last, to avoid explanations, he consented to be taken out: "But only this once."

All through dinner Rey talked about himself — his roles, his reviews, his triumphs over enemies. Daniel had never before been witness to the full sweep of the man's vanity and hunger for praise and still more praise. I was at once an awesome spectacle and a deadly bore. At the conclusion of the dinner Rey declared, flatly and matter-of-factly, that he was in love with Daniel. It was such an absurd *non sequitur* to the past two hours of self-aggrandizing soliloquy that Daniel nearly got the giggles. It might have been better if he had, since Rey seemed determined to regard his polite demurs as shyness.

"Come, come," Rey protested, still in good humor, "let's have no more pretences."

"Who's pretending?"

"Have it your way, *idolo mio.* But there *was* that letter — that can't be denied — and I shall continue to keep it —" He laid his many-ringed hand on the handkerchief peeking out of the breast pocket of his suit. "— here, next to my heart."

"Mr. Rey, that letter wasn't from me. And I have no idea what it said."

With a coquettish glance Rey reached into the inner pocket of his suit and removed a folded and much-frayed paper, which he placed beside Daniel's coffee cup. "In that case, perhaps you'd like to *read* what it says."

He hesitated.

"Or do you know it by heart?"

"I'll read it, I'll read it."

Marcella's letter was written on scented, floral-bordered notepaper in a schoolgirlish script embellished with a few cautious curlicues meant for calligraphy. Its message aspired to the grand manner in much the same way. "To my most dear Ernesto," it began. "I love you! What more can I say? I realize that love is not possible between two beings so different as you and I. I am but a plain, homely girl, and even if I were as beautiful in reality as I am in my daydreams, I don't suppose that would make much difference. There would still be a Gulf between us. Why do I write, if it is useless to declare my love? To thank you for the priceless gift of your music! Listening to your godlike voice has given me the most important, the sublimest moments of my life. I live for music, and what music is there that can equal yours? I love you — it always comes back to those three little words, which mean so much. I ... love ... you!" It was signed, "A worshipper from afar."

"You think I wrote this glop?" Daniel asked, having read it through.

"Can you look me in the eye and deny it?"

"Of course I deny it! I *didn't* write it! It was written by Marcella Levine, who is just what she says, a plain homely girl with a thing for opera singers."

"A plain homely girl," Rey repeated with a knowing smile.

"It's the truth."

"Oh, I appreciate that. It's my truth too, the truth of my *Norma.* But it's rare for a young man of *your* nature to understand such riddles so clearly. I think you really may have the makings of an artist in you."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. What would I be doing —" He stopped short, on the verge of an irretrievable slight. It wouldn't do to declare that no one in his right mind would write mash notes to a eunuch, when Rey evidently took such attentions for granted.

"Yes?" Rey folded the note and replaced it, next to his heart.

"Listen, what if I introduced you to the girl who wrote the note? She has a Tuesday subscription, and you're singing next Tuesday, aren't you?"

"Sono Eurydice," he said in melting tones.

"Then if you like, I'll take you to her between the acts."

"Tuesday, then. And shall we come here again after, for a bite?"

"Sure. The *three* of us."

"That assumes, *caro,* that there *are* three of us."

"Just wait. You'll see."

On Tuesday, at the intermission, Rey appeared in the lower lobby of the Metastasio, already decked out in the costume of Eurydice and seeming, even close up and without the lights assisting, a very sylph, all tulle and moonlight — albeit a sylph of the court rather more than of the country, with enough paste jewels to have equipped a small chandelier and enough powder on his face and wig to have sunk a thousand ships. Being so majestical, he moved with the freedom of a queen, parting the crowds before him as effectively as a cordon of police. He com-

mandeered Daniel from his post at the orange juice stand, and together they mounted the grand staircase to the Grand Tier level and then (to everyone's wonder) went up the much less grand staircase to the balcony, where, as Daniel had been certain they would, they found Marcella at the edge of a group of the faithful. Seeing Daniel and Rey advancing upon her, she stiffened into a defensive posture, shoulders braced and neck retracted.

They stopped before her. The group at whose edge Marcella had been standing now reformed with her and her visitors at its center.

"Marcella," Daniel said, in a manner meant to assuage, "I'd like you to meet Ernesto Rey. Ernesto, may I present Marcella Levine."

Marcella dipped her head slowly in acknowledgement.

Rey offered his slender hand, dazzling with false diamonds. Marcella, who was sensitive on the subject of hands, backed away, pressing knotted fists into the brown velveteen folds of her dress.

"Daniel tells me, my dear, that it is to you that I am beholden for a *letter* I lately received." You could almost hear the clavier underlining his *recitativo,* so ripe was his delivery.

"Pardon me?" It was all she could manage.

"Daniel tells me, my dear, that it is to you that I am beholden for a *letter* I lately received." His reading of the line did not vary in any particular, nor could you tell, from his regal inflections, whether this statement portended thanks or reproof.

"A letter? I don't understand."

"Did you, or did you not, give this charming young man a *letter* for me, enclosed in a box of chocolates?"

"No," she shook her head emphatically, "I never."

"Because," Rey went on, addressing the entire crowd that had gathered about them, "If it *was* your letter...."

The long blonde braid wagged wildly in denial.

"... I only wanted to say what a very kind, and warm, and wonderful letter it was, and to thank you for it, *personally.* But you tell me that you *didn't* send it!"

"No! No, the usher must have ... confused me with someone else."

"Yes, that's what he must have done. Well, my dear, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Marcella bowed her head, as though to the block.

"I hope you enjoy the second act."

There was an approving murmur from all the onlookers.

"And now you must all excuse me. I have my entrance to make! Ben, my little trickster, I shall see *you* at eleven." With which he spun round in a billow of tulle and made his way, royally, down the stairs.

Daniel had changed out of his uniform into a ragtag sweater and a pair of jeans and would not have been allowed into *Evviva il Coltello* if he hadn't been accompanying the great Ernesto. Then, to compound the offense, he told the waiter he wasn't hungry and wanted nothing more than a glass of mineral water.

"You really should take better care of yourself, *caro,*" Rey insisted, while the waiter still hovered in the background.

"You *know* it was her," Daniel said, in a furious whisper, resuming their conversation from the street.

"In fact, I know it wasn't."

"You terrified her. That's why she denied it."

"Ah, but you see I was looking at her eyes. A person's eyes always tell the truth. It's as good as a lie-detector test."

"Then look at mine and tell me if *I'm* lying."

"I've been looking for weeks now — and they are, all the time."

Daniel replied with a subdued Bronx cheer.

They sat in silence, Daniel glowering, Rey complacently amused, until the waiter came with wine and mineral water. Rey tasted, and approved, the wine.

When the waiter was out of earshot, Daniel asked, *"Why?* If you think I wrote that letter, why would I go on denying it?"

"As Zerlina says: *Vorrei e non vorrei.* She'd like to, but she also wouldn't like to. Or as someone else says, I forget who exactly: *T'amo e tremo.* And I can understand that. Indeed, with the baleful example of your friend before you, Bladebridge's inamorata, I can sympathize with your hesitations, even now."

"Mr. Rey, I'm not hesitating. I'm refusing."

"As you like. But you should consider that the longer you resist, the harder the terms of surrender. It's true of all sieges."

"Can I go now?"

"You will leave when I do. I don't intend to be made a public mockery. You will dine with me whenever I ask you to, and you will display your usual high spirits when you do so." As an object lesson Rey splashed wine into Daniel's glass until it brimmed over onto the tablecloth. "Because," he went on, in his throatiest contralto, "if you do not, I shall see to it that you have no job and no apartment."

Daniel lifted the glass in a toast, spilling still more of the wine. "Cheers, Ernesto!"

Rey clinked his glass with Daniel's. "Cheers, Ben. Oh, and one last thing — I don't care how else you choose to pass your time, but I don't want to hear that you've been seen in public with Geoffrey Bladebridge, whether alone or in a group."

"What's *he* got to do with anything?"

"My sentiments exactly."

The waiter appeared with a new tablecloth, which he spread deftly over the one stained by the spilled wine. Rey informed him that Daniel had regained his appetite, and Daniel was presented with the menu. Without needing to look he ordered the most expensive hors d'oeuvre and entree that the restaurant offered.

Rey seemed delighted. He lit a cigarette and began to discuss his performance.

March was a month of judgments. The annual disaster of winter seemed

to have rent asunder all the rotted threads of the social fabric in a single weekend. Social organization collapsed beneath successive shocks of power failures, shortages, blizzards, floods, and ever more audacious acts of terrorism. Units of the National Guard sent out to arrest this avalanche defected en masse. Armies of crazed urban refugees spilled of the ghettos and swarmed over the fallow countryside, only to suffer the fate of Napoleon's troops in their retreat from Moscow. That was in Illinois, but every state had a tale of similar *terribilitá*. After a while you stopped bothering to keep track, and after a while longer you couldn't anyhow, since the media stopped reporting the latest disasters, on the hopeful theory that the avalanche might stop misbehaving if it weren't spoiled by so much attention.

Meanwhile life went on pretty much as usual in New York, where disaster was a way of life. The Metastasio advanced curtain time an hour so that people could be home before the 12:30 curfew, and one by one the restaurants catering to the bel canto trade closed for the duration, all but *Evviva,* which doubled its prices, halved its portions, and carried on. The general feeling in the city was one of jittery exhilaration, camaraderie, and black paranoia. You never knew whether the person ahead of you in a breadline might not be the next thread to snap and — Ping! — shoot you down in your tracks, or whether you might not, instead, fall head-over-heels in love. Mostly people stayed indoors, grateful for each hour that they could go on gliding gently down the stream. Home was a lifeboat, and life was but a dream.

Such was Daniel's *Weltanschauung,* and such, pretty much, was Mrs. Schiff's as well, though her stoic calm was modified by a melancholy concern for Incubus, who, despite the bags of Pet Bricquettes stockpiled in the closet, was having a bad time of it. Early that year he'd developed an ear infection, which got steadily worse until he couldn't bear to be stroked anywhere about the head. His balance was affected. Then, either from resentment at being kept indoors or because he'd truly lost control, he stopped using his box in the bathroom and began pissing and shitting at random throughout the apartment. The smell of sick spaniel had always been a presence in these rooms, but now, as undiscovered turds fermented in the mounds of castoff clothes, as dribbles and pools of urine soaked down through the layers of detritus, the stench became a reality even for Mrs. Schiff — and unbearable to anyone else. Finally Rey presented an ultimatum — either she had the apartment cleared out and scrubbed down to the floorboards, or he would stop calling on her. Mrs. Schiff submitted to necessity, and she and Daniel spent two days cleaning up. Four large bags of clothes were sent off to be cleaned, and four times that amount went into the garbage. Of the many discoveries made in the course of these excavations the most notable was that of the entire score of an opera she'd written eight years ago to the da Ponte libretto for *Axur, re d'Ormus.* After an airing, this was despatched to the Metastasio and

accepted for production the following year. She gave a quarter of her fee to Daniel for finding the score, and the remainder just covered her dry-cleaning bill. A silver lining, though clouds continued to gather.

The first major intrusion of the world's disorders on their private lives occurred when the pharmacist at First National Flightpaths informed Daniel that the Annex could no longer supply him with the liquid nutrient by which Boa was kept alive. The legal fiction of her death meant that no rationing card could be issued in her name. Daniel's panicky protests elicited the address of a dealer in black market medical supplies, an elderly, out-of-work pharmacist in Brooklyn Heights, who pretended, when Daniel went to him, to have given up such traffickings. Such were the protocols of the black market. Daniel waited two days for his need to be verified. Finally a boy who couldn't have been more than ten or eleven called at the apartment while Daniel was at the Teatro, and Mrs. Schiff showed him to Daniel's room, where Boa lay in her endless enchanted sleep. The need being verified, Daniel was allowed to buy a two-weeks' supply, no more, at a price formidably higher than the going rate at First National. He was advised that the price was likely to continue to rise so long as rationing was in force.

Transatlantic phone lines had been one of the first victims of the crisis. You couldn't even send a cable now without government authorization. The mail was the only way he could get an SOS through to Miss Marspan. A Special Delivery letter might take two days, or a month, or might not arrive at all. Daniel sent off four letters from four different post offices; all arrived at Miss Marspan's flat in Chelsea the same morning. If she had any suspicions that Daniel was inventing difficulties to line his own pocket, she kept them to herself. She increased her banker's order to five hundred dollars a month, twice the sum he'd asked for, and sent him a rather valedictory letter full of news about the decline and fall of civilization on *her* side of the Atlantic.

Food had become everyone's problem. According to the media's steady buzz of placatory bulletins, there was enough to go round for many months to come. The difficulty was distribution. Supermarkets and grocery stores throughout the city had been pressed into service by the Rationing Board, but black market prices were now so inflated that it was worth your life to be seen leaving a distribution center with an armload (or pocketfull) of groceries. Even convoys of five or six men might be set upon. As for the police, they were mainly concentrated in the parks or outside the parking lots where the black markets operated. Despite this protective presence not a week went by without another, and more violent, mob assault upon these last tawdry bastions of privilege. By the end of March there was no longer a black market in the physical sense — only a network of individuals united by an invisible hierarchy. The economic system was being simplified to its atom-

ic components: every man was his own armed camp.

Thanks to the closet stocked with Pet Bricquettes, Daniel and Mrs. Schiff were never reduced to direst need. Daniel, a passable though seldom inspired cook, concocted a kind of bread pudding from crumbled Bricquettes, Hyprotine powder, and an artificial sweetener, which Mrs. Schiff claimed actually to prefer to her usual fare. He also organized groups of the building's residents to make trips to their distribution center, a former Red Owl Supermarket on Broadway. And, in general, he coped.

As the weather warmed it began to look as though he would scrape through the crisis without having to ask for Ernesto Rey's help. He would have, if worst had come to worst (if, for instance, Miss Marspan had balked at the rising cost of charity). Living with Boa's body had confirmed Daniel in his sense of duty, had made it seem less abstract. He would do anything he had to to keep her alive — and in his own possession. What could Rey demand of him, after all, that he hadn't done already, either by preference or out of curiosity? This was a question he tended to dwell on rather more than was quite healthy. He would lie there alone in his room going over the possibilities with a glazed, insomniac persistence. Some of those possibilities were pretty terrible, but fortunately none of his imaginings, even the mildest, would come to pass.

It had become clear that Incubus was dying, though neither the dog nor his mistress were prepared to face the fact. He kept pretending he wanted to be taken out for a walk, moping about the hallway and whining and scratching at the outside door. Even if he'd had the strength to make it as far as the corner lamppost, there was no question of giving in to him, since a dog on the street these days was just meat on the hoof and an incitement to riot.

Mrs. Schiff was devoted to the dying spaniel, and Incubus took every unfair advantage of her sympathy. He was everlastingly querulous, begging for food that he then refused to eat. He wouldn't let Mrs. Schiff read or write or even talk to anyone but himself. If she tried to get round these prohibitions by disguising a conversation with Daniel as a tête-a-tête with Incubus, he would sense it and punish her by staggering off to the darkest part of the apartment and flopping down in inert despair. A few moments later Mrs. Schiff would be there beside him, petting him and apologizing, for she could never hold out very long against his sulks.

One night, not long after the closing of the gym, Incubus came into Mrs. Schiff's room and insisted on being helped up onto her bed, though until now he'd accepted the new prohibition against this. His incontinence and the ensuing drastic overhaul of the apartment had inspired Incubus with an almost human sense of guilt, which each new spontaneous defecation served to keep alive.

Daniel, passing the room and seeing Incubus sprawled on the bed, set in to scolding him, but both dog and mis-

tress gave him such pitiable looks that he didn't have the heart to insist. He came in the room and sat in the armchair by the bed. Incubus lifted his tail a scant inch off the sheets and let it drop. Daniel patted him on the rump. He began to whine: he wanted a story.

"I think he wants you to tell him a story," said Daniel.

Mrs. Schiff nodded wearily. She had developed a kind of subdued horror of her own whimsies from having had to recite them so many times when she was feeling the opposite of whimsical herself. Her Scheherazade complex, she called it. It was useless, at these times, to try and abridge the tale being told, for Incubus could always sense when she'd departed from the established format and formulae and would whine and worry her until the straying story line had been brought back to the narrow paths of orthodoxy. At last she'd learned, like a good sheep, not to stray.

"This is the story," Mrs. Schiff began, as she'd begun so many times before, "of Bunny Honeybunny and his sister Honey Honeybunny and of the beautiful Christmas they spent in Bethlehem, the very first Christmas of all. One night, just about at bedtime, when Bunny Honeybunny was about to turn in for a well-deserved rest, for he had had, as usual, a *very* busy day, his dear little sister Honey Honeybunny came hopping, hippity-hop, into their cozy little burrow deep in the roots of a gnarly old oak tree, and she said to her brother — 'Bunny! Bunny! You must come out and look at the sky!' Bunny had seldom seen his sister so excited, so, sleepy as he was (and he was very sleepy) —"

Incubus knew better than to succumb to such hints. *He* was wide-awake and intent upon the story.

"— he hopped, hippity-hop, out of their dear little burrow, and what do you think he saw, shining up there in the sky?"

Incubus looked at Daniel.

"What did he see?" Daniel asked.

"He saw a star! And he said to his sister Honey Honeybunny, 'What a beautiful and truly amazing star! Let us follow it.' So they followed the star. They followed it over the meadows where the cows had settled down to sleep, and across the broad highways, and over the lakes as well, for it was winter and the lakes were all covered with ice, until at last they arrived in Bethlehem, which is in Judea. By this time, naturally, they were both quite tired from their journey and wanted nothing so much as to go to bed. So they went to the biggest hotel in town, the Bethlehem Hotel, but the night clerk was very rude and said there was no room at the hotel, because of the census the government was taking, and that even if there had been room he wouldn't have let rabbits into his hotel. Poor Honey Honeybunny thought she would cry, but as she didn't want to make her brother unhappy on *her* account, she decided to be brave. So, with a merry twitch of her long furry ears, she turned to Bunny and said, 'We don't need to stay at any silly old hotel. Let's go find a manger and stay there. Mangers are more fun anyhow!' So they went to look for a manger,

which was no problem at all, for, lo and behold, there was a cheery little manger just behind the Bethlehem Hotel with oxen and asses and cows and sheep ... and something else besides! Something so wonderful and soft and warm and precious they couldn't believe their eyes."

"What did they see in the manger?" asked Daniel.

"They saw Baby Jesus!"

"No kidding."

"Yes, there he was, the little Lord God, and Mary and Joseph too, kneeling beside him, and any number of shepherds and angels and wise men, all kneeling down and offering Baby Jesus presents. Poor Bunny Honeybunny and Honey Honeybunny felt just terrible, of course, because they didn't have any presents for Baby Jesus. So, to cut a long story short —"

Incubus looked up vigilantly.

"— the two darling rabbits hopped off into the night, hippity-hop, all the way to the North Pole, which represents a lot of hopping, but there was never a word of complaint from *them.* And when they got to the North Pole, what do you suppose they found?"

"What did they find there?"

"Santa's workshop is what they found. It was still early in the evening, so Santa was still there, and Mrs. Santa Claus as well, and all the little elves, millions of them, who help Santa make his toys, and the reindeer who help Santa deliver them, but I'm *not* going to name all the reindeer."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm tired and I have a headache."

Incubus began to whine.

"Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen. And Dasher and Prancer and ... and.... Help me."

"Rudolph?"

"With his nose so bright, of course. How could I forget Rudolph? Well, after everyone had sat down in front of the blazing fire and warmed their little paws and enjoyed a nice slice of Mrs. Santa's carrot cake, the two Honeybunnies explained why they'd had to come to the North Pole. They told Santa about Baby Jesus and how they'd wanted to give him a present for Christmas but didn't have any. 'So what we were hoping,' said Honey Honeybunny, 'was that we could give him ours.' Santa Claus, naturally, was deeply touched by this, and Mrs. Santa had to turn away to dry her tears. Tears of happiness, you understand."

"Is there any other kind?" Daniel asked.

Incubus shifted his head uneasily.

"Well," said Mrs. Schiff, folding her hands purposefully in her lap, "Santa told the Honeybunnies that *of course* they could give their presents to Baby Jesus, if they would help him load them into his great bag and put it into his sleigh."

"And what were the presents they put in the bag?" Daniel asked.

"There were rooty-toot-toots and rummy-tum-tums and dolls and frisbees and doctor kits with candy pills and tiny little thermometers for pretending to take a temperature. Oh, and a hundred other lovely things: games and candy and myrrh and frankincense and opera records and the Complete

Works of Sir Walter Scott."

Incubus laid down his head, content.

"And he loaded the bag of presents into his sleigh and helped the two Honeybunnies in behind him and gave a crack of his whip and —"

"Since when does Santa have a whip?"

"Santa's had a whip time out of mind. But he rarely if ever has to use it. Reindeer know instinctively where they should fly. So — away they all flew, instinctively, like the down of a thistle, straight to the manger in Bethlehem where Jesus and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and angels and wise men and even the night clerk at the hotel, who'd experienced a change of heart, were waiting for Santa and the Honeybunnies; and when they saw them up there in the sky, which was lit up, you'll remember, by that beautiful star, they all let out a great hurrah. 'Hurrah!' they shouted. 'Hurrah for the Honeybunnies! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!'"

"Is that the end of the story?"

"That's the end of the story."

"Do you know what, Mrs. Schiff?"

"What?"

"Incubus just went wee-wee in your bed. I can see it on the sheets."

Mrs. Schiff sighed and nudged Incubus, who was dead.

There seemed to be general agreement among the commentators, many of them not given to expressions of easy optimism, that a new day was dawning, that a corner had been turned, that life would go on. Those for whom the word was not a bugaboo said there had been a revolution, while those less millennially-minded called it a time of reconciliation. The weather was nicer, of course, as it invariably is in May and June. No one was quite sure what marked the commencement of this brighter era, much less whether the forces of darkness were in full retreat or had only stopped to catch their breath, but when the country woke up from the nightmare of its long collapse, a lot of problems had disappeared from the headlines along with a number of people.

The most amazing change, from Daniel's point of view, was that flight had been decriminalized in four of the Farm Belt states (though not yet in Iowa). Along another axis of reconciliation, the Reverend Jack Van Dyke was back in the news as the first bigshot liberal to support the Puritan Renewal League, the latest splinter group of Undergoders to try and make it in the big time. *Time* magazine had a cover photo showing Van Dyke and Goodman Halifax rigged out in the black Stetsons, stiff white collars, red rayon bow ties, and insignia-blazoned denim jackets that were the P.R.L.'s cheerfully anachronistic uniform. The two men were shown pledging allegiance to a flag in Arlington Cemetery. It wasn't Daniel's idea of the dawn of a new era, but Halifax had been behind the move to decriminalize flight, which was certainly to be counted to his favor, however involuted and Van Dykean the motives ascribed to him by *Time*.

Daniel would have taken a larger

and more affirming interest in these developments, but, sad to say, the vector of his own life refused to follow this general upward trend. Worst, in fact, had come to worst, for Miss Marspan had discontinued her assistance in the most definitive way. She was dead, one of a multitude to perish in London's ongoing, multiple epidemic. Daniel was informed of her death in a telex from her bank. The bank regretted any inconvenience that might issue from the sudden interruption of its monthly drafts, but as the deceased had made no provision in her will for such payments to be maintained, it could not act otherwise.

Daniel was similarly limited in his course of action. Until the spirit of the new era reached the Rationing Board and moved them to reconsider the plight of such as Boa, it would not be possible to return her to the dismal wards of the First National Flightpaths Annex. In any case, he no longer had cash sufficient to secure her stay at the Annex for more than a few months. Telling himself he had no choice, he went to Ernesto Rey.

The terms set for his capitulation were not generous. He was to have his skin dyed a deep teak-brown, all but a broad circle on each cheek that would be left its natural color, so as (Rey explained) to reveal his blushes. His hair, being jet-black, need not be dyed, but would be frizzed, fluffed, and shaped, topiary-wise, as fashion should dictate. He would accompany Rey whenever required to, wearing the livery of the Metastasio, or something equally gay and gaudy, and he would perform small services symbolic of his subjection, such as opening doors, page turning, and shining shoes. Further, he would engage, actively and unstintingly, in whatever carnal pursuits Rey should direct him towards, provided only (this was the one concession Daniel was able to obtain) such pursuits were legal and within the natural range of his competence. He would not otherwise be permitted to have sex, to which end he was to be fitted with an insanity belt. He would affect, both in public and private, to be infatuated with his benefactor, and to all inquiries as to why he acted in these ways he was to reply that he followed the promptings of a loving heart. In return Rey undertook to provide for Boa's well-being for such time as he should require these services of Daniel and for a year thereafter.

The articles of this contract were sworn to at a special dinner at *Evviva il Coltello* in the presence of Mrs. Schiff and Mr. Ormund, both of whom seemed to regard the occasion as auspicious. Mr. Ormund, indeed, was a proper mother of the bride, alternating between outbursts of ebullience and tears. He undertook to deliver Daniel that very evening into the hands of his own cosmetician and to supervise his entire transformation. This was, he declared, the very thing he'd hoped for when first he'd laid eyes on Ben and recognized him as a soul-brother. Mrs. Schiff was less effusive in her congratulations. She obviously regarded his physical remodeling as so much folderol, but she approved the relationship as being calculated to promote Ernesto's

peace of mind and thereby to enhance his art.

Daniel had never before known humiliation. He'd experienced fleeting embarrassments. He'd regretted ill-considered actions. But through all his tribulations, in Spirit Lake and during his long years as a temp in New York, he had never felt any deep or lasting shame. Now, though he tried as before to retreat to the sanctuary of an inner, uncoercible freedom, he knew humiliation. He did not believe, any longer, in his innocence or righteousness. He accepted the judgment of the world — the sneers, the smiles, the wisecracks, the averted eyes. All this was his due. He could wear the livery of the Metastasio without injury to his pride — even, at his better moments, with a kind of moral panache, like those pages in Renaissance paintings who seem, by virtue of youth and beauty, the rivals of the princes whom they serve. But he could not wear the livery of prostitution with so cavalier a grace: it pinched, it tickled, it itched, it burned, it abraded his soul.

He tried to tell himself that his condition had not been essentially altered, that, though he might give his neck to the yoke, his spirit remained free. He remembered Barbara Steiner, and the prostitute (her name forgotten) who'd inaugurated his own sexual career in Elmore, and the countless professionals here in New York with whom, in their free moments, he'd sported, both hustlers and whores. But there was no comfort in such comparisons. If he had not judged them so harshly as he judged himself, it was because just by being prostitutes they had placed themselves outside the pale. Whatever other qualities of worth they might boast — wit, imagination, generosity, exuberance — they remained, in Daniel's eyes, honorless. As now he was himself. For didn't they —didn't he? — say, in effect, that love was a lie, or rather, a skill? Not, as he'd believed, the soul's testing ground; not, somehow, a sacrament.

Sex, if it was not the soul's avenue into this world, and the flesh's out of it, was simply another means by which people gained advantage of each other. It was of the world, worldly. But what was left then that wasn't worldly, that didn't belong to Caesar? Flight, perhaps, though it seemed that dimension of grace would always be denied him.

Daniel's disposition was not sweetened by tribulation. He made an effort in public to carry on blithely, but at home he whined. Finally Mrs. Schiff took him to task.

"It's not humiliation that's bothering you at all, Daniel. It's anxiety. Ernesto hasn't required any specifically sexual services and you're getting antsy. Or are you, perhaps, a bit disappointed?"

"As far as I'm concerned he can keep me in wraps till I'm ninety-five: I won't complain."

"I must say, Daniel — you *seem* to be complaining. It's quite possible, you know, that Ernesto will go on being satisfied with the status quo. Our marriage stopped, in effect, with the slicing of the cake."

"So, why does he do it?"

"Bella figura. It's good form to have a glamorous young person in one's private possession. Admittedly, *I* couldn't have been called glamorous, even in my youth, but in those days my father was still a prominent racketeer, so there was a social cachet. In your case, I think he is determined to one-up Bladebridge. The man does worry him — quite needlessly, I think. But among the people whose good opinion he covets your conquest has been taken note of, at least as much as if you were a Rolls-Royce that he'd bought and then had customized."

"Oh, I know all that. But *he* talks about how much he loves me. He's always going on about his *passion.* It's like living inside an opera libretto."

"I could think of nowhere *I'd* rather live. And I do think it ungenerous of you not to lead him on somewhat."

"You mean to say I'm not a good whore."

"Let your conscience be your guide, Daniel."

"What do you suggest I do?"

"Chiefly, take an interest. Ernesto is a singer, and singers want more than anything else to be listened to. Ask to be allowed to go to his rehearsals, to sit in on his master classes. Praise his singing. Effuse. Act as though you meant every word in the letter you wrote to him."

"Damn it, Mrs. Schiff — I didn't write that letter!"

"More's the pity. If you had, then you might be ready to learn to sing yourself. As you are, you never shall.

"No need to rub my nose in it. I guess I've learned that fact of life."

"Ah, there's that whine in your voice again. The bleat of the guiltless lamb. But it isn't some implacable predestining Force that keeps you from being the singer you might be. It's your *choice.*"

Blushes are like tulips. In the spring there is a profusion of them, and then as the year gets rolling they become fewer and fewer. For a while it was enough that he be noticed by a stranger for Daniel to be afflicted by a spasm of shame, but inevitably there were times when, his mind being fixed on other matters, he was oblivious to the attention he received. As a natural consequence, he received less attention. For those moments when the world insisted on goggling, pointing fingers, and calling names, Daniel developed a small arsenal of defense mechanisms, from the pre-emptive sniping of "You're another!" (best delivered to bona fide blacks who limited their hostility to ironic glances) to maniac self-parody, as when he would pretend to strum a banjo and start to sing a brain-damaged medley of minstrel-show tunes (a ploy that could strike terror to the hearts even of potential muggers). Reluctantly, he came to understand the secret phoneys shared with freaks of all descriptions — that people feared him as they might fear to see their own idiot ids capering about before them and proclaiming their secret desires to every passer-by. If only they knew, he would wistfully reflect, that they're not even *my* secret desires, that they're probably not anyone's. So long as he bore that

in mind he could even enjoy grossing people out. And why not? If there is something you'd got to do and a way to enjoy it, you'd be a fool to do it any other way.

Toward his benefactor, too, Daniel took a more accommodating line. Though he never so far relented as to disguise the fact of an enforced compliance, he did try to act the part he'd been engaged to play, albeit woodenly. He resisted the impulse to wince when Rey would pet and pinch and otherwise feign a lubricious interest, which he only did when they were in public, never when they were alone. Then, in a way because there was an equivocal kind of cruelty in it, he began to reciprocate these attentions — but only when they were alone, never in company. He would call him "Sugar Daddy," "Dear Heart," "Lotus Blossom," and any of a hundred other endearments borrowed from Italian and French libretti. Under the pretext of "wanting to look his best" for Rey, he squandered quantities of hard cash on overpriced and tasteless clothes. He ran up huge bills with Mr. Ormund's cosmetician. He coquetted, strutted, posed, and preened. He became a wife.

None of these abominations seemed to register. Perhaps Rey, as a eunuch, accepted Daniel's outrages as a fair representation of human sexuality. Daniel himself began to wonder how much of his posturing was parody and how much a compulsive letting-off of steam. The celibate life was beginning to get to him. He began having wet dreams for the first time since puberty, and dreams of every sort in much greater abundance. During his stint with Renata Semple his dreams had been Grade B, or lower — short, simple, guileless dreams a computer could have put together from the data of his daily life. No longer. The most vivid of his new dreams, and the scariest for what it seemed to suggest about his mental health, concerned his old friend and betrayer, Eugene Mueller. At an early point in the dream Daniel was dining at *La Didone* with Rey and Mrs. Schiff. Then he was out on the street. A mugger had come up behind him and asked, in a conversational tone, whether he'd like to be raped. The voice sounded uncannily familiar and yet not to belong to anyone he knew. A voice from his past, before New York, before Spirit Lake. "Eugene?" he guessed and turned around to face him and to fall, instantly, in love. Eugene spread his arms, Gene Kelly-style, and smiled. "None other! Back from the bathroom —" He did a buck and wing and went down on one knee. "— and ready for love!"

Eugene wanted to fly to Europe immediately, for a honeymoon. He explained that it was he who'd been responsible for the plane crash in which Daniel and Boa had died. Daniel began crying, from (he explained) sheer surfeit of joy. They began to have sex. Eugene was very assertive, not to say rough. Daniel cut his hand, and there was some confusion as to the nature of the pain he was experiencing. He told Eugene to stop, he pleaded, but Eugene went right on. Nails were being driven into his hands and feet, to secure (Eugene explained) his wings.

Then he was standing on a chair, and Eugene was on a chair on the far side of the room, encouraging him to fly. Daniel was afraid even to lift his arms. Blood dribbled down over the feathers. Instead of flying, which didn't seem possible, he started to sing. It was a song he'd written himself, called "Flying."

The moment he started to sing he woke up. He couldn't believe it had been, he didn't *want* it to be, no more than a dream. Awful as it had been, he wanted it to be real. He wanted to make love to Eugene again, to sing, to fly. But here he was in his room, with the moonlight coming in at the half-parted curtain and making a ghost of Boa under her single sheet. His cock was erect and the glans was pressed painfully against the unyielding plastic of the insanity belt. He started crying and then, without stopping crying, stumbled across the room to get pencil and paper. On the hardwood floor, by moonlight, he wrote down everything he could remember of his dream.

For hours he would read over that transcript and wonder what it had meant. Did it mean that he might, after all, be able some day to sing? To fly? Or simply that his insanity belt was living up to its name?

At ten the next evening Daniel, in his latest Arabian gear, appeared on Rey's East 55th Street doorstep with a bowl of his special bread pudding. The doorman, as ever, looked askance, not to say daggers, but Daniel borne along by winds of inspiration, just whistled a a few bars of "I Whistle a Happy Tune" and sailed into the elevator.

Rey, naturally, was surprised to be visited so late and without warning. He'd already changed from his daytime drabs to the night's relative splendor, a shot-silk kimono with a few choice panels of embroidery.

Daniel held out the still-warm bowl. "Here, *amorino,* I made you a pudding."

"Why, thank you." Rey received the pudding in both hands and lifted it up to sniff at it. "I didn't realize you were such a homebody."

"I'm not, usually, but Mrs. Schiff swears by my bread pudding. It's my own recipe and very low in calories. I call it humble pie."

"Would you care to come in and enjoy it with me?"

"Do you have any cream?"

"I'll look. But I doubt it. Where would one get cream nowadays?"

Daniel took a stoppered jug of cream from within his burnoose. "On the black market."

"You think of everything, *mon ange.*"

In the kitchen, Rey, ever careful of his figure, spooned out a small portion of the pudding for himself and a larger one for Daniel.

When they were settled before the fireplace, under a fauvish pastel portrait of Rey in the role of *Semiramide,* Daniel asked Rey if he would do him a favor.

"It depends on the favor, surely. This is delicious pudding."

"I'm glad you like it. Would you sing a song for me?"

"What song?"

"Any at all."

"That's the favor you ask?"

Daniel nodded. "I just suddenly had to hear you sing. With the Teatro closed for the summer.... Records are wonderful, but they're not the same thing."

Rey riffled through the sheet music on the piano. He handed Daniel the score of Schubert's *"Vedi quanto t'adoro,"* and asked if he could handle the accompaniment.

"I'll do my best."

They went through the opening bars several times, Rey humming the vocal line, until he was satisfied with the tempo. Then he sang, without ornament or embellishment, the words Metastasio had written, the notes Schubert, a hundred years later, had set:

"Vedi quanto t'adoro ancora,
ingrato!
Con un tuo sguardo solo
Mi togli ogni difesa e mi
disarmi.
Ed hai cor di tradirmi? E puoi
lasciarmi?"

It dawned on Daniel, even as his fingers fumbled along in the loveliness, that Rey was not so much singing as setting forth a literal truth. Though he'd never heard the aria before, the Italian seemed to translate itself with spontaneous, pentecostal clarity, vowel by golden, anguished vowel: *See! ingrate, how I still adore you! A look from you is still enough to shatter my defenses and to strip me bare. Have you the heart to betray such love? And then to leave me?*

Rey broke off at this point, Daniel having altogether lost track of the accompaniment from the marvel of Rey's singing. They started out from the beginning again, and this time Rey introduced to the bare skeleton of Schubert's written score a tremolo that mounted by imperceptible degrees to utmost extravagance at *"E puoi lasciarmi?"* Then, abruptly, at *"Ah! non lasciarmi, no"* the heightened color was gone, as though a veil had fallen from the face of the music. He sang in a silvery, slightly hollow tone that suggested that he (or rather, Dido, whom he'd become) had been abandoned at the very instant she implored not to be. It was heartbreaking, heroic, and thoroughly exquisite, a sorrow and a sunset condensed into a single string of pearls.

"How was that?" Rey asked, when they'd finished the last repetition of the opening stanza.

"Stupendous! What can I say?"

"I mean, in particular, the *'E puoi lasciarmi?'* which Alice objected to."

"It was like being slapped in the face by Death."

"Ah, you should be a reviewer, *bell' idol mio.*"

"Thanks a lot."

"Oh, I'm quite sincere."

"I don't doubt that."

"I *might* even be able to arrange it for you."

Daniel looked down at his brown hands resting on the closed keyboard and expelled a short, self-defeated snort of laughter.

"You wouldn't want that?" Rey asked with, it would seem, honest incomprehension.

"Ernesto — I wouldn't want to review it, if I couldn't *do* it."

"Then you've never given up the wish to be a singer?"

"Does anyone ever give up his wishes? Do you?"

"That is an unanswerable question, I'm afraid." Rey went to the divan and sat down, his arms spread wide across the cushions. "All *my* wishes have come true."

Ordinarily Daniel would have found such complacence infuriating, but the song had modified his perceptions, and what he felt, instead, was a rather generalized tristesse and a wonder at the immense gulf between Rey's inner and his outer man, between the hidden angel and the wounded beast. He went and sat down at a confidential, but not amorous, distance from him and leaned back his head so that it rested on Rey's forearm. He closed his eyes and tried to summon up the exact curve and sweep and nuance of that *E puoi lasciarmi?*

"Let me ask you more directly then," Rey said, in a tone of cautious speculation. "*Do* you want to be a singer?"

"Yes, of course. Isn't that what I said in my letter to you?"

"You've always denied that was your letter."

Daniel shrugged. "I've stopped denying it." His eyes were still closed, but he could tell by the shifting of the cushions that Rey had moved closer. A fingertip traced the circle of pallor on each of his cheeks.

"Would you —" Rey faltered.

"Probably," said Daniel.

"— kiss me?"

Daniel arched his neck upward till his lips had touched Rey's, a very little distance.

"The way you would kiss a woman," Rey insisted in a hushed voice.

"Oh, I'll do better than that," Daniel assured him. "I'll love you."

Rey sighed a sigh of gentle disbelief.

"Or at least," Daniel said, trying for a bit of tremolo of his own, "I'll see what I can do. Fair enough?"

Rey kissed one cheek. "And I —" Then the other. "— will teach you to sing. At least —"

Daniel opened his eyes at the same moment that Rey, with a look of pain and the hint of a tear, closed his.

"— I'll see what I can do."

Though it had begun at four in the afternoon and no one of any consequence had arrived till well after six, this was officially a fellowship breakfast. Their host, Cardinal Rockefeller, the Archbishop of New York, moved democratically from group to group, amazing one and all by knowing who they were and why they'd been invited. Daniel was certain someone was prompting him via his hearing aid, in the manner of carnival psychics, but perhaps that was sour grapes, since the cardinal, when he'd offered his ring for Daniel to kiss, had affected to believe that he was a missionary from Mozambique. Rather than contradict him, Daniel said that everything was swell in Mozambique, except that the missions were in desperate need of

money, to which the cardinal equably replied that Daniel must speak to his secretary, Monsignor Dubery.

Monsignor Dubery, a man of affairs, knew quite well that Daniel was of Rey's party and would later be helping to provide entertainment for the cardinal's inner circle. He tried his best to partner Daniel with other social pariahs present, but all in vain. A black Carmelite nun from Cleveland snubbed Daniel soundly the moment the monsignor's back was turned. Then he was matched with Father Flynn, the actual missionary from Mozambique, who regarded his introduction to Daniel as a deliberate affront on the part of Monsignor Dubery, and said so, though not to Dubery's face. When Daniel, for want of other common grounds, told of Cardinal Rockefeller's earlier confusion, Father Flynn lost his bearings utterly and began, in a fury of indiscretion, to denounce the entire archdiocese of Sodom, meaning New York. Daniel, fearing to be blamed for deliberately provoking the man to these ecstasies, soothed and placated, with no success. Finally he just came right out and warned Father Flynn that he couldn't hope to advance the interests of his mission by behaving so, and that seemed to serve. They parted quietly.

Hoping to avoid Monsignor Dubery's further attentions, Daniel strayed among the public rooms of the archepiscopal residence. He watched a high-power game of snooker until he was given, politely, to understand that he was in the way. He studied the titles of books locked within their glass bookshelves. He had a second glass of orange juice but prevented the well-meaning bartender from slipping in any vodka, for he didn't dare tamper with what was so far, knock on wood, a completely level head.

Which he needed. For tonight he was making his debut. After fully a year of study with Rey, Daniel was going to sing in public. He would have preferred a debut uncomplicated by social maneuverings with those who were shortly to provide his audience, but Mrs. Schiff had explained what it had been too self-evident to Rey for him to attempt to discuss — the importance of starting at the top.

In all New York there could not have been a more select audience than that which attended Cardinal Rockefeller's musicales. The cardinal himself was a devotee of bel canto and was regularly to be seen in his box at the Metastasio. In return for his very visible patronage and the sparing use of his name in fund-raising brochures, the Metastasio supplied St. Patrick's with a roster of soloists that no church in Christendom could have hoped to rival. It also supplied talent for more secular occasions, such as the present fellowship breakfast. Rey, though scarcely subject himself to such impressments, was a devout Catholic and quite content to grace the cardinal's salon with his art so long as a certain reciprocity was maintained; so long, that is, as he was received as a guest and given access to the latest ecclesiastic scuttlebutt, which he followed with much the same fascination that the cardinal gave to opera.

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While Rey sang his own brief offering, a Carissimi cantata abridged and ornamented by the trusty hand of Mrs. Schiff, Daniel changed into his costume, an old tux from the back of Rey's closet, which he had, with the help of Mrs. Galamian, the Metastasio's wardrobe mistress, meticulously tattered and torn. He *still* wasn't feeling more than agreeably nervous. Maybe he was one of those fortunate few who just weren't fazed by performing. Maybe he'd actually enjoy it. He tried to concentrate on Rey's roulades, but for all the brilliance of the singing the music was almost impossible to fix one's attention on. Carissimi had had his off days, no doubt about it. He was, however, one of the cardinal's particular favorites, and so the propriety of Rey's choice could not be called into question. If Rey's impeccable pyrotechnics nevertheless left the audience (pared down now to a bare fifty or so) somewhat restive and willing to be cajoled into simply enjoying themselves, who could complain, except possibly Carissimi?

Rey finished and was applauded. He joined Daniel briefly in the green room, went out to take a second bow, and returned. "I shall go sit beside the cardinal now," he advised Daniel. "Don't enter for another couple minutes."

Daniel watched the two minutes disappear on his wristwatch, then put on his ever-so-dented top hat, and made his entrance, smiling. Aside from the mildest tingling in his legs and lower back he had no symptoms of stage fright. The cardinal was sitting in the third row of chairs with Rey, benignly impassive, beside him. Many of the cardinal's other guests were familiar to Daniel from the Metastasio. One or two had taken him to dinner.

He lifted his hands, fingers spread wide, to frame his face. He let his eyes roll, slowly, to the back of his head. He began to sing. "Mammy!" he sang. "How I love ya, how I love ya! My dear old Mammy." He kept very close, vocally, to the authorized Jolson version, while exaggerating the body language. It was a polite version of the fractured minstrel-show he would perform to freak out selected strangers. He finished suddenly and, before there could be applause, moved right in to the next number, a song from Wolf's *"Spanisches Liederbuch."* Daniel accompanied its tortured and rather schizzy pieties with the same overwrought gestures he'd used for "Mammy." They seemed, in this context, more like kabuki than schmaltz.

"The next song I'd like to sing for you," Daniel announced, removing his top hat and reaching into his pocket for a pair of rabbit ears, "needs a bit of introduction, but only a little bit. The lyrics are my own, though the idea behind them originates with the woman who wrote the music, Alicia Schiff. It's Bunny Honeybunny's opening number from a little musical we're putting together called *Honeybunny Time."* He fixed the rabbit ears in place. "There's nothing much you need to know about honeybunnies that the song doesn't pretty well explain, except that they're very lovable." He

smiled. "So, without more ado —" He nodded to the pianist. The rabbit ears wobbled on their wire stems and went on wobbling to the end of the song.

Goodness gracious sakes alive,
The bees are buzzing in their hive,
Making honey strangely sweet
Such as bunnies love to eat.

He sang as if transfigured by delight, negotiating the various vocal hurdles with room to spare. The music was ravishing, a chocolate box of a song that managed to make his dopey lyrics seem not only sincere but even, in a disturbing way, devotional. Where it really came alive was at the refrain, a long, looping chain of alleluias and la-la-la's that soared and swooped and skittered around the steady swirling compulsions of the piano. Wonderful music, and here he was, standing in front of Cardinal Rockefeller and all his guests and singing it. He was aware, all the while he sang, of faces beginning to break into smiles, and aware, as he took in their reactions, of the music, and there was no disjunction between these two awarenesses.

Eeenie meenie meinie mo,
Aren't those bees the limit though!
They love me so, they'd never sting,
And all I do for them is — sing!

Off he went on another roller-coaster ride of la-la-la's. This time, knowing that he'd brought it off once and could therefore bring it off again, he began, diffidently, to camp it up in proper honeybunny style. The people in the audience — that's what the faces had become: an audience; *his* audience — were grinning now, were eating out of his hand, were loving him.

Suddenly a switch flipped inside him, and a light came on, one bright flash of everlasting glory, and there was no way to explain it, but he knew that if he'd been wired into a flight apparatus at just that moment (and the moment was gone already), he would have taken off. He knew it, and it made no difference, because he was flying already — up to the ceiling, around the chandelier, over the housetops, and across the wide blue sea.

He sang the last verse at full tilt, with wierd, bemused exuberance.

La di da and la di dee,
This is living, yessiree!
Eating honey from a comb
In my honeybunny home!

For the third chorus he did, impromptu, what'd he'd never dreamed of doing during the weeks of rehearsal: he danced. It was unabashedly naive, the merest hop and shuffle, but just right (he guessed) for a honeybunny. Anyhow it felt right, if also risky. Once, concentrating on his footwork, he almost lost hold of the vocal line, but if he'd fallen on his face it wouldn't have made any difference.

He had become a singer. Which nobody could deny.

"And will there be more honeybunny songs?" Cardinal Rockefeller inquired, after Daniel had returned from the green room in his own human character.

"I hope so, your Grace. We're working on it."

"When there are, I shall try to persuade you to exert your fascination over us again. Such charm and, if I may call it so, innocence are all too rare. You, and your distinguished teacher, are both to be commended."

Daniel murmured thanks, and Rey, by way of advertising this accolade to the company at large, knelt to kiss the cardinal's ring. The cardinal then led Rey off to an adjoining room, and Daniel was left to receive various metaphorical posies of praise and a single matter-of-fact posy, from Monsignor Dubery, of six rather washed-up lilies. The nun from Cleveland apologized for her snub and gave him the address of her convent so he might send her the sheet music of this and all future honeybunny songs. Old acquaintances from the Metastasio offered prophecies of greatness.

The real payoff of the debut came when one of the Protestant contingent at the breakfast —Shelly Gaines, a curate from Van Dyke's Marble Collegiate church — insisted on taking Daniel apart from other well-wishers and shoulder-rubbers to deliver his own accolades in private.

"Your own song is, of course, beyond all praise, and entirely anomalous, if that isn't the same thing. It isn't pop, though it is in a way, and it isn't bel canto, though it requires a voice of bel canto elasticity, and it's nothing at all like operetta, though I suppose that's what it must be nearest to. Really quite amazing — and in that I speak only of the song, nothing of the singer, who was —" Shelly rolled his eyes in imitation of Daniel's own neo-darktown-strutters style. "— the prophet of an entire new form of madness."

"Thank you."

"But beyond compliments, Ben.... May I call you Ben?"

Daniel nodded.

"Beyond mere rapturous applause, Ben, I would like to make you an offer." He raised a finger as though to forestall Daniel's objections. "A professional offer. I gather, from the second song on the program, that your goals aren't entirely limited to the, how shall I say, commercial side of show biz."

"Really, I don't have *any* goals."

"Now, now, no false modesty."

"I mean, I'm still a student. A student's goal is just to learn."

"Well, then, my offer should interest you precisely as a student. How would you like to sing at Marble Collegiate? As one of our soloists."

"No fooling?" Daniel said, lighting up. And then, "No, that wouldn't be possible."

"Ah, the cardinal has already taken you to *his* bosom, has he? One just can't be quick enough."

"No, not at all. And I'm sure he has no intention of doing so. He's got the whole Metastasio to take his pick from. I'm simply not up to that level."

"You'd certainly be up to ours, Ben. And then some. We're not especially notable for our music program. A Bach cantata is about our farthest stretch, and that only once or twice a year. On the other hand, we try for more than a sing-along. From your point of view it would represent exper-

ience, which is a commodity you won't be lacking for long, but do you, at the moment, have any other plans? Rehearsals are on Wednesday evenings. And I think I could get a hundred a week out of the budget. What do you say?"

"What can I say? I'm flattered, but —"

"Mr. Rey would object — is that it?"

"He might. More likely, he'd haggle over the fee."

"What else then?"

"Where would I be? In a loft at the back or up front where people would be watching me?"

"Surely, Ben, after what I saw tonight, you're not going to tell me that you're the shy type! I've never seen such sang-froid. And in front of *this* audience!"

Daniel bit his lip. There was no way to explain. He'd known he'd come up against this problem as soon as he became, in any degree, successful, but despite the steady progress he'd made studying under Rey, success hadn't seemed an immediate danger. Hope had sprung eternal, of course, in his all-too-human breast, but the rational half of him, which was in charge of major decisions, had considered such hopes to be pipe-dreams, and so he'd let himself drift with the current from week to week till he arrived at the inevitable moment of decision, here at last.

How long, once he became, even in the smallest way, a public figure, could he hope to preserve his incognito? And more to the point: was that what he wanted, forever and always?

"Shelly," he temporized, "I'm grateful for your offer, believe me. And I'd like to say yes right now, but there's someone I have to talk it over with first. Okay?"

"You know where you can find me. Meantime, yours sincerely, and all that." Shelly, a little sad and rebuffed, departed, bumping into the music room's disordered chairs.

That same evening, in the taxi returning from Cardinal Rockefeller's, Rey hinted at the possibility, then announced the fact, of Daniel's manumission. Daniel expressed an honest surprise and a not dishonest regret; prudently, he did not by so much as one hurrah express his jubilation.

It was not to be an absolute sundering. Daniel would continue to study with the great Ernesto, but on the more customary footing of offering him, in lieu of immediate payment, a third of his professional income over the next seven years. Daniel signed a contract to this effect, witnessed by Mrs. Schiff and Irwin Tauber, who, as Daniel's agent, was to receive a further fifteen per cent. If this were exploitation, Daniel was delighted to be considered prospectively exploitable. Could there be any sincerer testimony to their faith in his future than their wanting to secure a piece of it for themselves?

His delight was soon to be tempered by the reality of his first paycheck. His wage from Marble Collegiate was an even hundred dollars; after deductions for federal, state, and city taxes and for Social Security, and after

Rey's and Tauber's percentages, Daniel was left with $19.14. So, when fall arrived, it was back to the Metastasio. Mr. Ormund kindly allowed him to take off early on Wednesdays to attend his choir's rehearsals. Further, he was promoted to the position (alternating with Lee Rappacini) of croupier on the casino's roulette wheel, a post which, even after the Metastasio's and Mr. Ormund's rake-offs, was an undeniably juicy plum.

Not that Daniel was given to fretting about money. He was still predominantly of the grasshopper persuasion and unable to take alarm at remote contingencies. By the terms of his agreement with Rey, Boa would be looked after for another year. Congress, meanwhile, was drawing up a uniform code of laws concerning flight, a code that would certainly see to it that no one would be put in the impossible position Daniel had been in, of being able to keep Boa alive only by resorting to the black market. In a year's time, when Daniel would have to reassume the burden of her support, it should not, therefore, be quite so crushing and unfair a burden. If he saved, he might even be able to put her back in First National Flightpaths. Such are a grasshopper's sanguine, summertime thoughts.

Having had, on the whole, a rather easy time of it during his year of concubinage, Daniel did not find freedom going to his head. In any case, these terms are relative. In a practical sense his life wasn't much changed, except that now he could, when the urge came over him, go out and get laid. Mostly, however, except for a three-day binge right after the belt came off, the urge didn't come over him, not in the old overmastering and time-consuming way. This diminution of his erstwhile perpetual motion may have had something to do with sublimation, but he doubted it. Renata Semple had always maintained that sublimation was a load of Freudian bullshit, that the best lays also transmitted the largest zaps of creative energy. Maybe he was just getting old and wearing out. Maybe his present sex life represented the optimum level for his metabolism and previously he'd been overdoing it. In any case he was happy, wasn't he, so why worry?

For two months he'd been letting his skin fade back to its natural color when an incident at the Natural History Museum made him think again. He was wandering lonely as a cloud among cases of curious rocks and mineral specimens, letting his mind get lost in the twists and turns, the dazzle and glitter of Nature's own chinoiseries, when out of the dim past stepped Larry, the counterman of the now-defunct Dodge 'Em Doughnut Shop. Larry, with more directness than grace, dropped a metaphorical handkerchief at Daniel's feet, waited to see if it would be picked up, and, when it wasn't, moved on to some ore-bearing boulders with a wistful, hard-boiled, "All right, Sambo, whatever you say." And never a glimmer of recognition. There was a time, and rather a long one, when Daniel had seen Larry on the average of twice a day to pick up his phone messages and generally to

coze. Larry, admittedly, had a partiality for phoneys, but even so! Is love as blind as that?

Daniel knew that every time he sang at Marble Collegiate he was taking a calculated risk of being recognized by someone from the still dimmer past. Because of Van Dyke's association with the P.R.L. there was a constant influx of church groups and convention delegates dropping in for the Sunday services, and among these visitors there was bound, sometime, to be someone from Amesville or environs who'd known the old, unreconstructed Daniel Weinreb. His fears hadn't finally stood in the way of his taking the job, but it might be just as well to continue to wear a mask that had proven so effective. Everyone would suppose he remained a phoney by preference, but that couldn't be helped. Besides, admit it, it had its moments.

He determined, at least, to change his markings. On his next visit to the cosmetician he had a small, mandorla-shaped spot bleached out high on his forehead, a process as painful as it was expensive. Then, to his great and immediate relief, the circles on his cheeks were filled in and his frizzed hair was straightened and cut to form a bang of oily ringlets obscuring the upright almond of whiteness on his brow. The new mask, being less flaunting, was even more effective as a disguise. His own mother, as the saying goes, wouldn't have known him now.

A year passed: a year immense with events, prodigies of history and of his own changed heart (if the heart it is, indeed, that registers the sense of vocation, of being summoned to a destined task, and not the eyes, or hands, or spine); a year of blessed tumult; a happy year too quickly gone by. What he did in that year could be quickly told. With Mrs. Schiff he finished a draft of a full-scale two-act version of *Honeybunny Time,* which Tauber immediately began showing to producers (all of them thought it was a put-on), and he wrote, or rewrote, some seven or eight songs of his own. But what he learned would require a fairly epic catalogue. Insights blossomed into fugitive visions, branched into viable propositions, interlocked into systems, and the systems themselves seemed to resonate mysteriously with all manner of things, great and small, with his hugest, haziest intuitions as with the curves and colors of a gladiolus in a plastic pot. It was as though he'd been offered an interlinear translation to the whole span of his life. Old chunks of unsorted awareness fell together in patterns as lucid as a Mozart melody.

How long could one go on summing things up like this? Mrs. Schiff said forever, so long as one remained on friendly terms with one's Muse. But who was the Muse and what did she require? There Mrs. Schiff could offer no oracles.

The question was important to Daniel, for he'd come in a rather superstitious way to believe that possibly Boa was his Muse. Hadn't his awakening coincided with the time that he'd brought her here to live with him? But how ridiculous, to speak at all of "liv-

ing'' with her, when she was nothing but an empty shell. It was with Mrs. Schiff, it was with Rey, that he'd *lived* for these three years. Yet he didn't for a moment suppose them to be Muses. They'd been his teachers; or, if that didn't do them sufficient honor or express the size of the debt, his Masters. The Muse was something, or some One, else.

The Muse, first of all, was a woman, a woman to whom one remained faithful, and Daniel had, in his fashion, remained faithful to Boa. This might or might not be significant, might or might not connect to some fundamental bedrock of truth beneath the unexplored muck of the subconscious. When it wasn't shining in the clear sunlight of joy, sex could be infinitely mysterious. But Daniel's conception of Boa as his Muse was more literal than that. He thought of her as an active presence, a benign will-o'-the-wisp, touching his spirit and lighting his way with unseen, subliminal glimmerings. In much the same way he had, in his youth, imagined his mother flying to him from far away, hovering over him, whispering to him, regarding him with a mournful, secret love that had been, nevertheless, the force that had sustained him through the desolations of the first loneliest years in Amesville. He had been wrong then; his mother had not been with him, had never known how to fly. But did that mean he was wrong now? Boa *was* a fairy; she might be with him; he believed she was, and, believing it, he spoke to her, prayed to her, beseeched her to let him off the hook.

For the free ride was over. Rey, though he'd regarded it as an unqualified waste of money, had fulfilled the terms of their agreement. Now, with that debt satisfied, it was up to Daniel. Boa's minimum weekly requirement cost a whopping $163, and there was no let-up in sight, as this wasn't the black market price. Rationing was over, and Daniel was able to buy her supplies directly from the First National Flightpaths' pharmacy: $163 represented the basic cost of one week's vacation outside your body as fixed by the new federal guidelines. By this means the government hoped to discourage fairies from permanently abandoning their vehicles by the roadside. Logically Daniel had to approve the new uniform code Congress had come up with — even in this particular. Alackaday, who would have supposed that such a wonder's coming to pass would have been nothing but a new source of grief for Daniel, who had marched in so many parades and sung at so many rallies in this very cause? But such was the case, and though there had been a few woeful outcries in the press from parents and spouses (and even a granddaughter) who were in the same costly fix as Daniel, there really wasn't much hope of this law being changed, for it represented a genuine consensus.

One hundred and sixty-three dollars stood at the borderline of what was possible and left a very scant residue from which to supply his own necessities. It was painful, it was downright cruel, to be earning a good living for the first time in years and still to have no security, no comfort, no fun.

He let Boa know it in no uncertain terms (assuming she was listening in). Enough was enough. He wanted to be rid of her. It wasn't fair of her to expect him to go on like this. Fifteen years! He threatened to phone her father and set deadlines for doing so, but since these threats weren't carried out, he had to assume either that she wasn't listening or didn't believe his threats or didn't care. Upping the ante, he menaced her with being disconnected from the umbilicus of tubes that sustained her vegetable life, but this was the merest huffing and puffing. Kill Boa? She was, God knows, an albatross around his neck; she was a constant memento mori, but she was his wife, and she might be his Muse, and to fail in his obligation to her would just be asking for trouble.

Aside from these notions about his Muse, Daniel was not, in general, a superstitious sort, but he was fast becoming a Christian, at least in the latter-day sense of the word as set forth in the teachings of Reverend Jack Van Dyke. According to Van Dyke, all Christians got to be that way by suspending their disbelief in a preposterous but highly improving fairy tale. This presented no difficulties to Daniel, who took naturally to pretending. His whole life these days was a game of make-believe. He pretended to be black. He had pretended, for one whole year, to be passionately in love with a eunuch. Sometimes he and Mrs. Schiff would pretend for hours at a time to be honeybunnies. Why not pretend to be a Christian? (Especially if it brought in, theoretically, a hundred bucks a week and, more to the point, a chance to perform in physical and social dimensions that suited the size of his voice and his art, which Marble Collegiate did to a tee.) Why not *say* he was saved, if it might make someone else happy and did him no harm? Wasn't that all most priests and ministers do? He'd never been the type, when people asked how he was feeling and he was feeling rotten, to *say* he felt rotten. He said he felt swell, and smiled, and he expected others to do the same. That was simply civilization, and so far as he could see, Christianity was just the logical outcome of such principles, the most devious and effective way ever discovered of being polite.

It was the night before Christmas, and the night before the night before Daniel was to appear in the Off-Broadway première of *Honeybunny Time.* Dreams, it seems, really do come true. But he was not happy, and it was hard to explain to Boa, who was the underlying cause of this unhappiness, why this should be so. There she sat, propped up in her little cot, a Christmas angel complete with a halo and a pair of wings from Mrs. Galamian's stock of costumes for the first-act dream-ballet that had been scrapped during the last week of rehearsals. Yet the problem was easily stated. He was broke, and while his prospects had never been brighter, his income had rarely been less. He'd had to leave the Metastasio two months ago, time enough to exhaust the little money he'd put away to tide him through an emer-

gency. But this was the one emergency he hadn't reckoned with — success. Rey and Tauber were both adamant as to receiving their full cuts. Daniel had done the arithmetic, and even if *Honeybunny Time* didn't just fizzle right out, Daniel's net earnings from it would still fall short of what was required at the heady rate of some three hundred dollars a month. And if the show were a smash, he wouldn't do any better, since he'd had to sign over his interest in the book for the chance to play Bunny. That, as Irwin Tauber had explained, was show business. But try and explain that to a corpse.

"Boa," he said, touching one of the nylon wings. But he didn't know where to go from there. To talk to her at all was an admission of faith, and he didn't want to believe, any more, that she might be alive, and listening, and biding her time. If she were, it was cruel of her not to return. If she weren't, if she'd left this world forever, as she'd left this husk of herself, this disposable container, then there could be no harm in his ceasing to care for it as well. "Boa, I'm not giving up another fifteen years. And I'm not going to peddle my ass again. I suppose I could ask Freddie Carshalton to loan me something, but I'm not going to. What I am going to do is I'm going to call your father. If that's wrong, then I'll just have to bear the guilt. Okay?"

The halo glinted.

"If you want to come back later, you'll have to come back to him. Maybe that's what you've been waiting for. Am I right?"

He leaned forward, careful not to touch the tube that snaked into her left nostril, and kissed the lips that were legally dead. Then he got up and went out into the hall and down the hall to Mrs. Schiff's office, where the telephone was.

In all these years he'd never forgotten the phone number for Worry.

An operator answered at the third ring. He said he wanted to speak to Grandison Whiting. The operator asked his name. He said only that it was a personal call. The operator said she would give him Mr. Whiting's secretary.

Then a new voice said, "Miss Weinreb speaking."

Daniel was too taken aback to reply.

"Hello?"

"Hello," he echoed, forgetting to use the deeper voice with which he'd addressed the operator. "Miss Weinreb?"

Which Miss Weinreb? he wondered. His secretary!

"I'm afraid Mr. Whiting isn't available at the moment. I'm his secretary. Can I take a message?"

In the other room Daniel could hear the telephone ringing. But it couldn't be the telephone. It must be the doorbell. In which case Mrs. Schiff would answer it.

"Which Miss Weinreb would that be?" he asked cautiously. "Cecelia Weinreb?"

"This is Aurelia." She sounded miffed. "Who is *this,* please?"

"It's a personal call. For Mr. Whiting. It concerns his daughter."

There was a long silence. Then

Aurelia said, "Which daughter?" Hearing her dawning surmise, he became uneasy.

At that moment Mrs. Schiff burst into the office. In one hand she held the halo from Boa's head. He knew, just by looking, what she was going to tell him. He replaced the phone in its cradle.

It hadn't been the doorbell.

"It's Boa," he said. "She's come back."

Mrs. Schiff nodded.

Boa was alive.

Mrs. Schiff put the halo down on top of the desk, where it rocked unsteadily. Her hands were shaking. "You'd better go see her, Daniel. And I'll phone for a doctor."

A week after it opened at the Cherry Lane, *Honeybunny Time* was transferred uptown to the St. James Theater, right across the street from the Metastasio, and Daniel was a star. His name, his own, the name of Daniel Weinreb, was spelled out on the marquee in winking lights. His face, dark as molasses, could be seen on posters all over the city. His songs were on the radio day and night. He was rich and he was famous. *Time* featured him on its cover, rabbit ears and all, under a 36-point rainbow-shaped and hued headline asking, portentously: BEL CANTO — IS THAT ALL THERE IS? Inside, in an exclusive article, Mrs. Schiff told something like the story of his life.

It was not his doing. Or perhaps it was. The phone call to Worry had been automatically recorded and traced by Whiting's security system. At his sister's suggestion, the voice-prints of the call were compared with those of tapes Daniel had made with Boa in days gone by.

The police appeared at the door of Mrs. Schiff's apartment at the very moment the curtain was going up on *Honeybunny Time.* Mrs. Schiff, presciently indisposed, was on hand to receive them. Boa had already been taken off to a clinic to recuperate from the effects of her fifteen-year-long coma and so was spared the first onslaught. When the police had finally been persuaded that only Daniel could supply them with the name of the clinic and had been despatched to the Cherry Lane, Mrs. Schiff, seeing that the cat was, in any case, out of the bag, decided to cash in her chips. With Irwin Tauber's help she got through to the editor-in-chief of *Time,* and before Daniel had sung the closing reprise of "Honeybunnies Go to Heaven," she had struck a deal, giving *Time* exclusive rights to her own 4,000-word version of the Romance of Daniel Weinreb. There was no way, after that, that *Honeybunny Time* wasn't going to be a hit.

Daniel was furious, but also, secretly, delighted. Even so, he determined, for form's sake, to be angry with Mrs. Schiff for having so profitably violated his confidences. Of course, it had only been a matter of time, once his phone call to Worry had been traced, before Daniel was apotheosized; a matter of hours, probably, as Mrs. Schiff tried, through Irwin, to explain. And, to do her credit, her ver-

sion of the past three years was as skillful a whitewash as any press agent could have contrived. According to Mrs. Schiff, Daniel's relationship with Rey had been based on mutual esteem and a shared devotion to the glory of the human voice. Her story dwelt mainly on Daniel's undying love for his wife, his struggles against manifold adversities (she included his recipe for bread pudding), the discovery of his buried talent and (this last being intended, surely, as a private poke in the ribs) in Christian faith. Nowhere did she state anything that wasn't strictly true, but it was scarcely the whole truth, nor — such were her powers as a storyteller — did the whole truth ever make much headway, once it did begin to leak out, via Lee Rappacini and a few other old friends. The media doesn't like to waste its heroes, and that's what Daniel had become.

Boa was preserved from most of this within the heavily guarded portals of the Betti Bailey Memorial Clinic, an upper-crust Westchester version of First National Flightpaths. At her own orders no one but Daniel and the clinic's staff were to be allowed into her room. He came there once a day in a rented limousine. While the limousine waited for the gates to be opened, the press would gather round with their cameras and their questions. Daniel would smile at them through the bullet-proof glass, which served the camera's needs. As to the questions — Where had Boa been these many years? Why had she returned? What were her plans? — Daniel was as much in the dark as anyone, for they had yet to speak to each other. Usually she was asleep, or pretending to be asleep, and he would sit by her bed, arranging hecatombs of cut floweres and waiting for her to make the first move. He wondered how much of all he'd said over the last three years she'd been at hand to take in. He didn't want to go through it all again, and in any case little of that was any longer to the point. The Boa who'd come back bore no resemblance to the living Boa he remembered. She was the same gaunt, hollow-eyed object that had lain all those years, inert, on the other side of his room, whom to love was as impossible as if she had been a bundle of sticks. She seemed infinitely old and wasted. Her dark hair was streaked with gray. She did not smile. Her hands lay at her sides as though she had no interest in them, as though they were not hers but only a more cumbersome piece of bed linen. Once in these two weeks of visits she had opened her eyes to look at him and then had closed them again, when she saw that he'd become aware of her attention.

Yet he knew she was capable of speech, for she'd given orders to the staff not to admit any visitors but Daniel. Even this small distinction was scarcely a balm to his heart when he knew, through Dr. Ricker, the Director of the Clinic, that no one, aside from the press, had sought to be admitted. Once Boa's miraculous return to life had become a matter of public interest, her father had made himself unavailable for comment. To the rest of the world Daniel and Boa may have

been the love story of the century, but to Grandison Whiting they were gall and wormwood. He was not, Daniel supposed, a forgiving sort of person.

Meanwhile, Daniel's bandwagon rolled onwards and upwards, a triumphal chariot, a juggernaut of success. Five of his songs were at the top of the charts. The two most popular, "Flying" and "The Song Does Not End," were songs he'd written in the sauna of Adonis, Inc., back before any of this had begun. Except, logically, it must have begun then, or even before. Perhaps it all went back to that spring day on County Road B, when he'd been stopped in his tracks by that devastating inkling of some unknown glory. Sometimes he'd look up at the issue of *Time* that he'd nailed to the wall of his room at the Plaza with four stout nails and wonder if *that* had been the actual, foredestined shape of the vision that had loomed behind the clouds that day — that dark face with its animal ears and the dumb question rainbowed over it. He would have preferred a more inward and transfiguring glory to have been intended, as who would not, but if this was what the moving finger had writ, it would be churlish not to be grateful for benefits received — and received, and received.

The next rung of the ladder, the next plum to fall in his lap, was an hour-and-a-half special on ABC. A third of the program was to be numbers from *Honeybunny Time;* another third, a selection of bel canto arias and duets featuring the great Ernesto, with Daniel doing little more than waft, metaphorically, an ostrich-feather fan; then, after a medley of such personal favorites as "Old Black Joe" and "Santa Lucia," learned in Mrs. Boismortier's classroom, there was to be a re-creation of "The March of the Businessmen" from *Gold-Diggers of 1984* (with Jackson Florentine making a guest appearance), winding up with the inevitable "Flying," in which an entire chorus was to be borne aloft on wires. Irwin Tauber, who had volunteered, with a shrewdness equal to his magnanimity, to reduce his commission to a standard ten per cent, sold the package for three-and-a-half million dollars, of which Rey, in return for relinquishing his overall slice of Daniel's next seven years, was to receive a million and a half outright.

Midas-like, Daniel's success affected everyone within touching distance. Rey, besides his million and a half, booked a tour through the Midwest. Rather, he expanded the tour he'd already been planning, for the whole country was, quite independently of Daniel, in the throes of a passion for all things musical, but especially for bel canto. Rey, a legend in his own right, had become by his association with Daniel exponentially more legendary, and his fees reflected it. Mrs. Schiff, too, had her share of these repletions. Besides the royalties rolling in from *Honeybunny Time,* the Metastasio had agreed, against all precedent, to present *Axur, re d'Ormus* as her original work, dispensing with the fiction that it was from the hand of Jomelli. She brought out her own long-playing record of *Stories for Good Dogs.* She

opened a pet show at Madison Square Garden. She appeared on a list of the Ten Best-Dressed Women.

Perhaps the strangest consequence of Daniel's celebrity was the cult that sprang up around not simply his myth but his image. His younger admirers, not content with mere passive adulation, determined to follow his darkling example and went out, in their thousands and soon their tens of thousands, and had themselves transformed into exact replicas of their idol — to the often considerable dismay of their thousands and tens of thousands of parents. Daniel became, by this means, a *cause célebre,* a symbol of all that was most to be extolled or most to be abhorred in the new era, a real-life Honeybunny or the Antichrist, depending on whom you listened to. His face, on a million posters and record sleeves, was the standard that the era lifted up in defiance of the age gone by. Daniel, at the center of all this commotion, felt as helpless as a statue borne aloft in a procession. His position gave him a wonderful view of the surrounding bedlam, but he had no idea at all where he was being carried. He loved every ridiculous minute, though, and hoped it would never stop. He started making notes for a new musical that he wanted to call *Highlights of Eternity,* or else *Heads in the Clouds,* but then one day he'd read through his notes and realized they didn't make any sense. He had nothing to say. He only had to stand in the spotlight and smile. He had to pretend to be this fabulous creature, Daniel Weinreb. Nothing more was asked.

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On an afternoon in February, on a day of bright and numbing cold, Boadicea openened her eyes and drew a deep breath that was partly a sigh and partly a yawn. Daniel didn't dare so much as look toward her for fear of startling her back into the glades of her long silence. He went on staring at the facets of the stone in his ring, waiting for her mind to materialize before him in the form of words. At last the words arrived, faint and colorless. "Dear Daniel." She seemed to be dictating a letter. He looked at her, not knowing how to reply. She didn't look away. Her eyes were like porcelain, shining but depthless. "I must thank you for ... the many flowers." Her lips closed and tightened to signify a smile. The least movement, the blinking of her eyelids, seemed to require a conscious effort.

"You're welcome," he answered carefully. What does one say to a bird that decides to light on one's finger? Hesitantly, he spoke of crumbs: "If there's anything else I can bring you, Boa, just say the word. Anything that might help to pass the time."

"Oh, it passes without help. But thank you. For so much. For keeping this body of mine alive. It still seems strange. Like —" She turned her head to one side, then the other. "— a pair of very stiff shoes. But they're getting broken in. Day by day. I practice. I forge new habits. This morning, for the first time, I practiced smiling. It suddenly seemed important. They didn't want me to have a mirror, but I insisted."

"I saw your smile," he noted weakly.

"It's not very authentic yet, is it? But I'll get the hang of it soon enough. Speech is much more difficult, and I already speak very clearly, do I not?"

"Like a native. But don't feel you have to. I mean, if it doesn't feel comfortable yet. There's plenty of time, and I'm a basically very patient person."

"Indeed. The nurses say you have been a saint. They are, all three of them, in love with you."

"Tough luck. I'm already taken." Then, abashed: "That's not to say ... I mean, I don't expect, after all this time...."

"Why not? Isn't it the best thing to do with bodies when you have them? So I seem to recall." She practiced her smile, with no greater success than before. "But I agree, it would be premature. I have been amazed, though, how quickly it all does come back. The words, and the way they try to connect with more meanings than they ever possibly will. As a fairy, one learns to do without them, by and large. But that was the reason I came back."

"I'm afraid I lost track of that. *What* was the reason you came back?"

"To talk to you. To tell you you must learn to fly. To carry you off, so to speak."

He winced, visibly.

She went on in the same evangelical vein. "You can, Daniel. I know there was a long time when you couldn't. But you can now."

"Boa, I've tried. Believe me. Too many times."

"Precisely: too many times. You've lost faith in yourself, and naturally that gets in the way. But before I returned to this body I watched you. For days, I don't know how many, I watched you sing. And it was there, all that you need. It was there in the very words of one of the songs. Honey from the mouth of the lion. If you'd been using a machine, you would have taken off any number of times."

"It's good of you to say so. But I'm sorry that was your reason for having come back. It's a bit of a lost cause, I'm afraid."

Boa blinked. She lifted her right hand and, as she looked at it, the first flicker of distinct expression stirred the muscles of her face. It was an expression of distaste.

"I didn't come back for any other reason, Daniel. Though I have no wish to have to deal with my father, that was a secondary consideration. Your threat made me return a little sooner possibly. But I never thought, and surely had no desire, to begin this ... circus."

"I'm sorry about the fuss. It hasn't been my doing, though I guess I haven't exactly resisted it either. I enjoy circuses."

"Enjoy what you can, by all means. I've enjoyed myself largely enough, these fifteen years and more. And I shall again."

"Ah! You mean, you already intend ... when you've got back the strength...?"

"To take off again? Yes, of course — as soon as I can. What other choice can there be, after all? It is, as my father might say, a business proposition. Here one finds, at most, only a little pleasure; there, there is only pleasure. Here, if my body perishes, I must perish with it;

when I am there, the body's death will cease to concern me. My care, then, is for my safety. Why should I be trapped in the collapse of a burning building, when all that is required to escape is that I walk out the door?"

"Ma'am, you preach a powerful sermon."

"You're laughing at me. Why?"

He threw up his hands in a gesture of self-parody that had become as automatic as the inflections of his voice. "Am I? If I am, then it's at myself that I laugh. All you say is true. So true it seems ridiculous that I'm still around, discussing the matter."

"It does seem so strange to me. It isn't just you — it's all these people. Most of them don't even try. But maybe that will change. *You* must try, at least." Her voice seemed oddly out of tune, when she spoke with any emphasis. "Perhaps our circus may do some good, after all. You are so much in the public eye. You can set an example.

He snorted in self-derision, then felt ashamed. She didn't know his reasons; he hadn't told her what he'd done just that afternoon.

"I'm sorry," he said, with grudging penitence. "I was laughing at myself again. I did something today I shouldn't have done, that I'm already regretting."

"Was that a laugh, before? It didn't seem so." She didn't ask what he'd done. Her eyes seemed incurious.

But he didn't let that stand in the way of his confession. "You see," he explained, "I said, in an interview that I *could* fly. That I love to fly. That I'm always just zipping off into the ether, which I described in abundant detail."

"So? I see no harm in saying that. You *can* fly."

"But I never have, Boa. I never, never, never have, and, despite your glad tidings, I've got a feeling that I never will. But after what I said today, I'm going to have to go on pretending for the whole fucking world."

"Why did you say it then?"

"Because my agent has been pressuring me to for weeks. For my image. Because it's what people expect of me, and you've got to give them their money's worth. But I'll tell you where I draw the line. I'm not going to pretend to take off in the middle of a concert. That is just too gross. People wouldn't believe it."

She looked at him as though from the depth of a cold, clear pond. She had not believed what he'd said.

"And because, finally, I *want* people to think that I can. Because, if I can't, then I'm no better than Rey."

"How strange. Your words make less and less sense. I think, perhaps, if you would leave now...? I meant to answer all the questions you've been so kind as not to ask. I know I owe that to you, but it's a long story, and I'm tired now. And confused. Could we put it off till tomorrow?"

He shrugged, and smiled, and felt resentful. "Sure. Why not?" He stood up, and took a step toward her bed, and then thought better of it.

She looked straight at him and asked, "What do you want, Daniel?"

"I was wondering if I should kiss you. As a matter of courtesy."

"I'd rather you didn't, really. It's my body, you see. I don't like it. I'm

not, in a sense, quite alive yet. Once I've begun to enjoy food again — perhaps then."

"Fair enough." He lifted his coat from the hook on the back of the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she agreed.

When he was almost out the door she called him back, but in so weak a voice he wasn't certain, till he'd looked around, that he'd heard her speak his name.

"On second thought, Daniel, *would* you kiss me? I don't like my body. Perhaps I'll like yours."

He sat beside her on the bed. He picked up her limp hand from where it lay on the unruffled sheet and placed in on his neck. Her fingers held to his skin infirmly, with only enough strength to support the weight of her arm.

"Does it turn you off," he asked, "my being a phoney?"

"Your skin? It seems an odd thing for you to have done, but it all seems odd, the way people act. Why did you do it?"

"You don't know?"

"I know very little about you, Daniel."

He put his hands about her head. It seemed insubstantial, the wispy, graying hair like ashes. There was no tension, no resistance in her neck — nor, it would seem, anywhere in her body. He inclined his head till their lips were touching. Her eyes were open but unfocused. He moved his lips by fractions of inches, as though he were whispering into her mouth. Then he parted her lips with his tongue, pushed past her teeth. His tongue nudged hers. There was no reply. He continued to move his tongue over and around hers. There began to be a resisting tension in her neck. She closed her eyes. With a parting nip of her lower lip, he disengaged.

"Well?" he asked. "What does it do for you?"

"It was ... I was going to say frightening. But interesting. It made you seem like an animal. Like something made of meat."

"That's why they're called carnal relations, I guess." He lowered her head to the pillow and replaced her hand at her side. He forebore to say what *she* put *him* in mind of: a funeral urn.

"Really? It's not the way I remember it. But that is what 'carnal' means, isn't it? Is that what it's usually like? For you, I mean?"

"There's generally a little more response. There have to be two animals involved, if you want results."

Boa laughed. It was rusty, and she couldn't sustain it, but it was a real laugh.

"I laughed," she said, in her next breath. "And I'm so ..." She raised both her hands and pressed the fingers together. "... inexpressibly relieved!"

"Well, that's anatomy for you."

"Oh, not just physically relieved. Though perhaps that is the more important aspect, at last. But I'd worried so. About having no *feelings.* No earthly feelings. I didn't think I'd be able to sing again, without feelings. But if I can laugh.... You see?"

"Good. I'm glad you can laugh. Maybe it was my kiss that did the trick. Just like the fairy tale. Almost like it, anyhow."

She let her hands rest, one atop the other, on her stomach. "I don't feel tired now. I'll tell you about my life in the beyond, if you like."

"So you won't have to wait till tomorrow to leave?"

She smiled, and it was, though faint, a real smile, not the simulation she'd been practicing. "Oh, you'll have months of me. How can I sing in this condition? And months are a long time here, aren't they? They're not, in the beyond. Time is quite beside the point."

"Fifteen years just go by in a flash?"

"Thirteen did. That's what I'm trying to explain."

"I'm sorry. Tell your story. I won't interrupt." He put his coat on the hook, pulled the chair a bit closer to her bed, and sat down.

"I was caught in a trap, you see. That first night, after I left my body, I was so ... delighted." She spoke with a peculiar fervor, with the sudden, illumined lucidity of martyrdom. The present, flesh-encumbered moment vanished in the blaze of a remembered noon. "I flew out of the hotel, and up, and the city, beneath me, became a kind of slow, ponderous, magnificent firework display. It was a cloudy night, without stars, so that, very soon, the city became the stars, some still, some moving. The longer I looked, the clearer it became, and vaster too, and more orderly, as though each node of light were laboring to explain itself, to tear itself up out of the darkness and ... and kiss me. Though not like your kiss, Daniel. Really, I don't think it can be explained. It was such an immensity of beauty." She smiled, and held up her hands to mark off some twelve inches. "Bigger than this."

"And you didn't want to leave it in order to come back to the hotel and nurse my wounded ego. That's natural enough."

"I did though, reluctantly. You were still singing, and I could tell you wouldn't make it. You weren't even near the edge. You are now. But you weren't then."

"Thanks for the Band-Aid. But do go on. You returned to the starry night. And then?"

"The hotel was near the airport. The planes coming in and out seemed, in a comic way, irresistible. Like elephants dancing in a circus. And the sound they made was like Mahler, pulverized and homogenized. It seemed *objectively* fascinating, though I suppose there was a fascination, underlying that, of a different nature. For what I did that night was follow one of these planes back to Des Moines. It was the same plane we'd come in, as a matter of fact. From Des Moines it was easy to find Worry. I was there by morning. I knew you'd be furious that I wasn't back yet. I knew I'd made us miss our flight to Rome."

"Providentially."

"None of that mattered. I was determined to see my father. To see him as he really was. That had always been my obsession, and that part of me hadn't changed."

"So did you get to see him naked?"

"It was moral nakedness I was after."

"I know that, Boa."

"No, I never did. I saw him get up on the day after our wedding, eat breakfast, talk to Alethea about the stables, and then he went into his office. I tried to follow. And never made it, of course. I was caught in the fairy-trap in the corridor."

"You must have known it was there."

"I didn't believe it could harm me. There didn't seem to be any limit to what I could do. I felt like some giant unstoppable wave. I believed I could have anything I wanted just by wanting it. Flying is like that. The only thing was, when I saw the trap, or heard it, rather, for one's first sense of it is a kind of siren song played on a tuning fork, far, far away and posing no possible danger ... when I heard it, *that* was what I wanted, what my soul lusted for. Whoever designed the thing is someone who has flown, who knows the sweetest sensations of flight and how to magnify them and draw them out. The damned machine is irresistible."

"A little rotary engine that spins round and round like a clothes dryer?"

"Oh, it is easy to resist the lure of ordinary machinery. As easy as refusing a piece of candy. But this bore no relation to anything except, possibly, the solar system itself. There were wheels within wheels, and sets of wheels within sets of wheels, in an infinite recession. One moved through them, flew through them, with a kind of mathematical exultation, a steady unfolding of 'Eureka!'s, each one pitched, so to speak, an octave higher than the last."

"It sounds better than television, I've got to admit."

"It was like that too: a drama whose plot always became more interesting. Like a game of contract bridge that was, at the same time, a string quartet. Like a test you couldn't fail, though it stretched you to your limit."

"It must have been a great vacation."

"They were the thirteen happiest years of my life."

"And then?"

"The teevee was turned off. I can still remember the dismay of that moment, as the thing ground down to a stop, and I became aware of where I was and what I'd done. I wasn't alone, of course. There had been hundreds of us whirling in the same ring-dance, dosie-do, and then ker-plunk. The spell was broken, and there we were, reeling a little still, but beginning to remember. And wishing the dead machine would start up again and sweep us back up into its lovely gears."

"Had your father turned it off then?"

"He? No, never. A mob had broken into Worry. A large mob by the look of the damage they'd been able to do. I never saw the fighting. By the time I'd mustered some purpose and worked my way out of the trap, the National Guard was in charge. So I know nothing about my rescuers, neither their reasons nor what became of them. Perhaps they'd all been killed."

"It was never in the news."

"My father doesn't like publicity."

"When was that?"

"The spring before last. Before the trees had budded."

Daniel nodded. "Things were pretty

desperate in general around then. That was when —" He stopped short.

"When my aunt died, were you going to say? I know about that. In fact, I was there. I was here too, of course. I didn't really think you'd have wanted, or been able, to keep my body alive all that time, but I had to find out. I went to the hotel. There's a kind of cemetery on the roof, with the names of all the missing, and where we must go to find our bodies. Once I'd seen what I'd become, my only wish was to get as far from it as I could. It seemed another kind of trap. I didn't want to become ... meat. I still felt, in a way, newborn, unfledged. For all its fascinations, one doesn't *grow* inside a trap. My own sense of it was that only a few weeks had gone by, the weeks I'd spent in Amesville after I'd got out of the trap."

"Pursuing your father still?"

"No. He'd changed. He was older, of course, and also, I thought, smaller. No, it wasn't on his account I lingered there. It was the landscape. That was as fine as ever. The skies and fields, they seemed my real parents, my source. I watched the first shoots force their way into the light, and each one was like a parable. I was a bird. In the trap I had rushed from complexity to further complexity. Now I became simpler, slower. Though I would still be overtaken by sudden alarms. One of them brought me to New York, and when I'd found this body, a worse alarm drove me away. I went to London, and after my aunt's death, fled again, this time to Vilars, where I'd been sent to school. I fell in love again with the mountains and lived an eagle's life. There were many of us there, and I began to learn, from the others, that there were forces of beauty and of ... attraction ... greater than the earth's. As you leave it, as you mount above the clouds, above the winds, you shrink into a pinpoint of ... it isn't thought, it isn't sentience ... of purpose, call it. But a purpose so pure, so ... unearthly.... And then, at a certain height, you cease to be finite at all. There is no distinction of you and them, of here and there, of mind and matter."

"What is there then? Anything?"

"One joins a kind of conscious sphere with the earth at its center, and the sphere revolves. It's what, in a way, the trap had imitated."

"Is it real?"

"Who can say? It seems, at the time, the only reality. But there's something beyond even that. What I describe is the view from the threshold, as it were. I knew that, but I didn't take the next step. If I had, I wouldn't have returned. That's quite certain. Something always held me back. The present delight. But not just that. That other gravity: of the earth and its fields, of my body. This body."

"Jesus." Daniel shook his head in mournful admiration. "I'm sorry. I really am sorry."

"You needn't be. I did what I had to, no more. I wasn't ready to go farther than I did. I hadn't made a proper farewell. Now I have."

"You don't want me to come back here again?"

"Did my words betray me again? Come back again if you feel you need to. But not on my account. I've told you as much as I know how to tell."

Daniel accepted this with the politest of grimaces. Then, smiling at the absurdity of the question that had popped into his head but seeing that it was, by its very irrelevance and trivialty, a small revenge for her own Olympian betrayals, he said: "Before I go then, there's one dumb question I'd like to ask you. Can you guess what it is?"

"About your family?"

"No. *Time* magazine filled me in about them. My father's retired and a bit senile. My mother runs a restaurant and considers me an ingrate. Aurelia works for your father and, like him, has nothing to say about me. My other sister is married and has taken over my father's dental practice. My question was dumber than that. What did you sing the night you took off? Did you get off on the first song you sang? Was it as easy as that?"

"I remembered the dream you'd told me about, the dream you had at Spirit Lake. So I sang that song. It was the first thing that came into my head."

"'I am the captain of the Pinafore.' You sang *that?*"

"And not even all the way through."

Daniel laughed. It seemed splendidly unfair.

"I'm sorry I asked. Well ... good-by, then." He took his coat from the hook on the door.

"Good-by, Daniel. You will fly, won't you?"

He nodded and closed the door.

He did, of course, return many times to the clinic, and Boa never failed to be cordial. Daniel felt obliged to give his own account of the intervening years, though he doubted whether his story held any real interest for her. Mostly when they talked it was about music. Day by day she grew stronger, until at last she was strong enough to attempt departure. She offered to let him be present on the day, just as she might have asked him to see her off at a dock. He declined to do so. She had been certain she'd succeed and she did. Two weeks after she had left her body, medical support was withdrawn, according to her written instructions. Her body continued its automatic processes for another few days, and then it stopped.

Early in July her ashes were spread, secretly, from a low-flying plane, over the fields of her father's estate.

EPILOGUE

The turkey was half raw, but when Michael, at the head of the table, declared it to be done to a turn, they all assented to the proposition in open defiance of the truth. Poor Cecelia wasn't to blame. She'd had to drive in to Amesville at noon to pick up Milly and Abe, and Milly, who had been threatening to boycott the family reunion along with her other daughter, had taken an hour to be persuaded to get in the car. By the time Cecelia got back to Unity and shoved the turkey in the oven, the dinner was doomed to failure, at least as a culinary event. If it was anyone's fault it was Daniel's, since it was because of his eight o'clock curtain that they couldn't wait till the turkey was done. Family reunions shouldn't have to be run on a timetable.

Daniel loved the house the Hendricks lived in. He wanted to move it, stuffed pike, slapdash sylvan canvas, and all, onto the stage of a theater and use it for the set of *Werther*. Behold, it would say, this is the way you must live! With coasters under drinks and African violets pining on the windowsill and mincing china statuettes and babies growing up and trying to smash the lot of it.

Daniel was entranced and already half in love with his nephew and namesake and had already begun, in an avuncular manner, to corrupt the boy, building up towers of alphabet blocks for him to knock down and then inciting everyone to clap for this display of wit and skill. Danny understood at once the nature of applause, that it represented the highest degree of adult attention one could command. He wanted more. Daniel built higher towers, spelling out longer words — TOWER, FLOWER, MANIFEST — and Danny knocked them down with the lightning bolts of his godlike hands, and the adults continued to enjoy themselves and to applaud. Until they did at last grow restive and started talking to each other again, at which point Danny had knocked over his father's drink and had to be taken upstairs to bed.

Of the six other grown-ups at the family reunion, three were complete strangers to Daniel, though Michael, Cecelia's husband, claimed to be able to remember Daniel from the days when they'd been neighbors on Chickasaw Avenue.

Across the table from Daniel sat Michael's much younger brother, Jerry, and Jerry's girlfriend (his fiance, until a week ago), Rose. Rose was (if Daniel were excepted) Amesville's first genuine phoney. *Her* color didn't come off in the bathtub. She was also a follower of NBC's Dr. Silentius and wore a large button that said GOD IS WITHIN. Between them, Rose and Daniel had kept the table talk limping along in the face of several massive brown-outs. It wasn't that his family was being unduly hostile (except for Milly, who was); it was more the natural reticence that anyone feels who's forced to cozy up to a stranger, which, after all, was the situation they were in.

Of them all, Abe seemed least unstrung. He was his usual gently taciturn self. Daniel thought *Time* had been unfair to say he was senile. The only time his mind seemed distinctly to slip the tracks was when, after his second whiskey sour, he asked Daniel, in a tone of guarded inquiry, what prison had been like. Daniel gave the same evasive answer he'd given the first time his father had asked the question nineteen years ago. Prison was a disgrace and he'd rather not discuss it. To which his father replied, once again, that that was probably the wisest attitude Daniel could take. Time, Abe declared, heals all wounds.

Daniel declined, and then was compelled to accept, a ritual second helping of the stuffing. Just as his plate was passed back to him, the phone rang. Cecelia disappeared into the kitchen and returned looking disappointed.

"That was Mr. Tauber," she in-

formed Daniel. "He was making sure you were here. He said your chauffeur will be here in half an hour or so."

"His chauffeur!" Milly echoed, scathingly. "Get that."

She spoke — habitually, it seemed — with her mouth full. Daniel couldn't remember her doing that when he'd known her. She seemed, in just about every way, to have become coarser. Perhaps it came of running a restaurant.

"I thought," Cecelia said, frowning (for she'd warned her mother about being sarcastic), "that it might be Aurelia. The least she could do is call up and say hello to Daniel."

"Well, I'm sure she would," said Milly, sprinkling pepper onto her potatoes, "if she didn't have her job to think of."

"Aurelia works for your old buddy Whiting," Abe volunteered.

"He knows that," Milly said, glaring at her husband.

"But it's about all I know," Daniel said, placatingly. "How did it happen?"

"Very simple," Cecelia answered. "She sucked up to him."

"Cecelia! Really!"

"Oh, not *physically,* Mother. But every other way she could think of. It started, actually, on the day of your wedding, Daniel. My sister isn't one to waste time. She started in on Boadicea, gushing about horses. Boadicea had to promise her that she could come out and ride one of her father's horses."

"It was perfectly *natural* for Aurelia to talk about horses. She had a passion for horses. Even Daniel should be able to remember that." Milly was determined to defend her absent daughter, if only because Aurelia had had the courage to stick to her guns and stay away from the family reunion.

"She had a passion for anything that cost money. Anyhow," Cecelia went on, relieved to have found, at last, a subject for conversation, "when we all next got together, at the memorial service for you and Boa, Aurelia's first concern was to remind Miss Whiting, the one who lives in Brazil now —"

"Alethea lives in Brazil?" Daniel asked.

Cecelia nodded impatiently. "She came right out and told her about Boadicea's promise. Well, what could they do? They invited her out there, and she did one of her numbers, and got invited back. She was out at Worry at least once a week for the rest of that summer."

"You could have gone too, if you'd wanted," Milly argued.

Cecelia disdained to reply.

"And from that she went on to become his secretary?" Daniel asked.

"*One* of his secretaries."

"Cecelia's jealous," Milly explained. "Aurelia earns approximately double what she does. Despite how many years in dental school?"

"A lifetime."

"Aurelia *is* awfully pretty," Rose explained.

"She certainly is," Abe agreed with paternal complaisance. "But so is Cecelia. Every bit as pretty. They're twins, after all."

"I'll drink to that," said Michael, and held out his empty wine glass.

Daniel, sitting next to the bottle, re-

filled his brother-in-law's glass.

"Let's change the subject, shall we?" suggested Cecelia. "I'm sure Daniel has all kinds of questions he's dying to ask."

"I'm sure I must, but, so help me, I can't think of one."

"Then I can," said Rose, holding out her glass to him. "Or have you already heard about Eugene Mueller?"

"No." The bottle was empty, so Daniel reached behind him for a fresh bottle from the bucket on the folding table. "Has Eugene returned from the dead too?"

Rose nodded. "Years and years ago. With a wife and two sons and a degree from Harvard Law School."

"No kidding."

"They even say he's going to be the next mayor. He's a real idealist. *I* think."

"If he is elected," Michael said, "he'll be the first Democrat mayor in Amesville in nearly half a century."

"Incredible," said Daniel. "Gee, I wish I could *vote* for him."

"He was a good friend of yours, wasn't he?" Jerry asked.

Daniel nodded.

"And his *brother,*" Rose went on, ignoring dirty looks from both Milly and Cecelia, "that is to say, his oldest brother, Carl — you knew him too, didn't you?"

Daniel popped the cork from the third bottle and managed to fill Rose's glass without spilling a drop. "We'd met," he allowed.

"Well, he's dead," said Rose with satisfaction. "A sniper got him in Wichita."

"He'd been called up for National Guard duty."

"Oh."

"I thought you'd like to know."

"Well, now he knows," said Milly. "I hope you're satisfied."

"That's too bad," said Daniel. He looked round the table. "Anybody else need to be replenished?"

Abe looked at his glass, which was almost empty.

Milly said, "Abe."

"I guess I've had my limit."

"I guess you have," said Milly. "You have some more, if you want, Daniel. You're probably more used to it than we are."

"That's show business, Mother. We drink it for breakfast. But in fact I've reached my limit too. I've got to go on stage in two hours."

"An hour and a half, more nearly," said Cecelia. "Don't worry — I'm keeping track."

The phone rang again just after Cecelia had passed around the dessert, which was homemade raspberry ice cream. It was tremendous ice cream, and she was back at the table before anyone had bothered to start talking again.

"Who was that?" Michael asked.

"Another crank. Best thing is just ignore them."

"You, too?" said Milly.

"Oh, they're all harmless enough."

"You should tell them to stuff it," said Rose militantly. "That's what I do."

"You *all* get crank phone calls?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, I don't get them on *your* account," Rose assured him. "It's because I'm a phoney."

"I told her not to," said Jerry morosely, "but she wouldn't listen. She never listens."

"It's a person's own business what color she is." She looked Daniel square in the eye. "Am I right?"

"Don't lay the blame on Daniel's shoulders," Milly snapped. "It was your own damned folly, and you'll just have to live with it till the stuff wears off. How long does that take, by the way?"

"About six months," said Daniel.

"Christ Almighty." Jerry turned to his ex-fiancee. "You said six *weeks.*"

"Well, I don't intend to *let* it wear off. So there. You all act like it's a crime or something. It's not a crime — it's an affirmation!"

"I thought we'd agreed," said Cecelia, "that Rose's trip to the beauty parlor was something we weren't going to talk about."

"Don't all look at me," said Rose, who was showing some visible signs of distress. "*I* didn't bring it up."

"Yes, you did," said Jerry. "You brought it up when you said about the phone calls you'd been getting."

Rose began to cry. She left the table and went out into the living room, and then (the screen door banged) into the front yard. Jerry followed a moment later, mumbling an apology.

"What kind of phone calls?" Daniel asked Cecelia.

"Really, it isn't worth discussing."

"There's various kinds," said Milly. "Most are just obscene in an ordinary loudmouth way. A few have been personally threatening, but you can tell they don't really mean it. I've also had a couple who said they were going to burn down the restaurant, and I reported those to the police."

"Mother!"

"And so should you, Cecelia, if you do get that kind."

"It isn't Daniel's fault if a bunch of lunatics have nothing better to do with their time than to.... Oh, I don't know."

"I'm not blaming Daniel. I'm answering his question."

"I was going to ask you, Daniel," said his father, with a composure that came from not having paid attention to what had seemed, by the sound of it, just another squabble, "about the book you gave me. What's it called?" He looked under his chair.

"The Chicken Consubstantial with the Egg," said Daniel. "I think you left it in the other room."

"That's it. Kind of a strange title, isn't it? What does it mean?"

"It's a sort of popular modern-day account of the Holy Trinity. And about different heresies."

"Oh."

"When I was in prison you brought me a book by the same writer, Jack Van Dyke. This is his latest book, and it's actually rather amusing. I got him to sign it for you."

"Oh. Well, when I read it, I'll write him a letter, if you think he'd like that."

"I'm sure he would."

"I thought perhaps it was something you wrote."

"No. I've never written a book."

"He sings," Milly explained, with ill-controlled resentment. Abe's vagaries brought out her mean streak. "'La di da and la di dee, this is living, yessiree.'"

This time it was Cecelia who got up from the table in tears, knocking over, as she did so, the folding table on which the overflow of the dinner had been placed, including the carcass of the half-cooked turkey.

Daniel regarded the idyll of the Hendricks' front yard with a wistful megalopolitan nostalgia. It all seemed so remote and unobtainable — the pull toy on the sidewalk, the idle water sprinkler, the modest flower beds with their parallelograms of pansies, marigolds, petunias, and bachelor buttons.

Milly was perfectly within her rights being pissed off with him. Not just for not having got in touch for all those years, but because he'd violated her first principles, as they were written out in this front yard and up and down all the streets of Amesville: stability, continuity, family life, the orderly handing on of the torch from generation to generation.

In his own way, Grandison Whiting was probably after pretty much the same thing. Except in his version of it, it wasn't just a family he wanted, but a dynasty. At the distance from which Daniel observed it, it looked like six of one, half a dozen of the other. He wondered if it wasn't really the only way it could be done and thought it probably was.

"Where do you go next?" Michael asked, as though reading his thoughts.

"Des Moines, tomorrow. Then Omaha, St. Louis, Dallas, and God only knows. Big cities, mostly. We're starting out in Amesville for symbolic reasons. Obviously."

"Well, I envy you, seeing all those places."

"Then we're even. I was just sitting here envying your front yard."

Michael looked out at his front yard and couldn't see much there besides the fact that the grass was getting brown from lack of rain. It always did in August. Also, the couch out here on the porch smelled of mildew, even in this dry weather. And his car was a heap. In every direction he looked, there was something broken down.

The year after he'd dropped out of St. Olaf's College in Mason City, Michael Hendricks had played rhythm guitar in a country-western band. Now, at twenty-five, he'd had to relinquish that brief golden age for the sake of a steady job (he ran his father's dairy in Amesville) and a family, but the sacrifice still smarted, and the old dreams still thrashed about in his imagination like fish in the bottom of a boat that have outlasted all reasonable expectations. Finding himself, all of a sudden, the brother-in-law of a nationwide celebrity had been unsettling, had set those fish into a proper commotion, but he'd promised his wife not to seem to be looking for a handout from Daniel in the form of a job with his road show. It was hard, though, to think of anything to say to Daniel that didn't seem to lead in that direction.

At last he came up with, "How is your wife?"

Daniel flinched inwardly. Just that morning, on top of his standard argument with Irwin Tauber, he'd had a fight with him on the subject of Boa. Tauber insisted that until the tour was over they should stick to the story that Boa was still convalescing at the Betti Bailey Clinic. Daniel maintained that honesty, besides being simply the best policy, would also generate further publicity, but Tauber said that death is always bad PR. And so, as far as the world knew, the romance of the century was still a going concern.

"Boa's fine," said Daniel.

"Still in the hospital though?"

"Mm."

"It must be strange, her coming back after all that time."

"I can tell you in confidence, Michael, I don't feel that close to her any more. It's a heartthrob of a love story in theory. In practice it's something else."

"Yeah. People can go through a lot of changes in fifteen years. In less time than that."

"And Boa isn't 'people.'"

"How do you mean?"

"When you're out of your body that long, you stop being altogether human."

"*You* fly though, don't you?"

Daniel smiled. "Who's to say I'm altogether human?"

Not Michael, evidently. He chewed on the idea that his brother-in-law was not, in some essential respect, his fellow man. There was something to it.

Far off down County Road B, in the direction of Amesville, you could see the limousine coming for Daniel.

There was a single backdrop for the show as it was being presented tonight in the auditorium of the Amesville High School, an all-purpose Arcadian vista of green hills and blue sky framed by a spatter of foliage on one side and a sprightly, insubstantial colonnade on the other. It was utterly bland and unspecific, like a cheese that tastes only of Cheese, not like any particular kind, and as such was very American, even (Daniel liked to think) patriotic.

He loved the set and he loved the moment when the curtains parted, or went up, and the lights of a theater discovered him there on his stool in Arcady, ready to sing yet another song. He loved the lights. The brighter they became, the brighter he wanted them to be. They seemed to concentrate in their tireless gaze the attention of the entire audience. They *were* his audience, and he played to them, and did not, therefore, have to consider the separate faces swimming beneath that sea of light. Most of all he loved his own voice, when it threaded into the delicate tumble of other voices that swelled and subsided in his own twenty-two piece orchestra, the Daniel Weinreb Symphonette. And he was willing, at last, that this should be his life, his only life. If it were small, that was a part of its charm.

So he sang his old favorites, and they looked at him, and listened, and understood, for the force of song is that it must be understood. His mother, with a fixed smile on her face, un-

derstood; and his father, sitting beside her and tapping his foot in time to Mrs. Schiff's *a la turca* march tune, understood quite as clearly. Rose, in the next row, hiding her tape recorder under her seat (she had taped the entire family reunion as well), understood, and Jerry, watching little bubbles of colored light behind his closed eyes, understood, although a major part of his understanding was that this sort of thing wasn't for him. Far at the back of the auditorium, Eugene Mueller's twelve-year-old son, who had come here in defiance of his father's strict orders, understood with a rapture of understanding, not in gleams and flashes, but as an architect might understand, in a vision of great arching spaces carved by the music from the raw black night; of stately, stated, mathematic intervals; of commodious, firm delight. Even Daniel's old nemesis from Home Room 113, even the Iceberg understood, though it was a painful thing for her, like the sight of sunlit clouds beyond the iron grating of a high window. She sat there, stiff as a board in her fifth row seat, with her mind fixed on the words, especially on the words, which seemed at once so sinister and so unbearably sad, but it wasn't the words she understood, it was the song.

At last, when he'd sung all but the last number on the program, Daniel stopped to explain to his audience that though in general this was a practice of which he did not approve, he had been persuaded by his manager, Mr. Irwin Tauber, to use a flight apparatus while he sang his last song for them. Perhaps he would not take off, perhaps he would: one never knew in advance. But he felt as though he might, because it felt so great to be back in Amesville among his family and friends. He wished he could explain all that Amesville meant to him, but really he couldn't begin to, except to say that there was still more of Amesville in him than of New York.

The audience dutifully applauded this declaration of loyalty.

Daniel smiled and raised his arms, and the applause stopped.

He thanked them.

He wanted them, he said, to understand the wonder and glory of flight. There was nothing, he declared, so glorious, no ecstasy so sublime. What was it, he asked rhetorically, to fly? What did it mean? It was the act of love and the vision of God; it was the highest exaltation the soul can reach to; it was, therefore, paradise; and it was as *real* as the morning or the evening star. And anyone who wanted to fly could do so at the price of a song.

"The song," he had written in one of his songs, "does not end," and though he had written that song before he'd learned to fly himself, it was true. The moment one leaves one's body by the power of song, the lips fall silent, but the song goes on, and so long as one flies the song continues. He hoped, if he were to leave his own body tonight, they would remember that. The song does not end.

That wasn't the song he meant to sing now, however. The song he was going to sing now was "Flying." (The audience applauded.) The symphon-

ette started its slow, ripply introduction. Daniel's assistant wheeled the gimmicked flight apparatus on-stage. Daniel hated the thing. It looked like something from the bargain corner of a mortuary showroom. Irwin Tauber had designed it, since he didn't want anyone else but himself and Daniel to know that the wiring was rigged. Tauber might be a whiz at electronics but as a designer he had negative flair.

Daniel was wired into the apparatus. It felt like sitting in a chair that was tipping over. That was so that when he pretended to go limp he wouldn't fall on his face.

He rested his hand lightly on the armrest. With his thumb he felt for the hidden switch under the satin on the armrest. Even now, he didn't *have* to use it. But he probably would.

He sang. "We're dying!" he sang.

We're dying!
We're flying
Up to the ceiling, down to the floor,
Out of the window, and down to the shore.

We're ailing!
We're sailing
Over the ocean, down to the sea,
Into the tempest, across a cup of tea.

We're sowing!
We're flowing
Down through the sewer, out with the tide,
And in at the gate that yawns so wide.

We're dying!
We're flying
Up to the ceiling, down to the floor,
Out of the window, and in at the door.

Like a flash flood the symphonette swept him into the chorus. Despite being strapped down to the apparatus, he was singing beautifully.

Flying, sailing, flowing, flying:
While you're alive there's no denying
That flying and sailing and flowing and flying
Are wiser and saner and finer pursuits
Than cheating and lying and selling and buying
And trying to fathom ... a fathomless truth.

He repeated the chorus. This time, as he came to the last line, at the caesura, he applied the lightest of pressures to the switch on the armrest, and at the same moment closed his eyes and ceased to sing. The symphonette finished the song by themselves.

The dials of the apparatus showed that Daniel was in flight.

It was the moment Mrs. Norberg had been waiting for. She stood up, in her fifth-row seat, and took aim with the revolver she had concealed, the evening before, in the upholstery of her seat. A needless precaution, for there had been no security check at the door.

The first bullet lodged in Daniel's brain. The second ruptured his aorta.

Later, when, preliminary to her sentencing, the judge was to ask Mrs.

Norberg why she had killed Daniel Weinreb, she would reply that she had acted in defense of the system of free enterprise. Then she placed her right hand on her breast, turned to the flag, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. "I pledge allegiance," she declared, with her voice breaking and tears in her eyes, "to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

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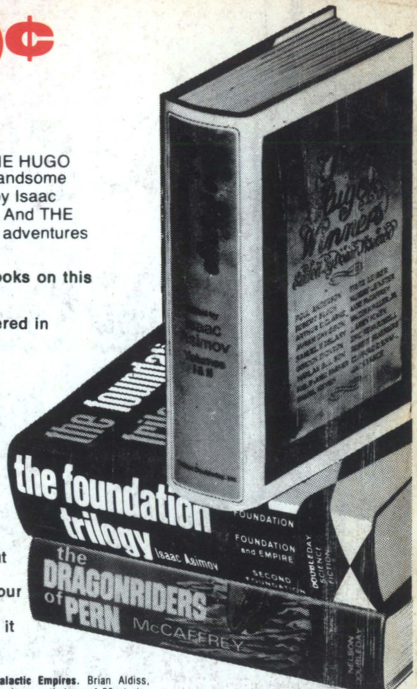

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