

## Go Starless InThe Night

Roger Zelazny

Darkness and silence all about, and nothing, nothing, nothing within it.

Me?

The first thought came unbidden, welling up from some black pool. Me? That's all.

Me?he thought. Then, Who? What . . . ?

Nothing answered.

Something like panic followed, without the customary physical accompaniments .

When this wave had passed, he listened, striving to capture the slightest sound.

He realized that he had already given up on seeing.

There was nothing to hear. Not even the smallest noises of life - breathing, heartbeat, the rasping of a tired joint - came to him. It was only then that he realizedhe lacked all bodily sensations.

But this time he fought the panic. Death?he wondered. A bodiless, dark sentence beyondeverything? The stillness . . .

Where? What point in spacetime did he occupy? He would have shaken his head. . .

He recalled that he had been a man - and it seemed that there were memories somewhere that he could not reach. No name answered his summons, no view of his past came to him. Yet he knew that there had been a past. He felt that it lay just below some dim horizon of recall.

He strove for a timeless interval to summon some recollection of what had gone before. Amnesia? Brain damage? Dream? he finally asked himself, after failing to push beyond a certain feeling of lurking images.

A body then . . . Start with that.

He remembered what bodies were. Arms, legs, head, torso . . . An intellectual vision of sex passed momentarily through his consciousness. Bodies, then . . .

He thought of his arms, felt nothing. Tried to move them. There was no sense of their existence, let alone movement.

Breathing . . . He attempted to draw a deep breath. Nothing came into him. There was no indication of any boundary whatsoever between himself and the darkness and silence.

A buzzing tone began, directionless. It oscillated in volume. It rose in pitch, dropped to a rumble, returned to a buzz. Abruptly then, it shifted again, to worklike approximations he could not quite decipher.

There was a pause, as if for some adjustment. Then "Hello?" came clearly to him.

He felt a rush of relief mingled with fear. The word filled his mind, followed by immediate concern as to whether he had actually heard it.

"Hello?"

Again, then. The fear faded. Something close to joy replaced it. He felt an immediate need to respond.

"Yes? Hello? Who?"

His answer broke. How had he managed it? He felt the presence of no vocal

mechanism. Yet he seemed to hear a faint echoing of his own reply, feedbacklike, tinny. Where? Its source was not localized.

It seemed then that several voices were conversing - hurried, soft, distant. He could not follow the rush of their words.

Then, "Hello again. Please respond one time more. We are adjusting the speaker.

How well do you hear we?"

"Clearly now," he answered. "Where am I? What has happened?"

"How much do you remember?"

"Nothing!"

"Panic not, Ernest Dawkins. Do you remember that your name is Ernest Dawkins?"

From your file, we have it."

"Now I do."

The simple statement of his name brought forth a series of images - his own face, his wife's, his two daughters', his apartment, the laboratory where he worked, his car, a sunny day at the beach.

That day at the beach . . . That was when he had first felt the pain in his left side - a dull ache at first, increasing over ensuing weeks. He had never been without it after that - until now, he suddenly realized.

"I - it's coming back - my memory," he said. "It's as if a dam had broken . . .

Give me a minute."

"Take your time."

He shied away from the thought of the pain. He had been ill, very ill, hospitalized, operated upon, drugged . . . He thought instead of his life, his family, his work. He thought of school and love and politics and research. He thought of the growing world tensions, and of his childhood, and-

"Are you right all, Ernest Dawkins?"

He had lost track of time, but that question caused him to produce something like a laugh, from somewhere.

"Hard to tell," he said. "I've been remembering - things. But as to whether I'm allright - Where the hell am I? What's happened?"

"Then you have remembered not everything?"

He noted odd inflections in the questioning voice, possibly even an accent that he could not place.

"I guess not."

"You were quite unwell."

"I remember that much."

"Dying, in fact. As they say."

He forced himself to return to the pain, to look beyond it. "Yes," he acknowledged. "I remember."

. . . And it was all there. He saw his last days in the hospital as his condition worsened, passing the point of no return, the faces of his family, friends and relatives wearing this realization. He recalled his decision to go through with an earlier resolution, long since set into motion. Money had never been a problem. It seemed it had always been there, in his family - his, by early inheritance - as ubiquitous as his attitude toward death after his parents' passing. Enough to have himself frozen for the long winter, to drop off dreaming of some distant spring . . .

"I recall my condition," he said. "I know what must finally have occurred."

"Yes," came the reply. "That is what happened."

"How much time has passed?"

"Considerable."

He would have licked his lips. He settled for the mental equivalent.

"My family?" he finally inquired.

"It has been too long."

"I see."

The other gave him time to consider this information. Then, "You had, of course, considered this possibility?"

"Yes. I prepared myself - as much as a man can - for such a state of affairs."

"It has been long. Very long . . ."

"How long?"

"Allow us to proceed in our fashion, please."

"All right. You know your business best."

"We are glad that you are so reasonable a being."

"Being?"

"Person. Excuse me ."

"I must ask something, though - not having to do with the passage of time: Is English now spoken as you speak it? Or is it not your native language?"

There was a sudden consultation, just beyond the range of distinguishability .

There followed a high-pitched artifact . Then, "Also let us reserve that question," the reply finally came.

"As you would. Then will you tell me about my situation? I am more than a little concerned. I can't see or feel anything."

"We are aware of this. It is unfortunate, but there is no point in misrepresenting to you. The time has not yet come for your full arouse."

"I do not understand. Do you mean that there is no cure for my condition yet?"

"We mean that there is no means of thawing you without doing great damage."

"Then how is it that we are conversing?"

"We have lowered your temperature even more - near to the zero absolute. Your nervous system has become superconductor. We have laid induction field upon your brain and initiated small currents within. Third space, left side head and those movement areas for talk are now serving to activate mechanical speaker here beside we. We address you direct in the side of brain places for hearing talk."

There came another wave of panic. How long this one lasted, he did not know.

Vaguely, he became aware of the voice again, repeating his name.

"Yes," he finally managed. "I understand. It is not easy to accept . . ."

"We know. But this does you no damage," came the reply. "You might even take a heart from it, to know that you persist."

"There is that. I see your meaning and can take it as hope. But why? Surely you did not awaken me simply to demonstrate this?"

"No. We have interest in your times. Purely archaeological ."

"Archaeological! That would seem to indicate the passage of a great deal of time!"

"Forgive we . Perhaps we have chose wrong word, thinking of it in terms of ruins.

But your nervous system is doorway to times past."

"Ruins! What the hell happened?"

"There was war, and there have been disasters. The record, therefore, is unclear."

"Who won the war?"

"That is difficult to say."

"Then it must have been pretty bad."

"We would assume this. We are still ourselves learning. That is why we seek to know time past from your cold remains."

"If there was all this chaos, how is it that I was preserved through it?"

"The cold-making units here are powered by atomic plant which ran well untended -save for computer - for long while, and entire establishment is underground."

"Really? Things must have changed quite a bit after my - enrollment - here. It wasn't set up that way at the time I read the prospectus and visited the place."

"We really know little of the history of this establishment . There are many things of which we are ignorant. That is why we want you to tell us about your times."

"It is difficult to know where to begin . . ."

"It may be better if we ask you questions."

"All right. But I would like answers to some of my own afterward."

"A suitable arrangement. Tell us then: Did you reside at or near your place of employment?"

"No. Actually, I lived halfway across town and had to drive in every day."

"Was this common for the area and the country?"

"Pretty much so, yes. Some other people did use other means of transportation, of course. Some rode on buses. Some car-pooled. I drove. A lot of us did."

"When you say that you drove, are we to understand that you refer to four-wheeled land vehicle powered by internal combustion engine?"

"Yes, that is correct. They were in common use in the latter half of the twentieth century."

"And there were many such?"

"Very many."

"Had you ever problems involving presence of too many of them on trails at same time?"

"Yes. Certain times of day - when people were going to work and returning - were referred to as 'rush hour.' At such times there were often traffic jams - that is to say, so many vehicles that they got in one another's way."

"Extremely interesting. Were such creatures as whales still extant?"

"Yes."

"Interesting, too. What sort of work did you do?"

"I was involved in research on toxic agents of a chemical and bacteriological nature. Most of it was classified."

"What does that indicate?"

"Oh. It was of a secret nature, directed toward possible military application."

"Was war already in progress?"

"No. It was a matter of - preparedness. We worked with various agents that might be used, if the need ever arose."

"We think we see. Interesting times. Did you ever develop any of efficient nature?"

"Yes. A number of them."

"Then what would you do with them? It would seem hazardous to have such materials about during peace."

"Oh, samples were stored with the utmost precaution in very safe places. There were three main caches, and they were well sheltered and well guarded."

There was a pause. Then, "We find this somewhat distressing," the voice resumed.

"Do you feel they might have survived - a few, some centuries?"

"It is possible."

"Being peace loving, we are naturally concerned with items dangerous to human species -"

"You make it sound as if you are not yourself a member."



There came another high-pitched artifact . Then, "The language has changed more eventhan we realized.Apologies.Wrong inference taken. Our desire, to deactivatethese dangerous materials. Long have we expected their existences. You perhaps will advise?Their whereabouts unknown to us."

"I'm - not - so sure - about that," he answered. "No offense meant, but you are onlya voice to me. I really know nothing about you. I am not certain that I shouldgive this information."

There was a long silence.

"Hello? Are you still there?" he tried to say.

He heard nothing, not even his own voice. Time seemed to do strange things aroundhim. Had it stopped for a moment? Had he given offense ? Had his questionerdropped dead?

"Hello! Hello!" he said. "Do you hear me?"

". . . Mechanical failure,"came the reply."Apologies for. Sorry about yesterday."

"Yesterday!"

"Turned you off while obtaining new speaker.Just when you were to say where bestpoisons are."

"I am sorry," he stated. "You have asked for something that I cannot, in good con-science, give to you."

"We wish only to prevent damage."

"I am in the terrible position of having no way to verify anything that is told me."

"If something heavy falls upon you, you break like bottle."

"I could not even verify whether that had occurred."

"We could turn you off again, turn off the cold-maker."

"At least it would be painless," he said with more stoicism than he felt.

"We require this information."

"Then you must seek it elsewhere."

"We will disconnect your speaker and your hearer and go away. We will leave you thinking in the middle of nothing. Goodbye now."

"Wait!"

"Then you will tell us?"

"No. I - can't . . ."

"You will go mad if we disconnect these things, will you not?"

"I suppose so. Eventually . . ."

"Must we do it, then?"

"Your threats have shown me what you are like. I cannot give you such weapons."

"Ernest Dawkins, you are not intelligent being."

"And you are not an archaeologist. Or you would do future generations the service of turning me off, to save the other things that I do know."

"You are right. We are not such. You will never know what we are."

"I know enough."

"Go to your madness."

Silence again.

For a long while the panic held him. Until the images of his family recurred, and his home, and his town. These grew more and more substantial, and gradually he came to walk with them and among them. Then, after a time, he stopped reporting for work and spent his days at the beach. He wondered at first when his side would begin to hurt. Then he wondered why he had wondered this. Later, he forgot many things, but not the long days beneath the sun or the sound of the

surf, the red rain, the blue, or the melting statue with the fiery eyes and the sword in its fist. When he heard voices under the sand he did not answer. He listened instead to whales singing to mermaids on migrating rocks, where they combed their long green hair with shards of bone, laughing at the lightning and the ice.