

This ebook is published by

Fictionwise Publications  
www.fictionwise.com

*The Short Fiction Leader*

Visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to find more titles by this and other top authors in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, and other genres.

This ebook copyrighted. See the first page of this book for full copyright information.

---

Fictionwise Publications  
www.fictionwise.com

Copyright (C)1975 Harlan Ellison. All rights reserved.

---

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines.

Fictionwise offers a reward of up to \$500 for information leading to the conviction of any person violating the copyright of a Fictionwise ebook.

---

i: *Someday*

Not much later, but later nonetheless, he thought back on the sequence of what had happened, and knew he had missed nothing. How it had gone, was this:

He had been abstracted, thinking about something else. It didn't matter what. He had gone to the telephone in the restaurant, to call Jamie, to find out where the hell she was already, to find out why she'd kept him sitting in the bloody bar for thirty-five minutes. He had been thinking about something else, nothing deep, just woolgathering, and it wasn't till the number was ringing that he realized he'd dialed his own apartment. He had done it other times, not often, but as many as anyone else, dialed a number by rote and not thought about it, and occasionally it was his own number, everyone does it (he thought later), everyone does it, it's a simple mistake.

He was about to hang up, get back his dime and dial Jamie, when the receiver was lifted at the other end.

*He answered.*

Himself.

He recognized his own voice at once. But didn't let it penetrate.

He had no little machine to take messages after the bleep, he had had his answering service temporarily disconnected (unsatisfactory service, they weren't catching his calls on the third ring as he'd *insisted*) , there was no one guesting at his apartment, nothing. He was not at home, he was here, in the restaurant, calling his apartment, and *he* answered.

“Hello?”

He waited a moment. Then said, “Who's this?”

He answered, “Who're you calling?”

“Hold it,” he said. “Who *is* this?”

His own voice, on the other end, getting annoyed, said, “Look, friend, what number do you want?”

“This is BEacon 3-6189, right?”

Warily: “Yeah...?”

“Peter Novins's apartment?”

There was silence for a moment, then: “That's right.”

He listened to the sounds from the restaurant's kitchen. “If this is Novins's apartment, who're you?”

On the other end, in his apartment, there was a deep breath. “This is Novins.”

He stood in the phone booth, in the restaurant, in the night, the receiver to his ear, and listened to his own voice. He had dialed his own number by mistake, dialed an empty apartment ... *and he had answered* .

Finally, he said, very tightly, “ *This is* Novins.”

“Where are you?”

“I'm at The High Tide, waiting for Jamie.”

Across the line, with a terrible softness, he heard himself asking, “Is that you?”

A surge of fear pulsed through him and he tried to get out of it with one last possibility. “If this is a gag ... Freddy ... is that you, man? Morrie? Art?”

Silence. Then, slowly, “I'm Novins. Honest to God.”

His mouth was dry. “I'm out here. You can't be, I *can't* be in the apartment.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I am.”

“I’ll have to call you back.” Peter Novins hung up.

\* \* \* \*

He went back to the bar and ordered a double Scotch, no ice, straight up, and threw it back in two swallows, letting it burn. He sat and stared at his hands, turning them over and over, studying them to make sure they were his own, not alien meat grafted onto his wrists when he was not looking.

Then he went back to the phone booth, closed the door and sat down, and dialed his own number. Very carefully.

It rang six times before *he* picked it up.

He knew why the voice on the other end had let it ring six times; he didn't want to pick up the snake and hear his own voice coming at him.

“Hello?” His voice on the other end was barely controlled.

“It's me,” he said, closing his eyes.

“Jesus God,” he murmured.

They sat there, in their separate places, without speaking. Then Novins said, “I’ll call you Jay.”

“That's okay,” he answered from the other end. It was his middle name. He never used it, but it appeared on his insurance policy, his driver's license and his social security card. Jay said, “Did Jamie get there?”

“No, she's late again.”

Jay took a deep breath and said, “We'd better talk about this, man.”

“I suppose,” Novins answered. “Not that I really want to. You're scaring the shit out of me.”

“How do you think *I* feel about it?”

“Probably the same way I feel about it.”

They thought about that for a long moment. Then Jay said, “Will we be feeling exactly the same way about things?”

Novins considered it, then said, “If you're really me then I suppose so. We ought to try and test that.”

“You're taking this a lot calmer than I am, it seems to me,” Jay said.

Novins was startled. “You really think so? I was just about to say I thought you were really terrific the way you're handling all this. I think you're *much* more together about it than I am. I'm really startled, I've got to tell you.”

“So how'll we test it?” Jay asked.

Novins considered the problem, then said, “Why don't we compare likes and dislikes. That's a start. That sound okay to you?”

“It's as good a place as any, I suppose. Who goes first?”

“It's my dime,” Novins said, and for the first time he smiled. “I like, uh, well-done prime rib, end cut if I can get it, Yorkshire pudding, smoking a pipe, Max Ernst's paintings, Robert Altman films, William Goldman's books, getting mail but not answering it, uh...”

He stopped. He had been selecting random items from memory, the ones that came to mind first. But as he had been speaking, he heard what he was saying, and it seemed stupid. “This isn't going to work,” Novins said. “What the hell does it matter? Was there anything in that list you didn't like?”

Jay sighed. “No, they're all favorites. You're right. If I like it, you'll like it. This isn't going to answer any questions.”

Novins said, “I don't even know what the questions *are* !”

“That's easy enough,” Jay said. “There's only one question: which of us is me, and how does *me* get rid of *him* ?”

A chill spread out from Novins's shoulder blades and wrapped around his arms like a mantilla. “What's *that* supposed to mean? Get rid of *him* ? What the hell's *that* ?”

“Face it,” Jay said—and Novins heard a tone in the voice he recognized, the tone *he* used when he was about to become a tough negotiator—“we can't *both* be Novins. One of us is going to get screwed.”

“Hold it, friend,” Novins said, adopting the tone. “That's pretty muddy logic. First of all, who's to say you're not going to vanish back where you came from as soon as I hang up...”

“Bullshit,” Jay answered.

“Yeah, well, maybe; but even if you're here to stay, and I don't concede *that* craziness for a second, even if you *are* real—”

“Believe it, baby, I'm real,” Jay said, with a soft chuckle. Novins was starting to hate him.

“—even if you *are* real,” Novins continued, “there's no saying we can't both exist, and both lead happy, separate lives.”

“You know something, Novins,” Jay said, “you're really full of horse puckey. You can't lead a happy life by yourself, man, how the hell are you going to do it knowing I'm over here living your life, too?”

“What do you mean I can't lead a happy life? What do you know about it?” And he stopped; of course Jay knew about it. *All* about it.

“You'd better start facing reality, Novins. You'll be coming to it late in life, but you'd better learn how to do it. Maybe it'll make the end come easier.”

Novins wanted to slam the receiver into its rack. He was at once furiously angry and frightened. He knew what the other Novins was saying was true; he *had* to know, without argument; it was, after all,

himself saying it. "Only one of us is going to make it," he said, tightly. "And it's going to be me, old friend."

"How do you propose to do it, Novins? You're out there, locked out. I'm in here, in my home, safe where I'm supposed to be."

"How about we look at it *this* way," Novins said quickly, "you're trapped in there, locked away from the world in three-and-a-half rooms. I've got everywhere else to move in. You're limited. I'm free."

There was silence for a moment.

Then Jay said, "We've reached a bit of an impasse, haven't we? There's something to be said for being loose, and there's something to be said for being safe inside. The amazing thing is that we both have accepted this thing so quickly."

Novins didn't answer. He accepted it because he had no other choice; if he could accept that he was speaking to himself, then anything that followed had to be part of that acceptance. Now that Jay had said it bluntly, that only one of them could continue to exist, all that remained was finding a way to make sure it was he, Novins, who continued past this point.

"I've got to think about this," Novins said. "I've got to try to work some of this out better. You just stay celled in there, friend; I'm going to a hotel for the night. I'll call you tomorrow."

He started to hang up when Jay's voice stopped him. "What do I say if Jamie gets there and you're gone and she calls me?"

Novins laughed. "That's *your* problem, motherfucker."

He racked the receiver with nasty satisfaction.

ii: *Moanday*

He took special precautions. First the bank, to clean out the checking account. He thanked God he'd had his checkbook with him when he'd gone out to meet Jamie the night before. But the savings account passbook was in the apartment. That meant Jay had access to almost ten thousand dollars. The checking account was down to fifteen hundred, even with all outstanding bills paid, and the Banks for Cooperatives note came due in about thirty days and that meant ... he used the back of a deposit slip to figure the interest ... he'd be getting ten thousand four hundred and sixty-five dollars and seven cents deposited to his account. His *new* account, which he opened at another branch of the same bank, signing the identification cards with a variation of his signature sufficiently different to prevent Jay's trying to draw on the account. He was at least solvent. For the time being.

But all his work was in the apartment. All the public relations accounts he handled. Every bit of data and all the plans and phone numbers and charts, they were all there in the little apartment office. So he was quite effectively cut off from his career.

Yet in a way, that was a blessing. Jay would have to keep up with the work in his absence, would have to follow through on the important campaigns for Topper and McKenzie, would have to take all the moronic calls from Lippman and his insulting son, would have to answer all the mail, would have to keep popping Titalac all day just to stay ahead of the heartburn. He felt gloriously free and almost satanically happy that he was rid of the aggravation for a while, and that Jay was going to find out being Peter Jay Novins wasn't all fun and Jamies.

Back in his hotel room at the Americana he made a list of things he had to do. To survive. It was a new way of thinking, setting down one by one the everyday routine actions from which he was now cut off. He was all alone now, entirely and totally, for the first time in his life, cut off from everything. He could not depend on friends or associates or the authorities. It would be suicide to go to the police and say, "Listen, I hate to bother you, but I've split and one of me has assumed squatter's rights in my apartment; please go up there and arrest him." No, he was on his own, and he had to exorcise Jay from the world strictly by his own wits and cunning.

Bearing in mind, of course, that Jay had the same degree of wit and cunning.

He crossed half a dozen items off the list. There was no need to call Jamie, to find out what had happened to her the night before. Their relationship wasn't that binding in any case. Let Jay make the excuses. No need to cancel the credit cards, he had them with him. Let Jay pay the bills from the savings account. No need to contact any of his friends and warn them. He *couldn't* warn them, and if he did, what would he warn them against? Himself? But he did need clothes, fresh socks and underwear, a light jacket instead of his topcoat, a pair of gloves in case the weather turned. And he had to cancel out the delivery services to the apartment in a way that would prevent Jay from reinstating them: groceries, milk, dry cleaning, newspapers. He had to make it as difficult for him in there as possible. And so he called each tradesman and insulted him so grossly they would *never* serve him again. Unfortunately, the building provided heat and electricity and gas and he *had* to leave the phone connected.

The phone was his tie-line to victory, to routing Jay out of there.

When he had it all attended to, by three o'clock in the afternoon, he returned to the hotel room, took off his shoes, propped the pillows up on the bed, lay down and dialed a 9 for the outside line, then dialed his own number.

As it rang, he stared out the forty-fifth floor window of the hotel room, at the soulless pylons of the RCA and Grants Buildings, the other dark-glass filing cabinets for people. It was a wonder *any* one managed to stay sane, stay whole in such surroundings! Living in cubicles, boxed and trapped and throttled, was it any surprise that people began to fall apart ... even as *he* seemed to be falling apart? The wonder was that it all managed to hold together as well as it did. But the fractures were beginning to appear, culturally and now—as with Peter Novins, he mused—personally. The phone continued to ring. Clouds blocked out all light and the city was swamped by shadows. At three o'clock in the afternoon, the ominous threat of another night settled over Novins's hotel room.

The receiver was lifted at the other end. But Jay said nothing.

"It's me," Novins said. "How'd you enjoy your first day in my skin?"

"How did you enjoy your first day *out* of it?" he replied.

"Listen, I've got your act covered, friend, and your hours are numbered. The checking account is gone, don't try to find it; you're going to go out to get food and when you do I'll be waiting—"

"Terrific," Jay replied. "But just so you don't waste your time, I had the locks changed today. Your keys don't work. And I bought groceries. Remember the fifty bucks I put away in the jewelry box?"

Novins cursed himself silently. He hadn't thought of that.

“And I've been doing some figuring, Novins. Remember that old Jack London novel, *The Star Rover*? Remember how he used astral projection to get out of his body? I think that's what happened to me. I sent you out when I wasn't aware of it. So I've decided I'm me, and you're just a little piece that's wandered off. And I can get along just peachy-keen without that piece, so why don't you just go—”

“Hold it,” Novins interrupted, “that's a sensational theory, but it's stuffed full of wild blueberry muffins, if you'll pardon my being so forward as to disagree with a smartass voice that's probably disembodied and doesn't have enough ectoplasm to take a healthy shit. Remember the weekend I went over to the lab with Kenny and he took that Kirlian photograph of my aura? Well, my theory is that something happened and the aura produced another me, or something...”

He slid down into silence. Neither theory was worth thinking about. He had no idea, *really*, what had happened. They hung there in silence for a long moment, then Jay said, “Mother called this morning.”

Novins felt a hand squeeze his chest. “What did she say?”

“She said she knew you lied when you were down in Florida. She said she loved you and she forgave you and all she wants is for you to share your life with her.”

Novins closed his eyes. He didn't want to think about it. His mother was in her eighties, very sick, and just recovering from her second serious heart attack in three years. The end was near and, combining a business trip in Miami with a visit to her, he had gone to Florida the month before. He had never had much in common with his mother, had been on his own since his early teens, and though he supported her in her declining years, he refused to allow her to impose on his existence. He seldom wrote letters, save to send the check, and during the two days he had spent in her apartment in Miami Beach he had thought he would go insane. He had wanted to bolt, and finally had lied to her that he was returning to New York a day earlier than his plans required. He had packed up and left her, checking into a hotel, and had spent the final day involved in business and that night had gone out with a secretary he dated occasionally when in Florida.

“How did she find out?” Novins asked.

“She called here and the answering service told her you were still in Florida and hadn't returned. They gave her the number of the hotel and she called there and found out you were registered for that night.”

Novins cursed himself. Why had he called the service to tell them where he was? He could have gotten away with one day of his business contacts not being able to reach him. “Swell,” he said. “And I suppose you didn't do anything to make her feel better.”

“On the contrary,” Jay said, “I did what you never would have done. I made arrangements for her to come live here with me.”

Novins heard himself moan with pain. “You did *what*!? Jesus Christ, you're out of your fucking mind. How the hell am I going to take care of that old woman in New York? I've got work to do, places I have to go, I have a life to lead...”

“Not any more you don't, you guilty, selfish sonofabitch. Maybe *you* could live with the bad gut feelings about her, but not me. She'll be arriving in a week.”

“You're crazy,” Novins screamed. “You're fucking crazy!”

“Yeah,” Jay said, softly, and added, “and you just lost your mother. Chew on *that* one, you creep.”

And he hung up.

iii: *Duesday*

They decided between them that the one who *deserved* to be Peter Novins should take over the life. They had to make that decision; clearly, they could not go on as they had been; even two days had showed them half an existence was not possible. Both were fraying at the edges.

So Jay suggested they work their way through the pivot experiences of Novins's life, to see if he was really entitled to continue living.

“Everyone's entitled to go on living,” Novins said, vehemently. “That's why we live. To say no to death.”

“You don't believe that for a second, Novins,” Jay said. “You're a misanthrope. You hate people.”

“That's not true; I just don't like some of the things people *do*.”

“Like what, for instance? Like, for instance, you're always bitching about kids who wear ecology patches, who throw Dr. Pepper cans in the bushes; like that, for instance?”

“That's good for starters,” Novins said.

“You hypocritical bastard,” Jay snarled back at him, “you have the audacity to beef about that and you took on the Cumberland account.”

“That's another kind of thing!”

“My ass. You know damned well Cumberland's planning to strip-mine the guts out of that county, and they're going to get away with it with that publicity campaign you dreamed up. Oh, you're one hell of a good PR man, Novins, but you've got the ethics of a weasel.”

Novins was fuming, but Jay was right. He had felt lousy about taking on Cumberland from the start, but they were big, they were international, and the billing for the account was handily in six figures. He had tackled the campaign with the same ferocity he brought to all his accounts, and the program was solid. “I have to make a living. Besides, if I didn't do it, someone else would. I'm only doing a job. They've got a terrific restoration program, don't forget that. They'll put that land back in shape.”

Jay laughed. “That's what Eichmann said: ‘We have a terrific restoration program, we'll put them Jews right back in shape, just a little gas to spiff 'em up.’ He was just doing a job, too, Novins. Have I mentioned lately that you stink on ice?”

Novins was shouting again. “I suppose you'd have turned it down.”

“That's exactly what I did, old buddy,” Jay said. “I called them today and told them to take their account and stuff it up their nose. I've got a call in to Nader right now, to see what he can do with all that data in the file.”

Novins was speechless. He lay there, under the covers, the Tuesday snow drifting in enormous flakes past the forty-fifth floor windows. Slowly, he let the receiver settle into the cradle. Only three days and



his life was drifting apart inexorably; soon it would be impossible to knit it together.

His stomach ached. And all that day he had felt nauseated. Room service had sent up pot after pot of tea, but it hadn't helped. A throbbing headache was lodged just behind his left eye, and cold sweat covered his shoulders and chest.

He didn't know what to do, but he knew he was losing.

iv: *Woundsday*

On Wednesday Jay called Novins. He never told him how he'd located him, he just called. "How do you feel?" he asked.

Novins could barely answer, the fever was close to immobilizing.

"I just called to talk about Jeanine and Patty and that girl in Denver," Jay said, and he launched into a long and stately recitation of Novins's affairs, and how they had ended. It was not as Novins remembered it.

"That isn't true," Novins managed to say, his voice deep and whispering, dry and nearly empty.

"It *is* true, Novins. That's what's so sad about it. That it *is* true and you've never had the guts to admit it, that you go from woman to woman without giving anything, always taking, and when you leave them—or they dump you—you've never learned a god damned thing. You've been married twice, divorced twice, you've been in and out of two dozen affairs and you haven't learned that you're one of those men who is simply no bloody good for a woman. So now you're forty-two years old and you're finally coming to the dim understanding that you're going to spend all the rest of the days and nights of your life alone, because you can't stand the company of another human being for more than a month without turning into a vicious prick."

"Not true," murmured Novins.

"True, Novins, true. Flat true. You set after Patty and got her to leave her old man, and when you'd pried her loose, her and the kid, you set her up in that apartment with three hundred a month rent, and then you took off and left her to work it out herself. It's true, old buddy. So don't try and con me with that 'I lead a happy life' bullshit."

Novins simply lay there with his eyes closed, shivering with the fever.

Then Jay said, "I saw Jamie last night. We talked about her future. It took some fast talking; she was really coming to hate you. But I think it'll work out if I go at it hard, and I *intend* to go at it hard. I don't intend to have any more years like I've had, Novins. From this point on it changes."

The bulk of the buildings outside the window seemed to tremble behind the falling snow. Novins felt terribly cold. He didn't answer.

"We'll name the first one after you, Peter," Jay said, and hung up.

That was Wednesday.

v: *Thornsday*

There were no phone calls that day. Novins lay there, the television set mindlessly playing and replaying

the five minute instruction film on the pay-movie preview channel, the ghost-image of a dark-haired girl in a gray suit showing him how to charge a first-run film to his hotel bill. After many hours he heard himself reciting the instructions along with her. He slept a great deal. He thought about Jeanine and Patty, the girl in Denver whose name he could not recall, and Jamie.

After many more hours, he thought about insects, but he didn't know what that meant. There were no phone calls that day. It was Thursday.

Shortly before midnight, the fever broke, and he cried himself back to sleep.

vi: *Freeday*

A key turned in the lock and the hotel room door opened. Novins was sitting in a mass-produced imitation of a Saarinen pedestal chair, its seat treated with Scotch-Gard. He had been staring out the window at the geometric irrelevancy of the glass-wall buildings. It was near dusk, and the city was gray as cardboard.

He turned at the sound of the door opening and was not surprised to see himself walk in.

Jay's nose and cheeks were still red from the cold outside. He unzipped his jacket and stuffed his kid gloves into a pocket, removed the jacket and threw it on the unmade bed. "Really cold out there," he said. He went into the bathroom and Novins heard the sound of water running.

Jay returned in a few minutes, rubbing his hands together. "That helps," he said. He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at Novins.

"You look terrible, Peter," he said.

"I haven't been at all well," Novins answered dryly. "I don't seem to be myself these days."

Jay smiled briefly. "I see you're coming to terms with it. That ought to help."

Novins stood up. The thin light from the room-long window shone through him like white fire through milk glass. "You're looking well," he said.

"I'm getting better, Peter. It'll be a while, but I'm going to be okay."

Novins walked across the room and stood against the wall, hands clasped behind his back. He could barely be seen. "I remember the archetypes from Jung. Are you my shadow, my persona, my anima or my animus?"

"What am I now, or what was I when I got loose?"

"Either way."

"I suppose I was your shadow. Now I'm the self."

"And I'm becoming the shadow."

"No, you're becoming a memory. A bad memory."

"That's pretty ungracious."

“I was sick for a long time, Peter. I don't know what the trigger was that broke us apart, but it happened and I can't be too sorry about it. If it hadn't happened I'd have been you till I died. It would have been a lousy life and a miserable death.”

Novins shrugged. “Too late to worry about it now. Things working out with Jamie?”

Jay nodded. “Yeah. And Mom comes in Tuesday afternoon. I'm renting a car to pick her up at Kennedy. I talked to her doctors. They say she doesn't have too long. But for whatever she's got, I'm determined to make up for the last twenty-five years since Dad died.”

Novins smiled and nodded. “That's good.”

“Listen,” Jay said slowly, with difficulty, “I just came over to ask if there was anything you wanted me to do ... anything *you* would've done if ... if it had been different.”

Novins spread his hands and thought about it for a moment. “No, I don't think so, nothing special. You might try and get some money to Jeanine's mother, for Jeanine's care, maybe. That wouldn't hurt.”

“I already took care of it. I figured that would be on your mind.”

Novins smiled. “That's good. Thanks.”

“Anything else...?”

Novins shook his head. They stayed that way, hardly moving, till night had fallen outside the window. In the darkness, Jay could barely see Novins standing against the wall. Merely a faint glow.

Finally, Jay stood and put on his jacket, zipped up and put on his left glove. “I've got to go.”

Novins spoke from the shadows. “Yeah. Well, take care of me, will you?”

Jay didn't answer. He walked to Novins and extended his right hand. The touch of Novins's hand in his was like the whisper of a cold wind; there was no pressure.

Then he left.

Novins walked back to the window and stared out. The last remaining daylight shone through him. Dimly.

vii: *Shatterday*

When the maid came in to make up the bed, she found the room was empty. It was terribly cold in the room on the forty-fifth floor. When Peter Novins did not return that day, or the next, the management of the Americana marked him as a skip, and turned it over to a collection agency.

In due course the bill was sent to Peter Novins's apartment on Manhattan's upper east side.

It was promptly paid, by Peter Jay Novins, with a brief, but *sincere* note of apology.

---

At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can:

- Rate this story
- Find more stories by this author
- Get story recommendations