

# Understanding Human Behavior

By Thomas M. Disch

## I

He would wake up each morning with a consciousness clear as the Boulder sky, a sense of being on the same wave length exactly as the sunlight. Innocence, bland dreams, a healthy appetite -- these were glories that issued directly from his having been erased. Of course, there were some corresponding disadvantages. His job, monitoring the terminals of a drive-in convenience center, could get pretty dull, especially on days when no one drove in for an hour or so at a stretch, and even at the busiest times it didn't provide much opportunity for human contact. He envied the waitresses in restaurants and the drivers of buses their chance to say hello to real live customers.

Away from work it was different; he didn't feel the same hunger for socializing. That, in fact, was the major disadvantage of having no past life, no established preferences, no identity in the usual sense of a history to attach his name to -- he just didn't *want* anything very much.

Not that he was bored or depressed or anything like that. The world was all new to him, and full of surprises: the strangeness of anchovies; the beauty of old songs in their blurry Muzak versions at the Stop-and-Shop; the feel of a new shirt or a March day. These sensations were not wholly unfamiliar, nor was his mind a *tabula rasa*. His use of the language and his motor skills were all intact; also what the psychologists at Delphi Institute called generic recognition. But none of the occasions of newness *reminded* him of any earlier experience, some first time or best time or worst time that he'd survived. His only set of memories of a personal and non-generic character were those he'd brought from the halfway house in Delphi, Indiana. But such fine memories they were -- so fragile, so distinct, so privileged. If only (he often wished) he could have lived out his life in the sanctuary of Delphi, among men and women like himself, all newly summoned to another life and responsive to the wonders and beauties around them. But no, for reasons he could not understand, the world insisted on being organized otherwise. An erasee was allowed six months at the Institute, and then he was dispatched to wherever he or the computer decided, where he would have to live like everyone else, either alone or in a family (though the Institute advised everyone to be wary at first of establishing primary ties), in a small room or a cramped house or a dormitory ship in some tropical lagoon. Unless you were fairly rich or very lucky, your clothes, furniture, and suchlike appurtenances were liable to be rough, shabby, makeshift. The food most people ate was an incitement to infantile gluttony, a slop of sugars, starches, and chemically enhanced flavors. It would have been difficult to live among such people and to seem to share their values, except so few of them ever questioned the reasonableness of their arrangements. Those who did, if they had the money, would probably opt, eventually, to have their identities erased, since it was clear, just looking around, that erasees seemed to strike the right intuitive balance between being aware and keeping calm.

He lived now in a condo on the northwest edge of the city, a room and a half with unlimited off-peak power access. The rent was modest (so was his salary), but his equity in the condo was large enough to suggest that his pre-erasure income had been up there in the top percentiles.

He wondered, as all erasees do, why he'd decided to wipe out his past. His life had gone sour, that much was sure, but how and why were questions that could never be answered. The Institute saw to that. A shipwrecked marriage was the commonest reason statistically, closely followed by business reverses. At least that was what people put down on their questionnaires when they applied to the Institute. Somehow he doubted those reasons were the real ones. People who'd never been erased seemed oddly unable to account for their behavior. Even to themselves they would tell the unlikeliest tales about what they were doing

and why. Then they'd spend a large part of their social life exposing each others' impostures and laughing at them. A sense of humor they called it. He was glad he didn't have one, yet.

Most of his free time he spent making friends with his body. In his first weeks at the halfway house he'd lazed about, eaten too much junk food, and started going rapidly to seed. Erasees are not allowed to leave their new selves an inheritance of obesity or addiction, but often the body one wakes up in is the hasty contrivance of a crash diet. The mouth does not lose its appetites, nor the metabolism its rate, just because the mind has had memories whited out. Fortunately he'd dug in his heels, and by the time he had to bid farewell to Delphi's communal dining room he'd lost the pounds he'd put on, and eight more besides.

Since then fitness had been his religion. He bicycled to work, to Stop-and-Shop, and all about Denver, exploring its uniformities. He hiked and climbed on weekends. He jogged. Once a week, at a Y, he played volleyball for two hours, just as though he'd never left the Institute. He also kept up the other sport he'd had to learn at Delphi, which was karate. Except for the volleyball, he stuck to the more solitary forms of exercise, because on the whole he wasn't interested in forming relationships. The lecturers at the halfway house had said this was perfectly natural, and nothing to worry about. He shouldn't socialize until he felt hungry for more society than his job and his living arrangements naturally provided. So far that hunger had not produced a single pang. Maybe he was what the Institute called a natural integer. If so, that seemed an all-right fate.

What he did miss, consciously and sometimes achingly, was a purpose. In common with most fledgling erasees, there was nothing he *believed* in -- no religion, no political idea, no ambition to become famous for doing something better than somebody else. Money was about the only purpose he could think of, and even that was not a compelling purpose. He didn't lust after more and more and more of it in the classical Faustian go-getter way.

His room and a half looked out across the tops of a small plantation of spruces to the highway that climbed the long southwestward incline into the Rockies. Each car that hummed along the road was like a vector-quantity of human desire, a quantum of teleological purpose. He might have been mistaken. The people driving those cars might be just as uncertain of their ultimate destinations as he was, but, seeing them whiz by in their primary colors, he found that hard to believe. Anyone who was prepared to bear the expense of a car surely had somewhere he wanted to get to or something he wanted to do more intensely than *he* could imagine, up here on his three-foot slab of balcony.

He didn't have a telephone or a TV. He didn't read newspapers or magazines, and the only books he ever looked at were some old textbooks on geology he'd bought at a garage sale in Denver. He didn't go to movies. The ability to suspend disbelief in something that had never happened was one he'd lost when he was erased, assuming he'd ever had it. A lot of the time he couldn't suspend his disbelief in the real people around him, all their pushing and pulling, their weird fears and whopping lies, their endless urges to control other people's behavior, like the vegetarian cashier at the Stop-and-Shop or the manager at the convenience center. The lectures and demonstrations at the halfway house had laid out the basics, but without explaining any of it. Like harried parents, the Institute's staff had said, "Do this," and "Don't do that," and he'd not been in a position to argue. He did as he was bid, and his behavior fit as naturally as an old suit.

His name -- the name by which he'd christened his new self before erasure -- was Richard Roe, and that seemed to fit too.

## II

At the end of September, three months after coming to Boulder, Richard signed up for a course in *Consumerism: Theory and Practice* at the Naropa Adult Education Center. There were twelve other students in the class, all with the dewy, slightly vulnerable look of recent erasure. They sat in their folding chairs, reading or just blank, waiting for the teacher, who

arrived ten minutes late, out of breath and gasping apologies. Professor Astor. While she was still collecting punchcards and handing out flimsy Xeroxes of their reading list, she started lecturing to them. Before she could get his card (he'd chosen a seat in the farthest row back) she was distracted by the need to list on the blackboard the three reasons that people wear clothing, which are:

Utility,

Communication, and

Self-Concept.

Utility was obvious and didn't need going into, while Self-Concept was really a sub-category of Communication, a kind of closed-circuit transmission between oneself and a mirror.

"Now, to illustrate the three basic aspects of Communication, I have some slides." She sat down behind the A/V console at the front of the room and fussed with the buttons anxiously, muttering encouragements to herself. Since the question was there in the air, he wondered what her black dress was supposed to be communicating. It was a wooly, baggy, practical dress, sprinkled with dandruff and gathered loosely about the middle by a wide belt of cracked patent leather. The spirit of garage sales hovered about it. "There!" she said.

But the slide that flashed on the screen was a chart illustrating cuts of beef. "Damn," she said, "that's next week. Well, it doesn't matter. I'll write it on the board."

When she stood up and turned around, it seemed clear that one of the utilitarian functions of her dress was to disguise or obfuscate some twenty-plus pounds of excess baggage. A jumble of thin bracelets jingled as she wrote on the board:

Desire,

Admiration,

Solidarity.

"There," she said, laying down the chalk and swinging round to face them, setting the heavy waves of black hair to swaying pendulously, "it's as simple as red, white, and blue. These are the three types of response people try to elicit from others by the clothes they wear. Blue, of course, would represent solidarity. Policemen wear blue. French workingmen have always worn a blinding blue. And then there's the universal uniform of blue denim. It's a cool color, and tends to make those who wear it recede into the background. They vanish into the blue, so to speak.

"Then white." She took a blank piece of paper from her desk and held it up as a sample of whiteness. "White is for white-collar workers, the starched white shirt wearable only for a single day being a timeless symbol of conspicuous consumption. I wish the slide projector worked for this: I have a portrait by Hals of a man wearing one of those immense Dutch collars, and you couldn't begin to imagine the work-hours that must have gone into washing and ironing the damned thing. The money. Basically that's what our second category is about. There's a book by Thorstein Veblen on the reading list that explains it all. Admittedly there are qualities other than solvency and success we may be called upon to *admire* in what people wear: good taste, a sense of paradox or wit, even courage, as when one walks through a dangerous neighborhood without the camouflage of denim. But good taste usually boils down to money: the good taste of petroleum-derived polyesters as against--" She smiled and ran her hand across the pilled cloth of her dress. "--the *bad* taste of wool. Wit, likewise, is usually the wit of combining contradictory class-recognition signals in the same costume -- an evening gown, say, trimmed with Purina patches. You should all be aware, as consumers, that the chief purpose of spending a lot of money on what you wear is to proclaim your allegiance to money *per se*, and to a career devoted to earning it, or, in the case of diamond rings, the promise to keep one's husband activated. Though in this case we begin to impinge on the realm of desire."

To all which he gave about as much credence as he gave to actors in ads. Like most theories, it made the world seem more, not less, complicated. Ho-hum, thought he, as he doodled a crisp doodle of a many-faceted diamond. But then as she expounded her ideas about Desire he grew uneasy, then embarrassed, and finally teed-off.

"Red," she said, reading from her deck of three-by-fives, "is the color of desire. Love is always like a red, red rose. It lies a-bleeding like a beautiful steak in a supermarket. To wear red is to declare oneself ready for action, especially if the color is worn below the waist."

There he sat in the back row in his red shorts and red sneakers thinking angry red thoughts. He refused to believe it was a coincidence. He was wearing red shorts because he'd bicycled here, a five-mile ride, not because he wanted to semaphore his instant availability to the world at large. He waited till she'd moved off the subject of Desire, then left the classroom as inconspicuously as possible. In the Bursar's Office he considered the other Wednesday night possibilities, mostly workshops in posture or poetry or suchlike. Only one -- *A Survey of Crime in 20th Century America* -- offered any promise of explaining people's behavior, so that was the one he signed up for.

The next day, instead of going to work, he went out to New Focus and watched hang-gliders. The most amazing of them was a crippled woman who arrived in a canvas sling. Rochelle Rockefeller's exploits had made her so famous that even Richard knew about her, not only on account of her flying but because she was one of the founding mothers of New Focus, and had been involved in sizable altercations with the state police. The two women who carried her down from New Focus in the sling busied themselves with straps and buckles and then, at Rochelle's nod, launched her off the side of the cliff. She rose, motor-assisted, on the updraft, and waved to her daughter, who sat watching on the edge of the cliff. The girl waved back. Then the girl went off by herself to the picnic table area, where two rag dolls awaited her atop one of the tables.

He walked over to the table and asked if she minded if he shared the bench with her.

She shook her head, and then in a rather dutiful tone introduced her dolls. The older was Ms. Chillywiggles, the younger was Ms. Sillygiggles. They were married. "And *my* name is Rochelle, the same as my mother. What's yours?"

"Richard Roe."

"Did you bring any *food*?"

"No. Sorry."

"Oh well, we'll just have to pretend. Here's some tuna fish, and here's some cake." She doled out the imaginary food with perfunctory mime to her dolls, and then with exaggerated delicacy she held up -- what was it? -- something for him.

"Open your mouth and close your eyes," she insisted.

He did, and felt her fingers on his tongue.

"What was that?" he asked, afterward.

"Holy Communion. Did you like it?"

"Mm."

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No, unless that just made me one."

"We are. We believe in God the Father Almighty and *everything*. Ms. Chillywiggles was even in a *convent* before she got married. Weren't you?" Ms. Chillywiggles nodded her large, wobbly head.

Finding the subject uncomfortable, he changed it. "Look at your mother up there now. Wow."

Rochelle sighed and for a moment, to be polite, glanced up to where her mother was soaring, hundreds of feet above.

"It's incredible, her flying like that."

"That's what everyone says. But you don't need your leg muscles for a hang-glider, just your arms. And her arms are very strong."

"I'll bet."

"Some day we're going to go to Denver and see the dolls' Pope."

"Really. I didn't know dolls had a Pope."

"They do."

"Will you look at her now!"

"I don't like to, it makes me sick. I didn't want to come today, but no one would look after me. They were all *building*. So I had to."

"It doesn't make you want to fly someday, seeing her up there like that?"

"No. Some day she's going to kill herself. She knows it, too. That's how she had her accident, you know. She wasn't always in a wheelchair."

"Yes, I've heard that."

"What's so awful for *me* is to think she won't ever be able to receive the Last Sacrament."

The sun glowed through the red nylon wings of the glider, but even Professor Astor would have had a hard time making that fit her theory. Desire! Why not just Amazement?

"If she does kill herself," Rochelle continued dispassionately, "*we'll* be sent to an orphanage. In Denver, I hope. And Ms. Chillywiggles will be able to do missionary work among the dolls there. Do you have any dolls, Mr. Roe?"

He shook his head.

"I suppose you think dolls are only for *girls*. That's a very old prejudice, however. Dolls are for anyone who *likes* them."

"I may have had dolls when I was younger. I don't know."

"Oh. Were you erased?"

He nodded.

"So was my mother. But I was only a baby then, so I don't remember any more about her than she does. What I think is she must have committed some really terrible sin, and it tortured her so much she decided to be erased. Do you ever go in to Denver?"

"Sometimes."

Ms. Sillygiggles whispered something in Ms. Chillywiggles' ear, who evidently did not agree with the suggestion. Rochelle looked cast down. "Damn," she said.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh nothing. Ms. Sillygiggles was hoping *you'd* be able to take them to Denver to see the dolls' Pope, but Ms. Chillywiggles put her foot down and said Absolutely Not. You're a stranger: we shouldn't even be talking to you."

He nodded, for it seemed quite true. He had no business coming out to New Focus at all.

"I should be going," he said.

Ms. Sillygiggles got to her feet and executed an awkward curtsy. Rochelle said it had been nice to make his acquaintance. Ms. Chillywiggles sat on the wooden step and said nothing.

It seemed to him, as he walked down the stony path to where he'd locked his bicycle to a rack, that everyone in the world was crazy, that craziness was synonymous with the human condition. But then he could see, through a break in the close-ranked spruces, the arc of a glider's flight -- not Rochelle Rockefeller's, this one had blue wings and his spirits soared with the sheer music of it. He understood, in a moment of crystalline levelheadedness, that it didn't make a speck of difference if people were insane. Or if he was, for that matter. Sane or insane were just stages of the great struggle going on everywhere all the time: across the valley, for instance, where the pines were fighting their way up the sides of the facing mountain, hurling the grenades of their cones into the thin soil, pressing their slow advantage, enduring the decimations of the lightning, aspiring (insanely, no doubt) toward the forever unreachable fastness of the summit.

When he got to the road his lungs were heaving, his feet hurt, and his knees were not to be reasoned with (he should not have been running along such a path), but his head was once again solidly fixed on his shoulders. When he called his boss at the Denver Central Office to apologize for absconding, he wasn't fired or even penalized. His boss, who was usually such a tyrannosaurus, said everyone had days when they weren't themselves, and that it was all right, so long as they were few and far between. He even offered some Valiums, which Richard said no-thank-you to.

### III

At Naropa the next Wednesday, the lecturer, a black man in a spotless white polyester suit, lectured about Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray, who, in 1927, had killed Ruth's husband Albert in a more than usually stupid fashion. He'd chosen this case, he said, because it represented the lowest common denominator of the crime of passion, and would therefore serve to set in perspective the mystery and romance of last week's assassinations, which Richard had missed. First they watched a scene from an old comedy based on the murder, and then the lecturer read aloud a section of the autobiography Judd Gray had written in Sing Sing while waiting to be electrocuted:

"I was a morally sound, sober, God-fearing chap, working and saving to make Isabel my wife and establish a home. I met plenty of girls -- at home and on the road, in trains and hotels. I could, I thought, place every type: the nice girl who flirts, the nice girl who doesn't, the brazen out-and-out streetwalker I was warned against. I was no sensualist, I studied no modern cults, thought nothing about inhibitions and repressions. Never read Rabelais in my life. Average, yes -- just one of those Americans Mencken loves to laugh at. Even belonged to a club -- the Club of Corset Salesmen of the Empire State -- clean-cut competitors meeting and shaking hands -- and liking it."

There was something in the tone of Judd Gray's voice, so plain, so accepting, that made Richard feel not exactly a kinship, more a sense of being similarly puzzled and potentially out of control. Maybe it was just the book's title that got to him -- *Doomed Ship*. He wondered, not for the first time, whether he might not be among the fifteen percent of erasees whose past has been removed by judicial fiat rather than by choice. He could, almost, imagine himself outside the Snyder bedroom in Queens Village, getting steadily more soused as he waited for

Albert to go to sleep so that then he could sneak in there and brain him with the sash weight in his sweaty hand. All for the love of Ruth Snyder, as played by Carol Burnett. He couldn't, however, see himself as a more dignified sort of criminal -- a racketeer or an assassin or the leader of a cult -- for he lacked the strength of character and the conviction that those roles would have required, and he'd probably lacked it equally in the life that had been erased.

After the class he decided he'd tempt Fate, and went to the cafeteria, where Fate immediately succumbed to the temptation and brought Professor Astor of *Consumerism: Theory and Practice* to his table with a slice of viscid, bright cherry cheesecake. "May I join you?" she asked him.

"Sure. I was just going anyhow."

"I like your suit," she said. This close she seemed younger, or perhaps it was her dress that made that difference. Instead of last week's black wool bag she was wearing a dull blue double-knit with a scarf sprinkled with blurry off-red roses. One glance and anyone would have felt sorry for her.

His suit was the same dull blue. He'd bought it yesterday at the Stop-and-Shop, where the salesman had tried to convince him not to buy it. With it he wore a wrinkled Wrinkle-Proof shirt and a tie with wide stripes of gray and ocher. "Thanks," he said.

"It's very '70s. You're an erasee, aren't you?"

"Mm."

"I can always tell another. I am, too. With a name like Lady Astor I'd have to be, wouldn't I? I hope I didn't offend you by anything I said last week."

"No, certainly not."

"It wasn't directed at you personally. I just read what it said in my notes, which were taken, all of them, practically verbatim, from *The Colors of the Flag*. We teachers are all cheats that way, didn't you know? There's nothing we can tell you that you won't find expressed better in a book. But of course learning, in that sense, isn't the reason for coming here."

"No? What is then?"

"Oh, it's for meeting people. For playing new roles. For taking sides. For crying out loud."

"What?"

"That's an old expression -- for crying out loud. From the '40s, I think. Actually your suit is more '40s than '70s. The '40s were *sincere* about being drab; the '70s played games."

"Isn't there anything that's just here and now, without all these built-in meanings?"

She poised her fork over the gleaming cheesecake. "Well," she said thoughtfully, then paused for a first taste of her dessert. "Mnyes, sort of. After you left last week someone in the class asked if there wasn't a way one could be just anonymous. And what I said--" She took another bite of cheesecake. "--was that to my mind--" She swallowed. "--anonymity would come under the heading of solidarity, and solidarity is always solidarity *with* something -- an idea, a group. Even the group of people who don't want to have anything to do with anyone else -- even they're a *group*. In fact, they're probably among the largest."

"I'm amazed," he said, counterattacking on sheer irresistible impulse, "that you, a supposed expert on consumerism, can eat junk like the junk you're eating. The sugar makes you fat and gives you cancer, the dye causes cancer too, and I don't know what else, and there's something in the milk powder that I just heard about that's lethal. What's the point of being erased, if afterwards you lead a life as stupid as everybody else's?"

"Right," she said. She picked up a paper plate from an abandoned tray, and with a decisive rap of her fist squashed the wedge of cheesecake flat. "No more! Never again!"

He looked at the goo and crumbs splattered across the table, as well as on her scarf (there was a glob on his tie, too, but he didn't notice that), and then at her face, a study in astonishment, as though the cheesecake had exploded autonomously. He started to laugh, and then, as though given permission, she did, too.

They stayed on, talking, in the cafeteria until it closed, first about Naropa, then about the weather. This was his first experience of the approach of winter, and he surprised himself at the way he waxed eloquent. He marveled at how the aspens had gone scarlet all at once, as though every tree on a single mountain were activated by one switch and when that switch was thrown, bingo, it was autumn; the way, day by day, the light dwindled as his half of the world tilted away from the sun; the way the heat had come on in his condo without warning, and baked the poor coleus living on top of the radiator; the misery of bicycling in the so much colder rain; and what was most amazing, the calmness of everyone in the face of what looked to him like an unqualified catastrophe. Lady Astor made a few observations of her own, but mostly she just listened, smitten with his innocence. Her own erasure had taken place so long ago -- she was evasive as to exactly when -- that the world had no such major surprises in store for her. As the chairs were being turned upside down onto the tabletops, he made a vague, semi-enthusiastic commitment to hike up to New Focus some mutually convenient Sunday morning, to which end they exchanged addresses and phone numbers. (He had to give his number at work.) Why? It must have been the demolition of that cheesecake, the blissful feeling, so long lost to him, of muscular laughter, as though a window had been opened in a stuffy room and a wind had rushed in, turning the curtains into sails and bringing strange smells from the mountains outside.

In the middle of November the company re-assigned him to the central office in downtown Denver, where he was assistant Traffic Manager for the entire Rocky Mountain division. Nothing in his work at the convenience center had seemed to point in this direction, but as soon as he scanned the programs involved it was all there in his head and fingers, lingering on like the immutable melody of  $1 + 1 = 2$ .

The one element of the job that wasn't second nature was the increased human contact, which went on, some days, nonstop. Hi there, Dick, what do you think of this and what do you think of that, did you see the game last night, what's your opinion of the crisis, and would you *please* speak to Lloyd about the time he's spending in the john. Lloyd, when spoken to, insisted he worked just as hard in the john as in the office, and said he'd cut down his time on the stool as soon as they allowed him to smoke at his desk. This seemed reasonable to Richard but not to the manager, who started to scream at him, calling him a zombie and a zero, and said he was fired. Instead, to nobody's great surprise, it was the manager who got the axe. So, after just two weeks of grooming, Richard was the new Traffic Manager, with an office all his own with its own view of other gigantic office buildings and a staff of thirty-two, if you counted temps and part-timers.

To celebrate he went out and had the famous hundred-dollar dinner at the Old Millionaire Steak Ranch with Lloyd, now the assistant Traffic Manager, with not his own office but at least a steel partition on one side of his desk and the right, thereby, to carcinogenate his lungs from punch-in to punch-out. Lloyd, it turned out, after a second Old Millionaire martini, lived up at New Focus and was one of the original members of the Boulder branch of the cult.

"No kidding," said Richard, reverently slicing into his sirloin. "That's fascinating. So why are you working here in the city? You can't commute to New Focus. Not this time of year."

"Money, why else. Half my salary, maybe more now, goes into the Corporation. We can't live for free, and there sure as hell isn't any money to be earned building a damned pyramid."

"So why do you build pyramids?"



"Come on, Dick. You know I can't answer that."

"I don't mean you as a group. I mean you personally. You must have *some* kind of reason for what you're doing."

Lloyd sighed long-sufferingly. "Listen, you've been up there, you've seen us cutting the blocks and fitting them in place. What's to explain? The beauty of the thing is that no one asks anyone else *why* we're doing what we're doing. Ever. That's Rule Number One. Remember that if you ever think of joining."

"Okay, then tell me this -- why would I *want* to join?"

"Dick, you're hopeless. What did I just *say* to you? Enjoy your steak, why don't you? Do I ask why you want to throw away two hundred dollars on a dinner that can last, at the longest, a couple hours? No, I just enjoy it. It's beautiful."

"Mmn, I'm enjoying it. But still I can't keep from wondering."

"Wonder all you like -- just don't ask."

## IV

With the increased social inputs at work, he had gradually tapered off on his visits to Naropa. Winter sealed him into a more circumscribed routine of apartment, job, and gym, as mounds of snow covered the known surfaces of Boulder like a divine amnesia. On weekends he would sit like a bear in a cave, knitting tubes of various dimensions and looking out the window and not quite listening to the purr of KMMN playing olden goldens in flattened-out, long-breathed renditions that corresponded in a semi-conscious way to the forms of the snow as it drifted and stormed and lifted up past the window in endless unravelling banners.

He had not forgotten his promise to Lady Astor, but a trip to New Focus was no longer feasible. Even with skis and a lift assisting, it would have been an overnight undertaking. He phoned twice and explained this to her answering machine. In reply she left a message -- "That's okay." -- at the convenience center, which got forwarded to the central office a week later. His first impression, that Destiny had introduced them with some purpose in mind, was beginning to diminish when one Saturday morning on the bus going to the gym he saw a street sign he'd never noticed before, Follet Avenue, and remembered that that was the street she lived on. He yanked the cord, got off, and walked back over unshoveled sidewalks to the corner of 34th and Follet, already regretting his impulse: fifteen blocks to go, and then he might not find her home. It was 8 degrees below.

In the course of those fifteen blocks the neighborhood dwindled from dowdy to stark. She lived in a two-story clapboard shopfront that looked like an illustration of the year daubed in black paint over the entrance: 1972. The shop windows were covered with plywood, the plywood painted by some schizophrenic kindergarten with nightmarish murals, and the faded murals peered out forlornly from a lattice of obscene graffiti, desolation overlaying desolation.

He rang her bell and, when that produced no result, he knocked.

She came to the door wrapped in a blanket, hair in a tangle, bleary and haggard.

"Oh, it's you. I thought it might be you." Then, before he could apologize or offer to leave: "Well, you might as well come in. Leave your overshoes in the hall."

She had the downstairs half of the building, behind the boarded-up windows, which were sealed, on this side, with strips of carpet padding. A coal stove on a brick platform gave off a parsimonious warmth. With a creaking of springs Lady Astor returned to bed. "You can sit there," she said, gesturing to a chair covered with clothes. When he did, its prolapsed bottom sank under him like the seat of a rowboat. At once a scrawny tabby darted from one of the shadowy corners of the room (the only light came from a small unboarded window at the back) and sprang into his lap. It nuzzled his hand, demanding a caress.

While he stumbled through the necessary explanations (how he happened to be passing, why he hadn't visited before) she sipped vodka from a coffee cup. He assumed it was vodka, since a vodka bottle, half-empty and uncapped, stood on the cash register that served as a bedside table. Most of the shop-fittings had been left *in situ*: a glass counter, full of dishes and cookware; shelves bearing a jumble of shoes, books, ceramic pots, and antique, probably defunct, electric appliances. A bas-relief Santa of molded plastic was affixed to the wall behind the bed, its relevance belied by layers of greasy dust. The room's cluttered oddity combatted its aura of poverty and demoralization, but not enough: he felt stricken. This was another first in the category of emotions, and he didn't know what to call it. Not simply dismay; not guilt; not pity; not indignation (though how could anyone be drunk at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning!); not even awe for the spirit that could endure such dismalness and still appear at Naropa every Wednesday evening, looking more or less normative, to lecture on the theory and practice of (of all things) Consumership. All these elements, and maybe others, were fuddled together in what he felt.

"Do you want a drink?" she asked, and before he could answer: "Don't think it's polite to say yes. There's not much left. I started at six o'clock, but you have to understand I don't *usually* do this. But today seemed special. I thought, why not? Anyhow, why am I making excuses? I didn't invite you, you appeared at the door. I knew you would, eventually." She smiled, not pleasantly, and poured half the remaining vodka into her coffee cup. "You like this place?"

"It's big," he said lamely.

"And dark. And gloomy. And a mess. I was going to get the windows put back in, when I took the lease last summer. But that costs. And for winter this is warmer. Anyhow, if I did try to make it a shop I don't know what I'd sell. Junk. I *used* to throw pots. What *didn't* I used to do. I did a book of poetry based on the Tarot (which is how I latched onto the job at Naropa). I framed pictures. And now I lecture, which is to say I read books and talk about them to people like you, too lazy to read books on their own. And once, long ago, I was even a housewife, would you believe that." This time her smile was positively lethal. There seemed to be some secret message behind what she was saying that he couldn't decode.

He sneezed.

"Are you allergic to cats?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"I'll bet you are."

He looked at her with puzzlement, then at the cat curled in his lap. The cat's warmth had penetrated through the denim, and warmed his crotch pleasantly.

"God damn it," she said, wiping a purely hypothetical tear from the corner of her bleary eye. "Why'd you have to pick this morning? Why couldn't you have phoned? You were always like that. You schmuck."

"What?"

"Schmuck," she repeated. And then, when he just went on staring: "Well, it makes no difference. I would have had to tell you eventually. I just wanted you to get to know me a little better first."

"Told me what?"

"I was never erased. I just lied about that. It's all there on the shelf, everything that happened, the betrayals, the dirt, the failures. And there were lots of those. I just never had the guts to go through with it. Same with the dentist. That's why I've got such lousy teeth. I *meant* to. I had the money -- at least for a while, after the divorce, but I thought . . ." She shrugged, took a swallow from the cup, grimaced, and smiled, this time almost friendlily.

"What did your husband do?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well, you seem to want to tell the whole story. I guess I wanted to sound interested."

She shook her head. "You still don't have a glimmering, do you?"

"Of what?" He did have a glimmering, but he refused to believe it.

"Well then, since you just insist, I'll have to tell you, won't I? *You* were the husband you're asking about. And you haven't changed one damned bit. You're the same stupid schmuck you were then."

"I don't believe you."

"That's natural. After spending so much money to become *innocent*, who would want to see their investment wiped out like . . ." She tried to snap her fingers. ". . . that."

"There's no way you could have found me here. The Institute never releases that information. Not even to their employees."

"Oh, computers are clever these days (*you* know that), and for a couple thousand dollars it's not hard to persuade a salaried employee to tickle some data out of a locked file. When I found out where you'd gone, I packed my bags and followed you. I *told* you before you were erased that I'd track you down, and what you said was, 'Try, just try.' So that's what I did."

"You can be sent to prison for what you've done. Do you know that?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? If you could have had me locked up before, you wouldn't have had to get erased. You wouldn't have damned near killed me."

She said it with such conviction, with such a weariness modifying the anger, that it was hard to hold on to his reasonable doubt. He remembered how he'd identified with Judd Gray, the murderer of Albert Snyder.

"Don't you want to know *why* you tried to kill me?" she insisted.

"Whatever you used to be, Ms. Astor, you're not my wife now. You're a washed-up, forty-year-old drunk teaching an adult education course in the middle of nowhere."

"Yeah. Well, I could tell you how I got that way. Schmuck."

He stood up. "I'm leaving."

"Yes, you've said that before."

Two blocks from her house he remembered his overshoes. To hell with his overshoes! To hell with people who don't shovel their sidewalks! Most of all, to hell with her!

That woman, his wife! What sort of life could they have lived together? All the questions about his past that he'd subdued so successfully up till now came bubbling to the surface: who he'd been, what he'd done, how it had all gone wrong. And she had the answers. The temptation to go back was strong, but before he could yield to it the bus came in the homeward direction, and he got on, his mind unchanged, his anger burning brightly.

## V

Even so it was a week before he'd mustered the righteous indignation to call the Delphi Institute and register a formal complaint. They took down the information and said they'd investigate, which he assumed was a euphemism for their ignoring it. But in fact, a week later he got a registered letter from them stating that Ms. Lady Astor of 1972 Follet Avenue in

Boulder, Colorado, had never been his wife, nor had there ever been any other connection between them. Further, three other clients of the Institute had registered similar complaints about the same Ms. Astor. Unfortunately, there was no law against providing erasees with misinformation about their past lives, and it was to be regretted that there were individuals who took pleasure in disturbing the equanimity of the Institute's clients. The letter pointed out that he'd been warned of such possibilities while he was at the halfway house.

Now, in addition to feeling angry and off-balance, he felt like an asshole as well. To have been so easily diddled! To have believed the whole unlikely tale without even the evidence of a snapshot!

Three days before Christmas she called him at work. "I didn't want to bother you," she said in a meek little whisper that seemed, even now, knowing everything, utterly sincere, "but I had to apologize. You did pick a hell of a time to come calling. If I hadn't been drunk I would never have spilled the beans."

"Uh-huh," was all he could think of to say.

"I know it was wrong of me to track you down and all, but I couldn't help myself." A pause, and then her most amazing lie of all: "I just love you too much to let you go."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't suppose there's any chance we could get together? For coffee, after work?"

When they got together for coffee, after work, he led her on from lie to lie until she'd fabricated a complete life for him, a romance as preposterous as any soap on TV, beginning with a tyrannical father, a doting mother, a twin brother killed in a car crash, and progressing through his years of struggle to become a painter. (Here she produced a brittle Polaroid of one of his putative canvases, a muddy jumble of ochers and umbers. She assured him that the Polaroid didn't do it justice.) The tale went on to tell how they'd met, and fallen in love, how he'd sacrificed his career as an artist to become an animation programmer. They'd been happy, and then -- due to his monstrous jealousy -- unhappy. There was more, but she didn't want to go into it, it was too painful. Their son . . .

Through it all he sat there nodding his head, seeming to believe each further fraud, asking appropriate questions, and (another First) enjoying it hugely -- enjoying *his* fraudulence and her greater gullibility. Enjoying, too, the story she told him about his imaginary life. He'd never imagined a past for himself, but if he had he doubted if he'd have come up with anything so large, so resonant.

"So tell me," he asked, when her invention finally failed her, "why did I decide to be erased?"

"John," she said, shaking flakes of dandruff from her long black hair, "I wish I could answer that question. Partly it must have been the pain of little Jimmy's death. Beyond that I don't know."

"And now . . . ?"

She looked up, glittery. "Yes?"

"What is it you want?"

She gave a sigh as real as life. "I hoped . . . oh, you know."

"You want to get married again?"

"Well, no. Not till you've got to know me better, anyhow. I mean, I realize that from *your* point of view I'm still pretty much a stranger. And you've changed too, in some ways. You're

like you were when I first met you. You're--" Her voice choked up, and tears came to her eyes.

He touched the clasp of his briefcase, but he didn't have the heart to take out the Xerox of the letter from the Delphi Institute that he'd been intending to spring on her. Instead he took the bill from under the saucer and excused himself.

"You'll call me, won't you?" she asked woefully.

"Sure, sure. Let me think about it a while first. Okay?"

She mustered a brave, quavering smile. "Okay."

In April, to mark the conclusion of the first year of his new life and just to glory in the weather that made such undertakings possible again, he took the lift up Mount Lifton, then hiked through Corporation Canyon past New Focus and the site of the pyramid -- only eight feet at its highest edge so far, scarcely a tourist attraction -- and on up the Five Waterfall Trail. Except for a few boot-challenging stretches of vernal bogginess, the path was stony and steep. The sun shone, winds blew, and the last sheltered ribs of snow turned to water and sought, trickle by trickle, the paths of least resistance. By one o'clock he'd reached his goal, Lake Silence, a perfect little mortuary chapel of a tarn, colonnaded all round with spruces. He found an unshadowed, accommodating rock to bask on, took off his wet boots and damp socks, and listened as the wind did imitations of cars on a highway. Then, chagrined, he realized it wasn't the wind but the shuddering roar of an approaching helicopter.

The helicopter emerged like a demiurge from behind the writhing tops of the spruces, hovered a moment above the tarn, then veered in the direction of his chosen rock. As it passed directly overhead, a stream of water spiraled out of the briefly opened hatch, dissolving almost at once in the machine's rotary winds into a mist of rainbow speckles. His first thought was that he was being bombed, his next that the helicopter was using Lake Silence as a toilet. Only when the first tiny trout landed, splat, on the rock beside him did he realize that the helicopter must have been from the Forest Service and was seeding the lake with fish. Alas, it had missed its mark, and the baby trout had fallen on the rocks of the shore and into the branches of the surrounding trees. The waters of Lake Silence remained unrippled and inviolate.

He searched among those fallen along the shore -- there were dozens -- for survivors, but all that he could find proved inert and lifeless when he put them in the water. Barefoot, panicky, totally devoted to the trout of Lake Silence, he continued the search. At last, among the matted damp needles beneath the spruces, he found three fish still alive and wiggling. As he lowered them, lovingly, into the lake he realized in a single lucid flash what it was he had to do with his life.

He would marry Lady Astor.

He would join New Focus and help them build a pyramid.

And he would buy a car.

(Also, in the event that she became orphaned, he would adopt little Rochelle Rockefeller. But that was counting chickens.)

He went to the other side of Lake Silence, to the head of the trail, where the Forest Service had provided an emergency telephone link disguised as a commemorative plaque to Governor Dent. He inserted his credit card into the slot, the plaque opened, and he punched Lady Astor's number. She answered at the third ring.

"Hi," he said. "This is Richard Roe. Would you like to marry me?"

"Well, yes, I guess so. But I ought to tell you -- I was never really your wife. That was a story I made up."

"I knew that. But it was a nice story. And I didn't have one that I could tell you. One more thing, though. We'll have to join New Focus and help them build their pyramid."

"Why?"

"You can't ask why. That's one of their rules. Didn't you know that?"

"Would we have to live up there?"

"Not year-round. It'd be more like having a summer place, or going to church on Sunday. Plus some work on the pyramid."

"Well, I suppose I could use the exercise. Why do you want to get married? Or is that another question I shouldn't ask?"

"Oh, probably. One more thing: what's your favorite color?"

"For what?"

"A car."

"A car! Oh, I'd *love* a car. Be a show-off -- get a red one. When do you want to do it?"

"I'll have to get a loan from the bank first. Maybe next week?"

"No, I meant getting married."

"We could do that over the phone if you like. Or up here, if you want to take the lift to New Focus. Do you want to meet me there in a couple hours?"

"Make it three hours. I have to have a shampoo, and the bus isn't really reliable."

And so they were married, at sunset, on the stump of the unfinished pyramid, and the next week he bought a brand new alizarin crimson Ford Fundamental. As they drove out of the dealer's lot he felt, for the first time in his life, that this was what it must be like to be completely human.