

This is Tim Powers first story in F&SF, but he is the author of three novels: THE SKIES DISCROWNED, EPITAPH IN RUST (1976) and THE DRAWING OF THE DARK (1979). He is thirty years old and lives in Santa Ana with his wife, Serena.

The Way Down the Hill

BY
TIM POWERS

"Then I was frightened at myself, for
the cold mood
That envies all men running hotly, out
of breath,
Nowhere, and who prefer, still drunk
with their own blood,
Hell to extinction, horror and disease
to death."

—George Dillon, from the
French of Charles Baudelaire

I hadn't been to the place since 1961, but I still instinctively downshifted as I leaned around the curve, so that the bike was moving slowly enough to take the sharp turn off the paved road when it appeared. The old man's driveway was just a long path of rutted gravel curling up the hillside, and several times I had to correct with my feet when the bald back tire lost traction, but it was a clear and breezy after-

noon, with the trees and the tan California hillside making each other look good, and I was whistling cheerfully as I crested the hill and parked my old Honda beside a couple of lethal-looking Harley-Davidsons.

I was late. The yard spread out in front of the old man's Victorian-style house was a mosaic of vans, Volkswagens, big ostentatious sedans, sports cars and plain anonymous autos. There were even, I noticed as I stuffed my gloves into my helmet and strode up to the front steps, a couple of skateboards leaning on the porch rails. I grinned and wondered who the kids would be.

The heavy door was pulled open before I could touch the knob, and Archie was handing me a foaming Carlsberg he'd doubtless fetched for someone else. Somehow I can always recognize Archie.

"Come in, sibling!" he cried jovially. "We certainly can't expect Rafe yet, so you must be Saul or Amelia." He studied my face as I stepped inside. "Too old to be Amelia. Saul?"

"Right," I said, unknitting my scarf. "How's the old man, Arch?"

"Never better. He was asking just a few minutes ago if you'd showed up yet. Where the hell have you been, anyway, for ... how many years?"

"Twenty — missed the last three meetings. Oh, I've been wandering around. Checked out Europe one more time and took a couple of courses back east before the old boredom effect drifted me back here. Living in Santa Ana now." I grinned at him a little warily. "I imagine I've got a lot of catching up to do."

"Yeah. Did you know Alice is gone?"

I tossed my helmet onto a coat-buried chair, but kept my leather jacket because all my supplies were in it. "No," I said quietly. "I'd always liked Alice."

"She is. Incognito underground, maybe — but more likely..." He shrugged.

I nodded and took a long sip of the beer, grateful for his reticence. Why say it, after all? People do let go sometimes. Some say it's hard to do, as difficult as holding your breath till you faint — others say it's as easy as not catching a silver dollar tossed to you. Guesses.

Archie ducked away to get another

beer, and I walked across the entry hall into the crowded living room. The rich, leathery smell of latakia tobacco told me that old Bill was there, and I soon identified him by the long, blackened meerschaum pipe he somehow found again every time. The little girl puffing at it gave me a raised eyebrow.

"Howdy, Bill," I said. "It's Saul."

"Saul, laddie!" piped the little girl's voice. "Excuse the nonrecognition. You were a gawky youth when I saw you last. Been doing anything worthwhile?"

I didn't even bother to give the standard negative reply. "I'll talk to you later," I said. "Got to find something for this beer to chase."

Bill chuckled merrily. "They laid in a dozen bottles of Laphroaig scotch in case you came." He waved his pipe toward the dining room that traditionally served as the bar. "You know your way down the hill."

It was a long-standing gag between us, deriving from one night when a girlfriend and I had been visiting a prominent author whose house sat on top of one of the Hollywood hills; the girlfriend had begun stretching and yawning on the couch and remarking how tired she was, and the prominent author obligingly told her she could spend the night right there. Turning briefly toward me, he inquired, "You know your way down the hill, don't you?" Bill and I now used the phrase to indicate any significant descent. I smiled as I turned toward the bar.

I stiffened, though, and my smile unkinked itself, when I saw a certain auburn-haired girl sipping a grasshopper at a corner table.

I could feel my face heat up even before I was sure I recognized her. It hadn't been long ago, a warm August evening at the Orange Street Fair, with the blue and rose sky fading behind the strings of light bulbs that swayed overhead. I'd been slouched in a chair in the middle of Glassell Street, momentarily left in a littered clearing by an ebb in the crowd. The breeze was from the south, carrying frying smells from the Chinese section on Chapman, and I was meditatively sipping Coors from a plastic cup when she dragged up another chair and straddled it.

I don't remember how the conversation started, but I know that through a dozen more cups of beer we discussed Scriabin and Stevenson and David Bowie and A. E. Houseman and Mexican beers. And later she perched side-saddle (because one of the passenger foot-pegs fell off long ago) on the back of my motorcycle as I cranked us through the quiet streets to my apartment.

She went out for a newspaper and ice cream the next afternoon, and never came back. I'd been wryly treasuring the memory, in a two-ships-that-pass-in-the-night way, until now.

Restraining my anger, I crossed to her table and sat down. The girl's face looked up and smiled, obviously recognizing me.

"Hello, Saul."

"God damn it," I gritted. "All right, who are you?"

"Marcus. Are you upset? Why? Oh, I know! I still owe you for that newspaper." Marcus started digging in his purse.

"Less of the simpering," I snapped. "You knew it was me?"

"Well, sure," he said. "What's wrong? I broke an *unwritten law* or something? Listen, you haven't been around for a while. Customs change, ever notice? What's wrong with members of the clan having relations with each other?"

"Christ. Lots of things," I said hoarsely. Could the old man have sanctioned this? "It makes me sick." I could remember going bar-hopping with Marcus in the 1860's when he was a bearded giant, both of us drunkenly prowling the streets of Paris, hooting at women and trading implausible and profane reminiscences.

"Don't run off." Marc caught me by the arm as I was getting up. "There are few things I've got to tell you before the dinner ceremony at six. Sit down. Laphroaig still your drink? I'll get a bottle—"

"Don't bother. I want to go talk to the old man. Save whatever you've got to say until the meeting."

"It's old Hain I want to talk about. You've got to hear this sooner or later, so—"

"So I'll hear it later," I said, and strode out of the bar to find Sam Hain,

our patriarch. I'd been there only about five minutes, but I was already wishing I hadn't come. If this was the current trend, I thought, I can't blame Alice for disappearing.

Back in the high-ceilinged living room I caught the eye of a little boy who was pouring himself a glassful of Boodle's. "Where's our host?" I asked.

"Library. Amelia?"

"Saul. Robin?" Robin was always fond of good gin.

"Right. Talk to you later, yes?" He wandered off toward the group around the piano.

From the corner of my eye I saw Marcus — who'd put on a bit of weight since that night, I noted with vindictive satisfaction — hurry out of the bar. I braced myself, but he just crossed to the entry and thumped away up the stairs. Doubtless in a snit, I thought.

I pictured old Marc sniffing and dabbing at his mascara'd eyes with a perfumed hankie, and shook my head. It always upset me to consider how thoroughly even the keenest-edged minds are at the mercy of hormones and such biological baggage. We are all indeed windowless gonads, as Leibnitz nearly said.

Old Sam Hain was asleep in his usual leather chair when I pushed open the library door, so I sipped my beer and let my eyes rove over the shelves for a minute or two. As always, I envied him his library. The quarto *Plays of Wharfinger, Ashbless' Odes*, Blaylock's *Wild Man of Tanga-Raza*, all

were treasures I'd admired for decades — though, at least in a cursory glance, I didn't notice any new items.

I absently reached for the cigar humidor, but my fingers struck polished table-top where it should have been. Suddenly I noticed an absence that had been subconsciously nagging at me ever since I'd arrived — the house, and the library particularly, was not steeped in the aroma of Caribbean cigars anymore.

Behind me the old man grunted and raised his head. "Saul?"

"Yes sir." It never failed to please me, the way he could always recognize me after a long separation. I sat down across the table from him. "What's become of the cigars?"

"Ahh," he waved his hand, "they began to disagree with me." He squinted speculatively at me. "You've been away twenty years, son. Have you, too, begun to disagree with me?"

Embarrassed and a little puzzled, I shifted in my chair. "Of course not, sir. You know I just wander off for a while sometimes — I missed four or five in a row at the end of the last century, remember? Means nothing. It's just to indulge my solitary streak once in a while."

Hain nodded and pressed his fingertips together. "Such impulses should be resisted — I think you know that. We are a clan, and our potentially great power is ... vitated if we persist in operating as individuals."

I glanced at him sharply. This

seemed to be an aboutface from his usual opinions — more the kind of thing I'd have expected from Marcus or Rafe.

"Ho. It sounds as if you're saying we should go back to the way we were in the days of the Medicis — or as Balzac portrayed us in *The Thirteen*." I spoke banteringly, certain he'd explain whatever he'd actually meant.

"I've been doing some deep thinking for a number of years, Saul," he said slowly, "and it seems to me that we've been living in a fantasy day-dream since I took over in 1861 and made such drastic changes in traditional clan policy. They were well-intentioned changes, certainly — and in a decent world they'd be practical. But we're not living in a decent world, ever notice? No, I no longer think our isolation and meek, live-and-let-live ways are realistic. Ah, don't frown, Saul. I know you've enjoyed this last hundred and twenty years more than any other period ... but surely you can see you've — we've all — been ignoring certain facts? What do you think would happen if the ephemerals ever learned of our existence?"

"It wouldn't matter," I cried, unhappily aware that I was taking the side he'd always taken in this perennial question. "They'd kill some of us, I suppose, but we've all had violent deaths before. I prefer quick deaths to slow ones anyway. Why can't we just leave them alone? *We're* the parasites, after all."

"You're talking rot," he snapped. "Do you really think killing us is the worst they could do? What about perpetual maintenance on an artificial life-support system, with *no* means of suicide? What about administering mind-destroying drugs, so you spend the rest of your incarnations drooling and cutting out paper dolls in one half-wit asylum after another? And even if you could get to your suicide kit or jump in the way of a car before they seized you ... do you think it's still absolutely impossible for them to track a soul to its next host?"

"I don't know," I muttered after a pause. In spite of my convictions his words had shaken me, touching as they did our very deepest fears. Maybe he's right, I thought miserably. *We are* parasites — all the liquor and food and music and poetry we enjoy is produced by the toiling ephemerals — but surely even parasites have to defend themselves?

"Saul," he said kindly, "I'm sorry to rub your nose in it this way, but you see we have to face it. Go have a drink and mix with the siblings; this will all be discussed after dinner. By the way, have you talked to Marcus?"

"Briefly."

"Talk to him at more length, then. He's got something important to tell you before the meeting."

"Can you tell me?"

"Let him. Relax, it's good news. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll finish my nap. It seems to be ripening to a real

Alexandrian feast out there, and if it's going to last on into tomorrow I'd best catch some shut-eye."

"Right, sir."

I closed the door as I left, and went back to the bar, slumping into the same chair I'd had before. Archie was tending bar now, and I called my order to him, and when it arrived I tossed back a stiff gulp of the nearly-warm scotch and chased it with a long draft of icy Coors.

Being a member of the clan, I was used to seeing cherished things come and go — "This, too, will pass" was one of our basic tenets — but the old man had, in only a hundred and twenty years, become a rock against the waves of change, an immortal father, a symbol of values that outlast individual lifetimes. But now *he* had changed.

One corner of my mind was just keening. Even *this*, it wailed, even *this* will pass?

I remembered the meeting at which he'd first appeared, on a chilly night in 1806 at Rafe's Boston mansion. Sam was then a boy of about ten, and though he knew everyone and greeted the mature ones by name, he never did say who he'd been before. This upset a lot of us, but he was cordially firm on that point; and we couldn't deduce it by a process of elimination, either — a number of siblings had suicided in the early 1790's, after the tantalizingly-hopeful French Revolution had degenerated into the Terror, and several apparently let go, never came back.

There was, of course, a lot of speculation about which one he was ... though a few whispered that he wasn't any one of our lost siblings, but a new being who'd somehow infiltrated us.

The crowd in the bar slacked off. Most of the clan had carried their drinks out into the back yard, where the barbeque pit was already flinging clouds of aromatic smoke across the lawn, and the dedicated drinkers who remained were now working more slowly, so Archie came out from behind the bar and sat down at my table.

"Have a drink, Archimago," I said.

"Got one." He waved a tequila sour I hadn't noticed.

I took a long sip of the Laphroaig. "Are we all present and accounted for?"

"Nearly. The count's at forty these days now that Alice is gone — and there are thirty-eight of us here. Not a bad turnout."

"Who's missing?"

"Amelia and Rafe. Amelia's currently a man, about forty years old. Maybe she killed herself. And of course Rafe just died two months ago, so we can't expect to see him for another decade."

"How'd he go this time?" I didn't care, really. Marcus and Rafe were fast friends, but though in some incarnations I liked Marcus, I could never stand Rafe.

"Shot himself through the roof of the mouth in his apartment on Lombard Street in San Francisco. Nobody was surprised, he was nearly forty." Archimago chuckled. "They say he managed to pull the trigger twice."

I shrugged. "If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing thoroughly," I allowed.

Archie looked across the room and got to his feet. "Ah, I see Vogel is out of akkavit. Excuse me."

Most of us choose to die at about forty, to ride the best years out of a body and then divorce ourselves from it by means of pills or a bullet or whatever strikes our fancy, so that our unencumbered soul can — though we rarely talk about it — dart through the void to the as yet unfirmly-rooted soul of some unborn child, which we hungrily thrust out into the darkness, taking its embryonic body for ourselves. It sounds horrible baldly stated, and there's a mournful ballad called "The Legion of Lost Children" which none of us ever even hums, though we all know it, but it's hard to the point of impossibility to stare into that final, lightless abyss, and feel yourself falling, picking up speed ... and *not* grab the nearest handhold.

Sam Hain, though, seemed to be an exception to this. He was born in mid 1796 and never died once after that, somehow maintaining his now one-hundred-and-eighty-five-year-old body on red wine, sashimi, tobacco and sheer will power. His physical age

made him stand out among us even more than the obscurity of his origin did, and being patient, kindly and wise as well, he was elected Master at our 1861 meeting.

Up until then the Master post had meant little, and carried no duties except to provide a house and bountiful food and liquor for the five-yearly meetings. I was Master myself for several decades in the early part of the sixteenth century, and some of the clan never did find out — or even ask — who the host of the meetings was. Sam Hain, though, made changes: for one thing, he arbitrarily changed the date of the meetings from the thirty-first of October to November first; he began to cut back on the several vast, clan-owned corporations that provide us all with allowances; and he encouraged us to get more out of a body, to carry it, as he certainly had, into old age before unseating some unborn child and taking its fresh one. I believe it was Sam, in fact, who first referred to us all as "hermit crabs with the power of eviction."

I looked up from my drink and saw Marcus enter the bar and signal Archie. The alcohol had given me some detachment toward the whole business, and I admitted to myself that Marc had certainly drawn a good body this time — tall and slender with cascades of lustrous coppery hair. I could no longer be attracted to it, but I could certainly see why I'd been so entranced at the street fair.

"Hello, Marc," I said levelly. "Sam says you've got some good news for me."

"That's right, Saul." He sat down just as Archie brought him his creamy, pale green drink, and he took a sip before going on. "You're going to be a father."

For several moments I stared at him blankly. I finally choked, "That night...?"

He nodded, grinning, and fished from his purse a slip of folded paper. "Tested out positive."

"God damn you," I said softly. "Was it for this that you picked me up in the first place?"

He shrugged. "Does it matter? I should think our main concern at this point is the welfare of the child."

Though sick and cold inside, I nodded, for I saw the teeth of the trap at last — if one of us dies while in physical contact with a pregnant woman, it is her fetus that that one will take. And though we of the clan can generally have children, the hermit-crab reincarnation ability doesn't breed true — our children are all ephemerals.

"A hostage to fortune," I said. "You're holding my unborn child for ransom, right? Why? What do I have that you want?"

"You catch on fast," Marc said approvingly. "Okay, listen — if you cooperate with me and a couple of the others, I'll allow your child to be born, and you can take it away or put it up for adoption or whatever. We'll even

triple your allowance, and you don't use more than half of it now." He had another sip of his disgusting drink. "Of course, if you *don't* cooperate, one of the clan is likely to die while holding my hand, and ... well, the Legion would have one more squalling member."

I didn't flinch at the reference to the strictly-tabooed song, for I knew he'd hoped to shock me with it. "Cooperate? In what?"

He spread his hands. "Something I don't think you'd object to anyway. The, uh," he patted his abdomen, "hostage is just insurance. Would you like a fresh drink? I thought so. Arch! Another boiler-maker here. Well, Saul, you've heard the good news — take it easy! — and now I'm afraid I've got some bad." He just sat and watched me until I'd had a sip of the new drink.

"Sam Hain is dead," he said, very quietly. "He blew his head off, in this house, late in 1963. Please don't interrupt! Rafe and I found his body only a few hours afterward, and came to a decision you might disapprove of — the next meeting wasn't for three years, so we had one of the secret, advanced branches of our DIRE Corporation construct a simulacrum."

I opened my mouth to call him a liar, but closed it again. I realized I was certain it was true. "What does smoke do, clog the thing's circuits or something?"

He nodded. "It's rough on the deli-

cate machinery, so we had him give up the cigars, as you noticed. It was me speaking to you through the simulacrum, from the controls upstairs."

"I saw you run out of the bar." Marc started to speak, but I interrupted him. "Wait a minute! You said '63? That can't be — he'd be ... eighteen now, and he'd be here today. If this is—"

Marc took my hand. "He *would* be eighteen, Saul. If he came back ... but he didn't. He let go. We were pretty sure he would, or we wouldn't have gone to the trouble of having the sim built."

I jerked my hand away. I didn't doubt him — Sam Hain was just the sort who'd choose to drop away into the last oblivion rather than cheat an unborn child of his life — but I wanted no intimacy with Marc.

"All right, so you've got this robot to take his place. Why involve me in—"

I broke off my sentence when a dark-haired man with a deeply-lined face lurched into the bar; his tie was loose, his jacket looked slept in, and he'd clearly been doing some preliminary drinking elsewhere. "Who's doling out the spirits here?" he called.

Archimago waved to him. "Right here, Amelia. We didn't think you were going to show. What'll you have?"

"Ethanol." Amelia wove with drunkard dignity across the room and ceremoniously collapsed into the third

chair at our table. "Okay if I join you? Who are you, anyway?"

I overrode Marc's brushing-off excuses, wanting some time to consider what he'd been saying. "Sure, keep your seat, Amelia. I'm Saul, and this is Marcus."

"Yeah," Amelia said, "I know. I visited Marc last year at his apartment in Frisco. Still living there, Marc? Nice little place, on that twisty street and all. Member that night we drove to—"

"You're late," Marcus said coldly, "and drunk. Why is that?"

Amelia's eyes dulled, and though her expression grew, if anything, more blank, I thought she was going to cry. "I had a stop to make this morning, a visit, before coming here."

Marc rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "This *morning*? Where, in New York?"

Archie brought a glass of some kind of whiskey, and Amelia seized it eagerly. "In Costa Mesa," she breathed, after taking a liberal sip. "Fairview State Mental Hospital."

"I hope they didn't say they were too full to take you," Marc said sweetly.

"Shut up, Marc," I said. "Who were you visiting?"

"My ... fiancé, from my last life," Amelia said, "when I was a woman."

The incongruity of a woman talking out of a man's body rarely bothered me, but it did now.

"He's seventy-two years old," she went on. "White hair, no teeth ... a

face like a desert turtle."

"What's he doing in the hatch?" Marc inquired.

His sarcasm was lost on the inward-peering Ameliã. "We were engaged," she said, "but we got into a fight one evening. This was in 1939. I'd gone out to dinner with a guy I'd met at a party, and Len said I shouldn't have. I was drunk, of course, and I laughed and told him ... the truth, that I'd slept around long before I met him, and would be doing it long after he was dead."

"Can this romance be saved?" said Marc, looking tremendously bored.

"Anyway, he belted me. First time ... only time ... he ever did. God I was mad. I can't now, as a man, *imagine* being that mad. So you know what I did? I went into the kitchen and got a big knife out-of-the-drawer and, while he stood there muttering apologies, I shoved the blade up to the handle into my stomach. And I pulled it out and laughed at him some more and called him every filthy name I knew, for three whole goddamned hours, as I lay there on the floor and bled to death. He never moved. Well, he sat down."

Even Marc was looking a little horrified. "I don't wonder the poor bastard's in Fairview now," he said. "And you *visited* him?"

"Yeah. I forget why. I think I wanted to apologize, though I was a thirty-year-old woman when he last saw me ... I told them I was a relative, and quoted enough family history to get

in." She took another big sip of the whiskey. "He was in a little bed, and his dried-up body didn't raise the blankets any more than what a couple of brooms would. I was looking respectable, freshly shaved, dressed like you see, smiling ... and yet he *knew* me, he recognized me!" Amelia gulped her whole drink. "He started yelling and crying and, in his birdy old voice, begging me to *forgive* him." She grinned, her man's face wrinkling. "Can you beat that? Forgive him."

"Absolutely fascinating," pronounced Marcus, slapping the table. "Now why don't you go find somebody else to tell it to, hmm? Saul and I have to talk."

"I want to talk to the old man," said Amelia weakly as she got to her feet and tottered away.

"Oh, God," Marc moaned, exasperated.

"Hadn't you better dash upstairs again?" I suggested. "With no one at the sim's controls she'll think it's a corpse."

"No," he said, staring after Amelia, "it's equipped to run independently, too. Speaks vague platitudes and agrees with nearly everything that's said to it. Oh well, she's too lushed to notice anything. Okay now, listen, Saul, you started to ask why we dragged you in on this — I'll tell you, and then you can call me a son of a bitch, and then do what I ask, and then, if you want, take the hostage when it shows up and disappear and never come back. As I

say, you and the kid will be financially provided for.

"Through the simulacrum, Rafe and I have been gradually changing clan policy, restoring things to the way they were before Hain took over in 1861. DIRE is going to resume the genetic and conditioning researches Hain made them stop in the 1950's, and, oh, we've bought and cultivated acres of farmland near Ankara for ... certain lucrative enterprises he would never have permitted, and — anyway, you see? As a matter of fact, we hope soon to be able to maintain a farm of healthy perpetually-pregnant ephemerals, so that we can have our deaths performed under controlled conditions and be sure the fetus we move on to is a healthy, well-cared-for one. Honestly, wouldn't it be nice not to find yourself born in slums anymore? Not to have to pretend to be a child for a dreary decade until you can leave whatever poor family you elbowed your way into? And we can begin taking hormone injections quite young, to bring us more quickly to a mature—"

Suddenly I was sorry I'd had so much to drink. "That's filthy," I said. "All of it. More abominable than ... than I can say."

He pursed his painted lips. "I'm sorry you can't approve, Saul. We'd hoped your long absence was a sign of dissatisfaction with the way things were. But with our ... hostage to fortune, as you put it, we don't need your approval. Just your cooperation. Some

siblings have commented on the changes in the old man, and we can't afford to have them even suspect that what they see is a phony. If they knew he was gone it would be impossible to get them to work together, or even allow ... Anyway, if they all see *you*, Sam's traditional favorite, drinking with the old man and reminiscing and laughing and agreeing with everything that comes out of his mouth, why, it'll be established in their minds, safely below the conscious level, that this is certainly the genuine Sam Hain they've unquestionably obeyed for more than a century."

"You want me to kiss him?"

Marc frowned, puzzled. "That won't be necessary. Just friendly, like you've always been. And of course, if you don't, then I'll go hold Amelia's hand in one of mine and," he patted his purse, "blow her head off with the other. And then it'll be her I give birth to in six months. Maybe she'd even be able to visit that poor son of a bitch at Fairview again, as a baby this time."

"I know, I know," I told him impatiently. "I comprehended the threat the first time. Shut up and let me think."

I've had a number of children, over the centuries, and they're all as dead-and-gone as Marc was threatening to make this one. It never bothered me much, even when, in a few cases, I'd actually seen them die — they'd had their little lives, and their irreversible deaths. And of course the ... eviction

of unborn babies from their bodies, though not a concept I was really at ease with, was anything but a new one to me. Still ... I didn't want a child of mine to get just alive enough to die and then be pushed away to sink into the dark. "They give birth astride a grave," Beckett said, "the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." That's how it is for the ephemerals, certainly. But let them have that instant's gleam of light!"

"All right," I said dully. "If Sam's gone, I don't care what becomes of you all anyway. I'll take the kid and go incognito underground."

"The wisest choice," approved Marcus with a grin that brought out smile lines in his cheeks. What, I wondered, would this girl have been like today, if Marc hadn't taken over her embryonic body years ago? Perhaps we'd still have met at the street fair, and talked about Stevenson.

It took me a few seconds to stand up, and I heard my chair clatter over behind me, but I felt coldly sober. "Trot upstairs and get in the driver's seat," I said. "I'd like to get home by midnight."

"Archimago will run the sim," Marc said, giving a thumbs-up to Archie, who nodded and strode out of the bar without looking at me.

"I'm going to take a walk out back," I said. "Clear the fumes out of my head ... and give your wind-up man time to join the others ahead of me. You don't want this to look rehearsed."

"I suppose not. Okay, but don't wander off or anything."

"You're holding the stake," I reminded him.

Scattered between the house and the backdrop of trees silhouetted against the darkening sky, my siblings were beginning to deal with dinner. The fire-pit blazed fiercely, seeming to lack only a bound martyr for some real nostalgia, and the crowd, as if to supply it, was dragging up a whole side of beef wired to a revolving black iron frame. They'd got into the cellar, and I picked my way through a litter of half-empty Latour and Mouton bottles on my way to the unlighted, vine-roofed patio on the west side of the house.

After dark we of the clan generally prefer noisy, bright-lit groups to solitude, and I wasn't surprised to find the deep-shadowed patio empty. I fished a cigarette from my left jacket pocket and struck a match on the side of the bench I was sitting on, and drew a lungful and then let the smoke hiss out and flit away on the cool, eucalyptus-scented breeze.

I stared at the dark bulk of the old house and wondered where its master was buried. Though it was like Sam to have let go, I blamed him for having killed himself. Surely he must have known we'd slide back into our old, ruthless ways once he was gone, like domesticated dogs thrown back out into the wilderness.

A dim green glow defined a window in the third story, near where several heavy cables were moored to the shingles. Doubtless the room, I thought, where Archie is hunched over whatever sort of controls a simulacrum requires. I picked a loose chip from one of the flagstones and cocked my arm to pitch it at the window — then sadly decided the move would be a mistake, and let it fall back to the payment instead.

I was aware that it would be quite a while before I'd know whether Marc had kept his end of the bargain. I shook my head and flicked away the cigarette. Marc and his crew were maneuvering me around — from the seduction three months ago to the curt orders of tonight — like a scarecrow, no more independent than their mechanical Sam Hain. Predictable is what you are, I told myself bitterly, and as helplessly useful as one of those keys for opening sardine cans.

Before I knew what I was doing I found myself standing on the seat of the concrete bench and gripping one of the horizontal beams that the vine trellises were nailed to. By God, I thought, I'll at least give Archie a scare, make him tangle the puppet strings a little. I chinned myself up and, driving my legs through the brittlely-snapping trellis, jackknifed forward and wound up sitting on the beam, brushing dust, splinters and bits of ivy from my hair.

I stood up on the beam cautiously. It dipped here and there, but took my

weight without coming unmoored, and in a moment I had flapped and tottered my way to the house wall, and steadied myself by grabbing a drain-pipe that, overhead, snaked right past the window I wanted to get to. Not wanting to lose my drunken impetus, I immediately swarmed up it in my best rock-climbing style, leaving most of the skin of my palms on the rough seams of the pipe.

I reached the level of the dim green window and braced a foot on one of the pipe's brackets; then I leaned sideways, gripped the window sill and made a fearsome wide-eyed, open-mouthed face while scrabbling at the glass with the nails of my free hand.

There was no response — just an uninterrupted, muted hum of machinery. I banged the pane with my forehead and made barking sounds. Still nothing.

I was beginning to get irritable. I dug in my right jacket pocket and pulled out the compact but heavy pistol I always kept there, and knocked in the glass. There were a few glass splinters in the frame when I was done, but I knew my leather jacket would protect me from them.

I brought my other hand quickly to the sill, heaved, and dove into the room, landing on my fingertips and somersaulting across a linoleum floor.

"I'll take over the controls, Arch," I gasped, springing to my feet. "How do you make the thing do a jig? Or—"

I stopped babbling. The room was

empty except for a long plastic case on the floor, about three feet deep and connected by tubes to a bank of dimly illuminated dials on one wall.

I sagged. My only concern at this point was to get out of there without having to answer any questions as to why I had thought it worth my while to break into what was doubtless the room housing the building's air-conditioning unit. I hurried toward the metal door in the far wall, but jerked to a halt when I peripherally glimpsed a face under the curved plastic surface of that suddenly-recognizable-as-coffin-sized case.

Sweat sprang out of my temples — I was afraid I'd recognized the face, and I didn't want to look again and confirm it. You didn't see anything, my mind assured me. Go rejoin the party.

I think I'd have taken its advice if its tone hadn't been so like Marc's.

I knelt in front of the case and stared into it. As I had thought, the sleeping face inside was Sam Hain's, clearly recognizable in spite of the fact that the head had been shaved of its curly white hair and a couple of green plastic tubes had been poked into the nostrils and taped down beside the jaw.

There didn't seem to be any way to open the case, but I didn't need to — I was certain this was the real Sam Hain, maintained, imprisoned, in dim lobotomized half-life in this narrow room. So much for Marc's story of a suicide

and refusal to be reborn! Marc and his friends had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure Sam was out of the picture without being freed from his old body.

I was still holding the little gun with which I'd broken the window, and I set it down on the plastic case long enough to whip off my jacket; then I picked it up and wrapped it and my hand tightly in the folds of leather. It was a little two-shot pistol I'd had made in 1900 for use on myself if I should ever want to leave a body quickly — its two bullets were .50 caliber hollow-points, pretty sure to do a thorough job at close range — and I didn't grudge Sam one of them.

I braced my wrist with my free hand and pressed the leather-padded muzzle against the section of plastic over Sam's head. "The cage door's open, Sam," I whispered. "Take off." I squeezed the trigger.

There was jarring thump, but the layers of leather absorbed most of the noise. I untangled the gun and put on the jacket, slapping it to dispell clinging smoke. One glance at the exploded ruin under the holed case was enough to tell me I'd freed Sam, so I tucked the gun back into my jacket pocket and turned to the window.

Getting out wasn't as easy as getting in had been, and I had a gashed finger, a wrenched ankle and a long tear in the left leg of my pants by the time I stood wheezing on the flagstones of the still-empty patio. I combed my hair, straightened my now-perforated

jacket, and walked around the corner, through the fire-lit mob in the back yard, to the living room.

It was a superficially warm and hearty scene that greeted me as I let the screen door bang shut at my back; yellow lamplight made the smoke-misty air glow around the knot of well-groomed people clustered around the piano, and the smiling white-haired figure with his hand on the pianist's shoulder fairly radiated benign fatherly wisdom. A stranger would have needed second sight to know that several of the company, particularly Amelia, were dangerously drunk, and that perhaps a third of them were currently a physical gender that was at odds with their instinctive one, and that their beaming patriarch was under his plastic skin, a mass of laboring machinery.

Marcus, perched on the arm of the couch, raised his thin eyebrows at my rumped, dusty appearance, then gave me a little nod and glanced toward the simulacrum. I obediently crossed the room and stood beside the thing.

"Well, Saul!" the machinery said. "It's good to see you, lad. Say, have you thought about what we were discussing earlier in the library?"

"Yes, Sam," I said with as warm smile as I muster, "and I can see it all makes perfect sense. We really do need to establish a position of power, so we can defend ourselves against the ephemerals ... if that should ever become necessary."

I wanted to gag or laugh. I hope, I mentally told the embryo in Marcus, you may some day appreciate what I'm doing right now to buy you a life.

"I'm glad," nodded the simulacrum. "Some truths are hard to face ... but you never were one to flinch, Saul." It smiles at the company. "Well, siblings, another song or two and then we'll get down to the meeting, hmm? Saul and Marcus and I have a few proposals to air."

Mirabile resumed banging away at the piano, and we went through a couple of refrains each of *Nichevo* and *Ich Bin Von Kopf Bis Fus* as a bottle of Hennessy made the circuit and helped the music to lend the evening an air of pleasantly wistful melancholy. I took a glass of cognac, and winced to see Marc working on still another grasshopper.

"Here, Mirabile," muttered Amelia, edging the pianist off the bench. "I learned to play, last life." After finding a comfortable position, she poised her unsteady hands over the keys, and then set to.

And despite all her hard drinking she played beautifully, wringing real heartbreak out of *The St. James Infirmary*, which we all sang so enthusiastically that we set the glasses to rattling in the cupboard.

We were still singing the last lines when it became clear that Amelia was playing and singing a different song, and our voices faltered away as the new chords moaned out of the piano

and Amelia's lyrics countered ours.

She was handling her man's voice as well as she handled the piano, and some of us didn't immediately realize what song it was that she was rendering.

"...Throw on another log," she sang, "—but draw the curtains shut!

For across the icy fields our
yellow light

Spills, and has raised a
sobbing in the night.

"Sing louder, friends! Drown out
that windy, wavering song
Of childish voices, and step
up the beat,

For a rainy pattering, like
tiny feet,

Draws nearer every moment. For
so very long

They've wandered, wailing
in a mournful chorus,
Searching through all of hell and
heaven for us."

I don't know whether it was the vapors of the cognac that caused it, or the mood of gentle despair that hung about us like the tobacco smoke, but a couple of voices actually joined her in the nearly whispered refrain:

"And at the close of some unhappy
Autumn day,

From their cold, unlighted
region,

Treading soft, will come the
Legion

Of Lost Children, and
they'll suck our souls
away."

Then a number of things happened simultaneously. Marc's little fist, as he lunged from the couch arm, cracked into Amelia's jaw and sent her and the heavy bench crashing over on the hardwood floor; Mirabile slammed the cover down over the keys, producing one final rumbling chord; the simulacrum just stood and gaped stupidly, and the rest of the company, pale and unmoving, registered varying mixtures of anger, embarrassment and fear.

Marc straightened, shot a look toward the sim, and then glanced furtively at me — snatched his eyes away immediately when mine met them.

"Get her out of here," he rasped to Mirabile. "Don't be gentle."

"To hell with the songs," said the Sam Hain replica expressionlessly. "It's time for the meeting."

I reached into my right jacket pocket. "Just a minute," I said. They all looked up, and I could see a dew of sweat on Marc's forehead — he was wary, even a little scared, and I believed I knew why. "I'll be back in a moment," I finished lamely, and walked into the kitchen.

Just outside the window over the sink was a thermometer, and I cut the screen with a butter knife to reach it. It unsnapped easily from the clamp that held it to the wall, and I pulled the

glass tube off and slipped it into my pants pocket. To explain my next exit I took a can of beer from the refrigerator and tore the tab off as I strolled back into the living room.

"Sorry to hold everybody up," I said. "We rummies need our crutch."

"Sit down, Saul," said Bill quietly. His pipe lay across his bony knees, and his little-girl fingers were busy stuffing it with black tobacco. "Marc went out back to drag everybody in."

I didn't sit down — for one thing, I found myself vaguely disturbed to see discolored teeth and red, wrinkle-bordered eyes in what should have been the face of an eight-year-old girl — but crossed to Marc's place instead. His creamy green drink was still cold, so I fished the thermometer tube from my pocket and, leaning over to hide the action, snapped it in half and shook the glittering drops of mercury into the drink.

Oddly, I felt only a tired depression as I moved away, and not the sorrow I'd have expected — but perhaps the empathy circuits in all of us were fused and blown out centuries ago, and we don't notice it because we so seldom care to call upon those circuits. The knowledge that my child had been killed two months ago, at any rate, grieved me only a little more than would news of the cancellation of some concert I'd been looking forward to.

For I'd figured it out, of course; the pieces were all there, and it had been Marc's involuntary, worried glance,

after that song, that put them all together for me. Rafe, Marc's closest friend in the clan, had shot himself two months ago living in an apartment on Lombard Street; and Marc, Amelia had said, was also living in an apartment on that street — the same one, I was certain. Obviously they'd been living together, in accord with Marc's new clan ethics. I wondered with a shudder whether Rafe had been jealous. When Marc came down for the street fair.

Probably Marc *had* intended to keep my unborn child as a hostage ... but then Rafe must have got sick or injured or something, and decided to ditch his middle-age body ... and was Marc going to let his old buddy take his chances with whatever fetus randomness might provide, when there was a healthy one so ready to hand?

And so Marc had taken Rafe's hand — and the gun too, I think, judging from the report that Rafe shot himself twice — and held on until the ruined body was quite still and he could be sure his friend's soul was safely lodged in the month-old fetus that had been my child's.

Standing there by the piano that night, I was certain of all this. At my leisure, since, I have occasionally had sick moments of doubt, and have had to fetch the Laphroaig bottle to dull my ears to any "sobbing in the night."

Marc led in those who'd been out back, many of them still gnawing

bones and complaining about being taken from their dinner.

"Shut up now, damn it," Marc told them. "The meeting's going to be a short one this time, you'll be back to your food in ten minutes. Saul and Sam have just got a few ideas to propose."

He nodded to the simulacrum, which stood up, smiled and cleared its throat convincingly. "Siblings," it said, "we all—"

I palmed my little gun and stood up. "Excuse me, Sam," I said, "I'd like to begin, if you don't mind."

"Sit down, Saul," Marc said through clenched teeth.

"No," I said, pointing the gun at him, "you sit down. Don't let your damned drink get warm. I want to open the meeting."

The rest of the clan began showing some interest, hoping for some diverting violence. Marc pursed his lips, then shrugged and sat down, not relishing the idea of losing his current body while it was still so young and usefully good-looking. I smiled inwardly to see him snatch up his glass and down the remainder of his drink at one gulp, and apparently not even notice, under the thick creme de menthe and cream, whatever taste mercury has.

For all I knew, the mercury might just pass through him, as inertly harmless in that form as a wad of bubble gum, but I hoped not — I wanted to throw acid on the wiring of his mind, sand in the clockwork of his psyche, so

that, though he might be reborn again and again until the sun goes out, every incarnation would be lived in a different home for the retarded. I hoped — still hope — the mercury could do the job, and with any luck get Rafe too.

"Siblings," I said, "I haven't been around for the last three meetings, but I gather there have been new trends afoot, fostered mainly by him," I jabbed the gun toward Marc, "and *him*," toward the simulacrum. "Quiet, don't interrupt me. For more than a century Sam Hain tried to civilize us, and now these two are eroding his efforts, throwing us back to the cruel, greedy old days of pretending to be gods to the ephemerals ... when actually we're a sort of immortal tapeworm in humanity's guts. What's that, Bill? No, I'm not drunk — sit down, Marc, or I swear I'll blow that beautiful face out through the back of your head — no, I'm not drunk, Bill, why? Oh, you're saying if these two are wrecking Sam Hain's teaching, then who do I think the guy with the white beard is? I'll show you."

I raised my arm and pulled the trigger, and the barrel clouted my cheek as the gun slammed back in recoil. My ears were ringing from the unmuffled report and the cordite smoke had my eyes watering, and I couldn't see the simulacrum at all.

Then I saw it. It was on its hands and knees in the middle of the rug, and all of its head from the nose upward had been taken out as if by a giant ice

cream scoop. Bits of wire and tubing and color-coded plastic were scattered across the floor, and two little jets of red liquid — artificial blood meant to lend verisimilitude in case of a cut in the cheek — fountained out onto the rug from opposite sides of the head.

The eyes, three-quarters exposed now, clicked rapidly up and down and back and forth in frantic unsynchronized scanning, and the mouth opened: "I'm hurt," the thing quacked, as the automatic damage circuits overrode anything Archie might be trying to do. "I'm hurt. I'm hurt. I'm hurt. I'm—"

I gave it a hard kick in the throat that shattered its voice mechanism and knocked it to the floor. "The real Sam Hain is upstairs," I said quietly, prodding my bruised cheek. "He was being maintained unconscious on a life-support system — and probably would have been forever if I hadn't shot him fifteen minutes ago." Marc stood up. "Give my regards to Rafe when he's born, in six months," I said. After a moment Marc sat down again. I faced the crowd. "Leave the clan," I told them, tossing my gun away. "Take all your money out of DIRE stocks. Stop coming to these horrible meetings and supporting the maniac ravings of people like Marcus and Rafe. Go incognito underground — any of you can afford

to live well anywhere, even without your allowances."

No one said anything, so I strode around them to the entry hall and found my helmet. "And when you die this time," I called back as I opened the door, "take the death you've had coming for so long! Let go! The Legion has members enough."

I left the door slightly ajar and trudged down the dark path toward my bike. It started up at the first kick, and the cool night air was so refreshing that I snapped my helmet to the sissy bar and let the wind's fingers brush my hair back as the bike and I coursed down the curling road toward the winking lights of Whittier. The headwind found the bullet holes in my jacket and cooled my damp shirt, and by the time I stopped at the traffic signal on Whittier Boulevard my anger had dissipated like smoke from an open-windowed room.

And so I've decided to let go, this time. It occurs to me that we've all been like children repeating eighth grade over and over again, and finally coming to believe that there's nothing beyond it. And when a century goes by and I haven't shown up, they'll say, What could have made him do it? not realizing the real question is, What stopped preventing him?

The F&SF Competition will appear in the January issue.