

A DAY IN THE SKIN (OR, THE CENTURY WE WERE OUT OF THEM)

Tanith Lee

When we go out to colonize the planets of other stars, odds are that there will be unexpected catastrophes. Science fiction has told of such things often, but we must bear in mind that by the time we achieve interstellar travel our technology will be greatly advanced, so we may by then have the means to cope with great problems. Of course, coping will always remain basically a human task, as Tanith Lee shows in this story.

Tanith Lee is one of the most accomplished science fiction writers of the past ten years, in both short stories and novels. She's been so prolific and accomplished that even a sample list of her books would be impractical; this story will give an example of why that's true.

And the first thing you more or less think when you get Back is: God, where's everything gone? (Just as, similarly, when you get Out you more or less think, Hey where's all this coming from?) Neither thought is rational, simply out-raged instinct. The same as, coming Back, it seems for a moment stone silent, blind dark and ice cold. It's none of those. It's nothing. In a joking mood, some of us have been known to refer to it, this-what shall I call it? this place-as Sens-D (sensory deprivation). It isn't though, because when your Outward senses-vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch- when they go off, other things come on. The a/fer-senses. Hard to describe. For a time, you reckon them as compensa-tion, stand-ins, like eating, out in the skin world, a cut of sausage when you hankered for a steak. Only in a while it stops being that. It becomes steak. The equivalent senses are just fine, although the only non-technical way I can come up with to express them is in terms of equivalents, alternatives. And time itself is a problem, in here, or down there, or where the hell ever. Yes, it passes. One can judge it. But one rarely does, after

the first months. In the first months you're constantly pacing, like some guy looking at his watch: Is it time yet? Is it time now? Then that cools off. Something happens, in here, down there... So that when at last the impulse comes through Time to get up (or Out) you turn lazily, like a fish in a pool (equivalents), and you equivalently say, Oh really? Do I have to?

"Sure, Scay. You do have to. It's in the Company contract. And if I let you lie, there'd be all hell and hereafter to pay H.Q. Not to mention from you, when you finally get Out for keeps."

So I alter-said, in the way the impulse can assimilate and send on, "How long, and what is it?"

"One day. One huge and perfect High Summer day. Forty-two hours. And you got a good one, Scay, listen, a real beauty."

"Male or female?"

"A/ee-male."

"All right. I can about remember being female."

"First female for you for ten years, ah? Exciting."

"Go knit yourself a brain."

Dydo, who manages the machines, snuffled and whined, which I alter-heard now clearly, as he set up my ride. I tried to pull myself together for the Big Wrench. But you never manage it. Suddenly you are whirling down a tunnel full of fireworks, at the end of which you explode inside a mass of stiff jelly. And there I was, flailing and shrieking, just as we all flail and shriek, in the middle of a support couch in the middle of Transfer.

"Husha hush," said the machines, and gentle firm me-mechanical arms held me and held me down.

Presently I relapsed panting-yes, panting. Air.

"Look up," said Dydo. I looked. Things flashed and tickered. "Everything's fine. You can hear me? See me?"

"I can even smell you," I gasped, tears streaming down my face, my heart crashing like surf on the rocks. There was a dull booming pain in my head I cared for about as much as Dydo cared for my last remark. "Dydo," I continued, speech not coming easy, "who had this one last? I think they gave it a cranial fracture."

"Nah, nah. 'S all right. Mike tied one on with the wine and brandy-pop. It's pumped full of vitamins and de-tox. Should take about a hundred and fifteen seconds more, and you'll feel just dandy, you rat."

I lay there, waiting for Mike Plir's hangover to go away, and watched, with my borrowed eyes, Dydo bustling round the shiny bright room. He is either a saint or a masochist (or are they the same?). Since one of us has to oversee these particular machines, he agreed to be it, and so he took the only living quarters permanently available. The most highly developed local fauna is a kind of dog-like creature, spinally adapted for walking upright, like the Terran ape, and with articulated forepaws and jaw. With a little surgery, this nut-brown woolly beast, with its floppy ears and huge soulful eyes, was all ready for work, and thus for Dydo.

“My, Dydoo,” I said, “you look real sweet today. Come on over, I’ll give you a bone.”

“Shurrup,” growled Dydoo. No doubt, these tired old jests get on his furry nerves.

Once my skull stopped booming, I got up and went to look at myself in the unlikely pier-glass at one end of the antiseptic room.

“Well, I remember this one. This used to be Miranda.”

There she stood, twenty-five, small, curvy, a little heavy but nice, creamy gold, with long fair hair down to her second cluster of dimples.

“Yeah. Good stuff,” said Dydoo, deciding yet again; he doesn’t or can’t afford to hold a grudge more than a minute.

“How long, I wonder, before I get a go at my own-“

“Now you know it doesn’t work like that, Scay. Don’t you? Hah?”

“Yes, I know it doesn’t. Just lamenting, Dydoo. Tell me, who had me Out last time?”

“Vundar Cope. And he broke off a bit.”

“What? Hexos Christ! Which bit?”

“Just kidding,” said Dydoo. “If you’re worried, I’ll take you over to the Store, and let yah look.”

“No thanks, for Chrissake. I don’t like seeing myself that way.”

“Okay. And try to talk like a lady, can’t you?”

“Walkies, Dydoo,” I snarled. “Fetch!”

“Ah, get salted.”

It took me a couple of quivery hours to grow accustomed to being in Miranda’s body; correction, Fern. Sub. 68. I bruised my hips a lot, trying to get between and by furniture that was no longer wide enough for me. The scented bath and the lingerie were exciting all right. But not in the right way, I’d been male in the beginning and much of the time after, and I’d had a run of being male for every one of my fifty-one days a year Out for ten, eleven years. That’s generally how it’s designated, unless an adventurous preference is stated. Stick with what you’re used to. But sometimes you must take what you can get. I allowed a while before I left Transfer, to see to a couple of things. The lingerie and the mirrors helped. It was a safe bet, I probably wouldn’t be up (to mis-coin a phrase) to any straight sex this holiday. Besides, I didn’t know who else was Out, and Dydoo had gotten so grouchy in the end, I hadn’t bothered to ask. Normally there are around forty to fifty people in the skin on any given day. Amounts of time vary, depending on how the work programs pan out and the “holiday” schedules have built up. My day, I now re-called, was a free diurnal owing to me from last year, that the Company had never yet made up. Perfect to the letter, our Company. After all, who wants to get sued? Not that anyone who sues ever wins, but it’s messy.

I wondered, as the moving ramp carried me out into town, just what Dydoo was getting paid to keep him woofing along in there.

The first body I passed on Mainstreet was Fedalin's, and it gave me the creeps, the way it still sometimes does, because naturally it wasn't Fedalin inside. Whoever was, was giving it a heck of a time. Red-rimmed eyes, drug-smoked irises, shaking hands and faltering feet. To make matters worse, the wreck blew a bleary whistle after Miranda's stacking. I didn't stop to belt him. My lady's stature and her soft fists were of use only in one sort of brawl. I could see, I thought, nor for the first, why the Company rules keep your own personal body in the Store whenever you yourself are Out. It means you never get into your own skin, but then too, there are never any overlaps, during which you might meet yourself on the sidewalk with some other bastard driving. Pandemonium that would be, trying to throttle them, no doubt, for the lack of care they were taking with your precious goods-and only, of course, ending up throttling yourself. In a manner. Although I didn't like looking at my own battered old (thirty-five) skin lying there, in ice, like a fish dummy, in the Store, I had once or twice gone over and compulsively peeked. The second occasion, not only gave me the shivers, but I'd flown into a wow of a rage because someone had taken me Out for a week's leave and put ten pounds on my gut. Obviously, the machines would get that off in a few days. (The same as lesions, black eyes, and stomach ulcers get got rid of. The worst I ever heard tell of was a cancerous lung that required one whole month of cancer-antibodies, which is twice as long as it takes to cure it in a body that's occupied.) But there, even so, you get upset, you can't help it. So it's on the whole better not to go and look, though H.Q. says it's okay for you to go and look-which is to prove to us all our skins are still around in the public lending library. Goddamn it.

The contract says (and we all have a contract) that as soon as the Bank is open for Business (five years it's supposed to be now, but five years ago they said that, too) we all go Back into our own bodies. Or into new improved bodies, or into new improved versions of our old bodies, or-you name it. A real party, and we all get a prize. When it all started, around eighty years ago, that is, once everybody had settled after the initial squalling matches, Violent Scenes, hysteria, etc., some of us got a wild thrill out of the novelty. Pebka-Sol, for example, has it on record always, where possible, to come Out as a lady. And when he finally gets a skin of his own again, that is due to be a lady, also. But Pebka-Sol lost his own skin, the true, masculine one, so he's entitled. I guess we're the lucky ones, me, Fedalin, Miranda, Christof, Haro- those of us that didn't lose anything as a result of the Acci-dent. Except, our rights...

I try to be conscientious, myself, I really do. But handling Miranda was going to be a drag. She's a lot littler than me, or than I'm used to, and her capacity is a lot less. I'm used to drinking fairly hard, but hard was the word it was going to be on her, if I tried that; plus she'd already been doused by some jack, yesterday. I walked into the bar on Mainstreet, the bar we used to hit in gabbling droves long, long ago under the glitter-kissed green dusk, when we were our own men and women. No one was there now, though Fedalin's haunt had just walked him out the door. I dialed a large pink Angel and put it, a sip at a time, into Miranda's insides, to get her accustomed. "Here's not looking at you, kid," I toasted her.

I had that weird feeling I recollect I had when I first scooped a female body from the draw forty odd years ago. Shock and disorientation, firstly. Then a turn-on, racy, kinky, great. I'd got to the stage now of feeling I was on a date, dating Miranda, only I was Miranda. My first lady had been Qwainie, and Qwainie wasn't my type, which in the long run made things easier faster. But Miranda is my type. Oh my yes. (Which is odd in a way as the only woman I ever was really serious with-well, she wasn't like Miranda at all.) So I dialed Miranda another Angel, and we drank it down.

As this was happening, a tall, dark man with a tawny tan, the right weight and nothing forcing steam out of his nose and eyeballs, came into the bar. He dialed a Coalwater, the most lethal beer and alcohol mix in the galaxy (they say); one of my own preferred tipples, and sauntered over.

“Nice day, Scay.”

“He knows me,” said Miranda’s soft cute voice with the slight lisp.

“The way you drink, feller,” he said.

I had emptied the glass, and Miranda’s ears were faintly ringing. I’d have to wait a while for the girl to catch up.

“Well, if he knows me that well, then I’ll hazard on who he is.”

“Win, and he’ll stand you a Coalwater.”

“The lady wouldn’t like that. Anyway. Let’s try Haro Fielding.”

“Hole in one.”

“Well, fancy that. They let us Out the same time again.”

Haro, whom I thought was in the skin of one of the tech. people whose name I had mislaid, grinned mildly.

“I’ve been Out a couple of weeks. Tin and irradiation traces over south. Due Back In tomorrow noon. You?”

“Forty-two hours.”

“Hard bread.”

“Yeah.”

We stared into our glasses, mine empty, and I wished sweet Miranda would buck up and stop ringing so I could drink some more. Haro’s rig had been auspicious, a tall dark man just like Haro’s own body. But he’d treated it with respect. That was Haro Fielding all over, if you see what I mean. A really nice guy, super intelligent, intellectual, all that, and sound, as about nothing but people ever are, and that rarely, let me add. We had been working together on the asti-manganese traces the other side of the Rockies when the Accident happened, back here in town. That was how we two kept our skins. I remember we were down a tunnel scraping away, with the analysis robot-pack clunking about in the debris, when the explosion ripped through the planet’s bow-els. It was a low, thrumming vibration, where we were, more than a bang. We were both a pair of tall guys, but Haro taller than me, with one of the best brains I ever came across. And he stood up and crashed this brain against the tunnel-ceiling and nearly knocked himself out. “What the F was that?” I asked, after we’d gotten ourselves together. “It sounded,” said Haro to me, “like the whole of Base Town just blew up, hit the troposphere, and fell back down again.” He wasn’t far out.

We made it back through the rock hills in the air-buggy inside twenty minutes. When we came over the top and saw the valley full of red haze and smoke and jets of steam, I was scared as hell. You could hear alarm bells and sirens going, but the smog was too thick to work out what kind of rescue went on and what was just automatic noise and useless. I sat in the driver’s seat, gunning the buggy forward, and swearing and half crying. And Haro said, “It’s okay.”

“Of course it’s not bloody okay. Look at it-there’s no goddamn thing left-“

“Hey,” he said, “calm down.”

“Calm down! You’re crazy. No, I’m not just shaken up over who may have just died in that soup. I’m pissing myself that if it’s all gone, we’ll never get off this guck-heeled planet alive.”

The point being that planet NX 5 (whereon we are) is sufficient distance from H.Q. that it had taken our team, the “pioneer squad” every expert Company sends in ahead of itself, to explore, to test, to annotate, to break open for the use of Man, had taken us, I started to say, around thirty Terran years to arrive. We’d traveled cryogenically, of course, deep-frozen in our neat little cells, and that was how we’d get back when it was time. Only if Base had blown up, then maybe the ship had blown up, too, plus all the life supports, the S.O.S.’s- every darling thing. Naturally, if reports suddenly stopped coming in, the Company would investigate. But it would take thirty years before anything concrete got here. Though NX 5 is a gallant sight, with its pyramidal rocks rich in hidden ores, its dry forests and cold pastel deserts busy with interesting flora and fauna, and its purling pale lemon skies... it doesn’t offer a human much damn anything to get by on. While the quaint doggies that roam the lands, barking and walking upright, joy of the naturalist, had a few times tried to tear some of us to pieces. Marooned without proper supplies, shelter or defense: with nothing-that was a fate and three-quarters.

“We’ll be dead in half a month,” I said.

“To die-to sleep, no more,” Haro muttered, and I began to think the blow on the head had knocked him silly, so it’d be a half month shared with a lunatic at that.

However. We careered down into the smoke, and the first thing, a robot machine came up and ordered us off to a safety point. Events, it seemed, weren’t so bad as they looked. Matters were in (metal) hand.

The short High Winter day drew to its end under cover of the murk, and we sat in the swimpool building on the out-skirts, which had escaped the blast. Other survivors had come streaming and racketing in. There were about ninety of us crammed round the pool, eating potato chips and nuts and drinking cold coffee, which were all the rations the pool machines, on quarter-power, would give us. Most of the survivors had been away on recon., or various digs, or other stuff, like Haro and me. A handful with minor injuries, caught around the periphery of Base Town, were in the underground medical sanitorium which, situated northside, was unscathed. There were some others, too, a third of the planet away on field studies, who had yet to find out. It seemed that the core in the third quadrant of Base’s energy plant had destabilized, gone critical and-wham. The blast was of course “clean,” but that was all you could say for it. The third quadrant (Westtown) had gone down a molten crater, and most of the rest of the place had reacted the way a pile of loose bricks might do in a scale 9 earthquake. That means, too, people die.

By dawn the next chill day, we had the figures. There had been around five thousand of us on-world, what with the primary team, and the back-up personnel-shipmen, ground crew, service, mechanics and techies. Out of those men and women, one thousand nine hundred and seventy-three were now dead. What we felt and said about that I won’t repeat now, there’s nothing worse than a bad case of *requiemitis*.

Some of them were pals, you see. And a couple of them, well. Well, one of them was once practically my wife, only we never made it that far, parted, stayed friends (cliche). Yep. *Requiemitis*. Let’s get on.

Aside from the dead, there were a lot of gruesomely in-jured down in the San., nearly three thousand of them. While the hospital machineries could keep them out of pain and adequately alive, the mess they

were in required one form of surgery only. The form that's discreetly known on Earth as Rebo, and is normally only for the blazing rich. Rebo, or the transfer of the ego, with all its memories, foibles, shining virtues and fascinating defects, from one body (for some reason a wash-out-crippled, pan-cancerous-what you will) to another, is only carried out in extreme cases. And indeed the business was hushed up for years, then said not to work, then said not to be in use. It happened though, that our Very Own Company was one of the sponsors of the most advanced Rebo (re-bodying) techniques. Again, on Earth and the Earth Worlds, there are laws that limit transfer strictly. (And, natu-rally, there are religious sects who block the Sunday news abhorring the measure.) In our case, though... we were different, weren't we? A heroic advance guard on a remote planet, needed to carry out vital work, etc.; and all that.

Those were the first tidings of comfort and joy; figures of death and injury and rumors of Rebo. It threw us about somewhat. I noticed that the machines started to serve us hot food and alcohol about this juncture. Then Haro and I got plastered to the plaster, and I stopped noticing. The second gospel came on about an hour later.

Now, an ego that's transferred, where doth it go? It goeth into another body, natch. Fine. Generally it's a grown body- android-tissue and cells. That can take anything from a trio of months to a year, dependent on format and specifications, and, let it be whispered, on the amount of butter you can spread. Sometimes, too, there have allegedly been transfers into the recently dead bodies of others. (There is supposed to be a gal in Appeline, New Earth, who bought her way into the pumped-out body of a movie star, dead of an overdose. Apocryphal perhaps.) Or even of animals. (There's a poem about that one: Please, God, make of me a panther, A pretty panther, to please me, Pretty please, Hexos or Javeh or Pan, There is no God but the god who can- Make me a panther, please.)

That-I mean, grown androids-is what should have hap-pened here. Approaching three thousand bodies for those that, alive only on support systems, needed them. Trouble was- you guessed it-the tissue banks that would have begun the project were over in Westtown and blown to tomorrow. It would take thirty years to get us some more.

The only facilities they had were the remains of the cryo-genic storage (the ship had caught the blast), whole if de-pleted berths for about two hundred, into which three thousand persons were not going to fit. And another outfit, of which we knew little, but which would act, apparently, as the interim point of the transferral operation, a kind of waiting room between bodies. Mostly, a transfer flashes the subject through that place so fast it's just a nonstop station on the way. Yet, this area, too, was it seemed capable of storing. Storing an ego. And its capacity was unlimited.

Just as requiems can be tedious, rehashing old action re-plays of panic and mayhem can get one down. So, I'll just spin the outline for those of us who like it in the big bold type.

The Company, who had gotten word of the latest position via the beacon intercom, had a proposition to offer us. And for proposition, read Fact. For we who are Company Persons know we belong to our Company, body and-yes, let's hear it for laughs-soul.

The Company would like us to stay on, and hang in there. This was how: The survivors of the Accident (and isn't that a lovesome name for it?) about one hundred and fifty people of both sexes, would donate their bodies to a common fund. Now, and let me stress this, around one hundred and fifty bodies put out like pairs of pants and dresses for the use of-one deep breath-over three thousand footloose egos. For the life supports would be switched off and the liberated bodiless egos of the mortally wounded taken into the wonderful-what shall I call it?-place-that stored unlim-ited egos within its unlimited capacity. And into that place also, would go the liberated egos of those whose "skins" had not been damaged, those

skins now the property of All. And here in the place we would all live, not crowded, for the disembodied are not crowded, lords and ladies of infinite space, inside a nutshell. Then, when it was our allotted time physically to work or play, Out we would come and get in a body. Not our own. That would hardly be fair, would it?

Make those who had lost their own bodies for good feel jealous. (For that reason, no one gets finally supplied from the Bank or the Store until everyone gets supplied. Suits for all or none at all.) Anyway, there might be a slip-up. Yes, slips-up happen, like cores destabilizing. Gray vibes to meet oneself on the street in thrall to another. And in thirty years the androids would start growing like beautiful orchids in their tanks. And in maybe sixty years (or a bit longer, we're starting from scratch, remember, and not geared in the first place to do it) there'll be suits for all, bodies for everyone. New bodies, old familiar bodies, loved ones, forgotten ones-ah, the com-post with it. It stank. And we shrilled and howled and argued and screamed. And we ended up in it to our eyebrows.

I recall wandering in a long drunk, and Haro, tall and dark and tawny, then as now, and drunk as me, said to me: "Calm down, Scay. They may blow it and kill us."

"But I don't want to be killed, pal."

"Nothing to it," said Haro. "Something to look forward to."

"My God, you still remember that," said Haro, draining his Coalwater.

Miranda's ears had stopped dinging.

"Say, Miranda, would you care for another?" I asked her in her own honeyed voice. "Of course I remember, you turkey. Get killed. Boy."

"Although Sens-D. is a sort of death. You realize that, Scay?"

"Yes. Surely. Only I'm not dead in there. In there stops me getting dead. You know, I was thinking, it's funny-" ("You thinking is funny? You're right there," interpolates Haro) "-You get in a skin and you come Out and you feel wrong, and you feel okay, all at the same moment. And if you stay with the skin a while, weeks, a month at a time, especially if you're working in it-it starts to feel natural. As if you always had it. Or something very like it, even if it isn't like it. Take Miranda here, I could get used to Miranda. Seems unlikely now, but I know from past experience I could, and would. Meanwhile, the-place-that starts to seem alien and frightening all over. So you can hardly stand to go Back there. And now and then, you need their drugs to stop you kicking and screaming on the way to Transfer, as if you were going off to get shot in the skull. And yet-"

"And yet?" said Haro, looking at me quietly with the other man's dark eyes.

"And yet, no one mentions it, but we all know, I suppose. When you come Out, there's the Big Wrench. It's yellow murder coming through into a new body. But when you go Back/n-"

"No Wrench."

"No Wrench. Just like slipping into cool water and drifting there. I know there's sometimes a disorientation-it's cold, I've gone blind-that stuff. But it happens less and less, doesn't it? The last time I went Back. Hell, Haro. It was like gliding out of a lump of lead."

“And how do you feel about working, in Sens-D.?”

I narrowed Miranda’s gorgeous sherry eyes. Haro called it by the slang name, always, and I knew Haro. He was doing that just because, to him, “sensory deprivation” meant nothing of the sort, and he’d acknowledged it.

“I work fine down, up, In there. I do. When they started asking us to work that way, assessments, work-ups, lay-outs- the ideas stuff we used to do prowling round a desk-I thought it’d be a farce. But it’s-stimulating, right? And then the assimilator passes on what you do, puts it in words Outside. I sometimes wonder how much talent gets lost just fumbling around in the physical after words-“

“And did you know,” said Haro, “that some of the best work any of us ever did is coming out of our disembodied egos in Sens-D.?”

I swore. “Ger-eat. That means we’ll be stuck in there more and more. If the sweetheart Company found that out, they’ll fix our contracts and-“

“But you just said, Scay, it’s good In there.”

“Devil’s advocate. Come on. Where’s the Coalwater you promised Miranda?”

He got the drinks and we drank them, and the conversation turned, because Company maneuvers and all the Company Likes and Wants can be disquieting. There have been nights in the skin I have lain and wondered, there, if the Company might not have arranged it all, even the Accident, just to see how we make out, what happens to us, in the place, or in the skin of another guy. Which is crazy, crazy. Sure it is.

Anyhow, Haro was due Back tomorrow, and I had only thirty-seven more hours left.

* * *

Rebuilt, and glamorized to make us happy, once we were stuck here for a century or so, Base Town was a strange sight, white as meringue against NX 5’s lemon sky. Made in the beginning for the accommodation, researches and plea-sures of a floating population of two thousand, you now seldom saw more than twenty people on the streets at a time. For whom now did the bright lights sparkle, and the musics play, the eateries beckon, the labs invite and the libraries yawn? Who races the freeway, swims the pool? Who rides the carousel? And, baby, ask not for whom the bell tolls. With the desert blowing beyond the dust traps on all sides, and sand-blown craters of the west, the Rockies over there, frowning down, where weird whippy birds go flying in the final spasms of sunset-Base has the look of an elegant surreal ghost town. It’s as if everyone has died, after all. The ones you see are only ghosts out for a day in the skin.

A new road goes west, off to that ship the machines are still working on. Haro and I walked out to the road, paused, looked up it into distance, but made no move to do more. Once, years ago, we all went to see what progress they were making on the getting-home stakes. So the road had occasional traffic, some buggy or jetcar pattering or zooming along, like a dragonfly with wings of silver dust. Not any more. Oh they’ll get the ship ready in time, it’s in the contracts, in time for the new bodies, so we can all go to sleep for thirty years and wake up home in H.Q., which isn’t home. Who cares, anyway. What’s

home, who's home, to hurry for? Thirty years older, sixty years, one hundred and sixty. And we, the Children of the Ice, are the same as always. Live forever, and sell your soul to the Company Store.

“Hey, Haro, what do we do now?”

We discussed possibles. We could take a jeep out into the desert and track a pack of doggies, bring back a lady doggy and give it to Dydoo (who'd not smile). We could swim, eat curry, nap in the Furlough, walkabout, eat pizza, go to a movie. We did those. The film was Jiarmennon, sent out to our photo-tape receptors inside a year of its release on the Earth Worlds, by the kindly Company. A terrific epic, huge screen, come-at-you effects, sound that goes through the back of the cerebellum and ends up cranking the pelvis. One of those marvelous entertainments that exactly combine action, spectacle and profound thought. I admit, some of the pro-found thought I didn't quite latch on to. But the overall was something plus. Five hours, with intervals. Three other peo-ple in the theater. One of them, the one in Fedalin, was asleep or passed out.

When we came forth, the afternoon bloomed full across the town, a primrose sunshade for two suns, and it was sad enough to make you spit.

“Miranda's hormones are starting to pick up. Did she have crying jags, do you know?”

We walked across to the Indoor Jardin, the one place we hadn't yet re-seen. In the ornamental pond, the bright fish live and die and are taken away, and new bred bright fish put in. Maybe it was the last Coalwater taken in the Sand Bar on East, but I, or Miranda's body, began suddenly to weep.

“Goddamn it, Miranda, leave it out, will you? I've only got you for another ten hours, and you do this to me. Quit, Miranda.”

“Why does it have to be Miranda who's crying?” said Haro in his damn nice, damn clever way.

“Well who's it look like?”

“Looks like Miranda. Sounds like you, feller.”

“Falsetto? Yeah. Well. I didn't cry since-Christ, when did I last?”

“You want me to tell you.”

Belligerent, I glared at him through massed wet cilia thick as bushes. “So tell me, tell me, turkey.”

“When the core blew, and took Mary with it.”

“Ah. Oh, yes. Okay. Shit.”

The pain of that, coming back when I hadn't expected it, stopped me crying, the way a kick in the ear can stop hiccups. You preferred the hiccups, all right?

“I'm sorry, Scay,” Haro said presently. “But I think you needed to know.”

“Know how I felt about-I know. It doesn't help.”

“Sometime, it may. You wanted to be with her. And Company red tape on marriage liability got in your

way and you both chickened out. But your insides didn't."

"I used to dream about it," I said sullenly. "The Acci-dent. And her, and what it must've-•"

There was a long pause, and the fish, who lived and died, burned there in the pond like votive candles.

"It's over now," said Haro. "It isn't happening to her anymore, except inside your head."

We sat on the stone terrace, and he put his arm over my Miranda's shoulders, and Miranda responded, the length of her spine.

"Miranda," I said, slightly ashamed, "wants you."

"And I notice the guy I'm wearing today fancies the heck out of Miranda."

He turned me, carefully, because I was a woman and he was much larger in build than I, and he kissed me. It was good. It got to me how good it was.

"We've never been in this position before," I muttered, in Miranda's husky voice. "As the space-captain said to the wombat.

"Never been male and female together, I mean." I elaborated, as our hands mutually traveled, and our mouths, and our bodies warmed and melded together like wax, and the flame lights up about the usual way, about the usual part, but, oh brother, not quite. "What I mean is, kid. If you'd tried this on when we were both male, I'd have knocked you into a cocked cuckoo-clock."

"The lady," said Haro, "doth protest too much."

So, I shut up, and we enjoyed it, Haro, Miranda, and I.

The lemon light was going to the acid of limes and the birds were tearing round the sky when we started back along Mainstreet. I hadn't gotten Miranda too drunk, but I had got her well-laid, and that was healthful for her. She had nothing to reproach me with.

"You're not, by any chance, walking me home, Haro Fielding?"

"Nope."

"Well, good. Because, when I see you again, I don't know how I'm going to live this down."

Heck, yes, I could hear myself, even the sentence-constructs were getting to be like Miranda's. That's how you grow used to what you are. I suppose it was inevitable, the other scene, he and me, sometime. Buddies. Yip.

"Don't worry too much about that," said Haro.

I shrugged. "I'll be Back In. I won't be worrying at all. That place is a real de-sexer, too. Genderless we go. And get Out... confused."

"That place," he repeated. "In. All that labor and all that machinery, to keep alive. When all the time, being In is, I'd take a bet, almost what death is."

“You said that already.”

“I did, didn’t I? So if that’s what death is like, where’s the difference?”

“The difference is, there’s a guaranty on this one. You get there. You go on. Not like-not like Mary, blown into a million grains of sugar.”

“Mary’s body.”

“Okay. Her body. I liked her body.”

Haro stopped, looking up over the town at the glowing dying sky.

“Don’t fool yourself. You loved Mary, not just Mary’s skin. And though Miranda and this guy here were making love, you and I were making it, too.”

“Oh now look-I’ve got nothing against-but I’m not-“

“Forget that. You’re missing the doorway and coming in the garbage-shoot with catsup in your hair. What I’m saying is this, and I want you to listen to me, Scay, or you won’t understand.”

“What do I have to understand, buster? Hah?”

“Just listen. Sens-D. is-Christ, it’s a zoo, an enclosure full of egos-of psychic, non-corporeal, unspecified, unclas-sified, inexplicable and unexplained matter, that persists out of, and detached from, the flesh. Got it?”

“I got it. So?”

“Death, Scay, is being that same psychic, non-corporeal, etc.-etc.-material-only Out of the skin and Out of the box.”

“Yes?” I said politely, to see if he’d hit me. He didn’t.

“The place, as you call it, is a birdcage. But look up there. That’s where the birds want to be. The free wide sky.”

I watched the birds in spite of myself. I thought about our extended peculiar lives in the slave gangs of the Company. Of going to sleep on ice. Of sliding into the place. Of days in the skin.

“That’s it?” I said eventually. “All you want to tell me?”

“That’s it, that’s all.”

We said our good-byes near the Transfer ramp.

“See you next skin,” I said.

And Haro grinned and walked away.

* * *

Dyddoo waved an ear at me as I strolled in, “Had a nice day?”

“Divine.”

Poor mutt. He’d been smoking, two trays full, and spilling over. I refrained from cracks about dog ends. What a life the man led, held in that overcoat of fur and fume. It was a young specimen that died up on the ridge, and the robots found it, cleaned out the disease, did the articulation surgery, and popped in Dyddoo. Sometimes, when he gets crazy-mad enough, he’ll bark. I know, I used to help make him. And you know, it isn’t really funny. Bird-cage. Dog-cage.

I got ready for going Back, and Dyddoo gave me my shot. I wasn’t bothered today, not fighting or wanting to. I guess I haven’t really been like that for years. The anguish, that had also gone, just a sort of melancholy left, almost nostalgia, for something or other. Beyond the high windows, the night was coming, reflecting on instruments and panels and in the pier-glass, till the lights came up.

“You ready now?” Dyddoo peered down at me.

“Go on, lick my face, why don’t you?”

“And put myself off my nice meaty bone? You should be so honored. Say, Scay? Yah know what I’m coming Out as at the end, the new body? Heh? The Hound of the Baskervilles. And I’m gonna get every last one of you half-eyed creeps and-“

Then the switches went over.

One minute you are here, and then you are-there-

I glided free of the lump of lead into the other world.

Three days later (that’s the time they tell me it was) I made history. I spent two hours in my own skin. Yes. My very own battered thirty-five-year-old me. Hey!

My body was due, you see, for someone else, and because of what happened, they dumped me into it first. So they could thump all those questions out at me like a machine-gun. The Big Wrench. Then Dyddoo yelping and growling, techies from C Block, some schmode I didn’t know yelling, and a whole caboodle full of machines. I couldn’t help much, and I didn’t. In the end, after all the lie-check tests and print-outs and threats and the apologies for the threats, I reckon they be-lieved me that it was nothing to do with me. And then they left me to calm down in a little cubicle, to get over my own anger and my grief.

He was a knight, Haro Fielding. A good guy. He could have messed it up with muck, that borrowed skin, or thrown it off a rock or into one in a jeep, and smashed it up, unusable. Instead, he donated it, one surplus body, back to the homeless ones, the Rest of Us. All they had to do was fill it up with nice new blood, which is easy with the technology in town here.

He'd gone up into the Rockies, sat down, and opened every important vein. The blood went out like the sea and left the dry beach of Haro lying under the sky, where the search-ers found him-it. They searched because he was missing. He hadn't turned up at Transfer next day. They thought they had another battling hysteric on their hands. No use to try transfer now, obviously. The body had been dead long enough the ego and all the other incorporeal etc. were gone. Though the body was there, Haro was not.

The slightest plastic surgery would take care of the knife cuts. One fine, bonus, vacant skin. He was a gentleman, that louse.

God knows how long he'd been planning it, preparing for it in that dedicated, clear-vision crusader sort of way of his. Quite a while. And I know, if I hadn't met him Out that day, the first I'd ever have heard of it would have been from some drunk sprawled in the Star Bar, Hey, you hear? Fielding took himself out.

As it was, obliquely but for sure, Haro'd told me all of it. I should have cottoned on and tried to- Or why should I have? Each to his own. In, or is it Out? For keeps.

And I guess it's grief and anger made me laugh so hard in the calm-down cubicle. God bless the Company, and let's hear it for the one that got away. As the line says, flying to other ills-but flying. Home free.

Free as a bird.