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TOI

A TORN DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

FOR DAVID HARTWELL,
who has ridden to the rescue More times
than the U.S. cavalry.

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed
in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people ,or incidents
is purely coincidental.

ANCIENT OF DAYS

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Part One

HER HABILINE

HUSBAND

Beulah Fork, Georgia

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ten-year-olds, whatever their color. Was the trespasser

some kind of animal?

"He's walking," RuthClaire murmured to herself. "Hairy or not, only human beings walk like that."

My ex is not given to panic, but this observation worded her. Her house (I had relinquished all claims to it back in January, primarily to spare her the psychic upheaval of a move) sits in splendid-spooky isolation about a hundred yards from the state highway connecting Tocqueville and Beulah Fork. Cleve Synder, meanwhile, leases his adjacent ninety acres to a cotton grower who does not live there. RuthClaire was beginning to feel alone and vulnerable. Imperceptibly trembling, she set aside her brushes and paints to watch the trespasser. He was closer to the house now, and a rake that she had left leaning against one of the 'pecan trees enabled her to estimate his height at a diminutive four and a half feet. His sinewy arms bespoke his maturity, however, as did the massiveness of his underslung jaw and the dark gnarl of his sex. Maybe. she helplessly conjectured, he was a deranged dwarf recently escaped from an institution populated by violence-prone sexual deviates

"Stop it," RuthClaire advised herself. "Stop it."

Suddenly the trespasser gripped the bole of a tree with his hands and the bottom of his feet; he shinnied to a swaying perch high above the ground. Here, for over an hour, he cracked pecans with his teeth and single-mindedly fed himself. My ex-wife's worry subsided a little. The intruder seemed to be neither an outright carnivore nor a rapist. Come twilight, though, she was ready for him to leave, while he appeared perfectly content to occupy his perch until Judgment Day.

RuthClaire had no intention of going to bed with a skinnydipping dwarf in her pecan grove. She telephoned me.

"It's probably someone's pet monkey," I reassured her.

"A rich Yankee matron broke down on the interstate, and her chimpanzee--you know how some of those old ladies from Connecticut are--wandered off while she was trying to flag down a farmer to unscrew her radiator cap."

"Paul." RuthClaire said. unamused.

'What'?"

"First of all "she replied, evenly enough. "a chimpan2 zee isn't a monkey, it's an ape. Secondly, I don't know anything at all about old ladies from Connecticut. And, thirdly, the creature in my pecan tree isn't a chimpanzee or a gibbon tlr an orangutan."

"I'd forgotten what a Jane Goodall fan you were."

This riposte RuthClaire declined to volley.

"What do you want me to do'?" I asked, somewhat exasperated. My ex-wife's imagination is both her fortune and her folly: and at this point, to tell the truth. I was thinking that her visitor was indeed an out-of-season skin-nydipper or possibly a raccoon. For an artist RuthClaire is remarkably nearsighted, a fact that contributes to the almost abstractional blurriness of some of her landscapes and backgrounds.

"Come see about me," she said.

IN BEULAH Fork I run a small gourmet restaurant called the West Bank. Despite the incredulity of outsiders (as, for instance, matrons from Connecticut with pet chimpanzees), who expect rural eating establishments in the South to serve nothing but catfish, barbecue, Brunswick stew, and turnip greens, the West Bank offers cosmopolitan fare and a sophisticated ambience. My clientele comprises professional people, wealthy retirees, and tourists. The proximity of a popular state park, the historic city of Tocqueville, and a recreational area known as Muscadine Gardens keeps me in paying customers: and while RuthClaire and I were man'ied, she exhibited and sold many of her best paintings right on the premises. Her work--4mly a Ikw pieces of which I still have on my walls--gave the restaurant a kind of muted bohemian elegance, but. in turn, the West Bank gave my wife a unique and probably invaluable showcase

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for her talent Until our split, I think, we both viewed the relationship between her success and mine as healthily symbiotic.

Art in the service of commerce. Commerce in the service of art.

RuthClaire had telephoned me just before the dinner hour on Friday. The West Bank had reservations from More than a dozen people from Tocqueville and the Gardens, and I did not really want to dump the whole of this formidable crowd into the lap of Molly Kingsbury, a bright young woman who does a better job hostessing than overseeing my occasionally highstrung cooks, Hazel Upchurch and Livia George Stephens. But dump it I did. I begged off my responsibilities at the West Bank with a story about a broken water pipe on Paradise Farm and drove out there lickety-split to see about my ex. Twelve miles in ten minutes.

RuthClaire led me to the studio loft and pointed through her window into the pecan grove. "He's still sitting there," she said.

I squinted. At this hour the figure in the tree was a mere smudge among the tangled branches, not much bigger than a squirrel's nest. "Why didn't you shoot off that .22 i gave you'?" I asked RuthClaire, a little afraid that she was having me on. Even the spreading crimson sunset behind the pecan grove did not enable me to pick out the alleged trespasser.

"I wanted you to see him, too, Paul. I got to where I needed outside, confirmation. Don't you see'?"

No, I didn't see. That was the problem.

"Go out there with me," RuthClaire suggested. "The buddy system's always recommended for dangerous enterprises."

"The buddy I want is that little .22, Ruthie Cee." She stood aside while I wrested the rifle out of the gun cabinet, and together we went back down the sairs, through the living and dining rooms, and out the plate-glass doors opening onto the pecan grove. Beneath the intruder's tree we paused to gape and take stock. The stock I took went into the cushion of flesh just above my right armpit, and I

sighted along the barrel at a bearded black face like that of a living gargoyle.

RuthClaire was right. The trespasser wasn't a monkey; he more nearly resembled a medieval demon, with a small but noticeable ridge running fore and aft straight down the middle of his skull. He had been on the cusp of falling asleep. I think, and the apparition of two human beings at this inopportune moment greatly startled him. The fear showed in his beady, obsidian eyes, which flashed between my ex-wife and me like sooty strobes. His upper lip moved away from his teeth.

From above the mysterious creature I shot down a dangling cluster of branches that would have eventually fallen, anyway. The report echoed all the way to White Cow Creek, and hundreds of foraging sparrows scattered into the twilight like feathered buckshot.

"I swear to goodness, Paul!" RuthClaire shouted, her most fiery oath. She was trying to take the rifle out of my hands. "You've always-been a shoot-first-talk-later fool but that poor fella's no threat to us! Look!"

I gave up the .22 as I had given up Paradise Farm, docilely, and I looked. RuthClaire's visitor was terrified, almost catatonic. He could not go up, and he could not come down; his head was probably still reverberating from the rifle shot, the heart-stopping crash of the pecan limb. I wasn't too sorry, though. He had no business haunting my ex.

"Listen," I said, "you asked me to come see about you. And you didn't object when I brought that baby down from the loft, either."

Angrily, RuthClaire ejected the spent shell, removed the .22's magazine, and threw the rifle on the ground. "I wanted moral support. Paulie, not a hit man. I thought the gun was vottr moral support, that's all. I didn't know you were going to try to murder the poor innocentwretch with it."

"'Poor innocent wretch,'" I repeated incredulously.

"'Poor innocent wretch?'"

This was not the first time we had found ourselves arguing in front of an audience. Toward the end it had

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happened frequently at the West Bank, RuthClaire accusing me of insensitivity, neglect, and philandering with my female help (although she knew that Molly Kfngsbury was having none of that nonsense), while I openly rued her blinkered drive for artistic recognition, her lack of regard for my inborn business instincts, and her sometimes madly rigorous bouts of chastity. The West Bank is : small--a converted doctor's office wedged between Gloria's Beauty Shop and Ogletree Plumbing & Electric, all in the same red-brick shell on Main Street--and even arguing in the kitchen we could give my customers a discomfiting earful. Only a few tolerant souls, mostly locals, thought these debates entertaining: and when my repeat business from out of town began falling off, well, that was the last straw. I made the West Bank off limits to RuthClaire.

Soon thereafter she began divorce proceedings. Now a shivering black gnome, naked but for a see-through leotard of hair, was staring down at us as my ex compared me to Vlad the Impaler, Adolf Hitler. and the government of South Africa. I began to think that he could not be too much more bewildered and uncomfortable than I. "What the hell do you want me to do?" I finally blurted. "Leave me alone with him," RuthClaire said. "Go back to the house." "That's crazy," I began. "That's--" "Hush, Paulie. Please do as I say, all right?" I retreated to the sliding doors, no farther. RuthClaire talked to the trespasser. In the gathering dark she crooned reassurance. She consoled and coaxed. She even hummed a lullaby. Her one-sided talk with the intruder was interminable. I, because she did not seem to be at any real risk, went inside and poured myself a powerful scotch on the rocks. At last RuthClaire returned. "Paul," she said, gazing into the pecan grove, "he's a member of a human species--you know, a collateral human species--that doesn't exist anymore." "He told you that, did he'?" "I deduced it. He doesn't speak."

"Not'English, anyway. What do you mean, 'doesn't exist anymore'/He's up in that tree, isn't he'?"

"Up in the air, More like," RuthClaire said. "It reminds me of that Indian, lshi."

"Who-shiT'

"A Yahi Indian in northern California whose name was !shi. Theodora Kroeber wrote a couple of books about him." RuthClaire gestured at the shelves across the room from us: in addition to every contemporary best seller that came through the B. Dalton's in Tocqueville Commons Mall. these shelves housed art books, popular-science volumes, and a "feminist" library of no small proportions, this being RuthClaire's term for books either by or about women, no matter when or where they lived. (The BrontE sisters were next to Susan Brownmiller; Sappho was not far from Sontag.)

I lifted my eyebrows: "'P'

"Last of his tribe," RuthClaire explained. "lshi was the last surviving member of' the Yahi; he died around' nineteen fifteen or so, in the Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco." She mulled this bit of intelligence. "It's my guess, though, that our poor wretch comes from a species that originated in East Africa two or three million years ago." She mulled her guess. "That's a little longer than lshi's people were supposed to have been extinct before Ishi himself turned up, I'm afraid."

"There goes your analogy."

"Well, it's not perJi, ct, Paul, but it's suggestive. What do you think'?"

"That you'd be wiser calling the hugger in the tree a deranged dwarf instead of an Indian. You'd be wiser yet .just calling the police."

RuthCtaire went to the bookshelf and removed a volume by a well-known scientist and television personality. She had everything this flamboyant popularizer had ever written. After flipping through several well-thumbed pages, she found the passage pertinent to her argument:

"'Were we to encounter Homo habilis---dressed, let us say. in the latest fashion on the boulevards of some modern metmpolis---:-we would probably give him only a pass

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ling glance, and that because of his relatively small stature.'" "

She closed the book. "There. The creature in the pecan tree is a habiline, a member of the species HOMO habilis.

He's human, Paul, he's one of us."

"That may or may not be the case, but I'd still feel obliged to wash up with soap and water after shaking his hand."

RuthClaire gave me a look commingling pity and contempt and replaced the book on its shelf. I made up a song--which I had the good sense not to sing aloud to her--to the tune of an old country-and-western ditty entitled "Abilene":

Habiline, O habiline,
Grungiest ghoul I've ever seen.
Even Gillette won't shave him clean,
That habiline.

I telephoned the West Bank to see how Molly was getting on with Hazel and Livia George (she said everything was going "swimmingly," a word Molly had learned from a beau in Atlanta), then convinced my ex-wife to let me spend the night at Paradise Farm on the sofa downstairs. For safety's sake. RuthClaire reluctantly consented. In her studio toff she worked through until morning. At dawn i heard her say. "It's all right, Paul. He left while you were sleeping." She handed me a cup of coffee. I sipped at it as she gazed out the sliding doors at the empty pecan grove.

THE FOLLOWING month--about three weeks later--I ran into RuthClaire in Beulah Fork's ancient A&P, where I do almost all of my shopping for the West Bank: meats, produce, the works. October. Still sunny. The restaurant business only now beginning to tail off toward the inevita-

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I I

ble winter slump. I had not thought of the lshi Incident, or whatever you might choose to call it, More than three or four times since actually investigating it. Perhaps I did not believe that it had really happened. The whole episode had a dreamlike texture that did not stick very well to the hard-edged banality of everyday life in Beulah Fork. Besides, no one else in Hothlepoya County had mentioned seeing a naked black gnome running around the countryside climbing trees and stealing pecans.

My ex and I chatted, altogether amicably at first.

RuthClaire had just finished an original painting entitled Principalities for her porcelain-plate series, and AmeriCred

Company of New York, New York, would begin taking subscription orders for this unusual Limoges ware at fifty-six dollars a plate in early December. The artist was going to receive an 8 percent royalty for each plate sold, over and above the commission paid her in July for undertaking the work. She was very excited, not solely by the money she stood to make but also by the prospect of reaching a large and undoubtedly discerning audience. Ads for the subscription series, AmeriCred had told her, were going to appear in such classy periodicals as Smithsonian, Natural Histota,, and Relic Collector. I wrote out a check tot fifty-six dollars and told RuthClaire to sign me up at the first available opportunity; this was my deposit toward a subscription. Folding the check into her coin purse, she looked unfeignedly flustered. But grateful, too.

"You don't have to do this, Paul."

"I know I don't. I want a set of those plates. My customers are going to enjoy eating off the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost--not to mention the nine different species of angel."

"They're not for dinner use, really. They're for display."

"A rank commercial enterprise?" I tweaked her. "Readymade antiques for the spiritual cognoscenti who frown on bodily functions like eating and ummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm?"

How about that'? You may be catering to an airy crowd,

Ruthie Cee, but we're both in business, it looks like--business with a capital B."

Amazingly she smiled, merely smiled.

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"I can see you haven't given up eating," I pursued.
"That's quite a load you've got there!"
Her shopping basket contained six uncut 'frying chickens, four heads of cabbage, three tins of Planters party nuts, four or five bunches of bananas, and several packages of fresh fish, mostly mullet and red snapper. I ogled this bounty. RuthClaire had never fried a chicken in her life, and I knew that she despised bananas. The other stuff was also out of the finicky pale of her diet, for in hostile overreaction to my virtuosity as chef and restaurateur she--not long before the end--had ostentatiously limited her intake to wild rice, bean curd, black beans, fresh vegetables, fruit juice, and various milk products. This spiteful decision had not helped our marriage any, either. "I'm having some people down from Atlanta." she explained, rather defensively. "Gallery people."
"Oh," I replied.
We looked at each other for a moment.
"They're all invited guests, I take it," I said at last.
"You don't want any uninvited drop-ins, do you'?"
RuthClaire stiffened. "I don't teed the uninvited. You know that. Goodbye, Paul. Thanks for taking out a subscription."
She went her way, I mine. For somebody subsisting on rabbit t'ood and artistic inspiration, i reflected, she looked damned good.

I LEARNED later what had been going on at Paradise Farm. On the morning after my overnight stay on the downstairs sofa RuthClaire had moved a rickety table into the pecan grove. Every evening she set it with paper plates and uncooked food items, including party nuts in a cut-glass dish that had once belonged to her mother. Further, on a folding deck chair she laid out one of my old leisure suits, altered for a figure smaller than mine, just in case

the nippy autumn air prompted the trespasser to cover his nakedness. At first, though, the habiline did not rise to this bait. The dew-laden suit had to dry every day on the clothesline, and every evening RuthClaire had to replace the soggy paper dinnerware and the slug-slimed food items. Around Halloween, when nighttime temperatures were dipping into the thirties, my ex awoke one morning to find the creature hunkering on the table on a brilliant cloth of frost. The grass looked sequined. SO did the habiline's feet. He was eating unpeeled bananas and shivering so violently that the table rocked back and forth. RuthClaire put on her dressing gown and hurried downstairs. She opened the sliding doors and beckoned the fellow inside, where he could warm his tootsies at the cast-iron Buck stove in the fireplace. Although he followed RuthClaire with his eyes, he did not move. RuthClaire, leaving the glass doors open, fetched a set of sun lamps from her loft. These she placed about the patio area so that they all shone directly into the house--runway lights to warmth and safety. The sun began to burn away the frost. An hour or so later, watching from her bay window, RuthClaire saw the habitine leap down from the table. For a moment he seemed to consider fleeing th?ough the pecan grove, but soon rejected this notion to stroll--head ducked, elbows out--through the gauntlet of lamps toward the house. A ballsy fellow, this one, and my ex was able to see quite clearly that this appraisal of him was no mere metaphor. A ballsy bantam in blackface. Her heart pounding paradiddles, RuthClaire went downstairs to meet him. This was the beginning: the real beginning. Although over time a few clues have come my way (some of which I will shortly set forth). I do not pretend to know e.t'ucdv how RuthClaire domesticated this representative of a supposedly extinct hominid species ancestral to our own--but she was probably More alert to his feelings and needs than she had ever been to mine. in the dead of winter, for instance, she routinely left the patio doors open, never questioning his-comings and goings, never surrendering to resentment because of them. She ted him

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whatever he liked, even if splintered splinters ended up between the sofa cushions or half-eaten turnips sometimes turned up on the bottom of her shower stall' looking like mushy polyhedral core tools. Ruthie Cee may have a bohemian soul, but during the six years of our marriage she had also evinced a middle-class passion for tidiness; more than once she had given me hell for letting the end of the dental floss slip down into its flip-top container. For her prehistoric paramour, however, she made allowances--

lots of them.

She also sang to him, I think. RuthClaire has a voice with the breathy delicacy of Garfunkel during his partnership with Simon, and I can easily imagine her soothing the savage breast of even a pit bull with a single stanza of "Feelin' Groovy." The habiline, however, she probably deluged with madrigals, hymns, and soft-drink ditties; and although she has always professed to hate commercial television, she has since publicly admitted using the idiot box--as well as song--to amuse and edify her live-in hominid. Apparently, he especially enjoyed game shows, situation comedies, sporting events, and nature studies. On the public broadcasting channels RuthClaire introduced him to such programs as "Sesame Street," "Organic Gardening," and "Wall Street Week," while the anything-goes cable networks gave him a crash course in contemporary hominid bonding rituals. All these shows together were undoubtedly as crucial to the domestication process as my ex-wife's lovely singing. But it was not until a week or so into the new year that I learned about any of this. RuthClaire drives to Tocqueville to do her shopping more often than she comes to Beulah Fork; and our chance meeting in the A&P, despite resulting in my order for the first plate in the Celestial Hierarchy series, had made her wary of running into me again. She stayed away from town. I, in turn, could not go out to Paradise Farm without an invitation. The terms of our divorce expressly stipulated this last point, and my reference to uninvited guests during our brief trite-h-trite in October had stricken RuthClaire as contemptibly snide. Maybe I had meant it to be

Anyway, on the day before Christmas Eve I telephoned RuthClaire and asked if I could come out to the farm to give her a present. Somewhat reluctantly (it seemed to me) she agreed. Although it was cold and dark when i rang the front doorbell, she stepped through the door to greet me, and we conferred on the porch. The Persian kitten in the cardboard box under my arm cowered away from Ruthie Cee, its wintry pearl-gray fur like a lion's mane around its Edward G. Robinson face. My ex, emitting sympathetic coos, scratched the creature behind its ears until it began to purr.

Then she said, "I can't accept him, Paul."

"Why not? He's got a pedigree that stretches from here to Isfahan." (This was a lie. Nevertheless, the kitten looked it.) "Besides, he'll make a damned good mouser.

A farm needs a mouser."

"I just can't give him the attention he needs." RuthClaire saw my irritation. "I didn't think you'd be bringing an animal, Paul. A sweater, a necklace, a new horror novel--anything nonliving I'd've been happy to accept. But a kitten's a different matter, and I just can't be responsible for him, sweet and pretty as he is."

I tacked about. "Can't I dome in for some eggnog?

Come the holidays, this place used to reek of eggnog."

"I have a visitor."

"A man, huh'?"

Somewhat gravely, she nodded. "He's . . . he's allergic to cats."

"Why can't i meet him'.)''

"I don't want you to. Anyway, he's shy."

I looked toward the carport. Although RuthClaire's navy-blue Honda Civic gleamed dully in the sheen of the yard's security lights, I saw no other vehicle anywhere. Besides }ny own, of' course.

"Did he jog out here'?"

"Hiked."

"What's his name'?"

RuthClaire smiled a crooked smile. "Adam," she said.

"Adam what'?"

"None of your bee's wax, Paul. I'm tired of this inter

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rogation. Here, hang on a sec." She retreated into the house but came back a moment later carrying a piece of Limoges ware featuring her painting Angels. "This is the plate for January," she explained. "Over the course of the year you'll go from Angels to Archangels to Principalities--all the way up to The Father--and I've seen to it that you'll receive the other eleven without having to pay for them. That's my Christmas present to you, Paul." She took the kitten's shoebox from me so that I could look at the plate without endangering either the mystified animal or the fragile porcelain. "See the border. That's twenty-four-karat gold, applied by hand."

"Beautiful." I said, and I kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Bring this Adam fella to the restaurant, Ruthie 'Cee. Frogs' legs, steak, wild-rice pilaf, coq au vin anything he wants--on the house. And for you. of course, the gourmet vegetable plate. I'm serious now. Take me up on this."

She returned my chaste kiss along with the kitten. "This is the way you behaved when we were courting. Good night, Paul."

"Good night, kid."

On the way back to Beulah Fork the kitten began prowling all over my shoulders and thighs and miaowing obnoxiously, it even got tangled in the steering wheel. I put it out about a mile from Ruben Decker's place and kept on driving.

IN JANUARY, as I have alluded, the pieces began coming together. To my surprise RuthClaire called to make reservations for Adam and herself at the West Bank: they were actually going to avail themselves of my offer. However, even though only the two of them were coming. RuthClaire wanted the entire restaurant, every table. If I would grant them this extraordinary boon, she would pay me the equiv-

alent of a night's receipts on a typical weekday evening in winter. I told her that she was crazy, but that if she and her inamorato came on a Tuesday, always my slowest night, I would donate the premises as well as the dinner to their Great Romance. After all, it was high time she indulged a passion that was erotic rather than merely platonic and painterly.

"That's a cheap dig," my ex accused.

"How many kinds of generosity do you want from me?" I snapped back. "You think I like playing Pandare to you and your new boyfriend?"

She softened. "It's not what you think, Paul."

No, indeed. It wasn't at all what I thought.

On the appointed evening Main Street was deserted but for Davie Hutton's police cruiser, which he had parked perpendicular to the state highway as a caution to potential speeders. Precisely at eight, as I peered through the gloom, RuthClaire's Honda Civic eased gingerly around the cruiser and slotted into a space in front of the West Bank. Then she and her mysterious beau exited the car and climbed the steps to the restaurant.

Sweet Jesus, I thought, it's a nigger kid in designer .jeans and an army fatigue jacket. She's not in love. She's on another I'm-going-to-adopt-a-disadvantaged-child kick. Disagreements about starting a family had been another front in our protracted connubial war. I had never wanted any offspring, while RuthClaire had always craved two or three Campbell's Kids clones or, failing that, a host of starving dependents on other continents. She believed wholeheartedly that she could paint, market her work, and parent--this was her ghastly neologism--without spreading herself too thin. I surrendered to her arguments, to the ferocity of her desire for issue, and for two years we went about trying to make a baby in the same dementedly single-minded way that some people assemble mail-order lawn mowers or barbecue grills. Our lack of success prompted RuthClaire to begin touting adoption as a worthy alternative to childbirth: the support of various international relief agencies, she avowed, would compensate the cosmic plan vital for our puzzling failure to be fruitful and

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multiply. We ended up with foster children in Somalia, Colombia, and Vietnam, and a bedroom relationship that made nonagenarian abstinence seem shamefully libertine.

Because I had wanted no part of adopting a racially mixed

child, to bring into our own home, RuthClaire had unilaterally

decided that sex with me was irrelevant and therefore

dispensable. She would rather paint cherubs on teacups.

Now here she was at the West Bank with a gimpy black teenager from Who-Could-Say-Where? Guess who's coming to dinner

"Paul, Adam. Adam, Paul."

I did a double take, a restrained and sophisticated double take. For one thing, Adam was no adolescent. More astonishing, he was the same compact creature who had come traipsing naked into the Paradise Farm pecan grove in September. His slender, twisted feet were bare. At a nod from RuthClaire he extended his right hand and grinned agrin that was all discolored teeth and darting, mistrustful eyes. I ignored his proffered hand.

"What the hell are you trying to pull, RuthClaire?"

"I'm trying to have dinner with Adam. This is an integrated place of business, isn't it? Interstate commerce and all that. Besides, our money's as green as anyone else's."

"His color's got nothing to do with it. Neither does your money's. He's--" I swallowed my indigestible objection.

"Go ahead, Paul, say it."

"He's an animal, RuthClaire, an animal in human clothing."

"I often thought the same thing of you."

I backtracked: "Listen, Ruthie, the county health department doesn't permit barefooted people in its licensed eating establishments. He needs some shoes. Sandals. at least."

"Shoes are one of the things I haven't been able to get him to wear." RuthClaire reached over and lowered the habiline's outstretched hand, which was still waiting to be shaken. "In comparison to you, Paul, Adam's all courtli-

ness and chivalry and consideration. Look at him. He's terrified to be here, but he's holding his ground, he's trying to figure out why you're so jumpy and hostile, i'd like to know myself. Why are you being such a jackass?"

"He belongs in a zoo.--Okay, okay, not a zoo, a research center or something. You're turning a scientific wonder, a throwback to another geological epoch, into a ?ddamn houseboy. That's selfish, RuthClaire. That's pathetic. There's probably a law against it."

"We'll sit over here," nay ex said peremptorily. "Bring us two glasses of water and a menu."

"Only one menu?"

RuthClaire gave me a look that was blank of all expression; it was also withering. Then she led Adam to a corner table beneath a burlap sculpture-painting (abstract) that she had completed during the first few months of our marriage.

Once the habiline was seated, I could no longer see his bare feet; the maroon tablecloth concealed them.

RuthClaire deftly removed the beige linen napkins, folded into fans, that I had earlier inserted into the waiting water glasses, for she had made up her mind that my humiliation must continue, This was nay reward for making the West Bank available for their preposterbus parody of a rendezvous.

I turned toward the kitchen. Livia George Stephens, my chief assistant cook, was leaning against the flocked metal divider separating the cashier's station from the dining area. I had given Molly Kingsbury, Hazel Upchurch, and nay two regular waitresses the night off. Livia George constituted nay entire staff. One hand rubbing the back of the other, she was sizing up our customers with a mock shrewdness that was genuinely shrewd.

"Good to see you again, Miss RuthClaire," she said aloud. "Looks like you brought in a friend with some spirit in his bones. Give me a chanzt, I'll put some meat on 'em too,"

"His name's Adam," nay ex replied. "He'd say hello, but he's a mute. I'm sure he's as pleased to meet you, though, as I am to see you again. I hope Paul's been behaving himself for you,"

Livia George tiptoed around this pleasantry. "Where's

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he stay?" she asked, nodding at Adam. "I am' never seen him 'roun' here befoah, and I know mos' evverboddy in this part of 'Poya County."

"Livia George," I said, "they're here to eat, not to chitchat. Why don't you go see about getting ready for them."

"Nothin' I can do till I know what they like, Mr. Paul. You wan' me to start cookin' befoah they put in a order?"

"I want you to get into the goddamn kitchen!"

Sullenly, her hips moving like corroded pistons, she went. When she had gone, I strode over to the table to pour out the water and to recite our menu items rather than to present them in a printed folder. For RuthClaire I recommended sauted mushrooms, an eggplant dish, steamed pearl potatoes, a spinach salad, and a Cheddar souffid with diced bell peppers and chives. For her tagalong escort, however, I suggested broiled liver and onions. Side orders of unsalted peanuts and warm egg whites would set off his main course quite nicely, and he could wash it all down with a snifter of branch water and branch water.

"I'llt have exactly what you recommend," RuthClaire said. "Just bring Adam the same thing and no bullyboy surprises, okay'? Water's all we want to drink, pure Beulah Fork spring water."

Although I followed RuthClaire's instructions, the dinner was a disaster. Adam ate everything with his spoon. He bolted every bite, and when he didn't like something--the eggplant au gratin, for instance--he tried to pile it up in the middle of the table like a deliquescent cairn. For this bit of creative gaucherie he at first used his hands rather than his spoon, and he burned himself. Later, when the food had cooled, he finished the eggplant monument. Nothing RuthClaire said or did to discourage this project had any effect, and there was no way to keep from looking at their table's new centerpiece unless you let your eye stray to Adam himself. A flake of spinach gleamed in his mustache, ten or twelve pearl potatoes bulged his cheeks, and he was nonchalantly pouring his ice cubes into the cheese soufflé.

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"This is his first time in a public restaurant," RuthClaire acknowledged.

"And his last, too, if I have anything to say about it."

My ex only laughed. "He's doing pretty well, really.

You should've seen the tbood fights we had out at Paradise Farm only a month or two ago."

"Yeah, I'm sorry I missed them."

She thinks she's Pygmalion, I marveled. She thinks she can carve a dapper southern gentleman out of inchoate Early Pleistocene clay. Welt. I loved the lady for the delusions she had formed.

Unfortunately, it got worse. For dessert RuthClaire ordered the two of them Nesselrode pudding, one of the West Bank's specialities and major attractions. Adam lifted the dish to his mouth and began eating of this delicacy like a dog devouring Alpo. After a few such bites, however, his head came up, his cheeks began to puff in and out like those of a blowfish, and he vomited all over the table. Guttural gasps of dismay or amazement escaped him between attacks, and in four or five minutes he had divested himself of his entire dinner and whatever else he may have eaten earlier that day. RuthClaire tried to comfort him. She wiped his mouth with a wetted napkin and stroked his furry nape with her fingers. Never before had a patron of the West Bank upchucked the extraordinary cuisine prepared in my kitchen, though, and I may have been more in need of comforting than RuthClaire's ill-bred habiline.

"Get him to the rest room!" I cried, much too late to save either the tablecloth or my equanimity. "If nothing else, get him to the goddamn street."

"He isn't used to such rich fare. I'll clean up the mess, Paul. Just leave it to me, okay'?"

"He isn't worthy of it, you mean! It's like feeding caviar to a crocodile, filet mignon to a high school fullback! It's ridiculous! I don't know what you're trying to do or what you think it proves!"

"Hush, Paul, I said I'd take care of the mess, and I will."

Livia George helped her, however, and when Ruth-

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Claire left that night, she placed three one-hundred-dollar bills next to the cash register. For the remainder of that week the West Bank reeked of commercial disinfectant and a faint monkey-house odor that no one but me (thank God) seemed capable of detecting.

"SHE'S LIVING with it," I told the young man sitting at the cluttered desk, his hands behind his head and his naked elbows protruding like chicken wings. "She's been living . with it since October."

"Times have changed, Mr. Loyd. Live and let live."

"It's not another man, Dr. Nollinger. It's male, I mean, but it's not, uh, human. It's a variety of upright ape."

"A hominid'?"

"That's RuthClaire's word for it. Hominid. habiline, something like that. A prehistoric primate, for God's sake. That's why I drove all the way up here to talk to somebody who might be interested."

"You could have telephoned, Mr. Loyd. Telephoning might have saved us both a good deal of time."

"Beulah Fork's a small town, Dr. Nollinger. Avers.'

small town. You can't even direct-dial without old Edna

Twiggs homing in to say she's going to patch you through. Then she hangs on to eavesdrop and sniffle. Times may

have changed, but bestial cohabitation's still a mite too strong for Hothlepoya Countians. You understand me, don't you'/"

"A habiline?"

"I want you to get it out of there. It may be dangerous.

It's certainly uncouth. It doesn't belong on Paradise Farm."

Brian Nollinger dropped his hands into his lap and

.squeaked his swivel chair around toward his office's solitary

window. A thin man in his early thirties, he ivas

wearing scuffed cowboy boots, beige corduroy trousers, a

short-sleeved Madras shirt with a button-down collar, wire-rimmed glasses, and a Wispy Fu Manchu mustache with an incongruous G.I. haircut. Outside his Window a family of stub-tailed macaques huddled in the feeble winter sun in a fenced-in exercise area belonging to this secluded rural field station of the Yerkes Primate Center, ten or twelve miles north of Atlanta. Nollinger was an associate professor of anthropology at Emory University, but a government grant to study the effects of forced addiction to certain kinds of amphetamines on a representative primate species had given him an office at the field station and experimental access to the twenty-odd motley monkeys presently taking the February sun beside their heated trailer. They looked wide-awake and fidgety, these monkeys--"hypervigilant," to use Nollinger's own word. Given the nature of his study, I was not greatly surprised.

"Why don't you write Richard Leakey or Alistair Patrick Blair or one of the other African paleoanthropologists specializing in 'prehistoric, hominids'?" Nollinger asked me. "They'd jump at the chance to take a living fossil off Ms. Loyd's hands. A find like that would secure an anonymous scientist's fortune and reputation forever. Leakey and Blair would just become bigger."

"Aren't you interested in fame and fortune?"

"In modest doses, sure." He refused to look at me. He was staring at a lithograph of an Ishasha River baboon in twelve different baboonish postures, from a grooming stance to a cautious stroll through tall East African grass.

"You don't believe my story, do you?"

"It's a little like hearing that a dinosaur has been spotted wading in the Chattahoochee, Mr. Loyd. Put yourself in my place."

"I'm not a crackpot, Dr. Nollinger. I'm a respected businessman with no history of mental illness or unprofitable undertakings. Moreover, my wife my ex-wife, I mean--is a painter of national repute. Should anything happen to her because you've refused to investigate the matter, well, the world of art will have suffered a loss as great as that about to befall the world of science. It's your

conscience, Dr. Nollinger. Can you live with the consequences of such a reprehensible dereliction of duty?" I got up to leave.

Stroking his Fu Manchu, the young anthropologist finally looked at me. "Mr. Loyd, after two or three years as a researcher, every competent scientist develops a nose for crackpots."

"All right. Go on."

"You came in here like a crackpot. You had the identifying minatory zeal and the traditional combative cast in your eye." He paused. "But you don't talk like a crackpot. You talk like a man who's bewildered by something he doesn't know how to deal with."

"Bingo," I said.

"I don't think you're making this up, Mr. Loyd. That would require some imagination." He smiled. "So I'll help you out." He stopped smiling. "On one condition."

"I'm listening."

"Send me a photograph or two---all you can---of this dispossessed specimen of Homo habilis. Use an Instamatic or a Polaroid and get me some proof, i don't like wild-goose chases, particularly to backwaters like Beulah Fork."

"You got it," I said.

And I walked back to the parking lot past a dozen confined communities of gorillas, orangutans, pygmy chimps, rhesus 'monkeys, and bespectacled primatologists, all of them equally inscrutable in their obsessive mindsets and desires. We are fam-i-/ee, go the lyrics of a recent popular song, but in my entire life I can recall feeling close--spiritually close--to only one other living creature, and that, of course, is my lovely lost RuthClaire. Why had she taken up with a man-ape when my poor human soul still longed for union with hers?

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To GET a photograph of Adam I had to sneak out to Paradise Farm in violation of a legal promise to RuthClaire. I had to go prowling around the house in the numbing winter dark. Fortunately, no dog patrols the property (otherwise, of course, even Adam would not have been able to sneak into our pecan grove), and I was able to climb into a magnolia tree near the downstairs bathroom without betraying my presence. I had neither an Instamatic nor a Polaroid, but an expensive Minolta with both a telephoto lens and a pack of high-speed film lbr shooting in dim or almost nonexistent light.

Voyeurism is not ordinarily one of my vices, but when RuthClaire came into the lavatory that evening to bathe, I began to tremble. The waxy brown leaves of the magnolia tree clicked together like castanets, mimicking the effects of a brutal winter wind. I looked, let me confess, but I did not take RuthClaire's picture. (The only extant print of her bewitching unclad body is the one that burns even yet in my mind.) When she lifted herself clear of the sunken bath, patted her limbs and flanks dry with a lavender towel, and disappeared from my sight like a classical nymph, I nearly swooned. Each of these three near-swoons was a metaphysical orgasm of the highest order. It had been a long, long time.

The bathroom light went out. and a real wind began to blow, surging through the pecan grove from eastern Alabama. i had to hang on to my perch. Adam and I, it seemed, had traded places, and the strangeness of this reversal did not amuse me. The luminous digits on my watch registered nine forty-eight. What if my habiline rival habitually relieved himself in the woods'? What if, even in winter, he insisted on bathing in White Cow Creek'? If so, he would never enter this bathroom, and i would never get

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his photograph. Dr. Nollinger would dismiss me as a

screwball of the most annoying sort. I had made a mistake. At 11:04 P.M., however, Adam entered the big tiled bathroom. He was wearing the bottoms of a suit of long thermal underwear and carrying what looked like the carcass of a squirrel. He climbed down into the sunken bath, where, after turning on an ablutive flow of water, he proceeded to rend and devour the dead rodent. He did this with both skill and gusto. I used up all my film taking pictures of the messy process--whereupon, spontaneously, I heaved my own dinner into the shrubbery beneath the magnolia tree. Turnabout, they say, is fair play Later that week I sent Brian Nollinger duplicates of the developed photographs and a long letter attesting to their authenticity. I added a P.S. The P.S. said, "The bali's in your court, Doc."

THE ANTHROPOLOGY professor was one of those urban people who refuse to own an automobile. He got around the Emory campus on foot or bicycle, and he buinmed rides to the Yerkes field station with whichever of his colleagues happened to be going that way. In the middle of March he arrived in Beulah Fork aboard a Greyhound bus, and I met him in front of Ben Sadler's hole-in-the-wall laundry (known locally as the Greyhound Depot Laundry) on Main Street. After introducing Nollinger to Ben (dry cleaner and ticket agent nonpareil) as my nephew, I led the newcomer across the street to the West Bank, where, for over a year, I had been living in the upstairs storage room and taking all my meals in the restaurant proper. Although I could have easily afforded to build a house of my own, or at least to rent a vacation chalet near Muscadine Gardens, I refused to do so in the dogged expectation that RuthClaire and I would eventually be reunited at Paradise Farm.

"Take-me out there," Nollinger said over a cold Budweiser in the empty dining area late that afternoon. "I'd have to call first. And if I tell her why we want to come, she'll decline to receive us."

My "nephew" fanned his photographs of Adam out across the maroon expanse of the tablecloth. "You didn't have an invitation to take these, Mr. Loyd. Why so prim and proper now'.))'"

"My unscrupulosity has well-defined limits."

Nollinger sniggered boyishly. Then he tapped one of the prints. "Adam, as your ex-wife calls the creature, is definitely a protohuman, Mr. Loyd. Even though I'm a primate ethnologist and physical anthropologist rather than a hotshot fossil finder like the Leakeys or A. Patrick Blair, I'd stake my reputation on it." He reconsidered. "I mean, I'd establish my reputation with a demonstration of that claim. Adam seems to be a healthy living specimen of the hominid known as either Homo habilis or Homo zara-kalensis, depending on which internationally known 'expert'

you choose to consult. In any case, your wife has no right to keep her amazing friend cloistered away incognito on Paradise Farm."

"That's exactly what I've always thought. Edna Twiggs is bound to find out sooner or later, and RuthClaire'll have hell to pay in Beulah Fork."

"I mean, Mr. Loyd, that your wife's most basic obligation is to the advancement of our knowledge about human origins."

"That's a narrow way of looking at it. She also has her reputation to consider."

"Listen, Mr. Loyd, haven't you once wondered how a prehistoric hominid happened to show up in a pecan grove in western Georgia'?"

"A condor dropped him. A circus train derailed. I really don't care, Dr. Nollinger. What's pertinent to me is his presence out there, not the convoluted particulars of his arrival."

"All right. But I think I know how he got here."

We each had another beer. My visitor sipped moodily at

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his while I explained that the best approach to RuthClaire might be Nollinger's masquerading as a meter reader for Georgia Power. While ostensibly recording her kilowattage for February, he could plead a sudden indisposition and request a chance to use the bathroom or to lie down on the sofa. RuthClaire was a sucker for honest working people in distress, and Nollinger could buy a shirt and trousers similar to those worn by Georgia Power employees at Plunkett Bros. General Store right here in town. Once he got inside the house, why, who could tell what might happen'? Maybe RuthClaire would actually introduce him to her hirsute boarder and a profitable rapport spring up between the habiline and the anthropologist. Twirling the silver-blond twists of his almost invisible Fu Manchu,

Nollinger merely grunted.

"What do you think'?" I asked him.

"I might do better to go out there as an agent of the Immigration and Naturalization Service," he replied, somewhat high-handedly. "I think a strong case could be made tot regarding Adam as an illegal alien."

"Is that right'? How so, Herr Professor?"

Nollinger embarked on a lengthy explanation. Purely on impulse he had shown one of his closest friends at Emory, Caroline Hanna, a young woman with a doctorate in sociology, three or tour of my photographs of Adam. Nollinger was seriously involved with Caroline Hanna, and he knew that she would not betray his confidence. The photographs had had a strange effect on Caroline, though. They had prompted her to reveal that in her alter-hours work with Cuban detainees in the Atlanta Penitentiary she had met one hardened Havana street criminal from the 1980 Freedom Flotilla who confessed that he belonged in prison. either in Cuba or in Los Estados Unidos. Indeed. Uncle Fidel had apparently released this cutthroat from a Havanan lockup on the express condition that he emigrate and commit fifty-seven different varieties of mayhem on all the unsuspecting American capitalists who ran afoul of him. Instead he had fled down the northern coast of Cuba in a stolen army Jeep and later on loot to Punta Gorda. where.

after hiding out for almost two weeks, he forcibly commandeered a fishing vessel piloted by a wealthy Haitian with strong anti-Duvalier sympathies and the strangest three-man crew that the cutthroat had ever seen.

"What was a Haitian doing in Cuban waters?" I asked
' Nollinger.

"Probably running communist guns back to the ill-organized guerrilla opposition to Duvalier in the wilderness areas around Port-de-Prix. Caroline says that the Cuban told her the vessel hadn't yet taken on any cargo when he surprised the gunrunner near Punta Gorda. He knifed the Haitian and threw him overboard. In the process he became aware of three half-naked enanos----dwarfs, I guess you'd say--watching him from behind the fishing tackle and cargo boxes in the vessel's stern. They reminded him of intelligent monkeys, not just animalistic dwarfs, and they made him intensely uncomfortable. With a pistol he lkmnd concealed in the pilothouse he stalked and mortally wounded two of these three mute witnesses to his crime. Their small gnarly corpses went overboard after their cap-rain's fleshy mulano body, and the cutthroat set his sights on the last of the funny little men scurrying about the boat to escape his wrath."

"The gunrunner's crew consisted of habilines'?" For the first time that afternoon Nollinger had piqued my curiosity.

"I think it did, Mr. Loyd, but all I'm doing right now is telling you Caroline's version of the Cuban thug's account of his round-about trip to Key West. You can draw your own inferences."

"What happened to the last crew member'?"

"The Cubans with whom the Haitian gunrunner had planned to rendezvous to make the weapons transfer pulled abreast of the vessel and took the killer into custody. They also captured the terrified hominid. They confiscated the Haitian's boat. Our detainee in the Atlanta pen says that these mysterious Cuban go-betweens--they were all wearing lampblack on their faces--separated him and the surviving crew member and shipped them both to Mariel Bay for the crossing to the States. Caroline's informant never

saw the funny little man again. Nevertheless, he's absolutamente cierto that this creature reached Florida in one of the jam-packed charter boats making up the Freedom Flotilla. You see, there abounded among many of the refugees rumors of a small hairy mute in sailcloth trousers who kept up their spirits with his awkward mimes and japery. As soon as the crossing was made, though, he disappeared into the dunes before the INS authorities could screen him as they finally screened those who found themselves in Stateside camps or prisons."

"Adam?" I asked.

"It seems likely enough, Mr. Loyd. Besides, this story dovetails nicely with the fact that your ex-wife: hasn't had as much trouble as might be expected domesticating--taming--her habiline. Although he seems to have returned to feral habits while scrounging his way up through Florida, purposely avoiding large population centers, his early days on a tiny island off the coast of Haiti made him familiar with at least a few of the trappings of civilization. Your wife, although she doesn't know it, has been reminding Adam of these things rather than painstakingly writing them out on a blank slate."

For a time we sipped our beers in silence. I pondered everything that Nollinger had told me. Maybe it explained how Adam had come from Haiti (of alt places) to western Georgia, but it did not explain how several representatives of Homo habilis, More than 1.5 million years after their disappearance from East Africa, had ended up inhabiting a minuscule island off the larger island of Hispaniola. Did Herr Professor Nollinger have an answer for that objection, too'?

"Working backward from Caroline's informant's story," he replied, "I did some discreet research in the anthropo-logical and historical holdings of the Emory library. First of all, I lbund out all I could about the island off HispanJoia from which the wealthy Haitian had conscripted his crew. It's called Montaraz, Mr. Loyd, and it was originally a Spanish rather than a French possession. However, in the mid-eighteen twenties an American by the name of

Louis Rutherford, a New England aristocrat in our nation's diplomatic service, bought Montaraz outright from a military adviser to Haitian president Jean Pierre Boyer. This was during the Haitian occupation of the Dominican Republic, which had declared its independence from Spain in eighteen twenty-one. The Dominicans regard their twenty-two-year subjugation to Haitian authority as a period of barbarous tyranny, but one of Boyer's real accomplishments was the emancipation of Dominican slaves. On Montaraz, however, in Manzanillo Bay, Louis Rutherford reigned supreme, and his own liberal sentiments did not extend to releasing his black, mulatto, and SpanishArawak laborers or to consider paying them tot their contributions to the success of his cacao and coffee plantations. He appointed a proxy to keep these enterprises going and divided his time between Port-au-Prince and the family estate in Vermont."

"I don't see what this has to do with Adam, RuthClaire, or me," I said. In another hour my first customers for dinner would be coming through the door. Further, at any moment I expected Livia George, Hazel Upchurch, and Molly Kingsbury to report, with my two evening-shift waitresses close behind. Noll'inger was ignorant of, or indifferent to, my business concerns: he wandered into the kitchen to help himself to another Budweiser and came back to our table swigging from the can like an undernourished athlete chug-a-lugging Gatorade. He had his wits about him, though. He tilted the top of the can toward me and soberly resumed his story:

"In eighteen thirty-six Mr. Loyd, Rutherford was sent to the court of Sa'id ibn Sultan, ,/1 Bti Sa'id, on the island of Zanzibar off the East African coast. We Americans were the first westerners to make trade agreements with Sayyid Sa'id and the first to establish a consul at his commercial capital in the western Indian Ocean. Rutherford went along because of his 'invaluable experience' on Hispaniola, where he had had to deal with both conquering Haitians and defiant Dominicans, a situation that some U.S. officials felt had parallels along the

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East African coast, where Sayyid Sa'id was attempting to impose his authority on the continental port cities of Mombasa, Kilwa, and Bravanumbi. Moreover, 'British moral objections notwithstanding, Zanzibar had a flourishing slave market; and Rutherford, as his American colleagues knew, recognized the commercial imperatives that drove even kindly persons like Sayyid Sa'id and himself to tolerate the more sordid aspects of the institution, in order to turn a

profit, it was the perfect assignment for Rutherford. "Two years after his arrival on Zanzibar, about the time he was scheduled to return to this country, Rutherford caught wind of an extraordinary group of blacks--pygmies. It was rumored, or hairy Bushmen--who had been taken to the Sultan's representatives in the continental port city of Bravanumbi by several Kikembu warriors and sold for immediate shipment to either Zanzibar or Pemba to work on Sayyid Sa'id's clove plantations. The Kikembu warriors called their captives 'little ones who do not speak' and claimed that they had found all nineteen of these uncanny quasi-human specimens living in a system of caves and burrows in the remote Lolitabu Hills of Zarakal. The warriors had stumbled upon the system by accident, after watching one of these funny little people, a male, sneaking through a gulley with two dead hares and a kaross of nuts and tubers. The hunters then proceeded to smoke the manikins out. Four or five of the little ones preferred to die in their arid labyrinth rather than to emerge and face the laughing Kikembu, but the remainder were captured and bound.

"An Omani retainer in Sa'id's court told Rutherford to go to the slave market there on Zanzibar to see these wonderful 'monkeymen.' At present they were being kept apart from the other slaves to spare them injury at the hands of the larger blacks with whom they would be competing for masters, it was also possible that outraged potential buyers might harm them. After all, said the retainer, you looked for strength in a slave, not delicacy or sinewy compactness. Rutherford went to the market and arranged to see the Zarakali imports in private. Apparently

the sight of these creatures entranced him. He wanted the entire lot. He bought them from Sayyid Sa'id's representatives with cash and a promise to do his best to establish a cacao-tbr-cloves trade between Montaraz and Zanzibar. When he left the Sultan's court, he sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in a vessel laden with silks, spices, and a small cargo of habilines--although, of course, nobody called them habilines in those days. They were manikins, monkey-folk, curiosities. Rutherford hoped not only to put them to work on Montaraz but to breed them into a self-perpetuating population. Later, in the states, he would exploit them--some of them, anyway--for their novelty value."

"He never did that, I take it."

"Rutherford died on Montaraz in eighteen forty-four, the same year Santo Domingo regained its independence from the Haitian interlopers. His holdings on the island were seized by followers of Pedro Santana. What happened to the fourteen diminutive blacks who survived the journey from East Africa--Rutherford's wife once referred to them in a letter to the wife of another diplomat as 'endearing little elves, albeit, most likely, the offspring of chimpanzees and debauched Zarakali niggers'--well, at this point, their fate is unclear. We have knowledge of them at all only because Mrs. Rutherford acted as her husband's secretary and carried on voluminous correspondences with her relatives in Boston and Montpelier.

I obtained some of this information, Mr. Loyd, from interlibrary loans and photocopying services, and I'm virtually certain that no one else in the world has an inkling of the importance--the staggering importance of the material I've assembled and synthesized in only two and a half weeks, it's the major scientific accomplishment of my life."

"Beats injecting macaques with No D6z, huh'?" I had begun setting my tables, single-handedly flapping open parachutes of linen and laying out silverware. Just as Nollinger was about to parry my sarcasm, Livia George appeared at the door. As the anthropologist shuffled the

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photographs of Adam out of her line of sight, I told her,

"This is my cousin from Atlanta. He'll be staying with us

a few days."

"Nephew." Nollinger corrected me, standing for the introduction.

"Right," I acknowledged. "Nephew."

Livia George came over and shook Nollinger's hand.

"Pleased to meecha. You're too skinny, thoah--all shanks and shoulder blades. Stay aroun' here a few days and I'll get you fattened up fine as any stockyard steer."

"That's a promise." I informed Nollinger. "not a threat."

"Thank you," he said uncertainly. "Thank you. ma'am."

RUTHCLAIRE DID not come to town either of the next two days, and Nollinger stayed after me to drive him out to see her. He was missing his morning classes at Emory, he said, and a colleague at the field station was having to oversee the daily amphetamine injections of his drug-addled macaques. He could not stay in Beulah Fork much longer. Did I want him to get Adam out of RuthClaire's life or not? If I did, I had to cooperate. Had I summoned him all the way from Atlanta only to confine him to my grungy attic-cum-dormitory? Was I that desperate for a roommate? I was ready to cooperate. Entirely at my expense my counterfeit nephew ate nothing but medium-rare steaks and extravagant tossed salads with Roquefort dressing. Moreover, to amuse himself between his final meal of the day and his own owlsh turn-in time he had brought with him a homemade syrinx, or panpipe, that he played with a certain melancholy skill but an intemperance that sabotaged, early on, my regard. Sometimes (he told me as we lay on our cots in the dark) he would play the panpipe for his experimental subjects at the field station, and the strains of this music would soothe even the most agitated and belli

cose of the males. It was an unscientific thing to do (he conceded) because it introduced an extraneous element into his observations of their behavior, but he lbund it hard to deny them-completely, anyway--the small pleasure afforded by his playing.

"t'm not a macaque," I replied. Both the hint and the implied criticism were lost on Nollinger.

I was not that desperate for a roommate. So the next day I swallowed hard and telephoned RuthClaire, explaining that a young man who greatly admired her work had stopped in at the West Bank to request an introduction. Would it be all right if I brought him out'? He did not seem to be (1) an art dealer, (2) a salesman. (3) a potential groupie, (4) a college kid with a term paper due, or (5) an oul-and-out crazy. I liked both his looks and his attitude. "Is he your nept!ew, Paul'?"

"What'?"

"Edna Twiggs told me yesterday that your nephew was staying with you."

"That's right. RuthClaire. He's my nephew."

"You don't have a nephew, Paul. Even Edna Twiggs knows that. That's because you don't have any brothers or sisters."

"I had to tell the home folks something. RuthClaire. They don't rest easy till they've got every visiting stranger sized up and pigeonholed. You know how some of them can be. I didn't want it going around that I'd set up house with another guy."

"Not much chance of that arrangement," RuthClaire said. "But why this petty intrigue and deception, hon'? What's the real story'?"

I had to improvise. "I'm thinking of selling out," I said hurriedly. "His name's Brian Nollinger and he's a potential buyer. Neither of us wants to publicize the fact, though--to keep from confusing everyone if the deal falls through. We're trying to prevent disillusionment or maybe even gloating. You understand'?"

"Selling out'? But, Paul, you love that place."

"Once upon a time I did. I've only kept it thesi2 past fourteen or fifteen months because I thought we might get

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back together. But that begins to seem less and less likely, doesn't it'?"

RuthClaire was so quiet I feared she had rung off. Then she said, "I don't understand why your potential buyer wants to meet me."

*'The part about him admiring your work is true.,' I lied. '*You know the three-dimensional paintings you did for the Contemporary Room in Atlanta's High Museum'? He's been to see 'em four or five times since their debut. Come on, Ruthie. He'd like to see you in person. I told him you would. It might help me cinch the sale."

Again she was slow to answer. "Paul, there are a couple of reasons why I might be reluctant to give you that kind of help." She let me mull the implications. 'AN right." she added a moment later, "bring him on. i'll put aside my work and tell Adam to get lost tot an hour or SO. ' ' "

She hung up before I could thank her.

Throughout this conversation Nollinger had been at my elbow. "I don't know anything about the restaurant business," he said nervously. "As far as that goes, I don't know very much about art, either."

"Do you know what you like'?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Never mind," I said. "Let's get out there."

DESPITE HIS musical talent and his advanced degrees in anthropology and,primate behavior, Nollinger had not been lying about his ignorance of art. I learned the dismaying extent of his ignorance on our journey out to Paradise Farm. Anxious that he not tip his hand too early, I alternately quizzed and coached him as we drove. Although not unfamiliar with such Renaissance biggies as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, he seemed to have abandoned his

art-appreciation classes just as they were forging into the terra incognita of the seventeenth century. He knew next to nothing about impressionism, postimpressionism, and the most influential twentieth-century movements. He confused Vincent van Gogh with a popular author of science-fiction extravaganzas, believed that Pablo Picasso was still alive in France, and vigorously contended that N. C. Wyeth was a much better painter than his son, Andrew, who painted only barns and motionless people. He had never even heard of the contemporary artists whom RuthClaire most esteemed.

"You're a phony," i said in disgust. 'She'll sniff you out in three minutes' time--if it takes her that long."

"Look, Mr. Loyd, you're the one who concocted this stupid scheme."

"I know," I said. "I know."

"Why don't we just tell her the truth'?"

"The truth wouldn't have got you out here," I said, easing my car into the gravel-strewn drive in -front of the house. "You'd still be in Beulah Fork playing your panpipe and waiting for your next tactfully mooched meal."

Nollinger's jaw went rigid..With visible effort he swallowed whatever reply he had thought to make. The air of fierce inner resolve suddenly radiating from him, rather like a lever, began to worry me.

RuthClaire met tls on the front porch, shook Nollinger's hand, and ushered us inside. We stood about in the sculpture-studded foyer like visitors awaiting their guide at a museum.

This was the first time I had set toot over the threshold since September, and the faint but disturbing monkeyhouse odor that Adam had left behind in the West Bank was as unignorable here as mold on a brick of cheese. Nollinger noticed it, too, the incongruous scent of macaques in a barnlike Southern manse. RuthClaire was probably inured to the smell by this time, but she quickly detected our sensitivity to it and explained it away as the wretched mustiness of a shut-up house alter a particularly severe winter.

"I'm not an admirer of yours," Nollinger blurted. His

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sallow face turned the color of a ripe plum. "I mean. I

probably would be if I knew anything about your work, but I don't. I'm here under false pretenses."

"Criminy," I murmured.

RuthClaire looked to me for either amplification or aid.

I rubbed the cold nappy head of a granite satyr next to the oaken china cabinet dominating the hall. (It was a baby satyr with a syrinx very much like Nollinger's.)

'I'm here to see Adam," the anthropologist said.

My ex did not take her eyes off me. "He's outside foraging," she replied curtly. "How do you happen to know about him?"

"Livia George may have let it slip," I essayed. "From Livia George to Edna Twiggs to the media of all seven continents."

"Here," said Nollinger. He handed RuthClaire the packet of photos I had taken from the magnolia tree outside the downstairs bathroom. Prudently, though, he saved back three or four of the pictures. Without facing away from me RuthClaire thumbed through the batch in her hands.

"You're a Judas, Paul," she said. "You're the most treacherously backstabbing Benedict Arnold I've ever had the misfortune to know. I swear to goodness, I actually married you! How could that have happened'?"

To Nollinger I said, 'I'm toting up your bill at the West Bank, Herr Professor. It's going to be a shocker, too. Just you wait."

"You told him about Adam," RuthClaire accused. "You actually volunteered the information."

"I was worried about you. Grant me that much compassionate concern for your welfare. I'm not an unfeeling toad, for Christ's sake."

"When'.)'` RuthClaire asked the anthropologist. "When did he get in touch with you'.)'"

"Last month, Ms. Loyd."

My ex counted on her fingers as if she were trying to compute a conception date. "It took at least four months for this 'compassionate concern' to develop, didn't it'/ Four whole months, Paul?"

"His instincts were right in coming to me," Nollinger

interjected. "You don't have any business keeping a rare hominid specimen like Adam in your own home. He's an invaluable evolutionary Rosetta stone. By rights he belongs to the world scientific community."

"Of which, I suppose, you're the self-appointed representative?'"

"That's right," Nollinger said. "I mean, if you'll just take it upon yourself to see me in that light."

"First of all, I'm not keeping Adam in my house; he's living here of his own free will. Second, he's a human being and not an anonymous evolutionary whatchamacallit belonging to you or anybody else. And finally, Dr. Nollinger, I'm ready for you and Benedict Iscariot here to haul your presumptuous heinies back to Beulah Fork. The sooner the faster the swifter the better."

Nollinger looked at me knowingly, conspiratorially.

"Your ex-wife seems to be an uncompromising spiritual heir of Louis Rutherford, doesn't she?'"

"What does that mean?'" RuthClaire demanded.

"I think what he's trying to say," I said, "is that you've got yourself the world's only habiline houseboy and you don't want to give him. up."

"It's a lbrm of involuntary servitude," Nollinger added, "no matter how many with-it rationales you use to justify the relationship."

"He comes and goes as he likes," RuthClaire said angrily. "Paradise Farm is his only haven in the whole materialistic grab bag of environments around here. Maybe you'd like him to live in a shopping mall or a trade-school garage or a tumbledown outhouse on Cleve Synder's place?'"

"Or a fenced-in run at the field station?'" I said, turning toward the anthropologist. "So that you can dope him up with amphetamines for fun and profit."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Loyal," Nollinger protested. "I'm on your side."

RuthClaire began tearing up the prints in her hands and sprinkling them on the floor like Kodachrome confetti.

"These are cheap papdrazzo snapshots," she said, her teeth clenched. She next went to work shredding the envelope.

"I still have these," Nollinger told her, holding up the prints he had palmed. "And Mr. Loyd still has an entire set of his own."

"She feels better, though," I said, looking askance at RuthClaire.

"Of course she does. Once we've gone, she'll have her habiline houseboy in here to clean up the mess. It's not many folks in this day and age who command the obedience of a loyal unpaid retainer. She likes putting him to use. She likes the feeling of power she gets from--" Suddenly, surprising even myself, I plunged my fist deep into the anthropologist's diaphragm. I would have preferred to clip him on the temple or the jaw, but his wire-rimmed glasses dissuaded me. Dissuaded, that is, my subconscious. Nollinger, the wind knocked out of him, finished his sentence with an inarticulate "Umpf" and collapsed atop the scattered photograph pieces. RuthClaire said, "Maybe you feel a little better, too. Not too much, though, I hope. His insults pale beside your treachery, Paul."

"That's probably so," I admitted, hangdog.

"Please get him out of here. !'Il start soliciting bed panners on Peachtree Street before your unmannerly 'nephew' ever lays eyes on the real Adam."

I helped Nollinger to his feet and led him outside to my automobile. Still bent over and breathless, he mumbled that my unprovoked assault was a classic primate ploy--especially typical of baboons or chimpanzees--to establish dominance through intimidation. I told him to shut up and he did. Thereafter he kept his eyes averted: and as we left Paradise Farm, rolling from crunchy gravel onto pothole-riven asphalt, I saw Adam staring out at us from the leafy picket of holly trees separating RuthClaire's property front the road. The half-concealed habiline, I glumly took note, was wearing one of my old golfing sweaters.

It did not flatter him.

Aq' slx o'clock that evening the sullen anthropologist boarded a Greyhound bus for Atlanta, and I supposed that our dealings with each other had formally concluded. I did not want to see him again, and I did not expect to. As for RuthClaire, she had every reason to feel the same way about me. I tried, therefore, to resign myself to her bizarre liaison with the mysterious refugee from Montaraz. After all, how was she hurting Adam or Adam her'? I must get on with my own life.

About a week later this headline appeared in the Atlanta Constitution, which I have delivered every morning to the West Bank:

RENOWNED BEULAH FORK ARTIST

HARBORING PREHISTORIC HUMAN
SAYS EMORY ANTHROPOLOGIST

"Oh..lo," I said aloud over my coffee. "Oh, no." The story featured a photograph--a color photograph--of Adam dismembering a squirrel in the downstairs bathroom at Paradise Farm. Not having reproduced very well, this photo had the dubious authenticity of pictures of the Loch Ness monster--hut it grabbed my eye like a layout in a gore-and-gossip tabloid, afflicting me with anger and guilt. About the only consolation I could find in the story's appearance was the fact that it occupied a small corner of the city/state section rather than the right-hand columns of the front page. The photograph itself was attributed to Brian Nollin,,er "I'll kill him." The Constitution's reporter had woven together a tapestry of quotations--fi'om Nollinger, from two of his colleagues at Emory, and from RuthClaire herself that made

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the anthropologist's claims, or charges, seem the pathetic fancies of a man whose career had never quite taken off as everyone had anticipated: The press conference he had called to announce his unlikely discovery included a bitter indictment of a "woman of talent and privilege" who was obstructing the progress of science for selfish reasons of her own. RuthClaire, in turn, had submitted to a brief telephone interview in which she countercharged that Nollinger's tale of a Homo habitis survivor living in her house and grounds was a tawdry pitch for notoriety and More government research money. She refrained quite cagily, I noticed, from any outright declaration that Nollinger was lying. Informed of the existence of photos, for instance, RuthClaire dismissed them as someone else's work--without actually claiming they had been fabricated from scratch or cunningly doctored. Moreover, she kept me altogether out of the discussion. And because Nollinger had done likewise (from a wholly different set of motives), no one at the Constitution had attempted to interview me. Ah, I thought, there's More consolation here than I first supposed. My ex can take care of herself

She would blame me for this unwanted publicity, though. She would harden herself to all my future efforts at rapprochement.

Despite the early hour I telephoned Paradise Farm to apologize tot what had happened and to offer my shoulder either to cry on or to cudgel. A recorded message informed me that RuthClaire's previous number was no longer functioning. I understood immediately that she had applied for and received an unlisted number. This unforeseen development hit me even harder than the newspaper article. Paradise Farm now seemed as far away as Hispaniola or the court of Sayyid Sa'id.

Before the hour was out my own telephone began ringing. The first caller was Livia George, who, in high dudgeon, asked me if I had seen the piece in the Constitution and wondered aloud how my devious Atlanta relative had managed to take a photograph of RuthClaire's mute friend Adam in her very own bathroom. "You got a spill-the-

beans Peepin' Tom for a nephew," she said." 'IF he ever comes back to visit you, Mr. Paul, Iain' the one gonna do his cookin', let me tell you that now." I agreed that Nollinger was a contemptible sneak and promised that she would never have to wait on the man again.

Then, in rapid succession, I received calls from a reporter on the Tocqueville Telegraph, a representative of "The Today Show" on NBC, an art dealer in Atlanta with a small stake in RuthClaire's professional reputation, and two of my fellow merchants in Beulah Fork, Ben Sadler and groceryman Clarence Tidings, both of whom expressed the hope that my ex-wife would not suffer disruptive public attention because of my nephew's outrageous blather to the Atlanta media. An artist, they said, required her privacy. I put their commiseration on hold by agreeing with them and pleading other business. The reporter, the TV flack, and the art dealer I had sidestepped, with terse pleasantries and an unshakable refusal to comment.

Then I took my telephone off the hook, dressed, and went shopping. My neighbors greeted me cheerily the first time our carts crossed paths, then studied me sidelong as I picked out meats, cheeses, and produce. Every housewife in the A&P seemed to be looking at me as she might a cuckolded male who pretends a debonair indifference to his ignominy. It gave me the heebie-jeebies, this surreptitious surveillance.

Back at the West Bank my uncradled receiver was emitting a strident buzz, a warning to hang up or to forfeit the boon of continuous service. I replaced the receiver. A moment later the telephone rang. It was Edna Twiggs, who told me that RuthClaire was trying to reach me. "Give me her new number," I said. "I'll call her." But Edna replied, "Hang up again, Mr. Loyd. I'll let her know you're home. I'm not permitted to divulge an unlisted number."

Cursing under my breath, I obeyed Beulah Fork's inescapable sedentary gadfly, and when next the telephone rang, RuthClaire's voice was soft and weary in my ear. "We're under siege," she said. "There's an Eleven

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Alive news van from Atlanta on the lawn, and several other vehicles--one of them's a staff car from the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer--are parked in the drive or along the roadway behind the hollies. It looks like a gathering for a

Fourth of July picnic, Paul."

"Have you talked to any of those people'?"

"The knocking started a little over an hour ago. I wouldn't answer it. Now there's a man on the lawn taking pictures of the house with a video camera and a stylish young woman in front of the camera with a microphone talking about the 'deliberate inaccessibility of artist RuthClaire Loyd.' She's said that about four or five times. Maybe she's practicing. Anyway, I can hear her all the way up here in the loft. They're not subtle, these people, 'they're loud and persistent."

"Call the police, RuthClaire. Call the Hothlepoya County Sheriff's Patrol."

"I hate to do that."

"They're trespassing. They're making nuisances of themselves. Call Davie Button here in town and Sheriff Crutchfield in Tocqueville.",

"What if I just poke my .22 out of the window and tell everybody to beat it'?"

"It'd make great viewing on the evening news."

"Yeah, wouldn't it?" RuthClaire chuckled wryly. "May the seraphim forgive me, but I was thinking a display like that might boost subscription sales for the Celestial Hierarchy series. AmeriCred has been a little disappointed in the way they're going."

"We live in a secular age, RuthClaire." Then I said,

"How's Adam taking all this'?"

"It's made him restless and reclusive. He's pacing the downstairs bathroom with the exhaust fan running--to drown out the clamor from the lawn."

"Well, I hope you closed the curtains on the upper half of th window in there. Reporters can climb trees, too. you know."

"Adam and I installed some blinds," she said. "No worry there. The worry's how long this stupid encircle

ment is-likely to last. I can't get any work done. Adam's going to develop a nei-vous disorder."

"Let the law run them off. That's what the law's for."

"All right."

"You're smart enough to figure that out for yourself.

What made you call me for such a self-evident serving of advice?"

"I wanted to let you know just how much trouble you've caused us. you dinkhead." (But her tone, it pleased me to note, was bantering rather than bitter.) "And one other thing besides that, Paul."

"Okay, I'll bite."

"Adam's one failing as a companion is that he can't talk. Maybe I just wanted to hear the silver-throated con man of Beulah Fork do his stuff' again." She let me ruminate on this left-handed compliment for a second or two, then gave me her new telephone number arid bade me a peremptory goodbye.

I sat there awhile with the receiver in my hand, but finally hung up before Edna Twiggs could break in to tell me I was on the verge of forfeiting continuous service.

INTERNATIONAL. MEDIA attention converged on Paradi'se Farm. Neither the Beulah Fork police department nor the sheriff's patrol from Tocqueville could adequately cope with the journalists, television people, curiosity seekers, and scientists who descended on Flothlepoya County for a peek at RuthClaire's habiline paramour. For a time the Georgia Highway Patrol intervened, rerouting the gatecrashers back toward the interstate and issuing tickets to those who ignored the detour signs: but Ruben Decker and a few of the other residents along the road linking Paradise Farm with town protested that they had been singled out for citations as often as had the journalists and the pesky

outsiders plaguing the area, many of whom, when stopped, produced false ID's to corroborate their claims of being locals. At last even the highway patrol threated to retreat from the scene; this wasn't their fight.

In desperation RuthClaire contracted with an Atlanta firm to erect an imposing beige-brick wall around the exposed sections of her property's perimeter: and this barricade, upon its completion in May, proved an effective psychological as well as physical deterrent to most of those

· who were stopping by for a casual, rather than a mercenary or a malevolent, look-see. Pale arc lights on tall poles illuminated every corner of the vast front and back yards and portions of the shadowy pecan grove behind the house. On two occasions RuthClaire broadcast stentorian warnings over a P.A. system installed for that purpose and actually fired her rifle above the heads of the trespassers creeping like animated stick figures across the lawn. Word got around that it was dangerous to try to breach the elaborate fortifications of Paradise Farm. I liked that.

Meanwhile, in the absence of hard facts, speculation and controversy raged. Alistair Patrick Blair, the eminent Zarakali paleoanthropologist, published a paper in Nature denouncing the notion of a surviving Early Pleistocene hominid as "sheer unadulterated grandstanding piffle." He was careful not to mention Brian Nollinger by name, not so much to avoid libeling the man, i think, as to deprive him of the satisfaction of seeing his name in print--even in a disparaging context. Blair cited the notorious Piltdown hoax as a veritable model of competent fiimflammetry next to this tottery ruse, and he argued vigorously that the few available photographs of Adam were clearly of a rather hairy black man in a molded latex mask like those designed for his PBS television series, Beginnings. Nollinger rebutted Blair, or tried to, with a semicoherent essay in Atlanta Fortnightly summarizing the extraordinary diplomatic career of Louis Rutherford and strongly condemning the artist RuthClaire Loyd for her tyrannical imprisonment of the bemused and friendless hominid. She was a female Simon Legree with a mystical bias against both evolutionary theory and the scientific method.

Sermons were preached both for and against my ex-wife. Initially, fundamentalists did not know which side to come down on because anyone opposed to the scientific method could not be all bad, while anyone cohabiting with a quasi-human creature not her lawfully wedded husband must certainly be enmeshed in the snares of Satan. By the second week of this controversy most fundamentalist ministers, led by the Right Reverend Dwight "Happy" McElroy of America's Creator Christian Constituency, Inc., of Rehoboth, Louisiana, had determined that the crimson sin of bestiality far outweighed the tepid virtue of a passive antievolutionary sentiment. Their sermons began both to deride RuthClaire for her sexual waywardness (this was an irony that perhaps only I could appreciate) and to pity her as the quintessential victim of a society whose scientific establishment brazenly proclaimed that human beings were nothing more than glorified monkeys (a thesis that their own behavior seemed to substantiate). Happy McElroy, in particular, was having his cake and eating it too. I audited a few of his television sermons, but almost always ended by turning down the sound and watching the eloquent hand signals of the woman providing simultaneous translation for the deaf.

Sales of RuthClaire's Celestial Hierarchy porcelain-plate series boomed. In fact, AmerJCred reversed a long-standing subscription policy to permit back orders of the first few plates in the series, then announced to thousands of disappointed collectors that this particular limited edition of Limoges porcelain had sold out. It would violate the company's covenant with its subscribers to issue a second edition of the plates. However, in response to the overwhelming demand for RuthClaire's exquisite work, AmeriCred, in conjunction with Porcelaine Jacques Javet of Limoges, France, had just commissioned from this world-acclaimed Georgia artist a second series of paintings to be entitled Footsteps on the Path to Man, which would feature imaginative but anthropologically sound portraits of many of our evolutionary forebears and several contemporary human visages besides: eighteen plates in all, the

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larger number being a concession to the growing public appetite for my ex-wife's distinctive art. Further, this series, this limited edition, would not be quite' so limited as the previous one: More people would be able to subscribe. "Congratulations," I told RuthClaire one evening by telephone.

"It's phenomenally tacky, isn't it'?"

"I think it'S called striking while the iron's hot." "Well, I needed the money, Paul. Having a wall built around two thirds of Paradise Farm didn't come cheap. Neither did the arc lights or the P.A. system. I have to recoup my investment."

"You think I don't know'?"

"Besides, I want to do this Footsteps on the Path to Man series. The australopithecines I'll have to reconstruct from fossil evidence and some semi-inspired guesswork, but for Homo habilis I'll have a living model. It's going to be fun putting Adam's homely-handsome kisser on a dinner plate."

"Maybe I could order five or six place settings of that one for the West Bank."

RuthClaire laughed delightedly.

Of course, the sermons following hard upon the ncw AmeriCred announcement were universally condemnatory. The depths to which my ex-wife had fallen defied even Happy McElroy's bombastic oratorical skills. He tried, though. The title of his message on the first Sunday in July was "From Angels to Apes: The Second Fall." Whereas the celestial hierarchy was an ascent to pure spirit, the blind worship of evolutionary theory--' 'Theory, mind you!" McEIroy roared. "Unsupported theory was a footstep on the downward path to Mammon, debauchery, and hell. At the end of his prepared remarks McEIroy asked his congregation to ,join with his loyal television audience in a silent prayer of redemption for paleoanthropologists everywhere and for their avaricious minion in Beulah Fork, Georgia, may God have mercy, RuthClaire Loyd. I am not a complete pagan: I joined in.

THE ATTITUDE of my own townspeople toward RuthClaire during this period was hard to judge. Many had resented the unruly influx of visitors in the spring and the inconvenience of the highway patrol roadblocks and spot identity checks. Still, most did not hold my former wife personally accountable for these problems, recognizing that she, too, was a victim of the publicity mill generating both the crowds and the clumsy security measures finally obviated by/the wall. Now the residents of Beulah Fork wondered about the relationship between RuthClaire and Adam. This preoccupation, depending on their ultimate' view of the matter, dictated the way they spoke about and dealt with their unorthodox rural-neighbor. Or would have. I'm sure, if RuthClaire had come into town More often. One sweltering day in July, for instance, I went into the Greyhound Depot Laundry to reclaim the tablecloths I had left to be dry-cleaned. Ben Sadler, a courtly man nearly six and a half feet tall, stooped toward me over his garment-strewn counter and in the blast-furnace heat of that tiny establishment trapped me in a perplexing conversation about the present occupants of Paradise Farm. Sweat beaded o0 his forehead, ran down his ash-blond temples, and accumulated in his eyebrows as if they were thin. ragged sponges not quite thirsty enough to handle the unending flow.

"Listen, Paul, what kind of, uh, creature is this Adam fella, anyway?"

I summarized all the most likely, and all the mos! asinine, recent speculations. I used the terms AustraIopithecus zarakalensis, Homo zarakalensis, and Homo habilis. I used the words ape-man, hominid, primate, and dwwf. i confessed that not even the so-called experts agreed on the genus or species to which Adam belonged.

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'Do they say he's human?'" Ben wanted to know.

"Some of them do. That's what Homo means, although lots of people seem to think it means something else. Anyway, RuthClaire thinks he's human, Ben."

"And he's black, isn't he'? I mean, i've read where the entire human race---even the Gabor sisters and the Osmond family--I've read where we're all descended from tiny black people. Originally, that is."

"He's as black as Hershey's syrup." i conceded.

"Do you think we're descended from Adam, Paul'?"

RuthClaire's Adam. I mean."

"Well, not Adam personally. Prehistoric hominids like him. maybe. Adam's a kind of hominid coelacanth." I explained that a coelacanth was an ancient fish known only in fossil form and presumed extinct until a specimen was taken from waters off South Africa in 1938. That particular fish had been five feet long. Adam, on the other hand, was about six inches shy of five feet. Thereibre. I did not think it absolutely impossible for a retiring, intelligent creature of Adam's general dimensions to elude the scrutiny of Homo sapiens sapiens for the past few thousand years of recorded human history. Of course, I also believed in the Sasquatch and the yeti

"That's a funny idea, Paul--all of us comin' from creatures two thirds our size and black as Hershey's syrup."

'Don't run for office on it."

Ben wiped his brow with one glistening forearm. "How does RuthClaire, uh, look upon Adam?" He feared that he had violated propriety. "I mean. does she see him as a brothel"? I've heard some folks say she treats him like a house nigger from plantation days--which I can't believe of her. not under no circumstances--and others who say he's More like a two-legged poodle gettin' the favorite-pet treatment from its lady. I ask because I'm not sure how I'd greet the little fetla if he was to walk in here tomorrow." "i think she treats him like a house guest, Ben." (I hope that's how she treats him, i thought. The ubiquitous spokesman for America's Greater Christian Constituency, Inc., had planted a nefarious doubt in my mind.)

Ben Sadter grunted his conditional agreement, and I carried my clean tablecloths back across the street to the restaurant.

That evening, a Saturday, the West Bank was packed, Molly Kingsbury was hostessing, Livia George and Hazel were on duty in the kitchen, and a pair of college kids from Tocqueville were waiting tables. I roamed from corner to corner giving assistance wherever it was needed, functioning not only as greeter, maitre d'. and wine steward, but also as busboy, cashier, and commander in chef (ha bit).

My regular customers demand personal attention, from me rather than from staff' members. A squib of gossip, a silly ,joke, occasionally even a free appetizer or dessert. I try to oblige most of these demands. This Saturday eve-rang, however, I was having trouble balancing hospitality and hustle. Although grateful for the crowd, by nine o'clock I had 'begun to growl at rny college kids and to nod perfunctorily at even my ,most stalwart customers. The muggy summer dusk and the heat from my kitchen bad pretty much neutralized the efforts of my ceiling fan and my one laboring air conditioner. In my Haggar slacks and lemon-colored Izod shirt I whs sweating just like Ben Sadler in the Greyhound Depot Laundry.

The door opened. Two teenage boys in blue jeans, T-shirts, and perforated baseball caps strolled in. Even in the evening the West Bank does not require coats and ties of its male clientele (shoot, I frequently work in the kitchen in shorts and sneakers), but something about these two--Craig Puddicombe and E. L. Teavers--made my teeth grind. I could have seen them in their string-tie Sunday best (as I sometimes did) without feeling any More kindly toward them, and tonight their flat blue eyes and sweat-curved sideburns incited only my annoyance. For one thing, they had left the door open. For another, I had no table for them. What were they doing here'? They usually ate at the Deep South Truck Stop on the road to Tocqueville. "Shut the door." I told Craig Puddicombe, carefully longing ice into somebody's water glass. "You're letting in insects.,"

Craig shut the door as if it were a pane of wraparound glass on an antique china cabinet. E.L. took off his hat. They stood on my interior threshold staring, at the art on the walls and the open umbrellas suspended from the ceiling as atmosphere-evoking ornament. They either could not or would not look at the people eating. I approached them because Molly Kingsbury clearly did not want to. "You don't have reservations," I told Puddicombe. "It's going to be another fifteen or twenty minutes before we can seat you."

Craig looked at me without quite looking. "That's okay. You got a minute'?"

"Only if it lasts about twelve seconds."

"We just want to talk to you a bit," E. L. Teavers said earnestly, almost ingratiatingly. "We think your rights are being violated."

Craig Puddicombe added, "More than your rights, maybe."

"Fellas," I said, indicating the crowd, "you don't choose a battle zone for a friendly little chat about human rights." "it was now, Mr. Loyd, because we happened to be ridin' by," Craig said. "For something this important you can spare a minute."

Before I could dispute this point, E. L. Teavers, surveying the interior, said, "My mother remembers when this was Dr. Kearby's office. This was the waitin' room, out here. Whites sat on this side, the others over that way. People used to come out of the examination room painted with a purple medicine Dr. Kearby liked to daub around." "Gentian violet," I told him, exasperated. "It's a bactericide.---Quick, now, as quickly as you can, tell me how my rights are being violated."

"Your wife--" Craig Puddicombe began.

"My ex-wile," I corrected him.

"Okay, your ex-wife. She's got a hibber livin' with her on premises that used to belong to you, Mr. Loyd. How do you feel about that?"

"A what living with her?"

'Hibber," E. L. Teavers enunciated, lowering his voice.

"it's a word I invented. Anyone can use it, but I invented it. It means habiline nigger, see'?"

"Clever. You must be the one who was graduated from high school. Craig .just went tk)r gym class and shop."

"I've got a diploma too, Mr. Loyd. Our intelligence ain't the issue, it's the violation of your rights as a white person, not to mention our traditional community standards. You follow all this, don't you?"

"You're not speaking for the community, You're speaking for Craig Puddicombe. teenage redneck."

"He's speakin' for More than that," E. L. Teavers said, smiling boyishly. The boyishness of this smile was a major part of its menace.

"We just dropped in to help you, Mr. Loyd. We're not bigots. You're a bigger bigot than E.L. or me 'cause you look down on your own kind who ain't got as much as you do or who ain't been to school as long. That's big'otry, Mr. Loyd."

"i'm busy," I said, and turned to take care of my customers.

E. L. Teavers grabbed my elbow--with an amiable deference at odds with the force of. his grip. I could not shake him off because of the water pitcher in my hand. He had not stopped smiling his shy, choirboy smile, and i lound myself wanting to hear whatever he had to say next, no matter how addlepatated or paranoiac.

"You see, there's a hibber--a lousy subhuman--inheritin' to stuff that doesn't, that shouldn't, belong to it. Since 'it used to be your stuff your house, your land, your wife--we thought you'd like to know there's people in and around Beulah Fork who appreciate other hardworkin' lk)lks and who try to keep an eye out for their rights."

"Namely Craig and you'?" Since finishing up at Hothlepoya High last June, I reflected, they had been working full time at United Piedmont Mills on the outskirts of Tocqueville. E.L., in fact, was married to a girl who had waitressed for me briefly. "Knowing that. lkrllas, has just about made my day. I feel infinitely More secure."

"You never went to school with hiberners," Craig

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Puddicombe said. "You've never had to be anything but their boss."

"Now you've got a prehistoric one getting it on with your wife."

"My ex-wife," I responded automatically.

"Yeah," said E. L. Teavers. "Like you say." He took a creased business card from the hip pocket of his jeans and handed it to me. "This is the help you can count on if it begins to seem unfair to you. If it begins to, you know, make you angry." He opened the restaurant door on the muggy July night. "Better am-scray, Craig, so's Mr. Loyd can get back to feeding his bigwigs."

They were gone.

I wandered to the service niche beside the kitchen and set down the water pitcher. I read the business card young Teavers had given me. Then I tore it lengthwise, collated the pieces, and tore them again--right down the middle. Ordinarily quite dependable, in this instance my memory fails me. All I can recall is the gist of the message on the card. But to preserve the fiction of my infallibility as narrator I will give here a reasonable faximile of the message on that small, grimy document:

E(Ivis) L(amar) Teavers

Zealous High Zygote

KuKlos Klan--Kudzu Klavern

Box 666 Beulah Fork, Georgia

BUSINESS HAD slackened noticeably by ten o'clock. At eleven we closed. I stayed in the kitchen for a couple of hours after Hazel and Livia George had left preparing my desserts for Sunday: a German chocolate cake, a carrot cake, and a strawberry icebox pie. The work--the attention to ingredients, measures, and mixing or baking times--kept my mind off the visit by the boys. In fact, I was

. making a purposeful effort not to think about it. A strategy that disintegrated as soon as I was upstairs in the stuffy converted storage room.

E. L. Teavers, a bright kid from a respectable lower-middle-class home, was a member of the Klan. Not merely a member, but an officer of a piddling local chapter of one of its semiautonomous splinter groups. What had the card said? Zealous High Zygote? Terrific Vice Tycoon? Puissant Grand Poltroon? Something rhetorically cyclopean or cyclonic. The title did not really matter. What mattered was that this able-bodied, mentally keen young man, along with his somewhat less astute buddy, had kept abreast of the situation at Paradise Farm and regarded it as an affront to all the values he had been taught as a child. That was scary. I was frightened for RuthClaire, and I was frightened for myself for having rebuffed the High Zygote's offer to help.

What kind of "help" did he and Craig have in mind? Some sort of house-cleaning operation? A petition campaign? A night-riding incident? An appeal to other Klan organizations for reinforcements?

In all my forty-six years I had never come face to face with a danger of this precise human sort, and I was finding it hard to believe that it had descended upon me--upon RuthClaire, Adam, and Beulah Fork--in the form of two acne-scarred bucks whom, only a season or two ago, I had seen playing (egregious) high school football. It was like finding a scorpion in a familiar potted geranium. It was worse than the pious verbal assaults of a dozen different fundamentalist ministers and far, far worse than the frustrated carping of Brian Nollinger in Atlanta. As for those anonymous souls who had actually leaped the barricades at Paradise Farm, they were mere sportive shadows, easily routed by light and the echoing reports of my old .22. That's the problem, I thought. How do you immunize yourself against the evil in the unprepossessing face of a neighbor?

Despite the hour--lately, it was always "despite the hour"--I telephoned RuthClaire. She was slow picking

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up, but she did not rebuke me for calling. I told her about the adolescent Ku Klutz Klanners who had pickpocketed my peace of mind.

"Elvis Teavers?" RuthClaire asked. "Craig Puddicombe?"

"Maybe I should report this to the GBI, huh'? Sometimes I get GB! agents in the West Bank. Usually they're dressed like hippies pretending to be potheads. I could put those guys on to the Zealous High Zygote and his string-along lieutenant gamete--just for safety's sake."

"Klanners?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"Were they wearing sheets'?" Hearing my put-upon sigh, she withdrew the question. "No, Paul, don't sic anybody on them. Let's not provoke them any further than they've already been provoked. Besides, I'm safe enough out here. Or so I like to think.--Do you know what's funny?"

"Not at this hour, no."

"The day before yesterday I got a call from a representative of a group called RAJA--Racial Amity and Justice in America. It's a black organization headquartered in Baltimore. The caller wouldn't tell me how he'd managed to get my unlisted number, just that he had managed. He hoped I would answer a few questions."

"Did you'?"

"What else could an art-school liberal from Charlotte do'/"

"Nothing," I said.

"He had a copy of Nollinger's article in Atlanta Fortnightly'. He wanted to know if I had enslaved Adam, il' I had Adam doing menial tasks against his inclination or will. it sounded as if he had the questions written down on a notepad and was ticking them off each time he asked one and got an answer. I kept saying No.' They were that sort of question. The last one asked if I would allow an on-sight inspection to verify my denials and to ascertain the i mental and emotional health of my guest. I said 'No' to that one, too. 'In that case,' the man from RAJA said, 'get

set for More telephone calls and eventually a racial solidarity march right in front of your sacred Paradise Farm.'

And then he hung up. When the phone rang just now, Paul, i was a little afraid it was him again."

"Nope:" I said glumly. "Just me."

'I'm catching it from all sides." The receiver clunked as RuthClaire apparently shifted hands. "You see, Paul, I've offended the scientific establishment by refusing to let their high priests examine Adam, and i've offended organized religion by trying to make a comfortable home for him. Now I've got Klansmen coming at me from another direction and civil rights advocates from yet another. I'm at the center of a collapsing compass rose waiting for the direction points to impale me. That's pretty funny, isn't it? There's no way for me to escape. I'm everybody's enemy."

"The public still loves you. Just ask AmeriCred."

"That's a consolation. A kind of cold one, tohight."

"Hey, you're selling More platters than a Rolling Stone.

Pretty soon you'll go platirmm. Cheer up, Ruthie Cee."

"Yeah, well, you don't sound all that cheery yourself."

She was right. I didn't. The scare inflicted upon me by Teavers and Puddicombe had .worn off a little, but in its place was a nervousness, an empty energy, an icy spiritual dynamo that spun paralyzing chills down my spine to the very tip of my vestigial tailbone. Even in the oven of the storage room I was cold. RuthClaire and I were linked in a strange way by our private chills. Each of us seemed to be waiting for the other to speak.

At last i said, "Does Adam sleep with you'?" It was the first time I had asked her this question. Somehow the time was right. For me if not for her.

"in this kind of weather, Paul, he won't stay in a bed.

He's sleeping on the linoleum in the kitchen where it's cool."

"You know what I mean."

"One morning I found him lying down there with the refrigerator door open. He doesn't do that anymore." "RuthClaire!"

"What do you want me to tell you. Paul? I've grown

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More and More fond of him the longer he's been around. As for Adam, well, he's comporting himself More and More like a person with a real sense of his own innate worth. It makes a difference."

"You've finally got your own intramural United Nations relief agency, don't you'? With a single live-in aid recipient."

"I can unplug this phone as easily as listen to you, Paul."

I apologized--quickly and effusively--for my sarcasm. It was, I admitted, rude and inexcusable. It would devastate me if she cut me off'. My tone was mock-pathetic rather than sappily beseeching, and she let me get away with it. How many times had we bantered in this way in the past? So long as I did not overstep a certain hazily drawn line, she welcomed the familiar repartee. It was, I knew, my one clear leg up on the uninitiated, inarticulate Adam.

"How's he doing?" I asked, mostly because I knew it would please her.

"He's doing famously. His manners have improved, he's adjusted to indoor conveniences, he's stopped killing squirrels (I think), and I've even taught him how to sing. He probably already had a knack for singing--plaintive melodies that run up and down the scale like a wolf's howl or the undersea aria of a humpback whale. He does a moving ,Amazing Grace,' Paul, he really does."

"Bring him to the West Bank again," I said impulsively. RuthClaire hesitated before replying. "Before this uproar, Paul, I'd'ye jumped at the chance. Now it worries me, the idea of removing Adam from the security of Paradise Farm. He's happy here, and safe."

"But he's something of a prisoner, isn't he? Just like that jerk from Emory and your caller from RAJA have accused."

"Everybody's a prisoner of something, Paul. Paradise Farm isn't exactly an island in the Gulag Archipelago, though."

"Then let me treat the two of you to dinner again."

r/

"Why don't you come out here? I'll do the cooking."
 "That's one of the reasons." Hastily I added, "Listen to me, now. I just don't belong out there anymore, RuthClaire. It isn't mine, and it hurts to walk around the place. It's yours, yours and Adam's. Besides, didn't you hope that eventually the rest of us would come to regard Adam as a neighbor and a peer? Isn't that why you brought him to the West Bank in the first place?"

Again RuthClaire was slow to answer. "He's still not ready for that. It would have to be after dark, Paul, and you'd have to make the restaurant off limits to everybody

but us. Just like last time."

"Deal."

"When'?"

"This coming Tuesday. Nine-thirty. It'll be good and dark by then, and I'll still be able to serve dinner between six and eight."

RuthClaire laughed. "The consummate businessman."

"We're two of a kind," I said. Then: "I've missed you,

Ruthie Cee. God Almighty, how I've missed you."

"Good night, Paul. We'll see you Tuesday."

RuthClaire hung up. Ten or-twelve seconds passed before the steady buzz of the dial tone began issuing from my receiver. I sat there in the ovenish heat listening to it. A cricket chirruped from behind a wall of cardboard boxes---they had once contained cans of tomato paste, bottles of catsup, jars of fancy mustard---opposite my cot. What an idiot I was. Months upon months ago i could have built myself a house much nicer than the one on Paradise Farm

A CHASTE conviviality suffused our get-together on Tuesday evening. There were only the three of us. Livia George and all my other help had left at eight-thirty, and although the odor of my customers' cigarette smoke usually lingered

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for hours, tonight the old-fashioned two-speed fan whirling among the umbrellas overhead had long since imparted a sea-breeze freshness to the air. It was much cooler than on Saturday, and I had a sense of sated well-being that probably should have alarmed me.

As a treat, as a concession, RuthClaire had permitted Adam to order steak, medium rare, and he sat in his place at our corner table using his cutlery with the clumsy fastidiousness of a child at an adult banquet. The improvement over his previous appearance in the West Bank was marked. He divided the meat into two dozen or more little pieces and ate them one at a time, his eyes sometimes nearly closing in quiet enjoyment. Further, he took mannerly bites of potato, broccoli, or seasoned squash casserole between his portions of steak, and he chewed with his lips pressed together. Not even the ghost of Emily Post could have faulted his scrupulously upright posture. As RuthClaire and I talked, I found it hard not to glance occasionally at Adam. He was wearing a pair of pleated, beltless trousers of a rich cream color and a short-sleeved white shirt with a yachting wheel over one of its breast pockets. He had come shoeless again, an omission for which RuthClaire again apologized, but the neatness of his apparel and the slick-whistle closeness of his haircut (had my ex used a pair of electric sheep shears on him?) More than offset the effect of slovenly or rebellious informality implicit in his bare feet. Now, in fact, I was sneakily watching his hands, which reminded me of his feet; they were narrow and arthritic-looking, as if his fingers had been taped together for a long period and only recently given their freedom. The stiffness and incomplete opposability of his thumbs made his dogged use of knife and fork all the more praiseworthy.

"You're a bang-up 'Enry '!ggins," I told RuthClaire. She was finished eating, having contented herself with a fruit cup (no bananas) and an artichoke salad, and her eyes rested almost dotingly on her habiline Eliza Doolittle. "Thank you, I guess--but you're not giving Adam enough credit. He's bright, eager to learn, and, at bottom, naturally thoughtful."

"Unlike some you've known."

RuthClaire smiled her crooked smile. "Well, you'd'ye probably done okay in the Early Pleistocene, Paul. You'd'ye probably prospered."

"That's not nice."

"Well, you're not, either--when your mind's on nothing but the satisfaction of your appetites. Too often it is."
- "Tonight'?"

"Not tonight. I hope. You seem to be trying hard to be as gentlemanly as it's in you to be."

Adam finished his meal. He wiped his mouth with a linen napkin. Then he picked up his stem of California burgundy and tossed it off in a noisy inhalation whose small component gulps set the apple in his throat bobbing like a fisherman's cork. He wiped his mouth again, his small black eyes glittering.

"Adam)" RuthClaire admonished.

Whereupon the habitine lifted his right hand and made a startling, pincerlike movement with his fingers. This motion he repeated, his broken-looking thumb swinging purposefully from side to side. His thick black eyebrows, grown together over the bridge of his nose, lifted in sympathy, and his eyes, too, began to "talk," coruscating in the candlelight.

RuthClaire interpreted: "The steak was excellent, he says. So, too, the wine."

I stared at the creature. I had never seen him use hand signs before. He had not yet stopped doing so.

"Now he would like to know if there's a rest room on the premises," RuthClaire continued. "He feels like a gallon of rainwater in an elastic teacup. He'd also like to wash his hands."

"You're making that up," I accused.

"Only the highfalutin metaphor. He really did ask if the West Bank has a public bathroom. Is that so hard to believe'?"

The West Bank has only one public bathroom; it is located in a small cinder-block niche directly behind the dining room. For a brief moment you must step outside--

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into a small section of alley--to reach this facility, and you must lock the door behind you to keep other patrons or even my restaurant employees from breaking in upon you once you have entered. Still, complaints are few, and I do not have the room to install a second water closet. The

county health department has approved this arrangement. Without another word to RuthClaire I led Adam to the w.c., nodded him inside, and returned to the dining room. Because no one but us three was present tonight, it made no difference it' Adam neglected to depress the lock button in the doorknob. This, I think, was one of my halfq'ormed intellections as I slid back into my chair and put my hand on Ruthie Cee's.

"You've been teaching him sign language."

"Hardly an original idea. They've been doing it with chimps and gorillas for years. They do it at Yerkes. In fact, at Yerkes they teach some of their primates an elaborate system of geometric symbols Called Yerkish. I checked out some books on sign language for the deaf to teach myself what Adam ought to learn. He's doing far better than any of the chimps and gorillas exposed to this system, though. It's true. I've checked the literature."

"it's amazing," I conceded.

"What convinced me to try was Adam's interest in the woman doing simultaneous sign-language interpretations of Happy McElroy's sermons every Sunday morning. He couldn't take his eyes off her. He still can't."

"You watch the program?"

"Adam's fascinated by it. The panorama shots of the congregation, and the singing, and McElroy's contortions at the pulpit--they hold him spellbound. Adam first found the channel back before the controversy that ignited some of McElroy's most authoritarian recent pronouncements, i mean, I wasn't purposely tuning in to see what that man, had to say about us. I was just letting Adam-watch whatever he wanted to watch."

-Does he still insist on watching, knowing McElroy's bias?"

"Oh, yes, it's probably his favorite Sunday show. Now,

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though, he makes ugly hand-signal suggestions when McElroy cites the relationship between Adam and me as a disgusting instance of contemporary moral decay. Adam hates Happy McElroy, but he loves the way he twists

around, and the singing, and the interpreter for the deaf, and the long shots of that heroic congregation listening to their leader's weekly jeremiads." RuthClaire smiled another off-center, self-effacing smile. "I can't deny him those pleasures, Paul. I want him to know--intellectually, anyway--there's a big, smelly, 'bustling, contradictory world beyond the boundaries of Paradise Farm."

"He must already know that."

"Oh, he does. He's told me jumbled stories about Montaraz, Haiti, and Cuba, not to mention the Freedom Flotilla and his trek up through Florida, He's known More hardships and chaos than most, but not until recently could he communicate these experiences to anyone."

We heard a thump at the back of the West Bank. Adam was returning to us from the water closet. At his elbow, towering lumpishly over him, was a stranger. The stranger had a .38 in Adam's ribs, and Adam's cautious step and frightened eye told us that his knowledge of the world clearly extended to the destructive capacity of firearms. Perhaps he remembered the fate of his conspecifics aboard the fishing vessel off the coast of Puma Gorda. Both indignant and fearful, I stood up to face this new intruder.

HE HOLSTERED his pistol in a sling under his sports jacket and steered Adam to our table with a remorseless meaty hand. His face, meanwhile, bore an apologetic expression that automatically lessened my fear of him.

"Thought he might run," the man said. "Didn't, though."

"I think you can safely let go of him," RuthClaire said.

He did. "Dick Zubowicz, INS--Immigration and Naturalization Service. This fella's an illegal alien, I'm afraid he's under arrest."

A knock rattled the front door. Despite failing to secure the door in the rear, I had locked this one. When I released the latch and opened to the slender supplicant on the raised sidewalk, the supplicant proved to be Brian Nollinger. Behind him on the sidewalk fronting the Greyhound Depot Laundry a small crowd of shadows--no More than five or six people--milled aimlessly about, unrecognizable. My first thought was that a sinister ulteriority underlay their presence, my second that they were simply waiting for the midnight bus to Montgomery. Then Nollinger swept past me into the West Bank, and I had no further time to consider the question.

"You've got him!" the anthropologist said to Zubowicz.

"It wasn't hard," the immigration agent replied. "He's a pretty docile fella, really. Catchin' 'em after they ear's always been my favorite way of doin' it, Dr. Nollinger. Takes the edge off 'em."

I glared at my former boarder. He had led Zubowicz to Beulah Fork, had lain in wait with him outside the West Bank, had undoubtedly been the principal goad to the government's decision to mount this sleazy little operation. I'll show you how to nab the notorious habiline with a minimum of fuss, he had promised, if you'll give me and my sociologist friend at Emory visitation privileges once the poor devil's interned. Nollinger paid scarcely any heed to either RuthClaire or me; he only had eyes for Adam. To snatch his granny glasses from his pale face, and to grind them to powder beneath my heel, would have been a satisfying release--but I mastered the impulse. With difficulty.

RuthClaire stood. "Under arrest'? For what?"

"I've told you, Mrs. Loyd," Zubowicz said. "For entering the country illegally, then for evading deportation by fleeing INS authorities. You're an accomplice, ma'am. You've aided and abetted."

"Am I under arrest, too?"

"I don't have a warrant for it, only the fugitive's. If you'll help us out--if you won't go contestin' or obstructin' us in our duty--well, it's not likely you'll be slapped too bad for your involvement."

RuthClaire looked at me. "No one's pressed any charges yet, and they've already begun plea-bargaining."

"That's not really the term for it," Zubowicz said softly, as if offended by the innuendo. "Our real interest's in Adam here."

"The illegal alien," Noltinger added.

"The only surviving specimen of Homo habilis in the entire world," i interjected. "You think your rights outweigh his, Notlinger, because he's a unique opportunity for bigger government grants and a measure of parasitic fame for Ol' Number One--not because he's an illegal alien."

Adam, I noticed, was following our argument closely, looking from face to face--as each of us spoke and running his right forefinger along the edge of the tablecloth. His nail had incised a narrow crescent in the material; a single maroon thread was caught in the notch at the top of this nail. The thread shuttled back and forth with the motion of the habiline's finger, like a minuscule red script on a parchment of the same concealing color. What did it mean? What was Adam thinking?

"Listen. Loyd," the anthropologist retorted, "if he'd thrown up tonight's dinner, too, you'd still be faunching to get rid of him. I'm not the only victim of self-interest under the West Bank's roof."

"That's what he was doing when I found him," Zubowicz said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked the man.

"Adam," the immigration agent replied. "He was retch'ing into the toilet bowl. Tryin' to, anyway. Couldn't get much to come up."

"Damn it!" I said. "That's a lie!"

"You always rub too much garlic and onion salt into your steaks," Nollinger testified. "Garlic salt, onion salt, tenderizer--it's just too much, Loyd."

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Adam lifted his hands, bit off the thread caught on his fingernail, and made a series of signs for RuthClaire.

"It was drinking the wine so fast that did it," she interpreted. "The steak was prepared and cooked to perfection. He apologizes for the bad impression created by his lapses in table etiquette. He's fine now."

"That's good," Zubowicz said, "because the prof and I are gonna run him up to Atlanta for bookin' and arraignment." He gripped the habiline by his hairy elbow.

RuthClaire said, "For being an illegal alien?"

"That's what I've been tellin' you."

"What if he were an American citizen'?"

Zubowicz lifted his eyebrows and smiled deferentially.

"What if what'?"

"He's my husband, Mr. Zubowicz. A minister from Tocqueville--an ordained minister of the First United Coptic Church of Dixie--married us in a private ceremony at Paradise Farm over two months ago. We even had blood tests. It's legal, I assure you. And we can prove it."

"Jesus, RuthClaire," I exclaimed, "you're ten--fifteen--maybe twenty years older than he is!"

"That's a pretty threadbare old ploy," Zubowicz said.

"The government's gotten really tough on people who marry aliens for no other reason than to confer American

citizenship on them. It's become something of an industry.

I'm afraid, and the penalties for taking part in these fake marriages---marriages in name only, for devious or fraudulent purposes, Mrs. Loyd--nowadays, ma'am, the penalties are severe."

"i'm expecting Adam's child," RuthClaire announced.

"How fraudulent or devious is that'?"

Nobody said anything. I sat down at the table and exhaled a sigh as profoundly melancholy as I could make it. My ex had just given us offhand confirmation of everyone's worst suspicions. However, unless you insisted on regarding Adam as subhuman, underage, or mentally defective, you could not logically continue to upbraid her for "living in sin." She was a married woman who had emphasized her bond to her latest spouse by cooperating with him in the conception of a new living entity. This

idea made me very unhappy. I preferred the living-in-sin hypothesis to so dramatic a demonstration of the lawfulness and incontrovertibility of their union.

Zubowicz turned to Nollinger. "Is it possible'?" he asked. "I mean, can a human woman and a, uh, wetl, a--'?"

"Habiline male," the anthropologist said.

"Yeah, what you said. Can they make a baby'? Will the genes, uh, match up'?"

"There's precedent," Nollinger admitted. "Of a sort. At Yerkes, not so long ago, a siamang and another species of gibbon successfully mated when they were caged together lot a long period. It surprised everyone, though." He squinted at Adam. "Interbreeding between distinct human speciesWro-Magnon and Neanderthal, for instance--is supposed to be one of the factors responsible for the wide variety among human physiques and face today. Yeah," he concluded, almost resentfully, "it's possible, Mr. Zubowicz."

I looked up. "RuthClaire, why didn't you tell me'?"

"I was going to, Paul. I didn't expect the evening to be abbreviated by a close encounter-with a stooge from Immigration and Naturalization."

"Mrs. Loyd," said Zubowicz, wounded. "I'm only doin'--"

She cut him off: "Mrs. Montaraz, you mean. In private life I'm Mrs. Adam Montaraz. My professional name's, still RuthClaire Loyd--that's what everyone knows my work by--but, considering your mission, tonight I'd prefer to be called by my legal married name."

The federal agent literally threw up his hands, turning in an oafish half-circle to escape the fury in RuthClaire's eyes. As he turned, a missile of some kind shattered one of the windowpanes in my front door. It grazed Brian Nollinger's head and ricocheted off the metal divider between the dining room and the cash register. Nollinger dropped bleeding to his knees. Glass sparkled like costume glitter in the candlelight.

A second missile--they were both red-clay bricks, or

portions of such bricks--burst through the picture window behind our corner table, toppling a potted geranium, a tall ceramic beer stein, and a fishbowl fill/d with colored sand.

Zubowicz had his pistol at the ready again, but now he was looping the barrel in circles and loudly encouraging everyone to retreat to the rear of the restaurant. Dazedly, even Nollinger complied, the gash on his temple leaking a crimson mucilage. Adam loaned the anthropologist his shoulder as, bent over like a special services commando, I hustled RuthClaire away from my shop's battered facade. The squeal of an automobile laying down rubber reverberated from one end of Main Street to the other.

A quick backward glance informed me that the shadows in front of the Greyhound Depot Laundry had dispersed to their own secret corners of the night. Main Street was empty now, and I did not believe that any More bricks would come flying through my windows. The vigilantes had had their fun.

"They're gone," I said, straightening up. "I think we're okay. Damn it to hell, though. Look at this mess. Just look at it."

"[NSURANCE'LL PAY for it," a voice from behind me said.

"Never knew a bigshot yet didn't have him lots of insurance."

Three people had entered the West Bank by the same route taken only a few minutes earlier by Dick Zubowicz. Two of them wielded shotguns. They all wore clothing that gave them the look of farmers in an outlandish variety of medieval clerical garb. Winged robes of shimmering lavender, with strange embroidered emblems and decorative piping of a much darker purple, fell just below the intruders' knees, revealing blue jeans and scuffed work

boots in two instances and pale hairy shins above a pair of powder-blue jogging shoes in the third. Pointed hoods--headpieces of grandiose, almost miterlike impracticality--concealed the faces of the three men, but for good measure they had pulled nylon stockings over their features to flatten and distort them.

But one of the intruders had just given himself away by speaking, and by revealing his own identity he had inadvertently divulged that of one of his seconds.

"Hello, E.L.," I said. "Hello, Craig."

Or maybe it had not been inadvertent at all. The robes, the nylon masks, the lopsided ecclesiastical headgear were more for show, for a corny Grand Guignol effect, than for

impenetrable disguise. That I could not puzzle out the name of the Ku Klutzler in jogging shoes--a lanky character who slouched along in a self-effacing stoop---was an irrelevancy; what mattered was that three of my neighbors had worked themselves into a state of self-righteous agitation so calculating and cold that the donning of pompously comical costume and the trashing of my four-star backwater card struck them as noble responses to something they did not understand. Or understood in the half-assed way of a street-sign painter confronting Hieronymus Bosch. (Hell, I'm still not sure that I understand what they did or didn't understand.) There they were, though, dressed like pious executioners and pointing shotguns.

Unignorable.

After relieving Zubowicz of his pistol, the Klanners produced two pairs of handcuffs, one of which served to anchor the immigration agent to the S-pipe under the sink

in my kitchen, the other of which manacled Nollinger to the flocked divider in the dining room. The man in jogging shoes, who never once spoke, took care of the handcuffing, and, as he worked, I could not help noticing the sweat running down his legs to the tops of his shoes' perforated ankle guards. The heat under those purple robes--! suddenly realized they were almost exactly the color of old Dr. Kearby's beloved gentian violet--had to be strength-sappingly intense. What imbecility,

"Davie Hutton's never around when you need him, is he?" Craig Puddicombe said, his shotgun trained on RuthClaire, Adam, and me. "Only pops'up when you've run a stop sign or laid down rubber in the A&P parking lot."

E. L. Teavers chuckled insinuatingly, and I looked even harder at the Klansman in jogging shoes. Was that Davie Button ? I could not really tell. His possession of handcuffs and his refusal to speak made me suspect that it was. It also helped to explain the blatancy with which the Zealous High Zygote's cohorts on Main Street had assaulted the West Bank and then made good their getaway. If Davie was with them, then they had had a free hand. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, Davie had never seemed quite so pale and etiolated as this apparition.

"Time to go," E(lvis) L(amar) Tearers said.

"Where. '?" RuthClaire asked him.

But now that Zubowicz and Nollinger were secured, the urge to banter with or taunt us utterly deserted the intruders. Grimly unspeaking, they herded us out the back door, past the rest room, and through the grass-grown alley to a small dewy hillock from which Beulah Fork's water tower rose into the summer darkness like a war machine out of H. G. Wells. Adam stared wistfully up into the crisscrossing support rods of the tower, but Teavers, apparently sensing that Adam had it in mind to break away and seek refuge aloft, cracked him across the temple with his shotgun barrel.

"Go on, you goddamn hibber!" he commanded him.

"None of that hibberish monkey business!"

As NollJnger had done in the restaurant, Adam fell to his knees. His lips curled back to reveal his canines, but RuthClaire knelt beside him to whisper inaudible consolation. Although Adam wobbled a little after regaining his feet, he was soon striding as assuredly as any of us, and our bizarre little party passed from the water tower's low hillock into an asphalt-patched street parallel to Main. From this street we marched into the upper reaches of the playground of the Beulah Fork Elementary School.

Crickets' were whirring enthusiastically, but otherwise the town seemed uninhabited, a vast sound stage accommodating the silhouettes of a few isolated Victorian houses along with hundreds of cardboard-cutout elm and magnolia trees.

The playground itself, on the other hand, was a minefield in the midst of these innocuous props. Crossing it, I kept waiting for Teavers to blow our heads off. It seemed pretty clear to me that he and his purple-capped henchmen were marching us to fatal appointments. Or, at the very least, to a tryst with tar and feathers.

'qs this how you look after the rights of a hardworking white man'?" I asked. "Wrecking his business and terrorizing him and his friends?"

"Shut up," Craig Puddicombe said.

"I mean, when you came in the other night, you were concerned about my rights being violated, Is this 'bow--?"

E. L. Tearers interrupted me: "That's all forfeit, Mr. Loyd. You and your wife are traitors."

"To what'?" RuthClaire asked.

"I told you to shut up!" Puddicombe hissed. "We don't have to explain nothin' to you!"

"Not now. maybe," Teavers added, evenly enough.

That ended the exchange. A moment later I saw a van parked behind the softball backstop on the northeastern corner of the playground. Two or three robed figures stood beside this vehicle, human carrion birds in the still unsettled dust surrounding it. The cab of a pickup protruded beyond the nose of the van, whose decorated sides the Klanners had obscured with a thick gouache of mud that had long since dried and hardened. As we approached, one robed figure made a semaphoring motion with both arms, climbed into the van, and eased it along the backstop so that Teavers and Puddicombe could throw back its sliding door and prod their captives inside. Adam and RuthClaire boarded together while I temporized on the threshold, one foot down in the dust as an uncertain tie to the reality of Hothlepoya County. We were about to be spirited away to Never-Never Land.

"Get in," somebody said, not too urgently.

I obeyed, but looked over my shoulder in time to see the man in jogging shoes go dogtrotting off toward a portable classroom behind the school.

Puddicombe climbed in after me and banged the van's sliding door to. RuthClaire, Adam, and I were made to sit on the floor in the center of the vehicle's passenger section. Around us perched armed members of the Kudzu Klavern: another four people caparisoned in cumbersome purple and redolent of stale sweat. The darkness prevented me from distinguishing the sex of each one, and their shoes---either sneakers or penny loafers--were not much help, either. At least one woman had come along, though, because her high-pitched mocking laughter greeted every underdone bon mot dropped into the deep try of our fear and confusion.

Now the van was bumping along at good speed.

"Coulda sworn he'd stink," one of the men said. "Expected dead rat or wet dog, somethin' foul anyway."

"Not this one," Puddicombe replied. "This one wears English Leather or he don't wear nothin' at all."

The woman guffawed. From where I was sitting it was impossible to tell to which robed body the guffaw belonged, only that it was nervous and feminine. After a mile or two, though, I arbitrarily assigned it to the penny loafers.

Our van bounded from rut to rut. We did not seem to be on paved highway. Once, our driver sounded his horn; the sour bleating blast of another horn, undoubtedly that of Tearers' pickup, answered it. We slowed and turned. The penny loafers guffawed, a high-pitched outburst with no apparent antecedent.

"Where are we going?" RuthClaire asked.

No one replied. Adam had his arm linked in mine. Occasionally he looked from side to side as if attempting to sort out the pecking order among our captors. I do not believe that he was frightened. Both RuthClaire and I were near, and with his free hand he was absentmindedly grooming my ex-wife, picking tiny knots out of the shingled strands of her hair.

Eventually the van skewed to a stop. Its sliding door popped back like the lid of a capsized jack-in-the-box. Puddicombe, minus his nylon stocking, forced us outside. We stood in the beams of E. L. Teavers' pickup truck's headlights, virtually blinded by their moted yellow glare. The van backed away, executed a precarious turn on the edge of a trail rut, and disappeared into the night with all its robed passengers but Puddicombe.

This frightened me far worse than anything that had happened so far, including even the first rocketing crash of brick against glass in the West Bank. RuthClaire, Adam, and I were stranded in the middle of nowhere with the Zealous High Zygote and his chief lieutenant. I looked up. Stars freckled most of the sky. but a migrating coal sack of clouds had begun to devour large chunks of the heavens to the west. It seemed to me that a bottomless abyss had opened. Over my head, under my feet--the chill of this sensation was spookily disorienting.

The headlights cut off. From across the weed-choked pasture Teavers said, "Bring the hibber here, Craig." "Why'?" RuthClaire asked. "What are you going to do, .>,,

I closed my eyes, opened them, closed them again. When next I looked around, though, the landscape seemed familiar. We were on Cleve Synder's property, not far from Paradise Farm, on a piece of isolated acreage that had never been used to grow beans, cotton, corn, or any other crop. Not tk)r over fifty or sixty years, anyway. Early in the century a brick kiln had operated here. What was left was a series of red-clay mounds surrounding cisternlike vats that plunged into the earth seemingly without bottom. Eight years ago, according to the skinnydipper's horrified playmates, a child from White Cow Creek had fallen into one of the vats. An attempt to locate and raise him had concluded with the absolute frustration of the spelunkers who had gone down after him in winch-assisted harnesses. Although afterward there had been some community agitation to cap or fill in the pits, Cleve Synder had offered to build a barbed-wire barricade with warning

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placards at fixed intervals, and this offer had quieted the angry uproar. Tonight, glancing about me, I realized that either Synder had never fulfilled his promise or else the vigilantes of the Kudzu Ktavern had undone his efforts to make the place safe. We were in the foothills of a miniature mountain range, far from succor, civilization, or warning signs.

Adam, looking at RuthClaire, made a bewildered hand gesture.

"I don't know," she replied, shaking her head.

Puddicombe slapped Adam's hands down and told RuthClaire to shut up. Teavers, a grotesque shadow, climbed into view on one of the nearby mounds. The mounds---it suddenly struck me---resembled eroded termitaria on a dusty East African plain. For a moment, in fact, it seemed that the five of us had been translated by some fantastic agency to the continent on which Adam's ancestors, and ours, had first evolved. Hothlepoya County was Kenya, Tanzania, or Zarakal. We were all Africans

"Tell him to get his clothes off," Teavers commanded RuthClaire from the lip of the mound.

"Why should I tell him that?"

"Do it, damn it! No slack or backtalk!" To stress the urgency of compliance, he fired off one barrel of his shotgun. The ground shook, and even Craig Puddicombe joined us in hunching away from the blast. A pattering of buckshot sounded in the brambles of a blackberry thicket not thirty feet away. Then everything was quiet again. Adam took off his pleated trousers by tugging down the zipper until it tore. His shirt he removed in similar fashion, popping off the buttons with his fingers. Because he disdained underwear as well as shoes, he now stood beside us as bare and unblushing as his prelapsarian namesake--just as, a year ago this September, he had first appeared at Paradise Farm. How small he seemed again, how supple and childlike.

'Okay, Craig, bring him here.' To RuthClaire and me Tearers said, "If either of you moves a step, I'll let fly this other barrel right into your hibber-lovin' faces. Tomorrow mornin' you'll look like fresh ground round."

Puddicombe laughed and nudged Adam forward. Adam seemed to be gripping the earth with his toes, as if walking the lofty bough of an acacia tree. Although Puddicombe finally halted at the base of the mound, Adam ascended to within two or three feet of Tearers.

"Don't," RuthClaire said. "Don't do it."

I did not know whether she was appealing to Adam or to Tearers. It made no difference. The young man in the gentian-violet robes dropped his shotgun, grabbed Adam by the arm, and pulled him to the lip of the vat. His intention was clear. He was going to sacrifice Adam to the Plutonian tutelaries of the pit. Equally clearly, though, he had not reckoned on the sinewy strength of the habiline, believing that his greater height and weight would suffice to topple Adam into oblivion.

But Adam, snarling, wrested his arm free of Teavers, sank his teeth into the young man's thigh through a coarse layer of denim, and spun him around like a demon astride a dervish. Teavers recognized his mistake too late to do anything about it.

"Shoot!" he ordered Craig Puddicombe. "Shoot the bastard I"

Puddicombe was of two minds, struggling to cover his prisoners and to protect his friend at the same time. If he fired, Teavers would suffer along with Adam, and I might have the opportunity to jump him. As a compromise, trusting his friend to overcome Adam's surprising resistance, he backed away from the mound and leveled both barrels of his shotgun at RuthClaire and me.

Dust billowed outward from the combat on the pit rim, a spreading reddish-black fog in the starlight, and then both Tearers and Adam went over the edge.

That was all there was to it. One moment they were vigorously grappling on the surface of their common planet, the next they were plummeting hellward as if neither of them had ever existed. Teavers did manage a scream as he fell--a trail, short-lived protest--but Adam made no sound at all; and maybe thirty seconds after they had engaged each other, the night again belonged to the crickets, the

stars, and the coal-sack thunderhead looming like a celestial abyss over Alabama.

RuthClaire and I held each other. Her hands were cold.

I could feel them--their coldness--through the back of my shirt.

"I ought to kill you," Craig Puddicombe said. This development had dumbfounded him, but he tried to talk anyway. "This is your doin', goddamn it, this is all your friggin' fault!" His voice was trembling. So were his hands. He backed away from us toward the mound, picked up Teavers' shotgun, and tossed it into the vat that had just swallowed the two combatants. "It's people like you," he said, choking on the words, "it's people like you who--" - The complete articulation of this thought stymied him.

Puddicombe broke for the pickup, jumped into its cab, and gunned the vehicle past us, nearly striking RuthClaire. Away from the brick kiln he sped, away from the nightmare that he had helped to create.

"We'll have to tell Nancy," RuthClaire said, her jaw resting on my shoulder. "Somehow."

"Nancy?"

"Nancy Teavers. His wife. The girl who worked for you once."

"Oh," I said,

For a long time we did not move. Eventually, though, I climbed the mound and peered down into the vat from my knees. I spent several minutes calling out to Adam and Tearers. I even dropped pebbles into the hole to try to plumb its depth. This was impossible. RuthClaire told me to stop, it was no use.

Wearily, then, we set off on foot together for Paradise Farm.

IT /()OK US no More than twenty minutes to complete this .journey. When we arrived, we found a twenty-foot-tall, gasoline-soaked cross of pine or some other fast-burning wood blazing on the lawn. One of its horizontal struts had already burned through, making an amputee of this self-contradictory symbol, but neither of us was in any doubt about the original shape of the structure. The scent of char and gasoline, coupled with the rape inherent in the cross's placement, lifted stinging tears to RuthClaire's eyes. She damned the people responsible. She cursed the incorrigible stupidity of her species.

It began to rain. Gusts of sighing wind whipped the flames about unmercifully.-The remaining cross arm splintered and crashed to the ground, showering sparks.

RuthClaire and I hurried along the gravel drive to the house, where we paused to watch the storm. Lightning flickered, thunder boomed, and finally the slashing rain extinguished, altogether, the obscene handiwork of the Ku Klutzers. The Zealous High Zygote was dead, i reflected: long live Adam's surviving descendants in universal forbearance.

Ha! I mentally scoffed. Didn't I want to kill Craig Puddicombe? Didn't I want a vigilante's revenge on the cross burners'?

They had cut the telephone lines. We could not phone out. me to the authorities or RuthClaire to Nancy Teavers. Even Edna Twiggs was ignorant of our predicament--unless, of course, she had had something to do with it. Standing in RuthClaire's loft, trying to undress my ex-wife for bed, I doubted everyone in Beulah Fork. I had seen only eight people in robes, but I imagined every single one of my neighbors encysted in that hateful garment: a Ku Klux Kaleidoscope of suspects.

RuthClaire, meanwhile, kept telling me to wait until morning to venture out, I would be a fool to brave this storm, there was nothing we could do for Adam, the cross burners were long gone.

I brought her a bourbon from the kitchen and sat by her on the bed until she had swallowed the last glinting amber drop. Ten minutes later she was asleep.

I secured every window and locked every door. Then I set off through the rain to Ruben Decker's farm a mile and a half down the highway. My clothes, immediately drenched, grew heavier and heavier as I walked. Two different southbound automobiles went whooshing by, hurling spray, but neither stopped: and I reached my destination waterlogged and fantod-afflicted. Like a drug dream, the image of Teavers and Adam disappearing into that voracious kiln hole kept flashing through my head. When I knocked on Decker's flyspecked screen door, I was on the verge of collapse. The sight of the grizzled dairy farmer coming toward me through his empty living room with a yearling Persian cat in his arms seemed no More substantial or trustworthy a vision than the muddled flashbacks that had accompanied me all the way from Paradise Farm.

"Got to use your phone," i said. 'Got to make some calls."

"Well, of course you do," Decker agreed, letting me in. The silver-blue cat in his arms was purring like a turbine.

i

DAVIE BUTTON had been patrolling the Peachfield residential area at the time of the attack on the West Bank. ; Later he had assisted the Hothlepoya County Emergency Rescue Service at an accident south of Tocqueville. Upon i being apprised of the evening's events by a dispatcher in the sheriff's office in Tocqueville, however, he returned to

Beulah. Fork and released Dick Zubowicz and Brian Nollinger from their handcuffs, using a master key. It no longer seemed likely to me that he had been the Klansman in the powder-blue jogging shoes. The identity of that person remains a troubling supposition.

Zubowicz and Nollinger spent the night on cots in City Hall.

Button, on his own initiative, installed a large piece of plywood over the hole in my picture window and a smaller one over the broken pane in my door. In the morning Livia George came in to clean up the glass, the spilled sand, the beer-stein fragments, and the dirt from the overturned geranium pot. The West Bank had survived. Nor was the cost to my insurance company going to be especially high. My premiums would not go up. In only another day or two I would be able to open for business again.

At Paradise Farm two employees of Southern Bell showed up to repair the telephone lines cut by the cross burners. Law-enforcement officers from Tocqueville and agents of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation poured into Beulah Fork. They examined the restaurant, the softball field at the elementary school, and the abandoned brick kiln on Cleve Synder's property. They used helicopters as well as automobiles. Because Craig Puddicombe had apparently disappeared from Hothlepoya County, perhaps even from Georgia, a description of both him and E. L. Teavers' pickup truck went out to every sheriff's department and highway patrol unit in the Southeast. Zubowicz and Nollinger told their stories to investigators at City Hall: RuthClaire and I unburdened ourselves to agents who had driven out to Paradise Farm. It rained all morning, a slow, muggy drizzle that did little to alleviate the heat, but by two o'clock that same afternoon a GBI man telephoned RuthCtaire to inform her that his agency had just made four arrests.

"Do you think you could go back out to the Synder place'?" he asked her.

"I dont know," she responded. "Why'?"

'We'd like a detailed run-through of everything that

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happened while you and Mr. Loyd were . . . hostages. It might prove helpful both in apprehending Puddicombe and

in prosecuting the Klanners who didn't stick around for well, for the final bit of dirty work," the agent concluded apologetically.

A reprise of the nightmare, I thought. Just what RuthClaire needs.

"Sure," she said. "When'?"

"Niedrach and Davison are with you now, aren't they'?"

Okay, good. They'll drive you and Mr. Loyd over there in twenty or thirty minutes."

The drizzle became a steady downpour. As we rode to the brick kiln with agents Niedrach and Davison, a weather report on the car radio attributed the rain to a fizzled 'hurricane off the Louisiana coast. Happy McElroy Country, I thought. It was my fervent hope that the storm had had at least enough fury to cripple--for a day or two, anyway--the broadcasting towers of America's Greater Christian Constituency in Rehoboth, Louisiana. My mood was vengeful, and sour. The agents in the front seat murmured between themselves like adults outside a room in which children are napping.

At the brick kiln we parked and waited for the rain to subside. Our driver, Niedrach, kept the engine running and the air conditioner going: otherwise we would have all succumbed to the humid heat.

Looking through the rain-beaded window beside me, I saw Brian Nollinger standing near the mound whose gullet

I

had engulfed Teavers and Adam. He had ridden out from Beulah Fork with another pair of investigators. They were still in their car, however, whereas Nollinger was listing in the deluge like a bamboo flagpole, his granny glasses impossibly steamed, his Fu Manchu dripping, dripping, dripping. I cracked my window about two inches.

"What the hell are you doing here'?" I shouted.

He looked toward our automobile. Almost prayerfully, seeing me, he canted his head toward the eroded mound.

"Mourning," he said. "I came out here to mourn. Mr. Loyd."

Between clenched teeth RuthClaire said, "He has no right."

Whether or not he had any right, Nollinger was martyring himself to his alleged bereavement, turning aside from us to squat like a pilgrim at the base of the mound. Maybe, I thought, he does feel a kind of grief for Adam . . . along with a More painful grief for his lost opportunities. The sight of him hunkering in the rain annoyed me as much as it did RuthClaire. It was true, though, that some of the shame and embarrassment I felt for the anthropologist was shame and embarrassment for myself. If I had not gone to him in February, after all, Adam might still be alive

"Can't you guys send that jerk back to Atlanta'?" i asked the agents.

Niedrach looked over his shoulder into the back seat.

"He's here as a consultant. Our chief thought his expertise might be helpful. We won't let him bug you or Mrs. Montaraz."

This last word made me flinch. The GBI had confirmed the validity of RuthClaire's marriage to Adam, and its agents were careful to call her by her legal married name. Mrs. Montaraz gave me an unreadable but far from timid glance.

The rain slowed and then stopped. The pecan trees and blackberry thickets began to drip-dry. The ruddy mud around the mounds meant treacherous footing, but Niedrach determined that if we did not mind dirtying our shoes a little, we could begin the reenactment. He would play Tearers' part, Davison would be Puddicombe, and Nollinger would impersonate Adam.

RuthClaire vetoed this idea. Nollinger must sit in the other car while the agent who had driven him out from Beulah Fork assumed the habiline's role. Niedrach accepted the substitution, and under a cloud cover fissuring like the crust of an oven-bound blueberry pie we rehearsed in minute detail what had already happened. "Teavers" and "Adam" were careful not to get too near the open vat, but RuthClaire began quietly crying, anyway. She shook

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off Niedrach's offer of either a break or a postponement, and we concluded the exercise in twenty minutes, with brief pauses for photographs and ratiocinative conjecture. Sunshine, suddenly, lay on the wet red clay like a coat of shellac.

We milled around, unwilling to leave. The spot had a queer attraction, like a graveyard or the ruins of a Roman aqueduct.

Then, from some distance off, we heard a wordless crooning, a cappella. The melody was that of a church hymn, one I remembered from long-ago Sundays wedged in a Congregationalist pew between my mother and an older brother with a case of fidgets as acute as my own: "This Is My Father's World." The crooning had a fever-

'berant quality that sent chills through my system--in spite of the stifling July mugginess. RuthClaire, Nollinger. the GB! agents, 'and I froze in our places. Bewildered, we looked from face to face. The crooning ceased, giving way to a half dozen or More sharp expulsions of breath, then resumed again with an eeriness that unnerved me.

"Adam/" RuthClaire cried. She ran to the top of the mound. "Adam, we're here!"

"Watch it!" Niedrach cautioned her.

The crooning stopped. Everyone waited. A sound like pebbles falling down a well: another series of high-pitched grunts and wheezes. And then, six or seven mounds away, above the rim of the vat piercing that little hill to an unknowable depth, Adam's head appeared! A gash gleamed on his hint of sagittal crest; his bottom lip protruded like a semicircular slice of eggplant. Numerous nicks and punctures marked him.

A beat. Two beats.

Adanfs head popped out of view again.

"Atkmfff" RuthClaire wailed. Descending the first mound, she ran on tiptoes toward the one concealing her husband.

But Adam pulled himself out of the ground before she could reach it. He was wearing, as everyone could now see, the shiny purple robe in which E. L. Teavers had plunged to his death. It hung on Adam's wiry body in

crimps and volutes. It fit him no better than a jousting-tournament tent, but it shone with a monarchial fire, torn and sodden as it was. At the bottom of the interconnected vats he had probably put on the robe to keep warm during the rain and darkness, but now he seemed to be wearing it as a concession to West Georgia mores. He had the look of a sewer rat emerging from its chthonic habitations: the King of the Sewer Rats.

RuthClaire embraced him. He returned the embrace, and Nollinger, the GBI agents, and I could see nothing of him but his black, bleeding hands patting RuthClaire consolingly in the small of her back.

"It's not so surprising he got out," Nollinger said sotto voce, addressing me sidelong. "Just remember that his ancestors--the ones the Kikembu warriors sold to Sayyid Sa'id's representatives in Bravanumbi--well, they were living in caves in the Lolitabu Hills. That's how they stayed hidden from modern man for so many thousands of years. Adam may have grown up on Montaraz. Louis Rutherford's little island off Hispaniola, but he pretty obviously retained some of the subterranean instincts acquired by his modern habiline forebears in East Africa. I mean, how many of us denatured Homo sapiens could have survived an ordeal st)---"

"Why don't you just shut up?" I said.

Nollinger shrugged and fell silent, meanwhile rocking contentedly back and forth in his boots, his hands in his pockets. My initial joy at Adam's return from the dead had gone off its groove, like a stereo stylus that refuses to track. And why not? My rival had reappeared.

AND MY rival. I must confess, triumphed utterly. Not long after the episode with the Zealous High Zygote & Co., RuthClaire and Adam sold Paradise Farm back to me and moved to Atlanta. Although convinced that most of

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her neighbors did not share the extremist sentiments of the Klan, RuthClaire no longer felt entirely comfortable in Hothlepoya County. Further, she wished to establish closer contacts with the galleries and museums exhibiting her work or making offers to exhibit it, and the rural lifestyle no longer suited her purposes. As for Adam, he has adapted to an urban environment as quickly as he adapted to the bucolic enchantments of Paradise Farm, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service no longer wishes to deport him to the Caribbean.

Adam paints. RuthClaire taught him. His paintings are novelties. They sell for almost as much as RuthClaire's own paintings of comparable size. Two of Adam's works--colorful instances of habiline expressionism--hang in the West Bank, gifts of no little value and decorative appeal, i receive many compliments on them, even from people ignorant of their creator's identity. RuthClaire contends that Adam is still improving.

Before the Montarazes' departure from Beulah Fork I threw them a going-away party in the West Bank. Livia George, Hazel Upchurch, Molly Kingsbury, Davie Button, Clarence and Eileen Tidings, Ruben and Elizabeth Decker, Mayor Ted Notes and his wife, and even young Nancy Teavers were among the guests. I served everyone on Limoges porcelain plates from both the Celestial Hierarchy and the Footsteps on the Path to Man series. The latter was still incomplete, unfortunately, but AmeriCred had sent me a dozen place settings of the most recent issue, "Homo habilis," with my ex-wife's compliments. I gave each of my guests this particular plate as a remembrance of the evening.

Although I had prepared her a vegetable dinner, RuthClaire ate very little. Her pregnancy had deprived her of her appetite. She nursed her meal along until she at last felt comfortable setting it aside in favor of a dessert cup of i rainbow sherbet--at which point she announced to all and sundry that although few contemporary divorces were either civilized or even tastefully barbarous, she and I were i still fast friends. When the baby came. Adam and she had I

agreed that I was to be its godfather. Indeed, if it were a boy, they intended to name it after me.

"Hear, hear!" everyone cried.

I stood to accept congratulations and propose a toast:

"You're a better man than I am, Adam M."

For a time. anyway, I actually meant it. It is not always possible, I'm afraid, to be as good as you should be.

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Part Two

Hts HEROIC,

HEART

Beulah Fork and Atlanta, Georgia

MARRIAGE DOMESTICATES. Divorce disrupts
palls. And work--not time--heals all heal
Business was booming at the West Bani,
soundly tot the first time in two years. Fur
the booming of a business can sometimes
belier than a lullaby.

I had finally managed to convince m
Claire and I were through--as man and
wistfully wary friends. After all, she was,
habiline husband, Adam Montaraz, and nc
say her devotion to the little man. He had
where I had failed to. He had moved will
He had become a successful artist in his o,
private evolution toward a kind of genteel
tication was moving right along. The Ath
would occasionally report that the Mot
tended a gallery opening, or a play, or

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Three times I had seen Adam's photogra

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and twice he had been wearing a tuxedo.

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Southern sophis-rata Constitution tarazes had at-
sporting event.
>h in the paper,

RuthClaire, on the other hand, had been wearing designer maternity clothes.

Encountering such items, I would mumble, "I'm glad they're doing well. I'm glad they're happy together." Then I would put the paper aside and busy myself revising a weekend menu.

As I say, business was booming.

IN EARLY December I began to decorate the West Bank for Christmas. One day, with Livia George's help, I was putting a sprig of mistletoe on an archway of wrapped plastic tubing /'acing the Greyhound Depot Laundry. A steady dristle---dristle is Livia George's original portmanteau term for mist and drizzle--sifted down on us like a weatherman's curse. Suddenly, out of this gloom, a silver batchback pulled into a diagonal parking spot just below my stepladder.

"Hey," Livia George said, "that's the fella Miss RuthClaire brung in here las' January. You know, the one done upchuck all ovah the table."

"Adam!" I exclaimed.

"Now he's got so uptown 'n' pretty he drivin' a silver bullet. An' jes' look who's with him, too!"

"RuthClaire!" I cried. Even in the mist-cloaked street, the syllables of her name reverberated like bell notes.

Embracing all around, we greeted one another. I even hugged Adam, who, in returning my hug, gave my back such a wrench that for a moment I thought a vertebra had snapped. He was gentler with Livia George, probably out of inbred habiline chivalry.

When RuthClaire and I came together, though, we bumped bellies. She laughed self-consciously, and I knew that her baby wasn't long for the womb. In defiance of the very real possibility of her going into labor along the way,

she and Adam had made the two-hour trip from Atlanta. That struck me as crazy. Angrily, I told them both so. "Relax. Paul. Even if I had, it wouldn't have been a catastrophe."

"On the shoulder of the expressway? Like a savage or something'.) You've got to be kidding!"

I turned to Adam. Although still far from a giant, he was taller than I remembered, maybe because he was wearing hand-tooled leather boots with elevator heels. I was going to rebuke him for making the drive with his wife so close to delivery, but RuthClaire had launched a spirited minilecture:

"Only a tiny fraction of all the babies born to our species have been born in hospitals, Paul. Today's world-population figures show it hasn't led to our extinction."

I whirled on her. "What if you'd had trouble?"

She patted the opaque ball turret of her pregnancy.

"Gunner here's not going to cause any trouble. I'll have him--or her--the way a birddog bitch drops her puppies. Thwup/ Like that."

"When's it due'?" I asked, shaking my head.

"They don't really know. I've been pregnant since June at least. That puts me early in rny seventh month."

"She safe enough, then," Livia George assured me.

Fresh-faced in the December mist, RuthClaire said,

"That's not altogether certain, Livia George. No one has any real idea what the hfi'biline gestation period is. Or was. Adam says that as a kid on Montaraz he witnessed a couple of births, but he doesn't have any memory of his people trying to reckon the length of a woman's term."

"Surely, one of those hotshot anthropologists up at Emory has an opinion on the matter."

"I'm sure they do, Paul, but we haven't asked them."

We think I'm close. Habilines may carry their offspring no More than five or six months, maybe even less. They're' small, you know."

"Yeah. Even when they're wearing platform heels."

"That's to help him reach the brake and accelerator pedals, not to pamper his vanity. Even so, we had to have those pedals lifted about four inches from the floorboard."

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"Jesus." I looked up into the glowering pewter sky. "A thirty-six-year-old madonna on the brink of water-burst and an East African Richard Petty who can barely touch his brakes!"

"You gonna keep 'em out here all afternoon, Mistah Paul, or can they go inside to field your cuss-'em-outs." I gestured everyone inside and sent Livia George to the kitchen tot coffee and hot chocolate. It was still a couple of hours before the dinner crowd would begin arriving. "Why didn't you telephone? I might not've even been here."

"You're always here, Paul. The West Bank's what you do."

"Yeah, but why didn't you telephone?"

"I can't help seeing Edna Twiggs sitting at the switchboard when I dial a Beulah Fork number, AT&T reorganization and all. I don't trust the phones--not alter last summer,"

"So you'd risk turning Adam into your obstetrician?"

"Absolutely. You see, Paul, Adam and i have reached a decision, i'm not having this baby in a hospital."

Unable to help myself, I rolled my eyes.

"Stop it. You belittle everything you don't understand."

"Is this going to be a hot-tub delivery'? That's one of the latest crazes, I hear. Mama pretends she's a porpoise in Marineland."

"Paul--"

"Birthing stools. That's big, too. You have the kid squatting, like a football center pulling the pigskin out from under his jersey."

Adam looked down at his crooked hands on my new mint-green tablecloth. RuthClaire, meanwhile, spoke through clenched teeth: "I'll never understand how we got married. Never."

Knowing I had gone too far, I apologized.

"Neither of those methods is as absurd as you make them out to be. Underwater delivery's nonstressful for i both mother and child, and a birthing stool gives a woman

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a degree of control over a process that's rightfully her

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own, anyway. If your consciousness is ever raised, Paul Loyd. ifs going to have to be with a block and tackle." Livia George came into the dining room from the kitchen with our hot drinks. "Had six babies 'thout a doctor 'round," she told us. "In a feather bed in my own house. Oldest done hit six-foot-four. Youngest am' been sick a day." Adam made a series of gestures with his hands, which RuthClaire translated: "Said to tell you, Paul, that we want our baby born at Paradise Farm. We'll even pay for the privilege. It's important to us."

"But why'?" I asked, almost--not quite<lumbstruck. "As soon as I check into a hospital, the media's going to descend. It's understandable. I guess, but I can't let them turn the birth of our baby into an international circus. Paradise Farm's already got a pretty good security system, and it's far enough from Atlanta to thwart a few of the inevitable busybodies."

"RuthClaire, why don't you fly to some remote Caribbean island'? You can afford it. It's going to be butt-bruising cold here in Beulah Fork--not like in Zarakal or Haiti, kid."

"What it comes down to i, well, !'ll be com[ortable out there. And what More fitting place to have Adam's

child than the place where he and I first met?" She turned an admiring--a loving--gaze on the habiline, and he reciprocated with one of intelligent steadfastness.

Discomfited, I said, "You can stay out there, Ruthie Cee, on two conditions."

' 'Two/' '

I stood up. "Just listen to me. They're easy. First, you don't pay me a dime."

Adam and RuthClaire exchanged a look, the meaning of which was clearly both gratitude and acceptance.

"Second, you let me find a reputable--and discreet--doctor to help you with the delivery."

"Absolutely not! An outsider would needlessly complicate things, and I'm going to be fine."

I told her that there was still a possibilio' she might need help. How could I live with myself it' anything went

wrong? She replied that for the past six months Adam had been reading--yes, reading--every tome on childbirth he could lay his hands on. It was also his Opinion that the unborn infant's gracile body--gracile, for God's sake!--would ease its journey through the birth canal. Ruthie Cee, a birddog bitch dropping puppies.

My forefinger made a stabbing motion at Adam. "It's a little hard for me to credit his coming so far in six months. You'll forgive me if I'm skeptical of his medical expertise?" "He's brighter than most. Paul, and he had a headstart on Montaraz that nobody seems to want to acknowledge." "Yeah, but he's not a doctor. And that's my second condition."

RuthClaire stood up. Adam stood up. For a moment I feared that they were leaving, and I cursed my show of intractability. I was on the verge of rescinding my second condition when Livia George gave me a face-saving out:

"S'pose / midwife Miss RuthClaire's little 'un'? How that be'?" She fluttered her hands in front of her breasts.

"I got me lots o' s'perience birthin' babies."

Hallelujah. RuthClaire, Adam, and I all did double-takes.

It was okay with all of us, Livia George's proposal. Something about her turn of phrase, something about her cunning self-mockery. Our conflict thus resolved, the four of us took turns embracing one another as we had earlier done on the sidewalk.

I SENT the Montarazes out to Paradise Farm with a set of keys. Livia George and I finished decorating, then stayed on for the dinner crowd. Hazel Upchurch and Nancy Teavers came in at 4:30. By recent standards, business was slow and the evening dragged. At 11:30 I was barreling up the highway to see how my new lodgers were doing. They had not yet gone to bed. I found them in

RuthClaire's old studio. Often over the past few months, I had entered-the untenanted loft to stand in its memory-haunted emptiness imagining just such a reunion. Now she was really back, my lost RuthClaire.

Adam, of course, was with her. He was sitting crosslegged on the drafting table opposite RuthClaire's low Naugahyde sofa. He had a book between his legs and a pair of gold-framed granny glasses clamped on the end of his broad, flat nose. The sleeves of his baby-blue velour shirt were rolled up, and he had unzipped it to the midpoint of his sternum, revealing a flannelly nest of reddish-black chest hair. He saw me before RuthClaire did.

"Still reading up on childbirth'?" I asked him.

He bared his teeth at me--a smile rather than a threat or an expression of fear--and lifted the book so that I could see it. RuthClaire pulled herself to a sitting position with my nappy beige rearing-bear blanket around her'shoulders.

By the door, I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

Then I crossed to the drafting table to find out what Adam was reading. A small, slick paperback: The Problem of Pain by C. S. Lewis.

"C. S. Lewis'?" I said incredulously, turning to RuthClaire.

"A habiline holdover from the Pleistocene's reading C. S. Lewis'?"

"What's wrong with that?"

I took the book from Adam. "Your husband here--the living descendant of a bunch of East African mole people-, is busily ingesting a work of theology'?"

"Do you believe he can read'?"

I glanced sidelong at Adam. I knew he had mastered sign language, I had seen him driving a car, and his eyes were appraising me with a keenness that gave me pause.

"Sure," I grudgingly admitted. "Why not'?"

"Then why find it hard to believe he's reading C. S. Lewis'? The man wrote for children, you know. He even wrote science fiction."

I changed tacks. "He ought to be reading, uh, Mid-wi/kO, Made Easy, or Benjamin Spock, or something like that."

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"He's done that already. Don't you understand? His

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consciousness is emerging from a kind of mental Upper Paleolithic. Adam's trying to find out who he is."

"More birthing-stool psychobabble?"

"Only if you choose to belittle it as such."

Adam made a series of signs with both hands, I could not interpret them. The irony of his knowing a system of communication of which I was ignorant underscored the foolishness of my doubting his interest in theology. (If he could sign, he could just as easily genuflect.)

"He wants to know if he has a soul," RuthClaire translated.

"So do I. Want to know if/have a soul, that is."

"Your lack of a heart may imply something equally discouraging about your spiritual equipment, Paul."

"Very funny. It's after midnight, kid. I can't believe we're discussing this."

"What about it? Do you think Adam has a soul'?"

"What kind of soul, lot God's sake'? An animal soul? A rational soul? An immortal soul'? All this sort of adolescent head game will get you is a migraine and a reputation as a philosophical nitpicker."

RuthClaire flapped her nappy blanket. 'Skip it. You've got all the sensitivity of a tire iron."

Suddenly dog-tired, I shuffled to the sofa and plumped myself down opposite RuthClaire. She took pity and lapped an end of her blanket at me. I pulled it over my knees.

"Almost like old times, hey, Paul'?"

"I can't recall having a chaperone before."

"Livia George."

"Livia George's a chaperone the way Colonel Sanders is a spokesman for the Save-the-Chickens Fund."

RuthClaire laughed, and we began to talk. Somehow,

owing in part to Adam's absorption in his book. it was almost as if we were alone in the wide, chilly room.

RuthClaire told me that downstairs she had seen, and had

been pleased to see, my growing collection of plates in her Footsteps on the Path to Man series. I had arranged the

eight titles issued to date on hinged brass stands in a

glass-fronted maple hutch. The plates included Ramapithecus, Australopithecus afarensis, A. africanus, A. boisei, Homo habilis. Homo erectus, Homo sapiens, and Homo neanderthalensis. The habiline, first issued back in August, bore an undeniable resemblance to the gargoyle perched on my drafting table.

"Look," I said, "you've got ten plates in this series, and you've already done the eight main hominids on the

road to Homo sapiens sapiens. What's next?"

"Contemporary racial variations."

"Negroes, Caucasians, Orientals?"

"That's right, ['ye already done paintings for those and some others---Oceanics, aboriginals, and American Indians. The final four are up in the air because there's some unavoidable overlap. I'll probably do Eskimoes, Arabs, pygmies, and Nordics, but I could just as easily substitute Bushmen or Montagnards or Ainu somewhere in there. It's arbitrary, of course, a way to get the number of plates up to eighteen. AmeriCred's- hollering for the last four so that they can get the plates themselves into production. Me, I'm sick of the whole rotten thing."

"Really'? You don't enjoy doing them?"

"It's donkeywork, Paul. I liked doing the prehistoric numbers, Adam's portrait and all that. But these last ten are sheer commercial excess. AmeriCred just wants their subscribers to keep paying through the nose for gewgaws.

I feel like a hack writing otherwise worthless potboilers."

"Enjoy your popularity. No one's twisting their arms."

"It's not that I'm doing a lousy job, it's just that these new ones aren't contributing anything to the development of my art. It's safe representational stuff. My audience consists almost entirely of well-to-do old ladies and fat-cat corporate executives looking for a 'classy' cultural investment.'" She stuck out her tongue, as if to see if there were a piece of lint or tobacco on its tip. (Nope.) "That's why

I've been so slow to finish this assignment. Paul."

"Blame it on your pregnancy."

"I've done that. It's a lie."

"People who regret making money are nincompoops."

"The regret--the guilt--comes from what you do to make it. Even you know that. Right now I'm whoring."

Adam looked up from *The Problem of Pain*. He made a gesture sequence loosely translatable as "Don't talk rubbish," then went back to Lewis's little piece of theodicy.

"Whoring'.) You didn't feel that way about *The Celestial Hierarchy*, did you'?"

"Not once. Those are breakthrough paintings. I avoided all the cliches--archangels with flaming swords, naked poly-polyes with wings on their heels, Jesus dragging his old rugged hanging tree. I did something new. It was a small miracle the series was successful. A bigger miracle it ever got commissioned."

"It made you popular. You hadn't bargained for that."
"How public," Ruth Claire quoted, "like a frog."
"That's smug elitism," I said. "It's probably insincere, too. You pretend to despise success because there's an old art-school attitude that figures nothing popular can be worth a damn."

"Listen, Paul, there's a backlash against me in the Atlanta art community because of my success. The people who count up there, well, they see my work on these stupid plates as a sellout. I do, too. Now, especially."

"If that opinion takes in the plates you're proud of, to hell with them."

"Paul. it's more complicated than that. They don't respect what I'm doing, and I can't really respect it, either--not these last ten examples of porcelain calendar art, anyway."

"They're jealous."

"That enters into it, sure. But I've always thought of myself as something of a visionary. My work for *American Creed* has undermined all that. The worst thing about the backlash is that I know I've brought it on myself."

The studio's overhead fluorescents flickered palely as the wind gusted and moaned. The yew outside the twin-paned plateglass creaked its tall shadow across our imaginations. Even Adam looked up.

"Is that another reason--you came down here? To escape the disapproval of the art-scene cognoscenti?"

RuthClaire frowned. "I don't know." Then her spirits mysteriously revived: "They like what Adam does. In February, Paul, the folks at Abraxas are going to give an entire third-floor gallery room over to an exhibition of Adam's paintings. It'll be in place for two weeks. Promise me you'll come see it."

"The West Bank," I reminded her. "It's hard to get away."

"You managed to get away last February when you dropped in on Brian Nollinger at that primate field station north of Atlanta. Well, Abraxas is twenty miles closer to Beulah Fork than that concentration camp for our furry cousins." A grinace of unfeigned revulsion twisted her mouth, but then her eyes were facetiously pleading. 'Listen, Mr. Loyd, I've just made you an offer you can't refuse. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. 'Yes. ma'am."

AND SO Adam and RuthClaire stayed with me, and Livia George drove home with me from the West Bank every evening to be on hand in the event that my ex-wife went into labor. At the restaurant itself we had a prearranged telephone signal. Adam, out at Paradise Farm, would dial and let the phone ring once. Then he would hang up, wait thirty seconds, and repeat the procedure. After the second ring, no matter how busy we were, Livia George and I would sprint up the Tocqueville Road in my Mercedes to answer his call.

Atlanta's news media finally caught on to the fact that the Montarazes had left the city. They telephoned the West Bank looking for a lead. Sometimes they even sought to induce Edna Twiggs to give them my unlisted number at Paradise Farm. She resisted. One day at lunch, in fact, she told me how she had turned down a bribe of money for

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that information. Edna Twiggs, an ally! Even so, I took the added precaution of connecting all the telephones in ; my house to an answering machine so that in my absence

RuthClaire and Adam could monitor incoming calls. Fortunately,

no one but me ever tried to ring them up.

I was still concerned that someone in a TV van or a I

newspaper company car might try to gatecrash. The At-

lanta papers had recently featured headlines about Adam

and RuthClaire. In the morning Constitution, this:

LOCAL ARTIST AND HER HABILINE HUSBAND
DISAPPEAR LATE IN HER HISTORIC PREGNANCY

In the afternoon paper, the Journal. this:

FOUL PLAY NOT SUSPECTED
IN ABSENCE OF LOCAL ARTISTS
BUT ABRAXAS CHIEF ANXIOUS ABOUT FAMOUS PAIR

The story under the latter headline reported an interview with David Blau, director of the Abraxas Gallery. Blau thought that the Montarazes were probably ()kay. but still believed they should contact him or one of his associates to confirm the fact.

"Is this fellow one of the avant-garde bigwigs who think you've sold out'?" I asked RuthClaire.

"David's More charitable than most. He credits me with practicing a deliberate serious-commercial split."

"Sounds like a decent enough Joe."

"He is. That's why I've got to give him a call."

"Don't," I blurted. My newfound, but still tepid, regard

lot Edna Twiggs did not permit me to trust her

totally. "Write a note. Put no return address on the envelope.

I'll mail it from Tocquevitle tomorrow morning.

He'll have it the day after."

That's what we did. While i was in Tocqueville to mail

the note, i hired a trio of private guards from a security

agency in the Tocqueville Commons Mall. The first man

came on duty that same afternoon.

Once the guards began their shifts, my taut nerves loos

ened. The likelihood of anyone's circling the farm and coming at us by way Of White Cow Creek seemed remote. It must have seemed remote to RuthClaire. too. She made up her mind that she was going to have her baby in a peaked canvas tent that she and Adam pitched beneath a pecan tree in the back. The tent was lavender. It reminded me of the floppy conical hoods worn by E. L. Teavers, Craig Puddicombe, and their anonymous Klan-mates on the night they came to kill Adam, I told RuthClaire so the first morning after the tent had gone up, its lavender surfaces sparkling with frost.

"You're right," she acknowledged, startled. "We bought it at a sporting-goods store in Atlanta and I never once thought of that. Maybe Adam did, though. Teavers's robe may have kept him from coming down with pneumonia."

"This tent won't keep you warm. The temperature today's in the twenties, RuthClaire."

"I'll be fine."

"The hell you say. What about the baby'?"

'The child's half habiline, Paul. Habilines are traditionally, and altogether naturally, born out of doors. The tent's a compromise."

"Out of doors in Africa or [laiti!]"

"If it's cold, Livia George can wrap the baby in a blanket and take it straight inside."

'Then what's the point of the stupid purple tent?"

"I've already told you. Don't you listen?" She turned on her heel and stalked toward the plateglass doors glittering above my patio deck. I followed her, shaking my head and mumbling curses.

ADAM CONTINUED TO read away at Lewis's The Problem of ' Pain. Too, from the library in Tocqueville--a side trip I made on the same day I hired the security guards and mailed my ex's note--he had me check out some other

fairly basic books on religious or spiritual topics: The I Serewtape Letters by Lewis, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, a young person's guide to understanding the great world religions, an English translation of the Koran, a biography of Gandhi, Thomas Merton's The Seven Storey Mountain, something called The Alphabet of Grace by Frederick Buechner, The Way of the Sufi by Idries Shah, a primer on the Talmud, and Mortimer Adler's How to Think About God. Pretty heady stuff tot a habiline. I had to carry the whole lot home in a Gilman No-Tare grocery bag from our local A&P.

Adam painted during the days, read in the evenings. Ruthie Cee, on the other hand, neither painted nor read. She spent most of her time sleeping while Adam worked. Sometimes she watched him. (He was putting the finishing touches on a huge, semiabstract landscape featuring a tangerine-red tree that reminded me of an African baobab.) She may have occasionally prepared a meal for the two of them, but if she did, she wasn't regular about it. She had no need to be. Livia George and I were scrupulous about bringing them at least one hot gourmet meal a day.

Saturday night at the West Bank. Six or seven people standing cheerful but also mildly impatient just inside the door, waiting to be seated. Fur jackets or chic leather car coats on the ladies. The men bundled in herringbone or expensive brushed sheepskin. Cold air swirling around the newcomers like the vapor in a frozen-food bin.

The telephone next to the cash register rang. I looked over at the flocked divider concealing the phone. A second ring was not forthcoming.

Oh no, I thought, not tonight,t

I smiled at a woman with a magazine-cover death mask

for a face and put one hand reassuringly on the shoulder of her escort. Mentally, though, I counted to thirty. The telephone rang again.

"That's it!" I cried. "That's it!"

Livia George came scurrying from the kitchen wiping

her hands on her apron. Her heavy upper arms were bare,

but she made no move to find her coat.

"Gona get going', Mistah Paul," she told me, pushing through the astonished people at the door. "Gotta he'p Miss RuthClaire birth that beautiful baby." She hustled out the door, down the sidewalk, and into the front seat of my Mercedes on the driver's side. Helplessly, I followed after, already resigned to the role of passenger.

The trip took maybe nine minutes, Our security guard automatically passed us through the gate, and my car's steel-belted radials flung gravel back at him as Livia George fishtailed us up the drive to the house. I was taking two steps at a time toward the front door when Livvy, at the corner' of the house, shouted, "Not that way, Mistah Paul! She in that purple puppet out back!"

"Go on!" I urged her. "I've got to grab a coat or something!"

The warmth of the house hit me like a Gulf Coast wind. I took a jacket from the shoulders of the baby-satyr statue on which I had draped it several days ago, pulled it on, and strode into the living room looking for a shawl or sweater for Livia George. From the back of a chair I grabbed a peach-toned afghan. But on the way to the sliding doors I hesitated.

Did I really want to see the woman I loved in the throes of childbirth'? Sure. Of course I did. Wasn't that what every sensitive with-it male wanted nowadays'? Men actually attended classes to learn how to provide support at the Moment of Truth. Some even scrubbed and put on surgical gowns to participate in the event. If their partners were back-to-nature advocates, they might build birthing stools or prepare lbr underwater delivery by buying scuba-diving gear. All I had to do was slide open a plateglass door and go tripping across my deck to a tent in a pecan grove. I was no longer RuthClaire's husband. The child in her womb owed me no genetic debt. It instead owed this paternal debt to a mute, sinewy creature right out of the early Paleolithic. Was the arrival of this squalling relic really an event I wanted to witness? My concern should

have been for RuthClaire's safety, for the health and well being of her child--but baser impulses had me in their grip and I hesitated.

Taking a deep breath, I went out onto my deck. The cold hit me like an Arctic hammer stroke, but I staggered through the pillars of my silhouetted pecan trees to RuthClaire's lavender tent. Inside the translucent smudge of the sailcloth, shadowy shapes stooped, straightened, and gesticulated. Adam, I was glad to see, had taken my PowerLite into the tent. He had even thought to carry one of the studio's sun lamps out there, an extension cord from the deck down into the pecan grove giving me a trail to follow.-

A hundred yards or so beyond the tent, a quick flash of light. I halted, blinked, looked again--but now the corridor of sentinel pecans was empty of any intruder but the keening wind.

"Mistah Paul, you better move your fanny fas' if you wanna see this!"

I moved my fanny fast. After skidding in the frost-rimed mulch, I whipped aside the tent flap, edged inside, and found RuthClaire lying flat on her back on a mound of blankets and ancient bed sheets spread out on a plastic dropcloth. Adam was kneeling to one side of his wife, but Livvy was hunkering between her legs--legs, I noticed, bundled in a pair of those ugly knit calf-warmers worn by women in aerobic-dancing classes---guiding from her womb the mocha-cream-colored product of her pregnancy.

"I told you it'd be easy!" RuthClaire cried ecstatically, letting her head fall back and laughing.

Livvy did something sure-handed to the umbilical cord, then lifted the minuscule infant by its ankles, bracing its back with one hand and showing it first to Adam and then to me. It was a boy, but a wizened and fragile-looking one. When Livvy slapped him on his angular buttocks, he sucked in air and wailed. Surprisingly, the sound lasted only a few brief seconds. Evolution on the Serengeti grasslands, I later came to realize, had selected for habitines whose newborns shut up in a hurry.

"Am' he a dandy!"

I put the afghan around Livia George's shoulders. Adam reached into the wings of the towel swaddling the baby to * touch his son on the head. Something like a smile flickered around Adam's lips.

"Okay." I said. "We've proved that Ruthie's game enough to bear her child in the back yard. Now let's get inside."

"Got a little bidness to take care of yet," Livvy said, handing the baby to its father. She knelt and massaged the undersides of RuthClaire's thighs; then she began to push gently on the mother's slack, exposed abdomen, to encourage the expulsion of the placenta. "Y'all go on in. Nothin' else for you to do out here."

Before Adam and I could exit, however, two strangers shoved their way into the tent.

First, a blond man in a double-breasted safhri jacket confronted us. Behind him, balancing a portable video unit on one denim-clad shoulder, was a slender black man. These intruders were so businesslike about deploying their equipment and their persons in the cramped interior that I actually considered the possibility that Adam and RuthClaire had hired them to video-tape their baby's delivery. If so, they were late.

'q'm Brad Barrington of Contact Cable News," announced the blond intruder. "My cameraman, Rudy Starnes." The black man gave us a perfunctory nod. "Well, well, well. Is this little fellow the Montaraz baby'/" He chucked the newborn under the chin with a gloved forefinger. "Looks like we underestimated the time it'd take us to get through the woods, Rudy. The big show's already come off."

'Sun lamp's giving us enough light to shoot by, Brad. Maybe I can do some reenactment footage to save the situation."

"Yeah," said Barrington. "And on-the-scene interviews." Grimacing. RuthCtaire raised up on her elbows. "What in pity's name do you guys think you're doing'/"

"You're trespassing," I protested. "You sneaked onto Paradise Farm from CLeve Synder's property."

A microphone in his fist, Barrington duck-walked beneath the tilted sun lamp to RuthClaire's shoulder, where he asked her if it had been a difficult delivery'. Leaning into the mike, RuthClaire let go of a high-pitched scream. Barrington recoiled, almost doing a prat-fail. Livia George, meanwhile, had slid the glistening placenta into a piece of torn sheet. Her entire manner implied that the sudden appearance of the two-man Contact Cable News crew was none of her affair. If nothing else, it was preferable to a hurricane.

"Who's on security duty tonight?" I asked. (I could never remember the guards' names.)

"Chalmers," RuthClaire replied, spitting out the word.

Barrington, looking more annoyed than abashed, approached her again with the microphone. "Don't you think this landmark event deserves a permanent video record'?

Don't you feel any sense of obligation to history'?"

RuthClaire, her breath ballooning, said, "Don't you feel any sense of shame, hanging over a half-naked woman with that instrument of psychic rape in your fist'?"

A thin veil of confusion fell across the newsman's face.

"Get out of here," I told him. "My first and last warning."

"Let's go, Brad," the black man said. "This ain't working out." Almost certainly at his partner's bidding, Starnes had just hauled a ton of equipment across five or six hundred yards of wintry darkness, and nothing was going as planned.

"Keep shooting," the blond man nevertheless told him.

"Brad--"

"This is a scoop! You see anyone down here from Channel Five or Eleven Alive? You know anybody else who staked out this place for three ass-freezing days'?"

"Nobody else that dumb."

I slipped outside and called for Chalmers, the guard. That did it for Starnes. He decamped, abandoning his associate to whatever fate the man chose to fashion for himself. He was hiking speedily off through the pecan grove, his equipment banging, when Chalmers came trot-

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ting around the corner of the house with his pistol drawn. The guard started to pursue the cameraman.

"Let him-go," i said. "It's the talking head in the tent who needs his butt run in."

Matters unraveled confusedly after that. RuthClaire was yelling at Barrington to go away, go away, and Livia George came out into the cold with the infant, nodding once at the house to show us that she was taking him indoors. Chalmers, a tall young man in an official-looking parka, started to go into the tent after Barrington when Barrington fell backward through the tent flap with Adam's head in his stomach and his arms pinioned to his sides. In a rapid-fire falsetto utterly unlike his on-the-air baritone, he was pleading for mercy--but he landed on his back with such an audible expulsion of breath that he could not keep it up.

Adam was all over him like a pit bull, leaping from flank to flank over the reporter's prostrate form, baring his teeth at him, all the while.growling as if rabid. RuthClaire emerged from the tent, too. Her blood-stained dressing gown hung to her ankles, her incongruous maroon leg-warmers visible just beneath its hem. She grasped one of the tent's guy ropes to support herself.

In a tone of rational admonishment, she said, "Stop, Adam. I'm okay. That's enough."

Through the fog of his rage, Adam somehow heard her. He stopped, Barrington's body rigid beneath him, and looked up sightlessly at Chalmers and me. Slowly--almost shockingly--sanity returned to his eyes, and he pushed himself off the reporter with his knuckles and stepped away from the whimpering victim of his assault.

"I want to hold my baby," RuthClaire told him. "Take me in."

Still trying to compose himself, Adam escorted her to the house. Chalmers and I remained in the pecan grove with Barrington, the guard pointing his pistol at the newsman's head. What now? Were we within our rights to shoot the trespasser'?

Barrington stopped whimpering. Catching sight of me

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upside-down, he asked if he could maybe have a cup of coffee before he called his station for a ride back to Atlanta.

"That damn Statues. He's probably to Newnan by now." Chalmers said, "If Mr. Loyd decides to press charges, you won't be going back to Atlanta tonight. I'll be turning you over to the sheriff in Tocqueville for a little quiet cell time."

Barrington got off the ground, groaning elaborately, and we argued the matter. If he gave me his word that Contact Cable News would never air the least snippet of tape taken tonight on Paradise Farm, I told him, I would forgo the pleasure of pressing charges. I was damned, though, if I was going to let him use my bathroom, much less serve him a cup of coffee. Barrington grumped about the First Amendment and Freedom of the Press, but verbally accepted my terms.

Then Chalmers and i accompanied him to the front gate. There, with a display of loyalty totally undeserved, Rudy Starnes picked up Barrington in the Contact Cable News van in which the two of them had been camping for the past three ass-freezing days, presumably to drive him back up the lonely highway to Atlanta.

UPSTAIRS, IN a tiny bedroom next to the studio, I found Livia George with the new parents. In one corner was a white wicker bassinet, but RuthClaire was sitting in an upholstered chair nursing her baby, whom someone had bagged up in a bright yellow terrycloth sleeper. A newt. I thought. A salamander. I reported what had happened with Barrington and told Livvy that I needed to go back to the West Bank to oversee the restaurant's closing--assuming, of course, that my employees hadn't already walked off the job in uncomprehending anger and frustration.

"They'll be back," RuthClaire said.

"I hope so," I said. "It's hard finding good help."

"Oh, I don't mean Hazel and Nancy and the others. I'm talking about those jerks from Contact Cable."

Abruptly, Adam stalked out of the room. I heard the lights click on in the studio and saw a wash of yellow lambency unroll past the nursery.

"I don't think he remembers the last time he let himself go like that," RuthClaire said by way of explanation.

"The time he wrestled E. L. Teavers into the brick kiln'?"

"That was self-defense, Paul, literally a matter of life and death. Tonight, the only thing that was really at stake was the sanctity of our baby's birth."

"Adam be awright tomorrow," Livia George assured us. "Too much 'citement for one evening."

"He didn't even bite the bastard," I said. "Ju knocked him down and growled."

"He went wild."

"Everybtxy goes wild now and then." I grinned. "Why, Ruthie Cee, even you went a little wild this evening."

She shifted her hold on the baby. "We were thinking of naming this little character for you. Keep that up, though, and you can forget it." Gently, she began to jog the suckling infant in her arms. "Adam sets standards for himself, high ones. They're high because the general expectation is that he'll comport himself like an animal. Well, his sense of self-respect demands that he never--ever--fulfill that cynical expectation."

"Which means his standards are higher than nine tenths of the world's human population."

"Adanfs human."

"You know what I mean. I was trying to compliment him."

The baby--Paul Montaraz, I realized with a sudden humbling insight--had fallen asleep nursing. He was small. Even asleep, his mouth tugged at RuthClaire's nipple with desperate infantile greed. Livia George lifted him up, coaxed a burp from him, and laid him on a quilted coverlet in the

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bassinet. RuthClaire told me that tomorrow morning the Montaraz family would return to Atlanta and my own life could go back to normal.

"Whoever said I wanted a normal life?"

"Look in on Adam, will you, Paul? Right now, another person's attentions might be better medicine for his blues than mine."

I looked in on Adam. He was sitting on the drafting table, his legs crossed, his stack of read and unread library books teetering at his knees. Although he heard me enter, he refused to look up. We were alone together in the tall drafty expanse of the studio. Despite the room's chilliness, my hands had begun to sweat.

"Adam," I said. "Don't feel bad about going after that 'Contact Cable turkey. If it'd been me, i'd've bit him."

The habiline looked me in the eye. His upper lip drew back to reveal his pink gums and primitive but powerful teeth. I looked away. When I looked again, Adam's gaze had gone back to his book.

'q wanted to congratulate you on becoming a father, Adam. The kid's a crackerjack." No response. "What's that you're reading'?"

The cloak of civility he was trying to grow into would not permit him to ignore a direct question. He lifted the small volume so that I could read its title. Ah, yes, The Problem of Pain again, on which Adam had foundered shortly after his arrival. I turn'ed the book around and saw that tonight he had run aground on the beginning of Chapter 9, "Animal Pain."

One sentence jumped out at me as it may have already jumped out at Adam: "So far as we know beasts are incapable of either sin or virtue: therefore they can neither deserve pain nor be improved by it." My belief that this sentence may have wounded Adam was predicated on the feeling that although RuthClaire had accepted him as fully human, he had yet to accept himself as such.

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"You ought to try this guy's Out of the Silent Planet." I said. "It's a helluva lot More fun than his theology." Adam carefully extracted the book from my two-fingered

ANCIENT OF DAYS

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grip. pulled it to his chest, and then flung it past my head to the far end of the studio. Like a broken-backed bird, it flapped to a leaning standstill against the baseboard. Adam took advantage of my surprise to unfold his legs and hop down from the table. Exiting the studio, he put me in mind of a lame elf or an oddly graceful chimpanzee: there was something either crippled-seeming or animatish about his walk.

"Shame on you, Loyd," I scolded myself.

PAPA, MAMA, and Little Baby Montaraz went back to Atlanta. The international media descended upon their home not far from Little Five Points, a two-story structure with a ramshackle gallery, lots of spooky gables, and a wide Faulknerian veranda. The house became almost as famous as the kid.

As for my namesake, he rapidly turned into the anthropological prince of American celebrity. Everyone wanted a piece of him and his parents. People, Newsweek, Life, "60 Minutes," "20-20," Discover, "Nova," Cosmopolitan, Omni, Reader's Digest, and a host of other publications and programs sought to report, analyze, or simply ride the giddy whirlwind of the Montaraz Phenomenon. Indeed, it took better than a year for the extravagant circus surrounding the family to dismantle its tents and mothball its clown costumes, but ever afterward, to this very day, a half dozen or so revolving sideshows have kept the promise (or the threat) of an even dizzier Return Engagement before the public.

But I'm running ahead of myself. Let me back up. In the absence of an attending physician, Tiny Paul required a birth certificate. Because his parents had left Paradise Farm early on Sunday morning, there was no way for them to obtain a file form on which to apply for a

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certificate from the Hothlepoya County Health Department.

On Monday, then. I drove to Tocqueville to pick up

the proper form. I filled it out while standing at the

registrar's counter. Surprisingly, this woman treated the

application as a routine matter. When I questioned her, she

told me that the form would now go to the Office of Vital Records in the state-government complex in Atlanta.

"What about the birth certificate'?"

"Send in a three-dollar filing fee and they'll send the certificate. It really doesn't take long."

"If I write the check, should I specify that the certificate itself should go to the parents' Atlanta address?"

The young woman--trim, deftly mascaraed--looked at me with a flicker of interest. "Why would they send the .certificate to you'? Writing the check doesn't make you the child's father."

"Then it isn't necessary?"

"Of course not."

Irritated. I sought to shock her. "What if I did happen to be the kid's father'?"

"Then it's awfully big of you to pay the filing tee," she said, not hesitating a second.

I grunted, pocketed my checkbook, and left.

On Wednesday, I received a long white envelope from Atlanta, not from the Office of Vital Records but from RuthClaire and Adam. The notes inside were both in Ruthie Cee's weird El Grecoish hand--tall, nearsighted characters in anguished postures--but the second of the two was reputedly dictation from Adam. Even partly disguised in RuthClaire's etiolated script, Adam's was the More original and the More perplexing document:

Well-loved Namer of our Son,
We are back. but are we home? My homes keep
jumping around. Paradise Farm I love for there I met
RuthClaire. For a while now it is the only one of alt
my homes that does not jump. Tiny Paul has just
.jumped into the world from my one home that stands
somewhat still. You are like a fierce seraphim that

holds down the corners of my jumping Eden. Thank you, sir, for doing that.

I must say two More things and maybe a little else. First, thank you for bringing me books on your card about God and thinking on Godness. Some of these I have regotten on my Atlanta card, so much am I interested. Second, deeply sorry for throwing one book -----even if it was my own--across your room in my bit, ter fit of not behaving right. It makes me laugh a little, with angry mirth, to say or see that title, THE PROBLEM OF PAIN.

I am also sorry for attacking that vile man Barrington. I should write to him to say so, but he should write me to say sorry a THOUSAND times himself. He should write Miss RuthClaire, and he should write YOU. He should quit his name from the station that sends him forth. God and thinking on Godness' should quiet my anger, but (too bad, too bad) they do not. Barrington is a man who needs better etiquette and also probably religion. So am I. But I have a long walk to get there.

This is my last "a little else" to ask you. One day this year Miss RuthClaire may ask you to come see about her seeing about me. Some doctors at Emory are plotting now a surgery to humanize me for this time and place. Do please come when she asks! We will reimburse--a pretty word--all losses. If you both agree to the niceness of using one bed during my hospital stay, I have no argument or jealousy to put against that wish,
Sincerely,

P.S. Miss RuthClaire has written my last a "little else" in some anger. I must learn, she says, that no roamed partner except possibly an Eskimo has a right "to dispose of the other's affections." I am telling her that I knew THAT already, and that the words "if both agree" prove I am not disposing, without consideration, her person. Good etiquette. Moral integrity.

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P.P.S. Tiny Paul does well. Sleeping at night very well. Making no noise. Good baby etiquette.

P.P.P.S. I would enjoy--greatly--a 15eh pal on spiritual matters, but you probably lack for time?

Utterly fascinated, I reread the letter and then went through it line by line a third time. What wouldn't a reporter give to lay hands on this extraordinary document? I thought briefly of letting different outfits bid for it, but once I had rejected this course as vile beyond even mx, notorious reverence for the profit motive, i never looked back. Adam was no longer my rival, he was my friend. I tried to imagine what sort of surgery the specialists at Emory were planning for Adam, but all I could think of · were such routine operations as appendectomy, tonsillectomy, molar extractions, and, forgive me, circumcision. Then it occurred to me that the doctors might be contemplating More exotic procedures, viz.. rendering Adam's thumbs wholly opposable, surgically removing his sagittal crest, or maybe even increasing his body height by putting artificial bone sections in his thighs or lower legs. The first and third options would perhaps make it easier for Adam to function among us, but the second was a potentially dangerous sop to either his or RuthClaire's (vicarious) vanity--for which reason I struck it from my catalogue. What then'? What were they going to do to Adam'? I folded the two notes back into their envelopes, feeling good about having decided to consider Adam my friend. Now it was necessary to act on that decision and enforce it by framing a reply. I found a grungy 14-cent postcard and wrote on it the following message:

Dear RuthClaire and Adam: I will come any time you need me. Just ask. No sweat about throwing C. S. Lewis across the room. i was once tempted to do the same thing myself. I'm the wrong pen pal for discussion of God and Godness, grace and salvation, extinction and immortality. Even good and bad etiquette in situations with a moral angle For that reason--not lack of time--I can't promise anything. Kiss the kid for me. Love, T.P.'s Godfather

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CHRISTMAS CAME and went. In Atlanta, the circus had begun. I wondered if my postcard had passed under prying eyes, thereby triggering the Montarazes' ordeal with the press. In the future, sealed letters only.

Early in February, RuthClaire wrote to say that they had received Tiny Paul's birth certificate. She included three dollars to cover the cost of the registration fee. I sent the money back. But with the bills and the note was a printed invitation to Adam's first exhibition of paintings at Abraxas. A wine-and-cheese reception in Adam's honor would precede the show, and I was also invited to that.' On the printed card RuthClaire had written, "You'd better be here, Philistine/"

The reception was on a Tuesday evening. I closed the West Bank after our 'midday meal, gave Livia George and the others both that evening and Wednesday off, put a sign on the door, and set off for the Big City . . . just in time to collide with rush hour.

Dristle kept my windshield wipers klik-klikking, and it was almost completely dark when I finally made my way up Moreland Avenue to Little Five Points and the Montaraz house on Hurt Street. That house, how to describe it? its' silhouette oozed a jolly decadence suggesting Mardi Gras and shrimp creole and tasseled strippers and derby-hatted funeral processionaires. A pair of lamps on black cast-iron poles shone on either side of the cobbled walk, their globes like spheres of shimmery, honey-colored wax. By their light, I saw two indistinct figures come out on the front porch, down the steps, and hand in hand through the misffall to my car. I let them in.

RuthClaire and Adam, of course, in boots and fleece-lined London Fog trenchcoats. From the two of them wafted the smells of soap, cologne, lipstick, aftershave, winter rain, and something peculiarly oniony.

"Don't I get to come in?" i squinted at my invitation.

"This is a wine-and-cheese reception, not a dinner."
Adam was sitting next to me, but the lady had slid into the back seat. "David Blau," she said, leaning forward, "asked us to show up a little early, Paul. We're letting you drive to throw the press off. They'll be looking for our hatchback."

"I thought they always had your place surrounded."
"Until we got Bilker Moody, they usually did. Tonight, thoughl the majority's already at Abraxas."

I asked about my godson. He was with the sitter, Pam Sorrells, an administrative assistant at the gallery who had sacrificed her own attendance at the opening to free Adam and RuthClaire for the event. An armed security guard--the aforementioned Bilker Moody--was also in the living room to protect La Casa Montaraz from uninvited guests. Bilker was nearly always present. That was the way their little family had to live nowadays.

"Look, the show's not officially over until eleven, Ruthie Cee. My stomach'll be rumbling like Vesuvius by then."
Adam reached into the pocket of his trenchcoat and withdrew a McDonald's cheeseburger in its Mazola Oil-colored wrapper. It was still warm--warm and enticingly oniony-smelling, i glanced sidelong at this object of gastronomical kitsch.

"Dare we offer a five-star restaurateur a treat from the Golden Arches'?" RuthClaire asked.

"Under ordinary circumstances, only at your peril. Promise not to tell anyone, though, and tonight I'll discreetly humble myself."

I ate the cheeseburger.. Adam produced a second one. I ate that cheeseburger, too. For dessert, RuthClaire handed me a (badly needed)' breath mint. Then off we drove, a nondescript pickup truck materializing about midway along the block behind us and tailing us all the way to the gallery.

THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA defines "abraxas" as "a composite word composed of Greek letters formerly inscribed on charms, amulets, and gems in the belief that it possessed magical qualities."

In Atlanta, the gallery called Abraxas is an influential but underfunded alternative-arts center in a predominantly black section of the city. The buildings making up the complex--a print shop, a theater, the galleries, and the studio wing--used to belong to a school. With the exception of the print shop and the studio wing, they were built early in the century in a stolid red-brick architectural style giving them the grim look of a prison or an oversized Andrew Carnegie library. Coming toward Abraxas from the east, you swing back and forth along Ralph McGill Boulevard between modest, clapboard and brick houses until you attain the crest of a hill. that plunges precipitously toward the foot of yet another hill. Abraxas, though, sprawls along the weedy mound of the first hill, partially obscured by the fence of a factory parking lot, and I was cheerfully dive-bombing the Mercedes past the gallery when Adam reached over to touch my arm and RuthClaire cried, "Stop,. Paul, you're missing it!"

My first good look at Abraxas left me chilled and skeptical. A one-person show at this abandoned school, I mused, could hardly have any more cachet or impact than a violin recital in a one-car garage in Butte, Montana. Adam's show was clearly small potatoes. The movers and shakers of the Atlanta art community had granted him this venue because his work had nothing but its novelty ("Prehistoric human relic actually puts paint to canvas!") to recommend it. More than likely, they had given him this show as a courteous bow to RuthClaire, almost certainly in the hope that she would contribute to the center's funding.

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This decaying three-story shell of chipped brick and sagging drainpipes was Abraxas'?

RuthClaire seemed to be monitoring my thoughts. "It's better inside. You have to park around back."

The lot had already begun to fill. We had to inch along behind earlier arrivals before finding a space beneath an elm tree at the end of the studio wing. Quite a crowd.

"The third-floor gallery has three main rooms," RuthClaire explained. "Adam's paintings occupy only one of them. Some of these people have come for the Kander photographs or the Haitian show."

We got out and crossed the lot to a plywood ramp leading into the old school's first-floor corridor. A security guard saluted RuthClaire and Adam and directed us up the cold interior stairs to the third floor. To my surprise, little inside the building contradicted my first impression of it as a candidate for the wrecking ball. At last, a formidable door confronted us, preventing entry to the gallery. Adam pressed a buzzer on the crumbling wall next to the door.

"I need a password," said a muffled male voice beyond it.

"Chief Noc-a-homa," RuthClaire replied. This was the name--the stage name, so to speak---of the Indian who was the official mascot of the Atlanta Braves. It was also the necessary password. The door opened.

"Welcome to the Deep South franchise of Cloud-Cuckoo- ' Land," said a tall, disheveled man in a frazzled, lime-colored sweater and a gray corduroy jacket with elbow patches of such bituminous blackness that it looked as if they would leave smudges on any surface they happened to touch. In fact, he held his elbows close to his sides as if to keep from leaving charcoal blots here and there about the gallery.

This was David Blau. He was nearly my age, but he exuded a boyish enthusiasm that seemed to be a permanent attribute of his character. RuthClaire made the introductions, and we went around the corner into the director's huge; drafty "office." In the middle of the room, a set of unfinished stairs climbed to a jutting mezzanine that may

have been a jerrybuilt studio loft. A lumpy sofa squatted with its back to the steps. People milled about between the sofa and its coffee table, between Blau's desk and a metal desk piled high with tabloid art publications. Other people, wine glasses in hand. were sitting on either the steps or the sofa, chatting, laughing, clearly enjoying themselves. Blau said they had a perfect right. Most of them had been working hard for the past ten days to make this opening possible. A woman in designer jeans and high heels approached us with a tray of wine glasses and decanters of both burgundy and white. Each of us took a stem, and even Adam drank, sipping at the rim of his glass as suavely as any cocktail-party veteran. 'Hey, Paul." RuthClaire whispered, "still think this is the Siberia of Atlanta's art world'.)''

Blau overheard her. "It's the High Museum that's the real Siberia," he said. "Every time I look at it I see a heap of trash-compacted igloos."

"I like it," RuthClaire said. "It's a lovely building."

"It's cold," Blau retorted. "Cold and sterile."

"You're not responding to the architecture, David. You're responding to the fact that its exhibition policies are different from your own."

"Southern artists can get shown in Amsterdam or Mexico City More easily than at the High," Blau told me.

"The High's safe. Colorful abstracts with no troubling political or social messages. Artists harmlessly dead or with one toot in some collector's anonymous Swiss bank account."

"It's supposed to be safe, at least in comparison to Abraxas. It's Abraxas that's supposed to be dangerous."

"Is Abraxas dangerous?" I asked Blau.

The Journal-Constitution art reporter--a young man with the clean-shaven look of a stockbroker--interrupted this conversation to ask RuthClaire if he could interview Adam. RuthClaire made a be-my-guest gesture and hooked arms with Blau and me to escort us in prankish lockstep out of the curator's office and into the flint gallery room. I glanced back over my shoulder to see the reporter and Adam

eyeing each other with polite perplexity. Adam's, however, was feigned.

"That wasn't fair," I told RuthClaire. "That guy didn't strike me as another Barrington."

"He'll survive. Maybe he knows sign language."

"What about Adam'? Isn't it awkward for him, too?"

"He appreciates the humor of the situation. It's the reporter who'll blink first, believe me."

Blau swept an arm at the walls of the spacious new chamber---careful, though, to keep his elbow tight against his side. "Is Abraxas dangerous? Hell, yes, Mr. Loyd."

I looked around. The white plaster or Sheetrock walls rose to a height of ten feet or so. Above them, extending another ten or twelve feet, were the cold red bricks of the old school's outer walls. Ceiling fans with wooden blades, motionless now, hung down from the shadows of the loft space. Then I dropped my eyes to the banners and paintings of the Haitian exhibit.

"Witch-doctor territory," Blau said, laughing. "This is one of the best collections of primitive Caribbean art ever put on display in the South. We did backllips to get it."

"Expensive'?"

Blau shook his hand at the wrist. "Under this administration, military bands receive More government money

than does the entire National Endowment for the Arts."

Dazzling tropical colors and bustling marketplaces danced in their frames on the Sheetrock. I liked what I saw. This painting was recognizably a portrait, that a landscape, and

this a street scene. The banners interspersed among the paintings were More puzzling. They featured beaded or sequined designs on long strips of silk or velvet. Even so, their cabalistic patterns seemed right at home in a gallery
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billing itself Abraxas.
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"What's dangerous about these items?" I asked.

"By themselves, I guess, not much--unless vaudun, the

Haitian voodoo religion, intimidates you. The banners you see here are what Haitian priests and witches call vevts. }. On the island itself, they'i'e laid out on the ground in meal or corn flour. They're ceremonial drawings that play a role I
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in the creation of trance states among vaudun initiates. Ours were made by real Haitians, of course, but they're only replicas of the verbs you might see in one of the canopy-covered temples during a real ceremony."

"The thing that's dangerous about this exhibit," RuthClaire said, "is that David and the others have put articles about the Duvalier government and our treatment of the Haitian boat people in odd places around the room. David's originally from Brooklyn. A radical-pinko-commie with a monthly car payment."

Blau put one arm across his midriff and bowed.

"What made you decide to go after Haitian art'?" I asked him.

"To tell you the truth, Adam. He's from a little island off the Haitian coast."

"Paul knows," RuthClaire said. "That's how we got our surname."

"Anyway," Blau continued, "it seems that Adam's people--the habiline remnant he was raised among--had occasional contact with members of the vattedun cult. The cult has its roots in West Africa, among the AradaDahomey Kingdoms, and even though Adam's ancestors come from East Africa, they share their continent of origin and their negritude with the voodooists. The Afi'ican-ness of the habilines and the majority of poor Haitians unites the two groups. It's a mystical thing, I'm afraid."

RuthClaire said, "Paul was convinced that a show in this old building was tantamount to deep-sixing an artist's work in the Chattahoochee."

"Not a bit of it," said the gallery director, taking her arm. "Let's show Mr. Loyd what really scares the More conservative members of our board."

We turned left into a small chamber with one strange, inward-curving wall, and I looked a question at RuthClaire.

"Eroticism," she explained. "Radical politics upsets fewer people than does graphic sex or nudity."

"Especially il' it has a racial or religious angle." Blau added.

"Right. You get red faces and resignations and withdrawn funding pledges."

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"Especially withdrawn funding pledges," Blau said.

"Then why bother to show it'?" I asked.

At which point I discovered that on the chamber's curved wall, and on the two long straight walls connecting with it, were arrayed thirty or forty large black-and-white photographs in simple chromium frames. A piece of Plexiglas as big as an automobile's windshield hung eight feet off the floor in the center of the room, and inside it was the word

STEREOTYPES

in thick, emphatic red letters, with the photographer's name--Maria-Katherine Kander--in much smaller characters beneath it. The photographs jumped out at me like a sudden angry slap.

"Holy Chhst," I murmured.

"They're best taken one at a time, in small doses,"

Blau told me. "But in here, I'm afraid, you'll have to prepare for a full-scale assault. Have a gander. We'll stay out of your way."

So he and RuthClaire drew back so that I could prowl along the curved wall looking at Ms. Kander's outrageous photographs. The first I stopped at, and studied, showed an angular black woman lying naked on her back on a sterile white sheet. Stacked between her legs, and in turgid piles around her thighs and belly, lay at least a dozen tiger-striped watermelons, a veritable gang-banging team of watermelons. The expression on the womaWs face suggested nothing short of complacent ecstasy.

I moved on.

A subsequent photograph was a frontal nude of a black man from the shoulders down and the thighs up. This faceless man had a daunting erection. At an upward angle paralleling that of his hard-on, he was holding the ebony barrel of a submachine-gun. I blinked and moved on. Next, an anorexic white woman in high heels and leather panties was lowering her mouth to the head of a microphone held out to her by a disdainful rock musician with an electric guitar draped across his body. Yet another

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photograph featured a sunken-eyed man in concentration-camp garb, a star of David stenciled on his arm band, gripping the bars of a bank vault. Ingots of gold bullion--like so many loaves of gilded bread--were visible on the shelves behind him.

An even More elaborate photograph showed a priest in a heavy cassock speaking to a congregation of naked parishioners, with his fingers crossed behind his back. Some of the people in the pews were fondling each other, while a few of the More elderly worshipers, pathetic in their wrinkles, frowned or slept. At the altar below the priest--the picture had been taken from behind his head--knelt a chimpanzee in black tie and tails, a top hat on its head. I wondered at the length of time it must have required to stage that one.

Blau approached. "What's the verdict?"

"They're genuinely offensive. They seem to be trying to offend me."

"They are."

"They succeed."

"If you say so," Blau replied, "yes, they do."

"Succeed in offending me'?"

"In offending you and in fulfilling the artist's intention."

"That intention being to offend'.))'"

RuthClaire appeared at my elbow. "You've got it."

"*Good," I said. "Until just now I was pretty sure you guys would regard my taking offense as middle class and unhip."

"No," Blau conceded, "they're definitely offensive."

RuthClaire nodded agreement. "Intrinsically offensive."

"Offensive in an absolute sense," Blau added.

We stood there in the gallery room looking at the definitely offensive, intrinsically offensive--offensive in an almost absolute sense--photographs of MariaKatherine Kander. Our abashed reverence before these disgusting artifacts began to irk me. Their "eroticism"--I hadn't seen anything that truly qualified--seemed to consist primarily of exposed flesh and simulated acts of fetishistic sodomy. Despite RuthClaire's implied disclaimer, I saw

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them as pornographic political statements. They were racist, misogynist, fascist, anticlerical, and maybe a dozen

other things too twisted or subtle to pinpoint. Antievolutionary?

Pro-consumerism? I had no clear idea. But their offensiveness was beyond question.

"What's the goddamn point?"

"Paul, try not to get ridiculously worked up over this."

"You mean there are degrees of offense that it's unhip to take'? I thought I could get as goddamn offended as I liked." I appealed to David Blau. "All I'm asking is what's the goddamn point of taking pictures that are meant to offend'?"

"Really," he replied, "it would be out of bounds for me to try to speak for Ms. Kander. Worse, you'd probably take it as some sort of definitive statement or explanation of her intent, which wouldn't be fair to either the artist or you."

"Criminy!" I exclaimed. "Who is this gal, anyway? Her name sounds German or Austrian. is she a Nazi'?" RuthClaire, who had an ostensibly calming hand on my arm, said, "I don't know her ethnic background. She's from Tennessee."

"She doesn't live in Atlanta," I hazarded. "She'd be an idiot to show such crap here--in this neighborhood, in a city with a black mayor--and try to live here, too."

"She's based in New York City," Blau admitted, "but she could live in Atlanta if she wished. Atlantans are more knowledgeable about contemporary art than you might think."

"Unlike your average hick from Beulah Fork'?"

"Paul," RuthClaire said, "let's go see Adam's work." She put a little gentle pressure on my arm. "Before the crowd:comes in."

"Wait a minute. I want to know David's interpretation of Ms. Kander's intent."

"But that would be to preempt--"

"RuthClaire. for God's sake, let me talk to the man." I rounded on Blau. "Look, I've got a mind of my own. You won't unduly influence my own final stance. I'm trying to

understand--to appreciate--these photographs. Isn't that what a show is for, to prompt greater understanding and appreciation of an artist's work'?"

Blau surrendered to my tirade. "Okay, you're passionate about this. That's good. You deserve an answer."

I waited.

"I think Kander's attempts to offend are motivated by a desire to heighten our outrage at the stereotypes she presents.

It's satire, Mr. Loyd, not a call to embrace what you see as, God forbid, accurate depictions of the people involved. Her technique forces you to reassess your basic attitude about each image. The art's not only in her skills as a photographer, but in the outrageous scenes she stages for the camera. I get off on that. The young lady's droll."

"That's one word for it," I said. "But is that how everybody who walks in here's going to interpret her work?"

"Oh, no. Some'll take one I°ok, turn around, and walk out. Others won't see anything but naked flesh. For them it's pornography, and they'll either enjoy it or scorn it as such."

I waved at the walls. "Is thi stuff for sale'?"

"Prints are. That's how Ms. Kander makes her living.

By today's standards, they're dirt cheap---but Kander's popular and sells in volume."

"Who's she popular with'? Voyeurs'? The artsyfartsy crowd'?"

"Both, I guess. There's no form to fill out to buy one'. So far as I know, you don't even have to be twenty-one."

'Where would you hang these things'? The bathroom'?"

"That's up to you. Are you thinking of ordering one?"

"Hell, no!" I virtually shouted.

Adam arrived in the company of a staff member named Bonnie Carlin, but I was still hot about the rub-your-nose.

in-your-own-smug-prejudices strategy of Kander's "art."

Everything Blau had said about it made a kind of backass-wards sense, but I kept telling myself that for all her cleverness and technical skill she was really accomplishing the Unnecessary, often for the Uncomprehending, and al

most always with a (pardon me) Drollery that bespoke a

superior smugness all her own.

Phooey, as Lester Maddox used to like to say.

Bonnie Carlin delivered a message--it was time to let the clamoring crowd in--and departed. We, too, abandoned the M.-K. Kander Room, crossing the corridor into the third and final gallery room, where Adam's paintings were the main attractions.

This room was like the first, but not so large. A single darkened studio loft brooded above us. Below it, all four wall; seemed to resonate with the vitality and prehistoric wildness that Adam--who had even begun to wear deodorant--would no longer permit himself to reveal in his day-to-day relationships with others.

I saw the huge barbed baobab that he had painted at Paradise Farm. I saw rolling silver-brown mounds that could have been either the Lolitabu foothills or a herd of headless mammoths on a dusty African plain. I saw grass fires, volcanic eruptions, jags of icy lightning, and a crowd of silhouetted human (or semihuman) forms either fighting or feasting or copulating. I also saw a series of ambiguous mother-and-child portraits that could have been of RuthClaire and Tiny Paul, or of a baboon female and her capering infant, or even of a genderless adult attacking a much smaller figure of the same unidentifiable, but monkeylike, species. There was also a painting of a hominid creature with the head of a dog or a jackal or a hyena, and around its head there glowed a brilliant orange-red light. The exhibit as a whole communicated energy and excitement. By my standards, very good stuff.

Demurely, Adam hung back, his hands behind him. His eyes shifted from side to side, as if fearful that I might ridicule this painting or maybe even take umbrage at something and walk out. At Paradise Farm, he had had no such qualms. Here, though, as the only artist actually on the premises, he appeared to be suffering a terrific bout of the butterflies.

"They're good," I told him. "I like 'em all."

The artist gave me a smile. His lips drew back to reveal teeth and gums. Then, flustered, he pursed them shut again.

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BY THE terms of his contract with Abraxas, Adam had to stick around long enough to meet some of the general public at the opening. Members of the board of directors who had not been able to attend the reception would want to greet him, as would some of the wealthier patrons who always arrived late. Moreover, Blau encouraged his artists to talk to students, impulse visitors, reporters from the Atlanta papers, and other media people. Temperamental aloofness could hurt fund-raising efforts.

The reception officially ended, and the crowd swarmed in. Adam and RuthCtaire withdrew to Gallery Number Three to receive congratulations and autograph Abraxas flyers. As for me, I retreated to Blau's office and poured myself the last half-glass of Asti Spumante from the only decanter not already empty. When I had finished this, I wandered into Gallery NumberOne.

The Haitian art was scoring heavily with tonight's visitors. I had to reposition my shoulders every few steps to slide through the pockets of people discussing it. Gallery Number Two, featuring Kander's work, was also Packed. Still flushed with admiration or embarrassment, two women squeezed out of that chamber into the hall.

"It's a wonder the place hasn't been raided," one of them said.

"Goodness, Doreen, the woman's making a statement." I followed Doreen and her scandalized friend into Gallery

Number Three. The Montarazes, huddled together for mutual protection, stood at the front of a ladderlike contraption giving access to the loft overhead. The sight of one of the hangers-on surrounding them brought me up short.

There before me--in checked shirt, green knit tie, dun pants, and fake suede jacket--slouched Brian Nollinger,

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the anthropologist from Emory, the Judas who had tried to turn Adam over to an agent of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. He had shaved his Fu Manchu, but his granny glasses and his air of unflappable belonging--"Why would these people be unhappy to see me here?" --identified him to me More certainly than a fingerprint check. And it was no comfort remembering that but for my own jealous meddling Nollinger might not have come into any of our lives, in a sense, I had created him. As an ongoing annoyance, if not as a human being.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Nollinger turned. "Hello, Mr. Loyd. I came to see the show."

"How long does it take you to see it'?"

"Well--"

"You don't know a damn thing about art. You're the kind of gallery-goer who thinks Winslow Homer was a blind Greek poet."

"Look, if it's okay with you, I came to apologize."

"For calling me an enemy of science'?" RuthClaire asked. "For accusing me of keeping my own private slave?"

For a moment, Nollinger looked genuinely embarrassed.

"Yes, ma'am, I regret that. I was feuding with Alistair Patrick Blair."

I shooed the other hangers-on away. "A scholarly feud excuses you of slinging mud at an innocent woman?"

"I had no idea she was going to marry Adam, Mr. Loyd. At least I believed the creature--the person--under her roof was a living representative of Homo habilis. That was More than Blair was willing to concede. Give me that much credit."

"Are you still shooting monkeys up with No D6z?"

That was a rabbit punch. The whites of Nollinger's weary eyes swung toward me. "I concluded those researches long ago. i've been trying to get a grant for some field work outside the States. But this isn't an easy time to find funding."

"So you showed up here to put the pinch on RuthClaire and Adam, I take it."

He shook his head, less in denial than in pity for the depth of my pettiness and suspicion. But one amazing consequence of this exchange was that RuthClaire had actually begun to turn a sympathetic eye on the man. She lacked the constitution for a sustained grudge. A character trait from which I, too, had benefited.

Nollinger gestured at the painting nearest us. "I'll tell you the truth. Another of my reasons for coming was professional. You see, I've always taken an interest in documented cases of the creative impulse in collateral species."

The poor fool was digging his own pitfall. I decided to lend him a hand. "What kind of cases, Dr. Nollinger?"

"Well, some years back, a chimpanzee in the London Zoo learned to draw and paint. He became downright proficient at putting circles and crosslike designs on canvas."

"A chimpanzee'?" RuthClaire said.

"That's right. I believe his name was Congo. They gave him his own show. He .even sold some paintings. The literature calls it the first documented exhibit of subhuman art in history."

RuthClaire's eyes had narrowed. "Are you trying to tell us that this is the second'?"

Nollinger was not an utter idiot. His face turned red.

"N-no, of c-course not. It's just that.., well, ww-we're all primates, you know. The impulse for self-expression may be b-basic to every primate species."

Abruptly, Adam turned and climbed the wrought-iron ladder into the gallery loft. Once there, he squatted in the shadows like a lissome Quasimodo.

"Go away, please," RuthClaire said.

"Wait a minute," Nollinger pleaded. "This is a public exhibit. You can't run me oft'."

"Have you seen the photographic exhibit?" I asked him. Mindful of the time I had hit him, he took a step backward. "You'll like 'em. Each and even one of them is an insult to people of taste and intelligence."

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"I'm trying to talk to the Montarazes."

"You're going into the Kander exhibit." I turned

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Nollinger around and headed him toward Gallery Number

Two. He tried to yank away, but I applied a bouncer hold and marched him out.

Fear of creating a scene prevented Nollinger from resisting me further. I took advantage of that scruple--at least he had one--to deposit him in front of a photograph of an American Plains Indian with an empty fifth of Wild Turkey in one hand and the blonde scalp of a white girt-woman in the other. This comatose nymphet wore only a black-lace teddy and lay prostrate at the big chief*s feet.

"Here you go," I said. "Another fascinating instance of the primate creative impulse."

This photograph, and the others around it, mesmerized Brian Nollinger, and I left him there in the crowded gallery room.

DAVID BLAU helped us escape Abraxas without running a gauntlet of reporters. We used an auxiliary stairwell to get away, emerging in the parking lot to find that it had stopped raining. Water glistened on the asphalt, and the trees dripped diamonds. In one patch of sky, a few fretful stars were trying to blink aside the cloud cover.

We drove to Patrick's, a restaurant in Little Five Points, and asked for a table away from the long storefront windows facing Moreland Avenue. Here we ordered More white wine, with a fresh spinach salad and a breast-of-chicken entrde. Because Nollinger had rained on Adam's parade, we had a hard time sustaining conversation.

"Consider the source and forget it," I told Adam.
"Your opening was packed. How often does that happen?"
"Rarely," RuthClaire said. "Not often at all."

"There, you see? It's a triumph, Adam. Forget about Nollinger's fatuous faux pas."
Adam wiped his fingers on a linen napkin. Leaning back

in his chair, he signed gracefully in the candle-lit dining room. Adam (according to RuthClaire's translation) did not regard the turnout at Abraxas as a personal triumph. At least half the people there had taken advantage of the respectability implicit in a gallery opening to ogle Kander's photographs. The most knowledgeable and devoted gallery patrons, Adam went on, had come for the Haitian exhibit. Indeed, those who had come to see his paintings (people like Nollinger, for instance) were motivated less by any faith in the potential importance of Adam's work than by simple curiosity. What sort of Rorschach blotches would a living hominid anachronism put to canvas'?

Half Adam's meal remained untouched. RuthClaire reached out and gripped him fondly on one side of his neck, massaging the taut sinews with a gentle hand. He closed his eyes, enduring this display of affection as if unworthy of it. Once upon a time, I knew, I would have killed to experience such tenderness at RuthClaire's hands. Once upon a time?

From my jacket I removed the letters that the Mon'tarazes had sent me in December. I shook out Adam's and

tilted it in the candle glow so that I could read it.

"One day this year Miss RuthClaire may ask you to come see about her seeing about me. Some doctors at Emory are plotting now a surgery to humanize me for this time and place. Do please come when she asks." Gallantly, I did not read the parts offering to reimburse me for my time and authorizing his wife and me to use the same bed if we both agreed to the "niceness" of that arrangement. "Any comments?"

"What do you want to know?" RuthClaire finally asked.

"What kind of surgery'? When's it supposed to happen'? When will you need me? Why so secretive'?"

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'*You'll come'?"

"I've already said so."

RuthClaire looked at Adam. He nodded a curt okay. "This summer," she said. "It's plastic surgery of an exacting kind. The point is to enable Adam to speak. It involves reshaping the entire buccal cavity--without de

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forming his facial features." She gave her husband a smile. "Hey, fella, I love that face." To me, she said, "There's work to be done on his vocal cords and larynx, too. Don't ask me to explain it all. It's already required several X-ray sessions, a couple of plaster castings, and more psycho-medical consultations than you'd expect a candidate for a sex change to sit through."

"Adam's going to be able to--" I turned one hand into a gibbering puppet. "--talk?"

"That's the basic idea."

I sat back in my chair. This particular basic idea had never occurred to me. Adam an orator'? Picturing him talking--like Brad Barrington or Dwight "Happy" Me-Elroy--gave me an uneasy feeling. What impact would the ability have on him? On others'? Would my acceptance of him--my commitment to him as a friend--gradually diminish as he asserted his own personality and opinions through the medium of direct speech? Did my regard (or Adam have its source in heretofore disguised feelings of superiority'?

"What's the matter, Paul?"

"How much is this going to cost'?"

"Lots."

"That's what i figured."

"For something this crucial, we've got it to spend."

She eyed me shrewdly. "You don't approve'?"

"Sure," I said. "It sounds great. Adam and I'll be able to commiserate about the weather.'

What was the matter with me? I had accepted so much

else about Adam--his marriage to RuthClaire, his biological
compatibility with my former wife, his developing
literacy, and even the half-pathetic sincerity of his spiritual
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yearnings. Why couldn't I accept his desire to talk'? To put
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my seemingly selfish reluctance in the best possible light,
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maybe I had a faint intimation of all the trouble looming
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ahead for us.

RuthClaire paid the bill, but I insisted on leaving the tip.

WE RETURNED in my car to the sprawling Montaraz bordello-cum-boarding house on Hurt Street. It was too late to play with Tiny Paul, but when we looked in on him sleeping in his bassinet. I was startled to see his dreaming features betray a hint of the feral self-sufficiency that only a moment ago, leaving Patrick's. I had seen in his father's face. All babies have something endearingly simian or pongid about them. but there in the sheen of his night light my godson's resemblance to a "collateral primate"--yes, a baby gorilla!--brought the forests of the Virunga Mountains of Uganda right into a bedroom near Inman Park. Life is strange. I thought, and I kissed the kid so that we could withdraw and leave him to his sleep. RuthClaire pointed me to a second-story guestroom wallpapered with a repeating pattern of pale green bamboo shoots, and Adam nodded me a friendly goodnight on his way downstairs to drive Pan Sorrells home. Alone, sitting on my bed, a paperback novel in my hands, I thought of Adam's naive invitation to share a bed with his wile while he was in the hospital--if, of course, we both agreed to the "niceness" of the sharing. How could I tell RuthClaire's new husband that tonight I wanted her beside me not to ravish but to cherish, not to penetrate but to pet'? These days, away from the West Bank, it was loneliness rather than sexual desire that ate at me, and that, of course, was why I kept myself so busy. At last I put the paperback down. heel-and-toed my shoes off. turned out the light, and stretched out to await the onset of sleep. It delayed and delayed, but eventually, two or maybe even three hours later, came. i spent Wednesday with the Montarazes, most of which we devoted to a tour of the High Museum on Peachtree Street, and on Thursday returned to Beulah Fork.

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Business continued to boom. People came in and went out, and so did money. I yelled at Livia George, she glared in insulted contempt at me, the dristles of winter gave way to the hurricanes of spring, soldiers of twenty or more nations died in almost all the senseless ways it is possible to die, dining-room help arrived and departed, and the president of the United States asked Congress to okay funds for a defense force of mutant giant pandas with which to protect the Aleutian Islands from Soviet invasion. Something like that. I was too busy to pay More than passing heed to weather, war, and politics.

AT LAST the summons came. I got to Atlanta on the day after Adam had undergone the nearly six-hour surgical procedure designed to give him the ability to speak. I would have been there for the operation itself but RuthClaire deliberately delayed asking me to come until the following morning, when it was already clear that her husband was out of danger. Whether all the tinkering would have the desired effect remained a question of prime concern, but not whether Adam would live or die. All this, defying the possibility of a tap, RuthClaire had told me in a telephone call--but when I reached Emory Hospital, I was still angry about not having been given the chance to sit with her during the actual surgery.

RuthClaire met me in a corridor below the pagodalike parking tower where I had left my car. She was wearing a white cotton blouse with scrollish cutouts in the collar, a seersucker skirt, and a pair of Italian sandals. She had a baby-carrier on her back, but it was empty because Tiny Paul, not yet nine months old, was standing at her knee gripping one of her fingers with a tentative hand. I could not believe it. T.P., whom I had last seen zonked in his bassinet, was walking. He wore navy-blue

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shorts, a powder-blue shirt, and a pair of minuscule tennis shoes with racing chevrons. There was nothing even remotely gorillaish about his appearance today. No baby fat, no leathery sheen on his forehead. As I approached him and his mother along the corridor, he eyed me with the solemnity of a pint-sized state legislator.

"Don't start in," RuthClaire said, raising her free hand in warning. "Everything's fine."

I knelt in front of the kid to give him a gentle poke in the breadbasket. His gums pulled away from his teeth in a . . . well, a smarl, which is to say a smile and a snarl so perfectly meshed that they are identical.

"He's really grown. How long's he been walking?"

"Since April, Paul. He's a dynamo. All the activity's slimmed him down.'*

"Walking at five months? Does he talk, too'.>''

That one earned me a reproving glance. "His' father's just had an operation to permit him to speak, and here you are asking me if our son's-talking yet. Do you want to make me cry?"

"RuthClaire--"

"Some children don't begin talking until they're two or More . It's nothing to be worrying about."

"Listen, i'm sorry. I didn't mean to---"

"Come on,'* she said angrily. "Let's go see Adam."

We averted an argument by walking to the elevators at the far end of the echoing corridor. T.P. kept up with us with an effortless trot, like an Ethiopian conscript of the 1940s jogging to the front.

Upstairs, the nurses at the nurses' station got our names and let us proceed down the hall to Adam's room. It was a long walk. I used it to begin berating my ex-wife for not calling me sooner, but she cut me off with a recitation of all the people who had already been by to see her and lend moral support.

"You don't need me anymore, do you?"

"Give that man a cigar. He's finally figured out the full implications of our divorce."

'*Why call me at all, then'?"

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"Because Adam thinks you should be here. He's trying to be the alpha-male of our household, appointing a lieutenant until he's well enough to return."

Like an invisible tide of warm honey, a mellifluous laugh came rolling out of Adam's room.

"What the hell was that?" I asked RuthClaire. "Not Adam?"

"We've got a visitor. He stopped by yesterday, too. I'd've run him off if Adam hadn't begged me before the operation to let the clown come calling." RuthClaire set Tiny Paul down, and the kid trotted into his father's room. "Come see."

We entered the room after the precocious toddler, who was already in the male visitor's arms. Adam lay on the bed beside them, his mummy-wrapped face tilted toward the door. An IV bottle on a pole dripped glucose into his bloodstream.

"Paul Loyd," RuthClaire said, "meet the Right Reverend Dwight McElroy."

Most television evangelists, I had long ago decided, looked like affluent mobile-home salesmen. An eye tic or a single unruly forelock of pomaded hair was the sole outward manifestation of the emotional kink that kept their motors going. But McElroy, whom I had watched for only a few fascinated weeks on his syndicated "Great Gospel Giveaway," did not fit this mold. Prematurely gray (or post-pubescently silver), he had the aristocratic mien of a European count. At the same time, though, I had no trouble dressing him out in basketball togs and putting him at the power-forward position for a team like the Celtics. He was too old for that, of course, but he appeared to be in great shape--lean, muscular, alert, and, in spite of his lank (rather than blown-dry) silver hair, facially collegiate.

Carrying T.P., the leader of the rigorously Protestant but otherwise scrupulously nondenominational Greater Christian Constituency of America, Inc., strcw3e toward me with his hand out. When he smiled, the count gave way to the down-home suggestion of a farm kid come to the big city i in a borrowed suit, i

"Just call me Happy, Paul. None of this Right Reverend business, now. Sometimes it flat wears me out."

"Me, too." RuthClaire said.

Warily, I shook the proffered hand. "I'm not a fan of yours. Happy. Forgive me for saying so."

"Well, I'm not a fisher of fans, Paul. I'm a fisher of souls."

"Any bites?"

"Why, they're always biting, Paul. They're just waiting to be fed." (I knew the feeling.) "That's why I try to keep my lines in the water."

"And your hooks out'?"

He knew he was being baited (as the Elizabethans baited bears, not as a southern angler readied a worm for skewering), but he neither laughed foolishly nor surrendered outright to my barb. He gave me an understanding smile and bounced T.P. lightly against his flank with one artn. "And my hooks out," he acknowledged. "The kind that don't tear, that lilt one up into the sun." He smiled again, as if to illustrate his meaning with a show of teeth.

I turned to RuthClaire. What was this joker doing here?

A little More than a year ago, he had condemned her from the pulpit as a twentieth-century sodomite. He had spoken with great force on two matters about which he undoubtedly remained acutely ignorant, evolutionary theory and the exact nature of RuthClaire and Adam's relationship. I wondered if the man had any shame at all. Summarizing my objections to his presence, I asked him if he did.

"I don't feel out of place here, Paul. Why? Well, it's simply not possible for me to hate the sinner as much as I do the sin. in fact, I don't hate the sinner at all. I love him." Adam, I noticed, was watching us. His eyes were pleading with RuthClaire to forgive their visitor--this rich, nationally famous tool for Christ--the particular foolishness that had wounded her so deeply a year ago.

T.P. had begun to squirm. McEIroy set him down. Then he said, "They say your husband's a habiline, Mrs.

Montaraz. What exactly is that. for mercy's sake'? From

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three states away, ma'am, I supposed everybody was making a fuss over some naked monkey out of some hard-to-get-to foreign jungle. 'A surviving representative of a

prehuman species,' that one fella said. Welt, I didn't

believe that then, and I don't believe it now."

He gestured at Adam, prostrate under a stiff hospital sheet. "That's not a habiline. That's not a ape. That's a man..The proof is you married him, ma'am. The further proof of it's this gift of God hanging on your skirt. And people, Mrs. Montaraz, I. can't he'p but love. I love Adam. I love you. I love your little boy. If I seemed to dump hellfire on y'all last year, that was because I hadn't yet come to know you and Adam for the fine people you are.

"It's likewise because I was supposing--along with millions of other folks the wide country 'round---exactly what the liberal press and all them high-profile network TV folks wanted us to suppose, namely, that Adam was a ape. A naked ape. Because that made a good story. Well, he's not a ape. He's a man. And the only sin either of you was guilty of is that of an appearance of impropriety in the eyes of the press and so in the eyes of some of us who, let me admit, should've known better'n to believe what we saw in our papers and heard broadcast at. us over our TVs. So I'm asking you to forgive me tot preaching you and your husband up as an instance of this troubled country's moral decay. Even Ol' Happy's human, ma'am."

"I didn't know that," I said. "How would you feel if instead of forgiving you, they sued?"

McElroy flicked me an annoyed look, but recovered and again importuned RuthClaire: 'I'm quite serious about the fullness of my sorrow over this. On the next 'Gospel Giveaway' I do in Rehoboth, well, I'll make you a retract, a completely sincere and thorough re-tract. It would be my real pleasure." He paused to assess the effect of this offer on RuthClaire. "Of course, it's my dut3., to do it, too," he quickly added. "But it would be my pleasure as well. i mean that."

Wearily, RuthClaire removed the empty baby-carrier

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from her back and slid it gently across the floor to the foot of Adam's bed. Then she crossed the room and sat down in the folding chair that McElroy had been using. T.P. trotted after her. She collared him and absentmindedly began knuckling his miniature Afro.

The evangelist spread his hands. "Well? Can you forgive me'?"

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. McElroy, if you'd just leave Adam and me out of your broadcast."

"Nothing else?"

"That'd be plenty. Oh, you could find Paul a chair. And one for yourself if you're going to stick around any longer."

McElroy smiled, did a heel click, and departed to look for two more folding chairs, shuffled to the end of the bed, grabbed my friend's toes through the sheet, and wobbled them affectionately back and forth. He, in turn, smiled at me with his eyes.

Considering the simplicity of his task, McElroy was gone an awfully long time. RuthClaire took advantage of his absence to fill me in. The man had come to Atlanta, and specifically to the Emory campus, at the invitation of the Institute for World Evangelism at Candler Theological Seminary. He had been in the city three days, speaking to seminary students and faculty at a variety of venues, including the William R. Cannon Chapel, one of the auditoria in White Hall, and the sanctuary of the Glenn Memorial United Methodist Church across North Decatur Road from Emory Village. Adam had purposely scheduled his surgery to coincide with McElroy's visit. Indeed, he had written the evangelist a letter explaining the operation's purpose, asking him to look in on RuthClaire during the delicate procedure, and requesting, too, a personal visit from the 'busy Right Reverend once the hospital staff had transferred him to a recovery room.

Adam had improved his chances for a favorable response by including with the letter a \$250 contribution to McElroy's television ministry. He had also worked to pique the man's curiosity (an instance, considering the

national appetite for news of the couple and their child, of almost touching overkill) by outlining for him his largely unguided religious researches over the past' ten months. Now, though, he wanted an authoritative pronouncement about his spiritual state. Did he, or did he not, possess a "SOUL"?

McElroy had replied that of course he did. On the other hand, he ought to give over the Biblically unsound, and altogether soul-destroying, notion that he belonged to a prehuman species out of which yet another prehuman species had arisen, and so on. A belief like that, denying the straightforward creation account in Genesis, would put the soul in mortal jeopardy. Adam was obviously sincere in his questing, but sadly misled about which direction to go 'by today's God-lost scientists and technocrats. McElroy would feel privileged to counsel with Adam, even to pray with him, while he was at Emory Hospital.

"He wrote McElroy?" I asked incredulously. "Sent him money'?"

"Oh, yes, most definitely. Adam's keeping his options open. He's written letters to the Pope, the Dalai Lama, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the chief elder of the Mormons, two or three ayatollahs in Iran, and a couple of the voodoo artist-priests who exhibited work at Abraxas back in February. If it meditates, sacrifices, or prays, Adam's written to it. Most of his correspondents reply. We have a scrapbook. We're probably going to need another one."

Adam worked his hands free of the sheet and tried to sign. By appearing to concentrate his will, he soon made these gestures distinct enough for RuthClaire to interpret. She must give over her hostility to McElroy, he advised her, for the man was there on his own valuable time to affirm Adam's humanity.

With a folding chair and a chair with a cushion, McElroy returned to the room. On the cushion rested a shiny bedpan in which two or three inches of water shimmered under the room's fluorescents. He was able to set down this chair without sloshing any of the water out of the pan. The metal chair he gave to me to unfold for myself. Then he

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placed the bedpan--with a hokey flourish---on the food

tray that swung out from Adam's bed.

"This is distilled water," he said. "I got it at the nurses' station, and it's physically pure, free of germs and pollutants."

"Can the same be said of the bedpan?" RuthClaire asked.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. It's been in an autoclave."

"Well, Adam's already had a sponge bath, Reverend McElroy. I gave him one this morning. There's no need to repeat it now."

"Has he been baptized'?"

"What'?"

"Has he received the sacrament of ultimate cleanliness?

Has he been washed in the Blood of the Lamb?"

"From a bedpan'?" I wondered aloud.

McElroy laughed. "The Lord and I make do with what's available. In going without baptism, I fear, Adam's begun to doubt his possession of the soul that, even now, he's in danger of leaving in perpetuity to the Prince of Darkness. I can't allow that, sir."

Her hands on T.P.'s shoulders, RuthClaire stared at McElroy as if he had proposed dousing Adam with lighter fluid. "This is in the worst possible taste," she finally managed.

"You may be right, Mrs. Montaraz. This may be in bad taste. Damnation has the weight of public favor on its side nowadays--it's the in thing to shoot for--but it's my deepest feeling that your husband isn't one to go along with the crowd simply because it's a crowd. Why'n't you ask him what he wants'?"

Realizing, I think, that McElroy had played an unanswerable trump, RuthClaire pulled Tiny Paul onto her lap and numbly, disbelievingly, shook her head.

"I'll ask him, then." Looking down on Adam, McElroy said, "Do you wish to receive the holy benison of baptism?"

With one hand, Adam made the gesture signifying Yes.

RuthClaire shook her head again, not believing that her husband would consent to what she regarded as a parody of the baptismal rite--but loving him too much to forbid him to continue.

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The evangelist closed his eyes. He asked God to purify further the water in the bedpan, then immersed his hands, lifted them dripping from the pan, and ca/'ried them to Adam's head. Dramatically, he brought them down together on the faint sagittal crest dividing the habiline's skull into hemispheres.

"Be careful," RuthClaire warned him. "Adam's jaw is a jigsaw puzzle of fitted pieces. If you hurt him or slow his healing, I'll . . ." She didn't know what she would do, but the warning seemed to get through McElroy's devout trance to his understanding.

Crooking his elbows, easing the pressure on Adam's head, he intoned, "Adam Montaraz, husband and father, by the authority invested in me as an ordained minister of * the gospel, I hereby baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Amen," I echoed him. It slipped out, this word. impelled, I think, by an unconscious memory of my slipshod Congregationalist upbringing in Tocqueville. RuthClaire, theoretically a believer, gave me a dirty look. McElroy wiped his hands and turned to her. "I want you to know, Mrs. Montaraz, that I've also lifted a prayer for Adam's speedy recovery."

"Thank you."

"What about that handsome boy there?"

"What about him'?"

"Has he been baptized'?"

RuthClaire folded her arms around T.P. "You've performed your ceremony for the day. It's time for you to leave."

"Delay could be a mortal mistake, ma'am. It could cause--"

"I don't think he's in any terrible danger: Baptists wait until they're twelve or thirteen, don't they'?"

"You're not Baptists, ma'am. Neither am I. We at the Greater Christian Constituency embrace the denomination, of course, but my own doctrinal origins are Methodist. We're brother and sister, Mrs. Montaraz."

Adam was signing, feebly but urgently.

"No," RuthClaire answered him. "Absolutely not. If it's done, it'll be done in a church, with a congregation present and a minister in his robes. And this pushy gentleman back in Louisiana counting his take:"

When Adam persisted, she grew More vehement: "You're overstepping what you have a right to ask! You're not the only one in this room responsible for your son's spiritual dispensation!"

McElroy said, "There's a Biblical injunction commanding wives to be--"

"Get the holy hell out of here!" RuthClaire yelled at him. T.P. burrowed into her armpit, and Adam's eyes fluttered shut. Like me, the habiline had probably never heard her utter an epithet stronger than "Heck!" or "Draft"

McElroy appeared ready to keep the argument going, but a portly man and a youth in his late teens or early twenties stopped at Adam's doorway, distracting the evangelist. The younger of the two men reproduced McElroy's lank physique almost exactly.

"C'mon, Daddy," he said. "Dr. Siebert's here to es-colt you to your next lecture over in White."

"Gotta go," McElroy told us cheerily. "Adam, stay in touch, you hear? It's been a jo5t, sanctifying you in Christ's sweet name. The boy next time, mebbe."

"Take the stupid bedpan with you," RuthClaire said. McElroy flashed her a look of disbelief and anger. Before it could turn into something stronger, though, he spoke to his son: "Come get the font, Duncan. I'm finished with it for today."

Duncan McElroy obeyed his father, retrieving the bedpan from the cantilevered tray and carrying it out of the room like a wise man bearing a thurible of perfumed incense. The evangelist gave us all a perfunctory salute, then followed Duncan and Dr. Siebert out of the room--off toward the elevator and another elevating session with some of Candler's theology students.

RuthClaire, wrung out, began very quietly to cry.

OVER THE next week, RuthClaire and I visited Adam every day, spelling each other when the other needed a break. Livia George was managing the restaurant in my absence and having no trouble at all, thank you. i drove down twice to check up on her, but her efficient handling i of matters made me feel about as useful there as a training wheel on a tank.

Adam was improving rapidly, but his doctors would not · yet permit the removal of his plastic chin support and the bandages holding it in place. So he was still taking nourishment intravenously and talking with us with sign language. Also, he had a lap-sized electric typewriter that he had taught himself to use by the hunt-and-peck method. McElroy had returned to Louisiana the day after Adam's baptism, but one unsettling consequence of the Bedpan Ceremony was the habiline's frequent recourse to prayer. The Lord's Prayer. The prayer of St. Francis of Assisi beginning, "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace." Any number of Old Testament psalms. "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep." The Pilot's Prayer. The Newspaper Col-mnnist's Prayer. A few obscure Eastern supplications, including Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and of course Sufic formulae. And a small anthology of weird but occasionally moving prayers--petitionary prayers--that Adam had written himself.

indeed, although Adam had accepted baptism in Christ Jesus's name, the prayer ritual in his hospital room had a decidedly ecumenical cast. Here is one of his prayers, typed out on the little machine he used to engage in animated dialogues with us:

Creator, awake or asleep, watchful or drowsing,
Timeless or time-bound,

Awake fully to my so-silent cry.
Remember the long-ago dead who loved animals
and clouds,
Redeem them in your pity-taking Thought.
And those who stumbled on the edge of Spirit,
Who prowled as do hyenas, just beyond the Light,
Think them, too, into the center of the Fire,
Consume them like sweet carrion in the loving warmth
Of your Gut and Mind.

If I am all Animal, Creator,
Give my growls, my whimpers, and my barks
The sound of angels hymning praise.
Let me not sing only for Myself
But also for the billion billion unbaptized Dead
With talons, teeth, and tails to herd them
Into unmarked graves of no importance.
O Gut and Mind above and all about,
Hear my so-silent plea on their behalf
And lift them as you have lifted Men. Amen.

Alter the baptism, every visit to Adam's room concluded
with a prayer. Once, bath annoyed and impatient, I
asked him what he believed he was accomplishing with
such ritual.

On his lap machine, he typed: THERE IS NOTRUE RELIGION
WITHOUT PRAYER.

That led me to question aloud the value of religion, trUe or otherwise, and
Adam struggled to answer that one, too.

Finally, he typed a single compound word: SELF-OEHNmON.

He seemed to find it amusing that the value of a systematic
belief in a Higher Power had its ultimate ground in
one's own ego. Was that a contradiction? No, not really.

A paradox'? Probably. But, of course, if Adam felt a
greater sense of urgency about his relationship with God
than did most twentieth-century human beings, the ambiguity
of his status vis-i-vis both God and his two-legged
fellows fueled that feeling.

"You know," I told him alter reading his "Gut and

Mind" prayer, "you're assuming there's a rigid line separating the ensouled from the soulless, real human beings

from humanoid animals."

Go on, he signaled.

"You've made it an either/or proposition. But what if

there's a gray area where the transition's taking place'?" LIKE THE DUSK SEPARATING DAY FROM NIGHT'.) "Exactly."

I read his next haltingly composed response over his shoulder: I UNDERSTAND. MISTER PAUL, THE BASIS OF HOW YOU ARGUE HERE. THE WORRY ABOUT WHAT AN EARLY HOMINID IS, BEAST OR PERSON. BUT MANY THINGS, I THINK, IT TAKES TO MAKE A CREATURE HUMAN, AND IF A CREATURE IS MISSING ONLY ONE OR TWO, I DO NOT BELIEVE IT IS RIGHT TO SAY, AH HA, YOU DO NOT BELONG TO HUMAN SPECIES.

"Okay, Adam, if you believe that human beings have souls, then anyone on this side---our side---of the transitional area has one. You're safe because ,,. well, because you've successfully interbred with a human woman." ET IS NOT THAT EASY. "Why not?"

BECAUSE A CREATURE GOING THROUGH ANIMALNESS TO HUMANITY--IN THEORY, I TELL YOU--IS GOING THROUGH A MAPPABLE SORT OF EVOLUTIONARY JOURNEY. BUT A SOUL DOES NOT DIVIDE, IT DOES NOT BREAK. YOU CANNOT GET CHANGE FOR IT. YOU HAVE ()NE IN YOUR POCKET OR YOU DO NOT HAVE ONE. WHERE, THEN, DOES GOD REACH INTO THE DUSK TO GIVE A SOUL TO ONE OF THE CREATURES ON THIS JOURNEY'? WHAT SECRET REASONS DOES HE HAVE FOR MAKING THIS VERY MYSTERIOUS GIFT'.)

"If God's reasons are secret, Adam, and the gift's mysterious, maybe it's impossible to know and futile to worry about. Maybe we'd be better off forgetting the whole stupid notion of souls, immortal or otherwise."

DOES IGNORING SUCH HARD QUESTIONS SEEM TO YOU, MISTER PAUL, AN ADMIRABLE WAY OF LIVING'?

"If they're nonquestions. If they don't have any answers."

Adam considered my offhand dismissal of his concerns. Then he typed: FOR ME, MISTER PAUL, THEY ARE REAL QUES-

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TIONS. He advanced the sheet of paper several times and added at the bottom of the page: LET US PRAY.

RuthClaire, who had been present throughout this verbal i and typed exchange, took from her handbag a slick little { paperback, The Wa), ora Pi/grim, reputedly by an anonymous nineteenth-century Russian peasant, and began to read aloud from its opening page:

' 'On the twenty-tburth Sunday after Pentecost-I went to church to say my prayers there during the Liturgy. Th first Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians was being read, and among other words I heard these--"Prav without ceasing." It was this text More than any other: which forced itself upon my mind, and I began to think how it was possible to pray without ceasing, since a man has to concern himself with other things in order to make a living.'"

Soon RuthClaire was leading us in chanting the pip grim's habitual prayer, the Prayer of Jesus, which goes, "Lord Jesus Christ, have me/cy on me." Throughout this chanting, though, I could think of nothing but how well Livia George was getting along at the West Bank without me.

Damn her, anyway.

AT THE Montaraz house I earned my keep preparing all the meals that we did not take at the hospital or at off-campus eateries. Keeping my hand in, I called this culinary activity. T.P. ate with us on most of these cosy occasions, growing fonder and More trusting of me with each bite. He no longer smarled at me, he unequivocally smiled. He was especially fond of a cheese-andbaby-shrimp omelet that I served up one morning for breakfast. RuthClaire and I got along like brother and sister. Nights, I kept to the upstairs gues! room with its bamboo-shoot

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wallpaper while she kept to the master bedroom just down the hall. T.P. would wake me in the morning by filching the covers from my bed with a methodical hand-over-hand motion that left the sheet and spread piled up on the floor like a drift of Dairy Queen ice cream. He wanted that gourmet omelet, and I was just the man to rustle it up. Less a godfather than an indulgent uncle, I was only too happy to oblige.

Sister and brother, RuthClaire and I.

My stay in the Montaraz house finally reconciled me to the fact of our divorce. In the bathroom, too many conjugal clues to overlook: a common toothpaste tube (neatly rolled up from the bottom), His & Her electric razors, a jar of antiperspirant that they obviously shared. We did not sleep together during my stay, RuthClaire and I, and the tension between us drained away. I was at ease in the Montaraz house, in total harmony with all its occupants.

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Almost, anyway. How do you develop a cordial relationship with a hefty, bearded young man who wears a .38 pistol strapped to his right ankle and a Ruger .45 half hidden under a fold of his Chattanooga Choo Choo T-shirt?

This was Bilker Moody, the laconic Vietnam veteran

and erstwhile automobile reposessor who had become the Montaraz family's chief security guard. Unmarried and

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virtually relative-less he had adopted RuthClaire, Adam, and Tiny Paul as surely as they had adopted him. I had

met Bilker back in February, but he had stayed almost I obsessively out of sight during those three days, as if the

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announced brevity of my visit required from him his considerate disappearing act.

Now, however, I saw Bilker Moody every day. Although he reputedly had an apartment of his own somewhere, during the week he slept in a small, bare room--at

one time a walk-in pantry--between the kitchen and the garage. The Montarazes had agreed to this live-in arrangement because it obviated the need to hire guards in shifts,

as I had done at Paradise Farm. Further, Bilker insisted that his vested interest in his own quarters would make

him More vigilant than a guard from off the premises.

True, he sometimes took catnaps, but his experience in

Southeast Asia had taught him to leap awake at the tread of a cockroach. Besides, his peculiar circadian rhythms made him keenest at night, when the threat of intrusion was greatest. He was no slouch during the day, either; he had the reflexes, instincts, and nerves of a champion jai-alai player, even if his size argued against his having them. He had honed his skills not only in the jungles of Vietnam but also during daring daylight recoveries of automobiles whose buyers had failed to keep up with their payments. The Montarazes could scarcely go wrong engaging a willing man of his bulk, character, and fearlessness. Bilker Moody seemed to genuinely esteem the people under his care. T.P. was fond of him, too, and had a remorseless fascination for the big man's full-face beard. Around the child, Bilker displayed the retiring gentleness of a silverback gorilla. Usually, though, he avoided getting involved in a play activity for fear of letting his guard slip. Enemies of the Montarazes' privacy were everywhere. During my stay in July, he intercepted and politely ran off any number of curiosity-seekers. That was what he had been hired to do. He wasn't really a babysitter. Bilker had as little to do with me as possible. He refused to eat the meals I fixed for RuthClaire and T.P., but clearly did not believe that I was trying to poison anyone. If he and I chanced to approach each other, he would ostentatiously give me room to get by, sometimes muttering a greeting and sometimes not. RuthClaire said that this was a respectful posture that, as an enlisted man, Bilker had automatically assumed for officers--but all I could think as I strode past was that he was pulling the pin on, and preparing to toss at me, a fragmentation grenade. Didn't he know that in the late 1950s, around the time of Elvis Presley's induction, I had spent two years of obligatory military service as an enlisted man? 'qs it my breath?' I asked RuthClaire. "Too much garlic in the blintzes?" "He's shy, that's all. This job is his life." "Shy, huh'? How long had you and Adam known him before he began spilling his war and repo-man stories'?"

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"He wanted a job, Paul. He had to talk to get it. He doesn't dislike you. He just feels uncomfortable around you, knowing you came at Adam's request, to bolster the guard."

Late one evening, then, after cleaning up the kitchen after yet another midnight supper, I approached Bilker's pantry to air the question man-to-man. The door to the pantry was ajar, revealing one wall of naked studs and a section of ceiling composed entirely of ancient tongue-and-groove slats. Tentatively, I rapped.

"What?" demanded Bilker Moody.

I stepped over the pantry's raised threshold and found the big man sitting on his rollaway bed with the Ruger trained on my abdomen. Recognizing me, he laid the pistol down. Disdainfully.

"Thought we could talk a minute," I said.

The pantry contained a plywood counter upon which rested a sophisticated array of surveillance equipment, a hotplate, a General Electric coffee maker, a computer, and a small wire rack of paperback computer manuals and soft-core pornographic novels. A huge commercial calendar hung over the bed. Its pinup photograph was not of a bare-breasted nymphet but instead of a customized automobile with mud flaps and Gatling-gun exhausts. The company responsible for the calendar made socket wrenches. Bilker Moody shook a handful of cartridges into his palm from a box. He inspected each bullet tip in turn.

"I've been impressed with your performance around here," I told him, hoping to disarm him with praise.

He looked me full in the face, his expression altogether grim.

"Do I rub you the wrong way, Mr. Moody'?"

"Ain't no right way to rub me. Don't like to be rubbed."

"Listen, I'm not here to put your job in jeopardy. I'm glad you're here. I only came because Adam wanted me to."

"Why'?"

The question surprised me. "As a kindness to RuthClaire, I guess."

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"If Adam likes you, you can't be too big a turd."
That stopped me for a minute. Then I said, "That's
what I tell myself when I'm feeling down: 'Hey, Paul. if
Adam likes you, you can't be too big a turd.' Cheers me
right up."

"Stay out of my way."

"This time next week, I'll've been gone three or four
days."

"I tell you that," Bilker Moody said, unblinking, " 'cause
wherever I am, that's where the action's gonna be. The
heat. You come in, I go out. It's for your own good."

"That's a little melodramatic, isn't it'?"

"You're the joker got took for the joyride down in the
Fork'? The one got that cross burned on his lawn'?"

"So you're really expecting trouble?"

"I'm paid to expect it."

"Then maybe I'd better leave you to your world"

"'Night," he said. "And on your way out--"

"Yeah?"

"Don't let the doorknob ream you in the asshole."

"Mr. Moody--"

"Just call me Bilker." His eyebrows lifted, maybe to
suggest that his vulgar parting shot had been intended
companionably, maybe to emphasize the irony of inviting
me to use his first name after firing that shot. He lifted the
Ruger and waved it at the door.

"Good night, Bilker. Really enjoyed our chat."

The following morning I gave RuthClaire a rundown of
this exchange, as nearly verbatim as I could make it. She
told me that I had made a skeptical convert of Bilker; the
proof of his good opinion was that he never joked with
incorrigible turds, only those who struck him as recyclable
into relatively fragrant human beings. Thanks a lot, I said.
But I settled for it. It was better than getting fragged in my
sleep

RUTHCLAIRE and Adam had a big downstairs studio, formerly a living room and parlor. Previous occupants had knocked out the wall, though, and now you had elbow room galore down there. In this vast space were unused canvases, stretching frames, makeshift easels, and even an upright sheet of perforated beaverboard with pegs and braces for hanging their art supplies and tools. Elsewhere, ?' finished and half-finished paintings leaned against furniture, reposed in untidy stacks, or vied for attention on the only wall where the artists had thought enough of their work to display it as if in a gallery.

"No More plate paintings," RuthClaire told me the night after my visit to Bilker. "I'm off in a new direction. Wanna see'?"

Of course i did. RuthClaire led me to a stack of canvases near a work table consisting of three sawhorses capped by a sheet of plywood. All of the paintings were small, no larger than three feet by four, the majority only a foot or two on their longest sides. RuthClaire had painted them in drab, washed-out acrylics. They were not exactly abstract, but neither were they recognizably representational--a troubling ambiguity they shared with Adam's bigger and bolder canvases.

To me, in fact, RuthClaire's new paintings looked like preliminaries for paintings that she had not yet essayed in final form. That she considered them finished, and regarded them with undiluted enthusiasm, astonished me. I wondered what to say. M.-K. Kander's photographs had at least given me the verbal ammunition of my outrage. Here, though, was precious little to comment on: murky beige or green backgrounds in which a variety of anonymous shapes swam.

"Well'?" Then, noting my hesitation, she said, "Come

on, Paul. 'Your honest reaction. That's the Only kind that's

worth a flip."

"The honest reaction of a restaurant owner's probably not even worth that, Ruthie Cee."

"Oh, come on. You've got good art sense."

"Let me off the hook."

"You don't like them.?"

"If i'd fingerpainted stuff like this in Mrs. Stanley's fourth-grade class in Tocqueville Elementary, she'd've said I was wasting paper. That honest enough for you'?"

As if someone had yanked an invisible bridle, RuthClaire's nostrils flared. But she recovered and asked me why Mrs. Stanley would have made such a harsh judgment.

"For scrounging around and muddying the colors."

"The muddiness is deliberate, Paul."

I replied that as a consequence these particular ,paintings looked anemic, downright blah.

"That's an unconsidered first impression."

"I've been staring at them a good five minutes."

"A gnat's eyeblink. Maybe you need to live with one a while. Pick out the one you hate the least--or hate the most, for that matter--and take it home with you."

I sighed audibly. RuthClaire's pitiful acrylics belonged on a bonfire. Even Paleolithic cave art--the least rather than the most polished examples----outshone these hazy windows on my ex-wife's soul. In the almost ten years I had known her, I had never seen RuthClaire do less challenging or attractive work. It was hard to believe that living with one of these paintings would heighten my appreciation of it or any of the others.

She began to explain what she was up to. Freeing the work of pretense. Bright colors had a blunt, primitive appeal that rarely engaged the intellect. She was after a subtler means of capturing her audience. Artists had to risk alienating their audience--not with violence, sacrilege, or pornography, but with the unfamiliar, the understated, and the ambigou---in order to make new. Viewers with both the patience and the openness to outwait their first negative reactions would see what she was trying to do.

"But what if the paintings are bad, RuthClaire? Flat out

bad? Banal, lackluster, and ugly?"

"Then you'll never be enlightened by them, no matter how long you hang around them. Eventually, your negative first reactions will be vindicated." Quickly, though, she hedged this point: "Of course, it's possible you're just color-blind or tone-deaf to the work's real merit."

"I know spoiled pork when I smell it. I don't have to eat it to know that it's bad."

"A gourmet chef is a gourmet chef is a glorified short-order cook. An artist is an artist is an artist."

"That's smug, RuthClaire. Really disgustingly smug."

She kissed me on the cheek. "You've noticed how ii small they are'?"

"A point in their favor."

"Another way of freeing them from pretense," she said, ignoring my cynicism. "Rothko liked big paintings because the viewer has to climb into them and participate almost physically in their energy and movement. Well, I want the patient viewer to climb into these canvases intellectually, Paul--not in the clinical way that a Mondrian, say, demands, but in the spiritual way that a decision for faith requires."

"That's clever. You want the viewer to acknowledge the merit of these paintings on Jaith?"

"I call the series Souls, Paul."

"Which of course explains everything."

At this juncture, altogether good-humoredly, RuthClaire decided to end the argument. Never had we been so badly at odds on the subject of her art, and never had our disagreement on the subject had less effect on our good opinion of the other. Weird.

"Let's go see Adam," she said.

THAT AFTERNOON I left the hospital, taking T.P. with me, to give Adam and RuthClaire a little time together alone. Our destination was a restaurant, fairly recently expanded and remodeled, called Everybody's. It served beer, sandwiches, pizza, salads, and pasta in an airy, relaxed atmosphere perfectly suited to its predominantly college-connected clientele.

I ordered beer and a bacon-cheeseburger for me, a Coke and a cheeseburger for my temporary ward. T.P. sat in a kiddie chair with a booster seat, and we whiled away forty or forty-five minutes eating and watching the people. Traffic plied the hill on North Decatur Road, squirrels scampered on the dappled campus across the street, and emerald-necked pigeons strutted the sidewalks. I felt loose and at ease, almost ready to drowse. Staring into my beer, I may have actually done so.: .

Someone was standing beside T.P. under the angled skylights of the restaurant. I almost spilled my beer reacting to the stranger's presence. Before I could stand up, though, she sat down on the chair opposite mine.

"Hello, Mr. Loyd:" she said. "i recognized you from the newspaper photographs. The baby's being here didn't hurt, though. That made me look twice. Otherwise, l'd've gone on by."

"Another tribute to my personal magnetism."

The woman wore an expression of amiable amusement. i figured her to be in her early thirties---almost out of the range of my serious affections. Thin-boned and tall, she escaped looking angular. Springy amber ringlets framed her pleasant face. She was wearing a gold-plated necklace that seemed to be made up of' dozens of minuscule glittering hinges. She folded her long arms on the table, and the amber down prickling them caught the evanescent dazzle of the tiny hinges at her throat.

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"My name," she said, "is Caroline Hanna." I
I tried to get a grip on the familiarity of her name.
"You've heard of me before, Mr. Loyd. Once, at Brian
Nollinger's urging, you took some photographs of Adam
Montaraz. Brian showed those photographs to me. And it i
was from me that he got the clue to research the island of
I
Montaraz as Adam's possible point of origin."

"Nollinger," I echoed her numbly.

"You don't like him, do you'?"

"in my book, he's a world-class jerk."

"That's not entirely fair," Caroline Hanna said evenly.
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'I'm sure it isn't. But his kindness to you, or to his
aged mother, doesn't absolve him of the dirt he kicked on
.

my ex-wile. It doesn't clear him of abusing my hospitality

:: . in Beulah Fork. To three quarters of his acquaintances, the

man may be nobility incarnate--but if all he ever shows

me is his pimply backside, well, Miss Hanna, that's what
i

I'm going to judge him by." She was looking at me as if I
I

were a sick bear in Atlanta's zoo. "I called you Miss
Hanna, didn't i? You're probably Doctor Hanna."

"Call me Caroline."

"Paul," I said, tapping my thumb against my chest.

"Anyway, I'm sorry to say that your friend Nollinger, I
back in February, even had the gall to ask RuthClaire and

I

Adam for money. He needed funds for some kind of field i
work he wanted to do somewhere."

"He'd come to apologize."

"Ostensibly. He even blew that. He started talking about
some painterly ape in England." ,

Caroline Hanna shook her head wistfully. "That's Brian,
all right."

"What can I do for you'? Would you like a beer'?"

She declined, saying that she had only wanted to get a
closer look at T.P.--he was a sweetie--and to introduce
herself to the man who had implicated Brian in the biggest
event in evolutionary science since the publication of Darwin's Origin of the
Species. She was glad to have contributed
in a small way to the unraveling of the mystery of the
origins of the Montaraz habilines. Too, she felt a certain
odd kinship with me, for we each had a peripheral impor-

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tance to the whole affair. Of course (she hastened to add),

she was further on the periphery than I, but she could

sympathize with the muddle of conflicting feelings that a

person in my position must sometimes experience. Wasn't she running a gauntlet of semipainful changes herself?

Ever the diplomat, I said, "Like what'?"

She apologized for prompting the question. "I wasn't fishing for a chance to list them. honest."

"You don't have to list anything. Just tell me the most painful of your changes. It might do you good."

Caroline considered this. Then she said, "Brian left Emory in June. He resigned his position in the anthropology department and left--without telling me anything. No foul play, you understand. He let the folks in his department know. He just didn't see fit to divulge his plans to me."

"Another teaching or research position somewhere?"

"Not according to his department head. Brian told him he was going to take off for a year and go overseas."

"He could always visit Alistair Patrick Blair in Zarakal."

A wan smile from Caroline. I added, "Self-possessed women frighten him. The lack of a goodbye is the damning proof. He's what my mbther would have called a cad."

"She would've had every right, but I'm not your mother."

I toasted Caroline with my beer mug. "Amen to that." I put the mug down. "But what else'? Surely, getting shut of the biggest No-Dfz pusher at that primate field station can't top the list of your woes."

"You know you're out of line, don't you'?"

"I do. I'm sorry. I can't help my feelings about, uh, Brian. Tell me something that'll stir my sympathy for him."

She started to get up. "Forgive me for butting in on you and your godson, Mr. Loyd. I have work to do."

"Please." I put my hand on her wrist. "One More chance. One More item from your list of worries. And I won't be such a sarcastic bastard again, believe me."

"No, you won't," Caroline said, subsiding. "How about this? The situation among the Cuban detainees in the

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Atlanta Penitentiary has me down. Some of those people belong in prison. But others deserve their freedom, and all my efforts to bring about releases for them have gone for naught. There. Do you like that one?"

"I'm in sympathy with it."

"Stupid idealist," she said, smiling gently. 'I'm going."

"Don't you want to know what I'm doing' here? With T.P.?"

"T.P.'s the baby? No. No, I don't. It's none of my business, and my business isn't really any of yours, either.'" Again she made as if to stand. I

"Give me your address, then. We might be able to redefine the limits of each other's business."

Hastily, she scribbled on the edge of a napkin. "Here's I: a telephone number. Now, then, I've really got to get busy."

"T.P. reacted to her move to abandon us--throughout our talk, he had been staring at her with moony adoration--by reaching out and upsetting his drink. I hurriedly began to gather up napkins with which to blot the mess. In order to get at it, I lifted T.P.'s chair out of the way.

"Do you need some help'?" Caroline asked.

"No, I've got it. Did you notice, though'? The little bugger's stuck on you, lady. So am I."

"Hush. That's embarrassing." She spoke in an undertone and looked around Everybody's at everybody looking at us.

"Knocking over his cup? Nah. Happens all the time with kids his age. Not embarrassing. People make allowances.'" "

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it."

She retreated a step or two. "i wouldn't mind if you called, though--not at all." Before I could reply, she was gone.

A young man with bushy hair and a long apron helped me finish cleaning up, and I sat back down. During her fifteen or twenty-minute stint at our table, Caroline Hanna had affected me in the powerful, nonrational way that teen-agers sometimes collide with each other. A pulse in my throat was working, and a film of sweat on my palms

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endangered my grip on my beer mug. How ungrown-up, I thought. How immature. In only a few years I would be fifty, and here I was surrendering to--actively encouraging--the kind of hormonal rush that sends callow high-school aspirants to ecstasy screaming to the showers. Nobody since RuthClaire had made me feel that way, not even Molly Kingsbury.

Later, our bill duly paid, T.P. and I returned to the hospital.

BACK IN Adam's recovery room, RuthClaire told me that David Blau had invited us to accompany him and his wife Evelyn to a nightclub near the Georgia Tech campus. The club Sinusoid Disturbances--was on a narrow little alley perpendicular to Spring Street. Its main attraction was live music, but it also featured (although only on Fire Sine Fridays) the work of several avant-garde "performance artists." These artists used music, projected visual images, props, the spoken word, and a variety of strange choreographies to make statements about art and life. David ranked high among the performance artists who had given Sinus-old Disturbances its reputation as Atlanta's leader on the New Wave nightclub scene. His group, consisting entirely of people from Abraxas, would be the main act at tonight's Fire Sine Friday. That was why he wanted RuthClaire and me to attend.

"What about Adam?" I asked.

But the habiline typed: I BE FINE. TOMORROW, AFTER ALL, I AM UNWRAPPED. ME FOR REST AND READING.

'May I bring a date?'

This request startled RuthClaire. "A date'?"

"That's right. A woman."

"I didn't think you meant a two-legged raisin. I just didn't know you knew anybody up here to ask."

"I've been shinnying down a knotted sheet every night

I've spent in your house, Ruthie Cee. Meet a lot of folks that way."

"Well, it's amazing Bilker hasn't shot you. What's her name'?"

"Caroline Hanna."

Just as I had done, RuthClaire struggled to locate this name in her mental ledger of friends, acquaintances, and so on. I let her struggle. In fact, I left Adam's room in search of a telephone, looked up the number of the sociology department, dialed it. and asked to be put through to Dr. Hanna's office. Although startled to hear from me so soon, she accepted my invitation, offering to meet me at the Montaraz house at seven-thirty, if that would simplify our first deliberate rendezvous. Right now, though, { she had no leeway for chitchat. She had promised the :iii 'students in her next class that she would have a test graded for them today.

RuthClaire and I left the hospital at five-thirty, T.P. dead to the world in my lap. Back on Hurt Street. Bilker emerged from the garage like a troll forsaking the shadow of its footbridge to terrorize a wayfarer. Hands on his hips, he bulked in the sunlight, malevolently squinting.

"We're going out on the town, Bilker," RuthClaire 'said. "All of us. Set the security alarms, lock everything up tight, and don't worry about the traffic around here. I'll ask the Fulton County police to make a couple of extra tours of the neighborhood, I need an escort, Bilker. Mr. Loyd, my ex-husband, already has a date."

Even in the garage, Bilker squinted. "To where, ma'am."

"Sinusoid Disturbances. Put on some struttin' duds, okay'?"

"For a trip to the doctor. Whose sinus trouble is it, anyway, yours or--" He jerked his thumb at me, unable to speak my name aloud.

"Informal clothes, Bilker. Don't worry about a single thing tonight. Tonight's just for fun."

THE BLAUS arrived at a quarter past seven. David was dressed like a painter, not the beret-and-palette variety but the extension-ladder-and-gallon-bucket kind. His wife, Evelyn, although at least forty, wore a little girl's party gown and patent-leather shoes with buckles. The Blaus, I took it, liked costumes.

Caroline Hanna, as good as her word, pulled up in front of the house at seven-thirty, in a blue Volkswagen beetle. I helped her out. and the small boy in me responded approvingly to her neat, relatively conservative clothes. Her skirt was a beige wraparound belted with a chairi similar in design to the hinged necklace still at her throat. Her jersey had stylized chevrons on its three-quarter-length sleeves, giving her the look of a drill sergeant in the Scandinavian Fashion Force. I walked her to the porch to meet the others.

T.P., who was going with us, was natty in white shorts and a T-shirt with a polka-dot bow tie printed directly on the material. He reached immediately tot Caroline. She took him from Bilker and began jogging him in her arms. Bilker looked relieved. After a bit More small talk, we split up to drive to Sinusoid Disturbances, the Blaus taking their car and Bilker assuming the wheel of my Mercedes to chauffeur the rest of us.

The sidewalk fronting Sinusoid Disturbances angled by it at such a daunting grade that as we drove past, looking for a parking spot, I wondered if the bistro's patrons had to walk around inside the club like sheep on a hillside, struggling not to topple. No one would ever mistake the crumbling, two-story building for Caesar's Palace.

"Uh. what kind of crowd do they get here?" Caroline asked.

"David says it's a pretty weird mix," RuthClaire replied, her arms on the seat back. "Tech students. Punk

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rockers. Kids from the Atlanta College of Art. It's mostly the last group that gets off on performance art on Fire Sine Fridays. Some of the punks'll go along with it, too, but the Tech students--the men, anyway--have a tendency to disrupt things."

"That's too bad."

"Oh. it's not so terrible. David doesn't let it bother him. He sees the disruptions as part of the spectacle."

Bilker. stymied by the traffic in his efforts to find a parking space, finally let us all out in front of the nightclub. A boy with an oversized safety pin through his cheek opened the front door for Caroline. who was carrying T.P.

for RuthClaire. This door was a slab of stained oak with a :: rectangular window of amber glass featuring a sine-curve

ill pattern etched into it in spooky crimson. I thanked the boy for his courtesy, and he replied, almost as if he Were i',i genuinely human, 'Wou're welcome." Then the door shut

behind us, and darkness settled upon our gingerly stepping group like a coffin lid.

*'Criminy," I muttered.

But RuthClaire had my arm, and she directed Caroline and me to a teller's cage from which a reddish glow emanated. We were in a foyer of some kind, and at the cage I leaned down and bought four admissions from a young woman in cutoff jeans and a short-sleeved sweat-shirt--after the punk at the door, a paragon of Middle American normality.

A few More steps put us on a concrete landing just beyond the narrow foyer. Concrete steps descended from the landing to the floor, about twelve feet down, or you could squeeze your way along the outside wall of the ticket cage to a mezzanine that projected from the bistro wall paralleling the interstate highway outside. Chairs and circular tables crowded both the mezzanine and the main floor below, and almost all of this furniture had the look of radioactive wrought iron.

Higher than the mezzanine level on the club's uphill side was a control booth for Sinusoid Disturbances's principal disc jockey. The booth had champagne-tinted Plexiglas windows, and a big, acorn-shaped flasher that whipped

strokes of blue and white light around the interior. Loud tousle played, and below us, flailing away at each other in this storm of noise, jitterbugged a host of damned-looking human wraiths.

T.P. was as awe-stricken, or as horrified, as I. He clung to Caroline as if at any moment she might toss him over the rail into the cobalt chaos of the pit. RuthClaire pointed out a table at the far side of the club, next to the projecting runway of the stage on which tonight's live entertainers would perform, and told us that David had reserved it for us.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Backstage with Evelyn. They're setting up. It's probably going to be another thirty or so minutes before they come on."

A trio of dubious humanoids brushed past us on the way downstairs. One of them bumped me in the back. Her hairdo was by the trs chic team of Friar Tuck and Bozo the Clown, but she hurriedly swung about to apologize to me.

"It's okay," I said, surprised by the depth of her anxiousness, "That kidney never worked very well, anyway,"

"Oh, no! I really did hurt you!"

I had to assure her that I was fine, that my allusion to a disabled kidney had been meant solely as a joke. But even in retreat the girl continued to apologize, and soon Caroline and RuthClaire were laughing.

"What the hell was that all about?" I asked them.

"Really, it's not about anything," RuthClaire said. "David says that this is the only part of the country where the kids who go punk forget to stop saying please and thank you. It's a cultural thing. Atlanta's punks are polite." "All of them?"

"Well, a lot of them. That young lady there seemed to be trying to make up tYr the ones who aren't."

Caroline shifted T.P. from one hip to the other. He was waving a fist in time to the music, his head ticktocking wildly. The sort of repetitive actions that wear out a person holding a child. RuthClaire noticed and took T.P. from Caroline, and we waited on the landing until Bilker came

swaggering up behind us. His gait seemed designed to intimidate anyone who took exception to his string tie or his undisguised contempt for Sinusoid Disturbances. Under his tan jacket (whose maroon back vents occasionally opened out like the gills of a gasping bass), he was wearing, I knew, his Ruger. On duty. Ready for action.' Anticipating the heat. A little melodramatic, I thought again. Bilker seemed to have a vision of himself as a latter-day Rooster Cogburn charging in single-handedly to rout the bad guys.

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ONCE ON the main floor, I saw that some of the club's customers were not flamboyant punks but intelligent young men and women of student age. I was probably the oldest person on the premises. I felt a little more comfortable here, among the kids wearing neat and modish clothes, but I was still something of a relic among these bionic space babies. Then the music stopped, and Bilker allowed that the only thing any noisier he had ever heard was a dusk-to-dawn mortar attack on his barracks near Da Nang. He was a country-music fan, a devotee of the no-nonsense article spun out by Roy Acuff and George Jones. Groups like the Oak Ridge Boys and Alabama soured his stomach. The former did too many cutesy-poo songs, and the latter, God save their souls, he had once seen perform at a country music festival wearing short pants. Short pants, for pity's sake. That was okay on a cookout, mebbe, but not on grown men making their living in front of the public! This was the most talking I had ever heard Bilker do. Through his tirade, I held Caroline's hand, pinning it to my knee under the tabletop. Then the club's DJ spoke, and the sound system permitted his words to reverberate over our heads like an articulate siren:

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"Welcome to amher Fire Sine Friday here at Sinusoid Disturbances, culture freaks! Comin' atcha from his plastic cloud is Hotlanta's answer to that silver-tongued sweetie in the White House, Bipartisan Bitsy Vardeman! Ol' Bitsy's here to ease the strain 'twixt donkeys and heffalumps, honkies and cooler cats, mentblks and ladies fair, hetero and homo pairs, an'--Lawd have mercy, y'all!--'twixt your ever-lovin' bodies and your ever-iivin' SOOOOUULS!" This last word stretched out until it had five or six syllables and the pitch of a freight-train whistle.

The curtains on stage parted, and the Moog-warped melody of an old standard set to a fusion-rock beat began to surge back and forth through the bistro. Suddenly, seven well-endowed young women in body stockings pranced into view, tossing their heads, rotating their arms, and apparently trying very hard to unsocket their pelvises.

"Prepare yourselves, culture freaks," cried Bitsy Varde-man from aloft, "for a little heartstoppin' boolaboola from Ess Dee's very own sultry and sensual ballet corps, the Impermanent Wave Dancers/"

The Impermanent Wave Dancers did twenty minutes of gymnastic splits, leaps, and buttock-flinching to progressively louder rock music. Bilker Moody watched them with the same clinical aloofness with which a law-enforcement officer might watch a fight between pit bulls. T.P. enthusiastically clapped his hands. Caroline's attitude was harder to gauge--a distrustful kind of wonder, maybe.

RuthClaire shouted, "David hates this, but it's just about the only thing that'll get a Friday-night crowd to pay a three-dollar cover for an evening of performance art!"

Finally, after a raucous eternity, the dancers departed, and Bipartisan Bitsy Vardeman announced, "Okay, babies, here tonight from Abraxas, Atlanta's Hall of Miracles and Mirages, David Blau and the Blau Blau Rebellion! Give 'em a hand, culture freaks! I say now, give 'em a hand/"

App}ause was sparse, and the darkness that had descended alter the dancers' collective exit persisted. Some of the students near us began to grumble.

Eventually, though. David Blau's voice spoke forcefully

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from behind the sequined curtain: "Let there be light?"

Obligingly, Vardeman spotlighted the curtain, which parted to reveal an immense black tarp suspended .like a movie screen at the rear of the stage. Blau, in his house painter's costume, walked forward from the back, stopped on the edge of the projecting runway, and stared soufully out over the heads of his audience.

"And Adam knew Eve," he declared in actorish tones. "And knew her, and knew her, and knew her. And the generations of Adam began to evolve. They evolved, my friends, toward the many likenesses of God that you may see sitting at tables all around you."

An unexpected blackout.

In this darkness, everyone in Sinusoid Disturbances could . hear some hurried but efficient-sounding rolling noises.

Then the footlights came on, and we could see a group of two-dimensional cardboard figures on wheels lined up in front of the tarp. Each cutout depicted a representative of five different early hominid species. The figures to the left looked noticeably More apelike than the figures to the right--although, somewhat anomalously, the figure in the middle had the most brutish physique. The oddest thing about the cutouts was that through holes corresponding to the figures' mouths, there hung limp blue balloons. Suddenly, all five balloons inflated, obscuring the painted faces behind them, and each balloon jiggled against the head of its cutout as if yearning to escape skyward. Because of the frank frontal nudity of the five hominids, this was an especially ludicrous sight, and many of the kids around us began to snigger.

A man of Oriental descent stepped out from behind the figure on the far left, "Australopithecus aphilrensis," he said. As soon as he had spoken, he reached behind his cutout, and the balloon biding its face floated straight up, four feet or so, and bobbed to a standstill on its string.

Para Sorrells's head appeared above that of the second figure in the line. "Australopithecus afficamts," she said. Its balloon also climbed ceilingward, halting about a foot above the balloon of the A. qlarensis cutout.

Then David Blau peeked mischievously from behind the

third figure. "Australopithecus robustus," he said. The balloon attached to this cutout--the most massively built of the five--ascended only a little over a foot. The incongruity of the balloon's brief ascent, after the audience had been led to expect something else, provoked laughter--as did the creature's resemblance to a squat, seminaked gorilla. Evelyn Blau popped up behind the fourth figure. This one bore an uncanny and obviously deliberate likeness to RuthClaire's hospitalized husband: Said Evelyn distinctly, "Homo habi/is." The helium-filled balloon in front of this cutout's face rose to a height of six or seven feet. A black man in painter's coveralls--a young artist with a studio at Abraxas--stepped out from behind the final cutout. He said, "Homo erectus." The balloon belonging to this creature, the tallest and the most human-looking of the lot, floated upward a /hot higher than the habJline's. Then the black man strolled down to the apron of the stage, looked out, spread his arms, and said in a haughty, sardonic voice, "Homo sapiens sapiens." Mall the wise the wise. The culmination of God's evolutionary game plan.

From the pocket of his coveralls, this man withdrew a pellet pistol. This action prompted Bilker Moody to reach for the shoulder harness under his coat, but RuthClaire patted his wrist and shook her head. Meanwhile, the performance artist with the pellet gun turned toward the cutouts, aimed his weapon, and, squeezing Off a shot, popped the balloon belonging to A. a/arensis. The cutout's human' attendant rolled it off-stage. Then the nonchalant black man popped the balloons of all the remaining hominid cutouts, giving the person behind each figure just enough time to push it into the wings before firing at the next balloon. When he was finished, he pocketed his weapon, walked to the Homo erectux cutout, and, like a hotdog vendor pushing a cart in Manhattan, guided the last of the extinct hominids into the wings.

Blackout.

A bewildered silence gripped the people in Sinusoid Disturbances. Then someone--a football player from Tech? --shouted, "What the fuckin' hell was that supposed to

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mean?" Others at their tables began to boo, a din that swept tidally from one end of the club to the other. Some of the art students near us, -however, were on their feet applauding and shouting, "Bravo! Bravo!"

Bitsy Vardeman averted a donnybrook by spinning Sister Sledge's popular recording, "We Are Family." a hit even before Adam's appearance at Paradise Farm. Many in the audience began to clap their hands, sing along, and boogie around their tables.

The lights in the club came up full. and all five members of the Blau Blau Rebellion were revealed standing on the stage, each one clutching a bouquet of ten or fifteen lighter-than-air balloons. David, Evelyn, and their fellows began distributing the balloons to various people in the crowd, beckoning folks toward the stage or ambling out the runway to make the transfer.

T.P. stood up in RuthClaire's lap, his arm stretched out for a balloon. Pam Son'ells, I saw, was coming down the runway toward us, Sister Sledge continuing to chant the lyrics of their repetitive anthem and dozens upon dozens of people now surging forward to intercept Para.

"Remember," she was shouting over the music, "you mustn't take one unless you believe--"

"Believe what?" a male student cried.

"Unless you believe you're immortal! And if you take one, you mustn't let it pop!"

"Why the hell not'.)' ' shouted the same young man, who had cleared a path to the end of the runway.

Para replied, "Because if you let it pop, you'll die."
"Oh. come off it."

"This is your soul," Para patiently explained. "If you let it pop, you'll die within three days."

"Bullshit!"

David Blau came to the end of the runway, lifted his cluster of balloons, and told the entire bistro. "It isn't bullshit. Whoever accepts one of these, but fails to care for it and lets it pop. well, you'll die almost immediately. You'll blow away on the wind as if you never existed."

The theatricality of this speech did not deprive it of effect. Just the opposite. It clearly frightened some of

those who had come forward for balloons. David had uttered a formula, and that formula produced the desired result--an explosion of superstitious doubt in people who ordinarily prided themselves on being hardnosed and pragmatic. Even I found myself believing David's weird formula. Some people backed away, while others shoved forward to replace the fainthearted.

T.P. had no doubt. He wanted a balloon. "Hunh," he said, almost toppling from RuthClaire's arms. "Hunh, hunh, hunh I"

"Go get him one," Caroline Hanna urged me.

Para Sorrells had just about given out all of the balIoohs. while the black man who had shot out the bobbing souls of the cardboard hominids was handing out his dwindling supply on the other side of the runway.

"That's okay," RuthClaire said. "Bilker'll get him a balloon."

"No. ma'am. I got other work."

I'll do it, then," Caroline said.

"You'll get an elbow in the lip," I warned her.

Almost miraculously, a punkette with a cottony white scalp lock and no eyebrows appeared at our table. A frail creature in a vest that laced tfcross her midriff, she extended her arms to T.P., who went to her as if she were an old and trusted friend. RuthClaire gave the baby up to the newcomer as much to relieve the pressure on her arms as to humor T.P.

"I'll get him a b'loon," the girl growled, screwing up one eye to look al my godson at such close range. "Friend uh mine round there's got one awready. He don' want it. I'll jus' give it to your nipper. Be rat back." She sounded as il' she had a mouthful of cornmeal.

Hall' stupefied by surprise, hall' grateful to her for quieting T.P., we watched her as she backed away to fetch the "b'loon" from her friend. She scarcely seemed to move her feet.

]hen Bilker awoke. "Hey, wait a minute!"

"I think it's okay," RuthClaire said dubiously. "She seemed lamiliar. She'll get Paulie a balloon and bring him back in a better temper."

"I'd better go after her," Bilker said. Something in me was belatedly alerted to the queerness of the situation. "Look, Bilker, you stay with RuthClaire and Caroline. I'll go after her."

"What's the matter'?" Caroline asked, grabbing my arm. The people near the end of the runway engulfed the white-haired girl, and the balloons floating above the crowd were no More useful as markers than clouds.

"I think I know her," I said, shaking free. "That's what's wrong with this." I plunged past Bilker. rebounded off a Tech student who was heading for the stage, squirmed through a gap, and, my heart pounding mightily, sidled around the end of the runway.

Spotlights continued to rake the club's interior, and behind me I heard RuthClaire cry aloud in anguish, ' 'Paulie/' : Beyond the runway, I broke into an open area, but T.P. and his abductress had already disappeared. They might have taken any of four or five different routes, but I headed for the nearest exit, a heavy door to the far left of the stage. I slammed its push bar, opening it on the intimidating whirr and rumble of the expressway. An automobile was heading down the hill past the front of the club, but it was hard for me to believe that the punkette had trotted through the alley and climbed into that vehicle in no More time than I had given her. I ducked back inside Sinusoid Disturbances, letting the door wheeze shut on its pneumatic retards.

Bilker was at my side. "She got away'?" My helpless look was all the answer he needed. "Shit!" he said. "It's a kidnapping. A goddamn kidnapping."

"Maybe not. This place is a madhouse. She could turn up again in a couple of minutes."

"Yeah," said Bilker. "And the goddamn Rooskies could decide to unilaterally disarm tomorrow." His band inside his coat, he was scanning the crowd for one face in a shifting mosaic of faces. "Friggin' donkey brain."

"If I'm a donkey brain, you're its butt. You let RuthClaire hand the kid over."

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Bilker gave me a look of malevolent contempt. "Who said I was talkin' about yoU'/' ' Someone had kidnapped Tiny Paul, and we were at loggerheads over a matter of no consequence. Even Bilker understood that. He grabbed my arm and dragged me back to the table where RuthClaire and Caroline were waiting. T.P. might be lost (for the time being, if not for good), but he had no intention of compounding his failure by letting someone else abduct RuthClaire.

"What happened? What's going on'?" The women very nearly spoke in unison. Bilker mumbled something about our having lost the girl's trail, and RuthbClaire, glancing back and forth between her bodyguard and me. clutched the lapels of my jacket.

"You know who it was, don't you?"

"Maybe I'm mistaken," I said, "but I think it was Nancy. With her eyebrows plucked and her head partly shaved. You know, little Nancy Teavers, Elvis's wife."

BtLKER SPENT the next thirty minutes charging through the crowd at Sinnsoid Disturbances, buttonholing people to ask il' they'd seen a skinny female carrying a kid in white shorts. He even barged into the restrooms--tbe women's as well as the men's--to identify the startled occupants of the toilet stalls. His efforts were unavailing, but he kept trying, as if single-minded persistence would make T.P. reappear.

I telephoned the police, who dispatched a squad car and notified the offices of several other law-enforcement units in the area. The unitbrmed cops who arrived at the club interviewed RuthClaire, Caroline, and me while Bilker continued to play detective on his own.

The older of the two policemen did all the questioning. His nametag said Crawford. He was a stocky man with a tbrehead furrowed by years of occupational squinting and

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skepticism. So that he could hear our answers, he talked to us on the sidewalk in front of the nightclub. His partner, meanwhile, descended into the pandemonium of Sinusoid Disturbances to look under the rocks that Bilker had not already turned over.

Aboveground, Crawford pursued his interrogation: "She was a waitress in your restaurant in Beulah Fork'?"

"Once upon a time,"

"Why would she kidnap the Montaraz child, Mr. Loyd?"

I told Crawford about the Ku Klux Klan involvement of Nancy's late husband, E. L. Tearers. I told him how Adam had wrestled E.L. into the vat of an abandoned brick kiln in Hothlepoya County. That was all it took.

Crawford recalled the story. Every city cop and backwoods deputy in Georgia knew it. He took a note.

"Revenge'? You think her motive's revenge'?"

': 'I don't think she planned this herself," I said, "At the West Bank, she was a sweet, hardworking kid. She liked me. She liked RuthClaire. I think someone's gotten to her."

*'Who'?"

"Craig Puddicombe, to put a name on hhn."

"Oh. God," RuthClaire said, slumping into me. "I handed Paulie over to her. I put him into her arms." She began to cry.

"On some leveL," I said, "you recognized Nancy. She took T.P. from you, you didn't foist him on her." I "I might as well have. I might as well've wrapped him up in a box and mailed him to her doorstep."

"Look, you'd been entertaining T.P. all evening. The subliminal-recognition factor made you trust that girl in spite of her weirdo getup. You befriended her after her husband's death, you certainly didn't expect her to betray that friendship."

"i wasn't thinking about any ol' that!" RuthClaire cried in frustration.

"That's my point, it was all working on you subconsciously. So stop blaming yourself for somebody else's villainy."

Crawford tapped the end of his pen on his notepad.

"Puddicombe disappeared after that brick-kiln business. His picture's in every post office in the Southeast, but nobody's seen him since."

"Nancy Tearers has."

"What makes you so sure?" Crawford asked, eyeing me from under his furrows. "For all we know, Mr. Loyd, the kid could be living in Acapulco."

"For all we know, he could be sitting down there in Sinusoid Disturbances with a Mohawk haircut and a safety pin through his cheek. Nancy would've never planned something like this by herself. But Puddicombe may've convinced her that this is a way to pay back Adam and RuthClaire for E.L.'s death--even if he did bring it upon himself."

"Adam has to be told," RuthClaire said. "He has to know."

Curious patrons of the nightclub, wraiths from the pit, had gathered around us on the sidewalk to gawk and eavesdrop. At last, though-, David and Evelyn Blau came out of the bistro through these bizarre figures--with Bilker Moody and Crawtbrd's young partner right behind them. Mireles, the second policeman, approached his senior. "The girl in the ticket cage says the kidnapper--the female punk you described to us--began showing up here for Fire Sine Fridays around the beginning of June." "Alone'.)' said Crawtord.

"She isn't really sure. It's dark in there, and the girl always paid her own cover and went on in."

"She just came on Fridays'?"

"The ticket seller only works three nights a week, which helps pin it down. She remembers her showing up especially for Fire Sine Fridays." Mireles flipped open a notepad of his own. "The only time the suspect ever spoke, the ticket seller says. she asked if... uh, the Blau Blau Rebellion was doing a gig."

"A Eib?" said David Blau distastefully.

"When she found out they weren't," Mireles continued,

"she didn't even bother to pay the cover. She left."

"A fan," Evelyn Blau said. "There's loyalty for you."

"And she came alone'?" Crawford pressed.

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Miretes had a thin, sallow face with eyes as brown as Hershey kisses. "It's like I said, Sergeant, she was careful to appear to be alone."

Bilker said, "I found a guy who'd seen her with somebody."

Sirens wailed in the distance. Traffic on the nearby expressway and the bass notes thrumming through the nightclub made the entire hill quiver like a drumskin.

"One of the yahoos who kep' yellin' during y'alt's show," Bilker continued. "He got concerned when I told him what happened to Paulie. He said the fi'eak that took him would sometimes sit at a table with a bearded fella."

"More," Crawford demanded.

"He tried to play it cool--punk, like--but he couldn't quite get it on, the look and all. Cowboy boots 'n' jeans instead of tennis shoes and pleated baggies. Like a guy with an eight-to-five job whose boss'd can him ii' he ever showed up lookin' freaky."

"Craig Puddicombe," I said.

"I've got to go see A&tm," RuthClaire insisted, digging her fingernails into my wrist.

"Somebody needs to go back to your house," Crawford } said. "This is a kidnapping. There may be a telephone call. That's almost always the next step, the telephone call."

"Not if the motive's revenge," RuthClaire said heatedly.

"Not if they take him somewhere and kill him."

"I don't think that's likely," Crawford said. He explained that a kidnapping usually pointed to a less gruesome motive, namely, the extorting of a ransom. If Paulie's abductors had merely wanted to kill him to punish his parents, they could have shot him from arlCbush. They could have run him and his guardian down with an automobile. They could have set off a bomb on the porch.

instead, they had staged a crime requiring at least some knowledge of the child's mother's movements, some fairly elaborate disguises and subterfuge, lots of patience, and an entire bistro basement full of luck. Tonight, everything, including Adam's confinement in the Emory hospital, had come together for them. it was even possible that the

accidental conjunction of all these elements had provided the couple an irresistible opportunity to act on impulse. Now, though, they would try to cash in. Crawford staked his reputation on the inevitability of a telephone call demanding money and outlining a sequence of steps for delivering the ransom.

Caroline, who had been holding RuthClaire's arm throughout this spiel, spoke up: "You're not being clear, Sergeant. Do you think the kidnapers planned the whole thing in excruciating detail, or do you think they got lucky and took the main chance'? it seems to me that their initial motive might tip their ultimate behavior."

"I'm not being clear, young lady, because I'm not a mind reader. Maybe they planned everything in 'excruciating detail' for some other night, but got lucky this evening and jumped the gun. Same difference, as I see it. They're gonna ask for money."

There was More discussion. Bored now, the hangers-on on the sidewalk began to drift away. Vehicles eased along Spring Street and our own little alley in deference to the squad car at curbside. The night smelled of engine oil and abused asphalt. Neon streaked the floodlit edges of the sky.

The Blaus agreed to take RuthClaire home. Bilker would ride with them. Caroline and I would go to Emory Hospi-la} to break the news of T.P.'s abduction to his father. The police would send detectives to the Montaraz house, both to protect its occupants and to monitor the unfolding of the kidnapers' extortion strategy. If twenty-four hours went by with no break in the case, the FBI would begin playing the most prominent role. Meanwhile Crawford and Mireles would continue following up leads here at the nightclub. Elsewhere in Fulton County--as in DeKalb, Cobb, Clayton, and Gwinnett--sheriff's patrols and municipal police forces would set up interlocking dragnets.

Interlocking dragnets. It sounded good, but I reminded myself that no one knew what kind of vehicle Craig and Nancy had at their disposal. Surely, Puddicombe had not been able to keep his friend E.L.'s pickup truck for the past year without incurring arrest. On the other hand,

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maybe he had changed its tag, jacked up its body, pin striped its hood. I gave Crawford a description of the truck

as I remembered it--a brief already on file with the Georgia

Bureau of Investigation--and he in turn had it radioed

around the greater metropolitan area. (Any white-haired

young woman gunning through Avondale Estates in a Ram

Charger would provoke immediate suspicion.)

Bilker told me where he had parked my car. When I finally got the directions straight, Caroline and I told the others good night and walked arm in arm down the sidewalk and through an alley to a crumbling asphalt terrace.

A smelly Dempsey Dumpster occupied most of this space.

Bilker had left the Mercedes beside the dumpster with two wheels on the terrace and two on the broken cobbles of the alley itself. No one else had even considered competing with him for the spot. Ignoring the effluvia from the trash bin, I pulled Caroline to me and kissed her full on the lips. She quickly broke away. "Men have all the innate romance of doorstops."

RuthClaire had said something like that to me back in December. I wrinkled my nose and looked around. "Not exactly the Moulin Rouge, is it?"

"Paul, please don't fantasize a friendly fuck later this evening," Caroline said. "I'm not ready for it. Even if I had been ready for it, the kidnapping would've changed that."

A friendly fuck, I thought. Now there's an expression RuthClaire would have never used. Hearing it spoken, however, had an effect precisely the reverse of what Caroline intended--it excited me. Maybe I was one of those bleary-eyed lechers for whom dirty talk is an aphrodisiac. Dirty? A single four-letter word of hearty AngloSaxon origin'?

Maybe, instead, I was a macho bigot who believed "bad language" was the province of males only. Me, macho'? A bigot, maybe--but not a muscle-flexer. More than likely, truth be known, I was simply unused to hearing "bad language" on a woman's lips. The cultural upheaval of the past two decades had passed me by. I was a forty-seven-year-old southern gentleman who was only

now getting straight the distinction in nuance between shacking up and Jiving together.

"Look," Caroline was saying, "my car's still parked in front of the Montarazes. Tomorrow when you and RuthClaire visit Adam, one of you can drive my VW and leave it near the sociology building." She handed me her keys. "I would like to see you again, Paul. It's just that this isn't the time. I can't believe you think it is."

"Life's short, Miss Hanna. This proves it."

"Ah, another disciple of the carpe diem approach." Her voice took on a revealingly brittle edge: "You think they'll kill him'?"

"They may." My knuckles whitened as I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. "Puddicombe may, at least. It's hard for me to believe that Nancy'd go along with him on that score. I don't know what he did to entice her up here, to get her to go punk--but they do share a common pain."

"The fact that Teavers died."

"Right. Her husband. His friend. I thought Nancy was free of that taint, though, i thought she'd managed to work through everything unscathed."

What Caroline next said struck me as a kind of sorrowful rebuke: "People who work through everything unscathed are rare. There may be nobody like that at all, only good pretenders. '

"Maybe so."

"I don't know whether I'd even be able to trust an unscathed person, Paul. He---or she--wouldn't be human." I looked at her sidelong. "The trouble is, you can't trust a scathed person, either. You can't trust anybody."

"No," Caroline murmured. "You can't trust anybody."

We rode for a while in silence. Then i began to speculate aloud on the kidnapping. Puddicombe had been hiding out for a year, eluding the police and plotting revenge. On the night of E.L.'s disappearance into the brick kiln, he had probably lit out for Alabama in his buddy's truck. There, after ditching the vehicle, he had lain low for a time, probably with the active aid of fellow Klan members. It was possible, of course, that he had left the

Southeast completely, striking out for the Rockies or the California coast. But if he had, he had almost certainly acquired another car. Teavers's pickup would have been a red flag to every highway patrolman between Opelika and Amarillo. Maybe, on the other hand, he had simply disguised himself--by growing a beard, say--and had ridden the bus.

Eventually, though, Puddicombe had returned from his fugitive exile, migrating as if magnetized to Georgia's capital city. In Atlanta, after all, it would not have been hard for him to find work as a dish washer or maybe even a garage mechanic. The biggest threat to his job would have lain in the likelihood of someone from Beulah Fork catching sight of him but if his work had kept him, so to speak, backstage, that likelihood would have been a skimpy one. On the street, a beard and a pair of sunglasses would have preserved his cover. To trip himself up, he would

have had to run a traffic light or neglect paying a bill. And so far, Puddicombe had prudently avoided those kinds of trip wires.

"How would he have involved Nancy?" Caroline said. Probably a letter, I told her. He would have written only once, and he would have stipulated a meeting somewhere between Atlanta and Beulah Fork. At a roadhouse or a small-town caf& he would have pressed his case, playing on Nancy's submerged bitterness and arguing the need to bring' about Elvis Lamar's posthumous vindication. Initially, she may have resisted some of these arguments, but at later rendezvous, each new meeting arranged at the one before, she would have begun to relish the idea of avenging her late husband--maybe not by killing anyone, but by bringing E.L. back to life as a worrisome force in the Montarazes' undeserved paradise of love and success. Indeed, she and Craig may have fallen in love themselves. Once, after all, E.L. and Craig had been as close as brothers, and somewhere in the Bible it was written that a man ought to wed his brother's widow so that he can

protect her person and champion her causes.

"You know the Bible'?" Caroline asked.

"Only by hearsay. The same way Craig Puddicombe

would know it. In Beulah Fork, distortions of it contaminate everyone's thinking, mine included. We have a bountiful legacy of high-minded misquotation."

"You think they're lovers?"

"If not lovers, sweethearts. In this day and age, probably lovers."

"Why so certain'?"

"Nancy's only eighteen. She was widowed at seventeen. Most of her school chums have moved from Beulah Fork, or married, or both. When she told me she was leaving the West Bank, she said it was to seek her fortune. Male chauvinist pig that I am, I took that as a code word for husband. She was bored, lonely, and vulnerable. Why shouldn't she fall in love with Craig?"

"Or he with her?"

"Right. Craig was E.L.'s twin in a lot of ways, and Nancy is a pretty little girl. Or was, anyway. They're both probably fighting to make sense of events and attitudes that they haven't handled all that well by themselves."

"Nancy was doing all right, wasn't she'?"

"Until Craig contacted her. Until this past April."

"What about the kidnapping? Do you think they've been following RuthClaire and Adam around, waiting for an opportunity like tonight's?"

"Looks like it."

"Then tonight had to be a dream-come-true for your ... well, your Puddicombe Conspiracy. Everything fell into place for them. Nancy was able to walk off with Paulie as easily as a kid steals an apple from a produce bin. Doesn't that strike you as--" she hunched her shoulders, shivering in recollection--"weird?"

"But everything didn't fall into place for them. Bilker came along. You and I came along. They had to make some of their own luck, and they did that. Nancy's costume, her choice of the balloon handout as the best time to approach us, their goddamn perfect getaway." I took a quick glance at Caroline. "What're you trying to imply? That there's something fishy about this business'?"

"Paul, please don't take this wrong--"

"God save me, take ,,hat wrong?"

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"I don't know RuthClaire. I don't know Adam. For that matter, I really don't know you. It crossed my mind--just briefly and not very seriously--that this might be a ... you know, a publicity stunt. To promote their art and

I

David Blau's gallery."

I

"Jesus Christ!"

"Look, Paul, I know it's backasswards and egotistical, but for a moment I was afraid I was being made sport of."

"Sport of? What do you mean. sport of'?"

"Not after the police arrived. And not really before, either. It's just that nothing that happened at the club seemed real. I couldn't help thinking I was an outsider, not getting the joke."

"The joke? What cynicism! And five minutes ago you were berating me for hoping for a friendly fuck on the same evening my godson gets abducted!"

"Paul, I was confessing to a doubt i had, not leveling i

an accusation. You're turning this into something it really isn't."

I was thoroughly confused. Our conversation had gone I off the rails with her plea not to take her next remark i

wrong. Had I taken it wrong, or had she impugned

RuthClaire and Adam's integrity as artists and parents? I thumbed an antacid tablet out of a roll in my pants pocket and inserted it under my tongue.

"Take me home, Paul. You don't need me at the hospital.

Adam certainly doesn't need me there, either, i'm

sorry this has happened. I'm deeply, deeply sorry."

I took her home, to an apartment complex on Clifton, not far from the Emory campus. My attempts to get her talking again met with monosyllabic rebuffs. She had wounded me by taking potshots at my friends, i had wounded her by calling her to account for her meanness and vanity.

Caroline's apartment building had pinkish stucco walls, gables with casement windows, and rustic Tudor trim. I parked beside the walk to her front porch, but before i could even undo my seat buckle, she got out. Then she leaned back down and gave a harsh barking little laugh. "What's that supposed to mean'?"

"I was about to tell you how much I enjoyed the evening."

"Oh."

"Parts of it, I did," she said. Then she slammed the door and hiked up her walk like a drill sergeant in the Scandinavian Fashion Force. I waited until she was safely inside before giving a salute and driving wistfully away.

"HE'S AWAKE," the nurse on Adam's floor said when I showed up at the hospital to fulfill my designated role as Evil Messenger. "He doesn't sleep all that much, anyway, but after Mrs. Montaraz called to tell us you were coming, I went down there to see if he needed to be awakened. He

didn't." A middle-aged woman with strong Germanic features and eyes like indigo marbles, the nurse tilted her head. "Is there anything I can do. Mr. Loyd?"

"Just make sure we're not disturbed for a while."

The nurse could not contain herself. "What's wrong?"

"If RuthClaire didn't tell you when she called, ma'am, then I certainly can't tell you." Unintentionally, the words came out like a reprimand. I patted the woman's shoulder to soften their impact, then walked down the long, antiseptic corridor.

Adam was sitting up in bed in the dark. He had propped two pillows behind him, and his legs were crossed beneath his sheet in the lotus position of an Oriental contemplative. The IV bottle beside him, its tube running to his wrist like a life-giving amber fuse, glinted eerily in the darkness. The bandages on his lower face gave him the look of an unfinished plaster-ot'-Paris bust. He sat remarkably still, and I felt as I had felt as a small boy, approaching my father after some terrible disobedience.

I did not reach for the light switch--maybe for reasons of self-concealment. I stood in the doorway letting my eyes adjust and noticing with what stoic endurance Adam's

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own eyes were trying to allay my fears. Somehow, he had picked up on them like a faint but acrid scent. Don't quail from necessity, his eyes said. Come sit down.

I crossed the room and sat down in the chair that RuthClaire ordinarily used. But I must have appeared about ready to bolt, for Adam lifted the arm to which the IV tube was attached and gently patted me, as I had patted the nurse. Go ahead, he was telling me; be as brutal as your news demands.

'RuthClaire would have come to tell you this, Adam, but circumstances don't allow. I'm her emissary. I'm here to tell you what nobody--not even your own wife---could tell you easily.'

Adam's eyes grew a little larger, and he made a series of signs that somehow permitted me to interpret them. "No, no one's died. So far as we know. Tiny Paul's been taken." And I told him in detail what had happened at Sinusoid Disturbances and afterward, including the police's conviction that we would soon receive a ransom demand and my own speculations about the identities of the kidnapers. At the moment, though, everyone was walking gingerly across a rope bridge over a chasm of indeterminate depth. We would not be able to see how far it was to the bottom until Craig Puddicombe or Nancy Teavers called. Lamely, I concluded, "All we can do is wait."

Adam pulled the IV tube free of the plastic connector in his wrist and lifted himself up high enough to hook the tube over its pole. There, it ceased to drip. My friend was wearing one of those hospital gowns with the split up the rear, a design feature of curious motivation. Was the split to make it easier for orderlies to administer enemas, or was it a sartorial aid to patients frequently victimized by sudden diarrhea attacks'? These seemed mutually exclusive goals, but the gowns were an immemorial hospital humiliation. Adam managed to wear his without looking supremely ridiculous (maybe because nudity held no terror for him); but when he hopped nimbly down from his bed in the garment, I found myself glancing around the room

in search of a safety pin with which to close up the vent in back. At Sinusoid Disturbances, I would have had no trouble finding one.

"Adam, what are you doing'?"

He brushed past me to the sink and-mounted a stairstep stool giving him access to his own image in the mirror. His hairy buttocks peeked through the split in his gown, and the backs of his thighs tightened and relaxed as he raised and lowered himself on tiptoes. It was then that I realized he was unwrapping the gauzy cerements holding the lower half of his face together.

"Adam!"

He shot me a warning look, motioned for me to keep my voice down, and resumed unpackaging his jaw. He had already discarded the foam-rubber cup for his chin, dropping it into the sink. Only the light spilling in from the corridor enabled him to work, but he was peeling off layer after layer with an alacrity that suggested he knew what he was doing. Had he been practicing for a moment such as this'? it hardly seemed likely, but how else account for the speed and knowledgeableability of his fingers'?

I whispered, "Adam, you can't leave the hospital. There's not a thing any of us can do until they call."

His fingers slowed a little, but he kept unpeeling gauze.

"What if the kidnappers ring up the nurses' station instead of the house'? That's a possibility, you know. If you rush home to RuthClaire, there'll be nobody here to take their call to the hospital. Nobody who can respond to their demands, I mean." I was improvising, only improvising, but the possibility began to sound realistic even to me. "You couldn't talk to them, of course, but you could authorize me to act as your spokesman. Think about it, Adam. Somebody has to be here."

The habiline shrugged my hand away and finished taking off his bandages. I looked at him in profile. His nose seemed less flat, his cheekbones slightly higher, his chin a good deal more pronounced. Not only had the plastic surgeons reconstructed his buccal cavity, they had given his entire face a more modern configuration. None of the

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changes was severe or blatant, but together they gave him a streamlined, Nilotic handsomeness. Adam came down the stairstep stool so that I was towering over him again, embarrassed by my own moronic tallness. From a hamper he grabbed a pair of clean white towels, which he folded double and spread out on the floor next to the bed. He nodded me down. I knelt on one of the towels, and he, of course, knelt on the other, turning me back into Goliath to his humble shepherd boy. Nevertheless, side by side, we prayed. Or, I suppose, Adam prayed while I knelt beside him with my forehead pressed against the edge of the mattress. "Pray without ceasing," it says in Thessalonians, but I couldn't even manage to get past the part about forgiving-usourtrespassesasweforgivethosewho-trespass, etc., without thinking of Nancy's perfidy, or how Caroline had thought the kidnapping might be a publicity stunt, or when I was likely to be able to resume my responsibilities at the West Bank. Pray without ceasing'? I couldn't do any better than an intermittent, "Don't let the bastards kill him, God," between which times I fantasized slitting Craig's throat, taking Caroline to bed, and catering the reception of an expensive wedding party at Muscadine Gardens--not necessarily in that order or all at once. My knees got sore, and my kidneys ached. Somehow, though, I stayed on the floor beside Adam for almost three hours, sharing his vigil. At 3:57 ^.M.--I checked my watch--the nurse came to the door to report that Adam had a telephone call. "I tried to tell him that this was an absurd hour to call," she said, "but he told me if I didn't fetch Mr. Montaraz, I'd . . . Fd 'live to regret it.'" "It's Puddicombe," I whispered. Aloud I said, "We'll be down there in two minutes. Go back and tell him." My heart was leaping against my rib cage. Too often, the parents of stolen children hear nothing from the abductors. A break like this--a break I had desperately anticipated--was a variety of sardonic miracle. The nurse left, and I began banging my forehead against the mattress in despairing joy. The son of a bitch had

actually telephoned! I rocked back on my heels and mouthed a silent thank you. Adam touched my shoulder.

"God. Bless. You," he managed.

I gaped at Adam. He had spoken, and never had I heard a voice so peculiarly pitched and modulated. A scratchy computer sort of voice struggling to sound human. Impulsively, then, I hugged the little man. Holding him at arm's length, I told him that he had better put on a pair of pants. If we were too long getting to the nurses' station. Puddicombe--or whoever it was--would grow nervous about the delay and hang up. I rubbed two fingers along the side of my nose. They came away wet.

A PAIR Of khaki trousers his only clothing, Adam accompanied me to the nurses' station. The woman on duty there was waiting for us with her hand over the telephone mouthpiece.

"is there an extension?" I said.

She nodded at the glass-walled office behind the counter.

"In there. If you want to, you can cradle the receiver on the speaker device beside the telephone, Mr. Loyd, and it'll broadcast like a radio."

"That's good," I said. "You wouldn't happen to have a tape recorder, too, would you?"

"One of our day nurses, Andrea, has a jam box. one of those big silver things that young people carry around to dealkm their elders with. It also records. Andrea leaves her tapes in the drawer. If it's important, you can tape over one of those--so long as you take the responsibility for ruining a favorite of hers."

"Yes! ma'am."

At which point il dawned on the nurse that Adam's face was free of its bandages. "Oh. my God! Those weren't supposed to come off yet. Dr. Ruggiero will flay me alive."

"No, he won't," I said. "Mr. Montaraz is healing nicely."

I led Adam into the office, found the jam box, rummaged up an unmarked tape, put it in the machine, and pressed the record button. Then I set the telephone receiver into the amplifier unit and depressed the lighted button on the base of the telephone. The nurse, having observed all this through the glass, hung up her phone and left to make

a tour of the floor. Efficient and discreet, that good woman. "We're here," I told the caller.

"Who's 'we'?" he asked, and those two syllables identified him for me: Craig Puddicombe. He had made no effort to disguise his voice. (If the restaurant business ever

got too tame for me, maybe I could go into police work.) I told Craig who I was.

"The first dude in history to let a hibber snake his old lady."

"We were divorced when RuthClaire married Adam."
"Yeah. And you even played pimp for 'em. didn't you. Now you're up there in the hospital holding the hibber's hand. Jesus, Mr. Loyd, you take the cake."

"But you and Nancy took the child. What do you--"
He cut me off. "Get your tape recorders all set up? Get a call off to the police? That why you took so goddamn long pickin' up the phone?"

"Adam had to get dressed. His room's at the far--"
"Stuff that, Mr. Loyd." He said something to somebody else in the room with him, but it was all muffled and indistinct. Then he said, "Prove to me the hibber's really there."

"How? You know he can't talk."

"He can sing, can't he'? He can hum like a rotary engine."

"Craig, he's had an operation. His face is bandaged. The entire lower portion of his face was remodeled."

"Yeah, well, he'll still be stump-ugly's far as I'm concerned. Have him hum through his bandages."

I started to protest, but Adam pulled my handkerchief out of my coat pocket, turned it into a bandanna, tied the

bandanna around his face, and stepped toward the amplifier to hum the melody of a Cokesbury hymn.

"That's the hibber, all right. A mule brayin' into a barrel."

"Prove to me you've got Tiny Paul," I said.

"By doin' what'? You wanna hear him scream'?"

I put my hand on Adam's arm. He stopped his unusual humming--half lament, half yodel--and removed the bandanna. He shook his head in response to Craig's last question.

"Never mind," I said. "What do you want?"

"A ransom. If Mister and Missus Miscegenation give us the ransom we want, they'll get their filthy little whatever-it-is back."

"How much money, Craig?"

"Who said anything about money?"

The unexpectedness of this really hit me hard. What sort of ransom required no monetary payoff'?

' "Y'all still there'?" Craig'asked.

"Yeah, we're here. State your terms. We're listening." For a moment, Craig consulted with his accomplice. Then, as if reading from a manuscript, he said, "We don't want money. We don't do violence. What we want is what's right. You may think the brat's been taken because his hibber daddy killed E.L., or you may think we covet what the brat's unnatural family's built up for itself since the hibber did that killin'. It ain't so, though, neither of those guesses. We took the brat to make some undone' justice get done. We took him to set some wrong things right."

This nonsense was scaring me. "What the hell do you want us to do, Craig'? Come on, get to the point."

"Have a little patience," the amplifier said, mockingly polite. A sound of paper rattling. "You get the little halfbreed back if and when you do the following stuff. First of all, Mister and Missus Miscegenation they stop livin' together. Second of all, they tell the papers and the TV they've stopped. They say they regret the sinful example they've set decent whites and blacks all over the world by bringin' their mongrel brat into it. Third of all. they--"

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"Craig," I pleaded.

"Third of all, they make a public apology to the parents, family, and widow of E. L. Teavers, my friend. And fourth, the hJbber gives himself up for trial on charges of--" a meaningful pause--"uh, malicious homicide."

"Craig, E.L. was trying to kill Adam. You and your crew had kidnapped us, for God's sake--the same way you and Nancy have criminally abducted Tiny Paul. There's not a court anywhere that would convict Adam of anything but saving all our lives!"

"Ah, we was just tryin' to scare some sense into you.

Nobody out at Synder's place was gonna get kilt--not until your goddamn hibber chucked E.L. down that hole."

"But that's what E.L. was trying to do to him, Craig!"

"Puttin' your hibber down that hole didn't kill him, did 'it'? Him and his kind lived hundreds of goddamn centuries in caves. So puttin' a hibber down a brick-kiln hole hurts it 'bout as much as tossin' Bt'er Rabbit into a goddamn briar patch. He popped back out, didn't he'? That provcs it." Absurd. absurd. The boy and I were operating from completely different sets of premises. I changed tacks: "Is that it'? Four things to do to get T.P. back'?"

"We gotta fifth un." Our tormentor rattled his prepared text again. "Inasmuch as Mister and Missus Miscegenation have made beaucoups of bucks from the degenerate elements of American society, and are richer than anyone but the upright and godly ought to be, they've got to--" Craig halted. His fancy lead-in had taken a little steam out of his delivery. "Inasmuch as all that, they've got to make contributions adding up to fifty thousand dollars to ten different charities and political groups of our choosing. They'll get the list on Monday or Tuesday. Each group gets at least three thousand, but--and this is big of us, now--Mister and Missus Hibber can decide themselves how to ladle out the twenty thousand left over after the first split."

"Money. It comes down to money."

"The money ain't important. Mr. Loyd. It's not for us, anyhow. It's only 'cause they got it and don't deserve it andi

need to give it to somebody who does--that's why we're makin' 'em do it. They do it by check, too. We get to see the canceled checks as proof it's all been done like we asked it to be. The list comin' in the mail explains the whole system."

Incredulously, i asked, "They won't get Tiny Paul back until all the canceled checks come in'?"

"Not until they've split up and annulled their ungodly marriage and lived apart long enough to show us they've really done it."

"Craig, what's the time frame? How long are you going to hold Tiny Paul'? There's no give-and-take in your terms. For you. it's open-ended--but for RuthClaire and Adam, it's a nightmare. And if they're living apart when you finally release the baby, who are you going to release him to*?"

"To your ex-old lady, of course. The hibber dbn't have any rights in this."

"But how long. Craig. Play fair'with us, damn it!" 'Whey'll know when we do, won't they'?" And he hung up. The speaker on the amplifier was amplifying a dial tone. No way to trace the call: It had come through the hospital's central switching system. So Craig Puddicombe and Nancy Teavers, with T.P. in their doubtful care, had sunk again into the nearly impenetrable anonymity of a metropolitan area with close to four million people! If, in fact, they had not made their call from Alabama. Tennessee, Florida, or one of the Carolinas. And even if they were still in Greater Atlanta, they had More than a hundred square riffles of labyrinthine territory in which to go to ground.

Adam slumped wearily into the chair at the desk. His voice, when he spoke, was a series of agonized croaks.

"I wish. Miss RuthClaire. Had let. McElrov. Baptize him."

ADAM MADE up his mind to leave Emory Hospital. While I telephoned RuthClaire, he dressed, packed a suitcase, and faced down the bewildered night nurse with a painful repetition of the words, "Goodbye, goodbye. Going now." During this confrontation, he maintained the dignified decorum of a Japanese chaFgd d'affaires. When I got off the phone, the nurse put through a hasty call to one of Adam's doctors, who at first voiced angry opposition to our plans to decamp at this hour. Talking briefly to me, however, he at last gave his reluctant consent, and the orderlies who had been summoned to keep Adam and me from hijacking an elevator to freedom dutifully backed off. The nurse then rode downstairs with us, reminding Adam to eat nothing chewier than oatmeal until Dr. Ruggiero had examined him again and pointing out that he would not be able to communicate as well as he wished until he had undergone his scheduled speech therapy.

At the Montaraz house, only a few minutes later, RuthClaire ran to Adam and embraced him.

I stood just inside the door connecting the kitchen to the big downstairs studio. The other three men in that room were Bilker Moody and the same pair of GBi agents who had driven RuthClaire and me back to the Synder property on the day after our abduction from the West Bank. Niedrach. Davison. I couldn't recall their first names. They wore nondescript business suits of flimsy black cotton, almost as if they had gone shopping together and picked their outfits off the same rack. Davison, however, sported a beige banlon shirt under his jacket, while Niedrach had made his own distinguishing fashion statement with a red clip-on tie and a red canvas belt on whose buckle there gleamed the embossed head of the mascot of the University of Georgia, a bulldog wearing a freshman's beanie.

Bilker.'s opinion of the GBI agentg revealed itself in the

curl of his upper lip.

At last Adam and RuthClaire separated, and RuthClaire distractedly reintroduced everyone. I gave Niedrach the cassette on which I had recorded Craig's ransom demands.

A tape player was produced, and the GBI men sat down next to it to listen to the cassette. Bilker retreated to the bar, Adam paced, and RuthClaire perched on the arm of the divan beside Niedrach. I squatted opposite the divan on the other side of the marble coffee table.

"... don't want money. We don't do violence. What we want is what's right. You may thfnk the brat's been taken . . ."

Afterward, Niedrach said, "That's the craziest--! mean, the absolutely craziest--set of ransom demands I've ever heard."

Seated gnomishly on the white-leather wheel 'of one of the Montarazes' high-gloss crimson bar stools, Bilker drawled, "The reason you:re dumfuzzled is that this ain't really a kidnapping anymore."

Niedrach raised his eyebrows. "No? What is it, then? A dope deal'?"

"A hostage situation."

"Every kidnap victim is a hostage," the GBI agent countered with as much tact as he could muster. "That's tautological."

"Yeah. Logical 'cause you've been taught it. But a hostage situation's different from a kidnappin'. Why'? For the simple fact that money ain't the perpetrator's number-one priority. It's the pursuit of some far-out political or ideological goal by means of terroristic threats."

"He told us they wouldn't kill Paulie," RuthClaire said. Bilker revolved a half-turn this way, a half-turn the

other. Because of his bulk, I almost expected to see the legs of the stool screwing curls of hardwood up around'

themselves as they sank into the floor. "Yeah, well, Puddicombe's cooler than any kidnapper 'cause he's got the

Great White Jehovah, Jumper of Jigaboos, on his side.

He'll take More chances than your two-bit kidnapper. If you push hint, he'll raise the stakes."

"The stakes he's playing for are revenge," I said.
"Mebbe so. But he gets it by makin' us dance to his fiddlin', not by crashin' the Montarazes' bank accounts."

"So?" said Niedrach,

"We better dance to his fiddlin'. Or make it look like it, anyway. Otherwise, he'll--pardon me, Mrs. Montaraz--he'll off his hostage."

Davison said, "How do you know so much about it?"

"Mebbe I watch the 'CBS Evening News.'"

Niedrach stood up and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Mr. Moody's pegged this exactly right. Now that we know it's a kidnapping----or a hostage situation involving a kidnap victim--the FBI's going to take over primary, responsibility lot solving the case. We have to contact them."

"But you and Mr. Davison have been through this with us before," RuthClaire said. "The FBI won't dump you completely, will they?"

"I hope not. I'll try to make that very point, Mrs. Montaraz, in telling them what's happened so far. In the ; meantime, though, it'd be smart if Adam--Mr. Montaraz, I mean--moved out. To give every appearance of comply: ing with the sickie's demands. Because Mr. Moody's right about that."

Bilker stopped revolving his stool, embarrassed to find an ally where he had posited a bungling bureaucrat.

RuthClaire said, "I just can't believe Nancy would let anything happen to Paulie. It's unreal."

"She may be in as much danger as your son," Niedrach said.

And so it was decided that Adam would indeed move out of the house on Hurt Street. Niedrach would have a secretary at the state GBI offices telephone the Atlanta newspapers with an anonymous tip about the deteriorating marital situation of the Montarazes. She would claim to be a neighbor with firsthand knowledge of their troubles. including a confidence from RuthClaire that her husband had just agreed to a trial separation requiring his immediate departure from the household. RuthClaire was then to grant a tight-lipped interview omitting any mention of the

kidnapping and succinctly confirming the anonymous neighbor's separation story.

"But a separation on what grounds'?" RuthClaire pleaded.

"Anything you can think of that doesn't strike you as too unseemly," Niedrach ,said.

Adam tried to speak, but his gravelish computer voice would not cooperate for him. He reverted to sign language, and RuthClaire interpreted it for the rest of us. "Career incompatibility," she said. "We've been arguing about Adam's career plans. I want him to keep painting, but he wishes to enroll--" she struggled to read his gestures correctly--"in the Candler School of Theology at Emory. He wishes to take the curriculum leading to the Master of Theological Studies degree. I'm to tell the reporter that Adam has gone off the deep end on matters God-related."

"That's great." Niedrach said. "That's inspited."

Davison wrinkled the bridge of his nose. "A habiline religious nut'?"

Yes. Apparently so. The point of the ruse, of course, was to get word to Craig that RuthClaire and Adam had stopped living together. The story's appearance in print would insure its finding its way onto local TV news broadcasts, where Craig might be monitoring recent muggings, rapes, street-name changes, city-council shouting matches, and mayoral trips overseas.

"What's the chance of the TV and papers catchin' wind of the kidnappin' itself'?" Bilker asked.

"A dust-up at a place like Sinusoid Disturbances is a regular thing." Davison replied. "We're in the clear for now."

Niedrach said, "Puddicombe's likely to break the news himself. Publicity doesn't worry him, he might even like it. So if the story leaks, Paulie won't be in any More. or any less, danger than he already is."

Where was Adam going to move to? We mulled the options. He needed a shelter that offered privacy as well as a certain remoteness from the urban bustle of Atlanta. What qualified'? A rented house in Alpharetta'? A lakeside cottage in Cherokee County'? The monastery in Conyers?

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"Let him come to Paradise Farm with me," I suggested. RuthClaire said, "Wouldn't Craig look askance on that? You're my ex-husband. You're also Paulie's godfather." "Two castoffs commiserating." I said. "it's honky-onhibber marriage that upsets him, not white and black males cohabiting."

"What would that do to our cover story about his decision to attend the Candler School of Theology'?" Adam signed again, and RuthClaire said, "It's too late, now, to enroll for summer term at the seminary. Besides, the fall semester doesn't officially commence until the last Monday in August."

"So the alibi holds," Niedrach said. "Take him with you, Mr. Loyd. We've got an agent in Hothlepoya County investigating the drug scene there. He can act as a go-between, relaying inlbrmation from us to you and vice versa. So go on."

"When'?"

"As soon as he can get ready to go. Now, if possible."

RUTHCLAIRE AND Adam went upstairs together to get him packed lt'or his stay at Paradise Farm. And, of course, to tell each other goodbye. Bilker and the GBi agents, discreetly embarrassed by this turn of events, sat together in the kitchen drinking coffee and swapping companionable tall tales about their prowess as bodyguards and their expertise as sleuths.

"I'll be back in an hour," I informed them.

Davison, who had draped his flimsy black jacket over his chair, Blurtd, "An hour? Where the hell do you think you're going'?"

"To tell somebody goodbye."

I drove to Caroline's--not in her little blue beetle, but in my big silver Mercedes. I arrived at 9:37 A.M., bleary-eyed, funky, and anxiously aware of the deadline I had set

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myself. An hour? I now had only forty-six minutes. It might take me that long to convince my hapless generative equipment that it could still pretend to that title. It might take me longer to convince the lovely Caroline to let me try to convince my equipment. Wasn't I presuming too much?

Staggering along the walk to her porch, I felt that I was moving in a pair of tinfoil shorts. I itched. I had not slept all night. My stubbly beard seemed to be infested with microscopic lumberjacks sawing away at every follicle. Who--whom--was I kidding'? I had no chance with this lady.

Forty-four minutes.

At last, bracing myself against her door, I leaned with one sharp elbow and alt my bathetic longing into the tiny button that rang her bell. Her dear, melodious bell. Inside her apartment chimed the opening eight notes of "Tara's Theme" fronl Gone with the Wind. They chimed over and over again because I was simply too weary to pull back my elbow.

Forty-three minutes.

"Who is it'?" Caroline's voice cried.

"Me."

She opened her door the three inches permitted by her safety latch. "What do you want'?"

"A friendly fee-fifofunx"

"Has anything happened'? Have they found Paulie'?"

I squared my shoulders and tried to alchemize my weary nonchalance into concerned sobriety. "Listen, Caroline, if you'll--"

"That's not my car," she said, peering past me. "How am I going to get my car home'?" She shook her head.

"Damn! That's not important, is it'? The important thing is Paulie. I'm still three-quarters asleep."

"If you'll let me in, I'll tell you all I--"

She was unfastening the chain. The door opened, and she was standing against a backdrop of framed Broadway posters, porcelain flower vases, and at least two copper umbrella holders. The cool breath of the apartment's air-conditioning rippled over me. As for Caroline herself, she

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was wearing a yellow dressing gown that seemed to be lined with layer upon liquid-thin layer of even paler material. She looked and smelled like the demigoddess of a fragrant wheat field.

"You'll have to talk to me first," she said. "You'll have to shower. You'll have to eat breakfast with me." "Forty-one minutes," I said. "I've got forty-one minutes." "Listen, Mr. Loyd, there's a clock in every room but the bathroom. You can hang your watch on the shower spigot for all I care. If you have any sense, though, you'll forget all about your stupid forty-one minutes and put your watch in the bottom of one of your shoes." She pulled me out of the doorway and shut us into the Fundy Bay briskness of her apartment.

As matters unfolded, I put my Elgin in the bottom of one of my shoes and deliberately forgot about it.

I SPENT More than forty-one minutes at Caroline's. I spent More than eigho'-two minutes at Caroline's. In fact, I didn't make it back to Hurt Street until better than two hours after my leave-taking--but neither Bilker nor the GBI agents could find it in themselves to scold me because Caroline herself, fetching in old jeans and a bright yellow tank top, had accompanied me. Alter all, she had to pick up her Volkswagen: moreover, as a witness to the crime, she wished to accommodate Niedrach and Davison by recounting the event from her point of view. Wouldn't they have sought her out eventually, anyway?]'hey admitted that they would have.

"Besides, RuthClaire might appreciate having another woman around for a while today," i said. "It's not going to be easy for her with Adam gone and only Bilker's shoulder to cry on."

Bilker snorted, in agreement rather than indimation,

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And when the Montarazes came downstairs,iuthClaic

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and Caroline embraced like long-lost siblings miraculously

reunited.

Adam and I, meanwhile, carried his belongings out to my car for the trip to Beulah Fork. Bilker lent a hand. Even on its high-performance shocks, the rear of my Mercedes began to sag. Adam had insisted on adding to his own tuggage at least three dozen of RuthClaire's more recent paintings. Although fairly small, these canvases were still affixed to their frames, and Bilker and I had to struggle to wedge them into the trunk between the suitcases and the pasteboard boxes.

"Adam, what's the point of taking the paintings?" "Remembrance," he gargled. Because it was painful for him to speak, I did not question him further--but it occurred to me that he was preparing himself for a lengthy separation from RuthClaire. This was not a surrender to despair, however, but an act of faith. If he and his wife were to be reunited with their child, they would have to accede to and of course endure the stipulations of the kidnapers. With luck, the GBI might break the case, but there was no guarantee. But these paintings--the drab acrylics that she had hopefully entitled 'Souls'--still seemed to me the least distinguished work of RuthClaire's career. They were blatant mediocrities. Only a uxorious husband could love them. I scratched my head. Adam was not really the uxorious type, but his fondness for this series--when, to 'remembrances,' he could have taken better examples of his wife's art--was truly puzzling.

We got away from Atlanta shortly after noon. On our drive down, Adam read. He had a stack of hardcover books at his feet on the floorboard, and he seemed to pick up, thumb through, and peruse a new one about every fifteen minutes or so. Does God Exist? and Eternity, by Hans Kung. God and the Astronomers by Robert Jastrow, God and the New Physics by Paul Davies. The Dancing Wu Li Masters by Gary Zukav. The Reenchantment of the World by Morris Berman. Mind and Nature by Gregory Bateson. An anthology entitled 'The Mind's Eye' by a pair of editors whose names escape me. I don't know what all

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else. I had the impression that Adam was reviewing these texts, checking passages that he had underlined in previous readings, rather than completely encompassing each volume for the first time--but even this formidable intellectual feat had its intimidating aspects. Out of respect for my pasnger's activity, I kept my mouth shut.

At Paradise Farm, unloading the car, I finally broke my self-imposed vow of silence: 'Adam, you know the story you told RuthClaire to tell the reporter about the reasons for your separation'.>''

He raised his eyebrows.

"The one about entering the seminary this fall'?"

"Yes'?" he croaked.

':It came to you so quickly, that apparent fiction. I was ..wondering if ... well, if it might really be something you'd like to try."

"Oh, yes," he managed. 'I. Have. Thought. About. It."

LlVlA GEORGE, Hazel Upchurch, and our latest little waitress from Tocqueville Junior College did not .jump for joy upon my return. An hour ago, a tour bus from Muscadine Gardens had set down forty people at the West Bank's front door. These people had descended like a flock of crows, eaten a dozen different menu items, left a skimpy collective tip, and flown away in their bus with a rude backfire.

"Did you give them the substitutes they wanted?"

Livia George was slumped spraddledgedged at a table near the cash register. "Don' I always, Mistah Paul'?"

"Everybody was taken care of'?"

She gave me a disgusted look. "We done turned you a pretty profit, and we done been doin' it the whole livelong week. You jes' like a man runs up to put out a fire when it's awreddy burnt down his house."

"Livvy. you say the sweetest things."

"How's MJstah Adam'.)''. she abruptly asked, sitting up straight and wiping her brow. "'How's Miss RuthClaire?"

"Fine," I tied. "Fine."

i made some noises about the apparent success of Adam's operation, but beyond that partial truth I couldn't comfortably go. To prevent any further discussion of the matter, I helped clean up the restaurant, then stayed on for the five-o'clock dinner crowd. Our receipts tk)r the day were encouraging, and I drove Livia George home without once mentioning that I had a guest in my house.

NEXT MORNING, somewhat closer to noon than to sunup,

I was awakened by the telev, ision set downstairs.

i knotted my terrycloth robe about my waist and stumbled

barefoot down the steps to find Adam sitting crosslegged

on the floor with a section of the Sunday Journal-Constitution strewn all around him and my RCA XL100's

screen flickering with ill-defined violet and magenta images

of Dwight "Happy" McElroy's "Great Gospel

Giveaway" broadcast.

"This is my story, this is my song," sang the hundred-member choir behind McElroy. "Praising my Savior all'

the day long!"

Shots of the choir were interspersed with wide-angle

pans of the congregation in McElroy's huge Televangelism

Center in Rehoboth. Louisiana. This soaring, baroquely

buttressed structure had been paid for by the four-bit to

five-dollar contributions of hundreds of thousands of Iow-income

subscribers to the doctrinal guidelines of the Greater

Christian Constituency of America, Inc. Despite the rad-died

colors on my picture tube, I could see quite clearly

that attending the 3-G service were More enraptured souls

than you could reasonably expect to find at the Omni

during an Atlanta Hawks basketball game. Seven thousand

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people? Ten? However many there were, they must have converged on Rehoboth from every city and hamlet on the Gulf Coast, not excluding Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Biloxi, and Mobile. The blessed place rocked.

"Ah." I said. "Your favorite show."

Adam was already dressed. A pair of light brown bush shorts and an orange T-shirt celebrating the pleasures of River Street in Savannah. He handed me a section of the paper called "The Arts."

"Turn first page," he growled, but, overnight, his speech had become clearer and more fluid.

I obeyed. What greeted my eye on the inside page was this headline:

MARRIAGE OF WORLD-FAMOUS ATLANTA ARTISTS ON SKIDS
AS RESULT OF HABILINE'S DECISION TO ATTEND SEMINARY

Beside the brief story was a file photograph of Adam and RuthClaire in "happier times." namely, at the opening of his show at Abraxas in February. My own face was a smudge of dots among other ill-defined faces in the background.

"That was quick, wasn't it'?"

I read the story. It quoted RuthClaire to the effect that Adam's pursuit of spiritual fulfillment had left him little time for either Tiny Paul or her. She still loved him. However, that very love made it impossible to deny him what he most wanted, a chance to study at Candler without the encumbrances of a demanding wife and child. She had offered to support him in his quest for a theological degree, but all he really wished was complete freedom from family obligations. No one alive fully understood the habiline mind, but in some respects Adam's outlook was that of a medieval ascetic with a calling for the priesthood. Had she not intercepted him on his northward trek through Georgia nearly two years ago, almost certainly he would have discovered his spiritual bent without first marrying.

Adam grunted. "She neglects to say. That 'almost certainly.' I would have. Remained a naked animal."

"Never mind. You still end up looking like a horse's butt, Adam. What kind of man abandons his wife and son to begin a course of religious study'/Jesus."

"I do not care how I end up. Looking. To people who do not know me."

"You just want Paulie back'?"

"Yes."

On "Gospel Giveaway," McElroy had launched into a sen'non, the words rolling from him like Gulf Coast combers in hurricane season, powerful, dangerous, unrelenting.

{Of course, there was also the ever-present inset of the vivacious woman interpreting the sermon for the program's deaf viewers, her hands flashing before her like hungry seagulls.) Suddenly, though, McElroy was holding up a copy of the same section of the Atlanta paper now in my own hands.

"... a continuing assault on the American family," he thundered, waving the newspaper at his congrega-

i' tion. "I had planned to apologize this morning for my overzealousness last summer in castigatin' the former RuthClaire Loyd for livin' in sin with a male creature not her husband. Well, it's long since become evident to

everybody that this so-called ci'eature is a man. He and Miss RuthChfire were in fact husband and wife at the time of their apparent illicit cohabitation. That being' so, they de.¥erved an apology from me. Why, this past week I visited Adam Montm'az at a hospital in Atlanta and placed my hands square on his head and baptized him' into the everlastin' glory and the ever-glorious communion of the Body of Christ, say Amen/"

The people in the Televangelism Center roared,

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' 'Amen/' ' '

"And at the same time I unburdened my spirit of its load of guilt and sorrow to both Montarazes. cailin' upon then] to forgive me in the great and gracious name of :lesus Christ. And did they forgive me? I believe they

I did.

and I went away from that city in the conviction

that here were two righteous human bein's saved from

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sin and despair by their faith in God and by their humble

t devotion to each other."

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"To God give the glory!" a member of the audience

cried.

"But what do I read this morning but that this selfsame couple, so concerned and carin' only five days ago, has fallen to the epidemic of sundered relationships ravagin' our country the way the plague once ravaged Europe! This story wounds me so grievously because RuthClaire Montaraz has broken her marriage for the most incredible of reasons. And what's that, brothers and sisters'? Why, nothing More terrible than her husband's desire to . . . to study for the ministn,,t' I A collective groan from the congregation. I

Adam sprang up from the floor and punched the button turning the set off. "That. Son. Of. Bitch," he enunciated.

"RuthClairç didn't let him baptize T.P. He resents her for that, Adam. He's trying to get back at her."

"He has misread the story. Is he . . . unable to read? I am the one. Who has deserted my family."

"Adam, it's all a fabrication. Everything in that story."

My friend struggled to explain himself: "But he has misread, even, the fabrication. A person working for a Master of Theological Studies . . . is not preparing for the ministry. That is the degree of a lay person. Mr. McElroy should know that."

"RuthClaire balked him. That's all he knows."

"So he blackens her name from his pulpit'? For oh-so-many viewers'? Is that what he does?" Adam stopped pacing, rubbed his lower jaw, and pointed one bony finger at the blank TV screen. "Dwight 'Happy' McElroy, you are one . . . very unpleasant . . . son of bitch."

I calmed Adam down and got him into the kitchen where, remembering the orders of Dr. Ruggiero, I prepared him a plate of soft scrambled eggs and a bowl of oatmeal. Adam ate ravenously, polishing off his eggs

belbre turning his spoon to the still steaming, cinnamon-sprinkled oatmeal.

The West Bank was closed on Sundays, not so much to honor the sabbath as to acknowledge the mores of the townspeople who honored it. And, like God, I myself

was not .opposed to twenty-four hours of uninterrupted rest every seven days.

At any rate, that afternoon Adam and I entertained ourselves preparing a kind of makeshift gallery display of RuthClaire's paintings Souls in her old studio. We organized them by dividing them into five groups of seven canvases each, scrupulously assigning different background colors and frame sizes to each group---after which we hung them on the walls or propped them on shelves or tables where they would show off to best advantage.

Sun--warm afternoon sun--came through the dusty Venetian blinds in zebra stripes of marmalade and shadow. Then, when I hoisted the blinds and hooked them high, this same sunlight flooded the entire studio. Prismatic dazzle bounced around the room, and our placement of the canvases, along with the energetic sunlight streaming in, transformed them from muddy, earthbound mistakes into oddly spectacular affirmations of their creator's talent.

'My God," I said.

Adam pointed at this canvas, and then at that, daring me to note how the finishes that had once seemed flat and monolithic now had depth and intricacy. Under the mute pastels lay eloquent patterns of shape and line, iridescent commentaries on the otherwise commonplace surfaces in which they were embedded.

"I never saw any of this before. It's hard to believe."

"I know," Adam said.

"Is this the way you always see them?"

"Of course not."

"But the other way . . . the other way, Adam, they're inexcusably ugly. Hardly worth keeping."

"Sometimes they might seem so. I have even heard Miss RuthClaire confess the same."

"A desire to undo them'? A desire to destroy them'?"

"Yes. But only when she has got . . . beyond them."

Above Paradise Farm. summer clouds pushed in dreamily from the west. mounting one another like amorous

sheep. The light in the studio changed. Someone had

swaddled the sun in gauze.

"They're mined," I said, meaning the paintings.

"They're back to normal."

Adam gave me an unreadable look. Then he patted me reassuringly on the shoulder: Don't fret, Mister Paul. A brief golden glory poured through the summer clouds. Only a little less dazzling than before, sunlight pirouetted through the studio. I looked again at RuthClaire's paintings. Nothing doing. The infinitesimal change in the light had somehow leached them of magic. And no matter how hard i tried over the next several days, I was never able to enter the studio at a time when the light was slanting in at the necessary angle and chromatic intensity to bring the canvases back to life.

ON MONDAY morning. Adam and I were each trying to disguise from the other our individual senses of expectancy. Today RuthClaire was supposed to receive from Craig a letter stipulating the groups---charities, political organizations--to which the Montarazes must write their ransom checks.

At 10:30, I began to get ready to drive into town for my luncheon business. Niedrach should have called, i told myself. But I immediately withdrew that thought, doubting the security of Beulah Fork's telephone lines. Craig did not need to know where Adam had gone, only that he had moved away from the big cupolaed house on tturt Street. As for Adam, he was walking barefoot through my pecan grove, contemplating his and RuthClaire's misfortune. I went down the steps of my sun deck to talk to him.

"If anything happens here. keep me posted. Call me at the West Bank. Even il' Livia George answers the phone, she won't recognize your voice. She's never heard it before." I

Adam. had no chance to reply. We heard a vehicle crunching through the gravel on the circular drive fronting the house. Who'? Friend, foe, or unsuspecting Avon lady? "Get inside," I said. "I'll check this out." The habiline obeyed. In the sweltering midmorning heat, I trotted around the house beneath the studio loft and turned the corner just in time to see a male figure climbing down from the cab of a glossy violet pickup truck. The truck was ,jacked up so high on its oversized wheels that the man's final step was a low-level parachute jump. He caught sight of me the moment he landed. He stood staring at me with a resolute skepticism.

"You Mr. Loyd?"

"Depends on who I'm talking to."

Neither clean-shaven nor bearded, neither a Beau Brummell nor a hobo, the man closed the distance between us. "A chameleon, huh'.) Well, so am I, I guess." He halted about five feet away. His outfit was that of a pulpwood worker--khaki-pants, blue work shin, rope-soled shoes, baseball-style cap with a perforated crown. "I'm Special Agent Neil Hammond. Can we go inside?" These words lifted a weight: I shook Hammond's hand and led him into the house through the narrow front foyer. We found Adam sitting on the stairs with a shoeshine kit applying cordovan polish to the hand-tooled leather boots (with elevator heels) that he had worn to the West Bank in December. in his slacks and T-shirt, in his dedication to the simple task, Adam reminded me of an elderly black man who had shined shoes at the Ralston Hotel in Columbus in the early 1960s. Sitting halfway up the stairs, he nodded at Hammond and me without ceasing to rub polish into the toes and heels of his boots. There was an air of melancholy to his expertise, but a melancholy devoid of self-pity.

Hammond and I watched him work. The habiline finished applying the wax, tugged his left boot on, grasped a shoeshine brush with his bare right foot, and began buffing the instep of the boot with an easy rocking motion that made a whispery noise in the stairwell. This sound was strangely soothing. Adam brought the left boot to a high

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cordovan shine, then removed it and duplicated the procedure in reverse, wearing the right boot and brushing it with his left foot. Hammond and I stood there beneath him in the stairwell, entranced.

"Done," Adam said. He put the brush away and positioned the polished pair of boots on the step so that the toes were even with its outer edge. They shone. They smelled good.

Then Special Agent Hammond began to speak. He had just arrived from Atlanta with a photocopy of the letter addressed to the Montarazes by the kidnapppers. On Saturday, the GBI had received federal authorization to fetch the letter from the U.S. Postal Service in advance of its scheduled Monday delivery. That was how he had managed to bring the message to Adam so early in the day. For the past month, Hammond explained, he had been doing undercover investigation for the Bureau's drug unit in Hothlepoya County. Yesterday morning, though, he had been summoned back to Atlanta to assume the role of message runner for this particular case. He was living in a mobile home between Beulah Fork and Tocqueville, frequenting grubby roadhouses every evening to see if any dope deals were going down, and periodically staking out the Muscadine Gardens private airport to determine if any of the aircraft coming into it were pot planes. Although it might be wise if Adam and I kept our contacts with him to an absolute minimum, Niedrach wanted us to know that

Hammond was our official liaison in Hothlepoya County. "The letter," Adam croaked.

Hammond went up the steps with the photocopy, I climbed to a position behind Adam so that I could read it over his shoulder, it was a tight fit for the three of us--but we arranged ourselves cosily enough, and Adam shook out the photocopy.

"Fingerprints on the envelope have already conclusively identified the author as Craig Puddicombe," Hammond said.

The letter itself consisted of an introductory paragraph, a list of the ten organizations to receive donations from the Montarazes, and a closing paragraph directing them to post

the "genuine canceled check" in a glass case at the interior entrance to Rich's department store in Lenox Square Mall. The "genuine canceled check" had to be posted by the second Monday in August, two weeks away, so that thousands upon thousands of mall patrons could view them as they entered Rich's to shop. The well-known signatures on these checks, and the surprising fringe organizations on their PAY TO THE ORDER OF lines, would undoubtedly stimulate a flood of copy-cat contributions. Moreover, nearly every young person who so much as glanced at the canceled-check display would become a potential suspect in the kidnapping--assuming, of course, that either the FBI or the GBI set up continuous video surveillance of the store's entrance.

"Which we'll certainly do," Hammond said. "Don't worry. This isn't as clever a ploy as Puddicombe thinks. For one thing, it's going to be very easy to fake the canceled checks."

I tapped the bottom of the photocopy. "It says here that he'll consult with the organizations in question to make sure the contributions have really been made."

"That's a bluff. Why have the canceled checks posted in a public place if they already know what posting the check is supposed to prove'?"

"For publicity's sake," I said. "To humiliate RuthClaire and Adam."

Adam looked up. "Would these organizations really take our forced donations, Mr. Hammond?" His most fluid speech yet.

"Some are outfits of dubious probity. They might. It seems to be this character's idea that we're to keep the kidnapping hidden from the general public--at least for now. That being the case, the outfits receiving the checks would have no reason to suppose you'd sent them under duress."

"Couldn't they tell their directors in private?" I asked.

"Of course. But that would entail a certain risk. If Puddicombe had an informant in just one of the organizations, well, he'd figure out pretty damn fast that we're

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using the same line of approach with all the other groups.

The danger to the kidnap victim is clear."

"Say nothing to any of them, then," Adam directed.

"We will send nothing but genuine cashable checks."

"After Pautie's recovered, Mr. Montaraz, there are steps we can take to recover the money, too. It's possible that a few of these outfits, understanding the full situation, would hand it over willingly--but it's equally likely that a couple of them, maybe More, wouldn't mind profiting from your ill fortune. We'd go after them through the state attorney general's office, but it could be a very messy set-to. Even a loud public outcry against one of these farcical bunches--Shock Troops of the Resurrected Confederacy--might not make them relent. It might even strengthen their will to take on our mainstream legal apparatus."

"About the money I have no care," Adam said. "Let it go."

Looking over his shoulder, I studied the list. In addition to Congressman Aubrey O'Seamons, the Klairvoyant Em-pile of KuKlos Klandom, and the Shock Troops of the Resurrected Confederacy (STORC), Craig had specified an odd array of praiseworthy, semirespectable, and questionable institutions. The Methodist Children's Home in Atlanta was cheek by jowl with the National Rifle Association and the Rugged White Survivalists of America. Neither Adam nor I could help noting that the last organization on the list was Dwight McElroy's Greater Christian Constituency. Ever helpful, Craig had provided up-to-date mailing addresses for each and every one of these groups.

"You give twenty-three thousand to the Methodist Children's Home," I advised Adam. "Three thousand each to the other nine groups."

Adam said, "We do not have this much money in our bank account, Mr. Hammond."

"If you're sure you actually want to handle this by writing the checks," he said, "we'll deposit the necessary amount to cover them. That would fortify our case in seeking reimbursement from any really hard-nosed ransom recipient. I ought to remind you, though, that if you'd let

us, we could have our documents division fake the canceled cheeks. That'd be easy for those guys."

"Craig Puddicombe would find out," Adam objected.
"That's a very real possibility."

"Then I must ask the aid of state in making up the total fifty thousand dollars."

"All right," Hammond said.

For a time, we sat in silence in the narrow chute of the stairwell, stymied by the harsh reality of the letter in Adam's hands. !s every vice a corrupted virtue, every evil a perverted good? i don't know, but the anguish and pain that Craig Puddicombe, a mere boy, was inflicting on the Montarazes--and on me by my willing involvement in their predicament--stemmed almost entirely from his pursuit of a variety of justice that was not only blind but tone-deaf and unfeeling. Further, he had implicated Nancy Teavers in his militant passion for left-handed justice. How. I wondered, could one misguided person trigger such ever-widening chaos?-

"What now?" I asked Hammond.

"Mr. Montaraz writes the checks, addresses the envelopes, and gives them to me to mail from a letter box in downtown Atlanta. And then there's not much you two fellas can do but wait."

"Two weeks'?" Adam asked. "Another two weeks?"

WHEN I reached the West Bank later that same morning, Livia George came at me out of the kitchen with a section of Sunday's paper roiled up in her fist like a rolling pin. She knocked me into a chair by the door with it.

"You tole me they was fine! You tole me Adam was healin' up real pretty 'n' evverthin' else was hunky-dory too!"

"I thought it was, I thought il was."

"Their marriage done broke and you think that's a

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up4ight development'? Where you get your smarts. Mistah Paul? From a Jay Cee Penney catalogue'?" She laid the newspaper down, flattened it out in front of me, and read aloud the article about Adam's decision to forsake his family for a period of intense study at the Candler School of Theology. "I nevah figgered him for a no-'count, Mistah Paul. Not for half a minute. Whyn't you talk him out o' this crazy scheme while you was up there'?"

"He was all bandaged up from his operation. Neither of them let on they were having trouble."

"Poo!"

"Look, Livvy, they waited until I'd left town to divulge their story to the press. That was deliberate. They hoodwinked me--to spare me the agony of their agony, I guess."

"You go 'phone that crab-walkin' Mistah Adam and tell him to get his fanny on back to his woman 'n' chile!"

"Nobody knows where he is, Livia George. He's moved out."

For the remainder of the day. my cook comported herself like a woman infinitely sinned against, slamming pots and pans around and muttering under her breath. Once, she came all the way out of the kitchen to glare at a red-haired man who had returned his three-minute Continental Burger as too oniony and overcooked.

"Overcooked'?" she groused, loud enough for the customer to hear." 'IF I had me a pasty face like that fella's, I wouldn't eat nothin' that wasn't burnt to a crumbly char. He get him a taste of underdone raw evver time he bite his bottom lip."

It was only with arm-twisting charm that I herded my Livvy back into the kitchen, and only by waiving his tab that I mollified the red-haired man whom my cook had publicly insulted.

In my heart, though, I blamed the entire situation on Craig Puddicombe.

To FORESTALL Craig's using the Montarazes' failure to comply with all his demands as an excuse to hurt their baby. Adam wrote the following letter to the editors of the Atlanta newspapers:

in your pages this past Sunday, a story suggests my wife and i have separated because of my interest in theology. Although in so saying, Miss RuthClaire says a partial truth, it is ONLY a partial truth. In whole truth, I have broken this marriage because a person of my subhuman species has no right to marry a Cauchsian representative of Homo sapiens sapieJls. I rue the bad example I have set the youth of this nation. I urge them very hard not to give in to the temptation to marry outside their species.

Further, Miss RuthClaire is too fine a person to continue sharing her bed with subhuman murderer such as I. The parents of the late E. L. Tearers of Beulah Fork, Georgia, know of what I speak, as do his Brothers, Sisters, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, and his un-tbrtunate Widow, Nancy, to all of whom I extend heartfelt apologies t)r surviving the murderous fall that for Mister Elvis Lamar was very fatal. I am sorry, I am sorry.

Finally, I do hereby surrender myself to any police or government body that does wish to arrest and prosecute me for the malicious homicide of E. L. Teavers. Please, O police chiefs, sheriffs, or special agents, publish in this Letters to the Editor column your desire so to do, and I will surrender myself to you in the lobby of the Jourtzal-Constitution building at 9:30 A.M. on the day alter this desire has been printed. This I solemnly swear and promise.
Adam Montaraz

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The letter appeared in the Constitution on Thursday morning and in the Journal that same afternoon. Adam had not let me or anyone else read it beforehand, and although it technically fulfilled all the ransom demands not yet complied with, I was afraid that its tone and its turn of phrase might backfire on all of us. The letter seemed to embody the first extended use of irony and sarcasm to which Adam had ever committed himself.

Special Agent Hammond visited Paradise Farm shortly before midnight on Thursday. He told us that Niedrach had doubts similar to mine about the likely efficacy of Adam's "Apology & Confession." If Craig were in a touchy mood, or if he believed that Adam had somehow played him false, T.P. might well have to suffer the consequences. On the other hand, the letter might lead Craig to contact RuthClaire or Adam, thereby multiplying the clues about his and Nancy's whereabouts and inadvertently laying the groundwork for their capture.

Southern Bell Security had cooperated with the GBI in setting up a trap on my telephone by installing a pin register--a device capable of holding a line open even after the caller has hung up--in the office of the Beulah Fork exchange, but had not bothered to try to put a trap on the telephones in the Montaraz house on Hurt Street because of the prohibitive number of exchanges i'n Atlanta. So I did not see how Hammond could say that another call from Craig might prove his downfall. In any case, it was hard to imagine the boy calling Paradise Farm. He would have to have a sudden prescient hunch about Adam's current hiding place.

"What in my letter could give offense?" Adam asked Hammond.

For someone able to grasp the metaphysical complexities of various spiritual issues, Adam was curiously obtuse on this score. I told him that his expression of regret appeared to be tongue in cheek, his apology a clever indictment of Teavers, and his offer to give himself up a parody of genuine confession.

"You've complied with the letter but not the spirit of Craig's demands."

"How can I comply with the spirit of demands that I abhor?"

"You can't," Hammond said. "But you can pretend to."

"I'm not good at this pretending," Adam growled.

"Never any good at it." A tear formed in the corner of his eye. He blinked, and the tear made a moist track down the gully between his cheek and his habiline muzzle. "I can no longer make-believe that I am happy apart from my wife. I can no longer make-believe that my praying seems helpful. I can no longer make-believe that the God of Abraham and also of the converted Paul cares very much about my family's terrible dilemma."

Hammond said. "We're here, Mr. Montaraz, caring as much as we can."

Seated at my dinette table with a bottle of Michelob in one hand, Adam broke down completely. He sobbed like an affronted three-year-old, his fragile lower face scrunch-ling around alarmingly. I was afraid that he was going to undo some aspect of the surgery that had "humanized" him.

"You should read the Book of Job." Hammond said.

Adam shrugged aside the special agent's hand. "Quiet the hell up!" he wheezed at the unperturbed Hammond.

"My people have known two million years of trial, even to the need of hiding away from our own descendants but not even as free person in United States of America can I escape further tribulation. Therefore, I beg you most imploringly, 'Quiet the hell up!' "Whereupon he flung his Michelob bottle between Hammond and me at the refrigerator. By some miracle, it failed to break, but beer sloshed everywhere, splattering the linoleum, and the habiline himself got up and left the room.

"Touchy tonight." said Hammond, not unsympathetically.

"Have you guys made any progress up there'? What about Craig's family here in town? Have you talked to them?"

"We haven't interviewed Puddicombe's mother or any of the other local family members because it's our judgment they'd try to tip him off. It's that kind of family."

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'What's Niedrach doing? And Davison? And their FBI liaison? Not a damn thing's happened since that letter came." I was mopping the spilled beer with paper towels.

Hammond tore a couple of sheets of toweling from the 'roll and knelt next to the refrigerator to help me. "They're I working," he said. "We're all working. Sometimes you ; need a lucky break." He carried the pieces of sopped toweling to the waste basket. "By the way, your friend Caroline Hanna told me to tell you hello. She's over there with your ex-wife nearly every moment she can spare

away from her work. A friend indeed, that lady." Oh, God, I thought, they're comparing notes. Aloud I said, "Thanks. So what do we do now?" "Sit tight, Mr. Loyd. Sit tight."

ADAM AND RuthClaire had written the ten checks demanded by Craig's letter for five thousand dollars each. Although these were sizable contributions by the standards of most American taxpayers, none by itself was enough to seem especially remarkable coming from national figures of the Montarazes' suspected wealth. The GBt agents had dissuaded them from writing any one check for an amount conspicuously larger than the others tot fear that Craig would use the disparity as an excuse to make further demands. He seemed to be enjoying the game he was playing, as if the adrenaline rush of formulating complex demands and having them carried out were a kind of bonus gift for his pursuit of "justice."

By the end of the week, we learned, the Montaraz bank in DeKalb County had begun making payments on some of these drafts. STORC, the Klairvoyant Empire, the Rugged White Survivalists, the Methodist Children's Home, and Aubrey O'Seamons had wasted little time cashing their checks. As a result, it might be possible to put all ten canceled checks in that glass display case in Lenox Square

a few days ahead of schedule. Late Friday night, in fact, exactly one Week after the kidnapping, Hammond informed Adam and me that the FBI had taken several discreet steps to have the checks in place by midweek. There was no sense delaying their availability to the kidnapppers until the second Monday in August if they had already cleared. Whether Craig would release T.P. before Monday was problematic, of course, but we all agreed that it was worth a try. Meanwhile, video surveillance equipment had been concealed in front of Rich's by specialists working in the mall after regular business hours.

Adam and RuthClaire exchanged letters during their separation. Bilker mailed them from random sites around the city, while I addressed all of Adam's billet-doux to Caroline Hanna's apartment so that she could carry them over to Hurt Street when she went to visit RuthClaire. We took these troublesome precautions because Niedmch believed that Craig would interpret any sign of contact between the Montarazes, even from afar, as a violation of their promise to live apart. Phone calls were also out. Caroline and I were under no such ban, however, and so long as I placed my calls to her from the West Bank rather than Paradise Farm, no one hid any objection to our talking to each other. Similarly, Caroline was careful to call me only at the restaurant. If she telephoned during business hours, I would clamber upstairs to my sweltering second-floor storage room to take the call on the extension there. Downstairs, Livia George would hang up, and Caroline and I would jabber away like furtive teen-agers. The heat of the storage room--with its musty cot and its lopsided pyramids of cardboard boxes and vegetable crates--heightened my sense of the illicitness of our hurried conversations. But I liked that feeling. It was absurd, feeling like a teen-ager again, but it was splendid, too. an unexpected benefit of T.P.'s kidnapping that in full daylight I was totally unable to square with the horror of that event.

On Saturday night, Caroline called at 1:30, just as Hazel and Livia George were going out the front door. But, with only an ancient rotating floor fan to keep me

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from collapsing from heat stroke, I took the call upstairs, anyway.

"Talk to me, kid."

"Not for long, Paul. Just wanted to let you know we're hanging on. Ruthie's unbelievably self-possessed. Me, I'm done in."

The, too. Frazzled. Big crowd tonight."

'Adam?'

"I'm starting to worry about him, Caroline. His weird amalgam of religious beliefs--his faith, if you want to call it that--seems to be deserting him. He walks around my place like Roderick Usher, morose and supersensitive. Know what he told me this morning'? 'I'm a lightning rod for human cruelty.' His exact words."

"That doesn't sound like him. It's self-pitying."

"It is and it isn't. I think he was expressing a degree of concern about the people around him. It bothers him that so many people--Ruth Claire, me, Bilker, the cops and special agents, and you too, probably--are endangering themselves trying to help him. He feels responsible."

"Well, he could just as easily say, 'I'm a lightning rod for human charity.' He's looking at things backwards, Paul."

"Is he any different from the rest of us'? He takes the good for granted. Evil thoroughly confounds him."

Caroline said, "Oh," as if a light bulb had gone on over her head. (A 40-watter.) Before I could ask her to explain herself, she said, "Oh.r' again. (A blinding 100-watter.)

"What is it'?"

"Do you remember how Adam apparently got to the states'? How he was one of three habiline crew members on a fishing boat running guns from Punta Gorda in Cuba to the guerrilla opposition to Baby Doc in Haiti'? Only that boat never made it back to Haiti. The Cuban I interviewed in the Atlanta Pen!gnacio Guzman Suarez y Pefia--well, !gnacio murdered the captain of that vessel and two of Adam's fellow habilines. That's another instance of violence that haunts Adam, another reason he keeps seeing himself as a 'lightning rod for human cruelty.' We keep

forgetting that he has a past that antedates his first appearance in Georgia."

I started to object, but Caroline cut me off:

"RuthClaire doesn't, of course, but the rest of us probably have no good idea of the hardships he's already survived."

"I love you. kid," I said. Only the faint idiot singing of the wires--the roaring of the voiceless inane---continued to link us. I shifted on the sagging cot, sweat lubricating my flanks. "You still there, Caroline'?"

"You might have had the decency to tell me that last Saturday morning," she finally replied.

"What's the matter? Everything was okay yesterday, wasn't it? Between us. i mean."

She let the wires sing a tw seconds. "Paul, I got a letter from Brian today."

"Nollinger?" My heart sank.

The very one, she admitted. The letter had come from a city called Montecristi in a northeastern province of the Dominican Republic. In it, good old Brian spent four or five paragraphs justifying his abrupt departure from Atlanta. His position in the anthropology department at Em-ory had steadily deteriorated. His well-publicized quarrel with the Zarakali paleoanthropologist A. P. Blair had put him on shaky ground with his colleagues, most of whom revered the cantankerous old fart. Nor had Brian improved their opinion of him by accusing the artist RuthClaire Loyd of making Adam Montaraz, the habiline refugee from the Caribbean, her personal "slave," when, in fact, the two had freely married each other. Unleashing an agent of the Immigration and Naturalization Service on Adam had been yet another regrettable mistake.

"He made plenty of 'em. Glad to know he's begun to regret them."

Caroline shushed me. Gradually among Brian's colleagues, she continued, paraphrasing the letter, there had grown the perception that he was trying to milk the habiline controversy of every last drop of potential career benefit. (And ineptly missing the pail.) He had further compounded his problems in the department by belatedly developing

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scruples about some of the experiments with primates at the field station north of Atlanta. Did these experiments serve any essential research purpose, or were' they instead only a convenient means of generating grant money for ethologists who might otherwise lack employment'.> At

last, chagrined by his own complicity in this system, he

had made loud noises about the inhumanity of his protracted stud) with stub-tailed macaques. Never again would he exploit innocent primates for research purposes, no

matter how noble the cause. Colleagues with funded experiments of their own had quite understandably interpreted Brian's newfound scrupulosity as a holier-than-thou

slap in the face. His reputation as a limelight-seeking troublemaker had taken on the dimensions of a behemoth. "He deserved that reputation."

"Maybe, maybe not. In any case, Paul, he says that since last summer his life has been a waking nightmare. He says if it hadn't been for my affection and support, he would've probably overdosed on sleeping tablets by Christmas."

"That's touching. Considering the debt he feels he owed you, why do you suppose he never got around to telling you goodbye'?"

"He apologizes for that. He was afraid if he came to tell me goodbye, he'd chicken out and stay. When he learned that he'd actually landed a research position with an American concern in the Dominican Republic, he didn't know whether to cheer or to panic. It was such a drastic break with his own past. A Georgia boy with advanced degrees in anthropology and primate behavior. He was turning his back on all that. He really didn't know if he could do it, Paul."

"Looks like he managed."

"Relax, will you'? I'm not buying an airline ticket to the Dominican. I don't love Brian. I'm just relieved to know he's okay."

I did relax. She no longer loved the man. Why, then, had she been so tentative about telling me that he had written? Well, my attitude toward him precluded comfortable talk about her former lover. She had been afraid to

mention Brian's name, much less tell me about his letter. At the same time, she had felt that to hold back word of the letter would be to sabotage whatever degree of trust we had so far created in our relationship.

"What the hell's he doing down there, anyway?" I blurted.

"He's been hired by the sugar industry," Caroline said, and I could hear her shuffling the pages of Brian's letter as I had once heard Craig Puddicombe uncreasing his list of ransom demands. "The plantations on which he's to work are owned by the Austin-Antilles Corporation. They've asked him to look into the conditions of Haitian canecutters. The canecutters are employed on a lottery basis by the local sugar-harvesting network. Brian's supposed to propose cost-efficient ways of improving their lot--without destroying the economic base of either the Haitian or the Dominican government."

"Cripes."

"What's the matter'? Brian says he's already begun sharing the squalid conditions of the canecutters. He's excited. He thinks that finding a way to channel some of Austin-Antilles Corporation's money to these people is going to be a real challenge. He's getting to use his anthropological background for a humane sociological purpose."

"Challenge? It's a shortcut to crucifixion."

"Why?"

"You ought to know that better than I. You're the one who's worked with Cuban and Haitian refugees."

"Not down there. Only here. What're you getting at?"

"Haitian politics are nasty. Dominican democracy is fragile, and Austin-Antilles is a multinational conglomerate that didn't get to be a multinational by sharing the wealth with peons. Just the reverse, I'm afraid. It sounds to me as if your friend Brian is getting caught in the middle of a canecutting public-relations ploy. Haitian workers always get the shitty end of the stick. It seems to be built into the system."

"Brian thinks he may be able to do some good."

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"Yeah, well, I hope he doesn't end up with nails in his feet and palms."

Caroline chuckled mordantly. "Which is the first time you've wished him anything less fatal than hanging at dawn, isn't it?"

I admitted that it probably was. I also told Caroline that if Brian did his job too well, and if Austin-Antilles refrained from firing him for his presumption, he would almost certainly be transferred to a less controversial company enterprise on some other island. That was just the way the Big AAC did business.

For a moment, the wires regaled me with inarticulate arias of static. Then my caller said, "I love you, too," and hung up. I sat there in the heat, stunned, savoring her words.

AT PARADISE Farm. Adam was vegetating. If he wrote RuthClaire a letter, he forgot to give it to me to mail. If he started a crossword puzzle, he soon lost interest. His books on theology, religious history, the philosophy of religion, and contemporary creation theory sat untouched in their boxes in the second-floor studio. Neit Hammond did not come by with news, and on Sunday morning, too wrought up by Caroline's declaration of love to sleep late, I was the one who turned on "Great Gospel Giveaway."

What motivated me? Maybe I simply had a hunch that McElroy would mention a recent \$5,000 contribution from Adam Montaraz. Bingo. He acknowledged it just as an army of cleancut ushers began filing toward the altar to pick up the collection plates. Adam, too busy trying to think of a nine-letter word for "false piety" to glance at the set, made no sign that he had heard McElroy acknowledge the donation.

That afternoon, however, he fell asleep while listlessly watching a Braves game on Channel 17. I was able to turn

Off the set without rousing him, a notable achievement because of his tendency to sleep as lightly as a cat. McElroy's sermon that morning had been called "Energizing Commitments." That was what Adam seemed to need, but, as I say, he had not listened to the man.

On Monday morning, about ten, I left Paradise Farm and drove into town. My first stop was at the Greyhound Depot Laundry to pick up my tablecloths. Ben Sadler, already looking rumpled and dehydrated, had them waiting for me on the counter. He seemed to be waiting for me himself. The black woman who operated his steam press--a forbidding-looking instrument with a lid like that of a coffin---also made a point of marking my entrance.

Uh oh, I thought. What's going on?

My subsequent conversation with Ben was curiously aimless, though, focusing on such weighty topics as the humidity level and hog-market prices. Strange. Ben usually liked to provoke a verbal scrap over the deployment of U.S. forces in Central America or the morality of alcoholic-beverage licenses for local eating establishments. I started to leave.

"Say," said Ben, "do you take Newsweek?"

"I don't subscribe. Occasionally, I'll pick it up. Why'?"

"Have you seen this week's issue'?"

"Is it out already?"

"Hy Langton, over at the drugstore, gets his copies first thing Monday mornin'. I bought one right off. He don't know what to do with the rest of 'em, though--put 'em out for sale or stash 'em down under the register."

"Newsweek'? With the Playboys and Penthouses?" "It's a eye-opener, the new one. Milly and me--"

nodding at the steam-press operator, who looked down in acute embarrassment--"we've been, uh, sort of discussin' how much times'ye changed, to let a magazine like ol' Newsweek use the kinda cover it's just used. Makes you wonder if it's sale to send your kids down a small-town sidewalk 'thout a blindfold."

"But you bought a copy'?"

"Well, Paul, I got it for you." Even in the heat of the morning and the heat of the laundry, Ben managed to

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blush. "Don't be insulted, now. It's not that I think you're some sorta creep or somethin'. It's just that, you know, once being' married to an artist and all, you're more sophisticated than a lot of folks in Beulah Fork. You know how to take such stuff 'thout being', uh, prurient about it. Isn't that the word, prurient?"

"For God's sake, Ben, what are you talking about?"

"Here." With one emphatic motion, he produced the magazine from beneath his counter and plonked it down on the folded tablecloths.

The cover of the magazine slapped me hard. but I kept my expression as noncommittal as I could. Let Ben and Milly invent a reaction rather than simply relate it. The gossip mills would grind no matter what i did.

And the cover on the new Newsweek'?

To be succinct, it consisted of a startling photograph of Adam and RuthClaire standing side by side, frontally nude, Adam to the left, RuthClaire to the right. Adam had his hand raised in a venerable human gesture signifying "Peace" or "I have no weapon." My ex-wife, although visible frontally from head to toe, was standing with her left leg slightly extended and her body canted a little bit toward Adam's. Eye-catching as they were, the couple occupied only the vertical right half of the cover.

The other half contained a pair of clocks side by side beneath the second three letters of the Newsweek logo. One clock had the initials u.c. in its center, the other the abbreviation A.D. Under the clocks, in eerie shadow, hung a translucent Plexiglas model of the continent of Africa, while at the bottom of the photograph, going from left to right beneath the suspended continent and the primeval couple, floated a string of islands representing the Greater and Lesser Antilles. From the island Hispaniola shot out a sequence of arrows demarcating the wake of a fishing boat on its way past Cuba to the tip of Florida. A legend superimposed beneath the feet of Adam and RuthClaire proclaimed:

THE NEW PHOTOGRAPHY
An Art in Militant Transition

"Bet this gets a lot of bluenoses to cancel their subscriptions," Ben said. "Whaddaya think, Paul?"

I was still not ready to say anything, but Ben was probably right. Whoever had taken this photograph had not bothered to air-brush the pubic hair or the private parts of my ex-wife and her husband. That was why I thought I knew the photographer's identity. I flipped to the cover story at the heart of the magazine. Scanning its lead and several subsequent paragraphs, I found the name MariaKatherine Kander over and over again. In fact, two of the photographs accompanying the article were relatively tame portraits--i.e., the models were either in shadow or semimodestly draped--from the same show at Abraxas that had featured Adam's paintings and the multicolored work of various Haitian artists. I had stepped into a timewarp flinging me back to February.

"Did you know they'd done this, Paul? Had their pictures taken in the altogether?"

"No. No, I didn't."

It was hard to imagine RuthClaire consenting to such a portrait. She was as naked in this Newsweek cover as I had ever seen her during our .decidedly unconventional marriage. Midway through that marriage, she had made up her mind that regular intercourse with me had about it all the irresistible romance of changing a flat tire on a '54 Chevy jalopy. It was not that she was puritanical or cold, it was simply that for her sex had become a time-consuming process best left to people with nothing More important to do. Her knowledge that I was probably never going to father her child had reintbrced this cavalier attitude in her. If procreation was out, and pleasure had long ago fled, why bother? At any rate, the last time I had seen her without a stitch was the night that I had climbed into a magnolia tree on Paradise Farm to take pictures of Adam in the downstairs bathroom. She had been infinitely More provocative in that setting. In the Kander photograph, she seemed to be representing Womankind for an alien eye that might not otherwise grasp the concept. In a sense, of course, that was exactly the point. I put the magazine on the tablecloths and gathered up

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the whole shebang in my arms. "Thanks for the Newsweek. Ben." Then I staggered across the street with my burden.

I dumped the tablecloths into a chair and told Livia George that, once again, she would have to handle the luncheon crowd without me. "Go on," she said, waving a hand. Nothing I did, or failed to do, could surprise her anymore. So with the rolled-up Newsweek in one hand, I exited the West Bank and climbed into my car.

Nell Hammond's jacked-up purple truck was parked in front of my house at Paradise Farm. The man himself was in the living room with a stack of Newsweeks balanced precariously on one of my More fragile-looking end tables. Hammond was holding the magazines in place with the heel of his hand. Adam was perched on the edge of a wingback chair across from the GBI agent, looking penitent and befuddled. My own copy was clutched in my fist like a billy club.

"You've seen it," Hammond said. "You've seen the day's major disaster." He gestured at the stack of magazines.

"I saw it about an hour ago, when I went to the drugstore to buy my wife an anniversary card. I bought every Newsweek in the damn place. Mr. Langton thinks I'm a first-class pervert, too. It's probably blown my cover." He shook his head. "My cover blown by a magazine cover. Funny, huh'? I went to every magazine rack in town buying the damn things up, Mr. Loyd, but the damage has already been done. People here remember Mrs. Montaraz--they remember her well--and a lot of the magazines that went out on the racks were snapped up for souvenirs, let me tell you. Tomorrow, the folks who have subscription copies'll get theirs. There's no way to put a lid on a thing like this. It's a public-relations disaster of colossal proportions, it's a blow to everything we've been trying to do in this case." He lifted his hand from the magazines, and they slid to the floor in a cascade of whispery thumps.

Adam and RuthClaire, Adam and RuthClaire, Adam and RuthClaire.

I looked at Adam. "What the hell did you two think you were doing, anyway'?"

P,,amm: --smmmmmmm

"They've contributed to what's sure to turn out to be the most collectible issue--cover intact, of course--of Newsweek magazine, ever," Hammond said, nudging the pile with his boot. "That's one of the things they've done. Newsweek'll get more letters than they've ever received, and nine tenths of 'em will be from outraged old ladies, concerned mothers, angry preachers, and so on. Subscriptions'll get canceled, sure, but every damn newsstand copy will be gone before the day's out.

"Do you remember how that flaky Beatle and his Japanese old lady made an album called Two Virgins back in the late sixties? They had themselves shot buck-naked for the album cover. Nobody at their damn company wanted to use the photographs, but the flaky Beatle insisted. At least they sold the damn things in brown envelopes, though. This--" he kicked one of the fallen magazines--"is being sold right out in front of God and everybody with Time and Woman's Day and Field and Stream. And by 'God and everybody,' I do mean ever3.'body. Little Bobby, Innocent Little Susy, Sweet Old Aunt Matilda, and, probably worst of all, Crazy Craig Puddicombe."

Adam, his hands clasped between his knees, looked up.

"Neither RuthClaire nor I had any inkling this photograph would appear--" gesturing vaguely--"as it so upsettingly has."

"But why did you pose for something like this?" I asked.

"In April, Mister Paul, long before my surgery, this M.-K. Kander person came to Atlanta on business at Abraxas. About 'shooting' RuthClaire and me, she inquired. The idea of the Primeval Couple had great appeal to her. Mister David did introductions. And Miss RuthClaire and this M.-K. Kander person, they took to each other very fast. So when her new friend suggest we pose in way you see, my wife has no great objection. Nor I. So our photographs got taken in gallery room where Ms. Kander had her February show. A little later, she kindly sends us prints of very same one that this magazine has given horrible honor of its cover." Adam sought my eyes. "Never

Michael Bishop

did we expect this picture to appear anywhere but in M.-K. Kander private porttblbio. This, then, is great shock." "It's a disaster," Hammond reiterated.

I opened out my scrolled copy and held it up. "But why like this, Adam'? Why did she want you to pose like this?" His growl tentative, Adam said, "The set-up was greatly symbolic. The Primeval Couple, as I have said. My name is Adam, and I am a habiline with origins going deeply .back beyond those of even Biblical Adam. So said MariaKatherine. Miss RuthClaire, to the contrary, is modern woman with life in technological times. So, again, said M.-K. Kander. Our marriage, she told us, unites past and future of species in exciting new Now." He paused. "Maybe this symbolism lacks clarity, but in standing naked beside .my wife I saw no great harm for this talented picture-taking person. Early Adam and somewhat later Eve. Miss RuthClaire thought it--you may be surprised--very funny and also enjoyable."

I stared hard at the magazine cover. "This pose reminds me of something, Adam. But what'?"

"Maria-Katherine patterned this composition after the plaques sent out into cosmos aboard Pioneer 10 and 11 spacecraft. They, too, you remember, feature naked male and female side by side, the male with left hand raised, On those plaques, of course, male is taller than female, and islands at bottom are not Cuba and so on, but the sun and planetary bodies of our solar system. A miniature of the spacecraft is shown leaving third such body and flying off between Jupiter and Saturn into cosmic ocean. Again, it was M.-K. Kander person's idea to use this pattern. A Plexiglas model of Africa hangs to right because humanity, it seems, did begin there. Miss Maria-Katherine made this continent artifact herself."

Hammond twisted his cap in his hands. "You had no idea this photograph was going to crop up as a Newsweek cover?' ' "They would have known," I said, defending them, "if the cover story had been about themselves. The editorial staff would have informed them. But this issue's cover story is about the new photography, and the only release

the editors probably needed was one from the Kander woman authorizing them to use this particular photograph."

"If we had known they were going to use it," Hammond said, "we would have told them what was going on down here. We could have asked them to deep-six the damn thing or at least delay it another week. There's nothing that topical about 'The New Photography,' for God's sake. They could have waited."

Adam stood up, thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his slacks, and, balancing on one leg, picked up a copy of Newsweek with the toes of his other foot. The magazine dangled there like a startled sea creature yanked from its natural element. And then Adam disdainfully dropped it.

"I am very unhappy with this ambitious photographer person," he said. "I am very unhappy, indeed."

I RETURNED to work. Hammond remained at the house with Adam. At six o'clock that evening, the agent telephoned the West Bank and told me that something had happened and that he and Adam were leaving for Atlanta.

"Wait a minute. I want to go with you."

Livia George was at my elbow beside the cash register.

"This got somethin' to do with Miss RuthClaire gettin' jaybird-skinny on that magazine'?"

"Hush, Livia George."

"City did this to 'em. City made 'em think they could shuck their clothes/'or some hotsy-totsy nashunal magazine."

"Damn it, woman, get out of my ear for a couple of minutes!" I had my hand over the telephone's mouthpiece.

A couple at a nearby table peeked up at me, disapproving of my language and tone.

Hammond's voice said, "This isn't your affair any longer, Mr. Loyd. Niedrach's just called. We've got to go."

"T.P.'s my godson. You can't close me out. Give me ten or so minutes and I'll be there with you."

"We're leaving."

"I'll follow."

"That's your prerogative."

"The Montaraz house on Hurt Street?"

"Goodbye, Mr. Loyd."

"What happened? Did Craig call? Did someone see him?"

But all I had in my ear was a busy signal. I barged into the kitchen, to which Livia George had sullenly retreated a moment ago, and found her slicing tomatoes into a salad. Hazel Upchurch was sautéing mushrooms in a cast-iron skillet. Debbie Rae House, my new waitress, was picking up a tray of water glasses.

"Pray," I commanded the three women. "I don't know what the hell good it'll do, but pray. Pray for T.P." Then I was gone.

DESPITE THEIR head start, I caught up with Hammond's pickup between the two exits sandwiching Newnan, Georgia, on 1-85. The sun was lowering itself rung by rung to the western horizon, but daylight still fingered above the heat-browned meadows flanking the interstate, and traffic was still brisk in both directions. Doing eighty, I had to hit my brakes to keep from overshooting the agent's truck, and my own car almost got away from me before I was able to bring it under control and follow Hammond and his habiline passenger into Atlanta without further incident. We parked across the street from the Montaraz house and went inside.

Adam and RuthCtaire embraced.

Niedrach was present, Davison was not. In the latter's place were two men in sports jackets and spiffily creased slacks; neither of these men had yet hit his fortieth birthday. One had stylishly long hair that just touched his collar in back but stayed well off his ears: he was pink-cheeked

and clear-eyed, after the fashion of a second lead in a B movie of the 1940s. The other man had an astronaut's conservative haircut, a nose that had once been broken, and a shovel-shaped mouth that sometimes seemed to move as if it had a will distinct from its owner's. Feds, these fellows. Latter-day heirs of the late, unlamented J. Edgar

Hoover.

Bilker Moody introduced these men as Investigator Tim Le May (the B-movie second lead) and Investigator Erik Webb (the shovel-mouthed astronaut). They had taken over the case on the Saturday afternoon following the kidnapping, but Niedrach had stayed on to coordinate their investigation with local police departments and the antiterrorist unit of the GBI. Given federal jurisdiction over most kidnappings, this was a somewhat unusual arrangement, but Niedrach's familiarity with Klan tactics and his intimate knowledge of the events precipitated last summer by the Kudzu Klavern had argued tellingly for his uninterrupted involvement with this case. I was glad to see him. He was wearing his bulldog belt buckle and a navy-blue windbreaker that made him seem out of uniform. He looked like the fatigued, seedy uncle or the younger, more dapper federal agent.

Adam approached him. "What has happened?"

"The bastard phoned," Bilker Moody said, his upper arms straining the sleeve bands of his sweaty banlon shirt.

"We've got a tape," Le May said. "Come into the kitchen and we'll play it for you."

We filed into the kitchen. The tape machine, with two sets of headphones, was connected to the wall phone beside the door leading to Bilker's pantry headquarters. Still, it was possible to sit at the kitchen table while listening to or taping a call, and Adam and RuthCtaire sat down at the table with Niedrach, Le May, and Webb. Hammond, Moody, and I found convenient corners into which to we