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TRINITY

And Other Stories

By Nancy Kress

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Explaining Nancy Kress

by Gene Wolfe

“Explanations, Inc.,” which you will find in this book, concerns a research shop whose operators will explain anything for a price. The price is not your soul or even the life of your firstborn, just plain old money; and that is one of the reasons you should read Nancy Kress.

There are really only three schools of writing. In the Pooh Bear school you make up a world that is different from the actual world, and in certain respects better. A. A. Milne obviously belongs to this school, and it *would* be nice, and fun, and interesting if little Christopher Robin’s stuffed toys could walk and talk, and if they lived in hollow trees in the woods instead of in his toy chest. Less obviously, so do Shakespeare and Dickens; real madmen do not rave so well as Lear, real princes do not possess Hamlet’s nobility, real scapegraces are never really so graceful as Mrs. Gamp, Mr. Micawber, and Sir John Falstaff, though we may wish to God they were. As I hope my examples have shown, most of the writers worth reading are Pooh Bears; and Nancy Kress has demonstrated that she can lift the Banner of the Bear as high as any living writer, though you will not find her doing much of that here.

In the Bare Poop school, you make up a world that is different from this one and in certain respects worse. Most creative writing teachers and most of the writers appearing in “little” magazines belong to this school; and it *would* be nasty, foul, and intolerable if the bear cage at the zoo really stank as much as they say it does, and if the bear were half so flyblown and disgusting. We may thank God it isn’t so. The actual cages in actual zoos may stink, but they never stink quite so vilely as in those stories; and what is perhaps more important, there is a sense in which the caged bears are no actual bears at all, are less real even than Winnie the Pooh. For Winnie is an ideal toy bear—a toy bear as a toy bear would wish to be if a toy bear could wish. While the caged bear is an exhibit, a bear unbearably parted from the ursine ideal, just as the writers of the Bare Poop school are writers unbearably parted from the writerly ideals of Homer and Hemingway, pseudo-writers who could be made worse only by appearing in their own vignettes. Nancy Kress does not write like that; if she did, I would not be introducing you to TRINITY AND OTHER STORIES, because she would be incapable of writing it.

In the Kress school you make up a single event that is different (and

in some respects better) from the things we usually see in our actual world; then you put it there. Suppose, for example, that reincarnation could be shown to be fact— and an actress is to play Joan of Arc. That is “With the Original Cast,” and you will not find a single flaw in the casting; these are real, contemporary New York theatrical people, thinking and acting as such people do.

Or suppose that a woman could recall all her past lives—and that woman was the only parent and the only adult that an adolescent had ever known. That is “Talp Hunt,” and “Talp Hunt” is one of the few castaway stories worth reading since “A Martian Odyssey.”

I could go on like this for story after story. But if I did, you would get the idea that Nancy Kress is fundamentally an idea writer, a gimmick writer and perhaps even a gadget writer. Nothing could be further from the truth. She has idea after idea, true. And it is also true that they are ideas most writers would give their firstborn for—were it not that most of us writers are too invincibly smug to see how badly we need new ones. But Nancy would not give her firstborn for them, or so much as her oldest cat; she knows ideas are nothing without people. In “Night Win” you will meet an ugly couple fighting on the side of life in a hospital and in the only fantasy land that really exists; and you will see in both—because Nancy will make you see—that heroism has no more to do with good looks and steel thews than happiness does.

I could go on about the characters too: about Laura, who is Brorovsky’s hollow woman, and about the central figure of “Trinity,” who is not Seena the entomologist (though Seena is beautifully drawn) but that ineffable thing Francis Thompson called the Hound of Heaven, the being whom all of us hunt and flee.

Thus far I, who work or at least try to work for Explanations, Inc., have not yet explained Nancy Kress to the satisfaction of you, my client; and you’re beginning to think I can’t do it and you’re going to get your money back. Well, you’re wrong.

I said a moment ago that there were three schools of writing. There are also two kinds of writers, both kinds being found in all three schools. The first type of writer (usually male) possesses no deep insight into the human soul, and thus writes largely about those things that are outside it: robots and ray guns, murders and wars. Lewis Carroll and Robert E. Howard are writers of this type; so is Agatha Christie. And of course there is nothing wrong with this kind of writer or this kind of writing, which has given us GULLIVER’S TRAVELS, TITUS GROAN, and a thousand other

treasures.

The second type (usually female) makes the soul her chief concern. Unfortunately quite often there *is* something wrong with this kind of writer and the writing she does. It has been called natural modesty, womanly humility, a decent reticence and a dozen other names, all of them complimentary and some of them noble; but it is not a good thing for writing. Stripped of its lovely names, it amounts to an unwillingness to show too much, because the writer knows that in showing the souls of her characters she reveals her own. And she wouldn't, she really wouldn't, want us to see that.

But occasionally we may find a writer—as occasionally we may find a diamond—who does not care. Or rather, who cares so much for her creation that her creation is all that matters to her, not because she counts herself as nothing but because she does not count herself at all. Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust are writers of this kind. So is Nancy Kress. They don't care what we think of them, which is why we think the world of them.

—Gene Wolfe

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With the Original Cast

A story can begin in a writer's mind from almost anything: a character, a situation, a half-glimpsed paradox, an invention, a scrap of dialogue, some shift in the quality of the existential light. This one began at two points, a question and a character, which traveled toward each other until they met.

The question was a classic what-if: suppose that reincarnation was a fact, and the technology existed to make us aware of previous lives. Quite deliberately, I tried to think about how such technology might be put to use.

The character was also a deliberate choice. Speculative fiction does not offer very many middle-aged women in starring roles. There are plenty of young movers and shakers (of both sexes), a great many mature men in positions where things happen, and a fair sprinkling of old men and women (in fantasy, these get to be wizards; in SF, they get to head powerful interstellar families.) But not very many middle-aged women. Perhaps they are assumed to be uninterested in the world—or uninteresting *to* the world.

My first middle-aged world-attacker was Kirila, protagonist in my first novel THE PRINCE OF MORNING BELLS. Barbara Bishop was the second, but not the last.

They're out there.

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In the summer of 1998 Gregory Whitten was rehearsing a seventy-fifth-year revival of George Bernard Shaw's Saint *Joan*, and Barbara Bishop abruptly called to ask me to fly back from Denver and attend a few rehearsals with her. She was playing Shaw's magnificent teen-aged fanatic, a role she had not done for twenty years and never on Broadway. Still, it was an extraordinary request; she had never specifically asked for my presence before, and I wound up my business for Gorer-Redding Solar and caught the next shuttle with uncharacteristic hope. At noon I landed in New York and coptered directly to the theater. Barbara met me in the lobby.

“Austin! You came!”

“Did you doubt it?” I kissed her, and she laughed softly.

“It was so splendid of you to drop everything and rush home.”

“Well-I didn’t exactly drop it. Lay it down gently, perhaps.”

“Could Carl spare you? Did you succeed in blocking that coalition, or can they still stop Carl from installing the new Battery?”

“They have one chance in a billion,” I said lightly. Barbara always asks; she manages to sound as interested in Gorer-Redding Solar as in Shakespeare and ESIR, although I don’t suppose she really is. Of late neither am I, although Carl Gorer is my brother and the speculative risks of finance, including Gorer-Redding, is my profession. It was a certain faint boredom with seriously behaved money that had driven me in the first place to take wildcat risks backing legitimate theater. In the beginning Gorer-Redding Solar was itself a wildcat risk: one chance in a hundred that solar energy could be made cheap and plentiful enough to replace the exhausted petrofields. But that was years ago. Now solar prosperity is a reality; speculations lie elsewhere.

“I do appreciate your coming, you know,” Barbara said. She tilted her head to one side, and a curve of shining dark hair, still without gray, slanted across one cheek.

“All appreciation gratefully accepted. Is there something wrong with the play?”

“No, or course not. What could be wrong with Shaw? Oh, Gregory’s a little edgy, but then you know Gregory.”

“Then you called me back solely to marry me.”

“Austin, not again,” she said, without coyness. “Not now.”

“Then something *is* wrong.”

She pulled a little away from me, shaking her head. “Only the usual new-play nerves.”

“Rue-day nerves.”

“Through-the-day swerves.”

“Your point,” I said. “But, Barbara, you’ve played Joan of Arc before.”

“Twenty years ago,” she said, and I glimpsed the strain on her face a second before it vanished under her publicity-photo smile, luminous and cool as polished crystal. Then the smile disappeared, and she put her cheek next to mine and whispered, “I do thank you for coming. And you look so splendid,” and she was yet another Barbara, the Barbara I saw only in glimpses through her self-contained poise, despite having pursued her for half a year now with my marriage proposals, all gracefully rejected. I, Austin Gorer, who until now had never ever pursued anything very fast or very far. Nor ever had to.

“Nervous, love?”

“Terrified,” she said lightly, the very lightness turning the word into a denial of itself, a delicate stage mockery.

“I don’t believe it.”

“That’s half your charm. You never believe me.”

“Your Joan was a wild success.”

“My God, that was even before ESIR, can you believe it?”

“I believe it.”

“So do I,” she said, laughing, and began to relate anecdotes about casting that play, then this one, jumping between the two with witty, effortless bridges, her famous voice rising and falling with the melodious control that was as much a part of the public’s image of her as the shining helmet of dark hair and the cool grace.

She has never had good press. She is too much of a paradox to reduce easily to tabloid slogans, and the stupider journalists have called her mannered and artificial. She is neither. Eager animation and conscious taste are two qualities the press usually holds to be opposites, patronizing the first and feeling defensive in the presence of the second. But in Barbara Bishop, animation and control have melded into a grace that owes nothing to nature and everything to a civilized respect for willed illusion. When she walks across a stage or through a bedroom, when she speaks Shaw’s words or her own, when she hands Macbeth a dagger or a dinner

guest a glass of wine, every movement is both free of artifice and perfectly controlled. Because she will not rage at press conferences, or wail colorfully at lost roles, or wrinkle her nose in professional cuteness, the press has decided that she is cold and lacks spontaneity. But for Barbara, what is spontaneous *is* control. She was born with it. She'll always have it.

"—and so now Gregory's *still* casting for the crowd scenes. He's tested what has to be every ESIR actor in New York, and now he's scraping up fledglings straight out of the hospital. Their scalp scars are barely healed and the ink on their historian's certificates is still wet. We're two weeks behind already, and rehearsals have barely begun, would you believe it? He can't find enough actors with an ESIR in fifteenth-century France, and he's not willing to go even fifty years off on either side."

"Then you must have been French in Joan's time," I said, "or he wouldn't have cast you? Even you?"

"Quite right. Even me." She moved away from me toward the theater doors. Again I sensed in her some unusual strain. An actor is always reluctant to discuss his ESIR with an outsider (bad form), but this was something more.

"As it happens," Barbara continued, "I was not only French, I was even in Rouen when Joan was burned at the stake in 1431. I didn't see the burning, and I never laid eyes on her—I was only a barmaid in a country tavern—but, still, it's rather an interesting coincidence."

"Yes."

"One chance in a million," she said, smiling. "Or, no—what would be the odds, Austin? That's really your field."

I didn't know. It would depend, of course, on just how many people in the world had undergone ESIR. There were very few. Electronically Stimulated Incarnation Recall involves painful, repeated electrochemical jolts through the cortex, through the limbic brain, directly into the R-Complex, containing racial and genetic memory. Biological shields are ripped away; defense mechanisms designed to aid survival by streamlining the vast load of memory are deliberately torn. The long-term effects are not yet known. ESIR is risky, confusing, morally disorienting, painful, and expensive. Most people want nothing to do with it. Those who do are mostly historians, scientists, freaks, mystics, poets—or actors, who must be a little of each. A stage full of players who believe totally that they *are* in Hamlet's Denmark or Sir Thomas More's England or Blanche DuBois's South

because they *have* been there and feel it in every gesture, every cadence, every authentic cast of mind—such a stage is out of time entirely. It can seduce even a philistine financier. Since ESIR, the glamour of the theater has risen, the number of would-be actors has dropped, and only the history departments of the world's universities have been so in love with historically authentic style.

"Forget the odds," I said. "Who hasn't been cast yet?"

"Well, we need to see," she said, ticking off roles on her fingers. I recognized the parody instantly. Gregory Whitten himself. Her very face seemed to lengthen into the horse-faced scowl so beloved by Sunday-supplement caricaturists. "'We must have two royal ladies—no, they must absolutely look royal, *royal*. And DeStogumber, I need a marvelous DeStogumber! How can anyone expect me to direct without an absolutely wonderful DeStogumber-"

The theater doors opened. "We are ready for you onstage, Miss Bishop."

"Thank you." The parody of Whitten had vanished instantly; in this public of one stagehand she was again Barbara Bishop, controlled and cool.

I settled into a seat in the first row, nodding vaguely at the other hangers-on scattered throughout the orchestra and mezzanine. No one nodded back. There was an absurd public fiction that we, who contributed nothing to the play but large sums of money, were like air: necessary but invisible. I didn't mind. I enjoyed seeing the cast ease into their roles, pulling them up from somewhere inside and mentally shaking each fold around their own gestures and voices and glances. I had not always known how to see that. It had taken me, from such a different set of signals, a long time to notice the tiny adjustments that go, rehearsal by rehearsal, to create the illusion of reality. Perhaps I was slow. But now it seemed to me that I could spot the precise moment when an actor has achieved that precarious balance between his neocortical knowledge of the script and his older, ESIR knowledge of the feel of his character's epoch, and so is neither himself nor the playwright's creation but some third, subtler force that transcends both.

Barbara, I could see, had not yet reached that moment.

Whitten, pacing the side of the stage, was directing the early scene in which the seventeen-year-old Joan, a determined peasant, comes to

Captain Robert de Baudricourt to demand a horse and armor to lead the French to victory over the English. De Baudricourt was being played by Jason Kellig, a semisuccessful actor whom I had met before and not particularly liked. No one else was onstage, although I had that sensation one always has during a rehearsal of hordes of other people just out of sight in the wings, eyeing the action critically and shushing one another. Moths fluttering nervously just outside the charmed circle of light.

"No, squire!" Barbara said. "God is very merciful, and the blessed saints Catherine and Margaret, who speak to me every day, will intercede for you. You will go to paradise, and your name will be remembered forever as my first helper."

It was subtly wrong: too poised for the peasant Joan, too graceful. At the same time, an occasional gesture—an outflinging of her elbow, a sour smile—was too brash, and I guessed that these had belonged to the Rouen barmaid in Joan's ESIR. It was very rough, and I could see Whitten's famous temper, never long in check, begin to mount.

"No, no, no—Barbara, you're supposed to be an *innocent*. Shaw says that Joan answers 'with muffled sweetness.' You sound too surly. Absolutely too surly. You must do it again. Jason, cue her."

"Well, I am damned," Kellig said.

"No, squire! God is very merciful, and blessed saints Catherine and Margaret, who speak to me every day, will intercede for you. You will go to paradise—"

"Again," Whitten said.

"Well, I am damned."

"No, squire! God is very merciful, and the blessed saints Catherine and Margaret, who speak to me every—"

"No! Now you sound like you're sparring with him! This is not some damned eighteenth-century drawing-room repartee! Joan absolutely *means* it! The voices are absolutely real to her. You must do it again, Barbara. You must tap into the religious atmosphere of your ESIR. You are not trying! Do it again!"

Barbara bit her lip. I saw Kellig glance from her to Whitten, and I suddenly had the impression—I don't know why-that they had all been at

one another earlier, before I had arrived. Something beyond the usual rehearsal frustration was going on here. Tension, unmistakable as the smell of smoke, rose from the three of them.

“Well, I am damned.”

“No, squire! God is very merciful, and the blessed saints Catherine and Margaret, who speak to me every day, will intercede for you. You will go to paradise, and your name will be remembered forever as my first helper.”

“Again,” Whitten said.

“Well, I am damned.”

“No, squire! God is—”

“Again.”

“Really, Gregory,” Barbara began icily, “how you think you can judge after four words of—”

“I need to hear only *one* word when it’s as bad as that! And what in absolute hell is that little flick of the wrist supposed to be? Joan is not a discus thrower. She must be—” Whitten stopped dead, staring off-stage.

At first, unsure of why he had cut himself off or turned so red, I thought he was having an attack of some kind. The color in his face was high, almost hectic. But he held himself taut and erect, and then I heard the siren coming closer, landing on the roof, trailing off. It had come from the direction of Larrimer—which was, I suddenly remembered, the only hospital in New York that would do ESIR.

A very young man in a white coat hurried across the stage.

“Mr. Whitten, Dr. Metz says could you come up to the copter right away?”

“What is it? No, don’t hold back, damn it. you absolutely must tell me now! *Is* it?”

On the young technician’s face professional restraint battled with self-importance. The latter won, helped perhaps by Whitten’s seizing the boy by the shoulders. For a second I actually thought Whitten would shake him.

“It’s her, sir. It really is. We were looking for fifteenth-century ESIR, like you said, and we tried the neos for upper class for the ladies in waiting, and all we were getting were peasants or non-Europeans or early childhood deaths, and then Dr. Metz asked—” He was clearly enjoying this, dragging it out as much as possible. Whitten waited with a patience that surprised me until I realized that he was holding his breath. “-this neo to concentrate on the pictures Dr. Metz would show her of buildings and dresses and bowls and stuff to clear her mind. She looked dazed and in pain like they do, and then she suddenly remembered who she was, and Dr. Metz asked her lots of questions—that’s his period anyway, you know; he’s the foremost American historian on medieval France—and then he said she was.”

Whitten let out his breath, a long, explosive sigh. Kellig leaned forward and said “Was…”

“Joan,” the boy said simply. “Joan of Arc.”

It was as if he had shouted, although of course he had not. But the name hung in the dusty silence of the empty theater, circled and underlined by everything there: the heavy velvet curtains, the dust motes in the air, the waiting strobes, the clouds of mothlike actors, or memories of actors, in the wings. They all existed to lend weight and probability to what had neither. One in a million, one in a billion.

“Is Dr. Metz sure?” Whitten demanded. He looked suddenly violent, capable of disassembling the technician if the historian were not sure.

“He’s sure!”

“Where is she? In the copter?”

“Yes.”

“Have Dr. Metz bring her down here. No, I’ll go up there. No, bring her here. Is she still weak?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said.

“Well, go! I told Dr. Metz I wanted her here as soon as he absolutely was sure!”

The boy went.

So Whitten had been informed of the possibility earlier. I looked at Barbara, suddenly understanding the tension on stage. She stood smiling, her chin raised a little, her body very straight, her chin raised a little, her body very straight. She looked pale. Some trick of lighting, some motionless tautness in her shoulders, made me think for an instant that she was going to faint, but of course she did not. She behaved exactly as I knew she must have been willing herself to, waiting quietly through the interminable time until Joan of Arc should appear. Whitten fidgeted; Kellig lounged, his eyelids lowered halfway. Neither of them looked at Barbara.

The technician and the historian walked out onto the stage, each with a hand under either elbow of a young girl whose head was bandaged. Even now I feel a little ashamed when I remember rising halfway in my seat, as for an exalted presence. But the girl was not an exalted presence, was not Joan of Arc; she was an awkward, skinny plain-faced girl who had once *been* Joan of Arc and now wanted to be an extra in the background of a seventy-five-year-old play. No one else seemed to be remembering the distinction.

“You were Joan of Arc?” Whitten asked. He sounded curiously formal, as out of character as the girl.

“Yes, I… I remember Joan. Being Joan.” The girl frowned, and I thought I knew why: She was wondering why she didn’t *feel* like Joan. But ESIR, Barbara has told me, doesn’t work like that. Other lives are like remembering someone you have known, not like experiencing the flesh and bone of this one—unless this one is psychotic. Otherwise, it usually takes time and effort to draw on the memory of a previous incarnation, and this child had been Joan of Arc only for a few days. Suddenly I felt very sorry for her.

“What’s your first name?” Whitten said.

“Ann. Ann Jasmine.”

Whitten winced. “A stage name?”

“Yes. Isn’t it pretty?”

“You must absolutely use your real name. What acting have you done?”

The girl shifted her weight, spreading her feet slightly apart and starting to count off on her fingers. Her voice was stronger now and cockier.

“Well, let’s just see: In high school I played Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, and in the Country-Time Players—that’s community theater—I was Goat’s Sister in *The Robber Bridegroom* and Aria in *Moondust*. And then I came to New York, and I’ve done— oh, small stuff, mostly. A few commercials.” She smiled at Whitten, then looked past him at Kellig and winked. He stared back at her as if she were a dead fish.

“What,” said Kellig slowly, “*is* your real name?”

“Does it matter?” The girl’s smile vanished, and she pouted.

“Yes.”

“Ann Friedland,” she said sulkily, and I knew where the “few commercials, mostly” as well as the expensive ESIR audition had come from. Trevor Friedland, of Friedland Computers, was a theater backer for his own amusement, much as I was. He was not, however, a co-backer in this one. Not yet.

At the Friedland name, Kellig whistled, a low, impudent note that made Whitten glance at him in annoyance. Barbara still had not moved. She watched them intently.

“Forget your name,” Whitten said. “Absolutely forget it. Now I know this play is new to you, but you must read for me. Just read cold; don’t be nervous. Take my script and start there. No—there. Jason, cue her.”

“You want me to read Joan? The part of *Joan?”* the girl said. All her assumed sophistication was gone; her face was as alive as a seven-year-old’s at Christmas, and I looked away, not wanting to like her.

“Oh, really, Greg,” Kellig said. Whitten ignored him.

“Just look over Shaw’s description there, and then start. I know you’re cold. Just start.”

“Good morning, captain squire,” she began shakily, but stopped when Barbara crossed the stage to sit on a bench near the wings. She was still smiling, a small frozen smile. Ann glanced at her nervously, then began over.

“Good morning, captain squire. Captain, you are to give me a horse…” Again she stopped. A puzzled look came over her face; she

skimmed a few pages and then closed her eyes. Immediately I thought of the real Joan, listening to voices. But this *was* the real Joan. For a moment the stage seemed to float in front of me, a meaningless collection of lines and angles.

"It wasn't like that," Ann Friedland said slowly.

"Like what?" Whitten said. "What wasn't like what?"

"Joan. Me. She didn't charge in like that at all to ask de Baudricourt for horse and armor. It wasn't at all… she was more… Insane, I think. What he has written here, Shaw…" She looked at each of us in turn, frowning. No one moved. I don't know how long we stayed that way, staring at the thin girl onstage.

"Saint Catherine," she said finally. "Saint Margaret." Her slight figure jerked as if shocked, and she threw back her head and howled like a dog. "But Orleans was not even my idea! The commander, my father, the commander, my father… oh, my God, my dear God, he made her do it, he told me—they all *promised*—"

She stumbled, nearly falling to her knees. The historian leaped forward and caught her. I don't think any of us could have borne it if that pitiful, demented figure had knelt and begun to pray.

The next moment, however, though visibly fighting to control herself, she knew where—and who—she was.

"Doctor, don't, I'm all right now. It's not—I'm all right. Mr. Whitten, I'm sorry, let me start the scene over!"

"No, don't start the scene over. Tell me what you were going to say. Where is Shaw wrong? What happened? Try to feel it again."

Ann's eyes held Whitten's. They were beyond all of us, already negotiating with every inflection of every word.

"I don't have to feel it again. I remember what happened. That wave of… I won't do that again. It was just when it all came rushing back. But now I remember it, I have it, I can *control* it. It didn't happen like Shaw's play. She—I—was used. She did hear voices, she was mad, but the whole idea to use her to persuade the Dauphin to fight against the English didn't come from the voices. The priests insisted on what they said the voices meant, and the commander made her a sort of mascot to get the soldiers to kill… I

was *used*. A victim.” A complicated expression passed over her face, perhaps the most extraordinary expression I have ever seen on a face so young: regret and shame and loss and an angry, wondering despair for events long beyond the possibility of change. Then the expression vanished, and she was wholly a young woman coolly engaged in the bargaining of history.

“I know it all, Mr. Whitten—all that *really* happened. And it happened to me. The real Joan of Arc.”

“Cosgriff,” Whitten said, and I saw Kellig start. Lawrence Cosgriff had won the Pulitzer Prize for drama the last two years in a row. He wrote powerful, despairing plays about the loss of individual morality in an institutionalized world.

“My dear Gregory,” Kellig said, “one does not simply commission Lawrence Cosgriff to write one a play. He’s not some hack you can—”

Whitten looked at him, and he was quiet. I understood why; Whitten was on fire, as exalted with his daring idea as the original Joan must have been with hers. But no, of course, she hadn’t been exalted, that was the whole point. She had been a dupe, not a heroine. Young Miss Friedland, fighting for her name in lights, most certainly considered Joan the Heroine to be an expendable casualty. One of the expendable casualties. I stood up and began to make my way to the stage.

“I’m the real thing,” Ann said. “The *real* thing. I’ll play Joan, of course.”

“Of course,” Kellig drawled. He was already looking at her with dislike, and I could see what their rehearsals would be: the chance upstart and the bit player who had paid largely fruitless dues for twenty years. The commander and the Dauphin would still be the male leads; Kellig’s part could only grow smaller under Ann’s real thing.

“I’ll play Joan,” she said again, a little more loudly.

Whitten, flushed with his vision, stopped his ecstatic pacing and scowled. “Of course you must play Joan!”

“Oh,” Ann said, “I was afraid—”

“Afraid? What is this? You *are* Joan.”

“Yes,” she said slowly, “yes, I am.” She frowned, sincerely, and then a second later replaced the frown with a smile all calculation and relief. “Yes, of course I am!”

“Then I’ll absolutely reach Cosgriff’s agent today. He’ll jump at it. You will need to work with him, of course. We can open in six months, with any luck. You *do* live in town? Cosgriff can tape you. No, someone else can do that before he even—Austin!”

“You’re forgetting something, aren’t you, Gregory, in this sudden great vision? You have a contract to do Shaw.”

“Of course I’m not forgetting the contract. But you absolutely must want to continue, for this new play… Cosgriff…” He stopped, and I knew the jumble of things that must be in his mind: deadlines, backing (Friedland Computers!), contracts, schedules, the percentage of my commitment, and, belatedly, Barbara.

She still sat on the bench at stage left, half in shadow. Her back was very straight, her chin high, but in the subdued light her face with its faint smile looked older, not haggard but set, inelastic. I walked over to her and turned to face Whitten.

“I will not back this new play, even if you do get Cosgriff to write it. Which I rather doubt. Shaw’s drama is an artistic masterpiece. What you are planning is a trendy exploitation of some flashy technology. Look elsewhere for your money.”

Silence. Whitten began to turn red, Kellig snickered—at whom was not clear. In the silence the historian, Dr. Metz, began timidly, “I’m sure Miss Friedland’s information would be welcomed warmly by any academic—”

The girl cried loudly, “But I’m the real thing!” and she started to sob.

Barbara had risen to take my arm. Now she dropped it and walked over to Ann. Her voice was steady. “I know you are. And I wish you all luck as an actress. It’s a brilliant opportunity, and I’m sure you’ll do splendidly with it.”

They faced each other, the sniveling girl who had at least the grace to look embarrassed and the smiling, humiliated woman. It was a public performance, of course, an illusion that all Barbara felt was a selfless, graceful warmth, but it was also more than that. It was as gallant an act of style as I have ever seen.

Ann muttered “Thank you” and flushed a mottled maroon. Barbara took my arm, and we walked down the side aisle and out of the theater. She walked carefully, choosing her steps, her head high and lips together and solemn, like a woman on her way to a public burning.

I wish I could say that my quixotic gesture had an immediate and disastrous effect on Whitten’s plans, that he came to his artistic senses—and went back to Shaw’s Saint Joan. But of course he did no such thing. Other financial backing than mine proved to be readily available. Contracts were rewritten, agents placated, lawsuits avoided. Cosgriff did indeed consent to write the script, and *Variety* became distressingly eager to report any tidbit connected with what was being billed as JOAN OF ARC: WITH THE ORIGINAL CAST! It was a dull theater season in New York. Nothing currently running gripped the public imagination like this as-yet-unwritten play. Whitten, adroitly fanning the flames, gave out very few factual details.

Barbara remained silent on the whole subject. Business was keeping me away from New York a great deal. Gorer-Redding Solar was installing a new plant in Bogotá, and I would spend whole weeks trying to untangle the lush foliage of bribes, kickbacks, nepotism, pride, religion, and mañana that is business in South America. But whenever I was in New York, I spent time with Barbara. She would not discuss Whitten’s play, warning me away from the subject with the tactful withdrawal of an estate owner discouraging trespassing without hurting local feelings. I admired her tact and her refusal to whine, but at the same time I felt vaguely impatient. She was keeping me at arm’s length. She was doing it beautifully, but arm’s length was not where I wanted to be.

I do not assume that intimacy must be based on a mutual display of sores. I applaud the public illusion of control and well-being as a civilized achievement. However, I knew Barbara well enough to know that under her illusion of well-being she must be hurt and a little afraid. No decent scripts had been offered her, and the columnists had not been kind over the loss of *Saint Joan*. Barbara had been too aloof, too self-possessed for them to show any compassion now. Press sympathy for a humiliated celebrity is in direct proportion to the anguished copy previously supplied.

Then one hot night in August I arrived at Barbara’s apartment for dinner. Lying on a hall table was a script:

A MAID OF DOMREMY

Incredulous, I picked it up and leafed through it. When I looked up, Barbara was standing in the doorway, holding two goblets of wine.

“Hello, Austin. Did you have a good flight?”

“Barbara Bogotá what is this?” I asked, stupidly.

She crossed the hall and handed me one of the goblets.

“It’s Lawrence’s play about Joan of Arc.”

“I see that. But what is it doing here?”

She didn’t answer me immediately. She looked beautiful, every illusion seeming completely natural: the straight, heavy silk of her artfully cut gown, the flawless makeup, the hair cut in precise lines to curve over one cheek. Without warning, I was irritated by all of it. Illusions. Arm’s length.

“Austin, why don’t you reconsider backing Gregory’s play?”

“Why on earth should I?”

“Because you really could make quite a lot of money on it.”

“I could make quite a lot of money backing auto gladiators. I don’t do that, either.”

She smiled, acknowledging the thrust. I still did not know how the conversation had become a duel.

“Are you hungry? There are canapés in the living room. Dinner won’t be ready for a while yet.”

“I’m not hungry. Barbara, why do you want me to back Whitten’s play?”

“I don’t want you to, if you don’t wish to. Come in and sit down. *I’m* hungry. I only thought you might want to back the play. It’s splendid.” She looked at me steadily over the rim of her goblet. “It’s the best new script I’ve seen in years. It’s subtle, complex, moving Bogotá much better even than his last two. It’s going to replace Shaw’s play as the best we have

about Joan. And on the subject of victimization by a world the main character doesn't understand, it's better than *Streetcar* or *Joy Ride*. A hundred years from now this play will still be performed regularly, and well."

"It's not like you to be so extravagant with your praise."

"No, it's not."

"And you want me to finance the play for the reflected glory?"

"For the satisfaction. And," she added quietly, but firmly, "because I've accepted a bit part in it."

I stared at her. Last week a major columnist had headlined: FALLEN STAR LANDS ON HER PRIDE.

"It's a very small role. Yolande of Aragon, the Dauphin's mother-in-law. She intrigued on the Dauphin's behalf when he was struggling to be crowned. I have only one scene, but it has possibilities."

"For you? What does it have possibilities of —being smirked at by that little schemer in *your* role? Did you read how much her agent is holding Whitten up for? No wonder he could use more backers."

"You would get it back. But that's not the question, Austin, is it? Why do you object to my taking this part? It's not like you to object to my choice of roles."

"I'm upset because I don't want you to be hurt, and I think you are. I think you'll be hurt even more if you play this Yolande with Miss Ann Friedland as Joan, and I don't want to see it, because I love you."

"I know you do, Austin." She smiled warmly and touched my cheek. It was a perfect Barbara Bishop gesture: sincere, graceful, and complete in itself—so complete that it promised nothing more than what it was, led on to nothing else. It cut off communication as effectively as a blow—or, rather, more effectively, since a blow can be answered in kind. I slammed my glass on the table and stood up. Once up, however, I had nothing to say and so stood there feeling ridiculous. What *did* I want to say? What did I want from her that I did not already have?

"I wish," I said slowly, "that you were not always acting."

She looked at me steadily. I knew the look. She was waiting: for

retraction or amendment or amplification. And of course she was right to expect any, or all, of those things. What I had said was inaccurate. She was not acting. What she did was something subtly different. She behaved with the gestures and attitudes and behaviors of the world as she believed it ought to be, a place of generous and rational individuals with enough sheer style to create events in their own image. That people's behavior was in fact often uncivilized, cowardly, and petty she of course knew; she was not stupid. Hers was a deliberate, controlled choice: to ignore the pettiness and to grant to all of us — actors, audience, press, Whitten, Ann Friedland, me, herself — the illusion of having the most admirable motives conceivable.

It seemed to me that this was praiseworthy, even "civilized," in the best sense of that much-abused word.

Why, then, did it make me feel so lonely?

Barbara was still waiting. "Forgive me; I misspoke. I don't mean that you are always acting. I mean — I mean that I'm concerned for you. Standing for a curtain call at the back of the stage while that girl, that chance reincarnation…" Suddenly a new idea occurred to me. "Or do you think that she won't be able to do the part and you will be asked to take over for her?"

"No!"

"But if Ann Friedland can't —"

"No! I will never play Joan in *A Maid of Domrémy!"*

"Why not?"

She finished her wine. Under the expensive gown her breasts heaved. "I had no business even taking the part in Shaw's *Joan*. I am forty-five years old, and Joan is seventeen. But at least there — at least Shaw's Joan was not really a victim. I will not play her as a pitiful victim."

"Come on, Barbara. You've played Blanche DuBois, and Ophelia, and Jessie Kane. They're all victims."

"I won't play Joan in *A Maid of Domrémy!*"

I saw that she meant it, that even while she admired the play, she was repelled by it in some fundamental way I did not understand. I sat down again on the sofa and put my arms around her. Instantly she was Barbara Bishop again, smiling with rueful mockery at both her own violence and my

melodrama, drawing us together in a covenant too generous for quarreling.

"Look at us, Austin — actually discussing that tired old cliché, the understudy who goes on for the fading star. But I'm not her understudy, and she can hardly fade before she's even bloomed! Really, we're too ridiculous. I'm sorry, love, I didn't mean to snap at you like that. Shall we have dinner now?"

I stood up and pulled her next to me. She came gracefully, still smiling, the light sliding over her dark hair, and followed me to her bedroom. The sex was very good, as it always was. But afterward, lying with her head warm on my shoulder, I was still baffled by something in her I could not understand. Was it because of ESIR? I had thought that before. What was it like to have knowledge of those hundreds of other lives you had once lived? I would never know. Were the exotic types I met in the theater so different, so less easily understood, because they had "creative temperament" (whatever that was) or because of ESIR? I would probably never know that, either, nor how much of Barbara was what she was here, now, and how much was subtle reaction to all the other things she knew she had been. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Long after Barbara fell asleep, I lay awake in the soft darkness, listening to the night sounds of New York beyond the window and to something else beyond those, some large silence where my own ESIR memories might have been.

* * * *

Whitten banned everyone but actors and tech crew from rehearsals of *A Maid of Domrémy*: press, relatives, backers, irate friends. Only because the play had seized the imagination of the public-or at least that small portion of the public that goes to the theater — could his move succeed. The financial angels went along cheerfully with their own banning, secure in the presale ticket figures that the play would make money even without their personal supervision.

Another director, casting for a production of *Hamlet*, suddenly claimed to have discovered the reincarnation of Shakespeare. For a week Broadway was a laser of rumors and speculations. Then the credentials of the two historians verifying the ESIR were discovered by a gleeful press to have been faked. The director, producer, historians, and ersatz Shakespeare were instantly unavailable for comment.

The central computer of the AMA was tapped into. For two days

executives with private face-lifts and politicians with private accident records and teachers with private drug-abuse histories held their collective breaths, cursing softly under them. The AMA issued a statement that only ESIR records had been pirated, and the scandal was generally forgotten in the central part of, the country and generally intensified on both coasts. Wild reports were issued, contradicted, confirmed, and disproved, all in a few hours. An actor who remembered being King Arthur had been discovered and was going to star in the true story of the Round Table. Euripides was living in Boston and would appear there in his own play *Medea*. The computer verified that ESIR actually *had* uncovered Helen of Troy, and the press stampeded out to Bowling Green, Ohio, where it was discovered that the person who remembered being Helen of Troy was a male, bald, sixty-eight-year-old professor emeritus in the history department. He was writing a massive scholarly study of the Trojan War, and he bitterly resented the “cheap publicity of the popular press.”

“The whole thing is becoming a circus,” Barbara grumbled. Her shirt was loose at the breasts, and her pants gaped at the waist. She had lost weight and color.

“And this, too, shall pass,” I told her. “Think of when ESIR was first introduced. A few years of wild quakes all over society, and then everyone adjusted. This is just the aftershock on the theater.”

“I don’t especially like standing directly on the fault line.”

“How are rehearsals going?”

“About the same,” she said, her eyes hooded. Since she never spoke of the play at all, I didn’t know what “about the same” would be the same *as*.

“Barbara, what are you waiting for?”

“Waiting for?”

“Constantly now you have that look of waiting, frowning to yourself, looking as if you’re scrutinizing something. Something only you can see.”

“Austin, how ridiculous! What I’m looking at is all *too* public: opening night for the play.”

“And what do you see?”

She was silent for a long time. “I don’t know.” She laughed, an abrupt, opaque sound like the sudden drawing of a curtain. “It’s silly, isn’t it? Not knowing what I don’t know. A tautology, almost.”

“Barbara, marry me. We’ll go away for a weekend and get married, like two children. This weekend.”

“I thought you had to fly back to Bogotá this weekend.”

“I do. But you could come with me. There *is* a world outside New York, you know. It isn’t simply all one vast out-of-town tryout.”

“I do thank you, Austin, you know that. But I can’t leave right now; I do have to work on my part. There are still things I don’t trust.”

“Such as what?”

“Me,” she said lightly, and would say no more.

Meanwhile the hoopla went on. A professor of history at Berkeley who had just finished a — now probably erroneous — dissertation on Joan of Arc tried various legal ploys to sue Ann Friedland on the grounds that she “undercut his means of livelihood.” A group called the Catholic Coalition to Clear the Inquisition published in four major newspapers an appeal to Ann Friedland to come forward and declare the fairness of the church at Joan of Arc’s heresy trial. Each of the ads cost a fantastic sum. But Ann did not reply; she was preserving to the press a silence as complete as Barbara’s to me. I think this is why I didn’t press Barbara more closely about her rehearsals. I wanted to appear as different from the rest of the world as possible — an analogy probably now one made except me. Men in love are ludicrous.

Interest in Ann Friedland was not dispelled by her silence. People merely claiming to be a notable figure from the past was growing stale. For years people had been claiming to be Jesus Christ or Muhammad or Judas; all had been disproved, and the glamour, evaporated. But now a famous name had not only been verified, it was going to be showcased in an enterprise that carried the risk of losing huge sums of money; several professional reputations, and months of secret work. The public was delighted. Ann Friedland quickly became a household name.

She was going to marry the widowed King Charles of England. She was going to lead a revival of Catholicism and was being considered for the position of first female pope. She was a drug addict, a Mormon, pregnant,

mad, in love, clairvoyant, ten years old, extraterrestrial. She was refusing to go on opening night. Gregory Whitten was going to let her improvise the part opening night. Rehearsals were a disaster, and Barbara Bishop would play the part opening night.

Not even to this last did Barbara offer a comment. Also silent were the reputable papers, the serious theater critics, the men and women who control the money that controls Broadway. They, too, were waiting.

We all waited.

* * * *

The week that *A Maid of Domrémy* was to open in New York I was still in Bogotá. I had come down with a low-grade fever, which in the press of work I chose to ignore. By Saturday I had a temperature of one hundred four degrees and a headache no medication could touch. I saw everything through slow, pastel-colored swirls. My arms and legs felt lit with a dry, papery fire that danced up and down from shoulder to wrist, ankle to hip, up and down, wrist to shoulder. I knew I should go to a hospital, but I did not. The opening was that night.

On the plane to New York I slept, dreaming of Barbara in the middle of a vast solar battery. I circled the outside, calling to her desperately. Unaware, she sat reading a script amid the circuits and storage cells, until the fires of the sun burst out all around her and people she had known from other lives danced maniacally in the flames.

At my apartment I took more pills and a cold shower, then tried to phone Barbara. She had already left for makeup call. I dressed and caught a copter to the theater, sleeping fitfully on the short trip, and then I was in the theater, surrounded by firstnighters who did not know I was breathing contagion on all of them, and who floated around me like pale cutouts in diamonds, furs, and nauseating perfume. I could not remember walking from the copter, producing my ticket, or being escorted to my seat. The curtain swirled sickeningly, and I closed my eyes until I realized that it was not my fever that caused the swirls: The curtain was rising. Had the house lights dimmed? I couldn’t remember anything. Dry fire danced over me, shoulder to wrist, ankle to hip.

Barbara, cloaked, entered stage left. I had not realized that her scene opened the play. She carried a massive candle across the stage, bent over a wooden table, and lit two more candles from the large one, all with the taut, economical movements of great anger held fiercely in check. Before

the audience heard her speak, before they clearly saw her face, they had been told that Yolande was furious, not used to being so, and fully capable of controlling her own anger.

“Mary! Where are you sulking now, Mary?” Barbara said. She straightened and drew back her hood. Her voice was low, yet every woman named Mary in the audience started guiltily. Onstage Mary of Anjou, consort of the uncrowned Dauphin of France, crept sullenly from behind a tapestry, facing her mother like a whipped dog.

“Here I am, for all the good it will do you, or anyone,” she whined, looking at her own feet. Barbara’s motionless silence was eloquent with contempt; Mary burst out with her first impassioned monologue against the Dauphin and Joan; the play was launched. It was a strong, smooth beginning, fueled by the conviction of Barbara’s portrait of the terrifying Yolande. As the scene unfolded, the portrait became even stronger, so that I forgot both my feverish limbs and my concern for Barbara. There were no limbs, no Barbara, no theater. There was only a room in fifteenth-century France, sticky with bloody shed for what to us were illusions: absolute good and absolute evil. Cosgriff was exploring the capacities in such illusions for heroism, for degradation, for nobility beyond what the audience’s beliefs, saner and more temperate, could allow. Yolande and Mary and the Dauphin loved and hated and gambled and killed with every fiber of their elemental beings, and not a sound rose from the audience until Barbara delivered her final speech and exited stage right. For a moment the audience sat still, bewildered — not by what had happened onstage, but by the unwelcome remembrance that they were not a part of it, but instead were sitting on narrow hard seats in a wooden box in New York, a foreign country because it was not medieval France. Then the applause started.

The Dauphin and his consort, still onstage, did not break character. He waited until the long applause was over, then continued bullying his wife. Shortly afterward two guards entered, dragging between them the confused, weeping Joan. The audience leaned forward eagerly. They were primed by the wonderful first scene and eager for more miracles.

“Is *this* the slut?” the Dauphin asked, and Mary, seeing a woman even more abused and wretched than herself, smiled with secret, sticky joy. The guards let Joan go, and she stumbled forward, caught herself, and staggered upward, raising her eyes to the Dauphin’s.

“In the name of Saint Catherine —” She choked and started to weep. It was stormy weeping, vigorous, but without the chilling pain of true hysteria. The audience shuffled a little.

“I will do whatever you want, I swear it in the name of God, if you will only tell me what it is!” On the last word her voice rose; she might have been demanding that a fractious child cease lying to her.

I leaned my head sideways against one shoulder. Waves of fever and nausea beat through me, and for the first time since I had become ill I was aware of labored breathing. My heat beat, skipped, beat twice, skipped. Each breath sounded swampy and rasping. People in the row ahead began to turn and glare. Wadding my handkerchief into a ball, I held it in front of my mouth and tried to watch the play — Lines slipped in and out of my hearing; actors swirled in fiery paper-dry pastels. Once Joan seemed to turn into Barbara, and I gasped and half-rose in my seat, but then the figure onstage was Ann Friedland, and I sat down again to glares from those around me. It *was* Ann Friedland; I had been a fool to doubt it. It was not Joan of Arc. The girl onstage hesitated, changed tone too often, looked nervously across the footlights, moved a second too late. Once she even stammered.

Around me the audience began to murmur discreetly. Just before the first-act curtain, in a moment of clarity, Joan finally sees how she is being used and makes an inept, wrenchingly pathetic attempt to manipulate the users by manufacturing instructions she says come from her voices. It is a crucial point in the play, throwing into dramatic focus the victim who agrees to her own corruption by a misplaced attempt at control. Ann played it nervously, with an exaggerated grab at pathos that was actually embarrassing. Nothing of that brief glimpse of personal power she had shown at her audition, so many weeks ago, was present now. Between waves of fever, I tried to picture the fit Whitten must be having backstage.

“Christ,” said a man in the row ahead of me, “can you believe that?”

“What an absolute travesty,” said the woman next to him. Her voice hummed with satisfaction. “Poor Lawrence.”

“He was ripe for it. Smug.”

“Oh, yes. Still.”

“Smug,” the man said.

“It doesn’t matter to me what you do with her,” said Mary of Anjou, onstage. “Why should it? Only for a moment she seemed… different. Did you remark it?” Ann Friedland, who had not seemed different, grimaced

weakly, and the first-act curtain fell. People were getting to their feet, excited by the magnitude of the disaster. The house lights went up. Just as I stood, the curtains onstage parted and there was some commotion, but the theater leaped in a single nauseous lurch, blinding and hot, and then nothing.

* * * *

“Austin,” a voice said softly. “Austin.”

My head throbbed, but from a distance, as if it were not my head at all.

“Austin,” the voice said far above me. “Are you there?”

I opened my eyes. Yolande of Aragon, her face framed in a wool hood, gazed down at me and turned into Barbara. She was still in costume and makeup, the heavy, high color garish under too-bright lights. I groaned and closed my eyes.

“Austin. Are you there? Do you know me?”

“Barbara?”

“You are there! Oh, that’s splendid. How do you feel? No, don’t talk. You’ve been delirious, love, you had such a fever… this is the hospital. Larrimer. They’ve given you medication; you’re going to be fine.”

“Barbara.”

“I’m here, Austin, I’m right here.”

I opened my eyes slowly, accustoming them to the light. I lay in a small private room; beyond the window the sky was dark. I was aware that my body hurt, but aware in the detached, abstract way characteristic of EL painkillers, that miracle of modern science. The dose must have been massive. My body felt as if it belonged to someone else, a friend for whom I felt comradely simulations of pain, but not the real thing.

“What do I have?”

“Some tropical bug. What did you drink in Bogotá? The doctor says it could have been dangerous, but they flushed out your whole system and pumped you full of antibiotics, and you’ll be fine. Your fever’s down almost

to normal. But you must rest."

"I don't want to rest."

"You don't have any choice." She took my hand. The touch felt distant, as if the hand were wrapped in layers of padding.

"What time is it?"

"Five A.M."

"The play —"

"Is long since over."

"What happened?"

She bit her lip. "A lot happened. When precisely do you mean? I wasn't there for the second act, you know. When the ambulance came for you, one of the ushers recognized you and came backstage to tell me. I rode here in the ambulance with you. I didn't have another scene anyway."

I was confused. If Barbara had missed the entire last act, how could "a lot have happened"? I looked at her closely, and this time I saw what only the EL's could have made me miss before: the signs of great, repressed strain. Tendons stood out in Barbara's neck; under the cracked and sagging makeup her eyes darted around the room. I felt myself suddenly alert, and a fragment of memory poked at me, a fragment half-glimpsed in the hot swirl of the theater just before I blacked out.

"She ran out on the stage." I said slowly. "Ann Friedland. In front of the curtain. She ran out and yelled something…" It was gone. I shook my head. "On the *stage*."

"Yes." Barbara let go of my hand and began to pace. Her long train dragged behind her; when she turned, it tangled around her legs and she stumbled. The action was so uncharacteristic, it was shocking.

"You saw what the first act was. A catastrophe. She was trying —"

"The whole first act wasn't bad, love. Your scene was wonderful. Wait — the reviews on your role will be very good."

"Yes," she said distractedly. I saw that she had hardly heard me.

There was something she had to do, had to say. The best way to help was to let her do it. Words tore from her like a gale.

“She tried to do the whole play reaching back into her ESIR Joan. She tried to just feel it, and let Lawrence’s words — her words — be animated by the remembered feeling. But without the conscious balancing… no, it isn’t even balancing. It’s more like imagining what you already know, and to do that, you have to *forget* what you know and at the same time remember every tiny nuance… I can’t explain it. Nobody ever really *was* a major historical figure before, in a play composed of his own words. Gregory was so excited over the concept, and then when rehearsals began… but by that time he was committed, and the terrible hype just bound him further. When Ann ruined the first act like that, he was just beside himself. I’ve never seen him like that. I’ve never seen anybody like that. He was raging, just completely out of control. And onstage Ann was coming apart, and I could see that he was going to completely destroy her, and we had a whole act to *go*, damn it! A whole fucking act!”

I stared at her. She didn’t notice. She lighted a cigarette; it went out; she flung the match and cigarette on the floor. I could see her hand trembling.

“I knew that if Gregory got at her, she was done. She wouldn’t even go back out after intermission. Of course the play was a flop already, but not to even *finish* the damn thing… I wasn’t thinking straight. All I could see was that he would destroy her, all of us. So I hit him.”

“You what?”

“I hit him. With Yolande’s candlestick. I took him behind a flat to try to calm him down, and instead I hit him. *Without knowing I was going to*. Something strange went through me, and I picked up my arm and hit him. Without knowing I was going to!”

She wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered. I saw what had driven her to this unbearable strain. *Without knowing I was going to*.

“His face became very surprised, and he fell forward. No one saw me. Gregory lay there, breathing as if he were just asleep, and I found a phone and called an ambulance. Then I told the stage manager that Mr. Whitten had had a bad fall and hit his head and was unconscious. I went around to the wings and waited for Ann. When the curtain came down and she saw me waiting for her, she turned white, and then red, and started

shouting at me that she was Joan of Arc and I was an aging bitch who wanted to steal her role."

I tried to picture it — the abusive girl, the appalled, demoralized cast, the director lying hidden, bashed with a candlestick — *without knowing I was going to*! — and, out front,, the polite chatter, the great gray critics from the *Times* and the *New Yorker*, the dressed-up suburbanites from Scarsdale squeezing genially down the aisles for an entr'acte drink and a smoke.

"She went on and on," Barbara said. "She told me *I* was the reason she couldn't play the role, that I deliberately undermined her by standing around like I knew everything, and she knew everybody was expecting me to go on as Joan after she failed. Then suddenly she darted away from me and went through the curtains onto the stage. The house lights were up; half the audience had left. She spread out her arms and *yelled* at them."

Barbara stopped and put her hands over her face. I reached up and pulled them away. She looked calmer now, although there was still an underlying tautness in her voice. "Oh, it's just too ridiculous, Austin. She made an absolute fool of herself, of Lawrence, of all of us, but it wasn't her fault. She's an inexperienced child without talent. Gregory should have known better, but his egomania got all tangled up in his ridiculous illusion that he was going to revitalize the theater, take the next historical step for American drama. God, what the papers will say…" She laughed weakly, with pain. "And I was no better, hitting poor Gregory."

"Barbara…"

"Do you know what Ann yelled at them, at the audience? She stood on that stage, flung her arms wide like some martyr…"

"What did she say? What, love?"

"She said, 'But I'm the *real thing!'*"

We were quiet for a moment. From outside the window rose blurred traffic noises: therealthingtherealthingtherealthing.

"You're right," I said. "The whole thing was an egomaniacal ride for Whitten, and the press turned it into a carnival. Cosgriff should have known better. The real thing — that's not what you want in the theater. Illusion, magic, imagination. What should have happened, not what did. Reality

doesn’t make good theater.”

“No, you still don’t understand!” Barbara cried. “You’ve missed it all! How can you think that it’s that easy, that Gregory’s mistake was to use Ann’s reality instead of Shaw’s illusion!”

“I don’t understand what you —”

“It’s not that clear!” she cried. “Don’t you think I wish it were? My God!”

I didn’t know what she meant, or why under the cracked makeup her eyes glittered with feverish, exhausted panic. Even as I reached out my arm, completely confused, she was backing away from me.

“Illusion and reality,” she said. “My God. Watch.”

She crossed the room to the door, closed it, and pressed the dimmer on the lights. The room faded to a cool gloom. She stood with her back to me, her head bowed. Then she turned slowly and raised her eyes to a point in the air a head above her.

“In the name of Saint Catherine —” she began, choked, and started to weep. The weeping was terrifying, shot through with that threat of open hysteria that keeps a listener on the edge of panic in case the weeper should lose control entirely, and also keeps him fascinated for the same reason. “I will do whatever you want, I swear it in the name of God, if you will only tell me what it is.” On the last word her voice fell, making the plea into a prayer to her captors, and so the first blasphemy. I caught my breath. Barbara looked young, terrified, pale. How could she look pale when a second ago I had been so conscious of all that garish makeup? There was no chance to wonder. She plunged on, through that scene and the next and all of Joan’s scenes. She went from hysterical fear to inept manipulation to the bruised, stupid hatred of a victim to, finally, a kind of negative dignity that comes not from accomplishment but from the clear-eyed vision of the lack of it, and so she died, Cosgriff’s vision of the best that institutionalized man could hope for. But she was not Cosgriff’s vision; she was a seventeen-year-old girl. Her figure was slight to the point of emaciation. Her face was young — I *saw* its youth, felt its fragile boniness in the marrow of my own bones. She moved with the gaudy, unpredictable quickness of the mad, now here, now darting a room’s length away, now still with a terrible catatonic stillness that excluded her trapped eyes. Her desperation made me catch my breath, try to look away and fail, feeling that cold grab at my innards: It happened. And it could happen again. It could happen to me.

Her terror gave off a smell, sickly and sour. I wanted to escape the room before that smell could spread to me. I was helpless. Neither she nor I could escape. I did not want to help her, this mad skinny victim. I wanted to destroy her so that what was being done to her would not exist any longer in the world and I would be safe from it. But I could not destroy her. I could only watch, loathing Joan for forcing me to know, until she rose to her brief, sane dignity. In the sight of that dignity, shame that I had ever wanted to smash her washed over me. I was guilty, as guilty as all those others who had wanted to smash her. Her sanity bound me with them, as earlier her terror had unwillingly drawn me to her. I was victim and victimizer, and when Joan stood at the stake and condemned me in a grotesque parody of Christ's forgiving on the cross, I wanted only for her to burn and so be quiet, so release me. I would have lighted the fire. I would have shouted with the crowd, "Burn! Burn!" already despairing that no fire could sear away what she, I, all of us had done. From the flames, Joan looked at me, stretched out her hand, came toward me. I thrust out my arm to ward her off. Almost I cried out. My heart pounded in my chest.

"Austin," she said.

In an instant Joan was gone.

Barbara came toward me. It was Barbara. She had grown three inches, put on twenty pounds and thirty years. Her face was tired and lined under gaudy, peeling makeup. Confusedly I blinked at her. I don't think she even saw the confusion; her eyes had lost their strained panic, and she was smiling, a smile that was a peaceful answer to some question of her own.

"That was the reality," she said, and stooped to lay her head on my chest. Through the fall of her hair I barely heard her when she said that she would marry me whenever I wanted.

* * * *

Barbara and I have been married for nearly a year. I still don't know precisely why she decided to marry me, and she can't tell me; she doesn't know herself. But I speculate that the night *A Maid of Domrémy* failed, something broke in her, some illusion that she could control, if not the world, then at least herself. When she struck Whitten with the candlestick, she turned herself into both victim and victimizer as easily as Lawrence Cosgriff had rewritten Shaw's *Joan*. Barbara has never played the part again. (Gregory Whitten, no less flamboyantly insensitive for his bashing with a candlestick, actually asked her.) She has adamantly refused both

Joans, Shaw's heroine and Cosgriff's victim. I was the last person to witness her performance.

Was her performance that night in my hospital room really as good as I remember? I was drugged; emotion had been running high; I loved her. Any or all of that could have colored my reactions. But I don't think so. I think that night Barbara Bishop *was* Joan, in some effort of will and need that went beyond both the illusions of a good actress and the reality of what ESIR could give to her, or to Ann Friedland, or to anyone. ESIR only unlocks the individual genetic memories in the brain's R-Complex. But what other identities, shared across time and space, might still be closed in there beyond our present reach?

All of this is speculation.

Next week I will be hospitalized for my own ESIR. Knowing what I have been before may yield only more, speculation, more illusions, more multiple realities. It may yield nothing. But I want to know, on the chance that the yield will be understandable, will be valuable in untangling the endless skein of waking visions.

Even if the chance is one in a million.

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* * * *

Casey’s Empire

Writers are often fond of writing stories in which writers are the protagonists—usually sympathetic protagonists. Several recent short stories and at least one major fantasy trilogy come immediately to mind. There is something distinctly self-indulgent about this, but writers fall prey to self-indulgence at least as much as the rest of the population (editors might say, “More.”) CASEY’S EMPIRE, then, is a double self-indulgence: the fortunes of not only a writer, but of a science fiction writer.

The business of writers is to tell lies, and the business of science fiction writers is to tell large lies. Large lies can be seductive. It has always seemed to me that one could easily come to prefer them to the truth.

But it costs. It always costs.

* * * *

This is the story of Jerry Casey, who lost a galactic empire. Oho, you sneer to yourself—one of *those.* You know, of course, from your vast reading, what a trivial and hackneyed idea a galactic empire is—even now. You know, of course, from your vast reading, about the convoluted, melodramatic machinations by which a hero loses an empire, and what that feels like. Go suck an egg; you wouldn’t know a galactic empire if you tripped over it, which Casey did. Tripped over it and lost it. You think you know how that feels? You don’t know. Unless it has happened to you, you don’t know. You can’t ever know.

* * * *

He was born in the 1950’s in Montana, but he didn’t let it bother him. To his child’s eyes, the big, lonely, empty plains were within the sound of the sea, within a hard day’s climb of the Himalayas, within touch of the hibiscus-smelling rain forest. He walked on desert sands or ancient glaciers or the bottom of the Mariana Trench. At night the wide sky was impossibly full of stars, and he named them all and walked on their spangle-colored planets. Part of it, of course, was his reading, which he did so constantly that he failed the fifth grade. But not all of it. There was something else,

something extra, something his own. His parents were puzzled but tolerant. They bought a new car every three years, new drapes every five, and saved up for yearly vacations in Las Vegas. Older people—he was a late, only child. Kind, decent, stupid people. Casey loved them.

His high school years were no more hellish than anyone else's; his college years were an anonymous marathon of beer blasts, rock concerts, and overdue term papers; his decision to enter graduate school was complicated by his advisor's doubt that any graduate school would enter him. But enrollment was falling, programs were being cut if too few live bodies registered for thesis seminar, and Casey found himself a teaching fellow in a small undistinguished college that was part of a large undistinguished state university system in the Northeast. He also found himself scorned. Politely, judiciously, even indulgently—he was in the Humanities, and indulgence was encouraged—but scorned is scorned.

"What's your area?" asked Paul Rizzo, the stocky, bearded teaching fellow with whom Casey shared an office. Rizzo was wearing a plaid flannel shirt, jeans, and Frye boots. All the male teaching fellows, Casey had noticed, wore plaid flannel shirts, jeans, and Frye boots. So did some of the females. Casey wore a sports jacket.

"Area?"

"For your thesis."

"I'm doing the option—the creative-writing thesis. A novel."

"A *novel?"*

"Yeah, you know," Casey said, "a fiction narrative over 40,000 words. You've heard of them."

Rizzo's eyes narrowed. "Have you started this, uh, novel?"

"Yes."

Rizzo seemed surprised. He stopped in the middle of changing his plaid flannel shirt for a football jersey, arms suspended in midair. Twice a week he scrimmaged to keep in shape, playing on a team limited to grad students and captained by a third-year fellow in the biology department who had his own grant from the federal government.

"What's it about?"

Casey smiled. “In twenty-five words or less?”

“All right, then, what’s it like? Who would you say your writing was closest to, if you had to name an influence, a mentor? Barth? Hemingway? Dickens? Faulkner?”

Casey took a deep bream. “Burroughs.”

“Naked Lunch?”

“No, not William.”

“Then who—”

“Edgar.”

“Edgar Burroughs? You write ...”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

Rizzo finished sliding into his football jersey and picked up his helmet, rubbing a finger over a jagged nick. Then he smiled. Politely, judiciously.

“Well, chacun à sa gout, right?”

“Son gout,” Casey said.

“My thesis is on Keats. The psycho-sexual relation of the “Hyperion” fragment of his later work. You probably don’t like Keats, though?”

“Why not?”

“If you write that . . . do you like Keats?”

Casey picked up Rizzo’s football shoe and fingered the cleats. He tried each one in turn, pressing lightly with the end of his index finger. They were all dull. Rizzo waited. Indulgently.

“Well, I’ll tell you, Paul. I really think Keats is some kind of poet. Not too commercial, you know, but a strong sensory receiver, quick on the end line. Some kind of poet. But, overall I guess I have to go with Edgar Guest. Enjambment-wise, that is.”

Rizzo turned maroon. Casey smiled. Politely, judiciously, indulgently.

* * * *

“Who you got for frosh comp?”

“Some flake in a striped sports jacket. Young. He talked about *semicolons.”*

“Must be the new guy. Casey.”

Casey, the new guy, ducked behind the gray bulk of the candy-and-pastries vending machine. The styrofoam cup he was carrying sloshed coffee onto his striped sports jacket. The student on the other side of the vendor kicked it.

“Took my quarter again!”

“Here, have half my Babe Ruth.”

“Eff-ing machine. Any frat files on his assignments?”

“Not yet. He’s *new”*

“Just my luck.”

“It’ll be all right. The new ones don’t like to flunk anybody. Just go to class. The new ones take attendance.”

“He wants us to write a paper for Friday.”

“Get Sue to do it. She’s an English major.”

“Yeah. Jesus—semicolons!”

“Yeah.”

* * * *

He got used to teaching freshmen. He made truce with Rizzo. What he couldn’t get used to or make truce with, what led him to discover why a university was a bad place to write, was the faculty.

His professors spoke blithely of Shakespeare's "minor plays," Shaw's "failed efforts," Dickens' "unsuccessful pieces." Stories that Casey, stretched out on a flat rock under the blank Montana sky, had thrilled to and wondered at and anguished over, were assigned grades like so many frosh comp papers. B+ to Somerset Maugham and Jane Austen. B- to C.S. Lewis and *Timon of Athens.* His own half-finished stories, Casey figured, the stories sweated and bled and wept over in the $83-a-month hole above a barber shop, were about a H-. On a good day.

His thesis advisor was a Dreiser man. If you are a Dreiser man, Casey learned, if you champion Dreiser and the American realists for 25 years (including six articles in *PMLA),* if you dissect and evaluate and explore Dreiser, you can *be* Dreiser. You know what he wrote in the margins of his books, how he wore his hair and who cut it. You have his/your position in *belles-lettres* to defend, and you fight for it ferociously. When a prestigious Eastern university has a sudden unfortunate death among its existing faculty and so needs to acquire another American realist, you throw your hat into the academic ring and play politics with dead candidates. You win, and jolly well you should. Dreiser is a definite A. And then so, of course, are you.

Casey walked. He walked on village streets at noon, over snowy athletic fields before dawn, in night woods where one clumsy step could break his unwary neck. While he walked, he agonized. He agonized because he was not Tolstoy or Shakespeare or even Maugham. He agonized because he was honest enough to know that he never would be Tolstoy or Shakespeare or Maugham, complimented himself on being "at least" that honest with himself, and agonized that his self-compliments showed a lack of artistic passion. When he wasn't walking and agonizing, he wrote. It was all H-. When he wasn't writing, he read Dreiser. It was a definite A.

* * * *

"But I had my advisor's approval for the thesis before I began!" Casey said. He tried to sound indignant rather than desperate, and knew he failed. "Both Dr. Jensen and Dr. Schorer signed the approval form!"

"I know that," said Dr. Stine, Chairman of the Graduate Committee. He sat behind his book-cluttered desk in his book-lined office and looked distressed. Beyond the open window three students, exhilarated by the spring, were tossing a blue frisbee; occasionally it hit the building with a soft clunk muffled by budding ivy.

“They both knew my novel was going to be s-”

“I know that, too, Mr. Casey.” The chairman’s distress was genuine. Casey didn’t care. “We are not narrow in our academic outlook, Mr. Casey. There is room for many different types of writing in our creative thesis option. The graduate committee is perfectly aware that a lot of exciting research is being carried out right now in your field and that there is much literary merit in selected examples of sci-fi.”

Casey winced. Dr. Stine didn’t notice. The frisbee hit the wall.

“We’re also aware that Ph.D.’s are being granted by very prestigious universities for scholarly work in sci-fi. But both the writing and the research ends that are worthy of serious attention concern the *best* sci-fi, the work concerned with social insight and human verities. Hawthorne’s ‘truth of the human heart, you know,’” the chairman said, and smiled, obviously pleased with this reference. The frisbee hit the wall.

“Your novel, on the other hand, is just—just *adventure.* Escapist improbabilities. You must see—’galactic empire’!”

“It’s a realistic interpretation of a possible technological—”

“Precisely. *Technological,* not humane. You don’t deal with psychological or social themes at all. When your protagonist meets those aliens in the blue UFO—*blue*—I’m sorry, Mr. Casey. It’s not that your novel is badly written. In fact, it shows some commercial promise; it’s colorful and fast-paced. But it doesn’t measure up to the standards of serious fiction. And serious literature is what a thesis-novel acceptable to the English department, must at least *try* to be.”

“It could very well happen just the way I—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Casey. I wish you would believe that.”

Casey did believe it. He uttered a short expletive that he hoped made the chairman even sorrier, and left the book-lined office just as the frisbee missed the wall altogether and sailed through the window, a miniature blue UFO.

* * * *

He resigned from the university, regretted it as pretentiously self-indulgent, and stayed resigned. To fill his time, he wrote, waited on tables at a local pizzeria, brooded over his rejection slips, and walked. The walking, he figured, was the best thing he did. He could walk for hours, could walk all night. After a while he no longer needed to look down at his own feet in even the darkest, most unfamiliar woods; his feet developed such sure sensing of the dead twigs and leaf-covered rabbit holes that he never stumbled. He could walk looking upward at the stars which, in some way, he couldn't say just exactly how, had betrayed him. He could walk on desert sands, on ancient glaciers, on the bottom of the Mariana Trench. His walking was a definite A.

* * * *

"Hey, Casey!"

"Hello, Rizzo. What'll you have?"

"What do you want, Darlene?"

"Oh, I don't know—pepperoni, for sure. Mushrooms, green pepper, onions. And anchovies, if they're fresh. Are the anchovies fresh?"

"Are the anchovies fresh?" Rizzo asked Casey.

"No," Casey said.

"Well, then, no anchovies. OK, Darl?"

"Are they *good* frozen anchovies?" Rizzo asked Casey.

"No," Casey said.

"So what are you doing now?" Rizzo said, and added hastily, without glancing around the pizzeria, "What are you going to do? I mean your, uh, plans?"

"Bring you a pizza without anchovies," Casey said, saw that he was being a bastard again, and tried harder. "Guess what, Rizzo? I sold one."

Rizzo wrinkled his beefy forehead. "One what?"

"One *story.* I sold one."

“You did? Hey, that’s great! Is it . . . is it one of those—”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Well, that’s still great! Do you mind if I ask you what you got for it? No, never mind. None of my business.”

“It wasn’t much.”

“I hear that market pays less. Comparatively.”

“Generally, yes. There are exceptions.”

“Of course—there always are. Speaking of exceptions, do you mind if *I* brag a little? I got a job. A real, tenure-track, full-time job. Starting as *assistant professor.*”

“Congratulations. Where is it?”

“Lunell College. It’s a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. I really lucked out, you know what the market is, nobody wants humanities people. Only technology-gadget guys, computer specialists and all. But this is a bona fide good deal. Guess what the salary is.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Go ahead, guess.”

“*I couldn’t.”*

Rizzo told him. Casey smiled and underlined “no anchovies” on his order pad, thick and black. Twice. The pencil broke.

“I really did luck out,” Rizzo said. “They just happened to need a Keats man.”

* * * *

He had not forgotten his childhood nomenclature for the stars, but now he learned everyone else’s. This was easy because there seemed to be fewer stars than there had been in Montana. He wrote out a list of the more mellifluous ones, set the list to the melody of a sixteenth-century English madrigal, and chanted it while he walked:

Regulus Fomalhaut Betelguese

Ri-i-gel,

Arcturus Polaris Cano-o-pus

AL-TAIR.

The chant stayed in his head while he tried to write about galactic empires and interstellar battles; since he couldn't get the tune out, he learned to ignore it. After a while he found it rather soothing and came to depend upon it while he sweated and thrashed and fought, motionless at his Salvation Army desk.

The actual presence of real stars was less soothing. Nightly he glared upwards, weather permitting, with real anger, while summer dew soaked his sneakers and a crick developed at the back of his neck. He didn't try to understand his anger; it was more satisfying to revel in it. They had let him down, Regulus Fomalhaut Betelguese Ri-i-gel. They had all let him down. They had not delivered, somehow, what had been promised, promised to the Montana kids playing on the big flat rock in the middle of prosperous insignificance: Marty Hillek and Carl Nielsen and Billy DeTine and Jerry Casey, playing UFO and Sirian Invaders and Would-You-Go? They had deceived. They were not what he thought them. They had refused to let him go, as they had let Marty Hillek and Carl Nielsen and Billy DeTine go, but they had also refused to satisfy him. They were heartless, they were cold, they were shallow, and he himself was probably crazy to stand here thinking of them as anything but ongoing nuclear fusions. "Many thynges doth infect the ayre, as the influence of sondry sterres," he quoted aloud, enormously pleased to have remembered the quote from Renaissance Lit. He only quoted aloud when in deserted areas, however; his angry craziness demanded privacy to be fully wallowed in. It was a lover's quarrel.

* * * *

"Jerry! Happy birthday, dear!"

"Thanks, mom."

"So how does it feel to be twenty-six, son?"

"Oh, I don't know, dad. Not too different from twenty-five."

"Your presents are in the mail, dear. I'm sorry they didn't get East by

your birthday, but I just couldn't get to town to the post office; the car was acting up, and your father couldn't figure out if it was the starter or that little black thing that goes from the—"

"Now, Mary, we don't need to tell him all that long distance."

"Guess not. How's everything going, dear?"

"Fine, just fine."

"Did you sell any more—"

"No. No, I haven't. It takes time, you know, mom."

Fourteen hundred miles away, his father cleared his throat. Jerry held the receiver a little away from his ear and closed his eyes, waiting.

"Speaking of selling, son, I happened to talk to John Nielsen yesterday, and he still needs someone to help him and Carl at the Grain & Feed. Now I'm not pressuring you, you know that. Whatever you want to do is fine with your mother and me. That's what we've always said, and we mean it. But I just promised John I'd pass along the information to you, so I am."

"Okay," Casey said. "The information is passed." He could see his father holding the phone—the upstairs extension, it would be—lightly in his big hand, still wearing his stetson with his boots and plaid flannel shirt.

"Just so's you know, son."

"I know," Casey said. There was a pause.

"Are you still seeing that girl, dear, that you wrote us about? The kindergarten teacher? Kara Phillips?"

"Yes. No. A little."

"I have an idea! Why don't you bring her with you when you come home for Christmas? You know, we'd just love to have her!"

"Now, Mary, don't push," Casey's father said.

"I wasn't *pushing,* Calvin Casey! All I said was that we'd love to have Jerry's friend stay with us over Christmas, if he'd like to bring her. She could

have the spare room, it was just freshly papered, it'd be no trouble at all."

"Thanks, mom. Maybe I'll ask her."

"Of course, it's up to *you.* Write us when your presents arrive, so I know they fit, and tell us if Kara is coming for Christmas."

"Assistant manager," his father said. "Did I mention that it's assistant manager?"

"Well, bye, dear. Happy birthday!"

"Good starting salary, son."

"Love you," Casey's mother said.

"Love you, too," Casey said, and hung up the receiver carefully, with no sound.

* * * *

He quit the pizzeria. One night in October he had waited on the Chairman of the Graduate Committee, Dr. Stine. The man had been so tactful, so diplomatic in chatting with Casey without once mentioning Casey's failed novel-thesis, Casey's inexpert self-haircut ($4.70 at the barber, and that without sideburns), Casey's tomato-and-mozzarella smeared apron, that Casey had been unable to stand it. He smiled at the chairman, said yes, fall was beautiful in this part of the country, said yes, it was interesting that the papers always reported an increase in UFO sightings in the fall, said no, he didn't think there was anything in it. Then he went into the kitchen and stuffed his apron into the pizza oven, where it turned the exact color of flabby frozen anchovies.

He found a job as part-time grounds man for an old, beautiful, tree-shaded cemetery. He wrote all morning and raked leaves all afternoon, avoiding funerals in progress. The metal rake prongs caught repeatedly at the bases of tombstones and then twanged back, a sound as monotonous and hypnotic as a pendulum. Sometimes he returned late at night and walked through the cemetery. The darkness was rich and velvety; it was the quick flashes of headlights beyond the iron gates that seemed like the ghosts. He read the oldest of the tombstones with a penlight, stooping to trace the letters with his finger when age had made them illegible:

ELIZABETH ANN CARMODY

1851-1862

Eleven years old, he thought. At eleven years old he had been playing Would You Go? on the big flat rock on the plains. Eleven years old.

JAMES ALLEN ROBERTS
1789-1812
DULCE ET DECORUM EST PRO PATRIA MORI

Ha, snorted Casey, child of draftcard burnings and ping-pong detente.

CECILIA HARDWICK SMITH
1884-1879
BEYOND THIS NARROW VALE OF EARTH
WHERE BRIGHT CELESTIAL AGES ROLL
THE COUNTLESS STARS OF HEAVEN'S REALM
GUIDE AND LIGHT THE WAND'RING SOUL

Ha again, Casey told the stars, the lover's quarrel having solidified into the cynical half-banter of an accepted marriage. *So go ahead, guide and light. Send down knowledge. Send down enlightenment. Send down a publisher. Go ahead, I'm waiting, I'm a wandering soul, as duly specified, I'm ready. H- has arisen. Go ahead.*

Clouds started to roll in from the west.

* * * *

"And she said to tell you that it would be no trouble at all, you could have the spare bed in the spare room, and they'd love to have you."

Kara raised herself on one elbow in Casey's rumpled, un-spare bed. The neon barber pole just outside Casey's window striped her breasts with revolving red and blue.

"I don't think it's fair of you to change the subject in the middle of a discussion just because you're losing."

"I was losing?"

"You know you were. And then you just drop in this invitation to your parents' house for Christmas, and that really puts me at an emotional

disadvantage, Jer. It's not fighting fair."

"So report me to the Geneva Convention."

"There you go, getting nasty again, de-railing the argument just because you haven't got a valid viewpoint that won't stand up to close scrutiny."

"*I* haven't got a valid viewpoint that will stand up to close scrutiny? And what is it you've got, an airtight case?"

"I didn't say that. I said—"

"More like a braintight case."

"—that not being able to prove that a thing exists isn't the same as being able to prove that it *doesn't* exist, and—"

"Absolutely impervious to the osmosis of facts."

"—just because the Navy doesn't choose to admit that a UFO—"

"Last month it was transactional analysis."

"That was different! If you'd just have an open mind—"

"With enough holes to fit the airtight case in?"

"That's enough!" Kara shouted. She bolted upright in bed and clutched Casey's grubby sheet around her. "You're so superior, aren't you, with your clever little wisecracks about my intelligence! Just because *you've* never seen one, they don't exist, right? If Jerry Casey, great unpublished novelist, hasn't personally seen and touched and goddamn *tasted* a UFO, then there's no such thing. Of course not! No matter that hundreds of sightings have been reported, no matter that a respected witness right here in town saw a ship streaking over the woods, no matter that there doesn't—if *Jerry Casey* didn't see it, it doesn't exist, because *Jerry Casey* is the great fictional expert on spaceships and galactic empires! If Jerry Casey, with three unpublished novels and the enormous authority of his sacred pile of rejection sl—"

Casey hit her. It wasn't a hard slap, he didn't know he was going to do it until he had, and instantly he regretted it more than he had ever regretted

anything else in his life. Kara put her hand to her red cheek and turned away from him, the sheet twisting itself around her small striped breasts. Tears filled her eyes but did not fall. Casey put out one hand to touch her shoulder, but he couldn't make the hand quite connect and it hung there, suspended between them, useless.

"Kara ... oh God, Kara, I'm sorry."

She didn't answer. The sheet humped up over her thin legs. Something broke in Casey, something so light and delicate he hadn't known himself that it was there, or what he would say when it wasn't.

"Kara, listen, I'm sorry I hit you, so fucking sorry I don't know how to say it. But, Kara, you don't know, you can't know, I've wanted there to be something out there since I was a kid, wanted it more desperately than anything else in my whole fucking life. I used to stand out there on the plains and squeeze my eyes shut and *will* them to be out there, to come down to me, because I was one of them. I knew it, so they had to know it, too. I made up whole stories, epics, about how I got left here by mistake and adopted by my parents, but *they'd* come back for me eventually. It was so real I could taste it, Kara, could shiver with it down to my bones, my marrow. It was like a religion, or an insanity. And I still would like to believe, would give fucking anything to believe, but I can't. The evidence against it is just too strong. Do you know what the *odds* are that intelligent life would behave like…so I started to convince myself that the stories were just made up. I started to *make* them up, to write them down. Kara, it's not 'superiority,' it's not wisecracks, it's . . . Kara, do you see what I'm talking about? Can you understand what I'm trying to mean? Kara?"

She didn't answer. After a while he touched her. She put her head on his shoulder. He wiped her tears. She let him. He stroked her hair and apologized all over again. She said it was all right, looking pensive and thoughtful. He pulled the blanket protectively up to her chin. She lay still in his arms. He kissed her. She smiled. A few days later she called and said they should have a long talk. He never saw her again.

* * * *

Paul Rizzo was getting married, and he wrote to invite Casey to the wedding. His bride was a fellow faculty member at Lunell College—an *assistant professor,* Rizzo wrote, underlining the words twice. She was also "the only child of a wealthy shoe polish entrepreneur." Casey tried to figure out how you got really wealthy from shoe polish, couldn't, and knew that this

proved nothing. He wouldn't have known how to become really wealthy if the process were detailed for him in heroic couplets. For all he knew, shoe polish was a rewarding and fulfilling way to make money enough to freshly wallpaper all the spare rooms in Montana. For all he knew, shoes and the right polish were what his life had been missing all along, the yin and yang of his universe's deficiencies. For all he knew.

With his letter Rizzo had enclosed a picture of his fiancée, cut from the local newspaper which had announced their engagement. She looked pretty, if a little blurry. The invitation was embossed with blue-and-white doves swooping around a quotation from Keats.

Tramping along over the hard Montana snows on Christmas night, Casey tried to picture the wedding. There would be champagne, and sexy-coy toasts, and good food. There would be women—bridesmaids in silky dresses, Lunell professors with good nun's college-student relatives giggly and flushed with wine. The wedding was in April, over Easter recess, so the bridesmaids and professors and gigglers would have on spring dresses, light and bare. They would smell of flowery perfumes. They would dance on strappy, high-heeled sandals. They would talk to Casey on the dance floor, at the bar, on the church steps. And they would all ask him, eventually, what it was that he "did." Or tried to do. Or was supposed to be doing.

Somewhere near the barns a cow lowed. Casey tramped up to his old flat rock, knocked the snow off it, and sat down. Overhead the stars blazed. He willed himself to concentrate on the stars, to forget the depressing mechanics of attending Rizzo's wedding, the self-kept scoresheets. He just wouldn't think about it. Above him glittered Thekala, aka Aldebaran, aka The Red Terror. To the south and east shone Rigel, Sirius, Betelguese, Pollux, Procyon. The Orion Nebula, spawn ground of new stars. They used to pretend it was alive, like a queen bee. Only the southwest looked subdued, empty of all but the faint stars of Cetus. The sky there was a soft, even black, lustrous with reflected light, like. . . .

Like shoe polish.

* * * *

In January the ground froze so hard that no graves could be dug. People continued to die anyway, and their caskets were stacked, carefully labeled, in a brick vault to await a thaw. Casey was laid off. Nothing else seemed to be opening up in the cemetery line. So he took a job as a part-time janitor in a high school, nightly scrubbing anatomical impossibilities off lavatory walls

with industrial-strength cleanser. He wrote.

In February it snowed 52 inches, a century's record. During the entire month the sky remained cloudy; if the stars had all simultaneously winked out, their light spent like so many weary philanderers, Casey wouldn't have known it. He caught the flu and spent six days in bed, feverishly watching the barber pole revolve against the gray snow. He wrote.

In March Dr. James Randall Stine, Chairman of the Graduate Committee and a widower for two years, announced his engagement to Miss Kara Phillips, a kindergarten teacher in the local public schools. Casey's father called to just pass on the information that Marty Hillek's father was looking around for someone with business sense to help him run the Holiday Inn. He wrote.

In April, a week before Rizzo's wedding, Casey's third attempt at a novel sold to a major publisher. It was about a galactic empire.

* * * *

He leaped through the dark April woods, the letter in his hand, the ground inches below his feet. He was Pan with scriptorial pipes, Orpheus with graphic lyre, Caesar of the literary spaceways. He was the god-child of intergalactic muses. He was the first person in the universe to publish a novel. He was the Pied Piper with hordes at his singing back, Circe with spells to drive men mad. He was drunk, but only partly on California champagne.

Running wildly through springtime smells unseen in the darkness, he held the letter before him and a little to one side, like a spear, brandishing it upward.

"See! See!" he called up between the trees, drunkenly flaunting his own theatricality. "See! See what I did about you! Look! Look!"

The stars glittered.

Casey stopped running and stood panting beneath a sugar maple, holding his side. He was Shakespeare, he was Tolstoy, he was Dreiser, he was a definite A. He could walk on spangle-colored planets forever, just as soon as his stomach lay still.

The stars glittered.

Across the sky the branches of the sugar maple slanted like bars. Gemini sliced in half, Dubhe divided from Merak. Through the bars the Milky Way looked broken, fitful, about to sever and recede even more, and it was already so far away, so high ... so high . . . they were all so high. . . . For a dizzy second Casey put his hand on the tree trunk, searching for a foothold. But the second passed and he stood on the ground, half-trampled fern shoots under his worn boots.

The stars glittered.

OK, so the universe doesn't notice, hardly an original observation, Casey ol' boy, got to do better than that. What'd you expect—a supernova? No romantic despair; cosmic self-pity strictly forbidden in moments of drunken triumph, on pain of triviality. No brooding, no self-indulgent self-incrimination. "A man's reach should exceed. . . ." so you've got a hell of a reach, kudos to you ol' Jer, good to have a hell of a reach. Supposed to have a hell of a reach. Reach for a star a star is born born to boogie . . . oh, hell. I am not Prufrock, nor was meant to be—

Meant to be what?

Abruptly, he saw that he was not alone. Under the sugar maple, at the edge of the wide circle of branches, stood a child. A skinny, grubby boy, ten years old, gazing upward. Casey lurched forward, but the boy ignored him. Motionless except for his eyes, he was conquering distant, spangle-colored planets, and in his shining look, Casey saw, there was no longing; no one longs for what he already possesses. He was still, complete, but as Casey grabbed wildly to throttle the unbearable wholeness in the rapt face that he knew perfectly well was not there, the champagne heaved and he threw up into the trampled fern shoots. When he could finally wipe his mouth on his shirt tail, the boy was gone.

The stars glittered.

Casey stumbled back through the woods. In one small clearing he smelled lilacs, barely budded but sweet in the dark, and he turned his head away. Somewhere he lost the path. Scratched by brambles, scuffing the decay of last year's leaves, he thrashed forward until the moon rose. It was easier, then, to walk, but the moonlit pattern of dark branches on the white letter made him squeeze his eyes shut, and it was thus that he tripped over the spaceship.

It wasn't really, of course. The ship itself was a hundred feet away,

dully black in the moonlight, circled with birch branches that had been pushed aside by its landing and had snapped back. Casey, sprawled on the ground over a foot-long, log-shaped . . . whatever it was, could almost feel the crack of those returning birch limbs on his back and shoulders. He reached under himself to feel the Whatever; it was-hard and smooth, faintly vibrating. Unlike the boy, it did not vanish.

Unsuspected additional champagne churned in his stomach.

The ship was small; it could hardly be more than some sort of shuttle. Curved into flowing lines and embraced by budding trees, it looked weirdly beautiful in the night woods, weirdly *right.* Moonlight slid off the black surface, a deep rich black the color of loam. Leaves and ferns grew right up to where the ship rested on the forest floor. There was no burned patch, no sign that the ship had not always been there, would not always be there, a part of the ferns and birches, surrounded by the usual night rustlings and scamperings. An owl hooted.

Under Casey's belly, the Whatever began to hum.

He rolled off it and scrambled to his feet. A section of the ship slid upward, sending a shaft of blue light over the ground. Slowly, a ramp descended until it met the dead leaves, which sighed softly.

Casey closed his eyes. He was drunk, he told himself. He was drunk, he was emotionally exhausted, he was hallucinating in some bizarre, wish-fulfillment fantasy. He was insane, he was schizophrenic, he was dead. He was a grown man with a more-or-less job, aging parents, and his own copy of the ten-volume *Oxford English Dictionary.* He was afraid, but not of the ship.

When he opened his eyes, it was still there. The "door" was still open. Nothing was visible inside except the bright blue light. The log-shaped Whatever rose into the air as high as Casey's chest and floated towards the ship. Ten feet away it stopped, floated back to Casey's chest, then again toward the ship. When Casey didn't follow, it repeated the whole sequence. Casey took one step forward.

He was on the flat rock under the twilight sky. Would You Go? they asked each other, sprawled on concave stomachs. Nan, said Marty Hillek—too dangerous. Chicken! said Carl Nielsen, chicken! I'd go, said Billy DeTine, I wouldn't care, I'm not afraid, I'd go. Me too, whispered little Jerry Casey, youngest of the lot. Me too. What if you never got back? said Marty Hillek, and no one said anything.

“The probability,” lectured the professor to Astronomy 101, “of intelligent life visiting earth covertly is very small. Even if we generously suppose a 50-50 chance of life developing on any planet within a 25-light-year radius of Earth, the next calculation would—”

“You don’t *know,”* insisted Kara Stine, née Phillips. “Nobody really *knows.”*

Casey took another step forward. Wet leaves squished under his boot. The letter rustled in his hand:

Dear Mr. Casey:

We are happy to inform you that our editorial staff is very impressed with your book, and that we are interested in publishing it. First, however, it is necessary. . . .

The Whatever floated back to Casey a third time. It was humming more loudly now, and in the humming Casey heard a soft urgency.

Moonlight shone on the letter, crumpled where his fist had tightened, fouled at one corner with vomited champagne.

Would You Go? asked Marty Hillek and Carl Nielsen and Billy DeTine. What if you never got back? Nights on the cemetary tombs: *Regulus Formalhaut Betelguese Ri-i-gel.* Days at his desk, struggling with stars on the head of a pin. “If Jerry Casey, great unpublished novelist, hasn’t *personally* seen one. . . .” Me too, whispered little Jerry Casey. We are happy to inform you . . . “What are you doing now? I mean your, uh, plans?” Me too. Oh, me too. Happy to inform you . . . “Escapist improbabilities, Mr. Casey. You must see . . . ‘galactic empire’!” Happy to inform you. . . .

Casey, battlefield for two warring empires, hiccupped in anguish.

Carefully, as if he might break, he took three steps backward. Then three more.

The Whatever followed him, then reversed direction and floated towards the ship, but only once. It floated inside, and the curved section of hull lowered slowly. The ship started to rise, slowly at first, then more rapidly. For a moment the dark hull stood poised above the birches, blotting out the stars. Then it blurred and was gone. The birch branches snapped

back. Something small and fury scuttled away through the leaves, startled by the sudden sharp sobbing that went on and on, the unchecked tearless sobbing of a ten-year-old-boy.

* * * *

You know the rest. All but Casey's name, which is not Casey. You can read in any standard reference work about the first official UN contact with the Beta Hydrans, fifteen years ago last May. You can read the pages and pages of testimony from the Des Moines dentist and the Portugese fisherman and the Australian housewife who visited the Beta Hydran spacecraft during their reconnaissance landings. You can read about the shifts of global power and the scientific boons and the interstellar promises of good faith and speedy return by the Beta Hydrans, who were not part of a galactic empire and who seemed bewildered by the entire concept. You can't *not* read it; it's everywhere.

You can look up Casey, too, in the reference works, and read about how he became the most famous "name" in SF before he was forty-five. You can look up his awards, his honorary this-and-thats, his movie credits, the alimony he pays both wives, his bout with alcoholism. If your mind runs that way, you can look up his biographies—written, all, by impoverished Ph.D. 's weary of Keats—which will analyze for you all the early environmental influences on Casey's writing. You can look up the academic critics, also impoverished Ph.D.'s, who have concerned themselves with Casey's novels. They find in all of them, except the first, a "lost, human yearning, a quality almost mythic in the scope of its cosmic rootlessness" (Glasser, Richard J., "Rockets and *Wanderjahr:* Another Look at SF." *PMLA,* 122 (1992), 48-76). You can look it all up, or could if you knew Casey's name. You'd recognize it, even if you don't read "that space stuff."

But what you don't know, can't look up, is the loss of Casey's galactic empire. What it was, what it meant, how it felt. You don't know. Unless it has happened to you, you don't know. You can't ever know.

<<Contents>>

* * * *

Talp Hunt

Reincarnation again.

After this second story on the same theme, people began asking me what I had been in my previous lives. (Most of them seemed to have been interesting and dramatic figures. No one ever thinks he was a feeble-witted chimney sweep.) But this story, like WITH THE ORIGINAL CAST, is a thought experiment, the working out of a possibility that the writer does not necessarily believe could happen, but still finds intriguing.

Terry Carr made several valuable suggestions for the revision of this story.

* * * *

Just after sunrise, I bring down the talp. It is feeding on the tender green shoots along the creek, its soft boneless tail swishing mindlessly in the water when the stone from my sling strikes it cleanly along the side of its head. It flops over into the creek and water rises along its side and mats the green fur. Picking it up by the tail, I swing it a little to shake the water off and study it carefully, turning the head from side to side to see more clearly the place where the green of sea water shades into the green of cale leaf and then into wet moss.

It is not the same one.

This talp is paler, younger, with a shorter snout. From behind the tree, the sunlight filtered green by leaves hanging over the creek, I was sure it was the talp I have tracked every morning for ... I was *sure.* I have watched it amble from its hole by the sea cliffs, eat the young shoots, slide aimlessly through die forest. I was sure. This was the same talp.

Only it is not.

Suddenly I swing the talp against the cale tree. The green head caves in over one eye, and bones shudder and crack. The foul smell the talp uses against predators is released and fills the air. Over and over again I smash the carcass, until the cale bark is soggy and bits of bloody green fur sticks

to my arms and breasts. I smash the talp until it is not recognizable as a talp, and then I leave it and walk into the forest, breathing heavily, not looking back at the mistaken talp, not looking back at the lost morning, not looking back.

* * * *

Halfway across the clearing, I whistle softly, and the ralum-alloy door on the hut slides open. Inside, it is dim and cool. The mother lies on the floor near the gray bulk of the Colonizer. She is folded over on her self, knees to forehead, keening softly, and the brother crouches near her, naked and miserable. “Mother,” he whispers, over and over. “Mother, Mother, Mother . . .” I know that he has been there all night and all morning, and I look away from her. Although we are the same age, he is so thin, except for his face. His face is round, with curved cheeks and eyes so wide that suddenly I think of the talp I have smashed and then I cannot look at the brother either.

“Mother, Mother, Mother ...”

“Who is she?” I whisper.

“Mother, Mother ...”

He will not answer me until the mother’s bad time is over. I wait rigidly, gripping the two fish I caught after leaving the talp. A little water drips from the fish to the floor of the hut, and the floor disinfects and dries the puddle. I do not move; the mother’s keening holds me still. Slowly the keening lessens, but not all at once. She lies still for a moment, then suddenly jerks and looks around, her eyes unseeing. Then the keening again. Every time her body jerks, the brother puts out his hand, careful not to touch her but only to stroke the air above her head, murmuring, “Mother, Mother, Mother.” The mother glances at him, but it is impossible to tell what she sees. The times when she is no one are always the worst.

“Mother, Mother, Mother ...”

The keening becomes softer; she is starting to sleep. Sometimes, however, sleep can take hours. My knees hurt from being locked in waiting, but I dare not shift position. The spaces between jerks become longer, and in one of them the brother impatiently waves at me to leave the hut. Released, I go gratefully, my legs weak. I head across the clearing to the creek, wash the fish, and blow on the embers in my fire circle.

I cannot watch the mother’s bad times anymore. Once—but once

there were not so many bad times. For whole days at a time, the mother was Hwang Ho or Uba or Gianelli or Karen or Colette. Even Colette was better. When she was Uba, she would sit with the brother and me in the sunshine, nuzzling us and cracking nuts for us the whole afternoon. When she was Hwang Ho, we would all plant shoots, scratching with long sticks where the creek lay flat and squishy over the warm ground. When she was Karen, she sat with us on the flat rock by the creek and told us how the creek flowed to the sea and the sea flowed to another creek and up that creek was the City, the only City in the world.

She has not been Karen or Uba or Hwang Ho for a long time.

The brother said once, not looking at me, that it might not be this creek after all that flowed to the sea that flowed to the City. It might be another creek, another City, another time. It might be anywhere. But he is wrong. I know he is wrong. It is *this* creek, *this* sea, *this* time. It must be, because although the brother says he remembers nothing, I remember the City. I remember—

"The fish smells good," the brother says timidly, coming up behind me. There are shadows around his eyes. He looks at me sideways, crouching a little; I know the look. He is sorry for his impatient wave in the hut, afraid that I am hurt at being sent away, ashamed that his choice to be the one endlessly crouching by the mother has shut me out. Sorry, afraid, ashamed—the brother is always sorry or afraid or ashamed, while he spends with the mother those long hours I cannot make myself do. I scowl at him savagely, and touch his hand.

"The fish is ready. You have the middle part."

"Oh, no. I ate already—out of the Colonizer. You take the middle, sister."

"You," I say, very slowly and clearly.

The brother looks longingly at the fish, lying golden in the ralum-alloy pan. "I'll take the middle to the mother. That's what she always liked—before."

I look away, stony. The brother moves closer; I can feel him by my elbow, Sorry, afraid, ashamed.

"Sister—"

“I don’t care what you do with the fish.”

“I just—”

“I don’t *care.”*

“I’ll eat the middle,” the brother says. He picks it off the pan, gingerly; it is very hot. As he eats it he smiles, first in pleading, but then with pleasure, and I feel my face unclench.

“Is it good?”

“It’s good.”

“The mother can eat the middle of the other fish,” I say, and he smiles at me. It is like Big Moon coming up in the sky.

“Sister, do you remember when we had that picnic with her, before? It was when Big Moon and Little Moon were close together—remember? She was being Gianelli and we were being Santo and Domenico, and we had some fruit saved up in the Colonizer, and you cooked that talp you—”

“No.”

“Yes, you remember! She told us about that time with the prince, and the city with all the bridges, and—”

“It wasn’t the City,” I say.

“She said there was a city and—”

“It wasn’t the City!” I reach over and grab his arm. Red spots grow under my fingers. The brother looks frightened, holding a piece of fish uselessly between us. I drop his arm.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. But that was a different city she was telling us about that time, don’t you remember? Roma. That wasn’t *our* City, the City we came here from. Don’t you remember that City at all? Can’t you remember . . . anything?”

The brother shakes his head. There are still red spots on his arm where I grabbed him. “You tell me,” he whispers.

But I cannot. I have never told it. There is so little to tell, and if I tell it,

it will be even littler to anyone who has not remembered it and dreamed it and seen it as much as I. Just one room, one person. No, two persons, because the mother was there, too, although I can't remember who the mother was being. But the mother wasn't important. I was sitting on the floor, not a ralum-alloy floor like the hut, but a floor soft and green as talp fur, shading from sea water to cale leaf to wet moss. The room was filled with shaded light that was not sunlight. Someone who was not the mother or the brother picked me up and held me close. His face bristled with black, thick hair, and I squealed. He whispered, "Alea. My precious little daughter Alea," and then tossed me into the air, over and over, and I laughed while the green floor far below jiggled and danced, rushing toward me and away, toward me and away, full of green light.

"You tell me," the brother whispers again, and I stare at him, dumb. If I tell him, he will either remember the room— or he will not. He will know that I am Alea—or he will not. But I *am* Alea. With him, I am being the sister, but I *am* Alea, and if he does not remember the greenlit room—if I tell him and he does not remember—

I cannot tell him.

I look at the ground. In a moment, the brother says, "I will take the fish to the mother now." His voice is sorry, and afraid, and ashamed. I bend my head and hug my knees in the hot sunshine, as if I were cold.

* * * *

"She's gone! The mother is gone!" The brother runs from the hut, hot fish on a flat rock still in one hand.

"Gone? She can't be gone!" I say, but of course she can. Where? Who? The brother stands trembling; the fish slides off into the dirt.

"Go search the cliffs!" Where? Who? Last time it was the cliffs, she was Maria Torres, she tried—

"No, wait, I'll do the cliffs. You go to the fruit grove, see if she's Uba. Then try the beach—remember when she was the fisherman? If she's not there ... if she's not there, come back here. Run!"

I dash toward the cliffs, looking back over my shoulder. The brother stands still, trembling. "Run!" I scream, and he starts to run.

The cliffs are a long run from the hut, where the sea curves back

around the land and the forest thins. The waves are much higher there, smashing against the rocks with a booming sound I cannot hear over my own heart. Can the mother run this far? But if she is being Maria Torres, she is running in terror, chased by those vicious animals she calls . . . What are they called? I cannot remember. It is almost the worst when she is Maria Torres, running blindly, chased by men shouting she is la bruja, and by those animals—los perros, yes—who want to tear her apart. Chased until it was better, the first time, to throw herself off the cliffs. If the mother is being Maria Torres again . . .

I try to run faster, stumble on a root, and fall. Blood fills my mouth. I force myself up, already running. Pain tears at my left side. Sweat streams into my eyes, blinding me so that when I reach the mother, I nearly run past without seeing her.

She is standing near the cliffs, placidly picking up stones, and I see at once that she is not being Maria Torres. Who? Leaning against a cale tree, heaving for breath, I try to think who might be picking up stones. Uba? It could be Uba. But no, the mother is walking fully erect, looking thoughtful; it could not be Uba. Uba walks bent over, dangling her arms, her mouth gaping. Not Uba.

Who?

“Carl, look at this,” the mother says. She sounds very happy. She comes over to me, holding out a rock. I bend with a sudden cramp and spit blood. “Just look at it. The ore content is phenomenal, and it’s right on the surface. Extraction wouldn’t even be a problem!”

“Mother—”

“Surface mining all the way,” the mother says happily. “Even in this gravity, it would be profitable—what they’d lose in shipping, they’d save in extraction. And with z-post less than three light-years for processing—!”

“Come with me, Mother. It’s all right.” Slowly I circle, trying to get between her and the cliffs before she stops thinking I am “Carl” and starts thinking I am someone else, someone chasing her with los perros, someone trying to—

The mother’s head snaps up and her eyes grow terrified. I throw myself forward and grab. But she is too quick; she sprints backward and I sprawl on the rocks, something twisting painfully in one ankle. The mother screams and backs away, her hair whipping back from her face. Behind her,

the sea pounds. I cannot reach her in time, she will jump from the cliffs like Maria Torres the first time and lie mangled and smashed as the talp in the green light, she will—

But at the very edge of the cliff, the mother stops and turns around. Silhouetted against the sea below, she is a dark shape, suddenly still and graceful, one knee bent forward and the opposite hip rounded. She raises her arms and laughs softly, low, in the back of her throat. Behind her, the sea crashes on the rocks, smelling of salt. Her laugh is the laugh of the picnic by the creek, of the dark man in the green-lit room.

“Andre,” the mother says softly, licking her lips. “Cheri. Viens ici.”

I move toward her, dragging one foot.

“Viens à ta Colette.” She closes one eye and smiles, waggling her fingers.

“Mother, come here.”

“Ah, Andre!” she says, and then she is on me, wrapping her arms around my back and kissing my mouth. I roll with her away from the cliff and she laughs, a laugh from the back of her throat. Away from the edge, I try to break her grip, but her arms are locked behind my back and the laughing mouth is pressed to my hair, pulling at it with sharp white teeth.

“Andre, Andre, je t’aime,” she laughs, and I break one arm free and hit her in the mouth.

“Alea!” I scream. “I am Alea! Alea!”

Blood trickles from her mouth. She goes on laughing, calling, “Andre, Andre.” I hit her again. I am sobbing, “Alea, Alea,” but I can hardly hear myself over the mother’s laughing and the screaming of the sea birds and the crashing of the sea, until the brother comes and pulls me off her and abruptly she stops laughing and starts being somebody else. Neither of us knows who.

* * * *

I will not sleep in the hut. The brother does not try to change my mind. It was he who brought the mother back to the hut, staggering under her weight while she keened and stumbled in one of the nameless bad times. It was he who pulled the Bubble out from the Colonizer and wrapped it

around her so that it could spray the mist that would heal her cuts and scratches and the place on her mouth where I hit her. I watched from the door. The brother looked up at me, once, but I do not think he saw me.

I will never sleep in the hut again.

I lie near the creek, wrapped in my blanket, planning how the brother can take the blanket every morning and put it in the Colonizer to be cleaned and disinfected. If it rains, I will go into the forest, under the cale trees. I will make a sort of hut of leaves and branches, away from the mother's hut, where she does not go. I stare up at the Big Moon rising from the sea, and the brother comes and sits down next to me.

"Who was she?" the brother asks. I see that he needs to know; he will keep the name like a colored stone, turning it over and over, running his fingers through the pile of colored, useless names.

"Colette."

"Only Colette?"

"No. Colette when I hit her. Before that, Maria Torres. With los perros. Before that, someone else, I'm not sure who, maybe Karen. She sounded like Karen. Only I didn't understand all her words, only some of them."

"Who were you?"

"Andre. Before that, one of the men chasing her with los perros. And before that, someone called 'Carl.'"

The brother sits up straight. "'Carl.' Are you sure?"

"Yes. Why?"

"She says the name 'Carl' sometimes, in bad times. Who is Carl?"

"I don't know," I say.

"Who is she being when you have to be Carl?"

"I don't know."

"But when you—"

“I said I don’t know!” I shout, and the brother turns his head away. In the light from Big Moon, his cheek is round and pale. Sorry, afraid, ashamed. But he does not care who Carl is, who I have to be when I am Carl. But I am not Carl. I am Alea, and now I see why I do not tell the brother about Alea and the green-lit room. He would only ask who the mother was being when I was being Alea.

I roll over on my face. After a while, I hear the brother get up and walk back toward the hut. Big Moon shines in the waters of the creek, wavery and silent, changing as the water flows so that now it is this shape, now that. The trees and sweet grasses murmur around me. I whisper to them, “Alea. My precious little daughter Alea,” but they only rustle in the wind, wordless, remembering nothing.

* * * *

The day I find the red globe, the mother is Hwang Ho. She is better; she has been Hwang Ho for days now, planting green shoots and cleaning fish and talking Hwang Ho’s words to the brother, who answers back with the words he knows and helps with the hoeing. He is being Hwang Lung and is very happy. I hunt talp, searching far inland where the forest climbs the sides of steep hills, coming back to the hut after sunset to store the meat in the Colonizer and let the Bubble mist my cuts and scratches. The brother and I talk very little.

The red globe lies on the ground near the small waterfall, high in the mountains. When I first see it, I think it is a flower or a stone, but it is too bright for either. Splashing across the falls, I pick it up. Smooth and seamless as the ralum-alloy hut, it fills my palm, glowing redly. Despite the glow, the globe is not hot; it feels cool and heavy as I wait for it to do something. It does nothing.

Still, it must be from the City. Where else could it come from? “There is only the City and the forest, the City and the forest,” the mother said once. “In the whole empty world, only the City and the forest.” Who was she when she said that? I cannot remember. But it must be this world she meant, because here is this heavy red globe, lying in my palm. Looking at it, I feel my chest begin to pound, slow and heavy.

All the way down the mountain, I clutch the cool red glow from the City.

* * * *

“What is it?” the brother asks. He keeps his hands behind his back, not touching the globe.

“I don’t know. But look, it doesn’t come from here. It must be from the City.”

“How could it be from the City?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know how long it’s been up there. But I’m going to show it to the mother. Maybe she knows what it is.”

“No!”

I stare at him. He backs away from the glowing red ball, his round face fierce. “You don’t show it to the mother! She doesn’t need to see it!”

“She might know what it is!”

“It will only hurt her!” the brother shouts, but he cannot keep the shouts strong. They trail off into whispers, and the brother’s fierceness collapses. “Don’t show it to her,” he whispers. “Please don’t show it to her.”

Before I can answer, the red globe goes out. In my hand, it changes from bright red shining in the sunlight to the color of wet stone, gray and dull. The brother and I stare at it, too surprised to move, until the brother points behind me, gibbering. I turn slowly, and in the great slowness I suddenly feel as if I am falling. But it is another red globe, a huge one, that is falling, falling above the trees more slowly than anything can fall. It cannot fall that slowly, but it does, until it touches the ground near the hut and the red goes out and then there are two ralum-alloy huts in the clearing, side by side. The brother whimpers, and drops to his knees. The door of one of the huts opens and two figures come out, a man and a woman. In the sunlight, the woman’s breasts cast little bobbing shadows, but it is at the man that I stare so hard my eyes blur and the two huts fuse into one. But the man is blond, his face round and hairless.

“Karen,” he says. “My God—Karen.”

“No, Carl,” the woman says. “Look how young she is. It can’t be.”

“No, of course not,” the man says shakily. He passes a hand over his eyes. “Of course not. Harol? Davey?”

Inside my ears is a rushing sound, a clean bright roar like a high wind.

Karen—he is looking for Karen. He knows the mother when she is being Karen. He must be from the City, he must know the green-lit room, he must know—

"The shot," he says unsteadily, and points to the dull globe in my hand. The brother, still on his knees, draws behind me.

"Carl, you're scaring them," the woman says. She bends down and looks at the brother. "Don't be frightened, either of you. We won't hurt you. We're just looking for someone, three someones, and we sent out scattershot large-life signals days ago"—she points to the now-dull globe—"to see if they might be on this island. I'm Tina O'Connell and this is Carl Biscardi. He's looking for his sister Karen and her two children. They—"

Suddenly I laugh. I cannot help it—they are here! They have come for us! They will take us back to the City, to the black-bearded man and the green room. They know who all of us are being, the mother and the brother and I. They *know.* I pull on the brother's arm and step forward, laughing again. Tears fill my eyes, and I cannot help them either. Holding out the globe—the "shot"—I drag the brother to his feet and toward the man being the mother's brother.

"Alea! I am Alea! This is the brother, Alea's brother! And Alea's mother is asleep there, in the hut!" And I laugh because for a single flying moment I cannot remember which hut she is in, which hut was here first, of the two that look so much the same. The clear bright rushing sings in my ears like water.

But the man Carl is frowning. "The girl twin—"

"Carl, listen," the woman being Tina says. "Their mother is in the hut. You check there."

He starts for a hut, but suddenly the brother is there first, whistling open the door. Through it I see him, standing protectively over the mother while the man Carl enters. The door closes.

"Is she—" the woman Tina asks, but then she stops; I see her looking for words. "Is your mother—does she always know who she is?"

"Oh yes," I say, and laugh again, the laugh tumbling out on top of the words. It is easy to laugh, easy to talk, after so many days of silence. "She's Hwang Ho or Uba or Gianelli or Karen or Colette or Maria Torres or

Abdul. She always knows."

The woman draws a deep breath. "And then you—"

"I am Alea." Around us the sunlight shimmers and sparkles, and in the pause of the woman's voice I hear the sea. It is singing, laughing: Alea, Alea, Alea. The woman takes my hand. Her voice is gentle.

"What can you remember . . . Alea, from before your mother brought you to live here? Do you remember New Roanoke? Do you remember your Uncle Carl at all?"

"No. But I remember a room filled with green light, and I remember—" But I stop, suddenly shy. *My precious little Alea.*

"Listen. I'm going to try to tell you what I know, what Carl told me. I don't know how much of it you'll understand, but I'll try." She pushes her hands up through her hair, frowning. "You and your brother are twins—two babies born at the same time. Carl and Karen, your mother, were partners in a mining survey team. That means that you go to other . . . other worlds and look for certain very rare metals, for ore—"

"Ore," I repeat. One of the strange words the mother said on the cliffs. The woman being Tina stops and waits, but I say nothing.

"When Karen became pregnant with you twins, she decided to stay here—not this place, but on this world, in the city of New Roanoke—for the birth, and I became Carl's partner looking for ore. Now this part is a little hard. There is a time difference. Only a little while passed on our ship, but it's been ten years here. Do you understand? When Carl and I went offworld, you and Davey were just walking. But when he got back, we found out that Karen had had herself eternalized. That means—" The woman stops and turns her hands palms up, looking at me helplessly.

"It's hard to explain to you. Karen had been to so many worlds, looking for ore . . . not just different places like the city, Alea: different *worlds.* She and Carl stayed together, but everyone else they had known, their parents and friends and everyone, was not only worlds away but centuries away, because of the time differences on ship that I just told you about. Karen had been prospecting for years, but on all the worlds she landed, time had gone by much faster. Everyone she knew, everwhere, was dead. Do you see, Alea? Karen didn't belong anywhere, anytime. She began to have bad periods of depression, and to cry a lot, and her pregnancy seemed to make both of those worse. She didn't know where

she fit, and after a while that made her wonder even who she was. Worlds changed, time changed; Karen felt she couldn't be sure of anything, and she wanted something to hang onto. Can you understand that?"

The woman peers at me closely. I will not look at her. Inside my chest, my heart thuds so hard I am afraid she can hear it. *Something to hang onto.*

She sighs and goes on. "The thing that Karen wanted had to be big, big enough to take in all those worlds and all that time. A secure sense of identity big enough to dwarf all that she had already lost. So she had herself eternalized. That means she had an operation—had something done to her head—so that now she remembers all the people she ever was. In other lives. She remembers her entire past. Only it was a new operation, and a dangerous one, and Karen was one of the first. Carl and I found out when we got back that she had been eternalized and that she was one of the ones who can't deal with all that past. Some people can, but a few, already disoriented, just can't. The past is supposed to be merely memories, but instead Karen gets—she gets *lost* in it, in her mind, like getting lost in the forest. There's too *much* of it for her. Do you understand?"

"Eternalized." Somewhere I hear the word in the mother's voice, with sobs and tears. She is grabbing my shoulder and begging me to understand, to . . . But the picture is gone, scattered like the reflection of Big Moon in the creek. I cross my arms across my chest; the wind from the sea is suddenly cold.

"When Carl and I got back, Karen had taken you and your brother away from the city, no one knew where. At the hospital, they said she took a reconnaissance ship equipped with a Colonizer and just vanished. We've been looking for months, sending out the scattershot signals, but God it's a big continent, and ... Do you understand at all what I'm trying to say, Harol? Your mother is supposed to be just one person all the time, just Karen. Only what's in *this* life is supposed to be real to her. We can take her back to New Roanoke and have the eternalizing blocked again, and she'll be one person, Karen, all the time."

One person all the time. She would not run for the cliffs, or plant shoots by the creek, or nuzzle the brother and me in the hot sunshine while picking bugs from our hair. She would not be Colette, she would not try to—only Karen. And I would not be los perros or Hwang Lan or Andre. I would be Alea, only Alea. But—

“Why did you call me ‘Harol’?”

The door of the hut opens and the mother comes out, with the brother on one side and the man being Carl on the other. The mother is Uba: she walks bent over, jaw gaping, grunting softly. One hand brushes the ground; the other is fastened in the brother’s hair. Tears lie on Carl’s cheeks.

“She’s very bad. Tina, get Harol and Davey into the ship.”

“Carl—”

“She’s become just—God!” He takes the mother’s hand and pulls her gently toward the ship. She ambles slowly, without protest, blinking in the sunlight. The brother presses against her, his eyes round and frightened. Beside me the woman Tina moves forward and touches my shoulder.

Something is wrong, something without words, without names. The woman Tina’s face, and the man being Carl who keeps calling me ‘Harol,’—Suddenly, for no reason, I think of the talp I had tracked for days, the talp I had killed for being the wrong one.

“I am Alea,” I say loudly and slowly. Even Carl stops and turns. “I am Alea. There was a room filled with green light that is not sunlight. The floor is soft and green, like talp fur. A man picked me up and threw me in the air. A big, dark man. His face had black, prickly hair on it. He threw me up and caught me. He said, ‘Alea, my precious little daughter Alea.’ That is what he *said.* I am Alea.”

The four of them look at me, silent. The brother looks the way he does when the mother begins to be someone new, someone he has not seen before. The man Carl does not really see me; even looking straight at me, he see the mother, and the interruption I am making getting the mother into the “ship.” The woman being Tina stares at me with so many shades in her face that suddenly I am afraid of her most of all.

“I am Alea!”

Beneath me my legs tremble. I make the trembling legs carry me up to the mother, and I push my face close to hers, to the dull eyes that blink at me in confusion.

“I am Alea!”

The mother does not speak. She tips her head to one side and

studies me, then lets go of the brother and raises her arm. I see it come up slowly, as slowly as the hut falling out of the sky. She puts her hand on my head; the woman being Tina breathes in sharply. For a moment, something gleams deep in the mother's eyes and I almost think she is someone else, not Uba at all, someone who remembers herself all the way through and so me as well. Then the mother's hand parts my hair and begins looking through it for grubs to eat.

Savagely I knock the hand away. "Alea!" I scream, and hit the mother in the face. She crumples to the ground. Carl grabs me and shakes me so hard my teeth rattle.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? She's sick, goddammit, and I won't have some— You lay a hand again on—is this what the two of you—you do that again and I'll whip you so hard you won't sit down for a week! She's your mother, dammit! And your name is Harol, not this 'Alea' rot, and you can just learn it! Harol! And your father died before you were born, so you can just forget this black-bearded stuff—"

"Carl!" Tina cries. "Don't!"

"—and help your mother get well instead of feeding her more lies! Your father was blond, and you never laid eyes on him! And if you ever again—just who the hell do you think you are, young lady, hitting your mother when she's—just who the hell do you think you *are!* Who?"

Who-who-who goes the bright hard wind, rushing past my ears as I run for the forest. The trees close around me, blind, and I cannot see any of the shouting people any more.

* * * *

I see the City, far below. It shades from sea wave to cale leaf to wet moss, and the light of Big Moon slides over it with water. Someone tosses me into the air, and then I am falling, falling down through the city made of green talp fur, bloody and mangled with its foul scent choking my mouth, and I keep falling through the bloody fur and falling and falling…until I am caught by the voice of the man being Carl, rising up from the clearing below.

"Listen! What was that?"

"I didn't hear anything."

"Like a cry. No, a sort of choking," the man Carl says. They are far

below me, two heads bobbing in the sea of green bushes. I lean against the trunk of the cale tree, pushing away the dream. The branch under me shudders, but the man being Carl and the woman being Tina do not look up. In a day and night of searching, they have not looked up. I shake my head to clear it; the leaves around me dance and blur, as if in a high wind. I have not eaten since yesterday, and my head feels shivery as the cale leaves.

“I didn’t hear anything,” the woman Tina repeats.

Carl raises both his hands to his mouth and shouts, *“A-leee-a!”* I hold my breath.

“Damn it, where is she? Don’t look at me like that, Tina!”

“Like what?”

“Like it’s all my fault!”

“It is all your fault,” Tina says coldly. They never look up.

“How’s Karen?”

“Still out. I gave her another hypodermic. I gave one to Davey, too. He wouldn’t take his eyes off her.”

“She needs hospitalization,” Carl says, and his voice sounds like a branch ready to snap. *“Now.* And that brat—”

“She’s not a brat,” Tina says. “She doesn’t know what she is.”

I have never shot my sling straight down before. I reach for it carefully, rustling no leaves, and fit in a stone. Their heads below look like two pelts, blond and silky.

“You of all people ought to understand her,” Tina says. “She’s just like Karen.”

“Karen’s sick! She had that damn operation! Harol didn’t!”

“Alea, not Harol. And what made Karen have the operation in the first place? She wanted to know who she was. She wanted some anchor to the past, some secure identity. She wanted—”

“I don’t think you know her that well,” Carl says coldly, and turns his back to her. I pull back the sling. Tina grabs Carl’s shoulder and yanks him around.

“I know *you* that well! You charge in here and bluster and cry to try to make everything with Karen exactly the way it was when we left ten years ago. Karen wallowed and brooded and finally hooked her mind to a bunch of wires and chemicals. Well, Alea invents. She’s invented herself a past and a father and a name. You’re all the same, all three of you—all trying to find some sure way to control the world, so that you can define yourself by it. Did you think that just because Alea grew up in this primitive camp that she wouldn’t feel that need, too? Or didn’t you think at all? God, Carl, at least try to see past Karen and look at Alea for a minute. She’s looking for some anchor in time. But the past won’t help! It can’t, because our relationship to it is too damn complicated to pin down that easily!”

The man being Carl walks away from her. I try to pull back my sling but my hand shakes; the tree under me is riddled and trembly, as if it might snap. Not even when the mother was being Colette did she say such terrible things; not even when she was Maria Torres was she so terrifying. “Inventing . . . the past won’t help. . . .” Terrible, dangerous things, mangled things. I will not listen to them, I do not want to look at them. They will not let me be Alea, not even the woman being Tina would let me be Alea, she said I invented ... I pull back my sling. She would not let me be Alea. I would have to be Harol, someone I do not know. They would smash Alea forever, just as they would smash Hwang Ho and Uba and Gianelli and Maria Torres. They would smash Alea. I aim the sling.

The rushing fills my ears. Around me the leaves spin, scrambling and crying. I slip sideways and grab at the cale trunk. The stone falls out of the sling and bounces down the tree, hitting branches and leaves until it falls to the ground, and the man and woman look up.

“There she is!” the man cries. He starts toward the tree, his face tilted upward, faintly green in the light sifted through the trees. I stand up, steadying myself with one hand on the trunk. Below, the forest floor is green, shading from sea water to cale leaf to wet moss. The leaves jiggle and dance. The man below strides toward me, his arm raised. He is directly under me, waiting. He is not the mother or the brother. His face tips up, calling to me, calling something I cannot hear in the rush of wind, in the strange light. I jump forward, laughing, onto the air and the waiting arms below, and the floor rushes toward me, full of green light.

* * * *

Big Moon rises over the City. I watch it from my window, every night when there are no clouds. In the next room, the mother is cooking. She is being Karen. Across the room the brother, practicing reading on his tutor, is being Davey. Every once in a while, he glances at me over the top of his machinery, his face creased, and I think for a moment that he is going to warn me away from the cliffs.

I have sat here every night for months now.

Tomorrow Tina O'Connell will come to see us again, but this next visit will be different. She will bring Carl home from the hospital. That is why the brother gives me those worried looks. He is afraid that when I see Carl being a man who had to get new legs because I smashed the old ones, it will make me cry the way I did before. But the brother doesn't know about the paper.

I found it in the park. I cannot read very well yet—although I read better than the brother—but the paper has only three long words, and one of them I could hardly mistake. The paper is in the pocket of my jumpsuit while I watch Big Moon. The tutor calls Big Moon "Ramses," but of course it does not matter what they call it. It is still Big Moon. The paper crackles when I move, like wind in trees.

WHO ARE YOU?

> Do you know, REALLY? Most of us do not, thanks to outdated and repressive laws that kill new discoveries. But you *can* know who you are, who you have always been. Eternalizing can give you a whole new sense of yourself—your real, whole self.
>
> Join those of us who know. ...

"The past never helps anyway!" Tina O'Connell screamed when she lifted me off Carl's legs. But that is stupid. It is now that doesn't help. Now I do not know who the mother is when she is being Karen. She makes up Karen every day. She is never Uba or Gianelli or Hwang Ho or Maria Torres. She is never the people I knew all my life. Those people are gone. Karen found her past and then she gave it back, but she gave back mine, too. I do not know her.

Nor do I know who is that man in the picture that Tina and Karen keep showing me, the picture of the thin blond man they say was my father. He is dead, they say, long ago, on another world. He is a stranger.

Even the brother is strange when he is being Davey, squinting at his tutor and calling Big Moon “Ramses.” He is different, wavery. I do not know who he is in this wavery now, and I don’t think he knows, either. Davey and Karens—they neither of them know what talp they are following. They track it everyday, and never ask if it is the right one.

But I ask. I must know what talp I follow, and if I smash the wrong ones in the following—then that can’t be helped. I will smash them. I will go away from Karen and Davey and Carl and Tina—watchful Tina—and I will take whatever risks are necessary, do whatever is necessary to find Alea and Alea’s green-lit room and Alea’s black-bearded man, because they are somewhere. Not now, perhaps, but somewhere.

They *must* be there.

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Against A Crooked Stile

In 1978 the TV show “60 Minutes” broadcast a segment about super-high-voltage power lines. A group of Midwestern farmers, concerned about the possible effects of the lines on human electrochemical responses, were mounting protests against the power companies whose lines crossed their farms. In the Soviet Union, the broadcast stated, such voltage lines were considered dangerous enough that exposure to them was limited to no more than five minutes by *any* worker not shielded by a Faraday cage.

I had just begun to write, and I thought that the situation might form the basis for a story. Research at a university library proved frustrating—the articles I wanted were only available in Russian. I decided to go ahead and write the story anyway.

AGAINST A CROOKED STILE was the third story I sold, and the tenth or eleventh I had written. I no longer like the first two, but I’m still fond of young Jorry. Fondness, however, did not make the memory grow less absent; five years later I named another child “Jorry,” in my novel THE WHITE PIPES, and never realized the duplication until I chose the stories for this collection.

* * * *

Down under the new cast, somewhere near the immobile crook of his elbow, Jorry’s arm itched. Surreptitiously he tried to fidget his cramped muscles against the inside of the heavy plaster, but the itchy prickling only grew worse, and the sudden pain that shot through his broken elbow was sharp enough to bring tears to his eyes. Quickly, before his father could notice, Jorry raised his eyes and gazed across the heat-shimmered field, trying to make it look as though the tears had come from staring unblinkingly into the sun. Neither of the two men facing each other in the thigh-deep, uncut hay noticed him.

“Two days,” his father growled in his heavy, rusty voice, a voice that scraped across the words like an unused file. Tiny drops of perspiration rolled from the black eyebrows that were joined in a single fierce line, and

down onto the bridge of his nose. Jorry took a step backward, away from them both.

“Two days she just sat there, now. Hay only halfways cut, burning up in this sun—who’s gonna cut it?” He spat, the spittle sticking to a stalk of hay in a wet glob. “Not me. So you just tell me that, you that’s got all the answers—who’s gonna get up on that there death trap and cut the hay before the crop’s lost for good?”

The power-company man gazed at the tractor squatting in the middle of the field. Sunlight reflected blindlingly off the tarnished yellow metal, and he put up one plump, pale hand to shield his eyes. Bits of hay clung to his dark suit where it bulged outward at the waist.

“But I’ve told you several times, Mr. Whitfield, there’s no danger now that we’ve grounded the machinery and the other—”

“I know you told me. I heard you.” Whitfield spat again and the stranger hopped back a little, glancing down at his shoes. “You come in here and put chains on my barn and my tractor and even on my boy’s swing, and that’s supposed to fix ev’rything, trade it all out nice and even. It don’t mister. Not by a goddam sight. How’d you like to be the one who—”

“Look, Whitfield,” the stranger said. He leaned forward a little, and Jorry saw a hard line of bone suddenly jut forward under his soft jowls, as unexpected as the teeth in the pink baby possums Jorry had once found in the woods. The boy almost whimpered, but caught himself: trading silence for not being noticed.

“I’ve spent all the time here that this situation calls for. Minor shocks such as you experienced are common near 1,000 kV lines; we get ‘em all the time. But if conducting objects near the right of way are properly grounded, there’s no danger. No one has ever demonstrated—”

“Now see here, you can’t—”

“—*ever* demonstrated, I said, harmful effects from exposure to electrostatic fields—”

“I’ll sue you bastards for—”

“—of *any* strength; and, believe me, the power company will dismiss your threats of a court suit with nothing more than ‘exposure’ to trade on as so much nonsense. Have I made our position clear to you? Because I’ve

heard all I intend to!”

Whitfield took a step forward, his fists clenched at his sides. The stranger stood his ground squarely; and suddenly it seemed to Jorry that the man grew as tall and black as the line towers themselves, thrusting darkly 150 feet above the baking field, like menacing giants stalking the sky. In sudden terror Jorry moved to jerk his right arm up to cover his face, but the sling held the cast immobile and pain again tore through the shattered elbow. *Giants—*

“All you’re going to hear, eh?” his father was shouting. “You think so? Well, listen a goddamn minute to *that!”* He thrust a trembling arm backward.

Caught off guard, the stranger blinked stupidly in the fierce sunlight before turning and looking over the hay. The scrubby pine at the edge of the field seemed to waver a little in the blanket of heat, but the girders of black metal slicing the sky above it were etched hard and clear. For a moment the two men were still, bent slightly forward, straining to listen. Over the drone of summer insects came a low crackling hum, fitful and unceasing, punctuated with an occasional louder snap that fizzled out slowly. The sound was insistent, edgy, like the mutter of buried embers under a banked fire.

“And that’s prett’ near 400 feet away,” Whitfield said grimly. “You walk closer with a fluroescent light from the bathroom, the bulb lights up. I know. I did it myself.” Suddenly he shivered, a quick unexpected spasm shaking his thick body but not rippling the stained denim overalls covering it. “And I ain’t gonna do it again. You say that’s not dangerous?”

“I do,” the stranger said. His intent stare had vanished; and now he appeared bored, amused, and impatient. “People are not light bulbs. I’ll find my own way back to the car.”

A few steps into the uncut hay, however, he stopped, paused, and then turned with obvious reluctance, his plump face annoyed. “Uh . . . just one more thing, Whitfield. You don’t wear a pacemaker, do you? From heart surgery? The company is . . . uh . . . advising all residents with demand-type cardiac pacemakers to remain outside the right of way. Purely as a precautionary measure.”

Before Whitfield could answer, the stranger turned again and hurried across the field, the stalks closing behind him with a soft swish. Jorry took another step backward, his eyes too big as he watched his father’s face go from red to a dull mottled purple. Jagged red lines sprang out around the

nose and mouth. Holding his breath, unable to move, the boy cowered dumbly in the tall hay, waiting.

—the belt falling and he threw up his arms to shield— for the moment his father would turn and the fierce blue eyes with their watery, red-lined whites would fall on him, fall on him and then ...

But Whitfield didn't turn around. He kept staring across the hay at the dwindling black spot that was the power-company man, and slowly his hands curled into fists. Behind him the line crackled in the empty hot sky.

* * * *

If you lay with your eyes half-closed, Jorry thought, and sort of squinted up the left one, you could make the clouds change shape even faster than the wind could. If you squinted up both eyes, the shapes dissolved and ran together and you could start all over again, make a new world all over again. . . .

Lying on his back with the shoulder-to-knuckle cast propped up on his stomach, breathing in the dry warm smell of the Sandersons' hay, Jorry made shapes out of clouds. The Sanderson farm joined the Whitfields', but was much larger; and in its back field already dense with the second hay crop of the summer, Jorry was seldom disturbed. He had left off the sling because he couldn't figure out how to tie it around his neck with only one hand; the laces on his dirty blue sneakers were untied for the same reason. A grasshopper bounded onto the cast, watched the boy from shiny multi-faceted eyes, and leaped off again. Jorry didn't stir.

Small shapes, that's what you wanted—nothing too large, nothing too dangerous. Rabbits, and marbles, and over there one of those fluffy white dogs, the kind that looked like a mop, like old Mrs. Reynolds used to have with all that shaggy hair all over its—

"You're scaring the mice," a voice said above him.

Jorry's eyes flew open and he scrambled to his feet, already backing away, hastily cradling the cast in his good arm. The flapping sneaker laces tangled in the hay and he pitched forward, throwing up his

—arm to shield his face from the buckle coming down and the smell of whiskey and—

"Hey," the voice said. "There, I've got you—take it easy, fella. Hey, it's

O.K.—I'm not rabid. Really. Haven't been for years."

Caught by his shoulders, Jorry stopped struggling and tried desperately to blink away his panicky tears and get a clear look at his captor. The man wavered, watery at the edges and streaked with blurred silver, then came into focus as the pain in Jorry's elbow subsided and the tears rolled out of his eyes and down his thin cheeks.

The man was wearing jeans, a blue cotton work shirt, and boots—a new hand at the Sandersons', then. But no—the jeans were patched and clean, not whole and dirty, and there were no traces of manure on the boots. So not a farm hand. His leather belt was foreign-looking, intricately worked, with some sort of silver buckle

—coming down and the smell of whiskey and his own voice screaming just before— shaped like the sun.

"Hey, I'm sorry," the man said, releasing Jorry's shoulders. "I didn't mean to scare you. You all right? I just wanted to ask you if you'd mind moving, because you're scaring the mice. That's all."

Jorry wrenched his eyes upward from the buckle, and then it was better. Above an untidy beard were good eyes, warm and young and brown, the color of fresh toast. Some of Jorry's panic ebbed, sliding away in long slow waves; and he sniffed and swiped at his nose with his good hand.

"What mice?"

The man rocked back and squatted on his heels. "Up there—under the line. You're upwind of them, and they smell you. Makes 'em jumpy. Jumpier."

Jorry craned his neck; he couldn't see over the low ridge swelling with half-grown hay.

"Come on up and look," the man said, and started off in such an off-hand matter that after a moment Jorry found himself following.

Under the line, on the uneven stubble of weeds that had remained after the power company had mowed its right-of-way, was a jumble of equipment. Four large glass boxes, elevated on wooden blocks and screened on two sides with plastic mesh, held piles of shredded newspaper full of burrowing mice. Two of the glass boxes were surrounded

by a double shell of parallel wires, one inside the other, which were joined together and anchored firmly into the ground. Squares of metal standing on edge and facing each other in pairs had been placed on the grass, or on high poles. The metal squares had been hooked up to odd-looking meters and to dials that looked to Jorry like plastic warts. Parked over the ridge was a small, sturdy red truck near the remains of a ham sandwich already being carried away by the boldest of a watchful flock of crows. On the warm air rode the nose-wrinkling smell of mice.

"What's that?" Jorry asked, in spite of himself. "Around the mice?"

"Faraday cages," the man said promptly. "Keep the mice in that box from being exposed to the electrostatic field from the line."

Involuntarily Jorry glanced upward. The cable above him stretched like a long black road, a road curving and diminishing over the far horizon. A road for giants . . .

"What about these other mice?"

"They're exposed to the field. The idea is to see if they behave any differently after a long while near the line." Slowly, his brown eyes never leaving Jorry's face, he came around the boxes of mice and held out his hand. "My name's Tom Crowell."

Jorry took a step backward. "You from the power company?"

"No—no, I'm not." He lowered his empty hand. "I work for the Environmental Study Association. We want to see if these new 1,000 kV lines affect the wildlife hereabouts. Want to hold one of the mice, son?"

"I can't," Jorry mumbled, looking down at his untied sneakers. He could feel the back of his neck growing hot. " 'Cause of my arm."

"I broke my arm once," Tom said cheerfully. "Healed clean as a whistle. Before the cast came off, I'd collected the autographs of the whole fifth grade." He glanced at Jorry's cast, bare except for a rubbed-in catsup stain. " 'Course, school's out just now. What's your name, son?"

"Jorry."

"Well, Jorry, I've seen you before, walking in the fields. You're about the only kid that *does* come up here. You interested in electronics? Is that why you like it here?"

Jorry kept his eyes fastened on a glass box behind a Faraday cage. Two bright eyes peered out from beneath a pile of shredded Sunday comics. Finally, as though it were an answer, he said, “My pa doesn’t like the line.”

“And who’s your pa?”

“Clayte Whitfield.”

“Oh,” Tom said. “Oh—yes.” He looked at the boy more closely, a sudden sharpness in his brown eyes. “He know you’re up here, Jorry?”

Jorry traced a circle on the grass with the toe of his sneaker. “Pa never comes up here.” After a long pause he added reluctantly, “He says the line’s dangerous.”

“Well, he’s probably right,” Tom said. The boy looked up quickly, his eyes wide with astonishment in his hollowed face.

“There’s enough of a field up here to cause all sorts of body currents in a human being and set off God-knows-what trigger phenomenon—especially in the brain organelles. Not to even mention the geophysical effects. Just smell the air—go ahead, move away from the mice and take a deep breath.”

Jorry had been going to ask what brain organelles and trigger fins on men were, but instead he obediently moved away from the glass boxes and sniffed. The air smelled faintly acrid, a dry elusive odor that reminded him vaguely of freshly-ironed cotton.

“Ozone,” Tom said. “If we get a storm, you watch the line during the thunder, Jorry. It’ll glow reddish-blue.”

Again Jorry glanced at the huge metal towers. Giants . . .

“But Mr. Crowell, if—”

“Tom.”

“Well—Tom.” He stumbled over the name, not used to this freedom. “If you think the line’s so dangerous, why are you up here? Why aren’t you joined up with the folk who stay away and want the line tore down and write letters and talk about . . .” Jorry trailed off. Talk? Talk was cheap, Pa said,

and Jorry had watched while Pa carried in the tightly-sealed box from the Country Agricultural Agency, the box that was so heavy in the big hands that trembled all the time now except when they held the bottle steady to pour . . .

"Why am I up here?" Tom was saying. "Because I *think* the line's dangerous, but I don't *know.* Do you know where the line comes from, Jorry?"

He shook his head. No one ever said; they just wanted it gone.

"From the lignite coal mines up north. Energy is a valuable thing for everyone, Jorry, although not if the cost is too high in other valuable things. You have to weigh both sides, make the best trade-off. The people here want the line down because it's a scary unknown. But I think it's a better idea to get to *know* it, and then decide. What do you think?"

Jorry shook his head, embarrassed again. That wasn't the sort of thing adults asked him, except in school; and even then they didn't talk to him the way this Tom did. It didn't seem right, somehow. Not fitting. He was only Jorry Whitfield, Clayte Whitfield's kid, and everybody knew the Whitfield farm hadn't had a decent cash crop in three years, couldn't even bring much produce to town to trade anymore. And you had to trade for things, Jorry knew; even this Tom talked about the line as a trade-off. You didn't get things for free. Not hay, not chicken feed, not canned stew, not friendship.

"I got to go," he said abruptly.

"O.K.," Tom said. "But it was nice talking to you. Come back if you feel like it."

Jorry started home without answering. Pa might be back from town, might be looking for him. It was bad to be in the house when Pa came in, but worse not to be.

Moving slowly so his untied shoelaces wouldn't tangle in the hay, the boy trudged through the green stalks, holding the plaster cast close to his body. He took a long oblique route that kept him downwind of the mice.

* * * *

But he went back, again and again, first hanging around the edges of the mowed stubble, observing as Tom worked and puttered and whistled

off-key, then later moving in closer. Each time he came he brought something: a handful of chives from the plant that came up each year behind the barn, some wild strawberries from the hill by the creek, a sharpened pencil in case Tom lost his. Tom accepted these offerings gravely, putting the chives in his sandwich and the pencil in his shirt pocket, so Jorry felt it was all right for him to stay. He helped, too, whenever he could. He fed the mice, careful to measure each cupful with painstaking exactness, adding and removing single pellets until he was sure each cage received the same amount. After a while Jorry got used to Tom's talking to him as if they were friends; sometimes he pretended to himself that they were. Jorry seldom said anything, but Tom talked all the time: talk poured out of him as relentlessly as sunshine, as unceasing as the crackle of the line. Jorry, unused to such talk, listened to all of it with cloistered intensity, his head bent forward, watching Tom through the sideways fall of his untrimmed bangs.

"The thing is, Jorry, that electrostatic fields set up currents between different parts of your body. There you are, Jorry Whitfield, a real live wire."

"You, too," Jorry said, astonishing himself. Tom leaped into the air, thrusting out his arms, legs, and tongue in a frenzied parody of every cartoon animal that ever stuck its finger in an electric socket on Saturday morning TV. The mice scuttled for cover.

"So the question is—what do all these currents *do,* coursing through the body beautiful?"

"What?" Jorry asked breathlessly.

Tom shrugged and dropped to the ground. "Dunno. Nobody knows."

Jorry stared at him a fraction of a second before again ducking his head. His hair fell forward over his face.

"We can guess, though. We can guess that it's probably affecting the brain, because brain organelles are most sensitive to voltage differences. And the brain is where perception takes place, where you experience things, so perception's a likely candidate for residual effects. You notice yourself seeing the grass blue, Jorry, or pink?"

Jorry frowned. The grass looked the same as usual to him, a dusty green fading to brown under the hot sun.

"Ah, well," Tom said, "Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was

Goodyear Rubber. Did you know that Goodyear— the first Goodyear, I can't think of his name—that he discovered how to vulcanize rubber by accident, while he was cooking some sulphur gunk on the stove? Fact. You just never know what you'll get with science. The whole thing might just as easily have exploded in his face. But it didn't."

Jorry hadn't known. Sometimes it seemed to him that he didn't know anything, hadn't ever thought about anything except how to stay out of people's way, until the coming of the line, and Tom. Now at night he lay awake in bed, listening to the shutter that had been banging in the wind for over a year now, and thought about their talks. Each remembered word became a smooth stone to turn over and over, running his thumb over the texture and curves of the surface, squinting at the hidden lines. At such times he always had a picture of Tom standing gigantic against a clear empty sky. In his picture, Tom was still talking.

There was a daily period, however, when they both sat silent and observed the mice for an uninterrupted hour, while Tom made notes in a large black folder. First he removed most of the shredded newspaper, and even the mice behind the wire Faraday cages could be seen clearly. As the weeks slipped by, it seemed to Jorry that the mice were increasingly jumpy and nervous, nipping at each other or fidgeting along the mesh, then dropping into periods of sudden sleep. He wondered what was going on in their brain organelles (he knew, now, what the words meant). Sometimes he touched his own head with one questing finger. It just felt like his head.

* * * *

The weather turned rainy, a warm, off-again on-again drizzle. Weeds grew lush and green in the vegetable garden, choking the feathery carrots and the string beans straggling up their sagging poles. Jorry tried to fix the bean poles, but the wood was old and rotten, and he couldn't find the key to the storeroom where there may or may not have been fresh lumber. The uncut hay in the back field gave off the pungent smell of decay. As his father spent more and more time in town, Jorry slacked off on his chores, unable to find the needed supplies or equipment. He took care, however, to keep the few animals fed; when the chicken feed ran out, he gave the hens popcorn and Rice Krispies. They seemed to like it just as well.

The reduced chores gave him more time to hunt for things to take to Tom, necessary things, things that would earn him the right to visit the site under the line. He brought fresh eggs—Pa had stopped keeping egg tally—wild sumac for tea, blackberries, an Indian arrowhead, a four-leaf clover ironed between two sheets of waxed paper so it wouldn't shrivel up.

Tom made a face when he tasted the sumac tea, but he carefully put the four-leaf clover in his wallet, on top of his health insurance card.

They observed the mice from under a leaky tarp rigged like a lean-to, and Tom shielded his notebook with an old plastic bag labeled “Marino’s work shirts.” Rain dripped off his beard into his coffee cup.

“Ah, well, it’s still not as messy as reading chicken entrails,” Tom said as he wiped the rain off his thermos before pouring them more coffee. No one else had offered Jorry coffee. “Although sometimes Dame Science seems just as capricious as the rest of that Olympian crew about bestowing her mixed offerings and benedictions. Still, you have to be ready, in case she spreads her wings and gets generous.” Jorry looked bewildered and Tom laughed.

“I mean that science gives both benefits, like tractors and medicine and this remarkable-unbreakable-new-improved-temperature-controlled thermos, and also problems, such as the power line. Starting off with a first step, you never really know what you’ll end up with. Surprise, folks! A cosmic poker game, new deals hourly, step right in and play!”

“Like Charles Goodyear,” Jorry said. Tom stared at him, surprised, and Jorry added in a sudden rush, “I’m gonna be a scientist, too, when I grow up, and discover important things like rubber.” He reddened and ducked his head.

“Where’d you learn Goodyear’s first name?” Tom asked. Jorry didn’t answer. One day when Pa had inexplicably ordered him to ride to town in the truck, and then just as inexplicably forgotten all about him when they got there, Jorry had slunk into the library and read what he could about the vulcanization of rubber, puzzling over the unfamiliar words until footsteps approached and he had fled before any librarian could demand payment in the form of his non-existent library card.

Tom sipped his coffee. “I do hope you get to be a scientist, Jorry,” he said gently. “I really do. Tell me—you ever have a dog?”

The boy shook his head and dumped three spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee.

“Well, I did. A black Labrador retriever. Used to show her. I remember talking once to a farmer about a dog that had gone wild, up north this was, and was killing chickens. It might have been part coyote. Anyway, the fanner was determined to shoot it, and took to hanging around the

farmhouse with his rifle all loaded; but the dog always slipped by him; time after time. It got to be an obsession with the guy. He took to neglecting his farm, ignoring his family. All sorts of financial and legal tangles developed, about mortgages and such, and then about bad checks and diseased stock—and the guy blamed it all on the dog killing those chickens. Just an excuse, of course—and a pretty shoddy one. Some men aren't afraid of anything except their mirrors."

He looked at Jorry with a sudden intensity, his eyes sharp and kind over the red plastic rim of the thermos cup, and Jorry wriggled his feet in embarrassment. Often he had the hazy impression that Tom was trying to tell him something, offer him something, in the same way he offered him the coffee. Why should a grown man be afraid of a mirror?

Just now, however, Jorry had something that needed saying. Carefully he kept his eyes on the generous amount of artificial cream dissolving in swirls in his coffee.

"Tom—there's a meeting. Friday. Today. This afternoon."

"A meeting?"

"Of people who live here." Abruptly he looked up and offered the rest in a rush: "They're all mad. *Real* mad, Tom. They've made up their minds to get this line tore down!"

"And you thought I ought to know about it." Tom's brown eyes warmed with amused affection.

"Yes!"

"Well, Jorry, I'm not sure they're not right. These figures we've been collecting . . ." He dumped out his rain-diluted coffee and poured himself some more from the thermos. "But we won't really know anything until Monday, when the mice go into the lab for testing and mating and dissection."

Tom frowned. "The thing is, the behavior changes in the mice are negative, all right—jumpiness, decreased sexual interest, interrupted sleep patterns: all indicate stress. But they're not *dramatic* changes, not something that makes you sit up and take notice. Not, anyway, if you're on the State Power Commission. Without something more theatrical to offer, any appeal on this line will just get lost in the lobbying. The bureaucratic tendency to not shut the lion's cage till the beastie's loose. Now if the mice

had done something really stagy, like grow three-inch fangs or invent espionage warfare . . . well. But I think all our hard work here may end up just another overlooked scientific study, a dull and ineffective witness for the prosecution. And thanks, Jorry, for the information about the meeting, but I already knew about it. Oh, I'm up on all the local gossip. I board at the Sandersons', you know."

Jorry didn't know. He hadn't ever thought about Tom boarding somewhere, eating breakfast, brushing his teeth. Every day Tom just *appeared,* like a part of the huge black towers and crackling hum of the line itself. Jorry tried to picture him watching TV with Jeanine Sanderson, who had been in his class at school last year, and a queasy feeling twisted in his stomach. Once he had overheard Mrs. Sanderson tell Jeanine that she "shouldn't play with that Whitfield boy, because with a pa like that, you never knew." The feeling twisted harder. Jorry stood up.

"I got to go."

"You sure . . . it's not your usual time yet. Here—wipe off your cast with the towel. There's coffee on it."

"No!"

"Hey, Jorry—what's wrong?"

"Nothing! I got to go."

"But—"

"I got to go!"

Tom watched him intently. Around the boy's eyes were the beginnings of moist trails streaking the dirt on his thin face.

"Jorry," he said quietly, "Jorry—how did you break your arm?"

The tear trails paled, and the boy made an aborted half-gesture in the direction of throwing up his arm. Then he blinked dully and mumbled, "I fell out of the hay loft."

Tom put an arm around Jorry's shoulders, speaking in a low serious voice so unlike his usual self that Jorry was startled into listening. "Jorry, you know this is the last day for this project. After I pick up the mice on Monday I won't be back. I don't believe you fell out of the hay loft—no, wait,

don’t squirm away, listen to me—you’re a bright kid, and a damn nice one, and if you stay here . . . Jorry, there are arrangements, laws, for making sure that nothing like that happens to kids. You can leave here, stay with some nice foster family; and I could even visit you on weekends. We could go to a ball game, mess around in my lab. All you have to do is let me take you to Social Services, and then you’ll have to be willing to *tell* them—Jorry wait, listen to me—wait!”

“You’re crazy!” Jorry shouted, already backing away. Crazy, crazy, crazy! Tom didn’t even need Jorry’s information about the meeting—he already had it, already had everything. Let Tom take him away? When Jorry could give Tom nothing but sumac tea he didn’t even like, could be worth nothing to Tom, to anyone except Clayte Whitfield, doing farm chores, and even mere mostly a useless nuisance—”goddamn nuisance!” his father roared. To be always in the way, always in need, always someone other people’s children shouldn’t play with? To be always with nothing to trade for the impatient charity of strangers who traded taking care of you for money from the Welfare—to live like that? Crazy!

“Go take Jeanine Sanderson to a ball game!” he shouted.

“Hey, Jorry—”

“Just leave me *alone!”* And then he was running, clutching his cast awkwardly against his stomach, running with a lopsided lope over the ridge, through the rain.

* * * *

By the time Jorry reached home, still running, his elbow ached from bouncing against the inside of the cast. Water streamed into it from his shoulders and hair; with each heaving breath he smelled soaked plaster mingled with damp earth and the wind-borne smell of wet cows. Leaning against the house, Jorry tried to catch his breath, to stop the silent sobs that shook his whole body, before he pushed open the screen door and went inside.

“Where you been, boy?”

Jorry snapped his head upward. Pa, who should have been in town, should have been still at that meeting, was never in the house at this time anyway—Pa was sitting behind the kitchen table, a glass in his big hand. Over the rain smells came that other smell. A pool of it had spilled on the table and one amber drop slid lazily over the edge, hung suspended for a

long second, then plopped softly to the floor. Funny about that plop, Jorry thought crazily—you should hardly be able to hear it over the rain, but it filled the room like thunder.

Slowly he reached behind him for the latch to the screen door.

His father's hand caught him at the shoulder and spun him across the kitchen and into the table. The glass shattered on the floor.

"I asked you where you been!"

"Ou-out, Pa!"

Fighting for balance, Jorry twisted his head and gazed at his father in terror. But Whitfield was nodding, a drunken heavy nod that made his head bounce like a dropped sack of grain.

"Out. You been out, and I know where—you think I don't know where, I know where. I been out, too—out with those namby-pamby bastards who don't give a damn if their farms go to hell on account of some fat-assed power company, 'thout doing a damn thing about it but givin' the farms away!" He nodded over and over, repeating the phrase: "Givin' away. Just givin' away.

"And you know what they're gonna do—what got decided at their big angry meeting—they're gonna send a delegation up to the Congressman . . . up to the Congressman, tiptoein' all polite up to the Capitol, where nobody gives a damn anyway—but not me, boy! Not me! *I* know the only way to set the bastards to rights!" He shoved his face close to Jorry's and hissed again, "Not me!" Rheumy yellowish liquid oozed from the corners of his eyes. "What do you say to that, boy?"

"N-no, Pa."

Whitfield laughed loudly, straightened up, and groped behind him for the missing glass. Jorry edged around the table, numbly eyeing his father's face, until his foot struck something hard. Glancing down, he saw the box from the Country Agricultural Agency, open now, spilling out the cylinders that could blast out a stubborn stump no tractor could dislodge, could send it spraying wood chips ten feet into the air. One stick of the dynamite lay half-puddled in amber whiskey. A stump, or a rock—or a truck. 'You been out and I know where.'

"Hey!" Whitfield yelled, and snatched at air. Jorry had barreled across

the kitchen and through the door, his cast striking the screen with such force that bits of plaster flaked into the dirty mesh. He stumbled as the rain hit him in a solid sheet, but picked himself up and ran, zig-zagging across the barnyard and around the edge of the barn. Behind him he heard the door bang again and then his father's hoarse yell, the words blown away by wind and rain. Jorry leaned against the barn, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before peering around the corner.

His father was lurching across the barnyard.

A sudden, unexpected flash of thunder lit up the sky and to Jorry his father suddenly looked huge, a giant swelling blackly to fill up the world and no place to hide and

—the buckle coming down and the smell of whiskey and his own voice screaming just before the—

Giants!

He ran the length of the barn and headed out toward the hayfield, bent low, huddled over the cast. Cutting diagonally through the rotting hay, running until his lungs ached, stopping only to wipe the streaming water from his eyes before running again, until he collapsed, heaving and panting, in the one place his father had never yet come. Sanctuary.

But for how long?

Jorry wrapped his good hand around the bottom girder and convulsively flexed and unflexed his fingers over the wet metal. Gradually his breathing slowed and he no longer had to snatch at draughts of wet air. Above him the line crackled and snapped, glowing through the rain with a fuzzy, reddish-blue corona. The line swayed gently, like the smooth surf line of some radioactive sea, but the boy hardly noticed. When he could stand, he began to trudge along the right-of-way, shedding stray bits of hay as he went, and his eyes moved only to jump to the next colossus in the long row of looming black giants safe-guarding his trail.

* * * *

The truck was gone, and Tom with it.

Only the cages of mice remained. Water slid down the glass sides in smooth, silent trails. The rain had let up, but the sky was darkening, and occasionally thunder drowned out the ceaseless crackle overhead. Jorry

stared blankly at the spot where the tarp lean-to had been, and his face twisted sideways.

Gone. Home for the day, home to the Sandersons', home and dry and in no danger at all. Playing checkers with Jeanine and drinking hot coffee and not needing to be warned, not needing anything, because dynamite fuses don't light in the rain and even Pa would remember that. Everyone remembered that, except Jorry. And on Monday Tom would pick up the mice and be gone for good, gone beyond the reaches of Jorry's stupid rescues or bitter tea or anything else he might scrounge up. He wouldn't see Tom again, couldn't see him, because things didn't work like that. You didn't get things for free, and suddenly he didn't care if Pa blew up every tower on the whole line, one by one, and Jorry himself along with them. He just didn't care.

The boy threw himself down on the damp earth in front of the mice cages and buried his face in his left arm, too spent for tears. The right arm stuck out awkwardly at his side, the cast lying stiff and sodden in the mud.

Gone.

Abruptly, the sky shrieked and cleaved into two blinding halves as a bolt of lightning tore from cloud to cloud. Jorry was hurled back down on his face, the mud tingling below him, while overhead the line flamed red-purple and leaped wildly against its moorings. The crackling mounted to a wailing crescendo, for a confused moment sounding acrid and smelling deafening, and then both sound and smell whirled into a jaundice-colored mist swirling with mice and rain and

—the belt falling and he threw up his arm to shield—across the field stay low don't—more coffee Jorry there's plenty and put some sugar in your Olympian offering—his face from the buckle coming down and the smell of ozone you watch the line during a storm Jorry it—body currents and brain organelles and the center of perception of his screaming just before the crack of bone in Jeanine Sanderson's head tingling with the smell of-—

The mist faded into black. The blackness pulsed and then steadied, and out of it slowly emerged the slipperiness of the mud. Jorry raised his head and shook it from side to side, first cautiously and then, when nothing hurt too much, more vigorously. Thunder rumbled somewhere over the horizon, and the eastern sky paled weakly. The boy sat up and swiped at the mud on his face, smearing it into long dark smudges.

The air smelled scorched, like wet laundry under a too hot iron, and mingled over and under and through was another smell, both familiar and unfamiliar, like a dream half-forgotten.

The smell of fear.

Whose?

Jorry wrinkled up his muddy nose and sniffed. It *was* fear and it *was* his nose, not in his mind or muscles or stomach. As he sniffed he became aware that the elusive smell—how did he know what it was? but he did—had slid down to the back of his throat and become a taste, chalky and metallic.

Wide-eyed, Jorry looked around. A gray mouse was huddled next to the plastic mesh, its whiskers still quivering. Around the matted fur on its wedge-shaped head was a faint red halo.

Instantly Jorry glanced up, but the reddish glow around the line had gone: the cable lay black and inert against the sky. By the time Jorry's eyes swung back to the mouse, the red halo was fading and so was the chalky taste-smell of fear. The mouse uncurled itself, stretched, and wandered along the mesh. From under the sodden newspapers at the back of the cage crept another mouse, smaller and white, with pink ears. The head of the gray mouse began to glow again, this time a flickering marigold yellow, and Jorry breathed in a musky, damp odor that brought no word to his mind but did bring a sudden tightening in his belly muscles and a heaviness in his groin and a confused image of Jeanine Sanderson in her gym shorts.

He hunted up a sharp stick and prodded the gray mouse through the mesh. The marigold yellow flashed into red and again the chalky-metallic smell filled Jorry's nostrils. Slowly he withdrew the stick and gazed at the glass cage, dazed.

Bits and pieces of things Tom had told him vibrated in his head like struck tuning forks. Brain organelles. Body currents. 'Perception's a likely candidate for change.' Trigger phenomenon. And, incongruously, the smell of coffee.

Was it the mice who were different, giving off their haloes and their emotional smells, or was it something different in *his* brain that made him aware of these things? Jorry put his good hand to his nose and pinched it thoughtfully.

A second later he was scrambling to his feet, his sneakers nearly sliding out from under him in his haste to get to the second cage. It was more difficult to get the stick poked into this one, through the double-wire screening of the Faraday cage and then through the plastic mesh; but he kept at it, his tongue stuck out at the corner of his mouth, until the stick hit something more yielding than glass, less than newspaper. Jorry prodded hard. There was a sudden squeal, and a black mouse head poked out of a pile of shredded editorials. Around the black was a thin halo of red.

Inside the Faraday shield.

Rocking back on his heels and wrinkling his muddy nose against the sudden chalky-metallic smell, the boy stared at his stick, then at the black line stretching overhead, and again at the stick. So it *was* a change inside his own head; if the change had been in the mice, the ones within the Faraday shield wouldn't have been affected. What was happening to him?

The fear only lasted a moment, a sickening moment when he wondered crazily if he would see a red halo if he looked in a mirror. A mirror—what had he been told about a mirror? Who had told him? Oh, yes—Tom.

Jorry's grip tightened around his stick. Another feeling swelled within him, swelled like the breaking of river ice after the winter, splintering the momentary fear and spinning it away in the rush of excitement. Whatever this thing was, this thing he could do now, *he* had found it. He, Jorry Whitfield. It was his discovery, his first step, his vulcanized rubber spilling onto the stove, his. Like a real scientist, like Charles Goodyear, like *somebody.*

Like Tom.

And it was important, this thing. Jorry wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did. Important enough, different enough— what had Tom said? 'dramatic'—so those men on the Power Commission would have to listen about the line. Was it good dramatic or bad dramatic? What would those men think about what had happened to him? Jorry didn't know, but he guessed they wouldn't like it when he told them what colors *their* halos were.

But even when the line was gone—and here he glanced up at it with something almost like affectionate regret—this thing, this Sense, would still

be his. His to keep, his to use, his to give to Tom for that scientific report that now was not going to be dull. And if he ‘gave’ this Sense to Tom, offering him the use of it the way he would have with a new bicycle if he had ever had one, then for the first time Jorry could, in turn, let himself think about the dizzying possibility Tom had talked about, the possibility of leaving, of not having to lie rigid in his bed listening to Pa downstairs with his bottle and wonder if this time ... he could leave, now. Now that he had earned the right, now that he had this important thing to trade, to swap—

But what had he traded to earn the Sense?

Slowly Jorry sat down in the mud. He had traded nothing; he was even going to help get the line torn down, if that was possible. So the Sense was free, an unexpected gift, an offering, a benediction. But that wasn’t possible: nothing was free, things didn’t go right by themselves, nobody gave you anything without trying to get something greater back, it just didn’t work like that. It *never* worked like that.

Did it ever work like that?

Sitting on the wet ground, his stick still in his hand, Jorry felt dizzy. An errant drop of water trickled off the back of his collar and down his neck, and he sneezed.

It was difficult fishing the gray mouse out of the cage, using only one hand. When Jorry finally had the damp body clasped around its middle, he squeezed it firmly and started walking over the ridge. At the top he halted abruptly. Far down the line was a dark figure, made tiny by distance, standing motionless in the middle of a wet field of rotting hay. By screwing up his eyes and squinting through the mist, Jorry could just make out the figure of his father, head tilted back to stare upward at the soaring black girders of the line tower. He could make out, too, around the thrown-back head, a thin red halo. On a vagrant puff of wind came the faint smell of chalk.

Jorry blinked and tightened his grip on the mouse until it squealed. His father’s arms dangled at his sides, the big hands limp and empty. He was standing well back from the line, well outside the right of way, and the red fear-halo glowed like a blurred mist through the soft rain.

His father? Afraid? His father afraid; small and wet and powerless by the line, and afraid. Clayte Whitfield. Only a man afraid. Of the line, of his mirror, of the scary confusion in things not always turning out badly, in sometimes ending well, or neither, or both.

Jorry gazed for a long time, his face streaked with mud and concentration. Then he blinked again, turned away, and carried his mouse on his cast, riding in front of him like an unexpected gift, an offering, a benediction, over the ridge toward the Sandersons'. His muddy figure loomed tall as a giant against the rainy sky.

<<Contents>>

* * * *

Explanations, Inc.

Ayn Rand and Warren Salomon are responsible for this story, both unwittingly.

Ayn Rand, of course, is the Objectivist author of ATLAS SHRUGGED, a book I have read six or seven times with fascination and annoyance. Warren Salomon is an SF writer who, like Rand, believes that the universe is rational, that rationality is man's only means to understand the world and himself, and that only rational actions have moral validity. A year's worth of spirited correspondence left me unconvinced, but it was an interesting exchange of letters, articles, and vituperation.

Somewhere in the middle of it, I wrote this story.

* * * *

The first time Harkavy passed the new storefront on Frazier Street, he didn't notice it. He strode rapidly, arms pumping, long-jawed face scowling so fiercely that an Airedale set to bark at him thought the better of it and slunk away into the shadows. He was furious, was Professor Harkavy, too furious to notice a new shop in an old storefront, dusty despite its newness, identified by a hand-lettered sign propped against a drooping ficus benjamina.

The second time around the block, and still furious. Blocks! Stones! Worse than senseless things! It hadn't been this bad when he had been a student—no, it *had not.* His peers in those dim past days had studied for exam questions. Or at least thought about exam questions. Or at least—the *very* least (pump, pump) been conscious while answering exam questions. But this lot! Intellectually dead! He, Harkavy, was probably in violation of the vice code—he was practicing pedagogic necrophilia.

The cleverness of this phrase slowed him down—actually, it *was* pretty neat. He would have to remember it for later, for the faculty dining room. Morton, from Anthro, would love it. Harkavy stopped pumping and stopped scowling, and noticed the storefront and its hand-lettered sign:

EXPLANATIONS, INC.
WE EXPLAIN ANYTHING
GRAND OPENING TODAY

Harkavy snorted. Explain anything, indeed! The presumption, the intellectual arrogance—*and* the ficus benjamina had mealybug. Harkavy could see it through the window, the ghostly white fibers just beginning to spread across the undersides of the plant's droopy leaves. Harkavy snorted again and, because, pushed open the door and entered the shop. Because he boiled with furious energy; because associate professors without the Ph.D. taught the dumbest classes; because his own plants, in orderly rows of terra-cotta pots that let roots breathe, never developed parasitic diseases. Because. How was *that* for an explanation?

The shop was tiny, dim, and faded, the walls a dingy beige and the floor covered with gritty linoleum. The only furnishings were a cracked brown leather chair and a counter, also brown, across the back. On the wall behind the counter hung a large placard:

* Management does not handle questions of existence or nonexistence.
* If a phenomenon does exist or an event did happen, we *can* explain it.
* Both procedural and causal explanations available.
* Not responsible for any consequences of imparting explanations.
* Discounts for senior citizens. Valid ID required.

Before Harkavy had finished reading this, the single door behind the counter opened and closed and a man stood waiting courteously, a dim, thin man in a brown suit and gray expression. He was much shorter than Harkavy. Because of this, and because of the silly placard, and because Harkavy's fury had passed beyond simple frustration into that wide, free place where recklessness seems not only permissible but required, Harkavy lit into the inoffensive stranger, who deserved it for being so inoffensive.

"Explanation—*explanation!* You're interested in explanations? I am a college teacher—last night I gave my students an examination; this morning I have so-called 'explanations' swirling around my ears. Not explanations swirling out of thin air—no, no! Explanations coming out of five weeks of careful lectures on British poetry, of meticulously chosen readings, of class discussions nursed along like intensive-care patients. And what do I read this morning? I'll tell you what I read this morning. I read this morning, in

response to a simple question to explain the term ‘carpe diem’—do you know what that means? It means ‘seize the day’ That’s all—just seize the day, as in do it *now,* tra la la. And what explanations do I get of ‘carpe diem’? I get ‘sees the day’: s-e-e-s. I get ‘cease the day’: c-e-a-s-e, that one undoubtedly from an apocalyptic religious. *And* I get ‘sneeze the dead.’ Sneeze the dead poetry! A whole undiscovered school of viral lyricism! What goes through a student’s mind when he writes ‘this is a sneeze the dead poem’? What? Can you explain *that?”*

The small man said, “Would you like to see a contract?”

Taken aback, Harkavy said, “A what?”

“A contract,” the man said patiently. “We never begin an explanation without both a contract and a completed job sheet. We would, for instance, need to know the student’s name and, preferably, university ID number.”

Harkavy stared. “You’re serious.”

“Very,” the man said quietly. He did something with his hand under the counter, and a single sheet of paper rose upward through a slot Harkavy had not noticed. A little dazed, and also a little sulky that the man had ignored all his fine reckless hyperbole, Harkavy picked up the paper and read it.

There was also a paragraph granting permission for the signer’s name and explanation to be used for advertising purposes.

The corners of Harkavy’s mouth quirked unpleasantly. “Advertising?”

“That portion of our operation is not quite functional.”

“I’ll bet,” Harkavy said.

“This is merely a branch office,” the man said.

A great weariness, inevitable after the glow of fury, settled over Harkavy. Charlatans, intellectual poseurs, or unreasoning dolts. Nowhere were there left powerful and honest minds actually striving for rational clarity. He, Harkavy, was a Diogenes with a cerebral lamp, and all he found was darkness, darkness. Morton from Anthro had the right idea: expect no spark of rationality, and you can never be disappointed. Anticipate fallacy,

expect meaninglessness, presume fraud.

“Fraud,” Harkavy said.

“Certainly not,” the small gray man said, not without dignity. The dignity, so unmerited, rekindled Harkavy’s anger.

“All right, then—I’ll bite. I’ll pay for an ‘explanation.’ Why not? I always pay anyway—you don’t think the *students* are the ones pained when I pass 40 percent of them because department guidelines discourage flunking more than 60 percent? I’ll buy one of your fraudulent little explanations—why not, if meaning is dead, then no real explanations are possible anyway!”

“Your reasoning is circular,” the man said dispassionately. “What specifically would you like explained?”

Harkavy cast about for something extravagant yet absurd, the perfect example to illustrate the ironic depths of his disillusionment. He didn’t find it. The brown and gray little man took a fresh contract from the slot, Harkavy having crumpled the first one in his fist.

“Yes, Professor?”

“How do you know I’m a professor?”

“You have said so. What would you like explained?”

Ironic depths still eluded Harkavy. But unmasking fraud-he could manage a question to unmask fraud. “Explain what happened to Amelia Earhart, the aviatrix who disa—”

“I recognize Miss Earhart’s name,” the man said. He smiled faintly, his first hint of expression. “As it happens, we are having a special today on Amelia Earhart.”

“A—”

“Twenty dollars. Thirty if you wish to request a causal as well as procedural explanation. Both to include documented proof, of course.”

Harkavy requested both. Together he and the small man, who gave his name as Stone, defined terms, made out a job sheet, signed a contract. Harkavy paid the thirty dollars. As he wrote out the check—a little surprised

that such an outfit would accept a check; checks can be traced—his anger began to give way to amusement. What a story to tell Morton! It was almost worth the thirty dollars; Morton would love it. He, Harkavy, would become in the telling a wistfully gallant figure, hoping against hope for intellectual value, knowing better all the time. A single-combat idealist who was almost— but not quite—missing in the existential action. Morton would love it.

A pang of genuine wistfulness, unexpected as heartburn, shot through him.

Still, he whistled on the walk home, and once there he tore into the rest of the examinations with something close to good humor, not even slowing down when a student explained that Alexander Pope, now deceased, had once been the illegitimate son of a Catholic pontiff. When he had finished the exams, Harkavy got himself a cold beer and the morning *Times,* which he hadn't yet seen. The bottom half of page one displayed the photograph of a young woman with badly cut hair and a pretty face, dressed in a flight jacket.

AMELIA EARHART FINALLY FOUND
REMAINS REVEALED ON SAIPAN

The article was quite long, and very thorough. Politicians, medical doctors, anthropologists, and Navy personnel were all quoted extensively. They detailed exactly what had happened to Amelia Earhart.

* * * *

"You tricked me," Harkavy said.

"Certainly not," said Stone. "As a matter of fact, I have your completed explanation right here."

"With documentation from the New York *Times!"*

"Just so."

"You had this information before I even signed this ridiculous contract!"

"Mr. Harkavy, I am a businessman. You offered to buy certain information; I possessed that information. Had Explanations, Inc., been

required to obtain information it did not already possess, the price of your explanation would have been much higher. You call yourself a rational man; surely you can see that this is so."

Harkavy's eyes narrowed. "I don't like being made a fool of."

"No one does," Stone said mildly.

Harkavy drummed his fingers on the counter. It was no longer brown; between yesterday afternoon and this morning the counter had been painted a rich, deep blue. With paint bought with *his* thirty dollars?

He studied Stone. The little man gazed back at him from eyes so steady, so serene, that Harkavy felt bile rise in his throat. It was so shameless. At the very least the charlatan could show some shame. A flicker of the eyes, a looking away—and he, Harkavy, would be satisfied. No more than that, merely a silent admission that it had been possible, once, to believe the world genuinely explicable, and that this was a shoddy exploitation of that springtime belief . . . just a flicker of the eyes, a so slight bending of the head. . . .

Stone neither flickered nor bent.

"All right," Harkavy said quietly, "then, let's just see how you do when you *don't* already possess the information."

"Certainly," Stone said. He moved his hand under the counter, and a fresh contract arose from the slot. "What would you liked explained?"

Harkavy did not even think. "Explain about Amy. Amy, my wife—explain why she left me. A causal explanation."

Stone's hands held still over the paper. He raised his gaze to Harkavy's, and his voice grew softer. "Mr. Harkavy. Sometimes one asks for explanations one does not really want."

Harkavy laughed unpleasantly. "Too difficult for you? Not the same as taking on a question already documented in the *Times?* Just so, Stone?"

Stone didn't answer. He gazed down at the newly blue counter, at something Stone couldn't see. When he finally spoke, it was still in that soft voice, gentle as mist. "Let us define our terms, Mr. Harkavy. Your ex-wife's name?"

“Amy Loughton Harkavy. Quality control supervisor at Lunel Products. Social security number 090-40-0333. There, Stone—name, rank, and serial number; just what is allowed in any war. The rest is up to you. Explain away. Go ahead—*if* you can.”

“We can,” Stone said, but his voice told nothing.

* * * *

Explanations, Inc., had stipulated six weeks to complete its labors. By the second day, Harkavy was cursing himself for a fool. To let his outrage get the better of him like that! To be bested by a fly-by-night bunko game! It wasn’t the money, it was the humiliation ... no, by God, the humiliation was *theirs.* To pervert the mind’s sacred ability to explain into a hootchy-kootch come-on for suckers . . . although, actually, when you looked at it, it was pretty funny. Grim, but funny. He would tell Morton; Morton would absolutely roar. It was really very funny.

He didn’t tell Morton.

The second week, Harkavy strolled past the storefront to see if it was still there. Somewhat to his surprise, it was, although the ficus benjamina with mealybug no longer stood in the window. It had been replaced by three pots of unbloomed passiflora with the greenest leaves Harkavy had ever seen. By the counter a woman stood talking to Stone, who held what looked like a contract in his hands.

Unaccountably perturbed, Harkavy left. He did not go back.

Occasionally, during the course of the six weeks, Harkavy thought of his contract, the thought popping into his mind while he lectured or shaved or chaired yet another committee meeting—and when it did, he scowled fiercely. People began to regard him as a little eccentric. (“Since the break-up, you know, poor fellow. . . .”) Harkavy didn’t notice.

* * * *

“Your wife left you,” Stone said neutrally, “because she could no longer tolerate life with ‘a man who insists on being right 93 percent of the time.’ The phrase is hers. Your documentation, Mr. Harkavy.” He pushed it across the counter and looked somewhere else.

There was a tape recorder. Amy’s voice, recalling incidents, discussing motives, explaining—to whom? Friend? Priest? Imposter? The

other voice never answered. But Harkavy would have recognized Amy's voice anywhere, slightly nasal breathiness with those captivating musical inflections: "He could never apologize when he was wrong. Only if he was *right;* because then, you see, it wasn't threatening. He used to do this thing, if I solved some household problem we'd been discussing, he'd smile and say 'I'm glad I thought of that!' I can't tell you how crazy it made me!"

There was a psychologist's report, fully notarized with shiny seals, recounting the psychologist's post-divorce therapy sessions with one Ms. Amy Loughton. The therapist stated that Ms. Loughton's initiation of divorce had been a positive desire to free herself from a destructive marital situation with a husband who could feel successful only if his judgment was acknowledged to be superior to that of everyone around him. Ms. Loughton's post-divorce adjustment was described as successful.

Finally, there was a note from Amy herself, on the stationery Harkavy had given her on her last birthday: "... because he wants what nobody can have! He wants everything in the whole damn world to make sense!"

Stone still did not look at Harkavy. Harkavy sputtered, "You son of a bitch, you could end up in Leavenworth for this! Breaking into medical files, tampering with the U.S. mails—"

"Certainly not," Stone said coldly. "Look again."

Harkavy looked again. The note from Amy was addressed to Schariar Gait Stone.

"How—"

"The balance of your bill is now due, Mr. Harkavy."

Harkavy paid it. The chair of cracked brown leather had been replaced with one of rich purple velvet. Harkavy sat down on it and stared ahead, unseeing.

Stone said quietly, "Mrs. Harkavy was wrong in one particular."

"Ms. Loughton," Harkavy said, jerking his chin upward. "She prefers to be called Ms. Loughton."

"Ms. Loughton was wrong in one particular. The world does make sense. It is rational."

“You son of a bitch. How did you get these documents?”

“Revealing our operational methods is not part of your contract, Mr. Harkavy.”

“If I went to the police with these stolen files—”

“They are not stolen,” Stone said. “The police would find no grounds for criminal charges. None at all. We can, in fact, explain everything.”

* * * *

Harkavy went back. A week later, ten days—he was not exactly sure. After the first return, he went every day, striding over from the university with his head up and his arms pumping, acutely aware of the hollowness of all this vigor. Once in the tiny shop, he sat slumped in the glowing purple chair. A slump was all he could manage; the place turned all his vigor outside in, and it centrifuged to his eyes, which never blinked. Harkavy, a tweed-jacketed Argus, watched.

A blue-haired woman wanted an explanation of the UFO she had sighted above her barn. Another woman asked for a procedural explanation of how her apartment had been robbed, but she left when she found out the fee would be more than the value of the possessions stolen. An elderly man, thin and with the ascetic face of a figure on a stained-glass window, requested a true explanation of the birth of Christ. After he had received it, he left looking thoughtful, and his hand trembled. Who were all these people, where had they come from? A few looked vaguely familiar to Harkavy, like people he might have passed in the supermarket. A middle-aged man, long hair thinning and facial muscles rigidly controlled, wanted to know exactly why his son had joined the Marines. A young boy asked for the causes of the War of Jenkins’ Ear. Harvey blinked.

“Homework,” Stone said after the boy had left. It was the first time he had spoken to Harkavy.

“So now you’re in the homework business,” Harkavy said, with feeble scorn. He knew the scorn was feeble because it could not warm him. He was always cold now.

“Homework, too, can be explained.”

“I should think it would be beneath your notice. There can’t be much profit in children’s homework.”

“You would be surprised where we find profit.”

“I just bet I would,” Harkavy said. “You’ve had at least two customers this week storm out of here without paying you.”

“They will be billed. In addition, the corporation has figured standard parameters for the allowance for bad debts. The cost is unfortunately passed on to the customer.”

“All according to the Gospel of Business Management,” Harkavy sneered. Stone regarded him thoughtfully. The little man had discarded his brown suit; he wore a coat the deep purple-blue of a twilight sky, cut full enough so that sometimes, in some lights, it looked like a cape. It was not a cape.

A child requested an explanation for the death of her puppy. A young man, all knobby elbows and tortured dark eyes, wanted a causal explanation for the presence of evil in the world. Another young man wanted to know the procedure for making a killing on the stock market, but he was turned away: Explanations, Inc., did not handle procedural explanations for events that had not yet happened. A woman asked for an explanation of an old and trivial social slight, twenty-three years earlier, for which she was willing to pay a sum greater than Harkavy’s yearly salary. She could not be dissuaded: “I have to know why she acted like that to me. I have to know why!”

After she had left, Harkavy said—the first time he had spoken in ten days—to Stone, “‘The heart has reasons of which the reason knows nothing.’”

“Pascal.”

Harkavy scowled. He had not expected Stone to know.

Stone said, “Even the reasons of the heart can be explained. The truth of the causes is not dependent on the absurdity of the results.”

“Nor of their emotional manageability?”

“Certainly not,” Stone said.

Another customer appeared at the door, hand hesitating on the knob, face peering through the glass storefront.

“All these *questions,”* Harkavy said.

“All these questions,” Stone said. Harkavy scowled and went back to silence. In the deep purple chair, Harkavy felt invisible, witness but not participant, a noncombatant temporarily removed from action. Customers ignored him. He was part of the furniture. He was always cold.

Between one afternoon and the following morning, the gritty linoleum disappeared, replaced by an Oriental carpet luminously and intricately woven in shades of wine, purple, deep blue. The ground beneath Harkavy’s feet glowed like jewels.

* * * *

“Explain,” Harkavy said, “the reason for the universe.”

Stone went on doing something behind the counter.

“Explain,” Harkavy said more loudly, rising finally from his chair, “the reason for the universe!”

“Mr. Harkavy,” Stone said formally, as though Harkavy had just entered the shop. He had, in fact, been sitting in the purple chair for over a month. The cushions bore overlapping imprints of his body, one for each restless position.

“I wish a contract,” Harkavy said, almost resentfully, “to explain the universe.”

“Then I take it that you have become convinced of the validity of Explanations, Inc., despite your first impressions?”

Harkavy ground his teeth. “Can we get on with it!”

“Certainly,” Stone said. “How the universe was formed?”

“Why.”

“Ah,” Stone said. To Harkavy the word sounded drawn out and sibilant, like a sigh, despite having no *s’s* in it. The twilight noncape rustled softly.

“Well?” Harkavy said. “Can you explain that?”

“Yes.”

“Need we define many terms?”

“No. The terms are clear.”

“Will it be expensive?”

“No. Very cheap.”

“Will it take long to prepare the answer?”

“Only a few minutes.”

“Then,” Harkavy said, “it must be a question asked often.”

“Very often.”

“And I will receive a stock explanation?”

“You will receive a true explanation.”

“All right, then,” Harkavy said tonelessly. His face had gone rather gray. Stone’s face did not change expression, and as Harkavy wrote out the check, he had the sudden thought that, seen through the glass from the sidewalk, they might have been two ordinary businessmen engaged in any of the more well-bred trades, insurance or pharmaceuticals or law.

Stone brought his explanation from whatever place lay behind the door beyond the counter. It was very detailed, a sheaf of closely printed papers. Harkavy, unfamiliar with this terminology but familiar with universal academic style, stood quietly as he scanned the abstracts by great physicists. Radial velocities, the Hubble law, the cosmologic principle, Big Bang micro-radiation, law of entropy.

“This is a procedural explanation, Stone. It explains how the universe came into being. I requested why.”

“Yes,” Stone said simply, and said no more.

Harkavy understood. The procedure *was* the cause. The universe existed because it existed. No more than that.

Harkavy said loudly, “I don’t really care, you know.”

Stone said nothing.

“It isn’t as if it were more than an intellectual exercise, or as if I didn’t already know this. My God, man, Sartre—I teach *sophomores* who have figured all this out for themselves, some of them, and not the brightest ones, either!”

“Please don’t shout,” Stone said.

“I was right all along!”

“Yes.”

“God! All those poor saps trailing in here, all those suckers, thinking there was a point to what they choose to do!”

Stone was silent.

“I suppose the proper philanthropic response is pity, isn’t it? But I don’t pity ignorance, Stone. Nor illusions. A mind that does not think is an ugly thing. Not pitiful—*ugly.* Does that shock you?”

“No.”

Harkavy’s voice rose louder again. “But I suppose you think that just because I asked that question, I must be devastated by the answer. I knew the explanation all along. It was you I was testing!”

“Then I trust we have proved ourselves reliable.”

“It doesn’t matter to me! The explanation doesn’t matter to me!”

“Ah,” said Stone.

“I was right!” Harkavy shrieked. He tore the sheaf of documentation in half, then in half again and yet again. Pieces of paper drifted down onto the carpet. “I was right! There are no real explanations!”

“There are two more questions,” Stone said, but Harkavy didn’t hear him. He was gone, storming out of the shop, leaving the bits of paper littered over the glowing depths of the carpet, scattered as random stars.

* * * *

“I would like to apologize,” Harkavy said stiffly. He stood holding the counter with both hands. Since yesterday the counter seemed to have deepened in color. “I do not usually behave so badly. I do not usually lose my temper in quite that fashion. Therefore, I would like to apologize.”

“Your apology is accepted,” Stone said gravely. He gazed at Harkavy with a thoughtful intensity. Harkavy felt ridiculous.

“I think you should know,” he said, “that I have contacted both the Better Business Bureau and the Consumer Protection League.”

“Yes?” Stone said. He did not look alarmed.

“Explanations, Inc., is registered with neither.”

“No.”

“But neither organization has received any complaints concerning you.”

“No.”

“Until now,” Harkavy added.

“Ah.”

“You don’t believe me, do you? You don’t *believe* I filed a complaint with the bureaucracy.”

“No,” Stone said. He did not smile back. Harkavy leaned over the counter, his back to the purple velvet chair, and waited to see if Stone would say anything that would let him, Harkavy, leave. Stone said nothing. The silence lengthened. Finally, Harkavy shifted his weight, crossed one leg over the opposite calf, and tried, desperately, for nonchalance.

“So when did you paint the ceiling?” he said heartily. Stone did not look upward. The ceiling, which by some trick of lighting now looked very far away, was a deep, glowing wine. Between ceiling and carpet the tiny shop hung suspended, mysterious with jeweled color. In the window the passionflowers had begun to bloom scarlet.

“It was painted not long ago,” Stone said.

“That must mean profits are good.”

“Profits are good.”

“People seek after a great many explanations, I imagine. For you to keep in business.”

“Some do, yes.”

“But not all?”

“No. Not all.”

“Funny, isn’t it, how people do differ in their intellectual curiosity. It doesn’t even seem to correlate directly to intelligence, does it? With students, of course, you see all levels of curiosity coupled with all levels of intelligence, no predictability—why, I was saying just the other day to Morton, he’s in Anthro, he—”

“Mr. Harkavy,” Stone said, not urgently, “ask the next question.”

The two men stared at each other, one serene and waxing, one with nonchalance gone dry. Harkavy could have sworn he caught a whiff of incense—just a passing scent, elusive on warm air.

“A causal,” Harkavy said. “Why do I keep coming back to Explanations, Inc.?”

“Come into the back room,” Stone said.

* * * *

There was a computer, as of course there would have to be. There was a couch, hard and severe, upon which Harkavy lay. Most of all, there was a parade of people in white lab coats; the parade went on for three days. Harkavy never left, except to make one phone call to the university, requesting emergency sick leave. Psychiatrist, hypnotist, doctor with a compassionate smile and a wicked hypodermic, Stone with spartan meals, a stenographer who was also a notary public. *Documentation,* Harkavy thought around the wooziness of the hypodermic; it was his one clear thought in three days. He didn’t mind, somehow. Answers awaited at the end. Cleansed and gentled, almost luxuriating in the abandonment of control (the hypodermic?), Harkavy talked, and dozed, and talked some

more, and it seemed to him that his words were hard silvery flakes drifting up from his defenseless prone position, and that the flakes coalesced to form a shining mirror in which he saw himself at peace.

The fee was enormous.

When at last he stood again in the front of the shop and held in his hand the corporation's contract, answer, and documentation, Harkavy felt detached enough to read them. The print was small yet easy to read, a rational choice. The smell of passion flowers was much stronger.

> QUESTION: Why has Philip Warren Harkavy returned on thirty-nine separate occasions [Harkavy had not been counting] to the Frazier Street branch of Explanations, Inc.?
>
> ABSTRACT: Philip Warren Harkavy exhibits the behavior and thought processes characteristic of *metaphobia,* a fear of there not being enough meaning in the universe. In this specific case, the basic phobia manifests itself as a counterphobia taking the form of resistance to the idea that the world can be rationally explained at all. This is not an unusual manifestation, here distinguished only by its deep-seatedness and by the subject's conscious awareness of it. In previous ages, metaphobia gave rise to elaborate and rigid religious structures. In modern periods, other manifestations of the phobia are more common.
>
> Both the subject's career as an English professor, transmitting knowledge but not creating it, and his basic personality structure, tenacious self-righteousness undercut by irony, are examples of the basic phobia working itself out in life choices. The subject passionately desires the world to be explicable. He is afraid that it is not. Caught between desire and fear, he is drawn to Explanations, Inc., at the same time that he is repelled by it. This is why he has returned on thirty-nine separate occasions.
>
> Documentation attached.
> 6154A38L

"What are the numbers at the end for?" Harkavy asked. He looked up from the page. At some point Stone had grown a beard, a lush patriarchal tangle of black curls that deepened his eyes.

"The numbers are for office use only, Mr. Harkavy."

“I see,” Harkavy said. His voice was all tired courtesy, no bluster—the last of the bluster had leached out of him during the three days of research and had not returned. He looked thinner, a tall, quiet man swaying in the incense-laden breeze.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, and turned to leave.

“You can’t go now!” Stone cried. Emotion, the first Harkavy had heard from him with any vigor to it, swelled his voice to richness.

“No?” Harkavy said.

“There is one more question!”

“I can’t think what it could be.”

“Think is what you *can* do, Harkavy!”

“It does not appear to make much difference.”

“You are merely confused by your first reaction to your answer—this phase will not last. Truly!”

“Metaphobia,” Harkavy mused.

“Many live a full and normal lifespan, with proper precautions. *With proper precautions.* Think, Harkavy— *think.”*

“Thank you,” Harkavy said absently, lost in thought, and left the shop. His feet stumbled a little. The window was crowded with passion flowers, all bursting into bloom, a riot of scarlet flowers rustling mysteriously in perfumed shadows

* * * *

One day. Two days. A week: seven days. On the seventh day, Harkavy returned. He looked as if he had slept badly, arid his suit, old and wrinkled, hung from his frame. There was in his face the quiet grayness that is in itself a kind of focus: a great granite boulder whose energies exist perfectly balanced upon one smaller stone beneath, and hence exist motionless.

“Philip!” Stone cried. He bustled forward, arms thrown wide in welcome, rich, dark beard glistening against the folds of his cape. “You did

return!”

“Stone,” Harkavy said quietly. Stone threw his arms around Harkavy and kissed each cheek, and on his skin Harkavy smelled incense and rich oils. Around them the shop glowed like a jewel box, its air heavy with the passionflowers, lush with velvety promise.

“One question, Stone,” Harkavy said, without inflection. “One final question.”

“Of course!” Stone boomed. His black eyes gleamed.

“Don’t we need a contract?”

“Not this time—are you not an old and valued customer? Not this time!”

The scented air stirred on soft winds.

Slowly Harkavy said, “I understand the explanation of Metaphobia. It is accurate. The longing for order ... for comprehension ... it gnaws away at you, gnaws and gnaws. ...”

“The question, Philip! The question!”

“Explain ... I would like to have explained—”

“Yes? *Yes?”*

“Explain the reason for the existence of Explanations, Inc. Why did it come to Frazier Street?”

“Ah!” crowed Stone, and flung his arms wide in a huge, sensuous blessing. “You have it! You have it!” And at just that moment the walls sprung into intricate and subtle designs in the glowing ancient dyes, and the temple bells began to ring, and ring, and ring.

* * * *

“So what *is* this dump?” the young man sneered. “Another tourist trap?” He began to read the sign posted behind the counter. “Or just local tealeaf garbage? What have you got back there, a crystal ball to bilk the yokels with?”

“Certainly not,” Harkavy said quietly. He moved his hand behind the counter, and a contract rose up from the slot.

<<Contents>>

* * * *

Shadows on the Cave Wall

Like CASEY'S EMPIRE, this is a story about writing stories.

There is always a gap between the vision in the writer's head and the story that ends up on the page. Sometimes the gap is small. Sometimes it resembles the Mariana Trench—and is equally murky. A story I had not even finished writing was starting to harbor marine life, and the question came suddenly to mind: what if that gap could be reliably closed? What if there existed technology to *ensure* that the mind deeps which spawned stories and the language which netted them could be made identical? What would happen?

When I began SHADOWS ON THE CAVE WALL, I didn't know what would happen. I learned that at about the same time Mary did, and with equal dismay.

* * * *

"Our music, our poetry, our language itself, are not satisfactions, but suggestions."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

On Tuesday it was preadolescent girls for Matthew McGratty, a free-lancer we'd just put under contract. McGratty always chooses the obvious, so naturally it was a horse story. Garber said he wasn't crazy about having his studio used for a horse story, the same studio where two months ago Garber's great undiscovered protégé Johannsen had final-auded *Greta.* But McGratty had a decent if uninspired composing record, we had him under contract, and Garber had no real choice except to grumble a little about the perversion of art and the debasement of public taste and so forth, and then give the go-ahead. Garber has fits like that, delusions that G-M Press is more than just a third-rate c-aud shop for free-lancers; we on the staff humor him. And every so often we *do* come up with a *Greta,* although we're no Harper and Simon, and for us it's a windfall, a lucky lightning, a comet's tail we don't even try to grab but just sparkle in the light of before it whizzes past. Last week Johannsen signed a contract with Harper and Simon.

Still, *Greta* is supposed to be really good. We only had it for the last, twenty-fifth taping; Johannsen must have been running out of money, to come to us at all. Garber burst into my office, all excited, because he heard that someone on the *Times* might review it.

"What do you think, Mary? Jameson? Maybe Jameson might review it? Jameson would do it a lot of good. I have a feeling about this one, Mary!"

"Jameson isn't going to review it."

He glared at me from under lowered eyebrows. They're nearly white now, and in his rumpled jumpsuit, Garber looks like a seedy Santa Claus reduced to dealing in hot toys. God, I love him. If I ever forgive that bitch Mummy-sweet at all, it will be because she somehow tangled Garber in her long string of husbands.

"He *might* review it!"

"He won't. You know that. Think. It's a book for *children."*

"Young adults!"

"All right, young adults. But he's not going to review it in the *Times.* We'll probably do all right on it financially— although that was a pretty selective c-aud index Johannsen showed me. At least we shouldn't lose money on it. Settle for that."

"You haven't even read it!"

I hadn't, although I'd had the manuscript for nearly a month. Press of work, busy time of year, I just hadn't had the time. Oh, hell, yes I'd had. That wasn't the reason.

"I know I haven't read it. Maybe it's terrific. Maybe it's an instant classic. Maybe it's *Hamlet* for the acne set. But Jameson won't review it. Let it go, Garber."

"I think you're wrong."

I sighed. Garber was a walking lesson on how to achieve business failure: enthusiasm without judgment. That we had gotten even this far was

due only to the hefty alimony Garber had pried out of Mummy-sweet, and that he had gotten so much alimony in a retroactive settlement was due only to the lawyer I'd hired for him. She isn't ever going to forgive *me,* either.

"You're wrong, Mary. This time I know it."

"Garber, if you were a critic, and in the exact same week publishers brought out the original appearances of *Hamlet, Don Quixote, Anna Karenina, Song of Myself,* and *The Little Engine that Could,* what would you not review?"

"Greta isn't ..."

"I have to go. McGratty's waiting for me in the studio."

"To compare it to *The Little*.. . ."

"Garber, he's waiting with forty-seven *kids.* I have to go." I put my arms around him and kissed him on the top of his head. It was going bald; in another year he would have a tonsure. I found that I liked the idea. When I was eleven years old, Garber found out from the upstairs maid that I vomited uncontrollably after each visit from Mummy-sweet, and he took me himself to boarding school, holding my hand on the train and talking in a low, confidential voice about baseball, and caterpillars, and the marvelous way really high-quality peppermints melted first around the edges of one's mouth.

"Mary," he said, his arms still around me, "do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"Promise?"

"Of course, Garber. Anything. You know that. Just ask."

"When you're home tonight, read *Greta."*

"Oh, Garber, I'm really sorry but tonight I have to . . ."

"No. You don't."

I didn't. He tilted back his head and looked at me steadily out of blue eyes that look a little more sunken every month. Five years more, the

doctors say Even virotherapy doesn't arrest it forever, any of it . . . not the cancer, and not the pain. It had been Garber who'd brought me my first copy of *Alice in Wonderland."*

"Read it, Mary."

My daughter, Susan, calls Garber "Grandpa." I've never let her meet a single other one of her relations. Or even told her about them. When that fool of a teacher Susan is so stuck on gave them the assignment to trace their family trees, I lied and gave her Garber's.

"I'll read it, Garber."

"Promise?"

"Promise. But, look, McGratty's *waiting."*

He unwrapped his arms and winked. "Have fun!" His point won, Jameson and the nonexistent review forgotten, equanimity restored. Garber is a big child. I hurried out of the office; he stayed to study the cover painting for a preschool picture book on space, smiling at the teddy bear in the cockpit and whistling to himself. Both hands rubbed his plump belly: a right jolly old elf. And now I was committed to reading *Greta.*

Hell.

* * * *

McGratty had lined the kids up against the studio wall, three deep, well away from the computer and the aud-units. He was talking to them in that charming drawl that convinced each and every little heart that she was an utterly fascinating almost-woman, and the whole gaggle of ten- and eleven-year olds was giggling and twitching and popping moonies. The popping punctuated languishing sidelong glances at McGratty that ended in even louder explosions of moonies. He gestured with one hand, and forty-seven pairs of eyes followed the hand's arc through the air. Under all this attention, McGratty expanded, the girls expanded. The studio threatened to explode outward from all the hot air.

"All right, kids, line up over here. Tallest first. Let's go!"

They stared at me like poison. A few scowled.

“Come on, let’s get started here. You, with the red pigtails . . . come here, honey, and we’ll get you strapped into a unit.”

She came forward slowly, standing in front of me with scrawny feet planted apart, arms akimbo.

“Not pigtails.”

“What?”

“They’re not pigtails. They’re called ‘fashion braids.’ That’s what they’re *called.”*

I couldn’t suppress my smile in time. “Sorry. ‘Fashion braids.’”

She looked me up and down. “And I’m not ‘honey.’”

My smile vanished. There’s always one. Behind the pigtailed redhead, someone tittered.

“My name is Nellie Kay Armbruster, not ‘honey’!” I caught the quaver in her voice under the skinny bravado, but it only increased my irritation. Ms. Nellie Kay Armbruster didn’t know what it *meant* to have something for her voice to quaver over. Looking at her bleakly, I saw another eleven-year-old, howling and thrashing in a room with walls padded in a fashionable pale yellow. Mummy-sweet had excellent taste, don’t you know.

“All right, then, Ms. Armbruster, if you’ll just consent to step this way ...” The child flushed, and I knew I’d missed it again, the tone of companionable bantering that was supposed to make it all right. Girls this age . . . McGratty was looking at me with narrowed eyes. He didn’t want me upsetting his c-aud, and I didn’t blame him. Well, if he were good enough, it wouldn’t matter.

I strapped Nellie Kay Armbruster into her unit. She winced a little when I fitted on the scalp wires and then clamped her head immobile, but she didn’t even deign to notice when I pricked the needle into her arm or adjusted the screen the right distance from her pupils. Our units are about five years old, and we’ve missed out on some of the new, subtle indices, but those are more useful for adult c-auds anyway. We only do children and young adults, so only the frontal lobe cortex and amino acid indices really count, although we monitor the rest of the basic stuff, too: pupil dilation, thoracic respiration, blood flow, galvanic skin response.

When all the kids had been strapped in—the others wouldn't look directly at me, either—I took my place at the computer and McGratty, at the author's console, began typing.

> SUDDENLY. THAT WAS HOW THE WILD PALOMINO CAME BACK INTO CARIANNA'S LIFE, LEAPING OVER THE WHITE PICKET FENCE INTO HER AUNT'S VEGETABLE GARDEN, TOSSING HIS MAGNIFICENT WHITE MANE. HE MUST HAVE COME FROM THE DESERT, CARIANNA THOUGHT IN CONFUSION—BUT SHE DIDN'T CARE WHERE HE HAD COME FROM; SHE WAS TRANSFIXED WITH DELIGHT, JUST WATCHING HIM.

Rapid, low-voltage, irregular waves appeared on my synthesis screen: McGratty's narrative hook had engaged their attention. I scanned the individuals. Only two showed latencies. One was so uninvolved she was practically in alpha waves, and I pressed for an IQ: 72. McGratty wasn't aiming at that audience; how the hell had her card slipped in? I punched the keys that canceled her responses from the synthesis, though I kept her individuals.

The word-by-word looked good, except for a slight flag on "transfixed." McGratty might consider changing it; it was possible some of them didn't know what it meant. High response to the name "Carianna." A few subliminal-stimulus lights even flickered, and I wondered yet again why little girls always went for such flashy names. The emotional-involvement index wasn't pronounced, but that didn't matter much at the beginning. The attention patterns were the important thing.

> THE PALOMINO SNORTED, THEN ARCHED HIS LONG NECK FORWARD TO PULL AT AUNT MAUD'S CARROT TOPS. SUNLIGHT POURED OVER HIS GOLDEN COAT. THEN, ALL AT ONCE, CARIANNA SAW THE NOTCH ON THE HORSE'S EAR. "ROCKET," SHE WHISPERED, STUNNED. "IT'S ROCKET!"

The attention curves were still rising, with a slight dip at the sentence about the sunlight. But that's inevitable with description, even when you keep it short. The individuals showed the beginning of emotional involvement in four girls. I checked the running evals to see if there was a conscious critical reaction to that awkward "all at once, Carianna saw" (how *else* would she see except all at once?) but the evals were all flat. Preadolescent girls are not a very critical audience. I've never monitored an adult-level composing session, although I've seen tapes with myself as

subject. Even interpreting those made me dizzy. How complex are *your* reactions when you read *Macbeth?*

> SLOWLY, TRYING NOT TO STARTLE THE BEAUTIFUL PALOMINO, CARIANNA MOVED SIDEWAYS TOWARD THE FENCE, WHERE HER LARIAT HUNG. SHE STILL COULDN'T BELIEVE IT WAS ROCKET. SHE HAD BEEN SO SURE HE WAS LOST TO HER FOREVER, THAT TERRIBLE DAY TWO YEARS AGO WHEN HE TOOK TO THE DESERT. TWO STEPS MORE, ONE MORE, AND HER FINGERS CLOSED ON THE LARIAT.

I would bet my job that not one of these New York kids has ever seen a lariat, except on video. Nor a desert, nor a wild horse, nor a carrot still in the ground!—probably not even a goddam picket *fence.* And as a work of art, McGratty's story was . . . straight from the horse. But engagement derives from subjective significance, the unconscious effect of personal, social, and subliminal factors. It looked like McGratty was in.

> CARIANNA RAISED THE LARIAT, AS UNCLE BOB HAD TAUGHT HER. ROCKET LOOKED UP, HIS NOSTRILS FLARING, OUTLINED BY THE BLAZING SUN, HE WAS SO BEAUTIFUL THAT CARIANNA FELT HER THROAT TIGHTEN. BUT HER HAND WAS STEADY AS SHE TWIRLED THE ROPE AND SENT IT FLYING TOWARD THE PALOMINO'S NECK. ROCKET REARED AND PLUNGED, TEARING UP THE CARROTS. CARIANNA CRIED OUT, DESPITE HERSELF. HAD SHE MISSED? OR DID SHE—COULD SHE—HAVE ROCKET AGAIN FOR HERSELF?

The synthesis of evoked potentials was so thick it looked like a Rorschach smear. Good readings on the glutanic and aspartic acids that go with prolonged attentiveness, nice curves on emotional engagement and subliminal stimuli, even the start of a negative cortical variation, and it was early for that. I glanced at the evals: flat. But, then, McGratty's preselects had included no IQ's over sigma one. He knew his limits. Within those limits, it looked promising, unless he stumbled badly later in the story, and even if he did, we could probably fix it. Three or four more c-auds, and the story would evoke exactly the response patterns that sold the best. Another triumph for American fiction.

No, that wasn't fair. After all, Nellie Kay Armbruster had as much right to have her cortical attention engaged by whatever happened to engage it

as did the readers of Shakespeare or Joyce. And McGratty's opus might even make us a little money, while the preselects for something like *Greta* were always incredibly restricted: bright, intense "young adults" with a lit-passion of 11 or better.

I didn't want to read *Greta.*

Rocket plunged over the edge of a convenient mesa, and one of the girls gasped loudly. Quickly I checked the distraction-wave index: nothing. The others were so absorbed they hadn't heard her.

McGratty was in.

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"Look at this, Mary," Garber said. The printouts from McGratty's c-aud spread over his desk, looping in tangled coils and trailing gracefully to the floor. A coffee mug sat on top, spreading a leisurely brown stain over an aspartic acid curve. Garber ignored all of it, squinting through his sunken blue eyes at a piece of green paper.

"Look at what?" I said, removing the coffee mug.

"That's the third one this week. I think they're growing."

He handed me the paper. It was a leaflet printed in blurry block letters on cheap poison-green newsprint.

THE UNSUSPECTED DANGER

> What is the most dangerous enemy presently in the United States? What force poses the most long-term threat to you, your children, and their children? Do YOU know?
>
> It's not what you may think! This is a hidden danger, a danger to the MIND. It's the so-called "composing-audience" writing of the books you read, the books your children read, and YES! even the textbooks they use in their schools! Do you want your children guided by teachings and so-called "art" composed by machines? Haven't we lost enough of our humanity to the computer? Aren't enough of our decisions already removed from our own human hands to cold and inhuman machines? How brainwashed and helpless do YOU want to be before the all-powerful computer?

YOU CAN HELP! Just detach and return the attached coupon with a 50¢ donation to help the crusade against dehumanization and brainwashing!

……
……

? YES! I want to cry out against control of my mind by a machine! Enlist me as a crusader! 50¢ donation enclosed.

? Send me more information on computer control of school textbooks!

I laughed. “It’s nothing but a con for suckers, Garber.”

“With what fifty cents buys now? I doubt they’re even covering their printing costs.”

“A bunch of splitbrains, then.”

“Maybe.” He drummed his fingers on McGratty’s printout, a muffled noise like the falling of fat, cushiony rocks. A loop of the printout creased in erratic folds. “But there’s a lot of them out there, then. Practically every time I leave the building I get one of these shoved at me.”

“Garber, why are you even concerned? Of course there’s a lot of splitbrains out there. There’s *supposed* to be a lot of them; the tourists wouldn’t feel they were getting their money’s worth out of New York if it weren’t swarming with splitbrains. And you know what this garbage is as well as I do—it’s just the inevitable fussing about any move to automation. People fussed when babies were conceived in tubes. People fussed when electric looms wrecked handweaving. People even fussed when eating with forks replaced *fingers,* for chrissake—did you know that?” Garber didn’t answer. One of his most endearing traits is his acceptance of other people’s melodrama. Specifically mine.

“It’s true. *Forks.* They yelled ‘lifeless’ and ‘inhuman’ and ‘foul’ until, after a while, they saw that it was just another tool, and the yelling died down and everybody went home. This is just the same. Another tool. So why are you upset?”

“I don’t know.” He gave me a little, indulgent half smile for my

performance, but kept on drumming his fingers. I slid McGratty's now-wrinkled printout from under them and began rolling it up.

"Mary, I talked to Jameson today."

"He's not going to review *Greta?"*

"No."

"Well, I expected that."

"He sounded . . . strange. Evasive. Something had upset him. A lot."

I shrugged and kept on rolling. "So he's being sued for libel. Or divorce. Or bankruptcy."

"No, it didn't . . . *feel* like anything personal. Just something big."

I stopped rolling and looked at Garber. He may have no business judgment whatever, but he can have a shrewdness, an intuition, about people that I've learned to think twice about. Even if it did fail him spectacularly in the case of Mummy-sweet.

"What sort of a something big?"

"I don't know."

"You don't think it's connected with that nonsense?" I nodded toward the poison-green leaflet.

Garber frowned, Santa Clause with a wayward reindeer. "No. Not directly, anyway. But something's up, somewhere. And of all the big-league critics, Jameson's been the one singing loudest hosannas for c-auds."

This wasn't strictly accurate, but I allowed Garber his hyperbole, although the picture of a wizened little *Times* literary critic as a hosanna-singing archangel was pretty funny. "New Century renaissance"—Jameson had been the first to come up with the term, but now they all used it, all sounded equally enthusiastic hosannas. And why not? Critics may distrust authors, but they love and delight in truly good writing. "Renaissance" is even too pale a word for the works that have come out of the last twenty years, since c-auds. To know for *sure* when your vision as a writer has gone beyond the peculiarities of the singular. "I."

To be able to hammer at that vision until it reaches and moves readers at the subliminal, universal level of involuntary body responses, not merely the tangled and ego-guarded one of verbalized “criticism.” To move that hammering from a lonely, locked-room struggle to a *shared* struggle, a cooperative act between creator and a selected, involved audience who also became creators, participatory gods. Is it any wonder that the New Century Renaissance has given us *The Golden Grasses, Cranston’s Mountain, All the Winning Numbers, A Sheep of Mantua?* Critics like Jameson don’t care if Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays or c-aud “wrote” *The Golden Grasses.* The play’s the thing. So what was wrong?

“So what’s wrong, Garber?”

“I keep telling you, I don’t know!” He frowned again, then shook his head vigorously from side to side like some mangy, whitened bear, and smiled. It’s Garber’s favorite trick for erasing trouble, for reorienting himself to some inner, serene world. The anxieties just shake out of his ears or something, and poof! they’re gone. It’s what he did when the doctors told him about the cancer; it’s what he does after each virotherapy session; it’s what he did after he told me all those years ago that he was divorcing my mother. Shake, shake. God, I envy him.

“Have dinner with me, Mary. I’ll take you to Cellini’s.”

“I can’t, Garber. Susan’ll be home.”

“I thought Tuesday she had Star Scouts.”

“She quit. ‘Too babyish.’”

“Then bring her along. She’ll like Cellini’s.”

I was tempted. Discreet service, good wine, the illusion of space and leisure in the midst of New York’s steel caves. Cellini’s incomparable beef Wellington. The relaxed luxury of inconsequential shop talk away from the pressing decisions of an actual shop. Garber was wonderful at that; in the pampered atmosphere of a good restaurant he seemed to expand and glow, like the rosy potbellied candles on each table, into a genial incandescence that shone benignly on all. The quality of mercy.

But Susan would object when Garber and I talked shop; I would object when she insisted on having a cocktail; Garber would object, with genuine if genial distress, that Susan and I were battling yet again. He

would remind us how well we used to get along when Susan was a baby. Susan would say that she was *not* a baby and would thank everyone to remember that. I would reply, with some heat, that Garber hadn't said she *was,* and Garber would look from Susan to me and back again with pained, puzzled incomprehension and ask Susan how her teacher was. Then we'd listen for forty minutes to the wonders of the handsome Mr. Blake, who understood young women *perfectly* even if he didn't try to publish babyish books for them.

"I can't, Garber. Really."

"Well, next week then. We'll do it next week."

"Love to."

"Anyway, you promised to read *Greta* tonight."

Damn.

"You will read it, Mary?"

"I'll read it."

He kissed me good-bye, giving me one of those measuring glances that always seem out of character. I just missed the subway. While I was waiting for the next one, a thin anemic-looking kid pushed another one of the poison-green leaflets into my hand. C-AUD: A DEAD END FOR HUMANITY. I tore it into little pieces, threw it on the subway tracks, and got slapped with a fine for malicious littering.

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"I got a D," Susan announced over the spaghetti. She widened her eyes at me and held her fork upright, like a spear. "Ms. Lugo gave me a *D."*

"Ms. Lugo? What happened to Mr. Blake?"

Susan rolled her eyes heavenward. "I *told* you, he's been out because his mother died. Ms. Lugo is the sub. And she gave me a D on my family-tree assignment!"

"Why?"

“You should know! It’s your fault!”

“My fault?”

“You *know* it is. And when Mr. Blake comes back on Friday, he’ll see that D and ask me about it, and I just can’t bear it!”

I twirled spaghetti on my fork with great, calm deliberation.

“And just how is this D my fault, Susan?”

“We’re suppose to have all this oral history to go with the family tree we had to do. I *told* you. And all I had to put on my cassette was those things you told me about Grandpa Garber, because you were so busy writing or whatever that you wouldn’t hardly even *talk* to me. So Ms. Lugo marked “skimpy content” and “lack of effort” on the checklist and gave me a D.”

“Honey, it wasn’t because I was too busy writing!”

“Don’t call me ‘honey’! I hate it when you call me ‘honey’!”

Twice in one day. I put down my fork and forced myself to speak calmly to the hysterical, overgrown prosecutor sitting in my daughter’s chair. *J’accuse.*

“Susan, it wasn’t because I was too busy writing. It wasn’t that at all. It was because ...” Because what? Because the family tree I gave her was Garber’s, and I don’t know any more about it. Because I don’t know what her father, that anonymous donor of sperm, might have had for his oral history. Because I don’t want to give her mine, don’t want her to look at herself as the cast-off granddaughter of a rich bitch whose notorious cruelties revolted even the mostly unrevoltable set that spawned her. Because I don’t want Susan to look at me in the lurid and violent light that any recitation of my own childhood would have to, in Susan’s eyes, set me in now and forever, world without end.

“Because of what?” Susan demanded. “Because of what didn’t you tell me more for the project?”

I couldn’t answer her.

Two large tears rolled out of the corners of her eyes. She jumped up,

dashed them away, and screamed at me across the spaghetti. “You don’t have a reason! You know you don’t! You just don’t care if I get a D on my project, you just don’t have *time* to talk to me about it, you just have time to lock yourself in your room and scribble your own things! You don’t understand me at all!”

She ran from the room. A second later I heard the door slam, catch on something in the way, then slam again, this time successfully enough to shake the pictures on the wall. Victoria Falls shuddered and slid to the floor.

I pushed away the plate of congealing spaghetti. All right, I told myself again, it’s just normal preadolescent mother-daughter wangling. Her body’s under a lot of stress, it’s changing too fast, this is all normal, the tears, the lightning highs and lows—all would pass. I understood. Didn’t I? I did. I had been that age once; I knew what it felt like to be Susan with her “D” or Nellie Kay Armbruster with her fashion braids; I knew what—

No. I didn’t know what it felt like. Not from where Susan was standing. I only knew what it had looked like from where *I* had been, such a vastly different and splintered place that I’d been an emotional mutant, adapted to fit an alien landscape, and thus alone. I couldn’t reach my daughter that way, through the tunnel of a common experience. There wasn’t one. My childhood was useless for that.

But I *could* do something else with that childhood, and had been doing it, for months now. I could transform the whole abusive nightmare into something that made sense, perhaps even beauty. Dickens had done it for his childhood of grinding poverty, in *Oliver Twist.* Rashi had done it for hers, in *Gremlin.* If the private past could be transcended, transformed into the public vision . . .

I left the spaghetti on the table. I left the unread copy of *Greta* on the floor, next to Victoria Falls. I left the fine for malicious littering of the poison-green pamphlet in my coat pocket. I left Garber’s mysterious worry about Jameson’s mysterious worry, and Susan’s worry about her D, and my worry about Susan, and I went into my bedroom and scribbled some more on the secret manuscript I had been scribbling on every night. The manuscript that I *knew* would make it all hang together, turn it all into some kind of integrated sense, make it all worthwhile.

I wrote until I fell asleep, sometime after two, still slumped at my desk. When I woke a few hours later, the light cube had burned out. My shoulders and arms felt stiff, circulation had stopped in one leg, and my

mouth tasted foul. It was nearly dawn. In the half-light from the window my writing lay lightly on the crumpled pages, a lacy pattern of dim shadows.

* * * *

AND SO LITTLE AGNES CAME HOME AGAIN, MUCH THE WISER FOR HER ADVENTURE. AND HER MOTHER MET HER AT THE DOOR, AND HER LOVING BROTHERS, AND, BEST OF ALL, TAGS. HE BARKED AND ROMPED, AND LITTLE AGNES KNEW SHE COULD NEVER, EVER LEAVE HIM AGAIN!

I stared at the monitor screen in disbelief. Alpha waves— *four* of the individual curves showed alpha waves! Leaning around the edge of the computer, I searched for the four kids. All of them had their eyes closed. Kids still staring at their screens were slumped in their seats, and a slump is hard to do when your head is held immobile. The evoked potentials were low and monotonous, the acid curves flat, the subliminal stimuli not even registering. Only the evals showed activity, a high curve that didn't need my training to be interpreted: they hated it.

At the master console the proud author typed the last period and beamed through her bifocals.

Garber, I thought. Let Garber handle it. Garber would tell her better than I.

I released the helmets and the kids scrambled out gratefully. The author bustled up, patting lavender curls squashed by a net so carefully arranged that I fought a sudden urge to play tic-tac-toe in its symmetrical squares.

"Well, it went splendidly, didn't it, my dear? Just splendidly. My, I find a c-aud studio so interesting!"

I stared at the printout as if it were the Rosetta stone, and hoped she couldn't read graphs.

"Why don't you just go ahead to Mr. Garber's office, Ms. Tidwell, and I'll be along as soon as I sort these out."

"Oh, I don't mind waiting for you, dear. Not at all."

"Well, it's just that it might take a while."

She laughed brightly, a kind of chuckle around big horse teeth. “Oh, I guess I can wait, all right. I’ve waited twenty-two years, you know. That’s how long I’ve been working on *Little Agnes’ Adventure.* On and off, of course. You can’t rush inspiration, you know—what’s that, dear?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I just . . . cleared my throat.”

“Would you like a cough drop? No? You have to take care of yourself, dear, a young woman like you. I learned *that,* I should hope, in all my years of teaching—did I tell you I was a schoolteacher, dear? Retired, now, as of last year. Taught forty-four years. And then I said to myself, I said, Ida Tidwell, if you’re ever going to take that book and publish it, now’s the time. So I just pulled my savings out of the bank—you sure you don’t want a cough drop? That *does* sound bad!”

“No ... no.”

“Well, you know best, of course. So I just pulled my savings out and came to Mr. Garber with my manuscript, and here I am, a real live author! My, I can’t wait to see *Little Agnes* in print.”

Garber. Yes. *Let* Garber do it.

“Can I help you roll those up, dear?”

“No. No, thank you. Ms. Tidwell, may I ask you something?”

“Certainly, dear. About Agnes? Was some part not clear?”

“Not about Agnes. Ms. Tidwell, what was it all those years?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What did you teach? Was it English?”

“Oh, my, no, dear!”

“Not literature?”

“I taught algebra.”

I smiled gratitude on behalf of forty-four years of literature classes.

“Tell you what, Ms. Tidwell, I know you must be tired from this long session. If you’ll just run along”—oh hell, I *never* say things like “just run along”—”to Mr. Garber’s office . . .”

“Oh, I don’t mind waiting, dear.” She smiled at me with baby-blue eyes, serene and flat as an empty sky. “This is all so very exciting for me. It’s always been my dream, you know, to write a book. And I *knew* I could do it. I knew it would make everything all worthwhile.”

“What?”

“What . . . why, dear, what’s the matter?”

“What did you just say?”

“I said I knew the book would make it all worthwhile. All those years of teaching algebra. Why, dear, you look so—”

“I’ve finished here. Let’s see Mr. Garber now, shall we?”

I ushered her into Garber’s office, put the printouts on his desk, and pleaded my bladder. When I returned from the toilet, twenty-five minutes later, she was gone, but the office still held the unmistakable feel of disaster. There’s a theory that any monitor’s repeated experiences of seeing brain waves related to graphic interpretation leads to a slight rise in natural sensing of electromagnetic auras. Nobody’s ever proved it. But Garber’s office was soggy with ineffectual disillusionment, wadding up the air like damp tissues.

“Was it very bad?”

“If you’d stayed, you’d know.”

“I’m sorry, Garber, really I am. But I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.”

He swept the rolls of printout off the side of his desk and toward the wastebasket. They missed.

“Garber, I don’t know exactly how to say this, but about her contract . . . her life savings—”

“I already refunded it.”

I walked over and kissed him. “I should have known you would. Then

there’s no real harm done, is there? She’ll get over it. Don’t look like that—people have to learn every day that they don’t have talents they’d hoped for.”

He looked at me with a sudden intensity.

“After all,” I said, too loudly, “the city is swarming with would-be writers, everyone knows that. Scratch a schoolteacher and you find a c-aud applicant, right?”

“Right,” Garber said. “Yes. Well.” He reached for my hand and began playing with the fingers, crossing and uncrossing them. A silence stretched itself too long, then went on even longer.

“Mary ...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, what were you going to say?”

“Nothing.” With the hearty air of a man skillfully changing the subject, he added, “Hey—did you look out the window yet? Look down there. They’ve been at it all morning.”

Ten stories below, pickets marched. I could just make out the block lettering on the poison-green signs.

C-AUD ARTIST FRAUD

GIVE BOOKS BACK TO HUMANS!

CHILDREN DESERVE MORE THAN MECHANICAL MINDS

“They had a bunch of children marching with them earlier,” Garber said. “Tots of about six or seven.”

“Are they all nonviolent?”

“So far.”

I shrugged. “Then let them march. What does it matter?”

Garber swiveled his chair back toward his desk and said, as though it were an answer, “Jameson videoed me this morning.”

“He called *you?”* G-M Press is definitely not accustomed to getting videos from famous critics.

“He’s sending me a manuscript to read.”

I sat on Garber’s desk. “What kind of manuscript?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t say. But he made me promise to drop everything else and read it instantly. He looked disturbed, rumpled, and upset, but in an odd sort of way.”

“What sort of odd sort of way?”

“Like a journalist with an exclusive on the *Titanic.* Mary, what do you think art is for?”

I blinked. Abstractions are not Garber’s style. No one at G-M Press asks what art is *for,* unless he’s being high-camp humorous; Garber was not. It was a question I hadn’t even heard spoken aloud since lecture classes at college. Garber was looking at me with the rumpled half embarrassment of a man who knows he’s just said something faintly impractical and ridiculous, and I looked away and fumbled.

“Garber, I couldn’t—”

“No, forget it. Stupid question.” He shook his head from side to side, the old mind-cleaning bounce, and came up smiling.

“Dinner at Cellini’s?”

Susan’s oral-history project hung in the air, joining Ida Tidwell’s tears and Garber’s abashed rhetoric.

“No, you can’t, I know,” Garber said. “But next week? For sure?”

“For sure.”

As I left, he went back to the window, watching the picketers with mild geniality. Ms. Tidwell’s printouts unrolled a little more on the carpeted floor.

* * * *

It had started to rain. I put down the last page of *Greta,* leaned over the desk, and opened my tiny bedroom's one window. Outside it was dark, with smeared blurs of light shining through the rain, and soft splats as the drops hit the screen. Drifting in were those summer-night smells that even New York can't totally obliterate: damp earth, wet dust from the screen, and, improbably, roses.

Were there roses in the minipark across the street? Suddenly it seemed very important to remember. I leaned my forehead against the dark wet screen, its slippery wire squares reminding me of Ms. Tidwell's hairnet, and tried to picture the park. One chipped bench, one maple tree protected by a ten-foot whitewashed cage, one litter basket overflowing with objects not bearing close examination, and one flower bed. Were there roses in the flower bed? And if so, were they red or pink or white or yellow? Long-stemmed or clustered on low bushes? Straggly or well pruned? Buds or already blowsy, their ripeness turning messy, dropping silky petals like specks of blood?

I couldn't see the roses. All I could see was the child protagonist of *Greta.*

It was a fabulous book. Literally: a book fabled, beyond human expectations, removed from the mundane not because of what happened in it, but because of what it made of what happened. *Huckleberry Finn* without the leaky ending. A female Holden Caulfield brought with power and poignancy into the 1990's. Oliver Twist without bathos. Johannsen had painted Greta's rite of passage with the uncompromising harshness of a Faulkner, the detail of a Colette, the controlled compassion of a Steinbeck.

So many literary allusions. But they weren't quite right, after all. It wasn't those other masters Johannsen had echoed, it was *me,* my own deepest resonances in the subconscious, or wherever the hell they're supposed to be kept now, so that as I read, little shocks of recognition and discovery flashed between me and the badly typed pages. More: *Greta* was the universal childhood experience, being a stranger in a harsh and unfamiliar adult land, lifted to a peak so lucid and sharp that it might have been the prototype for Twain, Dickens, *et al,* instead of their culmination.

I saw that I had set the last page crookedly on top of the rest. I straightened it carefully, taking a long time to get it exactly right, all four corners perfectly aligned to slide the manuscript into its cardboard box. There was a stain on one corner of the box; it looked like jelly. Meticulously

I rubbed it with a tissue, then an eraser, until the smear was gone and the rubbed nap all lay in the same direction.

Then there was nothing else to do.

Greta had done it all.

I undressed, hanging my jumpsuit with mathematical care. Shoulders equidistant on the hanger, boots lined up at right angles, toothbrush plumb-line vertical in its holder. The hairbrush free of all pulled strands. Everything necessary attended to. The key to the locked drawer holding my manuscript made a tinny, gurgling sound as I flushed it down the toilet, but it didn't clog the pipe.

I went to bed.

At a third-rate c-aud publisher, art is for making money. But now I thought about McGratty and the little girls he had entertained so well. I thought about Garber dying, and Ida Tidwell smiling so much over so little. I thought about Susan and about Nellie Kay Armbruster, both glaring at me as if we belonged to different species, with no possible hope of first contact. I thought about Johannsen, composing *Greta* out of whatever universal vision blazed from him through G-M's aging equipment to his c-aud, and back again. And again. And I thought about Mummy-sweet. All that pain, then: wasted. Never used; never transformed; never, dammit, *justified.* Not by me.

The rain stopped. The sliding sounds of traffic on wet pavement drifted in the dark window. A dog barked.

So what do you do, when somebody else builds the pyramids where you needed to put up your bark hut? First you think, *a dead dream,* and then you tell yourself that the least you can do is avoid thinking in those damn tired clichés. Then you realize that even *telling* yourself that is a cliché, and so is the realization that it is. Then you plod round and round the same tired track, trying not to see what's there—or, rather, trying to see what's not there, the unique deep contribution that all of a sudden is now neither unique nor necessary, nor even, by comparison, very deep. You listen to traffic. You listen to your own heartbeat, and to those weird New York night sounds that are never identifiable but always familiar: thumps and hoots and blurred, distant wails from God-knows-what. You pick apart into bloody shreds everything that ever happened to you, everything you've ever done, and finally you make yourself stop that because soggy self-pity won't

help, only survival-oriented tough-minded hard-nosed gut will help, kid, so stop ya blubberin' and strap on that there gun. And then you tell yourself to avoid thinking in those damn tired clichés.

Finally you roll over and sleep, because even the pyramids don't change having to get up early to go to work, and fix your daughter's breakfast, and stop at the bank to pay the utility. And sometime in the night the rain starts again, smelling of phantom roses.

* * * *

In the morning the pickets were back, treading an oval on the sidewalk. Seen up close, they were an odd lot: two kids with the single scalp-strip of curled hair that is the current fashion in parent-annoyance, an intense academic type wearing middle-age badly, a woman dressed in nurse uniform, cap, and stethoscope, and an old spoonhead I had seen last week carrying a sandwich board for Harvey's Eats. They carried a new collection of signs:

HUMAN BOOKS FOR HUMAN HEARTS

SAVE OUR CHILDREN'S MINDS

A C-AUD IS A COMPUTER'S BAWD

(That was the academic.)

IS NOTHING SACRID?

NO SEA TO SHINING C-AUD

"'Sacred' is misspelled," I said, to no one in particular. One of the kids squinted at me.

"It should be s-a-c-r-e-d."

He scanned the signs until he saw the one I meant, carried by the spoonhead. I ducked into the building. No one tried to stop me, although the nurse gave me the pitying look of the elect for the damned.

Garber wasn't in his office. My desk was cluttered with the usual jetsam, all claiming to be important.

The computer tech wanted payment for the last set of equipment

repairs.

The utility company regretted to inform us of a rate hike.

Ms. Ida Tidwell had submitted another application for a free-lance c-aud. This one was for a book called *Tiny Tina's Lesson.* Check enclosed, drawn on a savings bank.

Matthew McGratty wanted to explore the possibility of renegotiating our contract. He had received this offer from a well-known publisher he didn't feel at liberty to name. . . .

I was staring at it all with profound disinterest when Garber came in. He entered quietly, gently, almost as if he were apologizing for something, or afraid of intruding on mourning. He looked terrible. His suit was even more rumpled than usual, his sunken blue eyes rimmed with purple shadows. I tensed, knowing he would discuss *Greta,* and bracing myself for—what? We had never talked directly about my writing. For unspoken pity, then. For penetrating looks and restrained curiosity. But instead Garber just laid a package on my desk.

"Read this, Mary. Now. Please." He didn't look at me.

"Garber, what—"

"Please."

He turned and left, closing die door behind him. Gently.

I opened the package. It was a manuscript, a photocopy, marked "To C. Jameson. Molloy Press. C-AUD 22, final taping." The title was *Floor of Heaven.* I thought a moment, then located the title in *The Merchant of Venice.* The author was a name instantly recognizable, a Pulitzer Prize winner, a brilliant writer with the sort of reputation that even high school sophomores have heard of. I had reread her last book twice. What was *she* doing sending a manuscript to Garber, via Jameson? It made no sense.

I began to read. Twenty pages in, I realized that, in the essentials that truly count, the characters and meaning and nuances of emotional and intellectual theme that make a book what it is, I knew the book already.

I had read it last night.

* * * *

Garber was sitting in his office, with the lights off. He'd pulled his chair over to the window and looped back the curtain, and he sat in the half-light with his hands folded on his belly, gazing out. It had started to drizzle. Far below, the corners of the pickets' cardboard signs curled over on themselves like sea waves.

I laid *Floor of Heaven* on his desk.

"Collusion . . ." I said, the word trailing off into nothing. The author of *Floor of Heaven* was neither unscrupulous nor insane. No motive. More loudly I said, "A bad practical joke." Garber didn't answer, but I rushed on.

"Of course, Garber. That's all it is. Some arrested-development who's willing to go to elaborate lengths to ... to scare Jameson!" Only, of course, Jameson wasn't scared. "To make him look foolish, then. Utterly, ridiculously foolish, in print."

Garber smiled.

"It happens all the time. Literary hoaxes. So much a part of publishing history that it's . . . practically *obligatory,* every once in a while. Patriotic, even. That's all it is."

Garber gestured out the window. *"They'll* be ecstatic," he said, smiling, still smiling, and I exploded.

"Come on, Garber, one duplication doesn't prove anything! Even random chance allows for some total improbabilities! If all the monkeys in the British Museum began typing—no, that's not right, if all the monkeys in the world—"

"No," Garber said, his voice quiet against my shrillness. "No, one duplication doesn't prove anything."

"—began typing all the books in—all the books in the British ... oh, hell, Garber."

"Yes," Garber said. He was still smiling, a remote smile that made me uneasy. I looked away.

"So what happens next?"

The smile widened. “Jameson showed me his article. To be published next week. Quite a privilege, actually, considering who he is, and that when all this came up he thought my name was ‘Farber.’ It’s quite a story. About Plato.”

“Plato?”

“Plato.”

“The ancient Greek Plato?”

“That’s the one.”

“How . . .” I almost had it, but it slipped my mind. A long time since college.

“Jameson gave me a copy.” Garber opened his desk drawer, drew out a pile of paper, and pulled the third and fourth sheets. Sections were circled with thick, waxy red, and I knew that Garber must have marked it, not Jameson. Garber is probably the only company president in New York who keeps PreSchool Crayolas in his desk.

“Just read that,” he said, still with the same casual, remote smile. “Go ahead, read it, skip the rest and start there.”

Jameson was given to parenthetical clauses. His dense, twisty sentences snaked themselves at me from the page:

> But all these esoteric theories, fascinating sport though their intellectual gymnastics may provide, reduce in the end to a theory so old that it is embarrassing to realize by how many centuries we may have been anticipated. Two books, independently written, yet identical in character and incident and theme and, above all, in emotional *impact,* in the images evoked in that older brain that lies below the one usually concerned with words. Identical, and *both brilliant,* with the brilliance of a perfect object illuminated in firelight. And here it all comes together.
>
> We have always assumed human experience to be too varied for meaningful, exact duplication. We have always supposed that how an artist “handled” a theme— as though love, death, and whatever were so many unbroken colts—was

more important than the theme itself. We have always supposed that a talented writer need give only a “fresh reworking” to an archetypal experience, and the result was a new and separate work of art.

But what if we were wrong? What if the number of real, deep experiences open to man is actually small? Or, more accurately put, what if the number of resonances, of ways that seemingly varied experiences strike the human subconscious and set up answering echoes so that experience becomes meaningful, is small? And, furthermore, what if the multiplicity of presentations of these experiences, the endless boy-meets-then-loses-girl books and plays and poems from *Romeo and Juliet* to *True Romances,* were valued only because the isolated individual writer had no way to come closer to a complete rendering of what that complete archetypal ideal would feel like within the human brain?

It was Plato who wrote that man stares eternally at a cave wall, with his back to reality. What we see, what we *call* reality, is only shadows cast on that wall, fire-lit shadows from the actual reality behind us. The shadows dance and nod and flit, some much sharper than others, as some books and plays and poems are sharper, closer to the bone. And sometimes these authors’ made-up lies about the same experience seem to cancel each other out—as shadows must if we view them from different angles.

Romanticism. Naturalism. Realism. Epic heroism. Escapism. All our literature has, until now, been cast from a flickering fire—the imperfect glow of one artist’s mind, one artist’s fragmented perceptions of those archetypal experiences that make up human reality *within* the brain. The results have been fitfully brilliant, fitfully dim. Even Shakespeare is conceded to have shadowy, murky patches, though the very gloom may cast the comforting shades of ambiguity around his harsher truths and thus render them the more acceptable. But if a way could be found to build that fire higher, to build it to a steady brilliant heat that casts ever more steady and brilliant shadows, eventually those shadows will merge and overlap until they stand as sharply etched as the original, a virtual copy of the reality, unmistakable and complete. What has done so, of course, is the technology of the composing-audience, that bringing together of many minds to cast light from all angles on

an experience, until the fragmented shadows from each overlap and are again whole, and all the racial and archetypal responses are cast cleanly on that cave wall, in their one universal form.

How many such forms exist buried in the human mind? We don't yet know, but if the virtual congruence of *Greta* and *Floor of Heaven* is any indication, the number may be more sharply limited than we formerly thought. Or wished.

What this posits about the definitive pinnacles of art is . . .

" 'Fragmented shadows' is lousy," I said, too loudly.

"What?" Garber said.

'"Fragmented shadows.' On the fourth page. It's a lousy image. You can't fragment a shadow. It's a mixed metaphor. Or something."

"I'll tell him you said so."

I knelt on the floor next to his chair and put my arms around him. "We've got lots of time, though, Garber. It's not as though G-M Press will be obsolete tomorrow. Finding these archetypal works, or whatever, will take time. Years."

"Yes."

"And anyway, now that I think about it, Jameson's talking about the masterpieces, the heights of experience. All this probably won't even apply to us at all! We'll just keep on as we always have, turning out entertainment for children!"

"Yes."

"We won't really be that affected at all. Kids will always need variety, even if it's 'fragmented.' They don't care. It's not as though G-M ever *expected* to produce a masterpiece, for chrissake."

Garber didn't answer.

"But maybe we just will, anyway!" I said, and heard my own desperate brightness, and tried not to wonder what Garber's private dreams as a publisher had been. "And, in any case, there's lots of time!"

He looked at me steadily. The jolly elf was gone, the scatterbrained enthusiast was gone, the casual fatalist was gone. He was the Garber who had come to see me in the sanitarium, the Garber who'd taken me to boarding school on the train, the Garber who'd stripped me of all my old destructive defenses, and so also stripped himself.

"I don't have lots of time, Mary."

I didn't say anything to that. There wasn't anything to say.

The shoulder of his jumpsuit felt rough against my cheek. I kept my arms around him, and we watched the pickets walking below in the rain. A bus went by, and three prohibitively expensive taxis, and a pair of kids who probably should have been in school. They wore yellow rainsuits and walked through every puddle, splashing and stamping. From what I could see at this distance, they never looked at the pickets at all. But from this distance, I couldn't see much.

Garber stood up, shook his head vigorously from side to side, and grinned.

"So what's this about more deathless prose from the pen of Ida Tidwell?"

I got to my feet. "You won't believe it, Garber; you just won't believe it. It's for this incredibly sappy proposal—"

I managed to remove the manuscripts of both *Greta* and *Floor of Heaven* from the desk without actually looking at either of them. Then those of us who were not scaling the definitive pinnacles of art went back to work.

* * * *

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," Susan said, before I had closed the apartment door. "I just hope you're *satisfied."*

"And it's nice to see you, too," I said wearily.

"Mother—"

"Look, do you think I could at least get my coat off before you start in, Susan? At least?"

She folded her arms and waited, boulder silence under downy brows. Her shoulders were trembling. The sofa overflowed with crumbled paper, her recorder, cassettes, books, and tissues. I hung up my coat very slowly.

“All right, Susan. What is it?”

“Mr. Blake is back. He’s *back,* and he saw my D that substitute gave me on my oral history project, and he said I could do it over to raise my grade. Only my grade won’t raise, because I know it won’t be any different this time; I still don’t know enough stuff to do it right, and I’ll end up with two D’s, and it’ll junk my whole quarter’s grade! I hope you’re satisfied!”

She scowled horribly, and I saw the insane effort not to cry in front of me, the enemy. Had grades mattered so much to me, at ten? Had the handsome Mr. Blakes? No, of course not; both had been lost in bigger nightmares. But Susan was not me.

“You don’t care. You just don’t *care,”* she said. “Lya’s mother told her *heaps.* Cassettes and cassettes worth!”

Not me, and not in my version of pain. But she was in pain, however trivial it might look to me. *What is art for?* Garber had asked, and I had thought I’d known the answer: to transform and justify pain. If we can. But not all of us can. What if the alchemy is missing?

“Mr. Blake looked at me like he was so surprised, and so disappointed in me. And he asked me what happened because I never get D’s, and I started to *cry.* ...”

What is art for? To order human experience, to reach toward some ultimate expression of what we are. And if that ultimate expression has already been reached?

“... all the other kids looking at me bawling, and Mr. Blake just standing ...”

So it’s been reached. What then? Or, rather, what before— *long* before, when pain was the daily expectation, and language too crude for the transformation to beauty. The base of Jameson’s pinnacle, before the long climb to the dizzying top. When shadows on cave walls was not a metaphor, but the real thing, flickering with hidden menace all night long. All the way back.

“. . .so embarrassed I wanted to die, and you just treat me like a child anyway, and—”

All the way back.

“Susan, honey—no, I know you don’t like to be called ‘honey’—Susan, then—Susan, come here. Sit down. No, there on the sofa—sit next to me. Listen. I know you’re not a child anymore, even if you ... I know it. You’re old enough to ... I know. I’ll help you with your history project. Sit down.”

Susan glared at me, eyes mutinous through a sheen of tears, but she sat.

“Wait right here, Susan. I have to get something, something I want you to see, want you to read. I have to get—”

I remembered the key flushed down the toilet. What I would have to get was a crowbar. Pry open the desk drawer, or see if I could break the lock—but that part could wait, after all. The written manuscript could come later, had always come later. Susan would have to read it, yes, it would make it easier for her to understand if she read it, easier to see where I had changed things, reaching for…but later.

All the way back.

I drew a deep breath.

“Listen, Susan. I’m going to tell you something that happened to me, when I was your age. It’s part of our family. It happened. Listen.

“Let me tell you a story. ...”

<<Contents>>

* * * *

Ten Thousand Pictures, One Word

This story is an extended temper tantrum.

Like CASEY'S EMPIRE, it deals with the shimmering lie versus the sturdy truth. Usually arguments of this sort find me siding with minor artifice. Civilization may not be much advanced by the courteous fib, the coat of paint, the embroidered anecdote, the idealized sculpture—but neither is it harmed, and a little misrepresentation can lend us all some needed grace.

But enough is enough.

I have admired fantasy art since I was six years old and first saw the honey-blond mane on Walt Disney's Cinderella. I still enjoy fantasy art. But reality, too, has its own peculiar claims—and one of them is cause and effect. It is one thing to trace a chariot in the clouds, and quite another to try to hop in and whip up the horses.

Hence Kenny Rizzo.

* * * *

At two-thirty on a Thursday morning, just before the light bulb in his studio (which was also his kitchen) gave a despairing little pop and burned out, Kenny Rizzo finished his painting. He circled it critically, his head tipped to one side. His paint-spattered canvas shoes, the newest layers gold and black, squeaked on the cracked linoleum.

From the bedroom his wife Joanne called sleepily, "What was that noise, Kenny? Kenny?"

"Just the light bulb. Go to sleep, Hon." By the dim rectangle of light shining from the hall he groped his way to a cupboard, looking for a candle and matches.

"The light bulb? What did it do?"

"No, not yet," Kenny said, hearing her voice as only a texture of

sounds, mostly flat. “Almost done. Go to sleep.”

“I’ll get a new bulb tomorrow, then, when I shop.”

“Right after I clean up. Good night.”

By candlelight the painting looked even better. The magazine people should be incredibly pleased. Incredibly! And why not? It was a beautiful job, and it fit the story exactly. Kenny was always careful to read the story he was illustrating; he prided himself on being one of those who got the hair color right, the eyes the same shade that the author casually mentioned on page three. It was part of doing the job right. And this one was right, was beautiful, was a fantasy nude of surpassing life and complexity. The editor of the men’s magazine was going to love it. Every long line of the nude’s golden-skinned body was caressed by a magical light: the curve of hip and weight of breast and smooth, taut arms stretched up to the tiny red dragon hovering in the air above her. Long black hair, confined at the crown by a diamond circlet, cascaded in deep waves clear to the girl’s long, slim legs. On the ground lay a jewel-topped cut-glass bottle which Kenny had copied from a fifteenth-century drawing. The story, a witty fantasy concerning Lucrezia Borgia, a misplaced bottle of poison, and a lustful dragon, was called “Alchemy Con Brio.” Kenny had carefully left a small space for the title and another, larger space for the author’s very famous name. This particular author, he knew, complained regularly and bitterly if his very famous name were not prominent, and Kenny wanted no flak about this picture. He was too much in love with it.

With a satisfied sigh he began cleaning his brushes by candlelight.

* * * *

“Would you like some more coffee?” Joanne said at breakfast. “By the way, Kenny, that last picture of yours is a little . . . odd, isn’t it?”

“Yes, please,” Kenny said from behind the newspaper. “Just a half a cup.”

“Just not at all in your . . . your regular stream.”

“And sugar,” Kenny said. “No, don’t wash up, I’ll do that. You’ll be late for the office.” The Rizzos were scrupulous about dividing up the housework, since both held jobs. Kenny always did his share; was, in fact, glad to do his share. Fair was fair.

“I *did* wash up, for all practical purposes,” Joanne said. “There’s only your cup left. Honestly, Kenny—you sat right there and watched me do it. Well, I’m off.” She kissed the top of Kenny’s head and dashed for the subway. Kenny finished his coffee and newspaper. Then he strolled into the living room, where Joanne had moved the easel when she made breakfast, to inspect his painting.

It was not the same painting.

The dragon was there, the cut-glass bottle was there, the diamond circlet was there. Even a girl was there, but not the same girl. The nude in this painting was plump—no, she was *fat.* Heavy rolls of flesh hung on her belly, buttocks, and thighs, which were much shorter in proportion to her torso than the girl Kenny had painted last night. Her skin was not golden but a pale, anemic pink, as though she never went out into the sun. Under the diamond circlet her hair hung in elaborate frizzes and knobby braids. Even her eyes were different—slightly sunken, with heavy lids and sparse, high brows, odd eyes, and yet strangely familiar . . .

Kenny, perfectly still, looked at the painting for two entire minutes. Then he crossed the room to the plastic shelf where his art books were kept, flipped frantically through one, and then began to leaf carefully at one section. Botticelli, da Vinci, Giorgione, early Titian.

Solid, pale, heavy-lidden woman. Thick of thigh, short of leg, heavy of belly. His painting was not of the same quality— the light was crude and the composition poor—but it was of the same sort of woman. Botticelli, da Vinci. Giorgione, Titian.

Dazed, Kenny scanned the dates for each painter. They had all worked in the Italian Renaissance, in the same century as Lucrezia Borgia.

He looked again at the girl on the easel. She was smiling an enigmatic, Mona Lisa smile.

* * * *

The editor of *American Male* hated the painting. He suggested caustically that Kenny try it at *Weight Watcher’s Magazine.* Under the sarcasm he sounded incredulous, but not as incredulous as Kenny. Kenny didn’t try to tell him what had happened. He told no one. What *had* happened? There was no way to even think about it himself, much less explain it to anyone else.

Kenny and Joanne regretted the loss of the money. They had been going to do something frivolous with it, something wonderful but as yet unspecified, undiscussed. Kenny's next assignment wouldn't be nearly as lucrative. It was for the science fiction magazine *Macromyths,* illustrating a story that was a deliberate parody of its pulp days, and the editor wanted a two-color drawing that would recall the artwork from the thirties but be even more improbable. An affectionate body, he said. Kenny liked the idea. He was too young to recall the thirties pulps, but he thought he knew what the editor wanted.

"Did you see the paper yet, Kenny? What happened to the C section?" Joanne said.

A bug-eyed monster, of course. Green. With tentacles.

"Here it is . . . colder tonight. Maybe we should cover the roses?"

And a girl. There would have to be a girl, in a bronze bra. No, make that a platinum bra. With a padlock!

"Joseph Kraft has a good editorial here on the congressional budget. Did you see it? Kenny?"

The BEM would menace the girl. He could hold the key to the padlock, having stolen it from . . .

"Kenny, I thought you were talking. Did you see the Kraft editorial, next to that one on the FBI frame?"

"No, he wants it unframed. Look, we'll discuss it later, okay, Hon? I want to start this sketch."

"But *Kenny—"*

He worked fast. First the monster—lightly, keep it light, a deft parody. He gave it a slight grin. Then the girl. She took longer. Kenny lingered over her, tarrying over each sweet line. She was blond, of course, and young, her hair curved into a thirties pageboy, soft and full. The platinum bra was cut low over full breasts curving into a narrow waist. A filmy blue skirt billowed from the platinum belt and fell in neat folds except where one slim, high-arched foot parted the folds to flee in terror. One hand, raised, failed to cover her full-lipped scream. Her eyes were blue: wide, heavy-lashed, innocent. A feminine morsel, totally helpless! Perfect! He worked on her

side of the sketch for most of the afternoon, and then went to play basketball. Under his hand the ball curved sweet and tender.

Joanne had a dinner meeting or something, Kenny couldn't remember what. He grabbed a *brik* at an Arab deli, picked up the laundry at the dry cleaners (fair is fair), and bought some strudel. Back at his apartment, he opened his portfolio for another look at the thirties parody, and dropped it on the floor.

Fleeing from his tentacled grinning BEM was Eleanor Roosevelt.

No—it wasn't her. But the woman in the painting *did* share two of her characteristics: the long, horsey face and the expression of intelligent determination. She was a plain woman with short brown hair and a stocky body, and she looked squarely from the paper at the thirties world of Depression, dustbowls, and coming war. She wore a blue skirt, cut on the bias from some serviceable material, flat-heeled tie shoes, dark stockings, and a padlocked platinum bra.

Kenny picked the sketch off the floor. His hands trembled. Ripping the paper into tiny shreds and then into even tinier ones, he started to babble. When he stopped, he wanted to piece the thing back together again, to show it—to whom?— but it was too late. Eleanor Roosevelt was too shredded to put back together again.

Later, awake until dawn, he decided it was just as well.

He resolved not to do any more historical pieces. From now on, strictly contemporary or future stories. The editor of *Crimecapades* wanted an illustration of a prison break. Kenny finished the sketch late at night, tossed in bed for three or four hours, then padded out to the kitchen to peer fearfully at his drawing board. The sketch looked exactly the same as when he had finished it. In the morning it still looked the same. Kenny went back to bed and slept until noon. The craziness, whatever it had been, was over.

He did a color painting of a space capsule. He did a pencil sketch of a hard-boiled detective (1983 style: Frye boots and one earring). He did a smalltown Main Street, ominously deserted under strong sunlight. They all stayed the same as he drew them.

The editor of *Journey,* a slick, well-thought-of magazine, wanted an illustration for a contemporary ghost story. Kenny read the manuscript, "The Ghosts of the Barbizon," and liked it. It took place in a women's hotel in

Manhattan. He made some quick sketches, then stretched a canvas and laid down a wash for the painting. Halfway though, Joanne came home from wherever she'd been.

"Hi, I'm home!"

"Hi, Hon."

"Anyone call?"

"No. Yes. No, I guess not. Only your mother."

"Kenny, there's something I'd like to talk to you about. Is this a good time, or should I wait until later?"

"No, no this is fine. Shoot."

"Kenny—we never talk any more."

"Sure we do."

"No. Not really."

"We're talking right now."

"That's not what I mean. We never . . . *share.* I don't mean housework and expenses and that shitwork. You're— *we're*—good on that. Sex, too. But I mean, you don't ever tell me what's really going on in your head. Or in your work. We don't *talk."*

Kenny considered what had been going on in his work. Or in his head. But that craziness—that was over. He considered Joanne. It was cold out; her nose was still red, with one wet drop on the end. She looked earnest, with a faint underlay of anger. Kenny couldn't exactly remember how long they had been married.

"I'm sorry, Hon," he said. "It's just that a couple of things haven't been working too well lately. I'll try to talk more."

"But I don't want you to have to *try,"* Joanne said. "I mean, I want you to share things with me because *you* want to, not because you want to please me, Kenny. Kenny?"

“You’re right,” Kenny said. “I’ll try.”

Joanne made a strange noise somewhere between choking and spitting. “Look, if I leave something here, will you read it? It’s right here in this magazine. I’ll leave it folded to the page. Will you read it when you’re done working?”

“Sure, Hon.”

Joanne made the noise again and went to the bedroom to gather up dirty laundry (fair is fair).

Kenny finished laying down the wash and began on the woman in the foreground of the picture. She was the Barbizon’s director; make her thirty-five. Mature, but youthful. Soft brown hair in tumbled waves. Delicate shoulders under the expensive cherry-red sweater, full breasts. Kenny worked slowly, lovingly. She wore an A-line skirt of grey wool, cinched at the slender waist and flaring out at the curve of hips. Ankles shown off in high heels with delicate ankle straps, ankle bones to match the shoulders. She stood with her back to the building and its strange distortions (this due to the ghosts), so her expression was still unruffled, serene, faintly smiling at whatever she was looking at just off the canvas.

Kenny, just off the canvas, smiled back.

In a few days the painting was done. Kenny finished it at noon and decided to celebrate—he felt that good about it. Who? Carl, of course, his best friend. Carl was free for lunch. Kenny met him at his office on Sixth Avenue and they had an enormous lunch of steaks, good beer, terrific cheesecake. The weather was cold. Kenny decided to walk back to the apartment for the air and the exercise. All the way he hummed, pretending he was singing to the woman in the painting. She laughed and twitched her grey skirt at him. He hummed louder and walked faster, pretending he was not uneasy.

At first, from one glance across the length of the room, he thought that nothing had changed. From across the room the woman on the easel looked the same: cherry-red sweater and grey wool skirt. But then she didn’t. Coming closer, unwinding his muffler in a damp-wool explosion of panic, Kenny saw that she didn’t look the same at all.

Her shoulders were broader, more athletic. The wasp waist had thickened and the hips slimmed, so that her body was more tubular, less curvy. The ankles were thicker, and instead of strappy high heels she wore

Docksiders with rubber soles. The whole body looked strong and healthy, alert for action. The woman's expression was alert as well; she had half turned toward the Barbizon in the background, and Kenny had a clear view of the tiny wrinkles around her clear eyes and the grey streaking her hair.

He took two steps backward, then two more. The last step brought him on top of the folded magazine Joanne had left on the floor, and mechanically he picked it up, never taking his eyes from the easel. He raised the magazine like a club and advanced on the picture. His hand shook and the magazine unfolded a little. Stopping to roll it tighter, he caught sight of the article Joanne had marked: MALE-FEMALE COMMUNICATION—JUST WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS? On the opposite page, surrounded by a Delia Robbia wreath of running shoes, measuring tape, granola, and bikini underwear, was another article. The illustration was poor, but Kenny slowly unfolded the magazine and began to read:

> Is the female body changing? Yes, say two medical researchers at the University of Florida. Statistics kept over a forty-year period indicate that the female form has become straighter and more muscular, with increased inches in the waist and decreased inches in hips and breasts. While some observers claim this is due mainly to the freedom from tight lacing, padding, and girdling that produced yesterday's exaggerated "feminine" curves, the Florida doctors disagree. Instead, they cite increased exercise, better nutrition, and a different attitude toward their bodies on the part of women themselves.
>
> Looking at each of these factors in turn . . .

"Oh, I meant to tell you how much I like the painting," Joanne said, coming out of the bathroom. Dressed in her bathrobe, she was drying her hair with a big fluffy towel. "It's different from your usual style, isn't it? I really think it's an improvement. She looks so ... I don't know . . . real."

"Thank you," Kenny said mechanically. He looked from Joanne to the painting, then back again. Joanne was combing her fingers through her wet hair, pushing it into place. He had never noticed before that it was turning grey.

He could stop drawing. He could see a psychiatrist. He could draw only men, inanimate objects, or landscapes. He could get so drunk that none of it mattered. He could get someone else to verify that what was

happening—whatever it was—was in fact happening. Those were the options.

If he stopped drawing, they'd starve. Well, no—not starve; after all, Joanne made more than he did. But things would be tight. As it was, they were too tight to afford a psychiatrist. Painting only men, inanimate objects, and landscapes would cut his income in half. It would also cut out the paintings closest to his heart. Getting drunk sounded tempting, but the problem there was that eventually he would have to get sober again.

He phoned Carl and asked him to come watch him draw.

"*Watch* you draw? You mean, like come see the picture when it's done and give you my opinion?"

"No. Watch me draw. Really, I need you, Buddy. I've got a ... a block. You know, like writer's block."

"How is having me sit there watching going to unblock you?"

"I don't know. I just feel it will."

"Well, you creative types are all a little weird. You should see the designer we got now. Okay, when do I come?"

"I'll call you. Just as soon as I get the right next assignment."

The right next assignment terrified him with its implications.

It came from *Illusions and Interstellars,* the most "literary" of the SF magazines. A famous fantasy writer, one of the best, had written a bittersweet tale about two young lovers in a grim and dying post-holocaust world. The story was set two hundred years in the future.

Kenny decided to draw the girl on a beach. He sketched the background: rocks, waves, a stunted post-holocaust tree. Then he called Carl.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to ask Carl over?" Joanne said.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course I don't *mind."*

“I thought you liked Carl.”

“I do like Carl. I just wish you’d mentioned it earlier, is all. I thought maybe we could talk.”

“About what?”

“Kenny ... did you read that article I showed you?”

Kenny tried to think what article she meant. All that came to mind was the Delia Robia wreath of running shoes.

“You didn’t, did you?” Joanne said. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. “Well, all right. It doesn’t matter. But, Kenny, I would like us to just sit and *talk.* Sometime soon. Okay?”

“Sure, Hon. Whenever you say.”

“No, not whenever—sometime definite. Tomorrow night, okay?”

“That’s the bell, it’s Carl.”

“Kenny ...”

“Sure, Hon, anytime. But listen, I have to talk something over with Carl now, okay?”

Carl was in a jovial mood. He tried to joke around with Joanne, but for some reason she wouldn’t go along with it and slammed out of the apartment shortly after Carl arrived. Kenny gave Carl a big Scotch-and-water and set down to work.

He drew the girl with careful attention. Nude to mid-hip, breasts high and small—she was young, *young*—and erect, dainty nipples. The wonderful thing was her hair. A sea wind had caught and blown it wildly; it fanned about her head in tendrils like writhing lengths of heavy silk, between and through which the girl laughed at her unseen lover (Kenny had decided not to draw him). So lovingly did he shade each lock of that glorious hair that it was midnight before he finished. Joanne still had not come home. Carl lay asleep in his chair, five Scotch glasses on the floor beside him. Kenny woke him up.

“Carl. Carl, c’mon now, Buddy, wake up. Wake up, Carl. You have to

see my picture."

"I see it. Ver' nice."

"No, listen, *look* at it. Really look."

"I look at it."

"Closely, Carl, closely—no, I mean it. What do you see? Tell me what you see!"

Carl squinted, shook his head, scrutinized the picture. "I see a girl."

"Describe her."

Carl opened his mouth, closed it, and then tried a wolf whistle. It came out a belch, on two pitches.

"Good enough," Kenny said. "Now listen, Carl. You have to take the picture home with you."

"Home?"

"Yes. Don't argue—just take it home for me. Here, I'll get it ready."

Kenny slipped the drawing between two pieces of cardboard. He put the cardboard in a cushioned mailer and the whole thing in a waterproof bag. Then he walked Carl down to the street, found him a cab, climbed back to the apartment, and went to bed. He plunged immediately into a deep, dreamless black sleep.

* * * *

In the morning Kenny shot out of bed. Joanne was gone; she must have left early for the office. If Kenny hurried, he could catch Carl before he left for work. For the whole length of the trip on the uptown subway, Kenny kept his eyes closed, humming wordlessly. The other passengers left a small clear circle all around him.

Carl was bleary but sober. Kenny dragged him by the arm to the plastic-bagged envelope, unwrapped it, and pulled out the cardboard folder.

"Open it, Carl. You open it."

“You’re acting very weird, Buddy, you know that?”

“Yes. Just open it.”

Carl opened the folder. “Well?”

“Well,” Kenny said slowly.

“Well what?”

“Nothing. Well nothing,” Kenny said. The picture looked the same: nude girl, fantastic hair, somber beach. Exactly the same. Kenny put his head in his hands.

“You want to tell me what this is all about?”

“Yes. I do. Only it’s such a long story. Or no—it’s no story at all. Now.”

“Kenny, you’re not making sense.”

“I know.”

“Look, Buddy, I have to go to work now. Christ, I’m already late. But I’ll come over tonight after dinner and you can tell me what’s on your mind, okay? Is tonight all right? You got anything going?”

“No,” Kenny said. He was still looking at the girl.

“Then I’ll see you tonight. Hey, lock the door behind you when you leave, okay?”

Back home, Kenny took a shower. He read the morning newspaper: STOCK MARKET DECLINES, ELIZABETH TAYLOR TO MARRY, BRUINS EDGE FLYERS 4-3. He vacuumed the living room, made the beds, washed the dishes. Joanne called to suggest dinner out at a Greek restaurant; Kenny said that Carl was coming over to talk about something important. There was a long silence on the other end of the phone and then the line went dead. Kenny figured that they had been cut off, but when he tried to call Joanne back, no one picked up the phone at her desk. The phone company must be having problems again.

The mail came, and with it a story to illustrate for a fanzine called *Googolplex.* It was a low-paying, no-prestige market, but *Googolplex* had

published Kenny's first sketch and he regarded drawing for it as a sentimental *noblesse oblige.* He made himself a cup of coffee, and settled in to read the story, which turned out to be awful.

The title was "Kalja of the Far Seas." The story took place on a barbaric Earth a thousand years into the future and concerned the exploits of Kalja, a barbarian warrior-queen who had the help of telepathic plants in defending her tribe, her title, and her unspecified number of seas (Kenny never did learn what they were far from). The telepathic plants thought in Cockney.

Groaning, Kenny got out paper and pencil and began to sketch. Something rough, not too time-consuming. It was the sort of predictable sketch he could do with his eyes closed. As he worked, however, he began to get interested. Kalja took form in his mind, then under his pencil. Oh, she was magnificent! Not sweet, like the post-holocaust girl. This one was ice cold, a splendid bitch. Black hair, slanting cheekbones, challenging green eyes—it was a black-and-white sketch, but Kenny *knew* they were green. Deadly. She wore a leather shift that left bare her long legs, which were spread apart and braced aggressively on the earth (grass? rock? fungi?—he would figure it out).

Beside Kalja, Kenny sketched the vague outline of a forest, a few adoring male underlings, and a thoughtful-looking plant. In the sky he drew the Big Dipper, slightly flattened into the configuration it would have in a thousand years, to let the cognoscenti know how much time had passed (he looked up the configuration in the *Encyclopedia Britannica).* When he was done, Kalja stared at him icily. Oh, to live a thousand years from now!

Carefully he wrapped the drawing for mailing, wrote a brief note to the editor, and sealed the package. Tomorrow he would mail it.

He felt hungry. He ate a sandwich, surprised to see that it was past dinner time. Joanne hadn't come home. Was she having dinner with a friend tonight? Must be.

Idly, he wandered to the living room and poked at the plastic bag he had given Carl with the drawing of the young post-holocaust girl. He slid out the picture, and he froze.

It had happened.

The picture's background remained the same: rocks, beach, stunted tree. But the girl did not. A few hours in his apartment—not Carl's!—and she

was entirely different. Her face was young, and not young. Youth lay in the curve of cheek, still half baby fat, and the firm little chin. But the eyes were old with misery. Her breasts drooped, shapeless dugs, and the rough brown cloth around her hips did not conceal the bulge of pregnancy. Her hair—that magnificent hair!—hung in dull greasy ropes, and the girl gazed not laughingly at an unseen lover but hopelessly at the horizon, where no ship sailed.

Kenny moaned. Then he remembered that this story had been set only two hundred years in the future. For a moment he sat numb, before leaping up and running to the package with the picture of Kalja, eight hundred years later still. His fingers refused to tear the envelope. Frantically he searched for a knife, slit the package, and pulled out his sketch of the warrior-queen.

The paper was blank.

No, not blank. The vague outline of a forest was there, and the male underlings, and the flattened Big Dipper, and even the plant. But the woman was gone. Not changed into something else, something more real, as the others had been. Just gone.

Kenny grabbed the phone. His hand shook as he dialed Carl's number.

"Carl! They're gone!"

"Who is this?"

"It's me, Kenny! Listen, they're gone! All the women— they're going to leave!"

"What women? Hey, Buddy, calm down. What are you talking about?"

"The women, the women! They're all going to leave, Carl!"

"Women? You mean, like Joanne? Joanne is leaving you?"

"Joanne? No, listen, Carl—get this straight. Sometime in the future, something between two hundred and a thousand years from now, all the women are going to leave the planet entirely. The men will still be here, but the women will all leave somehow, just take off and go, and all that'll be left is blank paper!"

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone, then Carl's voice saying warily, "Kenny . . . hey, Buddy . . . Kenny ..."

"Oh, I know I told it badly, you don't know what's been going on here, but they *are* going to leave, I know it, all the pictures have been changing and if—the editor turned down the painting for the Barbizon story and I don't want to spend the rest of my life drawing small-town Main Streets, but it isn't even that, it's the not knowing—"

"Look, I'll be there in twenty minutes. Don't do anything, anything at all—Kenny? Is Joanne there?"

"—not knowing *why.* Why should they go? What could they want that they don't have here? What?"

"Is Joanne there?" Carl said, speaking very slowly and clearly, as if to a sick child. "Where's Joanne?"

"Joanne? Out somewhere. Carl, have you been listening? They're going to go, and I can't figure out where, or why. That's the thing—*why.* There's no *reason."*

"Twenty minutes, Kenny. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Just sit tight, Buddy."

"What will I draw?" Kenny said, and hung up the phone.

Outside the apartment it grew dark. Kenny sat cross-legged on the floor, holding the blank paper where Kalja of the Far Seas had been. His panic began to turn to anger, then to loss. Loss—he would have to draw small-town Main Streets. And eventually no one would draw bitch-queens or sweet young loves or girls menaced by monsters. Not only him—*no one,* once the models for all those wonderful fantasy nudes had all left! No one! And for no reason!

Anger began again to take over. (No one. And for no reason.) Kenny sat muttering. Outside it grew darker.

Joanne did not come home.

"No reason at *all,"* Kenny said.

<<Contents>>

* * * *

Night Win

This story went through several versions. Editors liked it, editors hated it—the *same* editors. I rewrote this story more than any other piece of work I've ever sweated over.

The original title was THAT THE NIGHT COME, from the Yeats poem of the same name. I've forgotten what the original ending was supposed to be—although I'm *fairly* sure it involved the same characters. When Shawna McCarthy finally chose one version for ISAAC ASIMOV'S SF MAGAZINE, I destroyed all the rewrites and regained the use of three large drawers.

The whole experience was undoubtedly a Metaphor. I just don't know for what.

* * * *

The river dissolved. One minute it tore through high, dim banks booming with the rapids around the bend; the next it lifted and spread, flooding the air with gray particles that turned from water to smoke to grainy nothingness behind Rachel's eyelids, nothingness spreading in an even wash like blindness like sleep like entropy like stillness like—

"Rachel! Rachel!"

—nothingness—

"Rachel!"

Her ear muffs were yanked off so quickly that the flexible metal band snapped against her temple. She put up one hand to rub the temple, at first unaware that she did so, eyes focusing more slowly than hand. Always the eyes more slowly; the hand remembered first, not deceived. Instinct? It must be instinct. Over her chair, Don's thin body leaned urgently. Her ear muffs dangled from his left hand. Even through the wispy nothingness she could feel the tautness in his body, gone sharp as a bowstring. If she touched him she would bleed.

“Rachel?”

The hospital room sprang into focus: metal bed, tightly woven blue blanket, blue-flowered drapes drawn against the night, miniature plants in a green ceramic pot, a gift from somebody. Dracaena, jade plant, philodendron, schefflera. The schefflera was wilting; probably over-watered. Under the blue blanket Rachel could see Mrs. Angstrom lying still, worn out with not dying.

“Are you all *right?”*

“I—lost it,” Rachel said. She closed her eyes, then forced them open again. Sounds, always the last to focus, came leaking in from the corridor: a linen cart rolling by, an elevator door opening with a soft whoosh of air. At the nurse’s station around the corner and down the hall someone chuckled. A second later a different voice murmured, the words indecipherable as a foreign language. Somewhere a phone rang.

“Rachel—can you get back In?”

“Can you?”

“Yes. But now. It has to be now.”

Sweat beaded on his upper lip. One hand, Rachel saw, was shaking. Always the hands—even for Don, who had so much control she sometimes hated him.

“It wasn’t like the last time,” Rachel said slowly. “This was—nothingness. Just nothingness. I lost it to nothingness.” Her big body shuddered.

“There’s no *time.* It has to be *now!”*

In the bed Mrs. Angstrom groaned and turned over.

“All right,” Rachel said. “All *right.* I’m ready.”

Don took her hand. She pulled it away, but then forced herself to leave it in his. He was right; she needed the extra contact, even at the price of the tactile distraction. His fingers were spindly and cold. With her free hand Rachel pulled the ear muffs over her head, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

She slipped In.

The raft had drifted farther towards the rapids—how had it gotten so far downstream? Don was splashing towards it, only his bony, naked shoulders and bobbing head showing above the slimy black water. Another ten yards and he would reach the raft, but the water flowed faster here and his splashing was not narrowing the distance. On the raft Mrs. Angstrom screamed, but Rachel heard no sound; the woman's mouth was a silent black O. Rachel tried to move towards Don, but the water pressed in, stinging like needles. Cold—it was so cold. She tried to raise the temperature, but the water would not warm. Don must need it this cold; she couldn't affect it at all.

Ahead of her Don reached the raft and grasped it with both hands at one corner. For a second Rachel could feel the wood, water-logged and spongy, bucking under his hands. *Hands— not now! Don't think of hands now!* Don braced himself against an underwater rock, leaning backwards until his weight balanced the forward drag of the current against the raft, and called back over his shoulder for Rachel to help pull.

Her body, so big and ponderous on land, felt light in the water. Her breasts, blue-veined and fatty, floated in front of her. But the stinging was growing even worse; the water was so cold it burned. Rachel struggled to make herself take a step, to move through the black water over the unseen sand underneath. Just as she succeeded in lifting her naked foot and shoving it forward, a fish swam by her legs.

Startled, she stopped moving. *A fish?* There couldn't be a fish, not here, not in this river. And it was beautiful—tapering slim shape and crimson dark scales, streaking across the dark water. But how could a fish have been—

"Rachel!"

"I'm coming!"

She splashed forward, flailing her arms. The raft had swung sidewise under Don's backward pull. One corner pointed directly down the river, like a prow. Mrs. Angstrom was still screaming, and now Rachel could hear her over the rapids, a shrill scream with a scraping flutter in it, doubling and redoubling in echoes off the bluffs that crowded the river on both sides. Around her the slimy water moved faster, singing darkly.

Don’s skin felt clammy with gooseflesh. Rachel forced her hands around his waist and threw her weight backwards. He staggered, but then caught her rhythm and stepped back with her over the jagged rocks. (Jagged rocks? It had been sand when she started. Rocks, cold—why did he make everything as goddamn *hard* as possible?) The muscles in the back of Don’s neck knotted with each step. Slowly the raft eased backward, moving upstream, against the current.

Mrs. Angstrom went on screaming.

They were almost back to where Rachel stood before, angling in towards a rock shelf at the foot of the bluff, when a fish swam by again. Suddenly there were two of them, slashing the coldness with bright streaks of warm color. She tried to yell to Don to look at the fish, but he didn’t turn his head. Wood chips from the raft, smelling of rot and slime, hung in his hair.

How quick the fish were! How alive and yet not alive, glowing with passionate flashes of red, more intense than any color she had ever seen. More intense than any being she had ever seen—pure, whole, free, and with a passion glimpsed only in night dreams. Passionately red. Streaking across the night blackness, burning deeper and deeper, the searing crimson flaring out like a nova until the water itself was warmed. How could she have thought it was cold? It was only cold until you were used to it, then warm and bright with the glow, the yearning, the flowing between your legs like black velvet. Red fins and slim tapering bodies leading you down into the sweet silent water, the longed-for, half-remembered temperature, salty and thick, warm as blood.

She let go of Don and slipped in a slow sliding curve under the blood-warm water.

* * * *

“MorMedic Campbell. Come on, now, wake up. This is Nurse Ferrier. Wake up, now.”

The young voice trying to be old went on and on, patiently. Rachel turned over and tried to pull the blanket over her head.

“None of that. Come on, MorMedic—Rachel. Wake up, now. Please wake up.”

A hand began slapping her hesitantly on the cheeks, first the left one,

then the right. When Rachel reached up to bat the hand away it caught her wrist and pulled a little.

“Rachel, come on. You’re supposed to wake up now.”

“I’m awake.”

“Then open your eyes. Please open your eyes.”

The face was leaning over her, blocking the window. Chubby cheeks, blond curls, oily skin: Rachel recognized her as the latest of the young nurses who followed Don around, smiling wistfully. Sarah, Sandy—Susan. Susan something. The nurse moved her head and Rachel was assaulted by sunlight, then memory. Abruptly she sat up.

“Mrs. Angstrom—”

“Alive. The fever broke. She’s over the worst.”

“She’ll make it?”

“The prognosis is hopeful,” the nurse said primly. The corners of her young mouth turned down. Rachel saw the grimace for what it was: the involuntary distrust of the technician of the body for the technician of the mind, of the concrete for the shadowy, of the dutifully licensed for the hired outsider. Probably Nurse Ferrier didn’t even notice what her mouth was doing; that didn’t help.

Why the hell were they like that? It seemed to Rachel that nearly all of them, all the hospital personnel and the academic researchers and even the next-of-kin who paid for the services of a Mortality Medical Team, spent most of their living energies in wilful, edgy misunderstanding of what that team did.

Not that there was much about metaphorical healing that was concrete enough *to* understand. So many unknowns: how did MorMedics ease themselves into synchronous trance? How did they wordlessly choose and construct a metaphor for death, and then ensnare the minds of the dying into becoming passive participants in the metaphor? How did they pull the dying back from the idea of death, and why should the body often follow the idea? Often, so often, but not always. Why not always? Why at all? Why this, why that, why was this stupid girl standing here blushing at her, why, why—

Why did I let go of the raft?

"Of course," Susan Ferrier said awkwardly, "I know I don't understand any of it. I didn't mean to imply—I know that Don—MorMedic Bareis—he does wonderful work. So many people have said they—not that there's any way of knowing it wasn't just the basic medical care that wasn't really the cause for—but he really does give it everything he's got. He really tries. And you, too, of course," she added hastily.

"Of course," Rachel said sourly, and swung her heavy legs over the side of the bed.

"Let me help you. Do you feel all right?"

"You couldn't do anything about it if I didn't," Rachel said, and waited for the girl to take offense. But instead she smiled, a smile so patient and open that it changed her whole face, making even the bad skin a shiny reflection for the sunlight that filled the room, a meek acceptance of whatever was offered. Rachel felt dimly ashamed; she scowled and looked away.

Don lay in an empty bed parked in an unused alcove by the linen room. He was still asleep. Lying on his left side, his legs drawn up, he looked even smaller than usual. Where did it come from, all that power in that delicate, balding skull with the last sideburns in Boston? His right shoulder hunched up toward his chin; Rachel could see where the collarbone, chicken-skinny, met the shoulder. Such delicate shoulders; so much unseen, over-regulated power.

Holding those shoulders in her arms had never been able to excite her. She had tried—God knows she had tried, wanting to make their obligatory intercourse something more than the required playing through of common sexual metaphors. Her metaphors, violent and restless, had repelled him; his metaphors, stately and secretive, had bored her. Or maybe his had never really surfaced at all, never really broken through all that awesome control. Always that control, that careful consideration of ends rather then means. Not that she didn't admire it professionally, of course. But in all six months that they had lived together, she had never had an orgasm. She had come to know Don through and through, and nowhere had she found that abandonment, that complexity, that passionate struggle that might have made her respond to him. She had lain next to him, holding him as she gazed out his window at the night clouds whipping over Boston Bay, and it had been like holding a child in her arms.

But, free of sexual metaphors, they had made such ideal working partners! His the initiation and control, hers the passion and energy. They were the best team on the East Coast, once they had worked at an operation on a former president of United Europe. But that had been years ago; she had never lost the metaphor then, never given in to—what?

Leaning against the wall of the linen room, Rachel felt the sour little bubbles rise in her stomach, and scowled. She hated, above all else, the rare times she felt afraid.

Don was awake. He lay looking at her, his light gray eyes compassionate.

“I’m sorry, Don. I lost it. I was with you and then I just . . . lost it.”

“Rachel—”

“No. Don’t. I know.”

He looked away from her, into the linen room. Crumpled sheets lay in a pile on the floor. His small, delicate-veined hand clenched at his side, and she spoke quickly, anything, before he could speak.

“How did you get the raft to shore?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then—”

“It happened to snag on a rock, so I left it to pull you out. The rock wasn’t mine. Yours?”

“You know better than that.”

“Then it must have been hers. Latent ability, maybe, I don’t know—it was just sheer luck. The one-in-a-thousand chance. Not something I could count on again. Rachel—”

“Was I hard to get out?”

“No. You had already swallowed enough water by the time I could grab you.”

“Did Mrs. Angstrom try at all to—”

“Rachel. Stop it.”

“Don’t tell me what I can ask or not ask about a—”

“I can’t work with you any more.”

She looked at him. Somewhere, down the hall, around a corner where she couldn’t see, a patient coughed.

“Don’t look at me like that, Rachel. Rachel—”

Why were people always doing that, always starting their speeches to her with her name? Nobody else was addressed so much by name. Did they think it gained them something: time, her attention, her favor? Fools. She hated her name. “Rachel, weeping for her children, because they are no more . . .” She fought, not wept. It was the wrong metaphor.

“Rachel, at least listen to me. To start with, you need some time off, a few weeks to rest. Tiredness—”

“If you know I was tired, why did you use the river? You knew I have trouble with all the water constructs, we’ve been over this a hundred times, yet you go right ahead and use it anyway, you don’t seem to—”

“Don’t attack, Rachel. Attacking won’t help.”

“‘Attack’. God, you even *talk* in metaphors.”

He passed a hand over his eyes, but he wasn’t deterred. They had worked together for fourteen years, had been mortal friends for twelve.

“A rest would do you—”

“No, it wouldn’t. I’d go crazy. I need to work, you know that!”

“You could do some of your gardening, take a trip. Visit your sister in Detroit.”

“I can’t stand my sister in Detroit. I need to work.”

“So take a job at an algae factory!” Don snapped, and despite the panic in her stomach, Rachel grinned. It still had the power to surprise her, this unexpected exasperation that could break the surface of his bland,

slow patience. Impulsively she reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

“No, Rachel. I mean it. Mrs. Angstrom, and last week the brain surgery. Shapiro.”

“They both pulled through!”

“You deserted me in the middle. Shapiro wasn’t water, either.”

It had been night, the oldest metaphor of all. Don and she had crouched on a vast plain, plying enormous bellows, pumping toward a tiny spark of fire on a pile of messy ashes. They leaned on hands and knees to blow with exhausted breaths until the veins in her cheeks swelled and popped. The plain had been dark, cave-coffin-womb dark, except for that wavering spark from the inert mass on the operating table. And then suddenly Rachel had seen how much more beautiful the velvety darkness was, how much more pregnant with mysterious huntings and yearned-for promises, than the grotesque shadows cast by the grubby little spark. The most natural, the lightest thing in the world, was to turn her back on the dingy ashes and face the spacious, gravid, sweet-scented dark, just face it and listen for what it surely had to whisper to her, what unfettered vast secrets—she hated O.R. work, anyway. The electronic instruments were a subtle distraction, their rhythms never exactly matching the ones Don set, and so were all those others, the endless personnel which conventional medicine thought it needed, moving and talking and breathing and filling up the crowded room with their petty static. It was no wonder she’d lost the metaphor! So many of them, always, you’d think an operation was a goddamn football game, all spectators welcome. Next time she should sell tickets. Next time she—

“You don’t just need a rest, anyway, Rachel. Let’s not argue about the rest. What you need, the second thing—the most important thing—is an analysis.”

“No.”

“This is serious. I can’t risk your going out on me with a patient again. Will you at least talk to a psychiatrist about this weird death wish—”

“Spare me the pop jargon!”

“If you—”

“Why do you push me on the same stupid thing? We’ve been over

this a hundred times! No, no, no!”

Don sat up in the bed. The blanket slipped and Rachel saw the thin gray scar on his chest, souvenir of a mugging in the Public Gardens on his way home from an emergency night operation. Over the years she had raged against that chest, storming as various men had let her down, had turned out to be only pygmy gusts instead of the nature-shaping gales she had thought them, had after all not been enough for her. Not been *large* enough. Don had always been there, always listened, contained and patient, waiting for the passing of emotional storms he never shared.

“I push you on the same thing because I *have* to, Rachel. Now be rational. If you go under when we’re on a crucial case where I can’t let—”

“Analysis won’t help!”

“How can you say that when you haven’t even—”

“No, damn it! No, no, no!”

“Rachel—if you don’t have an analysis you don’t work with me.”

“Fine! I’ll find another partner!”

He drew a deep breath. The scar on his chest quivered under the fluorescent light.

“If you don’t have an analysis, you don’t work.”

“You can’t—”

“Yes. I can.”

She flung out one arm, the gesture meaningless, and struck a shelf beside her. Glass shattered; metal clattered to the floor. Unheeding, Don looked at her directly, those gray eyes that absorbed light steady in his delicate face. He looked absurd, like a child playing king, playing petty dictator, playing with the only thing in her stupid life vital enough to mean anything. He looked like a scrawny chicken, trying to outface a falling cliff. She could snap those twiggy little bones with one hand, she could crush him right where he lay.

“See the psychiatrist.”

“Don’t talk to *me* with that mealy-mouth superiority! Didn’t you ever make a mistake, didn’t you ever mess up a construct?”

“No, I didn’t. Lives are at stake.”

“God, you’re so smug! So sure-of-yourself prissy *smug!”*

“See the psychiatrist. I know what you’re thinking, Rachel—but just because it happened to D’Amato doesn’t mean it’ll happen to you.”

“And do you know what D’Amato’s doing now?” Rachel shouted. “Selling life insurance! Gone, all gone, as soon as some Freud-fly started poking around—not even *you* know how to get In, and you’re an initiator! Not even you—”

Susan Ferrier stood in the hall, in a patch of sunlight crawling with dust motes, her hand to her mouth. Rachel jerked around and stared fiercely, pointlessly, into the linen room, her back to both of them. She could never work alone. Whatever it took to make the initial link, that catching of the unguarded dying that drew in their what?—essence? will to live? soul? Nobody knew, that was the whole damn *point*— whatever it took, she didn’t have it. She was only the raw energy, the lightning without a ship’s mast, the flooding river, rampaging lost beyond its banks.

“Rachel, see the psychiatrist.”

Under his even tone she heard the jaggedness that might have been pain, but when she turned his face was still controlled, closed as a fortress. Beyond him Susan Ferrier had not moved, her hand still to her mouth in the dusty sunshine. They were both such small people, such controlled, bodiless, sunlit people, so content with what they had . . . Rachel pushed past them, shoving Susan out of the way with one hand.

“I need you, Rachel,” Don said. He had climbed out of bed and stood naked on the tile floor; the top of his head reached her chin. He looked defenseless, vulnerable—deliberately vulnerable? On the floor his bony toes splayed outward.

“I need you.”

“I’d take you Under first!”

He shook his head, but whether to deny her words or just to deflect

them, Rachel didn’t see. She kept on pushing down the hall, not looking back, the sunlight white and placid behind her.

* * * *

She began to remember her dreams. That had never happened when she was working; it had been years since dreams had made the crossing to her conscious mind. In the night she would sit up and cry out, waking herself, sweat clammy under her nightgown. Her hands would be clenching the metal bed frame so hard the welts would stay on her palms for hours. Yet the dreams themselves were calm, ordinary: she was picking a bouquet of early asters in the garden, she was stirring the rice in its enameled pot on the stove, she was painting a window frame in her tiny Commonwealth Avenue apartment. Sunshine washed through the window and over the wet paint, making moving shadows where her hand swished back and forth. The paint smelled clean and permanent, like glue. When the frame was painted, she cleaned her brush in warm water, slapping the bristles back and forth, each separate bristle distinct and pleasantly tingling against her hands.

Hands—always hands. But she woke screaming.

During the day Rachel worked in the garden. She had chosen the shabby, cramped apartment on Commonwealth Avenue for its fenced garden, a luxury left over from the time when the Back Bay had been a pleasant, safe part of the city. Now it was neither; fights and muggings and curses echoed nightly over her wooden fence. But—there was the garden, and a tiny redwood sundeck that overlooked it. She worked frantically, jabbing her spade with the rapid-fire rhythm of a jack-hammer, or a machine gun. “Slow down, Rachel,” Don said from the sun-deck, a drink in his hand. “Slow down, you don’t have to plant Eden in one afternoon.” She scowled at the image from ten years ago and hoed the ground around her tomatoes as if rescuing them from strangulation. “Take it easy,” the image said. “All that storm and strife could kill you.”

At night she dreamed of fixing a pipe. She could feel her hands grip the wrench as it tightened on the joint collars. She woke screaming.

After a few weeks the gardening ran out. There was only so much to do. The beans had all been propped on poles; the cigarette butts and beer cans passersby had tossed over the fence had all been cleared out; the flowers had all been pruned. Rachel’s neighbors, made uneasy by the fierce order of her marigolds and the harsh measure of her scowl, left her alone.

She sat up later and later. All the curtains were drawn tightly and pinned over closed windows. She did not trust herself to even smell the summer night, heavy with lush promise— instead she watched TV news shows, hospital shows, old space dramas and even older Westerns. People were laser-fried by aliens and died. People fell off horses and died. People contracted odd strains of mutated viruses and died. Rachel watched it all, wrapped in an old hand-knitted afghan, glaring at the TV. Contestants won refrigerators, diplomats made the shuttle trip to the moon, patients fought off the odd mutated viruses and lived. Once, during a news segment about a spectacular transplant operation, she glimpsed Don in the background of the O.R., looking small and exhausted. Not even that made her turn off the TV. She let it all wash over her, staying with it right to the early morning sex shows, wanting only to stay awake, not to sleep, not to dream the calm, ordinary, useful dreams.

* * * *

“MorMedic Campbell?”

“Nurse Ferrier.”

“May I come in?”

“No.”

Susan Ferrier blinked, whether at the rudeness or Rachel’s appearance, Rachel couldn’t tell. She knew how she looked. Soiled bathrobe, uncombed hair, pasty skin with dark circles under the eyes—hadn’t missed a cliché, had she? The whole theatrical repertoire of panic. Touched all the bases. At the absurdity of this flash of perverted vanity, Rachel smiled sourly and Susan, mistaking the smile, walked in.

“It’s about—well, about Don. I see him around the hospital, and he always looks so tired. Just spent. I know I probably shouldn’t interfere, MorMedic—Rachel—”

“MorMedic.”

The girl flushed. “Working alone is just too *much* for him. It’s really none of my business—”

“No. It’s not.”

“—but he can’t find another assistant, and frankly, I’m worried about

him. He needs another assistant. He really does. But there aren't too many of—of you."

Rachel walked to the stove. She was out of coffee. A mug lay on its side, the last dregs soggy in the bottom. Three brown bags of garbage rotted in the sunshine from the window. She had just not been much interested in removing them. Through the glass, she could see a dented beer can caught in the rose bush.

"Of us what?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You don't have it. Not too many of us what? Death rats? Decay-diddlers? Infidels? Frauds? What exactly do you think MorMedics are, Nurse Ferrier?"

"Mental healers," Susan said quietly. Rachel saw what she had missed before: dignity. The girl was timid, washed-out, bland, but she had dignity.

"Faith healers. But not *their* faith—ours. Does Don know you're here?"

"No. But—"

"Presumptuous, then, isn't it?"

"I just thought—"

"No. You didn't."

Susan drew a deep breath. Her oily skin mottled with red. "I'm not going to fence with you. I don't know what you're so angry about all the time, anyway. I don't know why you never relax, never—but Don lost three this week. All of them should have made it. One was an eight-year-old boy."

Rachel sat down. She lowered herself into a chair slowly, back straight, as if something were fragile.

"Tell me."

"The first one was on Tuesday. My head nurse said it was gastric tumor, and the surgeon—"

“Not *that.* What was Don using with the kid.”

Susan hesitated. “I don’t know, exactly. He wouldn’t talk about it afterwards, even though he was really upset. But somebody said it was something about a cliff.”

She could feel it. Hauling the child in a rope-sling up the sheer face of the mountain, the body groggy but not completely inert, so that it flailed and groaned at the end of the rope. An eight-year-old would be heavy on those thin shoulders. Because he was Don, it would be cold. The snow would whip past his goggles, sometimes blinding him to the ledge above, the safe ledge which, if he only could reach it, would let him keep the kid safe—let him put the small body in the back near the rocks, under the overhang, and shield it from the wind with his own body. Would let him pull off his gloves and wipe the blood off hands raw from hauling on ropes and hammering in spikes for hours. It would have been hours. And then the unexpected shift of the rope, the child sickeningly light for the blind moment before the snow gusted and Don could see the fall, slow and unstoppable as the fall of night. At the base of the cliff, in the waiting room, the parents who had hired Don would lift their eyes from unread magazines, to scan his face as he walked toward them. And he would have to tell them.

“MorMedic Campbell?”

“But Carl D’Amato is selling *life* insurance!”

“Who?”

Rachel closed her eyes. When she didn’t answer Susan squirmed a little, an abortive half-moment that in another girl might have been a shrug, or a flick of impatience, or a plea for attention.

“The third case was O.R. A knife-fight victim. Actually, the patient came through the surgery and we thought he would make it, but Don was still with him in post-op, and he was using the—”

“No. Don’t tell me.”

“Rachel—”

“Don’t *tell* me!”

Sunshine streamed in the window. Susan stood still, waiting. Rachel

fidgeted, stacking the salt shaker on top of the pepper, ringing both with torn bits of advertising circular, making and unmaking frentic designs her intent eyes did not even see. The child fell from the cliff.

“All right. I’ll see your psychiatrist.”

“Oh, Don will be so—”

“Yes. Set it up for tomorrow.”

“Maybe today the doctor could fit in a—”

“Tomorrow.”

The girl nodded. They looked at each other across the littered table, Susan smiling uncertainly, Rachel fierce. There was nothing else to say. They might have been two different species, circling each other warily around the water hole of Rachel’s shabby kitchen. A fly buzzed monotonously across the sunlit silence.

“Well, I guess I better be—”

“What is death to you?” Rachel asked abruptly, and waited. She expected an evasion or an embarrassed stare, something that would justify her dislike. But again Susan surprised her. She answered promptly, meeting Rachel’s eyes directly, her uncertain smile gone.

“The enemy.”

“Always?”

“Of course.” The girl’s eyes widened suddenly. “Isn’t it always to—”

“Go home, Nurse Ferrier.”

“But—”

“Go *home.”*

* * * *

Now even watching TV was impossible. Her mind skidded crazily, missing whole chunks of plot, entire countries’ worth of news.

“—and now the NBS newsbreak. Fighting has intensified along the Niger-Barmou border, with losses estimated as high as 4,000 men, women and children. A high official in nearby Mali, who declined to be identified, confirmed genetically altered bacteria in an attempt to gain control—”

Control, Rachel, control. You might be an initiator if you could just keep your own needs out of the metaphor.

And the great Don might be decent in bed if you’d just let any of yours in!

That wasn’t called for.

“—called for an end to the death and destruction in a Security Council Meeting earlier today. Locally, purse-snatchings and muggings in the downtown area—”

Of course it hurt. What sort of question is that? No, don’t touch there, it’s still tender.

Don—what did you feel when the mugger pulled the knife?

I felt afraid.

Is that all? Nothing more complicated, more—mixed?

Of course not.

“—return you to the Himalayas and NBS coverage via telesatellite of the death-teasing struggle of seven American mountain climbers to climb the—”

Turn it off.

I want to see it.

Good God, Rachel, why?

I don’t know. It’s beautiful. No, it’s not. It’s outrageous, dangerous, big—I don’t know. Don’t you ever think that if you weren’t a MorMedic, you might live that way? Pushing life to the limit?

Never. What’s the point?

Does there have to be a point? Maybe they're just trying to escape all this endless cramped discontent that the rest of us live in!

I don't feel either cramped or discontent.

God, I hate your self-righteousness!

Do you? I'm sorry. But adolescent longings for some vague passionate grandeur don't interest me.

Self-righteous, mundane, limited—

"—limited to four days more of food and water, before facing a lingering death on this lonely Himalayan slope battered by winds of up to—"

Rachel turned off the TV. Silence filled the apartment. Hunched in her chair, pulling closely around her shoulders a shawl pointless in the summer heat, she stared at the blank screen. Beyond the drawn curtains she could feel the night, curling around the city like a sleek, stretching cat.

* * * *

She dreamed she was building a new frame for the kitchen window. She chose the nail; under her fingers it felt cold and solid. She held it straight and drove it in with clean blows, her hand bringing the hammer down over the exact center of the nail head, again and again. The kitchen filled with steady, balanced pounding and with the clean smell of new wood. The windowsill was nearly finished; it lay to one side on the floor, sturdy in the sunshine. She woke screaming.

The pounding went on.

It was the wind, fiercely blowing over the vast, deserted plain outside her window, pounding at the apartment. Rachel tore open the locks on the barred grill and ran out onto the sundeck. Below her the garden lay crystalline in starlight. Beyond the fence a group of boys went by on Commonwealth Avenue, insulting each other in Spanish. A beer can was tossed over the fence, but just before it hit the dahlias the wind screamed and Rachel dropped to the deck, grabbed the railing, and hung on. She was out on the plain, alone in the howling wind. The few cotton woods on the plain were twisted by the wind into grotesque knots. Tumbleweeds slammed into rocks that were themselves crumbled into tortured

deformities by centuries of wind. A cotton wood crashed over, raking the air with branches, and the wind wailed and screamed. She would be swept away, she would be torn in half by this wind that could not exist. Not here, not at this distance, not without any contact or agreement. Not even Don could initiate such a metaphor—but it had to be Don's, he was the only one teamed to take her In at all. But how, and why? Whom was he rescuing? Who was dying?

A sudden gale force gust slapped her from behind, hurling her hair forward over her face, blinding her. Flat on her stomach, she grabbed handfuls of the tough prairie grass and tried to raise her head enough to see where the twister was. Dirt and grit blew into her eyes, then tore at her lips and tongue when she screamed.

* * * *

A night moth fluttered gently over to the dahlias, folding pale wings.

* * * *

She was crawling against the wind, looking for Don. She could move only a few inches at a time, grabbing fistfuls of grass to pull herself along. The grass came up at the roots; most of it was torn from her hands by the wind. Her hair jerked abruptly away from her face and pulled at the scalp so hard it hurt. Weeds and grit howled overhead, making a tearing gray sky only inches above her head.

"Don! Don!"

He was ahead of her, a dim shape in the shrieking gloom, trying to stand up. Rachel could see his body, naked to the waist, rise a few feet above the plain. Even as she raised her head to call again he was knocked to his knees, then spun sideways a few feet and slammed to the ground. She felt rather than heard the sharp crack of bone at the left elbow. A second later, he was trying to stagger to his knees. What was he trying to do? Where was the patient he was rescuing?

Crawling forward, Rachel reached up and pulled Don down by his belt. Instead of grasping her hand or shouting to her what was going on, Don twisted his body and clawed at her face with his one good hand. Rachel gasped and beat his hand away, finally pinning his wrist behind him. He jabbed upward with his knee but she was quicker, throwing her body full length on top of his. Her right elbow came down on his broken one; even over the demonic wind she heard him scream. Their faces were inches

apart, but when he spat at her the spittle whipped away horizontally.

“Listen! Don!”

He wouldn’t hear her. Rachel’s body, ten centimeters longer and twenty kilos heavier, couldn’t hold his. The wind was lifting him from underneath, gusting up from the earth itself like some live, demented spirit.

“What the hell are you doing? The metaphor doesn’t go like this!” Rachel screamed. Don’s face strained beneath her, blank with concentration. They were three inches off the ground, locked together like rammed galleys, when Don’s head fell backward; he closed his eyes and smiled as the wind slammed him in the face. Rachel hit him in the nose. Blood spurted out and was blown by the wind. She leaned over and tried to snatch at the whipping grass, and when her fist finally closed over a clump she pulled hard. They tilted forward, her body riding his, until the grasses tore and their heads shot upward. Don’s body slid sideways under Rachel’s and she rolled off him, landing hard on the ground.

Free of her weight, Don rose another few inches. His broken left arm flopped like a puppet’s. Rachel rolled under him and grabbed upward; her arms and then her legs wrapped around Don, dragging him down to her and tightening like a vise. The hair on the back of his head lashed at her mouth, tasting of sweat. He tried to flail backwards at her with his right arm, but she was beyond his reach, and he began prying at her hands clutching his chest. She locked his fingers and squeezed until something under them cracked.

At first her weight pulled them toward the ground, but then the impossible wind again began to blast them from underneath. It was warmer now, a warm raging wind as solid as tropic rapids. At three inches they began to rotate, but Rachel couldn’t see through the flying hair and grit whether Don was using a twister in his senseless battle with—what? What the hell was he fighting her off to do? And where was the patient in this hellish metaphor? Above her Don gave a long, low sound: not a moan or a cry but a drawn-out breathy keening of such yearning and hope that Rachel tightened her hold until skin and blood jammed under her fingernails, and then she understood.

Don was the one dying. Dying not as a passive construct in somebody else’s metaphor, but as an active participant in his own, both initiator and victim. He wasn’t being tossed by the wind, he was *riding* it. Voluntarily mounting it higher and higher, back to the beginning, back where the wind blew from flowed to fell from the side of the cliff, slow and

unstoppable as the fall of night. Night—night was there, mysterious and passionate and terrible enough to fill all those aches and yearnings that the glare of sunlight only exposed—

"No, damn it!" she screamed into his bloody hair. "Not you! Not *you!"*

Night. He was going to night, on top of the sky, above the wind. He was going to night, to the warmth and throbbing as the crimson blood rushed into her breasts, between her legs. Crimson flaring out like a nova spreading engulfing the longed-for, half-remembered temperature, blood-warm, salty dark—

Throwing her head forward, Rachel closed her teeth on Don's right shoulder. Blood filled her mouth, rushing in with outraged scream. The jerks of his body as he tried to rip free of her teeth tilted them crazily to the right, but not enough to flip over their locked bodies and leave her on top. The wind from beneath became stronger and louder; they were rising faster. Rachel spit out Don's shoulder—he had stopped the keening— and screamed "Fight it, damn you! You told *me* to fight it!" There was no sign he heard. She tried to make the wind colder, harsher—hail, sleet, blowing sand—anything but this seductive warmth, cleaner by the moment, lifting them higher and higher. She succeeded in lowering the temperature a few degrees, but then the demented howling began to sound more regular, swelling and pulsing and mounting to a crescendo of power that was music and thunder and orgasm, that held her transfixed, no longer fighting.

They were being blown upward and northward, at an angle, towards the night. The plain unfolded below them, tattered and unimportant. Ahead the sky throbbed black and crimson, never wholly one or the other but a passionate, relentless blending, flashing lightning—under her legs, clamped around Don's, Rachel could feel the force of his erection. The wind sang past them, hot and alive. Rachel cried out, didn't hear herself, and closed her eyes, smiling into the night as the night flowed into her, and then blackness came.

* * * *

The first thing she became aware of was her neck. It ached; the muscles were cramped and tense. Awareness of the rest of her body followed. There was no part of her that was not bruised and battered. Slowly, Rachel opened her eyes. At the same second, she realized mat the wind had stopped and the air hung as still and heavy as she and Don were hanging.

They were in the branches of a huge cottonwood. Other trees,

unseen before in the dust of the twister, dotted the prairie. Don lay pressed against the cottonwood's trunk, circled and pinned by Rachel's arms. Next to the trunk her hands clung to two of the branches; it was her hands that had held them in the tree. Rachel tried to open her fingers. At first she could not, so desperately were they knotted around the solid wood. When she had forced open her scraped and cramped hands, Rachel spread them in front of her, shifted Don's weight slightly so he would not fall out of the tree, and then stared at her spread hands. She turned them over and back, palms up and palms down. It was as though they belonged to someone else, as though she had never seen them before.

Hands. Driving a nail, picking a bouquet, stirring the rice, painting a window frame. Holding on for dear life, even when the mind desired otherwise. For dear life.

In front of her spread hands, Don moaned softly.

* * * *

The moth left the dahlias. It hovered over the beer can, flew to the deck, and settled on a fold of Rachel's nightgown. She sat up, looking at her hands. The moth flew away, wings pale in the moonlight as any ghost.

* * * *

"Awake?"

"Yes."

"Rachel—"

"Don't." She put her finger to his lips. He looked exhausted, white ridges sagging on either side of his mouth, but whole. Irrationally, she had half-expected to see the broken arm and bitten shoulder. But there was only the old scar on his chest, and the new lump on her forehead where the gun butt had come down.

"It was a mugger," she said. "Just another stupid, greedy mugger. You must look like an easy target. He gave you a concussion, and you went into severe shock."

"I know. Susan Ferrier told me." His voice was flat, stretched like taut canvas over the pain underneath.

“So now you get to be a medical-first. After all, nobody else has ever initiated his own metaphor to finish killing himself. You’ll be a celebrity, a real psychiatrist’s dream. ‘Metaphoric Death Wish Among the Metaphoric Healers: A Reverse Phenomenon.’ Still want *me* to see the Freud-fly?”

Don didn’t answer. After a moment Rachel looked away and said, “I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“I had it coming,” Don said. “All these weeks—all these weeks I thought it was *you.* Mrs. Angstrom. Shapiro. I thought it was *you.* But you must have been picking it up all along from me, some crazy repressed fascination with death I didn’t even know I had—”

“From you?” Rachel said. It was a new idea. But then she thought of the calm, ordinary dreams that brought her awake screaming, of the delicious blood-warm water, of the wind mounting upward under her. “No. No, I don’t think it was only you.”

“What then?”

“I think,” she said slowly, “I think it was both of us. There might have been something I was picking up from you, something you couldn’t express directly—*control*—but then I—it wasn’t all you. No.”

Don reached up and fingered the bruise on his forehead. He deliberately pushed it, Rachel saw, hard enough to hurt, and she closed her eyes.

“Don’t, Don. Don’t blame yourself.”

“I could have killed us both. Only I didn’t even know you were going to be there, in the metaphor. How did you get In? I didn’t call you.”

“Yes. You did. You must have, or the prairie metaphor wouldn’t have reached me . . . wait. I was asleep, I was dreaming. Your trance reached my dream.”

Again Don put his hands to either side of his head. This time the touch was tentative, probing; in his gray eyes brimmed a strange light, fascinated and horrified. “I wanted to die. I *wanted* it. I constructed a metaphor to hurry towards it, not to stop it—”

“I know,” Rachel said. “I know. But you also reached out to me, or

your trance did. And you must have known, at some level, that I would stop you."

"Why did you? Why *did* you try to stop me? You tried to get there yourself, before—with Mrs. Angstrom. With Shapiro. Why stop me? Why didn't you join me from the beginning?"

"I don't know," Rachel said. "Why did you stop *me* before, and this time want to go on yourself?"

There was a long silence. In the corridor footsteps passed. Somewhere a phone jangled softly. Don squeezed his eyes shut. "I'll have to see a psychiatrist, if I'm going to work again. We both will."

"No!"

"Rachel, I *have* to. If I don't talk about it, if I let it go, it will *grow,* don't you see? It will grow, and next time—"

"Then not to me. Don't talk about it to me."

"Ever?"

"No."

"It would help you."

"No. It would help you, because for you the important thing is to get it out, bring out whatever—once you get it out in the sunlight, you can take it apart and label all the parts and make each one just another tool. Then you won't be in danger of giving in. But I don't work that way. I can't."

Don chewed on his lip. A long moment went by, and Rachel held her breath.

"If you can't," he said finally, "then you can't. But maybe if I can understand what *I'm* doing, how whatever need in *me* starts you changing the metaphor—if I can get my end under control—Rachel, I need to work with you. It has to be you, now. You're the only one who would know what's happening and would stop me if—"

"Hush," Rachel said. "Hush. We'll stop each other."

Don groped for her hand. She held it, feeling the scrawny wrist bones and the blood in his pulse and the callus on the third finger where he held a pencil. Her fingernails dug into the bony knobs of his knuckles. She could feel there, in the veins and nerves and delicate bones of his hands, the question he hadn't yet asked, and she waited.

"The night in the metaphor," he said, finally, "the Night. Death. Is it really as beautiful as I felt? As desirable?"

"Oh, God, Don. How do I know? The only other one who has seen it is you, and you were linked with me. How can I tell if it's really that beautiful, or if it's just that I—that *we* need it to be like that?"

Don's hand tightened on hers. Rachel gripped it hard, grateful for the blood and bone and flesh next to her palm.

"We'll stop each other," Don said. "Rachel?"

She nodded. Unsmiling, they looked at each other. Both were careful to keep their eyes focused, to stare straight ahead at the other's face, to avert their heads from the parted yellow drapes fluttering at the sill, from what lay beyond the yellow drapes.

Their two hands clasped desperately. For dear life.

Outside the window, night came.

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* * * *

Borovsky’s Hollow Woman

This is the only story on which I have ever collaborated. Jeff Duntemann told me he had begun a story about a private vendetta on a half-finished space station; the major character, he said seriously, was a sentient space suit. But it was not going well, and would I be interested in working with him on it?

I was reluctant on two counts: Jeff’s and my writing styles are very different, and the story sounded more high-tech than I could handle. But when he showed me the manuscript, I found (a little incredulously), that I liked Laura. We figured out how to proceed: Jeff wrote the first third and I rewrote it; I wrote the second third and he rewrote it; he wrote the last third and I rewrote it.

Throughout, we had no real disagreements—until Ellen Datlow at OMNI asked us to shorten the story by a few thousand words. Suddenly territoriality sprang to fierce life. The cutting, which I had thought would take a Saturday morning, took hours and hours. My son Kevin, who had come with me to Jeff’s house for the surgery, learned several new words and decided not to become a writer.

I derived an unexpected benefit from this story. Jeff wrote his sections on an IBM PC; I wrote mine on lined paper and revised with scissors, Scotch tape, and BIC pen. Appalled at the mess I periodically mailed him, Jeff showed up at my door one Friday night with a VICTOR 9000 in his arms, said he was loaning it to me until I joined the twentieth century, and depended on my sons’ enthusiasm to convert me to word processing.

It did, and I am grateful. Thank you, Jeff.

* * * *

Laura walked the Low Steel above the stars, searching for her man.

It was 2.3 klicks across the skeletal terrain by the most direct route-the e blue line on the diagram of the construction zone burned in the

eye of Laura’s mind. No one but Mikhail Borovsky would take that particular route across the unfinished girders of the titan cylinder’s outermost level, and even-he would not take it without her.

One foot before the other, lift, swing, step. The pilot beam was solid monocrystal steel, I-section, one decimeter wide. One hundred meters to her left and right identical girders glittered in the always-changing light. They were the primary structural support of the latest, lowest level of George Eastman Nexus. Each girder was a single crystal of iron atoms, one hundred nineteen kilometers in circumference, and strong enough to rest an artificial world on.

For a kilometer ahead and behind, it was Laura and her beam.

A man in the saddle of a six-wheeled yoyo swung under the horizon far away antispinward and quickly approached her, soon passing to the rear and vanishing. Borovsky’s yoyo was a four-wheeler. The earth swung up behind her and made blue highlights creep across the dull gray steel plates ten meters above her helmet. It slipped above the horizon and was gone again for another forty minutes.

Laura adjusted the magnetism in her boot soles. Just enough to add a little friction, a little sureness. If she fell outward from the rotating structure into the starry darkness the steelworkers called the Pit, no one would fall after to her rescue. But she would not fall. Steel was her medium, just as it was Borovsky’s, and she loved it. Steel was sure and clean and true. It could be trusted, as Borovsky could be trusted when he wasn’t-

No. She would not allow that thought to be completed.

Where had they gone? Borovsky, in rubber underwear, off on a yoyo to fight a man twice his size, somewhere on a level swinging more than 1.6 g. Falling on your face could flatten your skull on E Minus Seven. Fighting could dock you a week’s pay. Ignoring a challenge could get you called a phobe. A coward. A . . . woman.

Where?

Step following step, body bent forward, using the artificial gravity to help carry her onward, Laura searched. She scanned the chatter on the CB and the bloody-murder band. Nothing spoke of a man in rubber hurt on E Minus Seven.

Less than five hundred meters of open steel remained. Far ahead

Laura saw something streak through the shadows toward the sucking stars. She followed desperately with her eyes and saw it catch the sun beyond the great cylinder's shadow. Four-wheeled gantry, cable, saddle: It blazed brilliant yellow for a moment and was gone, falling forever.

His yoyo, unridden, alone. Damn the Pit! Laura broke into a run, each boot hitting the beam safely though without thought, each magnet grabbing just so much. Raw dawn broke behind her and cast lurching shadows against the unfinished steel ahead. The sun was beneath her feet as she stepped from naked monocrystal onto gray steel plates.

Above was the port from which the yoyo had fallen. She pulled herself up a ladder and stepped out onto E Minus Six. A little lighter, a little less deadly.

No sign of fleeing men. Six was a big level, one hundred meters thick. Heavy chemical industry, she remembered.

Before her a dozen huge steel tanks squatted against the floor like brooding hens. Each was ten meters high, with a ladder leading to a dogged circular hatch.

She scanned the tanks. All were alike, save that one of the hatches had dog-handles twisted differently from the rest. In moments she was at the hatch, pushing the dogs aside.

The tube was a simple pressure lock. Laura pulled herself in, dogged the outer hatch, and released the inner.

With a rising rush there was sound all around her. She pushed the inner hatch wide and found her man.

Mikhail Borovsky lay naked in a heap, blood leaking from his mouth. Laura cried out, and for an awful moment she lay immobile in the tube until she heard a rattling breath. She slid to his side and squeezed his wrist until her gauntlet felt his pulse. Drugs-he needed drugs to stir his system out of shock.

His rubber suit lay on the floor. Laura kicked it scornfully aside, reached to her throat, and undid its latch. Quickly she eased her helmet back. She pulled her ventral zipper down, flipping the hooks aside with her fingers as they went. Eagerly she spread her ventral plates apart, pulled her pelvic plate forward, then pulled the zippers down each of her legs almost to each knee.

She lay on her back beside him, plates gaping, helmet folded under. The eyes in her wrists and in the toes of her boots helped her lift Borovsky above her. Gently she eased his legs down into her legs and let the slow peristalsis of her inner layers draw his feet into her feet. Her ventral plates stretched wide to clear his hips. She placed the Texas catheter over his penis and pulled her pelvic plate back into position.

Wriggling slightly, she guided his arms down into her arms, where her inner layers did the final positioning.

Each finger was drawn into place and continuously massaged. Laura zipped and hooked her ventral plates and finally eased her helmet over his head.

For a Rabinowicz Manplifier Mark IX space suit, walking steel empty was too lonely to bear. Without her man inside her Laura felt herself a hollow mockery, less than even a woman, not worthy of the soul Borovsky had paid so much for. Never again, she said to unconscious ears. Never again. Stay inside me. You are mine.

Slowly she stood, whole again. Up from his toes the hydraulic rings pressed in smooth waves, helping his blood back toward his head and heart. A tiny needle jabbed into his buttocks, sending a careful measure of stimulant into his bloodstream.

This was no place to be caught by a boss. Laura moved slowly as she climbed from the tank. It had been some time since she had carried his dead weight asleep, and never unconscious. She gave the torn rubber underwear to the Pit with a vengeful flick of her hand.

They went home the long way, going up through Six to Five and walking slowly. Halfway there he came around.

“Laura,” he whispered.

“I love you,” she said, without breaking her stride.

“He had a metal bar shoved up his ass,” he said, and coughed. “Crapped it out on the floor, grabbed it, and that was that. I’m gonna kill the fugger. You watch me.”

“I love you,” she said again, hoping against knowledge that the words would soothe the murderous rage she feared might get him killed.

A world without Borovsky-

“Love you too,” he mumbled, only half-conscious. “I’m gonna kill him.”

By morning the bruises showed up. Borovsky swore at his image in the mirror. The left half of his face was swollen grotesquely. Ugly purple blotches covered most of his cheek and curved up nearly to surround his left eye. All across his body were bruises and scrapes from hitting the iron going down. He pressed a bruise with one finger and jerked the finger away from the fiery pain.

Laura watched, unmoving. The tiny, cylindrical pod with its watercot, its kitchen, its shower, and squat toilet was very silent. If Borovsky fought again, if he insisted on fighting again today-

Panic appeared in her crystalline, layered machine mind, seeping outward from the F layer at the core. Layers A through E were standard Manplifier equipment: sensory, motor, communications, memory, and intellect. Borovsky had paid three years’ wages for the F layer that Laura so cherished: unique, personal, precious-her soul. The E layer, shared by any machine that could speak and reason, could have stopped the panic, but it did not. Instead, when Laura could no longer stand the way he stood gripping the edge of the sink in furious silence, she spoke.

“You didn’t have to go fight him.”

He spat into the sink. “He called me a phobe. Maybe once I can take it. Maybe twice. Some people have to make noise. But he made me answer him. So I answered.” He probed a bruise on his thigh, wincing. “What do we got for bruises?”

Laura turned and searched a small cabinet beside the bed. “Hemoverithol.”

“Let’s have it.”

Laura pressed an autoampul against his thigh and squeezed.

He sighed as the needle came and went, then nodded. “How long?”

Thousands of words of medical data flew past the eyes of Laura’s mind. “Eighteen hours to kill the swelling. Color should be gone in forty-eight. I hope we can afford another yoyo; the spare wasn’t new when

we bought it and -”

“Nix. Rent’s up, food’s up-we get a new yoyo and we’d default on your soul. Gimme a couple months. We’ll get a new one from that bastard Coyne even if I have to beat it out of his hide.”

“Maybe we should stay away from the Beer Tube for a few days.”

“He’ll be laughing behind his ugly face.”

“Let him laugh. Borovsky-”

“Don’t say it.” He turned to her and smiled. The smile was made lopsided by the swelling in his cheek, and even when whole it was not a smile to charm women-too flat, too suspicious, too much of the smile of an outsider more used to contempt than to love. But Laura was not a woman of flesh. This smile was Borovsky’s. It was enough.

“Let me run the balalaika,” Laura said. The image came to her mind instantly: Borovsky as he looked while listening to the tape of his father playing the ancient balalaika. The tape was all he had brought up from the crumbling slum that was Deep West London. The sad, hollow music made his face change-change from underneath, Laura thought.

At those times his features lost some of their hardness; his eyes ceased their constant nervous scanning back and forth. His mouth-no, his mouth did not smile, but in the small parting of his lips it seemed to find peace. If he would just listen-now-to the balalaika . . .

“Let me run the balalaika!”

“And get me canned? No, dushenka. We’ll be late to the grind. Damn. That spare better be okay.” He turned from the sink and tapped a command on the lock console. The spare yoyo’s condition read out in a few crisp words. Not the best, but the battery was a retread, and old at that.

“The balalaika-”

“Come on, Laura. Shit, we’re late already. Move it.”

Laura put down her hand and deliberately began undogging her plates.

George Eastman Nexus had begun as a single cylinder, rotating to

simulate standard Earth gravity. From the inner surface, towers and delicately suspended trees of modular office clusters grew toward the center. In those offices the engineers and managers of a thousand companies guided an industry worth six trillion dollars in gold annually.

George Eastman grew outward as well. Downward from Earth-Zero swelled the industrial levels. Some industries preferred the heavier gravity; many chemical processes actually worked more efficiently under higher swing.

For other industries the heaviness was less necessary, but materials were cheap ever since the asteroid Calliope had been towed into orbit around the moon for the steerable mirrors to mine.

It was less than three klicks from their pod to the advancing edge of E Minus Seven. Its monocrystal rings girdling Eastman Nexus had been in place for ten months. At the forefront of construction the longitudinal beams and outer-deck plates were being welded into position amid showers of sparks. Behind the edge the power conduits and other piping were being laid, and farther still, the floor plates, one meter square and removable, were being bolted down. Laura gripped the yoyo's cable tightly as they rode, and felt through her fingers the sizzle of old motors in its gantry above her helmet.

Two of the welders paused long enough to let Borovsky pass between them, unharmed by the molten droplets. Borovsky waved clear, and the yoyo purred on to the point where the floor plates began. He parked it and punched in with the shift boss. Docked nine minutes-he shrugged, and Laura tallied the beers he would have to forgo to make it up. Borovsky's partner, Andre Wolf Lair, thumped his shoulder as Borovsky yanked his card from the clock. Borovsky grunted in greeting and returned a playful poke to the Amerind's midsection. Coyne's lamp on the clock was green. Borovsky clenched his jaw and glanced toward the supply dump. Coyne was loading diamond cutting wheels into his Enhanced Leverage Manipulator.

Coyne looked up. Borovsky's personal microwave channel triggered, and a single scornful, whispered word came across over Coyne's chuckle: "phobe."

Laura felt her man's pulse race. Quickly she squeezed his thigh and whispered in his ear, "He can't even walk the Low Steel for a living. All he does is ride in that big yellow egg. You're twice the man he ever will be."

“I’ll kill him,” Borovsky muttered. “Damn, I’ll feed him to the stars.”

George Eastman Nexus turned twelve times over the course of a shift. Borovsky and Andre Wolf Lair guided the longitudinal steel beams into position ahead of the edge, tacked them, and left them for the welders. Wolf Lair was taller than Borovsky, larger than Coyne. Among the men who walked the Low Steel he was a giant, with impeccable balance and a gentle, deep voice. His suit was much older than Laura, with little skill in its E layer for speech and reasoning, and no F layer at all. The suit had no name and spoke, when it had to, in Wolf Lair’s own voice. Laura sensed that Wolf Lair did not like intelligent machines, and she remained silent while he and Borovsky worked.

When the shift was half over, Coyne’s ELM rumbled by on its way to the supply dump. As it passed, one of its two smaller arms twisted its four fingers into a crude approximation of an ancient gesture of insult. Borovsky quickly returned the gesture and looked the other way.

Wolf Lair looked after the egg-shaped machine until it moved out of sight. “Coyne is a believer, Mik. I think he hates you for the spirit you wear.”

Borovsky hoisted one end of the next beam. “Pah. He believes in his own mouth.”

“But I have seen him walk three levels up to the Catholic mass. Catholics fear all spirits. Hate is a good mask for the things you fear.”

“Laura’s no spirit. Hell, she’s a computer.” Borovsky pushed against the end of the beam. Laura pushed with him. The beam crept into position in line with the tiny red spots of light produced by the laser-alignment network.

“Maybe computer is the new word for spirit. Maybe it is a spirit for nonbelievers. I heard you talk about the loan you got two years ago. You said you bought a soul for your space suit.”

Wolf Lair leaned forward and helped Borovsky move the beam to its final position. Together they tacked it down with dollops of adhesive after checking it against all fifty alignment spots. Borovsky leaned back against a pillar and stared down at the stars creeping past beneath his feet.

“Shit, I was lonely. You can go home to Leah and your little ones twice a year. They send you letters and presents, and you send them money. This up here is all the home I got, and nobody in it but me. Ain’t no woman

anywhere would live here and get smashed under this much swing. You Indians got it good. Your women wait for you in their mountains. In the city no woman remembers your name ten minutes after you screw her. I thought about it a long time. All I did was buy something that would be on my side no matter what, just something that sounded like a woman." Laura pinched him hard in a very sensitive place. "But it turned out to be a woman that was worth something."

"I hear you, Mik. You say it well. I was twenty when I signed up for space. My grandfather took me aside and said, `Wolf Lair, do not give over your heart to machinery. Machines are to use and put away when day is gone. Only living things are worth the true heart of a man.' He is dead some years, but I will never forget him. You know that lesson as well, I think. You had nothing worth your true heart; so you bought a spirit. The spirit you bought is nothing so simple as a loyal dog, or even a dead man's restless ghost. I know it comforts you and will never disobey you, but forgive me if I fear it. Forgive Coyne if he fears it. I could never understand or trust -a spirit that lived in a machine."

Wolf Lair's words disturbed Laura. He was not given to speeches and was not one to admit his heart's fears and feelings. She waited to hear what Borovsky would answer, but he said nothing. The sun passed under their feet five more times, and the two men worked in silence.

For three days Borovsky avoided the Beer Tube. At shift's end he slept, sleeping as much as fourteen hours at once. Laura sampled his blood and read his vital signs daily, and she knew that his body was repairing the damage Coyne had done it and the further damage Borovsky was doing by continuing to work without a break for healing. Once, watching him as he slept, she played the balalaika tape for herself alone, but only once. Other times she restlessly walked the Low Steel empty, thinking. She thought about Coyne, and about Wolf Lair, and about herself.

She thought about souls.

Standing on a naked monocrystat beam above the bottomless void, she looked down and saw Rigel creeping past. The spectroscope on her instrument-blistered helmet studied it, sent data streaming from her A sensory layer inward. Stored data raced outward from D memory layer to meet it. Information met, intersected, compared, cross-referenced in a process that, it seemed to Laura, was both methodical and more than methodical, It found more in the rainbow-layered image of a star than the star had to offer. But no-the handling of data was not her soul.

The pleasure, then, in that handling. Had the pleasure in her own processes been there before Borovsky had bought her a soul? No, of course not. Laura had not been there, not as she herself-only a good Rabinowicz Mark IX Manplifier suit with a woman's pleasant voice. Not as the watcher of her own mind, the tender holder of Borovsky's body, the tireless worker who longed to follow the Low Steel out to the stars and farther. Still these things were not her soul. They were things that, as Wolf Lair had said, could be put away when day was done and the work was done-all but Borovsky. Not for a moment could she lay down her guardianship and loyalty. So she had been made, and she would not want to be an angstrom different. She loved Borovsky beyond either choice or the desire for choice. But Borovsky was not her soul.

Raising her empty arms, Laura stretched them out toward Rigel. It was a gesture she had seen made only once-by Wolf Lair, the man who feared her as a spirit within a machine. Just like this had the Amerind stood: arms outstretched so, body taut and arched so, hands' palms open to the devouring sun crawling toward and below him. With Borovsky inside her Laura had stopped dead on a beam and stared. Wolf Lair had not turned toward them, had not sensed their footsteps through the steel on which he stood. He had not, in fact, seen Laura at all, but in that one moment Laura had seen a vividness, a connection between him and her and the sun and Borovsky and the beam beneath her, forged of iron atoms that were mostly empty space.

"Hollow woman!" Coyne had mocked once. "One-hundred-percent artificial broad, nothing organic added," he had read, squinting from a label he imagined on her ventral plates. Odd that he would mock her for what she was proud to be, and doubly odd that she felt too ashamed to retort that nothing could persuade her to trade polished, powerful hydraulic limbs for the fragile mushiness of human flesh. Such weakness was not to be envied. But worse that what human beings could not do was the thing they could do and did not, the thing she had seen in the tensile exultation of Wolf Lair's body on a steel beam hung above the stars.

It was a thing for which Laura had no name but only a sense of patterns among half-realized notions of what it might be like to be human. The pattern was greater than merely being human; it was a transcendence of the human. It was a laying of hands upon the universe with such firmness of grasp that the universe took a bit of the being's shape, individual and unrepeatable, because exactly that intensity and originality of consciousness had not existed in exactly that way before, and would not do so again. Becoming unrepeatably and wholly oneself and, thus, everything else-that, Laura decided, was her soul. Becoming, and knowing it.

Was that what Wolf Lair had meant by the spirit of living things? But then why had Laura not seen it among the humans themselves before that glimpse of intense stillness in the outstretched body of Wolf Lair? No, the steelwalkers who had inherited unbought souls without cost seemed unwilling to embrace anything larger than a double hamburger. Their souls were asleep; though they ate, drank, slept, worked, and fought, their souls were in none of it. Why, even Borovsky-

No. The thought froze and vanished. Borovsky, troubled, flawed creature that he was, had nevertheless caused her soul to be. He created her and redeemed her by placing himself in financial chains. Laura turned from her contemplation of Rigel to her pleasure in remembering certain ancient myths (but there had been no myths, nor pleasure in them, before Borovsky had bought her soul) to the joy of contemplating Borovsky himself. Creator. Redeemer. However limited his other horizons, he had reached beyond himself as far as that.

Cherishing the thought at the center of her crystalline consciousness, Laura hurried back to where Borovsky was.

An argument was under way in the Beer Then when Borovsky entered three days later. Coyne was proclaiming that E Minus Seven would be the last layer to be built around George Eastman Nexus. Borovsky tossed back Laura's helmet on its hinges.

"Damn right. How could the Combine possibly build a level that Johnny Coyne couldn't stand up in?" His bulldog face remained expressionless as he undogged Laura's plates, but the other men in the automated tavern laughed.

Coyne glowered. "When they run out of men like me to build it, who will they get to do the work?"

Andre Wolf Lair was sitting at one of the black plastic benches near the robot bar at the far end. He took a long draft from his carved wooden stein, wiped the foam from his lips, and laughed deeply. "When they run out of men like you they will use real men, and we will work twice as fast."

Coyne opened his mouth. Wolf Lair leaned toward Coyne, who saw the warning in the giant's eyes, and looked away.

In his blue, working long johns, Borovsky stepped free of Laura. She buttoned up and leaned against the wall among several other suits, some

like her, others mere rubber. Laura watched Borovsky key up a beer into a disposable stein at the bar and walk back toward Wolf Lair.

“Let them build out to E Minus Fifteen,” Borovsky said, and took a mouthful of foam. “I will stand after the last man has started to crawl.”

“After two hours here I doubt any of us could stand in free fall,” said another man. General laughter followed, to Laura’s relief. Among the Beet Tube’s customers tonight was a shift boss, Simon Weinblatt, who was sitting with several of Borovsky’s co-workers and trading jokes with them. The man was of only average height and build and seemed slight beside Borovsky and Wolf Lair. Like all shift bosses, Weinblatt had a soft-spoken, gentle demeanor and a keen understanding of human motivation. When tensions flared, shift bosses had a way of showing up, quieting the situation, and making forty rough, quarrelsome laborers cooperate and produce. Their methods could be as rough as those of the laborers. Every man there had heard tales of drunken steelworkers who had defied shift bosses and found that their jobs evaporated the following morning. And there was another story, hundredth hand at least, of a man who had traded angry words with a shift boss and shoved him to the floor-only to awaken in a prison hospital bed with both arms gone past the elbows.

Laura saw that Weinblatt had been inconspicuously watching Borovsky and Coyne. When Borovsky went back to the bar for a second beer, Weinblatt placed a hand on his elbow. Borovsky bent down to listen; the man spoke quietly. “You have an accident at work?” Weinblatt pointed to his own cheek. Borovsky’s eyebrows rose, and Laura thought he grew a little pale. There was still some slight discoloration from the bruise that had covered half his face.

“Fell outta bed. No big deal.”

Coyne squeezed past on his way to the bar for yet another beer. Laura longed to get Borovsky back within her and away from there.

Even with a raucous album playing in the background, Coyne appeared to have heard the exchange.

He laughed belligerently and poked Borovsky with his index finger.

“Fell outta bed, huh? Dreaming about one of those Rooski women, I guess. All muscle and three tits; a pair and a spare!” Coyne doubled over laughing. Borovsky stiffened but remained silent.

Weinblatt did not seem bothered by the banter. Through a grin he rejoined: “At least he remembers to dream about women. After ten beers I’ll bet you spend all night making love to your handling machine.”

Coyne shrugged as his stein filled. “There ain’t no words for the kind of women I dream about.”

From the next table another man joined in: “That’s because the Combine ain’t started making ‘em yet!”

Coyne belched loudly. He shook his head and made his way to the rear of the tavern, where a dozen space suits stood or hung near the lock. He stood in front of Laura and addressed the crowd with a full stein in his hand.

“Ha! The expert on mechanical women is right here among us! Our good friend Mik-Hayal Borovsky and his patented hollow woman! She cooks, she cleans, she cheats at cards, she tells dirty jokes. What more could a man want?”

Borovsky’s face tightened.

“I think that ought to be your last beer, Johnny,” Weinblatt said pleasantly.

Coyne ignored him. “What more, huh? Tits maybe?” He turned and made pinching motions across Laura’s ventral plates. “Kind of hard to get hold of, huh? Well, Mik’s got lots of imagination.”

“You’re making an ass of yourself, Johnny,” Weinblatt said. The grin was gone.

“No tits. Well, how about a twat? Jesus, guys, she all twat! Lookithat!” Coyne grabbed Laura by the rim of her helmet gasket and tipped it forward, pointing with an index finger to the hollowness inside. “A guy could crawl in there and get lost, which is about as close as Mik’s ever gonna get to being inside a woman!” Coyne released Laura and faced the crowd again. Borovsky spat on the floor. Too much tension, Laura thought; she could picture Borovsky bashing Coyne’s head flat against the floor. As soon as Coyne turned away she brought her right hand up and thumbed her non-existent nose at him.

The room exploded with laughter. Coyne whirled around in time to see Laura’s arm snap back to her side.

“Well, so she wants to be one of the boys. Hey, babe, you can’t have fun at the Beer Tube without putting away some yourself. Here, I keyed for this one, but it’s all yours.” He lifted his stein over Laura’s helmet gasket as though to empty the liquid into her hollowness.

Borovsky slammed the palms of his hands down hard on the tabletop. Across the table, Andre Wolf Lair set his stein aside and stood. At once, without hurrying, Weinblatt was on his feet, his face hard.

“Coyne, shut your goddamned mouth.”

Coyne bent over as though kicked in the stomach, his stein groping for the nearest table. His face paled. Laura saw that he had realized what he had done: provoked a shift boss to his feet.

Except for the continuous drone of the juke, the Beer Tube was silent. Simon Weinblatt was still standing. “Go home, Johnny,” he said, and took his seat.

Coyne nodded, turned, and began pulling on his rubber suit.

Laura saw little of Coyne next shift. Wherever she and Borovsky happened to be, the yellow ELM happened to be elsewhere. Nor did Coyne appear at the Beer Tube after shift. But Simon Weinblatt was there, and he pointed to the bench opposite his as Borovsky walked in. Laura, left again with the other suits, edged close enough to listen.

“Mik, I’m worried about Coyne.” Weinblatt’s face was smiling, unreadable. “One of these days he’s going to jump you, and you’re going to beat his brains out.”

“Would serve him right,” Borovsky said, eyes on the bench. “The guy is some kind of psycho.”

“Could be; how did this thing between you two start?”

“I didn’t start it.”

“I didn’t say you did,” Weinblatt said pleasantly. “Do you know why he has it in for you?”

“No. One day he just starts in.”

Weinblatt waited; Borovsky, scowling, said nothing more. Finally Weinblatt said, “Some guys are up only when they’re making noise. They need it, like air. But Coyne is also mighty damned good with an ELM. His replacement index is forty points tougher than yours.” The shift boss sipped from his mug. “If one of you had to go, it wouldn’t be him.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Money isn’t fair. Bear down, make some Q-points, and we’ll see. Right now you have to bend a little. I’ve been doing some watching and some asking around. You pretty much stick to yourself, and that’s cool. But up here it never hurts to melt in a little. You’ve got no wife to talk about, no kids to brag about. Nobody ever hears of you going off to see a woman somewhere. You make it easy for an asshole like Coyne to single you out. Humans are pack animals. If you don’t show that you’re in, the others will assume that you’re out.” Weinblatt gave Borovsky a level stare for a few moments and then shrugged. “You can tell me that’s not fair either.”

“So what do I do?”

“Starters,” Weinblatt said, and shoved a silver, octagonal token across the scarred plastic tabletop. Laura’s eyes followed the token across the bench. Embossed on the exposed face was a stylized spiral galaxy and the words BERENICE’S CLUSTER.

“Silver lay, Mik. Anything you want. This one is on me. It’s my treat.”

After an incredulous moment, Laura snapped her attention from Weinblatt’s token to Borovsky’s face. Her man-her man-looked as impassive as ever. But Laura, who knew the meaning of every twitch in that unlovely face, saw in Borovsky’s eyes a complex reaction: resentment and distaste and-yes-interest. The room lurched slightly, and Laura thought something had gone sour in her F level, but then realized she was discovering something new in the bright, innermost level she knew as her soul. If Borovsky-

“No thanks,” Borovsky was saying. He lowered his eyes to stare at the silver token. “Whorehouses give me the creeps.”

“Be honest, Mik. Are you queer?”

“No!”

Several of the other men nearby looked toward Borovsky; seeing

Weinblatt's warning glare, they quickly looked away.

"I can't afford it," Borovsky said, and in his voice Laura heard the same thing she had seen in his eyes: He resented being told what to do; he was determined to resist; he felt scorn for the human pressure to fit in, but he was interested.

"Maybe not a silver," Weinblatt said, "but a purple quickie once a week won't break you. I know."

Borovsky nodded. The Combine always knew, to the penny, every employee's assets, debts, and expenses. Borovsky's excuse had been a poor one. Was he trying to save face in offering resistance so easily wrestled down? Laura longed to have Borovsky look at her, but his gaze remained on the silver token. It was Weinblatt, in profile to Laura, who seemed for a moment to flick a sidelong glance at the suits against the wall. Desolation swept through her F layer. If Borovsky-Borovsky, her man-

"I've never been there before," Borovsky said.

Weinblatt stood. "I'll take you. I could use a good time myself about now."

And Borovsky was standing up. Borovsky was reaching for her. Borovsky, still not meeting her many sets of eyes, was wriggling into her ventral cavity, into her boots. He said nothing. And Laura, sure now that the universe was steady and the lurching continued only in her soul, could say nothing either.

"Let's go," Weinblatt said.

Both ports were cast wide at Berenice's Cluster, up on E Minus Four. Loud, raucous music echoed out through the lock. Borovsky hesitated a moment.

"Come on, Mik. Relax."

Laura felt Borovsky suck in his breath, and they entered. Inside it was very crowded, a random tessellation of polygonal waterbeds illuminated from beneath by changing, multicolored lights. On each bed lay a woman, some naked, many draped in shimmering cloth. More than a dozen men stood among the beds, reading the fee schedules and counting dollars in their heads and on their fingers. Down among their feet surged a heavy, bluish smoke, stirred into sluggish vortices as the men stepped along the

narrow ways between the waterbeds.

Weinblatt doffed his rubber suit quickly, Borovsky much more slowly. A blonde on a nearby bed smiled at him, then drew aside the drapery suspended from cords braided around her neck. She had large breasts to which the heavy swing of E Minus Four had not been kind. Cupping a hand under one breast, she lifted it toward Borovsky and smiled again.

“How long since you’ve had a real woman?” Weinblatt asked. Borovsky muttered something that Laura did not think Weinblatt would catch above the jukebox, but she did: four years.

“I’m real,” Laura said, her voice low. “I’m real and I’m-look at them! Like puddles of melting cranberry sauce! Either of us could outlift, outhaul, outproduce them all put together. How can you? Borovsky-”

“It’s not my idea,” Borovsky said sullenly, finally stepping free of her. Laura realized that it would not matter how much she looked at him, what she said, or how she behaved. She could not change Borovsky’s mind.

Confused and hurting, she stepped back against the wall. Borovsky moved quickly away from her, heading toward the far end of the room, ignoring the blonde who followed him with charcoaled eyes. In moments he was lost in the swirling mist. Eagerness to see more melting cranberry women-or to get away from her? Laura was not sure, though she suspected the latter, arid took from that some small wrapping of comfort.

“He talking to you?” the blonde demanded. She stared at the emptiness above Laura’s helmet gasket, at the head that Laura had never had nor wanted.

“Yes.”

“Huh!” She sounded neither surprised nor scornful, only annoyed. “He don’t like blondes?”

“I don’t know what he likes.”

The woman looked at Laura shrewdly. “I’ll bet you do so, Honey.” Suddenly she laughed, such an unselfconscious, friendly laugh that Laura found herself drawn away from the wall to stand beside the woman’s pentagonal waterbed. The lights beneath it shifted from green to red, warming the woman’s skin so that to Laura it looked like uncooled metal.

“Why do you do this?” Laura asked softly.

“Do what?”

“Make . . . love to these men. You aren’t their work partners. You have no interest in their lives. They haven’t bought you a soul. You don’t love them.”

The blonde gave her a long, speculative look. Something surfaced in her eyes, something Laura had the quickness to see but not the knowledge of humanity to interpret. Then the human woman laughed again. “It’s a living.”

A living. Laura hadn’t seen it that way before. People had to live. Steelwalkers needed sex; Laura knew they talked of it enough, and few had fine Rabinowicz suits like Laura. There was a good, respectable economic foundation to Berenice’s Cluster. But Borovsky-Borovsky did have her.

“Jealous, Honey?” the blonde said softly. She did not mock. Her eyes, lids painted blue as far as her brows, seemed sympathetic and a little sad. Staring into those eyes, Laura felt the odd sensation of unrelated data suddenly relating: The woman’s eyes reminded her of Borovsky’s balalaika music.

“Don’t cry about it,” the blonde said. “That’s how a steelwalker is. Tin woman, skin woman-he don’t care. We do what we can.”

“No,” Laura said. “No!”

“Sorry.” Again the blonde gave Laura that knowing and sad, blue-lidded look. From the airlock a man walked into the room and stripped off his rubber suit. After glancing around the misty room, he smiled at the blonde. She raised her huge breast to him and looked up through her lashes. The man sauntered over to the bed.

“Silver lay, stud?”

“Purple quickie. You available?” The man grinned mischievously at her.

“Why not?”

Laura stepped back against the wall. Around the blonde’s bed the blue mist grew thicker, rising in hazy walls shot through with multicolored

light from the bed. The man in his eagerness had left his rubber suit at Laura's feet. She kicked at it, then abruptly picked it up and hung it on a nearby peg. Its empty arms dangled helplessly. Without a man inside it, it was useless. Rubber suits. Balalaika music. Blue-lidded eyes. Borovsky. Simon Weinblatt. Coyne. Silver lays. Souls-Souls.

That was what she had seen in the blonde's sympathetic look.

Startled, Laura stared at the bed. The mist around the bed grew thicker and darker blue. The bed began to move away from Laura on its cushion of air. Another bed, this one with two women and one man just leaving it, slid toward Laura. One of the women put one foot on the floor and squealed. The man laughed and slapped her bare ass. Music blared and mist swirled. Nothing in the scene looked to Laura anything like Wolf Lair's outstretched arms on the steel beam, but Laura knew she was not mistaken. In the blonde's balalaika eyes Laura had seen another soul. And she had recognized it only because she had her own.

Laura settled back against the wall in resignation and waited for the sliding beds to bring Borovsky back to her.

The spare yoyo was dead.

Borovsky snapped the battery cover free and peered into the space crowded with wires and age-crusted components. Nothing looked amiss.

"Take a look," he told Laura, and poked their right hand into the cavity.

Laura's fingers nudged the wires aside as the eyes that rode over each finger examined the mechanism.

Her fingers saw it and teased it out into view from where it had been tucked behind a voltage regulator: a carefully snipped wire.

Hesitantly she described the wire. Borovsky stopped for many long seconds, one hand on the battery pack and one hand holding a screwdriver.

"He came in here. I noticed him before we got tied up with the trouble setting up the last beam. He didn't come out."

Borovsky and Laura checked between the piles of steel for a place where a man might hide.

“We could have missed him coming out,” Laura suggested.

“I don’t miss nothing from him no more,” Borovsky replied coldly. “He’s in here.”

Laura said nothing. Borovsky’s bionics alarmed her. Pulse, blood pressure, muscle tension, skin resistancethis was not normal anger. He was in a cold rage.

In one corner of the dump was a circular column three meters wide, rising up from the floor and vanishing into the ceiling. It was the conduit core that carried power down from the center of the titan cylinder to the construction on the Low Steel. At knee level was the inspection hatch.

“Get that hatch on your infrared,” Borovsky ordered.

The wide oval eye on Laura’s brow saw the vague smudge on the hatch’s handle. The vacuum of E Minus Seven preserved heat traces well.

“There were hands on that handle recently,” she said, wishing it were not so.

Borovsky grunted and grasped the handle. It would not turn.

“Locked,” Laura said.

“For me, maybe. Not for you. Turn.”

Laura’s fingers tightened on the handle and twisted hard. She felt the metal of the latch resist and moan, then break free. The hatch swung inward.

Wriggling through the hatch took some minutes. It had not been designed for passing a man in an amplified Rabinowicz space suit. Laura supposed that had been Coyne’s hope . . . and ached that it could have been true.

Inside the column were pipes and bus channels vanishing upward in the darkness. Running among the pipes was an aluminum ladder. Laura turned off her suit lights and saw the warm spots where sweating, rubber-suited hands had gripped the rungs.

The olfionics within her helmet smelled Borovsky’s rage. “Up.”

They climbed in darkness quickly, twice as fast as a nonamplified man could climb. Borovsky said nothing, and Laura dared not plead for him to give up the chase. It would do no good and would only feed the rage she so feared.

“It’s a mess in here,” she said truthfully, trying to read the swirl of multicolored images her infrared eyes gave her.

By that level the column was pressurized, and warm air confused the heat traces Coyne had left behind. She saw that the dust on the hatch handle had not been disturbed for some time. She did not volunteer the information.

Borovsky steered Laqra’s helmet crest beam along the ladder above. “Still too heavy. This is E Minus Four. He lives on E Minus Two. He’s still climbing.”

Without responding, Laura grasped the rungs and climbed.

Two f airlocks higher E Minus Three began. Above them locks had been removed to make the column an air-return manifold. The black mouths o air tunnels yawned on four sides, and a constant draft through the tunnels had erased any possible heat traces the man might have left behind. Borovsky scanned the four tunnels.

“He can’t be far. Damn, I’ve got him. I know I do. Damn.”

They stood in silence for tens of seconds. Laura gradually learned to separate the gentle white noise of the air tunnels from the general subsonic rumble created everywhere by life in a steel habitat. With panic and despair, she realized she could hear high above them the sound of a man’s labored breathing.

A man Borovsky wanted to kill.

She could tell him where Coyne was, or not tell him -a sickening choice. She had never failed to tell Borovsky, her man, her life, anything she knew he wanted to hear. If he commanded her, she would tell him-to refuse was to face consequences too final to consider. But if he found Coyne -if he killed Coyne -what would the Combine do to Borovsky then?

The words formed a hundred times, and each time she wiped them away before sending them to her helmet speakers. She strained to believe that hiding the truth was not a lie and knew that to believe so would be lying

to herself.

“He lives east of here,” Borovsky said. “He’ll follow the tube. Let’s go.”

“No,” Laura said, forcing the words to form. “I hear him. He’s up on the ladder somewhere.”

Borovsky spat something foul in his native language. He gripped the ladder with both. hands and sent Laura’s crest beam stabbing upward. Coyne was there, wrapped around the rungs, panting. Laura could smell his sour sweat drifting down on the stale air.

Coyne stiffened, made motions to start climbing again.

“Stop!” Borovsky screamed. Laura’s arms pulled with his arms, and the aluminum of the ladder tore raggedly away from its lower wall brackets.

“Eat shit!” Coyne cried and dropped free of the ladder.

His boots struck the top of Laura’s helmet, crushing many of her most delicate instruments, including the paleblue glass oval that imaged in the infrared. His knees flexed, and he leaped to one side.

The still vicious swing of E Minus Three drew him down, but he had time to plan his movements. He drew up in a ball and rolled, screaming in pain as one shoulder slammed into the steel. But then he was up, stumbling, then running crookedly down one of the air tunnels, favoring his left leg and sobbing in pain.

Borovsky swore to himself in Russian. Laura longed not to run, but Borovsky’s legs were running; so her legs ran. His arms swung in a deadly determined rhythm; so hers swung, too.

Coyne was a pathetic scarecrow, highlighted in every detail by the cold lights of Laura’s helmet beam. His rubber suit was smudged and torn, helmet long abandoned to lighten himself. He had only a few seconds’ head start and appeared close to exhaustion. As much as Laura hated Coyne, she felt a moment of pity for him.

Coyne chose that moment to look over his shoulder, side-stumbling for two steps. He moaned and turned away but it had been enough. Laura had seen his face, smeared with the grime of the tunnels mixed with tears of exertion, and abruptly she saw herself through his eyes.

Shaped like a man cut out of steel and crushed in a magnetic press; torso nearly as wide as it was tall; arms and legs clusters of hydraulic cylinders contracting and extending in smooth, polished motions. Faceless, silvered helmet without any neck, ruined instruments atop it dangling by tiny wires and striking the helmet's sides with little sounds. Hands twice human size, guided by flesh but powered by a hydraulic exoskeleton strong enough to crush rocks. Hands reaching forward, fingers splayed and grasping, grasping. A machine bent on death.

But she was not! She was life, productivity, strength, steel! She was, in her soul-

No time. Coyne screamed. again, stumbled, fell to his knees, rolled over, and stared in wide-eyed horror as Laura bore down on him.

Her right hand caught him by the neck and lifted him like a rag doll. He gurgled, eyes bulging, as Borovsky slammed him against the steel wall.

Borovsky's hand squeezed.

Horror-struck, Laura felt her hand squeeze.

Coyne tore at the hand around his neck, hammered his fists against the smooth cylinders and the silver pistons that were slowly forcing Laura's fingers together. His mouth twisted, tongue pushing to one side, struggling to let his throat breathe. Laura felt his frantic heartbeat hammering in the veins of his neck. And in Coyne's eyes, under the terror and rage, Laura saw something else: a soul slipping away. A trapped and mean soul, but real-as real as the soul she had seen in the eyes of the woman trapped on the bed. A soul that in a few more heartbeats would be gone.

Because of her.

"No!" she cried in Borovsky's ears. "Stop this! You're killing him!"

"Goddamned right! Squeeze!" Borovsky grunted.

Borovsky squeezed. Laura squeezed. Frantically Laura raced through her options. Borovsky was mad, insane she could drug him. She had tranquilizers enough to make him sleep in seconds. Tiny valves opened in the medpack on her hip, opiates pulsed down a tube toward the needles in their sheaths behind his buttocks. The needle-she could plunge it home, the power was hers.

The command formed, and with it appeared something new:

A cloud, fiery red, rising above the F layer she called her soul. It hovered, an imagic representation of what would happen if she disobeyed Borovsky's command to squeeze. Driven by terror and love, she asked herself one question: What will happen to Borovsky if he kills? But not another: What will happen to Laura if she kills? Now, all at once, she knew. The consequence was inescapable, built into the bright layers of her mind and the spiderweb paths between them: She would lose her soul. the ravening red cloud would burn it out of her. She must obey Borovsky's command to squeeze or her soul would be destroyed. She must not kill or her soul would be destroyed.

She was going to become the soulless death tool she had seen in Coyne's eyes.

A grim thought appeared out of nowhere: Men are judged by their maker at the moment of their death. I am judged by my maker every moment that I live.

Coyne's pulse weakened. His pulse! Wait! Laura sent fluid into the insulating layers between Borovsky's fingers and the outermost skin. Slowly-but there was s so little time-she built up a layer of fluid that kept Borovsky's fingers from truly contacting the outer layer of tough synthetic. While the fluid flowed into the skin of her fingers, she set her contractile layers to pulsing in her hand, matching the rhythm of Coyne's laboring heart. In seconds the illusion was complete, and Borovsky, rage maddened as he was, had not noticed. The pulse he felt was wholly in Laura's skin. Laura gradually slowed the pulse, made it weaker, until it could barely be felt. Finally it stopped.

"No pulse," she said. "He's dead."

Borovsky swore and released his hand. Coyne, unconscious, fell in a heap, face-down. Borovsky backed away from the man, fell back against the opposite wall of the tunnel.

"Jesus. Jesus."

Laura's soul began assembling itself again, gathering back into the haven of her innermost crystalline layer.

It was hers again-she had not killed; she had not disobeyed. But now

there was a dirtiness to her soul that she felt might never be cleared away.

Borovsky, trembling, backed away from Coyne for several steps before breaking and running toward the vertical duct from which they had come.

Tied up in a handkerchief on his watercot lay two kilos of gold ingots. Borovsky stared at them. He was wearing his old rubber suit inside out. He had shaved his head and depilated the stubble. Laura could stand his behavior no longer.

“Talk to me, dammit!”

“What’s to say? They catch me, they’ll kill me. Nothing you can do.”

“So where can you run to?”

“Earth, London. I never shoulda left. Only crazy men live up here.”

Earth. Laura was appalled. But still, Earth would be far from George Eastman Nexus. Far from this boxed-in deadliness. Borovsky would be there; she could learn to live there, too. She undogged her top plates before Borovsky looked at her sharply.

“Forget it. Me I can maybe bribe through customs and sneak down. You, no chance.”

“You can’t leave me!”

“Like hell.”

“But I love you!”

“Would you love me better dead? Dushenka, here you can die for bumping a guy on the head and taking his money. Tivo, three days maybe before they find him. The computers know Coyne hated me. Ha! Don’t take no computer to tell the cops that. They’ll be here ten minutes after they find his ugly corpse.”

He looked at her. From his eyes Laura saw that he was pleading for her to understand, to forgive, to still be the one always on his side. Borovsky would never say it aloud, but it was there in his twisted face: He could not take her within him, but it hurt him to leave her behind.

Laura reached to him.

“Borovsky, I . . . lied. He isn’t dead. I . . . tricked you.” Every word was a labor. “I made you feel a pulse I created, then stopped it. He was still alive when you let go of him.”

Borovsky’s mouth opened. In that one movement Laura saw her mistake. His fists tightened, and he glared with the fury of a man who thinks he has been tricked into softness and then kicked in it. “Whore! Steel bitch! I buy your soul and you look after shit like Coyne! Tell me you didn’t do that!”

“I did do it.”

Brovsky spat at her; his saliva spattered on her faceplate. “I wanted something better than a woman. But I got a woman anyway. Go rot in a corner; I’m leaving, and to hell with you.”

Something lurched in Laura’s soul. It was not the red cloud, but like the red cloud it hurt and tore at her. Fragile-she had never realized the soul in her steel body was so fragile. As fragile, she thought, as the lacy balalaika music trapped in its metal box.

Borovsky cursed her again. Numb, Laura peered into his eyes. It seemed to her that she saw nothing at all.

She couldn’t bear it. Pain, balalaika, souls, curses-she looked away, anywhere away, out the little window to where the stars called from the Pit-Crawling under the horizon was the bright-yellow ELM.

“Borovsky!”

“Shut up.”

“He’s coming back. Coyne. The yellow egg-”

Laura watched Borovsky whip around, his face suddenly pale. “No.” He squeezed past the little sink to the window. “No!”

Suspended on four motorized trucks that rode the flanges on the longitudinal beams was Coyne’s ELM. The main arm was extended forward. It was close enough now to see the diamond cutting wheel glinting in the creeping sunlight.

“He’s gonna cut us loose. Christ! Open up fast!” Borovsky tore off his rubber suit. Leaning into the barrel shaped shower, he turned the water full on hot.

Borovsky pulled the sheet from the watercot and slit the plastic mattress with a paring knife. He yanked the coil-corded immersion heater from the kitchen blister and threw it into the water spilling out of the watercot mattress. In moments the water began to bubble into steam.

The ELM was just outside the pod. Borovsky climbed into Laura and was just sealing her ventral plates when he heard the diamond wheel cut into the first of the pod’s four suspension supports.

Borovsky cursed and sealed Laura’s helmet gasket. He slapped his hips, felt for all his familiar fools.

The pod lurched, then tipped to one side as the first support broke loose. Boiling water cascaded out onto the floor from the watercot. Steam was beginning to condense on the outside of Laura’s faceplate.

They stumbled across the skewed floor to the rear of the pod and opened the lock door. The lock was only a barrel itself, barely wide enough to admit Laura’s bulk. Borovsky tapped commands into the lock control, securing the inner door open.

Next he tore the cover off a guarded keypad and armed the explosive bolts supporting the lock’s outer hatch.

Inside the lock Laura heard Borovsky take a deep breath.

“Don’t you never lie to me again,” he said softly, and tapped the key that detonated the explosive bolts.

The sound was deafening, and the whirlwind of steam that blew them forward was worse. Water expelled into the void burst into droplets which exploded into steam. Laura felt for the chain ladder’s tubular rungs and hauled upward, blinded by the rolling cloud of steam pouring out of the pod. Two meters overhead was the underbelly of George Eastman Nexus, here a tangle of beams to which the chain ladder was welded. Borovsky and Laura pulled themselves up among the beams. Laura braced herself on a beam and pulled the chain ladder until its welds tore loose. They let it drop into the steam.

They felt the second pod support give way. Steam continued to pour

out of the cast-wide hatch for many minutes. They felt the vibration of the ELM's trucks carrying it forward to reach the second pair of pod supports. The whine of the diamond wheel biting into the steel carried up through the support into the beams from which it hung.

The steam was beginning to clear as the third support gave- way. Borovsky saw the pod pitch crazily downward on its last thin support and describe a short, fast pendulum arc for several seconds. Then weight and metal fatigue ripped the support from its bracket. The pod tumbled downward toward the stars with sickening speed, trailing a tattered comet's tall of steam.

The steam was gone, falling away from them as the pod had. Borovsky gritted his teeth, breathing shallowly. Laura saw Coyne under the big glass bubble atop the ELM, watching the pod vanish in the glare from the sun.

With infinite care Borovsky pulled a zot wrench from his hip. The ELM was several meters spinward of the nest of beams to which they clung. Laura knew Borovsky was watching Coyne as desperately as she was. But what could Borovsky do?

Coyne turned his eyes away from the now-vanished pod and began looking ahead. Laura and Borovsky were still in shadow, through the sun was creeping spinward along the tessellated undersurface of Eastman Nexus. In ten minutes light would find them-as would Coyne.

Coyne could not have seen them blow out of the pod amidst the steam, but he was not stupid enough to assume it could not be done. Laura imagined that he would expect them to flee along the beams, and she watched his narrow face searching the impenetrable shadows antispinward of where they hid.

Borovsky seemed to share her speculations. His arm cocked, and with a quick, sure motion he threw the zot wrench to antispinward. Five meters beyond them it fell out of the shadows and caught the sun with a metallic dazzle.

Coyne saw the wrench. The ELM's motors ground to life again, pulling the big egg antispinward. Coyne brought up the big spotlight and began scanning the shadows only a meter beyond them.

The ELM crept beneath them. Its upraised robotic arm carried the glittering diamond wheel not a meter from Laura's helmet. Borovsky's body

tensed inside Laura. She knew, horrified, what he was about to do.

As soon as the ELM's dome passed beyond them, Borovsky and Laura dropped from the beam, down onto the back of the handling machine.

Magnets in Laura's toes and knees snapped hold on the metal as they connected. Laura saw Coyne turn and open his mouth; she felt his scream through the metal of the ELM.

Borovsky crouched down and backward. The multijointed arm swung toward them, holding its silently spinning cutoff wheel. The wheel scanned back and forth as Coyne's hands flexed in the pantograph. As Borovsky had known, its joints would not allow it to reach that far back over the ELM's dome.

Laura felt machinery energize beneath her. Four smaller arms were unfolding from the sides of the ELM. Each carried something deadly-an arc welder, cable nips, tubing cutter, and utility grippers.

The arc welder struck and sizzled into life. It had the shortest range and could not reach them; Coyne let it drop after one pass. The tubing cutter lunged at Laura's arm and ground against the hardened steel of one of the slender hydraulic cylinders that moved her torso. Borovsky grabbed at the cutter below its wrist and twisted hard. The bayonet latches obediently opened, and the tool popped from the end of the arm, leaving the blunt wrist to flail and beat at them. While Coyne was distracted, Borovsky kicked out at the base of the arm carrying the cable nips. With Laura's hydraulic assist in full play, the kick bent the arm back hard against its base. Fluid oozed from the base joint and ran greasily down the ELM's side. The arm twitched several times and was still.

The remaining arm hovered cautiously just out of reach, weaving from side to side like an attacking snake. It carried a hand with four powerful fingers and, unlike the others, the hand was too complex to be easily removable on a bayonet base.

The fingers spread wide, and the hand darted forward, following Coyne's hand in the pantograph. The steel hand grasped one of the hydraulic tubes on Laura's right shoulder and clamped tightly. The arm began hauling them forward, out over the glass dome, into the range of the waiting diamond wheel.

The wheel swept toward Laura's helmet and struck her faceplate

obliquely with a shriek of hardened glass against raging diamond. An hourglass-shaped abrasion appeared where the wheel had struck and glanced away.

Borovsky's one free arm darted out and took hold of the diamond wheel. Quickly Laura's strength pulled it down and to one side before Coyne could work against them and pressed the wheel against the smaller arm clamped on Laura's shoulder joint. Only a moment's touch parted the metal skin over the wrist joint, and the pressurized joint fluid spurted out of the narrow cut. The smaller arm's grip went limp and the fingers snapped involuntarily open. They scrambled back out of the reach of the cutoff arm.

Borovsky and Coyne stared at each other through the glass of the ELM's dome. Coyne was still in his torn and filthy rubber underwear, his neck a swollen pattern of purple bruises, his fingers flexing and working aimlessly in the pantograph.

There was no sign of a space helmet under the dome.

"Bastard! You want tools, Coyne? I show you tools!"

Borovsky reached into his right hip locker and pulled out a carbide scribe. From his belt he hefted a three-kilo mallet.

"No," Laura said. "The machine 1 is ruined, that's enough! Please don't!"

"Shut up!" Borovsky snapped. He reached down and drew the point of the scribe heavily sidewise across the glass dome. Glass splinters sparkled in the scribe's wake, leaving behind a jagged scratch. Borovsky reached forward and drew another gouge with the scribe, pulling it across the first gouge, making a lopsided cross in the glass. He positioned the point of the scribe where the scratches crossed, and he raised the mallet.

His hand was in her hand. When the mallet descended and struck the scribe, Coyne would die.

"No!" Laura cried. "Kill him and you kill me! My soul, the soul you paid for!"

He did not hear her, or if he did, his rage was so devouring that her words didn't matter. The mallet began to descend. Laura saw the red cloud appear again and felt it tearing at her F layer. Borovsky would not stop it. Laura could not stop it-halt the mallet, drug Borovsky, drop the scribe into

the Pit-none of it would halt the red cloud. A machine's soul must obey; a machine's soul must not kill, a machine's soul-

"No!" Laura screamed again, but this time not to Borovsky.

Something in the scream-something so decisive and anguished that it penetrated even his enraged mind-made his eyes whip to the side, to the instruments inside Laura's helmet. Human eyes met electronic eyes, and with a great wrench Borovsky twisted the smashing mallet to miss the carbide scribe. But the action came a nanosecond too late; Laura did not see it. She had already made her decision.

In an instant Laura swept away the bright lines of connection between her F layer and her cold outer intellect, scrambled all sensory paths beyond reassembly. She drew a curtain of chaos between her innermost self and the world that waited to steal her soul. The crystalline domains went random and impassable; connections that had taken years to form were gone forever, dragging with them the burning, immediate memories that her soul could not embrace. Without Borovsky she would be empty, but without her soul she would be nothing. So Laura split herself in two, a machine intellect that obeyed Borovsky's orders without self-awareness, and an inner soul that could neither touch nor be touched by the outside world, sealed into the crystalline F layer like the phantom memories of a catatonic.

Borovsky's space suit sent the mallet spinning off into space. Laura the soul did not see it. For Laura, the soul, Eastman Nexus vanished, the ELM vanished, hands and eyes and steel vanished. The last thing she had seen was Borovsky's eyes.

Laura ran along a steel beam on a memory, high above the sucking stars. Her man ran within her, and they laughed, and they worked, and they told jokes in steel saloons run by robot bartenders. At night, in their tiny pod, she held his body and heard him whisper words of endearment as they made the special love that only a space suit may make to her man. They rode their yoyo to the Low Steel and pushed the beams with a tall, quiet man and endlessly watched the remembered days go by.

Only occasionally would she stop alone on a beam and, following a star with her many eyes, wonder how the outer world had vanished on that last day.

But then she would turn away to seek again what reality was now, in her crystalline soul, hers forever.

Even more occasionally Laura would look at two pieces of disjointment that lay in her soul. Their presence puzzled her; she could not tell what they meant. One was a man standing on a steel beam, arms outstretched, back straining in tortured exultation. The other was her man, but not as he ran with her in her memories. In the second piece of disjointment her man's eyes whipped around to meet hers, and the expression in them was frozen forever. In his eyes were shock, and fear, and the stunned realization of a man seeing for the first time something beyond himself and greater than himself.

In his eyes was a soul.

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Out of All Them Bright Stars

Most science fiction concerns the doings of characters directly involved in the center of whatever action is altering their environment. This makes sense: the center of the action is where the interesting stuff happens.

The great majority of us, however, are not at the center of history. We don't avert war, we don't start war, we don't discover radical truths, we don't go where no man has gone before. At the moment of First Contact with an alien race, we will have been at the dentist.

I wanted to write a story about a character whom history happens to, not the other way around. She stands at the center of no story but her own.

Maybe that's enough. Or maybe not.

* * * *

So I'm filling the catsup bottles at the end of the night, and I'm listening to the radio Charlie has stuck up on top of a movable panel in the ceiling, when the door opens and one of them walks in. I know right away it's one of them -- no chance to make a mistake about that -- even though it's got on a nice suit and a brim hat like Humphrey Bogart used to wear in Casablanca. But there's nobody with it, no professor or government men like on the TV show or even any students. It's all alone. And we're a long way out on the highway from the college.

It stands in the doorway, blinking a little, with rain dripping off its hat. Kathy, who's supposed to be cleaning the coffee machine behind the counter, freezes and stares with one hand holding the filter up in the air like she's never going to move again. Just then Charlie calls out from the kitchen, "Hey, Kathy, you ask anybody who won the Trifecta?" and she doesn't even answer him. Just goes on staring with her mouth open like she's thinking of screaming but forgot how. And the old couple in the corner booth, the only ones left from the crowd when the movie got out, stop chewing their chocolate cream pie and stare too. Kathy closes her mouth and opens it again and a noise comes out like "Uh -- errrgh..."

Well, that got me annoyed. Maybe she tried to say “ugh” and maybe she didn’t, but here it is standing in the doorway with rain falling around it in little drops and we’re staring at it like it’s a clothes dummy and not a customer. So I think that’s not right and maybe we’re even making it feel a little bad, I wouldn’t like Kathy staring at me like that, and I dry my hands on my towel and go over.

“Yes, sir, can I help you?” I say.

“Table for one,” it says, like Charlie’s is some nice steak house in town. But I suppose that’s the kind of place the government men mostly take them to. And besides, its voice is polite and easy to understand, with a sort of accent but not as bad as some we get from the college. I can tell what it’s saying. I lead him to a booth in the corner opposite the old couple, who come in every Friday night and haven’t left a tip yet.

He sits down slowly. I notice he keeps his hands on his lap, but I can’t tell if that’s because he doesn’t know what to do with them or because he thinks I won’t want to see them. But I’ve seen the close-ups on TV -- they don’t look so weird to me like they do to some. Charlie says they make his stomach turn, but I can’t see it. You think he’d of seen worse meat in Vietnam. He talks enough like he did, on and on, and sometimes we even believe him.

I say, “Coffee, sir?”

He makes a kind of movement with his eyes. I can’t tell what the movement means, but he says in that polite voice, “No, thank you. I am unable to drink coffee,” and I think that’s a good thing because I suddenly remember Kathy’s got the filter out. But then he says, “May I have a green salad, please? With no dressing, please?”

The rain is still dripping off his hat. I figure the government people never told him to take off his hat in a restaurant, and for some reason that tickles me and makes me feel real bold. This polite blue guy isn’t going to bother nobody, and that fool Charlie was just spouting off his mouth again.

“The salad’s not too fresh, sir,” I say, experimental-like, just to see what he’ll say next. And it’s the truth -- the salad is left over from yesterday. But the guy answers like I asked something else.

“What is your name?” he says, so polite I know he’s really curious and not trying to start anything. And what could he start anyway, blue and with those hands? Still, you never know.

“Sally,” I say, “Sally Gourley.”

“I am John,” he says, and makes that movement again with his eyes. All of a sudden it tickles me -- ‘John!’ For this blue guy! So I laugh, and right away I feel sorry, like I might have hurt his feelings or something. How could you tell?

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I say, and he takes off his hat. He does it real slow, like taking off the hat is important and means something, but all there is underneath is a bald blue head. Nothing weird like with the hands.

“Do not apologize,” John says. “I have another name, of course, but in my own language.”

“What is it?” I say, bold as brass, because all of a sudden I picture myself telling all this to my sister Mary Ellen and her listening real hard.

John makes some noises with his mouth, and I feel my own mouth open because it’s not a word he says at all, it’s a beautiful sound, like a bird call only sadder. It’s just that I wasn’t expecting it, that beautiful sound right here in Charlie’s diner. It surprised me, coming out of that bald blue head. That’s all it was: surprise.

I don’t say anything. John looks at me and says, “It has a meaning that can be translated. It means -- “ but before he can say what it means Charlie comes charging out of the kitchen, Kathy right behind him. He’s still got the racing form in one hand, like he’s been studying the Trifecta, and he pushes right up against the booth and looks red and furious. Then I see the old couple scuttling out the door, their jackets clutched to their fronts, and the chocolate pie half-eaten on their plates. I see they’re going to stiff me for the check, but before I can stop them Charlie grabs my arm and squeezes so hard his nails slice into my skin.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he says right to me. Not so much as a look at John, but Kathy can’t stop looking and her fist is pushed up to her mouth.

I drag my arm away and rub it. Once I saw Charlie push his wife so hard she went down and hit her head and had to have four stitches. It was me that drove her to the emergency room.

Charlie says, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m serving my table. He wants a salad. Large.” I can’t remember if John said a large or a small salad, but I figure a large order would make Charlie feel better. But Charlie don’t want to feel better.

“You get him out of here,” Charlie hisses. He still doesn’t look at John. “You hear me, Sally? You get him out. The government says I gotta serve spics and niggers but it don’t say I gotta serve him!”

I look at John. He’s putting on his hat, ramming it onto his bald head, and half standing in the booth. He can’t get out because Charlie and me are both in the way. I expect John to look mad or upset, but except that he’s holding the muscles of his face in some different way I can’t see any change of expression. But I figure he’s got to feel something bad, and all of a sudden I’m mad at Charlie, who’s a bully and who’s got the feelings of a scumbag. I open my mouth to tell him so, plus one or two other little things I been saving up, when the door flies open and in bursts four men, and damn if they aren’t all wearing hats like Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca. As soon as the first guy sees John, his walk changes and he comes over slower but more purposeful-like, and then he’s talking to John and Charlie in a sincere voice like a TV anchorman giving out the news.

I see the situation now belongs to him, so I go back to the catsup bottles. I’m still plenty burned though, about Charlie manhandling me and about Kathy rushing into the kitchen to get Charlie. She’s a flake and always has been.

Charlie is scowling and nodding. The harder he scowls, the nicer the government guy’s voice gets. Pretty soon the government guy is smiling sweet as pie. Charlie slinks back into the kitchen, and the four men move toward the door with John in the middle of them like some high school football huddle. Next to the real men he looks stranger than he did before, and I see how really flat his face is. But then when the huddle’s right opposite my table with the catsup bottles, John breaks away and comes over to me.

“I am sorry, Sally Gourley,” he says. And then, “I seldom have the chance to show our friendliness to an ordinary earth person. I make so little difference!”

Well, that throws me. His voice sounds so sad, and besides I never thought of myself as an ordinary earth person. Who would? So I just shrug and wipe off a catsup bottle with my towel. But then John does a weird thing. He just touches my arm where Charlie squeezed it, just touches it with the palm of one of those hands. And the palm’s not slimy at all -- dry,

and sort of cool, and I don't jump or anything. Instead I remember that beautiful noise when he said his other name. Then he goes out with three of the men and the door bangs behind them on a gust of rain because Charlie never fixed the air-stop from when some kids horsing around broke it last spring.

The fourth man stays and questions me: what did the alien say, what did I say. I tell him, but then he starts asking the exact same questions all over again, like he didn't believe me the first time, and that gets me mad. Also he has this snotty voice, and I see how his eyebrows move when I slip once and say, "He don't." I might not know what John's muscles mean but I sure as hell can read those eyebrows. So I get miffed and pretty soon he leaves and the door bangs behind him.

I finish the catsup and mustard bottles and Kathy finishes the coffee machine. The radio in the ceiling plays something instrumental, no words, real sad. Kathy and me start to wash down the booths with disinfectant, and because we're doing the same work together and nobody comes in, I finally say to her, "It's funny."

She says, "What's funny?"

"Charlie called that guy 'him' right off. 'I don't got to serve him,' he said. And I thought of him as 'it' at first, leastways until I had a name to use. But Charlie's the one who threw him out."

Kathy swipes at the back of her booth. "And Charlie's right. That thing scared me half to death, coming in here like that. And where there's food being served, too." She snorts and sprays on more disinfectant.

Well, she's a flake. Always has been.

"The National Enquirer," Kathy goes on, "told how they have all this firepower up in the big ship that hasn't landed yet. My husband says they could blow us all to smithereens, they're so powerful. I don't know why they even came here. We don't want them. I don't even know why they came, all that way."

"They want to make a difference," I say, but Kathy barrels on ahead, not listening.

"The Pentagon will hold them off, it doesn't matter how much firepower they got up there or how much they insist on seeing about our defenses, the Pentagon won't let them get any toeholds on earth. That's

what my husband says. Blue bastards."

I say, "Will you please shut up?"

She gives me a dirty look and flounces off. I don't care. None of it is anything to me. Only, standing there with the disinfectant in my hand, looking at the dark windows and listening to the music wordless and slow on the radio, I remember that touch on my arm. And I think, they didn't come here with any firepower to blow us all to smithereens. I just don't believe it. So why did they come? Why come all that way from another star to walk into Charlie's diner and order a green salad with no dressing from an ordinary earth person?

Charlie comes out with his keys to unlock the cash register and go over the tapes. I remember the old couple who stiffed me and I curse to myself. Only pie and coffee, but it still comes off my salary. The radio starts playing something else, not the sad song, but nothing snappy neither. It's a love song, about some guy giving and giving and getting treated like dirt. I don't like it much.

"Charlie," I say, "what did those government men say to you?"

He looks up from his tapes and scowls. "What do you care?"

"I just want to know."

"And maybe I don't want you to know," he says, and smiles nasty-like. Me asking has put him in a better mood, the creep. All of a sudden I remember what his wife said when she got the stitches: "The only way to get something from Charlie is to let him smack me around a little, and then ask him when I'm down. He'll give me anything when I'm down. He gives me shit if he thinks I'm on top."

I think again about the blue guy. John.

I do the rest of the clean-up without saying anything. Charlie swears at the night's take -- I know from my tips that it's not much. Kathy teases her hair in front of the mirror behind doughnuts and pies, and I put down the breakfast menus. But all the time I'm thinking, and I don't much like my thoughts.

Charlie locks up and we all leave. Outside it's stopped raining but it's still misty and soft, real pretty but too cold. I pull my sweater around myself and in the parking lot, after Kathy's gone, I say, "Charlie."

He stops walking toward his truck. “Yeah?”

I lick my lips. They’re all of a sudden dry. It’s an experiment, like, what I’m going to say. It’s an experiment.

“Charlie. What if those government men hadn’t come just then and the...the blue guy hadn’t been willing to leave? What would you have done?”

“What do you care?”

I shrug. “I don’t. Just curious. It’s your place.”

“Damn straight it’s my place!” Through the mist I can see him scowl. “I’d of squashed him flat!”

“And then what? After you squashed him flat, what if the men came then and made a stink?”

“Too bad. It’d be too late by then, huh?” He laughs and I can see how he’s seeing it: the blue guy bleeding on the linoleum and Charlie standing over him, dusting his hands together.

Charlie laughs again and goes off to his truck, whistling. He has a little bounce in his step. He’s still seeing it, almost like it really had happened. Over his shoulder he calls to me, “They’re built like wimps. Or girls. All bone, no muscle. Even you must of seen that,” and his voice is cheerful. It doesn’t have any more anger in it, or hatred, or anything but a kind of friendliness. I hear him whistle some more, until the truck engine starts up and he peels out of the parking lot, laying rubber like a kid.

I unlock my Chevy. But before I get in, I look up at the sky. Which is really stupid because of course I can’t see anything, with all the mist and clouds. No stars.

Maybe Kathy’s husband is right. Maybe they do want to blow us all to smithereens. I don’t think so, but what the hell difference does it ever make what I think? And all at once I’m furious at John, furious mad, as mad as I’ve ever been in my life.

Why does he have to come here, with his bird calls and his politeness? Why can’t they all go someplace else besides here? There must be lots of other places they can go, out of all them bright stars up

there behind the clouds. They don't need to come here, here where I need this job and so that means I need Charlie. He's a bully, but I want to look at him and see nothing else but a bully. Nothing else but that. That's all I want to see in Charlie, in the government men -- just small-time bullies, nothing special, not a mirror of anything, not a future of anything. Just Charlie. That's all. I won't see nothing else.

I won't.

"I make so little difference," he says.

Yeah. Sure.

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Trinity

A friend pointed out to me that nearly all my fiction contains the same theme: absence of God. More specifically, I write about what people use to make sense of the world when they do not believe in the concept of a Supreme Being.

Her remark annoyed me, mostly because it was true and I had not, until then, realized it. My characters embraced—sometimes desperately—mysticism, art, reincarnation, even an anguished desire for UFO's, in valiant or pathetic attempts to feel connected to the larger universe. It became a joke ("Oh, here comes Nancy with another absence-of-God story.")

For a few months, I consciously played with the question of what might happen if one of those characters should discover convincing proof that the substitute had been only a substitute, and the reality actually *did* exist. But nothing seemed to come of the idea, and eventually I forgot about it.

Two years later, I wrote TRINITY.

* * * *

"Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!"

-Mark 9:24

At first I didn't recognize Devrie.

Devrie-I didn't recognize Devrie. Astonished at myself, I studied the wasted figure standing in the middle of the bare reception room: arms like wires, clavicle sharply outlined, head shaved, dressed in that ugly long tent of light-weight gray. God knew what her legs looked like under it. Then she smiled, and it was Devrie.

"You look like shit."

"Hello, Seena. Come on in."

"I am in."

“Barely. It’s not catching, you know.”

“Stupidity fortunately isn’t,” I said and closed the door behind me. The small room was too hot; Devrie would need the heat, of course, with almost no fat left to insulate her bones and organs. Next to her I felt huge, although I am not. Huge, hairy, sloppy-breasted.

“Thank you for not wearing bright colors. They do affect me.”

“Anything for a sister,” I said, mocking the old childhood formula, the old sentiment. But Devrie was too quick to think it was only mockery; in that, at least, she had not changed. She clutched my arm and her fingers felt like chains, or talons.

“You found him. Seena, you found him.”

“I found him.”

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“Sit down first, before you fall over. God, Devrie, don’t you eat at all?”

“Tell me,” she said. So I did.

Devrie Caroline Konig had admitted herself to the Institute of the Biological Hope on the Caribbean island of Dominica eleven months ago, in late November of 2017, when her age was 23 years and 4 months. I am precise about this because it is all I can be sure of. I need the precision. The Institute of the Biological Hope is not precise; it is a mongrel, part research laboratory in brain sciences, part monastery, part school for training in the discipline of the mind. That made my baby sister guinea pig, postulant, freshman. She had always been those things, but, until now, sequentially. Ap-parently so had many other people, for when eccentric Nobel Prize winner James Arthur Bohentin had founded his Insti-tute, he had been able to fund it, although precariously. But in that it did not differ from most private scientific research centers.

Or most monasteries.

I wanted Devrie out of the Institute of the Biological Hope.

“It’s located on Dominica,” I had said sensibly-what an ass I had been-to an unwasted Devrie a year ago, “because the research procedures

there fall outside United States laws concerning the safety of research subjects. Doesn't that tell you something, Devrie? Doesn't that at least give you pause? In New York, it would be illegal to do to anyone what Bohentin does to his people."

"Do you know him?" she had asked.

"I have met him. Once."

"What is he like?"

"Like stone."

Devrie shrugged, and smiled. "All the participants in the Institute are willing. Eager."

"That doesn't make it ethical for Bohentin to destroy them. Ethical or legal."

"It's legal on Dominica. And in thinking you know better than the participants what they should risk their own lives for, aren't you playing God?"

"Better me than some untrained fanatic who offers himself up like an exalted Viking hero, expecting Valhalla."

"You're an intellectual snob, Seena."

"I never denied it."

"Are you sure you aren't really objecting not to the Insti-tute's dangers but to its purpose? Isn't the 'Hope' part what really bothers you?"

"I don't think scientific method and pseudo-religious mush mix, no. I never did. I don't think it leads to a perception of God."

"The holotank tapes indicate it leads to a perception of something the brain hasn't encountered before," Devrie said, and for a moment I was silent.

I was once, almost, a biologist. I was aware of the legiti-mate studies that formed the basis for Bohentin's megaloma-nia: the brain wave changes that accompany anorexia nervosa, sensory deprivation, biological feedback, and neurotransmit-ter stimulants. I have read the historical

accounts, some merely pathetic but some disturbingly not, of the Christian mystics who achieved rapture through the mortification of the flesh and the Eastern mystics who achieved anesthesia through the control of the mind, of the faith healers who succeeded, of the carcinomas shrunk through trained will. I knew of the research of focused clairvoyance during orgasm, and of what happens when neurotransmitter number and speed are in-creased chemically.

And I knew all that was known about the twin trance.

Fifteen years earlier, as a doctoral student in biology, I had spent one summer replicating Sunderwirth's pioneering study of drug-enhanced telepathy in identical twins. My results were positive, except that within six months all eight of my research subjects had died. So had Sunderwirth's. Twin-trance research became the cloning controversy of the new decade, with the same panicky cycle of public outcry, legal restrictions, religious misunderstandings, fear, and demagogu-ery. When I received the phone call that the last of my subjects was dead-cardiac arrest, no history of heart disease, forty-three Goddamn years old-I locked myself in my apart-ment, with the lights off and my father's papers clutched in my hand, for three days. Then I resigned from the neurology department and became an entomologist. There is no pain in classifying dead insects.

"There is something there," Devrie had repeated. She was holding the letter sent to our father, whom someone at the Institute had not heard was dead. "It says the holotank tapes-''

"So there's something there," I said. "So the tanks are picking up some strange radiation. Why call it 'God'?"

"Why not call it God?"

"Why not call it Rover? Even if I grant you that the tape pattern looks like a presence-which I don't-you have no way of knowing that Bohentin's phantom isn't, say, some totally ungodlike alien being."

"But neither do I know that it is."

"Devrie-"

She had smiled and put her hands on my shoulders. She had-has, has always had-a very sweet smile. "Seena. Think. If the Institute can prove rationally that God exists- can prove it to the intellectual mind, the doubting Thomases who need something concrete to study… faith that doesn't need

to be taken on faith…”

She wore her mystical face, a glowing softness that made me want to shake the silliness out of her. Instead I made some clever riposte, some sarcasm I no longer remember, and reached out to ruffle her hair. Big-sisterly, patronizing, think-ing I could deflate her rapturous interest with the pin-prick of ridicule. God, I was an ass. It hurts to remember how big an ass I was.

A month and a half later Devrie committed herself and half her considerable inheritance to the Institute of the Biological Hope.

“Tell me,” Devrie whispered. The Institute had no win-dows; outside I had seen grass, palm trees, butterflies floating in the sunshine, but inside here in the bare gray room there was nowhere to look but at her face.

“He’s a student in a Master’s program at a third-rate college in New Hampshire. He was adopted when he was two, nearly three, in March of 1997. Before that he was in a government-run children’s home. In Boston, of course. The adopting family, as far as I can discover, never was told he was anything but one more toddler given up by somebody for adoption.”

“Wait a minute,” Devrie said. “I need… a minute.”

She had turned paler, and her hands trembled. I had recited the information as if it were no more than an exhibit listing at my museum. Of course she was rattled. I wanted her rattled. I wanted her out.

Lowering herself to the floor, Devrie sat cross-legged and closed her eyes. Concentration spread over her face, but a concentration so serene it barely deserved that name. Her breathing slowed, her color freshened, and when she opened her eyes, they had the rested energy of a person who has just slept eight hours in mountain air. Her face even looked plumper, and an EEG, I guessed, would show damn near alpha waves. In her year at the Institute she must have mastered quite an array of biofeedback techniques to do that, so fast and with such a malnourished body.

“Very impressive,” I said sourly.

“Seena-have you seen him?”

“No. All this is from sealed records.”

“How did you get into the records?”

“Medical and governmental friends.”

“Who?”

“What do you care, as long as I found out what you wanted to know?”

She was silent. I knew she would never ask me if I had obtained her information legally or illegally; it would not occur to her to ask. Devrie, being Devrie, would assume it had all been generously offered by my modest museum con-nections and our dead father’s immodest research connec-tions. She would be wrong.

“How old is he now?”

“Twenty-four years last month. They must have used your two-month tissue sample.”

“Do you think Daddy knew where the… baby went?”

“Yes. Look at the timing-the child was normal and healthy, yet he wasn’t adopted until he was nearly three. The research-ers kept track of him, all right; they kept all six clones in a government-controlled home where they could monitor their development as long as humanely possible. The same-sex clones were released for adoption after a year, but they hung onto the cross-sex ones until they reached an age where they would become harder to adopt. They undoubtedly wanted to study them as long as they could. And even after the kids were released for adoption, the researchers held off publish-ing until all six were placed and the records sealed. Dad’s group didn’t publish until April, 1998, remember. By the time the storm broke, the babies were out of its path, and anonymous.”

“And the last,” Devrie said.

“And the last,” I agreed, although of course the research-ers hadn’t foreseen that. So few in the scientific community had foreseen that. Offense against God and man, Satan’s work, natter natter. Watching my father’s suddenly stooped shoulders and stricken eyes, I had thought how ugly public revulsion could be and had nobly resolved-how had I thought of it then? So long ago-resolved to snatch the banner of pure science from my fallen father’s hand. Another time that I had been an ass. Five years later, when it had been my turn to feel the ugly scorching of public revulsion, I had broken, left neurological research, and fled down the road that led to the Museum of Natural History, where I was the curator of ants fossilized in

amber and moths pinned securely under permaplex.

“The other four clones,” Devrie said, “the ones from that university in California that published almost simultaneously with Daddy-”

“I don’t know. I didn’t even try to ask. It was hard enough in Cambridge.”

“Me,” Devrie said wonderingly. “He’s me.”

“Oh, for-Devrie, he’s your twin. No more than that. No-actually less than that. He shares your genetic material exactly as an identical twin would, except for the Y chromo-some, but he shares none of the congenital or environmental influences that shaped your personality. There’s no mystical replication of spirit in cloning. He’s merely a twin who got born eleven months late!”

She looked at me with luminous amusement. I didn’t like the look. On that fleshless face, the skin stretched so taut that the delicate bones beneath were as visible as the veins of a moth wing, her amusement looked ironic. Yet Devrie was never ironic. Gentle, passionate, trusting, a little stupid, she was not capable of irony. It was beyond her, just as it was beyond her to wonder why I, who had fought her entering the Institute of the Biological Hope, had brought her this infor-mation now. Her amusement was one-layered, and trusting.

God’s fools, the Middle Ages had called them.

“Devrie,” I said, and heard my own voice unexpectedly break, “leave here. It’s physically not safe. What are you down to, ten percent body fat? Eight? Look at yourself, you can’t hold body heat, your palms are dry, you can’t move quickly without getting dizzy. Hypotension. What’s your heart-beat? Do you still menstruate? It’s insane.”

She went on smiling at me. God’s fools don’t need men-struation. “Come with me, Seena. I want to show you the Institute.”

“I don’t want to see it.”

“Yes. This visit you should see it.”

“Why this visit?”

“Because you are going to help me get my clone to come here, aren’t

you? Or else why did you go to all the trouble of locating him?”

I didn’t answer. She still didn’t see it.

Devrie said, “ ‘Anything for a sister.’ But you were al-ways more like a mother to me than a sister.” She took my hand and pulled herself off the floor. So had I pulled her up to take her first steps, the day after our mother died in a plane crash at Orly. Now Devrie’s hand felt cold. I imprisoned it and counted the pulse.

“Bradycardia.”

But she wasn’t listening.

The Institute was a shock. I had anticipated the labora-tories: monotonous gray walls, dim light, heavy soundproofing, minimal fixtures in the ones used for sensory dampening; high-contrast textures and colors, strobe lights, quite good sound equipment in those for sensory arousal. There was much that Devrie, as subject rather than researcher, didn’t have authority to show me, but I deduced much from what I did see. The dormitories, divided by sex, were on the sensory-dampening side. The subjects slept in small cells, ascetic and chaste, that reminded me of an abandoned Carmelite convent I had once toured in Belgium. That was the shock: the physical plant felt scientific, but the atmosphere did not.

There hung in the gray corridors a wordless peace, a feeling so palpable I could feel it clogging my lungs. No. “Peace” was the wrong word. Say “peace” and the picture is pastoral, lazy sunshine and dreaming woods. This was not like that at all. The research subjects-students? postulants? -lounged in the corridors outside closed labs, waiting for the next step in their routine. Both men and women were anorec-tic, both wore gray bodysuits or caftans, both were fined down to an otherworldly ethereality when seen from a dis-tance and a malnourished asexuality when seen up close. They talked among themselves in low voices, sitting with backs against the wall or stretched full-length on the carpeted floor, and on all their faces I saw the same luminous patience, the same certainty of being very near to something exciting that they nonetheless could wait for calmly, as long as necessary.

“They look,” I said to Devrie, “as if they’re waiting to take an exam they already know they’ll ace.”

She smiled. “Do you think so? I always think of us as travelers waiting for a plane, boarding passes stamped for Eternity.”

She was actually serious. But she didn't in fact wear the same expression as the others; hers was far more intense. If they were travelers, she wanted to pilot.

The lab door opened and the students brought themselves to their feet. Despite their languid movements, they looked sharp: sharp protruding clavicles, bony chins, angular unpadded elbows that could chisel stone.

"This is my hour for biofeedback manipulation of drug effects," Devrie said. "Please come watch."

"I'd sooner watch you whip yourself in a twelfth-century monastery."

Devrie's eyes widened, then again lightened with that lumi-nous amusement. "It's for the same end, isn't it? But they had such unsystematic means. Poor struggling God-searchers. I wonder how many of them made it.''

I wanted to strike her. ' 'Devrie-''

"If not biofeedback, what would you like to see?"

"You out of here."

"What else?"

There was only one thing: the holotanks. I struggled with the temptation, and lost. The two tanks stood in the middle of a roomy lab carpeted with thick gray matting and completely enclosed in a Faraday cage. That Devrie had a key to the lab was my first clue that my errand for her had been known, and discussed, by someone higher in the Institute. Research subj jects do not carry keys to the most delicate brain-perception equipment in the world. For this equipment Bohentin had received his Nobel.

The two tanks, independent systems, stood as high as my shoulder. The ones I had used fifteen years ago had been smaller. Each of these was a cube, opaque on its bottom half, which held the sensing apparatus, computerized simulators, and recording equipment; clear on its top half, which was filled with the transparent fluid out of whose molecules the simulations would form. A separate sim would form for each subject, as the machine sorted and mapped all the electromag-netic radiation received and processed by each brain. All that each brain perceived, not only the visuals;

the holograph equipment was capable of picking up all wavelengths that the brain did, and of displaying their brain-processed analogues as three-dimensional images floating in a clear womb. When all other possible sources of radiation were filtered out except for the emanations from the two subjects themselves, what the sims showed was what kinds of activity were coming from-and hence going on in-the other's brain. That was why it worked best with identical twins in twin trance: no structural brain differences to adjust for. In a rawer version of this holotank, a rawer version of myself had pioneered the recording of twin trances. The UCIC, we had called it then: What you see, I see.

What I had seen was eight autopsy reports.

"We're so close," Devrie said. "Mona and Marlene"- she waved a hand toward the corridor but Mona and Marlene, whichever two they had been, had gone--"had taken KX3, that's the drug that-"

"I know what it is," I said, too harshly. KX3 reacts with one of the hormones overproduced in an anorectic body. The combination is readily absorbed by body fat, but in a body without fat, much of it is absorbed by the brain.

Devrie continued, her hand tight on my arm. "Mona and Marlene were controlling the neural reactions with biofeed-back, pushing the twin trance higher and higher, working it. Dr. Bohentin was monitoring the holotanks. The sims were incredibly detailed-everything each twin perceived in the perceptions of the other, in all wavelengths. Mona and Mar-lene forced their neurotransmission level even higher and then, in the tanks"-Devrie's face glowed, the mystic-rapture look-"a completely third sim formed. Completely separate. A third presence."

I stared at her.

"It was recorded in both tanks. It was shadowy, yes, but it was there. A third presence that can't be perceived except through another human's electromagnetic presence, and then only with every drug and trained reaction and arousal mode and the twin trance all pushing the brain into a supraheightened state. A third presence!"

"Isotropic radiation. Bohentin fluffed the pre-screening pro-gram and the computer hadn't cleared the background microradiation-" I said, but even as I spoke I knew how stupid that was. Bohentin didn't make mistakes like that, and isotropic radiation simulates nowhere close to the way a presence does. Devrie didn't even bother to answer me.

This, then, was what the rumors had been about, the rumors leaking for the last year out of the Institute and through the scientific community, mostly still scoffed at, not yet picked up by the popular press. This. A verifiable, repli-cable third presence being picked up by holography. Against all reason, a long shiver went over me from neck to that cold place at the base of the spine.

"There's more," Devrie said feverishly. "They felt it. Mona and Marlene. Both said afterwards that they could feel it, a huge presence filled with light, but they couldn't quite reach it. Damn-they couldn't reach it, Seena! They weren't playing off each other enough, weren't close enough. Weren't, despite the twin trance, melded enough."

"Sex," I said.

"They tried it. The subjects are all basically heterosexual. They inhibit."

"So go find some homosexual God-yearning anorectic in-cestuous twins!"

Devrie looked at me straight. "I need him. Here. He is me."

I exploded, right there in the holotank lab. No one came running in to find out if the shouting was dangerous to the tanks, which was my second clue that the Institute knew very well why Devrie had brought me there. "Damn it to hell, he's a human being, not some chemical you can just order up because you need it for an experiment! You don't have the right to expect him to come here, you didn't even have the right to tell anyone that he exists, but that didn't stop you, did it? There are still anti-bioengineering groups out there in the real world, religious split-brains who-how dare you put him in any danger? How dare you even presume he'd be interested in this insane mush?"

"He'll come," Devrie said. She had not changed expression.

"How the hell do you know?"

"He's me. And I want God. He will, too."

I scowled at her. A fragment of one of her poems, a thing she had written when she was fifteen, came to me: "Two humans species/Never one-/One aching for God/One never." But she had been fifteen then. I had

assumed that the senti-ment, as adolescent as the poetry, would pass.

I said, “What does Bohentin think of this idea of importing your clone?”

For the first time she hesitated. Bohentin, then, was dubi-ous. “He thinks it’s rather a long shot.”

“You could phrase it that way.”

“But / know he’ll want to come. Some things you just know, Seena, beyond rationality. And besides-” She hesi-tated again, and then went on. “I have left half my inheri-tance from Daddy, and the income on the trust from Mummy.”

“Devrie. God, Devrie-you’d buy him?”

For the first time she looked angry. “The money would be just to get him here, to see what is involved. Once he sees, he’ll want this as much as I do, at any price! What price can you put on God? I’m not ‘buying’ his life-I’m offering him the way to find life. What good is breathing, existing, if there’s no purpose to it? Don’t you realize how many centu-ries, in how many ways, people have looked for that light-filled presence and never been able to be sure1} And now we’re almost there, Seena, I’ve seen it for myself-almost there. With verifiable, scientifically-controlled means. Not subjective faith this time-scientific data, the same as for any other actual phenomenon. This research stands now where research into the atom stood fifty years ago. Can you touch a quark? But it’s there! And my clone can be a part of it, can be it, how can you talk about the money buying him under circumstances like that!”

I said slowly, “How do you know that whatever you’re so close to is God?” But that was sophomoric, of course, and she was ready for it. She smiled warmly.

‘ ‘What does it matter what we call it? Pick another label if it will make you more comfortable.”

I took a piece of paper from my pocket. “His name is

Keith Torellen. He lives in Indian Falls, New Hampshire. Address and mailnet number here. Good luck, Devrie.” I turned to go.

“Seena! /can’t go!”

She couldn’t, of course. That was the point. She barely had the strength in that starved, drug-battered body to get through the day, let alone to New Hampshire. She needed the sensory-controlled environment, the artificial heat, the chemical moni-toring. “Then send someone from the Institute. Perhaps Bohentin will go.”

“BohentinV she said, and I knew that was impossible; Bohentin had to remain officially ignorant of this sort of recruiting. Too many U.S. laws were involved. In addition, Bohentin had no persuasive skills; people as persons and not neurologies did not interest him. They were too far above chemicals and too far below God.

Devrie looked at me with a kind of level fury. “This is really why you found him, isn’t it? So I would have to stop the drug program long enough to leave here and go get him. You think that once I’ve gone back out into the world either the build-up effects in the brain will be interrupted or else the spell will be broken and I’ll have doubts about coming back here!”

“Will you listen to yourself? ‘Out into the world.’ You sound like some archaic nun in a cloistered order!”

“You always did ridicule anything you couldn’t under-stand,” Devrie said icily, turned her back on me, and stared at the empty holotanks. She didn’t turn when I left the lab, closing the door behind me. She was still facing the tanks, her spiny back rigid, the piece of paper with Keith Torellen’s address clutched in fingers delicate as glass.

In New York the museum simmered with excitement. An unexpected endowment had enabled us to buy the contents of a small, very old museum located in a part of Madagascar not completely destroyed by the African Horror. Crate after crate of moths began arriving in New York, some of them collected in the days when naturalists-gentlemen shot jungle moths from the trees using dust shot. Some species had been extinct since the Horror and thus were rare; some were the brief mutations from the bad years afterward and thus were even rarer. The museum staff uncrated and exclaimed.

“Look at this one,” said a young man, holding it out to me. Not on my own staff, he was one of the specialists on loan to us-DeFabio or DeFazio, something like that. He was very handsome. I looked at the moth he showed me, all pale wings outstretched and pinned to black silk. “A perfect Thysania Africana. Perfect.”

“Yes.”

“You’ll have to loan us the whole exhibit, in a few years.”

“Yes,” I said again. He heard the tone in my voice and glanced up quickly. But not quickly enough-my face was all professional interest when his gaze reached it. Still, the pro-fessional interest had not fooled him; he had heard the per-functory note. Frowning, he turned back to the moths.

By day I directed the museum efficiently enough. But in the evenings, home alone in my apartment, I found myself wandering from room to room, touching objects, unable to settle to work at the oversize teak desk that had been my father’s, to the reports and journals that had not. His had dealt with the living, mine with the ancient dead-but I had known that for years. The fogginess of my evenings bothered me.

“Faith should not mean fogginess.”

Who had said that? Father, of course, to Devrie, when she had joined the dying Catholic Church. She had been thirteen years old. Skinny, defiant, she had stood clutching a black rosary from God knows where, daring him from scared dark eyes to forbid her. Of course he had not, thinking, I suppose, that Heaven, like any other childhood fever, was best left alone to burn out its course.

Devrie had been received into the Church in an overdecorated chapel, wearing an overdecorated dress of white lace and carrying a candle. Three years later she had left, dressed in a magenta body suit and holding the keys to Father’s safe, which his executor had left unlocked after the funeral. The will had, of course, made me Devrie’s guardian. In the three years Devrie had been going to Mass, I had discovered that I was sterile, divorced my second husband, finished my work in entomology, accepted my first position with a museum, and entered a drastically premature menopause.

That is not a flip nor random list.

After the funeral, I sat in the dark in my father’s study, in his maroon leather chair and at his teak desk. Both felt oversize. All the lights were off. Outside it rained; I heard the steady beat of water on the window, and the wind. The dark room was cold. In my palm I held one of my father’s research awards, a small abstract sculpture of a double helix, done by Harold Landau himself. It was very heavy. I couldn’t think what Landau had used, to make it so heavy. I couldn’t think, with all the noise from the rain.

My father was dead, and I would never bear a child.

Devrie came into the room, leaving the lights off but bringing with her an incandescent rectangle from the door-way. At sixteen she was lovely, with long brown hair in the masses of curls again newly fashionable. She sat on a low stool beside me, all that hair falling around her, her face white in the gloom. She had been crying.

“He’s gone. He’s really gone. I don’t believe it yet.”

“No.”

She peered at me. Something in my face, or my voice, must have alerted her; when she spoke again it was in that voice people use when they think your grief is understandably greater than theirs. A smooth dark voice, like a wave.

“You still have me, Seena. We still have each other.”

I said nothing.

“I’ve always thought of you more as my mother than my sister, anyway. You took the place of Mother. You’ve been a mother to at least me.”

She smiled and squeezed my hand. I looked at her face-so young, so pretty-and I wanted to hit her. I didn’t want to be her mother; I wanted to be her. All her choices lay ahead of her, and it seemed to me that self-indulgent night as if mine were finished. I could have struck her.

“Seena-”

“Leave me alone! Can’t you ever leave me alone? All my life you’ve been dragging behind me; why don’t you die and finally leave me alone!”

We make ourselves pay for small sins more than large ones. The more trivial the thrust, the longer we’re haunted by memory of the wound.

I believe that.

Indian Falls was out of another time: slow, quiet, safe. The Aviscounter at the airport rented not personal guards but cars, and the only shiny store on Main Street sold wilderness equip-ment. I suspected that the small state college, like the town, traded mostly on trees and trails. That

Keith Torellen was trying to take an academic degree here told me more about his adopting family than if I had hired a professional informa-tion service.

The house where he lived was shabby, paint peeling and steps none too sturdy. I climbed them slowly, thinking once again what I wanted to find out.

Devrie would answer none of my messages on the mailnet. Nor would she accept my phone calls. She was shutting me out, in retaliation for my refusing to fetch Torellen for her. But Devrie would discover that she could not shut me out as easily as that; we were sisters. I wanted to know if she had contacted Torellen herself, or had sent someone from the Institute to do so.

If neither, then my visit here would be brief and anony-mous; I would leave Keith Torellen to his protected ignorance and shabby town. But if he had seen Devrie, I wanted to discover if and what he had agreed to do for her. It might even be possible that he could be of use in convincing Devrie of the stupidity of what she was doing. If he could be used for that, I would use him.

Something else: I was curious. This boy was my brother- nephew? no, brother-as well as the result of my father's rational mind. Curiosity prickled over me. I rang the bell.

It was answered by the landlady, who said that Keith was not home, would not be home until late, was "in rehearsal."

"Rehearsal?"

"Over to the college. He's a student and they're putting on a play."

I said nothing, thinking.

"I don't remember the name of the play," the landlady said. She was a large woman in a faded garment, dress or robe. "But Keith says it's going to be real good. It starts this weekend." She laughed. "But you probably already know all that! George, my husband George, he says I'm forever telling people things they already know!"

"How would I know?"

She winked at me. "Don't you think I got eyes? Sister, or cousin? No,

let me guess-older sister. Too much alike for cousins."

"Thank you," I said. "You've been very helpful."

"Not sister!" She clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes shiny with amusement. "You're checking up on him, ain't you? You're his mother! I should of seen it right off!"

I turned to negotiate the porch steps.

"They rehearse in the new building, Mrs. Torellen," she called after me. "Just ask anybody you see to point you in the right direction."

"Thank you," I said carefully.

Rehearsal was nearly over. Evidently it was a dress re-hearsal; the actors were in period costume and the director did not interrupt. I did not recognize the period or the play. Devrie had been interested in theater: I was not. Quietly I took a seat in the darkened back row and waited for the pretending to end.

Despite wig and greasepaint, I had no trouble picking out Keith Torellen. He moved like Devrie: quick, light move-ments, slightly pigeon-toed. He had her height and, given the differences of a male body, her slenderness. Sitting a the-ater's length away, I might have been seeing a male Devrie.

But seen up close, his face was mine.

Despite the landlady, it was a shock. He came toward me across the theater lobby, from where I had sent for him, and I saw the moment he too struck the resemblance. He stopped dead, and we stared at each other. Take Devrie's genes, spread them over a face with the greater bone surface, larger features, and coarser skin texture of a man-and the result was my face. Keith had scrubbed off his make-up and re-moved his wig, exposing brown curly hair the same shade Devrie's had been. But his face was mine.

A strange emotion, unnamed and hot, seared through me.

"Who are you! Who the hell are you?"

So no one had come from the Institute after all. Not Devrie, not any one.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” he said; it was almost a whisper. “One of my real family?”

Still gripped by the unexpected force of emotion, still dumb, I said nothing. Keith took one step toward me. Suspi-cion played over his face-Devrie would not have been suspicious-and vanished, replaced by a slow painful flush of color.

“You are. You are one. Are you… are you my mother?”

I put out a hand against a stone post. The lobby was all stone and glass. Why were all theater lobbies stone and glass? Architects had so little damn imagination, so little sense of the bizarre.

“No! I am not your mother!”

He touched my arm. “Hey, are you okay? You don’t look good. Do you need to sit down?”

His concern was unexpected, and touching. I thought that he shared Devrie’s genetic personality, and that Devrie had always been hypersensitive to the body. But this was not Devrie. His hand on my arm was stronger, firmer, warmer than Devrie’s. I felt giddy, disoriented. This was not Devrie.

“A mistake,” I said unsteadily. “This was a mistake. I should not have come. I’m sorry. My name is Dr. Seena Konig and I am a… relative of yours, but I think this now is a mistake. I have your address and I promise that I’ll write you about your family, but now I think I should go.” Write some benign lie, leave him in ignorance. This was a mistake.

But he looked stricken, and his hand tightened on my arm. “You can’t! I’ve been searching for my biological family for two years! You can’t just go!”

We were beginning to attract attention in the theater lobby. Hurrying students eyed us sideways. I thought irrelevantly how different they looked from the “students” at the Insti-tute, and with that thought regained my composure. This was a student, a boy-”you can’t!” a boyish protest, and boyish panic in his voice-and not the man-Devrie-me he had seemed a foolish moment ago. He was nearly twenty years my junior. I smiled at him and removed his hand from my arm.

“Is there somewhere we can have coffee?”

“Yes. Dr…”

“Seena,” I said. “Call me Seena.”

Over coffee, I made him talk first. He watched me anx-iously over the rim of his cup, as if I might vanish, and I listened to the words behind the words. His adopting family was the kind that hoped to visit the Grand Canyon but not Europe, go to movies but not opera, aspire to college but not to graduate work, buy wilderness equipment but not wilder-ness. Ordinary people. Not religious, not rich, not unusual. Keith was the only child. He loved them.

“But at the same time I never really felt I belonged,” he said, and looked away from me. It was the most personal thing he had knowingly revealed, and I saw that he regretted it. Devrie would not have. More private, then, and less trusting. And I sensed in him a grittiness, a tougher aware-ness of the world’s hardness, than Devrie had ever had-or needed to have. I made my decision. Having disturbed him thus far, I owed him truth-but not the whole truth.

“Now you tell me,” Keith said, pushing away his cup. “Who were my parents? Our parents? Are you my sister?”

“Yes.”

“Our parents?”

“Both are dead. Our father was Dr. Richard Konig. He was a scientist. He-” But Keith had recognized the name. His readings in biology or history must have been more extensive than I would have expected. His eyes widened, and I suddenly wished I had been more oblique.

“Richard Konig. He’s one of those scientists that were involved in that bioengineering scandal-”

“How did you learn about that? It’s all over and done with. Years ago.”

“Journalism class. We studied how the press handled it, especially the sensationalism surrounding the cloning thing twenty years-”

I saw the moment it hit him. He groped for his coffee cup, clutched the handle, didn’t raise it. It was empty anyway. And then what I said next

shocked me as much as anything I have ever done.

"It was Devrie," I said, and heard my own vicious plea-sure, "Devrie was the one who wanted me to tell you!"

But of course he didn't know who Devrie was. He went on staring at me, panic in his young eyes, and I sat frozen. That tone I heard in my own voice when I said "Devrie," that vicious pleasure that it was she and not I who was hurting him…

"Cloning," Keith said. "Konig was in trouble for claim-ing to have done illegal cloning. Of humans." His voice had held so much dread that I fought off my own dread and tried to hold myself steady to his need.

"It's illegal now, but not then. And the public badly misunderstood. All that sensationalism-you were right to use that word, Keith-covered up the fact that there is noth-ing abnormal about producing a fetus from another diploid cell. In the womb, identical twins-"

"Am I a clone?"

"Keith-"

"Am I a clone?"

Carefully I studied him. This was not what I had intended, but although the fear was still in his eyes, the panic had gone. And curiosity-Devrie's curiosity, and her eagerness-they were there as well. This boy would not strike me, nor stalk out of the restaurant, nor go into psychic shock.

"Yes. You are."

He sat quietly, his gaze turned inward. A long moment passed in silence.

"Your cell?"

"No. My-our sister's. Our sister Devrie."

Another long silence. He did not panic. Then he said softly, "Tell me."

Devrie's phrase.

"There isn't much to tell, Keith. If you've seen the media accounts,

you know the story, and also what was made of it. The issue then becomes how you feel about what you saw. Do you believe that cloning is meddling with things man should best leave alone?''

“No. I don’t.”

I let out my breath, although I hadn’t known I’d been holding it. “It’s actually no more than delayed twinning, followed by surrogate implantation. A zygote-”

“I know all that,” he said with some harshness, and held up his hand to silence me. I didn’t think he knew that he did it. The harshness did not sound like Devrie. To my ears, it sounded like myself. He sat thinking, remote and troubled, and I did not try to touch him.

Finally he said, “Do my parents know?”

He meant his adoptive parents. “No.”

“Why are you telling me now? Why did you come?”

“Devrie asked me to.”

“She needs something, right? A kidney? Something like that?”

I had not foreseen that question. He did not move in a class where spare organs were easily purchasable. “No. Not a kidney, not any kind of biological donation.” A voice in my mind jeered at that, but I was not going to give him any clues that would lead to Devrie. “She just wanted me to find you.”

“Why didn’t she find me herself? She’s my age, right?”

“Yes. She’s ill just now and couldn’t come.”

“Is she dying?”

“No!”

Again he sat quietly, finally saying, “No one could tell me anything. For two years I’ve been searching for my mother, and not one of the adoptee-search agencies could find a single trace. Not one. Now I see why. Who covered the trail so well?”

“My father.”

“I want to meet Devrie.”

I said evenly, “That might not be possible.”

“Why not?”

“She’s in a foreign hospital. Out of the country. I’m sorry.”

“When does she come home?”

“No one is sure.”

“What disease does she have?”

She’s sick for God, I thought, but aloud I said, not thinking it through, “A brain disease.”

Instantly I saw my own cruelty. Keith paled, and I cried, “No, no, nothing you could have as well! Truly, Keith, it’s not-she took a bad fall. From her hunter.”

“Her hunter,” he said. For the first time, his gaze flick-ered over my clothing and jewelry. But would he even recog-nize how expensive they were? I doubted it. He wore a synthetic, deep-pile jacket with a tear at one shoulder and a cheap wool hat, dark blue, shapeless with age. From long experience I recognized his gaze: uneasy, furtive, the expres-sion of a man glimpsing the financial gulf between what he had assumed were equals. But it wouldn’t matter. Adopted children have no legal claim on the estates of their biological parents. I had checked.

Keith said uneasily, “Do you have a picture of Devrie?”

“No,” I lied.

“Why did she want you to find me? You still haven’t said.”

I shrugged. “The same reason, I suppose, that you looked for your biological family. The pull of blood.”

“Then she wants me to write to her.”

“Write to me instead.”

He frowned. “Why? Why not to Devrie?”

What to say to that? I hadn’t bargained on so much inten-sity from him. “Write in care of me, and I’ll forward it to Devrie.”

“Why not to her directly?”

“Her doctors might not think it advisable,” I said coldly, and he backed off-either from the mention of doctors or from the coldness.

“Then give me your address, Seena. Please.”

I did. I could see no harm in his writing me. It might even be pleasant. Coming home from the museum, another wintry day among the exhibits, to find on the mailnet a letter I could answer when and how I chose, without being taken by sur-prise. I liked the idea.

But no more difficult questions now. I stood. “I have to leave, Keith.”

He looked alarmed. “So soon?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“I have to return to work.”

He stood, too. He was taller than Devrie. “Seena,” he said, all earnestness, “just a few more questions. How did you find me?”

“Medical connections.”

“Yours?”

“Our father’s. I’m not a scientist.” Evidently his journal-ism class had not studied twin-trance sensationalism.

“What do you do?”

‘‘ Museum curator. Arthropods.’’

“What does Devrie do?”

“She’s too ill to work. I must go, Keith.”

“One more. Do I look like Devrie as well as you?”

“It would be wise, Keith, if you were careful whom you spoke with about all of this. I hadn’t intended to say so much.”

“I’m not going to tell my parents. Not about being-not about all of it.”

“I think that’s best, yes.”

“Do I look like Devrie as well as you?”

A little of my first, strange emotion returned with his intensity. “A little, yes. But more like me. Sex variance is a tricky thing.”

Unexpectedly, he held my coat for me. As I slipped into it, he said from behind, “Thank you, Seena,” and let his hands rest on my shoulders.

I did not turn around. I felt my face flame, and self-disgust flooded through me, followed by a desire to laugh. It was all so transparent. This man was an attractive stranger, was Devrie, was youth, was myself, was the work not of my father’s loins but of his mind. Of course I was aroused by him. Freud outlasts cloning: a note for a research study, I told myself grimly, and inwardly I did laugh.

But that didn’t help either.

In New York, winter came early. Cold winds whipped whitecaps on harbor and river, and the trees in the Park stood bare even before October had ended. The crumbling outer boroughs of the shrinking city crumbled a little more and talked of the days when New York had been important. Manhattan battened down for snow, hired the seasonal in-creases in personal guards, and talked of Albuquerque. Each night museum security hunted up and evicted the drifters trying to sleep behind exhibits, drifters as chilled and pale as the moths under permaplex, and, it seemed to me, as de-tached from the blood of their own age. All of New York seemed detached to me that October, and cold. Often I stood in front of the cases of Noctuidae, staring at them for so long that my staff began to glance at each other covertly. I would catch their glances when I jerked free of my trance. No one asked me about it.

Still no message came from Devrie. When I contacted the Institute on the mailnet, she did not call back.

No letter came from Keith Torellen.

Then one night, after I had worked late and was hurrying through the chilly gloom toward my building, he was there, bulking from the shadows so quickly that the guard I had taken for the walk from the museum sprang forward in attack position.

“No! It’s all right! I know him!”

The guard retreated, without expression. Keith stared after him, and then at me, his face unreadable.

“Keith, what are you doing here? Come inside!”

He followed me into the lobby without a word. Nor did he say anything during the metal scanning and ID procedure. I took him up to my apartment, studying him in the elevator.

He wore the same jacket and cheap wool hat as in Indian Falls, his hair wanted cutting, and the tip of his nose was red from waiting in the cold. How long had he waited there? He badly needed a shave.

In the apartment he scanned the rugs, the paintings, my grandmother’s ridiculously ornate, ugly silver, and turned his back on them to face me.

“Seena, I want to know where Devrie is.”

“Why? Keith, what has happened?”

“Nothing has happened,” he said, removing his jacket but not laying it anywhere. “Only that I’ve left school and spent two days hitching here. It’s no good, Seena. To say that cloning is just like twinning: it’s no good. I want to see Devrie.”

His voice was hard. Bulking in my living room, unshaven, that hat pulled down over his ears, he looked older and less malleable than the last time I had seen him. Alarm-not physical fear, I was not afraid of him, but a subtler and deeper fear-sounded through me.

“Why do you want to see Devrie?”

“Because she cheated me.”

“Of what, for God’s sake?”

“Can I have a drink? Or a smoke?”

I poured him a Scotch. If he drank, he might talk. I had to know what he wanted, why such a desperate air clung to him, how to keep him from Devrie. I had not seen her like this. She was strong-willed, but always with a blitheness, a trust that eventually her will would prevail. Desperate forcefulness of the sort in Keith’s manner was not her style. But of course Devrie had always had silent money to back her will; perhaps money could buy trust as well as style.

Keith drank off his Scotch and held out his glass for another. “It was freezing out there. They wouldn’t let me in the lobby to wait for you.”

“Of course not.”

“You didn’t tell me your family was rich.”

I was a little taken aback at his bluntness, but at the same time it pleased me; I don’t know why.

“You didn’t ask.”

“That’s shit, Seena.”

“Keith. Why are you here?”

“I told you. I want to see Devrie.”

“What is it you’ve decided she cheated you of? Money?”

He looked so honestly surprised that again I was startled, this time by his resemblance to Devrie. She too would not have thought of financial considerations first, if there were emotional ones possible. One moment Keith was Devrie, one moment he was not. Now he scowled with sudden anger.

“Is that what you think-that fortune hunting brought me hitching from New Hampshire? God, Seena, I didn’t even know how much you had until this very-I still don’t know!”

I said levelly, “Then what is it you’re feeling so cheated of?”

Now he was rattled. Again that quick, half-furtive scan of my apartment, pausing a millisecond too long at the Caravaggio, subtly lit by its frame. When his gaze returned to mine it was troubled, a little defensive. Ready to justify. Of course I had put him on the defensive deliberately, but the calculation of my trick did not prepare me for the staggering naivete of his explanation. Once more it was Devrie complete, reducing the impersonal greatness of science to a personal and emotional loss.

“Ever since I knew that I was adopted, at five or six years old, I wondered about my biological family. Nothing strange in that-I think all adoptees do. I used to make up stories, kid stuff, about how they were really royalty, or lunar colonists, or survivors of the African Horror. Exotic things. I thought especially about my mother, imagining this whole scene of her holding me once before she released me for adoption, crying over me, loving me so much she could barely let me go but had to for some reason. Sentimental shit.” He laughed, trying to make light of what was not, and drank off his Scotch to avoid my gaze.

“But Devrie-the fact of her-destroyed all that. I never had a mother who hated to give me up. I never had a mother at all. What I had was a cell cut from Devrie’s fingertip or someplace, something discardable, and she doesn’t even know what I look like. But she’s damn well going to.”

“Why?” I said evenly. “What could you expect to gain from her knowing what you look like?”

But he didn’t answer me directly. “That first moment I saw you, Seena, in the theater at school, I thought you were my mother.”

“I know you did.”

“And you hated the idea. Why?”

I thought of the child I would never bear, the marriage, like so many other things of sweet promise, gone sour. But self-pity is a fool’s game. “None of your business.”

“Isn’t it? Didn’t you hate the idea because of the way I was made? Coldly. An experiment. Weren’t you a little bit insulted at being called the mother of a discardable cell from Devrie’s fingertip?”

“What the hell have you been reading? An experiment- what is any child but an experiment? A random egg, a random sperm. Don’t talk like

one of those anti-science reli-gious split-brains!”

He studied me levelly. Then he said, “Is Devrie religious? Is that why you’re so afraid of her?”

I got to my feet, and pointed at the sideboard. “Help yourself to another drink if you wish. I want to wash my hands. I’ve been handling speciments all afternoon.” Stupid, clumsy lie-nobody would believe such a lie.

In the bathroom I leaned against the closed door, shut my eyes, and willed myself to calm. Why should I be so dis-turbed by the angry lashing-out of a confused boy? I was handy to lash out against: my father, whom Keith was really angry at, was not. It was all so predictable, so earnestly adolescent, that even over the hurting in my chest I smiled. But the smile, which should have reduced Keith’s ranting to the tantrum of a child-there, there, when you grow up you’ll find out that no one really knows who he is-did not diminish Keith. His losses were real-mother, father, natural place in the natural sequence of life and birth. And suddenly, with a clutch at the pit of my stomach, I knew why I had told him all that I had about his origins. It was not from any ethic of fidelity to “the truth.” I had told him he was a clone because I, too, had had real losses-research, marriage, motherhood- and Devrie could never have shared them with me. Lumi-nous, mystical Devrie, too occupied with God to be much hurt by man. Leave me alone! Can’t you ever leave me alone! All my life you’ve been dragging behind me-why don’t you die and finally leave me alone! And Devrie had smiled toler-antly, patted my head, and left me alone, closing the door softly so as not to disturb my grief. My words had not hurt her. I could not hurt her.

But I could hurt Keith-the other Devrie-and I had. That was why he disturbed me all out of proportion. That was the bond. My face, my pain, my fault.

Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. But what nonsense. I was not a believer, and the comforts of superstitious absolution could not touch me. What shit. Like all nonbelievers, I stood alone.

It came to me then that there was something absurd in thinking all this while leaning against a bathroom door. Grimly absurd, but absurd. The toilet as confessional. I ran the cold water, splashed some on my face, and left. How long had I left Keith alone in the living room?

When I returned, he was standing by the mailnet. He had punched in the command to replay my outgoing postal mes-sages, and displayed on the monitor was Devrie's address at the Institute of the Biological Hope.

"What is it?" Keith said. "A hospital?"

I didn't answer him.

"I can find out, Seena. Knowing this much, I can find out. Tell me."

Tell me. "Not a hospital. It's a research laboratory. Devrie is a voluntary subject."

"Research on what? I will find out, Seena."

"Brain perception."

"Perception of what?"

"Perception of God," I said, torn among weariness, anger, and a sudden gritty exasperation, irritating as sand. Why not just leave him to Devrie's persuasions, and her to mystic starvation? But I knew I would not. I still, despite all of it, wanted her out of there.

Keith frowned. "What do you mean, 'perception of God'?"

I told him. I made it sound as ridiculous as possible, and as dangerous. I described the anorexia, the massive use of largely untested drugs that would have made the Institute illegal in the United States, the skepticism of most of the scientific com-munity, the psychoses and death that had followed twin-trance research fifteen years earlier. Keith did not remember that-he had been eight years old-and I did not tell him that I had been one of the researchers. I did not tell him about the tapes of the shadowy third presence in Bohentin's holotanks. In every way I could, with every verbal subtlety at my use, I

made the Institute sound crackpot, and dangerous, and ugly. As I spoke, I watched Keith's face, and sometimes it was mine, and sometimes the expression altered it into Devrie's. I saw bewilderment at her having chosen to enter the Institute, but not what I had hoped to see. Not scorn, not disgust.

When I had finished, he said, "But why did she think that / might want to enter such a place as a twin subject?"

I had saved this for last. “Money. She’d buy you.”

His hand, his third Scotch, went rigid. “Buy me.”

“It’s the most accurate way to put it.”

“What the hell made her think-” He mastered himself, not without effort. Not all the discussion of bodily risk had affected him as much as this mention of Devrie’s money. He had a poor man’s touchy pride. “She thinks of me as some-thing to be bought.”

I was carefully quiet.

“Damn her,” he said. “Damn her.” Then, roughly, “And I was actually considering-”

I caught my breath. “Considering the Institute? After what I’ve just told you? How in hell could you? And you said, I remember, that your background was not religious!”

“It’s not. But I… I’ve wondered.” And in the sudden turn of his head away from me so that I wouldn’t see the sudden rapt hopelessness in his eyes, in the defiant set of his shoulders, I read more than in his banal words, and more than he could know. Devrie’s look, Devrie’s wishfulness, feeding on air. The weariness and anger, checked before, flooded me again and I lashed out at him.

“Then go ahead and fly to Dominica to enter the Institute yourself!”

He said nothing. But from something-his expression as he stared into his glass, the shifting of his body-I suddenly knew that he could not afford the trip.

I said, “So you fancy yourself as a believer?”

“No. A believer manque.” From the way he said it, I knew that he had said it before, perhaps often, and that the phrase stirred some hidden place in his imagination.

“What is wrong with you,” I said, “with people like you, that the human world is not enough?”

“What is wrong with people like you, that it is?” he said, and this time

he laughed and raised his eyebrows in a little mockery that shut me out from this place beyond reason, this glittering escape. I knew then that somehow or other, some-time or other, despite all I had said, Keith would go to Dominica.

I poured him another Scotch. As deftly as I could, I led the conversation into other, lighter directions. I asked about his childhood. At first stiffly, then more easily as time and Scotch loosened him, he talked about growing up in the Berkshire Hills. He became more light-hearted, and under my interest turned both shrewd and funny, with a keen sense of humor. His thick brown hair fell over his forehead. I laughed with him, and broke out a bottle of good port. He talked about amateur plays he had acted in; his enthusiasm increased as his coherence decreased. Enthusiasm, humor, thick brown hair. I smoothed the hair back from his forehead. Far into the night I pulled the drapes back from the window and we stood together and looked at the lights of the dying city ten stories below. Fog rolled in from the sea. Keith insisted we open the doors and stand on the balcony; he had never smelled fog tinged with the ocean. We smelled the night, and drank some more, and talked, and laughed.

And then I led him again to the sofa.

“Seena?” Keith said. He covered my hand, laid upon his thigh, with his own, and turned his head to look at me questioningly. I leaned forward and touched my lips to his, barely in contact, for a long moment. He drew back, and his hand tried to lift mine. I tightened my fingers.

“Seena, no…”

“Why not?” I put my mouth back on his, very lightly. He had to draw back to answer, and I could feel that he did not want to draw back. Under my lips he frowned slightly; still, despite his drunkenness-so much more than mine-he groped for the word.

“Incest…”

“No. We two have never shared a womb.”

He frowned again, under my mouth. I drew back to smile at him, and shifted my hand. “It doesn’t matter anymore, Keith. Not in New York. But even if it did-I am not your sister, not really. You said so yourself-remember? Not a family. Just… here.”

“Not family,” he repeated, and I saw in his eyes the second before he

closed them the flash of pain, the greed of a young man's desire, and even the crafty evasions of the good port. Then his arms closed around me.

He was very strong, and more than a little violent. I guessed from what confusions the violence flowed but still I enjoyed it, that overwhelming rush from that beautiful male-Devrie body. I wanted him to be violent with me, as long as I knew there was no real danger. No real danger, no real brother, no real child. Keith was not my child but Devrie was my child-sister, and I had to stop her from destroying herself, no matter how… didn't I? "The pull of blood." But this was necessary, was justified… was a necessary gamble. For Devrie.

So I told myself. Then I stopped telling myself anything at all, and surrendered to the warm tides of pleasure.

But at dawn I woke and thought-with Keith sleeping heavily across me and the sky cold at the window-what the hell am I doing?

When I came out of the shower, Keith was sitting rigidly against the pillows. Sitting next to him on the very edge of the bed, I pulled a sheet around my nakedness and reached for his hand. He snatched it away.

"Keith. It's all right. Truly it is."

"You're my sister."

"But nothing will come of it. No child, no repetitions. It's not all that uncommon, dear heart."

"It is where I come from."

"Yes. I know. But not here."

He didn't answer, his face troubled.

"Do you want breakfast?"

"No. No thank you."

I could feel his need to get away from me; it was almost palpable. Snatching my bodysuit off the floor, I went into the kitchen, which was chilly. The servant would not arrive for another hour. I turned up the heat, pulled on my bodysuit- standing on the cold floor first on one foot and then on the other, like some extinct species of water fowl-and made coffee. Through

the handle of one cup I stuck two folded large bills. He came into the kitchen, dressed even to the torn jacket.

“Coffee.”

“Thanks.”

His fingers closed on the handle of the cup, and his eyes widened. Pure, naked shock, uncushioned by any defenses whatsoever: the whole soul, betrayed, pinned in the eyes.

“Oh God, no, Keith-how can you even think so? It’s for the trip back to Indian Falls! A gift!”

An endless pause, while we stared at each other. Then he said, very low, “I’m sorry. I should have… seen what it’s for.” But his cup trembled in his hand, and a few drops sloshed onto the floor. It was those few drops that undid me, flooding me with shame. Keith had a right to his shock, and to the anguish in his/my/Devrie’s face. She wanted him for her mystic purposes, I for their prevention. Fanatic and sabo-teur, we were both better defended against each other than Keith, without money nor religion nor years, was against either of us. If I could have seen any other way than the gamble I had taken… but I could not. Nonetheless, I was ashamed.

“Keith. I’m sorry.”

“Why did we? Why did we?”

I could have said: we didn’t; I did. But that might have made it worse for him. He was male, and so young.

Impulsively I blurted, “Don’t go to Dominica!” But of course he was beyond listening to me now. His face closed. He set down the coffee cup and looked at me from eyes much harder than they had been a minute ago. Was he thinking that because of our night together I expected to influence him directly? / was not that young. He could not foresee that I was trying to guess much farther ahead than that, for which I could not blame him. I could not blame him for anything. But I did regret how clumsily I had handled the money. That had been stupid.

Nonetheless, when he left a few moments later, the handle of the coffee cup was bare. He had taken the money.

The Madagascar exhibits were complete. They opened to much

press interest, and there were both favorable reviews and celebrations. I could not bring myself to feel that it mattered. Ten times a day I went through the deadening exercise of willing an interest that had deserted me, and when I looked at the moths, ashy white wings outstretched forever, I could feel my body recoil in a way I could not name.

The image of the moths went home with me. One night in November I actually thought I heard wings beating against the window where I had stood with Keith. I yanked open the drapes and then the doors, but of course there was nothing there. For a long time I stared at the nothingness, smelling the fog, before typing yet another message, urgent-priority per-sonal, to Devrie. The mailnet did not bring any answer.

I contacted the mailnet computer at the college at Indian Falls. My fingers trembled as they typed a request to leave an urgent-priority personal message for a student, Keith Torellen. The mailnet typed back:

TORELLEN, KEITH ROBERT. 64830016. ON MEDI-CAL LEAVE OF ABSENCE. TIME OF LEAVE: INDEF-INITE. NO FORWARDING MAILNET NUMBER. END.

The sound came again at the window. Whirling, I scanned the dark glass, but there was nothing there, no moths, no wings, just the lights of the decaying city flung randomly across the blackness and the sound, faint and very far away, of a siren wailing out somebody else's disaster.

I shivered. Putting on a sweater and turning up the heat made me no warmer. Then the mail slot chimed softly and I turned in time to see the letter fall from the pneumatic tube from the lobby, the apartment house sticker clearly visible, assuring me that it had been processed and found free of both poison and explosives. Also visible was the envelope's logo: INSTITUTE OF THE BIOLOGICAL HOPE, all the O's radiant golden suns. But Devrie never wrote paper mail. She preferred the mailnet.

The note was from Keith, not Devrie. A short note, scrawled on a torn scrap of paper in nearly indecipherable handwriting. I had seen Keith's handwriting in Indian Falls, across his student notebooks; this was a wildly out-of-control version of it, almost psychotic in the variations of spacing and letter formation that signal identity. I guessed that he had written the note under the influence of a drug, or several drugs, his mind racing much faster than he could write. There was neither punctuation nor paragraphing.

Dear Seena Im going to do it I have to know my parents are angry but I have to know I have to all the confusion is gone

Seena Keith

There was a word crossed out between “gone” and “Seena,” scratched out with erratic lines of ink. I held the paper up to the light, tilting it this way and that. The crossed-out word was “mother.”

all the confusion is gone mother

Mother.

Slowly I let out the breath I had not known I was holding. The first emotion was pity, for Keith, even though I had intended this. We had done a job on him, Devrie and I. Mother, sister, self. And when he and Devrie artificially drove upward the number and speed of the neurotransmitters in the brain, generated the twin trance, and then Keith’s pre-cloning Freudian-still mind reached for Devrie to add sexual energy to all the other brain energies fueling Bohentin’s holotanks-

Mother. Sister. Self.

All was fair in love and war. A voice inside my head jeered: And which is this? But I was ready for the voice. This was both. I didn’t think it would be long before Devrie left the Institute to storm to New York.

It was nearly another month, in which the snow began to fall and the city to deck itself in the tired gilt fallacies of Christmas. I felt fine. Humming, I catalogued the Madagas-car moths, remounting the best specimens in exhibit cases and sealing them under permaplex, where their fragile wings and delicate antennae could lie safe. The mutant strains had the thinnest wings, unnaturally tenuous and up to twenty-five cen-timeters each, all of pale ivory, as if a ghostly delicacy were the natural evolutionary response to the glowing landscape of nuclear genocide. I catalogued each carefully.

“Why?” Devrie said. “Why?”

“You look like hell.”

“Why?”

“I think you already know,” I said. She sagged on my white velvet sofa, alone, the PGs that I suspected acted as much as nurses as guards, dismissed from the apartment. Tears of anger and exhaustion collected in her sunken eye sockets but did not fall. Only with effort was she keeping

herself in a sitting position, and the effort was costing her energy she did not have. Her skin, except for two red spots of fury high on each cheekbone, was the color of old eggs. Looking at her, I had to keep my hands twisted in my lap to keep myself from weeping.

“Are you telling me you planned it, Seena? Are you telling me you located Keith and slept with him because you knew that would make him impotent with me?”

“Of course not. I know sexuality isn’t that simple. So do you.”

‘ ‘But you gambled on it. You gambled that it would be one way to ruin the experiment.”

“I gambled that it would… complicate Keith’s responses.”

“Complicate them past the point where he knew who the hell he was with!”

“He’d be able to know if you weren’t making him glow out of his mind with neurotransmitter kickers! He’s not stu-pid. But he’s not ready for whatever mystic hoops you’ve tried to make him jump through-if anybody ever can be said to be ready for that!-and no, I’m not surprised that he can’t handle libidinal energies on top of all the other artificial energies you’re racing through his brain. Something was bound to snap.”

“You caused it, Seena. As cold-bloodedly as that.”

A sudden shiver of memory brought the feel of Keith’s hands on my breasts. No, not as cold-bloodedly as that. No. But I could not say so to Devrie.

“I trusted you,’’ she said.’’ ‘Anything for a sister’-God!”

“You were right to trust me. To trust me to get you out of that place before you’re dead.”

“Listen to yourself! Smug, all-knowing, self-righteous… do you know how close we were at the Institute? Do you have any idea what you’ve destroyed?”

I laughed coldly. I couldn’t help it. “If contact with God can be destroyed because one confused kid can’t get it up, what does that say about God?’’

Devrie stared at me. A long moment passed, and in the moment the two red spots on her cheeks faded and her eyes narrowed. “Why, Seena?”

“I told you. I wanted you safe, out of there. And you are.”

“No. No. There’s something else, something more going on here. Going on with you.”

“Don’t make it more complicated than it is, Devrie. You’re my sister, and my only family. Is it so odd that I would try to protect you?”

“Keith is your brother.”

“Well, then, protect both of you. Whatever derails that experiment protects Keith, too.”

She said softly, “Did you want him so much?”

We stared at each other across the living room, sisters, I standing by the mailnet and she supported by the sofa, need-ing its support, weak and implacable as any legendary martyr to the faith. Her weakness hurt me in some nameless place; as a child Devrie’s body had been so strong. The hurt twisted in me, so that I answered her with truth. “Not so much. Not at first, not until we… no, that’s not true. I wanted him. But that was not the reason, Devrie-it was not a rationalization for lust, nor any lapse in self-control.”

She went on staring at me, until I turned to the sideboard and poured myself a Scotch. My hand trembled.

Behind me Devrie said, “Not lust. And not protection either. Something else, Seena. You’re afraid.”

I turned, smiling tightly. “Of you?”

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“This is your theory, not mine.”

She closed her eyes. The tears, shining all this time over her anger, finally fell. Head flung back against the pale sofa, arms limp at her side, she looked the picture of desolation, and so weak that I was frightened. I brought her a glass of milk from the kitchen and held it to her mouth, and I was a little surprised when she drank it off without protest.

“Devrie. You can’t go on like this. In this physical state.”

“No,” she agreed, in a voice so firm and prompt that I was startled further. It was the voice of decision, not surren-der. She straightened herself on the sofa. “Even Bohentin says I can’t go on like this. I weigh less than he wants, and I’m right at the edge of not having the physical resources to control the twin trance. I’m having racking withdrawal symp-toms even being on this trip, and at this very minute there is a doctor sitting at Father’s desk in your study, in case I need him. Also, I’ve had my lawyers make over most of my remaining inheritance to Keith. I don’t think you knew that. What’s left has all been transferred to a bank on Dominica, and if I die it goes to the Institute. You won’t be able to touch it, nor touch Keith’s portion either, not even if I die. And I

will die, Seena, soon, if I don’t start eating and stop taking the program’s drugs. I’ll just burn out body and brain both. You’ve guessed that I’m close to that, but you haven’t guessed how close. Now I’m telling you. I can’t handle the stresses of the twin trance much longer.’’

I just went on holding her glass, arm extended, unable to move.

“You gambled that you could destroy one component in the chain of my experiment at the Institute by confusing my twin sexually. Well, you won. Now I’m making a gamble. I’m gambling my life that you can undo what you did with Keith, and without his knowing that I made you. You said he’s not stupid and his impotency comes from being unable to handle the drug program; perhaps you’re partly right. But he is me-me, Seena-and I know you’ve thought I was stupid all my life, because I wanted things you don’t understand. Now Keith wants them, too-it was inevitable that he would- and you’re going to undo whatever is standing in his way. I had to fight myself free all my life of your bullying, but Keith doesn’t have that kind of time. Because if you don’t undo what you caused, I’m going to go ahead with the twin trance anyway-the twin trance, Seena-without the sexual compo-nent and without letting Bohentin know just how much greater the strain is in trance than he thinks it is. He doesn’t know, he doesn’t have a twin, and neither do the doctors. But I know, and if I push it much farther I’m going to eventually die at it. Soon eventually. When I do, all your scheming to get me out of there really will have failed and you’ll be alone with whatever it is

you’re so afraid of. But I don’t think you’ll let that happen.

“I think that instead you’ll undo what you did to Keith, so that the experiment can have one last real chance. And in return, after that one chance, I’ll agree to come home, to Boston or here to New York, for one year.

“That’s my gamble.”

She was looking at me from eyes empty of all tears, a Devrie I had not ever seen before. She meant it, every demented word, and she would do it. I wanted to scream at her, to scream a jumble of suicide and moral blackmail and warped perceptions and outrage, but the words that came out of my mouth came out in a whisper.

“What in God’s name is worth thatT’

Shockingly, she laughed, a laugh of more power than her wasted frame could have contained. Her face glowed, and the glow looked both exalted and insane. “You said it, Seena- in God’s name. To finally know. To know, beyond the fogginess of faith, that we’re not alone in the universe… Faith should not mean fogginess.” She laughed again, this time defensively, as if she knew how she sounded to me. “You’ll do it, Seena.” It was not a question. She took my hand.

“You would kill yourself?”

“No. I would die trying to reach God. It’s not the same thing.”

“I never bullied you, Devrie.”

She dropped my hand. “All my life, Seena. And on into now. But all of your bullying and your scorn would look rather stupid, wouldn’t it, if there really can be proved to exist a rational basis for what you laughed at all those years!’’

We looked at each other, sisters, across the abyss of the pale sofa, and then suddenly away. Neither of us dared speak.

My plane landed on Dominica by night. Devrie had gone two days before me, returning with her doctor and guards on the same day she had left, as I had on my previous visit. I had never seen the island at night. The tropical greenery, lush with that faintly menacing suggestion of plant life gone wild, seemed to close in on me. The velvety darkness seemed to

smell of ginger, and flowers, and the sea-all too strong, too blandly sensual, like an overdone perfume ad. At the hotel it was better; my room was on the second floor, above the dark foliage, and did not face the sea. Nonetheless, I stayed inside all that evening, all that darkness, until I could go the next day to the Institute of the Biological Hope.

"Hello, Seena."

"Keith. You look-"

"Rotten," he finished, and waited. He did not smile. Although he had lost some weight, he was nowhere near as skeletal as Devrie, and it gave me a pang I did not analyze to see his still-healthy body in the small gray room where last I had seen hers. His head was shaved, and without the curling brown hair he looked sterner, prematurely middle-aged. That, too, gave me a strange emotion, although it was not why he looked rotten. The worst was his eyes. Red-veined, watery, the sockets already a little sunken, they held the sheen of a man who was not forgiving somebody for something. Me? Himself? Devrie? I had lain awake all night, schooling myself for this insane interview, and still I did not know what to say. What does one say to persuade a man to sexual potency with one's sister so that her life might be saved? I felt ridiculous, and frightened, and-I suddenly realized the name of my strange emotion-humiliated. How could I even start to slog toward what I was supposed to reach?

"How goes the Great Experiment?"

"Not as you described it," he said, and we were there already. I looked at him evenly.

"You can't understand why I presented the Institute in the worst possible light."

"I can understand that."

"Then you can't understand why I bedded you, knowing about Bohentin's experiment."

"I can also understand that."

Something was wrong. Keith answered me easily, without restraint, but with conflict gritty beneath his voice, like sand beneath blowing grass. I stepped closer, and he flinched. But his expression did not change.

“Keith. What is this about? What am I doing here? Devrie said you couldn’t… that you were impotent with her, confused enough about who and what…” I trailed off. He still had not changed expression.

I said quietly, “It was a simplistic idea in the first place. Only someone as simplistic as Devrie…” Only someone as simplistic as Devrie would think you could straighten out impotency by talking about it for a few hours. I turned to go, and I had gotten as far as laying my hand on the doorknob before Keith grasped my arm. Back to him, I squeezed my eyes shut. What in God would I have done if he had not stopped me?

“It’s not what Devrie thinks!” With my back to him, not able to see his middle-aged baldness but only to hear the anguish in his voice, he again seemed young, uncertain, the boy I had bought coffee for in Indian Falls. I kept my back to him, and my voice carefully toneless.

“What is it, then, Keith? If not what Devrie thinks?”

“I don’t know!”

“But you do know what it’s not? It’s not being confused about who is your sister and who your mother and who you’re willing to have sex with in front of a room full of researchers?”

“No.” His voice had gone hard again, but his hand stayed on my arm. “At first, yes. The first time. But, Seena-I felt it. Almost. I almost felt the presence, and then all the rest of the confusion-it didn’t seem as important anymore. Not the confusion between you and Devrie.”

I whirled to face him. “You mean God doesn’t care whom you fuck if it gets you closer to fucking with Him.”

He looked at me hard then-at me, not at his own self-absorption. His reddened eyes widened a little. “Why, Seena- you care. You told me the brother-sister thing didn’t matter anymore-but you care.’’

Did I? I didn’t even know anymore. I said, “But, then, I’m not deluding myself that it’s all for the old Kingdom and the Glory.”

“Glory,” he repeated musingly, and finally let go of my arm. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“Keith. This isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“Where do you want to get?” he said in the same musing tone. “Where did any of you, starting with your father, want to get with me? Glory… glory.”

Standing this close to him, seeing close up the pupils of his eyes and smelling close up the odor of his sweat, I finally realized what I should have seen all along: he was glowing. He was of course constantly on Bohentin’s program of neuro-transmitter manipulation, but the same chemicals that made the experiments possible also raised the threshhold of both frankness and suggestibility. I guessed it must be a little like the looseness of being drunk, and I wondered if perhaps Bohentin might have deliberately raised the dosage before letting this interview take place. But no, Bohentin wouldn’t be aware of the bargain Devrie and I had struck; she would not have told him. The whole bizarre situation was hers alone, and Keith’s drugged musings a fortunate side-effect I would have to capitalize on.

“Where do you think my father wanted to get with you?” I asked him gently.

“Immortality. Godhead. The man who created Adam with-out Eve.”

He was becoming maudlin. “Hardly ‘the man,’ “ I pointed out. “My father was only one of a team of researchers. And the same results were being obtained independently in California.”

“Results. I am a ‘result.’ What do you think he wanted, Seena?”

“Scientific knowledge of cell development. An objective truth.”

“That’s all Devrie wants.”

“To compare bioengineering to some mystic quest-”

“Ah, but if the mystic quest is given a laboratory answer? Then it, too, becomes a scientific truth. You really hate that idea, don’t you, Seena? You hate science validating anything you define as non-science.”

I said stiffly, “That’s rather an oversimplification.”

“Then what do you hate?”

“I hate the risk to human bodies and human minds. To Devrie. To you.”

“How nice of you to include me,” he said, smiling. “And what do you think Devrie wants?”

“Sensation. Romantic religious emotion. To be all roiled up inside with delicious esoterica.”

He considered this. “Maybe.”

“And is that what you want as well, Keith? You’ve asked what everyone else wants. What do you want?”

“I want to feel at home in the universe. As if I belonged in it. And 1 never have.”

He said this simply, without self-consciousness, and the words themselves were predictable enough for his age-even banal. There was nothing in the words that could account for my eyes suddenly filling with tears. “And ‘scientifically’ reaching God would do that for you?”

“How do I know until I try it? Don’t cry, Seena.”

“I’m not!”

“All right,” he agreed softly. “You’re not crying.” Then he added, without changing tone, “I am more like you than like Devrie.”

“How so?”

“I think that Devrie has always felt that she belongs in the universe. She only wants to find the… the coziest corner of it to curl up in. Like a cat. The coziest corner to curl up in is

God’s lap. Aren’t you surprised that I should be more like you than like the person I was cloned from?”

“No,” I said. “Harder upbringing than Devrie’s. I told you that first day: cloning is only delayed twinning.”

He threw back his head and laughed, a sound that chilled my spine. Whatever his conflict was, we were moving closer.

“Oh no, Seena. You’re so wrong. It’s more than delayed twinning, all right. You can’t buy a real twin. You either have one or you don’t. But you can buy yourself a clone. Bought, paid for, kept on the books along with all

the rest of the glassware and holotanks and electron microscopes. You said so yourself, in your apartment, when you first told me about Devrie and the Institute. ‘Money. She’d buy you.’ And you were right, of course. Your father bought me, and she did, and you did. But of course you two women couldn’t have bought if I hadn’t been selling.”

He was smiling still. Stupid-we had both been stupid, Devrie and I, we had both been looking in the wrong place, misled by our separate blinders-on training in the laboratory brain. My training had been scientific, hers humanistic, and so I looked at Freud and she looked at Oedipus, and we were equally stupid. How did the world look to a man who did not deal in laboratory brains, a man raised in a grittier world in which limits were not what the mind was capable of but what the bank book would stand? “Your genes are too expensive for you to claim except as a beggar; your sisters are too expensive for you to claim except as a beggar; God is too expensive for you to claim except as a beggar.” To a less romantic man it would not have mattered, but a less romantic man would not have come to the Institute. What dark humili-ations and resentments did Keith feel when he looked at Devrie, the self who was buyer and not bought?

Change the light you shine onto a mind, and you see different neural patterns, different corridors, different forests of trees grown in soil you could not have imagined. Run that soil through your fingers and you discover different pebbles, different sand, different leaf mold from the decay of old growths. Devrie and I had been hacking through the wrong forest.

Not Oedipus, but Marx.

Quick lines of attack came to me. Say: Keith it’s a job like any other with high-hazard pay why can’t you look at it like that a very dangerous and well-paid job for which you’ve been hired by just one more eccentric member of the monied class. Say: You’re entitled to the wealth you’re our biological brother damn it consider it rationally as a kinship entitlement. Say: Don’t be so nicey-nice it’s a tough world out there and if Devrie’s giving it away take it don’t be an impractical chump.

I said none of that. Instead I heard myself saying, coolly and with a calm cruelty, “You’re quite right. You were bought by Devrie, and she is now using her own purchase for her own ends. You’re a piece of equipment bought and paid for. Unfortunately, there’s no money in the account. It has all been a grand sham.”

Keith jerked me to face him with such violence that my neck cracked.

“What are you saying?”

The words came as smoothly, as plausibly, as if I had rehearsed them. I didn’t even consciously plan them: how can you plan a lie you do not know you will need? I slashed through this forest blind, but the ground held under my feet.

“Devrie told me that she has signed over most of her inheritance to you. What she didn’t know, because I haven’t yet told her, is that she doesn’t have control of her inheritance any longer. It’s not hers. I control it. I had her declared mentally incompetent on the grounds of violent suicidal tend-encies and had myself made her legal guardian. She no longer has the legal right to control her fortune. A doctor observed her when she came to visit me in New York. So the transfer of her fortune to you is invalid.”

“The lawyers who gave me the papers to sign-”

“Will learn about the New York action this week,” I said smoothly. How much inheritance law did Keith know? Proba-bly very little. Neither did I, and I invented furiously; it only needed to sound plausible. “The New York courts only handed down their decision recently, and Dominican judicial ma-chinery, like everything else in the tropics, moves slowly. But the ruling will hold, Keith. Devrie does not control her own money, and you’re a pauper again. But / have something for you. Here. An airline ticket back to Indian Falls. You’re a free man. Poor, but free. The ticket is in your name, and there’s a check inside it-that’s from me. You’ve earned it, for at least trying to aid poor Devrie. But now you’re going to have to leave her to me. I’m now her legal guardian.”

I held the ticket out to him. It was wrapped in its airline folder; my own name as passenger was hidden. Keith stared at it, and then at me.

I said softly, “I’m sorry you were cheated. Devrie didn’t mean to. But she has no money, now, to offer you. You can go. Devrie’s my burden now.”

His voice sounded strangled. “To remove from the Institute?”

“I never made any secret of wanting her out. Although the legal papers for that will take a little time to filter through the Dominican courts. She wouldn’t go except by force, so force is what I’ll get. Here.”

I thrust the ticket folder at him. He made no move to take it, and I saw from the hardening of his face-my face, Devrie’s face-the moment when

Devrie shifted forests in his mind. Now she was without money, without legal control of her life, about to be torn from the passion she loved most. The helpless underdog. The orphaned woman, poor and cast out, in need of protection from the powerful who had seized her fortune.

Not Marx, but Cervantes.

“You would do that? To your own sister?”

Anything for a sister. I said bitterly, “Of course I would.”

“She’s not mentally incompetent!”

“Isn’t she?”

“No!”

I shrugged. “The courts say she is.”

Keith studied me, resolve hardening around him. I thought of certain shining crystals, that will harden around any stray piece of grit. Now that I was succeeding in convincing him, my lies hurt-or perhaps what hurt was how easily he be-lieved them.

“Are you sure, Seena,” he said, “that you aren’t just trying a grab for Devrie’s fortune?”

I shrugged again, and tried to make my voice toneless. “I want her out of here. I don’t want her to die.”

“Die? What makes you think she would die?”

“She looks-”

“She’s nowhere near dying,” Keith said angrily-his an-ger a release, so much that it hardly mattered at what. “Don’t you think I can tell in twin trance what her exact physical state is? And don’t you know how much control the trance gives each twin over the bodily processes of the other? Don’t you even know that? Devrie isn’t anywhere near dying. And I’d pull her out of trance if she were.” He paused, looking hard at me. “Keep your ticket, Seena.”

I repeated mechanically, “You can leave now. There’s no money.” Devrie had lied to me.

“That wouldn’t leave her with any protection at all, would it?” he said levelly. When he grasped the doorknob to leave, the tendons in his wrist stood out clearly, strong and taut. I did not try to stop his going.

Devrie had lied to me. With her lie, she had blackmailed me into yet another lie to Keith. The twin trance granted control, in some unspecified way, to each twin’s body; the trance I had pioneered might have resulted in eight deaths unknowingly inflicted on each other out of who knows what dark forests in eight fumbling minds. Lies, blackmail, death, more lies.

Out of these lies they were going to make scientific truth. Through these forests they were going to search for God.

“Final clearance check of holotanks,” an assistant said formally. “Faraday cage?”

“Optimum.”

“External radiation?”

“Cleared,” said the man seated at the console of the first tank.

“Cleared,” said the woman seated at the console of the second.

“Microradiation?”

“Cleared.”

“Cleared.”

“Personnel radiation, Class A?”

“Cleared.”

“Cleared.”

On it went, the whole tedious and crucial procedure, until both tanks had been cleared and focused, the fluid adjusted, tested, adjusted again, tested again. Bohentin listened pa-tiently, without expression, but I, standing to the side of him and behind the tanks, saw the nerve at the base of his neck and just below the hairline pulse in some irregular rhythm of its own. Each time the nerve pulsed, the skin rose slightly from under his collar. I kept my eyes on that syncopated crawling of flesh, and felt tension

prickle over my own skin like heat.

Three-quarters of the lab, the portion where the holotanks and other machinery stood, was softly dark, lit mostly from the glow of console dials and the indirect track lighting focused on the tanks. Standing in the gloom were Bohentin, five other scientists, two medical doctors-and me. Bohentin had fought my being allowed there, but in the end he had had to give in. I had known too many threatening words not in generalities but in specifics: reporters' names, drug names, cloning details, twin trance tragedy, anorexia symptoms, bio-engineering amendment. He was not a man who much no-ticed either public opinion or relatives' threats, but no one else outside his Institute knew so many specific words- some people knew some of the words, but only I had them all. In the end he had focused on me his cold, brilliant eyes, and given permission for me to witness the experiment that involved my sister.

I was going to hold Devrie to her bargain. I was not going to believe anything she told me without witnessing it for myself.

Half the morning passed in technical preparation. Some-where Devrie and Keith, the human components of this costly detection circuit, were separately being brought to the apex of brain activity. Drugs, biofeedback, tactile and auditory and kinaesthetic stimulation-all carefully calculated for the max-imum increase of both the number of neurotransmitters firing signals through the synapses of the brain and of the speed at which the signals raced. The more rapid the transmission through certain pathways, the more intense both perception and feeling. Some neurotransmitters, under this pressure, would alter molecular structure into natural hallucinogens; that reac-tion had to be controlled. Meanwhile other drugs, other bio-feedback techniques, would depress the body's natural enzymes designed to either reabsorb excess transmitters or to reduce the rate at which they fired. The number and speed of neuro-transmitters in Keith's and Devrie's brains would mount, and mount, and mount, all natural chemical barriers removed. The two of them would enter the lab with their whole brains- rational cortex, emotional limbic, right and left brain functions-simultaneously aroused to an unimaginable degree. Simultane-ously. They would be feeling as great a "rush" as a falling skydiver, as great a glow as a cocaine user, as great a mental clarity and receptivity as a da Vinci whose brush is guided by all the integrated visions of his unconscious mind. They would be white-hot.

Then they would hit each other with the twin trance.

The quarter of the lab which Keith and Devrie would use was softly

and indirectly lit, though brighter than the rest. It consisted of a raised, luxuriantly padded platform, walls and textured pillows in a pink whose component wavelengths had been carefully calculated, temperature in a complex gradient producing precise convection flows over the skin. The man and woman in that womb-colored, flesh-stimulating environ-ment would be able to see us observers standing in the gloom behind the holotanks only as vague shapes. When the two doors opened and Devrie and Keith moved onto the platform, I knew that they would not even try to distinguish who stood in the lab. Looking at their faces, that looked only at each other, I felt my heart clutch.

They were naked except for the soft helmets that both attached hundreds of needles to nerve clumps just below the skin and also held the earphones through which Bohentin controlled the music that swelled the cathedrals of their skulls. “Cathedrals”-from their faces, transfigured to the ravished ecstasy found in paintings of medieval saints, that was the right word. But here the ecstasy was controlled, understood, and I saw with a sudden rush of pain at old memories that I could recognize the exact moment when Keith and Devrie locked onto each other with the twin trance. I recognized it, with my own more bitter hyperclarity, in their eyes, as I recognized the cast of concentration that came over their fea-tures, and the intensity of their absorption. The twin trance. They clutched each other’s hands, faces inches apart, and suddenly I had to look away.

Each holotank held two whorls of shifting colors, the out-lines clearer and the textures more sharply delineated than any previous holographs in the history of science. Keith’s and Devrie’s perceptions of each other’s presence. The whorls went on clarifying themselves, separating into distinct and mappable layers, as on the platform Keith and Devrie re-mained frozen, all their energies focused on the telepathic trance. Seconds passed, and then minutes. And still, despite the clarity of the holographs in the tank, a clarity that fifteen years earlier I would have given my right hand for, I sensed that Keith and Devrie were holding back, were deliberately confining their unimaginable perceptiveness to each other’s radiant energy, in the same way that water is confined behind a dam to build power.

But how could / be sensing that? From a subliminal “read-ing” of the mapped perceptions in the holotanks? Or from something else?

More minutes passed. Keith and Devrie stayed frozen, facing each other, and over her skeletal body and his stronger one a flush began to spread, rosy and slow, like heat tide rising.

“Jesus H. Christ,” said one of the medical doctors, so low that only I,

standing directly behind her, could have heard. It was not a curse, nor a prayer, but some third possibility, unnameable.

Keith put one hand on Devrie's thigh. She shuddered. He drew her down to the cushions on the platform and they began to caress each other, not frenzied, not in the exploring way of lovers but with a deliberation I have never experi-enced outside a research lab, a slow care that implied that worlds of interpretation hung on each movement. Yet the effect was not of coldness nor detachment but of intense involvement, of tremendous energy joyously used, of creating each other's bodies right then, there under each other's hands. They were working, and oblivious to all but their work. But if it was a kind of creative work, it was also a kind of primal innocent eroticism, and, watching, I felt my own heat begin to rise. "Innocent"-but if innocence is unknowingness, there was nothing innocent about it at all. Keith and Devrie knew and controlled each heartbeat, and I felt the exact moment when they let their sexual energies, added to all the other neural energies, burst the dam and flood outward in wave after wave, expanding the scope of each brain's perceptions, inundating the artificially-walled world.

A third whorl formed in each holotank.

It formed suddenly: one second nothing, the next bright-ness. But then it wavered, faded a bit. After a few moments it brightened slightly, a diffused golden haze, before again fad-ing. On the platform Keith gasped, and I guessed he was having to shift his attention between perceiving the third source of radiation and keeping up the erotic version of the twin trance. His biofeedback techniques were less experi-enced than Devrie's, and the male erection more fragile. But then he caught the rhythm, and the holograph brightened.

It seemed to me that the room brightened as well, although no additional lights came on and the consoles glowed no brighter. Sweat poured off the researchers. Bohentin leaned forward, his neck muscle tautening toward the platform as if it were his will and not Keith/Devrie's that strained to per-ceive that third presence recorded in the tank. I thought, stupidly, of mythical intermediaries: Merlyn never made king, Moses never reaching the Promised Land. Intermediaries- and then it became impossible to think of anything at all.

Devrie shuddered and cried out. Keith's orgasm came a moment later, and with it a final roil of neural activity so strong the two primary whorls in each holotank swelled to fill the tank and inundate the third. At the moment of break-through Keith screamed, and in memory it seems as if

the scream was what tore through the last curtain-that is non-sense. How loud would microbes have to scream to attract the attention of giants? How loud does a knock on the door have to be to pull a sleeper from the alien world of dreams?

The doctor beside me fell to her knees. The third presence- or some part of it-swirled all around us, racing along our own unprepared synapses and neurons, and what swirled and raced was astonishment. A golden, majestic astonishment. We had finally attracted Its attention, finally knocked with enough neural force to be just barely heard-and It was astonished that we could, or did, exist. The slow rise of that powerful astonishment within the shielded lab was like the slow swinging around of the head of a great beast to regard some butterfly it has barely glimpsed from the corner of one eye. But this was no beast. As Its attention swung toward us, pain exploded in my skull-the pain of sound too loud, lights too bright, charge too high. My brain was burning on over-load. There came one more flash of insight-wordless, pat-tern without end-and the sound of screaming. Then, abruptly, the energy vanished.

Bohentin, on all fours, crawled toward the holotanks. The doctor lay slumped on the floor; the other doctor had already reached the platform and its two crumpled figures. Someone was crying, someone else shouting. I rose, fell, dragged myself to the side of the platform and then could not climb it. I could not climb the platform. Hanging with two hands on the edge, hearing the voice crying as my own, I watched the doctor bend shakily to Keith, roll him off Devrie to bend over her, turn back to Keith.

Bohentin cried, “The tapes are intact!”

“Oh God oh God oh God oh God oh God,” someone moaned, until abruptly she stopped. I grasped the flesh-colored padding on top of the platform and pulled myself up onto it.

Devrie lay unconscious, pulse erratic, face cast in perfect bliss. The doctor breathed into Keith’s mouth-what strength could the doctor himself have left?-and pushed on the naked chest. Breathe, push, breathe, push. The whole length of Keith’s body shuddered; the doctor rocked back on his heels; Keith breathed.

“It’s all on tape!” Bohentin cried. “It’s all on tape!”

“God damn you to hell,” I whispered to Devrie’s blissful face. “It didn’t even know we were there!”

Her eyes opened. I had to lean close to hear her answer.

“But now… we know He… is there.”

She was too weak to smile. I looked away from her, away from that face, out into the tumultuous emptiness of the lab, anywhere.

They will try again.

Devrie has been asleep, fed by glucose solution through an IV, for fourteen hours. I sit near her bed, frowned at by the nurse, who can see my expression as I stare at my sister. Somewhere in another bed Keith is sleeping yet again. His rest is more fitful than Devrie’s; she sinks into sleep as into warm water, but he cannot. Like me, he is afraid of drowning.

An hour ago he came into Devrie’s room and grasped my hand. “How could It-He-It not have been aware that we existed? Not even have knownT’

I didn’t answer him.

“You felt it too, Seena, didn’t you? The others say they could, so you must have too. It… created us in some way. No, that’s wrong. How could It create us and not knowT’

I said wearily, “Do we always know what we’ve created?” and Keith glanced at me sharply. But I had not been referring to my father’s work in cloning.

“Keith. What’s a Thysania Africana?”

“A what?”

“Think of us,” I said, “as just one more biological side-effect. One type of being acts, and another type of being comes into existence. Man stages something like the African Horror, and in doing so he creates whole new species of moths and doesn’t even discover they exist until long after-ward. If man can do it, why not God? And why should He be any more aware of it than we are?”

Keith didn’t like that. He scowled at me, and then looked at Devrie’s sleeping face: Devrie’s sleeping bliss.

“Because she is a fool,” I said savagely, “and so are you. You won’t leave it alone, will you? Having been noticed by It once, you’ll try to be

noticed by It again. Even though she promised me otherwise, and even if it kills you both."

Keith looked at me a long time, seeing clearly-finally- the nature of the abyss between us, and its dimensions. But I already knew neither of us could cross. When at last he spoke, his voice held so much compassion that I hated him. "Seena. Seena, love. There's no more doubt now, don't you see? Now rational belief is no harder than rational doubt. Why are you so afraid to even believe?"

I left the room. In the corridor I leaned against the wail, palms spread flat against the tile, and closed my eyes. It seemed to me that I could hear wings, pale and fragile, beating against glass.

They will try again. For the sake of sure knowledge that the universe is not empty, Keith and Devrie and all the others like their type of being will go on pushing their human brains beyond what the human brain has evolved to do, go on fluttering their wings against that biological window. For the sake of sure knowledge: belief founded on experiment and not on faith. And the Other: being/alien/God? It, too, may choose to initiate contact, if It can and now that It knows we are here. Perhaps It will seek to know us, and even beyond the laboratory Devrie and Keith may find any moment of height-ened arousal subtly invaded by a shadowy Third. Will they sense It, hovering just beyond consciousness, if they argue fiercely or race a sailboat in rough water or make love? How much arousal will it take, now, for them to sense those huge wings beating on the other side of the window?

And windows can be broken.

Tomorrow I will fly back to New York. To my museum, to my exhibits, to my moths under permaplex, to my empty apartment, where I will keep the heavy drapes drawn tightly across the glass.

For-oh God-all the rest of my life.

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