
Font Font Color Font Size 
Background Color

Senses Three and Six

By

David Brin

I lean here against this polished wooden surface, while the drums pound and the smoke blows around, and my mind feels like a wild thing, completely out of control. For days I've hardly slept, dreading the dreams that have come back... eyes in the sky and a fiery mountainside.

Even as I stand here, this damned day keeps throwing memories at me, like soggy rags dragged out of a pile of old discarded clothes—things I thought I'd buried away for good.

Right now, for instance, I can't help remembering how weird I thought my old man was, when I was a kid.

Oh, he was a pip, he was. Whenever he caught me in a lie, he would beat me twice.

The first thing he'd do was he'd take me into the house and lecture me really reasonable-like about how it was immoral to tell lies, how a real man would face the truth, and all that stuff. Then he'd make me bend over and take my licking like a man. That part was okay, I guess. I didn't like the lecture, but he didn't hit very hard.

It was later in the day he'd scare me half to death. And all the time in between I'd be so frightened I couldn't hardly breathe. I think, now that you get right down to it, he punished me *three* times each time he found out I'd lied... a spanking indoors for being unethical, a Chinese water torture of a wait, and then a terrific pasting out next to the garage for *getting caught*.

I think the wait was so I could think about how I could have talked my way out of it without lying... or come up with a better lie, one without holes in it.

When he knocked me around outside he kept telling me how stupid it was to waste an untruth—how a man's credibility was as important to his survival as his wind, his stamina, or his ability to make friends.

My lather was like that. Indoors he talked as if he were trying to teach me how to be moral and upright. Outside, in the twilight, he acted as if tomorrow I was going to be dumped into the Amazon, or Devil's Island, or deepest darkest Wall Street, and it was his job to see to it I could make it in a jungle.

One of the good things I can say about him is that he never got mad when I told him to his face he was nuts. He just laughed and said it was an interesting proposition—and that his duty to teach me to survive didn't include policing my opinions.

In all this smoke and noise and stream-of-consciousness rambling tonight, it occurs to me for the first time that maybe my old man was right after all.

Maybe he had a feeling I'd wind up in a place like this, hunted, trapped, my survival depending on the credibility of a lie.

These eyes in the sky keep coming back. And the picture of a burning mountain. I try to shrug them aside, but another image comes, uninvited, unwelcome...

A closeup of the moon...

Hey, I'm not illiterate. Though my life depends on seeming as if I am. Like Bogart said to Bacall, I been to college and I can read a book. It's just that I adapt real good. And right now I've got to adapt to being Chuck Magun.

Chuck. Yeah. Cut this memory crap and think about Chuck. Reinforce Chuck.

Chuck looks a lot like I used to look, naturally. I couldn't change that. He's a big guy with shoulders and everything heaped up six three or so. He looks mean. He lifts weights every day and runs a few miles along the riverfront.

He's got an old Harley torn apart in his living room,
and either a country western station or the TV is on all the time.

Chuck drinks in local bars, curses at all the right bad plays when football is on, and enjoys tearing up a patch of back road with his dirt bike, time to time. When he races he uses a lot of profanity, but he *never* loses his temper.

He reads motorcycle racing magazines and maintenance manuals with a guilty, *hungry* nervousness. He can't scan more than six or eight sentences without suddenly looking up with a shy grin on his face, as if he expected to be kidded, or maybe killed.

Mostly he doesn't read. He's a fully qualified member of the Great Unwashed. At least I hope so.

Chuckie may also be getting married soon...

(... A closeup of the moon... the stars bitterly bright... purple cat-slitted eyes...)

What was that? An earthquake? Did the bar shake? Why is my hand trembling?

Maybe I should stay away from provocative topics for a little while. As long as I'm standing here mumbling to a pretend listener in my own mind, I might as well do some background. It'll take up the time.

Ever been a bouncer?

You say no, my imagined friend? Well, let me explain. It's not a trivial trade.

Bouncers meet all the chicks. There seems to be a sort of fascination women feel towards that husky bearded type of guy who stands alone with watchful eyes at the edge of the bar with a big flashlight in his pocket and a beer that hardly gets touched during the night. Maybe it's that here's a big stud whose whole purpose in life is to make sure little girls don't get bothered in or around the Yankee Dollar if they don't want to be.

Anyway, the girls here are always flirting with Chuck. He doesn't mind, but I hate it. Their attentions make me nervous. I don't like strangers looking too close. Sure, none of *Them*, the monsters who pursue me, could disguise himself as a young woman. Especially the way they dress these days. Still, I have Chuck's girlfriend join him here each night to shake the chicks loose.

Hell, it's not the girls' fault. Neither is it Chuck's. So much for bouncer lesson number one.

Lesson number two is pick a place where kids hang out. You get a hell of a lot more aggravation, minute by minute, but it's a damn sight better than working bored sick in some topless place when some drunk jumps onto the runway to dance with the Girl, and you've got to jump up too, and grin and friendly-like ask him to join you in beer while the poor Girl has a stupefied smile on her face and only a little bikini bottom on her ass, and everyone in the house can see that big weighted flashlight you're holding behind your back, and you're wondering if your sphincters are going to hold because that drunk's got six friends at the bar just as "friendly."

That happened twice in Weed. I damn near broke character, as well as some poor Indian's head, before I quit.

Weed was a lot like Crescent City, wet and pungent. Only here the fog is made of ocean spray and clouds crawling upriver on their way to skirmish with the mountains. In Weed the morning haze was pure mosquitoes.

The kids who come to the Yankee Dollar to hear bluegrass and chivy sips of beer from their older brothers and sisters don't know how to be mean yet. They're so tied up in teenage smells and teenage aggravation. I remember when I was that age so I try to be tolerant.

It's funny how tonight I can recollect things like that from twenty years ago, but until recently I had trouble thinking much more than a week either way. Today I saw a jet flying high overhead. A fast little navy fighter, I guess. It got me thinking...

... The growl of engines... launching to a fanfare from Beethoven... laughter and clean flight...

Stop that! Divert! What *is* the matter with me? Where are these visions coming from?

Ignore 'em. That's what I'll do. Nothing like that ever happened... Think about something else. Think about the kids. Think about the kids and bouncer lessons.

I guess I like the kids enough. I watch 'em close, though. The worst they usually do is try to sneak pitchers outside or do J's in the corner. I put a stop to that fast, and have a rep for the sharpest eye in bouncerdom.

No way. I'm gettin' hauled up before a judge for "contributing to delinquency." A judge might be one of the ones *They* are watching. *They* catch wind of me, and pfff! There goes both Chuckie and me.

"Hey, Chuck!"

"Yeah, what! What you want?" I bellow. Full Chuck bellow from the edge of the bar.

They stand in the doorway ten feet away, three underage lodgepoles in denim—scraggly moustaches and zits. They want to pull something I'd catch them at easy. So they're about to appeal to Chuck's sense of camaraderie. I gotta smile.

"Hey, Chuck, can we bring in some beers? You're cool, man. We'll keep it under the table..."

Turn grin to grimace.

"Hell, no. You guys get that stuff out of here! Drink it at home and then come back. Or better yet, don't come back!"

They cuss me, laughing. I cuss back to maintain image, but my heart really isn't in it tonight.

Five minutes later they're back. Must have chugged the whole six-pack from the way they slosh and giggle as they come in, giving me a wink. Jesus! Can you remember chugging just to get a stomach full of beer? Doing it because a boy's got to have some sort of rite of passage when the girls just won't put out and we don't send young men after eagle feathers anymore?

That's bouncer lesson number three. Like your clientele. Establish empathy. But *never* identify too closely. It'll drive you nuts.

The surface of the bar is smooth, like ivory keys, like the smooth-rubbed stick in a trusty airplane... With my eyes closed the pounding of the drums blends with the crowd noises and seems to become the growling of engines. A red haze under my eyelids turns into a fire... fire on a mountainside.

My fingers press into the bar, the tendons humming momentarily as if to

something from Stravinsky...

And Parmin did have purple eyes.

Agh! Ignore it. Ignore it!

The Blue Ridge Mountain Boys are picking up a fast number beneath the spots, in a swirling haze of tobacco smoke. I imagine the smoke contains other things, as well, but it's hard to tell as my sense of smell isn't what it was. In fact, for reasons I'd rather not go into, it's pretty well nonexistent. I do a quick scan around the room to make sure no one's passing around a J too obviously. I'm no party pooper. Like I said, I have this thing about being busted.

I'll give the Boys credit. They sure do give that hillbilly music a shitkicking beat. The dancers on the floor are capering and screaming "Eeee-Haw!"... that city-boy version of the mountain yell.

Chuck likes this band. He's gotten drunk with them a few times and he fixes their bikes for less than he usually charges.

Once, though, when he'd had a bit too much brew, Chuck let them persuade him to join them with a borrowed harmonica. He'd intended just to clown around, but got carried away. He bent over that mouth organ and *played*.

By the time I came to my senses the crowd was whooping it up, the Boys thumping me on the back, and I was blinking in the spotlight, wondering what I had let happen.

I almost left town then and there, but that's when Elise had just broken her arm dirt-biking with Chuck for the first time. I guess he felt guilty, so I stayed.

Strange purple eyes, hooded and cat-slitted... a smile as subtle as any man's... A look of ages. You don't hide from eyes like those.

"You are a Protector," he said. "A certain fraction of your species cannot help themselves in this respect. Without something or someone to protect, they wither and die."

"Parmin, you are full of it."

Again that smile. A voice like a reed organ.

"Do you think I don't know what you are, Brad? Why were you, after all, among the first I chose for my Cabal... ?"

There's dancing out on the sawdust now. Single girls prance around the edges as if it's some tribal custom to let the couples take the center. I always found that an interesting phenomenon.

The kids don't know anything about bluegrass, though some of the boys affect harmonicas. If it's country it must be salubrious, so they hop around with thumbs in

suspenders and fingers splayed to give their dance a superficial country air.

I can't believe it. Did I just subvocalize the word "salubrious"? Sweet heavens, I must have gone mad!

What have I been doing, letting myself think like that? How long did I lapse? I look at my watch. No watch. I don't wear one anymore. What's wrong with me!

Calm down. You've only been intellectualizing since the beginning of the set. Too little time to do any real harm.

Besides, it's not proven *They* can put a tracer on subvocalized thought. That was just a theory.

Still, maybe they can. So cut the two-dollar words, hmmm? When did philosophy ever do anybody any good anyway?

Joey asks me to help him move a keg. Sure. Anything's better than standing here thinking. The crowd is too well behaved to serve as a distraction.

Down at the other end of the bar we heave the monster onto the platform. Straightening up, I rub the grease off my hands and look around the room. That's when I see her.

She stands by the door; the coldness comes over me like an Amarillo norther. I cringe a little, momentarily thinking to make myself invisible as she peers around, blinking in the sharp light of the stage spots.

But there's no dignified way to make six and a half feet of hair and muscle transparent. She sees Chuck and smiles and starts to walk over. And while she's between there and here the magic thing happens again. The coldness leaves me.

She *is* very pretty, and she moves well.

I try to look busy for a second, checking the place as she comes up beside me. Joey says hello. She answers him in a low alto voice—friendly, but with a hesitant sort of nervousness to it.

I didn't put the nervousness there. She had it when I met her, so don't blame me.

I'm not bothered by sky-eyes or fiery mountains now. The Boys are picking out one of my favorite silly tunes, "Old Joe Clark."

I went down to Old Joe Clark's,

Never been there before.

He slept on a feather bed,

And I slept on the floor.

Oh, fare thee well, Old Joe Clark,

Fare thee well, I'm gone.

*Fare thee well, Old Joe Clark,
Better be movin' on!*

She looks up at me.

"Hi."

I look back down at her. "Hi, yourself. How's the nursery?"

"Pretty good today, but we had a late afternoon rush. I hurried home and changed, but this saleslady came by and I couldn't resist letting her show me some things. I bought some nice scents so... so... that's why I'm late."

She suddenly looks a little scared, as if she's said something she shouldn't have. Oh, yes. Chuck hasn't got a sense of smell and hates to be reminded of it. It's true I haven't been able to pick up anything weaker than a six-day-dead steer in almost two years, but has Chuck really been so irritable that Elise should be frightened by a passing remark?

I shrug. "Have you eaten yet?"

"I had a snack earlier." She looks relieved. "I can fry us up a couple of steaks when we get home, if you want me to."

She wears her light brown hair in a permanent—swept around the ears like Doris Day. I always hated that style so Chuck tells her he likes it. She's too damn pretty anyway. A flaw helps.

"Come on." I grab her elbow and nod at Joey to take over watching the door. He's flirting with a teenybopper but I take the hand stamp with me. No one gets brew here unless he's been stamped. By me.

Elise steps a little ahead of me. She knows her walk drives me crazy, even after seven months or so of living together. It's like the way she is in bed. Totally committed. Every move is a caress. If it's not me or her plants she's stroking, it's the air, her clothes, the sawdust she's walking on.

She'll do. She's unsophisticated and decorative. Ideally, I'd have found someone without any education, but hell, everyone's been to college these days. At least she doesn't remind me of things, and she tries awful hard to please me.

The thing I guess I feel guilty about is leading her on. She obviously thinks she's going to work on me real hard and maybe I'll ask her to marry me. She's wrong.

I've already decided to marry her. But I have to keep up appearances. I'm the strong, silent type, remember? Chuck will have to be coaxed.

Damn it, I've *got* to stay in character! Would it do her any good to have *Them* catch up with me?

Old Joe Clark has got a house.

*Sixteen storeys high,
And every storey in that house,
Is filled with chicken pie.*

"Tell me what you're thinking."

Her hand is on my arm, playing with the thick hairs that gather under the shirt cuff. Those deep brown eyes of hers—she uses them like fingertips to touch my face lightly, shyly, as if to make sure I'm really there—they seem to show concern. Is it *that* obvious I'm not myself tonight?

That jet, flying so high in the sunshine... young Allan Fowler coming by later, to pester me with his foolishness... then all this philosophical crap I've been internalizing all night. Yeah, I'm going to have to pay attention to the old facade.

The secret of lying well is to do as little as possible.

"Oh, I was just thinking about that song they're doing now. We used to sing it when I was a kid. There's about a thousand verses." I take a long pull from my beer.

"I didn't know you used to sing, too. Is that when you learned the harmonica?" Her voice trembles just a bit, but the part of me controlling the mouth doesn't seem to notice. I'm on automatic.

"Um, yeah. Some of the other kids with folks at the Institute and I, we formed the Stygian Stegosaurus Band. Thought we were pretty hot shit. We played frat houses and the like. Nothing serious. Father bought me a banjo, but it never really took like the piano."

My next exhalation feels like a sigh. The song ends and so does the set. I look around and everything is peaceful, but I still check twice. When I was in the service I used to be able to *smell* trouble. Now I have to use my eyes.

Now, stop that. *Don't* think about the service! What's gotten into you, anyway?

I'm tired of yelling at myself. What a rotten day.

I turn to talk to Elise... Now, what's she got that *look* on her face for? What is it, amazement? Hope? Fear?

Oh, boy. What I just said.

Think... Father... I never mentioned my father before, though she used to try to draw me out about my past.

And the *Institute*! And music, my childhood... the piano.

There is a haze in front of me, a barrier of palpable grief. It hangs like a portcullis, cutting off escape. By touch I grab up the beer and swallow to hide the turmoil on my face. Think. Think.

The band's name she'll bleep out. Probably thinks it's dirty. Must recoup the rest. How? Make the Institute... "the Institution"?... A place for delinquents? Father

could become "Father Murphy," a kindly priest...

I can envision my old man grinning at me now. "See?" he'd say. "See how hard it is to maintain a good lie?"

I put the beer down without looking at her. "I'm going for a walk. Get some air. Tell Joey I'll be right back, okay?"

I can see out the corner of my eye that she nods. I try to walk straight on my way out the door.

... Her eyes were gray... When she laughed it felt like my chest was a kite and I'd light up into the sky... Parmin introduced us—I never knew a woman like her could exist...

"Go," he said.

"But Parmin, Janie has her own work to do, and my team is expecting those B-1 and Trident parts to be integrated into the ships ..."

"No. Your deputies can take over for a time, while the two of you go for a honeymoon. Am I not the expert? Have I not been watching your species for twenty of your generations? I will not have two of my department heads distracted later, while things are approaching completion.

"Go, Brad. Look into each other's eyes, make love, get a baby started. The child will be born on a new world ..."

I rest my head against the cool, damp bricks. Around back of the Yankee Dollar, near the garbage cans, I try to keep from crying out loud.

The pain is hot. A searing, almost hormonal rejection, as if my body were trying to throw off a revolting insertion... a transplanted organ, or an alien idea. The agony is dull and sweaty, with a faint delusional quality, and the rejected organ, I realize, is my own mind.

My hands grope against the wall. Fingers dig into the recessed lines of mortar that surround each of the bricks, my anchors. The texture is hard, yet crumbly. Little fragments break off under my fingernails.

The gritty coolness crackles against my brow as I roll it against the masonry... feeling the solidity of the building.

It is comforting, that solidity. Good heavy brick. Bound by steel rods and thick goops of cement that permeate and bond—to hold up the roof. To stand. It's comforting to think about bricks.

Think about bricks.

Bricks are hard because the constituent molecules are bound. They all hold together and gravity is defied. Randomness, too, is held off. Chaos is stopped so long as the molecules don't leave their assigned places.

And they can't do that. The vibrational energy they'd need would be too high. No

way over that barrier, except if they all decided to tunnel. And brick molecules can't all decide to tunnel at once, can they? Without someone to tell them to?

My fingers claw harder into the gritty mortar and a layer of skin scrapes away painfully. *Don't tunnel*, I cry silently to the molecules. *Don't. Stay here and be content as a brick. A simple honorable brick among bricks, which holds up roofs and keeps the cold wind off people...*

I plead desperately... and somehow I sense agreement. At least the wall doesn't seem to be going anywhere. In a momentary shiver, the fit is over. I'm left standing here feeling drained and a bit silly, with a dusty brow and filthy hands. I let the latter drop and turn to rest my back against the wall with a sigh.

It is a damp evening. Faint tendrils of fog creep across the twenty yards of parking lot between me and the far fence. The fog curls past like the fingers of an old blind woman—touching lightly the corner wall, the parked cars, the overflowing garbage cans—and moving on.

I start to cringe as a vaporous flagellum drifts along the wall to brush me. *Don't. It's only fog. That's all. Just fog.*

I used to like fog. It always smelled good. Lots of negative ions, I suppose. Still, here next to the garbage cans the stench must be pretty bad. I wish I could tell.

Laughter feels dry and artificial, yet I laugh. Here I am, suffering something akin to a psychotic break, and I'm worried about my damned sense of smell!

Parmin spoke so slowly toward the end, but cheerfully in spite of the pain.

"... The machines I have shown you how to build will do their part. My former masters, those who hold your world in secret quarantine, will be taken by surprise. They believe you will be incapable of any such constructs for hundreds of your years. You are all to be congratulated for making them so quietly and so well.

"Using these machines will be another matter entirely, however. These devices must be talked to. They must be coaxed. Their operators must deal with them on a plane that is at the meeting of physics and metaphysics—at the juncture of mathematics and meditation.

"That is why I selected men such as you, Brad. You fly jet aircraft, to be sure. But more importantly, you fly the same way you play the piano. All of our pilots must learn to play their ships, for persuading them to tunnel between the stars will require the same empathy as the pianist, who coaxes hammer strokes on metal wires to tunnel glory into a human brain."

My driver's license says I am Charles L. Magun. For well over a year I've repaired motorcycles for a living, and brought in a few extra bucks on the side keeping kids from wrecking themselves too badly in places like the Yankee. I have a live-in girlfriend who's been to college, I guess, but is no threat. She's quiet and nice to

have around. I have some redneck pals who I bike and lift weights with and everyone calls me Chuck.

But I remember forging Chuck's birth certificate almost two years ago. I set him up as a role, I recall,

someone *They'd* never find because *They* were looking for somebody else. I remember diving into Chuck and burning everything that came before, old habits, old ways, and most of all the old memories.

Until tonight, that is.

Okay, let's be rational about this. What are the possibilities?

One is that I'm crazy. I really *am* Charles L. Magun, and all that shit about having once upon a time played the piano, done calculus, piloted jet planes, piloted... other things... that's all a crock of madman's dreams.

It's amazing. For the first time in two years I can actually stand here and dispassionately remember doing some of those things. Some of them. Stuff not directly associated with the breakout. They seem so vivid. I can set up a hyperdimensional integral in my head, for instance. Could Chuck do that?

But I also remember, from long ago when I was a boy, those weird old men who used to come to the Institute bugging Dad and the other profs, to try to get someone to listen to their ideas for perpetual motion machines and the like. Their fantasies seemed sophisticated and correct to *Them*, too, didn't they?

The irony isn't lost on me—using a memory of the Institute to demonstrate that it's possible for me to falsely remember learning calculus.

Droll.

All right, perhaps I *did* construct Chuck. Maybe I *was* someone like who I think I was. But maybe everything that I'm currently *afraid of* is a fantasy. Maybe I simply went crazy some years back.

Look at me, spending an entire evening in a nonstop internal monologue, describing everything I think and feel as it happens, and every whimper and moan is out of some goddamn psychodrama, I swear. Like this paranoid delusion of vengeful creatures I call *Them* . . .

Oh, *something* terrible must have happened to me two years ago or so. But might it be something more mundane, like an accident? Or a murder? Maybe I created a terrifying and romantic fantasy to cover memories of the real trauma... something of this Earth, hidden under a bizarre mask of science fiction.

No one I know has even heard of the Cabal, or the Arks, or Canaan, or even a fiery crash on a mountainside just a hundred miles from here. I remember we Broke Out a bit early because elections were coming and the old administration was sure to lose. We thought the new crowd would be sure to blow the whistle. But not a word of any "secret project under the Tennessee hills" has ever hit the press. There wouldn't be any point in secrecy any longer, but there's been no word.

When you get right down to it, the story I remember is pretty damn preposterous.

A cool breeze is blowing now. The last drifts of fog fall away in tatters, fleeing into the gloom just past the streetlamps. The wind feels fresh on my face.

A third possibility is that I didn't make any of it up. I'm the hunted last survivor of a secret plot against a powerful outsider civilization, and my enemies will stop at nothing to catch me.

Hmmm. I never put it quite that way before. The next question, I now see, is obvious.

So what?

A smile? Is that what my answer is? A smile?

Yeah. So what? I want to shout. Who *cares* if they catch me? All they can do is kill me!

Why, in god's name, have I been making myself so miserable?

Wow.

All right, then. Chuck is a little bit overdone. Hiding as a macho motorcycle repairman is smart, sure. But Chuck doesn't have to belch in disgust every time a snatch of classical music comes on over the radio. He doesn't *have* to watch motorcross on the TV or make snide remarks every time Elise makes a pathetic little attempt at philosophizing.

Amazing I didn't think of this before. All I have left to lose is my worthless life. Small potatoes. Maybe I really can ease up a bit. Why didn't I think of this before?

The clouds part and suddenly there is the moon. It is beautiful, like an opal in the night. I can play subjective tricks with it, make it small, a pearl held up at arm's length, or go zooming in with my imagination, filling the sky with craters and taria much as... much as it might look from the portal of a ship.

I can see the Lunar Appenines, trace one of the ridges all the way to a little valley that twists and turns and dives into rocky depth. I can follow that cleft to the lip of a cave, a cave where there's buried...

Where there's buried...

No!

I refuse! Uh-uh! No fair.

I've done enough this evening, now leave me alone! I've agreed to be more reasonable, to let myself relax a bit and enjoy what's left of my life. But you can't make me remember, Brad. I won't do it!

Chuck hunches his shoulders and shoves his hands into his pockets. He shakes his head vigorously and walks toward the sound of drums and guitars, toward the door to the Yankee Dollar.

Imagine a blockade... a quarantine.

The stars are as numerous as specks of pollen blowing across a prairie. Life blossoms everywhere, and yet the glimmer of intelligence is rare.

Imagine an ancient civilization that cherishes the openness, the emptiness. They are reflective and refined—and selfish. They do not want space filled with clamorous young neighbors.

Imagine that one day a new species emerges, bright, curious, vigorous. The Old Ones set up a blockade as they have done in the past. With a severe kindness the fact of the quarantine is kept secret from the newcomers. A merciful discretion.

But now, imagine a traitor, an Old One who disagrees with Policy... And imagine a few precocious natives...

The set is over. A slow song plays over the FM and Elise waits at our table, moving her lips to the words of the song. I watch her as I walk along the dim bar and motion for Joey to give me a fresh beer.

Every so often, when I let her, Elise sings to me. Softly, holding my head on her lap and running her hands through my thinning hair, she croons her gentle country melodies and helps me sleep.

Right now her eyes are focused out beyond the bandstand somewhere. I suppose she's just staring out into space, but there's something in her expression... She does that sometimes. When she's puttering with her plants and I'm trying to adjust a jammed sprocket, suddenly she'll stop and look intently at nothing. At times like that I worry that she might actually be thinking.

Then she snaps out of it and makes some reassuringly benign remark about a stupid woman who wanted to buy azaleas out of season.

She *is* nervous, though she's calmed down considerably lately. I don't know where the nervousness comes from and I've avoided thinking about it. There was a time when I could have tried... but Chuck doesn't know anything about psychology. He thinks it's bullshit.

Hell, I give her strength and stability and loving and a good deal more. It's a fair trade.

Gray eyes, her eyes, laughing at me over her bright silver flute, making me grin and stumble over the chords—my fingers made schoolboy clumsy by the lightness of my heart...

Gray eyes—cool ivory keys and a silvery flute...

Duet...

As I approach the table she looks up and smiles shyly. "Did you have a nice

walk?"

"Yeah, it was fine."

There are questions in her brown eyes. No denying I did act unusual, earlier. But now I realize that I don't have to explain anything. Give it a rest and in a few days or weeks I'll start giving in a little to her curiosity. Chuck will explain a little. Minor stuff. No hurry.

Why not?

We talk about little things and spend a lot of time not talking at all. I check IDs and make sure nobody's molesting anyone in the men's room.

The Boys are back on stage playing quiet songs, as I return from one of my rounds and find Elise talking to Alan Fowler at our table.

Damn.

Alan's a nice, friendly grad student who's much too bright for his own good. He met Chuck at a dirt-bike race and sort of adopted him and Elise. Chuck insults him all the time, calling him a useless egghead, but he never seems to get the hint.

I come up behind Elise. She is very animated.

"... not sure I understand what they hope to accomplish, Alan. You mean you could actually mine *asteroids* efficiently enough to make a profit selling refined metals back to Earth?"

"That's what the figures show, Lise." Alan winks at me but Elise doesn't notice.

"You mean even after transportation costs are taken into account? Can you amortize costs over a reasonable period?"

Chuck frowns. What is this? He doesn't like hearing words like these from Elise. Who does she think she's fooling?

Alan grins. "Easily, Lise. Less than a decade, I'd guess. Of course, in the beginning it'll be water for propellants well be after. But later? Well, imagine twenty years' worldwide platinum production coming from just *one* small asteroid! Why, we could easily go back to the days of the sixties and seventies when there was so much of a surplus that liberal ideas could flower..."

I can't help snorting in disgust. Chuck votes redneck.

The secret Ark Project was responsible for over half of the mysterious inflation that hit the nation in the late seventies... Big endeavors, pipelines, bombers, space shuttles, went through design change after design change, all attributed to poor planning.

And yet the engineers involved were the very same who had brought the Apollo Program in ahead of schedule and under budget.

How could such incompetence appear out of nowhere? Bungled, rebuilt nuclear power plants, reworked and retooled factories, new equipment wasted and

tossed away.

Nobody bothered to check what happened to the original parts... the "flawed" equipment that had to be replaced... no one knew but a few in the highest places that the leftovers were taken to a cavern in Tennessee. Pieces of experimental windmills and redesigned submarines, prototype bombers and cancelled shuttles, the bits all cleverly fitted together into... into great globes... into beauty and eventually

Sure, Alan, look to space for salvation from economic woes.

The Project was responsible for most of the mysterious inflation that hit in the late seventies... A great nation's wealth, thrown in secret down a rat hole.

Dream on...

Elise notices me and her words stumble to a stop. But she recovers quickly. She grabs my arm as I sit down beside her.

"Why didn't you *tell* me Alan got accepted!" She tries to sound accusing but is too excited to make it stick.

I shrug. The kid had only told me about his "good luck" this morning. Chuck had offered perfunctory congratulations but had better things to do than spend all day gushing over the young idiot's long-range suicide plan.

"Aw, come on, Lise." Alan grins. "It's only a preliminary acceptance. They're going to put me through a wringer like boot camp and final exams put together. Probably the only result will be three months lost from my research, and a permanent empathy with my experimental rats!"

"Don't be silly!" Elise glances at me quickly and gives in to her natural instinct to touch his sleeve in encouragement. "You'll make it all the way. Just think how proud we'll all be to say we knew you when!"

Alan laughs. "I'll tell you what would help. What I *really* need is some coaching from the Zen master here."

He jerks his thumb in my direction.

Elise takes a fraction of a second to check the expression on my face. To me it feels stony, numb. I'm irked by this need of hers to constantly worry about my reaction, even if she's been doing it less lately.

I've never abused her. So Chuck growls! So what! She can do or say anything she wants, for crissake!

She laughs a bit nervously. "My bear, a Zen master? What do you mean, Alan?"

Alan grins. "I mean that one of the reasons I hang around this big grump is because he's the closest thing to a *real* guru I've ever met." Alan looks at Elise. "Have you ever watched him while he's fixing a bike?"

"Are you kidding? He has a Harley torn apart in the living room. I've tried and

tried—"

"No. I mean *really* watched him! Closely! He touches every piece and meditates on it before he does anything at all to it. No part is in its place out of tempo. I used to ask him to describe what he feels when he's in that state, but he'd just get mad and tell me to go away. Finally, I realized that the yelling was a sermon! It's *suchness* he's concentrating on. Or Tao or Wu or whatever you want to name it, only naming isn't where it's at, either."

I shake my head, muttering, "Crock of shit." And I mean it, too. Chuck and I are in total agreement.

Alan just laughs. "I once read a book about a meditation system just like the one Chuck uses. It was pretty popular about a decade or so back. Only I never believed it until I met Chuck. I don't suppose he ever read the book. He just does it."

Alan sighs. "And that's what I have to learn, to pass those tests in Houston. If I could move with grace and concentration like he does when he's fixing bikes, I'd be a shoo-in. I tell you, Chuck should be the one trying for astronaut!"

And that will be quite enough! Elise's smile fades as I growl.

"What a load of bull, Alan. I'm no... *Zan* master, if that's what you call it, and I sure have better things to do than get fried in one of those money-wasting, man-killing bombs they keep setting off down at Vandenberg! If you want to be popped up like a piece of toast you just go right ahead, but don't "entuse" all over me, okay?"

The damned kid just keeps grinning.

"*There!* There it is again! That expression on his face. It's the same one he had this morning when I stopped by to tell him I might get a crew slot on the space station."

Alan's expression turns inward a bit, puzzled and not afraid at all to show it.

"It's as if he knew something I didn't," he murmurs. "As if he thought all that was somehow child's play."

If Alan were sitting just a little closer, I know I'd strangle him. If a bright young idiot like Alan Fowler can see through Chuck... what about *Them*?

My face is made of sleet-swept granite. I don't move, but let the world turn beneath me.

Child's play. Indeed.

Imagine a year of rumors... of strange lights in the sky...

The supermarket magazines carry a spate of UFO headlines. Several famous psychics report getting severe headaches along with alternating feelings of claustrophobia and exaltation.

An amateur astronomer reports another of those mysterious "ventings" on the moon...

Imagine flashes in the sky...

The mental processes are slow. I feel tired and cranky. It's been a long night and only at intervals have I had relief from this ridiculous internal monologue... describing everything I think or feel to an unseen audience. It's an audience I'd rather show my backside, but that's physiologically impossible.

It's just past one. I help Joey close up while over by the door Elise flirts with Dan and Jase of the band. Thank heavens the role never required that Chuck be the jealous sort. It's good to hear her laugh. She has a nice laugh.

When I've finished, I say good night to Joey and meet her at the door. The fog has disappeared, leaving a starry night that's cool and slightly damp. I sniff, picking up the faintest strange touch of musk from the street.

We walk slowly to my car, around back past the garbage cans. I let her in and like clockwork she leans over to unlock my side. The cold upholstery squeaks as I slide across the bench seat to put my arm around her. She shivers slightly, slipping down a little and looking up at me as if all the world depends upon my kissing her here and now.

Her lips are soft and they move with an infectious hunger, drawing passion out of me. My hands have a volition all their own, and she responds to every caress—matching the effect on me with the little things she does with her fingernails on my back.

Our loving has been good in the past, but never quite like this. Even with Janie it was different, but...

I jerk my head up and moan, squeezing her against me. I pray that she thinks it's the loving.

My eyes squeeze shut to block out memory. Yet they fail even to stop simple tears.

Imagine flashes in the sky...

Parmin suggests the group's orchestra hold a farewell concert for the entire Cabal. He asks specifically for a Beethoven concerto.

Then it is time.

The Arks lift in battle formation, and take the picket ships completely by surprise, high above the jagged highlands of the moon's limb. The jailers barely get out a distress call before they are annihilated.

One Ark developed engine trouble, didn't it? Its crew and supplies were transhipped and it was buried in a cave... Then, one by one, the Arks peeled off to

seek their diverse destinations...

Imagine a young pilot who locks his controls, then rises to face the woman standing behind his chair.

"Marry me, pretty lady. Will you? I'll put the stars in your ring. You shall have a galaxy for a tiara." He takes her by the waist and raises her high, to the cheers of his crewmates.

Laughing gray eyes... She strokes his hair and bends over to kiss him. "Silly boy. We're already married. Besides, I don't want galaxies. Just one planet. That's all."

He lowers her and holds her close.

"Then a planet you shall have..."

Her breath against my neck is very warm. Her breast rolls silkily against my side.

I chose Elise because she seemed the antithesis of my former life. No one would expect to find me—to find my former self—with her, just as *They* would not look for someone fixing motorcycles in his living room and watching pimply kids in a country bar.

Yet she is life to me now, is she not? Where would I be without you, Elise, to anchor me to this world?

By their own laws *They* are sworn not to harm the innocent, though they would kill me on sight. Perhaps, though, when the manhunt ends and I am found, they may find it expedient to bend their rules and eliminate her as well, in case I had talked.

I shudder at the thought. That was one of the reasons for Chuck's antintellectualism in the first place, to keep from letting even a word slip. Perhaps the best thing to do, the most honorable thing, would be simply to leave.

I seem to be oscillating between flashes of painful memory and numbing calmness. Right now the pendulum is swinging back again. Suddenly everything is stark and shimmering. My head feels light, like crystal.

Over the night sounds of the suburbs I can hear horns of the boats on the distant river. I can feel Elise's heartbeats as I hold her. The textures that I see, in the car, in the brick wall outside my window, are vivid and intricate... like a pattern of hieroglyphs whose meanings dance at the edges of understanding.

Would reliving the past help Janie? Or Parmin or Walter, or any of the others? How would it help to remember a terrible, useless, one-sided battle that stretched over kiloparsecs and climaxed in smoke and stench and roiling flames under a lonely mountain?

Calmness settles in for real. The unwelcome acuity drifts away, unlamented. Holding Elise in the dark, I hardly sense the passage of time.

After a nameless interval I return, cursed still with this compulsion to narrate. It is getting a bit chilly in here, and I long for sleep.

Gently I disengage Elise and fumble the keys into the ignition lock. She, with her eyes far away, straightens her clothes. "We ought to get some of the other bikers together and throw some kind of going-away party for Alan," she suggests. I nod and grunt amiably as I turn the keys.

Nothing. "What the...?"

Check neutral, try again.

Zilch.

My gaze drops to the headlights switch. They were left on six hours ago, when I came in for work. Now, why did I do a fool thing like that?

There's Elise's old Peugeot across the lot. Typically on Fridays we come to the Yankee separately and go home together. The Yankee's lot is safe.

"Come on, we'll have to use your car tonight, Elise." I open my door.

She looks up with a sleepy smile, then her eyes widen. "But... but my car is a mess!"

For as long as I've known her she's always been reluctant to let me near her car. When we use it she always has to "straighten it up" first. She finds excuses to keep me from driving it.

Can you beat that? She'd give me her entire bank account if I asked for it, but I don't have a key to her frigging car. She stands up to me there, though while she's making excuses her voice quavers. I can't figure it, but I recognize guts when I see it. Maybe that's why I went along with it until now. For standing up to Chuck on this one small point I think I love her a little.

But tonight has been hell and I'm in no mood to walk six miles.

"Come on, Elise. You can drive but we've got to use your car. I'm exhausted and I want to go to bed."

She hesitates. Her brown eyes dart from me to the Peugeot. Then she jumps out with a forced laugh. "I'll race you there!"

Hell, she knows I always let her win. Except when we're playing "catch me and ravish me." But this isn't one of those times.

When I arrive she's already behind the wheel. "Beat you again!" She giggles.

I shrug and get in, much too numb to try figuring her out. I'll make this as painless as possible for her by slumping down and pretending to go to sleep.

Unfortunately, the images await me. Nowhere can I find peace.

Clouds part on greens and blues and browns... a lake-speckled forest that

almost stings with beauty... creatures of a million shapes, all strange and new, fill the air and land and seas...

Like a bubble blown across light-years, a ship settles down—gently, as if loath to disturb the loveliness.

It is a good omen, to be arriving in peace...

There is a feeling I used to get quite often when I was young, that I was being watched by omniscient beings.

It wasn't the same as the shadow I have lived under in recent times. Though powerful, my enemies are not all-seeing.

No. Back then, when I was a boy, it seemed as if the universe possessed a Big Eye, and a distinct taste for drama. Always I felt as if I were the central character in a great play.

To the Big Eye it wasn't important that you actually *did* anything. Even standing still watching the seagulls could be dramatic. Noble thoughts and grand unseen gestures were what it valued most of all—the secret unrewarded honesties—the anonymous charities and the unrequited loves.

For a time, when I was a kid, it was very clear to me that the proverbial tree falling in the unpeopled forest was, indeed, heard.

Maybe it was crap like that that got me into this mess. Hell, Freud took the whole thing apart long ago.

But long after I'd dismissed the Big Eye as an ego-displacement dream—a pseudo-Jamesian experience—I found it still beside me, hovering nearby as I agonized over every major decision in my life.

Where has it gone? I wonder. Did it leave me before the Breakout? Or did it follow me to Canaan, and experience with us our lovely doomed joy?

The rumble of the car massages my back as we pull out of the lot and onto the damp streets. I'm feeling sad, but peaceful. Maybe I *would* go to sleep if only Elise would drive less erratically. She seems to be in a godawful hurry to get home. I sense a shift from green to amber through my closed lids, and the brakes suddenly come on.

I have to put my hand to the dashboard as several items tumble out from beneath my seat.

"Hey! Take it easy!"

She laughs. But there seems to be a new level of panic in her eyes. "What's the matter? Don't you trust an expert driver?"

"Ha ha. Just try not to kill us within a mile of home, okay?" I look down at the junk that came out from under the seat. There's a little stereo playback and headphones, and a small bound notebook. I look up. The light is still red. Elise faces

ahead, her face pale.

"What are these?"

She jerks her head, half looking at me. "What are what?"

"This tape player. Is this your deep, dark secret?" I smile, trying to put her at ease.

"N—no. It—it belongs to a friend. She left it in the car when we went to lunch. I've got to get them back to her on Monday."

"What has she got on the tape?"

"Nothing. Just some classical music, I guess. She likes that sort of thing."

Oh, yeah. Curiouser and curiouser. I look up and see that the light has changed and nod at the road ahead. She turns to start the car rolling again, woodenly staring ahead of her.

As Elise drives I sit there with the incriminating items on my lap. It's a bit embarrassing. I'm tempted to put the recorder and notebook back under the seat, despite my curiosity.

She's driving slowly now, concentrating on the road. At this rate it will be a while before we arrive. Elise doesn't appear to be watching so I slip on the headphones and start the player. There is a faint hissing as the tape leader passes the heads. I settle down and close my eyes. After months of avoiding anything that even vaguely resembles "highbrow" music, it might be nice to hear anything Elise might choose to call classical, even if it's just a violin rendition of "Yellow Submarine."

There is the sound of a phonograph needle coming down. Then gently, a piano begins to play. Before the third note is struck my back is a mass of goose bumps and my breath is frozen in my chest... a wave of alienation overwhelms me... I cannot move, even to turn the machine off.

The Fourth Concerto.

Beethoven.

It's the von Karajan production I've listened to a thousand times.

The Fourth Concerto. It was the last piece performed by the group orchestra just before we broke up to board the Arks. Parmin had specifically requested it.

I protested. I was out of practice. But he would have his way, always. And Janie... (*Gray eyes laughing over a silver flute...*) she insisted as well. During those last two weeks, while we waited for the last ship parts, we practiced.

I can feel them now, the keys. The crafty idiosyncracies of that old Steinway. The loving clarity that could be coaxed from her. And in the orchestra, Janie's flute was like a soft unjealous wind, forgiving me the infidelity of this other great love...

Out of practice or not, it was like nothing else—that last night on Earth—except, perhaps, the glory of flying.

Parmin was very kind afterward, though I don't imagine I'll ever know what our

benefactor really thought of the performance. His was the Ark that rose first. The one bound for far Andromeda. The only one, I think, that got away.

The others? Three I know were tracked and destroyed. Two others *They* claimed to have found. I believe them.

Did any other survivors make it back here, to hide like rats among people who have no idea what happened in secret in their own skies?

We left after a night of Beethoven, a fleet. We won a battle in space and then I watched the Arks veer off, one by one, like seeds blown free from a stem, scattered by the wind.

I returned alone, like the Ancient Mariner, with a ship filled with corpses and an albatross of terror and guilt dragging at my neck.

"... Human pilot! Surrender, please! We have already killed far more than we can bear! Do not force us to add to the toll! The traitors who aided Parmin have been rounded up. All the other blockade runners are captured or destroyed!"

The voice lists the colonies besides Canaan they have captured. A voice filled with compassion and sensitivity, so similar to Parmin's that I almost cry...

But the bridge is filled with the stench of burning wiring and decaying bodies... I send the ship into a screaming dive Earthward, evading their best interceptors with tricks that I had learned far too late... My seat buckles underneath me, but somehow I hold on to the controls... My nostrils are filled with the odors of death.

"We realize that your conspiracy was kept secret from the vast majority of Earthlings. That is good. Can you not agree that, having failed, you don't want to see your fellows suffer prematurely? They don't have to find out about their quarantine for another two hundred years! Let them dream on, of an infinite playground in space! Surrender now, and spare the children below their dream!"

So compassionate! The murdering alien hypocrite! Jailor! Zookeeper!

I shout the hateful words and his image on the screen recoils... until the ionization trail of my reentry vaporizes the picture in a cloud of static.

The Ark screams ... I scream...

They tried to shoot me down, like *They* shot down Walter in his modified F-15 that afternoon on Canaan, when I was so late getting the Ark into the air.

There were too many of *Them* anyway. I told myself that a thousand times as the fight ravelled all the way back to Earth. It took time to get the Ark warmed up, and when *They* did what we never had expected—bombed the noncombatants in the settlement—I tarried to take on gassed and wounded survivors.

I watched *Them* fry the house I had just built. Janie had been in the cellar, packing preserves for the winter...

How did they find us so soon? We had counted on more time. How did it happen?

Smoldering wreckage steams within a new crater on an Oregon mountainside. Fires spread through the forest in all directions from a reawakened volcano.

I set charges in what remains and run... and run and run and run, but I cannot outrun the wind. It envelopes me from behind and chokes me with the stench of burning flesh ... I run from the smell ... I run...

There is a tear on my cheek. The soloist enters his cadenza and it is more sweet and sad than I can bear. The headphones slip off and slide from my lap to the floor, followed by the tape player. The sounds of the Fourth Concerto die away into muffled silence.

I'm sure the Big Eye will understand. I cannot afford music.

The blessed numbness returns in force. I open my eyes to look at my hands. They seem miles away. Yet I can make out every wrinkle, every pore and crevice. I glance at Elise. She drives slowly, her expression stony.

My hands fall on something cool and smooth. I look down and see the notebook that I had forgotten.

There have been times in my life when the Big Eye has come down off my shoulder to actually meddle around. Strange things have happened which I could not explain, like finding a live black rabbit on my doorstep at midnight, the evening I finished reading *Watership Down*. Or when I was considering giving up flying, and found that a sparrow hawk was perched on my windowsill, looking at me, staring at me until I found my confidence again.

I've been a scientist, too. But science doesn't welcome the Big Surprises. Only little ones that can be comfortably chewed and swallowed. When the unknown comes *in* out of the borderline and grabs you by the jewels, *that* is when the Universe has chosen to gently remind you that a change of perspective is due. It is showing you who is boss.

Science tells us not to expect personal messages from the Cosmos, either. But they happen, sometimes.

The notebook is smooth and cool.

Are you friend or foe? What shall I do with you, symbol in my lap?

In a rush the panicky commands go out to my body. Get up! Throw the cursed book down. Open the door and jump out. Start running. Start another lie... life in another town.

MOVE!

My treasonous body does not obey. The mutiny is shocking.

Okay... we'll try something else. I command these hands to open this book so that I can look inside.

With a sense of betrayal I watch as they obey. The scratchy paper riffles as my fingers pick a place at random.

By the moonlight there is no mistake. She wrote this. There's no mythical "friend" who left a notebook in her car. I never noticed before, but Elise has lovely penmanship, even if the lines do waver a bit, trembling across the page.

It's ridiculous, really. I moved out here to get some peace and quiet. To get a summer job that didn't feel like a Summer Job—and to get away from that crazy rat race of briefs, moot courts, and exams. I thought it would be amusing to live in the hicks for a while.

I realize now that I hated law school! Oh, not the learning. That was wonderful. But all the rest—the backbiting, the atmosphere of cynicism and suspicion. Ideals got you nothing but derisive laughter.

All those using, abusing men, so glib about respecting modern women, then turning and cutting them first chance. As if we "modern women" were any more kind, of course.

I'm never going back. Here it's peaceful and quiet. I've landed a job I wanted more than that damned clerkship. Can you imagine? It's tending and selling plants! I'm beginning to see why some Eastern peoples put gardening on a higher level than politics. I love it.

These are real people, not money- and status-grubbing yuppies. I'm terrified they'll reject me if they find out I'm a refugee from the world of polyester and gold chains.

Especially my new man. He doesn't talk much. I still haven't been able to define what it is that draws me so to him. But I'm desperate not to drive him off.

I think, maybe, he's the most real thing I've ever had to hold on to.

Two minutes ago I was surprised. Now it's as if I've known this all along. I flip to a later entry...

When am I going to learn? How many women have ruined their lives trying to change their men into something they're not?

He is gentle and kind and strong—such a lovable grouch. So what if he hates just about everything artistic or scientific. What has art and science ever done for me, anyway?

Oh, I'm so confused! What is this indefinable feeling I have about him? Why do I keep risking it all by trying to change him?

I think I'm actually starting to relax, sometimes . Whatever he's doing for me, I can't surrender it now. Better to give up this journal, the other hidden indulgences, rather than take any more chances...

So. Another refugee, albeit from a more mundane sort of crisis. Oh, Elise, I'm sorry I never knew.

I'm glad I never knew, for I would have run away.

I understand now why she encouraged that bright young idiot Alan Fowler to hang around. Her patient probing worked better than she'll ever know. Along with a series of incredible coincidences. And time.

The car is slowing down, coming to a stop. I look up and see we're on a side street a few blocks from home.

She is looking at me, shaking her head slowly, hopelessly. Her lips tremble and there are thin pulsing rivulets on her cheeks.

I let the book slip from my hands and close my eyes to breathe deeply of the night. I can smell her from a few feet away. She comes to me as musk and perfumes and sawdust from the Yankee.

I can also smell the dampness of the streets, and the pine forest south of town.

What else? Ah, yes. There is salt water. I swear. I can even smell the ocean from here.

She is crying silently, head lowered.

What am I going to do with you, Elise? How can I thank you, now that Chuck is gone, for taking care of him while I healed? How can I make you understand when I go away, as I must very soon.

I reach over and pull her to me.

It doesn't matter, Lise. It doesn't matter because I knew it all along. From the very first, I suppose, a part of me knew you'd be trying, without knowing exactly what you were doing, to summon me back. Don't cry because you succeeded!

I must spend a long time comforting her—holding her and gentling away the fear. I can see Andromeda faintly through the open window behind her, a stroke of light against the sparkling of the stars. I whisper to her and can feel the planet turn slowly beneath us.

I think I'm finished subvocalizing, this evening. It's not necessary anymore. Doors are opening and long and unused feelings and ideas are stepping out.

The opening traces of a plan are forming. They must have been gestating for months... designs for a lockpick for a very large cage. Lessons to be taught to Old Joe Clark.

There's a lot of work ahead, some of it quite dangerous. I'm not sure exactly how

to get started and it may wind up taking me a long, long way from here.

But I promise you, Lise—if you want me to—I'll take you with me when I go.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The senses referred to in the title are those of smell and the inner mind. There have been experiments showing vividly how closely connected odors are to our recollections. Sometimes a faint aroma will trigger the most vivid of memories. Once in a while, it goes the other way around.

I wanted to write about a character who wasn't sure what was real anymore, where his assumed identity began and where the horrifying past left off. This is the result.

I believe the one greatest moral contribution of Western civilization has been the concept of a difference between subjective and objective reality... the perpetual warning that says, "Watch out! You may only think you know what you know."

Human beings have a tremendous capacity for fooling themselves, for imagining slights, crafting false memories, denying faults, believing ideologies. Science fights back with the Uncertainty Principle, which has proven that no human can ever have perfect knowledge. Unless you can demonstrate it in a repeatable experiment, it cannot be treated as a fact. Sure, you can play with an idea without proving it. Metaphors, allegories, and science fiction stories are all great fun, and useful, too.

But until other people can regularly duplicate your experimental results, it's best to smile and remember to say "maybe."

"To thine own self be true ..." said Polonius. An honest person always double-checks, for it is all too easy to lie to the one who trusts you the most, yourself.

"Senses" is one of five stories which debut in this volume. It is also the oldest story here, begun long before my first novel, Sundiver. Every year since, I would dig it out and poke away at it for a while, then put it away again. It's one of the most difficult pieces I've ever done.

The following story might very well be the hardest of all.