

James Morrow

James Morrow (1947-) is one of the leading literary satirists today, who chooses to work in the science fiction and fantasy mode. He is particularly notable for his willingness to take on large intellectual and metaphysical challenges, and for his accomplished prose style. He has often, and with some justice, been compared to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. He is a moralist and an allegorist. He has never been comfortable with the conventions and literary habits of the SF field, and occasionally breaks them, sometimes to good effect. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* says Morrow “has great difficulty giving credence to the artifices of fiction. This may be the price paid for passion and clarity of mind; and it may be a price worth paying.” His major novels include *Only Begotten Daughter* (1990), in which God’s daughter is born in New Jersey in the closing years of this century. *Towing Jehovah* (1994), in which God is dead and his corpse, about the size of a small city, is found floating in the Atlantic Ocean and must be towed to the Antarctic to be preserved; and its sequel, *Blameless in Abaddon* (1996), in which the corpse is sold.

“Veritas” is a satirical Utopia. Kathryn Cramer, in “Sincerity and Doom,” her long essay on Morrow and science fiction, says, “Beyond defrocking Utopia, the story hits you in the face with the uncomfortable relationship between Art (particularly fiction) and the Lie.” She also suggests that this story may be in opposition to Orson Scott Card’s popular Ender series of SF novels, which aspire to a Utopia in which everyone tells the truth. Morrow address the question: Will the truth set you free?

* * * *

VERITAS

P

igs have wings...

Rats chase cats...

Snow is hot...

Even now the old lies ring through the charred interior of my skull. I cannot speak them. I shall never be able to speak them - not without being dropped from here to hell in a bucket of pain. But they still inhabit me, just as they did on that momentous day when the city began to fall.

Grass is purple...

Two and two make five...

I awoke aggressively that morning, tearing the blankets away as if they were all that stood between myself and total alertness. Yawning vigorously, I charged into the shower, where warm water poured forth the instant the sensors detected me. I'd been with Overt Intelligence for over five years, and this was the first time I'd drawn an assignment that might be termed a plum. Spread your nostrils, Orville. Sniff her out. Sherry Urquist: some name! It sounded more like a mixed drink than like what she allegedly was, a purveyor of falsehoods, an enemy of the city, a member of the Dissemblage. The day could not begin soon enough.

The Dissemblage was like a deity. Not much tangible evidence, but people still had faith in it. Veritas, they reasoned, must harbor its normal share of those who believe the status quo is ipso facto wrong. Paradise will have its dissidents. The real question was not, Do subversives live in our city? The real question was, How do they tell lies without going mad?

My in-shower cablevision receiver winked on. Grimacing under the studio lights, our Assistant Secretary of Imperialism discussed Veritas's growing involvement in the Lethan civil war. "So far, over four thousand of our soldiers have died," the interviewer noted. "A senseless loss," the secretary conceded. "Our policy is impossible to justify on logical grounds, which is why we've started invoking national security and other shibboleths."

Have no illusions. The Sherry Urquist assignment did not fall into my lap because somebody at Overt Intelligence liked me. It was simply this: I am a roué. If any agent had a prayer of planting this particular Dissembler, that agent was me. It's the eyebrows that do it, great bushy extrusions suggesting a predatory mammal of unusual prowess, though I must admit they draw copious support from my straight nose and full, pillowlike lips. Am I handsome as a god? Metaphorically speaking, yes.

The picture tube had fogged over, so I activated the wiper. On the screen, a seedy-looking terrier scratched its fleas. "We seriously hope you'll consider Byproduct Brand Dog Food," said the voice-over. "Yes, we do tie up an enormous amount of protein that might conceivably be used in

relieving worldwide starvation. However, if you'll consider the supposed benefits of dogs, we believe you may wish to patronize us."

On the surface, Ms. Urquist looked innocent enough. The dossier pegged her a writer, a former newspaper reporter with several popular self-help books under her belt. She had some other commodities under her belt, too, mainly fat, unless the accompanying OIA photos exaggerated. The case against her consisted primarily of rumor. Last week a neighbor, or possibly a sanitation engineer - the dossier contradicted itself on this point - had gone through her garbage. The yield was largely what you'd expect from someone in Ms. Urquist's profession: vodka bottles, outdated caffeine tablets, computer disk boxes, an early draft of her last bestseller, *How to Find a Certain Amount of Inner Peace Some of the Time If You Are Lucky*. Then came the kicker. The figurative smoking gun. The nonliteral forbidden fruit. At the bottom of the heap, the report asserted, lay "a torn and crumpled page" from what was "almost certainly a work of fiction."

Two hundred and thirty-nine words of it, to be precise. A story, a yarn, a legend. Something made up.

ART IS A LIE, the electric posters in Washington Park reminded us. Truth was beauty, but it simply didn't work the other way around.

I left the shower, which instantly shut itself down, and padded naked into my bedroom. Clothes per se were deceitful, of course, but this was the middle of winter, so I threw on some underwear and a grav suit with the lapels cut off - no integrity in freezing to death. My apartment was peeled to a core of rectitude. Most of my friends had curtains, wall hangings, and rugs, but not I. Why take chances with one's own sanity?

The odor of stale urine hit me as I rushed down the hall toward the lobby. How unfortunate that some people translated the ban on sexually segregated restrooms - PRIVACY IS A LIE, the posters reminded us - into a general fear of toilets. Hadn't they heard of public health? Public health was guileless.

Wrapped in dew, my Plymouth Adequate glistened on the far side of Probity Street. In the old days, I'd heard, you never knew for sure that your car would be unmolested, or even there, when you left it overnight. Twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, yet the thing started smoothly. I took off, zooming past the wonderfully functional cinderblocks that constituted city hall and heading toward the shopping district. My interview? with Sherry Urquist was scheduled for ten, so I still had time to buy a gift for my nephew's brainburn party, which would happen around two-thirty that

afternoon, right after he recovered. “Yes, I did take quite a few bribes during the Wheatstone Tariff affair,” a thin-voiced senatorial candidate squeaked from out of my radio, “but you have to understand...” His voice faded, pushed aside by the pressure of my thoughts. Today my nephew would learn to hate a lie. Today we would rescue him from deceit’s boundless sea, tossing out our lifelines and hauling him aboard the ark called Veritas. So to speak.

Money grows on trees...

Horses have six legs...

And suddenly you’re a citizen.

What could life have been like before the cure? How did the mind tolerate a world where politicians misled, advertisers overstated, women wore makeup, and people professed love for each other at the nonliteral drop of a hat? I shivered. Did the Dissemblers know what they were playing with? How I relished the thought of advancing their doom, how badly I wanted Sherry Urquist’s bulky ass hanging figuratively over the mantel of my fireplace.

I was armed for the fight. Two days earlier, the clever doctors down at the agency’s Medical Division had done a bit of minor surgery, and now one of my seminal vesicles contained not only its usual cargo but also a microscopic radio transmitter. My imagination showed it to me, poised in the duct like the Greek infantry waiting for the wooden horse to arrive inside Troy.

What will they think of next?

The problem was the itch. Not a literal itch - the transmitter was one thousandth the size of a pinhead. My discomfort was philosophical. Did the beeper lie or didn’t it, that was the question. It purported to be only itself, a thing, a microtransmitter, and yet some variation of duplicity seemed afoot here.

I didn’t like it.

* * * *

MOLLY’S RATHER EXPENSIVE TOY STORE, the sign said. Expensive: that was okay. Christmas came every year, but a kid got cured only once.

“My, aren’t *you* a pretty fellow?” a female citizen sang out as I strode through the door. Marionettes dangled from the ceiling like victims of a mass lynching. Stuffed animals stampeded gently toward me from all directions.

“Your body is desirable enough,” I said, casting a candid eye up and down the sales clerk. A tattered wool sweater molded itself around her emphatic breasts. Grimy white slacks encased her tight thighs. “But that nose,” I added forlornly. A demanding business, citizenship.

“What brings you here?” She had one of those rare brands in which even-digit is the same. 9999W, her forehead said. “You playboys are never responsible enough for parenthood.”

“A fair assessment. You have kids?”

“I’m not married.”

“It figures. My nephew’s getting burned today.”

“And you’re waiting till the last minute to buy him a gift?”

“Right.”

“Electric trains are popular. We sold eleven sets last week. Two were returned as defective.”

She led me to a raised platform overrun by a kind of Veritas in miniature and kicked up the juice on the power-pack. A streamlined locomotive whisked a string of gleaming coaches past a factory belching an impressive facsimile of smoke.

“I wonder - is this thing a lie?” I opened the throttle, and the locomotive nearly jumped the track.

“What do you mean?”

“It claims to be a train. But it’s not.”

“It claims to be a *model* of a train, which it is.”

I eased the locomotive into the station. “Is your price as good as anybody else’s?”

“You can get the same thing for six dollars less at Marquand’s.”

“Don’t have the time. Can you gift-wrap it?”

“Not skillfully.”

“Anything will do. I’m in a hurry.”

The downtown traffic was light, the lull before lunch hour, so I arrived early at Sherry Urquist’s Washington Park apartment, a crumbling glass-and-steel ziggurat surmounted by a billboard that said, ASSUMING THAT GOD EXISTS, JESUS MAY HAVE BEEN HIS SON. I rode the elevator to the twentieth floor, exiting into a foyer where a handsome display of old military recruitment posters covered the fissured plaster. It was nice when somebody took the trouble to decorate a place. One could never use paint, of course. Paint was a lie. But with a little imagination...

I rang the bell. Nothing. Had I gotten the time wrong? CHANNEL YOUR VIOLENT IMPULSES IN A SALUTARY DIRECTION, the nearest poster said. BECOME A MARINE.

The door swung open, and there stood our presumed subversive, a figurative cloud of confusion hovering about her heavy face, darkening her soft-boiled eyes and pulpy lips, features somewhat more attractive than the agency’s photos suggested. “Did I wake you?” I asked. Her thermal pajamas barely managed to hold their contents in check, and I gave her an honest ogle. “I’m two minutes early.”

“You woke me,” she said. Frankness. A truth-teller, then? No, if there was one thing a Dissembler could do, it was deceive.

“Sorry,” I said. I remembered the old documentary films of the oil paintings being burned. Rubens, that was the kind of sensual plumpness Sherry had going for her. Good old Peter Paul Rubens. Sneaking the Greek army inside Troy might be more entertaining than I’d thought.

She frowned, stretching her forehead brand into El Greco numerals. No one down at headquarters doubted its authenticity. Ditto her cerebroscan, voicegram. fingerprints...

A citizen, and yet she had written fiction.

Maybe.

“Who are you?” Her voice was wet and deep.

“Orville Prawn,” I said. A permanent truth. “I work for *Tolerable Distortions*. A more transient one; the agency had arranged for the magazine to hire me - payroll, medical plan, pension fund, the works - for the next forty-eight hours. “Our interview...” I took out a pad and pencil.

Her pained expression seemed like the real thing. “Oh, damn, I’m sorry.” She snapped her fingers. “It’s on my calendar, but I’ve been up against a dozen deadlines, and I - ”

“Forgot?”

“Yeah.” She patted my forearm and guided me into her sparsely appointed living room. “Excuse me. These pajamas are probably driving you crazy.”

“Not the pajamas per se.”

She disappeared, returning shortly in a dingy yellow blouse and a red skirt circumscribed by a cracked and blistered leather belt.

The interview went well, which is to say she never asked whether I worked for Overt Intelligence, whereupon the whole show would have abruptly ended. She did not wish to discuss her old books, only her current project, a popular explanation of psychoanalytic theory to be called *From Misery to Unhappiness*. My shame was like a fever, threading my body with sharp, chilled wires. A toy train was not a lie, that clerk believed. Then maybe my little transmitter wasn’t one either...

And maybe wishes were horses.

And maybe pigs had wings.

There was also this: Sherry Urquist was charming me. No doubt about it. A manufacturer of bestsellers is naturally stuffed with vapid thoughts and ready-made opinions, right? But instead I found myself sitting next to a first-rate mind (oh, the premier eroticism of intellect intersecting Rubens), one that could be severe with Freud for his lapses of integrity while still grasping his essential genius.

“You seem to love your work, Ms. Urquist.”

“Writing is my life.”

“Tell me, honestly - do you ever get any ideas for... fiction?”

“Fiction?”

“Short stories. Novels.”

“That would be suicidal, wouldn't it?”

A blind alley, but I expected as much.

The diciest moment occurred when Sherry asked in which issue the interview would be published, and I replied that I didn't know. True enough, I told myself. Since the thing would never see print at all, it was accurate to profess ignorance of the corresponding date. Still, there came a sudden, mercifully brief surge of unease, the tides of an ancient nausea...

“All this sexual tension,” I said, returning the pad and pencil to my suit jacket. “Alone with a sensually plump woman in her apartment, and your face is appealing too, now that I see the logic of it. You probably even have a bedroom. I can hardly stand it.”

“Sensually plump, Mr. Prawn? I'm fat.”

“Eye of the beholder.”

“You'd have to go through a lot of beholders in my case.”

“I find you very attractive.” I did.

She raised her eyebrows, corrugating her brand. “It's only fair to give warning - you try anything funny, I'll knock you flat.”

I cupped her left breast, full employment for any hand, and asked, “Is this funny?”

“On one level, your action offends me deeply.” She brushed my knee. “I find it presumptuous, adolescent, and symptomatic of the worst kind of male arrogance.” If faking her candor, she was certainly doing a good job. “On another level... well, you *are* quite handsome.”

“An Adonis analogue.”

We kissed. She went for my belt buckle. Reaching under her blouse, I sent her bra on a well-deserved sabbatical.

“Any sexually-transmittable diseases?” she asked.

“None.” I stroked her dry, stringy hair. The Trojan horse was poised to change history. “You?”

“No,” she said.

The truth? I couldn't know.

To bed, then. Time to plant her and, concomitantly, the transmitter. Nice work if you can get it. I slowed myself down with irrelevant thoughts - dogs can talk, rain is red - and left her a satisfied woman.

Full of Greeks.

* * * *

I had promised Gloria that I wouldn't just come to the party, I would attend the burn as well. Normally both parents were present, but Dixon's tropological scum-bucket of a father couldn't be bothered. It will only take an hour, Gloria had told me. I'd rather not, I replied. He's your nephew, for Christ's sake, she pointed out. All right, I said.

Burn hospitals were in practically every neighborhood, but Gloria insisted on the best, Veteran's Shock Institute. Taking Dixon's badly wrapped gift from the back seat, I started toward the building, a smoke-stained pile of bricks overlooking the Thomas More Bridge. I paused. Business first. In theory the transmitter was part of Sherry now, forever fixed to her uterine wall. Snug as a bug in a... I went back to my Adequate and slid the sensorchart out of the dash. Yes, there she was, my fine Dissembler, a flashing red dot floating near Washington Park. I wished for greater detail, so I could know exactly when she was in her kitchen, her bathroom, her bedroom. Peeping Tom goes high tech. No matter. The thing worked. We could stalk her from here to Satan's backyard. As it were.

Inside the hospital, the day's collection of burn patients was everywhere, hugging dads, clinging tearfully to moms' skirts. I'd never understood this child-worship nonsense our culture wallows in, but, even so, the whole thing started getting to me. Every eight-year-old had to do it, of course, and the disease was certainly worse than the cure. Still...

I punished myself by biting my inner cheeks. Sympathy was fine, but sentimentality was wasteful. If I wanted to pity somebody, I should go up to Ward Six. Cystic fibrosis. Cancer. Am I going to die, Mommy?

Yes, dear.

Soon?

Yes, dear.

Will I see you in heaven?

Nobody knows.

I went to the front desk, where I learned that Dixon had been admitted half an hour earlier. "Room one-forty-five," said the nurse, a rotund man with a warty face. "The party will be in one-seventeen."

My nephew was already in the glass cubicle, dressed in a green smock and bound to the chair via leather thongs, one electrode strapped to his left arm, another to his right leg. Black wires trailed from the copper terminals like threads spun by a carnivorous spider. He welcomed me with a brave smile, and I held up his gift, hefting it to show that it had substance, it wasn't clothes. A nice enough kid - what I knew of him. Cute freckles, a wide, apple face. I remembered that for somebody his age, Dixon understood a great deal of symbolic logic.

A young, willowy, female nurse entered the cubicle and began snugging the helmet over his cranium. I gave Dixon a thumbs-up signal. (Soon it will be over, kid. Pigs have wings, rats chase cats, all of it.)

"Thanks for coming." Drifting out of her chair, Gloria took my arm. She was an attractive woman - same genes as me - but today she looked lousy: the anticipation, the fear. Sweat collected in her forehead brand. I had stopped proposing incest years ago. Not her game. "You're his favorite uncle, you know."

Uncle Orville. God help me. I was actually present when Gloria's marriage collapsed. The three of us were sitting in a Reconstituted Burgers when suddenly she said, I sometimes worry that you're having an affair - are you? And Tom said, yes, he was. And Gloria said, you fucker. And Tom said, right. And Gloria asked how many. And Tom said lots. And Gloria asked why. Did he do it to strengthen the marriage? And Tom said no, he just liked to screw other women.

Clipboard in hand, a small, homely doctor with MERRICK affixed to his tunic waddled into the room. “Good afternoon, folks,” he said, his cheer a precarious mix of the genuine and the forced. “Bitter cold day out, huh? How are we doing here?”

“Do you care?” my sister asked.

“Hard to say” Dr. Merrick fanned me with his clipboard. “Friend of the family?”

“My brother,” Gloria explained.

“He has halitosis. Glad there are two of you.” Merrick smiled at the boy in the cubicle. “With just one, the kid’ll sometimes go into clinical depression on us.” He pressed the clipboard toward Gloria. “Informed consent, right?”

“They told me all the possibilities.” She studied the clipboard. “Cardiac - ”

“Cardiac arrest, cerebral hemorrhage, respiratory failure, kidney damage,” Merrick recited.

“When was the last time anything like that happened?”

“They killed a little girl down at Mount Sinai on Tuesday. A freak thing, but now and then we really screw up.”

After patting Dixon on his straw-colored bangs, the nurse left the cubicle and told Dr. Merrick that she was going to get some coffee.

“Be back in ten minutes,” he ordered.

“Oh, but of course.” Such sarcasm from one so young. “We mustn’t have a *doctor* cleaning up, not when we can get some underpaid nurse to do it.”

Gloria scrawled her signature.

The nurse edged out of the room.

Dr. Merrick went to the control panel.

And then it began. This bar mitzvah of the human conscience, this electroconvulsive rite of passage. A hallowed tradition. An unvarying text. Today I am a man... We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... I pledge allegiance to the flag... Why is this night different from all other nights... Dogs can talk... Pigs have wings. To tell you the truth, I was not really thinking about Dixon's cure just then. My mind was abloom with Sherry Urquist.

Merrick pushed a button, and PIGS HAVE WINGS appeared before my nephew on a lucite tachistoscope screen. "Can you hear me, lad?" the doctor called into the microphone.

Dixon opened his mouth, and a feeble "Yes" dribbled out of the loudspeaker.

"You see those words?" Merrick asked. The lurid red characters hovered in the air like lethargic butterflies.

"Y-yes."

"When I give the order, read them aloud. Okay?"

"Is it going to hurt?" my nephew quavered.

"It's going to hurt a lot. Will you read the words when I say so?"

"I'm scared. Do I have to?"

"You have to." Merrick rested a pudgy finger on the switch. "Now!"

"P-pigs have wings." The volts ripped through Dixon. He yelped and burst into tears. "But they don't," he moaned. "Pigs don't..."

My own burn flooded back. The pain. The anger.

"You're right, lad - they don't." Merrick gave the voltage regulator a subtle twist, and Gloria flinched. "You did reasonably well, boy," the doctor continued. "We're not yet disappointed in you." He handed the mike to Gloria.

"Oh, yes, Dixon," she said. "Keep up the awfully good work."

"It's not fair." Sweat speckled Dixon's forehead. "I want to go home."

As Gloria surrendered the mike, TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE materialized.

“Now, lad! Read it!”

“T-t-two and two make... f-five.” Lightning struck. The boy shuddered, howled. Blood rolled over his lower lip. During my own burn, I had practically bitten my tongue off. “I don’t want this any more,” he wailed.

“It’s not a choice, lad.”

“Two and two make *four*.” Tears threaded Dixon’s freckles together. “Please stop hurting me.”

“Four. Right. Smart lad.” Merrick cranked up the voltage. “Ready, Dixon? Here it comes.”

HORSES HAVE SIX LEGS.

“Why do I have to do this? *Why?*”

“Everybody does it. All your friends.”

“H-h-horses have... have... They have *four* legs, Dr. Merrick.”

“Read the words, Dixon!”

“I hate you! I hate all of you!”

“Dixon!”

He raced through it. Zap. Two hundred volts. The boy began to cough and retch, and a string of white mucus shot from his mouth like a lizard’s tongue. Nothing followed: burn patients fasted for sixteen hours prior to therapy.

“Too much!” cried Gloria. “Isn’t that too much?”

“The goal is five hundred,” said Merrick. “It’s all been worked out. You want the treatment to take, don’t you?”

“Mommy! Where’s my Mommy?”

Gloria tore the mike away. “Right here, dear!”

“Mommy, make them stop!”

“I can’t, dear. You must try to be brave.”

The fourth lie appeared. Merrick upped the voltage. “Read it, lad!”

“No!”

“Read it!”

“Uncle Orville! I want Uncle Orville!”

My throat constricted, my stomach went sour. Uncle: such a strange sound. I really was one, wasn’t I? “You’re doing pretty swell, Dixon,” I said, taking the mike. “I think you’ll like your present.”

“Uncle Orville, I want to go home!”

“I got you a fine toy.”

“What is it?”

“Here’s a hint. It has - ”

“Dixon!” Merrick grabbed the mike. “Dixon, if you don’t do this, you’ll never get well. They’ll take you away from your mother.” A threat, but wholly accurate. “Understand? They’ll take you away.”

Dixon balled his face into a mass of wrinkles. “Grass!” he screamed, spitting blood. “Is!” he persisted. “Purple!” He jerked like a gaffed flounder, spasm after spasm. A broad urine stain blossomed on his crotch, and despite the obligatory enema a brown fluid dripped from the hem of his smock.

“Excellent!” Merrick increased the punishment to four hundred volts. “Your cure’s in sight, lad!”

“No! Please! Please! Enough!” Sweat encased Dixon’s face. Foam leaked from his mouth.

“You’re almost halfway there!”

“Please!”

The war continued, five more pain-tipped rockets shooting through Dixon's nerves and veins, detonating inside his mind. He asserted that rats chase cats. He lied about money, saying that it grew on trees. Worms taste like honey, he said. Snow is hot. Rain is red.

He fainted just as the final lie arrived. Even before Gloria could scream, Merrick was inside the cubicle, checking the boy's heartbeat. A begrudging admiration seeped through me. The doctor had a job, and he did it.

A single dose of smelling salts brought Dixon around.

Guiding the boy's face toward the screen, Merrick turned to me. "Ready with the switch?"

"Huh? You want me - " Ridiculous.

"Let's just get it over with. Hit the switch when I tell you."

"I'd rather not." But already my finger rested on the damn thing. Doctor's orders.

"Read, Dixon," muttered Merrick.

"I c-can't."

"One more, Dixon. Just one more and you'll be a citizen."

Blood and spittle mingled on Dixon's chin. "You all hate me! Mommy hates me!"

"I love you as much as myself," said Gloria, leaning over my shoulder. "You're going to have a wonderful party. Almost certainly."

"Really?"

"Highly likely."

"Presumably wonderful," I said. The switch burned my finger. "I love you too."

"Dogs can talk," said Dixon.

And it truly was a wonderful party. All four of Dixon's grandparents showed up, along with his teacher and twelve of his friends, half of whom had been cured in recent months, one on the previous day. Dixon marched around Room displaying the evidence of his burn like war medals. The brand, of course - performed under local anesthesia immediately after his cure - plus copies of his initial cerebroscan, voicegram, and fingerprint set.

Brand, scan, gram, prints: Sherry Urquist's had all been in perfect order. She had definitely been burned. And yet there was fiction in her garbage.

The gift-opening ceremony contained one bleak moment. Pulling the train from its wrapping, Dixon blanched, garroted by panic, and Gloria had to rush him into the bathroom, where he spent several minutes throwing up. I felt like a fool. To a boy who's just been through a brainburn, an electric train has gruesome connotations.

"Thanks for coming," said Gloria. She meant it.

"I *do* like my present," Dixon averred. "A freight train would have been nicer," he added. A citizen now.

I apologized for leaving early. A big case, I explained. Very hot, very political.

"Good-bye, Uncle Orville."

Uncle. Great stuff.

* * * *

I spent the rest of the day tracking my adorable Dissembler, never letting her get more than a mile from me or closer than two blocks. What agonizing hopes that dot on the map inspired, what rampant expectations. With each flash my longing intensified. Oh, Sherry, Sherry, you pulsing red angel, you stroboscope of my desire. No mere adolescent infatuation this. I dared to speak its name. "Neurotic obsession," I gushed, kissing the dot as it crossed Aquinas Avenue. "Mixed with bald romantic fantasy and lust," I added. The radio shouted at me: a hot-blooded evangelist no less enraptured than I. "Does faith tempt you, my friends? Fear not! Look into your metaphoric hearts, and you will discover how subconscious human needs project themselves onto putative revelations!"

For someone facing a wide variety of deadlines, my quarry didn't

push herself particularly hard. Sherry spent the hour from four to five at the Museum of Secondary Fossil Finds. From five to six she did the Imprisoned Animals Garden. From six to seven she treated herself to dinner at Danny's Digestibles, after which she went down to the waterfront.

I cruised along Third Street, twenty yards from the Pathogen River. This was the city's frankest district, a gray mass of warehouses and abandoned stores jammed together like dead cells waiting to be sloughed off. Sherry walked slowly, aimlessly, as if... could it be? Yes, damn, as if arm-in-arm with another person, as if meshing her movements with those of a second, intertwined body. Probably she had met the guy at Danny's, a conceited pile of muscles named Guido or something, and now they were having a cozy stroll along the Pathogen. I pressed the dot, as if to draw Sherry away. What if she spent the night in another apartment? That would pretty much cinch it. I wondered how their passion would register. I pictured the dot going wild, love's red fibrillation.

After pausing for several seconds on the bank, the dot suddenly began prancing across the river. Odd. I fixed on the map. The Saint Joan Tunnel was half a mile away, the Thomas More Bridge even farther. I doubted that she was swimming - not in this weather, and not in the Pathogen, where the diseases of the future were born. Flying, then? The dot moved too slowly to signify an airplane. A hot-air balloon? Probably she was in a boat. Sherry and Guido, off on a romantic cruise.

I hung a left on Beach Street and sped down to the docks. Moonlight coated the Pathogen, settling into the waves, figuratively bronzing a lone, swiftly moving tugboat. I checked the map. The dot placed Sherry at least ten yards from the tug, in the exact middle of the river and heading for the opposite shore. I studied her presumed location. Nothing. Submerged, then? I knew she hadn't committed suicide; the dot's progress was too resolute. Was she in scuba gear?

I abandoned the car and attempted to find where she had entered the water, a quest that took me down concrete steps to a pier hemmed by pylons smeared with gull dung. Jagged odors shot from the dead and rotting river; water lapped over the landing with a harsh sucking sound, as if a pride of invisible lions was drinking here. My gaze settled on a metal grate, barred like the ribcage of some promethean robot. It seemed slightly askew... Oh, great, Orville, let's go traipsing through the sewers, with rats nipping at our heels and slugs the size of bagels railing on our shoulders. Terrific idea.

The grate yielded readily to my reluctant hands. Had she truly gone

down there? Should I follow? A demented notion, but duty called, using its shrillest voice, and, besides, this was Sherry Urquist, this was irrational need. I secured a flashlight from the car and proceeded down the ladder. It was like entering a lung. Steamy, warm. The flashlight blazed through the blackness. A weapon, I decided. Look out, all you rats and slugs. Make way. Here comes Orville Prawn, the fastest flashlight in Veritas.

I moved through a multilayered maze of soggy holes and dripping catacombs. So many ways to descend: ladders, sloping tunnels, crooked little stairways - I used them all, soon moving beyond the riverbed into other territories, places not on the OIA map.

All around me Veritas's guts were spread: its concrete intestines, gushing lead veins, buzzing nerves of steel and gutta-percha. Much to my surprise, the city even had its parasites - shacks of corrugated tin leaned against the wet brick walls, sucking secretly on the power cables and water mains. This would not do. No, to live below Veritas like this, appropriating its juices, was little more than piracy. Overt Intelligence would hear of it.

My astonishment deepened as I advanced. I could understand a few hobos setting up a shantytown down here, but how might I explain these odd chunks of civilization? These blazing streetlamps, these freshly painted picket fences, these tidy grids of rose bushes, these fountains with their stone dolphins spewing water? Paint, flowers, sculpture: so many lies in one place! Peel back the streets of any city and do you find its warped reflection, its doppelganger mirrored in distorting glass? Or did Veritas alone harbor such anarchy, this tumor spreading beneath her unsuspecting flesh?

A sleek white cat shot out of the rose bushes and disappeared down an open manhole. At first I thought that its pursuer was a dog, but no. Wrong shape. And that tail.

The shudder began in my lower spine and expanded.

A rat.

A rat the size of an armadillo.

Chasing a cat.

I moved on. Vegetable gardens now. Two bright yellow privies. Cottages defaced with gardenia plots and strings of clematis scurrying up trellises. A building that looked suspiciously like a chapel. A park of some

kind, with flagstone paths and a duck pond. Ruddy puffs of vapor bumped against the treetops.

Rain is red...

I entered the park.

A pig glided over my head like a miniature dirigible, wheeling across the sky on cherub wings. At first I assumed it was a machine, but its squeal was disconcertingly organic.

“You!”

A low, liquid voice. I dropped my gaze.

Sherry shared the bench with an enormous dog, some grotesque variation on the malamute, his chin snugged into her lap. “You!” she said again, erecting the word like a barrier, a spiked vocable stopping my approach. The dog lifted his head and growled.

“Correct,” I said, stock still.

“You followed me?”

“I cannot tell a lie.” I examined the nearest tree. No fruit, of course, only worms and paper money.

“Dirty spy.”

“Half true. I am not dirty.”

She wore a buttercup dress, decorated with lace. Her thick braid lay on her shoulder like a loaf of challah. Her eyes had become cartoons of themselves, starkly outlined and richly shaded. “If you try to return” - she patted the malamute - “Max will eat you alive.”

“You bet your sweet ass,” said the dog.

She massaged Max’s head, as if searching for the trigger that would release his attack. “I expected better of you, Mr. Prawn.”

We were in a contest. Who could act the more betrayed, the more disgusted? “I’d always assumed the Dissemblage was just a group.” Spit dripped off my words. “I didn’t know it was... all this.”

“Two cities,” muttered Sherry, launching her index finger upward. “Truth above, dignity below.” The finger descended. Her nails, I noticed, were a fluorescent green.

“Her father built it,” explained the dog.

“His life’s work,” added Sherry.

“Are there many of you?” I asked.

“I’m the first to reach adulthood,” said Sherry.

“The prototype liar?”

Her sneer evolved into a grin. “Others are hatching.”

“How can you betray your city like this?” I drilled her with my stare. “Veritas, who nurtured you, suckled you?”

“Shall I kill him now?” asked the dog.

Sherry chucked Max under the chin, told him to be patient. “Veritas did not suckle me.” Her gesture encompassed the entire park and, by extension, the whole of Veritas’s twisted double. “*This* was my cradle - my nursery.” She took a lipstick from her purse. “It’s not hard to make a lie. The money’ trees are props. The rats and pigs trace to avant-garde microbiology.”

“All I needed were vocal cords,” said the dog.

She began touching up her lips. “Thanks to my father, I reached my eighth birthday knowing that pigs had wings, that snow was hot, that two and two equaled five, that worms tasted like honey... all of it. So when my burn came - ”

“You were incurable,” I said. “You walked away from the hospital ready to swindle and cheat and - ”

“Write fiction. Four novels so far. Maybe you’d like to read them. You might be a bureaucratic drudge, but I’m fond of you, Orville.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You don’t. And when my cadre takes over and the burn ends – It won’t be hard, we’ll lie our way to the top - when that happens, you won’t know when *anybody’s* telling the truth.”

“Right,” said the dog, leaping off the bench.

“Truth is beauty,” I said.

Sherry winced. “My father did not mind telling the truth.” Here she became an actress, that consummate species of liar, dragging out her lines. “But he hated his inability to do otherwise. Honesty without choice, he said, is slavery with a smile.”

A glorious adolescent girl rode through the park astride a six-legged horse, her skin dark despite her troglodytic upbringing, her eyes alive with deceit. The *gift* of deceit, as Sherry would have it. I wondered whether Dixon was playing with his electric train just then. Probably not. Past his bedtime. I kept envisioning his cerebrum, brocaded with necessary scars.

Sherry patted the spot where the dog had been, and I sat down cautiously. “Care for one?” she asked, plucking a worm off a money tree.

“No.”

“Go ahead. Try it.”

“Well...”

“Open your mouth and close your eyes.”

The creature wriggled on my tongue, and I bit down. Pure honey. Sweet, smooth, but I did not enjoy it.

Truth above, dignity below. My index finger throbbed, prickly with that irrevocable little tug of the switch in Room 145. Five hundred volts was a lot, but what was the alternative? To restore the age of thievery and fraud?

History has it I joined Sherry’s city that very night. A lie, but what do you expect - all the books are written by Dissemblers. True, sometime before dawn I did push my car into the river, the better to elude Overt Intelligence. But fully a week went by before I told Sherry about her internal transmitter. She was furious. She vowed to have the thing cut out. Go ahead, I told her, do it - but don’t expect my blessing. That’s another thing the historians got wrong. They say I paid for the surgery.

Call me a traitor. Call me a coward. Call me love's captive. I have called myself all these things. But – really - I did not join Sherry's city that night. That night I merely sat on a park bench staring into her exotically adorned eyes, fixing on her bright lips, holding her fluorescent fingertips.

"I want to believe whatever you tell me," I said.

"Then you'll need to have faith in me," she said.

"It's raining," noted the dog, and then he launched into a talking-dog joke.

"My cottage is over there." Sherry replaced her lipstick in her purse. She tossed her wondrous braid over her shoulder.

We rose and started across the park, hand in hand, lost in the sweet uncertainty of the moment, oblivious to the chattering dog and the lashing wind and bright red rain dancing on the purple grass.