

POGROM

James Patrick Kelly

Like his friend and frequent collaborator John Kessel, James Patrick Kelly made his first sale in 1975, and went on to become one of the most respected and prominent new writers of the eighties. Although his most recent solo novel, *Look into the Sun*, was well received, Kelly has had more impact to date as a writer of short fiction than as a novelist, and, indeed, Kelly stories such as "Solstice.", "The Prisoner of Chillon.", "Glass Cloud.", "Mr. Boy," and "Home Front" must be ranked among the most inventive and memorable short works of the decade. Kelly's first solo novel, the mostly ignored *Planet of Whispers*, came out in 1984. It was followed by *Freedom Beach*, a novel written in collaboration with John Kessel. His story "Friend," also in collaboration with Kessel, was in our First Annual Collection; his "Solstice" was in our Third Annual Collection; his "The Prisoner of Chillon" was in our Fourth Annual Collection; his "Glass Cloud" was in our Fifth Annual Collection; his "Home Front" was in our Sixth Annual Collection; and his "Mr. Boy" was in our Eighth Annual Collection. Born in Mineola, New York, Kelly now lives with his family in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he's reported to be at work on a third solo novel, *Wildlife*.

Here he takes us to a frighteningly plausible near-future society for a new and disturbing take on the age-old war between the young and the old.

* * *

Matt was napping when Ruth looked in on him. He had sprawled across the bedspread with his clothes on, shoes off. His right sock was worn to gauze at the heel. The pillow had crimped his gray hair at an odd angle. She had never seen him so peaceful before, but then she had never seen him asleep. She had the eye zoom for a close-up. His mouth was slack and sleep had softened the wrinkles on his brow. Ruth had always thought him handsome but forbidding, like the cliffs up in Crawford Notch. Now that he was dead to the world, she could almost imagine him smiling. She wondered if there were anything she could say to make him smile. He worried too much, that man. He blamed himself for things he had not done.

She increased the volume of her wall. His breathing was scratchy but regular. They had promised to watch out for one another; there were not many of them left in Durham. Matt had given Ruth a password for his homebrain when they had released him from the hospital. He seemed fine for now. She turned out the lights he had left on, but there was nothing else she could see to do for him. She did not, however, close the electronic window which opened from her apartment on Church Hill onto his house across town. It had been year since she had heard the sounds of a man sleeping. If she shut her eyes, it was almost as if he were next to her. His gentle snoring made a much more soothing background than the gurgle of the mountain cascade she usually kept on the wall. She was not really intruding, she told herself. He had asked her to check up on him.

Ruth picked up the mystery she had been reading but did not open it. She studied his image as if it might be a clue to something she had been trying to remember. Matt moaned and his fingers tightened around the cast that ran from his right hand to his elbow. She thought he must have started dreaming, because his face closed like a door. He rolled toward the eye and she could see the bruise on his cheek, blood-blue shading to brown.

"Someone is approaching," said Ruth's homebrain.

"The groceries?"

"The visitor is not on file."

"Show me," Ruth said.

The homebrain split Matt's window and gave her a view of the front porch. A girl she had never seen before, holding two brown paper Shop 'n' Save sacks, pressed the doorbell with her elbow.

She was about thirteen and underfed, which meant she was probably a drood. She had long glitter hair and the peeling red skin of someone who did not pay enough attention to the UV forecasts. Her arms were decorated with blue stripes of warpaint. Or maybe they were tattoos. She was wearing sneakers, no socks, jeans, and a T-shirt with a picture of Jesus Hitler that said "For a nickel I will."

"Hello?" said Ruth. "Do I know you?"

"Your stuff." She shifted the sacks in her arms as if she were about to drop them.

"Where's Jud? He usually delivers for me."

"C'mon, lady! Not arguin' with no fuckin' door." She kicked at it. "Hot as nukes out here."

"I don't know who you are."

"See these sacks? Costin' you twenty-one fifty-three."

"Please show me your ID."

"Shit, lady." She plunked the sacks down on the porch, brushed sweat from her face, pulled a card from her pocket and thrust it toward the eye in the door. The homebrain scanned and verified it. But it did not belong to her.

"That's Jud's card," said Ruth.

"He busy, you know, so he must give it to me." One of the sacks fell over. The girl nudged a box of dishwasher soap with her sneaker. "You want this or not?" She knelt, reached into the sack and tossed a bag of onion bagels, a bottle of liquid Pep, a frozen whitefish, two rolls of toilet paper, and a bunch of carrots into a pile on the middle of the porch.

"Stop that!" Ruth imagined the neighbors were watching her groceries being abused. "Wait there."

The girl waggled a package of Daffy Toes at the eye. "Gimme cookie for my tip?"

Ruth hesitated before she pressed her thumb against the printreader built into the steel door. What was the point in having all these security systems if she was going to open up for strangers? This was exactly the way people like her got hurt. But it *was* Ruth's order, and the girl looked too frail to be any trouble.

She smelled of incense. A suspicion of sweet ropy smoke clung to her clothes and hair. Ruth was tempted to ask what it was, but realized that she probably did not want to know. The latest in teen depravity, no doubt. The smell reminded her of when she was in college back in the sixties and she used to burn incense to cover the stink of pot. Skinny black cylinders of charcoal that smeared her fingers and smelled like a Christmas tree on fire. Ruth followed the girl into the kitchen, trying to remember the last time she had smoked pot.

The girl set the bags out on the counter and then sighed with pleasure. "Been wantin' all day to get into some A/C." She surveyed the kitchen as if she were hoping for an invitation to dinner. "Name's Chaz." She waited in vain for Ruth to introduce herself. "So, want me to unpack?"

"No." Ruth took her wallet out of her purse.

"Lots of'em ask me to. They too old, or too lazy—hey, real costin' *wine*." She pulled a Medoc from the rack mounted under the china cabinet and ran her finger along the stubby shoulder. "In glass bottles. You rich or what?"

Ruth held out her cash card but Chaz ignored it.

"Bet you think I lie. You 'fraid I come here to do your bones?" She hefted the bottle of Bordeaux by

the neck, like a club.

Alarmed, Ruth clutched at her chest and squeezed the security pager that hung on a silver chain under her blouse. "Put that down." The eye on the kitchen ceiling started broadcasting live to the private cops she subscribed to. Last time they had taken twenty minutes to come.

"Don't worry," Chaz grinned. "I deliver plenty stuff before. In Portsmouth. Then we lose our house, got move to Durham. Nice town you got here." She set the bottle back on the counter. "But you can't hear nothin' I say, right? You scared 'cause kids hate you but I ain't breaking your head, am I? Not today, anyway. Just wanna earn my fuckin' nickel, lady."

"I'm trying to pay you." Ruth pushed the card at her.

She took it. "Place full of costin' shit like this." She shook her head in wonder at Ruth's wealth. "You lucky, you know." She rubbed the card against the port of Jud Gazzara's Shop 'n' Save ID to deduct twenty-one dollars and fifty-three cents. "Yeah, this is great, compare to dorms. You ever see dorms inside?"

"No."

"You oughta. Compare to dorms, this is heaven." Chaz handed the card back. "No, better than heaven, 'cause you can buy this, but you gotta die to get heaven. Gimme my cookie?" she said.

"Take it and leave."

Chaz paused on the way out and peeked into the living room. "This waiter what you do for fun, lady?" Matt was still asleep on the wall. "Jeez, you pigs good as dead already."

"Would you please go?"

"*Wake up, waiter!*" She yelled at the screen. "*Hustle or die!*"

"Huh!" Matt jerked as if he had been shot. "What?" He curled into a ball, protecting his face with the cast.

"Give nasty, you get nasty." Chaz winked at Ruth. "See you next week, lady."

"Greta, is that you?"

Ruth could hear Matt calling to his dead wife as she shouldered the door shut. She braced her back against it until she felt the homebrain click the bolts into place.

"*Greta?*"

"It's me," she called. "Ruth." She squeezed the security pager again to call the private cops off. At least she could avoid the charge for a house call. Her heart hammered against her chest.

"Ruth?"

She knew the girl was out there laughing at her. It made Ruth angry, the way these kids made a game of terrorizing people. "Turn your wall on, Matt." It was not fair; she was no pig.

By the time Ruth got into the living room, Matt was sitting on the edge of his bed. He seemed dazed, as if he had woken up to find himself still in the nightmare.

"You asked me to check in on you," she said. "Remember? Sorry if I disturbed you." She decided not to tell him—or anyone—about Chaz. Nothing had happened, really. So the world was full of ignorant little bigots, so what? She could hardly report a case of rudeness to the Durham cops; they thought people like her complained too much as it was. "Did you have a nice nap?" Ruth was not admitting to anyone that she was afraid of trash like Chaz.

"I was having a dream about Greta," said Matt. "She gave me a birthday cake on a train. We were

going to some city, New York or Boston. Then she wanted to get off but I hadn't finished the cake. It was big as a suitcase."

Ruth had never understood why people wanted to tell her their dreams. Most of the ones she had heard were dumb. She could not help but be embarrassed when otherwise reasonable adults prattled on about their night-time lunacies. "How are you feeling?" She nestled into her favorite corner of the couch. "Do you need anything?"

"What was funny was that Greta wouldn't help me." He had not noticed how he was annoying her. "I mean, I told her to have some cake but she wouldn't. She screamed at me to hurry up or I'd die. Then I woke up."

What had Chaz called him? A waiter. Ruth had never heard that one before. "Sorry," she said, "I really didn't mean to intrude. I should let you get back to sleep."

"No, don't go." He slid his feet into the slippers next to the bed. "I'd like some company. I just lay down because there was nothing else to do." He grunted as he stood, then glanced in the mirror and combed hair back over his bald spot with his fingers. "See, I'm up."

He turned away and waved for her to follow. The eye tracked along the ceiling after him as he hobbled down the hall to his office, a dark shabby room decorated with books and diplomas. He lived in only three rooms: office, bedroom and kitchen. The rest of his house was closed down.

"I'm pretty useless these days." He eased behind the antique steel desk he had brought home from his office when they closed the university. "No typing with this damn cast on. Not for six, maybe seven weeks." He picked up a manuscript, read the title, dropped it back on a six inch stack next to the computer. "Nothing to do."

Next he would get melancholy, if she let him. "So dictate."

"I'm too old to think anymore without my fingers on a keyboard and a screen to remind me what I just wrote." He snorted in disgust. "But you didn't call to hear me complain. You've been so good, Ruth. To pay so much attention and everything. I don't know why you do it."

"Must be your sunny personality, Matt." Ruth hated the way he had been acting since they released him from the hospital. So predictable. So sad. "I'm cooking my mom's famous gefilte fish. Maybe I'll bring some over later? And a bottle of wine?"

"That's sweet, but no. No, you know how upset you get when you go out." He grinned. "You just stay safe where you are."

"This is my town, too. And yours. I've lived here thirty-two years. I'm not about to let them take it away from me now."

"We lost it long ago, Ruth. Maybe it's time we acknowledged that."

"Really? Can I stop paying property taxes?"

"You know, I understand the way they feel." He tapped the keyboard at random with his good hand. "The world's a mess; it's not their fault that they're homeless. They watch the walls in the dorms and they see all the problems and they need someone to blame. So they call us pigs and we call them droods. Much simpler that way."

"So what are you going to do? Send them a thank you note for crippling you? Breaking your arm? Wake up and listen to yourself, Matt. You shouldn't have to hide in your house like a criminal. You didn't do anything."

"Yes, that's it exactly. I didn't do anything. Maybe it's time."

"Damn it, don't start *that* again! You're a teacher, you worked hard." Ruth grabbed a pillow she had

embroidered. She wanted to hurl it right through the wall and knock some sense into the foolish old man. "God, I don't know why I bother." Instead she hugged it to her chest. "Sometimes you make me mad, Matt. I mean really angry."

"I'm sorry, Ruth. I'm just in one of my moods. Maybe I should call you back when I'm better company?"

"All right," she said without enthusiasm. "I'll talk to you later then."

"Don't give up on me, Ruth."

She wiped him off the wall. He was replaced by Silver Cascade Brook up in Crawford Notch. She had reprocessed the loop from video she had shot years ago, before she had had to stop traveling. Water bubbled, leaves rustled, birds sang. "Chirp, chirp," she said sourly and zapped it. Afloat on the Oeschinensee in the Alps. *Zap*. Coral gardens off the Caribbean coast of St. Lucia. *Zap*. Exotic birds of the Everglades. *Zap*. She flipped restlessly through her favorite vacations; nothing pleased her. Finally she settled on a vista of Mill Pond across the street. The town swans cut slow V's across the placid surface. In the old days, when she used to sit on the porch, she could hear frogs in the summertime. She was tempted to drag her rocker out there right now. Then she would call Matt, just to show him it could still be done.

Instead she went into the kitchen to unpack the groceries. She put the dishwasher soap under the sink and the cookies in the bread drawer. Matt was a crotchety old man, ridden with guilt, but he and she were just about the last ones left. She picked up the whitefish, opened the freezer, then changed her mind. When was the last time she had seen Margie or Stanley What's-His-Name, who lived just two doors down? Ruth closed the door again, stripped the shrinkwrap from the fish and popped it into the microwave to defrost. If she were afraid to show him, Matt would end up like all the others. He would stop calling or move or die and then Ruth would be a stranger in her own home town. When the whitefish thawed she whacked off the head, skinned and boned it. She put the head, skin, and bones in a pot, covered them with water, cut in some carrots and onion and set it on the stove to boil. She was not going to let anyone make her a prisoner in her own kitchen. She ground the cleaned fish and some onions together, then beat in matzo meal, water, and a cup of ovobinder. Her mom's recipe called for eggs but uncontaminated eggs were hard to find. She formed the fish mixture into balls and bravely dropped them into the boiling stock. Ruth was going visiting, and no one was going to stop her.

After she called the minibus, she packed the cooled gefilte fish into one Tupperware, poured the lukewarm sauce into another and tucked them both into her tote bag beside the Medoc. Then she reached to the cabinet above the refrigerator, took down her blowcuffs and velcroed one to each wrist. In the bedroom she opened the top drawer of her dresser and rooted through the underwear until she found two flat clips of riot gas, two inches by three.

The slogan on the side read: "With Knockdown, they *go* down and *stay* down." The clips hissed as she fitted them into the cuffs. Outside, a minibus pulled into the parking lot of the Church Hill Apartments and honked.

"Damn!" There must have been one in the neighborhood; service was never this prompt. She pulled on a baggy long-sleeved shirtwaist to hide the cuffs and grabbed her tote.

As soon as Ruth opened the front door, she realized she had forgotten to put sunblock on. Too late now. The light needled her unprotected skin as she hurried down the walk. There was one other rider on the mini, a leathery man in a stiff brown suit. He perched at the edge of his seat with an aluminum briefcase between his legs. The man glanced at her and then went back to studying the gum spots on the floor. The carbrain asked where she was going.

"14 Hampshire Road." Ruth brushed her cash card across its port.

"The fare is \$1.35 including the senior citizen discount," said the carbrain. "Please take your seat."

She picked a spot on the bench across from the door. The air blowing out of the vents was hot, which was why all the windows were open. She brushed the hair out of her eyes as the mini rumbled around Mill Pond and onto Oyster River Road.

The mini was strewn with debris; wrappers, squashed beer boxes, dirty receipts. Someone had left a paper bag on the bench next to her. Just more garbage, she thought—until it jumped. It was a muddy Shop 'n' Save sack with the top crumpled down to form a seal. As she watched, it moved again.

She knew better than to talk to people on the minibus, but Ruth could not help herself. "Is this yours?"

The man's expression hardened to cement. He shook his head and then touched the eye clipped to the neckband of his shirt and started recording her.

"Sorry." She scooted down the bench and opened the bag. A bullfrog the size of her fist rose up on its hind legs, scabbled weakly toward her and then sank back. At first she thought it was a toy with a run down battery. Then she realized that some brain-dead kid had probably caught it down at the pond and then left it behind. Although she had not seen a frog up close in years, she thought this one looked wrong somehow. Dried out. They breathed through their skins, didn't they? She considered getting off the mini and taking it back to the water herself. But then she would be on foot in the open, an easy target. Ruth felt sorry for the poor thing, yes, but she was not risking her life for a frog. She closed the bag so she would not have to watch it suffer.

The mini stopped at an apartment on Mill Road and honked. When no one came out, it continued toward the center of town, passed another minibus going in the opposite direction, and then pulled into the crumbling lot in front of the Shop 'n' Save plaza. There were about a dozen bicycles in the racks next to the store, and four electric cars parked out front, their skinny fiberglass bodies blanching in the afternoon sun. A delivery man was un-loading beer boxes from a truck onto a dolly. The mini pulled up behind the truck and shut itself off. The door opened and the clock above it started a countdown: 10:00 . . . 09:59 . . . 09:58. The man with the aluminum suitcase got off, strode down the plaza and knocked at the door of what had once been the hardware store. He watched Ruth watching him until the door opened and he went in.

The empty lot shimmered like a blacktopped desert and the heat of the day closed around her. To escape it, she tried filling the space with ghost cars: Fords and Chryslers and Toyotas. She imagined there was no place to park, just like when they still pumped gas, before they closed the university. 06:22 . . . 06:21 . . . 06:20. But the sun was stronger than her memory. It was the sun, the goddamned sun, that was driving the world crazy. She could even hear it: the mini's metal roof clicked in its harsh light like a bomb. Who could think in heat like this?

The bag twitched again and Ruth realized she could get water from the store and pour it over the frog. She glanced at the clock. 02:13 . . . 02:12 . . . Too late now.

The carbrain honked and started the engine when the clock reached 00:30. Three kids trudged out of the store. Two were lugging sacks filled with groceries; the third was Chaz, who was empty-handed. Ruth shifted her tote bag onto her lap, got a firm grip on the handle and tried to make herself as small as possible.

"Destination, please?" said the carbrain.

"1 Simons." A fat kid clumped up the step well and saw her. "Someone on already." He brushed his card across the pay port. "Lady, where you goin', lady?"

Ruth fixed her gaze on the buttons of his blue-striped Shop 'n' Save shirt; one had come undone. She avoided eye contact so he would not see how tense she was. She said nothing.

The second one bumped into the fat kid. "Move, sweatlips!" He was wearing the uniform shirt tucked into red shorts. He had shaved legs. She did not look at his face either.

"Please take your seat," said the carbrain. "Current stops are 14 Hampshire Road and 1 Simons Lane. Destination, please?"

"Stoke Hall," said Chaz.

"Hey, Hampshire's the wrong way, lady. Get off, would ya?"

"Yeah, make yourself useful for a change." Red Shorts plopped his groceries onto the bench opposite Ruth and sprawled next to them. Ruth said nothing; she saw Chaz paying the carbrain.

"Wanna throw her off?"

Ruth clenched her fists and touched the triggers of her cuffs. "Just leave her and stretch the ride." Chaz settled beside the others. " 'Less you *wanna* get back to work." The fat kid grunted, and the logic of sloth carried the day. Ruth eased off the triggers as the mini jolted through the potholes in the lot and turned back onto Mill Road. The boys started joking about a war they had seen on the wall. Even though they seemed to have forgotten her, the side of Ruth's neck prickled as if someone were still staring. When she finally dared peek, she saw Chaz grinning slyly at her, like she expected a tip. It made Ruth angry. She wanted to slap the girl.

They looped around downtown past the post office, St. Thomas More Church and the droods' mall. The mall was actually a flea market which had accreted over the years in the parking lot off Pettee Brook Lane: salvaged lumber and old car parts and plastic sheeting over chicken wire had been cobbled together to make about thirty stalls. It was where people who lived in the dorms went. When the hawkers saw the mini coming, they swarmed into the street to slow it down. Ruth saw teens waving hand-lettered signs advertising rugs, government surplus cheese, bicycles, plumbing supplies stripped from abandoned houses, cookies, obsolete computers. A man in a tank top wearing at least twenty watches on each arm gestured frantically at her to get off the mini. They said you could also buy drugs and meat and guns at the mall, and what they did not have, they could steal to order. Ruth, of course, had never gone there herself but she had heard all about it. Everyone had. The cops raided the mall regularly, but no one dared close it down for good.

The fat kid reached across the aisle and snatched the abandoned paper sack. "This yours lady?" He jiggled it then unrolled the top. "Oh, shit." He took the frog out, holding it by the legs so that its stomach bulged at the sides. "Oh, shit, gonna kill the bastard did this."

"Sweet," said Red Shorts. "Someone left us a present."

"It's suffocatin'." The fat kid stood, swayed against the momentum of the mini and lurched toward Ruth. "They need water to breathe, same as we need air." When he thrust it at her, the frog's eyes bulged as if they might pop. "And you just sit here, doin' *nothing*." Rage twisted his face.

"I—I didn't know," said Ruth. The frog was so close that she thought he meant to shove it down her throat. "I swear, I never looked inside."

"So it's dyin'," said Red Shorts. "So let's stomp it. Come on, put it out of misery." He winked at Chaz. "Grandma here wants to see guts squirt out its mouth."

"I'll do your bones, you touch this frog." The fat kid stormed down the aisle to the door. "Stop here," he said. "Let me out."

The mini pulled over. Red Shorts called to him. "Hey sweatlips, who's gonna help me deliver groceries?"

"Fuck you." Ruth could not tell whether he was cursing Red Shorts, her or the world in general.

The door opened. The fat kid got off, cut in front of the mini and headed across town toward Mill Pond. Red Shorts turned to Chaz. "Likes frogs." He was still smirking as they drove off. "Thinks he's a Green."

She was not amused. "You leave it for him to find?"

"Maybe."

The mini had by now entered the old UNH campus. Online university had killed most residential colleges; the climate shift had triggered the depression which had finished the rest. But the buildings had not stood empty for long. People lost jobs, then houses; when they got hungry enough, they came looking for help. The campuses were converted into emergency refugee centers for families with dependent children. Eight years later, temporary housing had become permanent droodtowns. Nobody knew why the refugees were called droods. Some said the word came from the now-famous song, others claimed that the Droods had been a real homeless family. The mini passed several of the smaller dorms and then turned off Main Street onto Garrison Avenue. Ahead to the left was Stoke Hall. Red Shorts whispered something to Chaz, who frowned. It was getting harder and harder to ignore them; she could tell they were plotting something.

Nine stories tall, Stoke was the biggest dorm on campus. When Ruth had gone to UNH, it had housed about sixteen hundred students. She had heard that there were at least four thousand droods there now, most of them kids, almost all of them under thirty. Stoke was a Y-shaped brick monster; two huge jaws gaped at the street. Its foundation was decorated with trash dropped from windows. The packed dirt basketball court, dug into the sloping front courtyard, was empty. The players loitered in the middle of the street, watching a wrecker hitch a tow to a stalled water truck. The mini slowed to squeeze by and Chaz slid onto the bench beside Ruth.

"Wanna get off and look?" She nodded at the dorm.

"Huh?" Red Shorts had a mouth full of celery he had stolen from one of the bags. "Talkin' to me?"

"Up there." As she leaned over to point at the upper floors, Chaz actually brushed against Ruth. "Two down, three left. Where I live."

The girl's sweaty skin caught at the fabric at Ruth's sleeve. Ruth did not like being touched. Over the years, she had gotten used to meeting people electronically, through the walls. Those few she did choose to see were the kind of people who bathed and wore clean shirts. People who took care of themselves. Chaz was so close that Ruth felt sick. It was as if the girl's smokey stink were curdling in the back of her throat. She needed to get away, but there was nowhere to go. She fought the impulse to blow Chaz a face full of Knockdown, because then she would have to gas Red Shorts, too. And what if one of them managed to call for help? She imagined the mob of basketball players stopping the mini and pulling her off. She would be lucky if all they did was beat her, the way they had beaten Matt. More likely she would be raped, killed, they were *animals*, she could *smell* them.

"C'mon," said Chaz. "You show your place. I show mine."

Ruth's voice caught in her throat like a bone. The mini cleared the water truck and pulled up in front of the dorm. "Stoke Hall," said the carbrain. It opened the door.

"What you say, lady?" Chaz stood. "Won't hurt."

"Much." Red Shorts snickered. "You shut up," said Chaz.

Ruth stared at the words on her T-shirt, "For a nickel I will." She felt for the triggers and shook her head.

"How come I gotta play lick ass?" Chaz squatted so that her face was level with Ruth's; she forced eye contact. "Just wanna talk." The girl feigned sincerity so well that Ruth wavered momentarily.

"Yeah," said Red Shorts, "like 'bout how you pigs ate the world."

Ruth started to shake. "Leave me alone." It was all happening too fast.

"Stoke Hall," repeated the carbrain.

"Okay, okay," Chaz rose up, disgusted. "So forget it. You don't gotta say nothing to droods. You happy, you rich, so fuck me." She turned and walked away.

Ruth had not expected Chaz to be wounded, and suddenly she was furious with the foolish girl. Her invitation was a bad joke. A woman like Ruth could not take three steps into that place before someone would hit her over the head and drag her into a room. Chaz wanted to make *friends* after everything that had happened? It was too late, way too late.

She was already halfway down the step well when Red Shorts leaned toward Ruth. "You old bitch pig." His face was slick with greasy sweat; these droods had no right to talk to her that way. Without thinking, she thrust her fist at him and emptied a clip of Knockdown into his eyes.

He screamed and lurched backward against the grocery sacks, which tipped off the bench and spilled. He bounced and pitched face down on the floor, thrashing in the litter of noodle soup bulbs and bright packages of candy. Ruth had never used riot gas before and she was stunned at its potency. Truth in advertising, she thought, and almost laughed out loud. Chaz came down the aisle.

"Get off." Ruth raised her other fist. "Get the hell off. Now!"

Chaz backed away, still gaping at the boy, whose spasms had subsided to twitching. Then she clattered down the steps and ran up the street toward the basketball players. Ruth knew at that moment she was doomed, but the carbrain closed the door and the mini pulled away from the curb, and she realized that she had gotten away with it. She *did* laugh then; the sound seemed to come to her from a great distance.

Suddenly she was shivering in the afternoon heat. She had to do something, so she grabbed Red Shorts by the shoulders and muscled him back onto a bench. She had not meant to hurt anyone. It was an accident, not her fault. She felt better as she picked up the spilled groceries, repacked them and arranged the sacks neatly beside him. He didn't look so bad, she thought. He was napping; it would not be the first time someone had fallen asleep on the minibus. She retrieved an apple from under the bench.

She got so involved pretending that nothing was wrong that she was surprised when the mini stopped.

"14 Hampshire," said the carbrain.

Ruth regarded her victim one last time. Since she had tried her best to put things back the way they were supposed to be, she decided to forgive herself. She grabbed her tote bag, stepped off and hurried to the front door of Mart's decaying colonial. By the time the mini rumbled off, she had pushed the unpleasantness from her mind. She owed it to him to be cheerful.

Ruth had not been out to Mart's house since last fall; usually he visited her. It was worse than she remembered. He could not keep the place up on his pension. Paint had chipped off the shingles, exposing gray wood. Some of them had curled in the sun. A rain gutter was pulling away from the roof. Poor Matt couldn't afford to stay, but he couldn't afford to sell, either. No one was buying real estate in Durham. She heard him unlocking the door and made herself smile.

"*Ruth!* I thought I told you to stay home."

"Mr. Watson? Mr. Matthew Watson of 14 Hampshire Road?" She consulted an imaginary clipboard. "Are you the gentleman who ordered the surprise party?"

"I can't believe you did this." He tugged her inside and shut the door. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is out there?"

She shrugged. "So, are you glad to see me?" She put down her tote and opened her arms to him.

"Yes, of course, but..." He leaned forward and gave her a stony peck on the cheek. "This is serious,

Ruth."

"That's right. I seriously missed you."

"Don't make jokes. You don't understand these people. You could've been hurt." He softened then and hugged her. She stayed in his embrace longer than he wanted—she could tell—but that was all right. His arms shut the world out; his strength stopped time. Nothing had happened, nothing could happen. She had not realized how lonesome she had been. She did not even mind his cast jabbing her.

"Are you okay, Ruth?" he murmured. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine." Eventually she had to let him go. "Fine."

"It's good to see you," he said, and gave her an embarrassed smile. "Even if you are crazy. Come into the kitchen."

Matt poured the Medoc into coffee cups and they toasted their friendship. "Here's to twenty-six years." Actually, she had been friends with Greta before she knew Matt. Ruth set the tupperware on the counter. "What should I serve the fish on?" She opened the china cabinet and frowned. Matt was such a typical bachelor: he had none of the right dishes.

"I'm glad you came over," he said. "I've been wanting to talk to you. I suppose I could tell you through the wall, but..."

"Tell me?" She dusted a cracked bowl with the edge of her sleeve.

He ran his finger around the rim of the cup and shrugged uncomfortably. "You know how lonely I've been since the... since I broke my hip. I think that's my biggest problem. I can't go out anymore, and I can't live here by myself."

For a few thrilling seconds, Ruth misunderstood. "Oh?" She thought he was going to ask her to live with him. It was something she had often fantasized about.

"Anyway, I've been talking to people at Human Services and I've decided to take in some boarders."

"Boarders?" She still did not understand. "Droods?"

"Refugees. I know how you feel, but they're people just like us, and the state will pay me to house them. I have more room than I need, and I can use the money."

Her hands felt numb. "I don't believe this. Really, Matt, haven't you learned anything?" She had to put the bowl down before she dropped it. "You go to the dorms to tutor, and they beat you up. They crippled you. So now you're going to bring the animals right into your own house?"

"They're not animals. I know several families who would jump at the chance to leave the dorms. Kids, Ruth. Babies."

"Look, if it's only money, let me help. Please."

"No, that's not it. You said something this morning. I'm a teacher all right, except I have no one to teach. That's why I feel so useless. I need to—" A window shattered in the bedroom.

"What was that?" Matt bolted from his chair, knocking his wine over.

"There are many people on the street," announced the homebrain. "They are destroying property."

Ruth heard several angry *thwocks* against the side of the house and then more glass broke. She felt as if a shard had lodged in her chest. Someone outside was shouting. Wine pooled on the floor like blood.

"Call the police." Matt could not afford private security.

"The line is busy."

"Keep trying, damn it!"

He limped to the bedroom, the only room with a window wall; Ruth followed. There was a stone the size of a heart on the bed, glass scattered across the rug.

"Show," said Matt.

The wall revealed a mob of at least a hundred droods. Basketball players, hawkers from the mall, kids from Stoke. And Chaz. Ruth was squeezing her security pager so hard that her hand hurt.

"Hey, waiter, send the bitch out!"

She had been so stupid. Of course Chaz had heard the carbrain repeat Mart's address.

"Boomers. *Fuckin' oldies.*"

She had never understood why they were all so eager to hate people like her and Matt. It was not fair to punish an entire generation. "Burn 'em. Send the pigs to hell!"

The politicians were to blame, the corporations. They were the ones responsible. It was not *her* fault; she was just one person. "Co ahead, Matt," she said bitterly. "Teach them about us." Ruth pressed herself into the corner of his bedroom. "Maybe we should invite them in for a nice glass of wine?"

"What is this, Ruth?" Matt grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "What did you do?"

She shook her head. "Nothing," she said.