

SHIPS IN THE NIGHT

by

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Arnold was nearing the end of his first mile, moving methodically along the pebbled, grassy track at the edge of the treeline, looking out over the Red River of the North, when the wind first spoke to him. It blew through the twilight. Branches creaked and newly-fallen leaves rattled against the trunks of elms and boxwoods. The forest sighed his name.

Imagination, of course.

The river was loud around the bend. The jogging path crunched underfoot, and wings fluttered in the trees.

Arnold.

Clearer that time. A cold breeze rippled through him.

The sound died away, smothered in the matted overhang.

He drew up gradually, slowed, stopped. Looked around. He blinked furiously at the trees. The river was gray in the failing light. "Is someone there?"

A sparrow soared out of a red oak, and tracked through the sky, across the top of the windscreen, out over the water, over the opposite bank and into Minnesota. It kept going.

The current murmured past a clutch of dark rocks in the middle of the stream. Somewhere, in the distance, he heard a garage door bang down. He pushed off again. But he ran more slowly.

Arnold.

He stopped again, tumbled to a halt. Froze.

There was no mistaking it this time: the sound was only a whisper, a distant sigh. But it spoke his name. Breathed it, exhaled it. It was compounded of river and wind and trees. He heard it in the wave that rolled up the pebbled shore, and in the tumble of dead leaves.

It was not a group of kids hiding behind boxwoods. It was not anybody he could imagine. It was not a human voice at all. His heart pumped.

Courage had never been among Arnold Whitaker's virtues. He feared confrontation, feared doctors, feared pain, feared women. And, although he did not believe in ghosts, and in fact made it a point to smile cynically at tales of the supernatural or the paranormal, he had no taste for dark places, even for the short walk from his garage to his house when the moon was full. (He had, as a child, seen too many werewolf movies.)

He stopped near a black granite boulder, turned his back to the river, and surveyed the woods. He was in the wind screen that circled Fort Moxie, a narrow belt of trees seldom more than a hundred feet wide. No one moved among the box elders and cottonwoods. Nothing followed him down the jogging path. And, in a final sweep of the area, he saw that nothing floated on the river or stood on the opposite

shore.

The black boulder was one of many in the area that the glaciers had pushed down from Manitoba, and deposited when they began their long retreat at the end of the last ice age. It stood about shoulder high, and its rough surface was cool.

Arnold remained very still. The trees swayed gently in the early Autumn wind. Birds sang. The river burbled. Quickest way out was to leave the path, cut through the wind screen, and descend directly into town. But that required him to make an admission that he wasn't prepared to make. The day was far too pleasant, too sunny, too placid, to allow himself to be frightened by the wind. Wasn't that what they always said in haunted house movies? It's only the wind.

He discovered that he was crouched beside the boulder. He forced himself to stand, and, with steps that suddenly took wing, he bolted. He followed the path in and out of the trees. Arnold ran full tilt, racing through filtered sunlight. Occasionally, where the path curved, he did not. He leaped over logs, cut across glades, pushed between bushes. He emerged frequently along the river bank, only to plunge back into the trees. Eventually, still following the path, he veered away from the Red, and sliced downhill through the last vestiges of the wind screen. He was gasping when he came out onto Lev Anderson's fields, and crashed exhausted through the back door of the Fort Moxie Historical Center.

He scared the devil out of Emma Kosta, who was on duty, and her friend, Tommi Patmore. Emma jumped up from her chair and spilled a cup of tea, and Tommi, who was sitting with her back to the door when Arnold threw it open, literally fell out of her chair. Arnold shut the door, tried to latch it, gave up, hurried to Tommi's aid, and had to go back and try again with the door because it didn't close tight, had never closed tight, and the wind blew it open.

In the end Tommi had to get herself back into her chair. Both ladies stared in bewilderment at Arnold. "Why, Arnold," said Emma, "whatever happened to you?"

He had virtually collapsed against the wall, exhausted by his effort, lungs heaving. "Why, nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. What makes you think anything happened?" He needed another thirty seconds before he could get out the rest of it: "I was just jogging."

#

Arnold Whitaker was the proprietor and chief clerk at the Lock 'n' Bolt, Fort Moxie's hardware store. He was in his mid-thirties, a man of modest proportions and unremarkable features. He tended to be self-effacing, had never been known to offend anyone, and was generally mindful of the civilities: he held doors for women, told jokes only on himself, and spoke in carefully-modulated tones. No one had ever heard Arnold raise his voice.

His customers thought of him as solid and dependable, in the way that a good wrench and good bolts are solid and dependable. Nothing fancy in his makeup, no slick housing or plugboard wiring; just good, plain metal, carved to specification, and used within the parameters of the instruction manual.

Arnold was a bachelor. He lived upstairs over the hardware store in a spartan two-bedroom apartment. The furniture clashed: the rattan table undermined the spirit of his rolltop desk; the seductive effect of the black fur-covered sofa was utterly destroyed by the conservative gold-brown wingback armchair. Arnold had acquired most of his furnishings at sales in Fargo and Grand Forks. His clothing also reflected a tendency to put considerations of budget over those of taste. Indeed, it might be said that Arnold's propensity for discounts reflected a natural tendency to avoid anything in life for which he might have to pay full value.

He owned a good television, twenty-seven inches with eight hundred lines of resolution and wraparound sound. (He spent a lot of time watching TV, and he'd gotten the price he wanted last President's Day.) A high-priced discontinued stereo dominated the living room. Walls throughout the apartment had been converted into bookshelves, and they were filled with hardware catalogs and paperback techno-thrillers.

He slept in the middle room, which was dominated by a double bed that was seldom made up, and an ugly bureau missing several handles. (He was looking for a good replacement.) A smaller television and a VCR was set in one corner, and a rubber plant in another. A picture of a former girl friend whom he had not seen in years stood atop the bureau.

The back room looked out over the northwestern quarter of Fort Moxie. Houses in the border town were widely separated, even behind the commercial section. Lots were seldom smaller than a half-acre. Few streetlights burned back there, and consequently the area got thoroughly dark at night. Which was why Arnold had chosen his rear window to set up his telescope.

The telescope was perhaps the one thing Arnold owned that he had bought at retail. It was a 2080 Schmidt-Cassegrain reflector with a 25mm eyepiece. It gave him spectacular views of the moon, and of Jupiter and Saturn, especially on cold winter nights when the air seemed to crystallize, and the molecules and dust crackled and fell to earth, exposing the hearts of the great planets.

Arnold's secret ambition, one that he had never shared with anyone, was to find an incoming comet. To be there first, and to break the news. Comet Whitaker.

His neighbors knew about the telescope, and they assigned its existence to some minor idiosyncrasy, the exception to the general steady flow of Arnold's life.

Arnold, by the way, was liked by almost everyone. He did not give rise to passions: no one in Fort Moxie drifted off to sleep dreaming of him. And no one could recall ever having become really angry with him. He was just there, a presence downtown, reliable, polite, as much a part of the town as the post office or route 11 or the wind screen. What people liked most about him (though probably no one could have put it in words) was that Arnold really enjoyed hardware. Hammers and chisels, their polished wood stocks gleaming, the metal heads bright and clean, delighted him. He handled jacks and screwdrivers and boxes of tacks and lighting fixtures with obvious affection. And even his younger customers made the connection between Arnold's solid, dependable life style, and the nuts and bolts of his trade.

On the evening of the incident in the tree belt, which was the first unplanned occurrence in Arnold's life since the Flood of '78, he returned to the store in a state of considerable disarray. He locked both downstairs doors and checked all the windows, a routine he didn't always follow in crime-free Fort Moxie. And he retreated upstairs into the back room, where he sat a long time beside the telescope, watching darkness fall across the distant treeline.

He never doubted that he had in fact heard his name out there. Arnold was far too solid, too stable, to question his senses. He did not believe it was a prank, did not see how a prank could have been executed.

But what, then, was it? In the good hard light of his room, he could dismiss the supernatural. But what remained? Was it possible that some trick of the wind, some unlikely chance pattern of branches and air currents and temperatures had produced a sound so close to 'Arnold' that his mind had filled in the rest?

For almost an hour, he sat with his chin propped against his hands, staring through the window at the distant treetops.

Later, he went out to dinner, down to Clint's. That was a treat, but tonight he felt entitled. He wanted people around him.

#

The usual routine was that Arnold opened up at nine. He had two part-timers: Janet Hasting, a housewife who relieved him at lunchtime; and Dean Walloughby, a teenager who came in at three. If things were quiet, Arnold worked on his inventory, or his taxes, and made the trip to the bank. They closed at five. Dean went home, and Arnold went jogging.

But today, the day after the incident Arnold had begun to think of as *The Encounter*, complete with capitals, he had a decision to make. He enjoyed running. He especially enjoyed the solitude of the tree belt, and running against the wind off the prairie. He liked the clean rock-and-water smell of the Red River, and the far-off sound of airhorns on I-29. It was just after Labor Day, and Fort Moxie's short summer was fading fast. He did not like to lose what little good weather was left, especially to an aberration, a trick of the senses.

Arnold had been unnerved by the experience. He trembled at the prospect of going there again, understood he could keep away and no one would ever know he had given in to his fear. He might wonder for a time what had actually happened out there, but he knew that eventually he would assign the event to an active imagination.

That seemed like the safer course.

Yes. He would stay clear. No point tempting fate. Why ask for trouble? This afternoon, he would confine himself to running in town. Getting near the end of the season anyway. And having made his decision, he welcomed Janet Hasting in at eleven, and went to lunch shortly after with a clear conscience.

Arnold nodded to the small crowd of regulars in Clint's, and drew up a chair beside Floyd Rickett, who was dismembering a BLT. Floyd was tall, gray, sharp-nosed, pinched-looking, well-pressed in his postal uniform. He harbored strong opinions, and a strong sense of the importance of his own time. Cut to the bottom line, he was fond of saying, jabbing with the three middle fingers of his right hand. Floyd did a great deal of jabbing: he jabbed his way into conversations, jabbed through political opposition down at the club (where he was recording secretary), jabbed through lines and crowds. Life is short. No time to waste. Cut to the bottom line. At the post office, he specialized in sorting out problems caused by the general public. Floyd tolerated no sloppy wrapping, no barely-legible handwriting, no failure to add the proper zip code.

"You look upset," he said, targeting Arnold.

Arnold sat down, and shook his head. "I'm fine."

"I don't think so." Jab. "Your color's not good." Jab. "And you're avoiding eye contact." Slice.

Arnold immediately tried to establish eye contact. But it was too late. "Something odd happened to me yesterday."

Bottom line. "What?" Floyd leaned forward with interest. Odd occurrences, especially of the sort that could drain the equanimity from as solid a citizen as Arnold Whitaker, were rare in Fort Moxie.

"I don't know how to explain this, exactly." Arnold looked up as Aggie came over to take his order. When she had gone, he repeated his observation.

"Just get to the point," said Floyd.

"I was jogging in the wind screen yesterday. I go up there every day, after I close up."

Floyd shifted his weight.

"I heard a voice," Arnold said.

Floyd took another bite out of his BLT, chewed, and frowned when nothing more was forthcoming. "I give up," he said at last. "Whose voice?"

"There wasn't anyone there."

"Must have been somebody. There was somebody behind a tree."

"No."

"Then what's the point?"

"It wasn't a voice like yours or mine. What I mean is, that it wasn't a person's voice at all."

Floyd frowned. "What other kinds of voices are there?"

"I don't know."

"Okay. What did it say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Well, it called my name."

"And that's it?"

"Yes."

Floyd tilted his head, smiled, and finished his iced tea. "Got to go," he said. He had recognized that this was a conversation without a bottom line. No time to waste on it. "Listen, Arnold, what you heard was an echo. Or the wind. Wind plays funny tricks sometimes." He patted his lips with his napkin. "Maybe you need to take a few days off."

So Arnold went back to the store, and reconsidered his decision to stay away from the wind screen. He could not allow himself to be frightened off from something he really enjoyed doing. Especially when he had no explanation to offer, even to himself. By two o'clock, he had decided to confront whatever might be lurking (and that was the word that kept coming to mind) in the trees. And damn the consequences. But over the next hour, the forces of caution stormed back and retook the hill.

He considered inviting Dean, his part-timer, to go with him. But how would he explain the request? And anyway the kid was in terrible shape, and would only slow him down if a quick exit became necessary.

By the end of the business day, he had changed his mind several times, and finally settled on a compromise: he would stay out of the trees, but he would run as close to them as he could get, while remaining on the streets.

His usual regimen, after locking up and changing into his sweat suit, was to drive down and park at

the Historical Center, then run back along Bannister Avenue through town, and connect with the jogging path on the west side. Then he would follow it around the northern perimeter of Fort Moxie, passing the site of The Encounter, and eventually come out at the Historical Center. The route was about five miles long. He never actually ran that distance, couldn't run that far, but he used a combination of jogging and walking. And sometimes he stopped altogether. Frequently did so, in fact. All in all, he might need anywhere from an hour and a quarter to two hours to complete the course. Today, of course, would be different. To start with, he left his car in the garage. He started out along Bannister, cruising past the post office and the bank and the Prairie Schooner Bar and Mike's Supermarket and the Intown Video Store. But, instead of continuing all the way out to the western side, he turned north at Fifth Street, cutting across the leaf-strewn grounds of the Thomas Jefferson Elementary School.

Directly ahead, about six blocks, he could see the line of elms and boxwoods. The treetops rolled in a brisk prairie wind. They looked harmless enough. They also looked deep: when he'd been a boy, Arnold's imagination had delighted in turning the narrow belt of trees into thick woods. That childhood Fort Moxie had been a redoubt carved out of a vast forest, rather than a lonely outpost on the prairie.

He left the school behind, cruised past homes and the bake shop and the North Star Apartments. Two blocks up from Bannister, he passed Floyd's house. It was a pale green immaculately-kept two-story frame, with an enclosed front porch. Two box elders grew in a spacious, freshly-raked front yard. (The leaves had been bagged, and lined a side wall.) Broad manicured hedges marked its boundaries. A carefully-arranged assortment of bushes implied the owner's almost obsessive taste for symmetry and order. The evening newspaper, the Grand Forks Herald, lay folded in the middle of the lawn.

His red Nissan was parked in the driveway. And the man himself appeared at the door, waved to Arnold, and strolled out toward his newspaper.

Arnold waved back.

"Look out for the thing in the woods," he called, as Arnold passed.

Shouldn't have said anything. Arnold increased his pace slightly, felt his cheeks grow warm.

He was now approaching the Fort Moxie Library.

The library was the town's pride. The taxpayers had supported a bond issue, an architect from Bismarck had designed the structure to resemble a little Greek temple, and contributions of both books and money kept the institution well-funded.

The Greek temple commanded the top of a rise surrounded by lawns which had just begun to turn brown. Two elms, a flagpole, a statue of a cavalry soldier (from the days when the town was really a fort), and a few vervain and honeysuckle bushes contributed to a sense of disconnectedness from the world outside. The library was a time warp, located in a town that did not even have a police officer. It was part Hellenic, part 1910. A pebbled walkway, lined with green benches, curved through the grounds. The benches were occupied by teenagers, or by older residents enjoying the late summer days. And one, the one directly in front of the temple, facing it, held a stranger, a young woman Arnold had never seen before. She was, as he was quick to note, as his breath left him and he ran off the side of the curb, a woman of surpassing beauty.

It would have been an exaggeration to say that Arnold never had luck with women. There had been a few in his life, perhaps a half-dozen who had bedded down with him, and even one or two who might have gone to the altar with him. But none of these, in the full blaze of daylight, were able to fire his boilers, so to speak. The women who might have been capable of doing that always frightened him, and

so they inevitably ended on someone else's arm while Arnold kept his fragile ego intact. He could say, to his shame, that no truly beautiful woman had ever rejected him.

The woman on the bench was truly beautiful.

She had liquid green eyes, and red-blond hair cut shoulder length. When she moved, the hair swirled and caught the light. Her features were finely-chiseled, aristocratic in the finest sense, illuminated by an inner energy that drove Arnold's blood pressure well into the danger zone. Her expression suggested quite clearly that she would be unapproachable.

A book lay open on her lap, and a worn imitation-leather briefcase had fallen over at her feet. She wore a conservative light brown blouse, and a conservative dark brown skirt.

Needless to say, it would never have occurred to Arnold to alter course, to venture a hello, or even a wave as he went by. Rather, he simply continued on, watching as best he could until he had crossed Patcher Street, and the beautiful young woman passed from sight behind Kaz Johansen's yellow frame house.

Fifth Street just more or less stopped, went to dirt, and played out along a block where several houses were currently under construction, where only Al Conway actually lived. Arnold passed Al's place, and continued to the end of the street. There was an empty lot back there, beyond the construction, covered with thick grass and dead leaves. The lot mounted gradually into the wind screen. Arnold slowed, but did not stop. He wondered if the issue had ever been in doubt as he picked his way across uneven ground, moved up the short slope, and entered the trees.

The stated purpose of the tree belts is to protect towns from the winds that whip the prairie. During the previous spring, a poet who had come from St. Louis to speak at the library had said the real reason for windscreens had nothing to do with the wind; it was that it hurt people to look at all that emptiness, all the way to the horizon, so they built walls around themselves. The poet, Arnold guessed, had never been in Fort Moxie during the winter.

The narrow belt of woodland was very quiet.

He slowed to a walk. The wind moved softly through the upper branches, through patterns of sunlight. His fears had eased: the wood felt so unthreatening, so peaceful, that the incident of the day before seemed unreal, and very far away. These trees were his. Nothing frightening could move among them.

He picked up his pace. The jogging path came in from the left, and he eased onto it. The air was cool and invigorating, but he knew it harbored the first suggestions of the long winter to come.

He thought about calling out to the voice. Challenging it. Hey, Voice. I'm back. But he hadn't recovered that much of his courage. The forest moved around him. Branches swung, and insects whispered in bushes, and the sounds of his passage echoed back at him.

The river appeared, off to the northeast. He was drawing close to the spot where The Encounter had occurred.

Arnold slowed down, moving at a deliberate pace, saving his energy. The path had moved now to the far side of the trees, the outside of the screen, where it continued while the river angled in. The black boulder loomed ahead.

He stopped.

The wind drew at him, pulled at his clothes, rippled across the grass.

"Are you here?" he asked, very softly, not entirely sure he had mouthed the words at all.

The branches creaked and sighed.

The river flowed.

Feeling much better, Arnold broke into a brisk, triumphant trot.

The wind picked up. It smelled of water and green bushes. The foliage moved. The daylight changed complexion, as if something had come between him and the sun. There were clouds in the sky, toward the east. The sky was beginning to darken.

And the wind spoke.

"Do not--"

Arnold's knees locked. He tumbled, sprawled flat. There was nothing behind him. Nothing anywhere he could see. The sound had a stereo quality: it came from all directions.

"--Be afraid."

If there was anything more likely to terrify Arnold than a visitation in a lonely glade, it was an injunction, from whatever source, not to panic. He crouched on the ground, heart pounding. No one moved among the trees. The river was quiet, and the path was empty, as far as he could see. The voice was too close to have come from the opposite bank.

No human throat could have made that leafy, gurgling, wind-blown sound. "Who's there?"

His heart fluttered, and his breath caught, but he was able to keep the previous day's sickening panic at bay.

"Hello, Arnold." The treetops rolled slowly back and forth, as if a giant unseen hand played with them. "I was hoping you would come back."

A warm breeze touched his cheek.

"Where are you?"

"Here." Something like light laughter raced through the foliage. "I'm beside you."

"Where? Show yourself." Arnold struggled against rising panic.

"There is nothing to show."

"Say again?"

"There is nothing to see. Unless the light is right."

Got to be a trick. Somebody had to be recording this. Was he going to hear it played at the Elks next Saturday night? "Whoever you are, I don't care for the game." He was still not speaking loudly. "Is that you, Floyd?"

Silence rolled out of the trees and off the river. A gust blew across the glade in which he hid. "Who is Floyd?"

"A friend."

"A friend who plays tricks?"

"I don't know. Where are you, Floyd?"

"There is no one here but you and I."

"Who are you? Really?"

"A visitor."

"A tourist?"

"You could put it that way. Listen, Arnold, why don't you sit down? You don't look at all comfortable."

"Why don't you come out where I can see you? What are you afraid of? How do you do the voice trick?"

"I am in your field of vision."

"Where? Are you behind a tree?"

That soft laughter again, rippling through the elms and boxwoods. "I am at your side, Arnold." A sudden current of warm air flowed around him. "I am pleased to have an opportunity to talk with you."

Arnold was still watching the woods. "What is it? Speakers hidden around here somewhere?"

"You're hard to convince."

"Convince about what?"

"Okay. If you want, I'll do a demonstration. Pick a tree."

"What?"

"Pick a tree. Any tree." It sounded impatient.

"Okay." He pointed toward an American elm. "That one."

It was the biggest tree in the area, about sixty feet high. Its trunk was maybe twenty-five feet in circumference, covered with thick gray-brown bark. About a third of the way up, it divided into stout branches, dividing and subdividing into the leafy web that connected it with its neighbors. A squirrel clung to the furrowed trunk, its dark eyes locked on him.

"Watch now."

"I'm watching."

Overhead, the wind stirred. The upper branches creaked, moved, began to sway. They rolled in a single, synchronized dance, as they might during a gale. But the air where Arnold stood was almost still.

Leaves fell. And twigs. They drifted down through the graying light.

Arnold's mouth went dry. "What are you?" he asked slowly. "What do you want?"

"I'm a sightseer. A traveler."

"Why can't I see you, Traveler? Are you invisible?"

"Not really. Is the wind invisible?"

"Yes," he said. "Of course it is."

"Oh."

"I don't really understand what's going on." Cautiously: "You're not a ghost, are you?"

"No. There are some advanced species in which the essence survives the husk. But we are not among them."

Arnold frowned, and thought over the implications. "Am I?" he asked.

"Oh, no. Of course not. At least, I don't think so. No. Not a chance."

"Where do you come from?"

"Most recently, I've been exploring the prairies."

"No. I mean, where did you come from originally? Where were you born?"

"I was not born, in your sense of the word." The wood fell silent. Arnold listened to far-off noises, airhorns, a dog, an airplane. "I suppose it will do no harm. I saw my first sunrise on an artificial world quite far away. My sun is not visible from here. At least, it is not visible to me. And I doubt that it is to you."

Arnold's strength drained. Perhaps until this moment, he had expected that things would sort themselves out in some sort of rational way. But now he knew he had come face to face, so to speak, with the twilight zone. "Are you an alien?" he asked.

"That's a matter of perspective. But if we're going to indulge in name-calling and categorizing, you might keep your own simian characteristics in mind."

"No, listen. I'm serious. And you're not hostile, right?"

A sudden breeze swirled around his ankles. "Arnold, intelligent life forms are, by definition, rational. Reasonable."

"Marvelous." He was up on his feet again. "Listen, Traveler, I'm happy to meet you. My name's Arnold--" He stopped. "You knew my name before you ever spoke to me."

"Yes."

"How is that? What's going on? You're not the vanguard of an invasion, are you?"

"We're not much interested in invading, Arnold. That's more in your tradition."

"How does it happen you knew my name?"

"I know a few people in Fort Moxie. I don't spend all my time up here in the wind screen, you know."

"Who else have you spoken to?"

"No one.

"Nobody else knows you're here?" Arnold was having visions of his picture on the cover of Time.

"No."

"Why did you speak to me?"

Again, Arnold felt the movement of air currents. "Because I wanted to talk."

"About what?"

"Just talk."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes. I am."

"Why me?"

"I don't understand."

"Why me? Why not Alex Wickham? Or Tom Lasker? Why talk to me?" Arnold wasn't sure why he pursued the point. Maybe there was something special about himself, something that this supernatural creature could see in him that the townspeople couldn't. If he possessed a special quality, he should know about it.

"You're almost the only one who comes out here. Mrs. Henney jogs in the morning, but she's a trifle nervous, and if I revealed myself to her, I suspect she'd have a cardiac arrest on the spot."

"But you said you travel through town, too."

"I do. But I can't communicate with anyone there. Not enough trees. And no water."

"What do you mean?" "I do not have a tongue, Arnold. As you can perceive. I speak by manipulating other substances. I'm quite good at it, actually."

The Traveler sounded proud of itself. If any sense of disquiet still lingered in Arnold's soul, it was dispelled at that moment. "Listen, how would you feel about talking to a reporter?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not? This is a world-shaking event. First contact with another intelligent being."

"I won't ask who else is presumed in that equation to be intelligent. But no, thank you. I only wanted to talk with you. Not with the world."

"But nobody will believe this if I don't get a witness out here. How about Floyd Rickett, then? Would you talk to him?"

It laughed. A cascade of leaves and twigs exploded among the upper branches of a box elder. "I wonder if I made a bad choice."

"Okay. Okay, listen, don't get mad. All right? What did you want to talk about?"

"Nothing in particular."

"You don't have a message? A warning? Something you want me to pass on?"

"You have a strong sense of the melodramatic. No: I just saw you coming here every day, and I thought it would be nice to say hello."

"Well, that's ridiculous. This is the first contact between two intelligent species, and all we get to say is hello?"

"Arnold: this is probably not the first contact. The rules get broken all the time. And anyway, what more significant greeting is there?"

"You mean there've been others before this?"

"Of course. Not with me, understand. But, statistically, you're insignificant. What are the odds that you would hold the first conversation with someone from another world?"

""Then why haven't I heard about it? Why hasn't it been on TV?"

"Because we're not supposed to do it. Nobody is going to pose for cameras. Listen, I've got to be going."

"You mean this is all there is to it?"

"I'm afraid so, Arnold. It's been nice to talk with you."

"Wait a minute-- "

"Probably, it would be best not to say anything to anybody. You know how people are. And by the way, there is a reason I picked you. Other than simply because you happened to come out here."

That felt better. "What was it?"

"The telescope. I like people who want to see what's really out there. Beyond the horizon. You know what I mean?"

"Listen. Traveler. Will I see you again? I mean, talk to you again? Do you live here?"

The river gurgled against the inshore rocks. "I've been using this as a base. Yes. Sure. Stop by again. Anytime."

Arnold was on his feet now. "One more thing?"

"Sure."

"I don't know what to call you. Do you have a name?"

"We don't use names."

"I've got to have something to call you."

"Make one up."

"Traveler."

"That would be nice. I like that."

"Will you be here when I come back?"

"Can't promise. But I usually return about this time."

Arnold looked at the tallest tree in the area, the American elm which had served in the demonstration. He felt as if he were talking to it: "I enjoyed meeting you."

"And I, you. Goodnight, Arnold."

"I'll be back tomorrow."

A warm breeze swirled around him, then dashed across the river. A burst of foam leaped high.

#

Arnold charged back through the trees and ran south on Fifth Street, full of exuberance. First thing was to find someone to tell. Arch Johnson was out on his front porch, and Sal and Ed Morgan were hauling firewood back to their shed. Amos Sigursen was bent under the hood of his pickup. He wanted to go to each of them and clap his hands on their shoulders and say Hey, I've just talked with a visitor from another world; it's up in the wind screen, but each time he visualized the reaction, knew they would squint at him and joke around, or maybe just squint. He thought about going up and pounding on Floyd's door, tell him what he'd seen. But Floyd was too much of a no-nonsense type, and he wouldn't believe a word of it unless the Traveler was with him, and willing to maybe poke Floyd in the eye.

So he arrived home, with the secret of the ages still securely tucked inside his sweatshirt. He went through the back entrance, climbed to the second floor, and threw himself across his bed within reach of the phone.

But there wasn't even anyone to call. Arnold didn't have much of a family. Just a couple of uncles and aunts who already thought he was demented because he had never left his remote border town. And on that evening, flushed with the joy of his discovery, he realized that he knew no one with whom he could share a significant experience. The most satisfying outcome he could think of would be to drag Floyd out to the wind screen, and show him how wrong he had been. And that was pathetic.

He showered, sat down at his rolltop desk, and pulled out a legal pad. He wrote out everything he could remember about his conversation with the wind creature. He recorded not only the text of their conversation, but his impressions of the size of the thing (larger than the biggest elm), the suggestion of movement among the trees, and his estimates as to temperature and wind direction. I'll write a book on this one day, he told himself. And he wanted to be prepared right from the start.

There were also questions that needed to be answered. Where are you from? What do you think of the human race? What kind of anatomy do you have? How do your senses work? He recorded them more or less as they occurred to him, filling pages, and stacking the pages in a neat pile.

It had finally grown dark. (Fort Moxie was on the western edge of the Central Time Zone. The sun stayed quite late in the evening sky.) He sat by his window, looking toward the wind screen, not able to see it except as a deeper darkness toward the north. And he wondered whether the Traveler was up there now, moving among the trees, watching what was happening in Fort Moxie? But what would be the point of that? Nothing ever really happened in Fort Moxie. Of what possible interest could the small border town be to an entity from another world?

The night was filled with stars. Although he could not see it from his rear window, a new moon ruled the sky. The town lay quiet beneath its scattering of streetlights. It pleased him to think of Fort Moxie as

a place where history had been made. He wondered whether its name might one day become synonymous with a new age. The Fort Moxie Event.

Arnold never drank alone. In fact, he rarely drank at all. Weight was not a problem for him, yet, but he knew it would be if he indulged his taste for cold beer in any regular fashion. But tonight was an exception. It deserved recognition, it needed a marker, something to remember years from now.

He did not keep beer in the refrigerator, but he had brandy. (He didn't like brandy, but it had been a birthday present from the guys at the Elks.) He pulled the bottle out of the cabinet where he kept his pots, popped the cork, and put a little bit into a glass. He stood beside his telescope, rubbed its gray-green barrel with satisfaction, and raised the glass in the general direction of the wind screen. Here's to you, Traveler. And to the future.

Tomorrow, he would find a way to talk the creature into submitting to a TV interview.

#

Arnold woke in his armchair. The recollections of the previous day's events flooded back. Not a dream. A cup of cold coffee stood on a side table. It's really out there. Yellow pages filled with his scrawl were piled on the black fur sofa.

And it's friendly. And talkative.

He went back into his bedroom and looked out the window. The wind screen was hazy and unreal in the gray light.

He showered and dressed and ate breakfast with enthusiasm. This would be a day to really move the hardware. By God, he felt good, and, at nine o'clock sharp, he threw the doors of the Lock 'n' Bolt open to the world. It would never have occurred to Arnold to leave the store closed for the day, to return to the site of the Encounter, and savor the moment. The Lock 'n' Bolt was nothing if not reliable. He prided himself on the principle that no local catastrophe had ever forced him to close down during business hours. He had ridden out the Flood of '78, the blizzards of '87 and '88, the great Christmas storm of '91, and even the '92 tornado. Didn't matter. Whatever happened in the cosmic order, Fort Moxie could be certain the Lock 'n' Bolt would open promptly at nine. Order and continuity was what made the American people great.

During the course of the day, he waited on the usual number of customers, experienced a run on mallets (folks were changing over from screens to windows), showed Ep Colley what was wrong with his lawn mower, advised Myra Schjenholde how to install her paneling. Tom Pratkowski bought one of the new Super Convex snowblowers, and there was some movement in block heaters. These people were all his friends and neighbors, and Arnold wanted to take them aside, was dying to grab them by the collar, and tell them what was happening. But Ep would never have understood about extraterrestrials. (Ep wasn't entirely sure where Jupiter was.) And Myra was far too absorbed in visualizing how her new living room was going to look to care about a voice in the wind screen. And so it went. One needed a kindred soul for an announcement of this magnitude. And the day dragged on while Arnold looked for the kindred soul.

When Dean came in, he finished up his paper work, made a quick run to a supplier over in Hallock for some rakes, and got back just before five. They locked the store, and Arnold wasted no time changing into his jogging gear. He picked up the questions he'd written out the night before and stuffed them into a sleeve. Today he was ready. And when he came back this evening, he would have a few answers. And, he hoped, he would have persuaded the Traveler to hold a press conference.

He took the short route, up Fifth Street. He moved quickly today, his usual easy pace discarded for a sprint. The streets were full of kids tossing footballs. The weather had cooled off, and the sun rode in a cloudless sky. He knew that, when he breasted the trees, the world would open all the way to the horizon.

The lovely young woman with the red-blond hair was in front of the library again. She was on a different bench, on the far side near the parking lot. He caught his breath and slowed down. She sat with one knee crossed over the other, apparently absorbed in her book. The routine traffic of a Wednesday afternoon flowed around her, teenagers, and mothers with young children, and some of the town's retired folks.

But it was all backdrop. The benches and the box elders, the people and the frame houses across the street, even the little Greek library itself, all became the stage on which she performed. Arnold kept going, putting one foot before the other, not knowing what else to do. Maybe there was some place where a meeting would be inevitable, where she could be approached without his having to hang himself out on the line. Maybe if he became world-famous as the friend of the Wind-Creature, the man who had presided over the ultimate historic event, the situation would become more favorable.

Pardon me, Arnold. I know we've never met, but I was wondering if we could go someplace and talk about the Traveler.

She glanced up. Arnold wasn't quick enough, got caught staring. And for a single, riveting moment, their eyes swept across each other, not quite connecting. Even from his considerable distance, he felt her power.

That is, if it wouldn't be too much trouble.

He floated across the street, his hopes rising, seeing for the first time the full possibilities of the situation.

Arnold on *Sixty Minutes*: And what were your thoughts, Mister Whitaker, when you first realized you were speaking to a being from another world?

The library, and the woman, passed out of sight behind Conway's house. The National Academy of Sciences wishes to present its highest award, the-- What sort of award did they give out, anyway? --the Schrodinger's Cat Medal to Arnold Whitaker, owner of the Lock 'n' Bolt Hardware Store in Fort Moxie, North Dakota.

The empty lot at the foot of Fifth Street were rutted, and the ruts were covered by thick grass. Arnold slowed down, but he was still moving too fast when he left the unpaved roadway and started up the slope toward the trees. He lost his footing almost immediately on the uneven ground, and sprawled forward. But he suffered no damage other than a skinned knee. He limped the rest of the way into the wind screen.

The trees closed over him. He crunched through underbrush thick with piles of leaves. Birds sang and fluttered overhead. He pushed his hands into his pockets and walked jauntily through the narrow belt of woodland. The one fear he now had was that the Traveler might somehow be gone. Had second thoughts, perhaps. Or maybe the whole business had resulted from some massive breakdown of physical law which had now healed.

He wanted to cry out to the Traveler, to shout a greeting into the trees, but he was still too close to the Fort Moxie side of the belt. Wouldn't do to have people notice that old Arnie is up in the trees talking to himself.

He found the jogging path, and followed it out to the river, and finally to the black boulder, where he stopped. He listened for several minutes, and heard nothing unusual. "Traveler," he said, in a conversational tone, "are you here?"

The wind rose. "Arnold, why do you travel relentlessly around the outer boundary of so lonely a place?"

The starkness of the question threw him momentarily off balance. "I like to jog," he said.

The river murmured sleepily.

"I'm glad you stayed. I wasn't sure you would."

"Neither was I."

"But you came back."

"Yes."

"Where do you go when you're not here?"

"The prairie." The wind blew harder. "I love riding the gales through the prairie."

"But you must have gone somewhere, right? Grand Forks, maybe? Fargo?"

"Just the prairie."

Arnold looked off to the west, across the vast pool-table-flat land. It was deadly dull. He wondered whether his visitor might not be too bright. My God, what a disaster that would be. The first visitor from the stars, and it turns out to be a bit slow. "You said something yesterday about rules. Who makes the rules? Is there some sort of government out there?"

"There's a civilization."

"What kind of civilization?"

"I don't know. What kinds are there? Other than where people are civil?" It chuckled.

"I mean, is it one of those things like in Star Trek, with a lot of worlds?"

"I do not know the reference."

Arnold surreptitiously slid his legal sheets out of his sleeve. "Why are you here?" he asked casually.

"I answered that yesterday."

"You said you were a tourist. But what are you interested in? Architecture? Our technology? What?"

"I'm interested in riding the wind."

"Oh." Arnold felt mildly piqued. "Is that all?"

"This is such a violent world. It is very enjoyable."

"Violent?" He felt a chill rise from somewhere deep down: it sounded so pleased with the idea. "The world, this world, isn't violent. We haven't had a crime in Fort Moxie since the 1930's. And, well, we

have wars occasionally. But we keep them small."

"I'm not talking about people, Arnold. I mean the climate."

"The climate?"

"Yes. Your atmosphere is turbulent. Exciting. For example, in this area, a fifty-mile an hour wind is not at all unusual."

"So what?"

"I come from a place that is composed of glades and meadows and quiet streams. It's always very still. Very peaceful. Dull. You know what I mean? Not like here."

Arnold found a nearby log, and sat down. "What about us?"

"Who?"

"Us. People. What's your connection with us?"

"I don't have a connection with you."

"You're only interested in the prairies? Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm interested in your thermal currents. In your gusts and gales and storms."

Arnold laughed. "And you don't care about us?"

"What's to care about? No, I like to be driven across the sky. Arnold, you have no idea what a rousing, delicious atmosphere you live in."

"Well, I know it gets a little brisk."

"You're a solid, Arnold. You're safe. If I were caught out on the prairie, or even in here, by a strong gale, I would be scattered beyond recovery."

"Then why are you here at all? Why don't you go someplace safe? Like New York?"

"If I'd wanted safety, I'd have stayed home."

"That's why you come to the wind screen," said Arnold. "It's a refuge for you. Right?"

"Very good. Yes, it's comforting to settle in for the night, among these trees."

"How did you get here? To Earth, I mean. Did you come in a UFO?"

"What's a UFO?"

"Unidentified flying object. They've been seen all over. Some people think they're interstellar ships."

"Oh."

"Well? Did you come in one?"

"Oh, no. Sealed up in a ship, traveling between the stars? No, thank you. I don't think anyone would go anywhere if they had to travel around like that. Are you sure about these objects?"

"No. Not really."

"If I were you I wouldn't take those stories too seriously."

Arnold consulted his list. "You did stay here last night?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep?"

"Reasonably well, thank you."

"You do sleep, then?"

"Of course. Arnold, everyone sleeps. It's a universal phenomenon."

"Do you dream?"

"Oh, yes."

Insects murmured. "About what?" A sudden breeze lifted his notes from his hands. He watched the yellow pages sail high into the air, where a sharp draft caught them and blew them out over the river. They fluttered down into the water.

"I'd rather just talk idly," said the Traveler. "I really have no interest in being interviewed."

"I'm sorry," said Arnold.

"It's all right."

"I mean, I just wanted to be sure I didn't miss asking you something important." There was a restlessness in the trees.

"I suppose I shouldn't have started this."

The air stirred and began to move. "What's happening?"

"Goodby, Arnold."

"Please don't go." Air currents whispered through the foliage. "Hey," he called after it, "Why are you alone? What happened to the other one?"

The evening grew still.

"You are perceptive, Arnold."

"So what happened?"

"Listen, let it go, huh?"

"Some kind of accident?" After a long moment: "I'm sorry."

"I'll survive."

"When will you go home?"

"When they realize I haven't returned. They'll need to mount a rescue party."

"Who will?"

"Never mind. It's not easy to explain."

"So how long?"

"Hard to say. Could be tomorrow. More likely next spring."

"How will you know when they've come?"

"They won't exactly come. But they'll be able to find me."

"The one you lost: was it a mate?"

Ripples on the river. "The term has connotations that do not apply."

"I'm sorry."

Branches swung. "Walk with me."

"Sure. Which way?"

"Toward the highway. Along the river bank."

The air was warm and smelled of berries and mint. "How long will you stay here? In Fort Moxie?"

"I don't know. Until I decide to leave."

"Just follow the wind, huh?" Arnold grinned, pleased with himself. He walked slowly. The river flowed, and the forest moved, and the sun sank in the west.

The Traveler didn't say much. It seemed rather to react to the changing colors of the landscape, and to the occasional bursts of high wind out of the north. "Look to your left."

"What? What is it?" Arnold peered into the open spaces between the trees. There was nothing. Maybe a corner of Mark Hassle's garage.

"Butterfly."

He had to reprogram, change his perspective. Color fluttered in the sunlight. A monarch. Black and orange, it spread its wings and moved with magnificent unconcern over a honeysuckle.

"It is unique to Earth. As far as we know."

He felt the woodland breathe. A passing breeze lifted the insect. It flew a zigzag course and settled onto a leaf.

"End of summer," said Arnold. "It will be too cold soon."

They talked about wind currents and the hardware store and Arnold's telescope. "I envy you," said the Traveler.

"Why?"

"I can't look through a telescope."

Arnold frowned. "You do have eyes?"

"No. But I am not without vision." In its turn, the Traveler tried to describe how it felt to ride before the wind, gliding silently over the vast swaying grasslands. "It's best to stay low, near the ground. You get a sense of movement there. Higher, in the clouds, everything becomes very still."

Occasionally, the Traveler moved off through the trees. It seemed restless, and branches and bushes swayed in its passage. "Is anything wrong?" he asked at last.

"Why do you ask?"

"You move around so much."

"It is my nature. I cannot easily remain in one place."

The sun had dropped to the horizon. "I'd like to ask a favor," said Arnold. He'd been hoping the Traveler would give him an opening, say something that would allow him to introduce the possibility of bringing other people out to the wind screen. Arnold had, say, Brian Williams in mind. But no opportunity had presented itself, and so he had decided to act directly. "I have a friend who would give almost anything to talk with you."

"No."

"I've told him that you were up here, and he asked to meet you." Two squirrels dashed across the path and scabbled up a tree. "It wouldn't hurt anything. Just a few words, you know? Just say hello, the way you did with me." He felt a surge of desperation. "It isn't fair, you know. I mean, you started this. You didn't mind using me just so you could have somebody to talk to. But you don't care very much what it does to me. I've got the biggest secret in the world, and I can't tell anybody."

The Traveler did not respond.

"It's easy for you, isn't it? Not your problem." The north wind stirred the leaves. "Well, you can sit out here for the rest of the winter as far as I'm concerned. I'm not coming back."

Arnold walked heavily away on the jogging path. He was still walking, and feeling absurd, when he crossed Lev Anderson's fields and came out behind the Historical Center.

#

In a way that he was hard-pressed to define, the sheer unearthliness of the encounter seemed to be dwindling. The prickle along the backbone, the deep fears, the sense of wonder, faded. Despite its ethereal structure, the Traveler possessed a harder reality than, say, Mrs. Mike Kramer, who came in with her husband and, while he selected a hammer, gabbled on about the church choir's next project. Or Bill Pepperdine, the high school football coach, who was worried about the low level of ferocity in his offensive line this year.

Floyd Rickett came in around three, and jabbed his way through several customers taking advantage of Arnold's annual autumn paint sale.

"I was out in the wind screen today," he said, pointedly, talking across Mrs. Mellon, who was trying to make up her mind over the color chart.

Floyd's eyes connected with his. They were blue, but like marble rather than seawater. "And-- ?" asked Arnold, hopefully.

"This one," said Mrs. Mellon, pointing to sunset bronze.

Arnold nodded. "Just be a couple of minutes." He picked up the primaries, poured in a measure of red, and set it in the mixer. He activated the device, and returned to Floyd, who was waiting over near the flashlight display. Floyd looked puzzled, and maybe a little scared. He sold two gallons of white primer to Lev Anderson, helped Eddie Miranda choose a color for his porch, went back and got Mrs. Mellon's sunset bronze.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously, when his customers had thinned out. "Did you hear anything?"

"A voice," said Floyd.

"Out in the wind screen?"

"Yes." Cut to the bottom line. "Arnold, I was walking out there, thinking about what you'd said. And I heard it. Plain as day. Whispering in the treetops." The blue eyes peered at him from either side of the long, sharp nose. "I'll never forget it, Arnold."

"What did it say?"

"It was hard to tell at first. I could make out my name, but there was something else, too."

Miranda hadn't left the store yet, and he was showing signs of interest in the conversation. But Arnold didn't care. "Were you able to understand the rest of it?"

"I can tell you what it sounded like."

"What what sounded like?" asked Miranda.

"It sounded like..." Floyd dropped his voice, and delivered his next words in a conspiratorial tone: "... The Pack will be back."

Arnold's spirits sagged. "Excuse me, Floyd." He turned away.

"The Pack will be back." Floyd roared with laughter. "Sure enough, that's what it said."

"What what said?" demanded Miranda.

"Arnold's voice. Arnold says there's an invisible thing out in the wind screen that predicts football scores." Floyd's grin was as wide as the Red River.

Miranda laughed, and no one took any of it seriously. Still, when it was over, Arnold was left staring out across Bannister Avenue. His cheeks were enflamed. Arnold always thought of himself as an even-tempered man, and it was a fair assessment. On that day, however, he wondered whether half-seriously whether he might find a good hit man somewhere this side of Fargo.

At five o'clock, he closed up. And very deliberately ignored his jogging ritual. He changed into casual clothes, got into his car, drove out to the expressway, and turned north toward Canada. The wind screen, on his right, passed quickly and receded. When he reached the border, five miles north of Fort Moxie, it had become an insignificant green feature on the endless prairie.

He had dinner in Winnipeg, and went to a movie. But he kept rerunning his conversations with the Traveler, things said and not said, and wondered what it made of his absence. Was it sorry for the way it had treated him? Did it care that he had not come back?

The return ride was long and desolate, sixty-five miles through empty country, broken only by a couple of prairie towns. The night was clear, and a round, luminous moon lit the sky.

A sense of his own seclusion washed over him. And that seemed strange, because no one in town had more friends than he. People were always inviting him to their homes. And there had never been a Christmas during which he had eaten alone. Birthday cards flowed in like clockwork every year. On Saturday nights, he had the Elks. And he was a regular at Clint's and the Prairie Schooner. Everybody in Fort Moxie knew Arnold Whitaker. What more could anyone want?

Arnold, why do you travel relentlessly around the outer boundary of so lonely a place?

#

Why, indeed?

Next day, toward the end of the afternoon, Arnold went through his meagre library, and extracted two Civil War novels, Brice's History of the Ancient World (which was left over from his single year at UND), and an anthology of mystery fiction. He wrapped them in a supermarket bag, descended to the store, and helped close out. They had a couple of late customers, Harry Sills, who was looking for a match for a three-eighths inch hex screw; and Walter Koss. Walter seldom bought anything, but he loved to browse through hardware.

It was consequently later than usual when Arnold changed into his jogging gear. He selected his favorite sweatsuit, white with red trim, an outfit in which he looked particularly athletic. For the second time, he varied from his usual routine by leaving the car in the garage. Instead, he walked briskly west on Bannister, hauling his bag of books with him.

She was there. She was back on the center bench, the one directly in front of the portico. This time, he didn't even notice whether anyone else was on the grounds: he saw no one but her. The worn brief case lay by her side. The book was open in her hands.

He walked casually along the concrete arc, ostensibly looking toward the Greek columns, but actually watching for some sign that she had noticed him. Her eyes never left the printed page.

He strolled to within a few feet of her, and imagined that he could feel a wave of heat from the woman. He turned toward the colonnade with a sigh, mounted the steps, and walked inside. Jean DiLullo was on duty. Jean was friendly in a detached sort of way. She wore narrow frame glasses over her dark eyes, and tended to speak with hushed authority, in the manner of a person who has got a firm hold of the Truth. Her world was intelligible, open to investigation, and well-organized within the bounds of the Dewey Decimal System.

Arnold set his package on the counter, while she finished checking out the books of two adolescent boys. She smiled at him, and plied her stamp with energy. "Good to see you, Arnold," she said.

Arnold nodded, and returned the greeting. He took the books out of the bag. "I wanted to donate these."

"Well, thank you." She took a form from beneath the counter, wrote 'FOUR HARDCOVERS' on it, and pushed it across to him. "For the IRS," she said. "You fill in the value." "Okay." He asked how things were going, how her nephew Pete was making out at UND. And then, conversationally, "Who's the woman out front? I know her from somewhere, and I can't place her."

Jean came around from behind the counter, walked to the main doors, and looked out. "That's the

new fourth grade teacher," she said.

"Her name's Linda Something."

"Name doesn't ring a bell," said Arnold. "But I'm sure I've seen her before."

"Why don't you ask her?" said Jean, striding back to her post.

Nothing could have been further from Arnold's mind. "Yes," he said, casually, "maybe I'll do that."

Her red-gold hair glowed in the sunlight. She wore a white jacket today, over a blue blouse and skirt. As he watched, as he descended the stone steps, watching but not watching, she laid the book down in her lap, and her brow furrowed. Her eyes sought a spot off in the sky, and he felt that he could have stopped directly in front of her and not been seen.

He didn't test the theory, however. He strode quickly by, giving no indication (he thought) that he had noticed her. A child with a balloon bumped into him, giggled, and ran off across the grass. Arnold broke into a trot as he regained Fifth Street, and a few minutes later he was picking his way up the slope toward the wind screen. He felt emotionally weak.

The signs of the Traveler's presence appeared as soon as he entered the trees: warm drafts, unsynchronized movements of bushes and foliage, a gradual intensification of air pressure.

"Hello, Arnold."

Arnold blew on his hands, and tried to look as if he were in the wind screen for the express purpose of running, and for nothing else. He increased his pace slightly. "Hello, Traveler."

"I missed you yesterday."

"I was tired. Took a break from the routine. I'm not going too fast for you, am I?"

"No. It's easier for me this way." The elms and box elders shut off the sky. "I thought you might be angry."

"Me? No. Why would I be angry?"

"We had a disagreement."

Arnold's sense of victory was not entirely unmixed with guilt. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think my not being here would upset you." Arnold ran a little faster. "How long have you been alone? If you don't mind my asking."

"Since last winter."

"Are you male?"

"The term does not apply. At least, not strictly."

"What does that mean?"

"It's complicated. I do not fit easily into your categories."

"How do you reproduce?"

"You would need detailed instruction. Anyway, I'm uncomfortable talking about it."

"You're shy?" Arnold grinned broadly.

"I don't think of myself that way." Pause. "Perhaps you'd care to describe your own reproductive method. In a manner that someone unfamiliar with your anatomy could understand easily?"

Arnold grinned. "Okay." He picked up a twig, looked at it, and threw it a few feet away. "Your point." The wood was quiet. He tried to imagine what it might feel like to be completely alone in a strange place. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You've already done it. Thank you."

Neither spoke for a long time. Arnold, out of breath, had slowed down, and now stopped altogether and sat down on a fallen trunk. "You're welcome. What are you thinking about now?"

"How comforting the tree belt feels. At home, the open spaces are very attractive. Here, they are full of danger. So I enjoy hiding from them. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes. Of course." It didn't, but Arnold did not want to sound slow-witted.

"It is one of the things we have in common, Arnold."

"I don't think I understand."

"You, too, are more comfortable in the wind screen than you are in town. Why is that?"

"It's not so."

"Of course it's so. Why would you deny it, when it's evident?"

"It just happens that I enjoy the view from here."

"And the solitude."

"That too."

"My point."

Arnold threw his head back and laughed. "Everybody likes to be alone sometimes. There's nothing unusual about that."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Of course I am."

He got up, touched his toes a couple of times, and began to walk.

"You know, you're good company, Arnold."

"Thank you."

A wall of air touched him. It felt almost solid. It crowded him, sucked at his clothes, ran up his legs, moved across his throat, pushed his sweatshirt up and exposed his belly. "Cut it out," Arnold said.

Laughter rippled through the trees.

They traveled through the early evening, stopping in groves, looking out across the river. "When I was

a boy, I used to play up here."

"Were you alone then?"

"No. Never."

"Where are the others now?"

"Most are married. Busy with their lives. One's dead. In the war. And Floyd."

"What about Floyd?"

"Nothing. He changed. He was away for a lot of years. Came back to claim his property when his folks died. But he wasn't the same when he came back."

"How do you mean?"

"Don't know. He was just different."

"The intimacy had gone out of your relationship?"

"Yes. Something like that."

"But it sounds as if you are no longer close to any of your old friends."

"It's called 'growing up.'" When was the last time they had come up here together, he and Floyd and Susan Halley and Hunt Jacoby and the others? When had they decided the forays into the Black Forest no longer served a purpose, and should stop? They had failed to mark the occasion with appropriate ceremony. And that was what pained him, not that they had bolted their cool forest empire, but that there had been no final gathering of the force, no final farewell, no appreciation of what it had meant. "And you, Traveler: what drives you to come so far?"

Arnold was growing sensitive to the creature's moods, as one reads temperament from a human expression or tone. He could feel its uncertainty, watch the movement of its currents among the leaves matting the forest floor, observe its slow passage through brambles and branches.

"I love this world, Arnold. I love to gather its warm atmosphere around me, and to race across oceans before its boiling storms. To cruise silently over deserts, and to ride its thermal currents up the rock towers in the west. I wish there were a way to share these sensations with you."

"Are you anxious to get home?"

"One place is as close to home as another. Maybe none more than Earth."

"I don't understand."

The creature fell silent.

"If you don't mind my asking, was your companion killed near here?"

"Yes."

Again, the trees moved.

"Traveler," Arnold asked in a bright tone, "you don't eat, do you?"

"No. I collect energy directly."

Long silence. Lapping of waves. Stirring of grass and leaves.

"Will you be okay?"

"Yes." The word drew out, expanded, rose, and floated away over the trees. Then, nearby, sharp: "We have visitors."

Twilight was in its last throes. "Who, Traveler? Who's here?"

"Who you talking to, Arnold?" Bill Pepperdine's voice. Off to his left. Arnold turned in his direction, and saw him standing beside an elm. Flashlights switched on. Four of them. Mike Kramer was off to the right. And Tom Pratkowski. And, half-hidden behind Pepperdine, Floyd.

"Anybody see a monster here anywhere?" asked Kramer.

They laughed.

Pratkowski cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hey, Critter," he sang out. "Welcome to Fort Moxie."

The laughter turned to roars. They howled and clapped one another on the back and staggered around. One of them held out a beer for Arnold. "We have visitors," Pepperdine said. "Hello, out there."

Floyd hung back.

Arnold looked desperately toward the treetops. "Say something, Traveler. Tell them you're here."

They were shouldering one another, and having a good laugh, and shaking their heads, the way people do sometimes when they discover an old friend is no longer bolted down very tight. "Yeah, say something," said Kramer, speaking to a box elder. "Don't just stand there."

The only one not laughing was Floyd.

Arnold's gaze swept across them. Hard to believe: they had been his friends and neighbors for years.

"Arnold," Floyd said, "I'm sorry." He came forward.

Kramer was grinning. "It's okay, Arnold. We all have our little quirks."

Arnold walked between them, past Floyd without meeting his eyes, and went back into town the way he had come.

#

Next day was a little strange at the Lock 'n' Bolt. People came in, as always. They bought chisels and sandpaper and shelving, as always. But they didn't much ask for help, and their eyes were kind of off-center when they came over to pay up. They looked the other way a lot, and Arnold felt as if he were something of an oddity in his own store.

He considered passing on Clint's at lunchtime, because Floyd would be there, and possibly some of the others. But maybe this was an important moment for him, and he should not allow himself to be frightened off.

Floyd was in a booth toward the rear, with Lem Harkness and Rob Henry, both from the Federal Building.

Max Klinghofer, who owned Clint's, was wiping the lunch counter. When he saw Arnold, he wiped harder. And Arnold felt the heat rising into his face. Floyd was facing away from the door, but someone must have alerted him. He turned around, and waved cheerfully. As if nothing had happened. But his face colored.

The place was filled, as it always was at noon. People he had known a long time looked up, nodded, smiled. But there was a distance in some expressions, and nervousness in others. As his gaze passed over each table, its occupants fell silent. Arnold was reminded of those old westerns in which someone notorious strolls into the Lost Lode Saloon.

He picked up a Herald and sat down alone at a corner table. Aggie took his order, for a tuna and french fries, and Arnold glanced at the newspaper. He literally hid behind it, and Aggie had to ask him to move it when she brought his lunch. "You okay?" she asked, hovering over him.

He liked Aggie. Always had. "Yeah," he said. "I'm fine."

"If you don't mind my asking--" she kept her voice down, "--what happened last night?"

He looked at her. What had happened last night? "Hard to explain," he said. I'm going to have to move.

"You need any help," she said, "I'm here."

And later, as he worked his way through the last of the fries, Floyd appeared beside him. "Listen," he said, "I'm sorry about how things went, but it wasn't my fault." His long, thin face was a mask.

Arnold met his eyes. Floyd looked away. "Forget it."

"I did what I could." He threw his hands helplessly toward the ceiling. "Well, dammit, what do you expect with a story like that?" He stood quivering with anger, as if somehow Arnold had betrayed him. Then he turned without another word and stalked out the door.

#

Midnight on the western loop of the windscreen.

"We should not be meeting like this, Arnold."

His car was parked in the lot behind the bus plant, well out of sight. "Now you're willing to speak. Where were you when I needed you?"

"I have no intention of talking to a mob."

"I'm sorry you're bound by all these rules. But the whole town now thinks I'm crazy."

"I thought we'd agreed that you wouldn't say anything about this."

Arnold shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. "I'm sorry. All right? I made a mistake. But now I'm going to have to move out of here. You know that? I can't possibly stay in Fort Moxie after this."

"I think you're overreacting."

"That's easy for you to say."

"Listen, Arnold: do you have any idea what would have happened if I'd said hello to that crowd last night?"

"Half the town might not think I'm crazy."

"They might think worse things of a man who talks to voices in the woods. Voices that talk back."

"Well, whatever," grumbled Arnold, "it's done."

"I wasn't sure I'd see you again."

"I thought about staying away. If I get caught here, things will get worse."

"I think it would be a mistake to change your pattern."

"There's no one around now, is there?"

"No."

"Are you sure? They sneaked up on you pretty good last night."

"I was distracted." Long pause. "When are you planning to move?"

"As soon as I can sell the Lock 'n' Bolt."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. Maybe Fargo."

"Where is that?"

"About a hundred fifty miles south."

"How far is a mile?"

Arnold got up, and walked to the outer edge of the trees. They could see the river, curving in from the border, and, off in the distance, the border station. He pointed. "Those buildings are about five miles."

"Fargo seems close."

Arnold sensed a reproach. "What would you suggest?"

"A place further away than just over the curve of the horizon."

"Whatever."

"You sound bitter."

"Well, what do you expect? Worst thing that ever happened to me was meeting you. You're right, you know: you shouldn't say a word. Not to anybody."

The branches stirred. "Why did you tell Floyd?"

Arnold leaned against a box elder. A single car had just pulled out of the border station, and was starting south on I-29. He watched its headlights for a while. "I knew I shouldn't have said anything. But

he was a friend. At least I thought he was. He promised not to let it go any further."

"He should have honored his commitment.

"Yes, he damn well should."

"That is the tradition, is it not? Do what you say you will do."

"You could say that. You know what I'd like to do: you and I go over to his house and scare the hell out of him." Arnold was staring at the ground. It was difficult talking to someone you couldn't see. You never knew where to look. "I don't suppose you'd consent to that, would you?"

"You're vindictive, Arnold. The wind off the prairie was picking up. Leaves were pouring out of the trees. "No. I would not."

"That's what I thought." It was cooling off, and Arnold was thinking he wouldn't stay long tonight. "Do you feel the cold?"

"Not at this level. I'm able to generate internal heat. But at the height of your winter, yes. It is too cold for me."

"This whole business is my own fault."

"I'm glad you can see that."

"But I don't know what to do about it."

"Forget it. Your townsmen will."

A tractor-trailer rumbled north on the expressway. "Easy for you to say."

"Arnold, does it matter so much to you to be able to prove that I am here?"

"Yes. Damn it, it does. Id like somebody to know I'm not a nut."

"Then that somebody should be someone important to you?"

"Yes."

"All right, then. I will do it."

"You'll talk to someone?"

"Yes." The word hung there, in the moonlight.

"I'll bring Floyd up here tomorrow."

"No. Not Floyd."

Oh, yes, please. Floyd. Let me rub his nose in the truth. Speak to him the way you spoke to me. Spook him. Send him running out of the tree belt. Is it so much to ask? "I would really like it to be Floyd."

"There is a young woman who sits each day in the park at the library."

"Linda Tollman." A sense of unease crept over Arnold.

"I don't know. She is quite attractive. By simian standards."

"What of her?"

"I will speak to her."

"Are you crazy? I don't know her. What's the point?"

"She is important to you. She fulfills your requirement."

"That's not true. I don't even know the woman."

"That's my offer."

"You've been spying on me." The sudden realization irritated him.

"I happened to be there."

"Sure. And you want me to approach a strange woman, and ask her to go for a walk in the woods, so an invisible thing can talk to her?"

"I am not a thing."

"Forget it."

"It's your call, Arnold."

"Listen, try to understand the problem here." He went for a reasonable tone. "I've been moderately successful with women during my time." He could never have maintained eye contact with that one. "But you're asking me to pick up a woman I've never met. I'm not good at that. It's not my style. If you don't like Floyd, how about if I brought up, say, Tom Pratkowski? He was here the other night. A little out of line, then. But he's okay. I like him. He's important to me."

"The woman. Nobody else."

#

His first customer in the morning was Robert Schilling. Rob was the town's resident model train hobbyist, a retired customs inspector who came by the store occasionally to pick up wire and screws and plaster of paris. Rob was in his eighties, and moved, as one might say, with great deliberation. Arnold didn't believe the depleted energy levels were a function of his age. Even when Arnold was a boy, Rob had not been the man you would want to lead the escape from a burning theater. But today, he entered the Lock 'n' Bolt in a state of considerable excitement.

He pushed in immediately after Arnold had unlocked and opened the door. "Damndest thing I ever saw," he said.

Arnold grinned. "What's that?"

"You been over to Floyd's?" Rob's eyes were wide, and he looked thoroughly rattled. Rob never looked upset. Not ever.

"No," he said. "Why?"

"Go see it." He never quite got out of the doorway. "Go see what?"

"Floyd's house. It's devil's work." He banged out, crossed the street with long, sure strides, and crashed into Ed's Supermarket. Arnold stared after him. It was the closest Rob had ever come to delivering a religious sentiment.

There was a fair amount of traffic in the street: people were boiling out of the Downtown Cafe and the Federal Building. Some were pointing, in his general direction. Or toward Fifth Street. Then, the supermarket began to empty. Ep Colley, wearing a long gray woolen sweater twice his size, hurried out of the bank next door to the Lock 'n' Bolt. Maude Everson, the teller, was right behind him. Arnold leaned out the door. "Hey, Maude, what's going on?"

"Something about Floyd being buried." She threw the words over her shoulder and kept walking.

He heard sirens.

Arnold never considered simply leaving the store. Tradition weighed far too heavily. Instead, he called Janet and invited her to come in early ("if you like"). When she arrived, thirty minutes later and out of breath, she looked frightened.

"Something really strange happened at Floyd's." But her explanation was too garbled to understand easily, so he left her in mid-sentence and hurried outside. The sirens, by then, had stopped. Cars were moving, but an out-of-uniform Border Patrolman had taken up traffic duty at the Fifth Street intersection, and was letting no one turn in there. Large numbers of people were coming out of the side streets from the south side of town, and were running and walking, collecting into a steady stream that moved past the Jefferson School and flowed north past the Border Patrolman.

Devil's work.

A chill worked its way up Arnold's back. He had complained bitterly to the Traveler about Floyd. Had suggested joint action against him. But the wind creature was not human. Had he forgot that essential point? And spurred it on to commit some terrible atrocity?

He crossed the Jefferson school grounds and joined the small army moving up Fifth Street. Arnold's size prevented his getting a good look until he'd got to within about a block. And then his blood froze. The crowd was thick around Floyd's property, and vehicles cluttered the street, but that wasn't what had drawn his eye: something dark and enormous, some Mesozoic thing had attached itself to the front of the modest frame house. Emergency lights blinked, and a couple of the volunteer firemen were prominent, trying to maintain control in the absence of police. (Fort Moxie had no police. Arnold assumed that a deputy would now be on his way over from Cavalier.)

He got closer, and the Mesozoic thing gradually resolved itself into an enormous pile of dead leaves. Floyd's once-exquisite front yard was piled high with them. They rose in vast mounds, spilled across the top of his porch, buried the upstairs windows, buried the box elders, buried the driveway and maybe the Nissan. They spilled into the street, and washed across the property on either side.

Arnold looked nervously for Floyd, and was relieved to see him off to one side, gesturing to an EMT. The EMT was there with the rescue unit, all of whom had joined the crowd in gawking at the spectacle. Floyd was alternately jabbing with both hands and throwing his palms out, imploring the skies to open up and drown someone.

Some spectators were pointing off in various other directions, and talking with considerable excitement. They had noticed that, with the exception of Floyd's immediate neighbors, who had suffered

by their proximity to his house, every visible lawn, every piece of open ground, including the library and the high school, was immaculate. It appeared that something had swept every stray leaf within several blocks, and dumped it all on Floyd. And Floyd's place was engulfed with a mountain of vegetable debris.

A child came from nowhere, dashed between the rescue workers, and leaped onto one of the mounds. Its mother was right behind it, pulled it out, and dragged it kicking and screaming away.

Someone snickered. The volunteers grinned. The Border Patrol laughed. The people from the Federal Building roared. The crowd hooted. And cheered. It was as if a wave had broken: Gales of laughter swept across the crowd. Arnold joined in with a whole heart.

Abruptly, Floyd was standing in front of him, his face squeezed into a brick-red snarl. He pointed a trembling finger at Arnold. "You did this," he shrieked. And then, to the entire baffled assemblage: "It was Whitaker."

#

Linda Tollman was seated on the middle bench when Arnold arrived at a few minutes after five that afternoon. He had traded in his sweatsuit for slacks, a tennis shirt, and a yellow sweater that didn't quite fit anymore.

He posted himself about fifteen yards away, on another bench, pretending to read a Russian novel. But his heart pounded, and his juices flowed, and his level of terror mounted. He held onto his book, gripped it with white fingers, as if it were the only thing anchoring him to his secure, predictable existence.

She was the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

He could not make out the title of her book. An empty plastic bag, from which she had been feeding the squirrels (O, happy beasts!), lay beside her. She was not reading, but seemed instead to be gazing off into the distance, and Arnold noted with satisfaction that she paid no attention to the admiring glances she drew from all who passed, both male and female.

He tried to catch her eye, to see whether he might elicit some faint encouragement. But she never looked his way.

He was going to have to get up and walk over. What would he say?

Hello. My name's Arnold Whitaker. May I join you?

No. He might have tried that when he first arrived. It was too late now. Too much a blatant attempt at a pickup.

He could stroll in her general direction. Casually. Put his hands in his pockets, and pretend to admire the oak tree behind her, or the Greek pillars fronting the library. Nice columns. Doric, aren't they?

His pulse hammered in his ears. He clung to the arms of the bench.

There was more traffic than normal on Fifth Street, but they were all headed for Floyd's house, to gawk and take pictures. The world never notices the truly significant dramas.

He tried to surprise himself, and threw a quick command to his muscles: Get up.

No response.

Go on over. Say hello.

A passing breeze stirred her hair. With an achingly feminine gesture, she brushed it back. He tried to imagine that hand touching his wrist. Holding his cheek while those lambent eyes poured themselves into his own.

Do it.

The breeze lifted Linda Tollman's skirt. And while he sat, desperately aware of the hard surface of his bench, of the individual planks and the spaces between, and of the texture of the paved walkway, she closed her book, got up, brushed her skirt with a graceful left-handed movement, picked up her briefcase, and without (as far as he could tell) ever having seen him, strode off.

#

"What happened?"

The sky smelled of coming rain. "Forget it. I really do not want to play games with you."

"Okay." The sound rolled through the trees, splashed into the water, cut the tops off ripples. It moved among the box elders, pushed dead leaves before it, tugged at his trousers. And finally faded.

"You know I can't bring her up here."

"Why not?"

Arnold trembled. Here, in this solid American place, on the banks of the Red River, on the edge of Fort Moxie, North Dakota, he was acutely aware of standing at the threshold of another world, looking across the top of a globe-circling forest at multiple moons and strange constellations. "Because she's a stranger. You don't just invite strange women into the woods."

"You're not afraid of her, are you, Arnold?"

"Of course not."

"Then why don't you make the effort?"

"Why does it have to be her? Why not Aggie? Or Rob Schilling? Or almost anybody else in town?"

"The woman on the bench is quite attractive."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I would like to meet her."

"Why?"

"As simply as I can state it: I share your own appreciation for beautiful things. I would enjoy speaking with her."

"You can't be serious."

"Arnold, you've expressed the wish that you and I had never spoken. I can assure you that if she were a jogger, we never would have."

Arnold sighed. "You called us simians. Why would you care about a simian?" He was leaning against

a tree at the edge of a glade.

"Tell me: are you familiar with the gazelle?"

"I know what it looks like."

"Would you say that the animal is beautiful?"

"It's all right. I can take it or leave it."

"Picture the gazelle, with its wide eyes, and its clean, innocent features. Endow it with intelligence. Note that its compassion already exceeds the standard for most humans. Add self-awareness, of the kind that the woman has. Would you not find the creature attractive?"

Suspicion had begun to grow in Arnold's heart. "You're not planning some sort of assault, are you?"

"Of course not. Arnold, are you thinking sex?"

"I don't think so. You're not capable of sex, right?"

The Traveler was slow to respond.

"Are you?"

"Not strictly speaking."

"Unstrictly speaking."

"I am capable of orgasmic response."

Arnold shuddered. "How?"

"You have no word." Pause. "By engulfing something warm and intelligent and beautiful."

He began to back away. "Engulfing?"

"It is not how it sounds. No one is harmed."

"It sounds kinky."

"Your term is unfamiliar. But I can guess the meaning. Emotional relations between intelligent species is not unknown, Arnold."

"It still sounds unnatural to me."

"It's not even rare."

"Raped by a wind storm."

"Stop thinking sex, Arnold. We are beyond that. We are speaking of a higher emotion."

"Love?"

"Perhaps."

"Love is a temporary chemical imbalance."

"Others would define it differently."

"How would you define it?"

"As a sublime appreciation for the noblest qualities in a fellow creature. Affection ignited by passion. In the higher beings, it is accompanied by an obsession for its object's welfare."

"I'm not going to deliver Linda Tollman to you. The whole idea's obscene."

"You don't trust me." It sounded genuinely offended. "I would never harm anyone."

"Ha," said Arnold. "Look what you did to poor Floyd."

"It was for Floyd's own good. And you feel sorry for him now, right?"

"I didn't say that. Anyway, she won't come. Even if I wanted her to, she wouldn't come."

Again, a restless movement in the trees. "Certainly not, if you insist on sitting there all afternoon until she gets up and leaves. Did you think she would walk over and invite you to go for a walk by the river's edge?"

Arnold felt his cheeks redden. "You were there today, weren't you? You didn't tell me you'd be there."

The grass rippled.

"I want you to stay away."

"As you like."

#

Arnold understood Linda Tollman's inclination, while the weather held, to visit the park each afternoon. Fort Moxie's winters were long and bitter; one did not waste sun-filled days, particularly in September, when so few remained.

It was cooler today. The sun was hidden by a swirl of gray clouds.

This time, he instructed himself as he approached along the paving, walk right up to her. Say hello as casually as you can, and sit down. (He had hoped the other benches would all have occupants, but he could see immediately after coming off the parking lot that there was plenty of room for him elsewhere.)

His mouth went dry. He could feel his pulse picking up. She had propped her book in her lap and seemed to be focused on it. Several children played unnoticed on the lawn behind her. She wore blue slacks, a white blouse and sweater. An oversized multi-colored scarf had been tossed across one shoulder. Arnold wondered what it would be like to have such a creature in his life. He suspected there must be a husband or boy friend lingering somewhere.

He summoned all his courage and stopped in front of her. Actually stopped. He pretended to look at the box elder behind her, hoping to suggest appreciation for its subtle beauty. Meantime, he strained his peripheral vision for some sign of response from her.

She turned a page.

"Lovely day," he said, in a strangled voice.

Dumb. Couldn't he do better than that?

Her eyes touched him. They were vividly, electrically green. Brilliant, luminous eyes that could have swallowed him. "Yes," she said, in a neutral, uninterested voice, "it is." And that magnificent gaze slid off over his right shoulder and locked again on that goddam book.

Our Mutual Friend, he noted. Dickens.

An icy chill expanded in Arnold's stomach. This is not going to work. "I noticed you here yesterday."

She nodded without looking up.

Arnold did a kind of mental countdown from six and, on zero, took the plunge: "Do you mind if I join you?" His lungs weren't working right, his voice had gone to a higher register, and he mumbled the last two words. Maybe mumbled all of it.

"Of course," she said, with an inflection that neither invited nor rebuked. She moved over to make room. Plenty of room.

"Do you come here often?"

She continued to study the page. "Only to read."

A terrible silence settled over the park. Three adolescent girls came out of the library entrance. They were laughing in the conspiratorial manner of females everywhere. He sat at his end of the bench, pushed against the planks, felt the heat rise in his face. He was trying desperately to think of something else to say.

Would you like to join me for dinner? We could discuss Dickens, How about a walk down by the river?

"How's the book?"

She was about halfway through. "Quite good," she answered brightly. She looked at him again, and he felt opportunity beckon. What next? He could only think of the pain that would come with being sneered at by this lovely creature. And of the certainty that she would respond to any initiative in just that way. She sat resplendent in late afternoon sunlight, end-of-the-day sunlight, dazzling against the fading, pedestrian world around her. How often, he wondered, had the Traveler floated invisible beside her?

Was it there now? (He didn't necessarily take his visitor at its word.)

She seemed suddenly to recall something she'd forgotten. She held up one slim wrist to glance at her watch, and frowned. "I didn't realize it was so late." She rose, and, without another word, snatched up her bag and strode off into the deepening evening.

#

He was too embarrassed to go back to the wind screen. The prospect of trying to explain himself to the Traveler was painful. Damn the thing anyway. Arnold sat up late that night, watching TV, reading a techno thriller, unable to concentrate on either. Linda Tollman filled his mind. And the Grand Forks weather man predicted high winds and unseasonable rain.

It started in the early morning. By the time he went downstairs to open up, a fifty-five mile-an-hour gale had developed. It rattled the old building which housed the Lock 'n' Bolt, and drove everyone off the

streets.

Arnold tended an empty store. He put some tape on the windows as a precaution, and set up a portable TV back of the cash register, to follow the weather reports. Grand Forks thought conditions would abate shortly after midday. Meantime, high winds were sweeping the prairie from northern Manitoba into South Dakota.

They were doing some damage. They blew over Curt Gaarstad's garage and knocked out a few windows and picked up the bright new metal sign over Ed's Supermarket and lost it. Nobody ever saw it again. They also caught a shipment of shingles and roofing material down at the lumber yard and scattered it around town. The remainder of the dead leaves deposited at Floyd's (about half had been trucked away) went south, and they too vanished out over the prairie.

The wind blew throughout the early morning. It banged and clattered and hammered at the store, but Arnold felt safe because he'd been through similar storms countless times before. Light rain fell occasionally, the drops driven before the gusts, and smeared across Arnold's windows.

Janet called around ten to explain that they'd lost a storm door, and that she would be late. Arnold suggested she stay home until the weather settled. "Nothing happening here anyway."

He looked out at the deserted street and fretted for the Traveler. The few trees along Bannister Avenue heaved and writhed.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. At a quarter to eleven, he broke with custom, with his own iron law, and locked up. He got his car out of the garage, drove to Fifth Street, and turned right. No other traffic was moving.

He pulled as close to the wind screen as he could get, and climbed out. The wind knocked him over, took his breath away. He struggled upslope, into the trees. They provided no shelter whatever. He cupped his hands around his mouth and tried to shout over the incessant roar.

"Traveler."

But it was hopeless. Twigs, pebbles, debris pelted him. He struggled back to the jogging path, and tried again.

In the distance, he could see more rain coming.

"Traveler."

The storm howled.

And after a short time, while sheets of rain sliced like knives through the wind screen, Arnold retreated, cold, drenched, breathless, to his car.

#

He spent a long, dreary, frightening day. He was uncertain about the capabilities of his visitor, or its limitations. But he feared the worst. Heavy rains washed down after the winds had subsided. They beat steadily against the windows over at Clint's, while Arnold poked at a hamburger and french fries. He stayed in the restaurant, ordering coffee, and then beer, preferring human company tonight. And on this evening, most especially, he resented the Traveler. I may have lost you, and there is not even anyone with whom I can talk.

It was still raining steadily when he crossed back to the hardware store, and went up to his apartment to wait out the storm. The ten o'clock news reported it had already ended, but Arnold saw no change until well after midnight. Then, while the night grew suddenly still, he went back once more to the wind screen.

"Hello, Arnold." The voice reached out to him while he was still on the slope.

"Traveler, are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Where were you yesterday? I couldn't find you."

"I was right here."

"Why didn't you answer me?"

Laughter rippled through the wet trees. Too much competition. The voice of the storm was far louder than mine. But I was moved by your concern.

Arnold would have liked to clasp the creature, to pound its shoulder, shake its hand. "I wish I could touch you," he said.

A warm current flowed around him. You have.

The ground was soggy. There was no dry place to sit. "I just wanted to be sure you were all right."

"I'm fine."

Arnold was still only at the edge of the trees. His shoes and trousers were soaked from the high grass. "I'm going home. I'll see you tomorrow."

"What about the woman?"

"It didn't work out."

"Couldn't you have done more with the book? That was your wedge, Arnold."

"I did the best I could."

"Sometimes you behave as if you've lived most of your life in another world."

The Traveler seemed bigger somehow. As if it had absorbed river and trees. And the town, and even the endless plain beyond. "Look," he said, "the only way I could get her to come here with me would be at gunpoint."

"You underrate yourself. You are in fact quite handsome, except when you're trying to make an impression. Or when you're frightened."

"That's not what I mean," he said defensively.

"You should try again."

"I've had enough."

"You need to stand up straight. You slouch when you're under pressure. Look her right in the eye. Go after the book. That's your key."

"I can't do any of this. You're asking me to change the habits of a lifetime."

"It might help if you gave up the rumpled look. Get your trousers pressed. Maybe invest in a suede jacket. Get rid of the baggy sweater."

"I like this sweater. I've had it a long time."

"I know."

"And anyway, do you have any idea what a suede jacket costs?"

"Wouldn't she be worth it?"

"No. I'm not going back there. She walked off and left me sitting on the bench. She has no interest in me."

"All right, Arnold. This time, I'll help you."

"What do you mean?"

"I can move warm air. Stimulate her. She will find you very attractive."

"You wouldn't do that." Arnold was horrified. "What are you thinking of?"

#

His night was filled with visions of Linda Tollman. He threw damp sheets off, stared listlessly into the dark abyss over his bed, and listened to the elements play against the side of the house. Where was the Traveler now? Was it perhaps influencing him in some darkly subtle way, as it claimed it could influence the woman? The creature seemed so amiable, that he was inclined to overlook how devious it could be.

But there was the delicious possibility that it really could stir Linda Tollman's emotions. Would he accept her on such terms? He tried to imagine those eyes smoldering with passion for him, those lips pressed against his.

The fix is in.

He played and replayed his conversation with her, inserting variations, clever phrases; employing a casual, self-assured smile. She returns the smile and takes his hand. I've been waiting a lifetime for you, Arnold. She is so close he can hear her heartbeat.

He nods. She is only a gazelle. And I, for you.

It was still raining Saturday morning. He turned the Lock 'n' Bolt over to Janet and Dean for the day and headed south.

I-29 between the border and Grand Forks is a long, straight, unremarkable run of eighty miles. The countryside is flat and featureless, broken only by the city of Drayton, with its smokestack, at the halfway mark. The pavement steamed, and the gray sky literally sagged into the prairie.

Arnold arrived at about eleven, treated himself to a big lunch at the Village Inn, and headed for the mall. He was an impatient shopper, and by two o'clock had bought two pairs of jeans, a few sport shirts, and a pair of shoes. And a suede jacket. The jacket was tan, perhaps a trifle conservative for Arnold's taste, but the saleslady admired it, and it did seem to possess a stylish flare. It cost three hundred dollars.

He splashed back into Fort Moxie, and impulsively turned north on Fifth Street, past Floyd's, and cruised by the library. The rain had turned to a light drizzle.

Lights were on in the Greek temple. A couple of kids stood talking in the colonnade. The bench that Linda Tollman favored seemed to have attracted a yellow nimbus.

#

He spent the weekend reading Our Mutual Friend. He read over meals, read through long afternoons, read deep into the night. All other projects went on hold. He wasn't doing it simply for her, he told himself, but because it was a book he should read.

He assumed she would not go to the park over the weekend, but the point was rendered moot by the weather, which remained cold and dreary. It was now late enough in the season that there might be no more pleasant days, in which case he would have no choice but to call her. Or forget her. (She was not in the phone book, but Information had a listing for her.) That approach would of course require him to state his intentions directly. It was not a technique which meshed well with Arnold's style, which was more suited to holding the fort than organizing a sally.

In the late afternoons, he trekked through the dismal weather up to the wind screen, and huddled cold and wet beneath an elm that provided purely symbolic shelter. And he and the Traveler talked.

Arnold grumbled about his task, but the Traveler refused to entertain his objections. It talked instead about the sculpting of some particularly interesting peaks in the Canadian Rockies. And about the clash of air currents near some coastal areas. (The thing was unclear which coastal areas.) And it commented on the planet's deteriorating atmosphere. "Unbalanced. I would say there are too many people."

"I assume," said Arnold, "that it's a phase most cultures pass through."

"Think of it more as an intelligence test. Most species have a good record of taking care of their worlds. It's common among Simian-types, though."

They talked about nuclear weapons: