

ORPHANS OF EDEN

Well, what would *you* have done?

Begin at the front part, Spider:

It was just after two in the morning. I was right here in my office (as we call the dining room in this family), about to write a science fiction story called "Orphans of Eden" on this loyal senescent Macintosh, when he appeared in the doorway from the kitchen, right next to my Lava Lamp. I don't mean "came through the doorway and stopped"; I mean he *appeared*, in the doorway. He sort of shimmered into existence, like a Star Trek transportee, or the ball-players disappearing into the corn in *Field of Dreams* in reverse. He was my height and age, but of normal weight. His clothing was crazier than a basketball bat. I never did get the hang of the fashion assumptions behind it. I'd like to say the first thing I noticed about it was the ingenious method of fastening, but actually that was the second thing; first I observed that his clothing pointedly avoided covering either geni-tals or armpits. I kind of liked that. If you lived in *a nice* world, why would you want to hide your smell? He stood with his hands slightly out from his sides, palms displayed, an expectant look on his extraordinarily beautiful face. He didn't look afraid of me, so I wasn't afraid of him. I hit command-S to save my changes (title and a handful of sentences) and forgot that story completely. Forever, now that I think about it.

"When are you from?" I asked him. "Originally, I mean."

I'm not going too fast for you, am I? If a guy materializes in front of you, and you're sober, he *might* be the genius who just invented the transporter beam . . . but if he's dressed funny, he's a time traveler, right? Gotta be. *Thank God the kitchen door was open* had been my very first thought.

He smiled, the kind of pleased but almost rueful smile you make when a friend comes through a practical joke better than you thought he would. "Very good," he told me.

"It was okay, but that's not a responsive answer."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I can't say I think a lot of the question itself. Still, if it really matters to you, I was born in the year 2146 . . . though we didn't call it that at the time, naturally. Feel better, now?"

He was right: it hadn't been much of a question, just the only one I could come up with on the spur of the moment. But I thought it small of him to point it out. I mean, what a spur—what a moment! And the information was mildly interesting, if useless. "You don't go around pulling this on *civilians*, do you?" I asked irritably. "You could give somebody a trauma."

"Good Lord, no," he said. "Why, half the other *science fiction writers* alive now would lose sphincter control if I materialized in their workplace like this."

It was some comfort to think that my work might survive at least another hundred and fifty-five years. Unless, of course, he had run across one of my books in the middle of next week. "That's because they think wonder is just another tool, like sex or violence or a sympathetic pro-tagonist."

"Whereas you know it is a religion, a Grail, the Divine Carrot that is the only thing that makes it possible for human beings to ever *get* anywhere without a stick across

their ass, yes, it shows in your work. You understand that only by putting his faith in wonder can a man be a moral being. So you're not afraid of me, or compelled to disbelieve in me, and you probably hadn't even gotten around to trying to figure out a way to exploit me until I just mentioned it: you're too busy wondering."

I thought about it. "Well, I'm sorry to say I've been wasting a good deal of time and energy on trying not to look stupid in retrospect—but yes, most of my attention has been on wonder. Before we get to the question and answer section, though, what's your name?"

"Why?" he asked. "There's only one of me."

"Suppose I want to swear at you."

He gave a smaller version of that faintly annoy-ing smile. "Good point. My name is Daniel."

My wife's ex-husband is named Daniel. Also amazing, also faintly annoying at times. "Would you mind if I went and woke up my wife? She'd be sore if I let her sleep through this." Jeanne enjoys looking at very beautiful men. Obviously. Our teenager, on the other hand, would doubtless find a two-hundred-year-old grownup five times more boring than me—and enough music to wake her (the only thing that will do the trick) would probably also wake the tenants downstairs in the basement suite. "And would you care for some coffee?"

He shuddered slightly—then saw my expres-sion. "Sorry. That was for the coffee, not your wife. Imagine I brought you back to a Cro-Magnon's cave, and he offered you refreshments."

My turn to apologize. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"As to Jeanne . . . please don't misunderstand. I would be honored to meet her under other circumstances, another time. Your collaborations with her are even better than your solo work." I nodded strong agreement. "But if I correctly decipher her input therein, she is a Soto Zen Buddhist and a sentimentalist."

"What's wrong with that?" I demanded.

"Nothing at all. But I seek advice on a prac-tical matter of morality . . . and *you* understand how omelettes are made."

I frowned. "Do you mind if the Cro-Magnon has a little cup of jaguar blood to help him think?"

"This is your house," he said simply.

Well, actually it isn't—I'm a writer; I rent but I knew what he meant, and agreed with it. I thought about that while I turned another cup of water into dark Tanzanian magic and spooned in sugar and whipped cream. By the time I tipped the Old Bushmill's into the coffee my Irish was up. "Before we start," I said.

"Yes?" He was watching my preparations with the same gravity I'd like to think I could bring to watching an autopsy.

"You have managed to be sufficiently inter-esting that I will forgive you this once," I said. "But if you *ever* again drop in without phoning ahead first like that, I'll set the cat on you."

He did not quite look wildly around. "Do you have a cat?"

I winced. Smokey was killed a month ago, by some asshole motorist in a hurry. One of the best masters I ever served. "I'll get one if necessary. And I don't want to

hear any guff when you reach my answering machine, either. It's always on. People should be grateful I let 'em leave messages."

"Understood and agreed," he said. "And I apologize. But in my defense: what would you have done if I had left a phone message?"

I nodded. "That's why I forgive you this once." I made one last try at hospitality. "I can offer you charcoal-filtered water."

"Thank you, no."

I pointed to a kitchen chair, and took the one across the table from it for myself. He sat beautifully, like a dancer, or one of Jeanne's Alexander Technique students.

I took a long appreciative sip of my Irish coffee. "I'm listening, Daniel," I said.

"Before we start."

"Yeah?"

"When will you begin to get excited?"

"About a minute after you leave, I hope. By then I can afford to."

He nodded. We both knew I was lying; the cup was trembling. He really was trying to be polite.

Why was he trying so hard to be polite?

"You spoke of wanting my advice on a practical matter of morality," I went on. "Is this an ends-justifying-means kind of deal?"

I had succeeded in impressing him. "You have succeeded in impressing me," he said.

"Yes." I sighed. "You've read *Mindkiller*."

He nodded.

It's one of my scarier books. One or two critics, after having had someone literate summarize it for them, have declared that it says the end justifies the means. Beginning for the first time to be a little scared myself, I said, "And have *you* got the secrets of mindwipe and mind-write?"

"Oh, no," he said convincingly enough to make me relax again.

"What's holding things up?" I asked. "I expected that stuff to come along well before 2040."

"You vastly underestimate the complexity of modeling the brain."

I nodded philosophically. "It's going around these days. Well, I'm relieved, I guess. I had to force that happy ending. That happens to me a lot in the serious books."

He nodded again. "But you keep doing it. Splendid."

"Thank you." The better the flattery, the warier I become. Back to business. "Then I am to assume that you have another moral dilemma, as sharp as the one faced by Jacques in *Mindkiller*?"

"It is to me. I want you to tell me if I am a monster . . . or simply a victim of my inability not to ask the next question."

"Or both," I pointed out.

"Or both," he agreed.

I took another long gulp of Irish coffee. I've long since worked out to my own satisfaction the one about a writer's responsibility . . . but I'd always known that book would come back to haunt me one day. "Let me get this straight. You have already done . . . whatever this thing is. Some would call it monstrous. And now you

want my opinion on whether or not you were right to do it. Why? Since it's too late."

"I need to know if I dare go public—in my own fiction, my own space/time. If I can't per-suade you, I can't persuade anybody."

I always had the sneaking idea I'd make a good judge, if only there weren't so damned many laws. Time to find out if I was right. "First tell me your ends. Then your means. If you can do it that way."

"I can approach it that way," he said, "but the ends imply the means. I can put it in a nutshell. I wanted to do meaningful sociological experi-ments."

I understood him at once, because he was speaking to the heart of the science fiction story I'd intended to write. But in case I only *thought* I understood him, I dragged the exposition out of him like a good character should. "What do you mean?"

"I think you suspect," he said. "Most of the really important questions about human soci-eties are unanswerable because you can't contain the size of the question. You can't understand the ancient Romans if you don't know about all their neighbors and trading partners and subject peoples, and you can't really grasp any of *them* any better because they all influence each other helter skelter -and you can't even get a start on any one of them until you know *their* whole history back to their year one. It's the history that's even worse than the local complexity: so much of *any* society is vestigial, the original reasons for its fundamental assumptions forgotten.

"And it's the *history* that always gets in the way of trying to make things better. Look at your own contemporary fiction. Can you imagine any solution to the Irish problem or the Serbo-Croatian problem or the Palestinian-Jewish prob-lem or any one of a hundred others like them that does not involve giving everyone involved mass amnesia and erasing all the history books?"

"Well, yes," I said. "But it won't come soon. Now that you tell me telepathy isn't even going to be as easy as time travel."

"For all I know telepathy could come along before 2300," he said. "I left in 2292 . . ." (I calculated without much surprise that he was at least a hundred and forty-four subjective years old) " . . . and one of the limitations of time travel—a blessed one in my opinion—is that you cannot go further *forward* in time than you have already been. The only way to see the future is to live it. But I'm not expecting telepathy soon—then/soon—either."

I finished my coffee. "I'm sorry to hear that. Still, there's no real hurry. Once we have telepa-thy *and* time travel, we can build Heaven or a reasonable facsimile retroactively."

"As in your book *Time Pressure*," he agreed. "But since I don't expect that soon and can't depend on it ever, I'm trying to save the human race in a different way. There is some urgency about the matter. When I come from, we have come very close to destroying ourselves in cata-strophic warfare."

"Nanotechnological?"

"Worse. I strongly advise you to leave it at that."

I could not suppress the shudder . . . or the squirm that followed it. I had been wondering if he was too evolved to have immunities for primitive local germs just wondering, not wor-rying, as I believe a man's health is his business. Now I was reminded that there are circum-stances under which a man's health is your business.

Was Daniel carrying anything?

Too late to worry now. "What kind of a fiction is it?"

He hesitated. "It's hard to give you a mean-ingful answer. Imagine I'm a Cro-Magnon. Tell me: what's your world like?"

"Giddy, with fear and pride and guilt and shame, but trying to be as decent as it can."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. In those terms, the 2290s are sullen, scared and preoc-cupied with the present. In the immediate past is horror, and just beyond that are the things that inexorably brought it on us, and still we prefer not to think overmuch of the future. We see what went wrong, and don't know how to fix it. As near as we can see, all the future holds is another slow painful climb to the pinnacle which blasts all who stand on it, and those of us who think about that wonder what's the point. So not many of us think about it."

I was more grateful than ever to have lived my life in the twentieth century. But I was also puzzled. "It's hard to square that with your clothes. That kind of outfit in that kind of world doesn't ring true. People like that would cover up."

He smiled sadly. "These clothes were designed elsewhere."

Skip irrelevancies. The night was old. "Okay. So what do you figure to do about your situa-tion?"

He clasped his fingers together before him on the table. With his spine so straight, it made him look as if he were praying. "It's all the history, you see. The weight of all that history, all those mistakes we can't ever undo or forget."

"I can understand that."

"Probably you can; the problem is just now beginning to become apparent. Time was when the maximum length of history was the number of stories an old man could tell before he died. Then we got too damned good at recording and preserving the stories. At about the same time there began to be too many stories, and they all interacted. And then came the Information Explosion. Human beings are only built to tol-erate the knowledge of so much failure and tragedy. All the things we've ever done to warp the human spirit, from making wars to making gods, are there in us, at the root of anything we plant, at the base of anything we build. When you try to start all over again from scratch, you find out you can't. Your definition of `scratch' merely defines the direction history has warped you in, and condemns you to tug in the other direction. But the weave is too complex to straighten.

"It's too late for us to start over. It's too late to try and create a society without taboos: the people who would try it are warped by the knowledge of what a taboo is. It's too late to try and create a society without sexual repression: the parents inevitably pass along to their chil-dren at least warped shadows of the repressions *they* inherited themselves. It's too late to make a society without racism . . . and so on. Every attempt at an experimental Utopian community has failed, no matter how hard they tried to keep themselves isolated from the surrounding world. Sealing yourself up in a self-sustaining space colony and smashing all your comm gear doesn't help. It's just too late to experiment with a society that has no possessions, or conformity, or tribalism, or irrational religions—all possible experimental subjects are compromised by their knowledge of human history. What's needed is some way to put an `Undo' key on history."

"I think I see where you're going," I said. "I was just about to write a story about—"

"I know," he interrupted. "And you were going to screw it up."

We'll never know, will we? "Go on."

"Well, I think you know the only possible solution. Let's do a thought experiment—I *know* you won't mind the pun. Hypothetically: put a bunch of preverbal children—infants, for preference—in a congenial artificial environment. Plenty of room, plenty of food for the taking, mild climate, no predators, an adequate supply of useful materials and appropriate technology for later. Immunize them against all disease, and give them doctor-robots that will see them into adulthood and then fall apart. Provide AI packages to teach language skills and basic hygiene—both carefully vetted to be as semantically value-free as possible—"

"Have the AI design the language," I suggested.

"Yes. Open-ended, but with just enough given vocabulary to sustain a complicated thought: let 'em invent their own. A clean foundation. When they're ready to handle it, have the machines teach them the basic principles of mathematics and science, using numbers rather than words wherever possible, and just enough philosophy to keep them from brewing up organized religion. And *not a damned word of history*. Then you go away, and come back in a thousand years."

"To find them knifing each other over which one has the right to sacrifice a peasant to the teaching machines," I said.

"You are not really that cynical."

"Of course I am. Why do you think I have to keep writing those happy endings? You know, another writer wrote a story years ago with the same basic theme as your thought experiment—"

"Yes," he said, "and what was the first thing his protagonist did? Saddled the poor little bastards with the author's own religion! Gifted them with shame and sin and an angry but bribeable pater-nalistic God and a lot of other 'moral' mumbo jumbo. Phooey. He had greatness in his hands and he blew it. That time."

I didn't quite agree, but the differences were quibbles. And I had something else to think about. This wasn't a science fiction story Daniel was describing, or any cockamamie "thought experiment" ...

I once heard a black woman use some memorable language: she described someone as having been "as ugly as Death backin' out of a outhouse, readin' *Mad* magazine; ugly enough to make a freight train take a dirt road."

All at once a thought uglier than that was slithering around under my hair.

"Talk about cynical," I went on, "why don't we get down to the crucial problem with this little thought experiment, as you call it?"

I was looking him in the eye, and he did not look away. But he didn't answer me either. So I did.

"The problem is, where do you get the infants?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "that was the problem."

I poured more Irish coffee, omitting coffee, cream and sugar. When it was gone I said, "So you're the guy that laid the bad rap on all those gypsies." I was trying hard not to hate him. I try not to hate anybody, no matter how much it seems indicated,

until I've walked around it a little while. And he hadn't said he was through talking yet. But so far I really hated this ...

He looked confused for the first time since I'd met him; then he got the reference. "No, no. That wasn't me, any more than it was gypsies. As far as I know, that child-stealing gossip was sheer wishful thinking on the part of parents, combined with a natural hatred of anyone who didn't have to stay in the village they were born in. I've never stolen a baby, anywhere in Time."

"Then where did you get them? Roll your own? In a test tube or a petri dish or whatever? Were the donors informed volunteers?" Even if the answer was yes, I didn't like this one any better. Call up human beings out of nothingness, to be born (or decanted or whatever) and suffer and die, for purely scientific reasons? At least the first generation of them compelled to grow up without parents or role models, forced to reinvent love and law and humor and a trillion other things I took for granted? If they could? Grow babies as guinea pigs?

"I've never made a baby either," he said. "Not even with someone else's genes."

I frowned. "Den ah give up, Mr. Bones—how *did* dat time traveler ... oh." Then I said: "Oh!" And finally: "Oh!"

"A lot of infants have been abandoned on a lot of windy hillsides or left in dumpsters since time began," he said sadly. "If Pharaoh's daughter had happened to miss Moses, she probably could have picked up another one the next day. It tends to happen most in places and times where, even if the child had somehow miraculously been found and taken in by some contemporary, it would have had a maximum life expectancy of about thirty years. So I denied some of them the comfort of a nice quick death by exposure or predator, brought them to a safe place and gave them the means to live in good health for hundreds of years."

"And used them as guinea pigs," I said, but without any real heat in it. I was beginning to see his logic.

He didn't duck it. "That's right. Now you tell me: are my actions forgivable?"

"Give me a minute," I said, and poured more whiskey and thought.

Thou shalt not use human beings as guinea pigs.

Don't be silly, Spider. Accept that and you've just tossed out most of medicine. Certainly all the vaccines. *First* you use guinea pigs, sure . . . but sooner or later you have to try it on a human or you're just a veterinarian. And meanwhile people are *dying*, in pain ...

Thou shalt not experiment on human beings without their informed consent.

Many valuable psych experiments collapse with informed consent. You can't experiment with the brain chemistry of a schizophrenic without endangering his life. You can't find out whether slapping a hysteric will calm him down by asking him: you have to try it and see what happens. Daniel's too is an experiment which by definition may not have informed consent: informing the subject destroys the experiment. Is there, Written anywhere, some fundamental law forbidding a man to withhold information, even if he believes it to be potentially harmful?

Thou shalt not use infants as guinea pigs.

Hogwash, for the same reasons as number one above. How do you test an infant-mortality preventative, if not on an infant? Should we not have learned how to do fetal heart surgery? Do not the benefits of amniocentesis outweigh the (please

God) few who will inevitably be acciden-tally skewered? Would Daniel's orphans really be better off dead than in Eden?

Thou shalt not play God.

God knows someone has to. Especially if the future is as grim as Daniel says. And She hasn't been answering Her phone lately. When it comes down to the crunch, humans have *always* tried to play God, if they thought they could pull it off...

Ah, there was the crux.

"And what kind of results have you gotten?" I asked.

His face split in a broad grin. "Ah, there's the crux, isn't it? If you examine the data that came out of the Nazi death camps, and profit from that terrible knowledge . . . are you any better than Dr. Mengele?"

I winced.

"That is the question I want you to answer," he said. "You are completely insulated from any possible backlash to your answer—the people who will ultimately judge me will never know you were consulted, even after the fact. There is no stick to be applied to you as a result of your answer. And now I will offer the carrot. The same carrot that got me into this."

I was already reaching for the whiskey. *Dammit, I thought, this isn't fair. All I ever tried to do was entertain people ...*

Balls, came the answer from deep inside.

"If you tell me that constructing the experi-ment was a moral act," he went on inexorably, "I will tell you everything I can about the results."

Well, what would *you* have done?