

*In his short story "And I Only Am Escaped to Tell Thee," Roger took a wry look at the tale of the Flying Dutchman. In his piece, John Varley returns to the fertile waters of that legend for a story that any air traveler will read with a shudder.*

# THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

## JOHN VARLEY

IT WAS DARK WHEN THE PLANE REACHED O'HARE, THREE hours late. Snow swirled in white tornadoes over the frozen field. The plowing crews had kept just one runway clear. Planes were stacked up back to New Jersey. Flights were being diverted to St. Louis, Cleveland, Dayton, and other places people didn't really want to go when they *intended* to go there.

The 727 hit the icy tarmac like a fat lady on skates, slewed to the left, then straightened out as the nose came down and the thrust reversers engaged. Then the plane taxied for thirty minutes.

When the jetway finally reached them and the FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign went off, Peter Meers stood up. He was immediately bumped back into his seat by a large man across the aisle. Somebody stepped on his foot.

He struggled to his feet again, reached for his carry-on bag under the seat. When he jerked on the handle, it snagged on something. He pushed at it with his foot, being jostled from behind and almost falling into the man from Seat B, waiting for Meers to get out. He yanked again, and heard a sound that meant there was a new, deep scratch on the expensive leather.

He looked up in time to have a filthy duffel bag fall from the overhead compartment into his face. A filthier hand appeared and yanked on the canvas strap, and the bag vanished into the press of bodies. Meers glimpsed a ragged man with a beard. How had such a man got aboard an airplane? he wondered. Could you buy airline tickets with food stamps?

Retrieving his briefcase and his laptop computer, he slung everything over his shoulders. It was another ten minutes of shuffling before he reached the closet at the front of the plane where a harried flight attendant was helping people reclaim their garment bags. He found his, grabbed it, and slung it over his shoulder. Then he waddled sideways toward the door

and the jetway. On the way out he barked his shin against a folded golf cart leaning against the exit door. Then he was trudging up the jetway into O'Hare.

O'Hare. ORD. On a snowy night with one runway operating, an inner circle of Hell. Meers shuffled down the concourse with several million other lost souls, all looking to make a connection. Those who had abandoned all hope—at least for the night—slumped in chairs or against walls or just stood, asleep on their feet.

At O'Hare, connections were made not on shadowy street corners, cash for tiny baggies, but at the ends of infinite queues shaped, twisted, and redoubled by yellow canvas bands strung between stainless steel poles, under lights as warm and homey as an operating theater. Meers found the right line and stood at the end of it. In ten minutes, he shoved his garment bag, his carry-on, his briefcase, and his laptop forward three feet with the tip of his shoe. Ten minutes later, he did it again. He was hungry.

When he reached the ticket counter the agent told him he had missed his connecting flight for home, and that there would be no more flights that night.

“However,” she said, frowning at her computer screen, “I have one seat available on a flight to Atlanta. You ought to be able to make a connection from there in the morning.” She looked up at him and smiled.

Meers took the rewritten ticket. The departure gate was a good three miles from where he stood. He shouldered his burdens and went off in search of food.

Everything was closed except one snack bar near his gate. Airport unions were on strike. The menu on the wall had been covered with a sheet of butcher paper, hand lettered: HOT DOGS \$4. COKES \$2. NO COFFEE. Behind the counter were two harried workers, a fiftyish woman with gray wisps of hair straggling from her paper cap, and a Hispanic man in his twenties with mustard and ketchup stains all over his apron.

When Meers was still a good distance away, the counterman suddenly threw down his hot dog tongs, snatched the hat from his head and crumpled it into a ball.

“I'm through with this shit!” he shouted. “I quit. *No mas!*”- He continued to scream in Spanish as he ran through a door in the back. The woman was shouting his name, which was Eduardo, but the man paid no

attention. He hit the red emergency bar on a fire door and an alarm sounded as he scrambled down the stairs outside.

Meers could see a little through the glass. The Hispanic man was short and stocky, but a good runner. He charged away from the building. From somewhere beneath, two uniformed security guards charged out, guns in their hands. Eduardo was nowhere to be seen. The guards kept going. There was a flash of light. Gunfire? There was too much noise from jet engines for Meers to be sure. He shivered, and turned back toward the snack counter.

He was still ten people back in line when they announced his flight to Atlanta. He was three back when they made the second announcement. The gray-haired woman, still distracted by the flight of Eduardo, slapped a hot dog into his hand and spilled a third of his Coke on the counter as another call came over the public address. Meers hurried to a stand-up counter. There were no onions, no relish. He squeezed some mustard out of a plastic packet, half of it squirting cleverly onto his tan overcoat. Cursing, dabbing at the mustard, Meers took a bite. It was lukewarm on one end, cold on the other.

Gulping Coke and choking down cold wienie and stale bun, Meers hurried to the boarding area. Down the jetway and into the 727. Most of the passengers were seated except a few struggling with crammed overhead compartments. He sidled down to seat 28B. In 28C was a woman who had to be three hundred pounds, most of it in the hips. In 28A was a man who was more like three-fifty, his face shiny with sweat. Meers looked around desperately, but he already knew this was the last, the absolute last seat on the plane.

The woman glared at him as she stood. Meers got his carry-on under the seat, then popped the overhead rack. There was about enough space to store a wallet. The next one was just as full. A flight attendant took his briefcase and laptop and hurried away.

He wedged himself into the seat. The lady wedged herself into hers. He felt his ribs compressing. From his right came gusts of a sickening lilac perfume. From the left, waves of stale terror.

“My first flight,” the fat man confided.

“Oh, really?” Meers said.

“I’m real scared.”

“No need to be.” The fat lady scrambled in her purse for a box of tissue, then blew her nose loud enough to frighten a walrus. She crumpled the noisome tissue and dropped it on Meers’s shoe.

They were pushed back, they taxied, they waited two hours and taxied some more, they were deiced and waited another hour. All of which took much longer than it takes to tell about it. Then they were in the air. The fat man promptly threw up into the little white bag.

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Atlanta. ATL. They landed under a thick pall of black smoke. Somewhere to the west, a large part of Georgia was tinder-dry and burning. Hartsfield International sweltered in hundred-degree heat, and soot swirled across the runways. It was dark as night.

The fat man had filled barf bags all through the flight. In spite of this, he had eaten like a starving hyena. Meers had been unable to eat. He could barely get his hands to his mouth. He had stared at the meal on his tray table, as immobilized as if bound to his seat, until the stewardess took it away.

Just before reaching the gate the flight attendant arrived for the fat man’s latest delivery. Meers eyed the bulging bottom of the bag in horror as it passed over his lap, but it didn’t break.

The heat slammed him as he left the plane. It didn’t abate when he entered the terminal. The air was thick, hot syrup. The forest fires had downed power lines, and the air conditioning was off. So were the lights. So were the computers and telephones.

Somehow the ticketing staff were still working, though Meers couldn’t imagine how. He joined the endless line and began shuffling forward. He shuffled for five hours. At the end of that time, nearing starvation, the agent told him he hadn’t a hope of a connection to his home, but he could put Meers on a flight to Dallas-Fort Worth where his chances would be better. The flight would leave in nine hours.

Meers roamed the ovenlike interior of the airport. None of the restaurants and snack bars were open. With no re-frigeration and no electricity to run the stoves, there was no point. The bars were open and serving warm beer, but had not so much as a pretzel. People sat wilted in their chairs, stunned by the heat, looking out over the ashen landscape. A

nuclear holocaust might look a lot like this, Meers thought.

A few profiteers were selling ice water at five dollars a bottle. The lines were enormous. Meers found a clear space against a wall and sat down on his luggage. When he leaned forward sweat dripped off his nose.

He heard a commotion, and saw a man approaching with boxes on a hand truck. He was the pied piper of Atlanta, trailed by a mob of jostling people.

He stopped at an empty vending machine. When he opened the front someone in the crowd started pulling at a box. Someone else grabbed the other end. The box burst and spilled Snickers bars on the floor. In moments all the boxes had been torn open. When the tide ebbed away, the delivery man sat on the floor, feeling himself cautiously, amazed he hadn't been ripped to shreds. He got up and wandered away.

Meers had snagged a bag of peanuts and a Three Mus-keteers. He ate every bite, then made himself as comfort-able as possible against the wall and nodded off.

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A lost soul was screaming. Meers opened his eyes, found himself curled up over his possessions, a rope of drool coming from his mouth. He wiped it away and sat up. Across the concourse a man in the remains of a suit and tie had gone berserk.

"Air!" he shrieked. "I gotta have air!" His shirt was torn at the neck, his coat on the floor. He swung a fire ax at a plate glass window. The ax bounced off and he swung it again, shattering the glass. He leaned out the window and tried to breathe the smoke outside. He shouted again and began struggling with his pants. His hands were spout-ing blood, deeply slashed on the jagged sill, but he didn't seem to notice.

Off he ran, naked but for his pants trailing from one ankle and a blue silk tie like a noose around his neck.

Half a dozen security guards converged on him. They hit the man with their nightsticks and sprayed pepper in his face. They zapped him with tasers until he flopped around like a fish slick with his own blood. Then they cuffed and hogtied him and carried him away.

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The flight to Dallas was another 727. Half the passengers were under ten years old, in Atlanta for a Peewee beauty contest. The boys were in tuxedos and the girls in evening gowns, or what was left of them after twenty-four hours living rough at the airport with no luggage. Some of them were cranky and some were playful, and all were spoiled rotten, so they either sat in their seats and screamed, or turned the aisle into a rough-and-tumble race-track. Supervision consisted of the occasional fistfight between fathers when a child's nose was bloodied.

Meers had a window seat, next to a father who spent the whole flight carping about the judging. His son had not made the finals. The son, who Meers felt should have been left out for wolves to devour along with the after-birth, sat on the aisle and spent his time tripping running children.

There was no meal. The catering services had been just as crippled as the snack bars at the airport. Meers was given a pack of salted peanuts.

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Dallas-Fort Worth. DFW. It had been raining forty days and forty nights when the 727 landed. The runways were invisible under sheets of water. The mud between the taxiways was so deep and thick it swallowed jetliners like mammoths in a tar pit. Meers saw three planes mired to the wingtips. Passengers were deplaning into knee-deep muck, slogging toward buses unable to get any closer lest they sink and never be seen again.

The airport was almost empty. DFW was operating in spite of the weather, but flights were not arriving from other major hubs. Meers made it to the ticket counter where the small line moved at glacial speed because only one agent had made it through the floods. When his turn came he was told all flights to his home had been canceled, but he could board a flight to Denver in six hours, where a connection could be made. It was on another airline, so he would have to take the automated tram to another terminal.

On the way to the tram he stopped at a phone booth. There was no dial tone. The one next to it was dead, too. All the public telephones in the airport were dead. The flood had washed them out. He knew his wife must be very worried by now. There had been no time for a call from O'Hare, and Atlanta and now Dallas were cut off. But surely the situation would be on the news. She would know he was stranded somewhere. It would be great to get back home to Annie. Annie and his two lovely daughters, Kimberly and .

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He stopped walking, seized by panic. His heart was hammering. He couldn't recall the name of his youngest daughter. The airport was spinning around him, about to fly into a million pieces.

Megan! Her name was Megan. God, I must be punchy, he thought. Well, who wouldn't be? The hunger had made him light-headed. He breathed deeply and moved off toward the tram.

The door had closed behind him before he noticed the man lying on the floor at the other end of the car. There was no one else on board.

The man was curled up in a pool of vomit and spilled purple wine. He wore a filthy short jacket and had a canvas duffel bag at his feet. He looked like the man Meers had seen on arrival in Chicago, though that hardly seemed likely.

The tram made a few automated announcements, then pulled away from the concourse and out into the rain. It was pitch black. The rain pounded on the roof. There were flashes of distant lightning and a high, whistling wind. The tram pulled into the next concourse and the doors opened.

Three security guards in khaki uniforms stormed aboard. Without warning, one of them kicked the sleeping vagrant in the face. The man cried out, and the guards began battering him with their batons and boots. Blood and rotten teeth fountained from the man's mouth and nose. Peter Meers sat very still, his feet and knees drawn together protectively.

One of the security men took a handful of the screaming man's hair and another grabbed the seat of his pants, and they dragged him through the rear door of the tram and onto the platform. The third looked over at Meers. He smiled, touched the brim of his hat with his nightstick, and followed the others.

The door closed and the tram moved away. Meers could see the three still beating the man as the car moved out into the night.

Just short of the next concourse the lights flickered and went out, and the tram car stopped. Rain hammered down relentlessly. It gushed in rivers over the windows. Meers got up and paced his end of the car. He was careful not to walk as far as the stain of wine, urine, and blood at the other end, which looked black in the light of distant street lamps. He thought about what he had seen, and about his family waiting for him back home. He had never wanted so badly to get home.

After a few hours the lights came back on and the tram delivered him to the right concourse. He had to hurry to make the flight on time.

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This time he was on a wide-bodied aircraft, a DC-10. There were not many passengers. He was assigned an aisle seat. The takeoff was a little bumpy, but once at altitude the plane rode smooth as a Cadillac on a showroom floor. This late at night he was given a box containing a tuna sandwich, a package of cookies, and some grapes. He ate it all, and was grateful. By the window was an old man wearing an overcoat and a fedora.

“All those lights down there,” the old man said, gesturing toward the window. “All those little towns, little lives. Makes you wonder, huh?”

“About what?” Meers said.

“You don’t feel a part of the world when you’re up here,” the man said. “Those people down there, going about their lives. Us up here, disconnected. They look up, see a few flashing lights. That’s us.”

Meers had no idea what the codger was getting at, but he nodded.

“Used to be the same feeling, in my day. Trains back then. Night trains. When you’re traveling, you’re out of your life. Going from somewhere to somewhere else, not really knowing where you are. You could lie there in your berth and look out the window at the night. Moonlight, starlight. Hear the crossing signals as you passed them, see the trucks waiting. Who was driving them? More lost souls.” He fell silent, looking out at the lights below. Meers hoped that was the end of it.

“I always wear a hat now,” the old man went on. “Had a little haberdashery shop in Oklahoma City, opened it right after the war. Not far from where that building blew up. Got into the haberdashery business just in time for men to stop wearing hats.” He chuckled. “One day it’s nineteen forty-nine, everybody wears hats. Then it’s nine-teen fifty, suddenly all the hats are gone. Some say it was Eisenhower. Ike didn’t wear hats much. Well, I did okay. Sold a lot of cuff links. Men’s hosiery, silk handkerchiefs. Now I travel. Mostly at night.”

Meers smiled pleasantly and nodded.

“You ever feel that way? Cut off? Trapped in some-thing you don’t



understand?" He didn't give Meers time to answer.

"I recall the first time I thought of it. Got my discharge in New Jersey, nineteen and forty-six. I took the train under the river. Came out where that World Trade Center is now. Say, they bombed that, too, didn't they? Anyway, I thought I'd see Times Square. I went to the subway token booth. Not much bigger than a phone booth, and there's this little . . . gnome in there. Dirty window, bars in front, a dip in the wooden counter so money could slide under the window, back and forth, money in, tokens out. It looked like that dip had been worn in the wood. Over the years, over the centuries. Like a glacier cutting through solid rock. I slid over my nickel and he slid back a token, and I asked him how to get to Times Square. He mumbled something. I had to ask him to repeat it, and he mumbled again. This time I got it, and I took my token. All that time he never looked at me, never looked up from that worn dip in the wood. I watched him for a while, and he never looked up. He answered more questions, and I thought he probably knew the route and schedule of every train in that system, where to get off, where to transfer.

"And I got the funniest thought. I was convinced he never left that booth. That he was a prisoner in there, a creature of the night, a troll down in the underground darkness where it was never daytime. That he'd long ago resigned himself to his lot, which was to sell tokens." The old man fell quiet, looking out the window and nodding to himself.

"Well," Meers said, reluctantly. "The night shift comes to an end, you know."

"It does?"

"Sure. The sun comes up. Somebody comes to relieve the guy. He goes home to his wife and children."

"Used to, maybe," the old man said. "Used to. Now he's trapped. Something happened—I don't know what—and he came loose from our world where the sun eventu-ally does come up. But does it have to?"

"Well, of course it does."

"Does it? Seems to me it's been a long time since I've seen the sun. Seems I've been on this airplane ever so long, and I have no way of telling that it's actually getting anywhere. Maybe it isn't. Maybe the plane will never land, it'll just keep on its way from somewhere to somewhere else. Just like that train, a long time ago."

Meers didn't like the conversation. He was about to say something to the old man when he was touched lightly on the shoulder. He looked up to see a stewardess leaning toward him.

"Sir, the Captain would like to speak to you in the cockpit."

For a moment the words simply didn't register. Cap-tain? Cockpit?

"Sir, if you'd just come this way . . . ?"

Meers got up, glanced at the old man, who smiled and waved.

At first he could see little in the darkened cockpit. In front of the plane was clear night, stars, the twinkling lights of small towns. Then he saw the empty flight engineer's seat to his right. As he moved forward, he kicked empty cans. The cabin smelled of beer and cigar smoke. The captain turned around and gestured.

"Clear the crap off that and siddown," he said, around the cigar clamped in his teeth. Meers moved a pizza box with stale crusts off the copilot's chair, and slid into it. The pilot unfastened his harness and got up.

"If I don't take a crap in thirty seconds, I'm gonna do it in my drawers," he said, and started toward the rear. "Just hold 'er steady."

"Hey! Wait a goddamn minute!"

"You got a problem with that?"

"Problem? I don't know how to fly an airplane!"

"What's to know?" The pilot was dancing up and down, but pointed to the instruments. "That's your com-pass. Keep her right where she is, three one zero. This here's your altimeter. Thirty-two thousand feet."

"But don't you have an autopilot?"

"Packed it in, weeks ago," the pilot muttered, and banged hard with his fist on an area with dials that weren't lit up. "Bastard. Look, I really gotta go."

And Meers was alone in the cockpit.

He had a wild notion to just get up, pretend this never happened. Return to his seat. Surely the pilot would come back. It had to be some sort of joke.

The plane seemed level and steady. He touched the column lightly, felt the plane nose down the tiniest bit, saw the altimeter move slowly. He pulled and the big bird settled back at thirty-two thousand.

He quickly learned the biggest problem a pilot faced on a long night flight: boredom. There was nothing to do but glance at the two dials from time to time. His mind wandered, back to what the old man had been saying. And it just didn't add up. Well, of course the plane was getting somewhere. He could see the lights moving beneath him. Those brighter lights at the horizon; could that be Denver? As for the sun not rising, that was just ridiculous. The world turned. One moment followed another. Eventually it was day.

The pilot came back in a cloud of cigar smoke. He reached into an open cooler near his seat and got out a can of beer, popped the top, and drained it in one gulp. He belched, crushed the can, and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Looks like I fucked up," he said, with no apparent concern. "Sent for the wrong guy. Sorry about that, pardner." He laughed.

"What do you mean?"

"Thought you was in the know. Looks like it was that old guy. Somebody wrote down the wrong seat number. Who's runnin' this fucking airline, anyway?"

Meers would have liked to know the same thing.

"Don't you have a copilot? What do you mean, 'in the know'?"

"Copilot had him a little accident. Night cops. They broke his fuckin' arm for him. He's in the hospital." The man shuddered. "Could be three, four months yet till he gets out."

"For a broken arm?"

The pilot gave him a tired look. He jerked his thumb back toward the cabin.

“Screw, why don’cha? Get outta here. You’ll get it, one of these days.”

Meers stared at him, then got up.

“He’s dead, anyway,” the pilot said.

“Who’s dead?” The pilot ignored him.

Meers made his way down the aisle. The old man seemed asleep. His eyes were slightly open, and so was his mouth. Meers reached over and lightly touched the old man’s hand. It was cold.

A big fly with a metallic blue back crawled out of the old man’s nostril and stood there, rubbing its hideous fore-legs together.

Meers was out of his seat like a shot. He hurried five rows forward and collapsed into an empty seat. He was breathing hard. He couldn’t work up any spit.

Later, he saw the stewardess put a blue blanket over the old man.

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Denver. DEN. Tonight, it made Chicago seem like Ber-muda. The sky was hard and fuming as dry ice, and the color of a hollow-point bullet. Temperature a few degrees below zero, but add in the wind chill and it was cold enough to freeze rubber to the runway.

The huge plate-glass windows rattled and bulged as Meers lurched down the concourse, his luggage caroming off his hips, ribs, and knees. A chill reached right through the floor and swept around his feet. He hurried into the men’s room and set his bags down on the floor. He ran water in the sink and splashed it on his face. The room echoed with each drop of water.

He couldn’t bear to look at himself in the mirror.

He had to find the airline ticket counter. Had to get his boarding pass. Needed to find the gate, board the plane, make his connection. He had to get home.

Something told him to get out. Leave everything. Go.

He walked quickly through the nearly deserted departure area, slammed through the doors and out onto the frozen sidewalk. He hurried to

the front of a rank of taxis. It was an old yellow Checker, a big, boxy, friendly sort of car. He got in the back.

“Where to, Mac?”

“Downtown. A good hotel.”

“You got it.” The cab driver put his car in gear and carefully pulled out onto the packed snow and ice. Soon they were moving down the wide road away from the airport. Meers looked out the back window. The Denver airport was like a cubist prairie schooner, a big, horribly expensive tent to house modern transients.

“One ugly mother, ain’t she?” the cabbie said.

Meers saw the cab driver in profile as the man looked in the rearview mirror. Bushy eyebrows under an old-fashioned yellow Checker Cab hat with a shiny black brim. A wide face, chin covered with stubble. Big hands on the wheel. The name on the cab medallion was V. KRZYWCZ. A New York medallion.

“Krizz-wozz,” the man provided. “Virgil Krzywcz. Us Polacks, we sold all our vowels to the frogs. Now we use all the consonants the Russians didn’t have no use for.” He chuckled.

“Aren’t you a little far from home?” Meers ventured.

“Let me tell you a little story,” Krzywcz said. “Once upon a time, a thousand years ago for all I know, I was takin’ this fare in from LaGuardia. To the Marriott, Times Square. I figure, that time of night, the Triborough, down the Roosevelt, there you are. But this guy’d looked at a map, it’s gotta be the BQE, then the midtown tunnel. Okay, I sez, it’s your money. And whattaya know, we make pretty good time. Only coming outta the tunnel what do I see? Not the Empire State, but the fuckin’ bitch of a terminal building. I’m in Denver. I never been ta Denver. So I looks back over my shoulder,” Krzywcz suited the action to his words, and Meers got a whiff of truly terrible breath, “and no tunnel, just a lotta cars honkin’ at me, me bein’ stopped in my tracks. And that’s the way it’s been ever since.”

Krzywcz accelerated through a yellow light and up onto an icy freeway. Meers saw a green sign indicating DOWN-TOWN. Straight ahead, just above the horizon, was a full moon. Traffic was light, not surprising since the roadway was frozen hard. It didn’t bother the cabbie, and the old Checker was steady as a rock.

“So you decided to stay out here?” Meers asked.

“Decided didn’t have nothin’ to do with it. You figure I went on a bender, drove here in a blackout, something like that?” Krzywcz looked over his shoulder at Meers. In a sweep of streetlamp light Meers saw the left side of the driver’s face was black and swollen. His left eye was shut. There was a long, scabbed-over wound on his cheek, a slash that had not been stitched. “Well, suit yourself. Fact is, none of these roads go to New York. And believe me, buddy, I’ve tried ‘em all.”

Meers didn’t know what to make of that statement.

“What happened to your face?” he asked.

“This? Had a little run-in with the night cops. A head-light out, would you believe it? I got lucky. One whack upside the head and they let me go. Hell, I’ve had a lot worse. A lot worse.”

Hadn’t the pilot said something about night cops? They had sent his copilot to the hospital. Something was very wrong here.

“What do you mean, these roads don’t go to New York? It’s an Interstate highway. They all connect.”

“You’re trying to make sense,” Krzywcz said. “You’d better learn to stop that.”

“What are you trying to tell me?” Meers asked, feeling his frustration rise. “What’s going on?”

“You mean, are we in the fuckin’ Twilight Zone, or something?” Krzywcz looked at Meers again, then back to the road, shaking his head. “You got me, pal. I think we’re in Denver, all right: Only it’s like Denver is all twisted up, or something.”

“We’re in hell,” a voice said over the radio.

“Aw, shut the fuck up, Moskowitz, you stupid kike.”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” the voice of Moskowitz said.

“It don’t make no damn sense to me,” Krzywcz shouted into his mike. “Look around you. You see any guys with pitchforks? Horns? You seen any

burnin' pits fulla . . . Mia—”

“Brimstone?” Meers suggested.

“There you go. Brimstone.” He gestured with the mike. “Moskowitz, my dispatcher,” he explained to Meers. “You seen any lost souls screamin’?”

“I’ve heard plenty of screamin’ souls over the radio,” Moskowitz said. “I scream sometimes, myself. And I sure as shit am lost.”

“Listen to him,” Krzywcz said, with a chuckle. “I gotta listen to this shit every night.”

“Why do ya think it’s gotta be guys with horns?” Moskowitz went on. “That guy, that Dante, you think everything he said was right?”

“Moskowitz reads books,” the cabby said over his shoulder.

“Why do you figure hell has to stay the same? You think they don’t remodel? Look how many people there are today. Where they gonna put ‘em? In the new suburbs, that’s where. Hell useta have boats and horse wagons. Now it’s got jet airplanes and cabs.”

“And night cops, and hospitals, don’t forget that.”

“Shut your mouth, you dumb hunky!” Moskowitz shouted. “You know I don’t want nobody to talk about that over my radio.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Krzywcz smirked over his shoulder and shrugged. *Hey, what can you do?* Meers smiled back weakly.

“It don’t make sense any other way,” Moskowitz went on. “My life is hell. Your life is hell. Everybody you get in that freakin’ cab is livin’ in hell. We died and gone to hell.”

Krzywcz was furious again.

“Died, is it? You remember dyin’? Huh, Moskowitz? You sit in that stinking office livin’ on pizza and 7-Up, nothin’ happens for *months* in that shithole. You’d think you’d notice a thing like dyin’.”

“Heart attack,” Moskowitz shouted back. “I musta had a heart attack.

And I floated outta my body, and they put me *here*... Right where I was before, only now *it's forever*, and now *I can't leave!* Either it's hell, or limbo."

"Aw, limbo up a rope. What's a Jew know about limbo? Or hell?" He switched off the radio, glanced again at Meers. "I think he means purgatory. You wanna know from hell, you ask a Catholic Polack. We know hell."

Meers had finally had enough.

"I think you're both crazy," he said, defiantly.

"Yeah," Krzywcz agreed. "We oughta be, we been here long enough." He studied Meers in his mirror. "But you don't know, buddy. I could tell soon as you got in my cab. You're one a those airplane pukes. Round and round ya go, schleppin' your Gucci suitcases, cost what I make in a month. In and out of airports, off planes, onto planes. Round and round, and you think things are still makin' sense. You still think tomorrow comes after today and all roads go everywhere. You think that 'cause the sun went down, it's gonna come up again. You think two plus two is always gonna equal three."

"Four," Meers said.

"Huh?"

"Two plus two equals four."

"Well, pal, two plus two, sometimes it equals you can't get there from here. Sometimes two plus two equals a kick in the balls and a nightstick upside the head and a tunnel that don't go to Manhattan no more. Don't ask me why 'cause I don't know. If this is hell, then I guess we was bad, right? But I'm not that bad a guy. I went to mass, I didn't commit no crimes. But here I am. I got no home but this cab. I eat outta drive-thru's and I piss in beer bottles. I slipped offa something somewheres, I fell outta the world where you could go home after your shift. I turned inta one of the night people, like you."

Meers was not going to protest that he wasn't one of the "night people," whatever they were. He was a little afraid of the mad cabbie. But he couldn't follow the logic of it, and that made him stubborn.

"So we're in a different world, that's what you're saying?"

"Naw, we're still inna world. We're right *here*, we've always been here,



night people, only nobody don't notice us, that we're in a box. The hooker on the stroll, they think she goes home when the sun comes up, with her pimp in the purple Caddy. Only they don't never go home. The street they're on, it don't lead home. That lonely DJ you hear on the radio. The subway motorman, it's night there alia time. The guy drivin' the long-haul truck. Jani-tors. Night watchmen."

"All of them?"

"How do I know all of 'em? I'm gonna drive my cab inna office building, ask the cleaning crew? 'Hey, you stuck in purgatory, like me?' "

"Not me."

"Yeah, you airplane pukers. Most of us, we *know*. Oh, some of 'em, they gone bugfuck. Nothin' left of 'em but eyeballs like gopher holes. But you been here long enough, you stop thinkin' you're gonna find that tunnel back home, you know? Except you 'passengers.' Like they sez in the program. In . . ."

"Denial."

"In denial. You said it. Look ahead there."

Meers looked out the windshield and there it was, just below the yellow moon. The sprawling canopy of the Den-ver Airport, like some exotic, poison rain-forest caterpillar. He stared at it as the cab eased down an off-ramp.

"Always a full moon in Denver," Krzywcz cackled. "Makes it nice for the werewolves. And all roads lead to the airport, which is bad news for airplane pukers."

Meers threw open the cab door and spilled out onto the frozen roadway. He scrambled to his feet, hearing the shouts of the driver. He clambered up an embankment and onto the freeway, where he dodged six lanes of traffic and tumbled down the other side. There were a lot of closed businesses there, warehouses, car lots, and one that was open, a Circle-K market. He ran toward it, certain it would vanish like a mirage, but when he hit the door it was wonderfully prosaic and solid. Inside it was warm. Two clerks, a tall black youth and a teenage white girl, stood behind the counter.

He paced up and down the abbreviated aisles, hoping he looked like someone who belonged there. When he heard the door security buzzer, he

picked up a box of cereal and pretended to study it.

He saw two police officers walk past the counter. They've come for me, he thought.

But the cops walked toward the back of the store. One opened the beer cooler, while the other took a box and loaded it with donuts.

Both officers passed within ten feet of him. One had two six-packs of Coors hooked in a black-gloved hand-and he cradled a huge black weapon that had a shotgun bore but a fat round magazine like a tommy gun. The other wore two automatic pistols on her belt. She glanced at Meers, and gave him a smile both insolent and sexual. She wore bright red lipstick.

They strolled past the clerks, who were very busy with other things, things that put their backs to the police officers. They went out the door. There was a moment of silence, then a huge explosion.

Meers saw a plate-glass window shatter. Beyond it, the male cop was firing his shotgun into the store as fast as he could pump it. His partner had a gun in each hand.

He hit the floor in a snowstorm of corn flakes and shredded toilet paper. Both cops were emptying their weapons, and they had a lot of ammunition. But finally it was over. In the silence, he heard the police laughing, then opening their car doors. He got to his knees and peeked over the ruined display counter.

The patrol car was backing out. He caught a glimpse of the woman drinking from a beer can as the cruiser pulled out on the road. In a second, a yellow Checker cab pulled into the lot, the battered face of Krzywcz behind the wheel. He saw Meers and motioned frantically.

Shattered glass and raisin bran crunched under his feet as Meers walked down the aisle. Behind the counter the black man was crouched down near the safe. The girl was lying on her back in a pool of blood, holding her gut and moaning. Meers hesitated, then Krzywcz leaned on the horn. He turned his back on the girl and pushed out through the aluminum door frame, empty now of glass.

Krzywcz took it slow and careful out of the lot. Parked off to the left was the police car, headlights turned off, facing them. Meers couldn't breathe, but Krzywcz turned the other way and the police car did not move.

“They’ll be piggin’ out on beer and sinkers for a while,” the cabbie said.

“That girl . . . she—”

“She’ll be all right.” Krzywcz pointed ahead at flashing red lights. In a moment an ambulance rushed by in the other direction. He hunched down in his seat until it had gone by. “Eventually.”

“What is it with the hospital?” Meers asked. “Moskowitz didn’t even—”

“Hospitals is where you get hurt,” Krzywcz said. “There’s diseases in hospitals. Your wounds, they get in-fected. They give you the wrong pills, make you puke your guts up. All kinds of things can go wrong. Then you hear about the ‘experiments.’ “ He shook his head. “Bet-ter to stay out. Them night doctors and night nurses, they ain’t human.”

Meers asked, but Krzywcz would say no more about “experiments.”

The cab pulled up to the terminal building and Meers got out. He ran.

\* \* \* \*

They fired at him, but he kept running. They chased him, but he was pretty sure now they had lost him. He was out on the runways. A fog had moved in; the terminal was no longer visible.

This was no place for a human being, even on a summer night. He kept moving, avoiding the lumbering, shrieking silver whales that taxied through the darkness. He stopped by a low, poisonous blue strobe light that drove cold ice-picks into his eyeballs every time it flashed. He had no idea where he was, no idea where to go.

“. . . help me . . .”

It was more whimper than word. It came from just be-yond the range of the light.

“. . . for the love of God . . .”

Something was crawling toward him. It moved slowly into the light, a human figure pulling itself along with bloody hands. Meers fell back a step.

“... please help me ...”

It was Eduardo, from the O'Hare snack bar. His white shirt was a few blood-soaked scraps, black in the alien light. His pants were gone. One of Ms legs was gone, too. Torn off. Shattered white thighbone protruded.

Meers became aware of others. Like beasts hovering beyond the range of the campfire, figures were suggested by a blue-steel glint, a patch of pale cheek. They were darkened patches against the black of night. They wore fighter-pilot black visors, black helmets, Terminator sun-glasses. Shiny black boots. Belts and jackets creaked like motorcycle cops. Somewhere out there were ranks of black Harleys, he was sure of it. He smelled gun oil and old leather.

There were other shapes, other beasts. These were black, too, with fangs snarling blue in the night. They strained at their leashes, silently.

Meers began to back away. If he didn't make a sudden movement they might not come after him. Perhaps they hadn't even seen him.

Soon the shapes were swallowed back into the fog. Not once had he seen a distinct human figure.

Something brushed against his leg. He did not look down, but kept backing. Dark areas on the ground, seen peripherally, resembled body parts. But they were moving.

He heard a distant siren, saw flashing red and blue lights. A boxy white ambulance pulled up, a big orange stripe on its side with the words EMERGENCY RESCUE. The rear doors flew open. The light inside was dim and red-dish. The angle was wrong for Meers to see very far in-side. A black cloud of flies exploded into the air. He could hear them buzzing. A thick, black fluid seeped over the floor and ran over the bumper to pool on the frozen ground, steaming. Meers understood that in white light the stuff would be dark and red.

From the far side of the ambulance men and women appeared, clad in crisp whites or baggy surgical blues. They all wore gauze masks. The masks, their rubber-gloved hands, and their clothing were all spattered with gore. None of them had horns or carried pitchforks. Their attitude was efficient and workmanlike.

The doctors and nurses lifted Eduardo and tossed him into the open ambulance doors like a sack of laundry. One nurse loomed out of the fog with Eduardo's leg. The leg was twitching. She tossed it after Eduardo.

Meers was going backward at a walking pace now. A man in blue surgical scrubs looked in his direction. All the rest did, too. He turned and ran.

The world began to spin again, and this time it did not stop. He felt himself flying apart, and when he came back together, not everything fit in just the way it had before. He felt much better. He was smiling.

\* \* \* \*

He had found the terminal building again. He stood there on the sidewalk for a moment, getting his breathing under control. A big man with a battered face stood leaning against a taxi painted bright yellow with a checker-board stripe down the side. The man held up a thumb. When Meers stared at him blankly, the cabbie switched to his middle finger and muttered something about “airplane pukes.” Meers brushed snow and ice from his overcoat and ran his hands through his unruly hair. He entered the terminal.

Inside were Christmas lights, tinsel and holly. It was jammed with a sea of humanity, few of them showing any Christmas spirit.

He glanced to his left, and there was his luggage, sitting neatly against the wall. Meers hefted his possessions. Someone had put a strip of silver duct tape over the gash in his carry-on.

Meers was still smiling after three hours in line. The harried ticket agent smiled back at him, and told him there was no chance of reaching his home that night.

“You won’t get home for Christmas morning,” she said, “but I can get you on a flight to Chicago that’s leaving in a few minutes.”

“That’ll be fine,” Meers said, smiling. She wrote out the ticket.

“Happy holidays,” she said.

“And a Merry Christmas to you,” Meers said.

They were already announcing his flight. “. . . to Chi-cago, with stops at Amarillo, Oklahoma City, Topeka, Omaha, Rapid City, Fargo, Duluth, and Des Moines.”

Christmas, Meers thought. Everyone trying to go some-where at

once. Pity the poor business traveler caught in the middle of it. Puddle-jumping through most of the me-dium-sized cities on the Great Plains. It sounded like air-travel hell. But he took heart. Soon he would be home with his family. Home with his sweet wife . . . and his lovely children ... he was sure he'd think of their names in a moment.

He shouldered his burdens like Marley's Ghost shouldered the chains he had forged in life, and shuffled along with the slow crowd toward his boarding gate. He would be home in no time. No time at all.