

MILO AND SYLVIE

Eliot Fintushel

Eliot Fintushel made his first sale in 1993, to *Tomorrow* magazine. Since then, he has become a regular in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, with a large number of sales there, has appeared in *Amazing*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Crank!*, *Aboriginal SF* and other markets, and is beginning to attract attention from cognoscenti as one of the most original and inventive writers to enter the genre in many years, worthy to be ranked among other practitioners of the fast-paced Wild And Crazy Gonzo modern tall tale such as R.A. Lafferty, Howard Waldrop and Neal Barrett, Jr. Fintushel, a baker's son from Rochester, New York, is a performer and teacher of mask theatre and mime, has won the National Endowment for the Arts' Solo Performer Award twice, and now lives in Santa Rosa, California.

Here, in something of a change of pace for him (although still wry, funny and almost extravagantly inventive), a story to me reminiscent of Theodore Sturgeon at his poetic best, he takes a lyrical, tender and bittersweet look at an odd relationship between two very peculiar people.

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EVERYTHING HAS ITS PORTION of smell," Milo said. His skin and bones were enthroned in a plush, gold club chair facing the doctor's more severe straight-back with the cabriole legs. Milo strummed his fingers nervously against the insides of his thighs as he looked around the room, richly dark, with scrolled woodwork, diplomas in gilded frames hanging on the wall behind the doctor's mahogany rolltop next to the heavily curtained window. He could smell the doctor's aftershave. He could smell the last client too, a woman, a large woman, a sweating carnivore with drugstore perfume.

"Smell?" Doctor Devore always looked worried. Inquisitive and worried—the look was like a high trump, drawing out all your best cards before you had planned to play them. He had white, curly hair. He wore sweaters and baggy pants that made him look like a rag doll. He was old.

His cheeks and jowls sagged like the folds of drapery beside him. He wore thick, wire-rimmed glasses that made his tired eyes look bigger and even more plaintive. He was small, a midget, almost; one got over that quickly, though, because he never acted short.

"It's something my sister used to say."

"Why?"

"I don't remember." Like so much else. Milo moved too quickly for memories to adhere, or for sleep for that matter, except in evanescent snatches. Memories, sleep, *haunted* him. They were never invited guests. His sister's name, for example, which he did not remember, did not remember, *did not remember*, was death to pronounce or even think of.

There was a long pause. Devore was trying to use the silence to suck something out of him—*horror vacui*—but it didn't work. Milo had a practised grip. The things he had to hold down bucked harder than this shrink.

Dr Devore broke the silence: "Have you been sleeping any better?"

"Yes."

"Taking the prescription, hmm?"

"Yes." That was a trade-off. The pills let him sleep dreamlessly for longer spells, but with the danger that his grip would loosen.

"Let's talk about one of your dreams. Do you have one you want to talk about?"

Grudgingly, Milo said, "Yes." Could he snatch the cheese and escape the wire?

"Go ahead."

"It's dark. The fog is rolling in."

"Where are *you*?" Devore said. Milo began to cry. "That's all right. Just let the tears come. You don't have to answer right away, you know?"

"I have another dream."

"OK..."

"A Dumpster. One of those big, steel Dumpsters full of scraps and garbage. A car runs into it."

"Are you driving the car?"

"You don't get it!" Milo hooked one thumb over the side of his pants and tugged down the waist, hiking up his shirt so that Dr Devore could see his hip. "It was all smashed up! Everything was steaming and sputtering and dripping."

"What are you showing me? Are you telling me you hurt yourself? I don't see any marks, Milo—we're talking about a dream, yes?"

"Yeah. That was while I was in the waiting room just now. I dozed off."

"You dreamed that you hurt your hip in a car crash, is that it?"

"No, no! The fender, the hood, the engine! That's what was hurt!" Milo began crying again. "I'm a monster, that's all! Give me some more medicine! Give me something stronger! I can't hold on much longer!"

Dr Devore paused. "Milo, when the car crashed into the Dumpster, where were *you*?"

"I have another dream," Milo blurted. He was angry, like a small child choking back tears to shout his malediction.

"Let's stay with the last one ..."

"A window shatters."

"That's all?"

"That's all." Milo felt his skin and skull shattering like glass. He was collapsing into his own pelvis and lacerating the soft tissue of his remaining viscera—but it was the dream. He shouted too loudly, as if trying to be heard against the roar of a hurricane. "It hurts!"

"The glass hits you?"

"No."

"I don't think I follow, Milo. In all these dreams, where are you?"

"The fog, the Dumpster and the car, the window . . ." Milo clamped his bony fingers around the scrolls at the edges of his armchair as if it were an electric chair. He stared straight ahead, straight through Dr Devore, focusing on ghosts three thousand miles distant, waving from the past like dead men from the ports of a sunken ship.

Devore interrupted him. "Don't say any more if you don't want to, Milo." Milo froze, then slumped back into the chair. Dr Devore was standing up, hands on his sacrum, arching back and stretching his neck from side to side. It made a little crackling sound. "Anyway, our hour is about up. This was good, Milo. This was very good. You shared some of your dreams with me. We talked a little about your sleep problem, and about your sister ..."

"I didn't tell you anything about my sister."

"Right. We've got to get you to relax, you know? I am going to increase your chlorpromazine. Your house parents will give you the tablets in the morning and at night. I'll talk to them about it. You shouldn't worry. Just try to do the best you can, you know? And keep track of those dreams for me, will you, Milo?"

"Yeah, sure."

Dr Devore stood before Milo, waiting for him to get up. He had set up his psychic vacuum pump again, to suck Milo out of the club chair and get rid of him, Milo thought. Devore needed his beauty sleep.

Milo stood, turned, and walked out the door without saying thank you or good-bye. The waiting room was empty. Milo crossed the waiting room, opened the hall door and shut it again without going through. He waited thirty seconds, then returned to Dr Devore's office door and cupped his ear against it.

He heard Devore part the drapes and open one of the windows; it shuddered and squeaked against the casement. Then he heard the rolltop clack open, and Devore spoke into his tape recorder:

"Milo is on the verge of finding out. He would have blurted it out just now if I hadn't stopped him. It would be most inopportune for him to know everything just now. I think the best course would be to slow him down. The thorazine should help, but we can't rely on it. This is a tricky business. If he's too tight, something fatigues inside him and he manifests in spite of himself; if he's too loose, of course, he changes. Can't leave him at the home much longer the way things are going. Somebody's sure to see something, and what happens next may be out of my control. Get Sylvie in there, that's the only way. Remember to call Sylvie tonight, now, soon.

"Oh, yes! He said the thing about smell again, but he doesn't seem to understand what it means—which is good. There's a little time...God! I've got to take a nap. My knees are buckling."

The machine clicked off. Milo heard Devore stretch and yawn, then the rustle of clothing peeling off, the two chairs scraping the floor as Devore pushed them together. A moment later he was snoring.

The little machine! The box sheathed in perforated black leather hiding inside Dr Devore's rolltop with all of Milo's secrets! Like the totemic soul of a primitive: a pouch, a feather or a whittled doll secreted in a hollow log, proof against soul-snatching demons and enemies. Only, the demon was in possession of Milo's soul.

There was a fake window in the waiting room, drapery with a solid wall behind it, and opposite that, a print of some famous painting, a different one every time Milo visited. Sometimes, in fact, it was different when he left than it had been when he arrived; Devore must have paid someone he never saw to slip in and change it

periodically, like a diaper service. Mondrian to Dali, Manet to Munch or an anonymous Byzantine, each with a brass name tag on an ornate frame, while Milo conveyed his soul, via Devore, to the skin-covered box! Just now, it was a Chinese painting of a warrior monkey standing on a cloud in a great, plumed hat, brandishing a cudgel.

Milo tiptoed away from the door, hid behind the drapes and waited. He made quite a perceptible bulge there, but he was relying on Devore's drowsiness to get by with it. Being caught might not be so bad either. The way they looked at you then, at the home or at school, cross as it was, felt a lot like love.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed, because there was no daylight in there, but it seemed like a long time, and Milo had not had his thorazine. Below his stomach, inside the habitual knot, an older knot was beginning to ache. Aches in aches, Milo stood flush to the wall, breathing dust behind the drapery.

At last, he ventured out. The snoring had stopped. He pressed his ear to the door and heard nothing. What did he look like dreaming, the little man who harvested Milo's dreams? Milo turned the knob, degree by degree, soundlessly, until it stopped; then he pulled the door ajar and peeked in.

Impossibly, the room was empty. Devore was gone. The club chair and the cabriole chair were still pushed together in the centre of the room to form an odd, uncomfortable bed. Milo strode in and slammed the door behind him, as if to test, to make sure his senses hadn't fooled him, that Devore was actually absent. Nothing stirred. There was no other way out except the window, which was actually open, but the office was six storeys up.

Milo squinted and cocked his head like a cat listening for rats in the wall. However he had managed it, Devore was not there. Maybe, unawares, Milo had dozed standing up, and Devore had simply left through the waiting room. Milo went to the rolltop and pulled it open. The tape recorder was there. He opened it and took out the cassette. It had Milo's name on it, a cassette all to himself. He put it back in the machine and rewound.

The last rays of sunlight to skirt the top of the building across the street shone through a crystal suspended from the window sash, splashing rainbows on the office wall. As the land breeze breathed it back and forth, the crystal shook and spun, whirling colours about the room. Milo had never before seen Dr Devore's crystal or the rainbows. So there was a dance in the old bagface yet!

The prism clacked against the shivering glass. The tape whirred, then stopped. Milo pressed PLAY:

"Milo Smith. *Smith* not his real name. An assigned name. Nobody knows his real name. First name's probably *Milo*, though. Fourteen. Sporadically guilty of many relatively minor offences such as disorderly conduct, battery against

other children, petty thefts and so on. Frequently truant. Has been under state guardianship in group homes for about seven years. Generally shy and withdrawn, presents as extremely nervous, with many obsessive mannerisms. Plays his cards close to the chest, this one.

"Referred because of violent, disturbing dreams, waking other boys. Also some evidence of self-inflicted wounds. Chronic sleeplessness, nervousity. Looks like a mess, sunken eyes, thin as a rail, reminds me of the old photos of liberated camps at Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau. All he needs is the striped pants and a star of David.

"Seemed like he came in, then just waited for the hour to end. But he came in! Why? Something going on here. OKed chlorpromazine for now. Next week ... ?"

Milo PAUSED to think that one over. Why *had* he come? Nobody could force him. Nobody could hurt him. He hurt himself so badly already, just squeezing and squeezing to stay in control, that there was nothing worse to threaten Milo with. He stretched out on the two armchairs, cradling the tape recorder in his arms like a teddy bear. Think it over: *why?*

Outside the window, the street lamps flicked on. Milo had dozed off, he didn't know for how long, but it was dark. Unusual, dangerous, to sleep so long. Luckily, there had been no dream. There was still a rainbow on the wall—that was a new one! Milo walked to the window and passed his hand in front of the crystal.

That explained it; the crystal was a prop. The rainbow didn't move. It was somehow painted on the wall, painted no doubt over the real rainbow, the one from the crystal at the rainbow moment, sunset behind the MacCauly Building. Funny he'd never noticed it, but he always sat with his back to that wall, and when he came in or left this room, he always had a lot on his mind, or a lot to keep out of his mind.

PLAY:

"I want to remind myself here that Sylvie has come up with a way of using Zorn's Lemma for shape-shifting. She finds the maximal element of all the upper bounds of the chains in the shape she's departing from ..."

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

"... shape-shifting ..."

REWIND. PLAY:

"... shape-shifting ..."

STOP.

Below, a car drove by with its windows rolled down and the radio blasting, about a hound dog... The old song faded out of hearing, along with the clatter of a dragging muffler. Then there were voices and honking horns. The theatre crowd was arriving. Milo stared up at the rainbow on the wall, dimly aglow in the shadowy light of neon from outside.

PLAY:

"... Why do I always think of Sylvie when I think of Milo? Could he be like *us*?"

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

"... Could he be like *us*?"

There was a click, then static, an intentional erasure or else a dumb mistake: the wrong button pressed, the machine dropped, or just old, stretched tape. Then it resumed:

"Now I know something about Milo Smith. *I know what he's doing here, with me.* Once he trusted me enough to start describing those dreams of his, it came together for me—the odd inanimate object romances, the animal reveries, the sensations of bodiless flight, his deep terror; and the physical evidences, like fairy dust on the dreamer's bedclothes in the old folk tales.

"But it's hardly time for Milo to be told anything. First we have to build up the psychic *container*. If he were to realize it now, it would blast him to pieces. Sylvie went through the same sort of thing, but Milo's got the additional problem of this distorted, secret past.

"My approach has been all wrong. I mustn't precipitate any sudden epiphanies. More chlorpromazine. Slow, careful work. Test the ground before each step, Devore, or you'll land the both of you in a dark hole. If the state won't keep paying, screw them! Call it a charity case. God knows, there's plenty in it *for me!*"

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

"... plenty in it *for me!*"

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

"... plenty in it *for me!*"

STOP.

"Dr Devore?" — a voice out in the corridor. "Dr Devore? Dr Devore? Security, Dr

Devore! You in there, sir?" A rapping at the outer door. Fumbling for keys.

The knot in the knot in Milo's belly tightened further. He had to get up to ease the pain. He padded to the office door and peeked into the waiting room. The only light in there was the grey-green light that leaked out the door when he opened it, light through the office window from the lamps and signs on the street and the buildings nearby—and the glow of the wall rainbow reflected in the corner of Milo's eye. In the dark of the waiting room Milo saw what must have been an afterimage of the rainbow, as if it were a small animal that had sneaked out ahead of him through the office door.

Except for the rainbow, the waiting room was empty now, but Milo must have been dead-out dozing before, because the painting had been changed again. Someone must have gone in and out of the waiting room without waking him. The monkey warrior was gone. Instead, it was Munch's screamer on the screaming bridge, the air and river screaming.

He heard the key in the lock. For a moment, Milo had a sense of *deja vu*, the feeling that the turning key was himself. He shut himself in the office again, his heart pounding. Suddenly, to his astonishment, he heard Dr Devore's voice in the waiting room: "No, wait. I'm sorry. I'll open it for you. I must have fallen asleep."

The sneak! Everybody wants a piece of me. Milo ran to the open window, swung his feet over the ledge—it was a long way down—and listened. He yanked Devore's crystal off the sash by the string that held it, and he threw it out the window. A tiny, occasional glint, it plummeted six storeys and shattered on a kerbstone.

"... *plenty in it for me!*"

* * * *

He stared at the rainbow wall—all dark. No rainbow. Probably, it was Milo's own shadow blocking the window light from shining on it. He heard the hallway door opening. The voice outside went up nearly an octave: "Oh. Sorry, Doctor. I just had to check. I thought I heard somebody in here. I mean, I *thought* it was you, but I had to make sure."

"No problem. I'm *glad* you checked. It might *not* have been me, after all. I might have been somebody else."

"Right. Everything OK then, right?"

"Right. And I have a weapon, remember?"

"I remember. I still don't think it's a good idea."

"I do."

"You're the doctor."

The door clicked shut. The inner door opened. Milo jumped.

* * * *

"Can you fly like that all the time, or was it just some kind of crazy fluke?" The big kid speared one of Milo's fries—"You mind?"—and shovelled it on in. He was only an inch taller than Milo, if that, but the swagger made it six. He never stopped talking except to swallow. "Because if you can do that whenever you want to, little man, I've got a proposition for you."

They sat in a corner of the big, greasy restaurant. The light there was like bleach, harsh and merciless. Cadaverous chain smokers sucked coffee and talked to themselves, silently or aloud. With one hand, a lean, gap-toothed Okie was rocking her toddler's walker, while, with the other, finger by finger, she managed a hot-dog bun oozing green. At the next table, three college students discussed Heidegger over meatloaf. The proprietor, Aristotle Jitsi, sweet-talked a girlfriend on the phone pinched between his ear and shoulder, while he scraped the grill.

The big kid wore a bowler hat and a black leather jacket, the overcoat kind favoured by suave Italian street toughs, not the motorcycle kind. He had drawstring pants on, loose, with wide vertical stripes, red and white. His shoes were black leather Danskins—a rope walker? A ballet dancer? The ensemble didn't make much sense. "Well? Can you?"

Milo mopped up ketchup with a crust of his grilled cheese, then didn't eat it. He pushed the whole plate of French fries towards the big kid. "I don't know what happened. Thanks, I'm not hungry any more." Milo sneaked a look down at his own clothes. He never knew what he was wearing until he looked: T-shirt, faded jeans, sneakers, the cowboy belt they gave him last year on his birthday—lassoed Brahma bull buckle.

"You weren't trying to kill yourself, were you?"

"No."

"I think you could do it again. I think you've got some kind of a talent. I was just walking by, and I saw you whistling down like a dropped bomb. I heard the thud. I just about threw up. Then I ran up, and there you were, folding in your wings. Are they wings? Where did you get them? Do you make 'em? Your wings and that furry stuff you tucked away somewhere. For aerodynamics, right? Come on! I'm in the show business, little man. I could do something for you. Tell me some stuff. How about a piece of pie?"

Milo got up from the table and looked around for an exit.

"Hey, sit back down. I'm not done with you. Where you going, anyway? I bet you got no place to stay. Look at you. I can get you a place to stay, no sweat, no charge, but talk to me, little man, talk to me."

Milo started to walk, but a twinge in his calves stopped him. He didn't know what to do with his legs any more. He felt like an unmagnetized compass. Where to go? Not the group home—they'd ship him back to Devore! Outside of that, one place seemed as good as another. He could live *here*, talking to himself, breathing cigarettes, eating grease. He could die *here*, rocking some toddler in a walker, waiting for his teeth to rot.

"Come back," the big kid said. "I'll buy you a piece of pie. I'm rich as Croesus. I'm in the show business."

Milo sat down. "But I don't feel like talking. I don't know what happened, honest. Some guy was after me. He thought I had something he wanted, but I don't have anything. Do I look like I have anything?"

"What about those wings, boy? Those must be something to have."

"Do I look like I have any secret pockets on me?" Milo lifted his arms up over his head. "You must have been seeing things. I just landed lucky."

"No, I don't think so. Something's fishy here, little man, but I don't care. I like you. I live off fishy, anyway. Look at this." The big kid pulled a card out of his inner vest pocket and spun it across the table in front of Milo:

* *MOON* AND *STARS* * * *

Spectacles, Phantasmagoria, Puppets

for

Festivals, Conventions, Parties,
Theatrical Events, Promotions
Of Every Conceivable Variety!!!

by

S. VERDUCCI, MASTER SHOWMAN

(Equidecomposabilization Services Available
to Select Clientèle)

"What's *equidecohoozits*?"

"That's a sort of code word, little man. People who need it generally know that word; when they see it on my card, they know that I can supply it. It's sort of a side line."

"What does it mean?"

The big kid leaned across the table and spoke to Milo in a low voice. He watched Milo as he spoke, as if to measure Milo's response, word by word. "Look here, suppose you got two balls, OK? A great big one and a little bitsy one, both of them thick as a brick. Suppose I told you I had a way of taking the bitsy one apart and putting it back together so it was just as big as the great biggy, or making the biggy into a bitsy without adding or taking away a single atom? You reckon that would be handy?"

"That's what Dede wanted to know!" Milo started in his chair as if he'd touched a high power line. He hadn't spoken or thought that name for eight years. He coughed, trying to hide his shock, but the big kid hadn't missed it.

"Who's Dede?"

"I don't know. Just somebody. I told you, I don't feel like talking."

"Is she some kind of a brain?"

"She was my sister. Leave it alone, OK?"

"OK, OK!" the big kid said. "I got brains in my family too—brains and weirdoes, take your pick. I'm the only *normal* one. Look at the back of the card." Milo had to tilt the card to catch the light just so, but then he saw—there was a rainbow across it. "I'm a puppeteer, little man. I'm S. Verducci, travelling showman: MOON & STARS, Inc. And I want you to work with me. What do you say to that? You'll be rich as Croesus, too."

"I don't know. You gonna put me up for the night?"

"Didn't I say so? Let's go. You're tired, huh? Wait—pie?"

"No."

"So what's your name?"

"Milo."

"OK, Milo, follow me. Follow me, flying boy." S. Verducci dropped a silver dollar into his glass of water, which was still full. He picked up a crushed, empty hard-pack of Marlboros from the floor, tore off one side and placed it over the top of the glass. Then, holding the cardboard there, he inverted the glass on the table and slipped the cardboard out. The silver dollar was at the bottom of an upside-down glass of water. "Don't you love it? Let the waiter earn his tip, huh? It's OK—Jitsi likes me."

Milo followed S. Verducci past the coffee hounds, the welfare mothers, the college brains—a hooker moving in—and past the counter, to the door.

"Bye-bye, Jitsi, you old poisoner!" S. Verducci said.

"Bye-bye, Moon and Stars!"

Out the door into the breezy evening.

They walked twenty blocks, increasingly dark, increasingly run-down. Milo spied Dede watching from behind trash cans, though he was careful not to look. She disguised herself as a pimp cruising by in a vintage Cadillac. Her telescope was trained on Milo from a tenement window. And Devore was with her. He was small. He could hide anywhere, even behind fire hydrants maybe, or down below a sewer grate, phoning Milo's position in to Dede, who had a cop's uniform, a patrol car and a gun. Devore had a gun, too. He'd said so.

Don't think about Dede. There was a way to unthink things, to hold them in the blind spot. All it took was a knot in your stomach—and insomnia. *Don't think about... who?*

They came to a sooty storefront to which S. Verducci had a key. Stencilled across one large bay window in bold cursive were the words, "THE GRASS AND TREES." Underneath that: "Coffee and Conversation." There was a faint red light inside. S. Verducci turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door. The hinges squeaked. The easement groaned. A wonderful smell of wisteria flowed out.

"Everything has its portion of smell," Milo said.

"Anaxagoras!" said S. Verducci. "Smell, scent, essence, *sentience!* Everything is everywhere. Nothing's as solid as it seems! That's my whole business, little man! How did *you* know that?"

"My sister used to say it, that's all."

They walked past round tables with chairs on top of them. At the back, they turned a tight corner, and Verducci flicked on a light. They were at the top of a staircase leading to the basement. "Come on." He led Milo into a sort of black box theatre downstairs, with a dozen trans-planted church pews around a square platform. There was a large canopied bed onstage. "You can sleep here. I'll sleep upstairs. There's a toilet around the corner. I'll leave the light on at the top of the stairwell so you don't get totally spooked. See you in the morning, champ."

S. Verducci pulled off the bowler. He shook his head, and a stream of brown hair tumbled down to his waist.

"You're a girl!" Milo said.

"Sure. What did you think?"

"What does the 'S' stand for?"

"Sylvie. Sweet dreams, little man." She climbed the stairs, leaving Milo alone, in the cellar, in the dark.

* * * *

Dede at the library on a Saturday morning, Milo in her lap with a Dr Seuss. He peers up at the book she's reading, sees diagrams that look like envelopes folded funny and ones like globes with twisted meridians. There are letters Dede says are Greek and words she says are German. One Hebrew letter: aleph. Aleph with a tiny *zero*. Aleph with a tiny *one*. And a lazy eight: infinity.

"Is this how you do it, Milo?" Dede whispers. She doesn't expect an answer. At home Mama is washing her hands. Washing her hands and washing her hands.

Suddenly he is in the dark cellar at *The Grass and Trees* again, the air swarming with hypnagogic images, red and green, intricate, impene-trable geometries. He feels that he has just screamed, but nothing stirs. He rubs himself all over to make sure he is a human being. He checks his skin for fur, his shoulder blades for wings.

Sylvie's in cahoots with Devore—the thought, like a sudden needle, pierces him, as he remembers where he is.

He falls asleep again, and when he blows out the candles, seven of them plus one for good luck, all at once he finds himself on the wrong side of his lips. He is a puff of air eddying around the flames. It only lasts a second. Then all the candles are out. He smiles, but everyone else is screaming. Some of the children cover their eyes.

"What's wrong?" Milo says. Dede is watching with intense curiosity. Curiosity and desire.

Mama hasn't seen it. Mama is in the kitchen washing the sink over and over. Papa's eyes are bulging, his mouth hangs open, and his muscles are drawn so tight he looks like a starved alley cat. "What did you do? What the hell kind of trick is that?" He licks his lips and scans the room with a wild look. "Never mind! Never mind!" He runs to the door, then runs back, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I didn't see nothing." He shakes one of the guests. "Shut up! Shut up! Everything's OK!" They all stop crying, terrified. "Am I right, Milo? Am I right?"

"Yes, Papa."

"That was a mean, dumb trick, Milo. What, did you sneak under the table and back, huh? Don't you ever let me see you do that again." Milo won't.

* * * *

"What's the matter?" Sylvie, in her striped pants and a sleeveless undershirt, was standing silhouetted at the cellar door. Scant light from the stairway bathed her like earthshine on a slight, crescent moon.

"Huh?" He sat up. He had been lying fully clothed on top of the covers.

"You shouted. What's the matter? Scared of the dark? Tell me. Don't be ashamed." She walked towards him. Dim, reflected light played on her bare shoulders, through a tangle of hair. A moment of brighter light on one collarbone, as she brushed the hair away, made Milo lift his gaze to the soft, simple curve of her face, the broad forehead, the gentle slope of her nose, and her full lips. The thin fabric of the undershirt hung away from her torso, down from the peaks of her small breasts, and light diffused through the undershirt, shadowing her breasts like X-rays. Then she blended into the teeming dark nearer Milo's bed.

"Stay away."

"You think I'm gonna rape you or something? There's a little blue light I was gonna turn on behind the stage. The techy uses it to see what he's doing when he runs cues. Or maybe you'd like a couple of Kliegs. The control board is back there. I was gonna fiddle with it for you. Don't bother to say thank you."

"OK. Put on the blue light. Don't touch me, though."

"You're a pip, you know that?"

Milo clutched the covers around him and crouched under the canopy while Sylvie walked past him, barely visible in the deepening shadow inwards the back of the room. She was just a glint, now and then, a hint of skin, a wrinkle of fabric, disjointed patches of shifting light. Milo heard a click, blue light spilled faintly around the edge of a curtain, then the curtain was pulled back, and the black room filled with blue objects and blue air. It was as if the tide had gone out, leaving jetsam draped with blue algae on blue sand.

"OK?" she said.

"OK ... did I really scream?"

"Yeah."

"It wasn't the dark. I'm not afraid of the dark. But this is better. Thank you."

"Sure thing. OK now?" She was crossing the room, making a wide arc around the stage, weaving through the chairs.

"Yeah . . . hey!" Milo called to her as she started to mount the stairs again.

"What?"

"Why's there a bed onstage?"

"Don't ask." She trudged upstairs again. Milo heard her scuffling around, then slumping down and groaning quickly into slumber.

In cahoots. Definitely in cahoots. Milo whispered to himself, "I'm going to watch her. I'm going to find out about her. Her and Devore. They're up to something. They think I'm dumb, but I'm going to fool them."

No thorazine tonight. His muscles itched in places he couldn't reach to scratch. Every time he closed his eyes, he was deeply asleep; if he winked them open again, it was as if he'd been out for hours. Every sensum was thick with Devore's malevolence and Sylvie's conspiracy. Like a bombarded infantryman: "Keep a tight ass, Milo," he told himself.

Then Dede was cradling him in her lap, saying, "Everything is made of numbers, Milo. That's what Pythagoras said. Whatever you are, honey, something's the same, see? But what? Is it numbers? Euclid's all wet; there's no *congruence* between a little boy and a BankAmerica Mastercard, is there? No *similarity*, like angles and stuff. They're not even the same *genus* of topological space, because you got holes through your head and your butt and your little winkie, but a charge card's all connected everywhere.

"Something's the same though, because you go from this to that and back again, and whatever you are, you're *you*, aren't you? So how do you do it?"

"Why do you care, Dede?"

"You do such nice things for me, Milo, when you do those change-ums, I never want it to stop. I gotta figure out what's going on, so we don't lose you." She turns pages so furiously, a few of them rip. The librarian says something, but Dede pays no attention. "Maybe it has something to do with equideco ..."

From upstairs: "Hey! You OK?"

"What?"

"You were screaming again."

"Sorry!"

* * * *

There was no sunlight in the cellar, and therefore no time, just blue. Milo slept and woke like a subway car surfacing and descending through a dark metropolis. He got up to find the toilet. He stumbled past the control board "backstage", a closet with massive, ancient rheostats, a clipboard on a string, empty Coke bottles, and dust. Passing beyond the sphere of the backstage light, Milo knew where he was by the sound of his footsteps. They echoed more sharply as he reached the tiled room.

The bathroom door was held open by a mop bucket full of dirty water. On its scummy surface there were rainbows. Daylight leaked in through the bathroom window. Milo walked into the light and relieved himself into a urinal. The daylight, the tinkle, the morning breeze were like a benediction. He walked out past the rainbows, the dimmers and the stage, to the stairway. He smelled bacon.

He started up the stairs, when a gigantic crow peeked into the stairway from above, cawed a few times and said, in a high, scratchy voice, "Soup's on, little man!" Milo stumbled three steps backwards.

Then Sylvie's face appeared next to the crow's. She continued, in the crow's voice, "Eggs and toast for humans! *Pictures* of eggs and toast for the puppets!" Then she thrust out one arm, at the end of it a puppet made of five or six tiny men in trench coats—one puppet with multiple jaws that moved together: "*Hiss! Boo!*"

"Oh shut up," Sylvie said, "or I'll give you a picture of angleworms to eat." She pulled out of sight, her puppets with her. A second later the tiny men reappeared. "*Angleworms!*" they shuddered. "We're not partial to *angleworms!*" They scooted off.

The walls upstairs were covered with posters, masks, hand puppets, and marionettes, from minuscule to elephantine, hanging by hooks and wire. There were posters for wassail consorts, pantomimes, plays by people named Beckett, Ionesco, Tzara, Artaud, old cigarette ads enamelled in three colours, embossed on tin; also a wall-sized photo-graph of a man gleefully smiling as he leapt, birdlike, from a high window onto the street below—a bicyclist trundling past, unawares. "SAUT DANS LA VIDE," it said underneath. "LEAP INTO NOTHINGNESS," Sylvie explained.

Among the masks there were bug-eyed Balinese demons with teeth like tusks; there were lions' heads, monkeys, frogs, grotesque insects, the mask of a beautiful girl with a skull mask nested underneath, also a variety of clown noses and Swiss carnival masks, larval, exaggerated, alive, that Sylvie said she had received from a "business associate" in Basel. And the puppets: the huge crow and the little men back on their hooks already, moustached villains with black hats, Punch and Judy, Orlando Furioso in a plumed helmet, and also a variety of animals and inanimate objects. There was a printing press puppet, a city block whose tenement windows were mouths, a sky with star eyes and the moon for a mouth, a mountain, a lock and key, a long-legged airplane and a truck with teeth under its hood, among many still stranger.

Everything has its portion of smell. Sylvie had taken down the chairs from one round table and was laying down two steaming dishes of eggs and toast. Several flies accompanied her, and when Milo approached, they found their way to his face and neck. He slapped at them.

"Don't," Sylvie said. "Those are friends of mine, Eric and Mehitabel. The small one

is Beulah. Leave them alone. They're from upstate."

"Are you for real?"

"I'm a vegetarian, OK?"

"What about the pig? I smelled bacon."

"Nope. I can't help what kind of grease is caked on the burner. That's the owner's, not mine. Pull up and chow down, little man. We've got a day ahead of us."

Milo sat. Sylvie poured them both coffee. "You're strange," Milo said.

"Strange is good. I like strange."

"You're not rich. Not if you sleep in *this* place."

"Did I say I was rich, Milo?"

"Rich as Croesus."

"No, you got me wrong." Sylvie squeegeed egg yolk with her toast and folded the toast into her mouth. "Rich in creases, that's what I said. My costume gets all creased sleeping here under the tables, see? Rich in creases, is what I said. It's a Biblical locution."

"Sure. Who owns this place, if you don't?" Milo nibbled at his toast, played with the spoon in his coffee. Nonchalant—*that's the ticket*.

"*The Grass and Trees*'? Some guy you don't know."

"You work for him?" *Bet it's Devore*, he thought.

"Hell, no. This is a *fellowship* I got here. No strings attached. Guy appreciates my artistic ability, see? Why aren't you eating? Miss the meat?"

"No."

"Well?"

He started on the eggs, and then he couldn't stop. He ravened the toast and licked the plate. Sylvie poured him some more coffee. "Hurry it up, though. We got a gig the other side of town."

"We?"

Sylvie shooed Milo from the table, cleared it, and had him put the chairs back up and sweep while she did the dishes. She ducked behind a counter into a small

enclosure covered with green striped awning, and fished out two black suitcases. She handed one of them to Milo. "Wait a minute." Sylvie unlatched her case and pulled out a collapsible top hat, flattened to a disk. She contrived to blow on it, while flexing it just so, and it popped open. She twirled the hat between her fingers so that it wound up on Milo's head. He flinched. She grabbed her bowler from behind the counter and twirled it onto her own head the same way. "See? It's just business, little man. Now you're with *me*. Moon and Stars!"

That's what was stenciled on the suitcases, too:

***MOON*

on hers,

AND*STARS***

on his.

"Do I have to wear the hat?" he said.

"Sure you do! It suits you, too. Isn't it neat how it changes . . ." She pushed ahead of him to unlock and open the door, and he thought he heard her say, "... just like you?"

They only spent a few minutes in daylight, and Sylvie led Milo underground again, this time into the subways. They sat side by side in the strobing, shaking car with the suitcases on their laps; it was awkward, but Sylvie insisted they carry them that way. She also insisted that Milo sit on her left and that they hold the suitcases with the lettering facing out:

* * *MOON*AND*STARS* * *

"Free advertising," she said. No one looked. No one *ever* looked on the subway. If they looked, it meant trouble. Anything could happen down there, Milo learned; a baby could be born, water could spring from a stone, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse could thunder from a businessman's lapel, and everybody would turn their page of *Newsweek* or the *Enquirer* or the *New York Times* and keep their eyes down and their elbows close to their hips.

"What were you doing on the street where I fell yesterday?" Milo said between Manchester Avenue and Lafayette Park. *Make it sound like ordinary conversation.* "You were right below there, weren't you?"

"It was listed in my ephemeris: 'Boy falling out of the sky northeast of the MacCauly Building.'"

"Come on, Sylvie."

Sylvie shifted uncomfortably on the crowded bench. "Hey! You're the mystery man, not me, champ. I was going some place, that's all. Do you have to take up so much room?"

Milo scrunched himself farther into the end of the bench. "Have you ever been up there in that building where I fell from?"

"Where you *flew* from, you mean? Maybe. Yeah. Why? Yeah." She looked away.

Don't push too hard. She already knows I'm suspicious. She probably thinks I've seen her up there, and she's cooking up an excuse right now.

"I might have a client up there, I think, if it's the building I'm thinking of," Sylvie said.

"Equidecohoozits?"

"No. Well, sort of. Paintings. Copies of the Masters. Subscription service. It's another sideline. I got a *couple* of clients like that in that block. What were *you* doing up there?"

"Seeing a shrink."

"You crazy?"

"Just nervous. I have trouble sleeping, like."

"You're telling me!"

"What do you mean?"

The train stopped. Sylvie slid sideways into Milo, then righted herself as the doors slid open and two women rushed in, business executives, briefcases under their arms, talking about wheat futures. They grabbed a stanchion and braced themselves. The doors clapped shut, and the train lurched forward.

"What did you mean?" Milo said.

"You kept me up half the night, screaming and talking in your sleep."

"More than the once? What did I say?"

"Who cares? Stick with me, Milo. I'll teach you how to sleep ... Let's move to the next car. I don't like those two ladies."

"Did I say something about Dede?"

"Every damn thing you say is about Dede, Milo. Get up and let's go to the next car."

They're looking at me."

One of the execs was edging closer. "Moon and Stars? Hey, Moon and Stars! I want to talk to you! I've got another deal. Hey!" There was a quality of pleading in the woman's voice. Sylvie shoved Milo through the passage to the next car, and then the next, brutalizing whoever blocked the way and letting them curse.

"I hate that," she said at last. "I did something for her when I was still green, and now she won't leave me alone."

"What do you mean, everything I say is about Dede?"

"It's a big city, Milo. You can say whatever you like."

The train stopped. They squeezed out, pinched between the shoulders of a dozen workers, shoppers and students, only some of whom, in the subterranean light, looked human. Milo dutifully clutched his suitcase handle, clutched it so hard it made him think of the way he was clutching something else, in his belly, clutching so deep and so hard for so long that he had stopped thinking of it as something he *did*; instead it had come to seem like something he suffered. They climbed up into a broad, cobbled square separated by a massive archway from a sunlit park.

Sylvie walked briskly. Milo quickened his pace to stay abreast. They passed through the arch, across a meadow the size of a football field, and down a dirt pathway through a clump of trees, until they came in sight of a picnic shelter.

"This is it," she said. "Employee picnic. Dingsbooms, Incorporated or something. Full payment on day of performance. Watch this."

A few children were running towards them from the shelter. As they came within badgering distance, Milo, hanging back a few yards, saw Sylvie's suitcase stop in midair while Sylvie herself kept walking, still holding on. Like a tugboat trying to pull the shoreline out to sea, Sylvie suddenly was yanked back. The children giggled. Sylvie scowled. She pulled at the case. It wouldn't budge. She pushed it. She leaned against it. The children fell down laughing.

Between her teeth, she said to Milo, "Kick it."

"Huh?"

"Kick it."

Milo kicked it. The case flew forward, tumbling Sylvie to the ground. Milo rushed to help her.

"You ass," she said. "This is *part* of it. Give me your hand." Befuddled, he did it. Sylvie grabbed, pulling Milo down on top of her, sputtering and flailing. "Whoa!" she said—theatrically. The children howled. They ran to the shelter to get their

friends.

Milo lay face down, blinking and huffing, on top of Sylvie, face up, laughing. "You'll do," she said. His chest was on top of her chest. He could feel the breasts inside her smock. His legs were on top of hers. Her hair, the little of it that spilled out of the bowler when she tumbled, was in his face.

He scrambled to his feet, tucked his shirt in, wiped his face, recovered the fallen top hat. Sylvie got up. They picked up the suitcases and walked.

"Why do you dress like a boy?" he said.

"Showbiz, little man. It's all showbiz. Why do you?"

Sylvie found the Dingsbooms honcho and set up where he told her to. Inside the "AND * STARS ***" suitcase there were plastic pipes, tent poles, and coloured nylon sheets with sleeves sewn along the hems for the poles and pipes to make a frame. It took fifteen minutes to erect the puppet stage, five of them to shoo away the children and grab back joints and dinguses they'd boosted from Milo's suitcase.

Once the puppet stage was up, Sylvie was ruthless about keeping kids away. "This is our space, see?" she said to Milo, stooping low in the red light filtering through the nylon. She was hanging puppets and props on hooks backstage. "Nobody but showfolk here, Milo. If Mr Dingsbooms comes back here, we boot him. If it's the President of the United States, we boot him. If it's God Almighty with Saint Peter and Saint Paul...what?"

"Huh?"

"What do we do?" she said, exasperated.

"We boot 'em," Milo said.

"That's right. You gotta draw the line, Milo. You see what I mean?" She thrust her arm in and out of a few of the puppets hanging upside-down below the stage, practising transitions. "Go find the guy in the suit and tell him we're ready. Then come back here with me. Got it?"

"Yuh!" Milo ran.

Sylvie's puppet show was a Chinese folk tale: Stone Monkey. Milo crouched low and handed her things when she clucked, scowled or elbowed him. He watched, fascinated.

First, the initial phases of the creation of the universe were enacted: 129,000 years in twelve parts (sixty seconds each) represented by cacophonously squabbling puppets of mouse, bull, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, goat, monkey, cock, dog

and pig. After another twenty-seven thousand years, Sylvie's *Pan Gut* smithereened the Enormous Vagueness (a gelatinous blob manipulated by rods and strings). At last, halfway through the show, Stone Monkey was born atop the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit from a rock that Sylvie reported, in the wavering voice of an Ancient Taoist Sage, to be precisely thirty-six feet five inches in height and twenty-four feet in circumference.

Rascally Stone Monkey terrorized Heaven and Earth, absconding with various elixirs, virtuous gems, and magic weapons from the Jade Emperor—and anybody else who got in his way. In the end, on a bet with Buddha, he pissed on the Five Pillars at the End of the Universe—some children applauded, some booed, some giggled nervously—but they turned out to be the Buddha's fingers. Big Bud grabbed up poor Monkey and imprisoned him in a mountain of iron. Curtain.

The instant the curtain fell, Sylvie said, "Get the money." In a louder voice, she announced, "Children or others coming within two feet of the puppet stage will be shot," and she started taking everything apart.

Always, they slept and breakfasted at *The Grass and Trees*. Supper at Jitsi's. They did shows a few times a week at places all over town, indoors and out: libraries, loading docks, the beach, the park, a historical society, some rec centres and settlement houses, street fairs, block parties, and a hospital or two. "If they knew what I was," Sylvie said, "they'd never hire me. But I look like your clean-cut American kid, now don't I?"

"So what *are* you, Sylvie?" Milo would say.

"Oh, go fish! When are you gonna show me those wings?"

"Go fish, yourself!"

Milo learned the set-up routine and could strike quicker than Sylvie after a while. He started doing a few puppets, notably Lord Buddha and, in Sylvie's "Trash Show", a bilious Dumpster named Hector. He did chores like filling Monkey's rubber bladder with water for the piss scene, and velcroing the Enormous Vagueness back together after Pan Gui *decomposed* it. He learned what to say to Sylvie's patrons, how to accept their money or put them off when they were late setting up.

He enjoyed himself. He got a little sun tan. His ribs stopped showing. The hollows around his eyes disappeared. He got to know Jitsi, who called him "Little Man", because that's what he heard Sylvie call him.

Sylvie paid Milo part of her take, fivers at first, then tens and an occasional twenty. When they busked, he got half the hat. "For street work," she said, "we're strictly partners." He liked that.

After the first week or so, Milo forgot about investigating the Devore-Sylvie

connection. It just didn't seem so important any more. When Sylvie disappeared, on off days, without explanation or apology, Milo took himself to the zoo, the beach or the museum. There was never anyone at *The Grass and Trees* except Milo and Sylvie—and the Monkey King. The owner was on vacation, she said.

Milo would be settling into his fitful night's sleep, or would wake at an unknown hour—all the hours were dark down there—and hear the Monkey King cudgelling Lord Erlang. "Take that, you shrivelled pus bag!" He would creep sometimes to the foot of the stairs to hear it better.

"You can't fool me, you imbecilic macaque!" Sylvie blustered *basso profundo*, then squealed as Monkey, "Kowtow, pig-face, or I'll knock you silly!"

One night Sylvie surprised him by shouting, in her own voice, "Come on up here, Milo. I know you're awake. You might as well help me with the chase sequence."

He walked upstairs and saw Sylvie's puppet theatre set up in one of the bay windows, facing in. It was lit eerily from inside—blood red. The puppet theatre had been transformed into a weird temple with rows of fluted columns (papier-mache) and stained glass windows (cellophane). The God Erlang, frightening in the red light, appeared in full battle array, carrying a huge lance, huge, that is, in proportion to his own size of ten inches or so.

Suddenly, the opening of the puppet stage closed in on itself. The carpet Erlang stood on lapped at him like a tongue, the columns gnashed like teeth, the proscenium was like a lip smacking against the apron. Erlang barely managed to wedge the theatre space open with his lance.

"It's Monkey's mouth, Milo," Sylvie said. She left Erlang there, his head drooping lifelessly on his chain mail. "He's equideco'ed into a temple, get it?"

"First, Monkey turns into a sparrow and Erlang turns into a kite. Then Monkey is a fish, and Erlang is a fish-hawk. When Monkey changes to a water-snake, Erlang turns into a red-crested grey crane. What can Monkey do? He turns into a bustard. Look." She showed him a thin-billed, long-legged plop of a bird-puppet, with an enlarged face retaining a few essentials of Stone Monkey. "That's the lowest. A bustard'll let anything hump it—even crows. Promise me you won't ever be a bustard, flying boy."

"Huh?"

"Anyway, Erlang shoots him then. So he takes off and turns himself into this temple. See? This flagpole is Monkey's tail, only I haven't Sobo-glued the hair on yet. This whole thing *here* is Monkey's mouth. The windows are his eyes. But Erlang is on to him. He threatens to break the window panes. That would blind old Monkey."

"It's great, Sylvie! How did you do that?"

"Adhesives," she said. "Everything is adhesives, Milo, in the show business anyways: duct tape, hot glue, velcro, rivets—this is like my catechism, see?—stuff inside other stuff all over the place. I wanna start doing this story in a week. Sound OK?"

"Teach me."

"That's all I wanted to hear." She led him behind the puppet stage, into the heart of the red glow, and started to fill his hands with odd things.

"Sylvie ..." he said.

"Yeah?"

"How can Monkey do all that? I mean, what is he supposed to be that he can change into stuff that way?"

She stopped what she was doing and looked at Milo. There was nothing in the entire world outside this small ball of red light, Monkey's mouth, the jumble of props and puppets, the window glass behind them—"noitasrevnoC dna eeffoC ..."—Milo's eyes, Sylvie's eyes, each other's eyes in each other's eyes. "He's a shape-shifter, Milo. A *shape-shifter*."

Inside himself, Milo squeezed: not a tightening, but a pushing together, the way he might squeeze the string together on both sides of a knot, to let more slack in for the undoing. There was no thought before him, but a sort of *deja vu*. "Dede ..." he said.

"... Sylvie, you mean."

"*Sylvie*, I feel like I want to tell you something."

"I don't think so," she said. "We've got a lot of lines to learn here, a lot of cues to get down. Hold this." She handed him Monkey's Gold-Banded As-You-Will Cudgel, Weight 13,500 Pounds. She got up and switched on the overhead light. It was a cheap chandelier. The crystals dangled and made little rainbows on Lord Erlang, the puppet heads, masks and posters on the walls, "SAUT DANS LA VIDE," and all. They went to work.

There were never any customers, no coffee, no conversation; day after day, the chairs never came off the tables except for Sylvie and Milo. Once, an exterminator showed up with a gas mask, a heavy cylinder and a spray gun that looked like a sci-fi blaster; Sylvie nearly beat him unconscious, shoving him back out the door, while he waved his Service Orders in pink and blue and protected his private parts.

"Over my dead body," she said.

"Vegetarian!" Milo shook his head.

"They might be Stone Monkey, flying boy. They might be Franz frigging Kafka. How the hell do you know who the cockroaches are? Go kill, if you want to." She stalked out and didn't come back until the dark of the next morning, when she woke him to borrow some cash. It took Milo two days to feel that he had made it up to her.

The fifth week, she taught him how to sleep. She whispered to him in the dark. He let her onto the stage, but not too close: "Milo, there's a bowl at the bottom of your belly, a big bowl—can you feel it?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, every time you take a breath, like, the bowl kind of fills up with air. Doesn't that feel good?"

"I guess."

"And every time you breathe out, it kind of steams off, like soup steaming into cold air, see? You don't have to do a thing, little man. Just feel that bowl fill up, and then feel the steam float off it. Watch how it goes out your mouth and nose, and then feel the air coming in there again. Over and over. Because it feels good, that's all. If you start thinking about something, just go back to the bowl again. Nobody's keeping track. You don't have to get past one. Just one ... one ... one -see? That's the *real* way to count. All those other numbers are a lot of crap. Then, if it's night, you fall asleep, and if it's day, you keep awake. Get it?"

"I'll try it, Sylvie, but I'm scared."

"Tell me about it, sky-jumper boy. Scared!"

"How old are you?" he asked, staring at her with sudden intensity.

"A million."

"Come on, Sylvie!"

"Seventeen," she said.

"I'm fifteen. We're practically the same."

"Dream on, little man."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"Did you ever... ?"

"Yes." Suddenly she took his hand. "Not yet, Milo. It's too soon. But I feel it too. I think it might happen. Don't push, OK?"

"OK."

She cocked her head at him and bit her lip in a way that melted whatever of Milo remained solid before Sylvie. "What do you see when you look at me, Milo?"

"A girl—what do you mean?"

"When you see the moon and stars, maybe it'll be time then ..."

"Sylvie, I want to tell you something about myself."

She looked away. "I gotta go somewhere. Tell me when I get back ... Do you have any money? I'm a little short."

At the beach that day, lying in the sun on a hulk of driftwood, sand dusting his face, fine sea air puffing his shirt and filling his lungs like a sail, Milo breathed. Water welled, sucked and whispered around him. Waves lapped. The bowl filled and emptied. Thoughts came and went. Inside him, a knot loosened.

Dede was saying, "Milo, how can you be so small?" *She was big.* She was the Jolly Green Giant. She was King Kong, Mount Everest, the Moon. He felt that he was looking at her the wrong way through a microscope. She flipped him, and he came up heads. She laughed. "I mean, where's the rest of you, Milo? Don't worry, I won't spend you. I wonder what Galileo would say about this. He's the one who figured out how there are as many square numbers as there are numbers, baby. 1,2, 3, 4, 5 ... or 1, 4, 9,16, 25 ... for each of each there's one of the other—*savvy?* — even though the one bunch looks bigger, even though the one bunch is a part of the other. Is that how it is for you, Milo?" She tickled him on the eagle's breast. "Lots or little, somehow you're still my little Milo. Don't you *lose* something when you turn to a quarter? Don't you *get* something when you turn to a blimp? How do you do those changeums?"

The bowl filled, the bowl emptied. The sea. The wind. A knot inside him came undone. "I'm a shape-shifter!"

The sky darkened. The lake began to glow so intensely blue-green, seething in its basin, that it seemed more emotion than liquid. Strati knit the sky shut. Thunder. Milo climbed down from the log, brushed the sand off and started running. He was supposed to meet Sylvie in front of the bathhouse for a show in the old carousel enclosure.

"When the great world horse pisses, it rains," Dede had told him once. "Everything is transformations—it says so here in the Upanishads. Wanna hear more?"

"No." It had frightened him.

Now, just as in Dede's Upanishads, the rain broke like piss from a tight bladder. It sprayed down. The world horse whinnied. Its eyes flashed. The sand was speckled then splotched then rutted, and Milo was splattered with wet sand, splashing, pool to pool, towards the bathhouse. Then the hail began to fall. His scalp tickled. His hair sparkled with hail. When he brushed the tiny hailstones out, his hair *crunched*.

It only lasted a few moments, and the drumming of rain and hail subsided. He could hear the waves again, breathing back and forth far behind him, and the flag by the bathhouse flapping like a faltering conversation.

Sylvie was pacing back and forth between two pillars at the top of the bathhouse steps, just under the eaves of the roof, protected from the downpour. The broad stone steps were littered with tiny hailstones that crackled under Milo's feet.

"Sylvie!" he shouted. "I've got to tell you something. You've got to listen."

"Look, I'm in a hurry, Milo. There's a guy waiting on me inside there, and then we still have that show to do."

"But, Sylvie ..."

A tall wiry man in a Hawaiian shirt strolled out of the men's door across the landing from Sylvie and Milo. He was balding but meticulously groomed and greased, with sideburns down to his long, heavy jaw. His fingers were covered with rings. "Hey, what's the holdup *now*? My client is getting impatient."

Sylvie turned towards him. "One minute. Just wait inside. I never let you down yet, did I?"

"Okiedokie." He ducked back in.

"Listen, Milo." Sylvie was slightly trembling. So was Milo, but Sylvie wasn't wet. "I'm going to leave in a second, but I need you to stay here. You gotta go in where Lenny is and give him something for me—a box with some stuff inside. Watch him, Milo. Watch that he's careful with the thing I leave him, OK?"

"Sure, Sylvie ..."

"Listen. The guy he's with will do some stuff—it won't take long—and then Lenny'll give you some money. And he'll give you the box back. Make sure you get that box back and everything in it. *Mint*. Understand?" She handed him something. She had to push it into his hand, because at first he didn't see it, he had been focusing so intently on Sylvie's eyes. It was an ice pick.

He didn't know what to make of it at first. "Sylvie?"

"You won't have to use it, don't worry. It's just in case. You might have to *show* it to him — that's the worst it could get. Then he would give you everything and run. Lenny's not brave like you, jumper boy. Believe me, I know Lenny."

Milo put the ice pick under his shirt, inside his belt.

"Let Lenny leave. Just stay there by the showers. Make sure he's gone. Make sure nobody's around. If anybody's around, wait till they're gone. Put the box down on a bench. Come out to the door, and wait. I'll meet you there in less than a minute, guaranteed." She took a deep breath and huffed it out.

"OK," she said, strictly business now, all the tension turned to purpose. "Turn around, Milo. I gotta do something you can't see. Then I'll split, and I'll leave the package there for you to take in to Lenny. Just turn around, count to twenty, then do what I told you. Get it?"

"Yes, Sylvie."

"You're soaking wet, you jerk." She smiled and tousled his hair. "Don't you know to come in out of the rain?" Then she pushed his shoulder to make him turn.

"One, two ..." Rain dripping from the eaves. His teeth chattered a little. At twenty, he turned around and Sylvie was gone. There was a hat box on the landing, bound with a red ribbon. Milo picked it up and carried it across the landing and in through the men's door, hugging it closely to his chest with both arms. The ice pick pricked his thigh a little when he stepped, but it didn't hurt much.

He didn't see anyone at first. He was standing in a large, echoey dome with arched passages leading off every sixty degrees or so. The sound of slowly dripping water boomed all around him. He stood near the centre trying to figure out which way to go, when he heard a voice: "Psst! Hey, kid! This way!" Milo followed the voice as well as he could.

Moving into one of the small passageways, the quality of sound changed so abruptly that he felt someone had boxed his ears. Or else he was walking inside a sea shell, or inside the labyrinth of his own ear. The passage opened into a small, concrete courtyard with showers along the perimeter and a few benches near the middle. The hard floor sloped down towards a drain in the centre. Milo looked up. The sky was the colour of iron. He was cold.

Suddenly Lenny was at his side. "Surprised you, huh?" He had come from a shower stall beside the entrance. "I had to take a leak. Mr Jones used the regular facilities. He'll be right here . . . You a pal of Sylvie's? She never used you before."

Milo heard steps echoing behind him. He turned and backed out of the way, towards the benches. Mr Jones was a thick, crewcut man with a flaccid face. He wore a stiff, white short-sleeved shirt that fairly glowed in the stormy light. He squinted and

cocked his head at the sight of Milo. "This isn't a girl."

Lenny laughed. "So what? So she sent an associate. You'll notice he's got the merchandise."

Jones rolled his eyes. He looked disgusted. "That ain't all he's got, Lenny."

"Huh?"

"This associate here has got a weapon in his belt," Jones said. Milo looked down around the hat box to his waist. The soaked shirt was bunched around the handle of the ice pick. Jones stepped towards Milo and extended one hand, palm up. "Give."

"Come on, kid," Lenny said. "You don't need that. We trust each other here. God! I'm sorry, Mr Jones. The kid doesn't know how we do business, is all."

"Sure. So give."

Milo didn't move. He looked back and forth between Lenny and Mr Jones. For some reason, he didn't feel worried about them. He was worried about something else. Something Lenny had said.

"Sylvie doesn't *use* me."

Lenny smiled. "Tough. Very tough. Very impressive. OK. Sylvie doesn't use you. Just give Mr Jones the knife."

"It's an ice pick," Milo said. He looked straight at Jones. "And I'm keeping it. Sylvie didn't say anything about giving it to you—unless you try to cheat me."

"He's a *kid*, for crissakes!" Lenny laid a hand on Mr Jones's shoulder. Mr Jones kept his hand extended and his eyes straight on Milo. "Nobody's got anything to gain by violence here, am I right? Let's just do our business and adjourn. OK, Mr Jones?"

Jones nodded slowly. "*I'm* not impressed. I'm not *pleased*. But we'll let it go, because I respect Lenny, and because I think this little boy would lose his lunch before he pricked anybody with that steel dick. Also, I have a gun ... So, let's see the goods."

Jones stepped back. Lenny gave Milo a sheepish look. Facing Milo, so Jones couldn't see, Lenny mouthed the words: "He doesn't have any gun." Lenny shrugged. Milo held out the box to Mr Jones. Jones took it from Milo and carried it to one of the benches, where he laid it down and undid the ribbon.

Lenny stayed a few feet back with Milo. "You're wet, kid. Quite a downpour, huh?"

"Don't get the box wet," Milo said to Jones. The wooden bench was damp. Jones

shot him a black look and snarled something under his breath. Jones lifted the cover from the round box and laid it down on the bench beside the box itself. He reached in and pulled out a roll of cash. He fanned it, then removed the rubber band around it, pulled out one of the bills and held it at arm's length to look it over. He did the same thing with a few others, turning them over, flapping them and pulling them out with a snap. Then Mr Jones took a magnifying glass from his pocket and examined one of the bills more closely.

He returned the magnifying glass to his pants pocket. He stacked the bills together and bound them with the rubber band again. He put the cash back into the box, closed it and tied the ribbon with the same sort of bow it had had before.

"So?" said Lenny.

Mr Jones handed the box back to Milo and smiled. He turned to Lenny. "It's crap."

"What do you mean, it's crap? You can't tell me this is crap. This is the work of a goddam artist. Uncle fucking Sam himself couldn't tell this stuff from the real thing."

"I can. It's crap."

"You're trying to weasel a better deal out of me, aren't you, Harold? You said if this passed muster you'd front me the ten thou. I told you I could guarantee delivery of the rest in two weeks. OK, you said. Two weeks, you said. Ten thou up front on approval, you said."

"On approval."

"There's nothing wrong with this job. I'm telling you Sylvie's guy is an artist. He's a Da Vinci, Harold. Nothing's wrong with it. What's wrong with it?"

"It's off, that's all. The border's off. The weave is funny. We won't work with it. Find another distributor—it's your funeral."

"Somebody's supposed to give me some money," Milo said.

Jones turned on him, laughing. His face was like bread dough being folded and kneaded. His lips curled back, showing the gums, big and pink, like a horse's. "What, are you gonna pull out your ice pick now? You an artist, too? You gonna make me into an ice sculpture, kid? You guys are a million laughs."

Jones walked into the passage to the main chamber.

"Harold!" Lenny turned his head to shout after him, but didn't *move* an inch. He looked beaten. "Harold! Hey! Wait a minute here! Harold...Shit!"

"Are you gonna give me the money?" Milo asked Lenny.

"You're a real piece of work, kid, you and that bitch of a sister you got."

"She's not my sister."

"Give me the box. Screw Mr Jones. I'll find another Mr Jones."

"I'm supposed to take the box back to Sylvie. You're supposed to pay me."

Lenny grabbed at the hat box. Milo swung it out of his reach.

"I don't need this, kid," Lenny said. "I don't need your whore sister either, not after this. She screwed up. Give me the damn box. I'll pay her when I get *my* advance, see? This is supposed to be our sample. This is supposed to buy me a little time while our printer gets his act together. You see how many people you're holding up here, kid? Me, the printer, the printer's family, *my* family . . ." He was walking forward as Milo walked back, between the benches, towards the far showers. "... and Sylvie too. She's got no use for it, without I get some dough on it for her. Now, *gimme.*"

Milo was backed against a wall under a shower head. Lenny took another swipe at the box. Milo reached back and turned on the shower, spraying Lenny full in the face. Milo grabbed the ice pick from his belt. The point gouged Milo's own stomach, and his soaked shirt reddened. He looked down, uttered a small cry of surprise, and dropped the ice pick.

Lenny stopped sputtering and flailing. He stood still, with the spray pelting his face and plastering his sparse hair down in absurd curls. He stared at the blood welling up along Milo's belt. He stepped back out of the shower. "Oh, God, what a mess! Kid, you keep it. You keep the damn paper. Tell Sylvie she screwed up. Oh, God! Equidecomposa-bullshit! I musta been outa my gourd! Tell her this is the last time she does a job for anybody east of Topeka. And get a doctor, kid!" He turned and ran.

"She's not my sister," Milo said. He turned off the shower. There was a shallow pool of red before him, pushed outwards by the force of the spray and streaming back again towards the drain behind his heels. Like a drunkard navigating one sensum at a time, Milo looked at his right arm and saw that the hat box was still cradled there, soaked; then he found his feet and walked back to the benches, trailing bloody water.

He laid the box down on a bench. He started back towards the main chamber, but as soon as he entered the passageway, the air filled with bright Paisleys, and he found himself on his knees, gasping. He pulled up his shirt to look underneath. He could see the lip of the wound, where blood oozed. "It's not so bad," he said. He slumped down on to his buttocks. He was about to black out, but he forced himself awake. He rolled onto all fours, then stood up, a little at a time. He leaned his shoulder against the wall of the passage and slid along, like a child pulling himself along the

gutter of a swimming pool.

He was halfway down the passage when he heard Sylvie's voice behind him, in the courtyard, among the showers. "Milo! Milo, what happened? Whose blood is this?"

He started to say "Dede's", but stopped it before his tongue left his palate. *Dede's blood!* He looked at his fingers, and for a moment he thought that they were bloody claws ...

Dede lies before him, all bloody. Her spasms are like the jerks of a severed frog leg. He looks at his fingers. The claws are just now retracting into his fingertips, the carpal pad receding into a palm, the fur on his forearm turning into the slightest blond down. He cries, and his chin shudders into a gelatinous ooze, pulling upward, short-ening, then hardening again, as the fangs recede with a squeak, shrinking into his gums and out of sight. "Dede! Dede! Did I do what you wanted? Dede!" He looks around for help. His knees have softened and recongealed to face the right direction now. The boy he was supposed to kill for Dede, the one who wouldn't be her lover, is gone. The door has been thrown open and Milo can hear running down the street. "Dede, please say something!" He looks at his bloody fingers ...

"Mine, Sylvie," he said. "It's *my* blood!" There was something hilarious about it. He started to laugh. He turned to look back towards the showers, back to where Sylvie's voice had come from. The bit of sky he saw had cleared. There was a bright rainbow arching above the concrete wall, blue to red, and a fainter one above it, red to blue. He took one step towards the courtyard, and *everything* went red, then black.

* * * *

"I'm a shape-shifter, Sylvie."

"You dope!" She was changing the dressing again. Her face hovered above him. She was biting her lip. He could see that she was working hard not to cry.

"Where are we?" He was lying on a bed made of two chairs pushed together and covered with a white sheet. He had been undressed. He lay naked under another sheet.

"Some place, that's all. I took you to a doctor. It's the first time in my whole life I missed a booking, and it's *your* fault, little man."

"Did I tell you what happened?"

"Yeah. Who needs those crooks, anyway?" She kissed him on the forehead. "Milo... you were a champ. I can't believe how brave you are. I'm sorry I put you in that spot."

"I'm a shape-shifter, Sylvie. I remember everything. I breathed, and I remembered my sister, Dede. I did stuff for her. I was keys and credit cards and... *money*..." He stopped talking. Then he said it again: "The money!"

Sylvie looked away. "I'm sorry." The room was dark behind her.

"It was you!"

Sylvie shrugged.

"You were the money!" Milo said.

"I do stuff for Lenny sometimes. He had a press going somewhere, all set to turn out fifties, hundreds, deluxe items, Milo, really good work, but they needed some front money. I provided Lenny with a sample, is all. Like a grant application, see? They weren't ready to print yet. He was just supposed to show it and collect the advance. Then he pays me. Anyway, that was the idea."

"Was that Lenny Zorn?"

"What?" Sylvie looked at him with a slightly shocked expression, like a hoer who has struck an unexpected rock in a well-cultivated field. "Lenny *who* . . . ? Wait a minute. How do you know about that? You mean *Zorn's Lemma*, don't you? How did you hear about Zorn's Lemma?" She stared at him, her mouth hanging open. Slowly, it closed. Her brows descended. She grabbed Milo's arm. "You little rat! What do you think you are, some kind of a damned spy? You were listening in on me and the doctor, weren't you? You knew the whole time, didn't you?"

"*You're* a shape-shifter, too," Milo said, "you and Devore! What do you want from me?"

"God damn you, Milo! What is it with you? You think I want to hurt you? You think I want to use you? What the hell do I need you for? I'm rich as fucking Croesus!"

"You *already* used me, Sylvie. You nearly got me killed. Why?"

"I needed some money, damn it, that's all. And *you're* the one who nearly got you killed. You stabbed yourself, for pity's sake! It was a simple set-up. Failsafe!"

"You blew the borders, Sylvie. The guy said they were fuzzy."

"Well, it couldn't be *perfect*, could it? The guy would think it was regular dough. You think you could do better?"

Milo knew fifty-dollar bills pretty well. Sylvie insisted on cash from her puppet show patrons, and Milo had been doing most of the collecting lately. They often paid with a fifty, which was a headache for Sylvie to break, but easy for the sponsors to carry.

In his mind, Milo could see a fifty-dollar bill as clearly as he could see his own hand. He could *look* right through it and all around it, on both sides. He felt the pattern of ink on its surface as if it were a network of varicose veins. He felt the rough surface like a hairy pelt, like his own hairy pelt.

Suddenly, he felt the sheets collapse around him, his skin shrivel and implode. He felt as if he were becoming all tongue, and the tongue was sucking an unripe fruit that sucked back at him, drying him out till he winked out of existence entirely. It was very quiet, very dark, very still.

Milo was gone. There was only a vague *electricity*, a tension, slight at first, but it became more and more irritating, until it was unbearable. Then he burst into mundane awareness again, like a frogman bursting above the surface, gasping, shocked by the sudden light and air.

"Damn you," Sylvie was saying. "Don't you ever, *ever* do that again."

"Don't tell him *that*" a low voice said from behind Sylvie. A door had opened. Light poured in. Someone was walking in, silhouetted in the doorway. Milo could see only that he was a small man and, from the light flashing from his head, that he wore glasses. "His father told him that once. He won't like to hear that, will you, Milo? Tell the truth now, Sylvie. Was he any good?"

Sylvie was fuming. She swallowed. She breathed. She calmed herself for the small man's sake. "He's fabulous. I've never seen anything like it."

"That's what I figured." The man came closer and put his hand on Sylvie's shoulder. "You know who I am, don't you, Milo?"

"Sure," Milo said. "You're Dr Devore."

"That's right, Milo. I don't know much *materiel medica* any more, but I can still do first aid, OK. How's the belly?"

"I'm all right. Do you own *The Grass and Trees*?"

"You're a smart boy, Milo. We don't want to hurt you. We don't want to use you. In fact, it's exactly the opposite, you know?"

Now he made out the drapes, the rolltop, the chairs he lay on. "I jumped out of that window. I was a bat. I flew down."

"I didn't expect that," Devore said. "I didn't know you were still here. I wasn't in a position to know *anything* at that moment."

"The doctor was a *rainbow*," Sylvie said.

Devore clucked his tongue. "Ach! My small talent!"

"But you called Sylvie," Milo said.

"Yes, I had already called her to tell her about you, you know? She was on her way here when she saw you fly down. She improvised."

Milo started to tremble. He shut his eyes, then forced them open again. "Sylvie, Dr Devore, there's something I remembered from a long time ago..."

Devore cut in, "You don't have to tell us this, Milo. You don't have to say anything you're not ready to say .. ."

"I killed my sister. I killed Dede." He began to sob.

Sylvie kissed him on the forehead and cradled his head in her arms. "It wasn't you, little man. It was a mountain lion. You were a little boy! You couldn't control it! You didn't know anything! Dede was an *operator*! She would have used you up and thrown you away like an old Kleenex!"

Devore spoke in his low, soothing voice, the voice that held Milo just this side of panic when he retold his dreams. "We knew, Milo. All that talking in your sleep! We followed the leads. We traced your history, well, up until you disappeared, after your sister's death.

"Milo, you were no more at fault for Dede's death than you were for wrecking that car in your dream about the Dumpster. For a child as young as you were then, shape-shifting is the same as dreaming, you know? It's all make-believe!"

"She was my big sister! She took care of me!" Milo's face, like his throat, was tightening into a knot. "She read to me. She tucked me in at night."

Sylvie shook her head. "Milo! Milo!"

All at once, it was too much—the arch of Sylvie's brow, Dr Devore's sad smile, the sweet warmth of Sylvie's hand stroking his head. Milo braved the pain in his stomach and bolted upright. "I'm no good! I'm some kind of monster, is all! You don't understand!"

Sylvie tried to hold him, but he swung his legs over the side of the make-shift bed and pulled away from her. He flinched and started to double over, then braced himself and ran to the window, clutching the sheet about him. Devore followed him.

Milo pressed his forehead against the glass. "She wanted me to kill that guy. It wasn't the first time. The guy wouldn't do what she wanted. I was the only one who always did what she wanted—except just that once. I didn't mean to kill her, though!"

"You didn't kill her, you jerk!" Sylvie was crying too now. "It was the goddamn

mountain lion, Milo! It wasn't your fault!"

Milo pushed open the window and leaned out. He let his head hang, panting, dripping tears. Tears slid down his nose and cheeks and chin. "I could jump. I deserve it."

Devore's hand on his shoulder. "You already tried that, Milo. Inside you, you're too smart, you're too good to do that to yourself. When you jump, Milo, you fly! In your heart you know you must live. Dede *used* you, Milo. You protected yourself."

"Why are you so good to me? Nobody's ever been so good to me!" He turned around, trusting them to see his face, so ugly, he thought, with tears and spasms of grief.

"We just want to look out for you, Milo." Sylvie cupped his cheek, wet with tears, in the palm of her hand, and all at once his ugliness vanished: he didn't look like anything, he was only this touch, this gazing into Sylvie's gaze. It wasn't a shape-shifter's trick but the most human thing he had ever felt.

"We all look out for one another," she said. "We're all finding out what we are, what we can do."

Like a knot pulled free, Milo's breath shuddered once, then steadied. The sheet wrapped around him opened slightly: his movement had irritated the wound, and blood trickled below the dressing.

"Take a good look, Sylvie," Devore said, "and next time you need pin money, ask me."

"I said I was sorry," she said, "and I meant it. But I can't be told what to do, not by you, not by anybody. I got my own plans, you know. Your fellowship won't take me to Edinburgh for the Fringe Festival or Amsterdam for the Festival of Fools or to the Carnival in Venice or any of those other big venues that are goddam dying to experience the Moon and Stars!" Devore half-smiled, looked down, and shook his head.

Milo blinked. For a split second, Dede was there, pale and doughy. She was lingering in the corner with a hangdog look. She wasn't as big as Milo used to think, nor as subtle. As his big sister, then as a nameless forbidden dream, she had been mighty: volcanoes, oceans, storming skies, or a hot dry wind. Now she was just a shadow. "You used me, Dede! I was just a baby, and you were my big sister! Oh, Dede, You shouldn't have done that! That wasn't right!" Bookish, wan, small-hearted, eaten up by jealousy and desire, she simply faded from view.

Milo had been whispering to himself, he realized. He caught Sylvie and Devore's eyes on him; they looked away, embarrassed for him perhaps, but Milo didn't mind that they had heard him. *We all look out for one another*, Sylvie had said. We! There

were others like him! Milo breathed. Milo breathed. He was *innocent*.

He felt like someone suddenly waking after a long fever and rummaging for food. "Tell me about the painting in the waiting room. Is it... *somebody*?"

"Yes," said Devore. "I guess you'd have to say so. At least, she was somebody. She seems to be caught in there, like Narcissus staring into the lake. We can't get her back. Maybe she doesn't want to come back."

Milo shut his eyes; tears streamed down his cheeks.

Sylvie squeezed his hand. "Milo?"

"I was caught like that, Sylvie. I belonged to Dede, even though she was dead. She said I'd be all hers forever."

"Milo, you're going to be all *yours* forever," said Devore. "We're going to see to it. We're going to teach you everything. And you're going to teach us, too."

"Yes, I will." Milo took Sylvie's other hand in his. He looked at her, then at Devore, then Sylvie again. He had the extraordinary sensation of recognizing *himself* behind their eyes. "I love you, both of you!" he blurted out.

Sylvie smiled. Her face sparkled so, he thought he was looking at the moon and stars.

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